

A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF KIERKEGAARD'S LITERARY REVIEW OF  
THOMASINE GYLLEMBOURG'S NOVEL *TWO AGES*

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*Abstract*

Kierkegaard's literary review of Madam Gyllembourg's anonymous novel *Two Ages* can be seen from a feminist perspective as being both appreciative and critical of her work. He praises the (presumably male) author's artistry for its persuasiveness, impartiality, psychological characterizations, and non-judgmental life-view rooted in actuality as reflected in domestic life in the age of revolution and the present age but offers his own religious interpretation of the two ages in terms of passion and reflection, individuality and sociality, associating these characteristics with both women and men in agreement with some feminists and in contrast to the stereotyped views of woman and man in the novel.

*Keywords:* Feminism, passion, reflection, age of revolution, present age, religious lifeview.

*Resumen*

La reseña literaria que Kierkegaard hace de la novela anónima de Madame Gyllembourg, *Dos épocas*, puede interpretarse desde una perspectiva feminista tanto como un comentario positivo o como una crítica de su obra. Kierkegaard alaba el talento (supuestamente masculino) del autor por su persuasión, imparcialidad y descripciones psicológicas, y por la ecuánime visión de vida arraigada en la realidad tal como se refleja en la vida doméstica en la época de la revolución y en la época presente; no obstante, ofrece su propia interpretación religiosa de las dos épocas en términos de pasión y reflexión, individualidad y comunidad, y relaciona estas características con hombres y mujeres en consonancia con algunas feministas y en contraste con las visiones estereotípicas de hombre y mujer presentes en la novela.

*Palabras clave:* Feminismo, pasión, reflexión, época de la revolución, época presente, visión de vida religiosa.

Kierkegaard's literary review of Thomasine Gyllembourg's novel *Two Ages* provides an excellent example by which the reader can discern his attitude toward a fellow writer of the time who is a woman. It is therefore an especially important text from among his many works to consider from a feminist standpoint. It should be noted at the outset, however, that feminism is a diverse phenomenon which does not speak in a single voice but includes a range of different approaches to questions concerning the interpretation of woman and her relation to man on such topics as nurture and nature, sameness and difference, subjectivity and objectivity, femininity and masculinity, passion and reflection, community and individualism, with the emphasis in western society generally favoring the latter of each of these terms and associating them in particular with men.<sup>1</sup> Instead of going into detail on the variety of feminist views on these issues or aligning myself with a particular feminist perspective, however, in the present essay I shall focus on Kierkegaard's largely positive assessment of the author of *Two Ages* and the view of woman it presents which merit both approval as well as some critique from a feminist perspective.

The first thing to be noted in this regard is the deep appreciation Kierkegaard shows of Madam Gyllembourg (1773-1856) as a writer. Although her novels were published anonymously by her son J. L. Heiberg, who was a leading poet, dramatist, and literary critic in Denmark of the time, according to one assessment she was "the most important Danish female author of the Golden Age," having written 24 novels and stories as well as numerous plays, all being composed after she was 54 years old.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of these approaches and issues see my essays "Subjectivity versus Objectivity: Kierkegaard's *Postscript* and Feminist Epistemology," *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. by Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1997, pp. 267-85; "The Philosophical Affirmation of Gender Differences: Kierkegaard versus Postmodern Neo-Feminism," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 1988, pp. 18-26; "Kierkegaard's Erotic Hermeneutics as a Proto-Feminist Alternative to Hegelian, Nietzschean, and Derridean-Deconstructive Hermeneutics," *Søren Kierkegaard and the Word(s): Essays on Hermeneutics and Communication*, ed. by Poul Houe and Gordon D. Marino, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2003, pp.71-80; "Issues That Divide: Interpreting Kierkegaard on Woman and Gender," *Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series 1*, ed. by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Jon Stewart, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 1997, pp. 191-205. See also Jane Duran, "The Kierkegaardian Feminist," in *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, pp. 249-65.

<sup>2</sup> See Katalin Nun, "Thomasine Gyllembourg's *Two Ages* and her Portrayal of Everyday Life," *Kierkegaard and His Contemporaries: The Culture of Golden Age Denmark*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 2003, p. 272. See also Grethe Kjær, "Thomasine Gyllembourg: Author of *A Story of Everyday Life*," *International Ki-estudios Kierkegaardianos*. Revista de filosofía 7 (2021)

*Two Ages*, her last novel, was published in 1845. While this novel focuses on two women characters who are seen as representative of two different generations, namely the age of revolution and the present age, it would be too much to say that it presents a feminist view of woman inasmuch as the author was opposed to the emancipation of women and lived at a time when writing was not considered an appropriate vocation for a woman, hence the anonymous character of her writings.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the age of feminism in Denmark began with a younger generation of writers such as Mathilde Fibiger (1830-1872), Fredrika Bremer (1801-1865), Camilla Collett (1813-1895), Athalia Schwartz (1821-1871), and Pauline Worm (1825-1883).<sup>4</sup> One of Fibiger's works was roundly criticized by Kierkegaard in an unpublished review in which he associates the emancipation of women with the refusal of the main female character to marry a man as a husband but only as a brother—an action so original that Kierkegaard regards it as “almost indecent” and “theatrical.”<sup>5</sup> He thus shared Madame Gyllembourg's negative view of female emancipation. Frederikke Bremer is also criticized in his journals, being called a “smug spinster” and “silly tramp” for supporting his arch opponent Bishop Martensen on a theological matter.<sup>6</sup>

Having already read one of Madame Gyllembourg's earlier novels, *A Story of Everyday Life*, Kierkegaard spends a good part of the Introduction to his review of *Two Ages* heaping praise upon the anonymous author of that work, whom he assumes is a man. Dedicating his review to this presumably male author, the first thing he notices about the author of *Two Ages* is the degree to which he has remained the same with regard to the life-view sustained in these earlier stories, thereby producing “change within the creative repetition” of that perspective by maintaining a “closeness to the

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*erkegaard Commentary: Early Polemical Writings*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press 1999, pp.87-108.

<sup>3</sup> Nun, “Thomasine Gyllembourg's *Two Ages* and her Portrayal of Everyday Life,” p. 275.

<sup>4</sup> SKS 24, 63 / JP 6: 6709. See also Julia Watkin, “Serious Jest? Kierkegaard as Young Polemicist in ‘Defense’ of Women,” *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Early Polemical Writings*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press 1999, pp. 7-25; Kjær, “Thomasine Gyllembourg: Author of *A Story of Everyday Life*,” p. 102; Nun, “Thomasine Gyllembourg's *Two Ages* and her Portrayal of Everyday Life,” p. 284; Birgit Bertung, “Yes, A Woman Can Exist,” *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. by Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1997, pp. 51-67, and Birgit Bertung, *Om Kierkegaard, kvinder og kærlighed—en studie i Søren Kierkegaards kvindesyn*, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag 1987, pp. 52-61.

<sup>5</sup> SKS 24, 63 / JP 6:6709.

<sup>6</sup> SKS 22, 157 / JP 6: 6493.

actuality of daily life and the same distance in elevation, the same closeness to the conflict, the same distance in understanding.”<sup>7</sup> While the author’s life-view does not constitute a religious life-view, which Kierkegaard personally favors, he at least has a specific life-view (an advantage the author has over novelists in general, Kierkegaard notes critically) which “lies on the boundary of the esthetic and in the direction of the religious” inasmuch as it is acquainted with and knows the way out of the pain of actuality by becoming reconciled with actuality itself.<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard also notes that the author’s life-view has “a certain religious tinge” inasmuch as it “is not merely common sense but common sense mitigated and refined by persuasive feeling and imagination.”<sup>9</sup>

Persuasion is the quality for which the author receives the greatest praise from Kierkegaard, who recognizes and applauds his ability to persuade the reader by leading him or her into the world the life-view of the novel “creatively supports,” namely an affirmation of actuality, which is done by recognizing first of all the difficulty of change and then providing moral support until a new beginning is gained.<sup>10</sup> Persuasion is important, Kierkegaard observes, because it presupposes that “there is a difficulty, an obstacle, an opposition” that must be overcome which the author starts with in order to clear away the past, whereas religion “is unable to persuade for the very reason that it presupposes a new beginning.”<sup>11</sup> Even so, he suggests that those who “seek the decisive category of religiousness... will scarcely be tempted to discard the persuasive; on the contrary they will know both how to honor it and to appreciate it.”<sup>12</sup>

Kierkegaard also credits the author with having gained “a second maturity” in his own life which makes his writing neither “an element in his own development” nor a work of “genius, talent, or virtuosity” but “a work of interiority” that is “twice matured” by having won “something eternal” in the form of a life-view that enables him to be a guide to others rather than merely self-seeking.<sup>13</sup> As Kierkegaard sees it, “precisely by excluding his person” the author is able “to enter into an almost personal relationship with his readers in a cozy, friendly way.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in Kierkegaard’s

<sup>7</sup> SKS 8, 17, 18 / TA, 14, 16.

<sup>8</sup> SKS 8, 17 / TA, 14.

<sup>9</sup> SKS 8, 23 / TA, 21.

<sup>10</sup> SKS 8, 22 / TA, 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> SKS 8, 23 / TA, 20.

<sup>12</sup> SKS 8, 24 / TA, 22.

<sup>13</sup> SKS 8, 18-19 / TA, 15-16.

<sup>14</sup> SKS 8, 20 / TA, 17.

view the author's novel "is not only a consummate story but a novel of consummation" inasmuch as it advances a life-view that is "changed but in repetition," providing "an occasion for inwardness" in the way it maintains "the same almost feminine resignation... the same modesty of bearing, the same remoteness from uproar and the demands of the age, the same domesticity and faithful adherence to a Danish reading public."<sup>15</sup> For this reason, Kierkegaard concludes, *A Story of Everyday Life* has maintained its appeal to both the older and younger generations of that public. We may note too that, from his point of view, it reflects a typically feminine view of life, which is in keeping with the author's true identity but unusual for a male writer.

Kierkegaard turns next to a survey of the contents of Madam Gyllembourg's *Two Ages*, which is divided into two parts, the first part being set in the Age of the French Revolution and the second in the Present Age. He gives a brief outline of each part with a focus on two female characters, Claudine and Mariane, who are the chief subjects of the novel. Claudine is seen as being representative of the main idea of the Age of Revolution, namely passion, while Mariane is representative of the main idea of the Present Age, namely reflection, in the context of the domestic life of the age in which each character lives. What is most notable in this account is the sympathetic view Kierkegaard takes of each woman in describing the way she falls victim to the idea of the age in which she lives. Reflecting "the age's loose views of marriage," Claudine incurs a moral lapse by having a secret love affair with a military officer and giving birth to a child out of wedlock as a result.<sup>16</sup> Feeling isolated and in despair, she attempts suicide at first, then leaves the city after being forced from the home of her uncle and lives nine years in the countryside in recollection of her lover, atoning for her mistake by remaining faithful to herself, her child, and her lover by the "fervor of her devotion" to them, for which she is ultimately rewarded by being re-united with him.<sup>17</sup>

This faithfulness is repeated in the present age by her female counterpart, Mariane, a daughter of the same father's first marriage who is badly treated by him and his second wife. Involved in a secret love affair with a young man who, unknown to him, has been designated as the heir of Claudine's son, Charles Lusard, she resists the latter's advances in order to remain faithful to her lover, Ferdinand Bergland, who is unwilling to marry

<sup>15</sup> SKS 8, 19 / TA, 16.

<sup>16</sup> SKS 8, 27 / TA, 26.

<sup>17</sup> SKS 8, 28 / TA, 27-28.

her “out of fear of financial difficulties.”<sup>18</sup> When it is finally revealed who he is, the lovers are united in marriage and live happily in the castle that belonged to his father. Despite the author’s characterization of the present age, which Kierkegaard describes as “manifestly nondescript, thus trivial, formless, superficial, obsequious” and “superficial,” the novel ends with Mariane’s husband declaring: “I am happy to live in an age that despite its deficiencies make such great advances in so many directions. I subscribe to the faith that the human race, no doubt through many ups and downs, nevertheless will steadfastly approach the goal of perfection conceivable for an earthly existence.”<sup>19</sup> Kierkegaard thus concludes that “the reflection of the present age in domestic life is depicted but not judged” by the author, nor is hope for the future denied.<sup>20</sup>

Having provided a brief overview of the contents of Madam Gyllembourg’s novel in the opening chapter of his review, Kierkegaard engages in a lengthy esthetic interpretation and critique of the novel and its details in the next chapter. Here he notes that “what distinguishes this novel from others is that it has a more substantial basis; that is, each part has its age with its specific distinctiveness,” whereas “[as] a rule a novel has only the pictorial background.”<sup>21</sup> He also notes that “the novel is more universally grounded in something that is more essential even than the production itself,” namely that it “has as its premise the distinctive totality of the age, the reflection of which may be seen in the domestic life of the characters.”<sup>22</sup> He observes, however, that the author “did not intend to describe the age itself” but rather to situate the novel “somewhere between the presupposed distinctive character of the age and the age of reflection” in the characters of the novel.<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard thus takes as the principle of his esthetic critique the question of whether a girl like Claudine or Mariane can appear as “*typical*” of the age in which she lives.<sup>24</sup> From an esthetic point of view, he observes:

it is particularly in Part II that the author develops his mastery in exposition and description, his powers of observation, his balanced and dignified faithful reproduction of actuality, knowing how to keep even the worst of human

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<sup>18</sup> SKS 8, 31 / TA, 30.

<sup>19</sup> SKS 8, 31-32 / TA, 31.

<sup>20</sup> SKS 8, 32 / TA, 31.

<sup>21</sup> SKS 8, 32 / TA, 32.

<sup>22</sup> SKS 8, 32 / TA, 33.

<sup>23</sup> SKS 8, 32 / TA, 33.

<sup>24</sup> SKS 8, 33 / TA, 33.

foibles and trivialities in such perspective that it remains what it is, triviality and coarseness itself, knows how to invest it with such authenticity that it becomes interesting precisely for that reason.<sup>25</sup>

He goes on to observe that even the most subordinate characters “come alive to the reader” through the transparency, realism, and vividness of characterization as a result of the author’s “sense of proportion” and “his interest in actual human beings in the context of sympathy and a life-view.”<sup>26</sup>

The second esthetic characteristic of the novel which Kierkegaard finds commendable is the *impartiality* it exhibits toward the two ages described in it, although he suggests that the author shows a “*possible preference*” for the revolutionary age over the present age inasmuch as “*the characters of Part II stand out more clearly*” so as to be “audible, visible, and recognizable,” whereas those of Part I “*are more concealed in the intensity of a more universal passion*” which indicates that it is the *actual preference* of the author by virtue of his “greater artistry in depicting it.”<sup>27</sup> In the reviewer’s estimation, however, “the mastery of the author consists precisely in being able to give each side its due” and to do so in such an unobtrusive way that the difference between inwardness and exhibitionism is made plain without ever being directly distinguished by the author.<sup>28</sup> In short, the reviewer concludes that the impartiality expressed in the novel may be summed up by saying that Part I is “more *captivating*” while Part II is “more *entertaining*.”<sup>29</sup>

Kierkegaard turns next to what he regards as the author’s “superb characterization” of the psychological development of the main characters in *Two Ages* which control the crucial events that shape the respective ages in which they live.<sup>30</sup> Here he notes that “the author does not dare to present the age as having automatic consequences in the individuals,” as that would “transgress his task as novelist” by merely describing the age and illustrating it by examples “instead of viewing the reflection in domestic life and through it illuminating the age.”<sup>31</sup> He thus proceeds to examine each of the major characters in both parts to show how this is so. The characteristic that psychologically motivates Claudine’s romanticism is passion, which is described in the following manner:

<sup>25</sup> SKS 8, 33 / TA, 33.

<sup>26</sup> SKS 8, 33 / TA, 33.

<sup>27</sup> SKS 8, 34-35 / TA, 34-35.

<sup>28</sup> SKS 8, 35 / TA, 35.

<sup>29</sup> SKS 8, 39 / TA, 39.

<sup>30</sup> SKS 8, 41 / TA, 41.

<sup>31</sup> SKS 8, 41 / TA, 41.

All passion is like sailing: the wind must be sufficiently forceful to stretch the sail with one *uno tenore* [continuous] gust, there must not be too much flapping of the sails and tacking before reaching deep water, there must not be too many preliminaries and prior consultations. It is a matter of passion getting the power and dominion to take complete control of the unprepared.<sup>32</sup>

As Kierkegaard sees it, the art of “letting go with passion” constitutes “the romantic element in the author’s planned situations” in Part I.<sup>33</sup> He commends the “ingenuity” of the author in knowing how “to plot the relationships” so as “to give the romantic element predominance.”<sup>34</sup> With regard to Claudine, for example, “the psychological premises” that motivate her lapse from virtue “in turn motivate her constancy, for her mistake and her virtue are essentially the same romanticism.”<sup>35</sup> Two other characters in Part I who are also engaged in an illicit affair, namely Dalund and Mrs. Waller, are seen as reflecting conventional views of man and woman. Dalund is described as “exercising a refining and absolute influence expressive of his masculine and personal superiority” while Mrs. Waller reflects the typical behavior of a woman in being able to perceive the illicitness of their relationship only through him but becomes “erotically desperate” through her feminine drive so as “to allow her to forget that it was illicit.”<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to the passionate romanticism that motivates Claudine in Part I, the psychological presupposition which motivates Mariane, the main character of Part II, is seen as consisting in “a quiet inwardness” that is identified with “the life of falling and being in love.”<sup>37</sup> For her, however, “the love affair is not a beckoning signal but rather a withdrawal into inwardness” in order to dedicate herself to the suffering she has endured from the world of actuality in an environment that “exacerbates the daily harms and hurts” of her life.<sup>38</sup> “Troubled by reflection,” all she can do is to wait patiently in a manner which, according to the reviewer, has been “superbly” depicted by the author in an “accurate and fitting” manner.<sup>39</sup> Mariane’s lover, Ferdinand

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<sup>32</sup> SKS 8, 42-43 / TA, 43. On passion in *Two Ages*, see also John W. Elrod, “Passion, Reflection, and Particularity in *Two Ages*,” *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*, vol. 14, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984, pp. 1-18; Robert C. Roberts, “Passion and Reflection,” pp. 87-106 in the same volume.

<sup>33</sup> SKS 8, 43 / TA, 43.

<sup>34</sup> SKS 8, 44 / TA, 44.

<sup>35</sup> SKS 8, 44 / TA, 45.

<sup>36</sup> SKS 8, 46 / TA, 46.

<sup>37</sup> SKS 8, 48 / TA, 48, 49.

<sup>38</sup> SKS 8, 49, 50 / TA, 50, 51.

<sup>39</sup> SKS 8, 51 / TA, 51.



Bergland, is seen as reflecting the typical male fear of marriage, which in the reviewer's opinion constitutes "an expression of weakness" on his part.<sup>40</sup> Kierkegaard notes once again "how accurate and fitting everything is" with regard to the author's psychological delineation and reflection of the present age, which in his opinion "is essentially devoid of passion from the standpoint of inwardness and the romantic."<sup>41</sup> Concomitantly, Mrs. Waller is further described in a composite manner as being charming, lovable, smartly dressed, demure, cultured, and shrewd, yet tiresome, inane, ostentatious, superficial, conceited, and ambivalent, thereby eliciting praise from the reviewer for the admirable and masterful way in which the author knows how "to control a glittering and delusive weakness such as this" as well as the ease, naturalness, and art with which he illuminates her "lack of character in the momentary mirror of reflection."<sup>42</sup> "[W]hatever one thinks of representing an age by such a feminine figure," he concludes, "one thing is certain, the character is a masterpiece in the portrayal of superficiality, masterful all the way to the most insignificant detail."<sup>43</sup> Kierkegaard goes on to observe that Mariane's lover, Charles Lusard, is also "not wholly unaffected by the reflectiveness of the present age" inasmuch as his melancholy reveals "a romantic enclosing reserve" which indicates that he is already "living in recollection," although he is essentially "not part of either age" inasmuch as the idea he represents "is essentially alien to both ages."<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard sums up his esthetic interpretation of the novel with the following observation: "The amazing thing about the novel is that everything is so categorically true" even though it may seem "unpretentious" to a superficial reader and thus not as remarkable as the reviewer makes it out to be.<sup>45</sup>

The final section of Kierkegaard's review, consisting of 53 pages in the English translation in contrast to a total of 59 pages for all of the other sections combined, focuses on the conclusions which may be drawn from Madame Gyllembourg's novel. In this section Kierkegaard presents his own analysis of the two ages represented in it, the length of which indicates that it is this aspect of the novel which really interests him and motivates him to write a review of it. It would appear, then, that it is not so much the novel itself but the possibility it presents for Kierkegaard to develop his

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<sup>40</sup> SKS 8, 51 / TA, 52.

<sup>41</sup> SKS 8, 52 / TA, 53.

<sup>42</sup> SKS 8, 52-53 / TA, 53-54.

<sup>43</sup> SKS 8, 55 / TA, 55.

<sup>44</sup> SKS 8, 56-57 / TA, 57-58.

<sup>45</sup> SKS 8, 57 TA, 58.

own thought concerning the two ages represented in it that is of primary importance to him. Moreover, within this section only 7 and 1/2 pages are devoted to the age of revolution, while the present age receives 45 and 1/2 pages of consideration, indicating that the main period of interest to Kierkegaard is the latter one. In the short section on the age of revolution he focuses on “the consequences in which its concept is reflected” in “a general way” that corresponds “to the details of the author’s fictional presentation.”<sup>46</sup> These are listed in nine paragraphs, all but two of which begin with the same statement, “The age of revolution is essentially passionate,” followed each time by a different characteristic of the age resulting from that passion, namely the presence of form, culture, the absence of crudeness, propriety, a reactionary immediacy, revelation, and a non-nullification of the principle of contradiction.<sup>47</sup>

The present age, by contrast, is described as being “essentially a *sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence.*”<sup>48</sup> Noting that “the single individual... has not fomented enough passion in himself to tear himself out of the web of reflection and the seductive ambiguity of reflection,” Kierkegaard views his own age as engaging in “flashes of enthusiasm alternating with apathetic indolence” which indicate that “[a]s an age without passion it has no assets of feeling in the erotic, no assets of enthusiasm and inwardness in politics and religion, no assets of domesticity, piety, and appreciation in daily life and social life.”<sup>49</sup> Consequently “there is no hero, no lover, no thinker, no knight of faith, no great humanitarian, no person in despair to vouch for their validity by having primitively experienced them.”<sup>50</sup> Whereas “a passionate, tumultuous age wants to overthrow everything,” an age that is “devoid of passion... lets everything remain but subtly drains the meaning out of it” so as to be “impaired by a gnawing reflection” that results in a lack of character or inwardness in the individual as well as meaningful relationships with others, including relations between men and women, who are described in typical stereotyped terms:

Gone are the fervor, enthusiasm, and inwardness that... unite the frailty of the woman and the strength of the man in the equal intensity of devotedness.

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<sup>46</sup> SKS 8, 59 / TA, 61.

<sup>47</sup> SKS 8, 59-66 / TA, 61-68.

<sup>48</sup> SKS 8, 66 / TA, 68.

<sup>49</sup> SKS 8, 67, 71 / TA, 69, 74.

<sup>50</sup> SKS 8, 72 / TA, 75.

The relation does still remain, but it lacks the resilience to concentrate itself in inwardness so as to be united harmoniously.<sup>51</sup>

Ultimately, Kierkegaard concludes, “the tension of reflection establishes itself as a principle, and just as *enthusiasm* is the unifying principle in a passionate age, so *envy* [in the form of selfishness] becomes the *negatively unifying principle* in a passionate and very reflective age.”<sup>52</sup> Envy, in turn, takes the evil form of *leveling*, or the reduction and abstraction of individuals into the faceless and “monstrous nonentity” or phantom of *the public*, which leads in turn to “the ascendancy of the category ‘generation’ over the category ‘individuality’” and the abortion of true equality:

[W]hat the individual fears more than death is reflection’s judgment upon him, reflection’s objection to his wanting to venture something as an individual. The individual does not belong to God, to himself, to the beloved, to his art, to his scholarship; no, just as a serf belongs to an estate, so the individual realizes that in every respect he belongs to an abstraction in which reflection subordinates him.<sup>53</sup>

Sociality is likewise described as being a “consuming, demoralizing principle” that is “idolized” in the present age in such a way as to transform “even virtues” into “glittering vices” as the individual “seeks comfort in company” and brings about his or her own downfall as an individual.<sup>54</sup> This demise is aided by *the press*, which in turn gives rise to *the public*, which is “the real leveler” in Kierkegaard’s view.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> SKS 8, 74-77 / TA, 77-80.

<sup>52</sup> SKS 8, 78 / TA, 81. On envy see Robert L. Perkins, “Envy as Personal Phenomenon and as Politics,” *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*, vol. 14, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press 1984, pp. 107-132.

<sup>53</sup> SKS 8, 80-81, 86 / TA, 84-85, 91. On leveling see Alastair Hannay, “Kierkegaard’s Levelings and the Review,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1999*, ed. by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser together with Alastair Hannay and Christian Tolstrup, New York and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999, pp. 71-95. See also Robert L. Perkins, “Language, Social Reality, and Resistance in the Age of Kierkegaard’s Review of *Two Ages*,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1999*, pp. 164-181.

<sup>54</sup> SKS 8, 82 / TA, 86.

<sup>55</sup> SKS 8, 89 / TA, 93. On the public and the press, see George Pattison, “The Present Age: the Age of the City,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1999*, pp. 1-20. See also Robert L. Perkins, “Power, Politics, and Media Critique: Kierkegaard’s First Brush with the Press,” *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Early Polemical Writings*, vol. 1, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999, pp. 27-44.

Kierkegaard proceeds to examine in a critical and dialectical manner “the more concrete attributes of the reflection of the present age in domestic and social life as depicted in the novel,” observing first of all that “reflection itself is not the evil” inasmuch as “considerable reflection is the condition for a higher meaningfulness than that of immediate passion.”<sup>56</sup> Rather, it is the stagnation, abuse, and corruption of reflection that turn it into an evasion of truth. The present age is seen as being depicted in a disinterested manner by the author, who “with fine artistry and elevated composure” portrays it as being “essentially a sensible age, devoid of passion.”<sup>57</sup> Other characteristics of the age, such as chatter, nullification of the principle of contradiction, formlessness, superficiality, philandering, and anonymity, are also noted by the reviewer, leading him to conclude:

It is very doubtful, then, that the age will be saved by the idea of sociality, of association. On the contrary, this idea is the skepticism necessary for the proper development of individuality, inasmuch as every individual either is lost or, disciplined by the abstraction, finds himself religiously.<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, it is the need for a religious orientation in life that is repeatedly presented by Kierkegaard as the solution to the problems presented by the present age, as in his view the leveling process that has brought about the downfall of the individual “can be halted only if the individual, in individual separateness, gains the intrepidity of religiousness,” for one only becomes “an essentially human being in the full sense of equality,” which is “the idea of religiousness.”<sup>59</sup> He goes on to point out that

if the individual is unwilling to learn to be satisfied with himself in the essentiality of the religious life before God, to be satisfied with ruling over himself instead of over the world, if he is unwilling to learn to be inspired by this as supreme because it expresses equality before God and equality with all men, then he will not escape from reflection.<sup>60</sup>

As he sees it, “[r]eflection is a snare in which one is trapped, but in and through the inspired leap of religiousness the situation changes and it is the snare that catapults one into the embrace of the eternal.”<sup>61</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>56</sup> SKS 8, 91 / TA, 96.

<sup>57</sup> SKS 8, 92, 99 / TA, 97, 104.

<sup>58</sup> SKS 8, 100 / TA, 106.

<sup>59</sup> SKS 8, 78, 82, 83, 85, 88, 102 / TA, 81, 86, 87, 88, 89, 92, 108.

<sup>60</sup> SKS 8, 85 / TA, 88-89.

<sup>61</sup> SKS 8, 85 / TA, 89.

it is only “through the leap out into the depths” of the religious that “one learns to help himself, learns to love all others as much as himself.”<sup>62</sup> The “inspiring aspect” of this leap, however, will be that “the person who has gained himself religiously is only what *all can be*,” including women, who are encouraged by Kierkegaard to make the leap “into the embrace of God” by themselves so that “God’s infinite love will not become a second-hand relationship for them.”<sup>63</sup>

In offering a religious interpretation of Madam Gyllembourg’s novel, Kierkegaard goes substantially beyond the life-view of the author herself, although as noted earlier he does admit that her work has “a religious tinge” and “lies on the boundary of the esthetic and in the direction of the religious.”<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, the major difference between the author’s life-view and his own, as he sees it, is “the contrast between this author’s life-view and a more pronounced religious view” which does not “skip over the difficulties of life,” “overlook suffering,” or “rashly offer hope in the world, but religiously wants success and failure to signify equally much, that is, equally little, and does not want the religious to have significance by way of or along with something else, but wants it to have absolute meaning in itself.”<sup>65</sup> He thus emphasizes that his review is “*my own interpretation* of what I have learned from the author,” referring the reader to himself rather than to her for “*anything immature, untrue, or foolish*” that may be in it.<sup>66</sup> He also claims that the question of which age is better or more significant does not enter into the novel itself or into his review.<sup>67</sup> “The task in my review, just as in the novel,” he explains, “has not been to judge or evaluate the ages but only to depict them,” and he goes on later in the text to note that “the preface to the novel expressly points out that both can be equally legitimate.”<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, Kierkegaard’s depiction of the age of revolution is rather mild in comparison to his scathing characterization of the present age, which goes far beyond the picture of it presented by the author, who (we may recall) ends her novel on a positive note in the expression of hope for the future.

Any final assessment of Kierkegaard’s critical review of Madam Gyllembourg’s novel from a feminist standpoint, therefore, must be mixed,

<sup>62</sup> SKS 8, 85 / TA, 89.

<sup>63</sup> SKS 8, 88, 103 / TA, 92, 108-09.

<sup>64</sup> SKS 8, 18, 23 / TA, 14, 21.

<sup>65</sup> SKS 8, 16-17 / TA, 12-13.

<sup>66</sup> SKS 8, 104 / TA, 110.

<sup>67</sup> SKS 8, 73-74 / TA, 76.

<sup>68</sup> SKS 8, 104 / TA, 110.

that is, both appreciative and critical. While it is evident that he favors passion over reflection in comparing the age of revolution to the present age, some feminists would view this favoritism as compatible with a feminist perspective while others would see it as representing a stereotyped association of passion with woman and reflection with man, as if women lack the latter and men the former. The same ambiguity can be seen with respect to his emphasis on the single individual over against society or the generation. In modern society the individual is stereotypically associated with man rather than woman, but while Kierkegaard clearly favors individuality not only in this work but in other writings as well, he does not limit it to males. Rather, he sees it as being a possibility for women as well, especially with respect to the religious, which in his view is applicable to both women and men. Most notable in his account is the recognition and high praise of the author's artistry, maturity, ingenuity, disinterested manner, affirmation of actuality and a life-view as well as her sympathetic, impartial, and distinctive yet non-judgmental view and psychological characterization of the main characters in the novel. One wonders, however, whether thinking or assuming that the author is a man has made a difference in his evaluation or whether he was aware that the author was a woman and therefore all the more to be praised for her exceptional ability as a novelist. In either case, the author's novel provided a ripe opportunity for Kierkegaard to work out his own view of the two ages depicted in it. We can thus be grateful to both writers for their penetrating depictions of actuality in a previous age as well as in the present age, which is still largely our own.

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