



**Belfast**  
**Derry**

AICA Congress

1997 AICA Annual Congress

**Dr Cyril Barrett**

***“Wandering Hopefully: Watteau and Yeats”***

10:50 hrs, Saturday 20th September

WATTEAU AND JACK YEATS: TRAVELLING HOPEFULLY.

In his Unbounded Work, Samuel Beckett, the Irish philosopher, novelist and playwright wrote: 'I was never on my way, anyway, but only on my way.' This, more or less, sums up the itinerary of the ladies and gentlemen whom I shall be considering in this paper. They are on their way, but not on any particular way, theirs or anyone else's. They have a goal, but not a specific destination. They are travelling hopefully, with, unbeknownst to them, no terminus.

Unlike Beckett, whose characters never move more than the length of the stage - in Happy Days (Oh! le~~s~~ beau jours) Winnie does not move at all; in the first act she is buried in sand up to her waist, and, in the second act, up to her neck - but they either hope for what will never come (Waiting for Godot) or live, just hopefully; hoping for a happy conclusion that never comes. Jack Yeats's characters, <sup>on the contrary,</sup> are either on the move or pausing for a moment.

I have chosen four of them. An early drawing in pen and ink; the painting, The Two Travellers of 1942; and two later works: On the Famous Road to Fame and On through the Silent Land (1951).

The early drawing - From the West it's called - shows great determination and zest. <sup>A</sup> ~~The~~ young lad is on his way, and no doubt about it, whether to the great cities of Dublin and Cork, or to the less ambitious Ballina, Sligo, Galway, Ennis or Limerick. Anyway he's on his <sup>way</sup> with unquenchable hope and determination, the absolute picture of the <sup>e</sup> determined and hopeful traveller.



The The Two Travellers shows two professional travellers meeting and having a chat. A dray is passing them and one is heading for a town in the distance, presumably in the hope of getting work. He carries at least one bag, possibly two, his sole belongings. Like the man from the West he is travelling hopefully, but not with the same urgency. He has been a long time on the roads and has lost his initial impetus. Travelling hopefully has become a habit. He will probably end his life on the road to nowhere.

More ambitious is 'The Famous Road of Fame' or, to give it its full title:

Left, Left...  
 We left our Name  
 On the Road, On the Road  
 On the Famous Road, on the Famous Road:  
 On the Famous Road  
 Of Fame.

Unlike the previous travellers, determined or casual and constant, these are both determined and wholly confident. They have no more reason for confidence, but they have panache nonetheless. They march, beating their drums triumphantly, into a future that will never be realized. They bring to mind the play by Brian Friel, 'Philadelphia here I come' in which a young lad has illusions of glory in the New World.

In marked contrast to the other three pictures is 'On through the silent lands'. Nothing rumbustious here; nothing determined even; and certainly nothing easygoing. One detects a moment of hesitation even, but this is more likely a pause for reflection before continuing on the journey. One might even say that the traveller, far from being hopeful about what he might find in the silent land is apprehensive, brooding, pensive, low in his expectations. The picture

was painted in 1951, just over five years after the end of the war when much of Europe still lay in ruins; housing, food and other essentials of life were in short supply; and relatives and friends were still hard to trace. Yeats had expressed his feelings about the war in his 'The Blood of Abel' in 1941, and the aftermath of war in another masterpiece, apparently set in Ireland, thus linking the Troubles and the Civil War blood-shed with that of the vastly greater slaughter in Europe in the 1940s. It was called 'Grief', ~~and~~ painted in 1951, the year of 'On through the silent land'. Perhaps our traveller is about to descend, with <sup>a</sup> minimum <sup>of</sup> hopeful expectations, into the desolation of the silent land, where he may or may not find anything of his past <sup>that</sup> has survived.

The strength of this marvellous and deeply moving picture is that it can bear many interpretations. Perhaps the traveller is about to enter the promised land to find spiritual rest and fulfillment in tranquillity. With the time allotted I cannot pursue them. <sup>See possibilities</sup> But this does not matter. I just want to make three points.

First, in these four pictures Yeats has developed the concept of travelling hopefully pictorially. No doubt it can be developed further. But Yeats has mapped it out pictorially, giving a basic natural history. I'm not suggesting that he did it intentionally; but he did it. In four pictures we have (1) travelling hopefully and determinedly; (2) travelling hopefully, but taking one's time; (3) travelling triumphantly, convinced of success; and (4) travelling unenthusiastically, with hope diminished but just a glimmer left. This is something that literature and pictorial art can do in a way not granted to philosophy, psychology or any science.



My second point is that this mode of travelling is essentially romantic, if not fantastical. The only hint of realism is in the fourth traveller's question<sup>ing</sup> what the silent land has to offer. The two who stop to chat may be worldly wise, but still live in cloud cuckoo-land and have a devil-may-care attitude, the romanticism of tramps. As for the young man from the West, he seems in a trance, is not demented, so besotted is he with his vision of a city paved with gold and fountains lavishly spewing Guinness, Bushmills or even Gran Manier into the gutter. But the romantics par excellence are, without a doubt, the lads on the famous road to fame. Their vision, like that of Brian Friel's hero, is romantic to the point of absurdity: pure fantasy.

This brings me to my third point, namely, that all four travellers are, ultimately, pathetic. They will never reach their goal, or, if they do, it will not be as they imagined it to be. This is the harsh reality which every hopeful traveller, as depicted by Yeats, will encounter. They may get work, but it will not be the work they wanted, nor bring them the wealth they hoped for; the next job will be no better than the last; they will not achieve anything, much less fame in spite of their flamboyance; and they will find their home in ruin their wife and children dead and no one alive that knows them - but this may not stop them hoping, as widows hope that some day a lost child or husband, missing, presumed dead, may at last return. That is life: the expectation and the reality.

Friel's lad ended by saying that he did not know, when asked why he was going to Philadelphia. In 'Waiting for God' the expectation of Godot's arrival becomes fainter with every affirmation: 'Godot will surely come'. This is what wandering hopefully, as opposed to travelling hopefully, with no desire to arrive, means.



It is here that Yeats, Beckett and Watteau meet.

In the 1940s, as related by Tomas McGreevy, in his seminal monograph on Jack Yeats in 1945, Samuel Beckett said that in those days the early war years, the 1940s, Yeats was becoming 'Watteauer and Watteauer'. What did Beckett mean?

McGreevy quite reasonably argues that it was Yeats's sudden loose use of colour or his treatment of trivial subjects such as theatrical and other entertainers on a grand scale. This may be so. But Yeats had been portraying Watteau-esque characters ~~xxx~~ all his life: clowns, boxers, race horse riders, actors, dancers, acrobats, /etc., admitted musicians, a level of a far lower order than Watteau's aristocratic/dancers, dilettantes, ~~xxx~~ revellers, and lovers. In this respect he was becoming Beckett rather than Watteauer. His characters, while not losing their proletarian status, were becoming tragi-comic figures ~~like~~ <sup>like</sup> Malloy, ~~Beckett's~~ Maloney, Murphy, Estragon and Vladimir, Nagg and Nell of ~~Beckett's~~ novels and plays of the 1950s. And this suggests another connection with Watteau which Beckett may have had in mind.

Watteau painted the French aristocracy in its declining years, when it had been summoned to Versailles by Louis XIV to a life of politically harmless leisure, to be encouraged by the effete Louis XV and eventually led to the guillotine along with Louis XVI. <sup>Watteau</sup> ~~die~~ in 1721, only six years into the reign of Louis XV, and seventy years before the Reign of Terror, so it must <sup>be</sup> hindsight that makes us see his nobles and their entertainers dancing on the edge of doom. But his outstanding masterpiece, Embarquement pour Cythère (Embarkation for Cythera'), may give us an insight into his/forthcoming disillusionment, if not disaster, that follows irresponsible frivolity.



Watteau presented that picture for his acceptance to the Académie in 1717. The Academy had found a special category for it, fêtes galantes, mock pastoral court dress, which became particularly popular under Queen Marie Antoinette. Three years later he visited the famous London physician, Richard Mead, in the hope of finding a cure for his chronic consumption, as it was called in those days. He died the next year at the age of thirty-seven, not exactly a ripe old age. It is, therefore, hardly too fanciful to think that he saw through the ephemeral nature of aristocratic frolics or that the somber view of these festivities is summed up in the picture of revellers embarking on their pilgrimage to the mythical island of Cythera.

The island of Cythera is an actual Greek island, known in Greek mythology as one of the 'islands of the blessed' (fortunae insulae they were called in Latin), to which privileged mortals retired to live a life of unending sensual bliss. Watteau depicts groups of elegant French aristocrats setting out on this sybaritic quest with somewhat more restraint than Yeats's crowd on the road to fame, but with equally dismal prospects. Imagine having to live for ever with only sensual pleasures as a diversion! Yeats depicted these goings on in Irish mythical places: Hy Brazil, also an island, and Tir na n'Og (The Land of the Young) probably subterranean, under the sea. Watteau's treatment of the hopeless plight/<sup>of</sup>hopeful travellers may be more poignant than Yeats's, but surely not more profound. Whether this was what Beckett had in mind when he said that Yeats in the war years was getting 'Watteauer and Watteauer' no one can tell. I merely suggest that it might have been part of what he meant.

Cyril Barrett

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September, 1997