

IRA GERSHWIN

THE
ART
OF
THE
LYRICIST



PHILIP
FURIA

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THE ART OF THE LYRICIST

Philip FURIA

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*To my mother,
Ethel Rose Szilagyi Furia,
who taught me to love good books*

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PREFACE

This book developed quite naturally from *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America's Great Lyricists* (Oxford, 1990). In that book I surveyed the lyricists of what has been called the “golden age” of American songwriting—Irving Berlin, Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, Ira Gershwin, Dorothy Fields, and many others—concentrating on the poetic qualities of their greatest songs, the “standards” that seem as fresh today as when they were first popular. Even as I worked on that book, I realized that another approach to this great era would be to focus on a single lyricist, taking all of his songs from classic standards to the least known gems, and trace the growth of his art against the historical background of developments in the American musical theater, Hollywood musicals, and the commercial song industry then known as Tin Pan Alley.

As I considered such an approach, the lyricist who so obviously came to mind was Ira Gershwin. Unlike Irving Berlin and Cole Porter, who wrote both words and music for their songs, Ira Gershwin was exclusively devoted to the art of the lyricist. That art, as I try to show in this book, is a poetic art, but unlike poetry in that words must be intimately wedded to music. That intricate connection makes it impossible to discuss the art of the lyricist apart from that of the composer, particularly in the songs that Ira Gershwin wrote with his brother George. The Gershwin brothers not only worked but lived side by side, and, while songs usually started with George's musical ideas, it is evident that they were written in a give-and-take of accent and rhythm, phrase and cadence, syllable and note. Over the years, their collaboration grew as intertwined as the brothers' lives and produced a body of work in which words and music coalesce into a seamless artistic whole. George Gershwin has long had and continues to receive his rightful acclaim for his contribution to that work; this book, I hope, will add to the recognition that is equally his brother's due.

Although we most often associate him with George Gershwin's music, Ira Gershwin also collaborated with virtually every other great

composer of his time—Vincent Youmans, Harold Arlen, Jerome Kern, Kurt Weill, Burton Lane, Aaron Copland, and Arthur Schwartz. Where other great lyricists, such as Lorenz Hart, worked almost exclusively with one composer, Ira Gershwin's versatility in adjusting to the demands of a variety of musical styles gives the fullest perspective on the craft of the lyricist. Ira Gershwin was also one of the few lyricists of his time to write with equal success on Broadway and in Hollywood. Whether writing for the stage or for film, moreover, he increasingly sought to integrate his lyrics into characters and dramatic context, making him a central figure in the major transformation of the musical during his lifetime. In this book, accordingly, I concentrate not only on the poetic quality of his lyrics but on their relation to the dramatic moment out of which they emerge in a musical show or film. Of all the lyricists of his age, finally, Ira Gershwin left the fullest record of manuscripts, commentary, and other materials germane to the art of lyric-writing, as well as to that art's relation to poetry.

Through the kind assistance of the Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trusts I have been able to examine that body of material. I want to thank Mark Trent Goldberg, Executive Director of the Trusts, and those who helped me at various Gershwin archives: Raymond White at the Library of Congress; Marty Jacobs at the Museum of the City of New York; and Cathy Henderson at the Harry Ransom Research Center of the University of Texas. Robert Kimball, Edward Jablonski, and Lawrence D. Stewart shared their knowledge of the Gershwins with me, including their personal reminiscences of Ira; their generosity, sensitivity, and astuteness gave me some sense of what Ira Gershwin himself must have been like among friends.

My own friends and colleagues, Marty Roth, George T. Wright, and Michael Hancher, read versions of this book and responded with the same kind of insight, criticism, and enthusiasm that stamps their own books. Other friends read the manuscript and offered their own special insights—Brian Kent, a former student who, together with Marsha Hunter, performs the songs of the Gershwins and others with unparalleled excellence; Tony Hill, an aficionado of Irving Berlin, who is indefatigable in promoting my research on American song; Les Block, my favorite pianist, who included me in his show on the Gershwins and helped me prepare a script that became the germ for this book. Karen Johnson Furia read the original manuscript and offered excellent editorial suggestions, as well as the support and encouragement she has given to my work for many years.

In the earliest stages of my research I was ably assisted by Marianne Ahokas, a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, who painstakingly surveyed critical reviews of all Gershwin shows. Another graduate student, Michael Eldridge, ferreted out new and obscure recordings of shows and songs. Laurie Patterson assisted me with archival research and gave an astute editorial reading of the final version of the manuscript before it went to press. Others who love these songs kindly offered recordings, sheet music, research material, and relevant information: Arthur Geffen, Louis Aborn, Ken Carley, Dick Carson, Ted Roberts, Rosemary Hanes, Sally Leach, and Jack Rosner. My research was also supported by the Bush Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, and the Graduate School, the College of Liberal Arts, and the Department of English at the University of Minnesota. I also want to thank Dennis Cass, of the Lazear Literary Agency, for his work in seeing this book through to publication, and Leona Capeless and Joelyn Ausanka for their thorough editing of the manuscript. Sheldon Meyer, Vice President of Oxford University Press, has supported this book from its inception; I hope that it furthers his longstanding celebration of American popular song. A final acknowledgment goes to a great lyricist of more recent years, Sammy Cahn, who took an interest in my research, corresponded with me, and discussed his special art with me over the phone. Although we never managed to meet before he died, he taught me a great deal about his—and Ira Gershwin’s—craft.

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IRA GERSHWIN

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Bidin' My Time

1896–1917

Ira was the shyest, most diffident boy we had ever known. In a class of lower east side rascallions, his soft-spoken gentleness and low-keyed personality made him a lovable incongruity. He spoke in murmurs, hiding behind a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles . . . Ira had a kid brother who wore high stiff collars, shirts with cuffs and went out with girls.

—E. Y. “Yip” Harburg

ONE day in 1910 a second-hand piano was delivered to the Gershvin residence—evidently to their Second Avenue apartment in Manhattan, but it is difficult to be sure, since the Gershvins were a peripatetic family, changing homes some twenty times before their children had grown up. What kept the family on the move was Morris Gershvin, who kept changing his business—from a bakery to a restaurant to a cigar store, then a pool hall, a Turkish bath, even a bookmaking parlor. Since he liked to walk to work, the family residence changed with each new enterprise. A whimsical family, the Gershvins also liked to change their names. Upon arriving in America from Russia, Morris Gershvin changed his name from Moische Gershovitz, and when his wife Rose (born Rosa Bruskin) bore a son on December 6, 1896, they named him Israel—but always called him Izzy. By the time he was old enough to ask what his real name was, Rose and Morris had forgotten. Years later, when he applied for a passport, “Izzy” found out his name was not “Isidore,” as he had assumed, but “Israel.” By then, however, he had long since gone by the name “Ira.”

The piano was for Ira, the Gershwins' bookish and quiet son, who in 1910 earned a place in Townsend Harris Hall, a high school open to the brightest offspring of the teeming Lower East Side. Not content to rely on Ira's academic promise, the Gershwins, like many immigrant families, saw musical training as another step that would make the ladder of success one rung easier. With what trepidation the fourteen-year-old must have watched as the piano was hoisted up alongside the apartment building then eased through the second-story window into the Gershwins' "front room." Before Ira could be escorted to it, however, his younger brother, George (whose birth name was Jacob), rushed to the keyboard and, miraculously it seemed, banged out a popular song of the day. The miracle was soon explained by the fact that George had secretly learned to play on a friend's player piano. Miracle enough for Rose and Morris, since George's only other accomplishments had been in roller-skating and street-fighting. The trick worked—George got the lessons and Ira got to go back to his books.

If the piano tale marks George as his mother's son—aggressive, impulsive, flamboyant—it also reveals that Ira inherited something of his father's reticence and taciturnity. As S. N. Behrman, a lifelong friend, recalled, "the difference in the personalities of the two brothers was striking":

If George was streamlined and propulsive, Ira was reserved and scholarly. He was gently humorous. One sensed in Ira even at the very center of involvement, a well of detachment. George gave you everything at once; he was boyish, with an extraordinarily sweet character. He wanted his listeners to participate in the excitement of his own development.¹

The brothers' contrasting personalities would later prove perfectly suited to the craft of songwriting, where, to answer that perennial question, the musical idea usually came first. "I hit on a new tune," George once explained with characteristic gusto, and "play it for Ira and he hums it all over the place for a while till he gets an idea for a lyric. Then we work the thing out together."² Their sister, Frances, the last surviving member of the family, painted their work habits in more detail. George, she recalled, would

write a song sometimes in just a few minutes. There were very few things he would have to struggle over . . . he had no routine. He'd go to the piano after breakfast and a few songs would happen. He'd suddenly play something and say, "This is a nice phrase," and he would develop it. It all came so easily to him. Ira, on the other hand, was a perfectionist. He would work all night on one word sometimes.

Ira's tortoise-like pace was not just a reflection of his personality but an indication of how difficult it was to find syllables, words, and phrases to match George's music. Where composers such as Jerome Kern and Richard Rodgers gave their lyricists long and flowing melodic lines that provided ample space for lyrical development, George Gershwin strove for what he termed "*staccato* effects" and a "stencilled style."³ His melodies consisted of abrupt, angular phrases that gave a lyricist, as Ira himself put it, little room to "turn around." In "Embraceable You," for example (a song frequently cited as the perfect match of words to music), George rattled off a percussive string of repeated notes that so daunted Ira he checked into a hotel room for three days to find words to fit them. What he finally came up with, "Come to papa, come to papa do!," gave "Embraceable You" the rhythmic kick that is the "hallmark"⁴ of a Gershwin song. Ira's phrase also delighted Morris Gershwin, who regularly demanded that his sons "play the song about me," proudly thumping his chest and beaming at what he took to be the paternal allusion.

Ira, understandably, compared the art of lyric writing to that of creating a mosaic, carefully choosing the precise verbal shard to fit into each jagged musical space his brother provided. The meticulous artistry with which he selected and polished those vernacular facets would soon earn Ira Gershwin the nickname, among songwriters, of "The Jeweller." Yet it was not only Ira's skill at matching syllables to notes that produced the Gershwins' exquisite songs. Song, as Ira was fond of saying, quoting the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a "joint art of words and music, two arts, under emotional pressure, coalescing into a third."⁵ If the secret to a Rodgers and Hart song is the sweet-sour blend of sumptuous melody and unsentimental, even acerbic lyrics, then in a Gershwin song it is the way George's sensuous, driving energy is tempered (but never blunted) by Ira's urbanely innocent wit. Ira might at first give free rein to George's ardent insistence—fitting the abrupt notes that open a melody with

—Em-brace me!

However, when George aggressively reworks that phrase, Ira turns wryly playful:

My sweet embrace-
-able you!

With their fusion of passionate energy and laconic wit, the songs of George and Ira Gershwin are distinctively individual creations, stand-

ing out in a popular medium whose products are often indistinguishable one from the other.

In achieving that distinction, the Gershwins joined Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, E. Y. “Yip” Harburg and Harold Arlen, Cole Porter, and other composers and lyricists of what has been called the “golden age” of American song. In that era between World Wars I and II, American popular song radiated the casual elegance, literate wit, and stylish verve that distinguish the literature of the period as a whole. Like the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald or the poetry of e.e. cummings, the songs of the Gershwin brothers embody the style of the “Jazz Age.” Just as George Gershwin surpassed all other composers in wedding European classical traditions to the African-American strains of blues and jazz, Ira Gershwin was attuned to the tradition of English lyric poetry but also sought to capture the way Americans “spoke to each other—their slang, their clichés, their catchphrases.”⁶ “Embraceable You,” for example, reflects the 1920s penchant for suffixes among the new breed of “ad men” as well as Fitzgerald’s teenagers, who swoon over each other’s “kissable” mouths. With his brother’s idiomatic music to inspire him, Ira Gershwin, more than any of his contemporaries, took the American vernacular and made it sing.

Not only was he the perfect artistic complement to his brother, Ira’s personality was ideally suited to the subordinate role of the lyricist in American songwriting. Although critics may affirm that, in song, words and music must join “in a true marriage of equal partners,”⁷ the lyricist has always had to assume the traditional role of the self-effacing wife. The frustration many lyricists felt is reflected in a famous comment by a real-life wife, Mrs. Oscar Hammerstein. After years of hearing people refer to “Ol’ Man River” as a great “Kern” song, Mrs. Hammerstein finally snapped, “Jerome Kern did not write ‘Ol’ Man River.’ Mr. Kern wrote, *dum, dum, dum, da*. My husband wrote *Ol’ Man River*.”

Yet Ira Gershwin, who sometimes had to endure references to “George and his lovely wife, Ira,” was perfectly content to be “the other Gershwin.” S. N. Behrman recalled how

at the Gershwin parties, with everyone spellbound around the piano, while George was playing and singing Ira’s lyrics, I would steal a look at Ira, standing on the outskirts of the crowd, a small, benignant smile on his face, stirred to happiness by the effect his brother was creating. That they were his lyrics George was singing was, to him, peripheral. He was under the spell of his brother’s overwhelming personality, as the rest of us were.⁸

Never ceasing to admire the ease with which George could sit down at the piano, seemingly to amuse himself, then produce brilliant compositions, Ira Gershwin always regarded George as the consummate genius, himself as the loyal helpmate. When Behrman once told him, “‘You know, Ira, you are every bit as good as George,’ Ira shook his head. ‘No,’ he said, ‘George was more original.’”

While Ira marvelled at George’s fecundity and originality, he also helped harness and direct it. During their collaboration “many little musical figures, and ideas, which in passing George might have tossed aside, were held onto because Ira caught them and pinned them down with words that could sing well and have meaning.”⁹ From their earliest days, Ira’s success in school and his facility with language prompted his immigrant parents to designate him as the family representative who conferred with teachers and principals about George’s behavior problems. George Gershwin always spoke, with some awe, of “my brother Ira, the scholar.” According to lyricist Yip Harburg, a friend since childhood, George “looked to Ira for guidance, for critical evaluation, for taste.” His respect for Ira was “lifelong, profound and of the greatest significance . . . When Ira failed to nod, George would attack the keyboard with renewed dynamic vigor, until he met Ira’s intransigent demands.”¹⁰

Before their contrasting personalities coalesced into percussive chords and whimsical words, George and Ira moved to different rhythms. George, with his usual fervor, plunged directly into a career in music. After a few years of studying classical piano and composition, he was confident enough of his future in popular song to quit high school and, at age fifteen, go to work on Tin Pan Alley, the sheet-music publishing industry centered on West 28th Street. Starting as a lowly plugger at the Jerome Remick Company, he demonstrated the firm’s latest wares all day long for vaudeville performers in search of new material. Even then, however, his sights were set on songwriting, and, in 1916, he sold his first song to an Alley publisher. Its catchy bugle-call melody was reminiscent of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” the 1911 hit by his idol Irving Berlin. Unfortunately, George’s lyricist, Murray Roth, violated the Alley maxim that, for a song to sell, it needed a short, memorable title—one that could be repeated frequently throughout the refrain (so listeners would remember it when they went to buy the sheet-music). “When You Want ’Em, You Can’t Get ’Em, When You Got ’Em, You Don’t Want ’Em” earned George no royalties, but did establish him as a composer; he rechristened himself George “Gershwin,” and the entire Gershwin family followed suit.

Ira's course, typically, was as aimless as George's was direct. In what he called his "peregrinatory Manhattan boyhood," his wanderings enabled him to absorb the sights, smells, and, above all, the language of the polyglot city.

The horse-drawn street cars on Delancey Street, their stoves hot in winter; the trips with other kids to Chinatown to buy sugar cane at about a cent a foot; learning to swim in the mucky Harlem River; picking up some Italian phrases to serve as passwords in case you were ganged up on around Mulberry Street (a ploy which sometimes worked—if it didn't you got at least a sock on the jaw and ran like hell).¹¹

Proudly he recalled how at twelve he was deemed not the "smartest boy" in his class but "the best informed about New York" and was therefore chosen to lead a class expedition through lower Manhattan. "No question," he told himself late in life, "you were—first and last—a New Yorker."

New York, particularly in those early years of the century, was a city of words, and Ira not only absorbed the language of the streets, he read avidly. By his own admission, however, he read "without plan or purpose."¹² He first discovered books at

the laundry with a two-cent lending library side-line (in the back a wooden bench with three or four piles of nickel novels to exchange: the *Young Wild West*, *Pluck and Luck*, *Fred Fearnot*, and *Liberty Boys of '76* series); then the discovery of the public library, and the first book you took out was one on Thackeray's contributions to *Punch*.¹³

That first library loan is significant, since what William Makepeace Thackeray contributed to *Punch*, along with satirical sketches and cartoons, was light or "society" verse. Thackeray may have sparked Ira's lifelong interest in light verse with such elegant irreverence as

Spitting is a nasty thing,
Which French people do.
Little Lordling, don't begin
Expectorating too.

By the time Ira was in high school, light verse had become his passion as much as music was George's. The high school curriculum in those days stressed a "rigorous training in classical poetic forms." "We were well-versed," a classmate recalled, "in the ballad, the triolet, the rondo, the villanelle, the sonnet. We were highly disciplined. We were never permitted to use an oracular rhyme or a tonal rhyme like *home* and *tone*."¹⁴

“In my late teens,” Ira recalled, “I fooled around with French verse forms, such as the triolet, villanelle, and especially the rondeau—with its opening phrase taking on new meanings when repeated.”¹⁵ Writing poems such as “Rondeau to Rosie,” as he himself observed, later helped him in writing song lyrics:

My Rosie knows the places where
 One goes to lose all trace of care:
 The ultra swagger cabaret . . .
 The crystal chandeliered cafe . . .
 And oh, she knows the waiters there.
 Her wink will fetch from magic lair
 A bottle of a vintage rare . . .
 And potent beer? Hot dog! I'll say
 My Rosie knows!

Without my Rosie, I declare
 I'd plumb the depths of dark despair.
 To her I dedicate this lay;
 To her I owe my spirits gay,
 My smiling mien, my cheerful air,
 My rosy nose.

Just as he turned the title phrase “my Rosie knows” on its head in a rondeau, he could conclude a song lyric such as “But Not for Me” with an even cleverer twist:

The climax of a plot
 should be the marriage knot—
 but there's no knot for me.

As a lyricist, he found that the hardest part of his task was to find a title phrase; once he got his title—often “from thin air, figuratively and literally . . . by listening to the argot in everyday conversation,”¹⁶ he usually jumped “to the last line” of the melody and tried “to work the title in again; with a twist, if possible”—the kind of witty turnaround characteristic of light verse.

Ira's apprenticeship in light verse extended well beyond the school-room, however. Poetry, in those years, was everywhere, it seemed—even in the daily newspaper. All the big New York papers carried regular columns devoted to light verse; F. P. A.'s (Franklin Pierce Adams) “The Conning Tower” in *The New York World* was the most famous, but there was also Don Marquis's “Sun Dial” in the *Sun* and C. L. Edson's “Always In Good Humor” in *The Daily Mail*. In such columns, amateur

as well as professional versifiers, usually employing a clever pseudonym, could flaunt their mastery of the intricacies of meter and rhyme while skewering some contemporary topic or burlesquing a traditional poetic theme. Writing under the name of “Dotty,” Dorothy Parker could deftly (and daftly) sing:

Oh, life is a glorious cycle of song,
 A medley of extemporanea;
 And love is a thing that can never go wrong;
 And I am Marie of Roumania.¹⁷

Light verse wasn’t confined to these columns, however; from front page to back one could encounter a theater review done completely in quatrains or, turning to the sports page, find Grantland Rice writing up baseball scores and prognostications in couplets.

Beginning in 1908, Ira would cut out his favorite poems and paste them in scrapbooks, and he even put out his own one-page weekly, *The Leaf*. In high school, he met Yip Harburg, who shared his love of light verse and would go on to craft witty lyrics for such musicals as *Finian’s Rainbow*. “We were living,” Harburg recalled, “in a time of literate revelry in the New York daily press—F.P.A., Russel Crouse, Don Marquis, Alexander Woollcott, Dorothy Parker, Bob Benchley. We wanted to be part of it.”¹⁸ Seated near each other alphabetically, the two boys discovered they shared not only a love for light verse but a distaste for algebra. In what Yip termed an “antidote to the boredom of mathematics,” they started their own column, “The Daily Pass-It.” Printing the column on Townsend Harris Hall toilet paper (“to make it real establishment stuff”), they would circulate poems and cartoons surreptitiously around the room. Soon they had a more official column, “Much Ado,” in the school newspaper, where they satirized their teachers and classmates in quatrains.

In 1914, when “Gersh” and “Yip” went on to the City College of New York, they continued the column as “Gargoyle Gargles” in the campus newspaper. While most of their verse was topical humor, one of Ira’s poems from 1915 conjures up the way the Gershwin apartment must have sounded ever since the day George first sat down at the piano:

I remember, I remember
 Those peaceful happy times
 When we heard no music other
 Than distant church-bell chimes.
 That picture cannot now be drawn;

The flat wherein we dwell
 Alas! Of late it has become
 A throbbing torture cell.

I remember, I remember
 The time when peace prevailed;
 When no budding prima donna
 Above "Lucia" wailed;
 When the tenants living near us
 No phonograph did own,
 To drive me to insanity
 With its metallic tone.

I remember, I remember
 When no infernal chump
 On a pianola, down below
 Both day and night would pump.
 Someone next door the bugle flares
 He's blowing himself pink . . .
 They're all to music taken, Woe!
 I think I'll take to drink.

Beneath the comic despair, one can hear a note here of Ira's real frustration in a world where everyone but he, it seems, is caught up, in music.

As an apprentice effort, the lines of "I Remember, I Remember" are heavily padded with unnecessary words ("No phonograph *did* own") and awkward inversions ("Above 'Lucia' wailed") as Ira struggles to fit words to the fixed poetic rhythm. In only one line, the last, do the metrical requirements accord with a perfectly colloquial phrase: "I *think* I'll *take* to *drink*." In the other lines, the clash between meter and language robs the poem of that most essential quality of "light" verse—the ease, the spontaneity, the seeming absence of effort that gives light verse its "lightness of touch."¹⁹ For poets such as F.P.A. and Dorothy Parker, such lightness came only after years of struggle to master poetic meters. For others, particularly Ezra Pound, Carl Sandburg, and Amy Lowell, the constraints of regular meter and rhyme had to be abandoned for "free verse" that could better register American speech. For Ira Gershwin, the lightness would come when he turned from poetry to song, where the accentual patterns created by varied sequences of musical notes gave his words the colloquial ease they lacked when he had to adhere to strict metrical versification.

Another of his early poems, from 1916, offers a striking instance of how cramped and stilted his language could be when it conformed to a regular meter:

A desperate deed to do I crave,
 Beyond all reason and rhyme;
 Someday when I'm feeling especially brave,
 I'm going to bide my time.

Years later, after he shifted from poetry to song lyrics, Ira would find wit and ease by setting his syllables to a more flexible musical pattern:

I'm bidin' my ti-me
 'cause that's the kinda guy I'm.
 While other folks grow dizzy,
 I keep busy—
 bidin' my time.

Where the metrical regularity of light verse forces Ira into awkward inversions and padding (“deed to do I crave”), the sequence of musical notes for “Bidin’ My Time” frees him to play with the clipped and elongated syllables of American speech. Here the “bidin’”s and “‘cause”s register a laziness that shortens some words, while “ti-me” and “I-m” sluggishly drag themselves out over two notes. It was their apprenticeship in the rigors of light verse, its “metrical discipline and rhyming virtuosity”²⁰ that later enabled Ira, Yip, and other lyricists to match words to music with such apparent ease.

Their love of light verse soon carried Ira and Yip beyond New York newspapers to anthologies of poetry. Ira began collecting anthologies in high school, purchasing them out of his forty-cent-a-week allowance, and eventually had more than two hundred volumes of verse. One of their favorite books, Yip Harburg recalled, was *A Vers de Société Anthology*, edited by Carolyn Wells, herself one of the most prolific of newspaper versifiers. There they found their literary antecedents—Lewis Carroll and Austin Dobson, James Russell Lowell and Thomas Hood, as well as a distinguished poetic lineage that reached back through Dryden and Lovelace, Suckling and Herrick, to Jonson, Raleigh, and even Shakespeare. From such anthologies, Ira learned his poetic craft just as George honed his skills by studying piano exercise books. Reading poems that ranged across the full literary tradition, Ira and Yip learned that light verse is an art, not of origi-

nal poetic expression, but of giving a witty turn to a formulaic sentiment.

In one of their joint compositions, a 1915 poem called “Shackled,” “Yip” and “Gersh” reflected upon their “blasé conscious funning”:

Sometimes to us so queerly,
 There comes this feeling clearly,
 “We do not write sincerely!”
 And then mayhap we pause.

 And accuse ourselves of playing
 On words, great Nothings saying,
 When we might be a-haying—
 And so we rage and rant—

 Our comedy decrying
 Alas! It sets us sighing.
 But give up versifying?
 Good gracious! We just CAN'T!

While poets strive for “high seriousness,” “originality,” and “sincerity,” the light-verse writer repeats the clichéd “great Nothings” with a playful twist. If successful, the versifier calls attention less to his ostensible subject than to his own deft treatment of it. We praise not so much what he says but his clever way of saying it, delighting in his “conscious funning”—his open display of poetic devices, artifices, and contrivances.

Skimming through the poems in Wells’s anthology, Ira Gershwin saw how poet after poet took up a well-worn romantic formula—a catalogue of a mistress’s beauties, a plea for her favors, a lament over her scorn—and refreshed it with some trenchant turn. One such formula is that of celebrating a woman by rhyming her name, which light-verse poets enliven by choosing a name that challenges their skill at rhyme. They thus invite us to marvel not only at the glory of the lady but at the ardent struggles of the poet to capture her in words. Richard Watson Gilder, for example, sets himself the task of finding a rhyme for “Janet,” then slyly wonders “how *do* they plan it?,” while Eugene Field manages to rhyme his “Mistress Pyrrha” but only with a desperate “posie-dizened sirrah.” Frank Dempster Sherman begins with the same problem in “A Rhyme for Priscilla” but sidesteps it to display his skill at rhyming virtually any other name, from “dilettante”/“Dante” to “Il Penseroso”/“only so-so.” Only after he has strained his imagination

in a tour de force that continues for more than fifty rhymes, does he finally find one for his beloved—literally at hand—in the cigar he holds:

O Priscilla, sweet Priscilla,
 Writing of you makes me think,
 As I burn my brown Manila
 And immortalize my ink

As is typical in light verse, we are concerned less with Priscilla herself than the witty inventiveness she occasions in the poet.

In another of Ira's apprentice efforts of 1916, "To Sophonisba," he tried his hand, somewhat awkwardly, at this girl's-name formula, pleading,

Oh! Lady, if you still want me to
 Write you in lilting,
 Pulsating rhythm, in prancing swinging
 Meter, with smooth silv'ry rhyme,
 Oh, Sophonisba—
 DEAR Sophonisba—
 Change
 Your unrhymable name!

Years later, however, Ira gave a much better twist to the formula in a song lyric, "A Rhyme for Angela," where he strikes Sherman's pose of the rhymester able to come up with a rhyme for any other girl in the world:

I can find a rhyme for Lucy—
 for instance, her kiss is juicy,
 but I must confess
 I'm lost, more or less,
 with Angela, Angela.

Like Sherman, Ira evinces his pyrotechnic skill by rhyming other names:

Takes no time to rhyme, say, Chloe—
 For instance, her breast is snowy . . .
 I can find a rhyme for Irma:
 She's Heaven on Terra Firma . . .
 I can find a rhyme for Margot:
 On her favors there's no embargo . . .
 I can find a rhyme for Edith:
 She possesses what Everyman needeth . . .

But where Sherman ultimately triumphs in rhyming Priscilla, Angela remains unrhymed to the last—literally (and linguistically) beyond compare.

By bringing these techniques of society verse to bear upon the formulas of popular song, Ira Gershwin, along with Yip Harburg, Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, and other lyricists of the golden age transformed the lowly genre of song into a vehicle of urbane wit. Before these lyricists performed their alchemy, the job of a Tin Pan Alley lyricist was simple: “You gotta say ‘I love you’ in thirty-two bars.” While most of these wordsmiths were content to repeat the same formulaic expressions for love longed for, first sighted, lost, or unrequited, lyricists nurtured on light verse delighted in tackling the problem with witty variations upon the most hackneyed of formulas. Thus Cole Porter could have a lover confess his thralldom with “I’ve got you—under my skin,” as though romance were a dermal irritation. Lorenz Hart, similarly, could praise his beloved as a “Funny Valentine” whose “looks are laughable—unphotographable.” Ira Gershwin’s mastery of such light-verse inversions is evident when he takes the formula of lovers experiencing their first truly passionate kiss and has them ask a question usually posed when one finds one’s mate in bed with someone else: “How Long Has This Been Going On?” Speaking for all such lyricists, Yip Harburg averred, “I doubt that I can ever say ‘I love you’ head on—it’s not the way I think. For me the task is never to say the thing directly, and yet to say it—to think in a curve, so to speak.”²¹

The light-verse principle of refreshing stale romantic clichés was so fundamental to Ira Gershwin’s lyrical art that when he collected his lyrics in a book, *Lyrics on Several Occasions*, he organized them not by chronology but by the standard formulas upon which each lyric formed its particular “curve.” Thus one group of songs is labelled “The Not Impossible He” and includes songs like “The Man I Love,” “Looking For a Boy,” and other lyrics where a woman longs for the man of her dreams. Another formula, where a man pleads for his beloved’s favors, Ira dubbed “The Importunate Male”; he included in that category such variations as “Put Me to the Test” and “I Can’t Get Started.” Still another category, “A Quintet of Findings,” includes five songs of love at first sight, such as “Love Walked In” and “This Is New,” while torch songs such as “But Not for Me” and “The Man That Got Away” fall in the category Ira dubbed “Ladies in Lament.” By studying the various lyrics in each category, one can see how, in song after song, Ira Gershwin gave a subtly different turn to the same basic formula.

But while his organization of *Lyrics on Several Occasions* was based upon light verse, Ira prefaced his collection with a notice that clearly distinguished the art of lyric-writing from that of poetry. Since lyrics consisted of words wedded intricately to music, Ira insisted, any “resemblance to actual poetry, living or dead, is highly improbable.”²² Before a lyric could bristle with the witty variations and deft rhymes of light verse, the lyricist, unlike the poet, had to begin with a composer’s musical idea and then craft words “mosaically” with music, fusing syllable with note, accent with rhythm, and phrase with cadence, in the give-and-take of collaboration. Equally important, as Ira insists throughout the book, is that the words must “sing”—with precisely the right syllable wedded to the proper note and with plenty of open vowels to enable a vocalist to sustain and project the longer notes. Only after the lyricist had mastered those tasks could he strive for poetic effects. Little wonder that the great light-verse writers of the day seldom were successful at songwriting. Dorothy Parker and Ogden Nash only rarely managed to wed their wit to music, and when the dean of light verse, Franklin Pierce Adams, tried fusing singable syllables with musical notes, he confessed to finding the “method of the lyrist,” as he termed it, “infinitely harder.”²³

Thus when Ira Gershwin traced the genealogy of his mosaic art back to the Elizabethan age, he excluded the “great art-song writers,” such as John Dowland and Thomas Campion, because for them “the words always came first.” He found his true lyrical forebears in the Renaissance “satirists and parodists” who put new lyrics to traditional airs. Even Martin Luther, by this measure, was Ira’s literary ancestor, for he crafted new lyrics to secular tunes, throwing out “the worldly lyric to substitute one of spiritual quality.” For Ira Gershwin, this “practice of putting new words to pre-existent song” culminated in the eighteenth century, his favorite literary period, when John Gay took “sixty-eight short ‘airs’” from “the great store of English, Irish, and Scottish melodies” and set new words to them for *The Beggar’s Opera*.²⁴

So insistent was Ira Gershwin upon the distinction between poetry and song that he excluded even the songs of Gilbert and Sullivan from this lyrical canon because “practically all the lyrics were written first.” Ira had known W. S. Gilbert as a light-verse poet, prominently featured in anthologies such as Carolyn Wells’s, but he discovered the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas one day when Morris Gershwin, an opera lover, brought home a recording of *H.M.S. Pinafore*. That knowledge gave him a bit of one-upmanship on his friend Yip. When Harburg confessed that his favorite book of poetry was Gilbert’s *Bab Ballads*, Ira coolly

inquired, “You know, of course, those ‘poems’ are song lyrics?” “There’s music to them?” asked a flabbergasted Harburg. “Sure is,” Ira told him and then invited Yip home to listen to the Gershwin family Victrola. “There were all the lines I knew by heart,” Harburg recalled, “I was dumbfounded, staggered!”²⁵

Harburg’s astonishment is certainly understandable, given the enormous gap in quality between the songs of Gilbert and Sullivan and the tepid fare of Tin Pan Alley—a gap partly attributable to the fact that on Tin Pan Alley the “tunesmith” cranked out the music first, then the “wordsmith” tacked on the lyric (sometimes called merely “the words”). With Gilbert and Sullivan, however, Gilbert’s words came first, so their “songs” are essentially light verse set to music. Under the pseudonym of “Bab,” Gilbert had written light verse for *Fun* (a rival of *Punch*). When he and Sullivan first began collaborating on the Savoy operas, Gilbert simply asked Sullivan to set his “Bab Ballads” to music. *Trial by Jury*, their first successful work (which Ira recalled reading in 1911, the year of Gilbert’s death), consisted primarily of musical settings for poems that had already appeared in *Fun*. Similarly, *H.M.S. Pinafore* contained more than half a dozen of the earlier poems.

By setting light verse to music, Gilbert and Sullivan revolutionized European operetta. In both Viennese operetta and French *opéra bouffe*, the audience is swept up in the romantic plot, dashing characters and sheer spectacle; far from trying to call attention to their own wittiness, lyrics in such operettas efface themselves to bring out the sumptuousness of the music. In the satirical operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, however, characters are “constantly playing on the conventionality of their activity, on the unreality of theatrical illusion,” keeping the audience aware of, rather than immersed in, “the fabricated nature of the plot and dialogue.” Lyrics that bristle with outrageous puns and pyrotechnical rhymes thus contribute to this awareness of the “text’s fictitiousness and fabricated nature.”²⁶ When the lovers in traditional operetta pour out their hearts, we soar with their song; when the hero of *H.M.S. Pinafore* laments, “I love—and love, alas, above my station” and the chorus punningly responds, “He loves—and loves a lass above his station,” we laugh with our lyrical feet on the ground.

The problem with setting light verse to music, however, is that while Gilbert’s poems were “eminently recitable, with their carefully selected words all neatly clipped and set in rows, their spirited dactyls and anapests hurrying one along, their tempting but tongue-twisting alliterations and consonances, and their pompously reverberating syllabics, . . . they are not singable.”²⁷ Where singability was practically the

only requirement for lyrics in traditional operetta, Gilbert, admittedly “tone-deaf and unable to carry a tune,” had to learn to make his wit more euphonious, to loosen his rattling rhythms, soften his thumping rhymes, and replace his gutturals and fricatives with liquid consonants and long open vowels. In *Pirates of Penzance*, for example, “nice associates” became the less s-laden “nice companions” and an “e’en” was inserted into the line, “Thou gildest—e’en—the pirate’s trade” to give Sullivan an additional note for his melody and the singer a long vowel to sustain it.

In some cases a total lyrical overhaul was necessary to achieve “singability.” Gilbert originally had his pirate hero confess, in a clever light-verse reversal of formulaic longings, that he wished to abandon his romantic roguery and settle into middle-class English life. As usual, Gilbert couched that desire in crunching consonants—the hero wants “to doff his pirate gear and turn tall-hatty and broad-clothly,” for he “loathes his rude and draughty cave and sighs for brick relieved with stucco.” In making this lyric more singable, however, Gilbert totally recast the sentiment, having the disaffected pirate long not just for the accouterments of middle-class respectability, but the love of a maiden, even one “whose homely face and bad complexion / Have caused all hopes to disappear / Of ever winning man’s affection”:

To such a one, if such there be,
I swear by Heaven’s arch above you,
If you will cast your eyes on me,
However plain you be, I’ll love you!

With more singable vowels and softer consonants, clearly, came a much less witty, more romantic sentiment, one that veers perilously in the direction of love songs in traditional operetta. When joined to Sullivan’s “powerful, swelling melody,” moreover, even such comic lines as “whose homely face and bad complexion” strike a “note of extreme pathos.”²⁸

By making his lyric more singable, Gilbert knew, the lyricist ran the risk of seeing his words lose not only their witty lustre but even their meaning. Keenly aware of music’s power to transcend words, he always insisted that his lyric take precedence over Sullivan’s music in order of composition. Otherwise, as he suggested in one of his songs, the words need not make any sense at all:

“His gentle spirit rolls
In the melody of souls—”
Which is pretty,
but I don’t know what it means.

Precisely the same could be said of many lyrics written by the wordsmiths of Tin Pan Alley, whose task was to fit a singable syllable to each note of music. Even Oscar Hammerstein, hardly an Alley wordsmith, confessed his difficulties in making sense of some of his own lyrics. “Tote dat barge—lift dat bale,” Hammerstein pointed out, is rousingly euphonious, but while one can lift a bale no one, no matter how strong, can “tote”—that is, pick up and carry off—a barge. Similarly, “When I grow too old to dream” has an exquisite progression of vowels, but when, Hammerstein asked, is one ever too old to dream?

Hammerstein always regarded himself as a writer of what he called more “primitive” lyrics, where singability (or, as he termed it, “phonetics”) was the paramount consideration, as opposed to Gilbert, whom he regarded as working in the very different “field of brilliant light verse.”²⁹ It is between the wit of Gilbert and the “primitive” art of Hammerstein, between the clever variations of light verse and the mosaic art of wedding syllables with musical notes, that Ira Gershwin, along with such contemporaries as Lorenz Hart, Dorothy Fields, and Yip Harburg, would forge a new kind of lyric. Striving for a union of words and music, they gave a witty, but still singable and colloquial, curve to the most formulaic of romantic sentiments. Writing their songs primarily for sophisticated musical comedies, they struck a delicate balance between the flippancy of Gilbert and Sullivan and the strident sentimentality of traditional operetta.

By 1925, Ira Gershwin had mastered that balance, and he could reflect upon its rigors:

It all comes down to this: in the old days they would write their lyrics first and then get musical settings, whereas today the worry of songwriters is the melody of the song. The song is the important thing, the combination of words and music, rather than the words and music as separate entities. The reason that some of our songwriters are unsuccessful is that they regard lyrics the same way Gilbert did. They don't strive for union of the composer and the lyricist. They are not willing to sacrifice themselves to the demands or limitations of the tune, the movement, and syncopation.³⁰

By letting the emotional range of the music establish their themes and by plying their wit within the constraints of rhythm and cadence, these lyricists created an extraordinary hybrid, between light verse and popular song.

The catalyst for the emergence of this new kind of song was Jerome Kern's entry onto the American musical stage. Kern showed that the Broadway theater could produce popular songs of a distinctly higher

order than those that came off the assembly lines of Tin Pan Alley. Taking the Alley's musical formulas, Kern handled them with a sophistication born of his extensive classical training. His songs were published by the T. B. Harms Company, headed by the great Max Dreyfus, which specialized in "theater songs" rather than run-of-the-mill Alley fare. Hearing an orchestra play Kern's first big hit, "They Didn't Believe Me," George Gershwin was inspired to quit his job on Tin Pan Alley and go to work on Broadway as a rehearsal pianist.

Just as George and other young composers took their inspiration from Kern, Ira, along with other nascent lyricists, looked to one of Kern's collaborators, the English writer P. G. Wodehouse, who demonstrated that song lyrics, even when the music came first, could sparkle with as much wit as light verse. In 1915, Wodehouse attended a Kern musical for which his friend Guy Bolton had written the libretto. After the show, Wodehouse commented to Bolton that he thought everything was superb—except the lyrics. Pressed by Bolton and Kern, Wodehouse agreed to join them in their next venture and supply lyrics while Bolton concentrated on the book. That arrangement led to a brief but historic series of musicals at the Princess Theatre, a small, intimate theater where the emphasis was upon wit and sophistication rather than spectacular sets, costumes, and production numbers. While the Princess Theatre musicals lasted only until 1917, they proved to be the most important development yet to have occurred in American musical theater.

When he first tried writing lyrics, Wodehouse was skeptical, for he knew that in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas words were written first and that Gilbert himself had affirmed it was impossible to write good lyrics if the music came first. Nonetheless Wodehouse found that, far from restricting him, the music actually led him to create effects that he couldn't have achieved on his own. Citing one instance of how Kern's sequence of "twiddly little notes" inspired him to come up with a subtle rhyme in the phrase "If every day you *bring* her diamonds and pearls on a *string*," Wodehouse said, "I couldn't have thought of that, if I had done the lyric first, in a million years. Why, dash it, it doesn't *scan*."³¹

Following the music, Wodehouse could rhyme with literate yet slangy sophistication, as in "Cleopatterer," whose "slim and svelte" figure "gave those poor Egyptian ginks something else to watch beside the Sphinx." At other times he rhymed so subtly one could barely detect it in the progression of thoroughly vernacular phrases:

What bad luck! It's
coming down in buckets.