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Review of *Born Under Auschwitz: Melancholy Traditions in Postwar German Literature* by Mary Cosgrove. Rochester, NY and Cambridge, UK: Camden House, 2014. 234pp. ISBN 9781571135568.

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Mary Cosgrove. *Born Under Auschwitz: Melancholy Traditions in Postwar German Literature*. Rochester, NY & Cambridge, UK: Camden House, 2014. x, 234p. ISBN 9781571135568. £50 (hardback).

Melancholy, the principal focus of Mary Cosgrove's new monograph, has an estab-
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lished provenance in European literature; Cosgrove seeks to explore variations of it in recent German fiction, examining works by Günter Grass, Wolfgang Hildesheimer, Peter Weiss, W. G. Sebald, and Iris Hanika. Her point of reference throughout is the 1514 engraving by Albrecht Dürer titled *Melencolia I*, itself the subject of numerous scholarly inquiries.

Cosgrove's book is superbly researched and frequently thought-provoking, particularly as it proceeds from the experience of melancholy in the work of Grass, whom she nominates as a member of the Holocaust "perpetrator collective," to Hildesheimer and the "victim collective," through the others until she finally concludes that "collective guilt" remains a good thing for all Germans to maintain and from which to suffer. There is such a thing, she claims, as the "ethics of memory" (59), and the duty of remembering German guilt is a worthy one. Yet many young Germans no longer have an emotional connection to the Holocaust. The reunification of Germany has accelerated the unethical development of "*Shoa* business" (186), the memory industry in Germany. By the book's conclusion, Cosgrove recognizes (as does author Hanika) that such ethical considerations are on the wane; young Germans are tired of feeling guilty – though many retain feelings of guilt for not feeling guilty.

Such conceits make this book fascinating, though the overuse of postmodernist jargon dulls the sharp edges of Cosgrove's insights, most notably those about Grass and Sebald. Her overestimations about the "melancholy performative" (37) are good examples; she claims that the work of some linguistic philosophers has revealed the importance of certain indicative constructions in language, by which one's statements are genuine actions. It is true that in Roman legal tradition statements allowed husbands to obtain a divorce simply by throwing a pot against a wall and declaring his intent. Such assertions, however private and unwitnessed, were nonetheless performative; they were not merely utterances but constituted formations that were "performed." It is a profoundly unreasonable stretch to apply such abstractions to literary interpretations of the Holocaust. "We might view this," Cosgrove maintains, "from a deconstructionist angle in terms of the performative that indicates a lack of original, unitary meaning ... The heterogeneity of meaning that emerges in this space of ambivalence is the general condition of language, according

to Jacques Derrida" (6). Nonsense.

Esoteric ruminations on the ambivalence of language and the "destabilizing" of ideas about humanism notwithstanding, the broad term "melancholy" has different and often contradictory connotations. Ambivalence "also informs medical accounts of melancholy," Cosgrove notes: "[d]istinct from other kinds of sadness, melancholy is usually a sadness with insufficient cause: the subject struggles to identify and name what caused his sadness" (6). Here the author fails to go further with a much-needed clinical investigation. While certain postmodernist trends may reflect a "heterogeneity of meaning" about melancholy, there is no mention whatsoever of various shadings of the mental distress she purports to analyse, skipping over bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia, mood swings, adult attention hyperactivity disorder, and a whole host of other maladies. She is instead content to settle on the long-entrenched terms "good melancholy" and "bad melancholy:" the former provides a literary artist with opportunities to transcend sadness, while the latter relegates him to inertia.

The title *Born Under Auschwitz* derives from Rudolph and Margot Wittkower's *Born Under Saturn* (1963), which examined the popular image of the artist as an eccentric, noble genius. Saturn is "the astral mentor" of such a figure (9). Today, however, it signals the coming-of-age (after 1945) of authors who use melancholy as a means of crafting an ethical discourse of literary commemoration.

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