

# THE SMILE ON THE FACE OF THE TIGER

*A Profile of Leon Edel*

*Phyllis Grosskurth*

**A**FTER BECOMING DEEPLY INVOLVED in his life of Henry James, Leon Edel made a shrewd observation about the greatest danger that threatens a biographer. "I am sure," he stated, "that if someone were to attempt to study the psychology of biographers he would discover that they are usually impelled by deeply personal reasons to the writing of a given life — reasons not always conducive to objectivity and to truth." Edel then went on to analyze the biographer's dilemma: "He must appraise the life of another by becoming that other person, and he must be scrupulously careful that in the process the other person is not refashioned in his own image."

It seems to me that the hazard of which Edel speaks is confined to the biographer who has to reconstruct a human being from documents — letters, diaries, books, and so forth. The danger is implicit in the fact that the reconstruction, no matter how firmly substantiated by paper evidence, must necessarily be the creation of the intuitive imagination. The biographer must penetrate so deeply into his subject that he virtually becomes his subject for the duration of the writing of the biography.

The biographer who writes about one whom he knew intimately is faced with no such dilemma. Boswell and Froude were so keenly aware of the *otherness* of Dr. Johnson and Carlyle, of the external idiosyncrasies of their temperaments, that they were not threatened with the dangers of imaginative identification. Boswell and Froude knew and loved the Dr. Johnson who pounded his cane on the floor or the Carlyle who brooded over his pipe in the garden, but they did not know what it felt like to be Dr. Johnson impatiently pounding his cane or Carlyle puffing at his pipe.

Surprisingly enough, Edel takes a conventional and somewhat wistful view of such biographies. "Boswell, Froude, Lockhart, Forster," he says, "repose upon our shelves with vividness and mass and authority which later biographers cannot possess." It seems to me curious that at this point Edel does not recognize that his method and aims are essentially different from these writers, and every bit as valuable. Precisely because Boswell, Froude, et al, knew their subjects so intimately, they were able to capture the solid presence of a man smoking or banging his cane. They wrote of the impact their subjects made on them, and the fact that their subjects happened to be writers does not mean that Boswell or Froude produced *literary* biography. The creation of a literary biography, a study of the mind inside the man who held the pipe or the pen, is Edel's achievement. Later I shall discuss this aspect of his work in more detail.

As for his devoted labours to James, suffice it to say that Edel considers him one of the greatest of writers. It would be an impertinence to speculate on the "deeply personal reasons" which might have impelled him to devote such dedicated concentration to James. Surely admiration and sympathetic rapport for James might be the most important considerations.

Certainly there was nothing in the pattern or circumstances of Edel's early life to warrant any patent self-identification. Many people have been surprised to learn of Edel's thoroughly Canadian background. Brought up in Yorkton, Saskatchewan, a prairie boy's life would bear little resemblance to the worldly James children's peregrinations back and forth across the Atlantic.

At McGill in the early 20's Edel became associated with what has since become known as the "Montreal group." He has frequently made the nostalgic observation that he could write a book about those years, and he was particularly delighted to hear Professor Northrop Frye refer to this period of his life when he introduced him as Centennial Professor at the University of Toronto last January. In his sophomore year Edel became managing editor of the *Fortnightly Review* founded by A. J. M. Smith, Frank Scott, Allan Latham, and A. P. R. Coulbourn.

Remarkably successful for an avant-garde magazine, *The Fortnightly* published the work of the young poets A. M. Klein, Leo Kennedy, E. J. Pratt, and Robert Finch. Out of this association came the volume, *New Provinces*, which was a landmark in Canadian literature in its espousal of modernity. Of this group, Edel was the only critic and non-poet.

In 1928, after receiving his M.A. for a dissertation on what was then considered a very modern subject, the stream of consciousness novel, Edel went to Paris on a scholarship. At the Sorbonne he became a close friend of E. K. Brown. Both attended the lectures of Emile Legouis and Etienne Gilson, and they lunched together almost daily in a little *crémèrie* on the boulevard Saint-Michel.

He has described himself during this period of literary expatriates as "a kind of junior Left Banker," one who moved on the periphery of the James Joyce entourage. His outstanding impression of Joyce was of his total withdrawal into himself, even when surrounded by a chattering group of friends. Despite an early book he wrote on Joyce, Edel has found himself becoming increasingly antithetical towards Joyce through the years. He contends that Joyce is a far inferior artist to Henry James; that Joyce's self-absorption made it impossible for him to create character, and that *Ulysses* consists simply of a series of disembodied voices.

After receiving his degree from the Sorbonne, Edel returned to Montreal where he worked as a newspaper reporter covering the arts, as well as contributing to the *Canadian Forum* where he remembers with satisfaction that he wrote admiringly of A. M. Klein. During this period he also did some part-time teaching at Sir George Williams College. The depression had barred him from the academic life he wanted, but after returning from service overseas in psychological warfare, he went to New York University as a visiting professor in 1950 and 1951. In the spring of 1953 he gave the Christian Gauss Seminar at Princeton, and that autumn he was appointed associate professor in Washington Square College, N.Y.U., and full professor in 1955.

Apart from his work on Henry James, Edel's books include *The Psychological Novel* and *James Joyce: The Last Journey*. In 1951 his old friend E. K. Brown died, leaving the last section of his biography of Willa Cather unfinished. Edel undertook to finish the book, a job he has described as the most difficult he ever tackled. Working from Brown's detailed notes, Edel managed to make certain changes in the completed text and to adapt his own style in the final chapters so closely to Brown's that it is almost impossible to distinguish Brown's style from Edel's. This chameleon-like capacity later proved invaluable when he came to write the biography of Henry James.

EDEL'S PROFOUND INTEREST in James extends back to the end of the war when he brought out a critical edition of James's plays. Since then he has edited *The Ghostly Tales of Henry James*, and is at present editing a twelve-volume edition of *The Complete Tales of Henry James*. He is also the editor of *The Selected Letters of Henry James* and is now at work on what he considers will be the definitive edition of the correspondence, which will not be a complete edition, but a representative selection of significant letters.

Of the James biography, so far Edel has completed *Henry James: The Untried Years* (1953), *The Conquest of London* (1962); and *The Middle Years* (1962). For these he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and honored by the National Institute of Arts and Letters for "creative writing in biography." He has almost completed *The Master*, and although he is contemplating an even further volume, he is quick to point out that, taken together, the total volumes do not add up to excessive length. From the outset he deliberately avoided a chronological sequence in the interests of form, a system which has worked to his advantage so that he is now free to add another volume if it seems necessary.

In appearance Edel is a small, contained man with a narrow bespectacled face and an unobtrusive moustache. Widely cultured, in recent years he has confined his interests almost exclusively to Henry James. He lives quietly with his wife, a psychologist, and two enormous cats, in an apartment on Central Park West. One is immediately struck by the impersonal orderliness of his apartment. Uncluttered rooms, books arranged methodically on the many shelves lining the walls, filing cabinets, an almost bare desk. Nevertheless, Edel claims that when he is writing, his study becomes a welter of files and notes, and frequently time is forgotten as he works far into the night.

He finds it possible to live a dedicated scholarly life even in the din of Manhattan. A bus takes him directly to Washington Square (with all its James associations), where he has recently been named Henry James Professor at New York University. His classes are almost exclusively graduate seminars on James. When addressing other universities, he speaks on aspects of James or on the art of biography. When travelling abroad, the quest is always in search of additional James material.

In 1956 Edel was invited to deliver the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto. These were later published under the title, *Literary Biography*, from which I drew the remarks quoted at the beginning of this paper. Here was the rare case of a biographer speaking up for his art as a branch of literature which

has been unjustly neglected. Here also was a rare case of one theorizing about his own art, drawing largely on conclusions which had emerged from practical experience. A very real sense of responsibility sustains all his reflections, particularly in his analysis of the dangers, difficulties, and temptations of understanding too much and too well. Edel describes biography as "a kind of alchemy of the spirit." "To succeed," he says, "the biographer must perform the unusual — and the well-nigh impossible — act of incorporating into himself the experience of another, or shall we say becoming for a while that other person, even while remaining himself." The appraising, distancing eye must maintain a constant guard: "He must be warm, yet aloof, involved, yet uninvolved. To be cold as ice in appraisal, yet warm and human and understanding, this is the biographer's dilemma."

I stated earlier that it seemed to me next to impossible in the sort of literary biography Edel is writing to create a three-dimensional James. He makes many references to James attending dinner parties, James writing letters at a desk in his club, James riding on the Campagna, James walking about the streets of London. Nevertheless, we do not receive any concrete impression of James kinetically involved in any of these activities. We are aware of eyes seeing, of a mind responding, of the writer as observer in most of these situations. Lessing's distinction between the provinces of the various arts might almost serve as an analogy for the functions of sundry types of biography. If one is interested in a writer as a writer primarily, surely Edel's method is the only effective one. A biographer cannot have the best of both worlds; or, more precisely he cannot convey the inner and the outer man, because they are two different people. It is a problem that almost all biographers, including Edel, refuse to face. If they admit that they are concentrating on a sensibility, they are inevitably fearful that substantiality will be attenuated. Edel's biography is that of a literary sensibility, not of a man whose occupation was writing. The man Henry James has become a name on a page; but a responsive intellect continues to vibrate from Edel's pages.

Edel has spoken of the biographer's task as a "passionate quest." For a biographer who could never have known his subject, it is clear that Edel has regarded James as a quarry to be hunted down. Frequently he has spoken of the "road-blocks" that James seemed to erect to foil his pursuers. There is an undoubted triumph in Edel's remarks on the evidence that James found impossible to hide — namely, his works. If Edel could not re-invoke a Dr. Johnson or a Carlyle, he could convey a sense of the influence moulding the creative mind, of the world as it impinged on James's consciousness, and the connection between life and its transformation into art.

I have refrained from saying that James has shown us the creative mind at work. He could not do this, nor could any other biographer. One can speculate on the process, as Edel frequently does, but one can never capture the elusive mystery of another man's imagination. At times, indeed, Edel strains too hard to draw connections as in his hypothesis about the original elements of "The Turn of the Screw" (*The Conquest of London*, p. 266).

Above all else, Edel's life of James is a reconstruction of the world *as James saw it*. Edel has entered into James's mind to the degree that he has imagined how people, places, and events appeared to James's curious eye. It is my belief that he has functioned as such an effective alter ego because his responses are extraordinarily similar to those of James. Mutedly gregarious, Edel loves the atmosphere of clubs with their comfortable, unhurried conversation. Edel's understanding of why James enjoyed them so much is reflected in his evocation of the nineteenth-century London clubs to which James belonged. Again, Edel loves Washington Square and he would have been even more enchanted with it in the 1850's; hence, his appreciation captures its genius loci so vividly in *The Untried Years*.

When it comes to the deeper, more ambivalent levels of James's psyche, Edel advances various hypotheses but generally draws back from unambiguous personal committal. Edel believes firmly that the biographer is responsible for presenting all possible alternatives to his reader. The tense nature of William and Henry James's attitude to each other threads the biography, but the reader is not asked to understand the relationship any more than Henry did himself. William appears as an abrasive, providing an obsessive theme for Henry's fiction. Edel traces Henry's recurrent backache to his uneasy relationship with William. This ailment (or the "wound", a word which James offered gratuitously to hungry critics) has usually been attributed to a castration complex, a theory of which Edel seems on the one hand contemptuous, although he does not firmly shut the door on it. As far as interpreting James's sexual motivations, Edel traverses a wavering course. In *The Untried Years* he clearly associates the types of women created by the novelist with James's own uncertain feelings towards women:

Henry James feared and worshipped them, and hesitated to express his feelings lest he be turned away. For him women could be as chaste and beautiful — and unattainable — as Diana; or else they were another kind of huntress, harsh and predatory, literally dedicated to the chase — the chase of the husband — and thus to be fled.

Leon Edel undoubtedly knows more about Henry James than any other person alive. Yet it seems to me that in this passage he is straining too hard to accommodate fiction to fact. The later volumes record deep, enduring friendships with women, and I do not recall Edel describing any encounter from which James really "fled" — at least, not to my satisfaction. In Volumes II and III James appears as pleasantly neutral in all his relationships, unstirred by the passions that disturb human beings, even artists, from time to time. I understand that Edel is going to turn to this aspect of James's life in the forthcoming volume.

In a seminar on biography held at the University of Toronto last winter, Professor Edel made the remark that knowledge of the subject's sexual life was not necessarily important for a literary biographer if it did not have any particular relevance to his books. However, as a biographer, Edel's whole underlying premise is that a writer reveals himself in his creations, that the style and content are the man. For the epigraph to *The Middle Years*, Edel selected James's statement that "the artist is present in every page of every book from which he sought so assiduously to eliminate himself." My own impression in that suppressed passion is present in a very disturbing way in James's work. Edel, usually so anxious to relate life and work, never explores this feature of James's work — or life. Has he waited until the fourth volume to discuss James's sexual drives precisely because they were so ambivalent; or because he is saving some revelation for the end?

I raised this point because it seems to me curious that so important a part of most people's lives could be disregarded through three volumes of a biography. Professor Edel would probably defend his position on the grounds of "form", a word which recurs constantly in his conversation when discussing biography. I can understand how he could compress James's experience of London clubs into a single chapter, but I do not comprehend how one is justified in handling love in this manner. However, undoubtedly Professor Edel will prove me wrong if the complete biography emerges as the work of art it promises to become.

All this brings me back to the original warning cited by Professor Edel. No human being, no matter how sympathetic, shares the same proclivities, tastes, or drives as another. One can only assume a single layer of another's skin tissue, and even then, the biographer's own attitudes cannot be stifled completely. Professor Edel has probably got as close to Henry James as anyone ever will, but I suspect that Henry James will have the last laugh on us.

Although the biography offers an embarrassment of riches, I have concentrated on only one, and perhaps a relatively unimportant, reflection that has been

forced upon me. I could have waxed enthusiastic about its grace, its elegance, its urbanity, all conveyed in a leisurely pace highly reminiscent of James himself. I am convinced that this is a biography that will someday be referred to with the same authoritative assumptions with which one links Boswell and Froude.