

matic close. Hölderlin's obsession with finding a new poetic law might tempt us to believe that a poet's vocation finds fulfillment in either following, breaking, or creating law. Yet the truer domain of poetry, Schestag suggests, is what is neither prescribed nor proscribed but just allowed. This subtle shift in perspective disrupts the entire political apparatus that, starting from Plato and Aristotle, has built itself around the question of what poetry, as the political activity *in extremis*, must and must not do to claim a proper place in the city. For indeed, if Hölderlin's poetry has always produced a void, an abyss of meaning, in all those approaching it in expectation of yet another confirmation of a socialized yet authentic bourgeois individuality, it is precisely because it unfolds within the void that liberalism, in refusing to take seriously the question of what is allowed—of a liberty that is neither positive (the obligation of self-fulfillment) nor negative (determined by prohibition)—has itself produced as its own unexplored, opaque truth. Hölderlin's poetry fills this void, contours it, shapes it: not by decking it out with a nature beautiful, mysterious, or sublime, but by allowing the poetic word to flow, to branch, to tear, geo-logically but also historically and politically, as the space in which human beings, and other animals too, find leave for life in its joy and its sadness.

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Nagel, Barbara N. *Ambiguous Aggression in German Realism and beyond: Flirtation, Passive Aggression, Domestic Violence*. Bloomsbury, 2019. 158 pp. \$35.95 (paperback).

Ambiguity and aggression are usually not among the first associations one might have with nineteenth-century German realism. The period's obsession with description and detail as well as its harmonizing tendencies in the spirit of *Verklärung* suggest quite the opposite: a literature that avoids strong emotions and aims for straightforwardness. In her enormously insightful and brilliantly argued book *Ambiguous Aggression in German Realism and beyond*, Barbara N. Nagel, however, shows that realist literature modeled complex and nuanced forms of social violence that are all the more relevant in the light of current discourses on affect, aggression, gender, and power. Realism, according to Nagel, is shaped by "the literary opening up of everyday life, and its small, new codes of expression, which first allow ambivalent aggression to emerge" (2). A critical reexamination of these texts, as the book successfully demonstrates, shines light on the origins of the depiction, perception, and framing of social phenomena like flirtation, passive-aggression, and domestic violence as highly ambiguous, and thus provides insights into cultural patterns that are still at the center of contemporary debates on #MeToo and gendered violence.

Nagel's study operates at the intersection of German literary studies, affect studies, and feminist literary criticism and combines a wide range of innovative

approaches to unveil scenes of ambiguous aggression in canonical texts. Naming socio-political formalism as its greatest methodological influence, the book elegantly maneuvers in its analyses between literary-historical reflections, narratological and rhetorical examinations, and the application of concepts from psychoanalysis and affect theory. While the main focus is on realist authors like Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Adalbert Stifter, Theodor Storm, and Theodor Fontane, modernist writers such as Gerhart Hauptmann, Robert Walser, and Franz Kafka receive attention as well. Nagel explains this rather unorthodox pairing of realism and modernism by stating that both periods are shaped by “a heightened skepticism about the readability of affect and an intensified effort to capture those new, confusingly ambivalent affective constellations” (5), while also emerging in the historical context of seminal theoretical reflections on affect in the late nineteenth century by thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Georg Simmel, Ernst Bloch, or Walter Benjamin. Literary texts thus appear as “something like ‘the un-thought’ of affect theory” (15) of that time, and this book intriguingly demonstrates the intricate connection between the two.

The first chapter takes on the issue of flirtation as a highly ambivalent social practice that in our times sparks ongoing discussions on gendered aggression. By dissecting theoretical perspectives on the topic by Simmel, Benjamin, and Bloch and pairing them with scenes from the works of Storm, Keller, and Fontane, Nagel shows that especially in texts written by male authors and theorists, flirtation is portrayed as a deeply troubling, subversive act with the potential to disrupt gendered dichotomies. For these writers, the female flirt “is linked to a queer role-switch, with woman imagined as being in control of erotic potentiality” (22). Women therefore appear in these literary scenes as powerless and extremely powerful at the same time, which turns flirtation into a source of complex affective ambiguity. The take-away is not only that “the patriarchy experiences any increase of female freedom hysterically, as a moment of terror” (41), but also that close attention to questions surrounding flirtation can help us imagine “other forms of masculinity—those that can bear being terrorized out of mastery—as well as other forms of femininity, including those that are comfortable with power” (41). While this argument is immensely insightful, the chapter unfortunately does not engage with scenes of male flirtation or texts written by females, therefore somewhat limiting its scope and avoiding some key issues that one might associate with the #MeToo debate that is even mentioned in the chapter’s title.

This focus on ambiguous aggression as a female practice of resistance against patriarchal power structures also shapes the second chapter on passive aggression. The objects of inquiry are letters written by Theodor Fontane to his wife Emilie and by Franz Kafka to his fiancée Felice Bauer. In her astute and detailed readings, Nagel portrays these epistolary exchanges as fierce battles over access to literary, i.e., ambiguous language. While the male authors demand intelligible and straightforward letters, therefore insisting on the readability of the female consciousness for the male subject, their female counterparts resort to passive-

aggressive remarks and ambiguity, therefore colonizing the masculine sphere of the literary. Nagel's close readings unveil a complex arsenal of strategies of passive-aggressive communication in the realm of nineteenth-century intimate letter writing and shine a light on the intricate entanglement of literary ambiguity with gendered power hierarchies.

By framing domestic violence as a form of ambiguous aggression, the third chapter starts off in a quite controversial manner. The book's carefully crafted argument, however, avoids potential pitfalls and demonstrates how literary texts by Droste-Hülshoff, Stifter, Storm, Hauptmann, and Walser make violence in the domestic sphere appear as ambivalent and thus "displace subjective agency in favor of netlike structures and impersonal flows" (16), resulting in a "poetics of unaccountability" (16). This finding is among the study's most intriguing ones as it helps explain the epistemological struggle surrounding domestic violence to this day by showing how literature modeled ways of construing this violence as ambiguous and deflecting accountability. While Nagel's preeminent and meticulous rhetorical analyses might be a bit difficult to access for some readers who are less familiar with formalist approaches, the argument is persuasive and proves highly applicable to contemporary issues.

The last chapter breaks with the book's previous structure that focused on one form of social violence at a time in order to trace the afterlife of realism's ambiguous aggressions in the works of Robert Walser. Here, aggressive ambiguity becomes ubiquitous, and flirtation, passive aggression, and domestic violence begin to merge and overlap. Nagel makes this point by analyzing scenes of teasing, sublimation, dissimulation, and resentment in Walser's texts, carving out delicate "layers of affects" (111) through the combination of rhetorical and psychoanalytical scrutiny. The carefully executed close readings demonstrate once again the innovative potential of Nagel's approach and uncover new sides of an author whose aggressive potential has so far been largely overlooked.

Ambiguous Aggression in German Realism and beyond is an impressive and path-breaking study that serves as a prime example of why current political and social discourses would benefit from an increased attention to findings in the humanities that help contextualize and understand the ways in which Western culture frames and depicts issues surrounding violence, gender, and power. Since literary imaginations shape our understanding and perception of reality and, as Nagel states, "the analysis of the literary form grants insight into the logic of the social form" (1), books such as this one can increase our awareness of the many and ambiguous ways in which aggression manifests and functions in social interactions from the nineteenth century to the present. The study is well structured, written in an elegant and concise style, and opens up striking new perspectives on cross-disciplinary questions concerning affect and literary form that will enrich contemporary debates in academia and beyond.

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