Popular Modernism? The 'Urban' Style of Interwar Tin Pan Alley

Author(s): Ulf Lindberg

Source: *Popular Music*, Oct., 2003, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Oct., 2003), pp. 283-298

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3877576

Popular Music (2003) Volume 22/3. Copyright © 2003 Cambridge University Press, pp. 283–298.
DOI:10.1017/S0261143003003192 Printed in the United Kingdom

Popular modernism? The 'urban' style of interwar Tin Pan Alley

ULF LINDBERG

Abstract

The approach of this article complements those of previous critics that account for the rise of the 'mature' style of Tin Pan Alley chiefly in terms of the internal logic of the field of American popular music. It suggests that the so-called golden age of the Alley (ca. 1920–1940) should be considered in broader cultural terms, provided by modernisation and especially the growth of a 'cool', urban sensibility, representing a crucial reassessment of Victorian emotional style. In their contributions to this reassessment, the Alley greats stretched the conventions of popular song-writing in a number of ways, usually described vaguely in terms of 'wit', 'sophistication' and the like. Qualifying these concepts by lyrical analysis, the article suggests that the self-reflexive use of irony, linguistic play and 'realist' imperatives makes a number of songs approach contemporary 'high' literature in such a way that it makes sense to speak of a popular modernism.

Introduction

This article suggests that theories of modernisation and modernism can contribute to the understanding of why (roughly) the 1920s and 1930s have come to stand out as the golden age of the Tin Pan Alley song. Its focus is on lyrics, but the argument certainly applies also to the music. I want to suggest both that the renegotiation of the terms of romance, which characterises the work of the period's top lyricists, should be seen against the backdrop of a developed urban sensibility, and that it makes sense to consider the rise of 'unsentimental, even anti-romantic' (Furia 1990, pp. 15–16) standards for writing song lyrics in terms of a popular modernism.

Little work on Tin Pan Alley is informed by modern cultural theory and the impressive literature on modernity, Roell (1992) being one exception. The golden age usually appears as a discursive construct based on the application of an organic logic to the field of American popular music. It represents a stage in the 'maturation' of the field, brought about by the achievements of a few gifted individuals and ending, as living organisms do, in decay. The dominant strategy, applied by text-oriented critics like Wilder (1972), Furia (1990) and Forte (1995) as well as by historians and biographers, has been to single out the cream of the crop, using criteria like originality and popularity (that, needless to say, do not always go well together). Irving Berlin was dedicated a biography as early as 1925 and George Gershwin another in 1931,[1] while the first critic to use the concept of the golden age in a book title seems to have been David Ewen with *The Life and Death of Tin Pan Alley: The Golden Age of American Popular Music* (Ewen 1964). Despite explicit criticism like Th. W. Adorno's of the standardisation of popular songs or S.I. Hayakawa's of their escapism, the strategy has successfully contributed to Tin Pan Alley's

cultural legitimacy. This mission completed, however, there is both room and need for complementary approaches.

The corpus of songs examined in this article chiefly draws on the canon – I will discuss only lyrics and lyricists introduced in Philip Furia's standard work (Furia 1990) – which means it is statistically and historically *not* representative even for Tin Pan Alley in its heyday. I am aware that certain performances may bring other meanings into play.

'Modern' and its derivatives are notoriously slippery concepts (Friedman 2001). My understanding of 'modernisation' is informed by theorists like Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas. It designates a series of civilisatory, disciplinary and rationalising processes, which go back at least to the eighteenth century and tend to permeate all levels of a society – infrastructure, social relations, symbolic communication and subjective inner worlds. Modernisation still continues to undermine the impact of tradition, giving rise, as Berman (1983) and others have shown, to a characteristic ambivalence between a liberating increase in reflexivity and an experience of irrevocable loss. (Literary) modernism, on the other hand, I take as a heterogeneous family of styles (Peter Nicholls' 1995 overview is suitably titled *Modernisms*) whose seeds were sown in the mid-nineteenth century. In brief, modernist strands voice focal aspects of the experience of modernisation (such as immanence, contingency, and a destabilisation of references), typically in a language characterised by formal experimentation.[2] The term 'modernism' rarely crosses over into discourse on popular culture. When looked for, however, the uncertainties of living in modern times become equally visible in interwar consumer culture (which, like high culture, should be thought of as stratified). The Alley greats were revisionists in their idiom, not iconoclasts; but so were, after all, a great deal of the high literary modernists.

Modernisation and Simmel's 'city type'

In terms of production, the most obvious link between Tin Pan Alley and modernisation is the standardisation and the specialisation in popular music that was present from the start. In terms of distribution it is the media revolution that took place during the first part of the twentieth century. When the golden age broke, the Alley no longer existed as the geographical unit that its name implies. The accumulation of mighty publisher firms in 28th Street in New York had dispersed and the sales of sheet music were going down, leaving room for other principal song disseminators – big bands, radio and records competing with the musical theatre in the mid-1920s (Ewen 1977, pp. 276–81; Hamm 1979, p. 382), sound film being added in the 1930s. While the familiar song formula developed around 1910 (thirty-two bars, usually organised in eight-bar units according to an AABA pattern, where B formed a 'bridge' or 'release') proved remarkably unperturbed by the development,[3] the successive replacement of self-authored, home performances by mass-mediated, professional entertainment, the music's increased availability, and the cultural meanings added by widely different performance contexts are all relevant to my discussion.

Golden-age Alley pop, though, was a hybrid even as sheet music. Tapping a number of sources, it came to house tensions in terms of geo-culture, ethnicity, social class and gender that were realised to a shifting degree by performers. The first hits were sentimental ballads in an elevated idiom, but after the turn of the

century these increasingly clashed with a vernacular African-American impact coming from ragtime, 'coon' songs, the blues and jazz. In the 1910s and the 1920s there was an input from high and middlebrow white culture – European art music, contemporary American poetry, *vers de société*.[4] In gender terms most songs were designed to be unisex, open to both male and female performers, even if they had been launched as romantic solos on Broadway (Furia 1990, p. 44). The African-American impact seems particularly responsible for what was considered the *modern* sound of the music. Irving Berlin was rather emphatic on this subject, arguing that syncopation was bringing popular music 'in tune with the age of the ''automobile''' (Furia 1990, p. 55). Hamm, on the other hand, thinks that the combination of 'ragtime syncopation, displacements of beats, anticipations of rhythmic resolutions at the ends of phrases, and the use of triplet figures in duple time' with 'sentimental, flippant, and vaguely humorous' lyrics was what made the music sound *American*.[5] It also seems possible to argue that these features contributed to its *urban* character, since the connotations of the adjectives 'modern', 'American', and 'urban' often overlap. Being to a large extent the children of Jewish immigrants, arriving in the US at the end of the nineteenth century, the major songwriters of the golden age actually embody urbanisation.

Charles Hamm, in *Yesterdays. Popular Song in America* (1979), is the scholar who has most emphatically stressed the urban character of the Alley's 'mature' style, which he regards as a New York product designed for 'white, urban, literate, middle- and upper-class Americans' (Hamm, p. 379). According to Hamm,

> [t]he urbanisation of American popular song, set in motion by events of the last decades of the nineteenth century, was effectively completed in the 1910s and '20s. Even more than had been the case during the formative years of Tin Pan Alley, the field was dominated by composers and lyricists born and trained in New York, writing songs for publishers who not only had their offices in New York, but were themselves products of the city. The style of the music and of the lyrics had become a New York style, and general attitudes as to what a song should be and where it should fit into American culture were also shaped by the climate and taste of New York [. . .] The songs of Kern, Gershwin, Porter, and their contemporaries were urban, sophisticated, and stylish, and they were intended for people who could be described by one or more of these adjectives – or aspired to be (Hamm, pp. 377–8).

Clearly, 'urban' does not only refer to the music's locus of production, but also to qualities inherent in the product, even though these remain rather nebulous. Perhaps because it has the same roots as 'urbane', it calls forth the more or less tautological adjectives 'sophisticated' and 'stylish'. Together with 'witty', both are staples in the writings on Alley pop. Their content seems relevant but, like that of 'urban', in need of some qualification. I will return to 'witty' and 'sophisticated' in the lyrical analyses. But since 'urban' to me is the key word, I will turn to the German sociologist Georg Simmel and his famous 1903 essay, 'The metropolis and mental life', for a start.

Simmel's project is, in James Donald's (1999, p. 11) words, to understand 'how individual agency is enacted within [. . .] this real-imagined environment' that is the city. Part of the argument is familiar to the reader of Walter Benjamin's studies of Baudelaire's Paris. In fact it is a topos in late-nineteenth-century literature that the city triggers an overwhelming bombardment of sensual impressions (Benjamin spoke of a 'shock effect'), against which the individual has to mobilise defence mechanisms. To Simmel, the outcome of the 'intensification of the nervous life' is an intellectual, reserved, blasé attitude. This attitude is enhanced by the fact that

the big city is the centre of the money economy, which is based on impersonal market relations, and also because the city's complex functioning requires constant calculation. The other side of the coin is that the 'city type's' indifference represents a cosmopolitan freedom, which is inaccessible to the town dweller. But it is a freedom flawed by anonymity. Because the city's 'objective spirit' – its materialisation of culture – is so overpowering and people's meetings are so transient, the 'city type' must take to *staging* individuality in order to draw attention to its existence. This results in exaggerations, or, as Simmel (1903/1997, p. 183) puts it, 'the specifically metropolitan extravagances of mannerism, caprice, and preciousness'. In (social) psychological terms, then, the 'city type' hovers between emotional reserve and erratic demonstrations of subjectivity.

Simmel's argument is carried out at a relatively high level of abstraction, which has caused some doubts concerning the ontological status of his city and the claims he brings forward. Though Simmel had Wilhelminian Berlin in mind (Donald 1999, p. 10), his object is *the* metropolis. But this does not mean he is suggesting there is only one, unified urban way of life. Neither does Simmel claim there is a simple, causal relation between the size of cities and certain psychological reactions. What he wants is to establish that urban culture is the culture of modernity (Savage and Warde 1993, pp. 111–14). The city therefore emerges as a *horizon* that overflows the borders of its material shape on to a national and international level. Against this background it is not necessarily a problem that it often seems possible to exchange 'the city' for 'modernity' in the essay.[6]

Understanding urban sensibility *à la* Simmel triggers a number of interesting associations. Back to Baudelaire, for instance, in whose writings dandy cool is coupled to a kind of idiosyncrasy that anticipates the antics of the avant-garde at the time of World War I. Forward to the extremes of 1930s' American popular culture: on one hand the 'anarchic' films starring Marx Bros, W.C. Fields and Mae West, on the other the 'hardboiled' detective fiction of Hammett and Chandler. Or to literary history, where some theorists in want of a common denominator for the many-faceted strands of modernism have emphasised imposed emotional restraint as 'alienation' (Poggiolo 1962/1968) and others its suspension as 'individuality' (Luthersson 1986/1993). There are also links to later developments in social theory: Erving Goffman's notion of the 'presentation of self' that life in the modern jungle engenders, the passage from 'inner-directed' to 'outer-directed' man suggested by David Riesman or Warren Susman's opposition between nineteenth-century 'character' and twentieth-century 'personality'.

The birth of American cool

Particularly resonant with the above discussion is Peter N. Stearns' study *American Cool. Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (Stearns 1994). How, asks Stearns, did 'cool' come to take on the meaning of 'good'? As he points out, American historians to a large extent agree that the 1920s initiated a decisive break with Victorianism, and in some cases discuss it in terms of a new stage of modernisation (Stearns 1994, p. 302).[7] Stearns' own contribution to this tradition represents the break as the arrival of a new, white, middle-class emotional style (or, in foucauldian terms, 'emotionological regime'), designed to playing down intensity and stressing restraint. 'What took shape by the 1920s', he writes,

> was a major re-evaluation of intensities of personal expression. The Victorian relationship between sexuality and emotion, for example, was virtually reversed. During the nineteenth

century sexual intensity was regarded with uniform hostility in middle-class culture [. . .] Emotions, in contrast, could be vigorously indulged in appropriate contexts. By the 1920s [. . .] sexual intensity won new approval [. . .] Emotional intensity, in contrast, now encountered some of the blanket aversion that had described sexual intensity in the previous era. (Stearns 1994, p. 198)

In consequence, Stearns argues that there arose a need for 'symbolic alternatives' – a compensatory, spectatorship popular culture, expressive sometimes of Victorian standards, at other times serving merely as 'raw release' (Stearns 1994, p. 266). The other, 'erratic' aspect of the 'city type' sensibility is thus located in the field of leisure consumption. Also, the function of consumption is limited to escapism in a manner reminiscent of earlier 'mass culture' criticism. In the light of contemporary media research, this is a simplification that underrates the scope both of popular cultural texts and the uses they may be put to. Yet Stearns' work contains important observations that help to establish connections between the new emotional style and the innovations brought about by the lyricists of the golden age.

One of these innovations was to limit subject matter almost exclusively to love. According to Furia (1990, p. 15), between 1920 and 1940, 85 per cent of popular songs were love songs. Why was that? Perhaps because love, as Stearns shows, had become *both* highly valued *and* subject to intense debate. While 'bad' feelings such as anger or grief were successively expelled from public life from the 1920s and on,[8] love remained their most positive counterpart, but bereft of much of the intensity and spirituality that formerly made it so valuable its signified had to be renegotiated. After Victorian marriages had been attacked by an intellectual avant-garde in the 1920s, the opposition split in two directions during the 1930s: a hedonist, resolutely anti-romantic masculine stream in white middle-class culture, epitomised by the early volumes of *Esquire*, and a functionalist movement, which substituted mutual affection and rational companionship for romance. Interestingly, the overall stress on restraint also meant that emotions became less bound to gender than they had been – at least in theory, for of course interwar America was still under the sway of the ideology of romantic love. In Stearns' optics, the 1920s and 1930s appear as a transition period, which divided both men and women and, offering freedom with one hand while imposing new restraints with the other, also increasingly involved other strata of the population than the middle class. Indications of change include the growth of dating, an increasing divorce rate (Dumenil 1995, p. 130), and the emergence of new images of femininity in the sphere of cultural consumption. In the 1920s these embraced both emblems of decadence, such as the young Charleston-dancing girls known as 'flappers' or the novels of the Lost Generation, Edna St. Vincent Millay's celebration of the sexually liberated woman and images of glamorous women with an undisguised sexual appetite in advertising and film. The 1930s added, among other things, the couples of romantic comedies – 'William Powell and Myrna Loy, Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant, Cary Grant and Irene Dunne, Carole Lombard and *any* of her partners' – that were 'wonderful talkers rather than ideal lovers' (Dickstein 1996, p. 239). Such representations of gender, which allow the female enough intelligence and autonomy to make her at least equal to the male, also appear in golden-age Alley duets.

The ironies of 'Manhattan'

Before turning to song analysis I would like to submit a clarifying remark. I am not contending that golden-age songs simply mirrored contemporary social develop-

ments. The relations between modernisation, urban sensibility and golden-age Tin Pan Alley were complex, not linear-causal. The growth of new – more or less scientific, literary, and popular – discourses that subjected traditional notions of love to radical reassessment was not only the symptom of a new sensibility; it also helped to shape it. I consider the songs to be discussed as literary contributions to popular discourse on love, trying out various positions represented in the debate. In some respects, such as sexual outspokenness, the lyrics hold back, which is not to say attempts to stretch the limits were missing; for instance, William McBrien's 1998 Cole Porter biography resounds with censorship conflicts on this matter. On the other hand, they parade a wide range of emotional states, archetypal situations and speech acts (in which introspection characteristically gets the upper hand of other-direction) as well as a potential for complex statements, which was considerably furthered as a specialisation of the lyricist's craft set in around 1920 (Hamm 1979, p. 376).

As Furia (1990, p. 72) points out, up till 1925 song texts were generally held in low esteem, and so were their fathers – the lyricists were almost exclusively men. The restrictions of the format allowed little space for 'narrative, characterization, or social commentary' (Furia 1990, p. 14). However, lyricists learned how to turn these narrow confines to their advantage, perfecting colloquial diction and sound patterning as well as 'ragging' texts: 'reversing verbal accents, breaking up phrases, splitting words' (Furia 1990, p. 28). When Rodgers and Hart's 'Manhattan' became an overnight success in 1925, this was not least because its hip lyrics, reproduced in some dailies, signalled a lyrical renaissance.

The song is a bright little tune, based on an insistent five-note melodic motif that leaves plenty of room for Hart's signature, the excessive rhyming. The words are spoken by a young city dweller, using a 'we' that both includes and addresses the beloved. As the first chorus makes clear, they state what the couple expects from a summer spent in the city:

We'll have Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island too
It's lovely going through the Zoo
It's very fancy on old Delancey Street, you know
The subway charms us so
when balmy breezes blow to and fro
And tell me what street compares with Mott Street in July
Sweet pushcarts gently gliding by
The great big city's a wondrous toy
just made for a girl and boy
We'll turn Manhattan into an isle of joy

Furia (1990, p. 100) classifies 'Manhattan' as 'a list song based on place names'. As such it reaches out both towards a New York audience, shedding new light on the familiar, and a much wider, national public in want of fuel for its metropolitan fantasies. The Alley repertoire contains a large number of songs set in a big city, usually predicated on clichés of the metropolis as a bazaar or, sometimes, a jungle.[9] It is also common in songs of the 1920s to encounter city characters indulging pastoral fantasies (Vincent Youman and Irving Caesar's 'Tea for Two', 1924) or masquerades in pastoral settings (Rodgers and Hart's 'Mountain Greenery', 1926). The approach of 'Manhattan' is more sophisticated. It introduces the big city as a hybrid between a home and an amusement park – simultaneously place (inhabitable territory) and space (explorable territory) – by force of a rhetoric that pastoralises the metropolis.

This operation is hinted at by the metaphor 'a wondrous toy', whose connotations make a desirable, childish mode of experience stand in for a historical past. The subject is trying to persuade its partner that place is really space. However, it obviously knows it is largely an imagined city that it itches to take possession of, a space disfigured by modernisation: 'The city's clamour can never spoil/ The dreams of a boy and goil'. The effect is ironic; we are presented with an idyll in which '"balmy breezes" emanate from the subway and even the ordinarily frenetic push-carts of Mott Street go "gently gliding by"' (Furia 1990, pp. 100–1).

Speaking of Baudelaire, Nicholls (1995, p. 5) observes that modernisation seems to encourage ironic tonal play. But the theme of ironic re-presentation also adjoins 'Manhattan' to the contemporary Lost Generation novel. Exploring anti-urban American literary classics, Leo Marx (1984, p. 176) draws attention to a passage in F. Scott Fitzgerald's equally ironic masterpiece *The Great Gatsby*, issued the same year as 'Manhattan', where the narrator Nick Carraway ruminates on pastoral hope as 'a characteristically American propensity [. . .] fostered in Europeans by the image of the beautiful, rich, vast, seemingly unclaimed continent'. This dream is embodied by the main character Gatsby, but it fascinates Nick as well, which shows in the way he pastoralises New York: 'The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world' (Fitzgerald 1925/2000, p. 51). But, unlike Gatsby, Nick does not believe in a repeatable past. He keeps in mind there is another New York, 'the valley of ashes' – that modern industrial wasteland from where the novel's avenger, the 'ashen-faced' auto-mechanic Wilson, finally rises to end Gatsby's life – just as the subject of 'Manhattan' remains aware of the imprint of modernity on the city and has to tell itself that it is 'seen for the first time' to be able fully to enjoy it.

Perhaps these similarities do not suffice to make 'Manhattan' a modernist work – at least not by high cultural standards. The main reason is the lyrics take good care to front not the experience of loss, but the dream. Subjecting irony to the interests of wit, they set up a cheerful countenance far away from the tragic life feeling sounded by Fitzgerald's novel. By standards more tuned to popular taste, however, the 'renaissance' that the song introduces is undoubtedly a step towards contemporary American, high literature. In the following sections I will look more closely into some of the routes by which conventional representations of the main theme, romantic love, were challenged by golden-age lyricists. First I will show how 'wit' and 'sophistication' as textual effects reproduce the split of Simmel's 'city type' by articulating forms of emotional restraint that tend to leave behind some kind of resistant rest. The final section adds 'realism' as a means to de-idealise or criticise romance – a commitment to 'truth' that, at least in some cases, passes into modernist uncertainty.

Hybrid language, unisex wit

You're just too marvellous
Too marvellous for words
like glorious, glamorous
and that old stand-by, amorous
It's all too wonderful
I'll never find the words
that say enough, tell enough
I mean they just aren't swell enough

You're much too much
and just too very very!
To ever be in Webster's Dictionary
And so I'm borrowing a love song from the birds
to tell you that you're marvellous
Too marvellous for words

Clearly, Johnny Mercer's lyrics for 'Too Marvellous for Words' (1937) take as much interest in (witty) language as in the subject of love – so much that one may speak of a meta-text. Drawing on an inexpressibility motif with a long tradition in panegyric rhetoric (cf. Curtius 1948/1963, pp. 159–62), they reject not only Alley commonplaces and its own shortcomings, but language as such. No words of grandeur found in a dictionary do sufficient justice to the sublime object that the lyrics try to represent. It is then quite logical that they end by referring to mere sound – the birds' twitter, which perhaps stands in for Richard A. Whiting's ingenious melody. It is a very sweet song, but where is the speaker's allegiance: to the words that s/he after all has quite a knack with, or to the beloved that they both address and conjure up?

Language that draws attention to itself in a number of ways is a general characteristic of poetry. In the field of popular song, words may be more or less obtrusive, rely more or less on the music to complete a statement. Usually, though, they relate more closely and affectionately to everyday speech, trying to give worn clichés a twist that makes the familiar appear in a new light. Thus Simon Frith (1996, p. 161) argues that 'pop songs are really about [. . .] *formulas of love*'. In a broad sense, then, pop lyrics are *always* meta-texts, the difference being that Mercer's lyrics *explicitly* address such formulas. While this seems not to have been common practice in the period, a similar effect could be achieved by making widely different idioms clash and comment, so to speak, on each other. Though it usually served lighter ends, the ensuing hybrid language is another feature that golden-age lyrics share with much contemporary literature. Ira Gershwin's lyrics to ''S Wonderful' (1927), for instance, work at least on three stylistic levels. One is represented by the recurrent, slangy, slurred 's'; a second by (too) mundane praise such as ''s awful nice', and the third by romantic flowers of the kind that 'Too Marvellous . . .' discards – 'marvellous', 'glamorous', 'amorous'. Conjured up is a character – young, urban – that does not *say* s/he cannot find the words but *shows* it.

The desired effect of these and numerous other songs in the comic register is that staple Alley characteristic, wit. Wit deflects passion by transforming it into intellectual games, which favours representations of a modern, companionship (if not functionalist) type of love relationship. In the Alley version, it is unisex, the property of subjects displaying a strong affiliation with the heroes and heroines of contemporary romantic film comedies, whose chief attraction is their way with words. Measured by stereotypes of gender representation, the result is that male characters tend to appear more childlike and women more adult. The affiliation with screwball comedy becomes particularly clear in duets like, say, Rodgers and Hart's 'Thou Swell' (1927) or Cole Porter's 'It's De-Lovely' (1936), where the dialogue between male and female – entertaining, casual, more or less flippant – turns into a verbal competition between two equal parties. Tellingly, the unison chorus of 'Thou swell' includes 'Thou witty'.

However, the final retreat from language in 'Too Marvellous . . .', the pastoral imaginings of songs like 'Manhattan', the very substitution of outspoken erotic

desire for patter, whatever were the reasons: such features all seem to imply some kind of regressive wish at work. In the Gershwins' ballad 'Embraceable You' (1930) one even encounters a song that openly celebrates love *as* regression. From the start, attention is drawn to the embrace as an emblem of (con)fusion. Picking up on the topical suffix -able, which Furia (1990, p. 137) calls 'the ad-man's all-purpose additive', the lyrics plead: 'Embrace me, my sweet embraceable you/ Embrace me, you irreplaceable you'. While 'embrace me' casts the *other* as subject, 'embraceable you' has the *speaker* play this part. A desire to merge into the other is also implied by the recurrent use of 'you', which appears in all nine times in the short text, making it a true 'you-logy'. Finally, as the addressee is implored not to be 'a naughty baby' but 'Come to papa, come to papa, do', the melody, consisting of a series of quavers on the tonic with a final leap up to the third on the last word, underlines the effect of talk directed to a child. While the gendering effect of 'papa' is mild (a female singer could easily exchange 'papa' for 'mama'), the connoted parental love seems important. The sweet ecstasy that the song communicates thus appears to involve a triple destabilisation of boundaries: those between subject and object, male and female, adult and child.

Porter and the poetics of sophistication

The adjective 'sophisticated' is about as common a characteristic of golden-age lyrics as 'urban' and 'witty', but more ambiguous, as any dictionary will establish. According to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 'sophistication' denotes not only cultivation, but also 'the use of sophistry', adulteration ('making impure or weak'), complexity and subtlety; it is dancing on the thin line between refinement and over-refinement, decadence, perversion. When Forte (1995, p. 29) observes that in the context of popular music, 'sophisticated' is 'a mild criticism, to be sure, but a criticism nonetheless', he seems to have in mind primarily the dangers of subtlety. But the golden-age lyricist most often associated with sophistication, Cole Porter, put the whole register of significations into play. If Hart's favourite character was a 'wry masochist' and Ira Gershwin's a 'euphoric innocent' (Furia 1990, p. 169), Porter contributed a cosmopolitan, middlebrow dandy, whose reserve sometimes cracks to reveal 'a brief flash of real feeling'.

Drawing on Bourdieu, Joseph Litvak (1997, pp. 4, 9) argues that sophistication involves a struggle to 'outsophisticate' the other in complex taste games. But he goes on to add that sophistication is as much about sex as about class, and that 'in the Western *imaginaire*, gay people [. . .] function as subjects of sophistication'. As for Porter, his homosexuality was a public secret that, at the time, could not be given explicit expression in his song lyrics, which most likely contributed to some of the characteristics to be discussed. Another interesting biographic fact is that this master of the double entendre admired Berlin's 'simplicity' and wanted, like him, to write 'Jewish music' (McBrien 1998, p. 140). As Litvak (1997, pp. 79–80) shows, discussing Proust, a certain 'second naiveté' may well appear an advance in sophistication to the sophisticate.

It is in Porter's serious songs one encounters the flashes of 'real feeling'. Deflected desire returns in the guise of incantatory outbursts (like 'There's an oh such a humming yearning burning inside of me' in 'Night and Day') or is sensed as a kind of underground, throbbing compulsion that works like 'I've Got You under My Skin' thematise as an obsession. The release of this song is remarkable

for the uncanny quality that the use of triplets brings to the simple words, 'I'd sacrifice anything come what might/ for the sake of having you near/ In spite of the warning voice that comes in the night/ And repeats and repeats in my ear:/ ''Don't you know, little fool/ you never can win'', etc. Songs in the comic register, on the other hand, tend to let go; especially the so-called list songs linked to Porter's name embrace excess, another characteristic of the sophisticate according to Litvak (1997, p. 7). Nevertheless, the effect is again compulsive, only this time compulsion surfaces in the shape of mannerism. As the baroque accumulations of 'You're the Top' and 'Let's Do It' compete to invent ever-new, dazzling associations ('You're the National Gallery/ You're Garbo's salary'), puns ('Letts do it'), sly asides ('Electric eels, *I might add*, do it') and so on, everything becomes of equal value in relation to a common denominator – Eros in 'Let's Do It', the beloved in 'You're the Top'. The detachment inherent in this attitude is fully realised in a 1941 recording by Benny Goodman's orchestra in which Peggy Lee performs 'Let's Do It' in a flat, careless voice.

One hallmark of Porter's characters is that they often seem to be winking to a third part, an invisible audience, in the midst of addressing the beloved. This self-awareness, which contributes to the split, theatrical impression these characters project, does not limit itself to the recitative verse mode. Thus, as the late song 'All of You' (1954) shifts from 'she' to 'you' in the chorus, it expands on the distance of the verse that speaks of 'a big romantic deal I've got to wangle' by means of familiar imagery:

I'd like to make a tour of you
The eyes, the arms, the mouth of you
The East, West, North and South of you
I'd love to gain complete control of you
and handle even the heart and soul of you

Porter's typical subjects are indeed tourists. Natural life, cultural treasures, human bodies – all things are potential objects for consumption, dishes on a menu, otherness to be incorporated and spat out as sameness. No one of the Alley greats seems so fully to express a 'city type' sensibility as Porter.

Anti-romantic advances

Based on the notion of 'the one and only', the eighteenth-century invention of romantic love made emotional ties the only legitimate condition for a sexual relationship and stipulated that it be consummated in marriage. Severed from the needs of reproduction and kinship, sexuality became integrated in the quest for a soulmate, through whom self-identity would be realised (Houggaard 1994). As Giddens (1992, p. 58) stresses, romantic love marked an important step towards the autonomy of late modern Western women and a 'pure relationship' that both parties enter fully aware that it is going to last only as long as they find it profitable to their self-reflexive projects. At the same time this achievement has necessitated crucial revisions of the original matrix to the effect that most men and women today are wont not only to have a shifting number of short-term sexual relationships, but also to meet several 'one-and-onlies' and go through several marriage-like relationships. In consequence, the element of fantasy fulfilment inherent in the ideal of 'the one and only' has become stronger. No wonder its persistence in pop songs is often unfavourably contrasted as 'escapism' to the 'realism' of the blues. Yet, as Simon

Frith argues in 'Why do songs have words?', this is a gross simplification of matters. To a large extent the contrast is one of different conventions of representation – different 'formulas of love' – that involve questions of gender (romance being associated with a female outlook) as well as ethnicity.

Given the restrictions of the format, golden-age lyricists should not be expected to perform a radical break with romantic ideology. Explicit attacks on the *ideal* of monogamous love are rare, also within the comic register. Walter Donaldson and Gus Kahn's 'Makin' Whoopee' (1928) stages a merry bachelor, whose hedonist and misogynist reflections on marriage anticipate those propagated by the new-founded *Esquire* in the 1930s, but the use of such a stereotypical critic disarms the anti-romantic message. On the whole, Cooney's (1995, p. 81) observation that the screwball film comedies 'pushed acceptable standards (and plots) toward their breaking point, only to pull up at the end in rousing reaffirmation of basic social arrangements' seems valid also for the interwar Alley song.

This pushing of limits was not accomplished only by means of 'ragging' words, irony and hybrid language. In this section I will look into a tendency to 'realistic' representation, which also contributed to move standards in a more comprehensive, sometimes even anti-romantic direction. It includes images of the social low that exceed sentimental and exotic discourse, portraits of psychologically complex or deviant characters, language that mimics colloquial speech, etc. 'Bewitched' (1942) features a jaded female, who confesses to her strong sexual feelings for a no-good lover, indulging being 'dumb again/ and numb again/ a rich, ready, ripe little plum again'. 'My Funny Valentine' (1937), another classic Rodgers and Hart ballad, affectionately dwells on the physical imperfections of a 'slightly dopey gent', and Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields' comic duet 'A Fine Romance' (1936) represents two lovers engaged in (marital?) argument. It features a Mae West-like modern woman, who prefers jello to the present romance, during which she professes never having 'mussed the crease in your blue serge pants'. Fields' lyrics are all but anti-romantic: what both sides demand is more commitment. But it does not fit in comfortably among the 'companionship' duets discussed above either, because commitment is so defined that purely physical contact is emphasised, even contact of a not-so-pleasant kind ('nestle' rhymes with 'wrestle', 'clinches' with 'pinches'). The romance is indeed too much down-to-earth to be 'fine'.

However, the conflict between realistic and romantic codes also resulted in a few extremely ambiguous or contradictory lyrics. I will discuss two examples, the one belonging in the serious, the other in the comic register.

There will be many other nights like this
And I'll be standing here with someone new
There will be other songs to sing
Another fall, another spring
But there will never be another you
There will be other lips that I may kiss
But they won't thrill me like yours used to do
Yes, I may dream a million dreams
But how can they come true
If there will never ever be another you

In Harry Warren and Mack Gordon's 'There Will Never Be Another You' (1942) the title, a variant of 'you are my one and only', is used to contradict the experience that all things are contingent. However, romantic convention would hardly expect

the subject to include fantasies about future (though inferior) affairs with others in order to substantiate its vow. In fact, as the melody effortlessly meanders towards its resolution (there is no release), the lyrics not only dwell more on pleasures to come than on present bliss, but do so in a strange, matter-of-fact tone. Consequently the question arises if the lyrics deplore or furtively enjoy the transient character of modern love.[10] While 'Manhattan's' paradisiacal fantasy could be told by a rhetoric transfiguration of the modern city, 'There Will . . .' seems unable to repress what it knows. It says too much and breaks the rules.

Like 'There Will . . .', Rodgers and Hart's 'I Wish I Were in Love Again' projects a split subject. Addressing the ex-partner, a scarred, Hartian lover looks back at a relationship with ambivalent feelings, spelled out in paradoxes like 'gladly brokenhearted'. The paradox is the text's super-figure; it returns in the point that the lyrics try to make, that being 'gaga' (in love) is preferable to being 'sane' (bored). It should be observed that put this way, love is subjected to a strictly instrumental evaluation; it is celebrated merely as a reassurance against personal ennui. However, already the first chorus pictures the drawbacks of having a relationship so vividly that the conclusion/title phrase, on its appearance, seems entirely unmotivated. The listener is therefore prompted either to take it as irony or to construct the subject's desire as masochistic, which is Furia's choice (1990, p. 120). In the second chorus this bias becomes even worse. Hart starts out supplying the 'romantic' rhyme suite 'sigh', 'eye', 'die' with a blunt 'lie': 'The furtive sigh, the blackened eye/ The words ''I'll love you till the day I die''/ The self-deception that believes the lie/ I wish I were in love again'. This motif is sustained in the next, climactic period that introduces imagery one would hardly expect to find in an Alley song:

When love congeals
It soon reveals
The faint aroma of performing seals
The double-crossing of a pair of heels

So, are we supposed to believe what the title says or, on the contrary, to understand it as altogether ironic? As in 'There Will . . .', it seems that too much 'truth' produces an effect of indeterminacy. At this point it is fitting to recall Adorno's observation that the mimetic ambitions of realist fiction actually confirm that the world has become a strange place – that they cover over a *loss* of reality.[11] Like modernism, realism can be seen as an answer to the demands of modernisation, and pushed far enough it may end in modernist derealisation of the referent. This is what happens in the second chorus of 'I Wish . . .': in the previous four-liner, the referent is perfectly visible, but as the metaphors accumulate in the next one, it slides out of sight. The starting point, 'love congeals', is itself metaphoric. So is the implication (made ironic by 'aroma') that congealing love smells, a sensation that is given a new, almost surrealistic twist by the basically visual evocation of 'performing seals'. In this context the notion of a performance acquires overtones of mechanical reproduction, strain, even sweat. The criticism of putting on an act is finally spelled out as 'double-crossing', again coupled to a sensuous impression (crossed 'heels' – a synecdoche for 'legs'?).

If 'I Wish . . .' relies on figurative language (paradox and metaphor) to destabilise references, the simple words of 'There Will . . .' bring another of realism's routes into modernism to the fore: the literary use of reflection. Fokkema (1984) suggests that modernism privileges, both a 'hypothetical mode' (provisory solu-

tions, etc.), and certain semantic fields, one of which is that of compulsive thinking. These are also characteristics of 'There Will . . .', which makes it possible to inscribe the song in a historical process by which reflection successively turns inward, becomes a means to check emotions and drives in nineteenth-century decadent literature, and reaches a climax in modernist experiments with abstraction and dehumanisation.

Endnotes

1. Alexander Woolcott's *The Story of Irving Berlin* (1925); Isaac Goldberg's *George Gershwin. A Study in American Music* (1931).
2. Here I follow Stounbjerg (1991). More extensive accounts of literary modernism include Bradbury and McFarlane (1976), Bürger (1974/1984), Calinescu (1977/1995), Luthersson (1986/1993) and Poggioli (1962/1968), to mention but a few central works.
3. 'There is no way to tell', writes Hamm (1979, p. 339), 'from listening to a song by Irving Berlin or any of his contemporaries, whether it was written for vaudeville, musical comedy, the movies, or simply composed for radio play or possibly recording'. A major reason would be that the power of ASCAP, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers – for details, cf. the entry 'Popular Music' in *New Grove Dictionary of American Popular Music*, volume III (1986, p. 597) – was unfavourable to innovations. An unsuccessful trade union action taken by ASCAP in 1941 also proved crucial to the decline of the Alley. Refusing ASCAP's demand of double royalties, radio stations countered by forming a new organisation, Broadcast Music Incorporated, which favoured African-American and country songwriters. By 1952, BMI controlled 80 per cent of all radio music (Ewen 1977, p. 304).
4. Most of the second generation of Alley songwriters were schooled in European music, but less music by Stravinsky, Schönberg or Bartók than by Debussy, Fauré, Puccini, Rachmaninoff, Ravel and other early twentieth-century composers ('Popular Music' 1986, p. 597). Some lyricists, on the other hand, picked up not only on P.G. Wodehouse but also on the broken lines and split words of Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams (Furia 1990, pp. 6–11).
5. Hamm (1979, pp. 372–3). Arguing against Wilder (1972), Hamm tends to belittle the African-American impact, claiming that only 'quite superficial aspects of "Negro" music were skimmed off by songwriters of the 1910s, '20s, and '30s, to add a touch of exotic seasoning to their products', adding that 'emphasis on these details serves to detract attention from the more important fact that the chief stylistic features [. . .] came from an earlier generation of American songwriters and from the music of Central and Eastern Europe' (Hamm 1979, p. 358). Such features are, in Hamm's account, (i) the verse-chorus formula: the verse, having a recitative character, outlines a dramatic situation or an emotional state, while the chorus represents an aria-like, lyric elaboration of the verse statement – a solution arrived at via a tradition in which many verses with occasional chorus lines successively gave way to the opposite condition, the chorus gaining in weight and the verse becoming voluntary; (ii) a tonally unstable bridge or 'release', often with a great deal of chromatics, which creates a certain distance to the cliché, and (iii) a distinct forward direction, commonly achieved by means of melodic sequence and functional harmony (Hamm 1979, pp. 358–72). There is no need to pursue the issue here, but – jazz performances aside – the Alley's dependence on the chief trend in twentieth-century popular music, Afro-Americanisation, never really threatened its white character.
6. Langer (1984, p.108) puts the finger on a more serious problem, arguing that Simmel, like Goffman after him, represents the city as 'one large *downtown* area' in contradistinction to the Chicago school of urban sociologists that stressed the growth of local sub-communities in the cityscape. Modernisation, of course, breeds both detachment and attempts to remap the metropolis in terms of *Gemeinschaft*.
7. Stearns himself takes a rather critical attitude to the explanatory force of broad modernisation theories, although these are quite compatible with the local causalities that he identifies: 'the requirements of a corporate, service-oriented economy and management structure; small family size, with emphasis on leisure and sexual compatibility' between spouses; consumerism; and anxiety about [bodily disturbances caused by] emotional

excess' (Stearns 1994, pp. 289–90). It should also be pointed out that Stearns takes little interest in the *word* 'cool', whose new meaning derives from African-American culture, particularly jazz circles.

8. In the 1957 edition of *The 7 Lively Arts*, Gilbert Seldes directs attention to the absence of griefas a motif in urbanised American popular song: 'The sentimental ballads before 1920 were often about babies, separation, death. The theme of the sentimental song two generations later was (. . .) the failure of the man to keep his woman' (quoted in Hamm 1979, pp. 377–8). Hamm (1979, p. 378) also notes that only a handful of songs treated the Depression, and that no earlier war produced as few new songs as World War II (Hamm 1979, pp. 289–90).
9. For clichéd images of the city, cf. Langer (1984). Berlin's 'Puttin' on the Ritz', which celebrates the lure of the rich, would be an example of the 'bazaar' approach, while the 'jungle' setting of Cole Porter's 'Love for Sale' was considered so offending that the song was banned on the air.
10. As Furia points out (1990, p. 242), the subject gets so carried away that it refers to the addressee in the past tense in the line 'they won't thrill me like yours used to do'. Forte (1995, pp. 268–9) advocates the same interpretation (secret pleasure), but on musicological grounds. He thinks that the end period suggests, 'in its cold and detached way, that there is a distinct possibility that there will, in fact, be another you'.
11. Cf. Stounbjerg (1991, p. 26). The Adorno text is 'Balzac-Lekture', in *Noten zur Literatur* (1961).

Copyright acknowledgements

References

Berman, M. 1983. *All that is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity* (London)

Bradbury, M., and McFarlane, J. (eds.) 1976. *Modernism 1890–1930* (London)

Bürger, P. 1974/1984. *Theory of the Avantgarde* (Minneapolis)

Calinescu, M. 1977/1995. *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avantgarde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC)

Cooney, T.A. 1995. *Balancing Acts: American Thought and Culture in the 1930s* (New York)

Curtius, E.R. 1948/1963. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York/Evanston)

Dickstein, M. 1996. 'Depression culture: the dream of mobility', in *Radical Revisions. Rereading 1930s Culture*, ed. B. Mullen and S.L. Linkon (Urbana/Chicago), pp. 225–41

Donald, J. 1999. *Imagining the Modern City* (London)

Dumenil, L. 1995. *The Modern Temper. American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York)

Ewen, D. 1977. *All the Years of American Popular Music. A Comprehensive History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ)

Fitzgerald, F.S. 1925/2000. *The Great Gatsby* (London)
Fokkema, D.W. 1984. *Literary History, Modernism, and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia)
Forte, A. 1995. *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era 1924–1950* (Princeton/Chichester)
Friedman, S.S. 2001. 'Definitional excursions: the meanings of modern/modernity/modernism', *Modernism/Modernity*, 8/3, pp. 493–513
Frith, S. 1988. 'Why do songs have words?' *Music for Pleasure. Essays in the Sociology of Pop* (Cambridge) 1996. *Performing Rites. On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford/New York)
Furia, P. 1990. *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley. A History of America's Great Lyricists* (New York/Oxford)
Giddens, A. 1992. *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love & Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge)
Hamm, C. 1979. *Yesterdays. Popular Song in America* (New York/London)
Houggaard, J. 1994. *Dolken og såret. Studier i romantisk kærlighed* (Aarhus)
Langer, P. 1984. 'Four images of organized diversity', *Cities of the Mind*, ed. L. Rodwin and R.M. Hollister (New York/London), pp. 97–118
Litvak, J. 1997. *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory, and the Novel* (Durham, NC)
Luthersson, P. 1986/1993. *Modernism och individualitet. En studie i den litterära modernismens kvalitativa egenart* (Stockholm/Stehag)
Marx, L. 1984. 'The puzzle of antiurbanism in classic American literature', in *Cities of the Mind*, ed. L. Rodwin and R.M. Hollister (New York/London), pp. 163–80
McBrien, W. 1998. *Cole Porter: A Biography* (New York)
Nicholls, P. 1995. *Modernisms. A Literary Guide* (Berkeley/Los Angeles)
Poggioli, R. 1962/1968. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA)
'Popular music' pt. III: 'The Tin Pan Alley era'. 1986. *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, vol. III (London/New York)
Roell, C.H. 1992. 'The development of Tin Pan Alley', in *America's Musical Pulse. Popular Music in Twentieth-Century Society*, ed. K.J. Bindas (Westport, CT/London), pp. 113–21
Savage, M., and Warde, A. 1993. *Urban Sociology, Capitalism and Modernity* (Basingstoke/London)
Simmel, G. 1903/1997. 'The metropolis and mental life', *Simmel on Culture*, ed. D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (London), pp. 174–85
'Sophistication'. 2002. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary Online*
Stearns, P.N. 1994. *American Cool. Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York/London)
Stounbjerg, P. 1991. 'Det ustadiges æsthetik. Modernitet og modernisme hos August Strindberg', in *Læs*, 14, pp. 7–46
Wilder, A. 1972/1990. *American Popular Song. The Great Innovators* (New York/Oxford)

Selected songs

Berlin, I. 1928/1929/1992. 'Puttin' on the Ritz'. *The Irving Berlin Fake Book* (Milwaukee)
Donaldson, W., and Kahn, G. 1928/1995. 'Makin' Whoopee', in *20's, 30's & 40's Showstoppers*
Gershwin, G. and I. 1927. ''S Wonderful'. Gershwin, G. and I. (1994)
1930. 'Embraceable You'. Gershwin, G. and I. (1994)
1994. *The Genius of George & Ira Gershwin* (Seacaucus, NJ)
Kern, J., and Fields, D. 1936. '(This Is) A Fine Romance'. *Jerome Kern. The Man and His Music in Story, Picture and Song* (Santa Monica, n.d.)
Porter, C. 1928. 'Let's Do It'. Porter (1977)
1930. 'Love for Sale'. Porter (1977)
1934. 'You're the Top'. Porter (1977)
1936. 'It's De-Lovely'. Porter (1977)
1936. 'I've Got You under My Skin'. Porter (1977)
1954. 'All of You'. Porter (1977)
1977. *The Best of Cole Porter* (London)
Rodgers, R., and Hart, L. 1925/1990. 'Manhattan', in *Broadway Musicals Show by Show 1917–1929* (Milwaukee)
1926. 'Mountain Greenery'. Rodgers and Hart (1992)
1927. 'Thou Swell'. Rodgers and Hart (1992)
1937. 'I Wish I Were in Love Again'. Rodgers and Hart (1992)
1937. 'My Funny Valentine'. Rodgers and Hart (1992)
1942. 'Bewitched'. Rodgers and Hart (1992)

1992. *Rodgers & Hart Rediscovered* (Seacaucus, NJ)
20's, 30's & 40's Showstoppers. 1995 (Miami)
Warren, H., and Gordon, M. 1942/1987. 'There Will Never Be Another You', in *Bumper Book of Film Music* (Woodford Green)
Whiting, R.A., and Mercer, J. 1937. 'Too Marvellous for Words', in *The Best of Nostalgic Music* (n.d., n.p.)
Youmans, V., and Caesar, I. 1924/1995. 'Tea for Two', in *20's, 30's & 40's Showstoppers*

Discography

Benny Goodman and his Orchestra with Peggy Lee. 1941. 'Let's Do It'. *Let's Do It – 1941*. Phont CD 7669