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Complicit Atmospheres: Anti-Semitism and Midcentury US Fiction

Comparative Literature Studies

Author's Accepted Version

Will Norman

In this article I explore how US writers and intellectuals in the years following World War Two responded aesthetically to the questions of complicity raised by anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. I discuss two short stories in particular, which form part of a group of literary works that share a striking and singular theme: the nightmare of the liberal intellectual finding her- or himself complicit with anti-Semitism in the confined space of a social encounter, and unable to escape. In Vladimir Nabokov's short story "Double Talk" (1945), the narrator, a Russian émigré writer, attends a drinks party in a Boston apartment only to discover that the guests are Fascist sympathizers and that he had been invited mistakenly in the place of his malevolent anti-Semitic double. Mary McCarthy's autobiographical tale "Artists in Uniform" (1953) describes the narrator's encounter with an anti-Semitic colonel in the club car of a train, and her subsequent failure to disentangle herself from his prejudicial views as they lunch together in a station restaurant.¹ In reading these stories for their points of contact and shared concerns, we can begin to build an account of how complicity was addressed by members of a particular cultural formation in the early Cold War, that of an East-Coast intelligentsia characterized by its rejection of Stalinism, adherence to classically liberal political values and commitment to the aesthetic values of European modernism.² More specifically, we gain an insight into why the aesthetics of complicity should be understood as a necessary and constitutive element of this group's intellectual ethos.

The qualities of discriminating judgment, dispassionate scrutiny, and fastidious self-interrogation that provided members of this intelligentsia with their sense of identity and purpose were precisely those threatened and thereby mobilized by the spectre of complicity. The demand these intellectuals attempted to answer was to maintain the disciplined exercise of reasoned judgment in a world in which such critical activity was becoming increasingly difficult to practice, due to the collapse of categorical distinctions once held to be definitive. As McCarthy's friend Hannah Arendt put it in 1954, "for those engaged in the quest for meaning and understanding, what is frightening in the rise of totalitarianism is not that it is something new, but that it has brought to light the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgment."³ The spectre of complicity challenges distinctions between subject and object in particular, which makes it difficult to attribute agency and causality, and thus to determine guilt or responsibility. Debarati Sanyal's discussion of Primo Levi's "gray zone" is instructive in this regard: in the football matches Levi describes at Auschwitz, where SS guards and Sonderkommandos play one another in teams, the distinctions between victim and oppressor are effectively dismantled, creating a situation in which the extreme and the normal seem to converge.⁴ In this article, however, I want to explore how Nabokov and McCarthy approach such problems from an aesthetic perspective. Reading them in this way, the seemingly intractable philosophical and legal difficulties arising from complicity can be reconceptualized as starting points for the development of an aesthetics of complicity.

My account of complicity in midcentury fiction begins with two hypotheses. The first of these is that complicity can be understood in part as careless or irresponsible speech. The title of Nabokov's story, "Double Talk," already directs us towards this anxiety over the meanings and intentions behind utterances. In McCarthy's work, too, we discover the way in which complicit situations are accompanied by certain kinds of linguistic betrayal, by a failure to speak well to others, in one's own words and in good faith. I will also focus on

complicity's spatiality, and the hypothesis that complicity is made visible in the way it occupies spaces of social encounter. Accordingly, we will need to pay close attention to way that space is evoked and delimited in these stories, and in particular to the representation of oppressive, claustrophobic interiors inhabited by several embodied subjects – the stultifying interior of a train's club car for example, or that of a drinks party in a bourgeois Boston apartment.

In order to hold these two hypotheses together I will be using the term *atmosphere*. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Arendt described “the haunting spectre of universal cooperation, the stifling, poisoned atmosphere which had surrounded the Final Solution,” and I propose now that the word *atmosphere* has particular power and resonance for us in grasping how midcentury US writers engaged with the idea of anti-Semitic complicity.⁵ It helps us to see how the crisis of speech that the stories convey relates to the work of scene-setting and establishing place in fiction. The dialectic of dialogue and description that always animates the mode of fiction takes on an augmented and oppressive charge when, in complicit moments, they begin to work in disharmony. Atmosphere is that which holds speech and space in tension and creates the economy between them. Failures to communicate adequately in these works are accompanied by a recognition of complicity as atmosphere, which fills up whatever spatial formation it occupies, and engulfs the embodied subjects located there.

I am drawing on Gernot Böhme's work on the aesthetics of atmospheres, and in particular his understanding of atmosphere as “tuned space,” saturated with a certain mood.⁶ For Böhme, atmospheres are always both spatial and emotional, creating a challenge to the tradition of Kantian aesthetics with its emphasis on the dispassionate and disembodied judgment of artworks. Atmospheres return aesthetics to the realm of sense perception and feeling, challenging the dominance of reason and language as well as the structure of subject /

object relations, and focusing rather on spatiality and physical presence. Böhme's work does not address questions of complicity, but it nevertheless provides a suggestive theoretical frame for understanding the ways in which complicity for these writers becomes an *aesthetic* as well as an ethical and political problem. In their work, complicit atmospheres threaten to overcome the faculties of judgment and discrimination, compelling subjects into recognition of their social positionality as embodied, compromised and entangled selves. This recognition, in turn, calls into question the universalism they claimed for themselves: what McCarthy calls in her story "the whole concept of transcendence, which was very close to my heart, the concept that man is more than his circumstances, more even than himself."⁷

Nabokov and the Dangers of a Dramatic Exit

"Double Talk" was published in the *New Yorker* in June 1945. In the last two weeks of April, the Allied liberation of Nazi death camps at Belsen and Buchenwald had produced a series of articles in the American press that began to detail the crimes that occurred there, including photographs of piles of dead bodies. Brian Boyd's biography suggests that the story was composed in late March and early April, before news of the camps became well-known, but Nabokov and his Jewish wife Véra had lived in Berlin until summer 1937 and had a clearer idea than many of the realities of Nazi anti-Semitism.⁸ They had escaped Nazi-occupied France in May 1940, aided by a Jewish organization grateful for the support Nabokov's politician father had given them during periods of heightened anti-Semitic activity in Tsarist Russia.⁹ By 1945 Nabokov was living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and working as a lepidopterist at Harvard University while he tried to resurrect his literary career in a new country. He had yet to learn, however, that his brother Sergei had been one of those to perish in the concentration camps, having been arrested as a homosexual.¹⁰

“Double Talk” is one of the very earliest examples of American fiction to treat the Holocaust directly and substantively, though you will rarely see it discussed as such. The story received little attention at the time of its publication or subsequently. It sits uneasily with the dominant myth in Nabokov’s critical history – one propagated by him – that contemporary politics or world affairs had no impact on his work.¹¹ “Double Talk” gives expression to the fear, explicitly raised in January 1945 by Hannah Arendt, that there is no position outside responsibility for the atrocities of World War Two.¹² Moreover, it articulates the possibility that even the most cultured liberal intellectuals carry with them anti-Semitic doubles, and that strenuous efforts to disengage from anti-Semitism only result in deeper moral entanglement. Like a fish in a net, the more one struggles to escape, the more entwined one becomes in the threads.

The narrator of the story, we are told at its opening, has what he calls “a disreputable namesake, complete from nickname to surname, a man whom I have never seen in the flesh but whose vulgar personality I have been able to deduce from his chance intrusions into the castle of my life.”¹³ This double is a clear-cut anti-Semite, whose library fines for a copy of *The Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion* end up being sent to the narrator.¹⁴ The only other things the narrator has deduced about this double are that he is a drunkard and a philanderer, and a fellow Russian refugee. The body of the story concerns a gathering in Boston one evening during the spring of 1945 organized by a Mrs Hall. The narrator attends, having been invited on recommendation by a mutual friend. At the gathering he discovers a dozen middle-class people in a bourgeois salon calmly despairing the fate of Nazi Germany. The guest of honour is a man the narrator calls Dr Shoe, another Russian émigré, who, like Nabokov, had until his arrival in the United States been resident in Germany since the Russian Civil War. Dr Shoe is a genteel, anti-Semitic Nazi apologist, who presents Germany as a high-minded but misled nation, unjustly criticized and victimized in defeat. As Dr Shoe sits down to play

“The Star Spangled Banner” on the piano with the words “God Bless America,” the narrator, overcome with nausea, storms out of the salon, expressing his scorn to Mrs Hall on the way out. He takes the wrong hat, however, and the next morning Dr Shoe materializes at his door to return the narrator’s larger hat and to retrieve his own. The story concludes with the narrator receiving a letter from his double, accusing him of impersonating him and drunkenly insulting Mrs Hall. The double suggests the narrator pay him a sum of money “by way of indemnity,” or in other words as blackmail. In the final line, the narrator admits, “the sum he demanded was really a most modest one.”¹⁵

The story takes its doubling theme from Dostoevsky and Poe, two writers who Nabokov dialogued with consistently throughout his career. Like them, he offers the scenario as an irrational nightmare in which events unfold without the control of the perceiver. The substance of this nightmare is one of anti-Semitic complicity, and its particular power emerges at the moment when the subject leaves the space of complicity (in this case the bourgeois salon) only to discover that its trace is ineradicable. In this sense, complicity is recognized not at the moment one accepts an invitation to hospitality, but when one fails to leave the party convincingly, having realized it is nefarious. On an allegorical level, this persistence of the complicit trace is presented in the form of the anti-Semite’s hat mistakenly picked up by the narrator as he leaves. In a telling detail, we read that the narrator is disgusted by the object, smelling of another’s hair lotion, but wears it nevertheless because, as he tells us, “the night was rainy and cold.”¹⁶ This is an important detail because it condenses the conceptual stakes of the story’s wider engagement with anti-Semitism and doubling. The malodorous scent of the body and its perfumes has long been a consistent trope in anti-Semitic discourse, as with other forms of racism. In an ironic turn, then, the narrator’s disgust at the smell of the hat likely imitates the mode of prejudice assumed by its owner, as well as bringing them into a shared identification through the physical wearing of the scented hat

itself. As Adorno and Horkheimer claimed in the “Elements of Anti-Semitism” chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), “when we see we remain who we are, when we smell we are absorbed by the other,” in a moment of bodily identification.¹⁷ Taking the irony of the misplaced hat as an interpretive starting point, we can detect other pieces of evidence to suggest that the narrator is not as righteous as he suggests.¹⁸ As in classic doubling tales such as Poe’s “William Wilson,” we are left unable to ascertain exactly what *does* distinguish the narrator from his double, and with the demand that the motif of doubling is to be understood as an external projection of internal psychological divisions.

Before addressing the way in which complicity is represented spatially as atmosphere in this story, I want to dwell for a moment on the problem of bad faith speech. The principal meaning of the phrase “double talk” is speech that appears to be made in earnest, but on inspection is revealed to be empty or facetious. Its other sense, related but distinct, is of deliberately and deceptively ambiguous speech. One of the story’s most striking features is its rendering of Dr Shoe’s own double talk in the first sense, the way in which he uses the platitudes and clichés of genteel middle-class culture to express Nazi apologism and Holocaust denial. When asked why the Germans had not stood up to Hitler, Dr Shoe responds: “‘The answer is a terrible one,’ he said with an effort . . . As you know, I am German myself, of pure Bavarian stock, though a loyal citizen of this country. And nevertheless I am going to say something terrible about my former countrymen. ‘Germans’ – the soft lashed eyes were half-closed again – ‘Germans are dreamers.’”¹⁹ Such double talk is obvious enough, but what makes this story’s title more telling is the way it opens up the possibility that the narrator’s story itself is double talk in the second sense, in which his words leave open certain ambiguities about his own identity, leading to those doubts about his relationship to his double. Much of this question about the two meanings of double talk turns on the narrator’s own failure to challenge Dr Shoe. “Timidity, and perhaps morbid

curiosity,” he explains, “kept me from leaving the room,” and he remained silent because he stammers whenever he becomes excited.²⁰ However, the interpretive route remains open that he had lost control that night through inebriation, like his drunkard namesake, and thus lacked the mental resources necessary to marshal his speech into an adequately coherent challenge to Dr Shoe’s fascist affinities.

The narrator imagines his double being present at the gathering, as he believes he was intended to be. “The nightmare into which I had been propelled would probably have struck him as a cozy evening with kindred souls.”²¹ It is this coziness that I want to focus on, for it draws attention to the idea of atmosphere. Böhme describes atmospheres as quasi-objective in the sense that “we are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them.”²² In the absence of directly anti-Semitic comments and therefore of culpable evidence, it is in part the nebulous, faux-genteel atmosphere of complicity in the Boston apartment that the narrator finds so poisonous, but the power of the story rests in the way he is unable to completely exorcise the possibility that the atmosphere is in some sense attributable to him. He inhabits it, allows it to surround him, and most pertinently, despite its negative effect on him, is unable to alter its dominant social feeling as *cozy*.

The apartment interior in which this atmosphere circulates, and the way its mood is orchestrated, makes it seem like a stage set. The narrator is greeted by an “ancient elevator attendant, oddly resembling Richard Wagner,” who “gloomily took me up.” In the hallway, he notes “the chief decorative note was a certain type of ornamental vase manufactured in China, and possibly of great antiquity – in this case a tall, sickly colored brute of a thing – which always made me unhappy.” He then crosses “a small self-conscious room that fairly brimmed with what advertisement writers call ‘gracious living’ and [is] ushered – theoretically, for the maid had dropped away – into a large, mellow, bourgeois salon.”²³ The

detail of Wagner's double is significant insofar as it evokes the spectre of complicity with anti-Semitism.²⁴ Wagner was one of those anti-Semites to regularly deploy the trope of the malodorous Jew, but the Wagner allusion also opens the door to the possibility of complicity being perceived through aesthetic taste, and more specifically, through the aesthetics of atmospheres.²⁵ If Wagner was mass culture for middle-class Nazis, then gracious interiors and antique Chinese vases were mass culture for bourgeois American anti-Semites. The two arts of the composer and the interior designer have in common the way in which they are perceived by the subject as creating aesthetic experiences that fill up space with certain moods and emotions.

The importance of interior design is developed in the passage where the narrator, himself a writer, imaginatively enters the minds of Dr Shoe's listeners, in a self-conscious performance of free indirect discourse. The woman sitting next to him,

. . . was, in all probability, worrying about a bit of decoration having to do with some social event or wartime entertainment the exact nature of which I could not determine. But I did know how badly she wanted that additional touch. Something in the middle of the table, she was thinking. I need something that would make people gasp – perhaps a great big huge bowl of artificial fruit. Not the wax kind, of course. Something nicely marbelized.²⁶

The challenge we are left with is to make sense of the connection between Holocaust complicity and artificial fruit in Nabokov's mind.²⁷ We might hypothesize for the moment that it has something to do with a characteristically midcentury concern with the debased taste of mass culture, and the confusion between authentic art and what Clement Greenberg had termed as "kitsch" in his influential *Partisan Review* essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," six years earlier. Greenberg understood totalitarian regimes to be particularly fertile ground

for kitsch, because of its pliability for the purposes of propaganda: “Kitsch keeps the dictator in closer contact with the ‘soul’ of the people.”²⁸ The term that Nabokov used to describe aesthetic objects that aspire to high feeling and legitimacy but fall instead into cliché and inauthenticity was “poshlust,” which he had adapted from the Russian word *Poshlost*. His fullest account of poshlust came in his book on the Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol, published in 1944, where he offers detailed examples of poshlust in American advertising and Soviet state-sanctioned culture.²⁹ Later in his life, however, Nabokov made clear that he understood the domain of poshlust to extend beyond conventionally understood aesthetic objects. In 1966 he chose the phrase “we all share in Germany’s guilt” as a prime example of poshlust.³⁰ Complicity itself, in this case, is subject to negative aesthetic judgment as cliché.

By thinking about atmosphere, however, we can approach the problem in more specific terms. After all, what interests the narrator for much of the story is interior design, understood as the intentional production of atmosphere in order to create among a group of people a mood of coziness.³¹ That coziness is a shared mood of comfortable and lazy assent, in which the exercise of discriminating judgment and vigilance are discouraged by the production of atmospheres as staged enchantment (the narrator writes “I looked around and tried to convince myself that these were real people and not a Punch-and-Judy show”).³² The very innocuousness of the atmosphere of the gathering, with its clinking of glasses and polite conversation, its piano music and gracious interior, demands the exercise of vigilance and discrimination. The party’s stage-managed atmosphere softens what might otherwise be understood as an uncomfortable encounter between bourgeois leisure and the catastrophe of the Nazi death camps, and conjures instead the comfortable space in which complicity flourishes.

The narrator seems to suggest that if cozy complicity is the problem, the solution is the practice of vigilant speech and judgment capable of cutting through its hazy atmospheres.

If we only exercise the same disinterested, discriminating judgment in social encounters that we might exercise in evaluating aesthetic objects, then complicity might be avoided. In a more radical sense, though, the instabilities introduced by the doubling motif hold open the possibility that the class of midcentury liberal intellectuals is always already constitutively and inextricably caught up with the system of racial distinctions it wishes to transcend. It is illuminating to pay attention to the dual meaning of the word “white” in Nabokov’s story – its double talk, so to speak. The *dopplegänger* is imagined by the narrator as being “a young, very White émigré.”³³ The capitalization of “White” leads us to interpret its meaning as designating a particular ideological and class identity among Russian émigrés aligned with the departed monarchy and anti-Communism. However, the word and its odd phrasing, together with the context of the setting in the United States, also permits us to consider the function of a racial whiteness, entirely compatible with but also distinct from the politics of the Russian emigration. The narrator is extremely perceptive about whiteness and the way the term mediates between ocular perception and the construction of racial identities. He notes, for example, that Dr Shoe is lit by a lamp at his shoulder so that “one could admire the whiteness of his clasped hands” and then goes on to admit that, “for some odd reason, I recalled a swarthy Russian girl in New York who was so troubled by the possibility of being mistaken for her notion of a Jewess that she used to wear a cross upon her throat, although she had as little religion as brains.”³⁴ It is clear, then, that in the double talk of the story, whiteness in both the Russian political and racial sense is in play, as is the shame of racial recognition and misrecognition. The chief ambiguity left unresolved by the story is not whether the narrator paid off his double, but whether the narrator is Jewish, in which case the “indemnity” offered in return for cash at the story’s conclusion may be one against the public revelation of his racial identity, and the story begins to take on a generic resemblance to the classic passing narrative. Whether or not we wish to follow this line of interpretation, the

manner in which questions of race and color are brought to the surface of the story, but never fully exposed or resolved, exposes a tension in Nabokov's liberal aesthetics.³⁵ In that 1966 interview, Nabokov designated "overconcern with class or race" as one of the contemporary signs of poshlost.³⁶ Race was a taboo topic if dealt with explicitly in Nabokov's view, but might become a legitimate one if only one used the strategies of literary double talk and the evocation of complicit atmospheres.

McCarthy and Tuned Space

Mary McCarthy is perhaps the most important figure for an account of complicity in midcentury U.S. literature, by virtue of her relentless and aggressive interrogation of the moral life of liberal intellectuals. This was an interrogation that, by her own account, began and ended with scrupulously objective self-criticism. As Deborah Nelson has recently summarized, "McCarthy's body of work can be seen as a long meditation on the myriad forms of self-delusion that comforted her generation, not excepting herself."³⁷ This tendency to self-interrogation might be traced equally through either her long engagement with the Catholic tradition of confession in which she was brought up and educated, or through the classic liberal tradition of self-scrutiny and moral conscience exemplified for instance in John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*. It would not be too much to suggest that complicity was McCarthy's great subject, one which reached its apotheosis in the non-fiction account of her visit to Vietnam to report on the war in 1968. At the close of her report, McCarthy admitted finally to her inability to assume the objectivity she craved, and began to doubt her own mission of providing the necessary clarity of vision to disabuse supporters of the war in the United States of their naivety: "the illusion of being effective, the sole justification for my presence there, began to waiver in North Vietnam, the more I called upon it to defend me

against the charge of complicity with American ruling circles – a complicity attested by the mirror.”³⁸ This anxiety over the state of her own conscience and the possibility of maintaining a position of unsentimental critical objectivity in transcendence of her own contingent situation, ran throughout her career from the moment of her breakthrough novel *The Company She Keeps* in 1944, and across all the genres in which she worked: fiction, memoir, literary criticism and journalistic reportage. The particular failure of which McCarthy finds herself guilty in “Artists in Uniform” is, as we shall see, her inability to transcend her own ashamed recognition of herself as both a Jew and a bohemian artist.

The story presents one of those moments in her oeuvre when the satirical critical impulse behind McCarthy’s writing was turned away from the foibles of her New York intellectual circle and directed mercilessly at herself. Although *Harper’s* subtitle described the text as a “a story by Mary McCarthy,” the author herself published a subsequent rejoinder that made it clear that it was “a piece of reporting or a fragment of autobiography,” intended, as she put it, “to embarrass myself and, if possible, the reader too.”³⁹ It begins with the narrator trapped in the club car of a train between New York and St Louis with a casually anti-Semitic colonel. On challenging him on his views as they leave the train (performing the action that Nabokov’s narrator is conspicuously unable to), she finds herself nevertheless lunching with him at the station restaurant, unable to convince him of his errors while beginning to wonder if she might not herself harbour more subtle forms of anti-Semitism despite her own self-image as an unprejudiced and enlightened intellectual. The Colonel views her and her protests suspiciously as typical of left-wing bohemia but cannot understand why she would “stand up for” Jews on principle, being apparently Irish rather than Jewish herself. The story ends with the Colonel understanding his logic to be validated when he mishears her husband’s name as the apparently Jewish-sounding “Brodhead” instead of the

“Broadhead” it really is. “The victory was his. ‘One of the chosen, eh?’ his brief grimace commiserated.”⁴⁰

The story is organized around two distinctive quasi-public spaces – the club car of the train and the station restaurant – which are differentiated atmospherically by light and temperature. The story takes place during a summer heat-wave, and the train is passing through Indiana. The air-conditioning, the narrator informs us, “had not met the test,” and she becomes self-conscious about her green silk shirt, which she worries has functioned as a sort of bohemian dress – the artist’s uniform of the title – signalling her affiliations and social position (39). “As the conversation grew tenser, and I endeavoured to keep cool,” she says, “I began to writhe within myself, and every time I looked down, my contrasting greens seemed to be growing more and more lurid and taking on an almost menacing light, like leaves just before a storm that lift their bright undersides as the air becomes darker” (42). This emphasis on light and temperature take us directly into the distinctive attributes of atmospheres, with their characteristically ambiguous relationship to agency and feeling. Is it the light that draws attention to the green blouse or the narrator’s choice of clothing? Does the threat of the storm emerge subjectively from within the narrator or is it a function of some external tension, one which exists independently of her, “out there” in the club car? The interest here is in the way the narrator finds herself to be inhabiting a certain atmosphere, but is unable to determine conclusively who is responsible for it or where it comes from. Even as she assures the Colonel that, far from there being a hotbed of Communist insurrection, at Harvard “the general atmosphere is more anti-Communist than the Vatican,” the atmosphere in which she exists and speaks – that surrounds and indeed permeates her – is increasingly heated, saturated with aggressive prejudice (42).

The other space is a cool and dark air-conditioned restaurant at St Louis Station, in which, since she is hot and hungry, the narrator reluctantly lunches with the Colonel. “The

room”, she tells us, “was dark as a cave and produced, in the midst of the hot midday, a hallucinated feeling, as though time had ceased, with the weather, and we were in eternity together” (45). Here, then, the atmosphere of complicity is given its full and explicit treatment as the narrator rehearses the history of the Nazi death camps with the Colonel, through a series of misunderstandings and failed clarifications. When the Colonel asks “why should you be for them?” she replies “I’m not ‘for’ them . . . You don’t understand. I’m not for *any* race or nation. I’m against those who are against them” (45). Following this increasingly unmanageable, tangled syntax comes what is for our purposes the most important passage in the story:

This word, *them*, with a sort of slurring circle drawn round it, was starting to sound ugly to me. Automatically, in arguing with him, I seemed to have slipped into the Colonel’s style of thought. It occurred to me that defense of the Jews could be a subtle and safe form of anti-Semitism, an exercise of patronage: as a rational Gentile, one could feel superior both to the Jews and the anti-Semites. There could be no doubt that the Jewish question evoked a curious stealthy lust or concupiscence. I could feel it now vibrating between us over the dark table. If I had been a good person, I should unquestionably have got up and left. (45-6)

This passage serves as an unusually concentrated analysis of the structure of complicit atmospheres in midcentury US writing, exemplifying once again the significance of speech as a locus for crises of moral conscience, the introduction of aesthetic criteria into the recognition of complicity, and the location of complicit atmospheres in the spaces between embodied subjects. As in Nabokov’s “Double Talk,” this atmosphere is underpinned by an uncomfortable Dostoevskian doubling effect, in which every liberal subject carries alongside them a despicable anti-Semite: McCarthy, in claiming the story as autobiography, described its narrator as the Colonel’s “mutually repellent twin.”⁴¹

This is the moment when complicity again comes out into the open as a question that was always at some level, in the American context at least, about white liberals talking about race. The particular complexity of the problem relates to the fluid and concealable status of Jewishness in relation to whiteness in the United States. The twist in “Artists in Uniform” is that the narrator of this story is herself Jewish, insofar as she has, like McCarthy herself, a Jewish grandmother.⁴² As she confides to us, “by Nazi criteria I was Jewish,” but it is a status she refuses to admit to the Colonel, writing that “though I did not ‘hate’ the idea of being taken for a Jew, I did not precisely like it” (44). In the way it represents a woman intentionally concealing her Jewishness as well as her status as an intellectual, the story engages the conventions of the passing narrative, in which racial identities are hidden in order to ease protagonists’ movement through certain spaces and milieux. McCarthy’s narrator enters a form of complicity comparable to that which entangles the narrator of Nabokov’s “Double Talk”: her encounter forces her to think in terms of “Nazi criteria” despite herself, leading into the very racial discourse she is attempting to repudiate. Her silence about her grandmother, meanwhile, not only risks identifying her as a snob for whom Jewishness is degrading, but also places her in a comparable situation to a Jew concealing her ancestry in order to avoid identification and deportation under Nazi rule in Europe. Both victim of anti-Semitism and its enabler, McCarthy’s narrator experiences complicity as a situation in which she is confronted with her own silently and ashamedly raced self.

More singular is the way in which McCarthy emphasizes the interrelationship of language and space in complicit atmospheres. Use of the term *them* becomes a shared space of complicity, but one which we now know is inadequately defined in the light of the narrator’s admission of her Jewish grandmother, for the “slurring circle” contains an *I* in its *them*. Subject and object positions in this space are thus confounded, but this confusion is presented to us by McCarthy as an aesthetic concern, being *ugly*. Its lazy imprecision belongs

to the Colonel's impoverished "style of thought," into which McCarthy finds herself sliding. If Nabokov identified poshlust in the tastes of fascist sympathizers for marbelized fruit, then McCarthy too takes the opportunity to sneer at the Colonel's capacity for aesthetic discrimination. Her contemporary Elizabeth Hardwick rightly noted that "taste is . . . used as the surest indication of character" in McCarthy's fiction, and seeing her volume of Dickens, the Colonel enquires "*The Christmas Carol?*" as a means of opening the conversation, suggesting either that this is the only Dickens work he knows, or that it is his favourite.⁴³ McCarthy relies here on her readers' shared knowledge of *The Christmas Carol's* status in Dickens' oeuvre, as a work exceptional in its appeal to the popular taste, intended by the author himself as a money-making potboiler. She describes the Colonel's assumption as a "crudely bad guess" (42). Complicity then becomes associated with the literature of cliché, where language arrives second-hand, unthinkingly borrowed and carelessly deployed without self-reflection. In a correlative passage in *The Groves of Academe*, McCarthy's novel published the previous year, a character who has been duped into admitting responsibility for the actions of a duplicitous and malevolent colleague reflects on the occasion by saying "my words became disobedient, like the vocal chords of a person who habitually sings off key. I thought I heard the truth for an instant; somewhere I think I can still hear it, very faintly, but it eludes me, like perfect pitch."⁴⁴ Atmospheres, in Böhme's formulation, are "tuned spaces," but in these cases they are tuned wrongly, creating aesthetic negatives – ugliness and discord.

We are left finally with that striking transition from anti-Semitism to an atmospheric eroticism "vibrating" in the air between the narrator and the Colonel but belonging properly to neither. Its recognition by the narrator marks her relinquishment of the position of cool detachment she associates with the fantasy of the "rationale Gentile" in order to take up instead the disposition of the stereotyped irrational Jew, aware of herself as embodied, raced, and caught up in a tangle of mutual desire that compromises her ethical principles. "If I had

been a good person,” McCarthy’s narrator tells us in an echo of the situation described in “Double Talk,” “I should unquestionably have got up and left.” This anxiety is about more than McCarthy’s Catholic internalization of venial sin, for the drama of all these narratives of complicity in terms of plot hinges consistently and precisely on the decision of how and when to leave a certain space – to remove one’s body from a charged atmosphere – and the failure to do so satisfactorily.

Literary Complicity, Liberalism and Judgment

In the cases we have been considering here, the proximity of human individuals in social spaces has served as a reminder of embodied subjectivity, and the way in which complicity is grasped through sense perception: especially smell, touch and hearing. In this regard the German term *Stimmung* (from *stimme*, meaning voice) might serve as a suitable alternative to the word *atmosphere* as I have been using it, suggesting as it does the presence of a material contact, typically a very light one, on the body of the (ap)perceiving party.⁴⁵ Weather, sounds, and music all have a material yet invisible impact on us, and to this list we might add the smell of another’s body or indeed the “vibrating” eroticism of sexual desire. What interests me here is the way in which atmospheres or *Stimmungen* serve as placeholders for certain types of experience for which subjects lack adequate conceptual or linguistic apparatus in the dominant modes of expression. Complicity for these writers is one of those types of experience, lying outside the vocabulary of classical liberal theory and yet right at the heart of their aesthetic practice.

How are we to account for this apparent paradox? In *Bleak Liberalism*, Amanda Anderson delineates a midcentury liberal aesthetic committed to “complexity, difficulty, variousness, ambiguity, undecidability, hermeneutic open-endedness, and threshold

experiences,” standing at apparent odds with the values of transparency and proceduralism associated with political liberalism.⁴⁶ In Anderson’s reading, this aesthetic comes to stand for the necessary “other” of liberal reason, the limit to human progress and perfectibility that liberal thought posits as an enriching counterpoint to its political programme. The works we have been examining are amenable to such models. I want to emphasize, however, the sense in which midcentury American liberalism *required* this crisis of the subject assailed by anti-democratic prejudice in order to buttress its political programme. In 1949, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. set the affective tone of one of the most influential articulations of midcentury liberalism, *The Vital Center*, with the words “Western Man in the middle of the twentieth century is tense, uncertain, adrift.” What is more easily forgotten is the admission in his preface: “The experience with Communism has had one singularly healthy effect: it has made us reclaim democratic ideas which a decade ago we tended to regret and even abandon.”⁴⁷ If we understand these two claims to operate in a dialectical unity we are some way towards grasping why McCarthy might wish to embarrass herself publicly as a latent anti-Semite, and why Nabokov might write a story in which the émigré highbrow modernist is unmasked as an ineffectual drunk unable to shake off the taint of Nazism. Such strategies can be readily grasped as instances of the institutionalization of self-criticism that liberalism has always relied upon, and of its constitutive need for ideological conflict and crises of conscience to whet the blade of discriminating judgment. As John Stuart Mill wrote in *On Liberty*, “both teachers and learners go to sleep at their post, as soon as there is no enemy in the field.”⁴⁸

There is nevertheless a distinct sense of failure, uncertainty and impasse about these stories. Both writers became known primarily for the scandalous novels that succeeded these stories: Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) and McCarthy’s *The Group* (1963). The short, uncomfortable and claustrophobic fictions of complicity have been considered as superseded

by those more expansive later works, a pattern of judgement that aligns with the broader decline in estimations of the short story in America after 1950.⁴⁹ However, Nabokov himself changed the title of his story some time during the 1950s to “Conversation Piece, 1945,” a decision which seems to trivialize the story while signalling the historical limits of its relevance. Mary McCarthy even felt the need to publish an article *about* “Artists in Uniform” in the same magazine a year later, in order to clear up confusions about its meaning, which she thought had been misconstrued by over-zealous literature students. There is something, in other words, about these works which could not be allowed to stand, and which demanded qualification, revision or forgetting in order for their authors to become the people we now understand them to be. Although the stories answer the demands of liberal self-critique, their complicit atmospheres articulated a tension in midcentury liberal literary culture in a way that later appeared to both the authors and their readers as unsatisfactory.

In their recovery, however, we stand to learn something easily passed over in received accounts of American literary history, about a moment lasting from 1945 to around 1953 during which certain parts of intellectual literary culture in the United States deliberately if provisionally risked presenting themselves as complicit with anti-Semitism. It is the mid-1960s, once the archive of atrocity had been more fully established and considered, that are usually considered the moment at which such debates took place in the context of the Holocaust.⁵⁰ This period was inaugurated by the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, the publication of Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963, and the controversy that followed it for several years. 1966 was the year in which Nabokov designated the phrase “we all share in Germany’s guilt” as fatuous *poshlust*, but also the year in which Adorno made his claim in *Negative Dialectics* that “all culture after Auschwitz, including its urgent critique, is garbage.”⁵¹ Other prominent US writers, notably Arthur Miller in *After the Fall* (1964) and *The Incident at Vichy* (1964), took up holocaust complicity as a major theme in the mid-

1960s.⁵² The purpose of identifying an aesthetics of atmospheric complicity in this earlier moment is less to offer a pre-history of the later one, but rather to capture a tentative response in literary expression to an authentic crisis brought about by World War Two and the discovery of the death camps. Unlike the mid-1960s debates, this constellation assumed shape before the moral discourse surrounding the Holocaust had a chance to reify into anything like a set of positions. So although the demands of midcentury liberalism offer a vital context for understanding “Double Talk” and “Artists in Uniform,” its limits as an explanatory model are manifest in the way the stories bear witness to the sheer inadequacy of existing liberal concepts of individual responsibility and the intellectual apparatus with which they could be deployed. To return to Arendt’s 1954 remark about “the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgement” that became visible with the emergence of totalitarianism, we have seen how such startled realizations elicited a response from writers of fiction.⁵³ The complicit atmospheres of “Double Talk” and “Artists in Uniform” constitute an improvised aesthetic articulation of this philosophical crisis, which resituates its abstract terms within the lived experience of social encounters between individuals in shared spaces.

¹ For another example, see Saul Bellow’s second novel *The Victim* (1947), in which a Jewish newspaper worker in New York finds himself allowing a jobless ex-colleague to share his home, despite the knowledge that he is plainly anti-Semitic.

² While McCarthy was a key member of the group commonly known by intellectual historians as the New York Intellectuals, Nabokov fits less easily into that category, not having been through the process of renouncing the CPUSA and Trotskyism in the late 1930s

and early 1940s as most of them had. On the genesis, competing definitions and critical history of the term New York Intellectuals, see Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 6-12.

³ Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," *Partisan Review* 20, no. 4 (1954): 388.

⁴ Debarati Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 24-5. *Sonderkommandos* was the name given to prisoners forced by the threat of their own death to aid guards in their duties at the camp.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1965), 123.

⁶ Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. Jean-Paul Thibault (New York: Routledge, 2016), 2 and *passim*.

⁷ Mary McCarthy, "Artists in Uniform," *Harper's Magazine*, March 1953: 44.

⁸ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 85.

⁹ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 521.

¹⁰ Nabokov learned of Sergei's death by letter in the autumn of 1945. Boyd, *American Years*, 88.

¹¹ Will Norman, *Nabokov, History and the Texture of Time* (New York: Routledge, 2012) surveys and challenges this myth. For a reading of "Double Talk" that interrogates Nabokov's professions of indifference to history, see Tim Conley, "History and Denial in Nabokov's 'Conversation Piece, 1945,'" *Journal of the Short Story in English* 45 (2005): 113-121.

¹² Hannah Arendt, "German Guilt," *Jewish Frontier* vol. 12 (January 1945): 19-23.

¹³ Vladimir Nabokov, "Conversation Piece, 1945," *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995), 587. "Double Talk" was first published in the *New Yorker* June 23, 1945: 20-25. At some point between its inclusion in the short story collections *Nine Stories* (1947) and *Nabokov's Dozen* (1958), Nabokov made the decision to change its title from "Double Talk" to "Conversation Piece, 1945."

¹⁴ *The Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion* is a notorious, fabricated anti-Semitic text first published in Russia in 1903, purporting to describe a Jewish plan for global domination.

¹⁵ Nabokov, "Conversation Piece," 596.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 595.

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 151.

¹⁸ For a detailed reading of such clues, see Conley, "History and Denial."

¹⁹ Nabokov, "Conversation Piece," 590.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics." *Thesis 11* vol. 36 (1993): 114.

²³ Nabokov, "Conversation Piece," 588.

²⁴ On Nabokov's engagement with Wagnerian anti-Semitism, see Leonid Livak, "Jewishness as Device in Nabokov's Fiction," in *Vladimir Nabokov in Context*, ed. David M. Bethea and Siggy Frank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 230-33.

²⁵ On Wagner's anti-Semitism and smell, see Marc A. Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the anti-Semitic Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 195-260.

²⁶ Nabokov, "Conversation Piece," 590-91.

²⁷ Though startling, this juxtaposition seems nevertheless to be intentional on Nabokov's part.

Dr Shoe defends without challenge the necessity of incarcerating Jews, and the "purely sanitary measures" used in dealing with the corpses of those who died "in camp." Ibid., 593-4. Given these details, and the timing of the story's publication as news of the liberation of death camps reached the United States, we can be confident that the story evokes complicity not simply with anti-Semitism in the abstract, but with regard to the historical event of the Holocaust, even if its full extent was not yet clear.

²⁸ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (1939): 47.

²⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolay Gogol* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1944), 64-9.

³⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 101.

³¹ On interior design as the intentional production of specific atmospheres, see Mona Sloane, "Tuning the Space: Investigating the Making of Atmospheres through Interior Design Practices," *Interiors: Design, Architecture and Culture* 5, no. 3 (2014): 297-314.

³² Nabokov, "Conversation Piece," 590.

³³ Ibid., 587.

³⁴ Ibid., 589.

³⁵ On Nabokov's liberal aesthetics, see Dana Dragunoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011).

³⁶ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 101.

³⁷ Deborah Nelson, *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), 79.

³⁸ Mary McCarthy, *Hanoi* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 130.

³⁹ Mary McCarthy, "Settling the Colonel's Hash," in *On the Contrary* (London: Heinemann, 1962), 226, 227. On embarrassment in McCarthy's work, including analysis of "Artists in

Uniform,” see Jaime Cleland, “Pink Pants and Pessaries: Mary McCarthy’s Aesthetics of Embarrassment,” *Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 15, no. 1 (2004): 29-43.

⁴⁰ Mary McCarthy, “Artists in Uniform: A Story by Mary McCarthy,” *Harper’s Magazine*, March 1953: 41-49. Further citations in parentheses.

⁴¹ McCarthy, “Settling the Colonel’s Hash,” 239.

⁴² McCarthy’s relationship with the Jewish members of her family including her grandmother, as well as her attitude to Jewishness, is treated in her *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood* (London: Penguin, 1963). There she describes her “curious attitude” to them as a child, “in which the crudest anti-Semitism . . . mingled with infatuation and with genuine tolerance and detachment” (179).

⁴³ Elizabeth Hardwick, *A View of My Own* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1962), 36.

⁴⁴ Mary McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1951), 253-4.

⁴⁵ On *Stimmung* as an objective component of historical experience, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *After 1945: Latency as the Origin of the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 24.

⁴⁶ Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 7.

⁴⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2009), 1, xxii.

⁴⁸ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. David Bromwich and George Kateb (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 109.

⁴⁹ On the decline in critical estimations of the short story, see Sam V. H. Reese, *The Short Story in Midcentury America: Countercultural Form in the Work of Bowles, McCarthy, Welty and Williams* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017).

⁵⁰ See, for example, Peter Novick's influential claims about the US public's deferred engagement with the Holocaust in *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

⁵¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by Denis Redmond (online publication, 2001). Accessed August 10, 2018, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/052c/3047553269628dde27f4dc7ce397cc1fa25c.pdf>

⁵² On Miller and holocaust complicity, see Grant Gosizk, "The Banality of Addiction: Arthur Miller and Complicity," *Modern Drama* 61, no. 2 (2018): 171-191.

⁵³ Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 388.