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Oscar Wilde by RICHARD ELLMANN. (New York: Viking, 1987). xiv + 632pp. ISBN 0-670-81420-2; \$24.95.

Richard Ellmann's justly praised life of Oscar Wilde culminates a career devoted to biography. From his earliest work on Yeats to the full and detailed life of Joyce (1959; rev. 1982), Ellmann was known for judicious, encyclopedic lives that reflected primary research and literary scholarship. His final works continued this tradition, notably *Four Dubliners* (1986) and *Oscar Wilde* (1987). The first, a set of informal biographical essays on the Irish identities of Wilde, Joyce, Yeats and Beckett, demonstrates the graceful writing and balanced accounts that have characterized Ellmann's work. But the second, the long-awaited life of Wilde, posed unique problems because Ellmann confronted a legend as well as a life, a legend originating in Wilde's aestheticism, homosexuality, and writings. In short, Wilde presented a triumphant of personality rather than literature.

Or so previous biographers and critics have encouraged us to believe. Ellmann reverses this view arguing that Wilde left one masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and one near masterpiece, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, while his greatest achievement was his language. Suitably, Wilde's triumphant was dramatic, in life as well as in literature, and Ellmann balances his account between the prosaic and dramatic, constantly attempting to undo the myths in establishing the truth. For example, in authenticating Wilde's famous remark that "I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china" (an indirect allusion to Rossetti and his china collection), Ellmann traces various sources and renditions of the well-known quip to conclude convincingly that "no one else could have said it"(44). Throughout the lengthy biography, Ellmann carefully researches the famous and infamous stories of Wilde while in the course of his work providing a richly detailed narrative of Wilde's growth. Nonethe-

less, despite the success of the Oxford section and the sympathy in the account of Wilde's final days in Paris, a peculiar distance remains between the biographer and his subject. It is not that Ellmann lacks admiration for Wilde (indeed, he admires him too much) but that he lacks an understanding of his life.

The issue of homosexuality is central to this distortion. Unlike the engrossing sections of the biography — the trip to America in 1882-83, the infamous trials of 1895 and the earlier Oxford period — the account of homosexuality seems incomplete, and slightly puzzling in its attenuated social and historical context. Wilde's involvement with other men, which according to Ellmann did not begin until Robert Ross seduced him in 1886 when Wilde was in his early thirties, contradicts the views of others, notably Rupert Croft-Cooke who implies that Wilde's homosexuality began at Oxford. Little attention is given to any homosexuality at Portora Royal School where Wilde spent seven years, although such sexual practice was common in the public school milieu of England and, presumably, Ireland. Nonetheless, Ellmann develops Wilde's homosexual encounter as a drama with a hero (Wilde), villain (Robert Ross) and set (London social life). Such an account is in keeping with Ellmann's thematic impulses and structural pattern in the biography epitomized by the constant references to literary works to supply confirmation or illustration of personal action. For example, immediately following his description of the Wilde/Ross attachment, Ellmann turns to two versions of *Dorian Gray* to reinforce his presentation (260-1). Emphasis on Wilde's self-cultivation merges with the account of homosexuality to create a narrative literarily convincing but historically questionable.

In the biography, Wilde is not seen as a protestor against English codes preventing homosexuality but as a young man hesitatingly feeling his way to new pleasures. Approaching the issue of homosexuality in a relaxed manner, Ellmann is paradoxically too casual