

NATIONAL LITERATURE I

Improvement

Whose spirits should be rejuvenated, whose laboring bodies revitalized, by laughing at a play? The readily available response—that the theater is for the audience, with their exhausted bodies and depleted spirits—leads into a thicket of issues that, in fact, had a broad historical impact in Germany.¹ Part of the difficulty concerns the concept of *audience* itself, a noun that does not refer to a uniform group across time and space, but rather possesses a situation-specific meaning, shaped by multiple, varying factors. One approaches the concept of *audience* with caution because,

1. I leave aside lexicographical and conceptual-historical issues that would provide an additional line of inquiry. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the meaning of the German noun *Publikum* was contested, not least because it had significantly more capacious definitions than English *audience*. On this issue, with further references, see Dorothea E. von Mücke, *The Practices of the Enlightenment: Aesthetics, Authorship, and the Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), esp. 181ff.

at this historical juncture, it is unthinkable without reference to signifiers such as nation and people, whose meanings are equally subject to ambiguity and controversy. Even though the latter half of the eighteenth century is associated, in aesthetic theory, most prominently with an emphatic notion of the artistic genius, spontaneously creative and untethered from the constraint of tradition, debates over comic theater and its German audience headed in the opposite direction: in that of traditional, calculated creativity that speaks to culturally inflected predilections.²

Taking on such charged signifiers as German nation, German people, German audience, head-on involves being flooded by the sheer quantity of potentially relevant evidence, so widespread is the interest in the meaning of these big concepts during the latter half of the eighteenth century.³ For that reason, this chapter looks through a conceptual lens that I have employed repeatedly in this study and that functions as a key relay in the patterns of historical transformation during the latter half of the eighteenth century. It is striking that, beginning around 1730 and stretching to the turn of the nineteenth century, the envisaged transformation of the stage is chiefly described as a process of “improvement” (*Verbesserung*). Now it may seem a matter of definitional necessity that reform is a process of betterment, but merely acknowledging a teleology does not yet clarify the terminus ad quem, nor does it map out intermediary steps to get there. A major alteration in the vehicle and goal of improvement took place in the latter half of the eighteenth century once cultural difference—the difference, for instance, between the Germans, the French, and the English—became a decisive factor.

2. The locus classicus for the concept of genius is Jochen Schmidt, *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens in der deutschen Literatur, Philosophie, und Politik*, 2 vols. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985). For a more concentrated and deeply insightful discussion, see David E. Wellbery, *The Specular Moment: Goethe's Early Lyric and the Beginnings of Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 121–183.

3. For a sociological analysis of this difficult concept, with attention to historical detail, see Bernhard Giesen and Kay Junge, “Vom Patriotismus zum Nationalismus,” in *Nationale und kulturelle Identität: Studien zur Entwicklung des kollektiven Bewußtseins in der Neuzeit*, ed. Bernhard Giesen (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 1991), 255–303.

As a matter of course, the meaning and the consequences of the concept of *culture* in this setting will require some interpretation. And so this chapter and chapter 12 unfold a single argument in two steps. The fool will temporarily fade into the background over the following pages, but he eventually reappears in the final stretches as an indispensable agent in the formation of German literature in an emphatic sense.

As a point of departure, it is worth taking note of the absence of the term *literature* in this study thus far, and of the privilege assigned to *poetry*, in spite of the reader who may associate the latter with the lyric. This terminological absence is not without reason. For one, the term *poetry* aligns more accurately with the terminology favored in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Particularly in second-order critical reflection, *Poesie* and *Dichtkunst* are the standard terms; over the latter half of the eighteenth century *Literatur* (for the fastidious, often *Litteratur*) becomes increasingly prevalent. The shift, broadly speaking, from poetry to literature was not a lexical trade-in, and a close lexicography would show that the French loan word never fully supplanted the other eighteenth-century terms. But I have hitherto avoided using the noun that we now feel most at home with—*literature*—for reasons as much analytical as historical. Literature carries connotations that map poorly onto the critical activity in the seventeenth century or in the age of Gottsched, but that do well at the historical crossroads around 1760.⁴ The rise of a culturally inflected conception of literature has a lot to do, I wish to claim, with certain strategies of comparison that began to take hold starting around 1760.

The replacement of a poetic paradigm with a literary one was not instantaneous and intentional, but instead decentered and unplanned. It would be foolhardy, therefore, to try to summarize the entire debate over German literature from the second half of the eighteenth century; the following discussion focuses on a small number of representative samples from a close-knit discursive setting. The evidence comes

4. The most ambitious study of the shift from a rhetorically founded concept of poetry to the modern notion of literature is Rüdiger Campe, *Affekt und Ausdruck: Zur Umwandlung der literarischen Rede im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1990).

from a text entitled—in what is more than a happy coincidence—*Letters Concerning Most Recent Literature*, a pseudo-epistolary periodical centered in Berlin led by a small cadre of polymathic critics, scholars, and literary authors. Because of its focus on current publications and the acuity of vision evident in many of the epistles, this periodical can be seen as a nexus of the contemporary climate. In this journal, German dramatic literature appears in still inchoate terms, caught in a process of becoming.

To get an impression of the conceptual terrain, consider the concluding lines from the best-known and most revealing verbal blast against Gottsched and his reform program:

He [Gottsched] had the Harlequin ceremoniously banished from the theater, which was the greatest harlequinade that has ever been played. In short, he did not so much wish to improve our old theater as to be the creator of a totally new one. And of what sort? A Frenchifying one, without investigating whether or not this Frenchifying theater fit with the German way of thinking.

Er ließ den Harlequin feierlich vom Theater vertreiben, welches selbst die größte Harlequinade war, die jemals gespielt worden; kurz, er wollte nicht sowohl unser altes Theater verbessern, als der Schöpfer eines ganz neuen sein. Und was für eines neuen? Eines Französierenden; ohne zu untersuchen, ob dieses französierende Theater der deutschen Denkart angemessen sei, oder nicht.⁵

It is not difficult to read these rhapsodic sentences, published by Lessing in 1759 as the seventeenth installment in the *Letters*, as a death sentence for the reform program. Two surface features guide this line of interpretation. First, Lessing mockingly cites the founding myth of the reform movement in order to decry its wrongheadedness and futility. And, second, he identifies Gottsched as

5. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Jürgen Stenzel (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 4:499–500. Although Lessing is sometimes seen as a defender of the Italian-French Harlequin as separate from other traditions of the stage fool, this demonstrates that the Harlequin, for him, was a general term for the fool. Surely a writer of Lessing's sharp wit would have grasped the absurdity of deriding Gottsched's francophilic reforms while, in the same breath, practicing it himself!

champion of a derivative French neoclassicism. The scapegoat transaction that should ostensibly have brought an ennobled theater-drama coupling into existence is, Lessing claims, a charade, a foolish concoction. The argumentative logic of these dismissals provides a constructive heuristic for our analysis. The above passage identifies defects in the temporal and cultural design of the early Enlightenment reform program, and as we sketch out the lines of attack against the early Enlightenment reform project, as well as the alternative paths that stretched along beside it, this brief but profound passage from Lessing will serve as our guide.

Lessing identifies a temporal scission at the heart of the reform program, a complete division between the before and after. Within this paradigm, there is no remainder of preexisting stage conventions that traverses the boundary of reform. In other words, Gottsched's reform paradigm was ostensibly based in complete, instantaneous transformation: that was then, this is now. As such, the old reform program remained indifferent to the formal configurations or thematic contents that had hitherto enjoyed currency among theatergoers, writers, and actors. It follows that the exorcism of the fool was more than the symbolic realization of Gottsched's disavowal of the past; it was the attempt to install, by fiat and in an instant, an entirely extrinsic model of theater. And so we might say that in these few short lines Lessing identifies a logic of *imposed improvement*.

His own proposal, by contrast, advocates attending to "our [the Germans'] old dramatic plays," to see what "impacts us better" (*besser auf uns wirkt*).⁶ These simple phrases allow us to ascertain the temporal protocol according to which the alternative path of improvement should proceed. Lessing suggests that fundamentally altering the stage requires continuity between established conventions and future design. As Lessing had written already a decade earlier, the imposition of "rapid change" (*schnelle Veränderung*) is as "dangerous for taste as it would be for a child which one wanted to accustom to strong wine just after milk."⁷ Alimentary

6. Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 4:500.

7. *Ibid.*, 1:726.

and aesthetic maturation best proceeds, as he says, “step-by-step” (*Stufenweise*).⁸ The extended simile comparing theater to infantile development, together with the description of its pace in terms of the regularity of a gross-motor movement, provides a framework for conceiving of reform and improvement. But the framework is more than just a verbal cipher, an inconsequential switch from a literal to a figurative discourse. It points to a redrawing of the life-theater matrix, according to which the theater becomes a *vital extension* of its social environment.

This reorientation was not limited to a single writer. During the latter half of the eighteenth century, the patterning of improvement on the developmental rhythm of human life—and, in the same breath, decrying the mistaken derailment of such an organic trajectory—became the dominant way of identifying the wrong-headedness of Gottsched’s reform program. Lessing’s friend and former collaborator Friedrich Nicolai (1733–1811) remarked in 1761 and elsewhere among the *Letters* that “what one can say in a certain respect of good taste in Germany in general is valid specifically and in every respect of the German stage, namely that it is only still in its childhood.”⁹ Herder, in much the same vein, remarks in his commentary on the *Letters* that the German stage is akin to a “child that has become prematurely clever through imitation” (*ein Kind, das durch Nachahmen zu frühzeitig klug geworden*).¹⁰ He offers the alternative recommendation that the theater should “work backwards” and only then proceed forward; he encourages the return to erstwhile conventions and then, from the vantage point of a recovered origin, paving contiguous steps for improvement.¹¹ In his first draft of the *Wilhelm Meister* novel, Goethe summons a corresponding image when he says that in the early Enlightenment reforms the “German stage threw away its

8. Ibid.

9. Friedrich Nicolai, “Von den Ursachen, warum die deutsche Schaubühne immer in der Kindheit geblieben,” *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend* 11 (1761): 299–306, here 303.

10. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Werke*, ed. Wolfgang Pross (Munich: Hanser Verlag, 1984–2002), 1:339; see also 336.

11. Ibid.

children's shoes, before they were worn out, and had to walk barefoot in the meantime."¹² Such reiteration of a metaphorical scheme points to a shared sense that the path of improvement could not be charted in abstraction from the surrounding terrain. To be successful, innovation within the drama-theater dyad, rather, had to attend to the already existing ecosystem. Genuine innovation denies the possibility of a radical break in conventional ways of conducting the business of theater and demands instead a reflexive and appropriative relationship with hitherto established practices.

The question is, Whose practices? What does Lessing have in mind when he encourages attention to "our old dramatic plays"? After all, Gottsched certainly understood his own critical, translational, and poetic endeavors as the inheritance of a venerated past. Historiographical discrepancies between Gottsched and Lessing are especially evident in their differing approaches to cultural difference. Lessing objects to the servile dependence on French models that drives imposed improvement. His neologism "frenchifying" functions as a dismissal of the imitative mechanisms that formed the core of Gottsched's program. He objects not to imitation as such, but instead to a particular practice or method of imitation. So much is also clear from the fact that Lessing goes on to champion English drama—and Shakespeare in particular—as a more fitting model for German drama. In advancing the notion of progressive improvement, through a more avid interest in the English tradition, Lessing sings the opening line in what would become an epoch-making anthem, namely, the sense that Shakespeare—and not someone of the French neoclassical tradition—is the greatest modern dramatist.

The important thing for our purposes, however, is not the seesawing preference for the English or French, but rather the modification in the underlying logic of precedent. Note that in this passage, Lessing uses traditional rhetorical terminology of the paradigm case (*Muster, exemplum, παράδειγμα*), as was customary throughout the eighteenth century. In an argumentative move marking a break from the rule-governed reform program, Lessing

12. Goethe, FA I 9:32.

claims that what counts as an instance worthy of imitation depends on the imitative context.¹³ Models remain an indispensable ingredient in improvement, as the humanistic recipe dictated; but henceforth genuine forward progress cannot take place in a cultural-historical vacuum, nor can it be measured against a uniform standard. Instead, autochthonous stage conventions are of a piece with more general features of a generalized and pervasive mentality (*Denkungsart*), and both together must inform the intermediary steps that reform should take. In lieu of a predetermined standard of perfection to aspire to, Lessing embeds the transformation process in a matrix of cultural comparison. In drawing out similarities as well as differences among the Germans, English, and French, Lessing rejects the possibility of a single standard that all should adhere to, thus introducing the notion of a local mentality.¹⁴

Although Lessing formulates the incompatibility in terms of a broad-based frame of mind or mental attitude, his remarks are part of what could be described as the cultural emplacement of the theater. However polyvalent and notoriously difficult to define, the concept of culture can provide a powerful heuristic. *Culture* may not have been the word used in all instances, and the paradigm at issue can be detected even in the decade or so before the word itself made inroads into German language.¹⁵ After around 1750, discussion of theatrical practices and traditions, in fact,

13. It seems to me that Lessing's break with Gottsched becomes significantly stronger in the course of the 1750s; hence the difference between the view I am presenting here and my treatment of his introduction to the *Beyträge* in the opening of chapter 9.

14. There is a remarkable forerunner to Lessing's remarks—namely, Johann Elias Schlegel's "Gedanken zur Aufnahme des dänischen Theaters," reprinted in Johann Elias Schlegel, *Werke*, ed. Johann Elias Schlegel (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1971), 3:261–298. Although written in 1747, the more widely read edition of his collected works was not published until (tellingly!) 1764.

15. For a more focused history of the expansive use of the concept in the 1770s, particularly for historiographical purposes, see Michael G. Carhart, *The Science of Culture in Enlightenment Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). My claim is that when the word "culture" entered the German lexicon in the 1770s some of its meanings were already at work, under different lexical markers. Indeed, the use of this loanword is perhaps best explained by its ability to describe a conceptual nexus that had gained a foothold over the preceding years.

became organized by a metalevel of substantive—in the view of some, irreducible—difference. This level of difference is the platform upon which comparison takes place between the English, French, and German. These group terms do not operate primarily as political distinctions. Instead, they function as an instrument for identifying a prejudicial and uncoded mode of mutual belonging. In the theatrical context, comparisons among the English, French, and Germans served to undermine the possibility of a set of universal, canonical rules. The rise of German literary drama was closely tied to a novel investment in the regional boundedness of all literatures.

Speaking of culture should not evoke the picture of a unified and internally coherent Englishness, Frenchness, or Germanness. It should, rather, allow for the articulation of a twofold concern: with the distinctiveness of a given theatrical tradition and with the proper procedure for normative assessment of such distinctiveness. Of course, the concept of culture functions in a number of other important ways—in opposition to nature, for example, or in the contrast between cultured and uncultured—but these are not the senses that are at work in Lessing, Nicolai, Herder, and Goethe.¹⁶ In their texts, culture serves as a gauge for comparative difference and internal coalescence. As such, culture further develops the theme that first emerged at the beginning of part 3, namely, the relationship between theater and life. The introduction of cultural comparison, in fact, amounted to the inclusion of ever more quotidian features as relevant to the constitution of the theater. To step back for a moment and notice our place in the larger dialectic, we might say that, beyond the division between labor and restoration or earnestness and levity, we now stand on an additional level of mediation that deserves being called cultural life.

Looking at things in terms of cultural life draws out the difference between, for example, the meaning of “German theater” in 1730 and the meaning of the same terminology approximately

16. See Albrecht Koschorke, “Zur Epistemologie der Natur/Kultur-Grenze und zu ihren disziplinären Folgen,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 83, no. 1 (2009): 9–25.

thirty years later. The idea of a German theater changes once habitual and conventional features of day-to-day existence in a regionally bound social group become relevant to discursive construction of the theater.¹⁷ The claim that German theater should be assessed according to its own measuring-stick made sense only because of the logically antecedent belief in the irreducibility of culture-specific traits. To give an example, cultural difference provides a key premise of Friedrich Just Riedel's *Theory of the Beautiful Arts and Sciences* (*Theorie der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften*, 1767/1774). He argues that aesthetic taste is relative to "the national character (*Nationalcharakter*) and, in general, the circumstances."¹⁸ And why? Because "every people has national sources (*Nationalquellen*) out of which the judgments flow that it [the people] makes about the good and the beautiful."¹⁹ Riedel (1742–1785) includes among the culturally specific domains of life "religion, conventions, traditions, prejudices, . . . their pride, their character, their language, their form of government, their knowledge (*Kenntnisse*), and a hundred other points."²⁰ This passage makes the claim that all domains of life, including literature, are colored by the regionally dominant culture, and for this reason Riedel issues the following proviso: "The character of a nation and its form of thought must be taken as foundational and be compared with the character of other nations. By these means, the true temperament (*Temperatur*) can be determined according

17. My claim is not that all of these differences are always indicated by the concept of culture, but rather that these differences become salient at this historical juncture, and that the rise of such differences is best described as the invention of cultural difference as a key discursive axis. A good example of this is the controversy over how to translate the English term "humor" into the German language, particularly in the large scale (English humor, German humor, French humor, and so on).

18. Friedrich Just Riedel, *Theorie der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften* (Vienna/Jena: Christian Heinrich Cuno, 1774), 22. This passage is taken from the epistles on aesthetic issues included as addenda in the revised version of Riedel's treatise. The passages I quote are taken from the second letter, which is addressed to Karl Friedrich Flögel.

19. Riedel, *Theorie der schönen Künste*, 22–23.

20. Ibid., 25.

to which the German muse must sing German.”²¹ It is noteworthy that Riedel uses the metaphor of temperament, which refers to the intentional deviation from a pure tonal interval in music, not to a set of general dispositions or a collective mood. Yet the metaphor contains an ambiguity that reveals the conceptual difficulties intrinsic to the redefinition of literary art in terms of culture. Speaking of musical temperament makes sense only if pure intervals exist, and it is exactly the possibility of such purity that his remarks call into question. Much like Lessing, with his simultaneous accusations of “frenchifying” and elevating the English, Riedel struggles to find the words to describe the tissue connecting cultural life and theater, including what makes German theater German.

Given the equivocality of the quoted passages from Lessing and Riedel, it may seem an exaggeration to label this a watershed moment. In order to see this transition more perspicuously, it is helpful to distinguish between two different ways in which group markers such as English, French, and German become attached to the theater—in other words, two different ways in which English, French, and German name species of the higher-order genus theater.²² Recall that one of the founding gestures of the early Enlightenment reforms was the integration of the theater into a rule-governed poetics with universal applicability. The preference among early Enlightenment critics for the hybrid term “theatrical poetry” (*theatralische Poesie*) testifies to a specific method for harnessing the theater to a conception of poetry oriented toward universally valid guidelines. According to this scheme, then, among the kinds of poetry, one is theatrical poetry, which itself falls out into a variety of different

21. Ibid., 26: “Der Charakter der Nation und ihre Denkart müste zum Grunde gelegt, mit dem Charakter, andrer poetischen Völker verglichen und daraus die wahre Temperatur bestimmt werden, nach welcher die deutsche Muse deutsch singen muß.” *Temperatur* here is a musical metaphor, referring to the deviation from pure tonal intervals to fulfill specific purposes.

22. I learned of the logical structure of this difference through the study of Anton Ford, “Action and Generality,” in *Essays in Honor of Anscombe’s Intention*, ed. Anton Ford, Jennifer Hornsby, and Frederick Stoutland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 76–104. In my terminological decisions, I follow Ford’s lead.

species (French, Italian, etc.). Each of these theaters adheres to a canon of rules required of theatrical poetry, yet these rules exist and operate entirely independently of what makes the French theater distinctively French or the Italian theater distinctively Italian. (The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for other species of poetry.) In more traditional philosophical vocabulary, we might say that the constituent species of the genus differ by virtue of their accidents. From a modern vantage point, theatrical poetry looks here much like the genus of mammals, who share the marker of nourishing offspring with milk and are differentiated among themselves by a host of additional, inessential markers. Even if bumblebee bats and baboons differ in so many respects that their association would seem nothing more than an alliterative ploy, they both belong to the genus of mammals because they share a way of supplying their young with nourishment. The parallel between biological and poetic classification accurately represents the early Enlightenment conviction that the rules that group together poetic kinds reflect the structure of the world and its underlying principle of reason.

But there is another genus-species relation, which can be called categorical, that is organized differently. In this second genus-species relation, it is not possible to separate differentiae from the qualities of a genus. A canonical example in philosophy relies on the fact that red and blue can intuitively be thought of as species of the genus color.²³ But there are no features of redness that are accidental to the genus color, such that they can function as the distinguishing features of red from blue without simultaneously undoing red's belonging to the genus of colors. In simpler terms, we cannot break off the features that make red different from blue and still end up with the properties that make red into a color in the first place. Each species that belongs to the genus color forms, so to speak, a category unto itself; put differently, the species belong to a single genus but are categorically different.

Unpacking this contrast with all of its nuance would take a good deal of additional argument, but even this skeletal contrast can

23. The example of color, cited in Ford's essay, is taken from Arthur N. Prior, "Determinables, Determinates, and Determinants (I)," *Mind* 58 (1949): 1–20.

throw light on the functioning of the concept of culture after 1760. Assuming that English, French, and German theater are members of a more general class called theater, how should we think of the features that make them respectively distinct? What sort of a genus is the theater, such that it consists of English, French, and German species? Are culturally distinct theaters accidentally different or categorically different? The passages from Lessing and Riedel seem to pivot between these two conceptions.

Again, an example will help make these abstract considerations more concrete. Consider the remarks that Herder wrote in response to the *Letters Concerning Most Recent Literature*. Long recognized as a galvanizing force behind the explosion of German literature in the late eighteenth century, in his early career Herder was urgently concerned with the way different cultures inflect their literary creations.²⁴ A characteristic instance of this comes in a passage where he refers to the ancient Greeks as the “fathers of all literature in Europe.”²⁵ The phrase seems standard enough and, with its invocation of progenitor-progeny relation, seems to map on well to a genus-species classification. Fatherhood here alludes to a reproductive pattern—the father’s features and characteristics being passed down to the child. But the father-child relationship can also be understood, not in terms of the common traits, but instead according to the *differentiae*, the traits that are *not* bequeathed from parent to child, instead marking each

24. Within the abundant literature on Herder’s relationship to nation and culture, see Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also Vicki A. Spencer, *Herder’s Political Thought: A Study of Language, Culture, and Community* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012). On Herder’s conception of national literature, including his notion of *Volk*, see Ulrich Gaier, “Volkspoesie, Nationalliteratur, Weltliteratur bei Herder,” in *Die europäische République des lettres in der Zeit der Weimarer Klassik*, ed. Michael Knoche and Lea Ritter-Santini (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2007), 101–115; and Hans Adler, “Weltliteratur—Nationalliteratur—Volksliteratur: Johann Gottfried Herders Vermittlungsversuch als kulturpolitische Idee,” in *Nationen und Kulturen: Zum 250 Geburtstag Johann Gottfried Herders*, ed. Regine Otto (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1996), 271–284.

25. Herder, *Werke*, 1:213.

as an individual. If the Greeks are sponsors of German literature along these lines, then Herder is conceiving of literatures according to the first (accidental) model of genus-species relation.

Yet Herder's genetic picture of the Greeks' position in literary history and theory actually functions differently. He encourages the reader of his text to imagine the following transport:

Take off from a literature to which the Greeks first gave form once and for all; become a reborn contemporary of a bygone history, a bard of past times—and then judge! Which people, which century has ever made itself anything but a literature of the age and nation? The Greeks did not, and neither did we.

Setze dich aus einer Literatur hinaus, welcher einmal für alle die Griechen erste Form gaben: werde ein wiedergeborener Zeitgenosse einer abgelebten Geschichte, ein Barde vergangener Zeiten—so urteile! Welches Volk, welches Jahrhundert hat sich je eine andre als Sekular- und National-Literatur gebauet? Die Griechen nicht, und wir auch nicht.²⁶

It is easy to miss the subtlety of Herder's lines, which deftly avoid paradox. The opening gambit suggests that the Greeks cast the mold for all literatures to come. And yet it is not clear what sort of priority this mold possesses after it had been cast "once and for all." Are there subsequent molds that follow temporally (i.e., historically) on this first mold? If so, then what the Greeks created "once and for all" seems to lead a double existence—once as the ancient Greek form and once as the form open to further iterations. But Herder is not entangling himself in such a paradox; he is gesturing toward a conception of literature as a genus that falls out along the lines of a categorical species. Evidence of this can be found in the latter half of the quoted passage where Herder insists on the *per se* historical and cultural distinctness of all literatures. Even in the case of the ancient Greeks, the constitutive qualities of their literature cannot be broken down into those that are specifically Greek and those specific to a literary genus. Instead, they are a literature only insofar as their distinctive attributes, their cultural and national qualities, are definitive of their status as literature.

26. Ibid., 1:219.

The Greeks first gave form to literature, and in this respect they are its parent. But this primacy is temporal; the Greek form of literature, by 1760, stands alongside other literatures, each with different cultural qualities. The qualities that qualify German literature as a literature cannot be separated from those qualities that make it German, just as the qualities that made Greek literature into the first literature cannot be separated from the qualities that made it Greek. The most straightforward way to distinguish these two varieties of genus-species relation is to say that Herder is advocating the birth of German as a national literature, insofar as to be a literature is to be national. Indeed, Herder is saying something along those lines, and doing so at the same time that he denies the existence of poetry in a universal rule-governed sense.

Talk of national literature flows with particular ease concerning the theater. Around the same time when Lessing, Riedel, and Herder were making these statements, municipal authorities, sometimes in collaboration with private enterprise, adorned local institutions with the name “national theater.” Among these, the most prominent is undoubtedly the effort in Hamburg between 1764 and 1767 known as the Hamburg Enterprise, which enjoyed Lessing’s active engagement. Despite the appellation *national*, two-thirds of the plays performed at the Hamburg national theater (80 of 120) were not originally written in German—a statistic that fits with the broader trend in theaters across Germany.²⁷ In addition, during the latter half of the eighteenth century, a number of courts also appended “national” to their residential theater.²⁸ The word “national” appeared, for instance, in the names *Hamburger Nationaltheater*, *Mannheim Hof- und Nationaltheater*, *Das Königliche Hof- und*

27. See H. B. Nisbet, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: His Life, Works, and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 359–389, here 369. On the general context, see Reinhart Meyer, “Der Anteil des Singspiels und der Oper am Repertoire der deutschen Bühnen in der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts,” in *Das deutsche Singspiel im 18. Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg: Winter Universitätsverlag, 1981), 27–76.

28. Reinhart Meyer, “Das Nationaltheater in Deutschland als höfisches Institut: Versuch einer Begriffs- und Funktionsbestimmung,” in *Das Ende des Stegreifspiels, die Geburt des Nationaltheaters*, ed. Roger Bauer and Jürgen Wertheimer (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1983), 124–152.

Nationaltheater München, and more—so many more, in fact, that it would be absurd to suppose that each was intended as the announcement of the sort of political representation as would the same nomenclature today. At the time of the surge in national theaters, the Germans, unlike the two predominant axes of comparison (English and French), were not territorially unified, nor did they possess a capital city. The absence of a sovereign nation-state with a single, unified governmental bureaucracy and rule of law provides a good hint that speaking of the birth of national literature here does not settle the matter. For nation does not function, at this historical moment, as a purely political signifier. One possibility is to say that nation means in these instances cultural nation (*Kulturnation*), but this just displaces the need for clarification onto a further term.²⁹ As chapter 12 will draw out in closer detail, the concept of nation, as it is used in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, is essentially a synonym for culture. To say cultural nation is, in fact, to say cultural culture—in other words, to say nothing at all. In order to avoid this confusion, it makes sense to understand national literature and national theater as primarily cultural denominations.

The notion of cultural-national literature is best understood, so the basic claim of this chapter, according to the model of a categorical genus-species relation. This is not to say that texts by Lessing and Herder ever aspired to the classificatory precision—or explicitness and formality—that a philosopher might demand. But there is a positive, more historically instructive reason underlying the incomplete or inchoate descriptions of German as a national literature. To wit, becoming a nationally distinct theater is something that, according to the self-descriptions of eighteenth-century authors, the Germans had thus far failed at. Again and again, authors such as Lessing and Herder complained that Gottsched's reform movement had inhibited the German theater from properly differentiating itself and instead relegated it to a dreadfully mongrel existence.

The question of whether the German stage had achieved a sufficiently idiosyncratic (*eigentümlich*) or original (*original*) status

29. Friedrich Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, trans. Robert B. Kimber (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

constitutes a recurring theme beginning around 1760.³⁰ Herder, for one, brought together the developmental and cultural dimensions of improvement in his claim that the “German stage was . . . abandoned at birth; that instead of developing its *idiosyncrasy* (*ihr Eigentümliches*) the stage was made into a servile imitator.”³¹ Herder’s remark indicates that overreliance on external models inhibited the cultivation of a German theater. It is not at all difficult to hear echoes of Lessing’s condemnation of the “frenchifying” reform tendencies. The absent idiosyncrasy, meanwhile, is defined in terms of the German national character (*Nationalcharakter*), national spirit (*Nationalgeist*), national taste (*Nationalgeschmack*), and German practical life (*deutsche Sitten*). While these terms remain vague at this point, a series of installments in the *Letters Concerning Most Recent Literature* written by Friedrich Nicolai claim that a theater in German-speaking lands that performs “almost nothing but foreign pieces” (*fast lauter fremde Stücke*), cannot rightly be called a German theater.³² He provides the following diagnosis of the current state of affairs and prognosis for potential improvement:

So long as it is not yet possible to abolish the bad original compositions and still more miserable translations which are already on our stages; so long as we slavishly adhere to the rules in our original compositions and do not think to give our German stage an idiosyncratic character; so long these and various other conditions cannot yet be fulfilled; for that long we will not be able to boast that we have a German stage rightly deserving of the name.

30. I consistently translate the word *eigentümlich* as “idiosyncratic.” Although the lines of filiation are not entirely clear to me, I suspect that the term actually gained traction as a translation of the Latin *genius*, particularly in formulations such as *genius saeculi* and *genius loci*. While we would now render these terms as *Zeitgeist* and *Ortsgeist*, at least in texts from the middle third of the eighteenth century, there was apprehension about using the term *Geist* in this context, since it still carried strong religious and genuinely spectral connotations. I return to this theme in chapter 12.

31. Herder, *Werke*, 1:337.

32. Friedrich Nicolai, “Beurtheilung der zufälligen Gedancken über die deutsche Schaubühne zu Wien,” *Briefe, die neuste Literatur betreffend* 11 (1761): 307–316, here 314.

So lange es noch nicht möglich ist die schlechten Originale und noch elendere Uebersetzungen, welche bereits auf unsern Schaubühnen sind, abzuschaffen; so lange wir uns in unsern Originalen noch slavisch an die Regeln halten, und nicht daran denken, der deutschen Bühne einen eigenthümlichen Charakter zu geben; so lange diese und verschiedene andere Bedingungen noch nicht können erfüllt werden; so lange werden wir uns nicht rühmen können, daß wir eine deutsche Schaubühne hätten, die diesen Nahmen mit Recht verdiente.³³

Servile imitation and boundedness to rules had to be excluded for German literature to take hold. This passage is a reiteration of what could be called the distinction between endogenous and exogenous varieties of improvement. Cultural specificity is the product of a self-appropriative generative process, a dominance of endogamy over exogamy. What is most striking in light of the earlier remarks about genus-species relations is Nicolai's identification of an "idiosyncratic character" with the denomination "German stage." Everything else would render the stage unworthy of the national moniker. This is congruous with the opening of the very same sequence of epistles where Nicolai doubts that "we can say in the genuine sense (*im eigentlichen Verstande*) that we have a German stage as the French and English can boast that they have their own stages."³⁴ The concept of German literature, then, is coined to mark a shortcoming, as the placeholder for a still absent form. Universally valid rules are disavowed not to make a place for an emphatic notion of creativity without precedence, but rather in the aspiration to give a distinctive cultural flavor to the German theater. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, there was a prevalent dismissal of the desire to "go to market by the Greeks, the Latins, and the French, and borrow or buy from foreigners what we could have at home."³⁵

33. Nicolai, "Von den Ursachen, warum die deutsche Schaubühne immer in der Kindheit geblieben," 304–305.

34. Ibid., 299.

35. Justus Möser, *Ueber die deutsche Sprache und Litteratur* (Hamburg: Benjamin Gottlob Hoffmann, 1781), 6.