ELIZABETH PERKINS

LEADING OFF IN MANY DIRECTIONS

(Review Article)

Occasionally you come across a book that leads off in many directions and you want to recommend it to people of different interests .... "it's not exactly dead centre to your work, but I think you'll find it rather interesting here, for example." One book that brings to light just such a curious conjunction of interests is the recent edition of the poems of Victor Gustave Plarr, (1863–1929). Plarr was a member of the decadent and fin de siècle, languid and lively, group who comprised the Rhymers' Club in London and contributed to The Book of the Rhymers' Club (1892) and The Second Book of the Rhymers' Club (1894) in which appeared such poems as Yeats's *Lake Isle of Innisfree* and *The Fiddler of Dooney*, and Dowson's *Cynara*.

I

Dr Ian Fletcher, Reader in English at the University of Reading, has edited and collected Plarr's work in an attractive book published by Eric & Joan Stevens (London, 1974) as a limited edition of 750 copies. Dr Fletcher's introduction and notes indicate the kind of writing to be found in Plarr's work and place him in the late nineteenth century and Edwardian environment. Among such figures as W.B. Yeats, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Richard Aldington, Arthur Symons and Ernest Rhys (editor of The Everyman Library), Victor Plarr may not seem very significant, but Dr Fletcher has edited his work with such justice and understanding that you feel you will lose something of the experience of the nineties if you do not take writing like Plarr's into consideration. At the least he records contemporary impressions of the seminal figures of his period, before anyone could look into the future and see which seed would grow and which would not. Thus, is some private verse, Plarr writes:

> Of Yeats, they say, some vertebrae were found,
> Of Masefield half the scalp, the cheek of Pound ...
> (p.144)

and the famous "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion" is recorded as:

> And Ernest Dowson made a sonnet
> To a preposterous Polish bonnet,

and the enthusiasms and rivalries are whimsically set down:

> And all of us had seen Rossetti
> Still looming upon Charon's jetty,
> And everyone was still possessed
> By dreams of writing better than the rest!
>
> Wilde we knew well. We Beardsley saw,
> And duly damned the early Shaw.
> (p.145)

Some of Plarr's charm arises from the feeling the reader has that Plarr knew he was not going "to write better than the rest", and this melancholy ironic knowledge of limitation freed him from attitudinising and grandiloquence and set him to make his verse as shapely and clean as he could. His serious poetry is a triumph of gentle wit and true sensibility. Plarr's work is graceful and delicate without being attenuated, and it is undoubtedly the writing of a man who received much of his vital nourishment from his love of books and scholarship.

> I write and write: the tall books on the shelves
> Laugh with discretion up among themselves,
> Watching their dim-eyed owner hourly checked
> As in the Mine of Memory he delves.
>
> (p.140)

Plarr as poet is a late nineteenth descendant of Matthew Arnold – the poet Arnold who wrote *The Scholar Gipsy*, not the Arnold who deplored the tendency of *The Scholar Gipsy* to add zest to our melancholy and grace to our dreams. Plarr admired Arnold and paid him at least one overt tribute in verse:

> Arnold is dead, and everyone forgets
> His gracious doctrine, his hellenic creed,
> His faith in light and sweetness. 'Tis indeed
> So easy to repudiate our debts
> Of heart and brain! When what one most regrets
> Is stint of love, and ease, and wealth, who need
> Go wail for culture? 'Tis a colourless weed
> Which no one in his table nosegay sets.
>
> Yet, great Oxonian, it were meet and fit
> Could we but halt upon our daily stage
> Of pretty duty, dull mechanic task,
> To meditate thy theme and hear thee ask,
> "Is conduct all? Are grace, and light, and wit,
> Not chiefly good in this Boeotian age?"
>
> *On a Reading of Matthew Arnold* (p.59)

The Victorian formal diction does not conceal the sense of value in the sarcasm "who need/Go wail for culture?", a sense of value which gives the sonnet present potency. For although Plarr was at ease with the alleged decadence of the sighs and Cynaras – he wrote a sympathetic biography of Dowson – the ethical stance of his work is clear and direct, uncumbered by heavy-breathing moralism which inevitably leads to some measure of hypocrisy.

But Plarr's real tribute to Matthew Arnold is his extension of Arnold's *Balder Dead*. Plarr's *The Tragedy of Asgard* (1905) relates in competent blank verse

> The gods in their remorse and their decline,
> How they were judged and how endured eclipse, ...

The poem is worth reading for its own sake, especially by anyone interested in tracing the influence of the saga tradition, and also because it is a timely reminder that the ideals of heroism and social responsibility are often kept alive by those whose pattern of life and interests make no great

show of moralities and heroics. It is interesting to see how Plarr assimilates the "pale Galilean" concept which so titillated or shocked weaker contemporaries and places it simply and convincingly in the religious context of the epic. In the part of the poem called *The Re-Birth* the gods are united:

> and Thor's great sons returned,
> Magni and Modi, Power and Courage named.
> And in their arms they bore Miolnir back.
> Then sitting down upon their rocky thrones,
> They held high conclave there, and in these six
> Their fathers, the great Aesir, rose again.
> Incarnate in these gods old powers re-spoke
> Pleasantly, as when dear friends parted long
> Meet over wine at eve ....
> And one described a marvel he had seen,
> Saying, "When we were sitting in that dark
> Of late, or haply in that elder time
> Before the dread Last Battle, – for my thoughts
> Are in confusion wholly disarrayed, –
> With broken harps and useless swords piled up
> About us, and each one was drooping low
> A mourning meditative head, and thick
> Cobwebs of dreams about our eyes were woven ....
> And lo! a panting messenger appeared, ...
> 'O Gods,' he cried,
> 'Your day is over. Far, far hence are lands
> Which know you not, and have a different way
> Of living. I have seen them. There has risen
> One shall o'ershadow and outdo your fame!
> He is a pale worn man, of peasant stock,
> Yet mightier than all gods.' Feebly we stirred
> At this strange treason, but while yet he spoke,
> Wan in the twilight of our solitude,
> The shadows o'er his head were rent in twain,
> And we beheld the semblance of a Man,
> Nailed on a tree, and with effulgent eyes
> Bent pitying upon us! Therewith fell
> A deeper gloaming and I slept in night."
> (p.116–117)

Plarr is a "religious" poet in the sense that Keats and Shelley are and he uses the legend of the fall of the gods as they do, as Plarr's Aesir use the hammer Miolnir "to work magic in the world/and be a consecration from the past." *The Riding of the Gods* sets out this intention:

> Gladly would I my pen at once concede
> To Snorri, son of Sturla, the famed skald
> of Iceland, ...
> But Snorri Sturlesson low buried sleeps
> Under some lichened wind-affronting cairn
> Far northward, quite forgotten, and to-day,
> Stuffed in this Saxon hamlet overgrown, ...
> This London, hooded by its cap of clouds
> More terrible than Odin's, we must grope
> Piously dubious for shadowy myths,
> Which once were lifeblood of the heart and brain –
> (p.104)

Plarr is not only exhibiting the interest in saga literature shared by better poets like Arnold, William Morris and Ezra Pound, but he is making more explicit than they the contemporary need that created this interest. Pound indeed respected Victor Plarr, and J.J. Espey (1955) has shown that much of Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* is based on Plarr's recollections. T.S. Eliot called *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* "a documentation of an epoch" and it is rightly held that the thirteen satiric lyrics contain much of Pound's rejection of both the cult of decadence and cult of prudential morality that promotes material progress. In 1914 Plarr wrote in his book on Dowson:

> Young Mr Pound, to whom Dowson is a kind of classical myth, just as the ancients are a myth to us all, tells me the story, told him in turn by a good recorder, (Yeats), of how Dowson went to see poor Wilde in Dieppe after the debacle, and how he endeavoured to reform his morality by diverting it at least into a natural channel. It is at best a smoking-room anecdote, not fit for exact repetition.

Should Plarr's decorum here frustrate the reader, Yeats tells the story in his *The Tragic Generation*.

Pound describes Plarr as 'Monsieur Verog' in the seventh lyric of *Mauberley* called *Siena Mi Fe'; Disfecemi Maremma* (Siena made me, Maremma undid me). The Dante reference is made ironically since Plarr was born in Strasbourg and left with his family after the depredations of the Franco-Prussian war to find material peace at least in England. Plarr's mother was English and his criticism of London (his Maremma) is not made as an alien but as an "Old Saxon". As Charles Norman, Pound's biographer (1960) suggests, *Mauberley* shows Pound's respect for Plarr in contrast with "his views on a brace of successful contemporaries – 'Brennbaum' (Max Beerbohm) and 'Mr Nixon' (Arnold Bennet)." Plarr was Librarian of the Royal College of Surgeons when Pound knew him and he is introduced

> Among the pickled foetuses and bottled bones,
> Engaged in perfecting the catalogue,
> I found the last scion of the
> Senatorial families of Strasbourg, Monsieur Verog ....
>
> M. Verog, out of step with the decade,
> Detached from his contemporaries,
> neglected by the young,
> Because of these reveries.

If Pound saw Victor Plarr neglected by the young and detached from his contemporaries in 1920 it is likely that Dr Fletcher's edition will now help turn attention and interest towards him.

II

The Collected Poems of Victor Plarr was reviewed in *The Times Literary Supplement* (September 19, 1975) by Warwick Gould, Lecturer in English at Royal Holloway College, University of London. Mr Gould's review indicates some of the similarities between Plarr's work and that of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australian writers, and those interested in Australian literature will find it useful to follow up these leads. Literature as a comparative study, showing the operation of a literary and cultural zeitgeist and its modification by local factors, is of interest not only to the literary historian but to the aesthetician and the sociologist.

The samples of Plarr's work quoted above represent only part of his range. In other poems, as Mr Gould has pointed out, the Australian reader will be reminded of the immediate clarity of Shaw Neilson's vision, an odd congruence perhaps, since the Englishman depended so much on books and the Australian comparatively little. Let us set side by side without further comment two poems, both of which are too poignant and true to themselves to be called "slight." It is known that Shaw Neilson (1872–1942) read the poems of Thomas Hood, and some readers may find in *The Bridge of Sighs* a common ancestor of both lyrics.

Stand not uttering sedately
  Trite oblivious praise above her!
Rather say you saw her lately
  Lightly kissing her last lover:

Whisper not, "There is a reason
  Why we bring her no white blossom:"
Since the snowy bloom's in season
  Strow it on her sleeping bosom:

Oh, for it would be a pity
  To o'erpraise her or to flout her:
She was wild, and sweet, and witty –
  Let's not say dull things about her.

. . . . . .

Teach me not, tell me not,
  Love ever sinned!
See how her petticoat
  Sweetens the wind.

Back to the earth she went,
  Broken at noon;
Here is her petticoat
  Flapping a tune.

Have ye not ever heard
  Petticoats sing?
I hear a mourning flute
  And a sweet string.

Little silk ally in
  This her last war,
Know ye the meaning of
  What she died for?

Mourner most delicate,
Surely you hold
Manna that she has stored
Safe from the cold.

She had the loving blood,
Love gave her eyes,
And the world showered on her
Icicles – lies.

Speak to her, little wind,
Lovable sky,
Say to the soul of her
Brava – goodbye.

Teach me not, tell me not,
Love ever sinned;
See how her petticoat
Sweetens the wind!

The usefulness of this reading of Plarr's *Epitaphium Citharistriae* and Shaw Neilson's *The Petticoat Plays* is that in revealing similarities and differences the comparison points up the qualities of both poems. As it is not possible to continue to quote so extensively, the reader must follow up the suggestions that seem interesting. In *Death and the Player* Plarr writes with the muted but distinctive fantasy the Australian reader recognizes in Hugh McCrae's poetry, and elsewhere there is that sterner use of fantasy and impressionist record of history that may be found in the work of Kenneth Slessor. The poetic use of conversational rhythm and mood, also marked in Slessor's work and perhaps in Douglas Stewart's, is another mode that Plarr handles well:

At Citoyenne Tussaud's

The place is full of whispers – 'Mark you, sirs,
This one is he who struck our moralists mute
Before the crime which proved him wholly brute!
Mark well his face!' The gaping sight-seers
Nudge one another, and no tongue but stirs
In awe-struck comment on hat, coat, and boot,
Mean smirking smile, base air of smug repute,
Worn by some prince of viler murderers!

Nay, I like most these lank-tressed doctrinaires
Who cluster round their powerless guillotine;
Aquiline, delicate, dark, their thin cheeks mired
By their own blood – these Carriers and Héberts:
They only look so proud and so serene:
They only look so infinitely tired!

These comparisons would carry less meaning as critical observation if it were not that the poets' choice of subject-matter, the attitude and the values embodied in the attitude, and the verse form suggest something about the aesthetics of poetry and its relation to an ethical climate. To see Australian poetry from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the present in true perspective a little more special attention should be paid to those poems which do not explicitly deal with things Australian. The non-Australian poems of McCrae, Slessor and Baylebridge, for

example, are obviously significant in the history of Australian culture, and these poems should be considered with those of non-Australian poets who have made no decisive mark in literature, perhaps, but who are to be respected for their careful efforts to transmit human and cultural values.

Most unexpected of all, the reader will find among Plarr's poetry expressions of sympathy for the poor condemned to hard, ugly living. These recall some of Henry Lawson's most characteristic writing. Stanzas from *To One Asleep* show that Plarr's bookishness and social concern did not result merely in some dilettantish realism – arty glimpses of working-class life. The deep-rooted consciousness that eventually declares itself in effective Reform Bills and lasting Trade Union achievements is transmitted through such simple verse which in its very simplicity gives expression to an impulse of common humanity:

> With a rush and a growl at Cannon Street,
> And a jest like an oath, in he leapt
> 'Mong the clerklings demure and discreet,
> But 'ere Deptford he slept.
>
> Slumber hangs in the eyelids of intrigue,
> Sleep entraps drunken feet from beneath,
> But before such an infinite fatigue,
> It is almost like death.
>
> Nay, the man might be dead before our eyes.
> Pale and worn, dulled and still, shrunk and cowed,
> Of a truth he will look no otherwise
> When he's wrapped in his shroud! ....
>
> There's the cant of 'the Workman's Glorious Reign';
> There's the cant of 'what Effort can teach';
> There's the cant of 'the Discipline of Pain':
> Does he hear when they preach? ....
>
> Though the grime has crept inward to his heart,
> From the things that were once finger-tips;
> Though the sweat from his brow shall not depart
> Nor the curse from his lips;
>
> Shall you scoff at the tenets of his creed,
> And aver he's a leper to shun,
> Or confess, 'Here is Tragic Cain indeed,
> Here is Man's eldest son?'

It is not great poetry and Plarr even at his best is not a neglected genius, but what is it that prompted an Oxford educated, bookish Londoner to write in the nineties so exactly as the colonial, virtually self-educated Lawson was writing in Australia? Perhaps the Englishman, Francis Adams, who left his mark on Australian literature and died by his own hand at Margate in 1893, provides some connection between Plarr and Lawson. Adams's *Songs of the Army of the Night* are also minor verse, as are the similar verse collections of the Australian statesman, Henry Parkes. These are social and cultural questions, but surely they are also central to the phenomenon of Art? Great poetry stands beyond society, but the special value of minor poetry is that it reflects more truly the general attitudes and range of society when society functions at its best. Man, functioning at his lowest, produces no poetry. If society continues to produce two Victor Plarrs for one W.B. Yeats it will not be doing too badly.

In an Appendix to *The Collected Poems of Victor Plarr* Dr Fletcher has included a satiric piece called *A Note on a Savage Poet* which Plarr contributed to *Poetry and Drama* 1.3. (1914). Plarr's essay is based on a chapter from a book by Alfred William Howitt (1830–1908) called *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia* (1904) which Plarr cites as *The Natives of South-Eastern Australia*. Howitt, explorer and anthropologist, is well known to Australian anthropologists and musicologists and his life and work are a fascinating study. Howitt kept a Diary in 1861 while searching for the lost expedition of Burke and Wills and this is printed in *Burke and his Companions* (Melbourne, n.d.), essentially an account of the proceedings of the Exploration Committee in Melbourne when investigating the failure of the Burke expedition. Howitt's account of his relations with the natives, compared with the entries in the field-books and note-books of the unfortunate explorers, provide one objective illustration as to why the interaction between newcomers and native population was so complicated. Howitt and the aborigines established excellent relations apparently because Howitt liked mankind in general and was open to new understanding. Describing the burial of Wills in the Diary for September 18th, 1861 he writes:

> We heaped sand over the grave, and laid branches upon it, that the natives might understand by their own tokens not to disturb the last repose of a fellow being.

The explorer King had been found and cared for by the aborigines and Howitt describes the delight with which they observed his discovery of King:

> The natives were all gathered round, seated on the ground, looking with a most gratified and delighted expression.

Shortly after, however, the aborigines disappeared and on September 23rd, Howitt's Diary records:

> Went down the creek to-day in search of the natives. One of the party accompanied me, and we took two days' rations in case it should be necessary to prolong our search. Two days after, re-camped here; the natives left, and have not been seen since, and I could not think of leaving without showing that we could appreciate and reward the kindness they had shown to Burke's party, and particularly to King.

And on the following day Howitt relates:

> This morning, about ten o'clock, our black friends appeared in a long procession, men, women, and children, or as they here also call them picaninnies; and at a mile distance they commenced bawling at the top of their voices as usual. When collected together on a little flat, just below our camp, they must have numbered between thirty and forty, and the uproar was deafening. With the aid of King I at last got them all seated before me, and distributed the presents – tomahawks, knives, necklaces, looking-glasses,

> combs - among them, I think no people were ever so happy before, and it was very interesting to see how they pointed out one or another who they thought might be overlooked. The picaninnies were brought forward by their parents to have red ribbon tied round their dirty little heads. One old woman, Carrawaw, who had been particularly kind to King, was loaded with things.

It is to be hoped that the present climate will not judge Howitt's sincere sense of obligation to the aborigines as merely far-sighted self-interest or patronage. Even the Exploration Committee in Melbourne recorded this partially disinterested comment on Howitt's action:

> (The natives') conduct on this occasion had been an example to them all, and it was a credit to humanity generally. If for no other purpose, the camels might be usefully employed in carrying burdens in the shape of presents for those men; and the knowledge of it would soon spread through the various tribes, and the probability was that many valuable lives would be saved. On this occasion it appeared that the most childish presents had been given to the natives, such as looking-glasses; although with the means he had (the Speaker) highly approved of Mr Howitt's conduct, but his means were ridiculously inadequate.

Alfred William Howitt, then, at the age of thirty-one, was recognised as "a man not likely to put life or property in danger. He had shown great courage, prudence and energy"; but he had qualities and abilities also that were perhaps not so relevant to the needs of the Exploration Committee.

Plarr was interested in anthropology and seems to have enjoyed and assimilated Howitt's writing. But from his library he was unable to enter into and understand the lives of these remote and exotic people as intuitively as Howitt did. Plarr's satiric essay is directed at the sophisticated banality and the free verse forms of twentieth century poets, and in a somewhat muddled fashion he makes use of the actual songs quoted by Howitt in his text, and even of Howitt's textual commentary. Although Plarr uses the aboriginal poems for satire it seems that they interested him for their own sake, and he does value them as productions of a poet who might be typed as "the primitive singer". He uses Howitt's article to criticize contemporary tendencies of which he disapproved: in art, vers libre and futuristic expressionism, and in sociology, the noble savage concept and anthropological paternalism. Nevertheless this does not prevent Plarr himself from falling into several errors of cultural taste.

Plarr pretends that he himself has heard all the aboriginal songs he quotes, and augments them with apocryphal verses of his own designed to make adverse criticism on civilized mores and the attempts to convert the aborigines to these. Plarr's chief lapse from taste is that he does not seem aware of the great difference between his pseudo-native songs and the genuine ones - and yet it may simply be that he has not made it clear that the adulterated productions are meant to reflect the adulteration of the simple primitive life by cluttered civilized materialism.

Howitt ascribes the songs he quotes to different parts of the east Australian coast and to different singers, whom he can sometimes name

> Umbara, the Murring bard, who composed his songs when in his boat tossing on the waves, told me that his words came to him "not in sleep as to some men, but when tossing about on the waves in his boat with the waters jumping up round him".
>
> A very favorite song of this kind has travelled in late years from the Murring to the Kurnai. It was composed by one Mragula, a noted song maker of the Wolgal, describing his attempt to cross the Snowy River in a leaky bark canoe during flood. . . . . .
>
> Kurburu's song serves as an example of those which are connected with the supernatural, and it brings into view a curious belief, which is found in so many Australian legends and tales, of a supernatural relation of men and beasts. It was composed and sung by a bard called Kurburu, who lived during the early settlement of the country by the whites near where the town of Berwick now stands. He was supposed to have killed a "native bear", and being possessed by its Murup or spirit, henceforth sang its song. I was not able to obtain a verbatim translation of it, but Berak gave me the following free translation: "You cut across my track, you spilled my blood, and you broke your tomahawk on my head".

Plarr lumps all the bards together under the tasteless name Bonga Bonga - surely with genuine names like Umbara, Mragula, Kurburu, and Berak as examples, a poet could have invented something better. In other places Plarr corrupts Howitt's commentary, but he accurately reproduces the following songs which are given here for interest with Howitt's transcription of the original language:

Umbara's Song

Galagala	binja	buninga	ngali
Capsizing	me	striking	me

winbelow	jena	ngarauan	udja
(the) wind blows	hard	(the) sea	long stretched

kandubai	buninga	malinthi	buninga
between	striking	hard hitting	striking

ngali	mulari	binja	buninga
me	dashing up	me	striking

(Howitt glosses "winbelow": this is a curious instance of the manner in which English words are being engrafted on the aboriginal languages. "Winbelow" is really "the wind blows".)

Mragula's Song

Buraburai Quickly	biajanu talking	kumberneino mate his (to)	wargaiama looking about
ngilingua now	burbundu paddling	malagua	nuna this side (to)

Plarr quotes Mragula's song thus:

Another Boat Song (perhaps not by our poet)

Quickly talking to his mate, looking about,
Now paddling this side.

Howitt's songs, in the transcription of which he was helped by the early musicologist, Dr Torrance, are more interesting than Plarr's parodies, and the reader may be prompted to follow them up. It is possible that Plarr was attracted to the aboriginal songs partly for a certain resonance they have of early Anglo-Saxon poems like "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer", and Howitt's gloss of "winbelow" in Umbara's song may have reminded Plarr of the kennings in Old Norse.

In conclusion, here is one of Plarr's apocryphal songs

A Fragment

We sat for a very long time at the White Man's tent.
The younger savages were there - they of the new generation,
They do not make their boomerangs
As I do.
Nor do they reverence Totem.
I do. *(Note the subtle repetition of sound.)*
They set me talking over fire-water, a drink
They
Have mainly abandoned;
But the White Man remembers the good Old Days
When all the good Old Black Fellows
Regularly died of the effects of
It.
I talked of the Old Men, the Old Totems, the Kangaroo Ghost - the Dingo, the Altcheringa men,
And I could see them laughing in the edges of their White and shiny eyes,
And spitting politely behind their hands -
They are well-bred men.
But cried I: 'My black legs are not a spittoon!'
Then they said: 'What do you think of our poems, Bonga Bonga?'
And I studied, I studied, I studied.

Bonga Bonga or Plarr has given a fair parody of a canto by Ezra Pound and neatly caricatured himself reminiscing for Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley". A shadowy preview of the Jindyworobak poetry of the forties is there, too, and a hint that the experience of being the last of one's tribe is, after all, archetypal. Poetry and the tribe . . . perhaps in the end both are indestructible.