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Reading Richard Ellmann Writing Oscar Wilde

“[T]o know another person who has lived as well as we know a character in fiction, and better than we know ourselves, is not frivolous. It may even be, for reader as for writer, an essential part of experience.”

When his final work of biography was published in 1988, Richard Ellmann’s reputation as a scholar and a gentleman preceded him. It had done so for most of his intellectual life. In a 1946 letter to T.S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats’s widow, Georgie Hyde-Lees, wrote, “Richard Ellman [*sic*] tells me that you have written him a very kind letter saying that you will meet him when he comes to London. Unlike many of the young men who are now writing about WBY Dicky Ellman seems to me to have a purpose which is neither gossipy paragraphs or the easy way to get a Ph.D.”(Saddlemyer 20). His dissertation he titled *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, and it was published by Macmillan in 1948. His friend Ellsworth Mason describes the events this way: “Ellmann didn’t write a dissertation; he wrote a book which he submitted as a dissertation before he published it. It was a pioneering book in 20th century studies”(11). In 1960, Ellmann’s biography of James Joyce won the National Book Award² and it is “widely considered the best literary biography of the century... The book took twelve years to write and is a testament to Ellmann’s ability to gain the confidence and cooperation of the friends and relatives of his subjects”(Foley 130). In an introduction to essays written in his honor, four former students of Ellmann’s, all of whom went on to become University professors, write:

His personal grace and the genuineness of his humanity inspired not just confidence but love. His strong sense of family must have reassured those who favoured him with access to private papers and personal confidences that, in his rigorous researches into the lives of authors, he would not give unnecessary offense to relations or friends. In fact he remained on excellent terms with the families and friends of his subjects even after his books were published. (Dick xv)

In an interview with the *Miami Herald* in 1982, Ellmann describes an example of that phenomenon his own way:

[T]hen I went over to Dublin and met Joyce's sisters, who I was told would not speak to anybody about their brother – were very much ashamed of him – but actually they were not ashamed of him; they were very pleased to talk to me, and then his brother, Stanislaus, in Trieste, was a great help, though he was writing his own book. I saw him in '53 and '54 and then he died in '55. And after his death I did edit his unfinished memoir of James and I helped his widow sort out all the Joyce papers – an enormous trunkful of stuff...– and this really made the book [*James Joyce*] possible. (Robertson 44-5)

In 1987, less than a year before his final book's release, Ellmann died, but we can imagine that a scholar of his stature and experience might have felt a certain confidence in the work and even a sense of satisfaction, considering that it had taken twenty years to write. For his stature we need only look at the praise, the laudation, of his scholarship, trace the trajectory of his career, and consider the encomia immediately following his death, encomia about the body of work and the final one especially, and about Ellmann himself.

Would this last have surprised him?

First, perhaps, consider his comments about the rush to write biography hard upon a potential subject's death:

There is hardly time for mourning; the public's appetite for information must be filled as soon as the grave is. This appetite is not altogether discreditable. We long to understand our world, and imagine we can do so by understanding the vivid personalities within it. We want to bring them back to life, so far as we can. With literary men this impulse is especially understandable, for while television figures – politicians or athletes or newscasters – are people we can recognize like old acquaintances, writers work in such strict privacy and are generally so secretive about their intentions and sources that we look at their lives with even keener interest. We wish that the biographer would explain the mainsprings of genius. ("Freud" 469)

Was Ellmann a vivid personality? A former professor of mine, in conversation, described meeting him in the nineteen-sixties: "I was an undergrad. I thought he looked like an insurance salesman. I remember it vividly. The blue serge suit, you know? But I knew he was the great Richard Ellmann." Was he a "literary man," to use his own phrase? As one, he was important to biographers at the very least, and biographers can be important to the enrichment of our understanding of figures who

affect and, some say, even define our lives.³ Oscar Wilde, essayist, poet, novelist, and playwright, and Ellmann's subject for his second, and last, monumental work, said famously of himself, "I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram"(qtd. in McKenna 464). In 1987 Ellmann would say of him, "He belongs to our world more than to Victoria's"(Wilde 589). Whether Ellmann considered himself a "literary man" and an important one may perhaps be discerned by looking at his career in letters and his final choice of subject, and at his method of treating and rendering that subject's life. That he thought Wilde was a genius and great writer and a paragon of tested kindness and impossible tolerance is evidenced by the biography as a whole (which is to say that is precisely the book's story) and evidenced by the critical responses to it. Also, in an essay from 1967, Ellmann remarks that "Wilde was one of the first to see that the exaltation of the artist required a concomitant exaltation of the critic"("Critic" 29). Wilde wished "to free critics from subordination, to grant them a larger share in the production of literature" (30). Ellmann does not exalt himself in his work, but his influence on others is undeniable.⁴ He was praised and rewarded for this influence – this success as a scholar and writer – many times and in many ways in his lifetime. However, we cannot yet know, based on his writings about literary figures, if he would have seen himself as a potential subject for biographical study. A careful look, however, at his methods, both proposed and inferred, in this last of his books, may tell us much about the field Ellmann helped define, and perhaps open avenues to future study. Until his death, he was the finest example of a practitioner of the genre, his last work some say being his best.

In his now famous essays "Literary Biography" and "Freud and Literary Biography," Richard Ellmann, through various assertions and delineations, creates an idea of a philosophy of the writing of the form that sheds light on his approach to Wilde and helps me continue to define my approach to Richard Ellmann. This first example, below – both delineation and assertion – is perhaps the most forward, and also the most apologetic:

[W]hile he is neither inimical nor in his judgements Rhadamanthine – and good will seems to be a prerequisite – [the biographer] introduces an alien point of view, necessarily different from that mixture of self-recrimination and self-justification which the great writer, like lesser men and women, has made the subject of his lifelong conversation with himself. Yet some correction of self-portraiture is warranted because the sense of ourselves which we have in isolation is to a large extent fabricated, an ennoblement or a debasement.”⁵ (“Literary” 3-4)

“Biographers will continue to be archival,” he writes, “but the best ones will offer speculations, conjectures, hypotheses” (18). “Today we want to see our great men at their worst as well as their best [and] we ask of biographers the same candour that our novelists have taught us to expect from them” (5). “The form of biography is countenancing experiments comparable to those of the novel and poem”(18). He twice mentions Boswell, remarking memorably that the greatness of his biography of Johnson is “the sense it imparts of a man utterly recognizable and distinct” (6), and uses that book to stand as the finest example of a work quite different than those written in his own time:

More than anything else we want in modern biography to see the character forming, its peculiarities taking shape – but Boswell prefers to give it to us already formed... Boswell wants to reveal Johnson’s *force* of character, while today we should ask him to disclose to us the inner compulsions, the schizoid elements – such is our modern vocabulary – which lay behind that force. (5)

Despite the inclusive pronouns, however, we realize that in *Oscar Wilde*, Ellmann will do quite the opposite of what “today we should ask” Boswell to do. Ellmann will eschew, even ignore, the treatment of what our “modern vocabulary” seems to make us inevitably consider.⁶ Ellmann will attempt to take a pre-Freudian approach to the biography of Wilde, and while he never draws attention to this, we might imagine he quietly saw the approach as his innovative experiment.⁷ Ellmann’s relationship to Freud’s theories is complicated, however, and a stricter adherent to Freudian criticism might turn elsewhere in the analyst’s thinking and suggest that in ignoring Freudian criticism, Ellmann commits another potential error that Freud in fact anticipated. It is an error that Ellmann even mentions in a citation. He begins:

[W]hile traditional biography was usually animated by a desire to be adulatory or when necessary exculpatory, it could scarcely fail to present details that were irrelevant or perhaps at odds with this motive. The lives of creative writers, as of other men, cannot

consist only of moments of victorious self-transcendence and transcendence of circumstances, but must include pettiness and humiliations. (“Freud”469)

And he quotes Freud at length then, ultimately himself declaring, “This is a vehement indictment that Freud makes, though now a little out of date”:

“[B]iographers are fixated on their heroes in a quite special way. In many cases they have chosen their hero as the subject of their studies because – for reasons of their personal emotional life – they have felt a special affection for them from the very first. They then devote their energies to a task of idealization... To gratify this wish they obliterate the individual features of the subject’s physiognomy. They smooth over the traces of his life’s struggle with internal and external resistances, and they tolerate in him no vestige of human weakness or imperfection. They thus present us with what is in fact a cold, strange, ideal figure, instead of a human being to whom we might feel ourselves distantly related. That they should do this is regrettable, for they thereby sacrifice truth to an illusion, and for the sake of their infantile phantasies abandon the opportunity of penetrating the most fascinating secrets of human nature.” (470)

Any discussion of Freud prepares us to attempt to discern the author’s unexpressed relationship toward his or her subject. This view to a potential fuller understanding coupled with Ellmann’s adherence to an older style of biography forces us to assess the effects of hero-worship if we are willing to see the Wilde biography written to some degree with that approach in mind, in order that it might have been a more true reflection of the intellectual and personal spirit of the characters – the people – involved.⁸ “I think when biographers don’t interpret, they’re not much use,” Ellmann said in 1982 (Robertson 43). We must look carefully at what Ellmann chooses to interpret, and with what method. “In his studies of Yeats, Wilde and Joyce, he had shrewdly fused the celebratory techniques of Victorian biography with the close analytic methods of the New Criticism, essentially advancing an inclusive approach to literature, quite innovative when he began, and comprising a synthesis in a dialectical process,” his four former students write in “Richard Ellmann: The Critic as Artist” (xiii).

These celebratory techniques come under some mild scrutiny after Ellmann’s death. Declan Kiberd writes, “In stressing the affirmative qualities of... writers, he may at times have carried his optimism a little too far” (57).

He used each of the three great biographies to explore himself, managing in that process to convert even Wilde into a genial, witty avuncular charmer (a portrait which, by today's standards, rather overlooked his unpleasant use of rent-boys). All of this amply confirmed Wilde's adage that every portrait reflects more of the artist than of the subject. For Ellmann was in the end an artist, a finished example of the critic as artist.⁹(64)

John Stokes, in an essay published in the *Yeats Annual* devoted in part to remembering Ellmann, is at first more subtle in his criticism of method, then really more cutting, as he maintains in part that method:

[W]hoever the subject, when Ellmann was the biographer the most familiar objection to biographical criticism – that it confines literature to a single personal meaning – lost much of its force. For Ellmann's aim was always to expand the text by insisting upon its wide human reference... Ellmann's readings are always notable for their generosity... [With Wilde] he decided to match his profligate subject with an extravagant, immoderate book. Wilde praised the art of lying: Ellmann doesn't go that far, but nor does he rest with the merely verifiable... Missing evidence is conjured up by wit... Ellmann is both loyal and just, a friend who is able, for instance, to imagine Wilde being beastly to his wife, and who can understand why, without offering any excuse. That way nobody is let down. (131-5)

W.H. Auden said more than a half-century before this that Wilde's marriage to Constance Lloyd was "certainly the most immoral and perhaps the only really heartless act of Wilde's life"(qtd. in McKenna 48), and Neil McKenna goes far in his 2003 book *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* toward re-envisioning Wilde's life as a homosexual and the impact of that life on Wilde's art and society. In my reading of *Oscar Wilde*, I was moved to real contemplation by Ellmann's treatment of the role of Wilde's family in the formation of his character, and of Wilde's preoccupation with, and extensions toward, Roman Catholicism.

Ellmann writes generally of Wilde surpassing his brother in their mother's affections, and mentions at various times the potential to see in her an example of extravagance and creativity and marital tolerance, and in Wilde's father one of realized ambition and extra-marital prodigality. What I was struck by was Ellmann's rendering of Wilde's reactions to his father's death. Wilde's studies are interrupted, he returns home to a dying man who is surrounded by his children – two legitimate and three others – and returns to Oxford after the death (and a detailed paragraph of Ellmann's about the disaster of a will left

behind) – returns “in a sad and self-pitying mood. He saw financial troubles ahead, perhaps for life, and wondered whether, for the sake of so small a legacy, he had been wise to put off the purification of becoming a Catholic”(63) – his father having threatened to disown him. There is no more mention of his father’s life or death after this in the book, only of two publications of his and their tangential relevance to Wilde and his mother, and these two instances both years later. Of Wilde’s very early childhood – to think momentarily in a more common Freudian vein – Ellmann says effectively nothing, choosing to offer as a glimpse into Wilde’s youthful character a letter of the thirteen-year-old to his mother, a theatrical, jubilant note filled with exacting details about his clothing. Ellmann covers this omission of early youth by opening the book with a celebration of Wilde’s greatest gift: “Oscar Wilde first emerges for us into articulate being in 1868... in a letter,” presuming that, apparently like him, this is the only Wilde we really want to know (3). “The person we think of as Oscar Wilde is assembling here,” Ellmann writes after quoting the letter fragment, and proceeds with a dazzling close read of it that tells us from the book’s mere second page that he knows his man completely, unto death, and appreciates him all the way (4-5). In “Literary Biography” Ellmann writes that we “run the danger of being too simple about the [psychological] complexes. We may reduce all achievement to a web of causation until we cannot see the Ego for the Id... And yet the pursuit of the finished man in the child is irresistible for us”(7). In his *Oscar Wilde*, nearly twenty years later, Ellmann would resist.

Concerning the need to take Wilde’s moves toward Catholicism seriously, though Ellmann writes that Wilde so enjoyed “half-choice”(59), Wilde was also someone who managed to get himself blessed six times in his short life by the pope, and who once, visiting a friend who had transformed his own life by joining the seminary, dropped onto his knees to ask for that changed man’s help. In a letter to a friend written in his twenties, from what was for Ellmann a tedious military assignment in Virginia, Ellmann’s friend, Ellsworth Mason read “the first deep stirrings of intellectual life I had seen in [Ellmann] for a year, a poem entitled ‘In Dispraise of Parents’ ...with some fine lines like: ‘In the clutch, in the blow,/ Power lies, but truly lies/ In the tickle, the scratch,/ Using the Christian name,/ jollyng to weakness’(9). I did

not jump up to shout “Aha!” when I read these lines, but I thought it. I thought if Ellmann was terribly disappointed or even resentful over how he was raised, it might explain his seemingly unimaginable mistake, writing in “The Critic as Artist as Wilde” that “Wilde’s characters are invariably parentless. The closest kin allowed is an aunt” (this done on Wilde’s part, he says, to reduce the characters’ “danger of listening to people older than themselves”(30). I am looking at the Id, perhaps, ignoring Ellmann’s caveat, but to address the subject of his Ego¹⁰, I believe an argument can be made to show he felt qualified to make conscious decisions to remove Wilde’s childhood and his parents’ possible profound influence from consideration as critical subjects, and to lessen Wilde’s spirituality, even at the end. “A modern biographer,” Ellmann said, “is bound to attend to incursions of the irrational upon the rational, to look for unexpected connections and unsuspected motivations. For all this Freud remains a model, though no doubt a tricky one”(“Freud” 478).

Did Ellmann feel an affinity – more, a sympathy – with Wilde or his other subjects? He worked for twelve years on the Joyce biography and was taken into confidence by the family for the task. Seemingly by dint of character this American from the mid-west was made by Georgie Hyde-Lees recipient for his perusal of the entire literary remains of William Butler Yeats, becoming “the first scholar to confront what was substantially the entire body of manuscripts of a major twentieth-century writer”(Mason 10). Near the end of his life, in a note to Sean O’Mordha, with whom he was collaborating on a series of documentaries on Irish writers, Ellmann wrote, to let O’Mordha know he would be sending over his own biographical details for the film’s credits, “I’ll write soon about self, alter ego and the *tertium quid* – that strange unknown who does Yeats’s decision making”¹¹ (O’Mordha 30). Truly, his entire career is a record of painstaking work and well-earned success.¹² He landed, ultimately, at Oxford. Of Wilde, in a 1987 article he commented that the great wit represented “a boyhood passion of mine – in all that awkwardness of adolescence how I longed to flay my betters with some of his sentences”(Foley 135). Like Wilde, he had spent a year at Trinity College, Dublin. And in an essay

published in 1974 titled “Oxford in the Seventies,” he begins, “Just why I accepted a chair in English Literature at Oxford in 1970 is a matter I can hardly expect my unconscious mind to confide to my conscious one. That Oxford is, as Oscar Wilde declared with alumnal fervor, ‘the most beautiful thing in England,’ played its part”(567). That he mentions unconscious motives in the first sentence and Wilde in the second is as telling as the title: Wilde was at Oxford in the Eighteen-seventies, Ellmann there a century later. “Ellmann saw himself as on a mission in Oxford to bring the genius of Joyce to the recalcitrant English,” Kiberd writes (68). Wilde, we might say, had seen his own mission as the same, but the Irish genius he brought was his own. Ellmann may have understandably idolized and idealized Wilde, as a genius and as a writer capable of reflecting his age. Had Ellmann altered his own age’s perception and expectation of great writers and literature?

It is at the end of Wilde’s life in Ellmann’s rendering that I am most struck by a decision, a judgement, Ellmann makes concerning Wilde’s spirituality, Wilde’s soulfulness. The decision is conveyed in tone and by insinuation. Describing Wilde’s deathbed acceptance into the Church of Rome, Ellmann writes, “The application of sacred oils to his hands and feet may have been a ritualized pardon for his omissions or commissions, or may have been like putting a green carnation in his buttonhole”(584) – this, a reference to a request Wilde made of his friends on the opening night of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, eight years before. He asked that they all wear a green carnation because one of the actors would be wearing one. ““And what does it mean?”” asked a friend. ““Nothing whatever,”” Wilde said, ““but that is just what nobody will guess””(365). Wilde’s conversion, Ellmann suggests, might have been done simply to make others think there was significance in his act. Ellmann came into his own intellectually in the “arid, secular climate” of Yale in the nineteen-forties (Mason 6), but this does not mean he would be incapable of imagining a subject’s belief in the need for salvation. A hundred years separated them, but Ellmann seems unwilling to countenance the possibility of such a desire, a weakness, or a need perhaps for mystery. Ellmann seems, at the end of the biography, to be unable to isolate Wilde as really needing

anything but himself. In 1967 he treated Wilde's decline in talent, body, and spirit, in more passionate detail:

In recognizing the universality of guilt [the artist] is like Christ; in revealing his own culpability he plays the role of his own Judas. Wilde, who had written in one of his poems that we are ourselves "the lips betraying and the life betrayed," had in fact brought about his own conviction. The result was that he was remarried to the society from which he had divorced himself; he was no outcast, for he accepted and even sought the punishment which other men, equally guilty, would only submit to vicariously through him, just as all the prisoners suffer with the doomed murderer. By means of submission and suffering he gives his life a new purpose, and writes over the palimpsest once again. ("Critic" 36)

Twenty years later there is none of this speculative interpretation concerning transformation.¹³

It's entirely possible, of course, that Ellmann learned from Freud to include his subject's weaknesses – "I think we can attribute to Freud the way that our biographical attention has been directed away from the perfection of artifacts and onto the imperfection of artificers" ("Freud" 472) – but if this is so, in his admiration for Wilde, Ellmann perhaps turned these weaknesses into strengths, essentially committing the error he cites Freud warning against to begin with. Sartre, as a biographer of Baudelaire, Ellmann says, focuses on weakness and finds Baudelaire's success hard to "clarify or even admit" ("Literary" 7).

Ellmann seems to suffer the same way for Wilde's weaknesses and failures.¹⁴

This is unfortunate. We rely on an author for the fulfillment of every promise we feel is made in a work and at the end of *Oscar Wilde* one promise is unfulfilled. Wilde is said to have repeated three weeks before his death that his father would not let him convert. "Much of my moral obliquity is due to the fact that my father would not allow me to become a Catholic. The artistic side of the Church and the fragrance of its teaching would have cured my degeneracies. I intend to be received before long" (583). "God, make me a good man, but not yet" – Augustine's wonderfully human prayer is here, of course, but so is Augustine's larger example of true yearning and painful inability. Wilde equates his father with his own spiritual deficiencies and Ellmann addresses neither subject. For Ellmann, God was dead and so was Freud.

As in most silences, however, there lies an answer. Wilde early in his career said the secret of life was beauty, and later, after his release from prison, said it was suffering. One might argue that for Wilde, the Roman Catholic Church could make suffering beautiful. Here there is a plexus of ideas – art, life, lineage, spirit, individual identity and *Anima Mundi*, control and submission – a complex that requires treatment, a classicist’s touch, a philologist’s, or an aesthete’s. “The highest criticism is the record of one’s soul,” Wilde said (qtd. in “Critic” 30), and at the end of his life more than once remarked that he would write no more because he was now happy only to be – no longer needed to know. This was a man growing spiritual, flirting in his way with the submission to mystery after so many years of needing to have the last word, needing to be right. The silence in the work is simply Ellmann, too, dying sometime between its completion and its release, and knowing he was dying as he finished. Perhaps Ellmann, near the end himself, could not write of his hero giving in, and removed any need for pity when he himself, quietly, not famously, in Sean O’Mordha’s words, “facing the inevitable with energy and tenacity...finished his *Oscar Wilde* in the months that were left... [with] heroic persistence” (30). Ellmann had been diagnosed with Motor Neurone disease in 1986, and in reserving, even withholding pity, he may have been making a decision about the importance of his own opinion concerning Wilde’s opinions – here about death – even when those opinions may have been in opposition. It was a decision he may have needed to make, in “my own construction of his situation at a given time,” to use his phrase. For what Wilde’s life said in this case about the past did not matter, only what it said about the future did, as in our admiration of others we do not seek only examples of how to live but also how to die, and perhaps without fear, or self-pity. At this final stage of the book, when mystery is to be embraced for its integrity, I hoped for a closing paragraph to rival the one Ellmann crafted to close the section detailing the changes Wilde had undergone at Oxford, emerging, at last fully formed, to take on the world:

This sudden perception of a truth opposed to the home truth we are all prepared to acknowledge, and just as plausible, was Wilde’s answer to what he called the “violence of opinion” exhibited, as he saw, by most of his contemporaries. He traced his own detachment from that violence to Oxford, where he said he had learned “the Oxford temper,” though it was really his own temper. By the time he left the university he could see that life’s complexity could not easily be codified into thirty-nine or even forty-nine

articles, into ten or twenty commandments, into pluses and minuses awarded to this person or that creed. Wilde was a moralist, in a school where Blake, Nietzsche, and even Freud were his fellows. The object of life is not to simplify it. As our conflicting impulses coincide, as our repressed feelings vie with our expressed ones, as our solid views disclose unexpected striations, we are all secret dramatists. In this light Wilde's works become exercises in self-criticism as well as pleas for tolerance. (99-100)

For Oscar Wilde would change again, making of his life the constant experiment of the effect of lives on art and art on lives. After waiting almost one hundred pages, Ellmann delivers this interpretation that takes a worshipful, Victorian approach to a figure who called all the Victorians' notions into question and uses their hero-worship against them to say they missed the chance to worship the right man.

One last word on this Modernist who chose to die a Victorian? He would always be the famous Oscar Wilde, after all. He had seen to that.

Notes

1. Ellmann, "Literary" 19.

2. Also, *James Joyce* remains the only work of non-fiction to appear on the front page of the *New York Times* book review for its first and second editions. The second edition was released twenty years later and contained more than one hundred pages of new material.

3. From the Dictionary of Literary Biography: "He has gone far toward setting the standard for modern critical biography... [bringing] readers the humanity as well as the history"(Foley 126).

From a former student of Ellmann's at Oxford, Declan Kiberd, currently at University College Dublin and *The Irish Times*: "He seemed to be one of those great comparative critics produced out of the migratory experiences of the first half of the twentieth century: a cosmopolitan polymath" (58). And: "Scholars in particular will tell one another of his many acts of kindness done by stealth and discovered long afterwards"(53)... "He treated Joyce as a uxorious family man, arguing that his concern for his family gave his work its human dignity: in saying such things, Ellmann might have been describing his own experience. His gift for empathy, with his subjects as well as his informants, was a decisive factor in winning the confidence of the writers' families as he went about his work" (64). And last, this: "Ellmann features now not only as a Joycean but as a fully comprehensive figure in his own right. The writings of Yeats, Wilde and Beckett, as well as those of Joyce, seem quite inseparable from his explanations of them: and in helping the world to understand the Irish modernists, Ellmann inevitably helped the Irish to know themselves."

For a novelist's perspective of Ellmann and the two major works, there is Anthony Burgess from the publicity material on the jacket of the first American edition of *Oscar Wilde*: "[A] great book... the second of his masterpieces... a product of long and meticulous labour, which is also an expression of Ellmann's exquisite critical sense, wide and deep learning, and profound humanity."

For a poet's perspective: "Ellmann was a scholar and biographer of unparalleled scope and meticulousness, one who possessed a commanding sense of the whole outline of his subjects and a delicate capacity for eliciting fully-fledged meaning by brooding upon details. He was also a critic with a unique double gift: his illuminations were as felicitous as his judgements were authoritative. He could maintain subtle, receptive vigilance over a text and explicate it within the idiom of his profession; but he could also produce a kind of Johnsonian meditation that considered what the text was worth to the fuller enjoyment or better enduring of our unspecialized lives... This was because his writing, like his conduct, came out of that place from which, according to the poet Ted Hughes, the truest poetry also comes: the place in us where our ultimate capacity for suffering and decision is lodged. To meet Richard Ellmann was to encounter a gathered force. I was always moved by a feeling that innate gifts of fortitude, tenderness and fairness had been consecrated to a discipline, one which placed immense intellectual and personal demands upon him but which rewarded him with a rock-bottom emotional verity. In Keats's terms, he was an intelligence who had been schooled into a soul..." (Heaney 18-9).

4. Cf. Dick, et al.: "In consequence of the clarity and readability of his style and his genuine illumination of the texts, his audience extended well beyond the academy... He had the gift not of simplification, but of explanation"(xv). And Sean O'Mordha: "The seemingly unimportant was important. He once laughingly said to me, 'Don't you think the way a genius knots his tie is important?'"(29).

5. We remember that Joyce famously called biographers "biografiends" and Wilde said that while every great man has his disciples, it's usually Judas who writes the biography (qtd. in "Literary" 3). Also, cf.

Ellmann: “Oscar Wilde once remarked that biography ‘adds to death a new terror, and makes one wish that all art were anonymous’”(“Freud” 468).

6. For further consideration of Ellmann’s estimation of Boswell’s influence and importance, see his response to the question of an interviewer for the *Miami Herald* – “What biographers have been influential in your own work?” – in which Ellmann talks about trying to ignore external circumstances in Yeats’s life, as Yeats tried to do, but included, ultimately, politics, friendships, love affairs, tried to do the same with Joyce, but sought out friends and family too, because Joyce was dead. Boswell had Johnson as a subject while still alive, Ellmann says, but is the one influence he supposes he himself had in mind (Robertson 44).

7. And cf. Dick, et al.: “Ellmann was born, as a critic, into an age of New Criticism and he died in an age of critical theory. Though he had friends and even close relations in both camps... he never fully belonged to either. He always strove for ethical standards, but he was too sophisticated and good-natured to state in categorical terms what those standards might be. And he never proclaimed a hard and fast critical method, preferring to allow each of his chosen texts to dictate its own special terms, but he was always willing if asked to do so, to examine the assumptions on which his practices were based”(xvii).

8. Consider Foley: “For Ellmann biography was a many-faceted and subtle interpretive art... He manipulated tone to present a profound and humane portrait of Oscar Wilde”(139).

9. And Kiberd again, best considered alongside his remark that Ellmann was an artist: “In all of Ellmann’s seminars when a text came up for discussion his first advice to students was: ‘Let us take the writer’s part.’ Although he was honest enough to include much that was unflattering about Joyce’s selfishness, his neglect of his children and his exploitation of his brother while writing *Ulysses*, he overrode those elements with a narrative of his own about the essential decency of a great artist. It was as if Ellmann were in agreement with Dr. Johnson who believed that a good artist cannot really be a bad man”(64).

10. And see Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (qtd. in Foley 128): “We can say only with many qualifications that a given experience inspired a particular verse.”

11. Also, consider here Ellmann’s fusion of himself and Joyce in task and pronouns: “I think there’s something very peculiar about literary work, that it is a private matter, and while you’re no doubt affected by everything that’s going on – Joyce was terribly interested in politics, religion and everything else – you’re at the same time alone with a piece of paper in the way that a historical character isn’t”(Robertson44).

12. And in Foley: “While working toward his doctorate Ellmann was appointed to an instructorship at Harvard University in 1942. He left in 1943 to serve in the navy and with the Office of Strategic Services. In 1945, while serving in the military, he traveled the British Isles and interviewed Yeats’s friends and family, particularly the poet’s widow. In the article ‘At the Yeatses’ in the *New York Review of Books* (17 May 1979) Ellmann describes Mrs. Yeats’s generosity in the preparation of his dissertation...: ‘When I came to know her, she had been sorting and arranging Yeats’s books and papers, “a hen picking up scraps,” as she said. I was grateful to her not only for lending me manuscripts, a suitcase at a time, but for helping to interpret them... I learned from Mrs. Yeats, in fragments of recollection, something of what Yeats was like.’ Ellmann also met Maud Gonne [infamous object of Yeats’s unrequited love], then eighty-two, who received the biographer like a ‘young man come to call.’ Ellmann recalled that he, too, felt as though he was paying a ‘courtly visit’.”

Consider also, from Ellmann's interview with the *Miami Herald*, this anecdote with an air of predestination to it: "I had an instructor in college [Yale] who gave us some anonymous poems, one of which was by Yeats, and it made a tremendous impression upon me. So I got interested in Yeats and read a good deal of him and when I was trying to think of what to write a doctoral dissertation on, why there was this Irish friend of mine who said, 'You're working on Yeats, aren't you?' and I said, 'Yes,' and that was when I discovered it"(44).

From Dick et al., on the determined and independent-minded young scholar: "It took courage, as well as an extraordinary perspicacity, for a young graduate to stake his career on the poetry of W.B. Yeats. The sheer complexity of Yeats's art, the wayward sophistication of his sensibility, and the apparent eccentricity of many of his ideas were formidable obstacles to full appreciation of his achievement. But Richard Ellmann and a small number of gifted contemporaries accepted the challenge of modernism to occupy themselves with 'the fascination of what's difficult'"(xiii). Cf. Ellmann: "Wilde thought of himself as a voice of the age to be rather than of the one that was fading. Yet like anyone else writing criticism in the later 19th century, he had to come to terms with the age that had been, and especially with everybody's parent, Matthew Arnold. Wilde sought Arnold's approbation for his first book, *Poems*, in 1881, which he sent with a letter stressing their shared Oxonian connections"("Critic" 30).

13. At the top of that paragraph from the 1967 essay, Ellmann explains that Yeats had once upon a time edited down "The Ballad of Reading Gaol": In 1936, Yeats removed Wilde's ideas about universal criminality before publishing the poem in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* ("Critic" 35-6). Ellmann, fifty years later, neglects to discuss the poem's – and the poet's – religious assertions. No one seems to have ever been able to accept Wilde in his entirety.

14. And see David J. Gordon's laudatory remark on Ellmann's *Golden Codgers: Biographical Speculations* (1973), in the *Yale Review* (Spring 1974) concerning "Ellmann's ability to look unblinkingly at human weaknesses without a trace of condescension, without forgetting the strengths from which they are inseparable"(qtd. in Foley 134).

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