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**Review of Ann Murray, ed. *Germanistik in Ireland, Interrogating Normalcy: Proceedings of the Postgraduate Conference in German Studies, University College Cork, May 2011. Vol 3. Konstanz, Germany: Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 2013. Print.***

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*Germanistik in Ireland, Interrogating Normalcy, edited by Ann Murray, is a rich and diverse collection of essays from postgraduate students within German Studies. The papers' literary and historical subjects span three centuries and provide a helpful, wide-ranging insight into current postgraduate research in the field.*

This volume of essays is significant as it marks the first postgraduate conference in German Studies in Ireland. The contributions were initially presented as papers at this landmark event, which was designed to be as 'open, inviting and thematically diverse as possible' (Murray 7). The decision to convert conference papers to written papers is laudable, allowing the impact of current postgraduate research to extend beyond a single event with limited participants.

Organised by period, the collection opens with Andrea Hanna's analysis of the comic clown figure, focusing on Austrian playwright Philipp Hafner's use of the clown character Kasperl. Hanna begins with a helpful overview of the impact of 18<sup>th</sup>-century educational and theatrical reforms on dramatic clown figures, before showing how Kasperl, the acceptable, 'cleaned-up' version of more scandalous predecessors, is unexpectedly more successful at 'parodying bourgeois prudery' (Hanna 18). Through clearly explained examples and use of Bakhtin's concept of the loophole and the fool, Hanna reveals how the clown Kasperl is cleverly employed to subvert the enlightened rationale to which he so strictly adheres.

Tatsiana Shkliar's essay engages with Justinus Kerner's early 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel *Die Reiseschatten von dem Schattenspieler Luchs* and its engagement with shadow theatre techniques. The most important narrative feature of the shadow play is proposed to be the use of optical effects; the argument is made that Kerner's shadow plays, performed solely in the reader's imagination, are as rich as those on a stage. This conception of shadow theatre as 'optical games for the inner eye' (Shkliar 31) is carefully pursued throughout the essay, contextualised within Romanticism and neatly exemplified through a close reading of Kerner's satirical comedy, *König Eginhard*.

Next, Charlotte Lerg explores the founding of the Germanic Museum at Harvard around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Germany's relationship with America is concisely and accurately described, along with the self-styling of the former as a '*Kulturnation*' (Lerg 43). Lerg examines the various motivations for the founding of the Museum, from the educational to the ethno-nationalist, before analyzing the elaborate opening ceremony which offers 'an insight into the intriguing mixture of politics and academia, ethnicity and scholarly interest' accompanying the project (Lerg 48). Moreover,

Lerg convincingly shows how such a project encapsulates the 'mutable nature of German-American history' (Lerg 53).

Sarah Kelleher's article draws parallels between the work of Kurt Schwitters and Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Both artists strayed from the militarised, machine-like body presented in much interwar German art; Kelleher makes intelligent use of Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque as a means to elucidate their novel conception of the body. In particular, Kelleher identifies the relevance of such a model to Schwitters' *Merzbau* – subversive sculptures made from detritus – and von Freytag-Loringhoven's provocative 'acts of art' (Kelleher 64) performed on the streets of New York. Both artists are shown, convincingly, to mobilise the grotesque as a form of resistance by staging the body's 'unruly, transgressive properties' (Kelleher 68).

Ann Murray's essay also focuses on interwar art, namely the representations of soldierhood by the working-class war veteran Otto Dix. She explores how Dix sought to challenge the widespread mythologising and idealisation of the war experience and expose the (constantly downplayed) effects of war on the body, thereby exorcising his own traumatic memory. With reference to a number of Dix's paintings, Murray elucidates the way in which his close-up images of the unheroic fate of the soldier's body and the reality of warfare boldly confronted and negated the dominant political and social discourse of the period.

Simone Klapper then explores Ingeborg Bachmann's presentation of suicide in her 1966/7 novel fragment *Das Buch Franza*. The exploration of Franza's speechlessness and Bachmann's critique of written language – especially its role in processes of stigmatization – is particularly interesting, and readily supports the conclusion that Franza's suicide is the only way in which she can become 'unreadable' and protect herself from 'violent and deforming representation' (Klapper 103). In concluding, Klapper presents a considered answer to the thought-provoking question of how a novel that problematizes writing as an act of violence can escape its own practices of categorization and dissection.

In Antoinette McNamara's article, the child protagonist of Ulla Berkéwicz's 1992 novel *Engel sind schwarz und weiß*, Reinhold, is posited as an effective medium through which the author critically engages with National Socialism. Rather than employing the traditional image of the passive child witness, Berkéwicz endows Reinhold with agency as well as impressionability. Through him, it is argued, Berkéwicz highlights the 'formidable nature' (McNamara 111) of National Socialist propaganda and ideology whilst simultaneously undermining it through Reinhold's questioning, and McNamara cites numerous textual examples to support this proposition.

In the penultimate article (the conference's keynote paper) Dr Gert Hoffmann applies Levinas' considerations on the Other in eroticism to Ilija Trojanow's biographical novel *Der Weltensammler* (2006). He proposes that in Trojanow's account of the travels of 19<sup>th</sup>-century British colonial officer Richard Francis Burton, otherness is seen as 'another world' (Hoffmann 122). The significance of thresholds and places of otherness is carefully explored, and Hoffmann's analysis of the erotic heterotopia and its assistance in the abolition of cultural and colonial hierarchies is especially detailed (Hoffmann 127). Following a thorough discussion of Burton's death and the figure of the bastard in the novel, the character, the term, and the idea of Trojanow's 'Weltensammler' [collector of worlds] is

demonstrated to extend far beyond the transcultural and to open up a new experimental, cosmographic dimension.

The final essay by Markus Oliver Spitz provides an articulate insight into the poetics of Christoph Meckel, whose poetry and prose have been almost entirely ignored in the Anglophone world. Spitz takes five short poems from Meckel's volume *Souterrain* (1984) which exemplify the poet's work both formally and thematically and provides thoughtful English-language translations of them – a crucial step if they are to be studied more widely. Following an interesting discussion of Meckel's nuanced understanding of the term 'poetics' and his conception of the poem as 'nothing less than the chronicler ... of universal suffering' (Spitz 137), Spitz pithily demonstrates the ways in which this theoretical standpoint is illustrated within the five selected poems.

In conclusion then, the essays within this volume are carefully researched and well-argued theses. Ann Murray's introduction provides a helpful overview of the texts and the ways in which links can be drawn between them. The chosen title – 'Interrogating Normalcy' – is certainly accurate, if largely for its rather broad scope. Indeed, perhaps the main criticism that could be levelled here is simply that the comprehensive historical and disciplinary span of the collection results in breadth taking precedence over depth. Nevertheless, the editor of the volume has done well to draw such wide-ranging themes and periods together, and the result is a testament too to the diversity and richness of current postgraduate research in German Studies.

## Author Biography

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Lizzy Robinson-Self is in the second year of her PhD in German Studies at the University of Edinburgh, and is looking at German poetry produced in National Socialist concentration camps. Her thesis aims to uncover why so many people were compelled to write poems, and disprove claims that their work is unmediated and without aesthetic value.