Farewell, Victoria!

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For Jimmy Whistler the only thing more gratifying than coining a *môt* was publishing it. When Walter Sickert fathered one, and wanted to ensure its publication, he attributed it to Whistler, which gained it the front page of the *Westminster Gazette* directly under the leading article. “Very nice of you, very proper, to invent *môts* for me,” the Master said. “The Whistler *Môts* Propagation Bureau! I know! Charming! Only when they are in languages I don’t know, you had better advise me in good time, and send me a translation. Otherwise I am congratulated on them at dinner parties, and it is awkward.”

Readers even noted Whistler’s *môts* in their diaries, one such entry by Thomas Sergeaut Perry in 1888:

Whistler is mistaken for a hatter’s clerk and addressed, “This hat doesn’t fit.” “True, and your coat is damnablel ill cut, and I don’t like the set of your trousers.” Going to Collinses he finds an obviously unfinished picture in Whistler’s style, a frame like his own. C. asks for advice. “Leave it as it is.” C. apologizes for the frame, a copy of one of Whistler’s, saying, “You see, I took a leaf out of your book.” At the foot of the steps W. says, “It must have been a flyleaf.”

The squibs and polemics by which Whistler advertised himself were indispensable to his existence. As much as the Victorian artistic establishment would have had it otherwise, he would not be ignored. “I have seen Whistler,” Sickert once wrote, “spend mornings of precious daylight showing *Nocturne* after *Nocturne* to the football correspondent of a Fulham local paper.”

Whistler’s quarrelsome tone, often astute and clever, could degenerate easily into sheer silliness, for he was poorly educated and haphazardly self-educated. In Max Beerbohm’s unfinished *The Mirror of the Past*, unpublished in his lifetime, he parodied a taunting Whistler letter of the type reproduced in *The Gentle Art*. “Furious but amusing,” it is sent to the mythical Sylvester Herringham, a onetime friend of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who had com-
mented on Whistler’s notorious inability to complete a commission on time. “Is perfection,” Whistler retorts, amid ejaculations in French and German, “to be timed by the stop-watch, and must the painter in his wisdom compete with the perspiring fleet ones [hurrying bicyclists] of Lil[le]y Bridge? Was it between the fish and the soup that your Darwin knew Man a Monkey?”

Herringham’s curt reply gets to the heart of Whistler’s style and methods as seen by his detractors. “Your note has reached me. In so far as I can extract any meaning from its polyglot and illiterate verbiage, I deduce (1) that you are angry, and (2) that you are, at the same time, attempting to be funny. As to the reason for your anger I am as profoundly indifferent as I am depressed by your efforts to be funny.” Whistler, in Max’s fantasy, replies with further polyglot invective, as he might have in life, always eager to supply the last word and, if he could, to get it into print. His letters on professional issues were always intended to educate a larger public more than to explain or exculpate Whistler himself. Had the Herringham correspondence existed, he would have included it in The Gentle Art, risking the likelihood that despite his giving himself, always, the last word, his antagonist might have already furnished the reader with the more persuasive one.

Among the Americans in London whom Whistler knew in the late 1880s was Sheridan Ford, who wrote for the New York Herald and the Irving Bacheller Syndicate, who had published Art: A Commodity (1888). Having written several columns on Whistler, Ford had occasion to root through the newspaper files in which the record of the artist’s jousts with his contemporaries had appeared; he came up with the idea that the exchange of correspondence was worth preserving as a book. It meant a second wind for the old antagonisms, and possible income, which Whistler was only too willing to share if Ford did most of the work. As his collaborator searched newspaper files in the British Museum, Whistler went through boxes of correspondence and clippings he stored at home, often taking an already printed letter and repolishing the text in order to sharpen a barb or improve his own position in an old controversy.

Originally the collection bore the commonplace and not altogether accurate title The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler; and the type was already being set by Messrs. Field and Tuer of the Leadenhall Press when the author, urged on by his wife, Trixie, decided to cancel the agreement, pay off the editor with a pittance and order him to proceed no farther with the publication. The printers, receiving a similar notice from Whistler’s solicitor, George Lewis, obeyed; and it may have been preliminary to that action that Lewis, at his office in Ely Place, asked: “But, my dear Jimmy, would it be quite just—?” “‘My dear George,’” Whistler interrupted, “‘when I pay you six-and-eightpence, I pay you six-and-eightpence for law, not justice.’”
Collecting the Quarrels

James Whistler  c. 1880
The law was on Whistler’s side. He owned the rights to his own writing, although he had instructed Ford earlier to secure permissions in his own name from the newspapers involved, which Ford had accomplished. As Ford recalled the episode, when he was “measurably within sight of the promised land of printer’s proofs, Mr. Whistler, one fine morning, sweetly asked to have sent [to] him everything collected in the way of copy. The strangeness of the request sowed the seed of distrust....” On asking why, Ford was blandly informed that Mr. Whistler wished to convey the matter entirely out of Mr. Ford’s hands and entrust it to Mr. Whistler’s *cher ami*, one Theodore Duret, of Paris, who would kindly take charge [and] ... substitute his own name on the title-page....” Duret, a friendly and Anglophile Parisian critic whose portrait Whistler had painted as *Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Black* (1884), would not be involved and may not even have known that his name would be mentioned. Still, Ford had no intention of presenting Duret with Whistler’s gift, and angrily stamped out.

Quickly Whistler rushed off a note to Ford (19 August 1889) of more than usual ambiguity. “Let us have no wrong impressions. I thoroughly know that you are just the man to bring to its completion the work in question, and how lucky I am in having interested you in it.” Dropping any suggestion of Duret, Whistler declared that his involvement in painting had to be “made anterior to more literature,” and that the “proposed publication” would have to be postponed “for awhile.” But he was prepared to be generous. “Do let me recognise slightly the time and care you have taken to give the collection the shape it already has. I enclose, therefore, [a] cheque for ten guineas. I do not in this way pretend to value the pains you have been at, but in all fairness to each of us you must allow me to see that you are not so far absolutely the loser.”

In frustration and fury, Sheridan Ford decided that the letter required a Whistlerian reply. “No! no!” he wrote the next day, “believe me, you state the case clumsily. What you meant to say was, how lucky you were in my having interested you in yourself.” Returning the check, he added: “Shall I have a brutal philanthropy thrust upon me and be buried by the vulgar cheque of commerce? Credit it not, though chaos reign in Chelsea! Know also that I am endowed in perpetuity by an all-wise Providence, that Truth may triumph and the foolish in high places be put to shame.” He directed Whistler to bestow the ten guineas “on the unworthy poor of your parish, lest ridicule come down upon you and it be gleefully set down, by some historian of an idle day, how the Brush sought vainly to besmirch the Pen.” And in attention-seeking Whistlerian style, Ford offered the letter for publication. A day later it appeared in the *St. Stephen’s Review.*
As far as Ford was concerned, the exchange merely furnished more copy for his book, to which he added these as well as other unanswered letters to Whistler he would write, culminating in bitter verses, “Hic Jacet the McNeill,” dated 20 January 1890 and identified as “Refused publication by the St. Stephen’s Review.” No one would mourn Whistler, he began, because Nature, who endowed Whistler with “a subtle sense of form and colour,” had nevertheless “denied him heart,” engendering in him a taste for “unmeritable private feuds” and “a feminine love of notoriety” despite his “brave true words in the cause of Art.” The closing lines confirmed that Ford had burnt his bridges to Whistler: “May he make his peace with God; / he never did with man.”

Despairing of publication in England, and unwilling to discard the work he had done, Ford then took his copy, old and new, to Belgium and had the small book printed in Antwerp. There the printer, aware of the interest of the work he had set in type, objected to the unimaginative title, and Ford challenged him to pick a better one. He did, pointing to a paragraph in the introduction where the compiler had written: “This collection of letters and miscellany covers something over a quarter of a century, from 1862 to the present year. It illustrates the gentle art of making enemies....” “There’s your title,” said the printer. “Don’t use this other thing.”

Set in type once more as The Gentle Art of Making Enemies, two thousand copies were printed and ready for delivery when George Lewis appeared in Brussels and had the Procureur du Roi confiscate the copies and the type. Still determined not to be thwarted, Ford then pawned his watch and his wife’s jewelry and found another English printer, in Ghent, who printed the title page as “Paris: Delabrosse & Cie, 1890.” Ford had acquired (for Whistler) permission to reprint the Master’s stings and barbs first published by “Atlas” in the World, and prudently prefaced his collection with editor Edmund Yates’s 19 September 1889 grant of “liberty to reprint Mr. Whistler’s letters and other matters concerning him, which have appeared in these columns.” Nothing could have appeared more legal or authentic. Then he added an amiable dedication: “To all good comrades who like a fair field and no quarter these pages are peacefully inscribed.” Even the introductory note had the appearance of being free from rancor, Ford denying the existence of any “soulful intimacy between Mr. Whistler and myself,” commending the book “to Mr. Whistler’s enemies, with the soothing assurance that should each of them purchase a copy the edition will be exhausted in a week.”

Four thousand copies were printed, those with a grey-green paper cover for European distribution, and those with a similar cover imprinted in red, bound from sheets by the firm of Frederick Stokes and Brother in New York, which later disclaimed involvement with the book. Most of the Stokes
edition was destroyed by a warehouse fire, and few of the “Delabrosse” edition were sold over the counter, for Whistler persisted in his suit to ban any distribution of the book; he had gone ahead with preparations of his own edition, even to adopting Ford’s title—which appeared nowhere else in the book—and adapting Ford’s device of butterfly silhouettes—the Master’s hallmark—to grace each Whistler note.

Prudently Ford remained in Paris when George Lewis, aided by Belgian lawyers Edmond Picard and Albert Maeterlinck, took the matter, after months of legal delays, to the Belgian courts in October 1891. Whistler and M. Kohler, the Antwerp printer, were the only witnesses. “What religion do you profess?” asked the presiding judge before the administration of the customary oath. There was silence, while the artist pondered the unexpected question. “You are, perhaps, a Protestant?” pursued the judge, hoping to relieve the awkward situation. Whistler—whose first appearance in church since his mother died had been at his belated wedding in 1888—shrugged his shoulders, as if to leave it up to the judge, and when he was asked his age (he was now dyeing his carefully barbered locks) he objected and was upheld. But he did deliver his testimony, and Judge Moureau condemned Ford—in absentia—to a fine of 500 francs (then £20) and an indemnity of 3,000 francs (£120) to be paid with costs or three years’ imprisonment in default of payment. Since Ford never appeared in Belgium afterwards, only his confiscated books remained imprisoned, mildewing in the damp cellars of the Palais de Justice.

In Paris, too, Ford was checkmated, the American ambassador, Whitelaw Reid, introducing Whistler to the Procureur de la Republique, who saw to it that the book was suppressed. When what Whistler called “the true book” appeared he sent an inscribed copy to the ambassador, “a souvenir of flattering courtesies, and most effective aid in pursuit of The Pirate.” As American journalist George Smalley put it in one of his dispatches from London to the New York Tribune: “Nowhere was there rest for the sole of Mr. Ford’s publishing foot.” Unrepentant, Whistler wrote of Ford to a friend: “The horse pond is for him a mild sentence.”

While Ford was being treated badly and reacting accordingly, Whistler, having appropriated Ford’s title and ideas, set about creating his own edition and improving his own legend. He had become close to the young publisher William Heinemann, and he called him “publisher, philosopher and friend.” Together they planned the book. Whistler drove to Heinemann’s office almost daily at eleven to extricate him from his morning’s work and to breakfast at the Savoy, where on the balcony overlooking the Embankment, deserted between the customary dining hours, they would go over such tiny details as the arranging of a single butterfly on a page. That Heine-
mann might have other business or might already have had breakfast was preposterous to Whistler, and if the publisher did, he concealed it with real enthusiasm for the project.

The Ballantyne Press was entrusted with the printing, but Whistler chose the type, spaced the text, designed an asymmetrical title page and drew expressive butterflies for each entry which laughed, mocked, stung, drooped over the famous farthing damages of the Ruskin libel trial, or triumphed in gay flight, adding an appropriate flower of ego and eccentricity. A “publisher’s note” prefaced the book, explaining it as the reaction to “a continued attempt to issue a spurious and garbled version of Mr Whistler’s writings,” with only the Heinemann version as under Whistler’s “own immediate care and supervision.” Following were six pages of extracts from the London and Paris press—originally planted by Whistler—about the “extraordinary piratical plot” of a carefully unnamed villain. Then came Whistler’s title page (Fig. 1).

The dedication was in the same spirit: “To the rare Few, who, early in Life, have rid Themselves of the Friendship of the Many, these pathetic Papers are inscribed.” It became Whistler’s artistic autobiography and testament. It included—as Ford could not—Whistler’s carefully edited condensation of the disastrous Ruskin libel trial, in which Whistler had won only a symbolic farthing’s damages; his *Piker Papers*, about a case of mistaken artistic identity; his *Ten O’Clock Lecture* with its magical evocation of the way in which art trains the eye to perceive a romantic reality; his favorite exhibition catalogue texts; and interviews and newspaper encounters with the critics, from ’Arry Quilter to Oscar Wilde. It necessarily omitted Ford’s thirty small-format pages of introductory essay, “Mr. Whistler as the ‘Unattached Writer,’” by which Ford meant that Whistler was a critic characterized by “complete intolerance,” belonging to no school or party. Mostly stitched together from Whistler’s own comments, reprinted in full in the body of the book, the introduction had contained some perceptive criticism, particularly the observation that “with a catholic vision and a kindlier impulse” Whistler “might have evoked a wider influence.” And it omitted pages of Whistler anecdotes, exhibitions, and antics culled by the author from newspaper clippings as well as his own submissions to London newspapers and press syndicates.

The little book Ford had begun—in his version of the text—was “the record of some unpleasantness between the Brush and Pen.” The ridicule aimed at Whistler in his earlier years was

the common lot when a new force, a personality, makes itself felt.... Artists sufficiently original to interpret nature in a new way ever meet with misunderstanding.... Those who know Mr. Whistler only through his painting and writing are prone to forget—or never realise—the privations he endured in the
THE GENTLE ART
of
MAKING ENEMIES

AS PLEASINGLY EXEMPLIFIED
IN MANY INSTANCES, WHEREIN THE SERIOUS ONES
OF THIS EARTH, CAREFULLY EXASPERATED, HAVE
BEEN PRETULTY SPURRED ON TO UNSEELINESS
AND INDISCRETION, WHILE OVERCOME BY AN
UNDUE SENSE OF RIGHT

LONDON 1890
WILLIAM HEINEMANN

Fig. 1 Title Page  The Gentle Art of Making Enemies
Printed by Ballantyne Press, Heinemann 1890
attainment of his present position. And it should be set down to the eternal credit of the man that not once during his period of trial—at times approaching starvation—did he waver in his devotion to his art."

That Whistler would suppress such encomiums says less for his ego than for the forcefulness of Trixie Whistler, who wanted the proceeds of the book more than its praise of her husband. There would be publicity enough in its reception.

An irony in Ford’s introduction that Whistler may have liked less was Ford’s observation that Whistler, who “would extinguish the critic” because art needed neither explanation nor translation, in effect became a critic himself through his own recourse to print, “joining the ranks of those whose existence he deplores.” Ford was equally perceptive on Whistler as letter-writer, seeing him as “adept in the art of interesting [readers].” He noted Whistler’s gift for “wrapping innuendoes in graceful satire” in some cases, while in others forsaking “finesse” to indulge in “untempered onslaughts” in which some of his rejoinders had not “the slightest bearing upon the matter at issue.” Even so, Ford saw an “uncompromising independence” as the springboard of Whistler’s style and felt that it justified his caprices as they added “to the relish of his existence.” Whistler possessed, Ford concluded in his original version of the book, “the sanity of genius” rather than the serenity of the accepted master, and “as long as art endures, the pen that brings confusion upon pretenders will continue to benefit artists....”

Ford’s compilation of praise and blame, a curious package of contradictions which reflected the contrariness in Whistler, was nevertheless as much Ford as it was Whistler, and the Master, while behaving with moral dubiouness, was aesthetically sound in rejecting Ford’s interesting but less ego-centric compilation. His own version, given his heightened interest in the matter, was also far more eye-catching. As a piece of book design it became a leader in the Art Nouveau movement for the idiosyncratic disposition of black and white on a page, rather than the slavish centering of print, and the combining of simplicity with elegance and taste with economy (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

Through the examples of his catalogues and pamphlets, and especially through his The Gentle Art of Making Enemies, Whistler prodded book designers into producing striking effects with the simplest means at the disposal of any print shop. He required only ordinary type and ordinary paper, inexpensive binding and lettering, but a distinctively unconventional product resulted, one within the means of the ordinary book buyer—a book to be read as well as looked at.

The Gentle Art of Making Enemies project was to Whistler as much of a work of art as his most ambitious canvas, and the pains he took over each
THE GENTLE ART

The witness then paused, and examining attentively the Attorney-General’s face and looking at the picture alternately, said, after apparently giving the subject much thought, while the Court waited in silence for his answer:

“No! Do you know I fear it would be as hopeless as for the musician to pour his notes into the ear of a deaf man. (Laughter.)

“I offer the picture, which I have conscientiously painted, as being worth two hundred guineas. I have known unbiased people express the opinion that it represents fireworks in a night-scene. I would not complain of any person who might simply take a different view.”

The Court then adjourned.

The Attorney-General, in resuming his address on behalf of the defendant on Tuesday, said he hoped to convince the jury, before his case closed, that Mr. Ruskin’s criticism upon the plaintiff’s pictures was perfectly fair and bona fide, * and that, however severe it might be, there was nothing that could reasonably be complained of. . . . Let them examine the nocturne in blue and silver, said to represent Battersea Bridge. What was that structure in the middle? Was it a telescope or a fire-escape? Was it like Battersea Bridge? What were the figures

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Fig. 2 Verso Page 10  The Gentle Art of Making Enemies

Printed by Ballantyne Press, Heinemann 1890
OF MAKING ENEMIES

at the top of the bridge. And if they were horses and carts, how in the name of fortune were they to get off? Now, about these pictures, if the plaintiff's argument was to avail, they must not venture publicly to express an opinion, or they would have brought against them an action for damages.

After all, Critics had their uses. He should like to know what would become of Poetry, of Politics, of Painting, if Critics were to be extinguished? Every Painter struggled to obtain fame.

No artist could obtain fame, except through criticism.

As to those pictures, they could only come to the conclusion that they were strange fantastical conceits not worthy to be called works of Art.

Coming to the libel, the Attorney-General said it had been contended that Mr. Ruskin was not justified in interfering with a man's livelihood. But why not? Then it was said, "Oh! you have ridiculed Mr. Whistler's pictures." If Mr. Whistler disliked ridicule, he should not have subjected himself to it by exhibiting publicly such productions. If a man thought a picture was a daub, he had a right to say so, without subjecting himself to a risk of an action.

He would not be able to call Mr. Ruskin, as he was far too ill to attend; but, if he had been able to appear,
Farewell, Victoria!

Page were paralleled by the time he ostentatiously took over the proofs, as befit a literary gentleman. To Frederick Keppel, visiting the studio, he had happily read aloud from the proof sheets for two hours when a servant announced the arrival of a great lady in the English peerage. "Where is she?" "In her carriage at the door, sir." For ten more minutes he continued reading aloud, ignoring the waiting servant, until Keppel, realizing how cold a day in March it was, reminded him of the lady. "Oh," said Whistler, "let her wait—I'm mobbed with these people." Then he read on for fifteen more minutes before ordering the servant to let "her shivering ladyship" in. The book—or the pose—was more important.

Neither Whistler's pose nor his prose could have been deduced from his tranquil Mother canvas nor the impassive Carlyle, the fastidious yet simple later portrait arrangements, the evanescent nocturnes, the impressionistic etchings, the lyrical pastels. The bitterness of the maker of paradoxes and the belligerence of the maker of enemies materialized in Whistler's art only in the waspish sting in the tail of the butterfly signature. To George Moore the contents of The Gentle Art of Making Enemies would never have existed had they not been Whistler's "safety-valve by which his strained nerves found relief from the intolerable tension of the masterpiece," while the public at large probably agreed with the McClure's Magazine parody of the sublimely arrogant Whistler who chortled while hurling his scissors through a studio window one morning: "Ha, not yet nine o'clock and another enemy made!" To Beerbohm the book was the rare product of a "good talker who could write as well as he talked," and was as cosmopolitan and eccentric as the author:

Read any page of The Gentle Art of Making Enemies, and you will hear a voice in it, and see a face in it, and see gestures in it. And none of these is quite like any other known to you. It matters not that you never knew Whistler, never even set eyes on him. You see him and know him here. The voice drawls slowly, quickening to a kind of snap at the end of every sentence, and sometimes rising to a sudden screech of laughter; and, all the while, the fine fierce eyes of the talker are flashing out at you and his long nervous fingers are tracing extravagant arabesques in the air. No! you need never to have seen Whistler to know what he was like. He projected through printed words the clear-cut image and clear ringing echo of himself. He was a born writer, achieving perfection through pains which must have been infinite for that we see at first sight no trace of them at all. Certainly, the little letters are Whistler's passport among the elect of literature.

G. K. Chesterton could not understand how anyone could think that there was any genuine laughter in the The Gentle Art of Making Enemies. Whistler's wit, he thought shrewdly, "is a torture to him. He twists himself into arabesques of verbal felicity; he is full of a fierce carefulness; he is inspired with the complete seriousness of sincere malice. He hurts himself
to hurt his opponent.” The paradox Chesterton perceived was that Whistler was not sufficiently objective to be a great satirist, yet his satire survived. “No man,” Chesterton wrote, pondering the reason, “ever preached the impersonality of art so well; no man ever preached the impersonality of art so personally.”

Perhaps in the contradiction lies the success of his satirical writing, although it may still stand as much for its historic value as its histrionic value. The battles Whistler fought, D. B. Wyndham Lewis concluded, were—collectively—not merely Whistler versus the art critics of England but Whistler versus “the Island Race.” He was “extremely fortunate in his period” for there was a cultivated, leisured newspaper-reading public and a press that strived to meet its taste without serious concern for the laws of libel:

Living to-day, Whistler would not have seen 5 per cent of his Gentle Art letters appearing in the Press; whereas an editor like Edmund Yates (“Atlas”) of the World not only printed with joy anything Whistler cared to set his pen to, mischievously egging on the merry warrior and pointing out victims he might otherwise have missed as they skulked in the undergrowth, but printed with equal relish Whistler’s attacks on the World’s own critic. The victims whom Whistler scalped with joyous ease and exultant whoops were the solemn dullards, the Tom Taylors (“tough old Tom, the busy City bus, with its heavy jolting and many halts....”), the ineffable “Arry” Quilters, the Wyke Baylisses (“champion chess-player of Surrey, member of the Diocesan Council of Rochester, Fellow of the Society of Cyclists, and Public Orator of Noviomagus”), the Seymour Hadens, and those critics, metropolitan and provincial, who were to enrich his catalogues raisonnés.

Heinemann published The Gentle Art of Making Enemies late in 1890, a few months after the last pirated version, and Whistler ornamented a pile of presentation copies with inscriptions in the spirit of the book, offering one to Moore with what was for the Master, lavish praise for his recipient. “For furtive reading,” he wrote, “which means that anything George Moore writes—anything good he writes about painting—was plagiarised from me, James McNeill Whistler.” Two years later a second edition appeared, enlarged with more recent missives to the press. Before it emerged Whistler came upon a copy of the first edition in a secondhand bookstore. He had given this particular copy to an acquaintance after blandly inscribing, “With the regards of the author.” He bought the book, penned in an additional word above the line and sent it back to the ungrateful friend. The amended inscription read: “With the renewed regards of the author.” At work as always was the sting in the tail of the butterfly, the animating force behind the collected quarrels; for the butterfly was not born with his sting, but had to develop it and perfect it in self-defense. At the end of his second edition he included an envoi to “Atlas”—Edmund Yates. “These things we like to remember, Atlas, you and I,” he wrote, “—the bright things, the droll things, the charming things of this pleasant life—and here, too, in this lovely land...
they are understood—and keenly appreciated. As to those others—alas! I am afraid we have done with them. It was our amusement to convict—though they thought we cared to convince! Allons! They have served our wicked purpose—Atlas, we ‘collect’ no more.”