



*'Cherwell' photograph, 1961*

JAMES BLAIR LEISHMAN

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1902-1963

JAMES BLAIR LEISHMAN, the eldest son of a tea merchant, was born at Thursby, Cumberland, on 8 May 1902. He was educated at Earnseat School, Arnside, Westmorland, from which he removed to Rydal Mount, Colwyn Bay, in 1916.

At Arnside he is still remembered for his remarkably retentive memory and indomitable will-power, but also for his preference for long walks in country lanes to the football field, where it was said that he would not move except to get out of the way of the ball. He himself recalled with special pleasure a trip to Ambleside and a walk with a few boys through Clappergate to Rydal. As they gazed along the drive of a house called Fox How, an elderly lady invited them into the garden and showed them round, drawing their attention particularly to a tree planted by her father Dr. Arnold, and to another planted by her brother Matt.

At Oxford, where he matriculated from St. John's College in 1922, he was debarred from reading Classical Moderations by ignorance of Greek, but he set himself to learn the language so as to qualify himself for *Literae Humaniores* in which he obtained Second Class Honours in 1925. Two years later he was rewarded with a First in English Language and Literature. The prospect of an academic career was opened to him and he decided to read for the higher degree of Bachelor of Letters, submitting as his dissertation a study of the three Parnassus plays written for performance at Cambridge at the end of the sixteenth century. He was without doubt the most able student of his year, and it was not surprising that he was appointed to the only post which fell vacant in the summer of 1928, an assistant lecturership at University College, Southampton. He was to stay there for eighteen years. In 1946 he left to take up a university lecturership at Oxford, and was promoted to a senior lecturership the following year. He was elected to a research fellowship at St. John's College in 1959, and to a Fellowship of the British Academy in 1963.

During his last year at Oxford he had begun to teach himself German and to take an interest in recent German poetry. His enthusiasm for the work of Rilke led a friend to express the

wish to be able to read the poet in translation, and this induced him to attempt an English version. He translated a selection of thirty-five poems and offered them to the Hogarth Press, who had already published versions of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and his *Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*. The reception of this volume (1934) encouraged him to attempt the whole corpus of Rilke's poetry in English: *Requiem and Other Poems* appeared in 1935 (2nd ed., 1949), *Sonnets to Orpheus* in 1936 (2nd ed., 1948), *Later Poems* in 1938, the *Duino Elegies* (translated in collaboration with Stephen Spender) in 1939 (2nd ed., 1948), *Selected Poems* in 1941, *From the Remains of Count C. W.* in 1952, *Poems 1906-1926* in 1957, and *Selected Works. Vol. II, Poetry* in 1960. With this volume he supposed his work as a translator of Rilke to be complete. But there was still needed a complete translation of *Neue Gedichte*, only half of which was included in the last published volume. He therefore set himself to the task. The work was complete at the time of his death, and he had finished correcting the proofs.

In the meanwhile he had also translated selections from Hölderlin (1944 and 1947), and thirty odes of Horace (1956). The latter, prefaced by a long and valuable introduction on the differences between Latin and English versification and on the poetical character of Horace, was undertaken, like the first selection from Rilke, to help a friend to some understanding and appreciation of the original. Throughout these works Leishman invites comparison with his author: a scholarly translation was his first consideration, and he taxed the rhythmic and syntactic resources of English to the utmost in his effort to obtain closeness of rendering; but he never allowed himself to forget that he was translating poetry, and he might have claimed, though he never did, that his versions were themselves poetry of a high order.

[Professor Eudo C. Mason has kindly contributed the following assessment of Leishman's work in German studies: 'His reading in German literature never ranged more than desultorily beyond Rilke and the two writers in whom he became interested as a direct result of his Rilke studies, Hölderlin and Rudolf Kassner. He felt no urge to grapple with the interesting but intrinsically not very rewarding German poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with which he was chiefly concerned in his work on English literature, nor was he more than moderately attracted by Goethe and his age. He would have deprecated the suggestion that he was a Germanistic

scholar in the stricter sense of the word. But within the field to which he confined himself—a very exacting field—he was deeply read and earned recognition particularly as one of the soundest and profoundest authorities on Rilke. The uncertainty regarding linguistic niceties observable in his earlier translations soon disappeared, and even such scholars as Ernst Zinn, who to begin with had helped him, were later glad to consult him on knotty problems of interpretation. In his modesty he failed to recognize how, in the correspondence which he maintained for years with various fellow Rilke specialists in Germany and this country, they learnt certainly quite as much from him as he did from them, if not more. The final summing-up of his views on Rilke in the long introduction to *New Poems* is an excellent synthesis of erudition and intuitive perception, of critical detachment and enthusiastic admiration.’]

Although the introductions and commentaries accompanying several of his volumes of translations, no less than the translations themselves, had brought him a reputation as a German scholar, he regarded himself primarily as an Anglist. His postgraduate work upon the Parnassus plays was completed in an edition published in 1949; but by that time his principal field of interest had become the literature of the seventeenth century. A letter written to him by George Gordon in 1931 shows what he then had in mind to do: a selection from the Cambridge Platonists to replace Campagnac’s, or a book on Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne, or, with a prophetic leap into the future thirty years ahead, a book on ‘Shakespeare’s characteristic ideas’. Gordon was inclined to favour the book on the seventeenth-century poets, especially ‘since you have tested it so successfully with classes’. It appeared in 1934 with the title *The Metaphysical Poets*. At that time there were few studies of these poets available, and the book is still in many respects a valuable exposition of the work of the four poets chosen. Leishman long nursed a hope of revising it, but in this he was impeded by the outstanding success of his study of Donne, entitled *The Monarch of Wit* (1951; 6th ed., 1962). This was the first book of his maturity, the first to display his characteristic excellences in ample form. The kind of poet Donne is he establishes by some initial comparisons with Ben Jonson and, incidentally, Horace, and then by a painstaking discussion of what might be regarded as minor groups, the elegies (with their counterparts in Ovid), epigrams, satires, and verse epistles. The Songs and Sonnets are reached only half-way

through the book; but by that time the reader has been taught to recognize the use of language, the handling of ideas, and the appeal to a contemporary coterie that mark the poet's work, and he has his sights properly adjusted for Donne's most famous poems. The most learned and perhaps the most stimulating of his books is *Themes and Variations in Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1961), in which he places the *Sonnets* in their European setting, compares and contrasts the handling of topics by Shakespeare, Horace, Ovid, and Propertius, Petrarch and Tasso, Du Bellay, Ronsard, and many others, notes which familiar topics were not touched by Shakespeare, and which are peculiar to him, and succeeds in showing that 'Shakespeare transfigured and Shakespearianized his reading to a far greater extent than any other Renaissance poet'. In fact, he once expressed the hope that his book might prove a corrective to those studies of Renaissance thought which, by habitually quoting Shakespeare in illustration, lead us to assume that Shakespeare was typical of his times.

An illuminating examination of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (1951) was designed as the first instalment of an expository study of Milton's minor poems. This, like so many of his books, was based upon courses of undergraduate lectures undertaken with a major interest of his own in mind; it was carefully revised and kept up to date, and it may well be published. A similar work upon the poetry of Marvell had been on his hands for ten years or more. A small portion of it was delivered as a Warton Lecture before the British Academy on 4 October 1961. This had since been much expanded and revised, and the whole was within sight of completion at the time of his death. The character of the book is essentially similar to that of his *Themes and Variations in Shakespeare's Sonnets*, in that it explores the individuality of a poet, his resemblance and his difference from contemporaries and predecessors, by showing how he and they handled certain favourite topics. It is not surprising therefore that in writing to a friend he mentioned the subject for a future book on the History of Topics in Seventeenth-century Literature. For work of this kind he needed to keep the great classics in repair; but this was his pleasure, too, as well as the support for his conviction that only a knowledge of the classics prevents a man becoming too provincial in his judgement. When the present writer published, a few years ago, a selection from Pope's letters, he received a long ten-page letter in Leishman's small, crabbed, and highly idiosyncratic hand commenting on detail and generalizing most fruitfully on Pope's literary character; but

when another friend tried to persuade him to look again at *The Cloister and the Hearth*, Leishman told him that he had read it as a boy and did not feel he had time for such books now. The nature of a typical six-weeks holiday reading in the long vacation indicates the scope at which he was accustomed to aim; the trunks that were returned from Switzerland after his death contained the following books: the *Æneid* in a German translation, the Loeb editions of Martial's *Epigrams* and of the Greek Anthology, Rousseau's *Confessions*, Dryden's *Poems*, with Van Doren's study, *The Oxford Book of Italian Verse*, and all the appropriate dictionaries.

Leishman was a striking figure in any gathering. He was large-framed, though a little bowed in the shoulders of recent years. His features were sharply pointed and were set off by hair brushed wispily back from a central parting, with straggling side-whiskers which looked as though their owner were not altogether aware of their existence. To some he gave the appearance of a genial and benevolent witch; but no witch even on a benevolent expedition ever wore such clothes. They seemed to alter very little in point of style over the years. A plus-four suit of heavy brown tweed with a brown bow-tie was normal day-time wear in most seasons, with a pair of long trousers for greater evening comfort. A subfusc suit lurked in a wardrobe. Many years ago some friends, anxious that his normal appearance should not too greatly startle an appointment committee, mistakenly advised him to model himself for the occasion upon a bank clerk. As they sped him to his train, they noticed that the dark blue suit and a belted mackintosh of the same colour had been pressed into service, but that the hairiness of the tweeds had been transferred to a black hat of vast proportions. He was not a bank clerk but, as nearly as could be matched, a very distinguished savant from Ruritania.

His manner of life was shaped at an early date into a fixed routine, and being a bachelor he never found occasion to alter it. He spent his mornings at work; but a serious illness as a schoolboy had weakened his chest and determined him in a habit of spending every afternoon on foot or on a bicycle in the countryside, and he resented and resisted any interference with this routine, such as the expectation that he should attend academic business meetings. It was his custom on these expeditions to meditate and polish his translations. When asked why he had limited his translations of Horace to thirty odes, he replied that that was all that he found he could hold in

his memory at one time. He especially appreciated the permission granted him to walk in Wytham Woods, and he exercised the permission with weekly regularity. Perhaps he did not know that he was over-privileged, that the keepers (who respected him) kept an eye over him and their charge when, his powerful pipe failing to disperse the flies in summer, he lit a fire of sticks and leaves and sat with his head, hands, and a copy of Homer all suffused in smoke.

Week-ends permitted him expeditions to friends living a little further afield. These were undertaken on a heavy-framed bicycle (replaced by a lighter machine in summer), which he loaded like the White Knight's horse. The Christmas and Easter vacations were spent in more distant parts of the country. Since his step-sister lived in Glasgow, he was always to be seen in the north at Easter. He would arrive with a brief-case full of books, his other belongings slung in a huge grey pack on his shoulders. If his visit was to a country farmhouse, his arrival was preceded by a case of wine—sometimes the panniers of his bicycle contained a bottle or two—and he gave every encouragement to the farmer's wife to search for a few sprigs of chervil for his salad, and to pay particular attention to the date-stamp in a packet of St. Ivel cheese. But the summer vacations were invariably spent abroad when the country was not at war, in Germany and Switzerland, and for some years in the Sudeten parts of Czechoslovakia. He had many friends, among them Rudolf Kassner, men and women who had known Rilke or who could share Leishman's scholarly interest in the poet's work. He was warmly welcome in the houses of all his friends, for he was by nature simple, affectionate, and gentle; children and women liked him instinctively.

At his solitary meals in Oxford he indulged his passion for music from a huge collection of gramophone records, some of which were specially chosen as a suitable background for his post-prandial studies. By Oxford standards he was a recluse; but those friends who sought him out were rewarded by a warmly affectionate welcome and by conversation, at once learned and playfully allusive, which ranged over a wide field of European history and literature both ancient and modern, and interrupted with explosive force whenever it turned to local or national politics. He did not read daily newspapers, claiming that his eyesight was not good enough; but he read the *New Statesman and Nation* regularly, and growled alike at Tory and at Labour perversities.

Though a shy man, he was warm-hearted and took great delight in entertaining his pupils at his open Thursday-evening At Homes. On these occasions there was talk, and music, and reading, and sometimes the opportunity of meeting some of his continental friends. The pupils who made a practice of returning to these parties must have come in the first place drawn by their respect, and even reverence, for a tutor whose work was more than usually inspiring: 'you realized', said one of them, 'that a Leishman tutorial was something very special, absolutely genuine, of its own kind'; and another remarked that 'the intellectual discipline to which he subjected us and the spiritual exhilaration which he engendered in us were the most valuable things in our whole university career'.

He projected his learning better on these semi-formal occasions than at a lecture, where his enunciation was poor. He did not practise any of the little histrionic arts of persuasion, and relied too much on the sheer merit of his material. The audience was apt to feel frustrated at catching so little of what had been said. Yet it was these lectures, revised, expanded, repointed, and annotated, that became the books of his maturity.

While returning from a walk near Zeneggen in Switzerland, he missed his footing on a mule-track, stumbled, and fell to his death on 14 August 1963.

JOHN BUTT