

MEMORIES OF DYLAN THOMAS

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I FIRST MET Dylan Thomas in 1943. I was passing through London on leave and went to see my brother Philip, who took me along to a pub in Kings Road, Chelsea, where he was meeting Dylan. If Dylan liked you, it didn't take long to get inside his world, or at least certain sections of it, and you left him with the conviction that you had known him for years, had always known him. The word poet was not mentioned; what the evening brought out was mainly the delightful way in which Dylan and Phil companioned one another in quip, argument, anecdote, and other ways of expressing an unquenchable delight in life. Then, as always, their conversation together constituted an easy flow of shrewd laughter, with an effect of steady crescendo which was without strain, a spontaneous and chuckling tribute to everything that lived. I departed next morning with the feeling that I must re-read Dylan's poems, that there was something in him much bigger than I had expected, and that under the intense but narrow world of the poems was a broad base, a power of enjoyment which could encompass anything human.

Later in the summer I was given a fortnight's compassionate leave as someone, whose name I will not mention, had written in to the colonel that Philip was suffering from DTs and needed my presence. When the officer in charge called me out of bed to say I was to go off first thing in the morning, I told him that I didn't believe the story; but he replied that the leave had been granted and I was to take it. I won't go into this story further here, except to mention that Philip had nothing to do

with the application. However, the leave meant that I spent a fortnight with Philip and Dylan in Chelsea. Later that year, by a set of odd chances, I was transferred to the Education War Office, under the ABCA division, as a script-writer for the Army Theatre that was being set up. The Army Council in its section dealing with Establishments had agreed that groups of soldiers and ATS should be collected as actors by Michael MacOwan (then Captain, soon afterwards Major), but had refused to allow the inclusion of a scriptwriter—though the whole point of the scheme was that the groups should perform a new sort of play, topical and instructive. This typical bit of army crassness was overcome by taking me on as an actor, while in fact I sat in the War Office and did what was at least a captain's work. On paper I was still a mere signalman, but I had a most interesting job, at which I remained for the rest of the war. Most of the time I was in London, at the offices in Eaton Square, with lodgings in Pimlico. I was thus close to Dylan in Chelsea (Phil had married and lived in Earls Court), and we spent much time together until Dylan decided to evacuate himself and family from a London under the attack of flying-bombs. In the postwar years I saw less of him, especially after I retired to a Kentish forest in 1949. Still we met now and then even in those last three years and continued to be good friends.

I thus came to know Dylan fairly well, at a time before the curse of booze had come down upon him. I was never, however, so close a friend of his as Phil was. There was a strong bond between those two. In the years before the war Phil had lived with Dylan, in the same room, and for long they worked together on documentary films, Dylan's main source of funds and patronage before he turned to the BBC and then to the tours in the U.S.A. Despite some sharp differences in character, there was much akin in Dylan and Phil, in their way of life and in their values. Both had the capacity for something like a total surrender to life, to what was felt to be its fundamental impulses and needs; both at the same time had certain unbreakable powers of resistance, a determination to be true to their essential positions at whatever cost to themselves and everyone else. They reserved the right to make a clear and downright judgment of persons and things after having renounced all right or desire to judge. Both were imperturbably amiable and yet capable of violent repudiations and plain rudeness, once they felt their scheme of values to be threatened. But though Dylan had his own kind of honesty, which I shall try later to define, Phil was by far simpler and more direct in his reactions, his refusal to make the least compromise.

Both had profoundly anarchist attitudes, but after 1939 Phil's views

tended to be exasperatingly rigid, even childish so. Dylan's ironic sense went much deeper, taking in his own views of himself and his ideas, so that his anarchism was far suppler and more devious, capable of rounding on itself and even turning into its opposite. This means that despite the emotional similarities with Phil's careless and tangential way of crashing through whatever scene entangled him—an unconcern which however included a fine casual courtesy and a capacity to re-assert sympathy in the most unlikely ways—Dylan's views had underneath a strong intellectual system which it was easy to miss and which only a prolonged knowledge of both the man and his poetry made one able to recognize. Dylan felt in Phil his own lighter-weight brother, himself freed from the burden of poetry and encountering life with a genuine freshness at each new pub-counter, as if nothing had been learnt till that moment and as if everything was now being learnt in a burst of comprehensive joy and irresponsible love. It would be too simple to say that Phil expressed in fact the spiritual state that Dylan coveted and slyly enacted, but there is something in the comment. Dylan was an intellectual who aspired to shed every atom of the intellectual's pride in isolation, in superior knowledge, in abstraction of idea. For him the idea was life, the idea was poetry; any other moment of its existence was anathema. Phil was able to incarnate this attitude without self-consciousness. That was what endeared him to Dylan, in whom however it was highly self-conscious. For Dylan the detached idea, which could be developed in an intellectual argument and which could consequently be set against life, making demands upon him and insisting that he take action on its behalf, was something to be fought and evicted. Not that the fighting was done by any prolonged inner argument. The conflict was emotional, however many intellectual factors it brought into play; the evictors were a set of fears and anxieties that had been built up in Dylan's adolescent years as he first struggled to achieve poetry.

I feel sure that I am correct in saying that in all their long friendship no strain or conflict of any kind ever showed itself between Phil and Dylan. In each of them the anti-intellectual anarchism went too deep for the compact to wear thin and reveal elements of chafed falsity, irritated boredom: the sort of thing which seems a recoil from someone else, but is in fact a recoil from one's own unresolved conflicts uncomfortably bared in the other's inadequate or overpitched behaviour. *Par nobile fratrum*. In all this I recognize a greater closeness of Phil to Dylan than to myself. Dylan once told me, 'I love Phil as I love no one else, but I can't read his books.' The pure spontaneous element in Phil which created his charm had a marring effect on his work. Phil him-

self admired Dylan's poems whole-heartedly and had long considered him a great poet; he saw in them his own impulses and attitudes given definitive form.

DURING my Chelsea leave I came up against the deep inner conflict in Dylan, that found its outer expression in his relations with Caitlin. One morning I drifted into their rambling apartment. Dylan lay sore-headed abed, making a few gruff remarks as he smoked. Caitlin said that late at night, after we others had gone, he had torn up his poems in disgust and thrown them into the rubbish-tin.

'You rescued them,' I said. 'That's the job of the poet's wife. To rescue his poems from the rubbish-tin when life gets too much for him.'

She shrugged, and her handsome face with its faint golden glow sharpened in a shrewish way. 'No, you're quite wrong. It's the last thing I'd do. Dylan's corrupt. Corrupt right through and through. It's not for me to save him from himself. If he can't do it himself, let him rot.'

I was startled, shocked. My too-simple picture of Dylan as the pure lyric poet crumpled up, and I realized that I knew nothing of him or of his poetry. My only course was to start from the beginning all over again and look at the real poet, not my fantasy of him. I was also hurt on Dylan's behalf, wanted to say something that would ease the situation for him without annoying Caitlin, who had spoken with a quiet but deadly intensity. I couldn't think of anything to say, and stole a side-glance at Dylan. He went on smoking grumpily as if he hadn't heard his wife's words or as if they were not worth comment. Finally, he spat, coughed, and asked about Phil.

I gathered that he had had to undergo the shame of rescuing the torn manuscript himself, under Caitlin's scornful eyes. She had known he wouldn't sacrifice the poem, and he had to admit that she was right and that the tearing had been only a romantic gesture, an act of self-demolition that he couldn't sustain. I am not sure, but think that the torn poem was the 'Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait'. He was working at that poem at the time and had almost completed it, though he was still worried about a few small points. Some nights later, when he had retired to bed with a wambly stomach, he read it out to Phil and myself as well as several others of his poems. This was the first time I heard him read poetry, and I was deeply impressed. A mixture of sonority and deep though controlled feeling gave a fresh dimension to the words and revived my feeling of him as a poet whose work had a peculiar organic unity and implicated the whole universe in each statement, each image. But now I felt that he was also acting the part of the complete

poet and that sometimes he didn't know the reality from the rôle. Against my will Caitlin by the force of contempt and suffering in her voice had convinced me that he was charlatan as well as marvellous boy, unscrupulous entrepreneur as well as dedicated poet. My confusion and my divided mind about his work were increased by the fact that though I was carried away by the 'Ballad' in his splendid rendering I was repelled by the sadistic image of the girl bloodily hooked. I knew how it could be symbolically explained away, but under all the meanings I felt the plain fact of a ferocious conflict between him and Caitlin. And I felt that in this relationship of love and hate, which I was only beginning hazily to apprehend, she was as interesting as he was. ('Into Her Lying-down Head' was written not long after, I think, though I did not hear him read it for some months.)

A few days after Caitlin's outburst I had a chance to talk to her alone for two or three hours in one of the Chelsea pubs while Dylan and Phil were busy on some film-script. I tried to find out just what she had meant by calling Dylan corrupt. But she was one of the most difficult persons I have ever tried to pin down to a definite meaning. She was voluble, despite painful silences, but desperately unable to find in the dictionary of common associations the words that would express her precise point—and nothing less than those words would suffice. Any falling-back on cliché and conventional terms would dishonour both herself and Dylan. For it was at once clear that in condemning Dylan she was simultaneously cutting herself off from him and uniting with him in a fiercely protecting love. Both the separation and the union made her feel intensely proud. In one sense, she felt herself so much a part of Dylan that in denouncing him she was also proving his integrity, proving that he was aware of the worst that could be said of him, and getting in first with the admission so as to deny the world the right to repeat her words. Both the union and the separation made her suffer; and when she suffered it was with every fibre of her being. She knew well enough what she meant. She was able to express herself strongly, as in the attack on Dylan I have quoted, and her unusual angles of approach gave her words a remarkable directness and originality. But the words themselves could not be considered apart from the totality of the situation. What she said was complicated, wavering, full of obvious contradictions, edged with laconic subtleties. Written flatly down, it would have seemed erratic and uncertain; but taken in its total set of dovetailing and intricate implications, it had its own logical coherence. A coherence that was further composed of the varying inflections, the deep silences into which she gazed, the changes of the pupils of her eyes and the muscular

tensions about her lips, the particular tilt or tensify of her body on the bar-stool.

A conversation of that sort can be infinitely exciting and satisfying at each moment of its rich modulations, but the moments tend to cancel one another out when at the end one asks: What exactly was said, decided, summed up? All the same, I think I gained a clear and indelible comprehension of the peculiar tension between her and Dylan, its destroying and its creative quality. What I could not grasp or bring out of her was what she considered the alternative, the non-corrupt way, which she wanted Dylan to follow. She was as far as Dylan himself from any wish to see his poetry linked with a guiding idea, a cause of any kind. **I was hoping that she would show some signs** of this sort of wish, and did my best to push her in its direction. But she shied off any such interpretation. I wanted to say that while I agreed about the essential concreteness of poetry, that concreteness developed most fully and valuably in its conflict with ideas, in the acceptance of the human universal as a cause that must be striven for—which involved the organic being of the poet with an historical situation. And so on. I wanted to say that the purity she wanted would become a negation—stirring her bitter rejection—unless it accepted the sort of struggle I had in mind. But I was not sure enough that I understood her, and above all I wanted to see into her mind, see what lay at the bottom of those pools of silence into which she stared. I feared to muddy the waters by intelligent and irrelevant comment. I felt a very strong sympathy for her, a sort of love, but not a love that could be abstracted from the warmth I felt for the pair of them, Caitlin and Dylan in the bed of his poetry, tormented with all the fleas of a rivalry and a jealousy I had begun to understand. Waspish as she could be, I somehow always saw her as a distracted small girl who smacked the world in the eye to save herself from bursting into tears.

My rindy fruit of bitterness, already installed since childhood, though I can trace no evidence of suppression—it might have been more salutary had I been suppressed earlier and more thoroughly—swells to top-heavy proportions; dwarfs the happy landscape, colours with venom the smiling peasant. It even darkens the sun, pressing a ferocious torpor down behind my eyepit sinews. My bitterness is not an abstract substance, it is as solid as a Christmas cake; I can cut it in slices and hand it round and there is still plenty left, for tomorrow.

In such passages from her *Life Leftover to Kill* Caitlin catches an essential characteristic of herself, with the deliberately embarrassing note which was inseparable from her self-assertions. The whole book is a remarkably sustained piece of self-exposure, in which the lacerating comprehension of her thorny self is merged with a total inability to do any-

thing about it all. Here self-knowledge is immediately inverted into a bitter resentment; it appears as an act of revenge which is impotent except to rub salt in wounds. Anger has so long been convinced of its ineffectiveness that Caitlin can only conceive the revelation of pain as a wild accusation aimed at Dylan, her parents, the world, nobody, herself; a circular rage returning to the dead centre, exultant in its proof of a pointless crucifixion, a deaf universe. Love and hate have lost their Catullan contradictions; they merge in a numbed distraction where nobody and everybody is the enemy, and the lover has dwindled to a nagging ghost of self-torment.

Another ten years were needed to bring Caitlin to this state, which was however the logical conclusion of the attitudes to which she had irrevocably assigned herself. Not that the attitudes can be understood apart from Dylan, from the demands he made on her and the rôle he allotted her. A hopeless contradiction ruled at the heart of the relationship between them. She wanted the pure poet who transformed the impulses of his life into crystalline form; he wanted the pure mistress who reflected in her caprice the unpredictable movements of his poetry. But the poet's impulse in her conception needed to be the harmonious reflection of her caprice; and the mistress's caprice in his conception needed to be the delightful reflection of his liberated senses. In fact such an ideal could only work out in a series of deepening discords. Caprice and impulse collided in all sorts of ways, and what should have been their harmony appeared as a ceaseless conflict of egoist demands. The mistress wanted the lark of the song caged in her hand or at least nested in, and soaring over, her private piece of wild nature; the poet wanted a self-effacing wife who didn't need to be dragooned into wearing the correct dress for a Carmarthen market-day. Dylan wandered off on his loose tangents of seduction and booze; Caitlin accumulated bile in her corner of frustration, a witch whose spells evaporated in an atmosphere of frying chips and boiling napkins. The sacrifice of her ambitions as dancer and poet was not considered important enough to deserve even a patronizing pat of thanks.

I did not at first realize that Dylan's love of life had to struggle every moment of the day and night in order to keep ahead or even abreast of his pursuing fear of death. There lay the cardinal weakness of his character and his poetry, a weakness which however provided in turn the dynamic force of his virtues, his consuming need to find the image that would be large enough, and crafty enough, to bar the way of the pursuing fear. His fear expressed itself in the compulsive need to touch a woman; and because one touch led to another, led the way

through the labyrinth of the senses to the centrique part, his need was to pierce through all defences into the helpless womb, the continuous present of salvation, the eternal moment outside time. Later, drink became a compulsive need, but that was a derivation from the primary compulsion to achieve an absolute contact without the need of communication. His power of seduction lay in his power to present himself as requiring solace and sustenance as simply and unquestioningly as a newborn baby placed for the first time at the mother's breasts. But he needed booze in order to set free this hypnotic quality in his eyes and hands. And if the appeal didn't work with full effect, it didn't work at all. I have known women who found Dylan at any stage of his booze-release as something quite disgusting and repulsive.

The day before Dylan read us the 'Ballad' he had been commenting on a tall girl with whom we had had a few drinks. A tall lank girl with a bell of strawgold drowned hair and cold lost greygreen eyes, the mistress of a film-producer. As we left her, Dylan murmured to me, 'Did you see that she had leg-irons? Last week when I lay between her legs, I got a shock as the iron scraped against me. I'd forgotten it.' When he read the 'Ballad', I myself suddenly felt the shock of iron chafing against the flesh at its moment of supreme surrender. The tall lean girl plunging on the bed and pinned down brutally, slithering outside time and mortally hooked, unable to escape. I saw the long slow curve of her unresisting body as she sat with a cigarette in her slender fingers opposite Dylan; and Dylan, plump and taut inside his plumpness as a gamesome dolphin, sporting on the edge of her distraught vision. And then, in a succession of confused images, all the many girls into whom Dylan fled and from whom he fled, afraid of claims and responsibilities, and Caitlin at the heart of the swirl of transformations, the wife from whom he fled into the masquerade, and to whom he fled back in order to escape claims and responsibilities. Caitlin, aware of all this shape-shifting, its Circean mistress and yet its dupe, forcing Dylan into it and yet angrily demanding a totally different way of life. Dylan, unable to keep his fingers from the palm, the breast, the inner thigh, but struggling all the while to delay the moment of triumph, which was also the moment of absorption by the woman, the moment of his disarming. The moment of impotence that follows the arrogant orgasm; the mockery of death that echoes the cockcrow exuberant life. Dylan, resentful because Caitlin couldn't beat him into fidelity as a release from the widening circle of seductions which kept on worsening the fear of death by setting his small mortal mechanism of responses against an infinity of hungry challenging wombs. Each infidelity, by proving the fallibil-

ity of women, made more plausible the fear that Caitlin too had found her lover, was finding him, was at that very moment by the necessary irony of things plunging and pierced in the bed of the faceless enemy; was betraying Dylan to the loss and the void which was death. Dylan had no consolation that didn't double-cross him and intensify the fear that it was meant to dissipate.

Yet Dylan need not have feared at least the falling-away of Caitlin; for if his ideal was the sure home-centre that gave him freedom for all peripheral backslidings, hers was the sure home-centre that salved the wounds of man and wife by merging them, by enforcing an identity of crucifixions and thus achieving a simultaneous resurrection in which he and she were lost in a common joy and fear. They thus both needed the sure home-centre for opposite reasons. In her bitter strivings with Dylan, Caitlin must often have been tempted to sheath her forbidding rancours, assume her face of lyrical charm, and whistle up a string of lovers. But her stubborn hopeless integrity, her once-for-all-times-taken stand, prevented her from such an obvious retaliation. She continued to fight things out on her doomed ground, jealously cherishing that ground all the more for its untenability. Both he and she had the strength and the weakness of conducting a fated conflict, to the tragic and ridiculous terms of which they had to cling as the sole pledge of personal value.

Always Caitlin fascinated me by her precarious perch, from which nothing could dislodge her. I happen to have kept, out of many scribbled notes and sketches for poems, a few lines that I wrote down the evening when Dylan was reading the 'Ballad'. I cite them here as at least showing how my attention was concentrated on her, seeking to read the critical light in her eyes. She was one of those persons who own a naked face, a face that lacks some of the normal layers of disguise, reserve, falsity. For this reason it was often hard to interpret as it shone in its sharp separateness, its pallor of tense surfaces, its locked conflicts. We are more used to faces in which we seek to catch the reluctant momentary exposure. What my lines sought to express was Caitlin's element of glittering separateness, which, coupled with the need to achieve a total judgment of the scene, involved also a cold but passionate impact on us others—though what interested her was not the others but Dylan alone, in whom everything was summed up. On the other hand, Dylan, whose companionable warmth included us all in every intonation of his voice, every movement of his jovial body, seemed perfectly unaware of her presence and its questioning silence, its flawless resistance to everything he did or said.

The bush of light I saw
in a hush of warm awe
had strawgold plaited in it,
limelight of the mad minute,
o flaxen flash, o doll
birdkeen watching us all

because the flash was stillness
small but still with fullness
preening the clear face
awareness poised as grace
wildbird what made you linger
on my stiff pedantic finger

I wanted to define something of her strange immediacy as a radiant presence and an effaced ghost.

If Dylan's inner conflict could be defined at one level as an effort to oppose and reconcile the sure home-centre (poetry as union) with the peripheral submissions to impulse (poetry as freedom), the insuperable contradictions of his position appeared in his relation with the money-world. Life (poetry and copulation) was felt to exist in a world where money had not yet been born—just as love is too young to know what conscience is. If life were reduced to its primary elements, to the moment of birth as the rhythmic moment of in-and-out, advance-and-re-treat, light-and-darkness, then it was purely a matter that concerned only the poet and his immediate otherself (the mother, the organic universe, the lover). No one else could intrude; no responsibility existed except the need to realise the moment in its fullness, to inhabit the continuous present. Here was given the pure pattern of experience, and anything that attempted to distort or confuse it was the enemy, was the arresting abstraction which upset the eternal rhythm of immediate apprehension and gave power to the one-sided approach of death. Money was therefore the great enemy, the supreme abstraction, the pure embodiment of death.

Hence the unnerving terror that overcame Dylan whenever he moved from the birth-moment as the primal moment of union-separation, and confronted the world of adult responsibilities. Money was the castrating sword that flashed in his eyes and drove him back into the garden of eden. A garden of eden cursed with the omnipresent sense of sin; childhood become precious because it was not adult life, and realized as the eternal moment because of the dire and unceasing pressure of abstraction in the adult consciousness. The garden became a prison, yet had to be realized as freedom. Only poetry could so realize it, and therefore poetry was racked by a diabolic paradox. The sense of sin, of

death's dominion, had to be intensified by an infinite titillation so that the poet might be driven with all possible passion and anguish back into the garden, into the pure moment of contact with otherness, obliterating the very passion and anguish which he needed for the return-journey.

Money therefore became the crucial thing, indistinguishable in the last resort from the intellectual abstraction that alienated men from the real world, the flowing and irreversible world, the world that remained entire and seamless despite its judicial and murderous rending at every moment of the busy day. To settle to any means of earning money was thoroughly repugnant to Dylan, and became more so, all the while. His fear of death and impotence was reflected in a fear of being unable to earn the subsistence of himself and his family; and this fear went far too deep for any rational control or resolution. If you are sufficiently afraid of poverty and starvation, you do not hoard and count every penny; you throw it away as soon as you get it. You do the very thing you are most afraid of, in order to find out if the fear is real and if it has the complex consequences that you have attributed to it. The more money Dylan earned, the less he was capable of mastering it. Who wants to keep a murderer in the household?

There was more satisfaction in being kept than in earning one's keep, in stealing a thing than in buying it. For money that came from a theft or from patronage was not the abstract money of the exchange-market; it had become personalized by its passage through the hands of someone who was not striking a bargain with the poet, it had lost its exchange-value, its equation of men with things. Dylan was far too shrewd and sensible to become a thief in any ordinary sense, though his attitudes, if the sense of poetic vocation had been lacking, could easily have led into any delinquency. What he did enjoy was the taking of things like shirts from his patrons. He early put such mild pilfering into practice, carrying off shirts or pyjamas from the directors who helped him to find his footing in documentary films; and he was still liable to purloin such articles in the days of his American tours, when he was incomparably better-off. He would never have dreamed of stealing a pin from one of his friends; it was the theft from a patron that he enjoyed and considered a just act. He needed patrons and used all his great charm to collect them, but at the same time he despised and resented them. Through his thefts, which were prudently of the kind that could be explained away as absent-minded borrowings, he got rid of his sense of inferiority by a demonstration that he looked on a patron as a mere instrument for his own convenience. Oddly, no one ever seemed to resent such actions.

What then had Caitlin meant when she said that Dylan was corrupt through and through? I still find it hard to say in a few words what I decided that she meant. The fierce independence of her spirit was in many ways the direct opposite of Dylan's assertion of superiority, or at least of the poet's right to use subservience as a way of cheating the cheaters, of removing the snake-sting from money by treating it as something utterly unimportant, something so evil by its very nature that any trick with it was excusable. I cannot imagine her in the slightest of underhand manoeuvres. Her pride lay in extenuating nothing about herself—or about Dylan. It had a simple nobility about it, a puzzled and pained nobility, which was very different from the poet's extrication of his dignity by assuming that he had none, by acting the part of a buffoon so as to hide the deepest buffoonery of all, the inability to believe that any action at all possesses value except in so far as it leads back into the formation of an image which seems dynamically self-sufficient.

I take Caitlin to have been referring to the whole body of Dylan's compulsions, his sly submissions to booze, sex, and money in the name of a poetry which excluded her. Excluded her at that level, anyway. I do not mean that she was standing apart and judging some peccadillo, but that she was standing in his centre and judging the peccadilloes as the expression of a total personality. And yet, in saying all that, one is saying no more than half the situation. She considered Dylan to be corrupt, but she loved him; she had married him as the pure poet and she continued to find that poet in the sty of corruption, miraculously reborn out of the muddy depths. She criticised him in terms of her own callow and splendid certainties, but she criticised him also in the terms laid down by his poetry. The conflict was in the poetry as well in her, though more hidden and doggedly slow in its working-out. Dylan was not only corrupt, or his poetry would have been of little value; the ultimate values lay in Caitlin's love for Dylan (and his for her) and in his poetry. And this was what held them together despite all the long chafings and the sudden flares; what gave the poetry its validity and its obdurately fought-out quality. In the last resort the love and the poetry alone mattered, a poetry into which he refused to admit a word, a single chime of sound, until he had tested and retested it for its truth, its human and poetic truth, to the utmost of his ability and the scope of his vision. But, in his devious system, the cost of that uncompromising truth was a perpetually compromising evasion in everyday life, the cost of the love was a perpetual flight from its steadfast presence.

He was never his proper self till there was something wrong with him; and if ever there was a danger of him becoming 'whole,' which was very remote, he would crack another of his chicken bones, without delay, and wander happily round in his sling, piling up plates with cucumber, pickled onions, tins of cod's roe, boiled sweets; to push into his mouth with an unseeing hand, as they came, while he went on stolidly reading his trash. His passion for lies was congenital: more a practice in invention than a lie. He would tell quite unnecessary ones, which did not in any way improve his situation: such as, when he had been to one cinema, saying it was another, and making up the film that was on: and the obvious ones, that only his mother pretended not to see through, like being carted off the bus into his home, and saying he had been having coffee, in a café, with a friend.

So Caitlin records, with domestic verisimilitude. Much of their marriage was a duel of jealousies. If Dylan was tormented by the thought

The second comers, the severers, the enemies from the deep
Forgotten dark, rest their pulse and bury their dead in her
faithless sleep,

she was tormented by her jealousy of his masculine freedoms (in booze and love-making, in desertion of the home) and of his poetic achievement. Carelessly and ruthlessly he brushed aside her own aspirations to self-expression in verse or dance. She could have accepted all that if she had seen it as part of the expression of a non-corrupt poet; but as things were, she could not accept it. She could carry on only if she resisted and denounced every symptom of corruption; and those symptoms she found in any manifestation of praise or patronage of Dylan, any response on his part to the flattering world. So, if Dylan's way of meeting patronage was by sly unscrupulous exploitation of it, with caustic debunking asides to his friends, her way was by frank and violent repudiation. Hence the deliberately uncouth and unconciliating behaviour at any parties or gatherings where she considered that Dylan was being lionised. Unless she smashed up some of the furniture and heavily embarrassed Dylan, she felt that she had been defeated and made an accomplice of the corrupting thing. Any attempts to draw her in and placate her, she took as an insult. She noted her 'chronic fear of friendship', and the fact that, 'like all prodigiously vain people, packed with false pride, I wanted to be loved for myself alone.' After Dylan's rise to fame, she found it impossible to believe that she was being loved or courted for herself alone.

It is easier to analyse the points of dissension between her and Dylan than to express the quiet centre at which despite everything they did meet in happiness and concord. But without the latter the dissension would have been meaningless and the marriage would have broken up at an early stage in futile recriminations. Caitlin called Dylan corrupt

because she knew that in an essential place he was untouched by corruption; she showed her bleak faces of discontent because she was sure of the love she shared with him; she was jealous of him because she was also proud of him. She resented the abandonment of her own ambitions, and yet at the innermost core she acquiesced and was happy, because she suckled the poems as well as the children. Dylan grumbled or took a blank or bland attitude of disregard for her irrationalities. Though he disliked her wrecking activities at parties, he gained a certain satisfaction from them. They were like some of his own daydreams being put into practice—though they had aspects of nightmare. For in them he was caught in a cleft stick, between his ideals of domestic decorum and respectability, and his own reckless bohemian behaviour. The actual moments of violence were embarrassing and disturbing, because they thrust on him the need to do something, to accept some sort of responsibility; but in retrospect they became the source of a savage comoedic glee.

I should like to round off this account of Caitlin by a few words on our last significant meeting. I had gone to Oxford where a group was putting on a play of mine about Robin Hood, and called down to see the Thomases at the cottage they rented from A. J. P. Taylor and his wife in a rather swampy place by the river. Dylan was away, but Caitlin emerged from a littered kitchen that was dominated by a huge calf's head on a dish. 'It's beginning to stink,' she said complainingly, with her sleeves rolled-up, looking like a captive princess in some folktale setting, puzzled and hopeful. 'I suppose I ought to throw it away, but Dylan would be annoyed.' She met us later for some drinks; and as usual I felt happy in her company, convinced (perhaps delusively) that we understood one another. We ran and rambled through the streets in an obscure game of hide-and-seek, ending in a don's room in Balliol. There we danced, shaking the shelves of books, a sort of dance-mime in dim light peopled with shadows. More than ever I felt that we understood one another, beyond words, in a turmoil of shuffling shadows. Shadows that scraped and bowed in a swinging cage about us, outside the world. In her concentrated grace I felt that was sufficiently expressed all that she meant of poetry and its corruption, a harsh harmony of exchanges, a benediction flowing from a pure centre. And at the same time a mockery, a deft parody, a tenaciously virginal image of the self, an animal cry of *noli-me-tangere* with bared teeth.

However, on the way back, sliding along the slippery tracks that wound among the clump of trees by the waterside near her cottage, I bashed myself against a tree-trunk and made my nose copiously bleed. Waking next morning with a sore and bloodied face, I felt that the

night's conclusion had perhaps been correct, a salutary reminder that the sort of journey I had been making into Caitlin's spirit meant in the end a collision with a brick wall or some other insuperable maze-obstacle. So I finish off my Caitlin quest with this slap in the face, a slap which I myself, and not she, gave me.

BACK THEN to Dylan. His drinking habits had begun to worsen in the years I first knew him, though my impression is that he had been a fairly steady beer-drinker before the war, but in no way an obsessional boozier as he later became. Probably the strain of the early war-years first drove him into serious drinking. In 1943 he could imbibe large quantities of drink, but in the periods when he, Phil and I were much together, he seemed to suffer from prolonged after-effects much worse than we did. One story will illustrate his capacities. I had wandered off from the War Office one lunch-hour to the pub we called the Burglar's Arms near Charlotte Street. I found Dylan leaning on the bar there in a soaked condition, with a dab of a cigarette in a corner of his sagging mouth and a dull glaze over his eyes. While in his sober periods he still had something of his chubby cherubic youth, in drink he rapidly grew his piggish mask, heavy-lipped and snouted, with his big white hands floundering, his big brown eyes growing more protuberant. Now, seeing his sozzled state, I felt that I could not leave him to a gutter-fate. Secure in the knowledge that no one would miss me in Eaton Square, I told him that I'd see him home. He responded with a belch and a grunt, and despite my remonstrances managed to wheedle two more pints out of the barmaid. 'When the pub shuts,' he muttered. 'Not before. Gainst my principles.' So we stayed on drinking. Just one more pint. And another. Then the pub shut and we moved out into Soho. Dylan insisted he had to see someone in a club. We found the club, but the only person Dylan wanted to see was the barman. After a few hours we moved on to another club. I had given up suggesting that we should find a taxi. As I grew drunker, Dylan grew soberer, or so it seemed. The pubs had opened and we spent most of our remaining cash. Then Dylan managed to cajole his way into another club, an expensive one, where we went round the tables of various acquaintances of his, who bought us drinks. I said nothing, but was tolerated as a hanger-on of Dylan's, who was in army uniform. About one o'clock we left and found a taxi. In my memory, Dylan now seemed quite sober, having gained a second or third wind; but no doubt I was no longer capable of an objective judgment. I just had enough sense to stop the taxi as it was passing Victoria station, hand the driver the few pennies and sixpences I had left, and tell him to drive on to Dylan's address.

A volubly-protesting Dylan was thus planted with the problem of somehow settling accounts with the driver. I chuckled vaguely as I staggered to my lodgings.

Towards the end of the war the first full nemesis came on Dylan for his way of life, a nemesis that he always referred to as cirrhosis of the liver, no doubt with romantic simplification. I forget the exact date when he was taken off to hospital. I was not present at his emergence; but the Irish couple who went to welcome him back into the noisy world declared that his first words as he looked dazedly round were, 'Where's the nearest pub?' He had been warned that he must stop drinking. A few days later I remember drinking with him and the couple to the accompaniment of records of James Joyce reading *Anna Livia Plurabelle*.

But though Dylan was carried on a wave of terror and fascinated submission to the death which he made into a fated one, it is not true that he contemplated the certain end with any stoic calm or settled acceptance. He even made an effort at this time to cure himself of his drinking habits. A Danish woman whom I knew and who was married to a doctor was then doing some psychiatric work at one of the large London hospitals. She told me years later that Dylan called in, described himself as a poet, and asked to be cured of drinking obsessions. The psychiatrist treated him as something of a joke and bantered him about being a poet; he had never heard of Dylan and was mildly irritated by a patient portentously announcing himself in such terms. Dylan didn't take the raillery at all well and failed to turn up for the appointment that was made. One wonders what might have happened if he had encountered an intelligent and sympathetic psychiatrist. Probably nothing.

The ignorance of the psychiatrist about Dylan brings up the rôle of mass-media in forming reputations. From the time of his competition-successes in the *Sunday Referee*, and then after Edith Sitwell's review in 1936, Dylan had a certain reputation among highbrows; he came also to be well known in the documentary-film world as well as the literary pubs. But it was not until the documentary-film market began to dry up after the war and he turned to the BBC as a reader of poetry, that he reached a wider public. I recall noting the very moment of his reputation's expansion. He was one of several of us who read verse at the Ethical Society's rooms in Bayswater; his extremely fine and controlled reading of 'Into Her Lying-down Head' remains clear in my memory. There was only the usual small audience. Then, a few months later, with his first important BBC renderings having intervened, he gave a reading (somewhere in Kensington, I think) at which there was an overflowing and rapturous audience of young people.

I should like to stress the considerable difference between his early readings, at home or to small groups, and those given to radio and then to meetings in the U.S.A. His early style was richly eloquent, but with no paraded effects; in particular his readings of D. H. Lawrence's poems on flowers and animals had a fine subtlety of sustained rhythm. On the radio, generally after encouraging himself with much booze, he fell back on the stunning power and volume of his palpitatingly Welsh flow-of-sound, pulling out all the stops of what was described as his mighty Wurlitzer. He had recourse to increasingly ham-effects; and though the resulting Wagnerian effusion had its grandeurs, it quite lacked the intimate sensitivity of the days when he read solely for his own delight.

At some time in his life—presumably before he first left Wales—Dylan had read well and widely. Phil speaks of him as

the condemner of practically all his contemporaries, who yet had genuine humility—though he rarely spoke of his writings, save mockingly—when he was at work. He wrote in school exercise-books in a laboured, childlike hand; and I have seen him bent for hours over those books, often beside him a glass of beer or his children's sweet-rations, while carefully he wrote and then crossed out what he had written, hours—indeed, days—being spent pondering on one word. Those who saw him only as the truculent braggart in pubs, a cigarette forever dangling from his bottom-lip, or laughed with him when his fat little body quivered with laughter (for I cannot ever remember him laughing loudly) or watched him tense over the shove-ha'penny board, ready to lose his temper should he be beaten—he was an excellent player—knew only one side, the Panurge-side, of the man. They did not know those hours of torment over his childish exercise-books scrawled with his childish writing.

Only once did I catch Dylan reading a good book, and that was *Dombey and Son*, for he had a natural love of Dickens, one of whose characters he might well have been. Otherwise he read only detective-fiction, and usually while he lay in bed. At one time, however, he must have read deeply, his knowledge of poetry being no slight one, and when with friends we used sometimes to play a game in which each wrote a parody of some poet—Shelley, Byron, Browning, and so on—Dylan's effort not only showed that he knew the man's work well but it was often an excellent poem in its own right. Deeply do I regret having lost a parcel of these taken from him one night in a pub.

In 1943 he was much taken up with a periodical that dealt with various perversities, in particular those connected with rubber. He read passages out with much gusto. I found the accounts of naked lovers tied up or variously garbed in rubber rather mysterious, funny but unexciting. However, the imagery remained with Dylan (though not affecting his poetry, I think), as is to be seen in his retorts to persons who asked him why he had come to America: 'To continue my lifelong search for naked women in wet mackintoshes.'

One may say that, roughly, there were three Dylans. First there was

the quiet well-mannered unobtrusive Dylan of his quite sober moments. (Phil mentions meeting Dylan soon after his first arrival in London, at the Angel and Crown in St. Martin's Lane, and finding him then 'shy, almost timid,' with little to say.) The time when I saw him most invincibly reserved and modest in demeanour was during a visit of his parents to London. In his father's presence he was quiet, waiting to be spoken to, without the least fraction of his pub-swagger. Of the parents I recall only their typically Welsh lower-middle class appearance, gentle, assured, withdrawn: qualities that Dylan echoed with no sign of rebellion or double-meaning.

Secondly, there was the halfdrunk Dylan, charming and over-flowing with bonhomie and his particular kind of wit and humour. Thirdly, there was the drunken-snouted Dylan, capable of behaving in the grossest and most provoking way. The halfdrunk Dylan was the boon companion, who at his best wove round himself delightful flights of fancy and liked to reveal his remarkable powers as a mime, a parodist, a pricker of all pomposities and falsities. I recall especially one evening spent at the pub at the end of Cheyne Walk, when he had with him Constantine FitzGibbon, whom I took to be a young American poet. Dylan went on improvising all sorts of bizarre characters, with C.F. giving him a grave-mannered support. By reading his lighter stories and *Under Milk Wood* one can get some idea of what his improvised characterisations and his humorous inventions were like on such occasions. (A strong influence, by the way, which no one seems to have spotted in *Under Milk Wood* was that of T. F. Powys. To check up, I asked Phil and he told me that Dylan was a keen admirer of T.F.)

Once I showed Dylan some photographs of paintings by my father, in which the nudes were particularly capacious and spacious. Dylan turned them over slowly with glistening eyes and then said in a whisper of hushed awe, of sheer incredulity, 'And to think that there are fairies!'

I have stressed Dylan's fear and dislike of intellectualism. His effort to start poetry off from the simplest organic basis of experience, the birth-moment, implied a rejection of all imposed ideas or guiding lines. Not that Dylan of all people was so naïve as not to recognize that in any concatenation of words there must necessarily cohere meanings applicable at all levels, social as well as personal, political as well as aesthetic. But this fact did not make the effort of reduction seem any the less significant or worthwhile in his eyes. It merely meant that the expanded meanings and complex associations should emerge from, and find their verification in, the organic image at its highest point of concentration—not from any intellectual line of argument or any external wish to be on the side of the angels. Thus Dylan was constantly aware

of the wider relations of his images. Only the slightest oscillation of their particular point of balance was indeed needed to bring out a plain social application, as occurs, for instance, in an early poem 'Our Eunuch Dreams'. Here his reaction to the world of the cinema, which meant so much to him, is so sharp that he is caught at the moment of the direct blow, a moment that he usually let pass before he mustered his poetic energies. He demands that the existing situation be reversed and that its false art, the anti-art of alienation, give way to the positive art of truth in which the liberated powers of men may be realized:

The dream that kicks the buried from their sack
And lets the trash be honoured as the quick.
This is the world. Have faith.

For we shall be a shouter like the cock,
Blowing the old dead back; our shots shall smack
The image from the plates;
And we shall be fit fellows for a life,
And who remain shall flower as they love,
Praise to our faring hearts.

At the outset (in *New Verse*, 1934) Dylan had defined his creed: 'I take my stand with any revolutionary body that asserts it to be the right of all men to share, equally and impartially, every production of man from man from the sources of production at man's disposal, for only through such an essentially revolutionary body can there be the possibility of a communal art.' Treese has stated, 'By 1938, when I was discussing this statement with him, Thomas felt that he should withdraw it, and that it no longer applied.' I should like to know in more detail how that conversation with Dylan went. Certainly by 1938 he would have felt that the wording was too naïve and absolute, too little related to actual politics; and perhaps at that moment he was at the height of his struggle to concentrate on the birth-death image. In any event the 1934 announcement remained in all essentials his creed, though in later years he understood something of the complexity of the issues that it raised. What had changed and developed were both his ideas of poetry and his ideas of revolution. Or, rather, what had changed was the perspective in which he viewed his original ideas, the range of possibilities that he now intuited.

Augustus John has written, 'At one time Dylan told me that he joined the C.P., but, quite rightly, detached himself on finding that henceforth he would be expected to make his work a medium for propaganda. He was not a student of sociology, but, I think, like so many of his generation, discovered in himself a feeling for the underdog.' I fear that John has confused some story that Dylan told him: perhaps that he had

thought of joining the Communist Party at one time, but was put off by the fear of pressures to turn him into a propagandist. It is barely possible, though not likely, that he had joined in Wales before coming to London, at the time when he had ideas like that cited above. If so, he may well have been pushed around by some jealous branch-secretary. In 1934 we find him writing to the *Swansea and West Wales Guardian*, asking the editor to go as far as was possible in making readers aware 'of the immoral restrictions placed upon them, of the humbug and smug respectability that works upon them all their handcuffed days.' He said that 'at the roots of being lies not the greed for property or money, but the desire, large as the universe, to express ourselves freely and to the utmost limits of our individual capabilities.' He went on to denounce the fascist-minded. During the period of the Spanish Civil War, though he was against Franco, he was too obsessed by the problems of hammering out the primary bases of his poetry to think much about politics; and if in the early years of the war he had joined the C.P. in a momentary wave of antifascist enthusiasm, Phil would certainly have known.

I have asked various persons who were in a position to know if Dylan ever joined the C.P. in London: A. L. Morton (who helped Neuberger on the *Referee* and recalled the arrival of Dylan's first poem), Randall Swingler, and Edgell Rickword. None of them had ever heard of Dylan as a Communist. Further, Dylan said to me more than once, around 1949-50, 'If all the party-members were like you and John Sommerfield, I'd join on the spot.' He never suggested that he had already joined and been driven out by sectarianism. He wrote to his socialist friend Bert Trick a scathing letter on well-to-do middle-class intellectuals who became communists 'with no idea at all of what they priggishly call the "class-struggle".' The individual and the mass can be made poetically important 'only when the status and position of both are considered by that part of the consciousness which is outside both. . . . Historically poetry is the social and economic creed that endures.'

THE ESSENTIAL POINT however is that, despite his deep-going anarchism, he was never hostile to the Communist Party and that he remained all his life, as John says, a champion of the under-dog. I think his experiences of the early years of the war had much to do with the rebirth of his early political attitudes in a new form. Certainly those years did much to widen his experience and his sympathies. In his need to keep to traditional terms he expressed this new breadth mainly through religious imagery and idioms. About 1945, discussing with him what I felt as a new scope of vision, a more active sense of human solidarity, in his poems, I write, 'I think your work in documentary films has helped, by

forcing you to find terms in which to define your position plainly and explicitly.' He shook his head and denied that his scripts had at all affected his poems. I had indeed put the matter too crudely, and he was right in rejecting my formulation. But I still think his film-work did help make him think more directly about the political world and that it thus played its part, together with his reactions of pity and terror to the actual war, in begetting such poems as 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London'. More importantly, it stirred his dramatic sense, made him want to find a cinematic sweep of objectively-based images, and thus led on to *Under Milk Wood*.

It is worthwhile to glance at the script of *These are the Men*, remembering that Dylan would not have played a passive part in its conception and working-out. I have heard him and Phil discuss their scripts, and they were largely responsible for the ideas and treatments. Dylan's value as a script-writer lay precisely in this fact; for there was nothing brilliant in the actual wording of his texts. He lacked the capacity to invent dramatic themes, Phil being much his superior in this matter; but he overflowed with illustrative or interpretative ideas. In *These are the Men* somebody else no doubt had the idea of using the Nazi film *Triumph des Willens* against its makers, though this too may have been Dylan's own suggestion; in any event the theme and the idiom may be taken as genuinely expressing Dylan's political positions. The film uses passages from a Nazi documentary on the 1934 Reich Party Congress at Nuremberg, and inserts a deflating commentary in place of the actual speeches. But what I want to cite here are the opening sequences.

(The mood of the opening sequence is quiet and slow. From a height we look down on to men baking bread, men going about their work quietly and efficiently, men of no particular nationality, just working men. We see them in the bakery, in the fields at harvest time, on the dockside, on a trawler, in an iron foundry.)

Who are we? We are the makers the workers the bakers
Making and baking bread all over the earth in every town and village,
In country quiet, in the ruins and wounds of a bombed street
With the wounded crying outside for the mercy of death in the city,
Through war and pestilence and earthquake
Baking the bread to feed the hunger of history.

We are the makers, the workers, the farmers, the sailors,
The tailors, the carpenters, the colliers, the fishermen,
We dig the soil and the rock, we plough the land and the sea,
So that all men may eat and be warm under the common sun.

(Now we see behind the workers, behind the work they are doing, the shadow of war. The men are still doing their jobs, jobs that are done all over the world, pottery, carpentry, sleeper-laying, steel-making. This is their peacetime

work, but we see too what they or their brothers all over the world are doing now—fighting on every front.)

We are the makers, the workers, the wounded, the dying, the dead,
The blind, the frostbitten, the burned, the legless, the mad
Sons of the earth who are fighting and hating and killing now
In snow and sand and heat and mud;
In the streets of never-lost Stalingrad,
In the spine-freezing cold of the Caucasus,
In the jungles of Papua,
In the tank-churned black slime of Tunisia.

We are the makers, the workers, the starving, the slaves
In Greece and China and Poland, digging our own graves.

Who sent us to kill, to be killed, to lose what we love?
Widowed our women, unfathered our sons, broke the heart of our homes?
Who dragged us out, out of our beds and houses and workshops
Into the battle-yard of spilt blood and split bones?

(We are back in the bakery again—the camera tracks forward as one of the bakers opens the fire-door—the camera still moves forward till the flames of the fire fill the screen.)

Who set us at the throats of our comrades?
Who is to blame?
What men set man against man?
Shout, shout, shout out their name!

(The flames dissolve into hands raised in the Nazi salute—the sound dissolves into the frenzied 'sieg heil' of masses of men and women who crane their necks and push their fellows. From a great height we look down on the mighty crowd in the Nuremberg Festival . . .)

Dylan lent me the script for a collection of Declamations or Poetry in Action, which I was making for Tambimuttu; so he definitely accepted full responsibility for the work. Somehow or other I lost the impulse to complete the book and it was never done. What is specially characteristic of Dylan in his script is the stress on the solidarity of common tasks, on work as a uniting factor. Though his politics always remained rudimentary, they were based on this simple and fundamental idea: that work under the common sun united men and gave them their essential humanity, while everything that cut across the union—exploitation, racial or other divisions, war as the final monstrous expression of the alienation of men from one another and from the earth—was manifestly evil and needed no further exposure for its total condemnation. Brinnin therefore is partly right in his comments on Dylan, though he completely fails to grasp the depth of Dylan's convictions and the central part they played in his work:

Dylan's political naïveté, it seemed to me, was a consequence of his promiscuous affection for humanity and of his need for emotional identification with the lowest stratum of society. His socialism was basically Tolstoyan, the attempt of a spiritual aristocrat to hold in one embrace the good heart of mankind, a gesture and a purpose uncontaminated by the real-politik of the twentieth century. While he expressed himself strongly on political matters and tended indiscriminately to support the far left, his attitude was a kind of stance unsupported by knowledge, almost in defiance of knowledge. As long as, anywhere in the world, there existed groups of men pilloried by the forces of propertied power, Dylan wanted to be counted among their sympathisers. And yet no political manifestations of this ever showed in his poetry. Americans who had celebrated him as the romantic liberator—as the poet who had broken the domination of the once politically minded generation of Auden, Spender, MacNeice, and Lewis, would have been perplexed to find that he was actually far more censorious of the status quo than any of the other British poets.

The passage about spiritual aristocracy there would have made Dylan want to spew; and the assumption of his political ignorance merely shows up the ignorance of Brinnin himself. What is true is that Dylan's politics were at root the immediate politics of a clear-eyed and vigilant sympathy with one's fellows; and without such politics his poetry could never have come into existence or developed. Further, Dylan's love was not promiscuous or indiscriminate; it had its aspect of universal sympathy, as shown in the passage cited from *These were the Men*; but it also sharply excluded all who battered in any way, however abstract and hidden, on human suffering and division. It therefore excluded the major part of the intellectual world. There were very few contemporary writers indeed for whom Dylan had the least respect.

Dylan signed the Stockholm Peace Petition, the Rosenberg Petition, and actively supported the Authors World Peace Appeal. He was always ready to collaborate with us in Fore Publications, though we forbore to ask him for poems for *Our Time* since he was hard-up and we did not pay. However, when Paul Potts (whom I had introduced to Dylan and who did much to help the Thomas family in the last part of their Chelsea stay) got together a collection for *O.T.* in honour of Lorca, Dylan at once offered 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid'. He wrote a satire for *Circus* and was keen to support our series of Key-Poets (for which Edith Sitwell contributed the first booklet) with its hope of 'breaking down the barriers between poet and audience, and giving poetry a chance to re-discover itself as activity' (the last phrase is from Tristan Tzara); he allowed us to cite his name and was going to give us the never-finished poem of which 'In the White Giant's Thigh' was a part.

Doubtless there were many other such expressions of his downright political position; for I never knew him hesitate for a moment in giving his support to such movements. He was friendly with Aloys Skoumal,

cultural attaché round 1949 at the Czech embassy, who gained him an invitation to attend the foundation of the Writers Union in Prague in March. (MacNeice was also invited, but did not reply to the letter.) Skoumal has told me of Dylan: 'Before he left for Prague, he came to our place in Willesden where he spent an evening with my wife and me. We talked about various topics, also about Wales. To my remarks on Welsh National Eisteddfods—I have attended one at Colwyn Bay in 1947—he reacted in a tone which was not exactly hostile but certainly rather sarcastic.' Then I showed him some translations of his poems into Czech made by Offer and others during the war. He asked me to read a few stanzas of these, and in return he offered to read to us a couple of his poems in the original. I need not assure you how fascinated we were by his performance.* At Prague he enjoyed wandering about among the people and did not pay much attention to the official proceedings. One tale about him was that he got to know the wine-shops, into which he went on his own and ordered a double slivovice. He invariably paid with a five-crown note (worth about 6d. at the time), which he produced with a flourish and the magnanimous remark, 'You may keep the change.' Nobody remonstrated and Dylan was left with the impression of a lavish gesture. He enjoyed the company of the fine and jovial poet Nezval and of the large and equally jovial novelist Jan Drda. The latter, says Skoumal, was at Dobris, the Writers Home in the country, with Dylan.

'There was still plenty of snow when they took him for a walk in the park. Properly speaking,' says Drda, 'Dylan Thomas did not seem to walk at all, he frisked and gambolled, he made the impression of a bear floating in the air.' Another tale was that in order to protest against a dull literal-minded translator who had been allotted to him (I also once suffered from her), he climbed up on to the rail of the Charles Bridge, clasped one of the statues that decorated it, and threatened to jump into the river unless he was at once given a new translator. The protest was effective.

Dylan took the Peace Movements seriously and turned up at the meeting of writers held at Pearl Binder's house in 1950 to discuss the wording of our Appeal. I had arrived much too early and went to the pub across the road on the way to Hammersmith. Dylan came in. He had

* Skoumal was a small imperturbably cheerful man, a Catholic with a special love of our 18th-century literature, and of Celtic culture (hence his visit to Wales); he had a capacity to cite Swift in unexpectedly apposite ways. He has translated into Czech *Gulliver's Travels*, a Swift Anthology, *Tristram Shandy* (the first Czech version, published 1963 and at once sold out), Conrad's *Notstromo* and a collection of his short stories, K. Mansfield's stories, etc.; he has written on Swift and Wilde, lectured on Yeats, Synge, MacDiarmid, O'Casey; is working on *Vanity Fair*. With his wife he has done the two *Alice* books.

just returned from Persia where he had been working on a documentary film. There were upheavals going on in Persia and I said, 'Congratulations on starting the revolution.' For a moment he was disconcerted, then he gave one of his heaving laughs and expressed the hope that something shattering was really going to happen. At the meeting he had by far the most to say, arguing over every sentence of the Appeal and insisting that we must try as much as was humanly possible to get away from committee-jargon and make emotionally-direct statements. He dominated the discussion and all his amendments were agreed to.

These points about Dylan's political attitudes and ideas are not irrelevant to the consideration of his poetry and the creative conflict there revealed. I have tried indeed in these reminiscences to keep to matters which I think are bound up with that conflict. To make the application of the conflict expressed in his life to the conflict driving on and yet limiting his poetry would involve a detailed examination of a number of his best poems; here I can only indicate briefly the way in which I think the application could and should be made.

DYLAN, as I said earlier, was obsessed with the birth-copulation-death sequence or rather unity. Because of the concentration on organic experience, he might be able to see death as a birth, but he also was forced more and more to see birth (and copulation) as death. The fear of death (impotence in body and mind) became more and more oppressive, weighing down as a solid mass that had to be laboriously and painfully displaced before he could find the words he needed. In the postwar years his sense of an inner void grew increasingly acute; the more he felt great possibilities before him, the more he felt quite incapable of the concentration and comprehension which could put them into form. Brinnin is again half correct in saying:

... he and his unhappiness lay in the conviction that his creative powers were failing, that his great work was finished. He had moved from 'darkness into some measure of light', a progress attended by the acclaim of the literate part of the English-speaking world; but now he had arrived, he was without the creative resources to maintain and expand his position. As a consequence, he saw his success as fraudulent and himself as an impostor. While he expressed such thoughts largely as self-deprecating jokes, he could not disguise their gnawing reality or force.

It is true that he felt lost, but not because his work was finished. He was lost because he had begun splendidly and could not achieve a conclusion. His sense of being a fraud went far deeper than his fear of not being able to carry on; it was based in the conflict in his character and work that Caitlin had defined by calling him corrupt; it related to

his written work as well as the works he could not write. The problem before him was not what Brinnin states:

Would he continue, year by year, to be the roaring boy, the daemonic poet endlessly celebrating the miracle of man under the eyes of God? Would he, by some reversal of spirit, some redirection of his genius, become the wise, grey, and intellectually disciplined poet moving toward an epical summation of his lyrical gifts?

Such questions show a complete failure to penetrate the nature of Dylan and his work. The problem was to realize and control what was phoney and limited in the roaring boy, so that the creative conflict of the earlier work could be released into fuller dramatic forms with a wider human scope. Dylan was perfectly well aware of this. (Incidentally the phrase 'Under the eyes of God' points to the one blatant sentimentality in Dylan. He had no belief whatever in God or in Christ or in personal immortality, heaven, and hell; yet he spoke of writing 'for the love of Man and in praise of God.' No doubt he had his personal definition of God as something like 'the totality of the living universe,' but he knew quite well that the phrase would be given a pietistic meaning alien to his whole outlook. Brinnin cites him as saying that his aim was to produce 'poems in praise of God's world by a man who didn't believe in God.' One can imagine Dylan's blistering comments on any other poet who admitted to such an aim. I am not however criticising his use of religious imagery in the poems, especially of Christ's Passion; for such imagery is a precious and deeply significant part of the human heritage and does not necessarily imply that the poet using it is a Christian in any conventional sense of the term.)

Dylan wanted to develop dramatic and more objective forms of poetry; he realized that only by such forms could he break through the ring of obsessions, the tightening patterns which were strangling him. But for him the dramatization could not mean merely a change of genre, a projection of his unresolved inner conflict in a theatre of the absurd or of anguish. He declared that he wanted now to write only poems that were 'happy', and in this declaration he showed his acute self-understanding. He accepted the earth and his fellows—in the terms set forth by his 1934 statement and implied by the opening sequences of *These Were the Men*. A happy poem is not a poem without conflict; it is a poem in which the conflict is resolved. Dylan had come to realize that by the very intensity of his effort to remain lyrically concrete he had delivered himself over to the abstraction in a new and insidious form. To redeem and advance what was truly concrete in his achieved poems, he had to find the resolution of his conflicts in forms that broke through

the limitations of the previous phase. Mankind had to become more than self and otherness.

Under Milk Wood was his attempt to break through into the enlarged and more objectively-based form. To belittle it in comparison with the more concentrated poems, which own a powerful dialectic of thought and emotion, is to misconceive its aim. Its simplicity of structure could not have been won without the struggle of the dialectic preceding it; and it represented the first necessary escape from private symbolism into a fuller world where the dialectic could achieve a new birth, with great new possibilities of expansion. The opera that Dylan planned to write for Stravinsky would have made an excellent next step.

'His' opera was to be about the rediscovery of our planet following an atomic misadventure. There would be a re-creation of language, only the new one would have no abstractions; there would be only people, objects and words. He promised to avoid poetic indulgences: 'No conceits. I'll knock them all on the head.'

But he had reached the point where such a conception could only be a wild dream. *Under Milk Wood* had been completed under long and desperate pressure. The postwar years in general had seen Dylan steadily wrecking himself and dissipating his powers in an unavailing effort to escape the blind terror of death. He could not change the system of his life, the domestic hell and the flights which had become mere repetition of stale stimulations. He could not carry on to the new level the struggles defined in his poems up to and including *Deaths and Entrances*. He could only, by terrible and exhausting efforts, continue the same struggles and wring out a few more poems in which a painfully won enrichment of old themes disguised the inner dearth. *Under Milk Wood* emerged belatedly as a sketch of the new artistic start of which he dreamed but which he had become incapable of securing. In the last eight years the nemesis of what Caitlin in bitter insight and impotence had called his corruption, took more and more charge of him. In a handful of poems he held the terrifying darkness at bay, reaffirming his sense of man's unity with nature and of the alienating curse that broke the unity. He was fighting a steadily-losing battle, sucked-under more and more by booze and his fear-hatred of money. In many respects he disliked going to the U.S.A., and yet everything in him that Caitlin had called corrupt found the invitations alluring, irresistible. His death in New York was the logical result. Brinnin's book about the tours is the record not of Dylan in any fullness of the man and the poet, but of Dylan caught in the nemesis of his corruption.

To carry this analysis further would launch me into a detailed discussion of the poems, an adventure that I wish to keep for a separate essay.

Here it is enough to conclude with a few more memories. Though Dylan disliked intellectual arguments, he was ready enough to tackle even literary or philosophic subjects if they came up by some side-approach in company that he didn't suspect. Once in a talk (1950-1) I cited a passage from Nietzsche, to which Dylan warmly responded. We wandered into a discussion of Nietzsche, Dylan showing himself well acquainted with *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. In the end—in the pub's pissoir, I remember with pictorial clarity—he remarked, 'Why don't you write about him? You ought to.'

'That'd be the last stroke to bring me down as a compromised Marxist,' I said jokingly.

'To hell with that. Do it.'

I said that I would. Some day I'll do it and dedicate it to him.

The last time when we had anything to say to one another was at the Savage Club. As usual, he ate no lunch and sat hunched in a dull haze over his beer while we others went into the dining-room. Afterwards, we somehow began talking of critics and poetry. He had had one of his second-winds and for the moment showed no signs of beer-immersion. We talked of Dickens, Eluard, and the things written about Dylan himself. I began talking of his work to him, which I hadn't done for years. Finally I said, 'I'll write it all down. Better that way. Do you mind if I write about you?'

Dylan, no respecter of persons, answered, 'Nothing I'd like better.' He gave an owlish nod and began to slump back into a sozzled state. He had to go to some provincial town, I forget why. As we went out of the Club, I paused on the steps, took out a pound note, and put it in his hand. He looked to see what it was, nodded without any particular emotion, and went off. I didn't know why I'd made the gesture; and I still don't know why. He was better-off than I was at that time. Perhaps I wanted to express the fact that, though by no means without my money-worries, I felt that money touched a deeper level of fear in him than in me. However that was, the action was certainly meant as a token of friendship, of love; something of a desperate token, an admission of failure to achieve the desired communication at conscious levels. I stood on the steps, also rather stunned with beer, trying to understand what I had done. Dylan had hailed a taxi. As he stepped in, he turned round and waved, a happy smile spreading over his face. I waved back.

