Captain Scipio:

The Recollection of Phister's Portrayal as the Comic *par excellence*

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Kierkegaard's posthumously published recollection[1] of Joachim Ludwig Phister's portrayal of Scipio, Captain of the Papal Police, amounts, quite possibly, to the entirety of the extant critical literature on the comic opera *Ludovic*.[2] The comedy was a success in Paris,[3] and was part of the repertoire of the Danish Royal Theater from 1834 to 1841 with one performance being staged in 1846.[4] It is also the subject of a piano variation by Chopin,[5] but otherwise it has sunk into general obscurity. I will sketch the opera, the character of Scipio and his dramatic role, Kierkegaard's recollection of Phister's portrayal and finally speak to the significance of this portrayal for Kierkegaard in general, especially insofar as it illuminates his theory of the comic.

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[1] "Herr Phister as Captain Scipio" (*SKS* 16, 125-143 / *C*, 329-344) was written under the pseudonym Procul (meaning "at a distance") and originally intended as an addendum to "The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress" (*SKS* 10, 323-344 / *C*, 301-325). Kierkegaard considered publishing it in *Fædrelandet* with a note from the editor that the author would rather it wasn't printed (See *Pap.* IX B 73) but ultimately decided against it. Kierkegaard explains this in a letter to Phister, which accompanied a copy of the review (See *SKS* 28, 108-9, Brev 63 / *LD*, 276-7, Letter 193). Aside from this review, the letter and a few drafts Scipio is not mentioned elsewhere in Kierkegaard's writings, though there is reason to believe that the (comic) archetype of the "half-drunk man" derives ultimately from Phister's Scipio (see *SKS* 7, 450 / *CUP1* 516-17n). The review is also available in English with a long introduction on Kierkegaard as a dramatic critic in *Crisis in the Life of an Actress and Other Essays on Drama*, trans. by Stephen Crites, London: Collins 1967, pp. 7-63, pp. 107-126.

[2] Vernoy de Saint Georges, Georges-Henri, *Ludovic*, 1833, music by Louis Joseph Ferdinand Hérold and Jacques François Fromental Elie Halevy, in Danish as *Ludovic*, trans. by Thomas Overskou, first performed in Copenhagen in 1834, afterwards as a regular part of the repertoire until 1841 and once more in 1846. See also *Ludovico. Lyrisches Drama in zwei Aufzügen*, trans. by Karl August Ludwig von Lichtenstein, Mainz: Schott 1834.

[3] See Ruth Jordan, *Fromental Halévy: His Life in Music 1799-1862*, New York: Proscenium Press 1996 pp. 42ff.

[4] This is confirmed by several sources, including *C*, Notes, 460; Crites, 145; and Peter Tudvad, *Kierkegaards København*, Copenhagen: Politiken, 2004 258-259. In no source is there any indication when, or how many times, Kierkegaard viewed Phister's portrayal of Scipio, though Kierkegaard himself refers to reflecting on "a single performance" in his review *SKS* 16, 127 / *C*, 329.

[5] Chopin, *Variations Brillantes on an Aria from Ludovic by Herold*, Op. 12.

Ludovic is a comedy of misplaced love and shifting alliances. Francesca, a landowner outside of Rome, is pressured to marry her cousin Gregorio so that he can escape conscription to the Papal Police (of which Scipio is the captain). This raises the ire of her farm manager (and admirer), Ludovic the Corsican, who, playing to his hot-blooded archetype,[6] shoots her in the arm. This event causes Ludovic to be on the lam from the Papal Police (Scipio again), and yet the assault is also the apparent cause of Francesca shifting her affections to her assailant (she appears at the start of the second act with a pretty bow tied to her sling).[7] The second act contains a manhunt by the Papal Police (a variety of near-misses), a change of heart by Gregorio (who has by now joined the police force he sought to avoid), a general pardon of Ludovic's "explosive" actions and happiness all around.

Scipio's primary dramatic purpose appears to be the deflation of the Papal Police in the audience's eyes (hence adding both sympathy for Gregorio's original plight and a comedy of fulfilled expectations in Scipio's failures to capture Ludovic). He fits a stock character of the "drunken official," which Kierkegaard will comment on extensively in his review.[8] He is ineffectual in the charges of his office, overly strict with his subordinates, and awkward in front of women. His slovenly and awkward manner belies his impeccable uniform.[9] He is in one respect a tyrant and in another a buffoon, thus representing a character that is both dangerous and laughable. He appears mostly in two

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[6] Ludovic predates the most famous Corsican hothead, d'Artagnan of Dumas' *Three Musketeers*, by a decade.

[7] See Jordan, 43. This plot point is at least of tangential interest, given the various invocations of spousal/familial violence (in proximity to jest, humor) that appear in the authorship. See *SKS* 6, 80-82 / *SLW*, 82-85; *SKS* 7, 479ff., / *CUP1*, 550ff., 551n.

[8] i.a. *SKS* 16, 138ff. / *C*, 333ff.

[9] Whether historically accurate or not, one of Kierkegaard's first illustrations of Phister's comic genius comes from his insisting, over protest, on wearing full regalia in his portrayal of Scipio. *SKS* 16, 132 / *C*, 333.

"Finale" movements[10] (praising wine and the soldier's life, respectively) and so is very much a minor character, but one with important placement for the humor of the piece as a whole.

Kierkegaard recalls Phister's Scipio relative to four comic contradictions[11]: his official dress contradicts his unprofessional manner, his "gut out, chest in" posture is the opposite of the soldierly ideal,[12] his walk contains a recurring cant, alternating between steady and unsteady feet,[13] and finally what we might call the "comic epistemology of the ambiguously drunk."[14] The first three are relatively straightforward. Despite the impressive tassels on his sword, he cannot behave properly long enough for a young maiden to find appeal in their glamour. He frenetically checks the posture of his subordinates while "clearly being the most unsuited to correct others."[15] And his walk, varyingly described, appears to list to one side, "not walking but not falling either…as if one leg were a couple of inches too short."[16]

But each of these three contradictions appears merely to be an elaboration of the essentially comic feature of the performance: attempting to ascertain whether Scipio is drunk. It is immediately of interest that what at issue is not his state of drunkenness so much as *how we are able to ascertain* his drunkenness.[17] The primary comic sense of the

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[10] *Ludovic*, Act I, 7; Act II, 16.
[11] On Kierkegaard's definition of comedy as "painless contradiction" see *SKS* 7, 447ff. / *CUP1*, 513ff., 514-519fn.
[12] *SKS* 16, 136 / *C*, 337
[13] *SKS* 16, 137-138 / *C*, 338-339 Again, I am tempted to read this as a realization of the "half-drunk man" at *SKS* 7, 450 / *CUP1*, 516-17n.
[14] *SKS* 16, 138-141 / *C*, 339-343
[15] *SKS* 16, 138 / *C*, 339
[16] *SKS* 16, 137 / *C*, 338
[17] "The Lord only knows whether Captain Scipio actually drinks or not" is the title of this section (*SKS* 16, 138 / *C*, 339.) An excellent treatment of the ambiguity or "dialectic" of drunkenness can be found in Nelson, Christopher A.P., "'Drunk?'/'Not Drunk?' The Dialectic of Intoxication in 'Phister as Captain Scipio' and 'Becoming Sober'" in *Christian Discourses and The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an*

portrayal is not that he is literally half-drunk (though this is true throughout the majority of Phister's portrayal), but rather that, at all times, the audience both can and cannot *tell* he is drunk. In other words, Phister communicates drunkenness to the audience without making any overt indication that he drinks at all.[18] The fact that communication is at issue here, and that Kierkegaard had reason to cherish this particular communication, explains the review as a sort of completion of that communication.[19] Both Phister and Procul/Kierkegaard communicate through *reflection,* which leads to mutual understanding.[20] Phister is a reflective artist and Procul is a reflective critic, and both of them are in a parallel process: attempting to understand the portrayal of Scipio, if infinitely "at a distance" from each other.[21]

This layer of the review, between Phister and Procul/Kierkegaard the reviewer, sits over top the layer of recollection, between Phister/Scipio and Kierkegaard the spectator. In both "layers," the explicit issue is simple—reflecting on the ambiguity of Scipio's drunkenness, but the ambiguity redoubles again and again[22] towards the infinity of comic ambiguity as such. The humorous[23] communication between reviewer and actor is, in this reflective mode, a redoubling of the humor of the original portrayal. Kierkegaard is in on the "secret," of Scipio's drunkenness, and communicates this by

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Actress ed. Robert L. Perkins, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 2007, (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 17), pp. 345-366.

[18] *SKS* 16, 138 / *C*, 339

[19] *SKS* 28, 108-9, Brev 63 / *LD*, 276-7, Letter 193

[20] Reflection, and its relationship to understanding, is the primary philosophical subject of the review. *SKS* 16, 128-131 / *C* 329-333

[21] *SKS* 16, 130-131 / *C*, 332 and *SKS* 16, 143 / *C*, 343-344

[22] Observing a half-drunk man, characterizing a half-drunk man, portraying a half-drunk man, understanding a portrayal of a half-drunk man, reflecting and writing on the portrayal...etc.

[23] And it is clear, for example from the repeated "So, then, Captain Scipio is certainly not a drunken man." in the third section, that Kierkegaard himself is attempting to write a review of comedy that is itself comic. *SKS* 16, 138ff / *C*, 340ff

reflecting at a remove on the techniques with which Phister/Scipio attempted to conceal it in his performance.[24] Needless to say the review itself is quite funny.

Here is the relevance of the expansive way in which Kierkegaard reflects upon the smallest, most innocuous gestures and attitudes of Phister's Scipio. These include a variety of hand movements that communicate a stifled belch, or chronic flustering of hands as if "to fan away a certain vapor that he fears surrounds his head."[25] Furthermore these bits of business appear to have a sort of cumulative hilarity, with Phister's genius revealed through the orchestration of Scipio's controlled gestures and attitudes.[26] By way of this stage business, Phister manages to communicate "*telegraphically*," the humor of Scipio's ambiguous state of inebriation.[27]

Perhaps because of Kierkegaard's personal affection for Phister's portrayal, he describes this mode of communication/review as a certain kind of literary self-love, that is, a flexing of the muscles demonstrating that he too has the genius both to understand and to create ambiguity to comic effect. In this way his reflections on the nature of *portrayal* (which is ambiguously actor and character, Phister and Scipio) provide a possible key to Kierkegaard's own pseudonymous authors, who exist as dramatic

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[24] For the significance of ambiguity for the comic, especially as it connects comedy and the religious life see Pattison's recurring treatments of Scipio, which I have listed in the bibliography. Pattison speaks to both the strengths and weaknesses of this infinite, reflective "comic" mode of communication.
[25] *SKS* 16, 140 / *C*, 341
[26] Though it is always risky to suggest a contemporary analogue to a stock character of another time, Jeff Bridges' masterful portrayal of Jeffrey Lebowski in *The Big Lebowski* (1998) may illuminate the sort of ambiguous "fuzziness" that Kierkegaard speaks of, as well as its comic effects. Noteworthy, relative to Kierkegaard's larger point about the role of minutiae in Phister's portrayal, Bridges' performance is equally driven by business, attitude, gesture and pauses.
[27] *SKS* 16,139 / C, 341

personae, and yet personae whose essence could only be fully animated by Kierkegaard himself.[28]

Regarding "Herr Phister as Captain Scipio," Kierkegaard acknowledges that to reflect on the role of Scipio seems "accidental and strange"[29] given that Phister had such a storied career as a comedian.[30] Additionally, the character of Scipio may initially seem an odd object of Kierkegaard's affections, given that it is broad, farcical, and generally seems to invite low comedy. In fact, because of its pseudo-unpublished status, this review has at times been excluded from consideration as a serious component of his dramatic-critical authorship.[31] Kierkegaard's own commentary on the question of publication seems personal, rather than based on his conception of critical literature, and appears in an anonymous letter included with a copy of the review given to Phister himself:

> ...do not distain the gift of this little manuscript, which is, after all, intended for one reader only. For if I had the essay printed, and if in that case it were read by everybody, still it would not have found its reader if you had not read it. But on the other hand, if you read it, even though nobody else did so, it would have

[28] There are some considerable advantages to this view of Kierkegaard's relationship to the pseudonyms, even if it implies that Kierkegaard's readers are simply expected to have the ability to tolerate ambiguity, which is quite possibly the very wisdom he sees in comedy, at least for the philosopher. The idea that Kierkegaard *portrays* his pseudonyms (as an actor) more than he constructs them (as an author) will not be defended here, but it surely contains interesting possibilities. (Is Kierkegaard well- or ill-suited to play certain roles? Could Kierkegaard's portrayal of the pseudonyms be reprised? etc.)

[29] *SKS* 16, 127 / *C* 329

[30] Phister's career was already in full force by 1848. See Otto Zinck, *Joachim Ludvig Phister. Et teaterliv*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1896.

[31] Joseph Westfall presents this argument in *The Kierkegaardian Author: Authorship and Performance in Kierkegaard's Literary and Dramatic Criticism*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Press 2007 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 15), pp. 18-22. Given what I have stated here as well as the importance of Scipio for Pattison's work on the critical authorship I cannot find Westfall's argument for exclusion compelling. Furthermore the line between Kierkegaard's published work and his posthumous papers seems especially vague here, with a fully revised essay that in some sense is made public to a single individual. If anything, this article is even more significance because it calls into question *who Kierkegaard's public* really is, a question Kierkegaard himself addresses, i.a. *SKS* 7, 9-12 / *CUP1*, 5-8.

> reached its destination and found "the reader," the only one, indeed the only one, for not even I, the author, dare compare myself with this reader—as though I were as competent as he.[32]

This (comic!) conceit, that a dramatic review should be intended only for the performer, is also revealed in the closing paragraph of the review itself: Procul presents the reconstruction of the portrayal a way of "paying a debt" for the genius of the original performance. This is explicitly juxtaposed to the more typical form of review, which only treats immediately what is good or bad in the offerings of a given month.[33] Procul/Kierkegaard presents here an alternate sort of critical review—an insignificant performance that yet acquires significance because of it's lasting, if coincidental, impact on the critic (represented through reflection.) Here critique represents the possibility not of reviewing the ephemera of the day, but locating the 'red thread' of eternity in what is otherwise forgettable.[34] If anything this should stand as the full sense in which the review is a work of "self-love."[35]

To steal from the review's closing analogy, in reflecting on Phister's Scipio, Kierkegaard seeks to repay a debt he must and ought to remain in. It is clear that the relation between "reflection and reflection" is one of complete commensurability ("the

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[32] *SKS* 28, 108-9, Brev 63 / *LD*, 276-7, Letter 193
[33] *SKS* 16, 143 / *C*, 343-344
[34] Here as before, I acknowledge a great debt to George Pattison. See especially the "dizzying" effects of comic reflection in "Søren Kierkegaard: a Theatre Critic of the Heiberg School" in *Kierkegaard and his Danish Contemporaries* ed. by Jon Stewart, Aldershot: Ashgate 2009 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources,*, vol. 7, tome III), pp. 177-178.
[35] *SKS* 16, 128 / *C*, 330: "...there certainly is still some self-love in wanting to get to understand a masterful performance completely, or at least in a way completely different from the way others understand it, and approximately as the artist himself understands it."

account balances") conjoined with distance ("the infinite remoteness of ideality").[36] This relationship is referred to more poetically as "the most dignified possible *De*," as the complete absence of *Gemütlichkeit*, an abhorrence of drink, this last being ironic because of the subject of the third and fourth section of the essay.[37] This irony is the key to the genius of the article itself, which, in describing Kierkegaard's relation to Phister he presents as a redoubling of the relationship between Phister and Scipio, which is in turn a redoubling of Scipio and his interlocutors, the essence of which is sympathy for a man who must of necessity be formal with a world of individuals when his true passion is to buy everyone a drink.[38]

Scipio, a character who comically represents this ethical impossibility, lies at the heart of a small work of literary genius, noteworthy for its humor and subtlety of construction. The self-loving contingency to which Kierkegaard refers is clearly his own joyous and uproarious laughter upon seeing this portrayal,[39] and this essay is just as much an explanation of *why Kierkegaard found the performance funny* as it is of the artistry of Phister. To make moments of laughter, significant only to oneself, the impetus for a comic creation that has at least the possibility of conveying that laughter to others may be fairly assessed as an act of self-love, but it is at least remarkable insofar as comedy can rightly be the occasion for any form of love at all. At the very least something of why we

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[36] *SKS* 16, 130 / *C*, 332

[37] This is a key passage to the whole review (*SKS* 16, 130-131 / *C*, 332.) Note how Kierkegaard plays on the relationship between sobriety and drinking and the "*du*/*De*" relationship between individuals (here made in analogy to the relationship between two reflective individuals.) It perhaps goes without saying that Phister's Scipio is the ultimate expression of such a relationship, insofar as he is literally a sober individual representing (onstage) a drunk who is perfectly representing being sober (in the play).

[38] Here one can see the sympathy Kierkegaard has with Scipio when he is "accidentally no longer drinking" in the second Act. *SKS* 16, 141-142 / *C*, 342-343

[39] Kierkegaard is enough of a comic genius to understand that there is something of a weak redemptive quality of comedy – in sharing laughter at something so monumentally stupid as Scipio Kierkegaard attempts an axiological movement from something worthless to something precious.

love Kierkegaard (in his ability to perfectly "[set] at a variance two personae") seems to find unparalleled expression in his reflections on why he loves Phister's Scipio:

> What does it all mean? It means that there is a contradiction here. Now, it is undoubtedly true that in the situation of actuality a person of culture and character has often resolved this contradiction and made an attractive character out of it. But the contradiction is there, and it is also certain that when a genuine and reflective comedian gets hold of this contradiction and correctly knows how to set at a variance these two personae ... in one, without overdoing it, then the comic effect is priceless.[40]

[40] *SKS* 16, 133-134 / *C*, 335

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