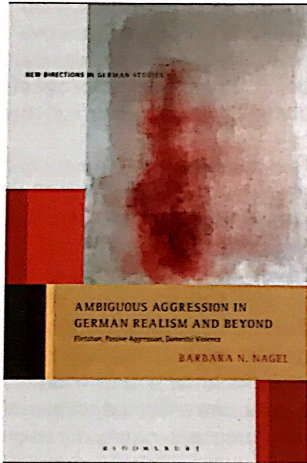


## BOOK REVIEWS



### AMBIGUOUS AGGRESSION IN GERMAN REALISM AND BEYOND: FLIRTATION, PASSIVE AGGRESSION, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE BY BARBARA NATALIE NAGEL

Bloomsbury Academic  
October 2019, 176 pages.

A review by Liliane Weissberg

The #MeToo movement began by charging a male Hollywood producer with rape and aggressive behavior toward women; by late 2017, it had spread beyond the American film industry. Such male behavior had been in place for a long time, of course, but the outcry now seemed universal. Yet on January 9, 2018, the *New York Times* reported on an open letter from Paris that took many by surprise. Catherine Deneuve, together with around a hundred additional female signers, protested the #MeToo movement by declaring #BalanceTonPorc (call out your pig). While refusing to condone overtly aggressive behavior, these women criticized American puritanical morals, and warned of a witch-hunt against men that would threaten

sexual freedom. “The liberty to seduce and importune was essential,” Deneuve declared. “Rape is a crime. But insistent or clumsy flirting is not a crime, nor is gallantry a chauvinist aggression.” A macho man’s behavior may be improperly aggressive, but a gentleman should be allowed to flirt.

Barbara Natalie Nagel, an assistant professor of German at Princeton University, has published widely on the topic of flirtation, a subject that also occupies the center of her recent, intellectually ambitious book, *Ambiguous Aggression in German Realism and Beyond: Flirtation, Passive Aggression, Domestic Violence*. Nagel is not interested in preserving a gentleman’s freedom to touch a woman, wink at her, or engage in suggestive banter. If Deneuve views flirtation as harmless, Nagel argues that it is not at all harmless. For her, it is a powerful and subversive concept—and in that she is not alone. Walter Benjamin too, was interested in flirtation as an exchange of undecided outcome. He described it as an implicit critique of the capitalistic system, since capitalism relies on ownership and on clearly delineated and stable power-relationships.

Benjamin’s remarks were but brief. The most prominent early German theorist of flirtation was Georg Simmel, who also insisted on flirtation’s subversive nature. Following Plato, he described it as a middle ground between having and not having. In 1909, Simmel devoted a whole essay to the subject, “Psychologie der Koketterie,” published in English as “Flirtation.” Simmel wrote it not for a scholarly publication, but rather for the Berlin newspaper *Der Tag*, which was billed as a “modern illustrated journal.” Moreover, he did not write as an academic sociologist—a field quite new at that time—but as a public intellectual. His main audience was probably neither macho men nor gentlemen, but female readers. The title

of the essay is important. While the English translation, “Flirtation,” can be viewed as gender neutral, *Koketterie*, like the French word from which is derived, is anything but. A *coquette* is a woman, and one whose reputation may be at stake.

In her own study, Nagel is eager to consider the gender of the person who flirts and the one who receives the attention. Flirtation can be unsettling, she claims, because women can flirt as well as men. Nagel focuses on flirtatious women, although, importantly, her examples are female characters in the works of male authors. Even the “young maiden” in Theodor Storm’s novella *The Rider on the White Horse* seems to be able to flirt without much previous instruction. Storm is, of course, a writer of the nineteenth century and a canonical author of German Realism. If the early period of a theoretical reflection on flirting can be located in the turn of the twentieth century, Nagel chooses her examples from an earlier time; theory catches up with fiction.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, bourgeois values were firmly established, and Nagel does not look for examples among poor miners or factory workers, but rather among this new middle class, which would self-confidently settle on “love” as a precondition for marriage, while transforming older court rituals into a casual language of gestures and winks. In literature, prose ruled, and authors were no longer eager to depict ideal beauty and elusive ideals of love; they instead strove for the interesting—or even the ugly. Flirtation and human aggression, whether ambiguous or not, turned into an acceptable literary subject.

Nagel chooses primarily German, but also Austrian and Swiss, examples for her study, and in the work of Storm, Theodor Fontane, Gottfried Keller, and others, she finds poignant cases of flirtation that drive the plot and at times unsettle deeply held moral convictions. She dedicates the first chapter to a discussion of flirtation and dedicates two further chapters to a discussion of passive aggression

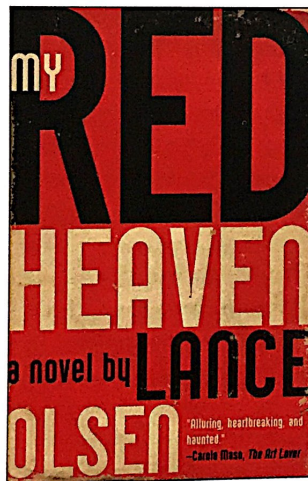
and domestic violence. Still, her interest in flirtation dominates, and passive aggression and domestic violence, cases that she subsumes to the notion of “ambiguous aggression” as well, take a bit of a back seat.

Aesthetically argued, passive aggression is an issue between *Sein* and *Schein*, “being” and “appearance.” A person presents herself in a weaker position while simultaneously using it to manipulate her counterpart. As in the case of flirtation, passive aggression offers women the opportunity to conform to expected behavior on the surface but aim for something else underneath. While flirtation may or may not result in a sexual encounter, the aim of passive aggression may have other goals. (It is also a medical term and may be assigned to a mental disorder.) Nagel discusses the exchange of letters between Fontane and his wife, Emily, but she moves into the twentieth century as well, by offering the reader glimpses from Franz Kafka’s epistolary exchange with Felice Bauer. In both cases, it is once again the man who is seeking to keep his upper hand in the relationship, and he uses the letter as an instrument of domestication.

In the case of domestic violence, no partner disguises his or her intentions. If something remains hidden, it is the nature of the relationship itself that the protagonists want to hide from the outside world. Domestic violence may involve two adults, but also more than two, and perhaps even children. Neither passive aggression nor domestic violence necessarily rely on the existence of an erotic relationship. Still, Nagel has chosen examples involving heterosexual couples, and her book turns into an unveiling of sorts, one in which the partners’ behavior reveals increasing violence as the ambiguity of what is unseen diminishes.

Nagel does not embed her subtle overall argument in a historical context; she transforms literature into a set of data as her analysis of writers and their letters competes with that of the fictional characters they create. Just a few years before Simmel’s publication of “Flirtation,” Sigmund Freud had analyzed Wilhelm Jensen’s

story “*Gradiva*” to learn about human desire. Nagel takes fictional characters similarly seriously—not by putting them on a couch but by entering them into a study of the psychology of emotions. She cites theory and writes about literature, but she is not a literary theorist. In the end, she is a deft cultural critic: she wonders what these texts can mean for us today—not for German readers of the past but for American readers now—and if a reflection upon them could contribute to contemporary discussion of the broader meanings of #MeToo. In this way, Nagel has provided us with her own open letter. □



## MY RED HEAVEN BY LANCE OLSEN

Dzanc Books  
January 2020, 200 pages

A review by Veronika Fuechtner

From the Netflix series *Babylon Berlin* to the exhibits celebrating one hundred years of the Bauhaus, Weimar Republic Berlin is enjoying a moment. As we witness the fragility of democracy around the globe, the economic uncertainty caused by the Corona crisis, and violent expressions of racism and anti-Semitism, we look to Germany between the two world wars for answers. How did people cope with dramatic historical and economic upheaval? Where did the slippery slope of fascism begin? And what

are the afterlives of this incredibly rich political, cultural, and scientific “laboratory of modernity”—as Weimar Germany is often referred to by its scholars and aficionados?

When writing about Weimar Berlin, it’s all too easy to slip into the well-established shorthand of “glitter and doom,” the narrative of an unbound hedonism that contributed to its eventual brutal suppression. Lance Olsen’s latest novel, *My Red Heaven*, masterfully steers clear of those clichés. Instead, it patiently explores a multitude of everyday lives on a single day: June 10, 1927. It pays homage to the idea of Weimar as a laboratory; the ingredients are a mix of genres, media, citations, avant-garde movements, and characters—historical, literary, and entirely fictional. Reminiscent of Wim Wenders’s iconic 1987 Berlin film *Wings of Desire*, readers follow the words, images, and sounds on the pages of *My Red Heaven* as they lead from one story and location to the next. As the murdered politician Rosa Luxemburg is thrown into the Landwehrkanal, her consciousness settles on a butterfly on Pfaueninsel (peacock island), which is immediately crushed by the boot of retired sommelier Anton, who “doesn’t register the dainty crunch one hundred and seventy-two centimeters below his current thoughts.” Anton and his love, Julius, buy a bratwurst from Carl Fischer, who turns out to slaughter people in the privacy of his home bathtub—“the concept being economy”—evoking the violence of WWI that continued to haunt streets and homes after soldiers returned. Fischer’s last thought is inadvertently picked up by Albert Einstein, as he recalls anti-Semitic attacks on his “Jew science” and relives a traumatic childhood tonsillectomy: “I sat there stifling a cyclone, thinking about my school, my teachers, how now they were inside me, too—.” The reader then returns to the bratwurst hut and spies on young Erika and Klaus making out in the woods, where they are surprised by philosophers Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, who are carrying on their famous affair by