should be Irish, was deceived and satisfied. It is always necessary to affirm and to reaffirm that nationality is in the things that escape analysis. We discover it, as we do the quality of saltiness or sweetness, by the taste, and literature is a cultivation of taste.

III

The Irish novelists of the nineteenth century, who established themselves, like the Young Ireland poets, upon various English writers, without, except at rare moments—Castle Rackrent was, it may be, the most inspired of those moments—attaining to personality, have filled the popular mind with images of character, with forms of construction, with a criticism of life, which are all so many arguments to prove that some play that has arisen out of a fresh vision is unlike every Irish thing. A real or fancied French influence is pointed out at once and objected to, but the English influence which runs through the patriotic reading of the people is not noticed because it is everywhere. I say, with certainty, that The Playboy of the Western World, so rich in observation, so full of the temperament of a unique man, has more of Ireland in its characters, in its method of art, in its conception of morals, than all the novels of Kickham, Michael Banim (I have much respect for his brother John, perhaps because French influence in part annullled the influence of Mrs. Radcliffe, and so helped him to personality); Gerald Griffin, so full of amiable English sentiment; Carleton, in his longer tales, powerful spirit though he was; and, of course, much more in any page of it than in all those romances founded upon Walter Scott which are, or used to be, published in Irish newspapers to make boys and girls into patriots. Here and there, of course, one finds Irish elements. In Lever, for instance, even after one has put aside all that is second-hand, there is a rightful Irish gaiety, but one finds these elements only just in so far as the writers had come to know themselves in the Socratic sense. Of course, too, the tradition itself was not all English, but it is impossible to divide what is new, and therefore Irish, what is very old, and therefore Irish, from all that is foreign, from all that is an accident of imperfect culture, before we have had some revelation of Irish character, pure enough and varied enough to create a standard of comparison. I do not speak carelessly of the Irish novelists, for when I was in London during the first years of my literary life, I read them continually, seeking in them an image of Ireland that I might not forget what I meant to be the foundations of my art, trying always to winnow as I read. I only escaped from many misconceptions when, in 1897, I began an active Irish life, comparing what I saw about me with what I heard of in Galway cottages. Yet for all that, it was from the novelists and poets that I learned in part my symbols of expression. Somebody has said that all sound philosophy is but biography, and what I myself did, getting into an original relation to Irish life, creating in myself a new character, a new pose—in the French sense of the word—the literary mind of Ireland must do as a whole, always understanding that the
result must be no bundle of formulas, not faggots but a fire. We never learn to know ourselves by thought, said Goethe, but by action only; and to a writer creation is action.

iv

A moment comes in every country when its character expresses itself through some group of writers, painters, or musicians, and it is this moment, the moment of Goethe in Germany, of the Elizabethan poets in England, of the Van Eycks in the Low Countries, of Corneille and Racine in France, of Ibsen and Björnson in Scandinavia, which fixes the finer elements of national character for generations. This moment is impossible until public opinion is ready to welcome in the mind of the artist a power, little affected by external things, being self-contained, self-created, self-sufficing, the seed of character. Generally up to that moment literature has tried to express everybody’s thought, history being considered merely as a chronicle of facts, but now, at the instant of revelation, writers think the world is but their palette, and if history amuses them, it is but, as Goethe says, because they would do its personages the honour of naming after them their own thoughts.

In the same spirit they approach their contemporaries when they borrow for their own passions the images of living men, and, at times, external facts will be no more to them than the pewter pot gleaming in the sunlight that started Jacob Boehme into his seven days’ trance.

There are moments, indeed, when they will give you more powerful and exact impressions of the outer world than any other can, but these impressions are always those which they have been the first to receive, and more often than not, to make them the more vivid, they will leave out everything that everybody can see every day. The man of genius may be Signor Mancini if he please, but never Mr. Lafayette.

Just as they use the life of their own times, they use past literature—their own and that of other countries—selecting here and there under what must always seem, until their revelation is understood, an impulse of mere caprice, and the more original, that is to say the more pure, the revelation, the greater the caprice. It was a moment of importance in Scandinavia when a certain pamphlet announced that an historical play could not find its justification in history alone, for it must contain an idea, meaning by an idea thought flowing out of character, as opinions are thought arising out of the necessities of organisation. We grow like others through opinions, but through ideas discover ourselves, for these are only true when images of our own power.

v

In no country has this independence of mind, this audacity I had almost said, been attained without controversy, for the men who affirm it seem the enemies of all other interests. In Ireland, in addition to the external art of our predecessors, full of the misunderstandings created by English influence, there is a preoccupation of a great part of the population with
opinions and a habit of deciding that a man is useful to his country, or otherwise, not by what he is in himself or by what he does in his whole life, but by the opinions he holds on one or two subjects. Balzac, in *Les Comédiens sans le Savoir*, describes a sculptor, a follower of the Socialist Fourier, who has made an allegorical figure of Harmony, and got into his statue the doctrine of his master by giving it six breasts and by putting under its feet an enormous Savoy cabbage. One of his friends promises that when everybody is converted to their doctrine he will be the foremost man of his craft, but another and a wiser says of him that ‘while opinions cannot give talent they inevitably spoil it’, and adds that an artist’s opinion ought to be a faith in works, and that there is no way for him to succeed but by work, ‘while nature gives the sacred fire’. In Paris, according to Balzac, it is ambition that makes artists and writers identify themselves with a cause that gives them the help of politicians, of journalists, or of society, as the case may be, but in Ireland, so far as I am able to see, they do it for sociability’s sake, to have a crowd to shout with, and therefore by half-deliberate sophistry they persuade themselves that the old tale is not true, and that art is not ruined so. I do not mean that the artist should not as a man be a good citizen and hold opinions like another; Balzac was a Catholic and a Monarchist. We, too, in following his great example, have not put away in anything the strong opinions that we set out with, but in our art they have no place. Every trouble of our Theatre in its earlier years, every attack on us in any year, has come directly or indirectly either from those who prefer Mr. Lafayette to Signor Mancini, or from those who believe, from a defective education, that the writer who does not help some cause, who does not support some opinion, is but an idler, or if his air be too serious for that, the supporter of some hidden wickedness. A principal actor left us in our first year because he believed *The Hour-Glass* to be a problem play. This is all natural enough in a country where the majority have been denied University teaching. I found precisely the same prejudices among the self-educated workingmen about William Morris, and among some few educated persons, generally women, who took their tune from the working-men. One woman used to repeat as often as possible that to paint pictures or to write poetry in this age was to fiddle while Rome was burning. The artist who permits opinion to master his work is always insincere, always what Balzac calls an unconscious comedian, a man playing to a public for an end, or a philanthropist who has made the most tragic and the most useless of sacrifices.

VI

Certain among the Nationalist attacks have been the work of ignorant men, untruthful, imputing unworthy motives, the kind of thing one cannot answer. But the Unionist hostility, though better-mannered, has been more injurious. Our Nationalist pit has grown to understand us, and night after night we have not been able to find room for all who came, but except at rare
played as if it were reality. Balzac in his preface to the 
Comédie humaine had to defend himself from this 
charge, but it is not the burning question with us at 
present, for politics are our national passion. We have 
to free our vision of reality from political prepossession, 
for entangled, as it were, with all that is exaggerated, 
lifeless, frozen, in the attitudes of party, there are true 
thoughts about all those things that Ireland is most 
interested in, a reverie over the emptiness and the full-
ness of Irish character which is not less a part of wisdom 
because politics, like art, have their exaggerations. We 
cannot renounce political subjects in renouncing mere 
opinions, for that pleasure in the finer culture of Eng-
land, that displeasure in Irish disunions and disorders, 
which are the root of reasoned Unionism, are as 
certainly high and natural thoughts as the self-denying 
enthusiasm that leads Michael Gillane to probable death 
or exile, and Dervorgilla to her remorse, and Patrick 
Sarsfield of The White Cockade to his sense of what a 
king should be; and we cannot renounce them because 
politicians believe that one thought or another may 
help their opponents, any more than Balzac could have 
refused to write the Comédie humaine because some-
body was afraid Madame l'Épicière might run away 
from her husband.

At the close of my speech at one of the performances 
we were asked to give to the British Association, I used 
these words: 'When I was coming up in the train the