Thoroughly modern Oscar

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It takes a great artist to be thoroughly modern—OSCAR WILDE

Professor Ellmann's critical biography of Oscar Wilde is that rare thing, a book that is both entertaining and disturbing. It not only diverts and fascinates with an account of a most extraordinary and tragic life but also pulls us up short and forces us to re-examine our own attitudes and reactions to moral, aesthetic, and literary judgments. For he presents to us a man who could have been a

Oscar Wilde by Beardsley.

Mary Evans Picture Library.

literary colossus—a playwright, poet, and storyteller as well as a dazzlingly witty conversationalist and profound thinker; yet whose genius was laid to waste by a fatal weakness of character, combined with the restrictive social attitudes of his time. And even today, 87 years after Wilde's death, the mention of his name too often provokes nothing more than an indulgent smile at the recollection of green carnations or "the love that dare not speak its name."

Ellmann brilliantly evokes the society of London in the 1890s, where figures such as Lillie Langtry, Whistler, and the Pre-Raphaelites were actors in the drama of Wilde's life; he shifts the scene to France during Wilde's success and also his years of exile, and gives a lively account of the American lecture tour in 1882, when in the role of poet and aesthete Wilde took the States by storm.

That Wilde was a man with deeply held convictions about the importance of individual expression and the role of art in society is too often overlooked. His political essays like "The soul of man under socialism" and "The critic as artist" are little read. Yet in his examination of these two essays Ellmann demonstrates that Wilde's theories on the purpose of art are mirrored in all his writings. Wilde was in fact attacking the values of Victorian society and the

hypocrisy of its principles, which were restrictive, being based on hatred and repression rather than on love, freedom, and expression. He maintained that deviations such as homosexuality should be tolerated as an expression of individual consciousness, and that individuals must rebel against society if society's restrictive attitudes are to be done away with—"I am something of an anarchist"—but he was equally conscious of the danger of "ignorant demagogues." Ellman points out that even an apparently "light" play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, is more radical than it appears because of its reversal of established attitudes and its destruction of stereotypes.

Life and soul

But what does Ellmann make of Wilde the man? His biography is the outcome of 30 years of painstaking research, prompted very clearly by a huge admiration for, and even identification with, his subject; he sees Wilde as one of society's victims, but does not try to gloss over his obvious failings. The main impression of Wilde that comes across is of his brilliance, together with an insatiable desire to please, to entertain, and to win approval. In any company he sought to shine and invariably succeeded with his precisely balanced aphorisms, which have become so well known as to be almost proverbial—"There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about" or "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it."

Under the net

Ellmann is adept at spotting the irony beneath these superficially flippant remarks, and the deeper irony always at work behind the scenes. In his boyhood in Ireland Oscar sometimes played at the seaside with a boy who was later at Trinity College Dublin with him; this playmate was Edward Carson, prosecuting counsel at Wilde's trial, who "performed his task with the added bitterness of an old friend." With similar irony, the syphilis that Wilde contracted from a woman prostitute in Oxford was to kill him in its tertiary stage, with an attack of meningitis, after many years of homosexuality.

In the later stages of the book, as Wilde grows more and more unable to cope with the constant demands and vicious temper of Lord Alfred Douglas, threats from the Marquis of Queensberry, and blackmail attempts by rent boys, Ellmann skilfully shows the noose tightening, and the reader feels the chill of impending doom. And yet despite this progression of distressing and squalid incidents what shines through it all is the greatness of Wilde's heart, his unfailing generosity and implicit guilelessness.

A man for our time

Following his studies of Yeats and Joyce, Ellmann, who died in May of this year, has left us a fascinating chronicle of the life and work of a third great Irishman, who speaks to modern man in today's world: "He belongs to our world more than Victoria's. Now, beyond the reach of scandal, his best writings validated by time, he comes before us still, a towering figure, laughing and weeping, with parables and paradoxes, so generous, so amusing and so right."

Oscar Wilde. R Ellmann. (Pp 648; figs; £15.) London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987. ISBN 0-241-12392-5.