

NATIONAL LITERATURE II

Custom

Just because the theater should “orient itself according to the taste of the spectators”¹ did not mean that advocates of theatrical reform wanted to hand things over to public opinion. Instead, it lent some precision to the widely circulating notion of *improvement*, encouraging the playwright and the critic to each behave much like a doctor whose relief comes not by way of “all violent means, but instead supports nature in order that it should help itself progressively.”² The mention of doctoring brings us back, once again, to the thread that has guided us through the previous chapters, namely, the relationship between the theater and life (now construed as the life of an entire culture). The project of literary improvement that emerges in the latter half of the eighteenth

1. Heinrich Georg Koch, *Antwort auf das Sendschreiben an Herrn K- in Z- die Leipziger Schaubühne betreffend* (Leipzig: Adam Kießling, 1753), 7.

2. *Ibid.*, 8.

century was organized around a teleological structure that sought to accomplish more than simply the imposition of abrupt change. Improvement functioned, according to this alternative model, as a process of step-by-step, self-appropriative transformation—of, in more readily recognizable terminology, *Bildung*.³ The concept of *Bildung* underscores that improvement consisted of the realization of potential in preexisting structures, in the augmentation of already established conventions, thoughts, feelings, desires, and inclinations. Reformers did not want to sever all traffic with external cultural-historical forms; they rather sought to use what they regarded as foreign elements to exploit still unrealized artistic potential within the autochthonous German theater. Or, as Justus Möser would have it, in a less abstract formulation: “In my opinion we must get more from ourselves and from our soil than we have hitherto done, and use the art of our neighbors, at the most, insofar as it serves our idiosyncratic products and their culture.”⁴

Before moving forward, a word of general orientation is in order. The fool, it may seem, has vanished from the story line as higher-order, more encompassing concepts, such as culture, literature, and nation, have become the protagonists. The reason for opening the aperture in this way has to do with the intimate relationship that these very same concepts entertain with the comic. These big-picture concepts provide the context that supported the surprising promotion, in the 1760s and beyond, of the fool as an inchoate local form with strong potential for making the German stage worthy of its name. During these years, the comic became

3. The structural transformation I outline in this and the previous chapter shows a basic analogy to the novelistic developments of the same era. My approach has been shaped by the incisive and far-reaching study of David E. Wellbery, “Die Enden des Menschen: Anthropologie und Einbildungskraft im Bildungsroman (Wieland, Novalis, Goethe),” in *Das Ende*, ed. Karlheinz Stierle and Rainer Warning (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1996), 600–639.

4. The passage in its original: “Meiner Meynung nach müssen wir also durchaus mehr aus uns selbst und aus unserm Boden ziehen, als wir bisher gethan haben, und die Kunst unsrer Nachbarn höchstens nur in so weit nutzen, als sie zur Verbesserung unsrer eigenthümlichen Güter und ihrer Kultur dienet.” Justus Möser, *Ueber die deutsche Sprache und Litteratur* (Hamburg: Benjamin Gottlob Hoffmann, 1781), 33–34.

closely interwoven with concepts like culture and nature, and, in this process, the fool began to appear to a number of major writers as an underutilized resource for furnishing the Germans with a dramatic literature of rank. Before returning to the fool, however, a more precise sense of the historical predicaments faced by the notion of a German culture generally and a German theater more specifically is needed.

With this road map in mind, let us return to the lines quoted at the outset, written by the prominent acting troupe leader Heinrich Gottfried Koch (1703–1775). These lines could very well solicit a very simple question: to wit, is it really that remarkable for the leader of a troupe to insist on attentiveness to what a paying audience might want? Obviously not. But there is more at work in Koch's remark: it encapsulates the distinction from chapter 11 between endogenous and exogenous models of improvement. Authors such as Koch approach literary improvement as emerging from the conspiracy of two forces: on one side, the local conventions for making theater and, on the other, the distinct culture in which the theater is produced. In order for doctoring to do its healing, both forces have to be at work.

The discourse on cultural distinctness in the eighteenth century was remarkably vast, but its basic contours can be readily sketched out. There is good reason to suspect that the cultural inflection of the theater, including the emphasis on endogenous improvement, drew essential energies from a sudden explosion of disagreement over the question of whether the Germans possessed a “national character” or “national spirit,” two concepts that migrated into the German language around 1760. These very same terms took center stage in the discourse on political and territorial independence beginning around 1800, but their earlier entrance into the German language was more troubled. Long before the jingoistic stridency among German intellectuals in response to Napoleon's invasion, and before the philosophical interest in the grounding of the nation-state among major philosophers from Kant to Hegel, the concern with a national character had a significant role to play in a less recondite discourse comparing different nations. One trigger of the interest in the concept of nation was surely the Pan-European

conflicts of the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), while another was the immense resonance of the French philosopher Baron de Montesquieu's (1689–1755) massive tome *The Spirit of the Laws* (*De l'esprit des lois*, 1748), which itself was part of a much larger discussion of these issues taking place in France.⁵ But the years after around 1760 witnessed a huge increase in the practice of delineating the relative advantages and shortfalls of the European peoples, including in their rules of positive law and their forms of government, but also their literatures.⁶ This is the broader discursive pool from which the texts of Lessing, Nicolai, and Herder that I discussed in chapter 11 emerged.

As notions of national spirit and national character attracted interest across the German-speaking world, a common argumentative pattern took form. Convinced that the German people must possess a distinctive identity, political thinkers felt the need to describe its core attributes. The necessity of such fundamental properties of a nation rested on an argument by Montesquieu: that national identity was a result of its topography and regional climate.⁷ The characteristic features of a people, we might say, are derivative of naturally given and immutable features of the world. Arguing along these lines posed a problem for German writers, who were haunted by the sense that their own identity was contaminated by an overreliance on foreign input. Thus it seemed that their own national spirit was both necessary and contingent, manifest and obscure. This dilemma was resolved by the realization that although nature imbues a people with unique elements

5. See David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 140–168.

6. The emphasis on the Seven Years' War has been argued in Hans-Martin Blitz, *Aus Liebe zum Vaterland: Die deutsche Nation im 18. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2000), and reiterated in Dorothea E. von Mücke, *The Practices of the Enlightenment: Aesthetics, Authorship, and the Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). On the influence of Montesquieu, see Rudolf Vierhaus, "Montesquieu in Deutschland," in *Deutschland im 18. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1987), 9–32.

7. By causal, I do not mean the single result. For most authors it was an exceedingly important factor in the formation of national character, but not the sole one. The strength of the causality assigned to climate differed from author to author, but the basic premise of an immutable foundation remained widespread.

and features, they may not be obvious to the empirical world. German writers located their own national identity along a historical timeline. Because their current reality seemed to belie the necessity of national specificity, the solution was to integrate the status quo into narratives of earlier Germanic peoples and the promise of a more glorious future. In particular, the picture of the Germanic tribes presented by the Roman historian Tacitus (ca. 56–120), and, more rarely, premodern feudalism, provide the scaffolding for the analysis and construction of the German nation of 1760.⁸ This narrative structure had a clear purpose: it turned the discussion of national identity into a recovery of a time when the German spirit aligned with the German nature. Because this moment of pristine cultural coherence was long past, the path forward to the origin had to be charted.⁹

This abstract pattern helps make sense of some of the uneasiness evident when national character and national spirit become topics of learned debate. Take the first German translation of Montesquieu, which appeared just a few years after the original publication under the altered title *Des Herrn von Montesquiou Werk von den Gesetzen* (*Mr. Montesquieu's Work on the Laws*, 1753).¹⁰ A few years later the word *Geist* was in fact used as a translation for the French *esprit* in a related publication, so the avoidance of this key word in the first translation is noteworthy.¹¹ The prefatory remarks to the first German edition of Montesquieu's work observe that the translator would have introduced *Geist* in the title if he did not "have to fear that it would be unintelligible to a large number of

8. It has long been noticed that a number of literary texts—Klopstock's is the most famous—appeared with Herrmann's battle as their primary theme. Goethe's early tragedy *Götz von Berchlingen* was also understood in a similar fashion, and for this reason generated lively debate, among whose main protagonists King Friedrich II of Prussia and Justus Möser were counted.

9. See Albrecht Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung: Grundzüge einer allgemeinen Erzähltheorie* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2012), esp. pt. 4.

10. Abraham Gottholf Kästner, *Des Herrn von Montesquiou Werk von den Gesetzen* (Frankfurt/ Leipzig, 1753).

11. Johann Heumann, *Der Geist der Geseze der Teutschen* (Nuremberg: Johann Georg Lochner, 1761); see, in particular, 89–91. Unlike the other texts I discuss in this context, Heumann's expresses comfort with the current sense of co-belonging as well as the political composition of the German people.

German readers.”¹² Uneasiness with *Geist* may seem odd to the modern reader more familiar with nineteenth-century trends, but at this earlier historical juncture “character” was a more comfortable term in German than “spirit” for describing what makes a nation distinct. We can see this skittishness at work, for instance, in the final section of the aesthetic treatise Kant wrote in 1764, during the precritical phase of his career, concerning “the national characters insofar as they bear on the sublime and the beautiful.”¹³ The philosopher from Königsberg betrays his allegiance to the modern parlance in his use of “national spirit” (*Nationalgeist*) as a synonym for “national character.” Consonant with contemporary preoccupations, he claims that differences among nations restrict the validity of aesthetic experience. Yet Kant, whose prose seems to today’s reader to exude hypotactic Germanness, also has difficulty defining what makes his people unique. At one point, he even goes so far as to claim they are made up of a sort of hybrid feeling between that of a Frenchman and that of an Englishman, a claim that seems to undermine their specificity not just as a nation, but also as aesthetic subjects.¹⁴

Beyond strictly philosophical expositions of the German personality, there was a further corpus of texts articulating the steps necessary to make German culture more distinct. One work that hews closely to Montesquieu’s terminology, Friedrich Carl von Moser’s (1723–1798) *Von dem deutschen National-Geist* (*On the German National Spirit*, 1765), moves quickly from an analysis of the titular concept to its primary focus: the intermediate steps needed to forge a sense of fellowship.¹⁵ While his point of departure in this treatise is the absence of a unified legal code, its real concern is an underlying “separatist way of thinking” among the Germans.¹⁶ The fractured juridical-political situation is merely the

12. Heumann, *Der Geist der Geseze der Teutschen*, penultimate page of unpaginated preface.

13. Immanuel Kant, *Werkausgabe*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 1996), 2:868–884.

14. *Ibid.*, 874.

15. See the illuminating presentation in Nicholas Vaszonyi, “Montesquieu, Friedrich Carl von Moser, and the ‘National Spirit Debate’ in Germany, 1765–1767,” *German Studies Review* 22, no. 2 (1999): 225–246.

16. Friedrich Carl von Moser, *Von dem deutschen National-Geist* (Frankfurt, 1765), 36.

most striking piece of evidence that, as Moser writes, “Our spirit has left us” (*Unser Geist ist von uns gewichen*).¹⁷ The task set before the German-speaking peoples is to find remedies that will fix this lack across all age groups, from the earliest youth to adulthood. Recovering naturally given attributes will require developing techniques to alter the German “practical way of thinking” (*praktische Gedenkungs-Art*)—the forms of quotidian and conventional conduct that shape the way a people thinks of itself in contrast to other nations.¹⁸ In particular, Moser tries to uncover practical routines that will inculcate behaviors fostering mutual association and coresponsibility, which thereby restore the depleted nation to its original plentitude and wholeness. For the argumentative path we are following, the decisive feature of this text lies beneath the diatribe against the juridical-political fragmentation in the call for a transformation in practical thought.

Moser’s text offers the indication of a more general tendency to anthropomorphize and atomize questions of communal belonging. To be more exact, when the problem of national unity came into focus, its source and solution could be found at the level of individual psychology and affect. Making the nation hang together properly was not a matter of grasping some piece of information or recognizing some intrinsic attribute. It had to be accomplished, instead, through the acquisition of more affectively charged qualities, such as patriotism (*Patriotismus/patriotisch*), national pride (*Nationalstolz*), national interest (*Nationalinteresse*), and love of the fatherland (*Liebe für das Vaterland*).¹⁹ Each of these concepts had the capacity to address the individual’s own sense of investment and participation in an encompassing nation. The functional advantage of locating the source of the national bond in the individual’s affective disposition, rather than in a more encompassing concept such as character and spirit, is the avenue of redress it opens up. If, for

17. *Ibid.*, 10 and 76–77.

18. *Ibid.*, 24.

19. It would be a fool’s errand to refer to specific uses of these concepts. To the attuned reader they jump out of the pages of Thomas Abbt, Justus Möser, and Herder, as well as almost all of the many, less well-known authors I have cited throughout part 3.

instance, national unity is composed of the “sum of self-love (*Eigenliebe*) of each specific person,”²⁰ then the mechanisms for creating a shared sense of identity will lie in each individual’s “feeling of the specific merits” that she possesses in contrast to individuals from other nations.²¹ This proposal, from a text devoted to the theme of national pride, which appeared in four versions between 1758 and 1768 and was then reprinted again in 1793, recommends using the imagination to encourage collective self-identification. In a particularly instructive passage, the author, Johann Georg von Zimmermann (1728–1795), points to a mechanism for fostering cultural unity that his own people might learn from the ancient Romans. In particular, the Germans should develop a reservoir of stories addressing “famous deeds shining forth from the history of the fatherland.”²² Such stories should be sacrosanct, and serve as collective reminders much like the devotional scapular and rosary carried by Catholics.²³ Such a battery, forged in the imagination, could equip the Germans with a sense of the value of belonging to the German nation.

The reference to the inspiriting power of the imagination is not unique. A more or less contemporary text written by the Austrian jurist Johann von Sonnenfels (1732–1817), who published widely on *policey* and the theater, similarly identifies the “example for imitation” as the essential ingredient for “arousing self-love even among the multitude (*Haufen*)” and thereby “making an entire people into patriots.”²⁴ “Dependency” or *Anhänglichkeit* is one of Sonnenfels’s preferred terms to describe an ideal relationship; the term bears more strongly on the affectionate attachment among persons than on needs relevant for survival or on pecuniary reliance.²⁵ Much like pride, an awareness of mutual reliance among

20. Johann Georg von Zimmermann, *Vom Nationalstolze* (Zurich: Heidegger und Compagnie, 1758), 12.

21. *Ibid.*, 3.

22. *Ibid.*, 106.

23. *Ibid.*, 138.

24. Johann von Sonnenfels, *Ueber die Liebe des Vaterlands* (Vienna: Joseph Kurzböck, 1771), 14.

25. See the definition on Sonnenfels, *Ueber die Liebe des Vaterlands*, 11.

the members of a nation equips them with motivations conducive to communal fellowship. Perhaps the most powerful manifesto for a subjective investment in the nation was Thomas Abbt's *Vom Tode für das Vaterland* (*On Death for the Fatherland*, 1761), a zealous call for bravery in the middle of the Seven Years' War. It explicitly names the imagination (again, *Einbildungskraft*) as the foundation of mutual affective investment. Abbt predicts that if even a small number of men sacrifice themselves on behalf of the nation, they will provide enough images (his word is *Gemälde*) that the "entire nation should soon follow suit, by virtue of which its entire way of thought will necessarily become new and sublime."²⁶ In addition to the pursuit of noble deeds, then, a nation is made out of a secondary layer of representations that can "be passed on through unbroken transmission to grandchildren."²⁷ It should perhaps not surprise us that, amid a flurry of citations from the contemporary poet Ewald Christian von Kleist (1715–1759) and from ancient Roman lyric, Abbt adverts in the final pages of his treatise to a concept we have already seen on a number of occasions, namely, to *Muster*, paradigmatic instances or examples.²⁸ The national bond that interests Abbt—a bond worthy of self-sacrifice—should be formed through the crafting, reproduction, circulation, and emulation of a culture-specific storehouse of examples. The notion of endogenous improvement, in short, provides the overarching design for nation building as well as national-literature building. Only with such internal improvement will the German nation and its literature achieve a timelessness akin to the timelessness embodied in the modern veneration of ancient Greek and Roman poetry.²⁹

For each of the above mentioned authors, the campaign for the cultivation of a collective identity has a favored device. Each expresses the desire for a particular model of heroism, namely, that of the great man—and especially one drawn from the annals of

26. Thomas Abbt, *Vom Tod für das Vaterland* (Berlin: Friedrich Nicolai, 1761), 34–35.

27. *Ibid.*, 51.

28. *Ibid.*, 94.

29. The parallel is hinted at in the discussion of immortality at Abbt, *Vom Tod für das Vaterland*, 50–52.

history—whose virtue and valor should serve as benchmarks for an entire nation. Each, furthermore, associates this model of virile masculinity with the tragic genre. Consider the elaboration of this compositional recipe in a journal article concerning the use of national history on the stage, published in the 1787. Culture-internal resources, the anonymous author claims, have a distinct advantage for the spectators: “When we see the heroes, the heroes of the fatherland, as well as warm, soulful, upstanding burghers themselves acting in the true brilliance of their dignity, we can take to heart their deed[s] and by means of imitation also achieve the very same merit.”³⁰ According to this scheme, erstwhile acts of greatness can provide a model for imitation to the entire people, thereby supplying them with a sense of their nation’s own worth and value. The uncomplicated and zealous advocacy for greater provincialism in thematic choices testifies to the fervor, among German writers, surrounding the call for a national personality.

But what about comedy and the comic? Does it too foster a nation’s sense of co-belonging and positive self-regard? Herder, for one, thought so. He believed—and he was not alone in this belief—that comedy could tell us more about human beings in their concrete historical and political existence than tragedy. Moreover, he claimed, comedy’s proper deployment would more effectively foster cultural unity. Comedy, as he says at one point, is the genre with “life and lived experience (*das Leben und lebendige Erfahrung*) as its subject.”³¹ In the course of a series of remarks on the state of contemporary German letters, he argues that comedy should be understood more elastically than just as a rule-governed form inherited from antiquity. He says that even though “tragedy has more power for beholding the human separated from his political trappings (*politischen Hüllen*), only comedy can allow itself greater liberty, which one gladly grants it, in those cases when it does not laugh at the trappings, but instead at he who hides

30. Anonymous, “Ist nicht die Schaubühne das tauglichste Mittel, Volksgeschichte gemeinnütziger zu machen,” in *Theaterkalender auf das Jahr 1787* (Gotha: Carl Wilhelm Ettinger, 1778), 33–40, here 34.

31. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Werke*, ed. Wolfgang Pross (Munich: Hanser Verlag, 1984–2002), 1:352.

beneath them.”³² We must note that in this passage, Herder’s reference to the political is meant in an unusually capacious sense. The basic claim is that comedy can disclose with unique effectiveness the often discrepant relationship between the human being in an abstract and universal sense, on one side, and the human being as a determinate cultural and historical subject, on the other. Much more effectively than its sister genre, tragedy, comedy and comic theater more generally draw out mundane features of human life and expose them as laughable.

Is it possible to achieve a more well-defined sense of the contingent social-historical factors that the comic evidently exposes? In the case of German theater this question had no straightforward answer. To see why, it is helpful to consider a further example. Direction can be found in a passage from a little-known text on the relationship between national character and national theater composed in 1794 by Wilhelm Friedrich August Mackensen (1768–1798):

The Swabian, the Austrian, the Silesian, the Westphalian, the resident of Lausatia, the one from Lower Saxony are all representatives of so many distinct nations, each with its own customs, own constitution, even its own particular language. Nonetheless, as soon as one views them as Germans, they have shared customs, shared constitution, shared language.

Der Schwabe, der Oesterreicher, der Schlesier, der Westphälinger, der Bewohner der Lausitz, der Niedersachse, sind eigentlich Repräsentanten von so viel eigenen Nationen, deren jede besondere Sitten, besondere Verfassung, ja, ihre besondere Sprache hat, und die dennoch, sobald man sie als Deutsche betrachtet, gemeinschaftliche Sitten, gemeinschaftliche Verfassung, gemeinschaftliche Sprache haben.³³

The passage specifies the concept of national culture at play in the case of Germany. Mackensen compares different kinds of regionally

32. The passage in the original German: “Ich weiß, daß die Tragödie mehr Gewalt hat, den Menschen, so wie er ist, abgesondert von seinen politischen Hüllen zu betrachten: allein die Comödie kann sich mehr Freiheit nehmen, die man ihr gerne zugibt, wenn sie nicht über die Hüllen lacht, sondern über den, der unter ihnen steckt.” Herder, *Werke*, 1:347.

33. Wilhelm Friedrich August Mackensen, *Untersuchung über den deutschen Nationalcharakter in Beziehung auf die Frage: Warum gibt es kein deutsches Nationaltheater?* (Wolfenbüttel: Heinrich Georg Albrecht, 1794), 2.

bound groups in order to show that cultural difference is not absolute. It depends instead on the sort of similarities at issue. If the goal is to establish differences among municipalities, the sorts of similarities that appear salient will not be the same as the similarities that would appear in contrast to diverse provincial areas or entire nations. The scale of comparison is decisive.

One feature of the translation I have just presented might very well rankle speakers of English and German. "Custom" is not a standard translation of the word *Sitte*. Notoriously resistant to translation and often simply left as a calque, the concept of *Sitte* stands somewhere between a convention and a moral, inflected with more value than the former, but lacking in the absoluteness of the latter. In the mid-eighteenth century, it is often used as the equivalent of the French concept *moeurs*, an idiom that presents English translation with the very same difficulty. In the above passage, as in many of the texts at issue in this chapter, the plural *Sitten* is the salient usage, especially when accompanied by a national modifier (*deutsche Sitten*, *französische Sitten*, and so on). In this construction, the term refers to an array of (usually uncoded) behavioral conventions and manners that are held in high esteem, are imbued with a belief in their rightness, and yet differ from culture to culture. Given the generality of this definition, as well as an ineluctable imprecision in any English translation of the concept, the term *custom* provides a more than adequate fit. It is important to note, however, that there is a normative dimension to the references to *deutsche Sitten*, German customs. The phrase does not refer to all the German customs, irrespective of socioeconomic considerations. It instead implies the interactive patterns evident in day-to-day life that are especially well embodied by a select slice of society.³⁴

34. I have the strong impression that in the latter half of the eighteenth century the concept *Sitte* functions differently than the cognate participial forms *gesittet* and the abstract noun *Sittlichkeit*. These two terms were often used, for instance, as translations of the English concept of morality, whereas *Sitte* allows for comparison among moral groups. Particularly instructive is the widely read and cited translation of Henry Home's 1751 *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion*, which appeared in German as Heinrich Home, *Versuche über die*

What do these challenges to translating the concept of *Sitte* tell us about German comic theater? If we return to the sentences quoted above, we notice that the author claims that the comparison among nations allows the Germans to appear unified. This is not just straightforward, but plausible. It would, in fact, be both if not for the fact that over the following pages the argument repeatedly calls attention to the forces that have inhibited the formation of a genuine German national character and set of customs. Toward the end of his opening gambit and before moving into an in-depth discussion of the theater, Mackensen castigates his compatriots with the words “We seek to inject ourselves with foreign customs without asking if they will be able to grow on our trunk.”³⁵ The distinction between a native and a foreign array of conventions amounts to the distinction between a stunted and a fecund growth. The Germans have failed to end up on the right side of this divide, thereby inhibiting the development of a unified character as well as a genuinely German theater. Mackensen returns to imitation—in particular, imitation of customs—as the crucial contribution of the stage to a consolidated nation. Much like the other texts we have been considering, Mackensen does not advocate a top-down imposition of legal or political infrastructure to foster unity, but instead recommends the stage as a bottom-up mechanism to create communal belonging. As a public forum, the theater has the capacity to alter, in Mackensen’s turbid formulation, “the occult connections among ideas, according to which it [the nation] represents the

ersten Gründe der Sittlichkeit und der natürlichen Religion, trans. Christian Günther Rautenberg (Braunschweig: Johann Christoph Meyer, 1768). In the translation of Home’s text, as in general, *Sittlichkeit* is used as the equivalent for the general concept of morality, and the terms *moralisch* and *Moral* describe the individual words or deeds. It is also important to note that *gesittet/ungesittet* also functions as a way of drawing hierarchical social distinctions—in order to claim that a privileged social group fully embodies the relevant *Sitten*, while a derided group is identified as *ungesittet*. *Deutsche Sitten*, we might say in a German idiom, are embodied in *die vornehmen Stände*. The customs worth having are those realized among the noble classes. In this respect, the German *Sitte* functions much like the French *moeurs*.

35. Mackensen, *Untersuchung über den deutschen Nationalcharakter*, 16. See also Möser, *Ueber die deutsche Sprache und Litteratur*, 15–16.

world and its objects; the idiosyncratic vantage points, which particularly determine its way of acting (*Handlungsweise*).³⁶ Taken together, the Germans do not yet have an “idiosyncratic way of acting” because they have shown, over the course of their history, such “receptiveness to foreign customs.”³⁷ Indeed, one of the chief tasks of the stage is to disseminate authentically German customs, thereby communicating to the nation its own exceptionality and uniqueness.³⁸

Now it is possible to grasp the unique role of comic theater in the nation-building project of the latter half of the eighteenth century. The fundamental claim, propounded by a number of different writers, is that laughter feeds off of—but can also help spread—culture-specific customs. In this respect, though pathos-laden plays can depict “noble, sublime, and heroic” deeds, tragic figures are “not nearly as well suited” as those from comedy for the “depiction of a national ethical life” (*Schilderung der National-Sitten*). Theater where spectators go to laugh, meanwhile, depends on “middling people and the types of characters whose customs correspond to their spectators.”³⁹ According to this line of thought, the mode of exemplarity that is the greatest strength of the tragic genre is also its greatest weakness. By depicting towering figures of human excellence—often from a bygone heroic age or from rarified social strata—tragedy introduces models that spectators cannot, by and large, identify with. To borrow Herder’s terminology, it abstracts from the trappings of lived experience and addresses the human being in a fashion transcendent of time and space. The comic,

36. Mackensen, *Untersuchung über den deutschen Nationalcharakter*, 4.

37. *Ibid.*, 5–6.

38. See in particular the remarks in Mackensen, *Untersuchung über den deutschen Nationalcharakter*, 7.

39. Jean Lois Castilhon, *Betrachtungen über die physicalischen und moralischen Ursachen der Verschiedenheit des Genie, der Sitten und Regierungsformen der Nationen* (Leipzig: Adam Heinrich Hollens Wittwe, 1770), 430. This text is an anonymous and very loose translation of the 1770 edition of Castilhon’s *Considerations sur les causes physiques et morales de la diversité du genie, des moeurs, et du gouvernement des nations*, a text that plagiarizes François-Ignace d’Espiard de la Borde’s 1752 *L’esprit des nations*. See Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France*, 140–141.

meanwhile, has as its element familiar speech and relatable deeds. A basic tenet organizing the literary genres, according to the historian and theorist of the comic Karl Friedrich Flögel (1729–1788), is that “man sees himself in comedy and satire as in a mirror.”⁴⁰ Accordingly, to write a history of the comic is to write a history of the “customs of the time and their alteration.”⁴¹ Unlike the timeless and placeless picture of human virtue often provided in tragedy, comic theater is closely bound together with the “idiosyncratic character of a nation and the specific characteristics of the age” or, in another formulation that shows the equivalence of the terms, with “the idiosyncratic customs and specific way of thinking of a nation.”⁴² As Flögel puts it in a final formulation, “As one can recognize a type of metal by the tone it makes, so too one can recognize the customs and way of thinking of a man by the jokes he makes.”⁴³

At the outset of this chapter, I claimed that endogenous improvement required the conspiracy of both local theatrical forms and a unique, surrounding culture. And, as we have just seen, comic practices are particularly revealing of a culture’s defining customs. But the conclusion is not, and could not have been, that German comic theater could now simply begin portraying distinctively German customs, nor was there a storehouse of venerated forms to draw on. Autochthonous theatrical conventions appeared scarce to so many critics and playwrights because German writers had, at least since the early Enlightenment reforms, “despised indigenous fruits and instead preferred to reap Italian and French ones of middling quality” and consequently ignored the possibility of a “refinement of indigenous products.”⁴⁴ In a kindred formulation, “For a long time now, we have seemed highly uninteresting to ourselves.”⁴⁵ The

40. Carl Friedrich Flögel, *Geschichte der komischen Literatur* (Liegnitz/Leipzig: David Sieger, 1784), 1:28.

41. *Ibid.*, 1:253.

42. *Ibid.*, 1:130 and 134.

43. *Ibid.*, 1:219.

44. Möser, *Ueber die deutsche Sprache und Litteratur*, 16–17.

45. Helfrich Peter Sturz, “Julie, ein Trauerspiel in fünf Aufzügen mit einem Brief über das deutsche Theater an die Freude und Beschützer desselben in Hamburg,” in *Schriften* (Munich: Johann Baptist Strohl, 1785), 2:119–222, here 124. The tragedy with attached letter was originally published in 1767.

project of improving the stage has thus far produced only “boring or artificial” results “spun of French silk.”⁴⁶ A German theater worthy of the name would be one emancipated of the servile dependence on external forms—one that appropriates already existing local conventions and works step-by-step to improve them. The domain of the comic would seem the natural candidate for such endogenous improvement, with its particularly close relationship to local customs. But the turn to German culture was imperiled by the internal diversity of the German peoples and lands. Lessing famously remarked upon the failure of a national theater in Hamburg that it was caused not by a diversity of “political constitution,” but instead by a lack of coherence in “the character of customs” (*dem sittlichen Character*).⁴⁷ Customs could not form the foundation of an idiosyncratically German comic theater so long as authors had to ask, as another observer of the Hamburg enterprise put it, “Which customs shall we imitate? The customs of a single province?”⁴⁸ There was a broad-based sense that the Germans lacked a preestablished national unity—a coherence of customs—that a potentially improved comic theater could even draw on. The project of using the comic as a medium to reflect or even help fabricate national unity came to seem, in light of the internal diversity of German life, a hopeless dead-end.

Faced with this dilemma, an alternative had to be found. Given the proximity of the comic to local customs, the question became whether it was possible to use this theatrical form as an instrument for furnishing culture with unity. By way of imitation, the comic stage could potentially provide the vehicle for bringing forth a unified set of specifically German customs. The problem was identifying a theatrical form that cut across the internal heterogeneity of the German people and that could be readily appropriated and improved upon. Herder, among others, proposed that the faint

46. Sturz, “Julie, ein Trauerspiel in fünf Aufzügen,” 125–126.

47. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Jürgen Stenzel (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 6:684.

48. Sturz, “Julie, ein Trauerspiel in fünf Aufzügen,” 124–125. In the next sentence of his letter, written in 1767, Sturz goes on to say that all the clamoring about national spirit in recent treatises had done nothing to supply the nation with one.

hints of an unrealized national distinctness could be found in what he called “coarse humor” and “base laughter.”⁴⁹ “A theater in its infancy must go through these paths [because] every nation in the world, which loves comedies according to their own nature, portrays this form of the comic—according to their own nature.”⁵⁰ Strikingly, he further points to a particular preliterate resource, namely, the “old-German Hans-Wurst,” as a touchstone for a stage culture yet to be invented. In his view, those pursuing the improvement of the German stage needed to realize that this ignoble figure provided a form that could become the motor for the dissemination of a national culture. In his view, no theatrical form but the comic could relate with the same vividness the “life and lived experience” of the people. Since the internal coherence of this German life had been compromised by its dependency on other cultures, the fool constituted a particularly promising mechanism for shaping the nation. As Herder remarks, crystallizing a widespread sentiment, if authors would only set about refining this theatrical form, they will “give birth slowly, with difficulty, but then ultimately,” to a distinctively German form of literary theater.⁵¹

49. See Herder, *Werke*, 1:336 and 346. See also Sturz, “Julie, ein Trauerspiel in fünf Aufzügen,” 2:125 and the suggestive remarks in Möser, *Ueber die deutsche Sprache und Litteratur*, 39–40.

50. The passage in the original: “Jede Nation in der Welt, die Comödien nach ihrer Art liebt, zeichnet dies Lächerliche—nach ihrer Art.” Herder, *Werke*, 1:346–347.

51. Herder, *Werke*, 1:348.