INTRODUCTION

RAMPANT FLACCIDITY
OR NOTIONAL CULTURE

Look on my works ye mighty and despair...
—Percy Bysshe Shelley (1818)

Postmodernism makes others of us all. Shelley’s cautionary sonnet sounds the knell for his century’s triumphalist constructions of “culture” and “nation.” Though the twenty-first century might confidently assert its emergence from the primordial ooze of essentialism, historicism, and positivism, nonetheless, our times have stuck to the ancient fondness for classification. A recent essay discussing Derrida and Rosenzweig amplifies some of the contemporary concerns with the nomenclature of genre, period, and form:

Rosenzweig and Derrida seek to articulate and engage in a “history in an uncommon sense” as something else
besides the alternatives of factuality or relativism (of teleology or a history of the idea of history), Hollander performs “history,” for example, as a singularity that at times erupts into these writers’ discourse(s), she is able to question the view that Rosenzweig’s reading of Hermann Cohen and Derrida’s reading of Edmund Husserl adopted the conventional static periodization (and accompanying valuation) ascribed to their predecessors: the Kantian Cohen followed by and distinguished from the religious, the “static phenomenologist” Husserl followed by and distinguished from the “genetic” or “historical” (but not historicist).2

While some may shy from “a reading of a reading of a reading”—this is one of the norms of postmodernist method, whereby everything old is old again. This is especially pertinent to theatre, particularly if one goes one better than Richard Schechner’s notion of performance as “the rearrangement of old behavior in new settings.”3 The term notional culture is offered to counter the certainty of national culture. In our day, “hard” definitions go limp and the preference contemporary scholars have for the plural form of nationality teases us into the thought of “grand theory” culture. Thus, it becomes a matter of planes of existence rather than places of existence. The following chapters engage with the contemporary critique of culture, nation, and their location.

One can hardly comment on “cultural location” without drawing on the work of Homi Bhabha. Recall Bhabha’s comments on V. S. Naipaul, who remains one of the most controversial “Englishmen” alive.4 Bhabha draws attention to Sir Vidia as a writer who makes almost everyone uncomfortable, mostly because he refuses to be a “third world” writer. He is Trinidadian by birth, Indian by heritage, and British by choice. Of course, in a sense, Naipaul is not “British,” and Bhabha’s critique is amplified by
Bhabha’s own “location” of identity via the Persian minority of Mumbai.\(^5\) Bhabha’s “locating” culture begins with his assertion: “It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond.”\(^6\) And he emphasizes the way we define our “presence” by noting the prevalence of the prefix “post” as it is applied to “modernism,” “feminism,” “colonialism,” and so on. To Bhabha, “the beyond” is a new horizon. We may recall de Certeau’s argument at the opening of “Histoire et psychanalyse” and consider Sir Vidia’s “identity” as a breviary of how to “cannibalize history.” Indeed, it is as though Bhabha forcefully reads between the lines of Naipaul’s public pronouncements to inscribe a de Certeauvian “historiography” over his old self.\(^7\) What is more, if we juxtapose Naipaul’s recent use of both the persona and oeuvre of W. Somerset Maugham in his novel *Half a Life*, with Naipaul’s own parallels with the author/other (one of the earliest significant recognitions Naipaul received was the Somerset Maugham Award in 1961), we find Naipaul the richer for it. Maugham’s homosexuality and self-imposed exile superficially complicate what is an otherwise vigorously conventional cynicism. Nonetheless, Maugham’s firmly stated opinion about the rising generation of the 1950s (“they are scum”) presages Naipaul’s caustic assessment of contemporary culture. Maugham was, of course, only dismissing the title character of *Lucky Jim* and those of his ilk, but his remark was taken as a condemnation of the entire younger generation—though Kingsley Amis won the Maugham prize, too. Finally, if we want to test the ironic, adjacent placement of Naipaul and Maugham, we should recall Clifford Geertz’s construction of the moment of comprehension of another culture as akin to getting a joke.\(^8\) The “joke,” here, is the perception of Sir Vidia as self-anointed conservator of all the tradition invoked by Maugham’s “Companion of Honour” motto: “in action faithful and in honour clear.” (Maugham chafed at this “honour.” He saw it as almost an insult.
as he had desperately wanted a knighthood.) The crown that decorates the Companion of Honour motto punctuates its imperialist connotations. This is a British subject’s prerogative—the geopolitical context of the Companion of Honour is clear, but elsewhere one must ask what does “British” mean? No doubt Sir Vidia could readily tell us—and that is another reason he is such a cultural irritant. Thus, we can see that attempting to frame the discussion of identity and character is fraught with connotational peril. Leaving aside this consideration of the literary persona, let us turn directly to the performing body of work. In their way performers, playwrights, theatre critics, and the material culture of performance offer us another way of departing from “static” phenomenology and approaching history in Derrida’s “uncommon sense.”

The performing body of work can be viewed through the prism of material culture and the idea of performance, both of which are things theatricality and performance accrue. In this context, the high-relief commemorative medal of a performer that can be grasped and even caressed is a figure of performance, as is the printed review of a performance that may be held between the fingers and drooled over or spat upon. The expansive idea of the performing body of work, while shying from postmodern epistemic insouciance, nevertheless must recognize that it is the product of the early twenty-first century and eagerly obsolesces the certainty of nineteenth-century concepts such as Coleridge’s “fancy and imagination” and the critical taxonomies they engendered. Conversely, recent, vehement antinomianism would make “genus envy” little more than the “toy of thought” that Derrideans delight in, but the system of nomenclature derived from the eighteenth-century sage Carolus Linnaeus abides (hence “genus”). Linnaeus was one of the wonders of his age, diverse giants such as Goethe and Rousseau hailed
him as extraordinarily influential (Goethe’s disagreements with Linnaeus’ ideas about the morphology of plants aside). Thus, it is no surprise that we “order” the memorabilia of performance in particular ways. A postmodern historian no longer insists on the primacy of “factual” evidence, but when he or she develops an argument there will be an intellectual close-order drill of abstractions. And consider the fascination that minutiae hold for certain new historicists, or the necessity of specifying exactly which type of photograph is being used in a discussion of theatrical iconography. Recently, Thomas Postlewait has offered a dazzling array of twenty-two “current designations,” presented through the intellectual good offices of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*. Yet, the “wonder” Foucault expresses at the bizarre categorical chart of Borges seems an odd instigation for historical investigation, and Postlewait rather daringly notes the routine arrogation of primacy Foucault’s “ruptures” obtain. Foucault was after all a self-described genealogist.

Even if the Phrygian cap of Foucauldian power-seeking once seemed fitted for all aspects of performance, yet for old-fashioned theatre theorists Linnaeus’ universal system has literary analogues such as Freytag’s famous pyramid, George Pierce Baker’s taxonomy of genre, or Polti’s thirty-six dramatic situations. A refreshingly unabashed taxonomy occurs in a recent essay by one of the leading historians of national theatre and its culture, Stephen Wilmer. Wilmer asserts four categories: “geography, language, ethnicity and aesthetics.” While postmodernist reflection insists on a guillotining of such confidently normative approaches, nevertheless, if, as the poststructuralist loves to insist, the rejection of theory is itself a theory, is not then the rejection of category itself a category? The, if I may, anti-categorical imperative of postmodernism is seemingly refuted by contemporary writers such as Robert Schanke and Kim Marra who caution
that queer artists must be outed, as well as by their confrères who take a similar tack with characters in plays. For instance, in Noël Coward’s case, Private Lives is naught but a queer text in which heterosexual coupling is irrelevant and all that matters is the alleged gay encoding that Coward enacts (especially given that he performed in both Private Lives and private life). The essentialist nature of such arguments may be reduced to toutes jouir; toutes comprendre. Coward was writing for persons, not glands. He defined star power as directly correlated to the number of people who want to go to bed with any given star, and both the characters in his plays and the character he created for himself to perform in public were omnisexual.

Coward’s famous creation of his “self” would not seem to be a part of material culture, but a cigarette holder and a dressing gown are things often exhibited in glass cases to demonstrate what and who Coward was, and what he meant to his own generation who accounted thus aspired to Coward’s public behavior. Whereas he resolutely disguised his private life, unlike his childhood costar Michaél Mac Liammóir, nevertheless, both refused to take part in anything smacking of gay liberation or “consciousness.” After all, Coward put a premium on the hetero/homosexual allure that he felt was endemic to his appeal. Even in his final years he dismissed any suggestion that he come out, disdaining the autobiographical revelations of a homosexual drama critic as having no possible resonance with his own magnetism, “the British public at large would not care if Cuthbert Worsley had slept with mice.” When prevailed upon to admit that A Song at Twilight had as much to do with himself as with Somerset Maugham, he began using a line that he would employ with variations for the rest of his life, “There are still a few old ladies in Worthing who don’t know.”16
In the twenty-first century, men such as Coward and Mac Liammóir seem surreal. Their careers are in illuminating contrast to the grim reality of the last stage of Alexander Moissi’s career and indeed with his posthumous career as “Aleksandër Moisiu.” The Albanian-born Moissi had been a leading performer of the German-speaking theatre, yet his career vanished with the rise of Hitler. Moissi is a representative “man without a country”; his talent was stilled because the only thing “German” about him was language. The New Order rejected him. Moissi was unable to locate his culture adequately. Conversely, Coward, who followed Churchill’s orders to sing “Mad Dogs and Englishmen” wherever the guns were blazing, was emblematically English—even after he became a tax exile. And there is Mac Liammóir’s exhaustive, if ultimately desperate, attempt to make Irish the language of Ireland’s expression of its own culture. Coward and Mac Liammóir, though, clearly situate themselves “safely” within their chosen realms. Despite Coward’s concluding decades in Switzerland and Jamaica—where he was buried—his knighthood and memorial tablet in Westminster Abbey, upon which the Queen Mother herself placed a floral tribute, would no doubt be regarded by The Master as his greatest rewards. Mac Liammóir was honored in death with a state funeral. Moissi died in flight, having turned down an offer of assistance from his putative “native land,” Albania.

Nevertheless, Moissi, Coward, and Mac Liammóir had something that could be used by a national culture. They reveal something about how the theatrical persona can be part of the culture of a nation, how the things that the performer does can be taken as manifestations of that culture. Considering performers as disparate in their queerness as Michaël Mac Liammóir and Noël Coward is instructive for texturing identity. So, too, are the variety of guises used by the drama critic John Mason Brown.
Indeed, drama critics are the great problematic for the cultural historian reviewing theatrical history. What is one to make of drama criticism, as it is held in near total contempt, save for a few of its practitioners? Brown’s complex career amplifies this discourse.

Earlier material culture entered into this discussion. And one notes the (unfortunate) recurring use of the term *materiality* in the discourse of national identity and the performer. Thus, one finds pertinent a consideration of nineteenth-century portrait medals of performers. Contrast the essentially anonymous nature of the performed commemoration today; I refer to the plethora, if not the ubiquity, of the “awards show.” The commemoration here is virtually anonymous, though, because the award itself is generic. Save, I would argue, for the only truly iconic award: the Oscar, designed by Cedric Gibbons in 1928.17 (Yet, even this “icon” is faceless.) The portrait medal, by contrast, is a recapitulation in metal of the essence of the public persona of the performer and, by extension, what the culture of the nation wishes to celebrate officially. This is particularly relevant in late Imperial Austria. The striking of a medal was a signal event in the establishment of a performer’s respectability and reputation. On a mass scale, the series of photographs, widely disseminated on postcards, of Burgtheater actors taking their ease in a book-lined study filled a similar function.

One of the most important actors to emerge from late Imperial Austria is Alexander Moissi who embodies the inherent contradictions and anomalies of national identity and the modern artist. Moissi was one of the great international stars of the early twentieth century, one of the last actors who was able to attract crowds who could not understand the language he spoke. Nonetheless, his international reputation did him no good after the *Anschluss*; the suspicion that he was Jewish or the fact that as an ethnic Albanian Hitler’s Reich considered him one of the
“lower orders” forced him to flee. In an outlandish finale to his career, he chose to seek Mussolini’s protection and died en route in Switzerland. Moissi’s posthumous hero-status as a major cultural icon of Albania is equally bizarre given that he made no attempt whatsoever to forge any connection to his homeland during his life. Indeed, even if he had sought to do so, it would have been virtually impossible for him to have pursued a career as either a classical or popular actor in Albania. So, he became an Albanian star long after the fact. While he lived, he was often described as “Mediterranean,” though he performed in German-language theatres. A member of Max Reinhardt’s company, he played Hamlet, Oedipus, and created the title role in Hofmannsthal’s adaptation of *Jedermann*, the famous morality play, in the epochal Salzburg production.

Turning to a playwright, Eugene O’Neill (1888–1953) should be a much more troubling figure than he is. Ironically, O’Neill’s breadth has been reduced to variations on why he is “America’s greatest playwright.” There is little discussion about his work, save in the context of his life. As far as production debate, rigid historicizing limits its terms to the context of the original productions. The reductiveness is partially the fault of O’Neillians who have made O’Neill’s life a combination treasure map and quadratic equation providing the “solution” to his plays. A leading O’Neill scholar even became a licensed psychologist as a way of legitimizing his inquiries into the playwright’s life and works. The study of O’Neill as informed by performance has been hobbled by obeisance to the memory of the great productions of the past. Moving away from the surface of O’Neill’s life and career would seem a given, but this has happened only recently and infrequently. Eugene O’Neill was put on a postage stamp, albeit a rarely used, one-dollar stamp. This stamp gained frightful notoriety when it was identified as the Unabomber’s stamp
of choice, thus affixing a violent underside to O’Neill’s iconic status as “America’s greatest playwright.”

The concept of a national character remains distressingly relevant today. It is an aspect of nineteenth-century romanticism growing out of Enlightenment conceptions of the individual and nationhood. Considering the United States, a key component of the nineteenth-century American theatre and arguably its most important feature as an historical subfield, is the representation of “Americanness” as we find it on stage. The nineteenth-century American jingoist was no less self-conscious about his or her national identity than today’s refuge-seeking patriotic scoundrel. Therefore, it is difficult for us to accept that a great part of the significant “representations” of Americans on the stage were those based on broadly conceived and executed stereotypes. Furthermore, the nineteenth century assumed differences in ethnicity or nationality were logical and even “scientific.” Indeed, in what was perhaps the last gasp of eighteenth-century aesthetics, the identification of “national” culture became a crucial identification point in the defining mechanism of what constitutes a “people,” *Volk or narod*.

During the years of the European migration to the North American continent, philosophers of culture came to define popular or folk art in a way that allows us to use the United States as an example or proof as much as it makes a valid channel for our inquiries. From Montaigne’s 1595 essay “On Cannibals” (translated into English by John Florio in 1603), springs a source for the idea of the “noble savage.” One aspect of the savage’s nobility that Montaigne stresses is *poésie populaire*. While we understand that *populaire* in this context is not “popular” as it is used in English, in an era of so-called viral marketing, can we still take its meaning as “from the people”? When Madison Avenue types cruise the “‘hood” zealously seeking insight into the next
trend that they can sell to suburban mall rats, and even pay stylistic agents provocateurs to aid them in this quest, can anyone maintain a belief in spontaneous bourgeois popular culture? Nor can even proletarian culture be “spontaneous” in the globalized “pop” marketplace where the marchand provocateur’s all too visible hand guides taste and sales. The urban “gangsta” has become a commercialized analogue of Atala and Winnetou.19

If one speaks “of the people,” or even “folk,” one is presumably speaking of the pre-postmodern, for even “folk” has connotations that cloud Montaigne’s usage for us. Suffice to say that he is discussing informal literary types—the roots of ballad or song. For Montaigne, poésie populaire represents songs of life derived from wholly natural, internal inspiration, and from an idyllic, communal way of life. Montaigne’s notions flourish through the twentieth century, appropriated by various totalitarian regimes of the left and right as a weapon against “bourgeois decadence.” Thus, we find Nazis and Communists latching on to conceived folk traditions and exalting them by way of “ministries of culture.” They and others, of course, were experts at fabricating “instant” cultures.20 We shall see that even a last grasp at absolute monarchism in Europe, King Zog’s Albania, attempted this sort of thing. The mention of monarchism may allow us an interlude of discursive intellectual nostalgia.

This ideal of national character was elaborated on by the philosopher usually identified as the first modern, “scientific” historian, Giambattista Vico. In 1725 he picked up on this notion; note, though, that it is not known whether he read Montaigne, but the resonances are there. Vico draws on this notion of nationality as the premise for his theory of history. All humanity passes through three stages of thought, so Vico argues, moving from primitive folk-wisdom to more highly developed attitudes of
social awareness and knowledge. Vico identifies the three stages as the intuitive, the metaphysical, and the scientific—indeed, a key norm of the categorical. No society should neglect one aspect in favor of the other as it studies its past. The primitive (intuitive) must always be regarded as the base. The culture should learn from its origins and refresh itself in appreciation of and respect for the old ways. In the twentieth century the American critic Edmund Wilson stresses Vico’s importance as a philosopher of history to better trace the development of Marxism. Marxism is of course a “scientific” approach to the study of human institutions, and is as representative of the nineteenth century, as Linnaeus’ taxonomy is of the eighteenth century.

Wilson’s To the Finland Station begins with a discussion of Vico’s La Scienza Nuova, which was first published in 1725. (Vico’s subtitle is significant: Principles of a New Science Dealing With the Nature of Nations, Through Which Are Shown Also New Principles of The Natural Law of Peoples.) Vico draws directly upon Francis Bacon’s study of the plant and animal kingdoms. He was also inspired by Grotius, who devised a proposal for the study of the history of philosophy and theology as evidenced by actions and language. Grotius asked that we consider what impact—if any—philosophy had made on human history.

Vico’s work was unappreciated in his own time, and would be neglected for nearly a century. Thus, Vico’s influence can be better traced from the French historian Michelet’s rediscovery of him in 1820. It may have taken a century for Vico to become widely known, but the weight of Vico’s impact is immeasurable. Before him history had been solely that of biographies of “great men,” the detailing of immense events, or the transcription of the earthly record of Divine Providence. Vico posits that societies are growing, organic entities. He traces the line of thought which argues that things are determined by past events and present circumstances.
Another cultural philosopher we must consider is Rousseau. Montaigne’s conception of *poésie populaire* is an obvious influence on the Rousseau of the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* of 1750 and the “Lettre à d’Alembert” of 1758. The influence of Rousseau upon the Enlightenment cannot be overstressed. What is more, many political leaders of the American Revolution saw themselves as Rousseauvians and the creation of the United States of America as the choicest fruit of the Enlightenment. The image, then, of what constitutes an American must be grounded in the dearly beloved paradox: the American is a new creature, an Adam or Eve of a new, wholly “Enlightened” realm. The American exists in a sphere free from and of Europe, but this notion itself is wholly an “Old World” construction and the entire premise of the United States of America—if one considers it on the idealized level—is part and parcel of Europe and its institutions. Nonetheless, it remains to be said that the idea—not to mention the creation—of the United States is the single greatest proof of the influence and power of the Enlightenment. In spite of this, however, the overwhelming humanistic concern that originality and newness are paramount allows the United States to infect itself with amnesia at will.

Rousseau is the most influential disseminator of the belief that civilization cuts humanity off from a central truth of existence, that by separating ourselves from “nature” we become unnatural and ultimately depraved. Only through a return to “nature” can there be hope. The arts are perhaps the most obvious cause of human decay; no better evidence can be found than in the contemporary forms that please the sensibilities of the allegedly civilized citizen. Rousseau demonstrated his beliefs via theatrical, literary, and musical works that glorified the pristine grandeur of the simple life led by the people of the countryside, through what are in essence folk characters. Virgil’s *Georgics* and the
Renaissance’s re-creation of “pastoral” aside, Rousseau represents the idealization, through a sustained, philosophical system, of the “natural” human being. We regard it as something of a great leap to extend this metaphor of the natural individual to the natural nation, but such was the contemporary ideal. The United States comes to be regarded as the Enlightenment model. It becomes all the more convenient when the chronology of American identity coincides with the United States’ coming into existence as the Enlightenment gives way to Romanticism. This trope of analogues is, of course, a representative positivist “given.”

For the past three decades, though, the insufficiency of this conception of “nature” has been put in the balance with the even more fretted-over definition of “culture.” If we look briefly at the Aufklärung for philosophical evidence regarding the “natural culture” of a nation-state, we must turn to Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). Herder is a Sturm und Drang poet as well as a philosopher, and he works up his personal tastes into a cogent and highly influential vision of culture. What is more, he insisted that each country and even each period of history produced a unique flowering of culture. He rejected utterly the notion that Shakespeare is another Sophocles or that Milton is another Homer. In the 1840s, Ralph Waldo Emerson would popularize this idea in the United States. From Herder’s *Fragmente* (1767) through *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1791), he propounds his theory of Volkskultur. Emerson posits that it is the arts of the people that are the basis for the fine arts in “form, spirit, and expression.” The forms springing from the people were the true basis for higher culture, even if the creators of high art were unaware of the “lower” forms. Thus, we have an almost intuitive notion of Volksstümlich (in Herder’s sense of culture that is “of the people”). Once again the
connotations of the English word “popular” constrain its use. Herder’s evolutionary conception of the power of folk art is a fundamental idea of this era, one that informs art appreciation and aesthetics into the twentieth century. Herder carries his ideas about the development of art into the study of history and here his ideas are equally stimulating and influential. History must reflect the stages through which cultures have passed. The variety of these layers should be shown in full rather than merely allowing the illumination of the bright spots of history and culture to enlighten us. We ought to envision the entire spectrum of cultural experience. If one could only annul the dire consequences of the mystical nationalism that Herder inspires, cultural studies would not seem such a late-twentieth-century phenomenon. Now for the purposes of our inquiry, Herder’s contention that each people is individual, develops its own particular culture, and asserts itself through national forms, is most important. Yet, he was not without his opponents. Late in the nineteenth century, Ernest Renan countered that “nation” should not be linked with “people,” that the patrie is not based on “race” but on ideas. Renan asserted that if irrational ethnicity prevailed over his concept of rational nationality, “it would destroy European civilization.”23 (Renan’s ideas have gained new currency through the work of Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha, among others.) Renan used the Roman Empire, Switzerland, and the United States as examples of nations without “blood” or even language to bind them together.

Interestingly, it is just after the so-called “national era” that Herder’s “democratic” conception of culture entered the forum of American debate. The American transcendentalists, led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and later Walt Whitman all by himself, were to make much of the idea of the uniqueness of national culture. Nevertheless, we see the presentation of the American identity on the stage long before this. The reality of variegated
conceptions of national character came up in comic and serious characters, most notably in the first successful American play, Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* (1787). Tyler’s protagonist, Jonathan, becomes “Brother Jonathan,” the graphic emblem of the United States that emerged before the Uncle Sam figure. Jonathan is the first successful stage Yankee and the first renowned American stage character. The stage was, from the Revolutionary era on, the bellwether of American identity.

Conventional thought would dispute this, citing patriotic opposition to the stage, which lingered through the Federal era. Said antipathy was based on the supposition that the theatre was so un-American that it was alien—and equally important—that it was undemocratic. It was presumed that most actors were English, that most plays were of British origin, or that their themes were aristocratic. Yet, in such dramatic incarnations as Tyler’s Jonathan, Mowatt’s Adam Trueman, and the transatlantic theatrical sensations of “Yankee” Hill and Chanfrau’s “Mose,” eighteenth- and nineteenth-century audiences would applaud both American types and performers as national heroes.

Returning to cultural location, how can there be outposts of cultural certitude in our time? Is the Piccolo Teatro Italy’s national theatre? Or is it one of the given theatres of the European Union? In North America, what ought one make of Canada’s de facto national theatre, The Stratford Shakespeare Festival, which has been a cultural muddle almost from its first season? Perhaps we know what a national theatre is when we see it, and the audience members recognize it while they are there, and can even confidently refer to it, but when pressed to address its function beyond that label, one discovers no adamant definers. Given these problems, I would submit that the National Theatre of “N” is best thought of only as a place, that is, as a playhouse per se. Albeit it is a privileged one, chiefly because it is subsidized by
a government agency or governing board, but any hegemonic tentacles are attenuated in our time. Thus, we may regard the national theatre as a place where important theatrical things happen. It is not a “location of culture” in itself, but a place where the performance of culture may take place. Likewise, the so-called “national playwright” is not a representative citizen-artist, but rather an individual who happens to somehow be identified as a national playwright.

The national theatre in the twenty-first century is a place to visit, perhaps be proud of, certainly representing a standard, but surely not the standard. Consider the existence of branches of a national theatre that are provincial playhouses with state funding. The Czech example is illustrative. No one, even the most zealous Moravian separatist, would think for a moment that a reference to the Národní divadlo meant a theatre in Ostrava, Brno, or Olomouc. When performers from the “national theatre” appear in a film or television episode, the ultimate criterion of excellence is invariably that they perform at the Národní divadlo in Prague. The viewer may never have seen the actor in Prague, but the fact that he or she performs at the Národní divadlo trumps even the fact that the performer is from the viewer’s hometown. The difficulty of locating national culture in a playhouse is vexing, dealing with “national” actors, less so.

In 1840 the English historian and philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) delivered his lectures “On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History.” These blend mythology of the folk with the metaphysical speculation that the hero can come from any sphere: Odin, Zeus, Mohammed, Napoleon, Dante, Rousseau, and Luther are examples of Carlyle’s “heroes.” He explains: “The hero can be what you will according to the world he was born into.” He responds to the dynamic needs of all persons—their unspoken mystical longings. All heroes recognize the spirit of their time.
Carlyle identifies the hero’s key quality as, “original insight into the primal reality of things.” Because of the hero’s grasp of “the great Fact of existence,” he never lies. “He is heartily in earnest. Each act or pronouncement is ‘a kind of revelation.’” 24 To Carlyle, “hero worship is the one fixed point in modern revolutionary history, otherwise it is as if [it were] bottomless and shoreless.” Hero worship is evidenced through loyalty to the hero—thus it resembles religious faith.25

Carlyle, in spite of the nod to revolutionary rhetoric, is more concerned with cultural commentary than political analysis. One should view his notion as an attempt to replace God with a faith in human beings and their society. Carlyle’s ideas are readily apparent as both instigator and reflector of social consciousness in the nineteenth century. Certainly the Wagnerian-Nietzschean notions so important to the theatre of the latter part of the century have some part of their genesis in this type of faith. It is also not difficult to recognize the sociological and historical relevance of these ideas to American and European theatre of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Shelley’s “Ozymandias” reveals, the cultural edifice of nationality is built on a foundation of sand. Sifting though those traces is symptomatic of genus envy. Thus, from a variety of perspectives that I hope the ensuing chapters provide, we can see how the consideration of material culture and performance worries the periodization of form and culture itself.