W. B. Yeats, “An Irish National Theatre” (from Explorations)

[The performance of Mr. Synge's Shadow of the Glen started a quarrel with the extreme National party, and the following paragraphs are from letters written in the play's defense. The organ of the party was at the time The United Irishman, but the first serious attack began in The Independent. The United Irishman, however, took up the quarrel, and from that on has attacked almost every play produced at our theatre, and the suspicion it managed to arouse among the political clubs against Mr. Synge especially led a few years later to the organised attempt to drive The Playboy of the Western World from the stage.—1908]

When we were all fighting about the selection of books for the New Irish Library some ten years ago, we had to discuss the question, What is National Poetry? In those days a patriotic young man would have thought but poorly of himself if he did not believe that The Spirit of the Nation was great lyric poetry, and a much finer kind of poetry than Shelley's Ode to the West Wind, or Keats's Ode on a Grecian Urn. When two or three of us denied this, we were told that we had effeminate tastes or that we were putting Ireland in a bad light before her enemies. If one said that The Spirit of the Nation was but salutary rhetoric, England might overhear us and take up the cry. We said it, and who will say that Irish literature has not a greater name in the world to-day than it had ten years ago?

To-day there is another question that we must make up our minds about, and an even more pressing one, What is a National Theatre? A man may write a book of lyrics if he have but a friend or two that will care for them, but he cannot write a good play if there are not audiences to listen to it. If we think that a national play must be as near as possible a page out of The Spirit of the Nation put into dramatic form, and mean to go on thinking it to the end, then we may be sure that this generation will not see the rise in Ireland of a theatre that will reflect the life of Ireland as the Scandinavian theatre reflects the Scandinavian life. The brazen head has an unexpected way of falling to pieces. We have a company of admirable and disinterested players, and the next few months will, in all likelihood, decide whether a great work for this country is to be accomplished. The poetry of Young Ireland, when it was an attempt to change or strengthen opinion, was rhetoric; but it became poetry when patriotism was transformed into a personal emotion by the events of life, as in that lamentation written by Doheny 'on his keeping' among the hills. Literature is always personal, always one man's vision of the world, one man's experience, and it can only be popular when men are ready to welcome the visions of others. A community that is opinion-ridden, even when those opinions are in themselves noble, is likely to put its creative minds into some sort of a prison. If creative minds preoccupy themselves with incidents from the political history of Ireland, so much the better, but we must not enforce them to select those incidents. If, in the sincere working-out of their plot, they alight on a moral that is
obviously and directly serviceable to the National cause, so much the better, but we
must not force that moral upon them. I am a Nationalist, and certain of my intimate
friends have made Irish politics the business of their lives, and this made certain
thoughts habitual with me, and an accident made these thoughts take fire in such a
way that I could give them dramatic expression. I had a very vivid dream one
night, and I made Cathleen ni Houlihan out of this dream. But if some external
necessity had forced me to write nothing but drama with an obviously patriotic
intention, instead of letting my work shape itself under the casual impulses of
dreams and daily thoughts, I would have lost, in a short time, the power to write
movingly upon any theme. I could have aroused opinions; but I could not have
touched the heart, for I would have been busy at the oakum-picking that is not the
less mere journalism for being in dramatic form. Above all, we must not say that
certain incidents which have been a part of literature in all other lands are
forbidden to us. It may be our duty, as it has been the duty of many dramatic
movements, to bring new kinds of subjects into the theatre, but it cannot be our
duty to make the bounds of drama narrower. For instance, we are told that the
English theatre is immoral, because it is preoccupied with the husband, the wife,
and the lover. It is, perhaps, too exclusively preoccupied with that subject, and it is
certain it has not shed any new light upon it for a considerable time, but a subject
that inspired Homer and about half the great literature of the world will, one doubts
not, be a necessity to our National Theatre also. Literature is, to my mind, the great
teaching power of the world, the ultimate creator of all values, and it is this, not
only in the sacred books whose power everybody acknowledges, but by every
movement of imagination in song or story or drama that height of intensity and
sincerity has made literature at all. Literature must take the responsibility of its
power, and keep all its freedom: it must be like the spirit and like the wind that
blows where it listeth; it must claim its right to pierce through every crevice of
human nature, and to describe the relation of the soul and the heart to the facts of
life and of law, and to describe that relation as it is, not as we would have it be; and
in so far as it fails to do this it fails to give us that foundation of understanding and
charity for whose lack our moral sense can be but cruelty. It must be as incapable
of telling a lie as Nature, and it must sometimes say before all the virtues, 'The
greatest of these is charity'. Sometimes the patriot will have to falter and the wife
to desert her home, and neither be followed by divine vengeance or man's
judgment. At other moments it must be content to judge without remorse,
compelled by nothing but its own capricious spirit that has yet its message from the
foundation of the world. Aristophanes held up the people of Athens to ridicule, and
even prouder of that spirit than of themselves, they invited the foreign ambassadors
to the spectacle.

I would sooner our theatre failed through the indifference or hostility of our
audiences than gained an immense popularity by any loss of freedom. I ask nothing
that my masters have not asked for, but I ask all that they were given. I ask no help
that would limit our freedom from either official or patriotic hands, though I am
glad of the help of any who love the arts so dearly that they would not bring them into even honourable captivity. A good Nationalist is, I suppose, one who is ready to give up a great deal that he may preserve to his country whatever part of her possessions he is best fitted to guard, and that theatre where the capricious spirit that bloweth as it listeth has for a moment found a dwelling place, has good right to call itself a National Theatre.