Aesthetics, Politics, and the Other: Toward an Ethical Theory of Art in Christopher Isherwood's *Prater Violet*

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In 1939, as Christopher Isherwood departed England for America, he determined that throughout the 1930s, he "had been playing parts, repeating slogans created for [him] by others," as he puts it in his late memoir, *Christopher and His Kind: 1929-1939* (1976) (333). "It just doesn't mean anything to me any more—," he explained to the poet W. H. Auden, who had left England with him; "the Popular Front, the party line, the anti-Fascist struggle. I suppose they're okay but something's wrong with me. I simply cannot swallow another mouthful" (333). Isherwood rejected anti-fascism in part because this left-wing political movement involved an acceptance of militarism that conflicted with his own turn to pacifism on the eve of war. Many consequently understood this pacifism as a retreat from politics, particularly from the cultural critique of fascism. This understanding likewise informs later readings of Isherwood's work, with the result that his texts after the 1930s are often perceived to be apolitical.[1] But Isherwood's persistent returns to the 1930s need to be reconsidered within the aesthetic and social politics of the mid- to late-twentieth century, focusing on his first post-war novel, *Prater Violet* (1945).

Throughout the war years, though Isherwood was *on the side of* anti-fascists and though he felt guilt for leaving England in 1939, he began to perceive that the predominant aesthetic forms for political critique in the 1930s ascribed to reactionary definitional practices predicated on the oppositional discursive construction of self and other. In *Prater Violet*, Isherwood returns to the 1930s as a response to such options for thinking the relation between art and politics. The novel reflects specifically on the representational practices of politicized art, aestheticism, propaganda, and entertainment, and in so doing, it

performs self-critique, for Isherwood was variously engaged in such practices throughout the 1930s and during the war years. Vital to this "self" critique, however, is an *ethical* encounter with the other, thus presenting another possibility for thinking the relations between art and politics, self and other. In what follows, I map Isherwood's turn from accepted forms of anti-fascist aesthetics, his public critique of these forms in *Prater Violet*, and the novel's materialization as ethics.

In his wartime diaries, Isherwood becomes increasingly critical of the aesthetics and politics of anti-fascism. In 1941, after reading a propaganda "pamphlet by [the British novelist E. M.] Forster, called *Nordic Twilight*," Isherwood begins to distance himself aesthetically from other anti-fascist writers, including those he most admired like Forster. Isherwood responds in particular to a comment Forster makes about civilization: "I believe that if the Nazis won they would destroy our civilization," writes Forster—a statement that makes Isherwood "sad" (qtd. in *Diaries* 136). "What is this 'civilization'?" that Forster defends, asks Isherwood; "For Morgan, it means the right to freedom of self-expression" (*Diaries* 136). But freedom of expression does not mean one is "civilized"—this, Isherwood claims, "is the classic fallacy of liberalism" (136). "There are plenty of people able and willing to sound the call to battle," he continues, for free expression permits people "To stand up for the half-truths and relative values. To preach the doctrine of the Lesser Evil" (136). Isherwood wants, however, something more "from Morgan, our philosopher"; he does not want from him a defense of liberalism, civilization, or war. But neither does he oppose Forster's own right to defend his mother or his home. Isherwood opposes, rather, Forster's turn to propaganda and to the reactionary attitudes implicit in this propaganda ("It was you [Forster] who taught us the futility of hate," exclaims Isherwood [137]). He opposes, further, the resulting definitional practice of "othering"—the reductive identification of another against which one's own identity is constituted and privileged (here, English civilization is the privileged site of articulation against Nazi "barbarism" or "perversion").[2] Instead, Isherwood wants Forster to "preserve his judgment, and see the war as a whole, as a tragedy for which we are all responsible" (136).

Isherwood's effort to acknowledge the "futility of hate" in contemporary art and politics and his desire for a corresponding sense of responsibility toward violence and war, materializes in a screenplay for Paramount he wrote with Lesser Samuels in the early 1940s. The film was to present "fairly" the position of the conscientious objector (C. O.) [*Diaries* 262]. Upon completion of this screenplay in 1943, Isherwood describes in his diary two scenes he particularly likes, the second of which resonates with his responses to Forster's pamphlet

and to English aesthetic responses to fascism more broadly. In the first scene, a young man, the C.O. of the narrative, is taken to a hospital for ·wounded soldiers. Upon seeing these wounded men, the father questions the son's sense of war-time obligation: "Don't you think you owe these boys something?" he asks; "The hero answers, 'Yes, I do. . . . Don't you see father? Now, more than ever—just *because* of those boys—I can't back down from what I think is right . . . *They* didn't'" (262; emphasis in original). Through an encounter with soldiers fulfilling their "duties," the C. O. is able to realize *his* responsibility not to participate in the violence of war. The second scene finds the young man at a tribunal having to defend his C. O. position where "he is asked what he'd do if he came back home that afternoon and found the Nazis there. He answers, 'I'd try to remember that they were human beings'" (262-63). Perhaps not surprisingly, the film studio "changed [the script] utterly, scene by scene, word by word" (263).

Through censorship, Isherwood realizes the limits for thinking the relation between art and politics and self and other during the war years, and was beginning to formulate a means for moving beyond such limits. We can see this movement in a letter he entered in his diary (but did not send) to contemporary British writer Cyril Connolly. Connolly was an outspoken critic of both Isherwood and Auden after their emigration to America; he referred to them, for instance, as "ambitious young men with a strong instinct of self-preservation and an eye on the main chance" ("Comment" 1).[3] The letter in Isherwood's diary is a response to another criticism Connolly made of Isherwood and Auden, this one in 1943. "As leaders of a literary-political movement" in the 1930s, who left Europe when war was imminent (and, in regard to Isherwood, who remained committed to pacifism), the two, Connolly remarks, "have done untold harm to their cause" (qtd. in *Diaries* 365). Connolly holds to the notion that Isherwood's turn to pacifism signified a turn *from* politics. Isherwood's response to Connolly's condemnation that he has harmed the "literary-political" cause of the 1930s is emphatic: "thank God if I have," declares Isherwood; "I am trying to hatch out into something different" (366). If Isherwood did not send that letter to Connolly, it is because he was putting into practice the renunciation of the ego as taught by Vedanta, the Eastern spirituality that came to define his pacifism.

This description of "hatch[ing] out into something different" suggests Isherwood's desire for a *new* relationship between the self, art, and politics, which each of the above moments illuminate. Finding he could not subscribe to the politics of militarism and war, of hate and reaction, and to the aesthetic practices compelled by these totalities, Isherwood attempts to compose a different form for art wherein the

self is not prioritized in *opposition* to an other. To elucidate such form as it materializes in *Prater Violet*, I rely on Emmanuel Levinas's conception of the ethical relation to the Other. Levinas's opposition to ontology provides a basis for understanding Isherwood's opposition to the epistemological dichotomy self/other. [4]

"The visage of being that shows itself in war," proposes Levinas, "is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy" (*Totality* 21). Western philosophy, against which Levinas poses his ethics, is that which understands "being" as the individual's recognition of its existence and subsequent objectification of the world and others. "The *way* of the same" (which might be understood as that of the self), Levinas critiques, is to possess the other, to reduce the other to my own understanding. The result of such possession is submission to totalities: "If the same would establish its identity by simple *opposition to the other*, it would already be a part of a totality encompassing the same and the other" (*Totality* 38; emphasis in original). Totalities establish "a homogeneous continuum," a unity, a social order, "under a sole act of thought" (*Alterity* 39); "The true function of totalizing thought," he explains further, "does not consist in looking at being, but in determining it by organizing it" (47). One's consciousness of one's self and the objective "knowing" and representation of the other give rise to totalizing thought.

But the relation between the self and the other, for Levinas, is actually an *unknowing* however unrecognized by philosophy and politics. Levinas offers, that is, another way of thinking "being," of thinking the relation to what he indicates as "Other," *not* a reductive essence objectified and possessed by the same. ("This way of thinking is against a philosophy which does not see beyond being," Levinas summarizes [*Otherwise* 16]). Rather, the alterity of the Other, the otherness of the Other, *cannot be grasped* by the same. The Other's alterity *disrupts* totalities, disrupts the self's sense of autonomy and privilege. The individual's encounter with the Other, according to Levinas, is that which interrupts "the being that is always preoccupied with that being itself and its perseverance in being" (*Entre-Nous* 199); this "breakup of essence is ethics" (*Otherwise* 14).

The encounter with the Other, what Levinas identifies as "the face of the Other," evokes the imperative of one's responsibility to and for another, which constitutes one's subjectivity. The Other commands one to respond—it is an "appeal coming from the other to call me to responsibility" (*Totality* 213). Through the encounter with the Other, one realizes also responsibility for one's self (Lingis xlii). That is to say, "the concern about oneself [. . .] is not originally a movement back upon oneself on the part of a striving to posit oneself in being and

persevere in being," that with which Western philosophy has been preoccupied; rather, concern for the self "originates in a subjectivity whose *responsibility* has become a problem for itself" (xlii; emphasis added). The relation to an Other, then, makes possible critique, understood as "a calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same" (*Totality* 43). Critique, rather, "is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics" (43). The alterity of the Other calls forth my responsibility, impels me to "self" critique—to question my concern regarding my relation to Others.

In *Prater Violet*, Isherwood critiques aesthetic forms grounded in the oppositional logic of the same to the other, which he perceives as structuring various forms of anti-fascist aesthetics. But such critiques do not constitute another form of reaction; on the contrary, they are part of a broader effort Isherwood undertakes in his search for a form of art that is primarily self-critical. That is to say, in *Prater Violet* he reflects back upon his own involvement in the art and politics of the 1930s and, in so doing, is implicated in the novel's various aesthetic and political criticisms. In this way, the novel moves toward the ethical, to an art form that calls into question the same, that critiques the "self"—whether conceived as the artist, English "civilization," or anti-fascist art—*through* the prioritization of the Other.

Politicized Art and Aestheticized Politics

Set in 1933, the year of Hitler's access to power in Germany, *Prater Violet* fictionalizes Isherwood's experiences with making a commercial film in the midst of escalating political crisis. The novel's autobiographical narrator, "Christopher Isherwood," a British novelist, has been hired by Imperial Bulldog Pictures to rewrite the screenplay "Prater Violet" with Dr. Friedrich Bergmann, an Austrian Jewish director in exile from now-Nazified Germany (where he was a prominent director in the silent cinema during the Weimar era).[5] Bergmann is based on the Austrian emigrant filmmaker, Berthold Viertel, with whom Isherwood worked in 1933 for Gaumont-British and in the 1940s for MGM in Hollywood. With the solidification of National Socialist power as historical backdrop, Isherwood turns a critical gaze upon various art forms and upon himself as an artist engaged in cultural politics.

The exiled director, Friedrich Bergmann, is represented as an anti-fascist artist in order to *critique* and move beyond that position. Bergmann believes that the film he and Christopher are making has the potential to be socially revolutionary; this leftist response to film resonates with the thinking of Walter Benjamin, who, in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" called for the "politicization of art" over and against what he referred to as the fascist "aestheticization of politics," his privileging of Communist art in opposition to Fascist politics. *Prater Violet*, like Benjamin's article, takes aim at fascism's "aestheticization of politics" and its aesthetics of distraction, which, both Benjamin and Isherwood propose, is not wholly unlike that exercised by the commercial film industry (in the business of entertaining mass audiences). However, *Prater Violet* extends its aesthetic beyond that conceived by Benjamin and other leftist intellectuals as it points up the limits of politicized art. In so doing, Isherwood publicly distances himself from the aesthetic practices of the left.

Most significant for this discussion is Benjamin's pronouncement that the destruction of aura, "which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction," points "beyond the realm of art" to politics, and as such, is "intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements"—namely with Fascism and Communism (221). Benjamin views art's loss of "aura" as democratically and thus politically mobilizing; it is "the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the *universal equality of things*' has increased" (223; emphasis added). Perception here suggests *reception* wherein, through technology, the work of art can be brought closer to the masses. Benjamin cites film in particular as the technological art that can liberate those masses.

Through its democratization of culture, film has the potential, according to Benjamin, to be revolutionary, to be progressive. Such possibilities, however, are lost under fascism, Benjamin argues—and under the film industry of "Western Europe" as well, he suggests. "We do not deny that in some cases today's films can also promote revolutionary criticism of social conditions, even of distribution of property," Benjamin remarks of Socialist Realism (231). But it is neither revolutionary content nor form which he sees the contemporary film industry producing: "our present study is no more specifically concerned with this than is the film production of Western Europe," he notes ironically (231). If Benjamin is more concerned with radical form, with the use of montage, than he is with content, with Socialist Realism, he nevertheless does not see this as a concern of Western European filmmaking either. Rather, he continues, "the film industry [in Western Europe] is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses

through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations" (232). Such film offers passive consumption, what might be understood as the possession of the world by the self.

Strikingly, Benjamin reiterates this critique of the film production of Western Europe in the essay's oft-cited epilogue, in which his assessment of fascism as the "aestheticization of politics" emerges. Fascism is, Benjamin determines, "the consummation of *'l'art pour l'art'*" (242). Like the "illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations" practiced within the commercial film industry in the West, fascism, too, *distracts the spectator from action*: "Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses *without* affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves" (241; emphasis added). This expression manifests through film—through the mass reproduction of the masses on screen. Fascism thus distracts "modern man" from democratic action and offers instead "aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (242). Benjamin's implicit suggestion is that film under fascism shares characteristics with that of the capitalistic film industry of Western Europe—and, one could add, of Hollywood. Against such aestheticization, Benjamin poses politicized art.

Reminiscent of Benjamin's contention that "today's films can also promote revolutionary criticism of social conditions," Isherwood's Bergmann sees "Prater Violet" as "highly contemporary" and "of enormous psychological and political significance"—it has, in other words, progressive potential for art, for mass politics, and for the non-politically-engaged artist of the 1930s (*Prater Violet* 49). The film represents, he explains to Christopher, "the dilemma of the would-be revolutionary writer or artist, all over Europe" who is bourgeois but "permits himself the luxury of a romantic interest in the proletariat" (49). Once the safety and comfort of this writer's world collapses through revolution, however, as Bergmann is sure it will, the bourgeois artist, "'the declassed intellectual,'" must decide to which class, political program, and aesthetic tradition he will belong:

> "if he is loyal to his artistic traditions, the great liberal-revolutionary traditions of the nineteenth century, then he will know where he belongs. He will know how to align himself. [. . .] Unfortunately, however, he does not always make this choice. Indeed, he seldom makes it. He is unable to cut himself free, sternly, from the bourgeois dream of the Mother, that fatal and comforting dream. [. . .] He hates the paternal, revolutionary tradition, which reminds him of his duty as its son. His pretended love for the masses was only a flirtation,

after all. He now prefers to join the ranks of the dilettante nihilists, the bohemian outlaws, who believe in nothing, except their own ego, who exist only to kill, to torture, to destroy, to make everyone as miserable as themselves . . ."

"In other words, I'm a Nazi and you're my father?" (50-51)

Bergmann outlines above what were perceived to be the two options for the 1930s artist: if the bourgeois writer turns away from the progressive and revolutionary practice of politicizing art, "he" will necessarily turn *to* a version of art that evokes, in Benjaminian terms, the futurists and other avant-gardists who were drawn to fascism—the so-called decadents whose work spectacularizes death and destruction. Or, in turning away from the ideals of romanticist liberation, one turns toward reactionary avant-gardism. Bergmann here, like Benjamin, privileges the aesthetics of the politically-revolutionary artist against an other, the "decadent" avant-garde artist.

Implicated in this critique of what Benjamin and other Marxist cultural critics regarded as decadent art, however, is a version of politicized art as well—for this is still the "dilemma of the would-be revolutionary writer." The left bourgeois artist, Bergmann maintains, who remains rooted to his ivory tower, only scapegoats others; such writing becomes destructive and empty, indeed, *propagandistic*. This is the criticism Virginia Woolf makes in her 1940 essay "The Leaning Tower" of 1930s leftist writers.[6] While Woolf's essay received much angry reaction from others of Isherwood's generation, *Prater Violet* reiterates Woolf's essay and thus points to his evolving distance from the art and politics of his own generation.

Woolf suggests a comparison between the destructiveness and emptiness of leftist 1930s prose and poetry to that of (though she doesn't name it) propaganda: "it explains the pedagogic, the didactic, the loudspeaker strain that dominates their poetry. They must teach; they must preach," she writes ("The Leaning Tower" 26). The artist Woolf, Benjamin, and Bergmann describe—conceived variously in their different critiques as the left bourgeois writer or the avant-garde— resorts to the oppositional logic of totalities as a re-action against misery. And such reactionary behavior, Isherwood suggests, resonates with fascism. Or, as Brian Finney summarizes, "to maintain the ivory tower position of the twenties, [Bergmann] demonstrates, is to condone the spread of fascism" (189). Perhaps, then, the politicization of art, predicated on reactionary thought, is not all that different from fascist aestheticization.

In the above passage from *Prater Violet*, the link suggested by the left between Nazism and aestheticization is equally criticized, as

evidenced by Christopher's satirical comment: "'In other words, I'm a Nazi and you're my father?'" Isherwood does not seek to counter what was commonly perceived among 1930s intellectuals—that Nazism aestheticized politics; rather, he aims to dissociate the assumption that this aestheticization has its roots in literary Aestheticism as it was conceived in the nineteenth century. Isherwood refutes this assumption by way of the film's "head cutter," Lawrence Dwight, a great formalist who wants to produce Art for Art's Sake. Dwight wants to remove film from "'all of this fascist-communist nonsense,'" to remove the political from art, to "'fight anarchy'" by "'making patterns'" (*Prater Violet* 69). Through patterns, Dwight contends, one can "'create meaning'" (70). "'And what about the things that won't fit into your patterns?'" Christopher asks. To which Dwight replies: "'Discard them.'" "'You mean, kill Jews?'" counters Christopher (70). Christopher questions whether a Nazi ideology underlies this aesthetic. It does not: "'When you make patterns, you don't persecute. Patterns aren't people,'" Dwight counters, distinguishing between his artistic notion of "making patterns" and Hitler's persecution and murder of Jews (70). If Isherwood needs Dwight to articulate a difference between Aestheticism and fascism it is not because he wishes to separate art from politics but to separate the assumption that the fascist aestheticization of politics has its roots in literary Aestheticist philosophy, an assumption that requires an other to sustain a notion of the politically-committed and putatively "responsible" self.

Through the above passage, in which he critiques the reactionary and oppositional thought of the avant-garde, of politicized art, and of the leftist effort to condemn aestheticism, Isherwood explores the conflicts of the 1930s artist. As his close friend Stephen Spender similarly explains in his 1951 memoir of the 1930s, *World Within World*: "We were the generation of conscience divided between the ideal of non-political art and the exigencies of anti-Fascist politics" (xvi). In a series of lectures delivered later in his life, Isherwood articulates the options this way: "Writers make bad totalitarians, because they feel guilty. So they are apt to cover their guilt by attacking art itself, calling it formalism or decadence or escapism, and extolling in its place what is in fact propaganda" ("A Personal Statement," unpublished ms.).

Ultimately, however, "Prater Violet" is neither a form of political art nor Aestheticism, leading to yet another critique the novel forwards. After Hitler's annexation of Bergmann's homeland, Austria, Bergmann comes to the realization that "Prater Violet," only a romantic musical after all, is yet another effort of the film industry of Western Europe to distract the masses through what Benjamin called "illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations." Such filmmaking, characteristic

of many British commercial films of the 1930s that produced entertainment for the masses, is "a substitute for reality, rather than a more lucid appraisal of it" (Armes 79).[7] "Prater Violet," Bergmann determines, is "'heartless filth! This wretched, lying charade!'"; "'It is a crime'" that "'definitely aids Dollfuss, and Starhemberg, and Fey and all their gangsters,'" he determines (*Prater Violet* 96).[8] Mass culture participates, then, Bergmann is right to conclude in 1933, in the spread of fascism, if not overtly through propaganda, then covertly through distraction from responsibility.

Consequently, at the end of *Prater Violet*, Christopher receives a letter from Dwight, now in Paris, who writes that though French workers "are all going to see" the film, "Prater Violet" is "definitely counter-revolutionary and ought to be banned. Meanwhile, in the cinema round the corner, a wonderful Russian masterpiece is playing to empty seats" (*Prater Violet* 128). This Russian masterpiece is not presumably an example of Socialist Realism since, it seems, the workers are not going to see it.[9] Dwight earlier predicts such reception when he tells Christopher, "'if you so-called artists would behave like technicians and get together, and stop playing at being democrats, you'd make the public take the kind of picture you wanted. This business about the box office is just a sentimental democratic fiction. If you stuck together and refused to make anything but, say, abstract films, the public would have to go and see them, and like them'" (70). Dwight accuses these "so-called" artists of "prostituting" themselves by entertaining the masses. This comment points to Isherwood's concerns about "movie work, hack work" as "something essentially false, cheap, vulgar" (34)— at least in its contemporary forms—in which he is caught between his wish that film be an art with a political sensibility and his need to earn a living by working for a mass audience, both in England in 1933 and in Hollywood from the 1940s through the 1970s, and thus his own potential complicity in "distraction." This paradox remained unresolved, but it appears that for Isherwood this distracting business was better than writing propaganda, an activity that John Lehmann suggested they both do during the war and the German novelist Klaus Mann appealed to him to do while in exile in America. But since Isherwood was a great "lover of movies since childhood," he would continue to try to get the studios to accept difference, though to no avail (*Christopher and His Kind* 152).

If politicized cinema was at times subsumed by commercial entertainment, commercial entertainment film lent itself to forms of distraction and evasion that served fascism, and art for art's sake was not consumed by the public, what effective role *could* cinema, and art more generally, play in political (and ethical) critique? What

possibilities remained for the relations between aesthetics and politics? How could the artist compose an art form that did not reproduce totalizing thought? Structured loosely like a screenplay, the novel *Prater Violet* opens with dialogue and "stage direction"; it is roughly the length of a script and it shares its title with the film in the story. The critique of art the novel advances might be read, then, as pointing toward "something different," a potential model, indeed a hope for cinema.

The making of "Prater Violet" in the novel occurs just after the advent of the sound film, the move away from what Isherwood calls the "poetry" of the silent film, the move away from the image ("A Writer and the Films," unpublished ms.). In moving toward sound, Isherwood remarks, cinema became more invested in Realism, in the transfer of plays and novels onto the screen—stories in which "the boy is running after the girl, he gets her or he doesn't, very simple, crude movements, and all the marvelous irrelevancies which make up half of the charm and atmosphere of a great novel, [are] utterly destroyed," stories, that is, already inscribed by narrative and social conventions and expectations ("A Writer and the Films"). Indeed, this is the kind of film Christopher and Bergmann ultimately produce. While scholars like Linda Mizejewski have criticized Isherwood for continuing to work in a commercial industry that demanded such realist heterosexual plot structures (*Divine Decadence* 76), Isherwood did in fact "imagine some entirely different kind of film" that would not reify socially-circumscribed subjectivities and narrative. To be sure, Isherwood desires:

> a kind of film which I believe has never really been attempted, in which one gave impressions of a great novel–a sort of symphony [. . .]. [Y]ou could do such a thing with a film dealing with an enormous novel on the epic scale and by creating hundreds of little moments and not dwelling so much on the fortunes of the principle characters, perhaps really bring the book not only to life but into a new meaning and significance in another medium. ("A Writer and the Films")

Prater Violet does not, as we shall see, dwell "so much on the fortunes of the principle characters"; rather, these characters create "a sort of symphony," whose motif is ethics in the face of totalizing thought and the aesthetics and politics incited by such thought. If the novel *Prater Violet* has written the possibility of a "new meaning and significance"— that "something different"—consisting of "little moments," "impressions," it was to remain in the pages of a novel. Isherwood's belief in the potential for mass cinema would not be realized in his experiences with script writing in Hollywood, for the ethical encounter he sought to render visible—suggested by the screenplay about the

conscientious objector, for instance—would not be produced by the studios. Film remained "hack work," but it was that which afforded him the time to develop his ethical theory of art in novelistic form.

As Isherwood felt the burden of this dilemma, so too did Berthold Viertel—the model for Bergmann. After reading a draft of *Prater Violet*, Viertel, though in praise of the novel as a whole, protested against Isherwood's representation of the refugee filmmaker Bergmann and what Viertel saw as a "discrepancy in Bergmann between theory and praxis" (Letter, Oct. 26, 1944). Viertel did not want to be seen as, or to see himself as, an artist who compromised and subsumed both his aesthetic vision and his political commitment in favor of mass appeal. Just over a week later, however, Viertel realized that perhaps Bergmann "is more typical than you think, he is the figure of an emigrant as none exists so far in literature" (Letter, Nov. 8, 1944). Bergmann represents, that is, the exiled artist attempting to make art and to make art matter in the face of war and pacifism, domination, and murder. He is the modern emigrant artist whose conditions of exile necessitate a critical relation to aesthetics *and* politics.

Toward an Ethical Practice of Art

Ethics emerges in *Prater Violet* by way of an encounter between Christopher and Bergmann. Theirs is a particular kind of meeting, one that resonates with what Levinas calls the face-to-face relation. According to Levinas, recognition of the Other is not an act of *cognition* because the Other cannot be fully known and thus "possessed." Rather, "the relationship with alterity, which is what escapes apprehension, exceeds all comprehension, is infinitely remote, is, paradoxically enough, the most extreme immediacy, proximity closer than presence" (Lingis xxv). Bergmann is a figure who "exceeds all comprehension," but it is this very excess, this beyond being, that causes those he meets in England to want to identify and thus to subjectify him. Christopher discovers, however, that Bergmann cannot be so easily "placed." After speaking with him on the telephone, a conversation that begins with many gaps and hesitations—signifying a lack of "comprehension"—and communicates solely the appointment of a time at which the two artists will meet, Christopher arrives at Bergmann's hotel, only to learn he is not there. This begins a series of escapades in which Christopher attempts to "locate" Bergmann through the help of hotel and store clerks who seek to insert him into reductive narratives, to re-present him: "'You know what foreign gentlemen are, being strange to the city,'" the hotel porter remarks (*Prater Violet* 13); "'Quite a character, isn't he?'"

poses "the girl at the little tobacconist's" (13); "Mitchell's [the magazine stand], also, remembered the foreign gentleman, but less favorably" (14). Still, Bergmann proves inaccessible despite, or perhaps because of, the many efforts of others to grasp him.

When Christopher finally encounters Bergmann, a mutual recognition takes place, forestalling the objectification of one consciousness by another. The face of the Other, that is, is a form of expression, not an other to be comprehended but a response to the same: "The presentation of the face, expression," explains Levinas, "does not disclose an inward world previously closed, adding thus a new region to comprehend or to take over. On the contrary, it calls to me above and beyond the given that speech already puts in common among us" (*Totality* 212). "There are meetings," Christopher similarly narrates, "which are like recognitions—this was one of them":

> Of course we knew each other. The name, the voice, the features were essential, I knew that face. It was the face of a political situation, an epoch. The face of Central Europe.
>
> Bergmann, I am sure, was aware of what I was thinking. 'How do you do, *sir*?' He gave the last word a slight, ironic emphasis. We stood there, for a moment, looking at each other. (*Prater Violet* 16-17)

If Christopher "knows" Bergmann, it is not in a personal sense; he "recognizes," rather, what Bergmann's "proximity closer than presence" communicates—politics, suffering, the demand of a response.

This encounter establishes the novel's ethical narratorial consciousness, which is conveyed near the end of the novel. On the last day of the film's production, Christopher and Bergmann are walking home together: "Perhaps," thinks Christopher,

> I might have turned to Bergmann and asked, "Who are you? Who am I? What are we doing here?" But actors cannot ask such questions during the performance. We had written each other's parts, Christopher's Friedrich, Friedrich's Christopher, and we had to go on playing them, as long as we were together. [. . .] For, beneath our disguises, and despite all the kind-unkind things we might ever say or think about each other, we knew. Beneath outer consciousness, two other beings, anonymous, impersonal, without labels, had met and recognized each other, and had clasped hands (*Prater Violet* 126-27).

Isherwood again foregrounds the lack of a need to identify self and other. Christopher and Bergmann are beyond "being"—"anonymous, impersonal, without labels," without ego. They have "clasped hands," called to each other. Together, they give expression to the narrative.

That is to say, the "authors" of the film "Prater Violet" have "authored" the novel: they have inscribed each other's parts, composed a work of art—the novel, in this case—which is not dominated by an authoritative "I," by a self who represents others. The novel thus thematizes an aesthetic practice that unites both self and other as well as content and expression. The narratorial consciousness, composed by outsider-artists, is non-authoritative; it disrupts totalities, namely the totalizing conventions of realist and anti-fascist aesthetics and totalitarian politics.

The ethical correspondence between Christopher and Bergmann established by the novel's form is mirrored further by the novel's content. Not only are Christopher and Bergmann linked at the level of plot as filmmakers, but they are linked politically by way of their literal and metaphorical positioning as "refugees," a fact that serves a larger socio-political purpose. Bergman, a "Jewish Socrates" (*Prater Violet* 40), and Christopher, a persecuted poet, a "poor Shelley," sought by "Byron's hangmen" (28), will "pay the penalty of those who tell the truth" (61). Indeed, both are treated as prisoners by the film studio, which bears the symbolic name Imperial Bulldog Pictures. As its name implies, this empire-like studio is an aggressive force that imposes its will on others. When Bergmann and Christopher fail to produce "Prater Violet" quickly enough, Chatsworth, the head of the studio, sends his "underling," Ashmeade, after them. According to Bergmann, Ashmeade is "the Secret Police." Bergmann and Christopher are subsequently put "on trial": "the criminals are dragged into court to hear the death sentence" (60); "they torture us, and we have nothing to confess" (64). This description is significant because it textually follows the political event of the Reichstag fire trials, Bergmann's enactment of "the entire drama" of these trials for Christopher and their secretary Dorothy, and a nightmare Christopher has about "Hitler Germany" in which he is at a political trial (55). "The trial" of these artists accrues the force of these political precedents. Further, Christopher's queerness (marked by his unreadable relationships with the genderless J., K., L., and M. and his refusal to respond to Bergmann's inquiries "'Is it Mr. W. H. you seek, or the Dark Lady of the Sonnets?'" (38)) and Bergmann's Jewishness position them as persecuted outsiders whether under the Nazi regime or within British society. These subjectivities do not become reified in the novel, however, thereby re-instituting a privileged self against which one can subjectify an other. The novel, that is, does *not* dwell "so much on the fortunes of the principle characters." Rather, by way such fortunes, Isherwood conveys a "truth": he identifies violence, domination, and aggression as constitutive of existing relations of social and political power.

Like his vision for film, consisting of "little moments," Isherwood creates "impressions" of fascist persecution in *Prater Violet*, creates microcosms of the persecution made possible by totalizing thought. He sets his story of persecution in England and in the ostensibly non-political world of commercial filmmaking, and in so doing, extends his understanding of cruelty not solely to overt practices of violence and domination, but to everyday injustice. In other words, Isherwood conceives of a socio-political critique made possible by an ethical encounter with the Other. In this, he is like Levinas, who "tries to build a bridge from ethics, conceived as the non-totalizable relation to the other human being, to politics, understood as the relation to what Levinas calls the third party [. . .], that is, to all the others that make up society" (Critchley 24). Isherwood's attempt "to build a bridge from ethics [. . .] to politics" (or perhaps from politics to ethics) happens by way of aesthetics. "If the writer is persecuted," Isherwood details in a lecture, "he must still endeavor, as long as he can, to *dissuade the state from committing this crime against him and itself*" ("A Personal Statement," unpublished ms.; emphasis added). But in attempting to do so, the persecuted outsider-artist is not dogmatic, for "as soon as he becomes merely defiant and tragically heroic he has lost his usefulness" ("A Personal Statement"). This resistance to dogmatism is a resistance to reactionary thought and suggests a way of reading *Prater Violet*: it is not simply a "defiant" novel, opposing art forms only to replace them with others; instead, the novel works toward justice through critique, which is ethics. "It is always starting out from the Face, from the responsibility for the other," explains Levinas, "that justice appears, which calls for judgment and comparison" ("Philosophy" 104). *Prater Violet* turns toward the "third party," extends its judgment to society as part of its critical self-reflection.

This kind of judgment emerges in the contrast between early and later scenes of Christopher's domestic life. The opening "scene" of the novel takes place between Christopher, his mother, and Richard, his brother, over morning tea. Following a phone call from the "movie people," Christopher enters the dining room and stands inside the doorway until his mother gives him "a cue line" (*Prater Violet* 5). Assuming a disinterested attitude toward the call, he tells his mother and Richard about it. They are fascinated. Claiming he has work to do, but unwilling to end his performance, he waits for another cue line from his mother. With the newspaper "crumpled and limp" in front of them, the discussion soon turns to politics (7). Christopher's performance continues: "I was off. My mother poured fresh cups of tea for Richard and herself. They exchanged milk and sugar with smiling pantomime and settled back comfortably in their chairs, like people in

a restaurant when the orchestra strikes up a tune which everybody knows by heart" (8). Christopher begins "to sketch, none too briefly, the history of National Socialism since the Munich Putsch" (8)—a script he apparently "knows by heart"—when the telephone rings again, and again, it is the movie people. The conversation slips easily between "the movies" and politics, and little distinction is made between the performance associated with filmmaking and that of the upper-middle class British family discussing National Socialist Germany, a concern which is consequently made ironic, for it is a pantomime, acted by figures who do not speak or who only speak in rehearsed scripts. "Respectability" of the upper-middle-class English family is deconstructed here as a performance, an aestheticized representational ideal.

But what are we to make of Isherwood's criticism of England's "pantomime" since it is he who left England when war was imminent and consequently makes his critique following six years of a war during which he was six thousand miles away? Isherwood's self-reflexive ethical perspective demands that he reflect on his own actions just as he reflects on English culture and politics. That is, in the above passages, he does not exonerate his autobiographical narrator-artist from his lack of political and aesthetic responsibility. Rather, significantly, his critique is largely focused *on* Christopher, who, at the beginning of the novel, fulfills his "role" as the artist concerned with (however superficially given his performance) but not *responsible* for politics or for Others. This image recalls Isherwood's feelings about his own left-wing stance by the end of the 1930s, an implicit self-criticism within the novel.

Or perhaps not so implicit. Once Bergmann realizes that "Prater Violet" is "heartless filth," he begins to criticize everyone around him—those who "'think nothing'" (*Prater Violet* 103). It is not politics about which they should care, he determines, but about "'plain human men and women'"; they should be concerned "'with flesh and with blood'" (103). Despite Bergmann's demand for some sense of obligation from others, Christopher feels he cannot respond: "I no longer knew what I felt—only what I was *supposed* to feel" (104; emphasis added), a comment not unlike that which Isherwood later uses in *Christopher and His Kind* to describe his thoughts at the end of the 1930s, as cited in the opening of this essay. The focus on filmmaking in *Prater Violet* determines the form his self-critique takes in this earlier text, thus the inscription of his political commitment as "performance."

Although Christopher is satirized at the start of the novel for his political ambivalence, his relationship with Bergmann changes him. As the novel progresses, Christopher's performance falls away as a

performance as Bergmann persistently inserts politics into the everyday. The picture Bergmann later provides of National Socialism, for instance, is given a seriousness that outweighs Christopher's early "script" of this history. Bergmann's is the story of power, brutality, terror, murder, and the culture to come, the effects of totalizing thought and action, the consequences of violence and war:

> The attack on Vienna, Prague, London and Paris, without warning, by thousands of planes, dropping bombs filled with deadly bacilli; the conquest of Europe in a week; the subjugation of Asia, Africa, the Americas; the massacre of the Jews, the execution of intellectuals, the herding of non-Nordic women into enormous state brothels; the burning of paintings and books, the grinding of statues into powder; the mass sterilization of the unfit, mass murder of the elderly, mass conditioning of the young; the reduction of France and the Balkan countries to wilderness, in order to make national parks for the Hitler Jugend; the establishment of Brown Art, Brown Literature, Brown Music, Brown Philosophy, Brown Science and the Hitler Religion. (*Prater Violet* 41-42)

Later in the novel, when Christopher again picks up a newspaper, this one concerning fighting in Austria, it is not to begin another performance but to acknowledge the terror and fear Bergmann must be experiencing. Christopher's mother and brother come to share in this anxiety as well. This time, after his reading of the newspaper, they "watched [Christopher] in silence. Bergmann had become part of their lives [. . .]. This was a family crisis" (94). Bergmann's crisis, a personal and political crisis, has become the crisis of the English family. Their relation to the Other has also been redefined. What might be understood as Christopher's philosophical reflections at the end of the novel on love, life, death, fear, and the recognition of an Other result from his encounter with Bergmann. It is an invocation that calls him from the solipsism of the opening pages to a self who reflects on his relations to Others by the novel's close.

The trajectory Isherwood maps in *Prater Violet* concerning Christopher's changing political consciousness reflects the author's own changing attitude throughout the war years not only to politics but to art's role in this larger historical context. Unlike the film "Prater Violet," the novel *Prater Violet* critiques reactionary attitudes and thus points up the limits of 1930s aesthetics. The effect is an art form that turns its gaze *inward* rather than out toward an other. The novel *Prater Violet* has written a new form for modern political art, what might be advanced as a different conception for anti-fascist art in its resistance to totalities. The novel, that is, achieves what the film did not; it composes a new

form for art that prioritizes a relationship to an Other, through which one's responsibility then calls into question the self, totalizing thought, and persecutory practices, even those in everyday interaction. The novel *performs* this relation to Others, performs, that is, what Isherwood came to see as his responsibility to society—presenting a possibility for non-totalizing art and thought.

As a pacifist, Isherwood found himself continuously confronted with criticism of his withdrawal from politics and from responsibility. It is not surprising, then, that after Bergmann's explosive criticisms of those who do not care about Others, Christopher questions: "What is the use of caring at all, if you aren't prepared to dedicate your life, to die?" He determines, "Well, perhaps it was some use. Very, very little" (*Prater Violet* 105). However little Christopher might perceive the effects, the use of this effort, of this responsibility of caring, the novel itself does suggest otherwise. During the war, Isherwood perceived what Levinas later articulates—thoughts limited and indeed ridiculed by the totality that war presents—that "peace [. . .] cannot be identified with the end of combats that cease for want of combatants, by the defeat of some and the victory of the others, that is, with cemeteries or future universal empires. Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism" (*Totality* 306). The violence of social and political totalities, carried out in war, cannot lead to peace. Rather, peace emerges only through the ethical face-to-face relation with the Other. Isherwood realizes peace, his pacifism, through the thought of Others, an ethical relation he composes in his art and calls upon us as readers to respond to.[10]

Notes

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1. Criticism on *Prater Violet*, for instance, often focuses on the novel's father/son relationship existing between Bergmann and Christopher. See for example Paul Piazza and Lisa Schwerdt, whose readings thus reproduce oedipalized narratives of psychosexual development, obscuring Isherwood's radical aesthetic politics.

2. Other leftist writers in the 1930s deploy anti-fascist rhetoric that resembles Forster's. See for example Leonard Woolf's *Barbarians*

at the Gate and Clive Bell's *Civilization*, which construct notions of civilization by deploying problematic civilized/barbaric binaries that bear affinities with fascist ideology. Isherwood will distinguish himself, beginning with his first post-war novel, from what he comes to understand to be reactionary definitional practices of such thought.

3. Cyril Connolly was not alone in his criticism of Isherwood and Auden. Both were criticized by the British government for *"seeking refuge abroad"* (qtd. in Lehmann 55; emphasis added). Evelyn Waugh portrayed them in his 1942 novel *Put Out More Flags* as the infamous Parsnip and Pimpernell. "The great Parsnip-Pimpernell controversy," as one character comments, is "how these two can claim to be *contemporary* if they run away from the biggest event in contemporary history. [. . .] 'It's just sheer escapism'" (Waugh 43; emphasis in original). Even Isherwood's close friends were at first critical of his departure. The Marxist novelist Edward Upward, for instance, could not understand Isherwood's pacifism let alone his turn to the Eastern philosophy of Vedanta. In an unpublished eight-page letter to Isherwood dated 23 July 1939, Upward criticizes Isherwood and argues against what he sees as the dogma and fanaticism of pacifism.

4. I capitalize Other in keeping with Levinas's practice in order to distinguish the ethical relationship to "the same" or "the self" proposed in his work from the binary self/other.

5. To distinguish between the novel and the film-within-the novel, I italicize the title of the novel and put quotation marks around the title of the film.

6. Piazza notes the connection between Woolf's essay and Bergman's moral discourse, but does not read further the significance of her essay to Isherwood's attitudes toward art and politics.

7. According to Jeffrey Richards, a Mass Observation survey conducted in Britain in the late 1930s found that "when questioned, cinema-goers would invariably talk about the cinema supplying entertainment, escapism, dreams. 'Films take you out of yourself,' they would say" (184). Of 559 cinemagoers surveyed in Bolton in 1937, 171 preferred to see "musical romances," the top-rated genre (184). Documentaries, Richards points out, following either "Soviet-style socialist realism, the tradition of didactic lecture and avant-garde aesthetic experimentation [. . .] were not on the whole seen by the mass movie-going public" (193).

8. From 1932 to 1933, E. R. von Starhemberg and Engelbert Dolfuss headed the Austrian government and worked to move it in a fascist

direction. In 1934, however (a year after the novel's setting), Dollfuss was murdered by Austrian Nazis (Payne 248-50).

9. I thank Jean Walton for this observation.

10. Despite the extensive criticism of Isherwood for his turn to pacifism when war was imminent, he realized his ethical obligation through a relation to Others. His relationship with his German lover Heinz Nieddermeyer, for instance, brought him to realize his pacifism. Heinz, conscripted into Hitler's army, was, in 1939, considered to be an enemy however "an unwilling part of the Nazi military machine" he might be (*Christopher and His Kind* 335). Still, Isherwood could not fight an enemy of which Heinz was now a part. Thus, he determines: "Once I have refused to press that button [to blow up the Nazi army] because of Heinz, I can never press it" (335-6), articulating his prioritization of Others.

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