



**THE OUTCRY**  
HENRY JAMES

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INTRODUCTION BY  
**JEAN STROUSE**

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS  
CLASSICS

## THE OUTCRY

HENRY JAMES (1843–1916), the younger brother of the psychologist William James and one of the greatest of American writers, was born in New York but lived for most of his life in England. Among the best known of his many stories and novels are *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *The Wings of the Dove*.

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*New York*

This is a New York Review Book  
Published by The New York Review of Books  
1755 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

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First published in London by Methuen & Co. Ltd. and in New York  
by Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
James, Henry, 1843–1916.

The outcry : Henry James ; introduction by Jean Strouse.  
p. cm.

ISBN 1-59017-000-8

1. Painting—Collectors and collecting—Fiction. 2.  
Painting—Expertising—Fiction. 3. Art historians—Fiction. 4. Art  
dealers—Fiction. I. Title.

PS2116 .O8 2002

813'.4—dc21

2001006492

ISBN 1-59017-000-8

Cover photograph: Knut Nicolaus, *Back of a Water-Damaged Painting  
on Canvas*

Cover design: Katy Homans

Book design by Lizzie Scott

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

April 2002

[www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com)

## INTRODUCTION

REVIEWING a new novel by Henry James on October 5, 1911, the *Times Literary Supplement* announced: "And now comes 'The Outcry' to astonish [James's] admirers with the phenomenon of a positively exciting plot. We venture to add also, a plot almost excessively 'up-to-date.'" That the reviewer so heralded the plot had to do with the famous inaccessibility of the author's great previous novels—*The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl*. When *The Wings of the Dove* appeared in 1902, James's brother William complained: "You've reversed every traditional canon of story-telling (especially the fundamental one of *telling* the story, which you carefully avoid)." The dramatic, plot-driven *Outcry*, which had in fact started out as a play, proved far more popular than its immediate predecessors, running through five printings in a few weeks, "whereas," its pleased but somewhat embarrassed author told Edith Wharton, it had "taken the poor old [*Golden Bowl*] eight or nine years to get even into a third."

The outcry in question concerns the art drain that was transferring the contents of England's ancestral houses to the collections of American millionaires—hardly a new theme for James: he had been writing about the transatlantic "traffic" in art, culture, and imaginative perception for more than thirty years, only this time he treated it as a comedy. And *The Outcry* had a specific contemporary referent. Toward the end of 1909 a heated public protest had prevented the Duke

of Norfolk from selling a Holbein portrait, "The Duchess of Milan," to Henry Clay Frick, and the British had raised over \$350,000 to buy the painting for the National Gallery—which gave James the idea for a play he had already agreed to write. It was to be part of a London repertory season at the Duke of York's Theatre, organized by J. M. Barrie and the American producer Charles Frohman; others invited to contribute were George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy, Harley Granville-Barker, Somerset Maugham, and Barrie himself. James had longed for success on the stage all his literary life—he published his first play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, in 1869, and his most painful public failures were productions of *The American* and *Guy Domville* in the 1890s. Consequently, he was delighted at the age of sixty-seven to be drawn into the highly professional company of the Frohman-Barrie group.

He wrote *The Outcry* "with great intensity and interest" in the last few weeks of 1909, then suffered an acute depressive breakdown (brought on partly, according to his biographer Leon Edel, by the poor sales of the New York Edition of his novels). During this illness, at the insistence of Barrie and Granville-Barker, he reluctantly cut the text of his play. Then, in May 1910, the death of Edward VII closed London's theaters, putting an end to Frohman's repertory season.

Over the following year James turned *The Outcry* into a slight but sharp and funny novel, primarily adding physical descriptions and narrative interpolations to the virtually intact dialogue. The structure remains so much that of a drama, with four "acts," barely transformed stage directions, and people entering and exiting left and right, that at one point James forgot it wasn't: a character squarely turns his back and crosses into an adjoining room while remaining "in sight of the others, not to say of ourselves."

That imperiously dismissive back belongs to Lord Theign of Dedborough, whose great (inherited) paintings have attracted

the attentions of a rich American collector, Breckenridge Bender. Like Christopher Newman in *The American*, Bender with his freshly minted millions stands in sharp contrast to Old World aristocrats who need his money but sneer at everything he stands for. They refer to him as a “money monster,” “you dreadful rich thing,” “the wretch who bagged Lady Lappington’s Longhi,” and the avatar of “such a conquering horde as invaded the old civilisation, only armed now with huge cheque-books instead of spears and battle-axes.” The impecunious Theign, who has an exalted sense of his own position even though he can’t afford to pay the gambling debts of his dissipated elder daughter, Kitty, wants to marry off his far more appealing younger daughter, Grace, to the repugnant but well-heeled Lord John (whom James describes as having “a certain delicacy of brutality”)—in exchange for which Lord John’s even more repugnant mother will forgive Kitty’s gambling debts. It’s an ugly bargain, of which Grace wants no part. But her father has to sell something. Enter Mr. Bender, loosely based on the banker J. Pierpont Morgan.\* Prowling England for acquisitions, Bender is after “some *ideally* expensive thing,” and at Dedborough he is particularly “after” Sir Joshua Reynolds’s great “Duchess of Waterbridge.”

What interested James was the “larger morality” of his scenario—the degree to which the “fortunate owners” of England’s great art wealth, holding objects in trust for the nation, might be held to account by the public for the quality of their guardianship. It is inconceivable to the autocratic Lord Theign that he might have to answer to anyone (least of all British commoners) for anything. When his daughter Grace opposes a possible art sale on grounds of the nation’s

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\*I am indebted to Adeline Tintner’s article in *Apollo*, “Henry James’s *The Outcry* and the Art Drain of 1908–9,” February 1981, for drawing my attention to this book and Bender’s similarity to Morgan.

cultural heritage—"what we've set our hearts on is working for England"—Theign snaps, "And pray who in the world's 'England' unless *I* am?"

In *The Outcry* James plays deftly and lightly with essential questions of value—as it is defined (or not) by aristocratic lineage, as inherent in unselfish love and works of great beauty, as measured by enormous sums of cash, as accruing more to the names of certain artists than to others, as discerned by the "new" connoisseurship in art. The professional art world turns up in the person of Hugh Crimble, an eager scholar (bearing strong resemblances to Roger Fry and to James's novelist friend Hugh Walpole), who describes himself as belonging to a "band of young men" who care about pictures, and who is, notes Lady Grace approvingly, "playing football with the old benighted traditions and attributions you everywhere meet."

Once the cast is assembled at Dedborough, Hugh tours the rooms and begins to think that a small portrait by Moretto of Brescia may in fact be an exceedingly rare Mantovano. Mr. Bender takes an immediate interest, and Hugh secures Theign's grudging permission to ask the "first authorities in Europe" to compare this portrait with another in Verona and to decide, based on "intimate internal evidence," whether the two are by the same hand. James alludes here to the German-educated Italian art historian Giovanni Morelli (1816–1891), whose method of searching for significant, revealing particulars in works of art had helped substitute comparative procedures for subjective feeling in the "science" of attribution—and whose disciples included Bernard Berenson, Gustavo Frizzoni, and Jean-Paul Richter. James, thinking he had made up Mantovano—"the Mantuan"—for *The Outcry*, was embarrassed to learn in 1912 that there was a sixteenth-century painter, Rinaldo Mantovano, whose works were at the National Gallery. He told the friend who pointed out his mistake that "*my* Mantovano was a creature of mere

(convincing) fancy—and this revelation of my not having been as inventive as I supposed rather puts me out!”

Several of the novel’s most entertaining scenes highlight the distance between noble rhetoric about art and the raw facts of cultural expropriation, as artistic treasure flows in the direction of the world’s latest fortunes. Lord Theign at first refuses to “traffic,” explaining condescendingly to Bender that the Reynolds “Duchess” is “a golden apple of one of those great family trees of which respectable people don’t lop off the branches whose venerable shade, in this garish and denuded age, they so much enjoy.”

The forthright Bender: “Then if they don’t sell their ancestors where in the world are all the ancestors bought?”

And when Grace warns Hugh that “people *have* trafficked; people do; people are trafficking all round,” he replies, “Ah, that’s what deprives me of my rest and, as a lover of our vast and beneficent art-wealth, poisons my waking hours. . . . Precious things are going out of our distracted country at a quicker rate than the very quickest—a century and more ago—of their ever coming in.”

Grace gently points out that England’s precious things don’t really belong to England: “I suppose our art-wealth came in—save for those awkward Elgin Marbles!—mainly by purchase too, didn’t it? We ourselves largely took it away from somewhere else, didn’t we? We didn’t *grow* it all.”

James’s critics often cast him as hopelessly in thrall to decadent European sensibilities, but in *The Outcry*, as in *The American*, the straightforward, energetic “new man” with his big ambitions and deep pockets has far more of the author’s amused affection than do the hypocritical aristocrats who try to use him. The flexible Bender knows exactly who he is and has an acute eye for real value, unlike the rigid and cruel Lord Theign of Dedborough (note the names), who is more willing to sell his daughter than one of his heirlooms. No one learns much in this tale—not the way Isabel Archer

and Milly Theale and Lambert Strether and Maggie Verver learn things. But in the “larger morality” of James’s drama, the outcry over a particular painting brings about resolutions that are happy for England and for the only people in the story the reader can like.

William James, who died in 1910, never read this novel that partly fulfilled a request he had made to his brother in October 1905, only half in jest, to “write a new book, with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigor and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness in the style.” Well, maybe a little fencing in the dialogue.

—JEAN STROUSE