

Dibdin Down the Coal Hole:
G. Herbert Rodwell (1800–1852)
and the Place of Popular Song

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George Herbert Buonaparte Rodwell (1800–52), the composer and writer who wrote his name G. Herbert Rodwell, or George Herbert Rodwell, had a fascinating career straddling artistic disciplines, unlike his rivals, who were specialized composers or writers. He first came to public notice with the popular farce, *Where Shall I Dine?*, brought out at the Olympic Theatre as early as 1819; a second farce, *A Matter of Doubt; or, Seven Years Since*, followed in 1823. But in between, Rodwell concentrated on music, and took private lessons with Henry Bishop (1786–1855), Britain’s leading theatre composer in the 1810s and 20s. Rodwell’s textbook, *The First Rudiments of Harmony*, was subsequently dedicated to Bishop, “My Dear Friend and Master”:

to you alone I owe all the musical knowledge I possess. ... it will always be my proudest recollection to think that I have been the pupil of our English Mozart. (v)

Rodwell’s compositional debut, representing the end of his musical apprenticeship, came with the “Melo-dramatic Burletta,” or “Dramatic Romance,” *Waverley, or Sixty Years Since* – from Walter Scott – brought

out at the Adelphi Theatre on 8 March 1824. In the following decade, he concentrated mainly on composing for the theatre, establishing something of a partnership with Edward Fitzball (1792–1873), a prolific and successful writer for the popular stage; as Michael V. Pisani says, “Fitzball and Rodwell might almost be said to be the first long-standing British playwright-composer team of nineteenth-century popular drama” (86). After 1836, Rodwell largely stopped composing, though, and in the 1840s he commenced a new career as a serial novelist, presumably inspired by the sensational success of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37) and subsequent serialized fiction. He published three novels in all, *The Memoirs of an Umbrella* (1845), *Woman’s Love* (1846), and *Old London Bridge* (1848–49), and showed considerable flair in his new medium. He found an audience amidst intense competition, and all three of his novels were reprinted for decades. Indeed, a slightly abridged version of *Old London Bridge* would find a home in E. A. Baker’s series of “Half Forgotten Books” as late as 1904.

All three of Rodwell’s novels look back with some anger on the musical world that, for a decade or so, he largely left behind.¹ The basic outlines of that anger can be quickly established from his *Letter to the Musicians of Great Britain* of 1833, a shrill statement of grievance which has, to some extent, kept his name alive.² It highlights “the present depressed state of the English composer” (3), which had come about “Because FOREIGNERS are allowed to push us from our homes, and fatten on our distress” (4). British composers, according to the *Letter*, unless wealthy enough not to need income from their music, depend on the sale of sheet music and have to consult the amateur market:

English composers are now no longer paid but by the publishers; so that should a composer (I mean an English composer) find it pleasant to eat as well as to write, he must study more particularly what will be acceptable at the boarding-school, than what will be admired by the scientific of the musical world. (5)

In a vicious circle, “foreigners” are entrusted to compose the more prestigious kinds of music (especially grand opera), forcing British composers to compose purely popular music aimed at the largest audience – songs and simple piano pieces; British composers’ composition of such work is then interpreted as evidence that they were incapable of loftier music in the first place. *Woman’s Love* deals fairly directly with the sort of cultural issues highlighted in the 1833 *Letter*, and the hero represents a fantasy of the sort of composer Rodwell wished to be: inspired, aristocratic, upwardly-mobile, educated in British institutions, with a natural gift for melody, creating operas deserving of performance in the finest theatres. I have discussed these aspects of this novel elsewhere (“Anglo-German Conflict”). The present essay is focussed on Rodwell’s ideas about popular song, and here the other novels are more important. He composed many songs, often writing both lyrics and music, and some achieved a certain amount of success. Nevertheless, Rodwell’s relationship to popular song was complicated, as the *Letter* would suggest, and as the novels demonstrate.

“Popular song” is, when examined closely, a complex category, and Rodwell’s novels, among other things, can be read as an exploration of the various kinds of song that can, or could, be placed under that heading. Matthew Gelbart’s groundbreaking study of the way music was recategorized in the decades around 1800 shows that what we might loosely

think of as the modern definition of a popular song was steadily emerging in industrialized Britain, in Rodwell's lifetime:

Since the 1760s, the words “popular,” “national,” and “traditional” had been used interchangeably and inconsistently in Anglophone writing to designate what we now call folk music. Two of these had ceased to be satisfactory synonyms by the 1850s. (260)

By around 1850, “traditional music” was starting to be called “folk music,” while “national music” and “popular music” had come to have different significations. “Popular music,” the main concern here, was increasingly identified as urban, commercial music aimed at a mass audience. A new, modern paradigm thus emerged in which both “art music,” increasingly linked with the taste of a cultural elite, and “folk music” (now increasingly embraced by “art music”), were understood as threatened from below by a new kind of aggressively marketed commercial music. Gelbart constructs a schema to represent the new relationships, and it is reproduced here for its usefulness to the present discussion (fig. 1).

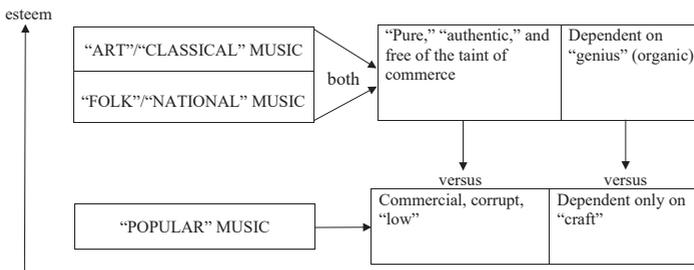


Fig. 1. Matthew Gelbart, schema of mid-nineteenth-century musical categories (Gelbart 257)

Gelbart's schema represents the end result of a gradual shifting of musical categories. It needs to be kept in mind that the shifting was occurring during Rodwell's lifetime, and therefore he could draw on both older and newer concepts of popular song; indeed, it will become clear that in many respects he was opposed to the new distribution of value.

1. Top-down and Bottom-up Versions of Popular Music in *The Memoirs of an Umbrella*

A cover feature in *Reynolds Miscellany* for 22 May 1847 stated that “The three most popular writers in England” were “Mr. Charles Dickens, Sir E. Bulwer Lytton, and Mr. William Harrison Ainsworth” (qtd. Carver 2-3). This is a useful verdict when it comes to assessing Rodwell's novelistic career, for he was strongly influenced by these writers, as well as the more obscure G. P. R. James (1801–60), a prolific follower of Scott whose heyday was already past. The basic model for *The Memoirs of an Umbrella* is, remarkably, Charles Dibdin's *Henry Hooka* of 1807, as the second section of this essay demonstrates. But it incorporates much more up-to-date influences. The narrative strategy was probably inspired by Douglas Jerrold's popular *Story of a Feather*, serialized in *Punch* in 1843, then published in a revised, volume form in 1844 – a clever revival of the eighteenth-century “It-Narrative,” as Rodwell's own novel is.³ And Rodwell expands ideas from Dibdin and Jerrold into a rich, Dickensian panorama of modern life, drawing on *Pickwick* for some of the atmosphere and characterization (and a few specific plot elements). *The Memoirs of an Umbrella* was even illustrated by Hablot Knight Browne (“Phiz”), the celebrated illustrator of *Pickwick* and several subsequent Dickens novels. On the other hand, the rather dandified

egoist Herbert Trevillian, one of the villains of the story, owes as much to Bulwer Lytton as Dickens. *The Memoirs* reflects Rodwell's long career of writing for the popular theatre in its heavy reliance on what James called "put[ting] ... private cogitations into the form of that necessary folly, a soliloquy" (1: 159), and coincidental encounters; these features are found in all three of Rodwell's novels, but gradually diminished.

In *The Memoirs*, most of the characters sing at some point – generally to themselves, and usually to relieve their feelings. Such singing is represented as natural and unproblematic, and on one occasion positively enchanting, as Alice, one of two heroines, sings a sad song for which Rodwell provides both the lyrics and a score (70-72). This is one of two occasions where he provides the score of a song, suggesting that he was imagining a sort of multi-media work in which the reader might pause to sing along with his characters. For whatever reason, though, this is not a feature of the subsequent novels.

Two characters in *Memoirs* are particularly associated with music; they are closely connected with each other, and Rodwell uses them for polemical purposes. The first is Mr. Chickwheedle, a rascally lawyer whose schemes are gradually undone in the course of the novel. His talents as a vocalist, pianist and guitarist appear to have been developed entirely to increase his seductive powers, for he regards music as the swiftest way of winning a woman's heart. He is consistently associated with a famous air from Giacomo Meyerbeer's epochal grand opera *Robert le Diable* (1831), "Robert, toi que j'aime," though Meyerbeer is not named, and perhaps only the more musically literate readers could have been expected to spot the reference. Chickwheedle has obviously adapted the lyric – the original is addressed to Meyerbeer's title character – so as to make it suitable for wooing a woman,

in particular the apparently rich widow, Mrs. Julia Seymour, whom he intends to wed: “‘Toi que j’aime,’ and he hummed a portion of the air, ‘I’ll settle her [Julia’s] business with my guitar,’ and he then sang again, ‘Toi que j’aime’” (45). Chickwheedle does not get to sing the song in public, as he had hoped. Julia inveigles him into sponsoring “the most extensive and elegant masquerade, that had ever been given in a private mansion,” but the evening goes disastrously wrong for him, and he is left regretting what never came to pass: “I intended to stand up and sing after supper, whilst playing on my guitar ... in that song I intended to have poured out my whole soul before the lovely Julia” (93, 94). Despite this setback, Chickwheedle does end up married to Julia, who is a fraud, and soon afterwards she symbolically breaks his guitar, apparently by hitting him over the head with it. The final glimpse the novel affords us of Chickwheedle is of a “very shabby, poor fellow ... singing ‘TOI QUE J’AIME’ to the sound of an old guitar with a mended back, at the door of a tavern, under the piazzas, in Covent Garden” (166).

Chickwheedle’s consistent association with *Robert le Diable* comments on the success of foreign opera in Britain at this period, a matter discussed in my other essay on Rodwell (“Anglo-German Conflict”). It also highlights Rodwell’s dislike of any affected preference for singing in foreign languages. “Robert, toi que j’aime” was first published in London in 1832, and different editions appeared there periodically for decades, in most cases only in French, though sometimes with an English singing version added. A caustically satirical scene of a servants’ party in *The Memoirs* makes Rodwell’s feelings about Chickwheedle’s preference for the French version clear. There is a valet called Groggs, who, “as that name did not sound quite foreign enough, ... had altered it to ‘Groggani,’ a name that would answer

as well for an Italian bandit as it did for an impudent English cheat” (131). He sings at the party:

... seizing up an old pair of bellows, by way of guitar, (for with him attitude was everything) and pretending that this *wind instrument* was a stringed one, started off in a little Spanish song.

The company, like their betters, not understanding one word, pronounced it “sublime” and remarked “how unlike English.” (131-32)

Phiz’s illustrations help bring out the intended parallels between Chickwheedle and Groggs (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Phiz’s illustrations of Chickwheedle (left) and “Groggani”

The main interest in the present essay, however, is the particular notion of a popular song represented here. “Robert, toi que j’aime,” the product of an elite (though perhaps not *very* elite) culture, transcends that culture and becomes broadly popular. This had been happening for centuries. For example, Jean-Baptiste Lully’s opera *Amadis* (1684), written primarily for the court of Louis XIV, contains the famous air “Amour, que veux-tu de moi?” that was soon said to be sung by “toutes les Cuisinieres de France” (all the cooks in France), in a fascinating, paradigmatic, example of downward cultural diffusion (Lecerf de la Viéville 2: 328). This succinctly expresses the older idea of popular music as music appealing broadly to every social class and was the model of popular song with which Rodwell was most comfortable. Bishop, his hero, was particularly adept at introducing attractive songs into his operas that could enjoy a second, independent life outside the theatres, and Bishop’s “Home Sweet Home,” from the opera *Clari; or, The Maid of Milan* (1823), has a strong claim to be the most popular song of the entire nineteenth century. Rodwell himself aimed to place popular songs in his operas in this way. So though he clearly objects to Chickweedle’s affected preference for foreign things, and his misuse of affecting music, he cannot be objecting to the underlying premise that a popular song may emerge from an opera.

The significance of this becomes clear when we examine the other important musical character in *The Memoirs*. Tibby Snob is a ferocious caricature of a self-educated man and the constant butt of the novel’s jokes. He comes into Chickweedle’s employ and quickly gains favor with the lawyer, thanks to his talent for forgery. Rodwell’s scorn for Snob’s musical culture is perhaps surprising, but very revealing. Snob’s room is decorated with “sundry pretty wood-cuts, which Tibby had, in former times, taken

from the tops of street songs: these he had framed himself, in little strips of gold paper” (94). The implication is that “in former times” Snob spent some of his slender income on cheap, illustrated broadside ballads which he recognized could provide him with both music and art. (The “little strips of gold paper” is so precise that I’m left wondering if Rodwell had actually seen ballad illustrations treated in this way.) From such ballads, Snob has apparently taught himself to sing, and with some success. He now sings at “the Coal Hole ... a celebrated tavern wherein *gentlemen* often congregated to enjoy the soul of harmony and the fascinating weed” (105). Like most local references in the novel, this names a real place: the Coal Hole, the oldest of the three principal “song-and-supper rooms” in London, was established at 15 and 16 Fountain Court, the Strand, in 1815. An 1842 advertisement gives a good idea of the nature of the place:

COAL HOLE TAVERN, STRAND.—JOHN RHODES respectfully acquaints the noblemen, gentlemen, and visitors to “the great metropolis” that the undermentioned list of favourite and acknowledged talented vocal artistes are to be heard nightly at his establishment, commencing at 9 o’clock, viz.:—Mr. Bruton, the far-famed comic song writer and singer, who has always “something new;” Mr. J. Wells, surnamed [sic] the “Funny Joseph,” allowed to be the best table comic singer in the world; Mr. F. Martin, the sentimental vocalist; Mr. C. Sloman, the only English improvistore, aided by a catch and glee party, consisting of the names of Bannister, J. Miller, Price, and Mr. John Rhodes. Singing commencing nightly at nine, and proceeding with a rapid succession of glees, comic catches, sentimental ballads, and the unequalled pastoral effusions, by Messrs.

John Rhodes and Bruton. Steaks, chops, welch rabbits, wines, cigars, &c. Copies of Mr. Bruton's songs can only be had of himself at the Coal Hole, or by letter, addressed to him there. (*Bell's Life in London*, 27 Nov. 1842, 1)

As Laurence Senelick writes, this was an establishment attracting “the aristocracy, professional men, bohemians and university students, redolent of sizzling mutton chops and expensive cigars; there the exclusively male audience would be regaled by exclusively male singers, paid for their services” (xii). Rodwell clearly despised the musical pretensions of such places, though they represented the “up-market end” of drinking establishments offering musical entertainment, with at least two other kinds of venue below them (Senelick xii). Thus Snob is positioned well above the fallen Chickwheedle, singing at the doors of taverns, and he is, in the larger picture, one of the immediate predecessors of the music hall entertainers of a slightly later age.⁴ Alert contemporary readers would have understood that he sings for money and very likely writes his own songs, too.

At the fateful masquerade, Chickwheedle does not get a chance to sing to Julia, but he is called on for a song when the ladies have left the room after supper. He refuses, apparently from sour grapes, and it is Snob who seizes the chance to shine, singing a catchy, comic number, “The Captain of the Guard,” to “great approbation” (110). This song, presumably intended to represent Snob's Coal Hole vein, is the second of the songs for which Rodwell provides a score. It concerns a diminutive captain who maintains that he would have been big were he not small, and it contains a stanza of some relevance to the present discussion:

Macready, Liston, Rainforth, Balfe,
 All pray'd I'd write a play;
 And wondrous were the beauteous lines
 I made them sing or say:
 This tragic, comic, lyric piece
 So full of wit was cramm'd;
 I should have been a Shakspere
 Had my piece but not been d—d. (107-09 [in score])

Snob assembles a rather extraordinary collection of names here. William Charles Macready (1793–1873) and John Liston (1776–1846), both known mainly as actors, represent the tragic and comic poles of their profession; Rodwell had married Liston's daughter in 1832, and clearly had a particular fondness for the man described elsewhere in *The Memoirs* as “the great, the incomparable Liston” (33). Elizabeth Rainforth (1814–77) was a singer, and Michael William Balfe (1808–70) a composer, although, like Macready, he had also been involved in theatre management. Rainforth and Balfe were closely connected in the public mind, because she had created the role of Arline in Balfe's opera *The Bohemian Girl* (1843), the greatest success of his career, and one of the defining works of the 1840s. In fact, if Snob's “tragic, comic, lyric piece” with singing and speaking evokes one work more than another, it is *The Bohemian Girl*. Rodwell took particular satisfaction in Balfe's career, which he described as “a glorious answer ... to the anti-English wise-heads” (“A Glance”).

Although it is not certain that “The Captain of the Guard” is meant to be understood as Snob's own composition, it obviously represents his culture – indeed this is much the fullest glimpse we get of the sort of music that

might (according to Rodwell) be heard at the Coal Hole. As such, the song's references to Rainforth and Balfe, and general evocation of works like *The Bohemian Girl*, can be read as defining the upper limits of Snob's, and the Coal Hole's, musical awareness, and though the joke concerns the speaker's failure to enter that world, there is at least a hint of where the upwardly mobile Snob would like to go, musically speaking. He and Chickwheedle thus follow opposite musical trajectories, effectively passing each other at the masquerade. Chickwheedle pursues a downward curve away from the opera house to tavern doors, while Snob plots an upward curve from "street songs" to the Coal Hole to jokes about consorting with the likes of Balfe.

Chickwheedle, then, represents a top-down model of how popular songs come into existence, while Snob marks the new bottom-up model that was, as Gelbart shows, very much in the ascendancy by the mid-nineteenth century. It cannot be said that *Memoirs* takes a more favourable view of Chickwheedle for this reason, and he is, after all, one of the novel's two principal villains. But it is clear that Rodwell presents Chickwheedle as objectionable mainly because of what he does, while he presents Snob as objectionable mainly because of what he is. At a psychological level, I would maintain that Rodwell's relationship to Snob is rather like Dickens's to Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend*, "perhaps his most powerful negative self-portrait" as Fred Kaplan puts it (474). Snob epitomizes everything that Rodwell most fears, both in himself, and in the musical culture in which he operated: a veneer of desperate, sham gentility scarcely hiding an irredeemable vulgarity. And in diagnosing the cultural problem that Snob represents, Rodwell points an accusing finger very directly at places like the Coal Hole, where, through some alchemy involving "Steaks, chops, welch rabbits, wines, cigars, &c," street singers

could metamorphosize into “vocal artistes” entertaining “noblemen” and “gentlemen,” blurring the boundary between polite and popular culture.

Woman’s Love, Rodwell’s second novel, has a specific source in James’s *The Gipsy* (1835). Most of the musical interest in it is concerned with opera and issues between British and German music, and these are discussed in my other essay on Rodwell (“Anglo-German Conflict”). In terms of popular music, it adds little to *Memoirs*, but reinforces the analysis of the earlier novel given here. Edward Swangoose, a gossip journalist, the butt of many jokes, has a role combining elements of both Chickwheedle and Snob. He cultivates a friendship with Lord Charles, “a youth of about fifteen years of age, who was well known to him [Swangoose] as a nightly frequenter of those temples of iniquity wherein men and boys with high-sounding titles, but low and vulgar minds, degrade themselves” (28). Swangoose is suspected of aiming to marry Lord Charles’s aunt, Lady Snoozle, prompting the young baronet to reprimand him:

“I say, Goose, draw it mild, mind that – the old girl has been angling for a flat-fish for many a day, and is of a *rather* loving turn; draw it mild, for, between ourselves, I have no great ambition to have you for an uncle; you’re very well in the coal-hole, but –”

“Sir,” said Swangoose, with great dignity, “a literary man is a match for a princess.” (39-40)

The “coal-hole” (no longer dignified with capital letters, as though it is, after all, just a generic establishment), is thus associated with the sort of place evoked earlier where the likes of Lord Charles “degrade themselves,” where the likes of Swangoose provide the entertainment, and the boundaries

between the social classes are blurred. Swangoose is later called a “gentle troubadour,” but as his fortunes decline, he is discovered in a pub, “bawling out at the top of his voice a Bacchanalian ditty” (109, 295). Lord Charles, too, endures a precipitous descent when it is belatedly discovered that he is an illegitimate child, not the heir to a dukedom he had always imagined himself to be (312). The Coal Hole, then, and the musical entertainments it provides, represent pretension on the part of entertainers like Snob and Swangoose, and delusion on the part of “noblemen” like Lord Charles, who believe they dignify the establishment by supporting it – altogether, a corrupt and corrupting culture.

2. Challenging Charles Dibdin in *The Memoirs of an Umbrella*

As well as examining opposing models of popular song, *The Memoirs of an Umbrella* as a whole is a response to a central figure in Britain’s popular song tradition: Charles Dibdin (1745–1814). In the fourth volume of his great *General History of Music, from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* of 1789, Charles Burney had noted:

Poetry and Music, in high antiquity, formed but one profession, and many have been the lamentations of the learned that these sister arts were ever separated. Honest Harry Carey and Jean Jaques [sic] Rousseau are the only bards in modern times who have had the address to reconcile and unite them. (2: 1000)

The “Honest Harry Carey” Burney refers to, with unmistakable condescension, is Henry Carey (1687–1743), Dibdin’s most obvious British

precursor. Yet by the time Burney wrote, Dibdin himself had demonstrated, much more convincingly, how the “sister arts” could be recombined. He wrote and composed dozens of musical theatre works, and hundreds of songs, and from the mid-1780s onwards his purely literary ambitions developed a life of their own. Among his great quantity of published writings are three three-volume novels, *The Younger Brother* (1793), *Hannah Hewit; or, The Female Crusoe* (1796), and *Henry Hooka* (1807). Dibdin was the first British composer to write novels, and from Rodwell’s vantage point he was the obvious example of how a theatre musician might take up novel writing comparatively late in his career. Given this, the correspondences between *Henry Hooka* and *The Memoirs* – Dibdin’s last novel and Rodwell’s first – stand out as quite extraordinary, strongly suggesting that Rodwell was very deliberately engaging with the earlier composer’s legacy.

Henry Hooka has, as the central character connecting most of the other characters, a “Mr. Baffle,” an alias for Sir Henry Hooka, the hero’s father. Sir Henry has been in India for twenty years, since his son Henry was a small boy; on returning to England, he assumes the identity of Mr. Baffle so that he can look into the truth of various disadvantageous reports which have reached him concerning the behaviour of his son, who has grown up in England. *The Memoirs* has, similarly, a central character called “Mr. Stutters,” an alias for Abel Quickly, the hero’s uncle. He has been in India for twenty years; on returning to England, he assumes the identity of Mr. Stutters so that he can look into the truth of various disadvantageous reports which have reached him concerning the behaviour of his nephew, who has grown up in England. Like Sir Henry, he is used to connect most of the other characters together, and his nephew is eventually “astonished to find that Mr. Stutters appeared to know everybody, and everything” (151). Both

Mr. Baffle and Mr. Stutters are wealthy and extremely charitable, using their money to create as much happiness in the world around them as possible.

In *Henry Hooka*, the hero, young Henry, has a maternal figure in Mrs. Debenture, having lost his own mother as an infant. Mrs. Debenture is the widow of Sir Henry's former business partner, and with Sir Henry absent in India, she stands *in loco parentis* to young Henry. She has a daughter, Camilla, who ends up married to Henry. Though not actually a marriage of cousins, this feels like one, given the closeness of the two families. For complicated reasons which I have explained elsewhere ("A clue"), it is only revealed that Camilla *is* Mrs. Debenture's daughter at the emotional climax of the novel. Thus young Henry belatedly discovers that the maiden he loves is daughter to his own adoptive mother. By having Alfred as Abel Quickly's nephew rather than his son, Rodwell can do things a little differently, though the general pattern is the same. At the emotional climax of *The Memoirs*, Mr. Stutters discovers he has a daughter, Ellen, and this happens to be the very woman with whom Alfred is in love. Thus a relationship which had not seemed consanguineous ends up as a marriage between cousins.

Where Rodwell departs from Dibdin is in having the hero, Alfred, an orphan. This was a change driven by the fact that the plot requires Alfred to be financially dependent on his uncle, just as young Henry in *Henry Hooka* is dependent on his father. Moreover, if Alfred had a parent alive in the vicinity of London, the whole "Mr. Stutters" deception would be much less plausible. But Alfred has a sort of adoptive mother with whom he lives. This is Mrs. Piggles, who again has an important connective role in the novel. Not much is said about how she and Alfred came into their present relationship, but in their first conversation she says: "I knew and loved your dear, old mother: and for her sake I'd do a great deal [for you],

setting aside my liking for your great silly self’ (51). If we represent these different relationships schematically, it can be seen that Rodwell’s story is, substantially, a sort of mirror image of Dibdin’s (fig. 3).

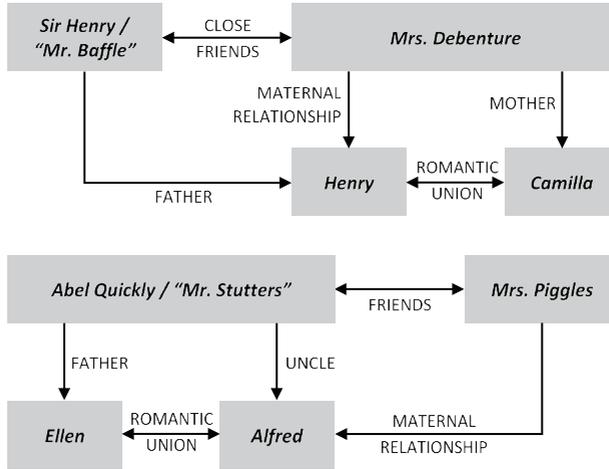


Fig. 3. Comparative structures of *Henry Hooka* (top) and *The Memoirs of an Umbrella*

In addition to Mrs. Debenture and her daughter Camilla, *Henry Hooka* contains two other significant female characters, and in addition to Mrs. Piggles and Ellen, *The Memoirs* does too. Moreover, there are close correspondences between Dibdin’s four principal female characters and Rodwell’s. Mrs. Debenture and Mrs. Piggles are both older, respectable, wealthy, propertied women; they no longer have any interest in romantic involvements with men, and fill a maternal role in the novels. Their wealth allows them to offer something of a refuge to younger characters in distress.

Camilla and Ellen are both gentle, idealized heroines beautiful in appearance and virtuous and loyal to a fault. As noted above, they both discover late in the respective novels their true parentage. As infants, they

were both substituted for another, dead child. Camilla thus grows up as “Flametta,” living with the real (dead) Flametta’s cousin. Ellen is the sole survivor of a shipwreck off Cornwall as an infant. Found and adopted by a local woman, Mrs. Trevillian, she grows up with a brother, Herbert, the villain, who is taught to believe that Ellen is his dead sister. Camilla, as Flametta, is unhappy in her new family, and is rescued from it by Mrs. Debenture offering to take her into her own home as a companion. Thus mother and daughter are unwittingly reunited. In a parallel series of events, Herbert eventually treats Ellen badly, attempting to force her into marriage against her will, and she runs away from home; when she is assaulted in the street, she is rescued by Mr. Stutters, who takes her into his house, which is conveniently close. Thus father and daughter are unwittingly reunited. Of course Camilla living unknowingly with her mother is not the same thing as Ellen living unknowingly with her father, and to avoid any scandal there is an interim stage in *The Memoirs* in which Ellen becomes a paid companion to Alice Clareville, a character to be introduced in a moment. Thus both girls work as companions before discovering their true parentage.

The third pair of female characters is Dibdin’s Clara Lovegrove and Rodwell’s Alice Clareville. Clara, who has a surprisingly large role in *Henry Hooka*, as I have discussed elsewhere, was the hero’s mistress prior to his courtship of Camilla. She has been the “kept mistress” of a number of men over a number of years, but Dibdin presents her very favourably as a highly principled woman. After her relationship with Henry is over, she becomes the headmistress of a girls’ boarding school. By the time Rodwell came to write *The Memoirs*, Victorian propriety had intervened, and it was impossible both to show a deserving young hero keeping a mistress shortly before his marriage to someone else, and to present a kept mistress

as a virtuous woman. Rodwell got round this by connecting Alice with the villainous Herbert Trevellian. Herbert marries her secretly, believing her an heiress, then leaves her when he realizes that by the marriage she has forfeited her fortune. In fact, the marriage turns out to be legally invalid, because the man who performed the wedding service was a fraudster, so Alice is able to claim her fortune after all, but now recognizing Herbert's true character, she determines on a life as a single woman. Both Clara and Ellen are represented as beautiful and virtuous, but having had sexual relationships outside (legal) marriage, they are understood to have lost their innocence, and therefore cannot be rewarded with marriage. In the course of the novels, they both develop important relationships with the older women: Clara is given her school by Mrs. Debenture, who comes to have maternal feelings for her, and Alice, when abandoned by Herbert, lodges with Mrs. Piggles, who similarly develops maternal feelings for her.

The fourth and final pair of women are Hilaria Spondee and Julia Seymour. Hilaria married young, but left her husband and had a series of affairs with different men, taking as much of their money as she could. She ends up married to a villain. Julia is a seemingly wealthy American widow, though in reality an accomplished conwoman. Her goal is to use her appearance of wealth to ensnare a wealthy husband, and, as noted above, she succeeds with Chickwheedle. Both Hilaria and Julia are selfish, immoral women; Hilaria is very obviously contrasted with Clara, and, in more subtle ways, Julia is contrasted with Alice.

While the important female characters can be precisely paired up in this way, the correspondences between several of the key male characters are weaker, but still significant. As noted already, Sir Henry and Abel Quickly are very similar as wealthy "nabobs" using aliases so that they can look into

the affairs of a young relative. The younger Henry and Alfred have similar roles, structurally, though they are significantly different in character and lifestyle, reflecting the different eras in which the novels were written: Henry is more like Tom Jones, while Alfred is more akin to Nicholas Nickleby. In *Henry Hooka*, the hero has a very loyal Irish servant called O'Nouse, who provides a good deal of the comedy. He is later “created Sir Henry’s *factotum*” (3: 170). In *The Memoirs* it was obviously impossible for poor Alfred to keep a servant, so the loyal Irish servant, Larry O'Lochlan (known as Lanny), is employed directly by Mr. Stutters. Both these Irish servants get married to equally good-natured women in the course of the novels. Another notable correspondence occurs between the lawyers employed by Sir Henry and Abel Quickly. The former employs Mr. Playfair, while the latter employs Mr. Rant: both lawyers are high-minded, principled men, and they help clear up the various deceptions and confusions which must be dealt with before the deserving characters can enjoy their happy endings.

Obviously there are important differences between the novels, too. Rodwell includes far more characters, and his various villains – most memorably Herbert Trevellian, Chickwheedle, and Snob – have no clear precursors in Dibdin. *Henry Hooka* is largely devoid of serious or consequential villainy, and the novel mostly encourages a tolerant, indulgent view of human foibles. In *The Memoirs* the difference between vice and virtue is sharpened, and the two principal villains, Trevellian and Chickwheedle, are essential to Rodwell’s plot. I certainly would not want to suggest that Rodwell simply stole Dibdin’s story, but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that *Henry Hooka* served him as a model or template that could be freely adapted, much as *The Gipsy* served him in the same way for *Woman’s Love*.

Ordinarily, of course, it would seem exceptionally bizarre for an 1840s novelist to choose to adapt a largely forgotten and not very good novel from 1807. The connection only makes sense if we assume that Rodwell was interested in Dibdin's career, and as they were both well-known composers and writers for the theatre who turned comparatively late in their careers to novel writing, such an interest is easy enough to explain. The parallels between the novels are not, in themselves, particularly meaningful, and Rodwell's actually antagonistic relationship to Dibdin only becomes clear when we look at his final novel, *Old London Bridge*. But what they demonstrate, I suggest, is Rodwell placing himself in a competitive relationship with Dibdin and trying to show that he could write a better novel with the same materials. And in this he triumphantly succeeded: *The Memoirs* is superior to *Henry Hooka* according to almost any standard that might be applied, and also proved significantly more successful.

3. *Old London Bridge* and the Popular Singer-Songwriter

Old London Bridge is the most accomplished of Rodwell's novels in its narrative art, with less reliance on monologue and improbable secrets being revealed than its predecessors. It is very clearly a response to James's novels of Tudor England, such as *Darnley* (1830), and more specifically Ainsworth's recent historical novels with plots linked to sites of strong historic interest: *The Tower of London* (1840), *Old St. Pauls* (1841), *Windsor Castle* (1843) and *Saint James's* (1844). The influence of Dickens and Bulwer Lytton has now largely disappeared. *Old London Bridge* starts on May-day, 1536, and the fiction is developed against a background of real events, with a considerable number of historical personages introduced.

Rodwell's vision of Tudor England involves plenty of music: the suggestion, strongly, is both that Londoners in the 1530s and '40s were exposed to a variety of music through the church, the public fairs, ceremonial occasions, and in the course of private music-making; and also that they were expected to be able to play or sing when called upon to do so. This allowed Rodwell to explore issues concerning popular song in an extended historical framework.

Three characters in *Old London Bridge* are particularly associated with music. The first is Sir Filbut Fussy, a wealthy dupe represented as fashionable and cultured. His association with music is established in Rodwell's most complex musical *mise-en-scène*, an evening of music-making in the house of the rich merchant William Hewet:

Alyce Hewet [William's wife] ... seated herself at the virginals, a sort of spinet, from which our modern pianoforte is derived.

Sir Filbut [the visitor] seized upon the theorbo he had just presented to Alyce; the merchant, without being asked to do so, at once began to tune his rebeck, or three-stringed fiddle; Harry Horton [an apprentice] took up a flute; and Flora Gray [the maidservant], who was really a very pretty singer, was desired to be the leader of the vocals. ...

Grand was the crash, as the reader may suppose, when so many fine performers struck up together. Away they played for dear life. What did it matter to them whether they came in at the right place or not? (41-42)

This description suggests that Rodwell imagined Tudor society more democratically musical than that of his own time. Indeed, music here rather confounds actual social relations. Sir Filbut, who is planning to seduce Alyce, is the disharmonious element, socially, but the most harmonious element, musically. By contrast, William Hewet, an ideal husband and worthy citizen, is the main source of discord in the scene: “having turned over two leaves instead of one ... he had all through been fiddling the accompaniment of a perfectly different piece of music, and in a different key too” (42).

As a “punishment” for his error with the score, Hewet’s wife makes him sing a song, and he “never sang but one song in his life, and that was ‘Simon Frisell,’ a very ancient ballad, even three hundred years ago” (42). The reference is to the fourteenth-century “A Balad Against the Scots,” the manuscript of which, in the British Museum, had been published by Joseph Ritson in 1790 (5-18), though Rodwell probably found it in Richard Thomson’s *Chronicles of London Bridge* (162-65). Rodwell describes Hewet’s performance as a “ten verse infliction” (43), and as the scene continues he seems to gesture at musical progress towards greater refinement:

After this [the ancient ballad] the pretty Flora sang a ballad, every verse ending with something about “Naughty Harry of the Hill.” ...

Then Sir Filbut sang a song of his own authorship, and his own composition, but this was of a rather better order, for, with all his vanity and folly, Sir Filbut Fussy possessed many of the attributes of a real poet, and of the genius of a musician ... every word he sang was of love, and every line he sang with pointed emphasis towards

the beautiful Alyce. (43)

The suggestion is that the three songs are quite different, and if we translate these differences into terms that mid-nineteenth-century readers would have recognized, then “Simon Frisell” would be classed as “traditional” or (increasingly) “folk” music. Although Rodwell leaves it unclear whether the ballad is an “infliction” because of its nature, or simply because of Hewet’s performance, this itself is surely significant: if he had wanted to say something positive about old ballads, this was the place to do it, and he is conspicuously silent on the subject. Flora’s ballad is a popular song of the day, probably a bottom-up sort of popular song, given that opera and “classical” music had yet to be invented in 1536. Finally, Sir Filbut’s song would be classed as “art” music, inspired by passion. Sir Filbut is associated with the fashion for Italian things, and though there is no mention of Italian music, it is reasonable to infer that his poetry and music display Italian influence. If we map social class onto this, then the upper class is aligned with art (and possibly foreign) music, the middle class with folk (and perhaps national) music, and the lower class with popular music; but crucially, this does not stop them all making music together. Although he is unquestionably a villain, Sir Filbut’s culture is represented as partially redeeming him.

The second character strongly associated with music is Lord George Talbot, who, because of some “difference” with his father, assumes the character of an artist, Walter Lerue. As an artist, he specializes in very realistic portrait drawings, perhaps suggesting the influence of Hans Holbein (though the German artist is never mentioned). But “Walter Lerue” is a very anachronistic character who seems to have walked into Rodwell’s novel

from a much more modern era. He wanders around the countryside outside London, sketching ruins and playing “a sweet and melancholy air” on the flute he always carries (218). As a musician, he fascinates Anne Hewet, the heroine, who learns to sing his “air” (251). He is introduced into the novel mainly as a rival to Edward Osborne, Rodwell’s hero and Anne’s true love, whom she will eventually marry. In a sense, he is to Anne a much more honourable and principled version of what Sir Filbut had been to her mother; like the latter, he represents an easy, gentlemanly, tasteful feeling for the art of music.

Within the musical economy of the novel, Sir Filbut and Lord George are strongly contrasted with “Diddle ’em Downy,” a popular singer. He is first introduced as a newsman called Knowy, but after he takes up the “scandal trade” and “touch[es] upon the irregularities of his Grace the King,” he gets in such trouble that he “determined to alter his course of life, and thenceforth became a celebrated comic singer” (146). We first see him in the latter capacity at Bartlemy Fair:

He had been fortunate enough to make an enormous hit, with the first song he wrote and sang; he henceforward was known only by the name mentioned in that song; and as this ditty was called “London Rogueries, or the life and adventures of Diddle ’em Downy,” we may presume that of many of the rogueries therein rehearsed, he could vouch for the truth, for we suspect he had been the principal actor himself.

So widely had the fame of this song, “Diddle ’em Downy,” flown, that the arrival in Bartlemy Fair of the celebrated singer thereof, was hailed with acclamations. He knew full well that a little eccentricity

in any way, always has a powerful effect in fixing the remembrance of any one, in others [sic] minds, so he invariably travelled upon an ass; wore a coat of a fashion quite his own, which was profusely ornamented with imitation gold and jewels; but the greatest point of attraction, was his originality in wearing a blue wig, with a pink tail!

...

At last Diddle 'em Downy appeared; but here our pen blushes at its own want of power to express even in a faint degree, the wonderful performance. ... It is true, that we could say, how at the end of every verse he twisted his celebrated wig into a new position; but what position? there's the point – what position? Any one could twist a wig, but no one could twist a wig as Downy did. Another misfortune under which we labour, is to find that his celebrated song was never printed; and although we have searched through every MS. in the British Museum ... we have never been able to meet with it. All we know is, and this is merely traditional, that each verse expressed a peculiar roguery, and ended with these emphatic words –

“* * * be they black, white, fair, or brownny,

And tho' they got up with the lark in the morn.

Yet none could be up to Diddle 'em Downy,”

and then, as was usual with ancient lyric poetry, the words were repeated again and again –

“Diddle 'em Downy, Diddle 'em Downy –

None could be up to Diddle 'em Downy.”

Three times was the song called for, and three times did Downy vary the Rogueries, until the hearers began to think that the world was made of nothing else. (146-48)

This may not be quite the withering satire applied to Chickwheedle, Snob, or Swangoose, but it is, nonetheless, a forensic demolition of a particular kind of musical celebrity, and one that retains its point today. One just has to think of a Katy Perry or Lady Gaga concert in the past decade to realize that what Rodwell is objecting to has long outlived his mockery – indeed Gaga (real name Stefani Germanotta) especially might be read as the cartoonish apocalypse of everything Dibdin objects to in Diddle 'em Downy, even down to her chosen moniker. Although almost every other character in Rodwell's intricately-plotted novel is directly linked, in some way, to the main plot(s), Diddle 'em Downy is perfectly incidental, strongly suggesting that he is included simply to make a musical statement. The name is very resonant. According to OED, "diddle" could signify 1) "To move from side to side by jerks" (possibly relevant to the twisting of the wig); 2) "To waste time in mere trifling"; 3) "To swindle"; and 4) "To do for, ruin; to kill." None of these are positive associations, needless to say, and it is telling that the group of fair people Downy travels with are closely linked to the criminal underworld.

As noted above, Rodwell includes a considerable number of genuine historical characters in *Old London Bridge*, and the description of Downy, with its reference to the British Museum, is obviously designed to persuade the reader that he is another such. In fact, there is very little in common between his suggested career and that of the actual minstrels of Tudor England. By far the most widely-cited account of the matter available in Rodwell's day was Scott's essay "Romance," originally published in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which draws extensively on earlier secondary sources, especially Ritson. According to Scott, "The minstrels and their compositions seem to have fallen into utter contempt about the time of

Henry VIII” (454). They were increasingly associated with beggars and vagabonds, with which groups they would be soon after legally classified. Scott’s evidence for his claim “about the time of Henry VIII” is Richard Sheale, the only sixteenth-century minstrel for which there is much of a documentary record. Andrew Taylor’s recent study of Sheale shows that Scott’s reading of the evidence was too one-sided; Sheale had some social standing, as he was probably employed as a “praise-singer” to the great Stanley family. But Taylor’s study, too, points to a career quite unlike Downy’s. Rodwell’s suggestion is that Downy enjoyed a national celebrity (unlike Sheale) and performed to a paying audience, who had a choice of different seat prices (there is a reference to “the highest priced seats” [147]). He is as different from the traditional minstrels supported by great houses on one hand as he is from the impoverished strolling entertainers imagined by Scott, the ancestors of today’s buskers. He is, in short, a successful professional entertainer operating in a modern-looking cultural arena.

Given the earlier, detailed account of music-making in William Hewet’s household, the oddest thing about the description of Downy’s performance is the absence of any reference to an instrument. Rodwell refers to a “band of musicians” at the fair, but whether they accompany Downy or not is unclear (147). Minstrels traditionally performed on harps, and we know Sheale travelled with one. In some parts of the country, by the 1500s, the pipe and tabor were preferred (Taylor 58-59). The obvious explanation is that Rodwell was deliberately vague here to give his satirical portrait of a celebrity singer a timeless resonance – any mention of a harp or pipe and tabor would have placed Downy too obviously in the past for his purposes. He may, in part, be satirizing a particular contemporary singer, indeed, one possibility being Paul Bedford (?1792–1871), who started performing at the

Adelphi in 1838. Dickens's description of Bedford singing at the Vauxhall Gardens in 1836 anticipates certain aspects of Rodwell's description of Downy:

The comic singer ... was the especial favourite ... A marvellously facetious gentleman that comic singer is; his distinguishing characteristics are, a wig approaching to the flaxen, and an aged countenance ... He sang a very good song about the seven ages, the first half hour of which afforded the assembly the purest delight; of the rest we can make no report, as we did not stay to hear any more.
(130)

Nevertheless, given Rodwell's intense engagement with Dibdin, evidenced in *The Memoirs of an Umbrella*, the primary target must be Dibdin and his legacy.

At first glance, Dibdin might seem to offer as reassuringly a top-down model of popular song as Bishop, the "English Mozart," Rodwell's hero. Dibdin cultivated a relationship with the royal family and members of the aristocracy, voluntarily composed music for royal occasions, wrote operas for the leading London theatres, collaborated extensively with David Garrick, and obtained a government pension on the basis of his patriotic songs. Rodwell can have objected to none of this. But another aspect of Dibdin's musical legacy to some extent compromised the top-down model: his love of performing his music direct to the public. Dibdin first became famous as a singer-actor and there is some evidence that, from early in his career, he would be called upon to offer private, one-man musical performances.⁵ From 1787, such one-man musical shows, or "Table

Entertainments” as he liked to call them, became central to his identity as a musician. For a time, these shows were sensationally popular, and between 1791 and 1805 Dibdin even had his own London theatre, the Sans Souci, specifically to present them. Here his Table Entertainments moved fluently between elite and popular culture in a way scarcely seen before. A good example can be found in his 1795 Christmas show, *Christmas Gambols*, which has recently been recreated. This is described as taking place in the “great Hall” of the impeccably polite and patriotic Sir Alfred English. One of Sir Alfred’s visitors is “Squire Mazzard, just comed [*sic*] down from London” (*Christmas Gambols*), and he sings a rather risqué popular ballad called “Jacky and the Cow,” about the new fashion for tailless coats. The ballad became very popular, and was published in various single sheet forms, mixing on equal terms with bottom-up street songs. Some of these were illustrated, and thus the kind of publication that would end up in Tibby Snob’s collection. “Jacky and the Cow” in itself is an attractively vulgar piece of popular culture, but mediated to the public as it originally was, by Squire Mazzard, Sir Alfred English, Dibdin himself, and the genteel, neoclassical elegance of the Sans Souci, the vulgarity was wrapped in politesse.

Not content with London performances, Dibdin also toured extensively, presenting his shows in a wide range of venues up and down Britain, thus establishing the sort of model associated with “touring” popular musicians of more recent times. Outside London, he would have encountered less sophisticated audiences, but Dibdin prided himself on his ability to entertain anyone willing to pay his entrance fee, and to adjust his performance to suit his listeners. In his *Observations on a Tour*, for example, he describes how he gave a performance at the assembly rooms in Penrith, in April 1799:

... whenever I paused, I was publicly admonished by a drunken quaker, to the no small amusement of every one in the assembly room, and to no one more than myself; for knowing exactly how every thing would turn out, I humoured this new mode of chorus to my entertainment so comfortably, that a stranger might have been induced to fancy that I hired the man for the purpose. Towards the conclusion, I had occasion to introduce my song of the Auctioneer, which, by accident, I had found out to be Broadbrim's profession. At this he was completely hung up or cut down, which are, I believe, both genteel expressions for this kind of non plus, and presently afterwards the spirit moved him to take himself off. (1: 303)

No significant British composer before Dibdin had written songs like “Jacky and the Cow” or sung in assembly rooms with drunken Quakers as a “chorus.” He was, in short, completely redefining how a composer might manage his career, and his impact on the whole culture of popular song – in which I include the contexts in which songs were sung, and the way they were distributed through print media and oral transmission – is so vast as to be immeasurable. It would take a lot of special pleading to make out that Dibdin's songs, and his performances of those songs, consistently followed a top-down model of cultural creation as a sort of downward extension of his more sophisticated music. Rather, as in the case of *Christmas Gambols* and “Jacky and the Cow,” Dibdin found new ways to open up polite culture at its lower end, allowing for a bottom-up insurgency of street-smart vulgarity. Dibdin's true successor in polite culture was Charles Mathews (1776–1835), whose “At Homes” became so popular in the 1810s, when Rodwell was growing up; he too used the term “table entertainment” (Klepac

17). But Mathews was never as vulgar as Dibdin could be, and it is much harder to imagine him spontaneously incorporating a “drunken quaker” into his act. Thus the influence of the more downmarket aspects of Dibdin’s shows has to be looked for elsewhere, in places like the Coal Hole, and in the performances of the likes of “the ‘Funny Joseph,’ allowed to be the best table comic singer in the world.” Intriguingly, in 1846 one of the singers on the Coal Hole’s roster was a “Mr James Hare (the modern Charles Mathews)” (*Bell’s Life in London*, 4 Jan. 1846, 1). Given Dibdin’s vogue in the 1840s, a decade in which several editions of his songs were published, it is extremely likely that his own songs also made up part of the Coal Hole’s repertoire.

Rodwell had many of Dibdin’s gifts, and was his most obvious successor as a theatre musician with serious literary ambitions, but the younger composer-writer appears to have had no interest in performing his music directly to the public. The evidence of his portrayals of Snob and Diddle ’em Downy strongly suggests that he saw this as vulgar, and the latter, in particular, represents a fierce rejection of the professional singer-songwriter career route as established by Dibdin. And *Old London Bridge* makes it clear why this is: extramusical factors intrude to an excessive extent, from the cultivation of a deliberately eccentric persona on the part of the performer – image over substance – to audience pressure for certain favourite songs to be performed, and above all the need to meet the audience on its own terms. Audiences, as Dibdin knew well, turn composers into entertainers.

Conclusion: Audience and Function

The matter of audience is central. For Rodwell, popular song is ideally the music through which amateur performers express themselves. This may be a matter of working people singing to themselves as they go about their work, such as Lanny in *Memoirs*, or Benjamin Bung, an Australian sheep farmer in *Woman's Love*, whom Rodwell represents very positively; or it may be middle-class young ladies expressing their sorrows at the piano, such as Alice in *Memoirs*; or families making music together. This is important, as Rodwell is ultimately making a point about the *function* of popular song; and, as Gelbart shows so convincingly, before the modern system of music classification was established, on the basis of music's origins and intended audience, music was classified according to function. In Rodwell's view, the origin of these songs (whether in the spheres of "art," "folk," or "popular" music, for those who see meaning in such distinctions) is much less important than the pleasure they give the singer.

Some amateur singers can compose their own songs, like Sir Filbut, and perhaps the preprofessional Snob. But most cannot; there is therefore scope for composers like Rodwell to write songs for amateurs to sing. But what sort of songs should they compose? And what sort of relationship will these songs have to other kinds of popular song? The best answer to this is a striking passage in *The Memoirs of an Umbrella* commenting on the effects of love on Lanny, the Irish servant:

There was a marked difference ... in the snatches of songs he sang as he walked along.

“If I had a Donkey wot voodn’t go;” “All round my Hat,” and the like, had now given way to “My Heart and Lute,” which he altered to *flute*, in consequence, I found afterwards, of his having given up blowing a cloud in favour of blowing a flute.

He seemed to be rather fond of altering other peoples’ poetry, for in singing Barry Cornwall’s “Mary,” he changed the name to Lotty ... (98)

“All around my Hat” is a popular ballad of uncertain date and unknown authorship that was certainly well known by the 1840s, and “If I had a Donkey wot wouldn’t go” was another anonymous ballad, first published around 1820. On the other hand, “My Heart and Lute” (1823?) was written by Thomas Moore to an existing tune by Bishop, and Cornwall’s “Here’s a Health to thee, Mary” had been set by Rodwell himself (1824). In other words, the movement is from bottom-up street songs to top-down (very loosely) “art songs” setting poetry by admired poets, this reflecting the refining impact of love on Lanny’s musical sensibility. But the point of the passage, in my reading, is that these songs are all part of the same popular repertoire: they are all known to a London servant. Therefore, the argument is against the modern idea of an “art song” as somehow opposed to a popular song. Indeed, it would be absurd to pigeonhole “Home Sweet Home” as an “art song” when its astonishing popularity transcended any notion of it belonging to an elite or refined culture inaccessible to the ordinary working man or woman. Bishop and Rodwell surely *hoped* “My Heart and Lute” and “Here’s a Health to thee, Mary” would achieve a similar degree of popularity, even if they didn’t – I don’t believe either man would compose a song with the hope it would *not* become generally popular. The distinction

Rodwell makes is not based on an argument about genre and origins, but again, simply, on a concept of function. Bishop and Rodwell compose songs for more refined feelings, not for more refined audiences.

It seems obvious that any composer can write both more and less refined songs, and both Rodwell and Bishop did so, just as Dibdin had before them. Rodwell's problem with Dibdin, his obvious predecessor as a composer-writer, was that the latter had brought popular songs into much more immediate conjunction with a paying audience. In Rodwell's novels, audiences consistently corrupt popular music in some way: they bring out the pretension and affectation of Chickwheedle and "Groggani"; the selfish desire for some personal advantage in Chickwheedle and Sir Filbut; the mercenary motives in Snob and Swangoose; and the combination of all these things in Diddle 'em Downy. The question of function again obtrudes here: a popular song designed for amateurs to sing is rather different from a popular song designed to bring a professional singer-songwriter immediate reward through the act of performance. Rodwell, at least, wants to insist on the distinction. We can, I think, dismiss any idea that his objection is principally to performance being rewarded over composition: he came from a world of opera and musical theatre where, however unfair, it had long been normal practice to reward top performers over the composers who gave them their successes. Rather, his concern was that Dibdin had established a model for a composer not appealing to an audience's refined feelings, but to its desire for immediate musical (and comedic) gratification – a concern akin to Wordsworth's fears about the rise of popular literature, expressed in the celebrated Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). His predecessor's innovatory performance style had, in Rodwell's view, fed into, and probably helped shape, a new kind of musical culture, soon to find full expression in

the music hall, but when Rodwell was writing still located principally in the “song-and-supper rooms,” the original model for which had been provided by the Coal Hole, founded in London’s theatre district the year after Dibdin’s death.

Notes

- 1 Late in his life Rodwell reinvented himself as a composer with some success with the “Musical Drama,” *The Seven Maids of Munich, or The Ghost’s Tower* (1846), and “Grand Musical Fairy Spectacle,” *The Devil’s Ring; or, Fire, Water, Earth and Air* (1850).
- 2 For recent discussion of the *Letter*, see Burdekin, Burden 5: 129-56 (introduction and text), and Rohr 172-73.
- 3 For the development of the “It-Narrative,” see Blackwell.
- 4 The first London establishment to be called a music hall was given that designation in 1847; the first purpose-built music hall opened in 1851. See Baker 5.
- 5 In *Observations on a Tour*, Dibdin records how “[e]arly in life” he was invited to a baronet’s house and expected “to be comical and entertain the company” (1: 181, 182). This episode can be probably dated after January 1765, when Dibdin became famous with his performances of Ralph in *The Maid of the Mill*, but not long after.

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Synopsis

Dibdin Down the Coal Hole: G. Herbert Rodwell (1800–1852) and the Place of Popular Song

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G. Herbert Rodwell (1800–52), who pursued a double career as a composer and man of letters, turned primarily to novel writing in the 1840s. His three novels are concerned with musical issues linked to Rodwell's general discontent with the status of British composers, as set out in his *Letter to the Musicians of Great Britain* of 1833. The novels' attitude to popular song is investigated here. Rodwell's first novel, *The Memoirs of an Umbrella* (1845), includes two characters particularly associated with music, both used for polemical purposes. One represents a top-down model of popular music, singing an aria from an opera by Giacomo Meyerbeer initially in private company but later as a busker, while the other represents a contrasting bottom-up model, teaching himself to sing from printed street songs and subsequently performing at the Coal Hole, the oldest "song-and-supper room" in London. The Coal Hole, an establishment with both musical and social pretensions, was clearly despised on both counts by Rodwell. *The Memoirs of an Umbrella* is also, remarkably, a rewriting of Charles Dibdin's final novel, *Henry Hooka* (1807), a significant fact given that Dibdin (1745–1814) was Rodwell's obvious precursor as a composer and man of letters who turned to novel writing comparatively late in his career. Rodwell was measuring himself against Dibdin and engaging with

the latter's complex cultural legacy. Rodwell's second novel, *Woman's Love* (1846), contains another attack on the Coal Hole. His final novel, *Old London Bridge* (1848–49), includes examples of the sort of "gentleman composer" Rodwell aspired to be, but contrasts them with Diddle 'em Downy, "a celebrated comic singer" known as much for his unique wig as for his music. The portrayal of Downy represents a fierce rejection of the professional singer-songwriter career route established by Dibdin and his heirs. Ultimately, Rodwell was advocating both that popular song should be primarily a medium for amateur performers to express themselves, and that composers like himself should be introducing more refined songs into the popular song repertoire.