

Falling Rocket: James Whistler, John Ruskin, and the Battle for Modern Art by Paul Thomas Murphy. New York: Pegasus Books, 2023. 394 pp. + 21 colour plates, 13 b/w illus. ISBN 978-1639364916. \$29.95.

Tell the truth: when was the last time you enjoyed reading an academic book? Not just benefitted from its argument, or admired its theoretical subtleties, its adept marshalling of primary sources and other research materials – but actually found the volume engrossing? Paul Thomas Murphy has revisited the legal, aesthetic, and personal entanglements of James McNeill Abbott Whistler and John Ruskin and produced a vivid, wholly engaging account of the libel trial which, to some degree, damaged both but also ensured their celebrity. Whistler’s right to paint the truth about the world as he understood it, in an experimental representational mode, and Ruskin’s right to tell the truth about paintings, as he understood them, were at the heart of the case. Both wanted to be what Foucault would term a “privileged enunciator” – and more than that, they wanted to be recognized as being *in the right*. Although Whistler was the more litigious and irascible of the two, each man was indomitable, happy to be caustic (even vituperative), eager to defend his principles and smite any and all nay-sayers. Ruskin, however, did not have *his* day in court: illness prevented him from attending and testifying in November 1878. Whistler was happy to seize the spotlight – but, as Murphy thoroughly explains, unhappy in his Pyrrhic legal victory. The jury agreed that Whistlehad been libelled but signaled its admiration for Ruskin by awarding damages of one farthing – then worth one-quarter of a penny. Loyal supporters (181 strong) paid Ruskin’s court costs. Whistler, always profligate in his spending, had depended too much on receiving the £1000 he had demanded in damages; after the trial, he was declared financially insolvent, and his assets – including his beloved White House in Chelsea, purchased by none other than art critic Harry Quilter – were “liquidated” in order to pay many creditors.

Whistler sued Ruskin for libel because, after the renowned “arbiter of art” visited the inaugural exhibition of the Grosvenor Gallery¹ on 23 June 1877, he published a short commentary that excoriated the painter’s canvases. Ruskin had been unimpressed with the “modern” art being exhibited at the Grosvenor and faulted the “eccentricities” and “imperfections” on display. Only the works of Edward Burne-Jones escaped censure because, according to Ruskin, they constituted “the only art-work at present produced in England which will be received by the future as ‘classic’ in its kind.” Of the seven paintings by Whistler, including *Nocturne in Blue and Silver (Old Battersea Bridge)* (1872-73), Ruskin singled out for corrosive censure *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (1875), with comments that were, in