

## Beneath the Calm Raged a Passionate Mind

HENRY JAMES: The Treacherous Years (1895-1901)  
 by Leon Edel (J.B. Lippincott Company) \$10.00

Whenever budding writers announce that they are setting forth in search of Experience (invariably with a capital E) in order to have something to write about, I think of Henry James, who never felt impelled to go treasure-hunting at Angkor Wat, hull-baiting at Pamplona, or even dean-baiting in the Harvard Yard.

Yet he contrived to produce some of the greatest novels and stories in our literature. When he felt a special need for excitement, he probably took two lumps of sugar in his tea instead of one. Otherwise, he just wrote.

But the placid surface of James's bachelor existence was deceptive. Beneath it a formidable mind raged in constant ferment and a passionate sensibility twitched ceaselessly, like an amoeba, to the tiniest moral or esthetic stimuli.

It is this rich interior life which justifies Leon Edel's mammoth biography, of which this is the fourth of five projected volumes. The first appeared back in 1953, and the second and third, published in 1962, won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. There has been no slackening of pace or loss of interest along the course of the James marathon that Edel has devoted his life to running. Clearly, this is destined to be the most distinguished, as well as the longest, literary biography of our time.

The years Edel calls treacherous began ominously with the first twinges of gout and the last blow to James's theatrical ambitions, when his play *Guy Domville* was roundly booed at its premiere on Jan. 5, 1895. They ended as James, ensconced in his beloved Lamb House in Rye, symbolically greeted the dawning 20th Century by shaving off his beard, thus creating the massive, bald-domed figure of the most familiar portraits.

In between, he bought a typewriter (he was suffering, understandably, from writer's cramp), learned to bicycle, mourned the death of Robert Louis Stevenson, assisted at Rudyard Kipling's wedding, ducked out of London to avoid the commotion over Queen Victoria's Jubilee, and fell platonically in love with a young and rather obtuse Norwegian sculptor named Hendrik Andersen.

Even the most trivial of these events had its profound consequences for James's art. The purchase of the typewriter meant the hiring of a dour Scottish secretary, since typing was harder for James than cycling. The

process of dictation, Edel maintains, radically altered James's prose style, producing the long, serpentine—and diffuse—sentences which so plague lazy readers of his late fiction.

The prose styles of James I and James II had been shucked off, like the beard, to make way for the Old Pretender, whose magnificently baroque last novels—*The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*—will occupy the final volume.

The most significant event of the treacherous years was the failure of *Guy Domville*. James envied Oscar Wilde's magic touch in the theater, and made the fatal mistake of thinking there is no essential difference between dialogue on stage and dialogue on the printed page.

Although the first-night audience included Bernard Shaw, Arnold Bennett, and H. G. Wells as reasonably sympathetic critics, the peanut gallery roared down James's super-auburn and rather stiff play. James appeared on stage at the final curtain to receive the plaudits, but only heard the catcalls.

He had always had what he called the "imagination of disaster." In the face of this real disaster his spirit plummeted, and he spent the next five years producing the weakest novels of his maturity: *The Other House*, *What Maisie Knew*, *The Awkward Age* and *The Sacred Fount*. In them, he abandoned his great theme of the conflict between American and European values for an obsessive interest in technique for its own sake.

Most of these novels, along with *The Turn of the Screw*, written in the same period, deal with children suffering, haunted and betrayed. Edel, with his customary psychological insight, sees James reverting to his own childhood under the crushing blow the failure of his play dealt to his adult ego. Only when he had purged himself of this disaster was James able to return in triumph to his larger themes.

James himself once referred to "that queer monster, the artist." To follow the biographical spoor of such a monster requires a hunter equipped with infinite patience, literary acuity and psychological tact. Edel, who lives and breathes Henry James, is just such a biographer.

Mr. Freedman, an author and critic, teaches English at Simmons College.

by Richard Freedman

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