The Jameses were such a fascinating and complicated family that there is much we could discuss. Let me start by asking about your understanding of the health problems of the children in the family. William, Henry, and Alice were continually suffering from symptoms which can only be thought of as having a psychological basis. And surely their preoccupation with illness must somehow tie in with their father’s physical disability.

LE Inevitably: the leg lost in a childhood accident.

JWA Yes. My question, then, is: How do you explain the central role which invalidism played in the lives of the children in the James family?

LE Well, we start inevitably with the fact that the children saw from their earliest years a father who wasn’t like other fathers. He had only one leg. If one wants to be very Freudian, one could say that the spectacle of a man with a missing limb represents in one way or another a kind of castration. Not all of him is there. This arouses anxieties and undercurrents of fear. I am not entirely extrapolating. In The Spoils of Poynton Henry alludes to the permanence of a legless state. In other novels, he has special ways of referring to disabilities. I remember from my days in the army what a basic fear I used to find among the men: that of losing their genitals in battle; they feared this worse than death. It existed in barracks jokes and barracks anxieties. It reflects a kind of primordial terror. On a simpler level the James children saw their father as an incomplete man, one who was not physically whole. As a result he receives special care, special attention. And then we get a particular element in the James family: the presence of two women who fetch and carry— in addition to the servants— and who are supportive of papa. There is Mary James, the wife and mother; there is her sister, Aunt Kate (Catherine Walsh). Not enough attention has been paid to Aunt Kate. Everyone knows, I believe, how many Kates there are in the novels and tales— I can reel off some: Kate Croy, Kate Beever, Kate Cookham, Kate Creston, Kate Julian. Whenever Henry portrays a strong, forceful female he gives her the name of Kate. They are all determined women. They know what they want. Aunt Kate certainly did. She married late, but the marriage didn’t last long. She came back to the family. This situation could have enabled the two older sons, and certainly the daughter, to feel “Well, I’ll be looked after too, if there’s something wrong with me.” And often psychically this kind of wish can end up in backaches, migraines, constipation, various kinds of hysterical symptoms. The younger sons were healthy adolescents and they escaped the symptom phase by becoming soldiers in the Civil War.

JWA Your comment about Aunt Kate reminds me of a question I would like to ask you about her. You noted at one point in your biography of Henry James that she “was in every way a second mother to the James children.” But I carefully went through your references to her, and I could not find the evidence on which you based your conclusion that she played such an important role in Henry James’s life.

I deduced this from the kinds of letters Henry wrote to her. I think in some ways he was more at ease with her than with his mother. I remember that when he met Turgenev, he described to his Aunt Kate in great detail his first call on the Russian writer. But that kind of evidence is not always conclusive because his letters were handed around, so that his mother— or even the entire family— was being addressed when he wrote one or another of its members. Still, his letters to his mother and to some extent to Alice are more worldly and social; his letters to William more related to literature and European culture; and his letters to Aunt Kate seem to depend on his moods. In psychological terms, I suppose Aunt Kate was often the "good mother" as distinct from his own mother, who became the "bad mother" when she badgered him about finances.

So in a sense he expected a more sympathetic response from Aunt Kate than from his mother.

He opened up to her, I think, in ways that he didn't to his mother (aunts and uncles often have that advantage), perhaps in part because of anxiety that if he opened up more to his mother she would make more demands. His mother always asked for accounts, always warned him about women and encouraged him in his egotism.

Much of what we have discussed so far concerns the difficulties and the conflicts in the family. I myself feel that I understand the weaknesses of the James Family better than its strengths. But what was special about this family that enabled it to produce two such geniuses as William and Henry? (Or perhaps I should include Alice and say that among the children there were three unusually creative individuals?) How do you account for the positive side of this family?

Well, you will remember that Freud never tried to explain genius. There occurs a moment and a time when certain individuals, in a certain family environment, live certain kinds of lives, experience certain kinds of tensions and passions and interactions, which give them extraordinary selfhood and the power that goes with it. The father's ambiguities and ambivalences probably made the sons turn in the direction of reality; his vaguenesses made them concrete; and the mother's "toughness" was something with which Henry could identify. William had a more difficult time. Henry asks himself many of these questions in his late memoirs, A Small Boy and Others and Notes of a Son and Brother. He wonders what his mother had to offer as an integrated self, when she gave all of herself to the family; but he cannot see that what she offered was her own power and her drive to control, and this became Henry's drive in art. The father was full of vacillation, but Henry, the second born, knew from the first what he wanted to do— to be "just literary." William as first-born had to bear the brunt of his parents' anxieties over having a child. That is often the case; by the time the other children come along, they are no longer a novelty. William, being the novelty in the family, was cock-of-the-walk in certain ways but also strapped down in others. We get to know the mother best by seeing all the mothers Henry created in his novels— they are always controlling, domineering mothers, and nowhere more strongly so than in The Spoils of Poynton. Mrs. Gereth never gets off her son's back. I remember a verse by Delmore Schwartz:

Child labor! The child must carry
His fathers on his back.

That was his problem. But the mothers too. William had to carry his father until after the old boy's death; then he was ready to write his first book and this was his collection of his father's papers. Having, so to speak, buried papa, he finally began his own career. Henry's burden seems to have been his mother, but he escaped her (one never really does entirely) by living abroad. The introjected mother however, kept driving Henry to achieve—he had to go on being the successful performer, as he had been within the family when he earned the title of "Angel." In revising my biography for Penguin I made up for my original laziness in not dealing adequately with a novel in which there is a heroine named Angela. This novel, Confidence—one of James's minor works—needs larger treatment, and I have done this in the revisions.

What strikes me about your comments is your appreciation of the inner ways in which a child's perceptions of his parents influence the formation of his personality. The outer influences are often obvious; for example, a son whose father is a businessman may become a businessman too. But throughout your biography of Henry James you displayed your sensitivity to the more intricate and deeper connections between Henry and his parents.

I am particularly interested in the subject, which psychoanalysts have discussed, of a child picking up a parent's "covert drive." For example, we know that T. S. Eliot's mother was an amateur poet, but she certainly did not make her mark as a writer. I would speculate that in some hidden way Tom Eliot, the little boy whose mama wrote verses, picked up the fact that this was something his mother prized, and this contributed to his poetic drive: he knew it would please his mother. We all know in what a concrete and realistic—and magical—way young children see what is often hidden or disguised in adult behavior. The history of geniuses is filled with children achieving what one or the other parent wanted to do but failed. The covert drive of the parent may certainly be considered one of the elements in the making of greatness.

JWA How does this apply to Henry James?

2See the following article in this issue: Leon Edel, "Revision of a Chapter from The Life of Henry James."

LE He acquired readily his father's love of picturesque language; but his father did not have the discipline of art. That came from the mother, whose covert drive was for discipline and control. And then his mother regarded Henry as "special" among her four sons. With a combination of elements of this sort, Henry's great style, his artistic confidence, the assurance with which he prepared for his career, can be discerned in all that he did as a young man. But remember these speculations and extrapolations are only a part of a very complex personality process. Well, let's look at the two brothers. You know the old aphorism: William wrote philosophy or psychology that was fiction, and Henry wrote fiction that was philosophy or psychology. A misleading epigram. William was a scientist blessed with a superb, elucidating style; Henry was an imaginative artist. But the description of the two in reality testifies to some kind of family irradiation, originally derived from the father's powerful verbal originality.

JWA When we were arranging this interview you mentioned to me that your treatment of the relationship between William and Henry was the most controversial part of your biography.

LE It shouldn't have been, but my evidence flew in the teeth of preconceptions about the attachment between the brothers, their often good-humored correspondence, and William’s occasional good-natured criticisms of his brother’s style. When one looks more closely, one sees that Henry was hurt by these criticisms; also, William's attacks were distinctly aggressive, and in the earlier years, when Henry was becoming famous ahead of him, he spent quite a bit of time “putting down” his sibling. Those who love William James — and he is most loveable — didn't at all like my showing that William was constantly pushing his brother out of the way, and really avoiding him. In my first volume, I wrote a chapter called “Jacob and Esau” to show how this myth of brother robbing brother of his “birthright” existed in the James family. Sometimes William was Jacob and sometimes he was Esau, and vice versa. When William was abroad, he thought he was robbing Henry of his chance to be in Europe, where he belonged, and he wrote home in that sense. When Henry was abroad, he did the same thing for William. When they came together Henry nearly always developed headaches, and William ran away as quickly as possible. One biographer has scoffed at this; he said maybe the headaches came from the flu or from other causes. He would have done well to look into psychological headaches — often the result of rage and frustration — about which we now know a great deal. And then another professor, a historian with literary pretension, has accused me of “distortion.” But my quotations were accurate enough and it was clear that he was “resisting” the idea that William James was anything but an heroic figure. He is — in his work. But not in his letters or his acts, where he is simply as human as the rest of us. The facts are there at every turn, if we look at them. For example, Henry's feeling that William always wanted to avoid him, yet his own relief when William went to South America — he said he now felt free and “uncorrected.” We have William's consistent critiques of Henry's work, though William himself was not a storyteller. He was on stronger ground when he took issue with style — being a great stylist himself. And then there were the difficulties Henry created for William in their struggle to earn favor in the family circle. (Any parent today knows the meaning of "sibling rivalry," a term I originally avoided.) Some have argued I was perpetuating childhood rivalries in the adult life of these singular personages. But anyone who knows his psychology knows that certain infantilisms linger, that certain childhood patterns remain. At maturity they were loving brothers, but William still ran from Henry and Henry still adored William and wished for his love. We could probe more deeply and see fraternal "incest" (a subject not much dealt with), but others are at work on this subject and I do not want to trench on their ground. I had a great deal of evidence even before I unearthed that significant letter written late in life by William, addressed to the secretary of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, who was a complete stranger to him. The secretary had written to announce his election to the Academy. William replied that since Henry, his "younger, vainer and more frivolous brother," was already a member, there might be a redundancy of Jameses, and he backed off. He also was being disingenuous when he added he really didn't care for this kind of honor, since it was purely honorific. Yet he kept on accepting honorary degrees and honorary memberships in foreign academies. I have evidence that William always considered Henry to be vain and frivolous and unimportantly "aesthetic."

JWA Certainly William's relationship with Henry was emotionally charged. Although William's feelings of closeness to Henry were very real, he often became uncomfortable when his brother was nearby. I think you brought out William's ambivalence with particular clarity in your discussion of the time when Henry came to Cambridge and William suddenly fled to Europe.

LE You are referring I guess to the time William took passage for Greece to "escape from the flu season" in Cambridge, just when Henry arrived in Cambridge. William, so far as I know, had never fled "the flu season" before. But that happened also when William was on sabbatical in Switzerland. Henry came to visit his brother and sister-in-law, and the day after he arrived William announced he had planned a walking tour in the Alps and left. So Henry spent time with his nephews and niece.

JWA To what extent did Henry have similar feelings? Didn't he also become uncomfortable when he was around William?

LE Well, you'll remember the time he developed migraines after a number of days with William in Florence. That episode is incorporated in The American and William recognized himself in the little clergyman who hates Europe. There was also the time when William came to visit Henry in London. Henry arranged for him to meet T. H.
Huxley, but William stayed a few days and left for the Continent and Henry, in bewilderment, had to make excuses all round. One has only to read the slight novel of the late ’70s, Confidence, about Angela and the scientific young man, to see how much William could embarrass Henry. But Henry doted on his brother; he reminds me at moments of some old faithful family dog who comes tagging along behind William and is told to go home. William could take Henry only in small doses. This is clear in the letters William wrote to his wife.

JWA How do you know what William wrote in those letters? Along with everyone else who has done extensive work in the William James Papers, I am all too aware that his correspondence with his wife is closed to researchers until the year 2020.

LE Members of the James family have access to these letters, and they have given me some of William’s allusions to Henry. William felt guilty but told his wife he simply couldn’t abide Henry’s lightness and aesthetic way of seeing things. But Henry didn’t know this and he always came running, only to be rebuffed.

JWA Henry apparently had a need for someone to confirm his sensibility, and William was a person who potentially could have done this, but for his own personal reasons was unable to. William was one of the few people — perhaps the only person — capable of understanding Henry. But William’s own concerns — his rivalry and his need to be admired — made it impossible for him to give his brother the recognition he craved.

LE Let me add this about Henry’s devotion and love for William: I would go so far as to suggest that all those later relationships with young men that Henry formed in his old age contained the buried childhood wish to recover William’s love out of their “lost childhood.”

JWA I hadn’t thought of that. That’s very powerful.

LE We are faced here with two brothers who were born only 15 months apart. That closeness from the first bred intimacy, affection, and the usual feuds we find among siblings. The intimate male closeness between brothers in such cases does not necessarily contribute to homosexuality, but it can foster homo-eroticism. In my new book I show how the relationship between Maynard Keynes and his father, a splendid father-son relationship, contributed to Maynard’s psycho-sexual life. At any rate, there is much more than meets the eye in Henry’s saying in his memoirs that William was always around the corner and out of sight — as if in his 15-month start in life he had gotten so far ahead Henry could never catch up. That is the essence of the way a younger sibling feels about the older one who has been in the world that much longer. In someone like Henry this amounted almost to an historic lag.

JWA Psychologically sophisticated critics have noted that a powerful novel characteristically expresses the author’s underlying concerns, but when these concerns come through too directly the novel is likely to be considered ineffective. Melville’s Pierre is an example. I wonder whether this reasoning might help account for the failure of Confidence, the novel by Henry James which you mentioned a few moments ago?

LE I agree. It has the usual charm of style but its story is like one of those eighteenth-century comedies of misunderstandings — Henry was writing too close to his deepest feelings and didn’t distance himself. There are many successful novels and stories of Henry’s which deal with the same theme. They often contain the friendship of two men; one is always a version of artistic and literary Henry, the other is scientific and philosophical William.

JWA We have had a lot to say about William and Henry. Let’s not leave out the other children. There is Alice, whose journal you edited, and the forgotten James children — the two younger brothers, Willy and Robertson.

LE I gave them a separate chapter in The Untried Years. They went off to the Civil War. There was a gap of some years between them and the older William and Henry. They were wounded or suffered in other ways from the war. One became a happy-go-lucky spendthrift and died at forty; the other, verbally gifted, was a drifter from one thing to another, one religion to another, and ended up an alcoholic. And Alice was an invalid who would be forgotten today if she had not kept a belligerent and very Irish diary. The heaviest family “investment’’ was in William. He was Number One. Henry as Number Two still was a source of interest. Numbers Three and Four were “routine.’’ This often happens in families. And the girl was the usual victim — she was almost like a foundling who struggled in late and had four powerful brothers to contend with. In the Victorian world girls didn’t play tennis or run about freely and Alice internalized her anger and died of cancer.

By the way, when I wrote the life of Henry James, in the five volumes, over a period of twenty years I avoided, as I said, the term “sibling rivalry” — I just used the word “rivalry.’’ It’s amazing how the analytical terminology is now in common usage.

JWA Let me ask you at this point how you developed an interest in the application of psychology to biography?

LE This interest was aroused when I was twenty-one. I was studying at the Sorbonne. I went on the traditional Rhine journey that summer, and on to the Passion Play and the Salzburg festival; and in Vienna met a friend who took me to a summer seminar being given by Alfred Adler. Psychology had not been my proper study, although I had written an M.A. dissertation on the “modern psychological novel” (which became my book on the subject twenty
years later). Still, my interest then was in Henry James's unsuccessful plays. I was doing a doctoral thesis called "Henry James: The Dramatic Years." I had vaguely heard of Adler as the inventor of the concept of the "inferiority complex," and I went along out of curiosity and my very early interest in man's inner worlds. This was why I had already written on Joyce, Woolf, and Dorothy Richardson — Faulkner was to come. Adler was a stout, short, alert, vivacious little man with a goatee who welcomed me cordially. I found him warm and friendly. He invited me to his special table at the Café Siller down by the Danube, where he nightly gathered his students about him in the Germanic way, and he seated me next to him. I was wearing a splendid reddish beard, and looked like an ambassador or foreign diplomat — perhaps that inspired him to take notice of me, for I really was abysmally ignorant. His students told me that Adler had begun by working in the natural sciences, and I remember talk of trees in forests that grew taller than others in order to get sunlight and air. "Aha, the inferiority complex," I said. But it dawned on me later how well Adler in what he called "individual psychology" understood the quest for power — the need for an individual to get to the light of the sun. I told him about my studies in English; he of course was interested in Henry and William James, and knew William's work. I remember his saying to me that if I were interested in biography, I should look very attentively at the relations of the two brothers. It's extraordinary how this casual and unexpected encounter with one of Freud's early disciples bore such profound fruit in my life. Adler said to me there was every reason to bring together the disciplines of literature and psychology and I have been doing this ever since. When I returned to Paris I began to read Freud in French translations. I really date my inter-disciplinary work from that summer.

JWA What other grounding have you had in psychology? I ask because it is a question which matters to anyone who aspires to write psychological biography. What are the ways one can learn about psychology in order to make sensitive use of it in a biographical work?

LE I don't think a biographer can learn out of a brief reading of manuals, texts, or the classics of psychology. There are entire biographies written out of Erikson, or one or two volumes of Freud, but it is my belief that unless the worker in the two disciplines possesses first of all a certain kind of true inwardness, and second a chance to explore his own fantasies and dreams, he should avoid venturing into this field. Such literary scholars are quite as ill-informed as psychoanalysts who venture into literature with their therapeutic experiences. I have written a lecture on the subject in which I try to establish what "the nature of psychological evidence" is and who is equipped to handle it. I think biographers not properly equipped should leave psychology out of their work; no extraverter need apply! In my lecture, I make the point that the only part of Freud, or his successors, that need concern us is the exploration of the unconscious and what it can teach us about man's ways of dreaming, imagining, thinking. We are not doing therapy on our subjects, but we can stand a little therapy ourselves to prevent us from making mistakes and mixing up our own lives with the lives of our subjects. I wasn't doing therapy on the James family. They were not my patients. But I was studying what had happened to them in the light of psychology and watching their imaginations in action, while at the same time policing my own subjective attitudes. To that extent one can borrow from the techniques of psychoanalysis.

JWA I am aware of the lecture you just mentioned. It was published in 1961 and entitled "The Biographer and Psycho-Analysis." In fact, I was planning to ask you a question based on one of your comments in that lecture. You noted that when a biographer understands his subject he can risk publishing a first volume while the second one is unwritten "and have the boldness to say that he is not afraid that new material will alter his fundamental insights."4 What is especially interesting about that comment is that you made it after you had published your first volume on Henry James, but before the remaining four volumes had yet appeared. Did significant material become available after you completed the first volume, and, if such material did appear, what were your reactions to it?

LE I wasn't boasting. What I was trying to say was that it is not the material that makes a biography, though the material represents the bricks and straw, it is what the material furnishes in the way of insights. Having determined the psycho-dynamics of my subject from the available material there was small likelihood that new material would give anything but the same picture, though greater richness and deeper insights might be possible. It was my publisher who confronted me with my technical problems by urging me to publish the first part of the biography that I had planned as one single large volume. I had written, he said, a portrait of the young Henry James and it was eminently publishable. My reaction was one of pleasure mingled with alarm. What if new material should turn up? Could I be sure my judgments were right? Wouldn't I need to be free to revise — and how revise a published book? The publisher told me to think it over. I reread what I had done, wrote some new chapters to give the book greater independence from what was to come, and decided I should have faith in my judgments and confidence in my knowledge. Well, "The Untried Years" has stood up for more than thirty years. I did come on new material, sometimes much richer material. My search in the later volumes was for retrospective methods, the use of the flashback, the moving backward and forward in time, that enabled me to put into my late volumes material that properly could have been in the first volume. What gave me confidence was my having enunciated all my themes in the early chapters, a little like a playwright who plants a gun in Act I and we know the gun will be used before the end of the play. But remember I

started with awareness of how my story would end, and the psychological patterns do not change, they evolve. Also you must remember that in 1961 my second and third volumes were all but complete, so I had a good sense of how the "serialization" of my book was working out. In my later volumes, I used many retrospective chapters; my goal was to keep my story-line from becoming cluttered. This is the trouble with most academic biographers who are fine scholars but who have no knowledge of how to write a biography. Their biographies in the end are not written at all, they are just compilations of materials, scrapbooks assembled out of archives. They never think about the diachronic and synchronic — or, to put it in the more common language of our time, they are befuddled by the linear events and don't know how to cope with simultaneities. The problem is as old as Homer, or as simple as Tolstoy, who always started one hare running, then stopped and started another; then came back to hare number one, then started hare number three. It's in all the old novels. Biographers should study them and use their very old bag of tricks, instead of piling everything in chronologically. A date book is not a life. We must not translate the disorder of life into a biography, but we must, in our orderly narrative, give the reader the feeling of the disorder. These are some of the secrets of my life of Henry James.

But has criticism taken notice? Critics will dissect a poem until it is barely breathing. But I have yet to read a critical study of the structure and form of a biography. The biographical form is in its infancy, and criticism hasn't yet begun to ask itself the proper questions. I have practiced biography from the first as an art form. Your Money-penny-and-Buckler or Nicolay-and-Hay many-volumed biographies are merely partial archives in print. To find the right form for the given life, and then to tell the story as a lucid and enthralling narrative — for the life of a poet, a novelist, a statesman can be enthralling — that should be the aim of biography. Instead, these vertiginous lives are reduced to bundles of fact, pedestrian dry rot. I learned from Strachey, from Van Wyck Brooks, from Maurois, from Michelet — from those who recognized (in spite of their own shortcomings) that linear prose cannot carry too large an archival burden, and must be adapted to the story that is being told.

JWA Arthur Link, who has written five volumes of a biography of Woodrow Wilson, commented to me once that in many ways his background was similar to Wilson's. They were both from the South, both sons of ministers, both from a Presbyterian background, and Professor Link felt that those commonalities helped him to understand Wilson. On the other hand, he also pointed out ways in which he is different from Wilson and mentioned aspects of Wilson's personality to which he had difficulty relating. I wonder about the relation of your own background to that of Henry James. I would imagine that in some ways there are similarities which would foster your identification with him and your ability to see the world through his eyes and that there would also be factors which would stand in the way of the development of that process.

LE This is the heart of the matter — the relation of the biographer to his subject. In my book Literary Biography, "Subject" is my opening chapter. Biographers begin by falling in love with their subjects, or falling into hate. The love biography becomes an elegy, the hate biography a debunking affair. Neither can have much worth, though a biographer in love (like Boswell) can write a masterpiece. The time came, long before I started my life of James, when I asked myself why I had picked him out of all the world's subjects. I saw that I had gone through a phase of total worship. And total involvement. The explanation came before I decided to write James's life. I had worked through some of these problems in my early Sorbonne dissertation. One of the answers to my question — aside from my belief that as a stylist, as a user of words, we must put him beside Shakespeare and Milton — was my awareness of having been reared on the Canadian prairie. You might laugh and wonder how a provincial could latch on to a cosmopolitan. But in that small town where I grew up everyone was looking back to their "old home." It was this that gave me my affinity later with Willa Cather. The Ukrainians, the Russians, the Jews, the Doukhobors, the Poles, the cockneys, the Irish of our town all figured in my childhood, and their children were my schoolmates. They had come from Europe. They talked of Europe. They looked toward Europe. I was reared on nostalgia and the elegies of "lost countries," a sense of exile and disinheritance. You see, I talk like James's "passionate pilgrim." He was the American who went back to England to die. In my childhood I was exposed much more to the heartache of the lost and abandoned than to the new freedom, the liberty of the new land, the hope for the future. They had come out of feudalism and ghettos, but the intellectuals of my mother's and father's house mixed their freedom with recollections of a culture absent from the prairie. This was perhaps a different kind of cosmolatianism from Henry James's. I often ask myself why I grew up with such a positive vision of Europe rather than the negative vision — the one that made the pilgrims flee Old World inequities. But we lived in great isolation on the prairies. The snows were deep, the winters long. Radio was just beginning to be invented. All we had (and how vivid my memory of this can be) was the train in the morning on its way from the outer world, and the train in the evening, on its way to the "civilization" from which we were distanced. I think my need for the world "beyond the horizon" may have stemmed from my having been taken, with my brother, to the little Russian town where my mother's parents lived. We made the journey when I was three and my brother in his second year. I have remote memories of the sea voyage, the greenness of England, the European cobbled towns. I still have Russian words and Russian childhood songs — one about a little goat — circling around in that far-away dream-like phantom world; and there is a memory of walking across an endless stubble-field to see a flying machine, but all I can conjure up are adult legs all around me. So I had in common the nostalgia, the sentimental longings, for that far-off land imparted to me mainly by my mother who felt herself trapped in those Canadian snows.
But the “Europe” dream was only one part of what I had to explore to qualify myself for the writing of James’s life and his Europe dream. I had also to disengage myself from James as a father-figure, or a mother-figure. Perhaps even as a brother-figure.

JWA How much younger is your brother?

LE About 15 months.

JWA That is just the difference in age between William and Henry. How did your relationship with your brother help you to understand the relationship between the two James brothers?

LE I suspect it’s the other way around. My writing of William and Henry gave me understanding of my relationship with my brother. It is interesting that he is a philosopher, but he’s quite different from William, and then it was I who was the elder brother. I suppose I bossed him around a great deal. We were in the same classes at school, and were treated almost as twins for years and dressed by our mother in the same way. He was a much better student. I was the gregarious always-around-town boy — I suppose on the run from “family” in the way of many boys. But as Link said, there are similarities and there are differences. My brother studied Latin and Greek. I went into modern languages. He went to Oxford. I went to Paris. He has written on ethics, Aristotle, legal philosophy, anthropology, and has had a distinguished career.

JWA I have heard of him — Professor Abraham Edel.

LE He’s well known and active. Of course we had our rivalries when young. He was meditative by nature, but active in sports. I think my relationship with my brother did make me ask myself in the second volume of the biography what effect Henry James had on William. And while my book was concerned with Henry, I found myself inserting a chapter on William, and his problems in his relationship with Henry, in order to give the reader a balanced picture. I felt I would be telling a less one-sided story.

JWA I’d like to ask you one more thing about your brother. If you think it’s too personal, don’t hesitate to say so. An interesting thing about William and Henry’s relationship is that people are often surprised when they learn that they were so close in age. Yet, for their whole lives, Henry looked at William as being the older brother and always felt a step behind him. And William always considered Henry to be his younger brother. I wonder whether that was true in your relationship with your brother, too: that even though there was only a year or so difference in age, yet it still seemed like an older brother-younger brother relationship.

LE I think there were times when I gave him older-brother status, especially when he tutored me in my weak subjects, algebra and the sciences. In brotherhood, even in rivalries, there can be interchangeable roles.

JWA Certainly when Henry began publishing his books, and was making such a name for himself, and William was still struggling to find a career — during that period I’m sure William felt Henry had surpassed him.

LE That is true. And that was why I suspect Henry and William for the greater part of their lives kept the Atlantic Ocean between them. And then there was the delicate question of what Mary James, the mother, did to reinforce William’s feeling that he was rejected by her in favor of the “angel” Henry. That was certainly hard for William to take.

JWA Yes, indeed.

LE It is best illustrated in the correspondence between the brothers about division of the estate. Henry, having been made executor, tried to divide it into even parts. William felt he deserved a larger share – the father had already given the younger sons so much money, and then William had a family while Henry was a bachelor. The letters between the two constitute a not very edifying quarrel. There again we have the Jacob and Esau situation.

JWA Yes, it was practically a literal Jacob and Esau situation since inheritance was involved.

LE There have been one or two critics who have speculated that I was writing about my relation with my brother rather than about William and Henry.

JWA I think the evidence for the rivalry and tension between William and Henry is so overwhelming that it is hard to imagine that anyone could seriously raise the question of whether it existed. And I can say that as one who has no brothers.

LE I think most of my readers have agreed with the evidence I produced. Curiously enough I was first drawn to this question by a slip of the pen (it didn’t seem like a typo) Henry made when in his memoirs he got William’s birth-date wrong. There I was using Freud directly; he made historians aware of the importance of slips of the pen. Henry made the mistake at the moment when he was writing about William’s having had a head start in life. Unconscious emotions often make a pen do strange things. You may recall the one I mentioned in “The Untired Years” in which Henry, writing a letter in 1884 and referring to the coming year, 1885, three times writes 1865 instead. What emotions were involved in this instance? I asked myself. I searched 1865 thoroughly, with the result that I wrote an entire chapter on Henry’s emotions at the end of the Civil War. Now about the rivalry, since I noted that Henry slipped in giving his brother’s birth-date, I began to watch other small details of that kind, and to pay attention to their language to each other in their letters. In watching for affect the biographer has to distinguish between the feeling in the documents and his own feelings, and the danger of
reading his own feelings into the documents. Once a biographer becomes alert to “projection” he is writing a very particular kind of biography.

JWA I get the impression that you have spent a considerable amount of time exploring your personal feelings about Henry James. I think that all biographers establish a close personal relationship with their subjects; the biographer who is in touch with his feelings will be much more adept at handling them than the biographer who has an identification with his subject which he has never examined.

LE I could, if I had time, go on to the interesting question of my having to write my early volumes when I was dealing with a subject younger than myself, then there came the volume in which we were the same age, and then he was older than I was. I had to be careful about my continuing relationship with my subject. There are times I wish I could be writing The Master now — I could deal much more understandingly with the aging process. There is no question a biographer uses his life’s experiences. That is his dilemma.

JWA I wish you would say just a word about the way your feelings toward Henry James changed during the period in which you were working on Henry James.

LE I passed from hero-worship in my twenties to a proper distancing, and the more I learned the better I felt I understood his life-myth. A biography in my opinion is the record of that myth, and it is very difficult to disinter it. Lately I have written much about this: the need to ask ourselves why Thoreau really went to Walden pond, why Hemingway was such a frightened man beyond his show of boasting and bravado, what the depths of guilt were in Hawthorne that made him a recluse and contributed to his myth of disaffection from society. Biographers have been writing extravert biographies about human beings whose inner lives are the true sources of their achievement.

JWA What, then, was Henry James’s myth? Could you give a brief description of it? Perhaps we may end with that question.

LE He set out to achieve fame, fortune, glory; he was ambitious, and his ambition stemmed really from his childhood dream and need to prove himself to his mother, to surpass his brother, or at least to catch up with him. The myth is always highly personal and nearly always related to the sense of self and the need to find one’s place in society and in the world. When we understand it, biography becomes not an art which diminishes but one which enhances. It is a record of men and women overcoming difficulties, struggling free in some mysterious way from the emotional chains that would frustrate them or even kill them. Biography doesn’t dissipate the mysteries, but it engages us in them — and the unraveling is fascinating and endless.