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Spiritual Glamour and Frightful Mutilation: Kondoleon, Kierkegaard and Camp

Written by Robert F. Gross

[S]he would have been canonised, but for an unfortunate remark. It comes in *The Red Rose of Martyrdom*. "If we are all a part of God," she says, "then God must indeed be horrible."

—Ronald Firbank, *Vainglory*¹

But men are ignorant of all such things; to know that, one must be a fashion designer.

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*²

There is a vast critical literature on Søren Kierkegaard.³ There is a much smaller, but not inconsiderable, critical literature on camp.⁴ I've yet to find any overlap between the two

¹ Ronald Firbank, *Vainglory* (New York: Brentano's, 1925) 113.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way: Studies by Various Persons*, trans. and ed. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 69.

³ In this vast literature, Westphal and Sløk offer helpful overviews, with the latter particularly accessible for those without a strong foundation in Continental philosophy. (Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard," in *A Companion to Continental Philosophy* ed. Simon Critchley and William R. Schroeder (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 128 - 138; and Johannes Sløk, *Kierkegaard's Universe: A New Guide to the Genius*, trans. Kenneth Tindall (Copenhagen: Danish Cultural Institute, 1994).) See Roger Poole, "The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: University Press, 1998) 48-75 for an excellent summary of Kierkegaard's reception and influence, and Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy after Kierkegaard," trans. Jonathan Rée, in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 9-25, for a sage estimate of his importance for contemporary thought. Bert O. States in his *Irony and Drama: A Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1971) considers the implications of Kierkegaard's theory of irony for the study of drama; in "Une nouvelle lecture de 'Crime et Crime': la plus parisienne des pièces de Strindberg," *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre* 3 (1978): 307-320, Richard Vowles relates his writing to Strindberg's *Crimes and Crimes*; and Robert Markley uses it to elucidate Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* in "Drama, Character and Irony: Kierkegaard and Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer*,"

bibliographies. In a way this is not surprising; the two authors tend to circulate in very different circles. Kierkegaard enthusiasts give the impression of being an earnest lot, seemingly averse to theatrics, while camp followers appear far more inclined to turn to *All about Eve* than *Sickness unto Death*.

There is very, very little literature, alas, devoted to playwright, novelist and poet Harry Kondoleon, whose plays first graced the stages of Off- and Off-Off-Broadway all too briefly between 1981 and 1994.⁵ A queer author with a highly individual voice and vision, his 1993 play, *The Houseguests*, constructs a sort of cruising ground in which the religious concerns of Kierkegaard rub up against the Kondoleon's camp strategies. (After all, the two men have more than a little in common: both lifelong bachelors, marginalized in their respective fields and slow to gain acceptance by the mainstream, sharing not only an enthusiasm for masks, ironies and theatricality, but an engagement with spirituality as well, prolific and audacious in their work and premature in their deaths. . . .) Although I am not about to argue for a direct influence on Kondoleon by Kierkegaard, I will argue that Kondoleon's representation of spiritual experience, particularly as it appears in *The Houseguests*, shares a common problematic with the Danish philosopher, and that not only do Kierkegaard's work and Kondoleon's illuminate each other,

in *Kierkegaard and Literature: Irony, Repetition and Criticism*, eds. Ronald Shliefer and Robert Markley (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984) 138-193.

⁴ Of this literature, Sontag's remains the most influential and frequently cited, Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Noonday Press, 1961) 175-292, but Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," in *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dryer, rev. ed. (New York: New York Zoetrope, 1984) 40-57, David Bergman, *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), and Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) all add considerable historical insight and greater political awareness to the understanding of camp. See particularly, Dollimore's analysis of camp strategies in Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw*, which work to very different ends than Kondoleon's.

⁵ Besides reviews and obituaries, for an excellent overview, see Don Shewey, "Homage to a Theatrical Comet of the 80s," *New York Times*, 19 November 2000: II,5:2. For an analysis of gay representation in two of Kondoleon's plays, see Robert F. Gross, "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Reification and Gay Identity in *The Fairy Garden* and *Zero Positive*," *Essays in Theatre/Études Théâtrales* 8 (1989): 23-33.

but that *The Houseguests* demonstrates how the aesthetics of camp can provide a particularly sophisticated set of strategies for the theatrical representation of spiritual experience.

Since *The Houseguests* is far from being a canonical text, a brief synopsis may be in order. The play harks back to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* with its witty and malicious host couple treating their naive visitors to rounds of *Get the Guests*, which in turn harks back to Noel Coward's *Hay Fever* and August Strindberg's *Dance of Death*. By the 1990s, the Strindbergian couple had become such a stock type on the American stage that Kondoleon is able to establish it at once. We see the couple—Vera and John—casually perusing the Sunday papers. Vera says "Could you know how much I despise you?" The husband replies, laconically, "I could guess".⁶ After trading articulate declarations of mutual repugnance and undying contempt, they soon turn to the subject of their equally loathed houseguests, the seemingly banal and unremarkable Manny and Gale. When this couple return from the beach, Vera and John immediately set upon them with the full vigor of their shared disdain. The men leave to barbecue dinner, whereupon Gale prostrates herself before Vera with declarations of frenzied passion, which Vera greets with *hauteur*. When the men return to find Gale sucking Vera's foot, it opens the way for several rounds of *Get the Guests*, which eventually leave all the participants in despair. Vera admits that she had considered suicide an appropriate solution to their problems earlier that day, but proposes instead that they swap spouses and separate for six months. Leaving a lovelorn Gale with John, Vera takes Manny in tow, announcing that they will all meet in a skiing lodge in the mountains six months hence. Curtain.

The second act presents their reunion. Over the past six months, the Vera and Manny have been reduced to penury and reside in an uncompleted ski lodge without adequate heating

⁶ Harry Kondoleon, *The Houseguests* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1993) 5.

or sanitation. Vera has broken all her bones in skiing accident, lives with intense chronic pain, and can no longer afford painkillers. Manny has lost most of his hearing, and his equilibrium. They are surprised to learn that the other couple is in worse shape than they are. John enters in a wheelchair, having had his hands and feet amputated due to gangrene. Not only is Gale blind, but is subject to fits of homicidal rage, which are usually directed toward Vera. They are all beset with rage and desolation, which is finally challenged by Vera, who notes that they enjoy the services of a girl who does their cleaning for free. "She's a part of this whole new love principle," she explains.⁷ Struck by the idea of love, she suggests that the four of them focus on love by chanting or humming, or merely saying the word "love" in unison. The others balk at this seemingly absurd proposal, but she finally rallies them, and when they finally say "the word" with fear and timidity, the play ends abruptly in an eruption of thunder and lightning.

The play's title introduces its dominant metaphor. In the first act, Vera speculates that we are all "God's houseguests",⁸ and she further refines the thought near the play's conclusion:

It's not for us to understand the nature of miracles. We just have to wait. We are houseguests of our bodies and God's earth and we are no sooner here than our host wants us to leave. That's why a proper house gift is so imperative.⁹

Kondoleon takes the device of the malicious hosts from Albee, Coward and Strindberg, and transforms it into the vehicle for religious speculation. In the first act, we see the mortal hosts humiliate their guests, reducing them to tears and despair. In the second act, we see all the characters suffering horribly from a series of grotesque accidents that frustrate any attempts at

⁷ Kondoleon 44.

⁸ Kondoleon 14.

⁹ Kondoleon 45.

rational explanation. If we are all houseguests, Kondoleon suggests we may have a host whose game of Get the Guests makes George and Martha seem gentle by comparison.

Summarized like this, the religious vision of *The Houseguests* might sound like one of bleak despair and powerless rage against a malevolent deity; a gnostic vision of divine malice. Such a reading, however, would ignore the development of the characters in the face of their seemingly gratuitous suffering. While the healthy, privileged characters of the first act squabble over issues of power, pleasure and status, only to fall into despair, the impoverished, suffering characters of the second show moments of kindness, patience and longing. The contrast is most pronounced in the case of Vera. While earlier she was the most snide and malicious of them all, in the second act she is an improbably poised and gracious hostess, hobbling about in splints and casts, offering her guests a few stale cookies and tea brewed from a already used tea bag. Her suicidal fantasies have disappeared, and been replaced by charmingly batty illusions of community: "I thought we could all reunite and be like Gudrun and Ursula and Birkin and Gerald" she explains, using the characters of D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* as a somewhat improbable idyllic model,¹⁰ and suggesting they support themselves by selling t-shirts or making batiks.¹¹ She is the one who becomes the advocate for this new "love principle," accepts the possible efficacy of chanting, and finally persuades the others to join with her in saying the word "love" as the most rudimentary kind of prayer She urges them to "say it with conviction so that it can be heard above the cacophony of devils".¹² Vera's ethical qualities contrast with her external fortunes.

¹⁰ Kondoleon 40.

¹¹ Kondoleon 44.

¹² Kondoleon 45.

Described this way, the ending of *The Houseguests* may sound as facetiously sentimental as the previous description sounded gratuitously nasty—a celebration of the ennobling potential of suffering. Kondoleon's dramaturgical sophistication, however, consists in his ability not only to sustain the sentimental and nasty possibilities side by side as facets of a complex reality, but in his presenting both possibilities through strategies of camp.

Camp is, it is widely agreed, an elusive phenomenon that ultimately frustrates attempts at definition,¹³ but it is so intrinsic to the style of *The Houseguests* that some of its most salient aspects need to be mentioned here. A set of counter-discourses developed in queer male subcultures back at least as far as the early eighteenth century,¹⁴ "camp constantly questions the dualisms of the dominant society".¹⁵ As a queer strategy, it most frequently questions dualisms surrounding gender and sexuality, but does not stop there, extending to question a range of socially constructed oppositions, most notably nature/culture, depth/surface and authenticity/affectation. These terms tend to be questioned, as we will see in examples from *The Houseguests*, by complicating the dualism through irony and excess, rather than resolving it in favor of a single term.

Jack Babuscio identifies four stylistic hallmarks of camp: irony, aestheticism, theatricality and humor.¹⁶ Although these characteristics can be found elsewhere, in camp they work to question dualisms and express the values of a queer culture. Camp is in part distinguished from the burlesque and spoof by the ambivalent feelings it creates in response to its tactics. While

¹³ See Sontag 175, Babuscio 41, and Dollimore 310.

¹⁴ Bergman 104.

¹⁵ Bergman 106.

¹⁶ Babuscio 41-49.

spoon and burlesque tend to elicit a response of unambiguously superior laughter, camp undermines the notion that the sublime and the silly, the pathetic and the absurd, the fragile and the tough, the trivial and the momentous, can only be appropriately experienced apart from each other; the questioning of ideological dualisms is accompanied by the complication of emotional reaction.

From the very beginning, *The Houseguests* displays a camp sensibility. Rather than spending any time establishing the grounds for Vera and John's acrimonious union, they are presented as theatrical types, whose casual perusal of the newspaper ironically qualifies their venomous repartee, as does the cool, articulate style in which they express it. In Kondoleon's hands, a spite-filled marriage become a form of dandyism. The viewer has no recourse to a moment of apparent "depth" that can confirm what John and Vera "really feel" for each other. They exist totally on the level of performance, as do all dramatic characters, but without the usual dramaturgical *trompe l'œil* provided to deceive the spectator with an illusion of depth. Here, a desperate marriage may be artifice.

A similar camp strategy is used to treat Vera's frequent expressions of ennui, despair and suicidality. Early on, Vera compares her "exquisite" fatigue with the "inexhaustible beauty" of the boredom of Jeanne Moreau, Monica Vitti and Jean Seberg on the silver screen.¹⁷ When Vera identifies her own existential plight with those of these celebrated icons of art film despair, she immediately puts the authenticity of her own despair in question. What does it mean, after all, when one's supposedly agonizing situation seeks validation by reference to glamorous film performances? As Jonathan Dollimore points out, camp rejects a depth model of identity often by taking "depth" to excess and thus revealing its theatricality and undermining dominant

¹⁷ Kondoleon 6.

morality's terms of authenticity.¹⁸ But camp not only mocks the depth traditional models of depth also "mocks the *Angst*-ridden spiritual emptiness that characterizes the existential lament"¹⁹ as well. To revise Le Rochefoucauld, there are those who never would have despaired, had they not first seen it at the movies. To camp existential ennui as Kondoleon does is to camp it by aestheticizing and theatricalizing it, and thus, ironizing it. though, perhaps in this case, Kondoleon does not so much merely mock the existential lament as complicate it. It is less that existential *ennui* is simply to be dismissed as a pose. A pose, after all, can be felt at the very moment that it is affected.

The Houseguests quickly establishes itself as camp through its high artifice and irony, and the characters, though ostensibly introduced to us as made up of two heterosexual couples, are soon queered. Gale is infatuated with Vera, who takes pleasure in her admirer licking her feet;²⁰ John is sexually aroused by contact with Manny,²¹ whose hysteric relationship to male homosexuality is either the result of extensive childhood abuse or extreme homosexual panic.²² Any illusion of sexual orientation as authenticity is subverted in this world in which, as Vera explains "Latency is always overt".²³ The commonly accepted distinctions between masculine and feminine in the dominant culture are completely undermined in the ever-shifting play of pleasure and power—John and Vera could as easily be a same-sex couple as a heterosexual one.

¹⁸ Dollimore 310-311.

¹⁹ Dollimore 311.

²⁰ Kondoleon 12.

²¹ Kondoleon 18.

²² Kondoleon 18.

²³ Kondoleon 17.

Yet Kondoleon's particular use of camp strategies do not work simply to demolish the characters' poses of ridicule, but to complicate any simple dichotomy between depth and surface, emotion and affectation. Take, for example, Kondoleon's treatment of director Otto Preminger's 1958 critical and box-office cinematic debacle, *Bonjour Tristesse*. Based on Françoise Sagan's once-notorious novel of sexual precocity and wayward youth, starring Vera's favorite star, Jean Seberg, the film seems absolutely appropriate to Vera's particular camp sensibility —decadence and existentialist despair with gowns by Givenchy. She shares her favorite moment from the movie with Gale:

there is one shot in this crappy film that quite personally annihilates me. I'm sure it is filmed by the second director or the location director or whatever they're called but not the hack at the helm. It's a long shot and Jean is wearing a party dress with a wide skirt and a bustier and her little boy haircut and she gets out of her sports car — I think it's topless — I don't know cars — it's in Cannes you see. Or St. Tropez. Or Nice or wherever the fuck it is! But in that moment — and you'll have to trust me on this — is all that God can provide in the way of ... of ... of *spiritual glamour*, where everything for once and maybe never again *coalesces* into a perfection of being, of supreme beauty caught in transit.²⁴

Turning to a movie whose pleasures can be truly relished only through camp appropriation, Vera finds a privileged moment of vision in a sequence from *Bonjour Tristesse* which is not subordinated to the demands of story or character, but is a collection of glamorous objects (Seberg with her Givenchy gown and haircut, sports car, the Riviera setting).

How are we to respond to Vera's epiphanic moment? On the one hand, it is easy to respond negatively, judging Vera as a superficial materialist who mistakes profane values for spiritual ones. From that point of view, the profane noun "glamour" undercuts the sacred

²⁴ Kondoleon 13.

adjective "spiritual." But Kondoleon refuses to deflate this oxymoron by resolving it so easily. First, he does not make the object of Vera's longing a high art object, say the Sistine Chapel or an ode by Keats, but a movie whose excesses of theatricalization (sexual hysteria, "decadence" and melodramatic plot contrivances) and thoroughgoing aestheticization (one often feels, watching *Bonjour Tristesse*, that the film's *auteur* is not Preminger, but Givenchy) render it excellent material for camp appropriation. This appropriation puts into question the conventional, hierarchical separation of "high" and "low" forms of artistic expression that are believed to elicit exalted and spiritual responses in the first case, and materialistic and base responses in the second.

By challenging this hierarchy, Kondoleon problematizes the widespread practice of yoking aesthetic qualities to spiritual ones. When Caravaggio paints a seductive, sulky John the Baptist, Tiepolo dresses the Blessed Virgin in a stunning crimson gown (a creation of spiritual glamour in which fashion certainly trumps traditional devotion), or Guido Reni presents the Magdalene as all flowing hair, crystalline tears and daring décolletage, we seem to be in the presence of religious works that lend themselves to camp recognition. If a languid and muscular St. Sebastian can inspire spiritual longings, why not Jean Seberg?

Furthermore, Vera situates her favorite moment of spiritual glamour less in the narrative of *Bonjour Tristesse* than in the story of Jean Seberg's life. The winner of a national talent search to play the lead in Preminger's *Saint Joan*, Seberg's swift, Cinderella-like ascent quickly spiralled downward into a checkered acting career, a series of unsuccessful marriages, harassment by the American press and government agencies, a nervous breakdown and suicide. By reminding us of Seberg's cruel demise, Kondoleon infuses the isolated moment of glamour with pathos. It becomes one privileged moment of beatitude within an otherwise cruel story of a real-life Cinderella destroyed.

The fate of Jean Seberg foreshadows those of John, Gale, Vera and Manny, as they are transformed through a series of unforeseen accidents into impoverished and socially ostracized sufferers. Misfortune sweeps down unexpectedly on this camp and queer circle. Although *The Houseguests* contains only a single, indirect reference to AIDS,²⁵ it is clear that, on one level, this tale of a queer world unexpectedly thrown from health, privilege and longings for glamour to physical debilitation, poverty and social ostracism reflects Kondoleon's view of the situation of the gay community in the late 80s and early 90s, including the playwright's own (he was to die from complications from HIV infection less than a year after *The Houseguests'* premiere). Kondoleon's strategy of rupturing a camp universe with an onslaught of extreme, unforeseen misfortune, and testing the limits of the camp style through this rupture gives *The Houseguests* an unusual place in the literature of AIDS—a play in which specific social, political and medical circumstances of HIV infection in the early 90's might seem to be displaced in favor of a more universalized statement about human suffering, but whose camp and queer strategies demand that the play also be read on a more specific level.

If Vera's longing for spiritual glamour establishes one religious vision, the inexplicable catastrophes visited on the characters provides another, one which is not only decidedly unglamorous, but which shocks our aesthetic sensibilities. To the extent that we are appalled by the "bad taste" of presenting the suffering of these characters in a camp register, we find ourselves implicated in the notion that the religious must somehow be attractive and aestheticized. The overall movement of the play is from the stylish to the disturbing, playing on the implications of Vera's reaction to Jean Seberg in *Bonjour Tristesse*, in which the spiritual glamour of Seberg in the film is at odds with her suicide in real life.

²⁵ Kondoleon 28.

Kondoleon further complicates this camp moment response to *Bonjour Tristesse* by making Vera's response to the cinematic moment not mere delight at it or pity for Seberg, but rage "Oh, can't you see, that moment is *me!*" Vera cries out in frustration, "Everything I've lost in life is in that moment. I would kill to retrieve it — kill repeatedly and without remorse, as God kills!"²⁶ Spiritual glamour does not console with its supreme beauty, but inflicts a sense of loss. It elicits an acute sense of desperation by tantalizing the viewer with a vision of fullness and coherence that is beyond her reach. The thought of spiritual glamour, ironically, does not lead to aesthetic contemplation but an identification with a deity that is beyond human ethical constructions. Thus, Vera's notion of spiritual glamour in a moment from *Bonjour Tristesse* summons up aestheticism, theatricality, irony, humor, longing, pathos, rage, and hubris.

And if the *Bonjour Tristesse* sequence were not already sufficiently complex, I would like to further complicate it at this point by introducing Kierkegaard into the analysis. This critical move at first appears incongruous, since Kierkegaard is widely regarded as precisely the sort of existentialist philosopher of depth that Dollimore sees camp as set to undercut.²⁷ Following widely held notions of both camp and Kierkegaard, one would expect Kondoleon to undercut Kierkegaard, and Kierkegaard to dismiss not only Vera, but whole of *The Houseguests* as an example of the lowest of the three famous stages in his philosophy—that of the aesthete, who, as Sløk neatly summarizes it, "a person who has a sense of artistic values, for whom beauty in life is preeminent",²⁸ who is detached, theatrical²⁹ and ironic.³⁰ But that conclusion would oversimplify both *The Houseguests* and Kierkegaard's writings.

²⁶ Kondoleon 13.

²⁷ Dollimore 311. For a persuasive criticism of this common approach to Kierkegaard, however, see Ricoeur, "Philosophy after Kierkegaard," 9-10.

²⁸ Kondoleon 43.

Gilles Deleuze discusses Kierkegaard not merely as a theatrical thinker, fascinated with masks and pseudonymity, but as a very strange sort of theatrical director. Turning to Johannes de Silentio's lengthy description of the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling*,³¹ Deleuze observes:

the knight of faith so resembles a bourgeois in his Sunday best as to be capable of being mistaken for one, this philosophical instruction must be taken as the remark of a director showing how the knight of faith should be *played*.³²

Although Deleuze correctly characterizes Kierkegaard's thought as theatrical, he ignores how the example he gives is also strangely anti-theatrical. The Kierkegaardian knight of faith is to be played by the effacement of any theatrical sign that would allow him to be recognized as such. In contrast to most acting in the modern period, Kierkegaard's direction demands that the surface become opaque to any show of deep interiority. The realm of faith, in other words, is a realm that lies outside representation.

As a spatial metaphor of hidden authenticity, Kierkegaard's realm of the religious invites comparison with the gay trope of the closet. Like the closet, Kierkegaard's realm is a spatial construction of deep interiority, invisible to outsiders, yet conferring a secret dimension of meaning to the subject's movements in the world. As such, they both are products of a modern, bourgeois sense of selfhood. These two spatial metaphors, however, exist in fundamentally different relationships to the exterior. To emerge from the closet as a queer is to validate a social

²⁹ Kondoleon 46.

³⁰ Kondoleon 48. Any discussion of Kierkegaard's 'stages' must be approached with caution. These are complicated terms, often expressed by pseudonymous authors, and which, moreover, undergo alterations in the course of Kierkegaard's career. See Westphal for a useful overview of some of the problems involved, and Poole for a history of how the understanding of Kierkegaard has moved from systematizations based on orthodox Christian thought and Hegelian systematizing to more postmodern approaches.

³¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 38-41.

³² Deleuze 9.

dimension of one's experience that has hitherto been sequestered, while for Kierkegaard the movement into social representation is a falsification of something that can only remain pristine by remaining unseen. As Westphal points out, in Kierkegaard's late work, he emphasizes the ease with which the religious passes over into the aesthetic.³³

In *Stages in Life's Way*, Kierkegaard comes closest to creating a totally camp figure in the person of the Fashion Designer, a figure who is constructed in the tensions between masculine and feminine, sweetness and malice, thoughtlessness and reflection, and artifice and nature.³⁴ A self-proclaimed "madman",³⁵ who squanders his goods and profits in a realm in which "fashion, after all, is the sacred".³⁶ In his breathless, intoxicated tirade at an all-male symposium on heterosexual love, the designer reduces everything in heterosexual romance to his fascination with appearance. An antithesis to the knight of faith, he is the man of appearances. Here, there is nothing but artifice and ephemerality. But, whereas Vera's notion of spiritual glamour preserves the tension between the aesthetic and the religious, the Fashion Designer's tirade allows the notion of fashion to completely undercut any serious claims of *couture* to the sacred, or the sacred to *couture*. Kierkegaard stops short of camp by situating the Fashion Designer in a work which contains other voices that will manifest a sober interiority that he "lacks," and by having this speaker speak with scorn of the women who worship fashion, thus keeping a disdainful distance from the utter collapse of the dualisms profane/sacred, trivial/significant, inauthentic/authentic.

³³ Westphal 136.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way* 22.

³⁵ Kondoleon 66.

³⁶ Kondoleon 67.

Slavoj Zizek has argued that Kierkegaard's three realms of the aesthetic, ethical and religious correspond to Jacques Lacan's psychic realms of the imaginary, symbolic and the real,³⁷ and, indeed, Lacan's view of the real as the realm that resists representation, which ruptures the intimacy of the imaginary and the coherence of the symbolic, leading him to observe that "*The gods belong to the field of the real*",³⁸ suggests, at least in this respect, an affinity with Kierkegaard.³⁹

And with Kondoleon as well. For when Kondoleon's camp, with its intense aestheticism, comes up against the eruptions of the real/religious, one of two things happen. Either it establishes an ironic tension between the religious/real and its inevitable distortion in expression, (for example in the tension between the comedy of manners world of hosts and houseguests and the metaphorical extension of that to an attempt at a theodicy); or it causes a rupture in the play's fabric. The catastrophic mutilations of the four characters occur in the gap between the two acts, and the final eruption of thunder and lightning in possible response to the word "love" is cut off before any unambiguous revelation. Indeed the very device of thunder and lightning sustains the camp tension to the final curtain. After all, is the prelude to a grand theophany by a loving or cruel deity? Or is it mere aesthetic display — the campily humorous shaking of sheets of metal in the wings, accompanied by quick light cues? In *The Houseguests*,

³⁷ Slavoj Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out*, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001) 78.

³⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978) 45.

³⁹ Needless to say, the caveat that applies to Kierkegaard's complex terminology must also be applied to Lacan. Curiously, Zizek misreads both Kierkegaard and Lacan when he writes that while the aesthetic/imaginary and the ethical/symbolic border on each other, and the ethical/symbolic and the religious/real as well, there is no boundary between the aesthetic/imaginary and the religious/real (82-83). See Westphal 129f., who disagrees in this reading of Kierkegaard, and Miller in Lacan, noting his use of the Borromean knot to elucidate the relationship between the three realms (279-280) as well as Ragland for different readings of Lacan's topography.

the religious manifests itself either in tension with the camp excess that strives to express it, or as a terrifying, violent absence which creates gaps in the representation. It is a tribute to Kondoleon and the power of camp that *The Houseguests* can contain such gaps and yet sustain its camp style to the end, accepting its inevitable limitations with irony and humour, rather than agonizing over them.

The problem that Kierkegaard and Kondoleon engage in their work is rooted in the nature of religious representation. Symbols of the sacred, Paul Ricoeur points out, are inevitably sites of "combat" between the sacred and the profane:

The sacred can be the sign of that which does not belong to us, the sign of the Wholly Other; it can also be a sphere of separate objects within our human world of culture and alongside the sphere of the profane. The sacred can be the meaningful bearer of what we described as the structure of the horizon peculiar to the Wholly Other which draws near, or it can be the idolatrous reality to which we assign a separate place in our culture, thus giving rise to religious alienation. The ambiguity is inevitable: for if the Wholly Other draws near, it does so in the signs of the sacred; but symbols soon turn into idols. Thus the cultural object of our human sphere is split in two, half becoming profane, the other half sacred [. . .].⁴⁰

The more common artistic strategy is to attempt to finesse the rupture between representation and Ricoeur's Wholly Other (read: Kierkegaard's religious, Lacan's real), running the risk of falling into idolatry. To represent the spiritual, the artist must appropriate other codes of representation (scientific, somatic, social, political, etc.) whose origins continue to manifest themselves despite the appropriation. The result is inevitably an ironic distance which the artist can either try to camouflage or, like Kondoleon, can foreground. To say that all religious art includes a gap in representation that lends itself to camp, and which grows more

⁴⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) 531.

intense the more excessively theatrical the work becomes in hopes of closing the gap (from the local church's Christmas pageant to the Herculean efforts of Mahler's "Symphony of a Thousand") is not to be dismissive, but appreciative of the inevitable problematic it poses. By working in a camp mode, Kondoleon stresses the status of his artifice *as* artifice, and avoids any claim of transcendence. By so doing, he is able to present the journey of his characters as both a spiritual progress and a sequence of theatricalized postures. When Vera urges Gale to forgive her as she as forgiven Gale, we feel a joy at what seems to be a conversion of Vera from petty malice to generosity of spirit. But when she explains that she has finally been able to forgive Gale for staining her furniture with suntan lotion,⁴¹ we are suddenly repositioned firmly within the realm of the aesthetic. The re-appearance of the aesthetic does not negate the spiritual, but it complicates it. The force of the real, being unrepresentable, can never displace the aesthetic, only skew it—perhaps, queer it.

Ever since Susan Sontag's oft-quoted observation, "Camp is a solvent of morality",⁴² theories of camp have tended to assume that it is a sort of universal solvent, a complete subversion of the ethical/symbolic by the deviously inspired tactics of the aesthetic. Although this may often be the case, it ignores that camp, like all systems of representation, has its limits, and that those limits will make its presence felt through the system. While Kondoleon does use camp to dissolve ethical considerations, he works skillfully on the difficult boundary between the aesthetic and religious, with each never quite giving way to the other. *The Houseguests* shows camp consciously working at not only its particular stylistic limitations, but at the limits of all representation. It finds a way to both include the religious/real without making claims to

⁴¹ Kondoleon 43.

⁴² Sontag 290.

adequately represent it. It becomes a sort of dramatic *via negativa*, introducing representations of the religious while at the same time clearly underlining the inadequacy of these representations, not intellectually, but as deeply felt and unresolved disjunctions of tone.