BOOK REVIEW

Ambiguous Aggression in German Realism and Beyond: Flirtation, Passive Aggression, Domestic Violence. By Barbara N. Nagel. New York: Bloomsbury, 2019. 176 pages.

With the flare-up of #MeToo in 2017 (a movement created by Tarana Burke more than ten years earlier to support young Black women and girls from economically disadvantaged communities who had experienced sexual violence), the delusions of postfeminism were replaced by a new awareness—unprecedented in its social reach as well as its judicial and economic effect—of the pervasive violence of misogyny.[1] In her otherwise rather uninspired contribution to an editorial on the #MeToo campaign for the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Kathy Davis asks that we direct our attention "to the murky and complicated ambivalences in which sexual harassment . . . [is] embedded" (Zarkov and Davis 8). Davis draws upon an astute argument in favor of "cultivating ambivalence" as an anthropological method by Ciara Kierans and Kirsten Bell, who suggest that "an analytic of ambivalence . . . teaches us more about the character of social relations than prefigured moral stances can" (23). Barbara N. Nagel has responded to this call in the field of literary studies with a daringly original, elegantly written, rigorous, and witty book.

After only two years of the surge of #MeToo, which brought the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and gender violence to the fore, Nagel offers a historical and literary account of how we arrived at the current "rape culture." The phrase itself is ambiguous (I have learned to attend to such things from the present study), coupling a marker of creativity and sophistication (culture) with a phenomenon as brutal and destructive as rape. How better to face this ambiguity than to return to German realism, Nagel suggests, because in and through this literature the perfidious ambiguity of intimate violence came to be developed and socially condoned.

While Davis and her reference are concerned with the oppressors and the murky ambiguities and complicated ambivalences that they experience, Nagel cultivates ambiguity on both and, even more important, on as many sides as possible. Of perhaps foremost interest to our field is the ambiguity of literature or, rather, the ambiguity of literary ambiguity. Literary ambiguity is often celebrated as an aesthetic and epistemological virtue singularly suited to representing complex issues and empowering the reader's autonomy of thought. Nagel shows that it also masks aggression and allows violence to develop and perpetuate under the radar. She alerts us to the literary canon's complicity in social violence and exposes a "poetics of unaccountability" (16).

The book "explores small social forms of ordinary life," namely, flirtation, amorous and conjugal correspondence, and family life (2). The lives might be deemed trivial, but the fact that aggression and violence rank among the ordinary is no small matter. Nagel's slim book is a power tool with a broad range of applications.

[1] Anybody worried about the movement tending toward superficiality might want to turn to Burke's account of its inception (MeToo, "History"), which serves as a reminder of what MeToo is about.

It combines historical with formal (in particular, narratological and rhetorical) analysis of realist and modernist works in tandem and considers intimate verbal and physical aggression, in its larger social context, as an emotional phenomenon, thus drawing on and contributing to affect studies. The result is a wealth of insights.

Her central historical claim serves as an etiology of ambiguous aggression. Niklas Luhmann taught us that love, as we know it, was forged by the European literature of the long eighteenth century. Now, Nagel reveals that subtle aggression is an invention of the late nineteenth century, specifically of German realist literature. She traces the linguistic provenance of this affect back to the distinctly bourgeois character of German realism, compared to its European counterparts. Political conservatism here accompanies emotional repression, and that, in turn, produces complex, intricate, or ambiguous affect. She finds a great deal of proscription and uncertainty regarding feelings in German realism. Her main example for socially impermissible emotion in the bourgeois context is female aggression. One could certainly add other examples, both personal and systemic, of emotions produced and at the same time disavowed by patriarchy, industrialization, colonialism, the intensification of capitalism, and the failed revolutions of 1848. In particular, the role of repressed feelings of guilt in producing a culture of silence and a rhetoric of pervasive ambiguation warrants further analysis.

In any case, German syntax, which allows for plenty of grammatical ambiguity, suits this need for "dimmed-down emotions" and "carefully balanced, rhetorical negotiations of social violence" (10). Hence, contemporary affect theory can learn much from German literature and its scholarship. While affect theory already draws considerably on German thought, new insights can be gained from reading German literature for how it theorizes affect. Nagel's book is a case in point and also illustrates the inverse, namely, that scholars of German literature had better not ignore contemporary affect theory.

Nagel insists on the readability of affect. Especially because emotional life in the West has developed historically from named passions with clearly correlated expressions via ambivalent emotions to a sliding scale of infinitesimal differences in feeling (what Jameson calls affect [42] and Nagel describes as ambiguous or "symphonic aggression" [103]), affect requires interpretation. There is no clarity (anymore) in matters emotional. The object of emotion studies has progressively disaggregated. Beyond their literary treatment, the affects and aggressions that Nagel discusses thus have an intrinsically literary or rhetorical, because nonliteral, quality to them. She has much to say on the syntax of emotion and brilliantly argues that repressed aggression can be detected in the frequent use of hyperbaton, a rhetorical trope that interrupts the flow of a sentence by inserting phrases in unusual places.

The book has four main chapters. The three steps from flirtation to amorous correspondence to domestic violence, with a gradual increase in the seriousness of the relationship (and corresponding severity of violence), is supplemented and opened up by the odd one out: a fourth chapter on the modernist and allegedly pacifist writings of Robert Walser. However, this opening does not furnish a resolution; ambiguity persists. Against expectation, Nagel does not use Walser as a peacemaker but brings out the ubiquitous aggression in his texts.

The first chapter intervenes in the debate that has entangled flirtation with harassment and pitched, once again, feminism against the defense of sexual freedom. As the editors of *Flirting in the Era of #MeToo*, which appeared around the same time as Nagel's book, point out, "Flirting is something of an underlying flashpoint for feminism" and acutely "in need of some critical analysis" (Bartlett, Clarke, and Cover, 1, 4). Nagel, an expert in the theory of flirtation,[2] contends that the line between flirtation and harassment is not fine at all, and the risk of accidentally crossing it and slipping from innocuous playfulness into violent abuse is rather low. To begin with (and here her argument takes an interesting turn), there is nothing innocuous about flirtation—it is terrifying. Anybody drawn into the scene of flirtation may feel this terror, since (here comes the second surprise in her line of argument) the victim of flirtation is the existent power structure. Harassment and flirtation thus follow completely different logics: one uses power and privilege to subdue a member of a group; the other puts all interests on the line to destabilize power and privilege. She arrives at this momentous result via a critical review of historical theories of flirtation and excellent literary analysis (the interpretation of the semantic field around the repeated use of *Stich* in a particular scene of flirtation in *Jenny Treibel* exemplifies her superior skills).

Each section of this chapter pairs a realist author with a critical theorist of the early twentieth century: Theodor Storm's novellas *Renate* and *The White Horse Rider* with Georg Simmel's essays "On Flirtation" and "On the Psychology of Women," Gottfried Keller's novella *The Three Decent Combmakers* with Walter Benjamin's autobiographical writings, and Theodor Fontane's novel *Jenny Treibel* with Ernst Bloch's thought-image "Pippa Passes." All these texts—with the exception, perhaps, of Storm's *White Horse Rider*—present the male perspective, entrenched in a heteronormative matrix. A female and a nonheterosexual perspective are sorely missing, except for the author's own approach, which certainly fights against the misogynistic arguments. Yet Nagel settles for too little, for my taste, when she claims that flirtation "is linked to a queer role-switch," producing coquettish sovereigns and male hysterics (22). Her analysis of a dash in Simmel's text as a "typographic strap-on" (25) makes a few steps in the right direction, even though dildo logic can be pushed much further, as Paul B. Preciado has shown, than assuming that a woman needs to have strapped one on if she penetrates. Admittedly, it is very important not to turn a blind eye to the oppressor's logic and instead to examine it thoroughly. This Nagel does superbly. However, half-hearted queering here seems like an easy way out, especially since pedophilia and victim blaming are among the issues. While flirtation might temporarily destabilize power relations, almost all of these texts, whether theoretical or literary, put the woman back in her place in the end (which doesn't take much because, as Nagel also elaborates, flirtation is "the event of the erasure of the event" [40]). Nagel provides a counterexample in Elke Volkerts, the female protagonist of Storm's *White Horse Rider*, whom she describes as flirting with the law, that is, flirting with the Other, in an outstanding reading that turns Elke into an anarchist heroine (an ambiguous one, of course). In the end, if, as Nagel argues, "flirtation helps us to imagine other forms of masculinity—those

[2] Together with Daniel Hoffman-Schwartz and Lauren Shizuko Stone, Nagel coedited *Flirtations: Rhetoric and Aesthetics This Side of Seduction* (2015).

that can bear being terrorized out of mastery—as well as other forms of femininity, including those that are comfortable with power" (41), much has been gained.

The second chapter is a curious one when evaluated from a feminist perspective. It analyzes passive aggression in the correspondence between Fontane and his wife Emilie Fontane, née Kummer, as well as between Franz Kafka and his fiancée Felice Bauer and lover Milena Jesenská, and finds it mostly on the side of the authors, who are clearly situated as male in this context. Passive aggression has been not only decried in recent decades but also squarely identified with the female gender role. Instead of appropriating and resignifying the contemptuous qualifier—as one common and successful feminist and queer strategy goes—Nagel shows that the other side in the binary cannot claim to be free of it. Yet, she makes no mention of the prominently gendered quality of this form of ambiguous aggression. Gender plays a role, instead, in her discussion of the literary status of private letters—an intriguing contribution to literary theory—and of the fact that the letters written by the female partners of these famous authors are largely lost.

With her chapter on domestic violence, Nagel's full theoretical force comes to the fore, together with her supreme acumen in literary analysis. The subject matter here is a clearly hierarchical violence: aggression exerted by the patriarch against his woman or by a parent against a child. From an objective standpoint, there is nothing ambiguous about domestic violence, but within the thick of it, little can be neatly parsed. This is the case on all sides of the scene. Those who exert violence, Nagel demonstrates (and the anthropological scholarship of Rita Segato confirms [9]), often experience themselves not as aggressive but as fulfilling (and sometimes suffering from) their duty to punish. The victims need love and shelter and reinterpret the violence they suffer according to their needs. Bystanders turn a blind eye, due to an erroneous conception of privacy. The family, Nagel concludes, functions as the institution that renders violence ambiguous. Nothing could be more appropriate, then, than the term *domestic violence*, with its outrageous yet normalized ambiguity. While Nagel elaborates on all these points, the chapter does not explicitly address rape but focuses on beatings, leaving this sexualized form of domestic violence to the ambiguous workings of discretion. Her formalist readings are masterfully executed, elucidating the poetics of unaccountability via a narratological analysis of the literature that models the stories we still tell ourselves, surpassed only by her rhetorical analysis of emotional syntax.

With the last chapter on Robert Walser's "symphonic aggression," Nagel turns Walser's dictum about "murderously peaceful people" against him (134). The bourgeois subject gains autonomy and shores up his social superiority through the ascetic self-denial of feelings and the projection of them onto lower folks (women, children, those viewed as "other" in terms of race or social class [Pahl 10–11, 192n19]). Walser perfects this strategy and adds to it by teasing out aggression in others. His self-anesthetizing thus flips into ubiquitous aggression, and the writer, who is generally regarded as the most pacifist in the German canon (Hermann Hesse preaches, "If poets like Walser were the 'leading minds' then there would be no war" [quoted at 104]), becomes, in Nagel's genealogy, the subterranean model for today's (white hetero cis) male resentment.

For somewhat different reasons, contemporary feminism, literary studies, and affect studies all need a high tolerance for and a strong practice of ambiguity.

Ambiguous Aggression in German Realism and Beyond intervenes at the intersection of these three fields to sharpen our sensorium for the workings of ambiguity. This is a brilliantly structured and deftly argued book that models a new kind of scholarship: rigorously formalist and politically relevant.

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