

abundantly clear in the preliminary report of the so-called Boiteux Committee—or, more properly, the *Commission de Réflexion Economique pour la Préparation de l'Echéance de 1992*—a report which was submitted to Edouard Balladur, then Minister of Economics and Finance, in February of this year. These various considerations point to the advisability of having a Prime Minister, like Michel Rocard, who can work hand in hand with the President and who has a head for economic questions. By May 1988, conflictual *cohabitation* had apparently outlived its day. And any slight prospect of its

revival was ruled out by the results of the June legislative elections, which, tight as they were, gave no majority to the RPR-UDF alliance.

Whether Jean Daniel's wider reflections on François Mitterrand will appear significant or not in seven or five years time is an interesting question. The challenges are there to see: the future handling of the domestic issue of immigration and nationality, and the framing of a more coherent and dignified policy—at national and European level—in respect of the Middle East.

## A Personal Enquiry

### *Richard Ellmann as Biographer—By PARK HONAN*



IN THE MOST unashamed way, I am going to draw on my acquaintance with Richard Ellmann and on a comment he made on my work. My object is not to puff myself or to imply that we were close friends (we never were). But since the man is revealed partly through what he said and the impression he gave, and that “man” has something to do with Ellmann, the biographer of Joyce and Wilde, I find it right to be personal about him—at the risk of seeming too autobiographical.

Ellmann is the best literary biographer to have written in English in our century. No one would call his *Joyce* or *Wilde* “academic”<sup>1</sup>; they lack the stiff, squeezed-dry aspect of other scholarly accounts of lives and do not play false with human experience and feeling. Yet he was an academic professional, leaving a post at Evanston in Illinois to take a chair of English at Oxford. He was a convivial figure at New College, even an early morning jogger. Shortly before he died he was teaching during autumn terms at Emory in Georgia.

I met him in the 1960s, not long after he published *James Joyce*. We exchanged letters, oddly enough about tax laws, and later I asked Weidenfeld & Nicolson to send him a copy of my *Matthew Arnold: A Life* (1981) as a matter of course. Neither my editor nor I were seeking a comment from him, and I would not have expected him to send me more than a postcard in acknowledgment, and so I was surprised by his letter from West Germany. “I have just this moment put down your book”, Ellmann wrote to me from Höxter on 3 September 1981,

“... with a great sense of having been successfully ushered

through sixty-odd years of the 19th century. Your book succeeds abundantly in changing one's view of father (and mother) and son, but it also re-draws Arnold's character, so he is no longer the sombre character ‘with Matthew Arnold's face’ but has ebullience along with irony and intelligence and earnestness. The account of his life as school inspector is fascinating, as with the account of his American tour. Then there is your great coup in identifying Marguerite—a pity that she didn't at least bear him an illegitimate child—one feels for his embarrassment and humiliation, and welcomes the power of poetry to make so much out of their incomplete moments together. His life as a married man is also fascinating instead of (like most married lives) dull. . . . I've much enjoyed my four days in your company!”

How typical of his kindness, I thought. Dick Ellmann had no need to praise me—he owed me no favours—and certainly I had no need of his praise. After years of work on a biography one knows its merits and faults well enough oneself. (One may need praise during the writing, or require lavish praise after repairing the plumbing or wallpapering the bedroom.)

I HAD KNOWN DICK only slightly. At one meeting he seemed relieved to talk to me apart from other sherry-drinking guests at a reception; perhaps only because he knew I would listen. He was an excellent listener himself, and I may have chatted idly for five minutes; then he told me that he was not certain that he could ever adjust to being a professor at Oxford. He disliked committee-work, felt that he might be viewed as a shirker, and was anxious about his wife's health. On another occasion he was reluctant to talk about the present at all. He told me about interviewing Carl Jung in Switzerland on the subject of Joyce. I never had any illusion that I had penetrated the veil of Dick Ellmann, and felt that a soft wall of kindness kept us apart: he must have told others as much as he told me. But one tries to peer over walls, and I thought

<sup>1</sup> *James Joyce* (Oxford University Press, 1959, n.e. 1982) and *Oscar Wilde*. By RICHARD ELLMANN. Hamish Hamilton, £15.00.

(more than once) that what I detected on the other side was a mild, amiable confusion, self-doubt, a sense of feeling out-dated and misplaced in a locale, out of touch with the self and everything else—in short, a profound and agonising humility, the first requirement for a biographer.

A SENSE OF DISLOCATION, confusion, and of being out of touch, with profound humility, I believed I had witnessed before. Bristling with a feeling of rivalry, I had met William Irvine on a luncheon date in London: he was far advanced in a biography of Robert Browning that I had intended to write. (I had a fellowship to help me advance my work.) Irvine, then in his fifties, with a gauzy device worn over one ear to conceal an inexplicable ailment, seemed vulnerable and lost. I took his arm to convey him to our restaurant. He stiffened slightly when I mentioned in passing several of his works, his *Bagehot*, or my feeling for the affinity of his prose style with that of Huxley in *Apes, Angels, and Victorians*. At luncheon, he was receptive, not as if he approved in the slightest way any theory or remark I advanced, but as if the kindest imaginable human radar screen—with mild and appropriate comments—were turning this way and that way to receive and sort out anything I said.

Irvine reached the perfection of biography in his chapters on Browning's first 50 years in *The Book, the Ring, and the Poet*, a book which I completed after Irvine died<sup>2</sup>; he had left his 21 chapters in beautifully finished form. Richard Ellmann reached his own perfection in *James Joyce*, a book which I came to know almost as well as Irvine's work. That is, I had read Ellmann's *Joyce* for about six months along with Joyce's *Ulysses*; the latter was the chief text that I discussed week by week with a dozen young women, late at night, in an informal "James Joyce Group" which I ran in the 1960s when teaching at a women's college. (We met in one or other of the girls' bedrooms, with most of the group in pyjamas, and I have seldom known freer or better discussions.) And so, as it seems to me, charmingly but also intimately I had come to know Ellmann's work and, similarly, Irvine's work, a little later.

The first thing to say is that—despite my impressions of Ellmann and Irvine as men, or as acquaintances—their biographical writing is anything but dislocated or tentative. It is painstaking and assured, with a flowing style that conceals the work that has been taken to be exact and authoritative. Irvine is one of the finest biographical stylists in English; he uses irony, rhythm, diction and images to give an exact sense of the Browning who appears in letters and other evidence. Strachey in *Eminent Victorians* had brought wit, grace of phrasing, and intelligence to biography but at the expense of delicate accuracy and truth. (It is typical of Strachey to have

said that he would alter a fact, if need be, to save the rhythm of a sentence's ending.) Irvine brought the grace and suppleness of English into the service of accuracy and so moved beyond biographical writing of his time. Ellmann is less various and subtle than Irvine, but warm, confident, at ease, and exact in manner. If Irvine is elegant, Ellmann can be axiomatic almost to the point of a breezy vulgarity—while being perfectly just and controlled:

"Joyce is the porcupine of authors. His heroes are grudging heroes—the impossible young man, the passive adult, the whisky-drinking greybeard. It is hard to like them, harder to admire them. Joyce prefers it so. Unequivocal sympathy would be romancing. He denudes man of what we are accustomed to respect, then summons us to sympathize."

And Ellmann, in style and form, brought something new to biography in the long paragraph of unified and concentrated subject-matter and accumulating effect. If the bane of biography is its multitude of facts, as the bane of an army of invasion might be its two million individuals, the facts (like the men) need not be reduced or pulverised or altered in being. But they must be marshalled and grouped, subordinated and cunningly organised. In a larger structural way, Ellmann's chapters deal with more than slices of chronological time and the "growth" of his subject. They have prevailing themes of their own, usually signalled or hinted at in each chapter's epigraph and sometimes in an opening sentence. Thus, for example, chapter eight in Ellmann's *Joyce* builds up shrewdly to Joyce's early experiences in France, its pleasures, broadening effects and accompanying stringencies, after the "Paris rawly waking . . ." epigraph from *Ulysses* and Ellmann's first narrative sentence, "Paris was Dublin's antithesis". In good biographies, and certainly in Ellmann's practice, everything *in effect* becomes narrative, and one of his own most effective skills is his ability to make literary criticism appear to advance his biographical "story".

"The form of biography", he wrote in *Golden Codgers: Biographical Speculations*, "is countenancing experiments comparable to those of the novel and poem. It cannot be so mobile as those forms because it is associated with history, and must retain a chronological pattern, though not necessarily a simple one."<sup>3</sup> A lively recognition of this, I think, led Ellmann to structure his chapters experimentally with careful attention to emotional growth or psychological change in his subject. The "Joyce" at the end of an Ellmann chapter is usually different from the "Joyce" at the start of it; perhaps more important, our view of Joyce through the chapter has taken on a new dimension. In a long biography, Ellmann takes elaborate pains to avoid the effect of repetition; and, in showing us the life of a writer whose art, year by year, may not be continuously or ceaselessly evolving, a literary biography may all too easily repeat its effects.

For example, Leon Edel's life of Henry James<sup>4</sup> is admirably detailed, but it is also wearisome: it keeps us for long stretches at the surface of events which, in effect, are telling us what has already been established by Edel in connection with James's habits and character. Edel's literary criticism is far from being feeble; but it is, often, hardly more than a

<sup>2</sup> William Irvine and Park Honan, *The Book, the Ring, and the Poet* (Bodley Head, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Golden Codgers: Biographical Speculations* (Oxford University Press, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Leon Edel, *The Life of Henry James: The Untried Years* (1953), *The Conquest of London* (1962), *The Middle Years* (1963). Revised edition in one volume (1985).

compound of well-written plot-summary and speculative psycho-biographical theory. Edel traverses the span of his subject's life and works so that we feel little of importance that James did is being left out; however, he lacks Ellmann's quick, confident (and confidence-inspiring) penetration.

Ellmann avoids the effects of psychological theorising in both *Joyce* and *Wilde*. Indeed we are seldom prompted to question the authority of his biographical voice, his critic and presenter; it is not that we feel Ellmann is always right, but that there is a well-planned consistency in the pattern of his criticism within a book. We feel that what is being said of a work is not adventitious but intrinsic to a much larger, overall interpretation of Oscar Wilde or James Joyce. The intelligent consistency charms and compels; we want to see how the critical remark will be borne out in the larger pattern. He is appropriately bold, as for instance on the last story in Joyce's *Dubliners*: "The selection of details for 'The Dead' shows Joyce making those choices which, while masterly, suggest the preoccupations that mastered him." That does not point out of the biography to Freud but into the biography's presentational structure, and back towards the groundwork of an argument, as well as ahead to the promise of confirming evidence about the "preoccupations".

Ellmann could be delicious on Edel's habit of picking up and dropping of Freudian techniques. On the penultimate volume of *Henry James*, Ellmann writes in *Golden Codgers*,

"Edel seems almost ready to give up Freud, as when he describes the turmoil in Henry James's mind: 'Two forces contended within: his intellect and his emotions. . . . Rational form and mind were thus interposed against the chaos of feeling.' This is the psychology not of Freud but of Alexander Pope. Apparently aware that his readers may be getting confused, Edel in the preface to this volume explains his biographical method . . . but isn't it peculiar to say, in this generation, that the emotional life has nothing to do with sex life or bowel movements?"

WHAT ELLMANN COULD NOT BEAR was the crass and easy underrating of the complexity of a subject's mind, or the resort to a fashionable idea to save the biographer the task of coming to grips with ambiguous and difficult evidence. There is also something oddly exasperated in Ellmann's comments on Edel, odd because (as in his dealings with me) he was unshowily generous with other biographers.

As a rule, no one could be less suited to reviewing a new biography than a biographer; novelists and historians make allowances for each other more readily, I think. In any case Ellmann's comments on Edel are professionally protective, as if he felt Edel had betrayed the guild or the mystery of the craft in slipshod Freudianising, and had failed to realise that a biographer's authority should not be compromised and, furthermore, must be earned and demonstrated throughout the narrative of a life. 500 scholarly footnotes do not earn authority, and mere factuality will never demonstrate one's

understanding of the history of a person. But if authority is lost, all is lost, and unless it is evident nothing will be evident: nothing one says will then show and convince. Authority depends on the depth, range and imaginative alertness of one's research; it seems to depend on one's prose style and tone, also on structure within a chapter and the structural sequence of chapters; but most of all, for Ellmann, it depends on an attitude to personal evidence.

ON EXACTLY this matter, Leon Edel's pronouncements have been colourful but seldom subtle or particularly useful. In his brief *Literary Biography* (1957), Edel stated that "the biographer is called upon to take the base metals that are his disparate facts and turn them into the gold of human personality". Well, I have a room in my house called the Alchemist's Room because a member of my family makes jewellery there, and no more gold is made in it than the medieval alchemists made; gold is gold and nothing else. You have gold, or you don't, but no "base metals" are transformed into it, alas.

Ellmann certainly didn't subscribe to a transforming magic, but he did believe in historical evidence about persons. So far as I can judge, he felt that if what Edel calls "human personality" was not evident in the document, it was not recoverable. Not every figment of personality or aspect of a mind will be traceable in a letter by Joyce or Wilde, but it is clear Ellmann believed that in this genre one may combine, assimilate, extract and abstract—not create. One will fail in trying to turn one thing into something else.

He himself is not creative, and his comments on Joyce and Wilde (although too various to be categorised) might be very generally divided into two main kinds. Ellmann extracts from evidence about his subject at a given time, or he abstracts from the whole of the evidence he is aware of, to make a general remark about a subject's mind; and the generality will be an integral part of his biography's structure. For him, many kinds of combining are legitimate, but nothing else can be done in the way of transforming "disparate facts" into some conception of personality.

He was not too pleased with Painter's Freudianising or post-Freudianising in *Proust*,<sup>5</sup> though Painter seemed more "persuasive" in his use of psychology than Edel: Painter let himself be taken away from the judging of personal evidence to an external authority who produced universal truths. Once that happened, Painter, in Ellmann's opinion, lost hold of his materials and, invoking the psychology gods of our time, became careless with language, sometimes using "psychological interpretation half-literally, half-figuratively".<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, no particular wish to dispense with psychological insight or even modern psychological theory can be found in Ellmann's essays; his protest is usually against the fashionable biographical method of imposing "a proving frame" upon evidence, rather than facing the task of getting the evidence to yield what information it will. Ellmann aligns himself most with Strachey, oddly, in assuming an intelligent but sceptical reader. Biographical narrative within itself proves its own good sense.

<sup>5</sup> George Painter, *Marcel Proust: A Biography* (vol. 1, 1959, vol. 2, 1965).

<sup>6</sup> See *Golden Codgers*, ch. 1.



But whereas Strachey found character easy and knowable and would not take it seriously because the Victorians took it too seriously, Ellmann is a disciplined interpreter who knows that character *is* very difficult to estimate. An immense amount of research is undertaken and a complex, dense, but readable structure of history is offered to show a person, a portrait of Joyce or Wilde. For Ellmann, the Irish are the Israelites of our day, greater than their nation, exiled and dispersed, rich in spirit but also torn within, dominated and dominating, forced to fight or to beguile. Ellmann is fond of them. Wilde and Joyce used their Irishness to become heroes of art, of Western culture, in effect. But what are they as men?

TO SEE THEM steadily at all, perhaps, is to understand what it is to be modern. "On or about December 1910", wrote Virginia Woolf, "human character changed." Ellmann, in his essay on the epoch of pre-War courtliness and Edwardian literature, "Two Faces of Edward", would put back ten years Virginia Woolf's date of the momentous change: "If a moment must be found for human character to have changed", Ellmann wrote, "I should suggest that 1900 is both more convenient and more accurate than Virginia Woolf's 1910." Wilde, to an extent, anticipates the change; Joyce, who was eighteen in 1900, participates in it. The modern is not in passionate revolt and is not strictly religious or irreligious, though Edwardians looked "for ways to express their conviction that we can be religious about life itself". According to Ellmann, the modern writer shares with other Edwardians a belief in a secular miracle, the transformation of the self, or the possibility of its sudden alteration. So Joyce appears to agree with Yeats that if we pretend hard enough to be the mask or the self we adopt, we can become that other self; and this takes us back to Oscar Wilde, that peculiarly earnest poseur.

For the biographer, the modern writer exhibits an extreme self-consciousness in any case, and a fluid and never easily demonstrable character. For what self is the man who adopts masks, and seems to believe in them, ever expressing? Ell-

mann the biographer is "modernised" by his subjects, and it is not enough for him simply to record the changing patterns of Joyce's or Wilde's behaviour and utterances and being: he must understand a self-conscious subject even to chronicle its behaviour accurately.

THE IDEA that character changed in 1910 or 1900 is a useful myth, of course; but, it seems to me, a key aspect of the "change" occurs further back in Europe's cultural history. Goethe and the *Stürmer und Dränger* exhibited a new kind of self-consciousness in the 1770s. Goethe later explained that the old, innocent, almost somnambulatory poetry of his youth was no longer possible: "Daily criticisms in fifty different places, and gossip caused by them, prevent the appearance of any sound production", said Goethe finally. "He who does not keep aloof from all this, and isolate himself by main force, is lost." Wordsworth, Arnold and Emerson bewailed the new self-consciousness and the introversion needed to stay in touch with *some* self, or to know anything about anyone and write effectively. Isolation preserves individuality but separates one from most of one's material in society.

Hence we have anxious Victorian poems about isolation and the double-self, or dramatic monologues in which the poet can hardly be dissected away from the mask; and then Edwardian and Georgian works by Yeats, Joyce, Eliot and Pound in which the maker is in effect the mask. The biographer can only estimate and penetrate the mask by accepting the subject on the subject's terms, and this, I think, is why humility was so useful to Ellmann the academic intellectual, and why he could appear to be mildly confused.

His humility was natural; it led him through subjectivity and devotion to a full, confident understanding of two self-conscious writers. He had learned to be passive, hesitant, receiving, in two or three minds about the subject at hand; yet his performance in the two masterly biographies of Joyce and Wilde is cunning and surprisingly confident.

## Somersby

The church squats like a grey toad,  
huddled on the escarpment's edge  
waiting for a mighty claw from heaven.  
When we open the door, the cold hurts:

black pews and a blacker heaven  
hidden among yews and leaking stones;  
the hollow eye of the collecting bowl.  
But that voice crying "Father, forgive them",

is the wind, surely, in the ugly tower,  
guilt singing its familiar blackmail?

We stand, rigid in the empty porch,  
words raining from coloured glass,

pain leaping from the saintly histories.  
In leafless branches, ghosts weep,  
children of our soiled imagination:  
the taut farmers and parish councillors,

angry women with their sullen lives.  
Outside, in the sun, the yews creak.  
The sundial spreads its green corrosion.  
Through frozen hedgerows, time leaks.

*William Bedford*