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*Ambiguous Aggression in German Realism and Beyond:
Flirtation, Passive Aggression, Domestic Violence* by Barbara
N. Nagel (review)

Benjamin Sauvé

German Studies Review, Volume 43, Number 3, October 2020, pp. 610-612
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/gsr.2020.0087>



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breaks inherent to Hoffmann's variations on the *Märchen* form and its relationship to a posited reality. Christina Weiler investigates the transgressiveness of play in *Das fremde Kind* and its critique of Enlightenment rationalism, and Ruth Kellar looks at idiosyncrasy in *Der goldne Topf* and its "revisualization of a phenomenal reality that is both particular and typical, actual and constructed" (168). Howard Pollack-Milgate's chapter takes as its subject *Prinzessin Brambilla* and its representation of theatricality as a locus of transformations between private imagination and public performance, which he analyzes alongside Hannah Arendt's conception of private and public. Hoffmann's text, Pollack-Milgate suggests, ultimately transgresses distinctions between public and private by refusing to generate meaning or to resolve the "semantic networks" (187) it sets in motion.

Part 4 considers the transgressive qualities of Hoffmann's novel *Kater Murr* in the context of its reception and its relationship to literary history. Julian Knox considers *Kater Murr* as a reflection on the form and conventions of the *Bildungsroman*. Hoffmann's ironic variation on the *Bildungsroman* narrative, Knox suggests, replacing any linear sense of progression with the circles of Johannes Kreisler, shows that for Hoffmann, "no single narrative is or can be what it seems when it comes to the intricacies and contradictions of the human life" (195). Rasmussen also approaches the novel as transgressive of its own limitations, analyzing it in the context of Kierkegaard's ideas about humor.

While no overarching reading of Hoffmann's "transgressive" poetics emerges from this varied collection, it succeeds in emphasizing his keen-sighted awareness of and cynicism toward limiting structures both social and literary. *Transgressive Romanticism*, like *E.T.A. Hoffmann's Orient*, engages its central spatial metaphor to make Hoffmann's complex potential as a protorealism clear: expertly attuned to the forms of life and literature with which he was familiar, while always ready to subvert and think beyond them.

Polly Dickson, *Durham University*

Ambiguous Aggression in German Realism and Beyond: Flirtation, Passive Aggression, Domestic Violence. By Barbara N. Nagel. New York: Bloomsbury, 2019. Pp. 176. Cloth \$100.00. ISBN 978-1501352713.

Barbara N. Nagel's innovative approach in her new book *Ambiguous Aggression in German Realism and Beyond: Flirtation, Passive Aggression, Domestic Violence* shows how interesting new directions in German studies can be. This approach to German realism is refreshing because it focuses on aesthetics linked with the social and political implications of affect. It also allows for a reevaluation of now "classical" and canonical authors such as Gottfried Keller, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Robert

Walser, Franz Kafka, Theodor Storm, and Theodor Fontane by shedding light on concepts of aggression. These concepts are recontextualized through the lens of contemporary developments such as the #MeToo movement and recent gender and feminist studies. The book uses in its four development chapters a methodology of new sociopolitical formalism.

The central focus of the analysis is affect and how it is depicted in realist literature. The author justifies the use of realism through its aspiration toward objectivity, “the two paradigms that carry the burden of the realist aspirations are, as Lukács and Barthes each taught us in different ways, description and the detail” (7–8). The development of the book goes to great lengths to show not only how literary texts portray violence through subtlety, hiding in descriptions and details, but also how the theory surrounding violence reflects it. In this matter, realist texts are also read through the lens of Georg Simmel, Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, and a panoply of modern theorists who wrote about affect.

Each chapter is separated thematically and is introduced by a contemporary debate. For example, flirtation made the news recently in the context of the #MeToo movement when French public figures defended the right to flirt. In the first development chapter, Nagel shows how flirtation itself becomes an ambivalent act, because of its uncertain outcome creating a gender-power reversal. Nagel then offers many examples to show how male-authored realist literature treats the social occurrence of flirtation. The lens of contemporary issues never comes in the way of the meticulous reading of nineteenth-century literature, instead, it completes it. Despite the challenge of integrating these different temporal perspectives, the analysis flows very well, centering around readings of literary texts within their theoretical and historical contexts while incorporating contemporary discussions.

The greatest strength of Nagel’s book is how it incites the reader to rediscover literary works through a different lens. For example, she explores in the first chapter the flirtation of Elke in Storm’s *Der Schimmelreiter* (1888) and, upon rereading the scene with the help of her analysis, the flirtation becomes clear through affect and the legal manipulation associated with it. Nagel interprets the flirtation as an ambiguous act in itself: “We can read this legal-erotic negotiation alternatively as a gesture of female empowerment or of female submissiveness” (30). This example shows how ambivalent details in realist texts can be, but also how flirtation can act as a double-edged sword in its representation.

By creating disenchantment not only around realist authors such as Storm, Kafka, Fontane, and Walser, but also around theorists such as Simmel, Freud, and Benjamin, this work is refreshingly subversive. While addressing the difficulties surrounding the biographic genre, Nagel examines in the second chapter personal letters written by Kafka and Fontane, from which she points out the passive-aggressivity in their interactions with their female companions, Emilie Fontane, Felice Bauer, and, later,

Milena Jesenská. Furthermore, Nagel and Kafka assign a second readability to letters. Like literary texts, they are filled with possibilities of interpretation through details and subtleties. Nagel points out how the Fontane wife-and-husband duo takes part in this passive-aggressive war, while Kafka's correspondences remain mostly unanswered because of the lack of access to his correspondents' letters. Nagel draws a comparison between the difficulties of interpreting subtlety in realist texts and the reading of verbal aggression, which both hide affect in the details.

The third chapter addresses the stunning effect of domestic violence depicted in scenes from Keller's *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe* (1856) and Droste-Hülshoff's *Der Judenbuche* (1842). This is where the topic becomes sensitive because it shows the inability of characters to cope with physical aggression by a family member. The last chapter brings into focus domestic violence amalgamated to flirtation and passive aggressivity in Walsers' writing. Here, Nagel points out that domestic violence is misleading in its own denomination, as it expresses a toned-down version of violence, a domesticated one. The argumentation surrounding domestic violence is the most interesting because it shows the issues surrounding the separation of public and private affairs into violence. The author admits that physical violence is, in real life, not close to being ambiguous, but in the literary (and sociopolitical) discourse, domestic violence is depicted as ambivalent, which points out how taboo or "pushed under the rug" the problem can be.

As a last note, while seemingly commensurate with other volumes in the Bloomsbury library series, at a list price of US\$100 for 176 pages, this book strikes me as expensive, especially for a student budget. But if one is interested in German realism or in the representation of violence in literary works, this book is a must-read. It refreshes the discourse on everyday violence and offers a substantial new way of reading violence, especially in our contemporary context.

Benjamin Sauv , *McGill University*

Der popul re Pakt. Verhandlungen der Moderne zwischen Operette und Feuilleton.

By Ethel Matala de Mazza. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2018. Pp. 480. Cloth €25.00. ISBN 978-3103972344.

This book is a sustained exploration of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century "small" forms across journalism, criticism, and popular theater. Ethel Matala de Mazza foregrounds the function of a range of "minor" genres in reflecting upon the democratic promise to involve mass publics in cultural and political life, what she calls the "popular pact." A central goal of this book is thus to reconstruct the history of modernity as a discontinuous, fractured history of distinct public spheres; as Matala de Mazza proposes, small forms' mosaic-like structure better captures such