



RICHARD ELLMANN

Richard Ellmann 1918–1987

RICHARD ELLMANN was fortunate to begin his career just as modernism was becoming an admissible academic topic. It was his genius to give it critical mass in his work on the three Irish titans, Yeats, Joyce and Wilde. It was genius too, as well as good fortune, that led him to approach them in that order, three monosyllables that will be his epitaph. The first step in this progress began in September 1945 when, assigned from the US Navy back to the Office of Strategic Services and posted to London, he was able to find his way to Dublin and visit the poet's widow, George Yeats. She was already the watchful guardian of Yeats's posthumous reputation, as aware as T. S. Eliot that he was 'one of those few poets whose history is the history of their own time, who are part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them'. But previous visitors had been few. Yeats had died at Roquebrune in January 1939, and his fame dwindled, his books out of print during the war. So that meeting, three years before Yeats's body returned to be reinterred 'under Ben Bulbin', was as full of significance for Mrs Yeats as for Dick Ellmann, American and just half her age. On the face of it, the situation was ripe with possibilities for mutual misunderstanding, but, as he recalled in the preface to the second edition (1979) of *Yeats: the Man and the Masks*, they hit it off at once.

Such a dénouement, determining his future, could hardly have been imagined as he grew up in Highland Park, Detroit, where he was born on 15 March 1918. He did well at school, well enough to go on to Yale, where he graduated 'with exceptional distinction' in English in 1939. He went on to complete an MA thesis on 'The social philosophy of Thomas Carlyle'

(1941). But this overlaid an earlier and deeper passion. His Yale colleague Ellsworth Mason, lifelong friend and collaborator, whose job at the University Library it was to put out for public use duplicate catalogues from the acquisitions department, observed that he 'was already heavily into Yeats, and when I noticed him looking at the catalogues I volunteered to call his attention to all Yeats items in the catalogues I handled. From an ample allowance he was able to buy most of what I found, and had bought more than two-thirds of Yeats in first editions at prices from US\$3.50 to US\$8.00 before he left Yale for war service in 1942.¹

This was another stroke of luck; even a year later he might not have found catalogues or books as easily or frequently. His MA thesis complete, Mason recalls that Ellmann took the same route as other Yale graduate students. Armed with a recommendation from Frederick Pottle, Director of Graduate Studies in English, he called on another Yale man, Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, who had abandoned the pursuit of Horace Walpole to become head of a section of the Coordinator of Information, a new government agency that was to become the Office of Strategic Services. There he became a unit head in March 1942, but in August he was invited to become an instructor at Harvard, where he spent the next year. It was then that he read Joseph Hone's *W. B. Yeats*, just published (London, 1942), thoroughly, and his verdict, 'competent and safe', already shows that he surmised how much more there was to be found out. A year later he was drafted into the US Navy. He found relief from the boredom of a unit in Virginia that dealt with constructing airfields and other buildings by writing poetry, some published in the *Kenyon Review* (he did not take up Dodd, Mead's offer to publish a book of them). He was later moved to Washington, but at the end of the year a better chance came his way, when he was transferred back to the Office of Strategic Services and posted to Paris, on the staff of the Commander of US Naval Forces, France.

Paris was the first European city that Ellmann lived in long enough to attempt the difficult task of extracting from its outward appearance, the townscape, and from the speech of the people he met, its essence, to be rendered in the original or in translation. He could absorb an amazing amount of heterogeneous facts and impressions, as quickly as a dry sponge soaks up water, and as quickly put both in order. In 1945 this was an instinctive trait, born of a desire to order new material, factual or

¹E. Mason, 'Ellmann's road to Xanadu', in S. Dick, D. Kiberd, D. McMillan and J. Ronsley (eds.), *Omnium Gatherum: Essays for Richard Ellmann* (Gerrards Cross, 1989), p. 6.

imaginative, in a logical or at least useful order. One outlet was writing verse, and more of his poetry appeared in the Yale *Furioso* and the *Kenyon Review*. In the long term, however, meeting Henri Michaux proved more important. Cosmopolitan, orientalist, artist as well as poet, Michaux's references were both difficult and challenging. The sense of a mind barely in control of characters struggling to impose order on a fluid universe, with only the writer's own ironic humour to relieve the struggle, made new demands on his intellect and linguistic skill. Two dozen poems in translation, published separately in the *Partisan*, *Kenyon* and *Sewanee Reviews* and elsewhere between 1946 and 1953, culminated in *L'Espace Dedans: the Space Within* (New York, 1951), translated and with an introduction by Ellmann. Absorbing the impressions of his year in Paris in 1945 and translating Michaux's abstract and 'difficult' prose and verse were an apprenticeship for other practical and semantic challenges that lay ahead.

While in Paris he met his Yale colleague Norman Pearson, now head of the Office of Strategic Services in London, who summoned him there. London was a new city to explore, English English a new language to learn, but it was from this point of departure, by this circuitous route, that Ellmann arrived in Dublin in September 1945.

At 46 Palmerston Road, Rathmines, the first sight of Mrs Yeats's study, which had been her husband's, was astonishing. There in the bookcases was his working library, often heavily annotated, and in cabinets and file cases were all his manuscripts, arranged with care by his widow. She was very good at hunting up at once some early draft of a poem or play or prose work, or a letter Yeats had received or written. When complimented, she said she was just a hen picking up scraps. Among the scraps were all Yeats's letters to Lady Gregory, done up in innumerable small bundles according to year, with ribbons to hold them together. I asked her about Yeats's first meeting with Joyce, and she showed me an unpublished preface to *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903) in which Yeats described that singular occasion. I evinced a perhaps unexpected interest in the magical order to which Yeats belonged, the Golden Dawn; she opened a chest and took out his implements and regalia and rituals. Agape at such profusion, I could only say that I would like to return after the War, and she replied, 'I hope you will.' So it came about that I spent the year 1946–7 in Dublin, working with these books and papers.²

Ellmann already knew, or sensed, what was needed if such an encounter was to be fruitful: knowledge, intimate and sympathetic, of every least detail that could be found out in advance, about life, then limited to Hone's biography, and works, now being reprinted, and the background, literary

²R. Ellmann, *Yeats: the Man and the Masks*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1979), pp. xi–xii.

and political, behind both. He knew Yeats in print as well as anyone could; already aware of the textual complexities (Yeats had passively or by accident authorised different printed editions in his last decade), he had now to come to terms with a wealth of manuscript beyond computation. Beyond that, he had also to relate a sociology of Ireland learned from print to the reality around him, picking his way through the minefields of a family with three Yeatses (as seen by widow, son and daughter), with Maud Gonne MacBride still alive, Gogarty self-exiled in New York, other friends old and new at odds over every aspect of his complex character, with lowering suspicion from the clergy, and the embers of politics, quiescent during the war, blown red by Seán MacBride and the newly founded Clann na Poblachta. Just as with George Yeats, Ellmann won all hearts by his unforced charm, his wit, always an asset in Dublin at any time, and his integrity, proof against seduction or battery.

This familiarity, so early acquired, saw him through all the far-ranging enquiries that followed. He knew well what they would be: ‘He had fallen into a gold mine and was fully confident that he would emerge from it with most of the important nuggets already shaped into imperishable form.’³ The work to which he had set his hand did not cease when he returned to Washington that autumn. Ellsworth Mason was already back at Yale, whence he sent extracts of Yeats’s letters from John Quinn’s sale catalogue, but on 5 May Ellmann was able to report: ‘This is the eve of my demobilization. I go to Bainbridge⁴ tomorrow and prepare to re-enter the world of the living.’ Next month he was back in Dublin, ensconced at the United Arts Club.

There is a vivid picture of that second and longer visit in John Kelleher’s ‘With Dick in Dublin’,⁵ revealing the ease with which he picked up the threads, not only of last year’s visit, but of still vital memories of Yeats. They met his younger brother, the painter Jack Yeats, met Maud Gonne, or rather Madame MacBride. She did most of the talking, reciting familiar facts. Kelleher wondered if Dick had got anything useful out of the interview: ‘It wasn’t until much later that I realized that in these interviews he could perceive clearly many things, small significant traits of personality for instance, that I, with my all-too-ready judgments, might miss completely.’ They met H. O. White at Trinity College, who opened more doors in Dublin than anyone else and said ‘Yeats is still everywhere in this

³Dick *et al.*, *Omnium Gatherum*, p. 10.

⁴The Naval Training Center in Maryland.

⁵Dick *et al.*, *Omnium Gatherum*, pp. 13–22.

town.' Kelleher bought a bicycle and explored the south, returning to urge Dick to join him on the last leg of his trip. They climbed Ben Bulbin, and met those who remembered Yeats. As they headed north to Donegal, Ellmann came to dislike the bicycle. He took the train back to Dublin from Londonderry, leaving his companion with a lasting impression of what he intended:

I really came to understand what Dick was doing. His way was to come armed with more, and generally more detailed and reliable, knowledge than he could expect the person interviewed to have, yet never to bring this forward, scarcely ever to interrupt. He let them talk; he showed himself grateful for what they told him; now and then with a quiet question he would elicit some particular point, and in leaving would express his thanks again. He left them smiling and thinking what a nice young man!

Though I then wondered that he thought the trouble worth it, for in view of what he already knew the ore he could extract from these interviews would scarcely assay at one-percent, when, a year later, I was reading his book in type-script I saw how much this constant concern for small facts, minor interrelations, contributed to the consistency and authenticity of the portrait.⁶

This method, thus sympathetically and shrewdly described, underlies Ellmann's three great books, *Yeats: the Man and the Masks* (New York, 1948), *James Joyce* (New York, 1959) and *Oscar Wilde* (London, 1987). That is not to diminish his mastery of the biographer's regular resources, the reading of documents, letters, diaries, directories, timetables, the ever critical balance between fact, in print and script, against the spoken evidence of witnesses, and beyond both the words and images in creative writing. The eye and ear for detail was like a dynamo, always gently humming, applied to a pupil's essay or response to a seminar question as well as his own critical writing. It was one of the reasons why he was much admired and loved as a teacher; those who read what he wrote knew they were in safe hands.

The winter and spring of 1946–7 found Ellmann in Dublin, shuttling between the United Arts Club and Buswell's Hotel, suffering from flu, and writing two theses at once, 'William Butler Yeats: the fountain years' for a Litt.B. from Trinity College, Dublin, where H. O. White was a constant friend and guide to Yeats's early years, and 'Triton among the streams: a study of the life and writings of William Butler Yeats' for his Yale Ph.D. (all but lost in transit by Pan American in April). This combination was no light task, but it was punctuated by another visit to the Continent, and

⁶Ibid., p. 19.

the beginnings of work on Joyce, shared with Ellsworth Mason, for whom he bought a map of Dublin and *Thom's Official Directory of Dublin* for 1904. By August he was home at Highland Park, and September found him at Harvard, picking up the threads of his pre-war stint as an Instructor. His Yale thesis was duly rewarded with a doctorate, awarded the John Addison Porter prize for the best dissertation of the year in 1947; it was the first given by Yale for work on a twentieth-century writer. Swiftly adapted for publication, it was accepted by Macmillan and came out in 1948. Its reception made it clear that Ellmann's was a rising talent; it also recognised his work as a milestone in the understanding of Yeats's poetry. Articles followed in the *Kenyon Review*, *Western Review* and *Partisan Review*. Harvard promoted him to be Briggs-Copeland Assistant Professor of English Composition, with five years' tenure.

Before his first year was out, an event of lasting significance to his future took place: he met Mary Donahue and they were married on 12 August 1949. Women, apart from Mrs Yeats, had not been conspicuous in Ellmann's life hitherto. Mary Donahue was already conspicuous. Famous as a feminist critic, the future author of *Thinking about Women* (London, 1968) in which she ruthlessly examined male stereotypes of women from Jane Austen to Norman Mailer, she brought a sharp edge, a touch of acid, to what was always an equal partnership. What united them was wit, Dick's like the summer lightning that plays about the clouds, Mary's a bolt that struck straight to earth. They did not, in the event, stay long in Cambridge, Ellmann diverging from his teaching duties to begin a critical study of Yeats's poetry. As his tenure at Harvard was only temporary, in 1952 he accepted appointment as Professor of English at Northwestern University, three years after the university's first computer was installed in a spare room in the observatory. The Ellmann family moved to Evanston, Illinois, a dozen miles north of Chicago, which was to be their home for the next sixteen years.

In 1954 Ellmann's study of Yeats's poetry was published as *The Identity of Yeats* (London), to further applause, and he became a regular reviewer, every literary editor's first choice, of any and every book on Yeats that appeared, with occasional diversions to James Gould Cozzens, Conrad, Hemingway, Wallace Stevens, Tom Stoppard and Auden. Beckett too was never far away, but increasingly Joyce came to dominate Ellmann's work and life. When he reached Evanston, one of the first of the new colleagues that he met was Walter B. Scott, who introduced him to the parodies in 'The oxen of the sun'. Another was James F. Spierri, whose Joyce collection, seen before it was sold to Kansas University next year, convinced

him that a biography could be written. He corresponded with Joyce's bibliographers, John Slocum and Herbert Cahoon, and picked up the first threads lain down by Harry Levin. A first essay on Joyce and Yeats appeared in the *Kenyon Review* in 1950, reprinted as 'The hawklike man' in *Eminent Domain* (New York, 1967). Six more such studies, all important, appeared in the next three years, one of them, 'The grasshopper and the ant', reflecting on Joyce and his brother Stanislas. He edited the latter's *My Brother's Keeper: James Joyce's Early Years*, long in gestation but published posthumously only in 1958 (London); with his old friend Ellsworth Mason, he also edited *The Critical Writings of James Joyce* (New York, 1959).

But these were casual ports of call on the long journey from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to *Finnegans Wake*. With the encouragement of Frank O'Connor and Carroll G. Bowen, he set to work, going to Europe in 1953, 1954 and 1956, visiting every place in which Joyce's wandering life had been spent and revisiting Dublin to walk the streets that are the setting, the greatest of all walking-on parts, of *Ulysses*. The copious pages of acknowledgements read like a travelogue: Joyce's surviving friends and acquaintances, collectors of his works, libraries and archives—he visited them all, making friends wherever he went, who saw him depart with sadness. Harriet Shaw Weaver, Joyce's muse, publisher and now literary executor was, he wrote, 'constantly generous to me; otherwise I could not have proceeded with the book'. She let him read her letters, published and unpublished and, although in her eighties, read the eventual manuscript. That ran to some 350,000 words, a prodigious achievement, the more so as there is not a wasted word in it from start to finish. There are 265,000 words in *Ulysses*, and if ever an author deserved to have half as many words again written about him as he himself wrote, it was Joyce. Time after time, the minute details of daily life weave in and out of Joyce's imaginings, and through them into his writings. The record wanders on, as shapeless and as shaped as the epigraphs to each chapter that Ellmann chose from *Finnegans Wake*: 'The verisimilitude in *Ulysses* is so compelling that Joyce has been derided as more mimic than creator, which charge, being untrue, is the greatest praise of all.'⁷

A biographer cannot get behind the skin of his subject without becoming, to some extent, part of the subject. If the subject is also in part the creation of his or her own fiction, that image has to be fitted into the mould of the day-to-day reality of the occurrences making up the life. These

⁷R. Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York, 1959), p. 363.

parallels and paradoxes returned to Ellmann when he gave his inaugural lecture on 'Literary Biography' at Oxford in 1971. Now, in 1959, the critics were overcome less by the concept of nature imitating art than by the sheer volume of all the new information about Joyce, and with it the inwardness of his fiction. Long as it was, Ellmann's biography was not long enough for those to whom Joyce's life and writings were an unending mystery. The symbolisms that lay everywhere were now accumulated in a labour that was not itself laborious because it was patently a labour of love. It was clear to the critics that the talent seen growing in *Yeats: the Man and the Masks* had now matured in a gigantic masterpiece that set in focus the largest and most intractable monument of modernist writing. 'That great biography of yours has it all', wrote Mason, 'we can throw the other books away.'⁸ A reputation in his own field was exchanged for a larger one on an international scale. His pupils, a small army on their own, found they had to share their devotion with hundreds of admirers stretching beyond academic bounds. He rewarded them with more writing and an influence freely lent to forward the careers of his students. 'The power you wield!' exclaimed Mason, 'God save us you never take over the Mafia!'⁹

He did not, even if his reputation in Dublin fell not far short of it. He continued to pursue Yeats and Joyce, and in 1966 that other figure, never far away among all his Irish explorations, finally entered the scene. The impetus came from Charles Ryskamp, professor of English at Princeton, whose idea it was, with E. D. N. Johnson and Alfred Bush, to put on an exhibition 'Wilde and the Nineties', drawing on the university collections and that of Mary Hyde (later Viscountess Eccles), near by at Four Oaks Farm, New Jersey. It was Ryskamp's inspiration, too, to ask Ellmann to contribute an essay to the catalogue. 'The critic as artist as Wilde' was the result, launching Ellmann fairly on his third great biographical voyage. This was followed shortly after by *Eminent Domain: Yeats among Wilde, Joyce, Pound, Eliot and Auden* (New York, 1967), five essays whose titles—'Oscar and Oisín', 'The Hawklike Man', 'Ez and Old Billyum', 'Possum's Conversion' and 'Gazebos and Gashouses'—revealed an easy familiarity with all the complex relationships of his heroes.

In 1965 he and his Yale classmate Charles Feidelson published *The Modern Tradition* (New York), an anthology of key modernist texts that became a manifesto for a branch of study, remote twenty-five years earlier, that had become a new orthodoxy. Ellmann was now at the summit. He

⁸ 28 Dec. 1974.

⁹ 6 Oct. 1978.

had enjoyed two Guggenheim Fellowships in 1950 and 1957; another came in 1970. Other universities pressed their claims on him, but he remained faithful to Northwestern, which promoted him to a personal chair in 1964, the Franklin Bliss Snyder Professorship of English, named after the university's president in 1939–49. He was a Fellow of the School of Letters in Indiana University in 1956 and 1960, Senior Fellow 1966–72, and Frederick Ives Carpenter Visiting Professor at the neighbouring University of Chicago in 1959, 1967 and 1975–7. He was chairman of the Modern Language Association session on contemporary literature in 1955, member of the Executive Council 1961–5 and the Editorial Committee 1968–73, and American Scholar 1968–74. He became a member of the American Academy, and won the National Book Award in 1960. He was Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1979. He had honorary degrees from the National University of Ireland, Boston College, Emory, Northwestern, McGill, Gothenburg and Rochester universities.

All this had happened or was in the wings when Ellmann left Northwestern in 1968 to take up the chair of English at Yale. He was to return to the scene of his first academic triumphs, and seemed set to end his career there. But despite the solidity of the reputation thus consecrated, despite the honours, awards and responsibilities that went with it, there was a gipsy streak in Ellmann that resisted proprieties and certainty. Among the many who had courted him before were his English admirers, and even after leaving Northwestern, for good, it seemed, he had not been dismissive of such approaches: 'established at Yale, he could predict exactly which meetings he would be attending on any given day in the foreseeable future; Oxford offered no such predictability'.¹⁰ In 1969 he was invited to apply for the Goldsmiths' chair of English at Oxford. His mind was now increasingly bent on Wilde, and the chance to be within easy striking distance of the places where Wilde had spent so much of his life, besides the archival and library resources, was too tempting to be resisted. All seemed set for another, more adventurous change of direction when in December Mary Ellmann had a cerebral haemorrhage; an operation on the aneurysm failed, and she found herself condemned to a wheel-chair existence. Ellmann quickly adapted to this change at the centre of family life. Mary was adamant that the planned move should go ahead, and Dick was duly elected to the chair, and the fellowship of New College that went with it.

¹⁰ John Kelly, 'Ellmann, Richard David (1918–1987)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/39805>> (accessed 24 March 2014).

They made their home at 39 St Giles', where they kept open house to graduate students, new friends and old, visiting from America. Nothing at Yale, Harvard or Northwestern had quite prepared the cosmopolitan Ellmanns for Oxford, but they took to it with an infectious gaiety, his wit striking sparks off the local wits, her now slow speech adding trenchancy to hers. He gave his inaugural lecture on 'Literary Biography' on 4 May 1971. Lecturing came easily to him, but he preferred the give and take of the seminar, to ask questions, to suggest not dictate answers. No text was impenetrable to inquiry: 'Let's take the poet's part', he would urge,¹¹ certain that the clue could be found.

More books followed: his extraordinary return journey, *Ulysses on the Liffey* (New York, 1972), 'a Great Pyramid filled with beautifully worked out puzzles and penetrations', reconstructing the text from its Dublin roots (he was always the most scientific of symbolic critics), and *Golden Codgers* (London, 1973), a series of 'biographical speculations', including 'Literary Biography' and 'The Critic as Artist as Wilde', and other essays on George Eliot, Wilde's *Salome*, André Gide and T. S. Eliot. *The Consciousness of Joyce* (London, 1977) pursued a constant theme in both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. A second edition of *Yeats the Man and the Masks* came out in 1979 (Oxford), with a new preface recounting how Mrs Yeats had introduced him to the manuscripts and her memories, and how that had led to meeting Maud Gonne, the first flame of Yeats's life.¹²

But all the time the life of Wilde was hammering away in Ellmann's mind, waiting to be let out. He had edited his critical writings, collected a series of critical essays on Wilde (*The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, and *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*: both in London, 1969). He had lectured on Wilde in love and at Oxford. He had edited *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York, 1982). But these were side-shows. In attempting the life of Wilde he had one great asset that was also a huge disadvantage. Allan Wade, actor, collector and bibliographer of Yeats, had over many years collected, and in 1954 finally published, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London). This had come too late for *Yeats: the Man and the Masks*, but Ellmann had known Wade and references to 'unp. Ltr' acknowledge his help. Wade had also been pursuing the letters of Oscar Wilde as industriously, but had not finished his work when he

¹¹Dick *et al.*, *Omnium Gatherum*, p. xiv.

¹²He made one uncharacteristic error. He described the copy of *A Selection of the Love Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (Dublin, 1913) that Yeats had given to her as with 'the only pages that she had troubled to cut were the ones that contained poems written to her'. It was those that were uncut.

died in 1955. He left the task to his publisher, Rupert Hart-Davis, who had brought out *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*. Already the author of *Hugh Walpole: a Biography* (London, 1952), Hart-Davis had a fair idea of the task ahead, but no one could have foreseen how long it would take, how much time to satisfy the standards of accuracy in transcription and annotation that Hart-Davis set himself and his many helpers. *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* came out in 1962 (London), to universal applause, almost every one of the reviewers announcing that despite all the many previous biographies it would obviate the need for any other. All this mass of material was already there for Ellmann; it also stood in his way.

Finally, he set to work, threading his way through the still smouldering embers of the controversies of Wilde's life and those who had tried to explain them with his usual grace and tact. As with Joyce, he left no detail unexplored, a harder task than with Joyce: all the events were that much longer ago, and overlain, then and later, with contradictions and argument. Many had been cleared up by Hart-Davis's *Letters*, but inevitably there were others unmentioned in Wilde's correspondence. Some of these aspects of the 'hidden Wilde', so to speak, such as the belief that syphilis contracted at Oxford, present but latent until his final illness, explained much of his sexual ambiguity, were risky, but Ellmann was not averse to risks and surprised his peers by the ease with which he accepted correction if it came. He made many new friends as well as new discoveries during the research and writing which increasingly occupied his time. Rupert Hart-Davis was foremost among them, reading what he wrote as he wrote it. Merlin Holland, Wilde's grandson, provided family photographs and memories. Mary Hyde, later Lady Eccles, gave him full access to her collection. The William Andrews Clark Library at Los Angeles, with the largest institutional collection in the world, was as generous.

Besides the various chips from the Wilde workbench, he continued to write on all the subjects that had engaged him. A great deal of work went into a second edition of *James Joyce*, substantially revised with the help of Catherine Carver (Oxford, 1982); used to the editorial supplications of Saul Bellow and John Updike, she worked on Ellmann's prose with the same affection and acumen. Mary Reynolds provided other suggestions and 'a new and much more elaborate index', a great improvement. The new edition came out in 1982, and won the James Tait Black and Duff Cooper Prizes the following year. He gave the British Academy's Sara Tryphena Phillips Lecture on 'Henry James among the aesthetes' on 19 May 1983, and lectured twice at the Library of Congress, 'W. B. Yeats's second puberty', about Yeats's experiment with the Steinach operation, on 2 April

1984, and 'Samuel Beckett, Nayman of Nayland', his first formal approach to the fourth Irish pillar of modernism, on 16 April 1985. His most recent occasional pieces were gathered together in *Four Dubliners: Wilde, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett* (London, 1986). His last new writing to be published in his lifetime was his 'Preface' to Hans Walter Gebler's monumental *Ulysses: the Corrected Text* (New York, 1986).

In 1982 Ellmann had become Woodruff Professor of English at Emory University, Georgia, held in conjunction with his Oxford chair, from which he retired in 1984. New College made him an Honorary Fellow, and Wolfson College, Oxford, elected him Extraordinary Fellow, also in 1984. A new future uninhibited even by the teaching that he enjoyed seemed to lie open before him. All too soon, however, came the first signs that his physique was not what it had been. A big man, well built, he had coped with Mary's disability without strain. In the autumn of 1985 he fell twice while jogging; that winter his voice was unaccountably hoarse; travelling to Canada in June 1986 for his honorary degree from McGill he found difficulty standing or sitting upright, and his speech was now slurred. When he got home he went to London for a specialist opinion. He came back to find Mary with company. 'How did it go?' she asked. He paused, then said, 'He didn't tell me anything I didn't know.' 'Did you expect to live for ever?' she replied. It was motor neurone disease, they learned. She had to watch the frame fall in on itself, muscles, hands, then voice failing, a progress that acupuncture or Chinese medicine could not delay. Ultimately, a simple keyboard with roll-printer became his sole means of communication; even so, his words showed that the mind within was undiminished. He died on 13 May 1987.

The pace of writing Wilde, never slow, had since become a race against time, in which he was abetted by Mary and both his daughters, Lucy and Maud. Owen Dudley Edwards, Wilde scholar since 1954, came to wait on him hand and foot and eye. Catherine Carver again edited the text thoroughly, making criticisms from which, he was still able to write, 'I have greatly profited.' She also read the proofs, and was relieved to find marks in his set that showed that he had been able to finish them up to the last page. Mary Reynolds provided another admirable index. *Oscar Wilde* came out posthumously in September 1987 (London).

The reviews were as much elegies to Ellmann as praise for his last work. 'A master of the biographer's art', wrote John Gross in the *New York Review of Books*, 'Ellmann has the first, indispensable virtue of telling his story well—not just the big story but the lesser stories that lie coiled inside it.' All the other critics were in accord, and *Time Out* added

‘Ellmann’s life is likely to remain as revered and read as the same author’s lives of two other Anglo-Irish prodigies: Yeats and Joyce.’

Time is not likely to alter that verdict. Any biographer facing the task that he took on three times, how to relate the realities of life to the creations of the mind, will do well to read his words. Those who do will come to realise that he had another gift, perhaps the greatest: to be able to enter into the mind of each of his subjects, instinctively to become them, even to write about them as they would have written.

Had Yeats died instead of marrying in 1917, he would have been remembered as a remarkable minor poet who achieved a diction more powerful than that of his contemporaries but who, except in a handful of poems, did not have much to say with it . . . His prose would have continued to come forth in the same beautiful, bottomless style as in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, published just before his marriage, built up out of evasion so skillfull that the reader is never sure whether he is being presented with a doctrine or with a poem in prose.¹³

Joyce is Gabriel Conroy when ‘The time has come for him to set out on his journey westward’: ‘The bubble of his self-possession is pricked; he no longer possesses himself, and not to possess oneself is in a way a kind of death. It is a self-abandonment not unlike Furey’s, and through Gabriel’s mind runs the imagery of Calvary. He imagines the snow at Oughterard, lying “thickly drifted on the crooked crosses, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns.” He thinks of Michael Furey who, Gretta has said, died for her, and envies him his sacrifice for another kind of love than Christ’s. To some extent Gabriel too is dying for her, in giving up what he has most valued in himself, all that holds him apart from the simpler people at the party. He feels close to Gretta through sympathy if not through love; now they are both past youth, beauty and passion; he feels close also to her dead lover, another lamb burnt on her altar, though she too is burnt now; he feels no resentment, only pity. In his own sacrifice he is conscious of a melancholy unity between the living and the dead.’¹⁴

Patience was turned against the satirist: ‘So Wilde found ways to act and speak in full knowledge that they could and would be mocked. To be derided so was part of his plan. Notoriety is fame’s wicked twin: Wilde was prepared to court the one in the hope that the other would avour him too.’ Nor did Wilde spare his old teacher: ‘Wilde might have treated Mahaffy nostalgically, but the erect pen has no conscience’.¹⁵

Richard Ellmann has been long dead now, and others knew him better than the present writer. Besides the Ellmann who will live on in the three biographies and his many lesser writings, there is the more elusive but as

¹³ Ellmann, *Yeats: the Man and the Masks* (1948 edn.), p. 220.

¹⁴ Ellmann, *James Joyce*, pp. 258–9.

¹⁵ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London, 1987), pp. 131 and 271.

vital figure preserved in the memories of friends and students, among them those who contributed to *Omnium Gatherum: Essays for Richard Ellmann*, edited by Susan Dick, Declan Kiberd, Dougald McMillan and Joseph Ronsley, begun before his death and published in 1989. There Jane Lidderdale recalled ‘one of his traits . . . his artistry in opening a lecture: a challenging and often witty first sentence, accompanied by a little turn of the head, a signal to his listeners that he was glad to be addressing them’. Owen Dudley Edwards remembers what made him an honorary citizen of Dublin. Among the questions after a lecture he gave in Dublin was one that made him laugh: ‘now Mr Garvin knows perfectly well that he knows far more than I do about this point and I’m not going to be foolish enough to answer his question’. He knew that John Garvin knew more about Joyce than anyone else in Dublin. He also knew that he was a civil servant in local government, as such a mere amateur to most academics. It was characteristically graceful as well as wise to give credit where credit was due.

Ellmann knew the value of facts; establishing the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth was to him a sacred duty. He also knew that there was a further kind of truth, unsupported by facts, the legend that grows up round the great that can never be wholly detached from reality. It was not right to treat it as just a failure in the record, a defect for which allowance had to be made, but rather as part of a greater reality, no less real because less true. Charity, sifting grain from chaff, made moral sense of both. Charity was what he saw as common in the lives of Yeats and Joyce and Wilde, different though they were. It was what drew him to them. Charity he had himself in abundance, extended not only to his heroes, with all their strengths and weaknesses, but to everyone who came his way, students, colleagues, anyone he met. He was a lovable and much loved man.

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