

THOMASINE GYLLEMBOURG:
HER NOVEL *TWO AGES* AND KIERKEGAARD'S CONCEPT OF LEVELLING¹
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Abstract

In both *From the Papers of One Still Living* and *A Literary Review*, Kierkegaard had high praise for Thomasine Gyllembourg, who was known to her public only as “Author of *An Everyday Story*.” Despite Kierkegaard’s enthusiasm for Gyllembourg’s fiction, the scholarly consensus is that the socio-political analysis in the third part of *A Literary Review* is unrelated to Gyllembourg’s *Two Ages*, the very novel under review. In this short paper, I seek to demonstrate that, to the contrary, Kierkegaard’s conceptualization of levelling (*Nivelleringen*) is actually influenced by *Two Ages*.

Keywords: Thomasine Gyllembourg, Kierkegaard, Golden Age Denmark.

Resumen

Tanto en *De los papeles de alguien que todavía vive* como en *Una reseña literaria*, Kierkegaard elogia a Thomasine Gyllembourg, quien era conocida en público simplemente como “autor de *Una historia cotidiana*”. A pesar del entusiasmo de Kierkegaard por las obras de ficción de Gyllembourg, el consenso entre los especialistas es que el análisis socio-político en la tercera parte de *Una reseña literaria* no tiene relación con *Dos épocas* de Gyllembourg, la novela que es el objeto de la reseña. En este breve artículo, intento demostrar que, por el contrario, el concepto de Kierkegaard de nivelación (*Nivelleringen*) está en realidad inspirado en *Dos épocas*.

Palabras clave: Thomasine Gyllembourg, Kierkegaard, Edad de Oro de Dinamarca.

¹ All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated. When quoting from *Søren Kierkegaard's skrifter*, I will translate the passage myself, but corresponding references to the standard English editions will also be provided for the reader's convenience.

Before launching into his takedown of Hans Christian Andersen in his first book, *From the Papers of One Still Living* (1838), Kierkegaard strives to contextualize the remarks to come with a brief survey of contemporary Danish fiction. He shall “make an attempt at orienting us a little in our novel- and short-story-literature, recalling that here such an attempt to begin from the beginning and from nothing has also occurred; indeed, it has been realized . . .”² One would be justified in detecting a whiff of Hegelianism here. In fact, in the previous paragraph, Kierkegaard had explicitly referenced Hegel and his claim to a presuppositionless start. “[F]or we do not know how to otherwise designate the cycle of short stories,” Kierkegaard continues, “that began with *An Everyday Story* (with nothing) . . .”³ *An Everyday Story* was an anonymous novella that appeared in Johan Ludvig Heiberg’s periodical *Kjøbenhavns flyvende Post* in 1828,⁴ and whose title became a designation for realist Danish language literature.⁵ If Jon Stewart is correct that Kierkegaard was in the midst of a “pro-Hegelian period” during the composition of *From the Papers of One Still Living* (and beyond),⁶ then the novella’s start from nothing could be seen in a positive light. It is unclear, however, whether this “nothing” refers to the non-existence of Danish realism at the time,⁷ or—perhaps rather dismissively—to the unremarkable domestic content of *An Everyday Story*. Whatever the case may be, Kierkegaard ultimately embraces the “life-view” of “the Author of *An Everyday Story*,”⁸ for Andersen, he claims, lacks such a perspective altogether.⁹

After Kierkegaard had put what would be his so-called first authorship behind him with the publication of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

² SKS 1, 20 / EPW, 64.

³ SKS 1, 20 / EPW, 64.

⁴ [Thomasine] Gyllembourg-Ehrensward, *En Hverdags-Historie*, in *Samlede Skrifter af Forf. til “En Hverdags-Historie,”* 2nd edition, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 1866, vol. 1, pp. 161-218. See also Thomasine Gyllembourg, *An Everyday Story*, trans. by Troy Wellington Smith, *The Bridge: Journal of the Danish American Heritage Society*, vol. 42, nos. 1-2, pp. 9-46.

⁵ Henning Fenger, *The Heibergs*, trans. by Frederick J. Marker, New York: Twayne 1971 (*Twayne’s World Authors Series*, vol. 105), p. 144.

⁶ Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003, p. 237.

⁷ “When Heiberg launched the *Flying Post* on January 1, 1827, he found no useful model for that which held his interest, modern prose fiction dealing with contemporary individuals and their problems.” Fenger, *Heibergs*, p. 142.

⁸ SKS 1, 21 / EPW, 65.

⁹ SKS 1, 32 / EPW, 76.

in 1846, his intent was to put down his pen and become a pastor.¹⁰ But, with a compulsion to write bordering on full-blown graphomania,¹¹ he, like the pseudonym Nicolaus Notabene of *Prefaces* (1844), soon discovered a means of circumventing this injunction. Whereas Notabene avoided being an author by writing prefaces,¹² he, Kierkegaard, would do so by reviewing books.¹³ The decision to devote his *A Literary Review* (1846) to *Two Ages* (1845),¹⁴ the capstone novel of the Author of *An Everyday Story*,¹⁵ would thus appear auspicious, as it brings Kierkegaard's book-production full circle. Hence, in *A Literary Review*, Kierkegaard explains,

What I first wrote contained, among other things, some reviewing words or rather an outpouring concerning these short stories. Since that time, I have never tried my hand as a reviewer. After seven years, it is then my wish—a second time, finally—to make an attempt and again with *An Everyday Story*. I have, what propriety still allows in relation to an anonym, a supposition of the possibility that the honored, unknown author in his time read the little pamphlet; if now he then again will do me the honor of reading these lines, I hope he shall find me unchanged or if possible changed in repetition: a little more clarity in presentation; a little more lightness in a flowing style; a little more slowness in knowledge of the task; a little more inwardness in discretion; that is, changed in repetition.¹⁶

Here *An Everyday Story* refers not to the novella of that title, but rather to the *oeuvre* of the Author of *An Everyday Story*, which now included *Two Ages*. Upon its publication, *A Literary Review* was forwarded to J. L. Heiberg, the accredited editor of *Two Ages*,¹⁷ and Kierkegaard received an obliging reply from the author, who nevertheless remained anonymous.¹⁸

¹⁰ *Pap.* VII-1 A 4 / JP 5, 5873.

¹¹ Joakim Garff, *Soren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. by Bruce H. Kirmmse, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005, pp. 458-459.

¹² *SKS* 4, 476 / P, 12.

¹³ *Pap.* VII-1 A 9 / JP 5, 5877.

¹⁴ Forfatteren til *En Hverdags-Historie* [Thomasine Gyllembourg], *To Tidsaldre. Novelle*, ed. by Johan Ludvig Heiberg, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 1845.

¹⁵ Although I will refer to *Two Ages* as a novel, since it stretches to almost 300 pages, it is actually subtitled a “short story” (*Novelle*). Here we might heed the words of Henning Fenger, who writes, “Novel, novelette, tale—these three terms . . . were in no sense distinct from one another during this period.” As we shall see in the foregoing, the Author of *An Everyday Story* chose this designation quite deliberately. Fenger, *Heibergs*, p. 143.

¹⁶ *SKS* 8, 26 / TA, 23.

¹⁷ *SKS* 28, 128 / LD, Letter 134.

¹⁸ *SKS* 28, 131-134 / LD, Letter 138.

In print, Kierkegaard takes for granted that the Author of *An Everyday Story* is a man, but he may have heard rumors that Thomasine Gyllembourg, Heiberg's mother, held the pen behind the anonym.¹⁹ Indeed, that Fru Gyllembourg was responsible for this widely beloved authorship was something of an open secret around Copenhagen.²⁰ But who was Thomasine Gyllembourg? And did her *Two Ages* serve as a genuine inspiration for Kierkegaard, or was it merely an occasion for his own speculations (as a number of scholars have alleged)? I will attempt to answer this first question in the next section, with the remainder of the essay devoted to the second question. In short, my thesis is that Kierkegaard's notion of levelling is informed by a vivid image from *Two Ages*.

I. Thomasine Gyllembourg

On November 9, 1773, Johan Buntzen and his wife, Anna Bolette, welcomed their first daughter into the world. She was named Thomasine. Although four more daughters would follow in the coming years, Thomasine remained the mother's favorite. According to Thomasine's sister Hanne, the emotional Anna Bolette lavished affection on the eldest daughter because she had taken the place of her first child, a son, who had not survived infancy. At the age of eight, Thomasine lost her mother, which caused her great psychic trauma. Now, in providing for the girls' education, the wealthy Herr Buntzen was exceedingly liberal (in both senses of the word), especially when compared to the standards of the time. In 1787, Peter Andreas Heiberg, the thirty-year-old author, translator, and republican *bel esprit*, was hired to serve as a language instructor for the daughters of the house. The next year, Heiberg would ask Buntzen for Thomasine's hand in marriage. This proposal received the approval of both father and daughter. On August 8, 1790, the wedding took place, and a son, the aforementioned Johan Ludvig Heiberg, was born on December 14 of the next year.²¹

But the marriage was far from happy. Not only was there a significant age difference between the two spouses—at the time of the wedding,

¹⁹ TA, Historical Introduction, p. vii.

²⁰ Katalin Nun, *Women of the Danish Golden Age: Literature, Theater and the Emancipation of Women*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 8), p. 12.

²¹ Klaus P. Mortensen, *Thomasines oprør – en familiehistorisk biografi om køn og kærlighed i forrige århundrede*, Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad 1986, pp. 17-20.

Thomasine was only 16, whereas Heiberg was 32—but they also had diametrically opposed temperaments; he was coolly rational, whereas she—like her mother—was prone to fiery, passionate outbursts. Thomasine found a more kindred spirit—indeed, he would become her soulmate—in Carl Frederik Gyllembourg-Ehrensward, a Swedish baron living in exile for conspiring in the assassination of his king, Gustav III.²² Heiberg—if he was not being ironic—played the tolerant husband, urging his wife, in regard to her friendship with the frequent houseguest, “Do in this respect as if I did not exist.”²³

Yet, if Heiberg had not run afoul of the Danish crown for his public outcry against bureaucratic corruption,²⁴ the relationship between Thomasine and Gyllembourg-Ehrensward would probably have remained unconsummated. Exiled from Denmark for life in 1799, Heiberg immigrated to Paris in 1800, unaccompanied by wife and son.²⁵ By June of that same year, Thomasine and Gyllembourg-Ehrensward had most likely commenced their extramarital affair.²⁶ In September, Thomasine sent her “*lettre remarquable*” to Heiberg in Paris, asking for a divorce. Not only did he reject the idea; he applied for permission to return home to Denmark. After Christian VII refused this plea and granted Thomasine her wish, she promptly wed Gyllembourg-Ehrensward.²⁷ This *cause célèbre* not only introduced Fru Gyllembourg to the Danish public as an opponent of conventional morality; it would also provide her with springs of Rousseauian passion from which she would draw in her later career as a writer.²⁸

As per the terms of the divorce, Thomasine lost her maternal rights to Ludvig. At first, he was put into the hands of Lise Iürgensen, one of Thomasine’s younger sisters, and then he was entrusted to Knud and Kamma Rahbek of Bakkehuset (the celebrated salon), before returning to his aunt’s.²⁹ When the Gyllembourg country estate burned down in March 1806, both mother and stepfather moved back to Copenhagen, and Ludvig joined their household on an unofficial basis, without the sanction of his father.³⁰

²² Mortensen, *Thomasines oprør*, pp. 24-26.

²³ Quoted in Mortensen, *Thomasines oprør*, p. 33.

²⁴ Fenger, *Heibergs*, p. 29.

²⁵ Nun, *Women*, p. 9.

²⁶ Mortensen, *Thomasines oprør*, p. 27.

²⁷ Nun, *Women*, pp. 9-10.

²⁸ Fenger, *Heibergs*, p. 38.

²⁹ Mortensen, *Thomasines oprør*, p. 88.

³⁰ Fenger, *Heibergs*, p. 43.

Reading and speaking French, German, Latin, and Greek as a boy, J. L. Heiberg was readily admitted to the University of Copenhagen in October 1809.³¹ A universal naturalist like Goethe or Hans Christian Ørsted, he formally studied mathematics and medicine, but also pursued zoology, entomology, as well as botany. His favorite scientific subject was astronomy,³² a field which Kierkegaard would later savage merely for its association with Heiberg,³³ who had begun as Kierkegaard's mentor but became his hated rival. Heiberg was also a man of letters, taking an MA in Spanish and Portuguese in 1817, soon followed by a doctoral dissertation in Latin on Calderón de la Barca.³⁴ Let us briefly follow Heiberg's career as a litterateur, as it is here that Thomasine Gyllembourg reemerges in the public eye, albeit behind her celebrated anonym.

After reuniting with his father during a three-year residency in Paris,³⁵ J. L. Heiberg accepted a lectureship at the University of Kiel in July 1822. Over the summer of 1824, he stayed in Berlin, where he met Hegel and his school.³⁶ Returning to Copenhagen in April 1825, Heiberg set about reforming Danish theatrical taste through his vaudevilles.³⁷ On another flank, with the aim of improving the culture and etiquette of the Danes, he began publishing his *Kjøbenhavns flyvende Post* on New Year's Day, 1827. That same month, Thomasine Gyllembourg, at the age of 53, debuted as an author in this same publication,³⁸ with a series of fictional letters to the editor that were later collected as *The Family Polonius*.³⁹ As stated above, her signature work, *An Everyday Story*, would appear in *Kjøbenhavns flyvende Post* the following year.

Fru Gyllembourg's prose fictions went hand in glove with her son's didactic project, as they were the first in the Danish language to successfully address middle-class life.⁴⁰ Although she adhered to this motif throughout her career, Gyllembourg would also concern herself with the historical

³¹ Ibid., p. 44.

³² Ibid., p. 53.

³³ E.g., *SKS* 7, 150 / *CUP1*, 161.

³⁴ Fenger, *Heibergs*, p. 56.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 62-63.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 71-72.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 78ff.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 142-143.

³⁹ [Thomasine] Gyllembourg-Ehrensward, *Familien Polonius*, in *Samlede Skrifter af Forf. til "En Hverdags-Historie,"* 2nd edition, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 1866, vol. 1, pp. 45-160.

⁴⁰ Fenger, *Heibergs*, pp. 144-145.

and the political in her culminating novel *Two Ages*, which juxtaposes the fervor of the revolutionary period with the levelling forces of liberalism in 1840s Copenhagen. As I will argue in the third and final section of this essay, Kierkegaard's distinct visualization of levelling is borrowed from Gyllembourg's *Two Ages*. Somewhat surprisingly, my position runs counter to the current state of the field, as the following report will demonstrate.

II. A Literature Review

As we learned in the introduction, Kierkegaard was an ardent admirer of the Author of *An Everyday Story*. Here is what he most appreciated about her *Two Ages*:

For this novel is indeed different from others in this, that it has a more substantial ground: each part its age in its specific difference. . . Here . . . the novel is established more universally in something, which is more essential than the production itself, while the production will really only give the reflection [*Gjenskinnet*]. As a premise, the novel has the age's particular totality, and the production is the reflection [*Reflex*] of this in domestic life; after the production, the idea turns back again to the totality of the age, which is now also revealed in this reflection [*Reflex*].⁴¹

It is this mirroring of the grand historical canvas in the domestic miniature that makes *Two Ages*, in my estimation, one of the great novels of the first half of the nineteenth century. Although it is practically unknown outside of Denmark, *Two Ages* deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as the masterpieces of Walter Scott and Jane Austen; in fact, with its technique of reflecting historical developments in daily life, *Two Ages* could be considered a seamless synthesis of these two preeminent British authors.

To offer just a single example of what this reflection looks like, I refer my reader to the first scene of the novel, which takes place in Copenhagen, in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Denmark has recently forged an alliance with republican France. The Danish capital is enlivened by the appearance of Frenchmen in the streets, and the merchant Waller has opened his home to the diplomatic envoys.⁴² One Sunday afternoon, when the French are elsewhere, this merchant sits around the table with his wife,

⁴¹ SKS 8, 32 / TA, 32.

⁴² [Gyllembourg], *To Tidsaldre*, pp. 3-5.

his niece, his nephew, a friend of the house, and his irascible brother, the councilor:

The servant walked around with a tray of coffee-cups and offered them to the gentlemen sitting in the circle. As he took one, the councilor said, "Well, in God's name! That, then, is also according to our new fashions! In the good old days, you all came around with sugar and cream in the cups; now we must inconvenience ourselves. At that time, one also got the cup properly full, but then, of course, it was indeed coffee, not extract, like this black mixture, which could stop a man's heart. May I ask for a cup of water?" he added.

Madame Waller reached for the water and said kindly, "Forgive me, dear brother-in-law! Someday I will remember how you want it."

She brought him the cup herself and added, "I fear that today in all respects I have been unlucky in meeting your taste, since I noticed at the table that you hardly tasted the food."

"Dear sister-in-law," answered the councilor courteously, as he kissed her fine little hand, "today your cooking was, as always, excellent, but I lost my appetite because we waited so long for our midday meal. You know well enough that in the good old days we ate dinner at two o'clock at the latest, instead of going to table at three o'clock and upwards, as we do now here in this house, according to the new French fashions."

"I am sorry, dear brother-in-law! But Waller has wanted this change. It has now become normal to eat later, and Waller's business of late—"

"Yes, and his acquaintances of late, and the accursed French manners of these confounded times, according to which you, for example, do not even dare to call your husband, as before, 'my husband,' or 'Peter,' which is his Christian name, but address him by his surname, 'Waller.' You should rather say 'Herr Waller.'"⁴³

Here the domestic is not an autonomous realm unto itself, but one that is shaken by the convulsions of world history. Instead of proper coffee, Madame Waller must serve coffee extract—due, no doubt, to wartime embargoes and shortages. Moreover, the revolutionary spirit has left its stamp on household routines and marital relations, as Waller has asked his wife to accommodate his French business partners by serving dinner at the time to which they are accustomed; and Madame Waller adopts what the councilor takes to be the French practice of referring to her husband by his last name.

Given that Kierkegaard perceptively noted that *Two Ages* had not just a domestic, but also a geopolitical dimension, it is strange that Gyllembourg

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

is not given much credit for having influenced the analytical third part of *A Literary Review*, entitled “Returns for the Observation of the Two Ages.”⁴⁴ In the introduction to his translation of *A Literary Review*, Alastair Hannay notes that Kierkegaard, in part 3, addresses the very same phenomena which are evident in part 2 of *Two Ages*, but he excepts levelling from this statement, claiming that “an allegory that he [Kierkegaard] uses to illustrate the sinister side of levelling, with its seat in the anonymous public, anticipates his own fate at the hands of *The Corsair* so closely that it may have been inserted at the last moment when those events had actually begun to unroll, making the streets of Copenhagen uninhabitable for him.”⁴⁵ To put it briefly, the *Corsair* affair refers to Kierkegaard’s clash with the satirical journal *Corsaren*, which he provoked into attacking his person in a series of articles and caricatures, thus making him the laughingstock of Copenhagen. Although, as we shall see, Kierkegaard will associate *Corsaren* with levelling in a journal entry, he derives neither the concept nor the imagery of levelling from the affair, as should soon be clear.

Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, who also made a translation of *A Literary Review* (but which they confusingly chose to retitl *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age, A Literary Review*), write, “Kierkegaard’s penetrating discussion of levelling, demonic anonymity, the loss of individuality and organic community in the irresponsible crowd, and the emptying of language in Part III of his review of *Two Ages* is an *independent* cultural analysis with the occasional aspect of the *Corsair* affair in the transmuted form of universality.”⁴⁶ Although I will not have the space in the next section to deal with all of the facets that the Honges mention, I can, in any case, affirm that levelling has by no means been grafted from the *Corsair* affair onto *Two Ages* in the *Review*; indeed, Kierkegaard’s particular portrayal of the force of levelling is inspired by an image from the novel, which we will come to shortly.

Nevertheless, citing Kierkegaard’s maxim that “great geniuses cannot really read a book because during reading they will constantly develop themselves more than understand the author,”⁴⁷ Hong and Hong assert that Kierkegaard, with *Two Ages*, is “using a book as an occasion for his own

⁴⁴ SKS 8, 58 / TA, 60.

⁴⁵ Alastair Hannay, “Translator’s Introduction” to *A Literary Review*, London: Penguin 2001, p. xxi.

⁴⁶ TA, Historical Introduction, p. x (my emphasis).

⁴⁷ SKS 17, 136, BB:46 / KJN 1, 131.

thinking.”⁴⁸ They are not wrong in this assumption; *Two Ages* provided Kierkegaard, from his perspective, with the opportunity to write a book without being an author. Kierkegaard, however, not only understood *Two Ages* quite well; he also seems to have appropriated its representation of levelling. Gyllembourg’s final novel, then, was more than a mere “occasion”; it provided a striking illustration of a sociopolitical development that Kierkegaard would approach head-on in part 3 of his *Review*.

Aside from Hannay and Hong and Hong, the only other scholar writing in English to discuss the precise relation (or lack thereof) between *Two Ages* and part 3 of *A Literary Review* is, to my knowledge, Katalin Nun, and she, too, discounts the role of the novel in that part of the *Review*. In the article “Thomasine Gyllembourg’s *Two Ages* and her Portrayal of Everyday Life,” Nun presents her argument as follows:

I will show that while Thomasine Gyllembourg gives an account of the changes which took place in certain aspects of the everyday life from the end of the 18th century to the 1840’s, Kierkegaard, by contrast, uses the ideas and issues of the novel to define the two ages by means of abstract theoretical terms in line with his own thought.⁴⁹

But one could contend that an “abstract theoretical” expression like levelling is perhaps something more concrete—indeed, it is fleshed out in *Two Ages*, as we shall see—and that Kierkegaard’s ideas, especially his political philosophy, should not be opposed to those of the Author of *An Everyday Story*. Indeed, according to Fenger, Gyllembourg, like J. L. Heiberg and Kierkegaard, rejected the “leveling tendencies” of “growing liberalism.”⁵⁰

Nun then cites the aforementioned anonymous letter from Gyllembourg to Kierkegaard:

I feel elevated by the honor you have shown me, and bashful that it is greater than my merits in literature could hope. On the one hand, it is a great recommendation for my little work that it has been able to give rise to a book like yours; but when I, on the other hand, look at my novel by the side of this book, so richly equipped with such profound, striking, and witty

⁴⁸ *TA*, Historical Introduction, p. xii.

⁴⁹ Katalin Nun, “Thomasine Gyllembourg’s *Two Ages* and her Portrayal of Everyday Life,” in *Kierkegaard and His Contemporaries: The Culture of Golden Age Denmark*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 2003 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 10), p. 273.

⁵⁰ Fenger, *Heibergs*, p. 151.

observations, then this novel seems to me like a simple romance, from which a poet has taken a subject and composed a drama.⁵¹

According to Nun,

These words suggest Thomasine Gyllembourg herself thought Kierkegaard used her text as a springboard for his own concerns. . . [H]e takes the issues of the novel and develops them into something completely different. As we have seen, Madame Gyllembourg writes about two concrete ages, the age of her youth and that of the 1840's. Her concern is not to characterize the ages in abstract terms but to illustrate how they influenced the concrete aspects of everyday life, customs, and behavior. Even if her characters have a representative function and even if behind the story there is also a general view of life, she concentrates throughout on concrete lives and on concrete existential problems.⁵²

There may be some false modesty in Gyllembourg's words to Kierkegaard, although that would certainly be difficult to prove. Instead, what should be addressed here is the false dichotomy between the "abstract" and the "representative," on the one hand, and the "concrete" and the "existential," on the other. Gyllembourg's novelistic art does not recognize these as hard-and-fast distinctions, as it consists precisely in the refraction of world-historical forces in the everyday.

Hence, in the prefatory address of "The Author to the Reader" in *Two Ages*, Gyllembourg writes,

The subject I have wanted to deal with is not the great events, which so violently shook the end of the previous century, and which still disturb our days, not that raging storms' reflection [*Gjenskin*] in our fatherland, nor the cold and foggy air that it has left, but only what I would call the domestic reflection [*Reflex*] of that, the effect that it has exerted on family life, in private relations, in individuals' opinions and views, an influence by which everyone, consciously or unconsciously, has been affected.⁵³

⁵¹ SKS 28, 131 / LD, Letter 138.

⁵² Nun, "Gyllembourg's *Two Ages*," p. 295. Katalin Nun, "Thomasine Gyllembourg: Kierkegaard's Appreciation of the Everyday Stories and *Two Ages*," in *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries*, Tome III, *Literature, Drama and Aesthetics*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Farnham: Ashgate 2009 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 7), p. 164. Nun, *Women*, p. 39.

⁵³ [Gyllembourg], *To Tidsaldre*, pp. v-vi.

Quite interestingly, as Gyllembourg explains to her reader, *Two Ages* is a short story (*Novelle*)—and not a novel (*Roman*)—not because of its length, but because of its unpretentious content.⁵⁴ As Klaus P. Mortensen suggests, “it was important for [Gyllembourg] . . . to make it clear that the everyday stories were not a trespass on masculine territory. The great, public ‘lofty subjects’ are not their affair, only the conditions of the everyday.”⁵⁵ Or so she would want us to think. But I would argue that Gyllembourg does in fact address these so-called “lofty subjects,” even if the reader only catches glimpses of them in the mirror of the domestic sphere.⁵⁶

It is by no means my aim to reinscribe a hierarchy in which impersonal philosophical and political forces are somehow superior to the intimate experiences of family life. Nonetheless, I believe it discredits Gyllembourg as a novelist to assert that she was not attending to these forces with the same keen interest that she devoted to the everyday, albeit at something of a remove. As I will show in the third and final section, the author of *Two Ages* depicts a mundane instance of levelling, and gives one of her characters a pithy metaphor for this phenomenon. Levelling, then, is not transposed onto the novel by Kierkegaard in his *Review*. To the contrary, in elaborating his conceptualization of this socio-political force, it would appear that Kierkegaard adapts imagery from Gyllembourg’s masterpiece.

III. Levelling

First, it should be noted that the Danish verb *nivellere* (“to level”) and its variants do appear in Kierkegaard’s published corpus prior to

⁵⁴ Gyllembourg restates a passage from the “Interimsblade” of *Kjøbenhavns flyvende Post*, no. 31: “I certainly realize that there are loftier subjects, but it seems to me as if these could easily lead outside of the short story’s boundaries; and, in any case, I do not dream of being able to fly like the eagle to the regions where the naked eye cannot follow; but the author of *An Everyday Story* builds his nest on people’s houses like the swallow, and there he raises his unassuming song.” [Gyllembourg], *To Tidsaldre*, p. viii.

⁵⁵ Mortensen, *Thomasines oprør*, p. 154.

⁵⁶ It should be mentioned that Nun writes about the supposed non-relation between part 3 of *A Literary Review* and Gyllembourg’s final novel in a more recent monograph, namely, 2013’s *Women of the Danish Golden Age: Literature, Theater and the Emancipation of Women*, but here the rhetoric against *A Literary Review* is only sharpened: “[O]n the one hand, the work is supposed to be a review of a text about the everyday life of the time. On the other hand, as shown, the novel merely serves as a point of departure for Kierkegaard to develop his own theories which, in the end, have nothing directly to do with the text under review.” Nun, *Women*, p. 41.

A Literary Review,⁵⁷ but that the nouns *Nivellering* and *Nivelleringen* (literally, “levelling” and “the levelling,” respectively, but both are usually translated as “levelling”) do not emerge in print before this work. More importantly, although Kierkegaard fleetingly conceives of levelling as a political phenomenon in *Fear and Trembling* (1843),⁵⁸ in *A Literary Review* levelling not only receives a far more extensive treatment; it is also evoked metaphorically in a manner redolent of Gyllembourg’s *Two Ages*. We can thus maintain that the novel, in at least this one respect, had a significant impact on part 3 of the *Review*, contrary to the current scholarly consensus.

As said before, part 2 of *Two Ages* takes place in the 1840s, some 40 years after the scene around the coffee-table cited above. In part 1, Claudine, Waller’s niece, falls in love with Charles Lusard, an aristocratic French soldier, and has a son by him. Refusing to give up her child or her commitment to Lusard, Claudine holds out in a quiet country refuge until she is finally reunited with her lover. They then marry and retire to the latter’s country estate. At the start of part 2, we find Claudine and Lusard resting in their graves on the estate. Their son, Charles Lusard de Montalbert, has returned to his ancestral home after traveling the world. Without a family and at loose ends, he decides to go to Copenhagen in the hopes of finding an heir to share in his good fortune. Towards that end, he visits the home of Christian Waller, commercial councilor and son of the aforementioned merchant in part 1. Christian Waller is married to a woman who frequently flirts with the young men who visit her, such as a certain Hr. Arnold, who, in the following scene, espouses a radical levelling:

[A]nother couple of guests had turned up. They were keeping themselves to the cabinet with the lady of the house, and it must have seemed as if there was something in the air that day, for these two were already in a lively argument. One was Hr. Arnold, the other a somewhat older yet still young military man. They were in such zealous spirits, they did not in the least cut short the thread of their conversation at the appearance of Lusard and the commercial councilor, though the officer said to Arnold, “Surely you would never dare claim he is a bad or simply mediocre poet? Can you be in earnest?”

“No,” shouted Arnold, “to tell you the truth, I was not in earnest but, all joking aside, I would gladly lend a hand to overthrow him and anyone else

⁵⁷ SKS 1, 137 / CI, 79. SKS 4, 155 / FT, 62. SKS 7, 407n / CUP1, 448n.

⁵⁸ “It is easy enough to level all of existence with the idea of the state or an idea of society.” SKS 4, 155 / FT, 62.

usurping a greater or lesser throne on Parnassus, and standing in the way of those fresh, young talents, who are then unable to get on in the world.”

“If they are any good, it is very likely they will get on in the world, just as their predecessors did; and, if they are no good, then it is truly creditable if someone can turn them away from the Grove of the Muses before it becomes completely submerged.”⁵⁹

Here the Author of *An Everyday Story* reciprocates a tip of the hat from Kierkegaard. In *From the Papers of One Still Living*, Kierkegaard had praised Gyllembourg’s anonym, and scoffed at the parvenu Andersen, who, in his novel *Only a Fiddler* (1837), had suggested (or had his narrator suggest) that even geniuses require nurture to achieve their full potential. According to Andersen’s narrator, “Genius is an egg that needs warmth for the fertilization of good fortune, or it becomes a wind egg.”⁶⁰ In response, Kierkegaard cries out incredulously in *From the Papers*, “Really, genius needs warmth! Genius shall have the help of women [*gaae Skjorteveien*]!”⁶¹ Gyllembourg’s military man rehearses the argument of *From the Papers*, as he, like Kierkegaard, maintains that talented writers will have no trouble supporting themselves by their craft.

Arnold then proposes an artistic socialism that would severely narrow the distinctions between master and apprentice:

“Yet, in the Grove of the Muses, freedom should surely reign, and not respect for persons. This aristocracy of art or literary aristocracy is not one hair better than the one fought against in the state. Through the name they once had, these literary celebrities usurp not only the pecuniary advantage, both in the bookshop and in the theater, that could provide a younger author with a happy and pleasant youth; but, what is worse, they also usurp the fame that is the goal of this youth’s endeavors, and which would cause his wings to grow. Is that fair? Is this the freedom and equality the world has fought for so many years now? I am addressing myself to you, Hr. de Montalbert! Freedom and equality must no doubt be hallowed ideas for you, since your late father has sacrificed life and limb for them.”

“Since you ask,” replied Lusard, “I will frankly confess that my father would—as they say—spin in his grave if he heard that the freedom and equality he has given life and limb for should be to deny the worker his wages, or the most deserving his laurels—to chop off the heads rising above the crowd so that everyone can be equally tall. Such an equality is rejected by nature

⁵⁹ [Gyllembourg], *To Tidsaldre*, pp. 257-258.

⁶⁰ H. C. Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand. Original Roman i tre Dele*, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 1837, vol. 1, p. 161.

⁶¹ *SKS* 1, 36n / *EPW*, 81n.

herself, or rather the higher power, the spirit assigns us our lot, according to a will we do not understand. It does not give everyone equal gifts; we are not born equal.”⁶²

Responding on behalf of his late father, Lusard *filis* distinguishes between a universal human equality—the affirmation of which was the goal the French Revolution, as he understands it—and an enforced levelling of individual material circumstances. Although envy (*Misundelse*) does not appear explicitly in the passage above, the perceptive reader should be able to attribute this emotion to Arnold. As Kierkegaard writes in *A Literary Review*, “Envy, in *establishing* itself, is *levelling* . . .”⁶³

By using decapitation as a metaphor for this negation of personal difference (“so that everyone can be equally tall”), Lusard the younger evokes the bloody excesses of the Terror, which had targeted France’s worldly and spiritual elites. Although Nun claims that “leveling . . . appear[s] nowhere in Thomasine Gyllembourg’s text and ha[s] in fact nothing to do with it,”⁶⁴ this passage proves that levelling is indeed present in *Two Ages*, even if it does not appear by name.⁶⁵ Moreover, it would seem that Kierkegaard was struck by Gyllembourg’s articulation of levelling, as he uses it—or so it would appear—for his own purposes in *A Literary Review*. But whereas Lusard de Montalbert describes the beheading of those who stand “above the crowd,” Kierkegaard imagines the possibility of a better sort of equality; he believes that everyone has the opportunity to avoid levelling and, in turn, to be elevated to the aristocracy of the spirit. He writes, “[L]ook, the sharp scythe of levelling permits everybody, each in particular, to jump over the blade—look, God awaits! So jump, then, into the Deity’s embrace.”⁶⁶ This horticultural implement is perhaps somewhat different from the guillotine, whose long shadow looms over Lusard de Montalbert’s speech, but both examples share the image of a keen edge poised to level off the populace.

⁶² [Gyllembourg], *To Tidsaldre*, pp. 258-259.

⁶³ SKS 8, 80 / TA, 84.

⁶⁴ Nun, “Gyllembourg’s *Two Ages*,” p. 294. Cfr. Nun, *Women*, p. 38.

⁶⁵ Citing an undated 1846 passage from Kierkegaard’s *Papirer*, in which Kierkegaard associates *Corsaren* with levelling, Nun asserts that the idea of levelling took shape around Kierkegaard’s nasty run-in with the satirical paper. But, since Kierkegaard had already read *Two Ages* by this time (see TA, Historical Introduction, p. ix), it is more likely that he appropriated levelling from *Two Ages*, and then applied this concept to his experience with *Corsaren*. Nun, “Gyllembourg’s *Two Ages*,” p. 294. Nun, *Women*, p. 38. See *Pap.* VII 1 B 43 / COR, Supplement, p. 176.

⁶⁶ SKS 8, 103 / TA, 108.

Even just this one strong affinity between *Two Ages* and *A Literary Review* should be enough to demonstrate that Kierkegaard did not choose the novel arbitrarily, as one of any number of possible opportunities, his own words on the matter notwithstanding.⁶⁷ To the contrary, it is evident that he found something immensely valuable in Gyllembourg *qua* political thinker, as a critic of levelling. That is not say that Gyllembourg's careful chronicling of historical and contemporary family life should be forgotten or overlooked. Indeed, the domestic realm is integral to *Two Ages*, and, to repeat, I do not want to privilege the novel's political and philosophical elements over the author's ongoing commitment to the everyday, especially since these elements are usually fused with one another. Instead, my purpose in writing this essay has been to show that the relation between *Two Ages* and *A Literary Review*, far from being merely superficial, is grounded in the robust conceptualization of levelling that Kierkegaard owes to Gyllembourg.

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⁶⁷ In an entry dated February 1846, Kierkegaard asks himself, “[W]hat if in the future I now decided for that crumb of productivity I can indulge, to do it in the form of criticism, so I would lay down what I had to say in reviews that would unwind my thoughts out one or another publication, so that they really could also lie in the publication. Then I would still avoid being an author.” Kierkegaard, of course, can be notoriously chary when it comes to crediting his sources of inspiration. And while he may have approached *Two Ages* with his own agenda in mind, he soon found himself indebted to Gyllembourg for her treatment of levelling. *SKS* 18, 279, JJ:419 / *KJN* 2, 258.

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