

# Joyce Cary's Major Poems

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Joyce Cary's two long poems, *Marching Soldier* and *The Drunken Sailor*, have never received the critical attention they deserve. Indeed, few of those critics interested enough in Cary's work to write books about it even mention his poetry.<sup>1</sup> This neglect would be understandable if the poems were no better than his early efforts at Edinburgh and Trinity College,<sup>2</sup> but both *Marching Soldier* and *The Drunken Sailor* are mature and original works. The form of these poems is well worth analysis, but more important at this stage of their appreciation is a study of their ideas and the way in which they add to the reader's understanding of Cary's novels, with which they share many themes, particularly the themes of the injustice of life, the necessity of freedom, and the world's creative character.

It is sometimes difficult to separate these three themes in Cary's work, because he considers them interrelated. Cary's most important theme is something he calls "creative imagination" but which is essentially a change in beliefs or habitual reactions due to a change in circumstances caused by freedom and chance. Cary attributes all change in fashions, politics, literature, or any other human interest to boredom, the press of circumstance, or the desire to carve out one's own niche in life.

Cary claims that the world is "no more chaotic than a symphony." He adds that "It is not a tangle of events, but a skein of motives, sustained by the permanent elements of human nature in creative history. To say that there is nothing fixed, true or dependable anywhere is nonsense both to our experience and reason."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, though there are "permanent elements" in the world, the change caused by everyone being

creative at once makes of life "a wild confusion of events from which we have to select what we think significant for ourselves."<sup>4</sup> Cary shows the characters in *Marching Soldier* and *The Drunken Sailor* doing this, whether they believe vain promises, cling to fruitless hopes, follow orders, or form their own imaginary worlds.

Finding and maintaining order in life demands continual use of creative imagination, as the conception of that order must change as the world changes if the individual is to survive the revolutions of ideas that continually shake society. In an unpublished preface to *The Drunken Sailor*, Cary writes:

It is the imagination which enables a man to steer among the confusion of fate. For only by grasping that chaos into a picture upon which he imposes the order, can he know what to do next. So each man creates for himself a world, which is his security and also his delight, but a delight, that since it is an order of the spirit imposed upon a chaos, tosses on storms, forever in danger of shipwreck. The spirit therefore, loving its creation, passionately hates the injustice and cruelty of nature, and blind luck, and says to itself "Never shall I submit to the caprice of time and circumstance. I shall force them to serve the order of my mastery. This I know not only from my soul but the memory of old battles, and especially from my defeats. It is defeat that has made me strong and implacable." For only defeat can open to the young imagination the enormous pit of eternal necessity, crowded by the obscene monsters of chance, cruelty, spite, disease and imbecility.<sup>5</sup>

Cary goes on both to attribute all ideas and works of art to this struggle to bring order to chaos and to explain why the chaos continues:

The world of meaning, which is the order of the spirit, exists only by the continuing effort of the imagination, and all realised works of the spirit, which are forms of meaning, all states, churches, palaces, arts, become senseless things unless recreated continually in the imagination. So one generation despises and tears down as mere encumbrances what another has built with love and adored like a divinity.<sup>6</sup>

These ideas lie at the heart of Cary's major poems. Indeed, the poems cannot be understood unless one grasps the ideas.

*Marching Soldier* is one of the finest long narrative poems written about World War II. The poem is dedicated to the infantry and follows it as it leaves home, crosses the sea, lands in a strange place, fights and rests and fights again, then moves on. There is an all-pervading dustiness in the poem, a sense of heat and smoke and confusion, as "ignorant armies clash." The soldiers push on stoically, almost dazedly, toward wherever the fighting seems to be, despite their exhaustion and conflicting orders.

The speaker in *Marching Soldier* never identifies himself, thus lessening the reader's interest in him as an individual. At times he seems to be one man, and at times he shifts to the plural and speaks for his comrades, but often the "I" in the poem seems to be the collective voice of all soldiers as it speaks of longings and fears that all would know. Cary chose to write *Marching Soldier* in free verse with a rather long line and took advantage of the form to shift rhythms and voices frequently. There is the steady drum-like voice that paces the marchers as they board the ship, a voice that seems almost to come from above the men as it describes them. When the soldiers talk among themselves, their voices are harsh, their words simple, and the descriptions of fighting are much the same. In one of the most poignant scenes of the poem, when the men talk with captured enemy soldiers, the narrator seems to imagine the words rather than report them, and the rhetoric becomes more poetic, impassioned at times, and full of imagery. Finally, the narrator writes of ideas, or of dreams of home and the past — though here especially he seems to be speaking with the collective "I" — and again the voice is more reflective and metaphoric than is the usual conversation of soldiers.

The details of the setting are too scant for definite identification: there are fields, a beach, a town with white church towers. Italy or France seems to be the battlefield, but it might as easily be Greece or some other country. Likewise, though the soldiers seem to be English and the enemy German, the only specific reference is to a "gestapoman" who kills children. The weapons in the poem might be used in any war of this century. The marching soldier of World War II, Cary seems to suggest, is in

spirit the same soldier who marched to Thermopylae and will march at Armageddon:

Battle we know in a hundred mornings,  
 Various as the sea, but always for soldiers, it is the  
 same battle,  
 Who come to a place unknown, and work their way to  
 blind horizons.<sup>7</sup>

This universality lends depth to Cary's meaning.

The marching soldier is also a metaphor for those individuals, doomed to injustice and uncertainty in a constantly changing creative world, who refuse to give in to fear, who do not worry about what others are doing, who do their duty, who long for truth but are satisfied for the time being with work to do. "Don't you know there's a war on / All the time, and all around," the soldier asks (p. 6). *Marching Soldier* is not an allegory — the events and concerns are clearly those of soldiers in actual battles — but the reader is constantly reminded in subtle ways that all who leave security behind in the name of duty are soldiers, much as for Thomas Wilcher, in *To Be a Pilgrim*, such people are pilgrims.

We do not ask eternal joys or peace everlasting.  
 We are reasonable men, old soldiers to whom war has  
 issued  
 Plenty of time to think, and to think again. (p. 5)

These are people who accept life as it is given and work without demanding reward.

At the centre of *Marching Soldier* is the question, "What is truth? What does all this mean?" "Tell us the word that rules, / Tell us the truth which is mastery," the prisoners plead (p. 10). The soldiers have no answer, for they have the same question:

"We do not ask for miracles, we know that all men must  
 suffer,  
 Only tell us why it has been laid upon us,  
 Tell us the name, the name of our pain, that we may  
 make it a friend,  
 Tell us the name of our grave,  
 That it may be our bed." (p. 28)

No answer comes, and the soldiers march on. They see their friends die; they see men they have thought dead alive again. They find their way by marching into the cannon's mouth, by keeping their faces to the bullets.

When the soldiers ask their prisoners what has made them fight, the prisoners blame the spell-binder who has promised them truth. "Because of a man, a preacher," they say,

Because of a mouth that cried to us names,  
 And the names walked among us like kings. At the sound  
 of their feet  
 Old leper poverty fell from our necks, cold idiot fear  
 crept from our beds.  
 The clouds rose from the sky, the oceans were drawn  
 together into a cow-pool,  
 The nations were a cabbage field, calling for our seed,  
 The birds sang in our cellars, a loving wife took us  
 by the hand  
 To bring us to our field, our cow-pool, our little farm;  
 With six pigs, six cows, and roses round the gate.  
 And the wife was truth eternal, the roses were beauty  
 that never withers,  
 The field was peace everlasting.  
 Because of a word, comrades, we went to war  
 For love and for joy, for peace everlasting, we followed  
 the drum.  
 But the word was empty, its kingdom was the vapours of  
 a dream.  
 We are lost, comrades. Tell us where we are, and where  
 we must go? (pp. 9-10)

The prisoners' creative leader has gained their service by giving them a vision of what life could be: a fertile farm, a faithful wife, and peace. In the name of that idea they have marched; they have killed. They have discovered, however, that their intuition of reality is wrong: murder does not lead to peace; madness does not lead to sanity; the will is not the same as the right. The result of their attendance to duty is capture, so now they are looking for a new answer.

Cary suggests the inherent power of freedom, a major theme in his novels, by having the prisoners ask the soldiers why the authoritarian army has lost, despite its strength, to the less able

forces who fight for democracy, even though democracy leads to cowards and dodgers and profiteers:

Say why the lie is strong but liars weak,  
 Why the truth is weak, but he who has truth stronger  
 than the iron and the idiot.  
 In the stomach of the liar who deceived the young men,  
 A bottomless sore opened dry lips,  
 And cried like a starving bird. (p. 11)

The marching soldiers give no answer because they have none. They do what they must. The reader is left to infer a reason by studying the course of the war which was going on as Cary wrote the poem.

“Only tell us, if you know,” the marching soldier asks, “who gives the first orders? / What truly makes the wheels go round?” (p. 5). He has found a temporary answer in his marching, in his duty. Although he continues to ask, his legs keep moving:

And in my dream I was marching, marching,  
 To drums, quick as the sea, but they were playing  
 A tune I understood, that spoke to me like truth,  
 Neat as a toy, which holds a living city in its glass ball.  
 Wisdom which gave me back my own sky, my own sea,  
 And all the world that I had travelled,  
 Made simple as a child's word, clear as a child's sight,  
 Peace which had the truth of war and war which had the  
 mind of peace,  
 The face of a soldier, who marches, marches,  
 In his own dream, in his own world.  
 In his own peace. (p. 7)

The answer found in a soldier's life is simplistic, perhaps, but it is satisfying in that it offers the security of a job to be done, even though the goal is not always clear. The marching soldier finds inner peace in the face of war because he keeps marching. Many of Joyce Cary's most vivid characters — Mister Johnson, Sara Monday, Gulley Jimson, and more — overcome misfortune by marching on to the next battle. Their creativity allows them to make a new life wherever they go.

The soldier accepts the injustice of fate as a matter of course. He recognizes it as the nature of life. The war Cary portrays in

*Marching Soldier* is full of injustice: a man steps on a mine which kills someone else when it goes off; a shell appears from nowhere and rips off a man's arm; the glory falls to those behind the lines. But the soldier does not complain:

Injustice we know, he speaks to us in our own tongue,  
He curses us for another's fault, he praises us for what  
a comrade did.

He is our get-away, our prisoner's friend.

He is the clown whose tears are a joke, whose triumph  
is a downfall,

Who says to us, 'I am a man like you, look at me and  
laugh, laugh till you cry,'

Whose ugliness is truth, whose weakness is compassion,  
whose folly is a friend,

Who cures despair with its own hopelessness. He is the  
last laugh,

Our pay, our billet, our rations. (p. 24)

By recognizing the injustice of life, the soldier defuses his anger at it. He accepts it and goes on.

The soldiers have to search for their answers. On the other hand, the women and children at home have already found their truth:

For women know their answer and keep it in a house,  
And children have a secret.

In the beginning is their word

They live with understanding.

In war, they have a peace, in the sand of hatred, they  
grow friendship.

Tell us, women, your answer. (p. 6)

The women create a world of order in their homes. They understand others and compromise and make friends. Instead of searching for answers, the soldier implies, they let answers come to them.

The war mothers are courageous as well, however. With husbands at war they must live alone; they must raise new soldiers. "Our fathers went young to war, our mothers were married to fate," the soldier says:

At the call of the drum, they left their faithful things,  
their convent peace,

To take into their arms, men condemned,  
 They threw away their minion names, narrow as a virgin's  
   bed,  
 For a soldiers question, wide as darkness,  
 Between two battles they conceived,  
 Under the noise of unseen engines they bore us.  
 Their loneliness was our courage, their fortitude our  
   honour,  
 Their hearts were loyalty, their milk patience,  
 They put on our feet the iron boots of duty. (pp. 14-15)

The duty of the soldiers forces the women to duty, and they too accept it without flinching. It is, after all, their life, and they cannot avoid it.

The answer of the women, however, seems unacceptable for soldiers. What is the answer? What is the word for which the soldiers search? Peace; creativity; freedom; God — the answers Cary found to his own questions come to mind and often seem to cry out for insertion in the blank space. The soldier, though, can offer nothing so final:

The word is march for a soldier.  
 March, march, and keep your rank. (p. 28)

He has no answer, but he will march till he finds one. He may not know whom or where he is fighting, but he knows that fighting is his job, and there is some solace in work which must be done. The war Cary writes about seems absurd, but sometimes life seems absurd. The picture *Marching Soldier* paints of the future of war is not rosy, but history has proven it correct. Cary has a profound sympathy for the soldier, but no sentimentality. He romanticizes the infantry by attributing to it a stoicism it may lack, but the resulting picture is powerful and illustrates his ideas.

*The Drunken Sailor*, Cary's astounding attempt to embody his theory of creative imagination in a fifty-eight page allegorical "ballad-epic,"<sup>8</sup> is one of the most extraordinary poems of the century. Its exuberance, pure Cary, makes even Gulley Jimson's seem mild by comparison. The lines careen down the page in a swift iambic tetrameter, jolted by frequent breaks in rhythm



and metre. Like waves in a tempest, the rhymes thrash wildly, five or six together at times. Puns mix with parody, alliteration with allusion, courage with crazy joy. The total effect is a bit like standing on a ship's bridge in a hurricane. At first glance, *The Drunken Sailor* seems almost amateurish in its lack of control, but such a storm of words is exactly the form the poem needs to emphasize its content, and a closer reading makes Cary's artistry apparent. Perhaps the best approach to the poem is to read the first pages aloud, to get drunk on the language of it, for there are few poems better suited to oral interpretation. There are depths in *The Drunken Sailor* which are plumbed only by careful reading, however, because while the surface meaning is generally clarified by Cary's glosses, the implications are sometimes obscure.

Like the plot of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," that of *The Drunken Sailor* is neither readily comprehensible nor easily believable, but since it is allegory, it need not be. The sailor pilots the sailing ship of imagination, crewed by creative artists from Dante to Baudelaire, over the sea of injustice and fate. The rotten old ship is attacked by the modern battleship of authority because, as in Plato's ideal republic, authority cannot keep order when imagination is continually dreaming up new ways to do things. The sailor calls his crewmen as the battleship begins firing, but the artist-seamen pay no attention until sailors from the battleship try to board the sailing ship. Their life of imagination threatened, the seamen burst into action and set the sails, and the little ship skims away. It is soon trapped against the wind, however, and seems lost until the drunken sailor turns it into the breeze, directly in front of the battleship, where the bow-wave catches the light sailing ship and casts it aside. Before the huge battleship of authority can turn, the ship of imagination disappears.

In the next episode, the ship is trapped in the maelstrom of "the common round of life" (p. 38) and freed only when authority appears, for the crewmen again use their imagination and literally whistle up a wind, which blows them out of the whirlpool, just as the whirlpool collapses when struck by a salvo from the battleship's guns. The sailing ship is not yet safe, for

the battleship keeps up the fight. The little ship's sides are so flimsy, however, that the shells pass through them without exploding. The cannonballs of creativity, on the other hand, small as they are, seem to fall into the battleship's smokestacks, stopping it and then causing it to explode and sink.

Authority gone, the crewmen suffer from "a new illusion of finality, of stability, in which minds are caught by their own realized dreams" (p. 56), as their boat is gradually entwined with seaweed. (As Cary writes elsewhere, imagination "has a tendency to lock up feeling in given constructions. It builds its house, so to speak, and furnishes it, and then it tends to consider that nothing more is to be done. It sits down to take a holiday; it ceases to reach out and explore; it considers that it has answered all questions, there is nothing more to know."<sup>9</sup>) Finally, the drunken sailor discovers their danger and rallies his men, who once more raise the sails and praise their fate—to wander always and never rest.

Cary uses the story, which is as entertaining as it is improbable, to illustrate how he thinks life works. His marginal glosses explain the philosophy behind the action. As he writes near the end of the poem,

the free soul can never rest content in the accomplished thing of art, church, or government, but soon turns from it with disgust in proportion to the fury and hope of its making. It is the lover who murders his love; the revolution which devours its leaders; the prophet who tears down a church. And imagination by its very nature must find in all completion a gaol, in all conclusion a grave. (pp. 59-60)

Throughout the poem Cary presents the theme of creative imagination, which infuses all of his books, in its most extreme form, without his usual concern for the effect of the freedom of one person on the freedom of others. He does it because he wants to emphasize the need for joyful acceptance of change, since change is the world's nature. As the drunken sailor sings,

Holy Father, Holy be he  
Who nailed us living to this tree  
Of our responsibility,  
Who damned our folly to be free

On watch for all eternity  
 Through boundless storm, nor ever see  
 Peace but only victory  
 Withering in its own hot breath,  
 No rest but war's that sleeps on death  
 And loves its mattress. (p. 9)

Even more than it is today, the idea of eternal war, of victory without peace, must have been upsetting for the English in 1947, when many basic commodities were still rationed because of shortages caused by World War II. In a time when the whole world craved stability, Cary preached its impossibility.

Change, Cary believes, is inevitable in a world where new people need new ideas to call their own. The Liberty Men, sailors on shore leave,

. . . who, due  
 Five years back living, brew  
 All to one rendezvous,  
 In five hours fury to make all things new (p. 49)

speak of physical change when they say,

And leper change, corruption's self  
 Eats out joy's face beneath your kiss. (p. 52)

The billboards in town challenge passersby

With exhortations to more high desires,  
 Beer, beauty-creams and tyres,  
 Spinning grinning in the sky,  
 "Choose and be the thing you buy  
 Sparkling, happy, lord of time and space." (p. 51)

Some things gain meaning with time and emotional ties, but some things merely grown tiresome. The billboards promise a life with new meaning. For Cary, life is a continual search for meaning, and this search, combined with natural mutability, makes the world change so fast that those who fear change will be destroyed by it.

Chief among those who revel in the world's nature are the creative artists,

Poets, spellbinders primed to flash  
 The tale,  
 That sings them into hell and out of gaol, (p. 5)

because they not only accept change but cause it. The drunken sailor chooses as his crewmen people who love

To make the word that breathes, that knows to fly  
On its own wing  
The living dangerous thing, (p. 18)

people with

Nerves taut as stays  
Which, since for all their days  
They bear the doom  
Of pride and masterdom,  
Like those sad harps which ever from  
Our gale tormented rigging shake  
Must sing because they cannot break. (pp. 10-11)

Smart and Cowper are there, Ronsard, Rousseau and Moliere, Shakespeare, Dickens, Tennyson, Arnold and Carlyle, and the narrator explains why they are on the ship. Though few of them would agree about many things, each has created a new world in the face of an authority which threatens to crush all individuality, though that world might be small and though it might be more evil than the world it destroys. By publicly examining their fears and the world's flaws, these poets speak to readers with the same fears, inspiring unease and revolution, preventing the world's stagnation.

Many people dislike change, however, and the urge to create a fortress secure against change leads to authority. The conflict between freedom and authority leaves refugees in its wake. In *The Drunken Sailor* these refugees, known as "the Fugitives," live aboard the battleship of authority and sacrifice what they must to have peace. The fugitives sing,

We fly from love that makes men saints  
To die from any god or state.  
For any slogan, rag or dope,  
Love that is the joy of war  
The seed of hate. (p. 25)

They fear love — whether it be love of home, country, god, or even family — because love breeds a willingness to protect the thing loved, despite the cost, and that cost is usually personal

sorrow. The fugitives speak of the joy with which these lovers fight, but claim that the result is the opposite of pleasure:

It is our homes that lie in ash  
Our sons who died, but not in joy. (p. 26)

They turn to authority for protection and praise unchanging law, for freedom leads to chaos. The result of their desire for security is that when the ship of authority sinks, they go down with it.

As the crewmen of the drunken sailor's ship sail on, saved by their imagination, the sailor orders them to sing "Against immortal nothing's idiot might" (p. 62), so they sing of the reward of those who embrace change.

Glory singing, glorious he  
Who damns this folly to be free,  
Danced upon damnation's sea  
To know joy's immortality,

they sing of the "Holy Father" mentioned by the sailor in almost identical words. To Cary, it is God who condemns the world to the joyful responsibility of freedom, and Christ who, by his actions, "Danced upon damnation's sea," setting an example for those drowning in it.

Cripple's will outleaping kite  
To stoop on stealthy-winged delight,  
Blind men's eyes that stab the night  
Of earthsick noon with heaven's sight,

they sing, in praise of those who seize life despite their problems, as a bird seizes its prey. The allusion to blind men brings to mind Milton and Sampson, both of whom did much to destroy the "earthsick noon" of authority. The poem ends with a final quatrain sung by the crew:

Battle's peace within the heart  
That rocked on terror mounts apart  
To hear from ravaged valleys start  
Childish songs, forgot by art. (p. 63)

The sailor has spoken early in the poem of those poets searching for

The living dangerous thing,  
That children's lips, by chance, have breathed  
in sleep. (p. 18)

The sailors gain inner peace by accepting the creative nature of the universe. That peace helps them put their terror aside, just as the marching soldiers do, and climb toward the discovery of the primeval truths previously known only to innocence. It is an idealistic conclusion and perhaps even a farfetched one, but to Cary it is the logical answer and the one he presents not only in *Marching Soldier* and *The Drunken Sailor*, but throughout his writing.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Barbara Fisher makes a few brief references to it; Andrew Wright devotes four pages to the poetry; the most detailed study is George Garrett's "The Major Poetry of Joyce Cary," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 9 (Autumn 1963), 245-256.
- <sup>2</sup> Cary's first volume of poetry, for which he used the name Arthur Cary, was *Verse* (Edinburgh: Robert Grant, July 1908). Many of the poems Cary wrote while at Trinity College exist in manuscript in the Bodleian Library. None of this early work, which shows little talent, adds much to an understanding of Cary's mature thought, so it will not be discussed further.
- <sup>3</sup> MS. Cary 237, fol. 3; translated and printed as "Notes sur l'art et la liberté," *Preuves*, 17 (August 1954), 28-32. All manuscript references are to the James Osborne Collection of Joyce Cary's Papers in the Bodleian Library. Thanks are due to the Joyce Cary Estate for permission to use Cary's papers and to the U.S.-U.K. Educational Commission for the Fulbright Scholarship which made the research possible.
- <sup>4</sup> *Art and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 5.
- <sup>5</sup> MS. Cary 210, "An Essay on Imagination," p. 1.
- <sup>6</sup> MS. Cary 210, "An Essay on Imagination," p. 3.
- <sup>7</sup> *Marching Soldier* (London: Michael Joseph, 1945), p. 8; hereafter cited parenthetically.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Drunken Sailor* (London: Michael Joseph, 1947), dust jacket; hereafter cited parenthetically.
- <sup>9</sup> MS. Cary 238, fol. 83-84; typescript of lecture titled "Imagination and Life."