

The Opera that Never was: Dylan Thomas and Igor Stravinsky's Projected Collaboration

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In 1953 there was a projected collaboration between Dylan Thomas and Igor Stravinsky: an opera whose libretto was to be written by the poet and set to music by the composer. Unfortunately, due to Thomas's death that same year, this plan never materialised. The aim of this article is to offer a detailed exploration of the context within which this project originated and what it entailed for the poet, especially in relation to the direction where Thomas's work was taking him before his death. The opera with Stravinsky could have been the culmination of the poet's work inasmuch as it brought together his love of sound, rhythm and music, the horror of the war, his fascination with language and the near-extinction of human life. Moreover, the artists were able to exchange a series of letters before Thomas's death. The second contribution of our article is the publication of Stravinsky's letters to Thomas, which have not been previously published. Whilst the narrative of their encounters and relationship has been shaped in certain ways by different writers, a close examination of the primary source materials—the accounts of friends, the content of the letters and the circumstances in which they were written—help shed light on this highly promising, but uncompleted, project.

Keywords: Dylan Thomas; Igor Stravinsky; Libretto; Correspondence; WWII; Language

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La ópera que nunca fue: la proyectada colaboración entre Dylan Thomas e Igor Stravinsky

En 1953 Dylan Thomas e Igor Stravinsky comenzaron a dar forma a una idea que aspiraba a convertirse en una ópera con música del compositor y libreto del poeta. Por desgracia, y

debido a la muerte de Thomas ese mismo año, esta nunca se concluyó. El objetivo de este artículo es ofrecer un examen detallado del contexto en el que se originó este proyecto y cómo influyó en Dylan Thomas, especialmente con relación a su poesía en esos años. La ópera con Stravinsky podría haber supuesto la culminación de la obra del poeta en tanto que pretendía aunar su amor por el sonido, el ritmo y la música, el horror de la guerra y su fascinación por el lenguaje y la extinción de la vida humana. Una segunda contribución de nuestro artículo es la publicación de las cartas inéditas que Stravinsky escribiera a Thomas poco antes de que este falleciera. Si bien la crítica ha dedicado algún espacio a las particularidades de la relación entre ambos autores, lo cierto es que el estudio del tema de la ópera y de la correspondencia entre Thomas y Stravinsky, así como de las circunstancias en las que se produjo esta colaboración, ayudan claramente a entender mejor lo que supuso para ambos artistas este prometedor proyecto que finalmente no pudo ver la luz.

Palabras clave: Dylan Thomas; Igor Stravinsky; Libretto; Correspondencia; Segunda Guerra Mundial; Lenguaje

Sopratutto cercava una cosa che gli scrittori consiocono bene, cide un punto da cui guardare le cose che no esisterebbe se non ci fossero loro. Se non trovi que l'angolatura insistente, stai facendo una fática inutile
(Baricco, *Una certa idea di mondo*).

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1953 there was a projected collaboration between Dylan Thomas and Igor Stravinsky: an opera whose libretto was to be written by the poet and set to music by the composer. Unfortunately, due to Thomas's death that same year, the plan never materialised. The first aim of this article is thus to offer a detailed exploration into the contextual backdrop within which the project originated and what it entailed for the poet, especially in relation to the direction his work was taking him before his death. The opera with Stravinsky could have been the culmination of the poet's work inasmuch as it brought together his love of sound and music, the horror of the war, his fascination with language and the near-extinction of human life. For this reason, we firstly concentrate on the circumstances that led both artists to go to the U.S., which reveal how their connection was possible. We then focus on the themes of the project itself, essentially language and war, departing from the fact that they cannot be understood without taking into account the opera's larger musical and theatrical context or without the consideration of Thomas's work at the end of his career. Moreover, the artists were able to exchange a series of letters before the poet's death. The second contribution of our article is the publication of Stravinsky's letters to Thomas, which have not been previously published. Whilst the narrative of

their encounters and relationship has been shaped in certain ways by different writers, a close examination of the primary source materials—the accounts of friends, the content of the letters and the circumstances in which they were written—helps shed light on this highly promising, but uncompleted, project.

2. THE LAND OF PROMISE: THOMAS AND STRAVINSKY IN THE U.S.

Both before and during World War II, many artists decided to flee from the political strife in Europe and emigrate to the United States. Such was the case of Aldous Huxley, who went to the U.S. in 1937, and British writer W.H. Auden also emigrated to America shortly before the outbreak of the war in 1939, for various personal and political reasons. It became commonplace at the time to begin a teaching and lecturing career on emigrating to America and there was a rise in the number of celebrity poetry circuits where writers were able to find significant sources of income, especially linked to the creative writing programmes of various universities, many of which were established after the war, and this resulted in the “academic institutionalization of poetry in American post-war literary culture” (Wasley 2013, 120). Over a decade after Huxley and Auden left for the U.S., Thomas went overseas on a series of lecture tours; nevertheless, his motivations were different to those of his contemporaries.

2.1. Thomas in America: An Escape

Thomas navigated several worlds throughout his life: from Swansea, where he was born, to Laugharne, London and America. Specifically, though, America was for Thomas an escape, a refuge. Living within a context of violence and political strife left an imprint on the writer, and according to Mellor, Thomas’s wartime works “repeatedly return to representations of the organic as a way both of capturing these moments of intense violence, and of drawing meaning from them” (2018, 158). It is not clear when the idea of an escape from post-war Britain occurred to Thomas exactly, but before the war ended, he already had America in mind, as a place that was a long way away and where he would be able to stop worrying, especially about money (Ferris 1978, 198). In 1949, John Malcolm Brinnin, who had just been appointed as the director of the Poetry Center at the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Hebrew Association in New York, extended an invitation to Thomas to give poetry readings in the U.S., which the latter swiftly accepted.

Before his tours in the U.S., Thomas also caught the attention of James Laughlin, from the New Directions publishing company, who took him on as an author and made it his business to promote Thomas’s profile in the U.S. More evidence of the fact that Thomas’s work was already attracting attention in the U.S. was his winning of the Blumenthal Prize for Poetry in 1938. New Directions put out *The World I Breathe*, Thomas’s first U.S. publication, in 1939 and it received mostly positive reviews by poets such as John Berryman and Robert Lowell (Lycett 2004, 218). Despite squabbles with Ann Watkins, Higham’s New York

associates, more New Directions publications ensued—namely, *New Poems* (1943), *Selected Writing of Dylan Thomas* (1946) and *In Country Sleep and Other Poems* (1952).

Thomas went to the U.S. four times, which in total added up to a period of almost twelve months. The first tour took place in 1950, during which he delivered poetry readings and attended many parties and a variety of engagements. The second time he went to America was with his wife Caitlin in 1952. Finally, in 1953, the year he met Stravinsky, he went twice—first in April and then in October. He died a month later. Although for the poet America initially embodied the idea of something different, unexplored—an escape—, this was not the reality he encountered. Thomas's broadcast talk *A Visit to America* (1953) is in fact a satirical account of the large numbers of what Thomas called “a dazed and prejudiced procession of European lecturers” who went on tours to the U.S., many of whom he described as “fat poets with slim volumes” (1953, 63). However, looking beyond his witty lines, Thomas did not describe his experience in America as particularly joyful. Although he recalled being greeted with enthusiasm and generosity in the country, he also spoke about how, as time passed, writers slowly began to mistrust themselves when they realised that audiences greeted all lecturers with equal enthusiasm. The reality of what these tours entailed for Thomas is clear: “And, in their diaries, more and more do such entries appear as, ‘No way of escape’ or ‘Buffalo!’ or ‘I am beaten,’ until at last they cannot write a word” (1953, 63-64). According to Ackerman, the U.S. proved to be a world that was unfamiliar and destructive, which made Thomas feel helpless and isolated, as his letter to Caitlin from Kenyon College shows:

I wrote to you last from be-Biffled Washington. Then I sweated back to New York. Then I read in Columbia University, New York. I flew to Cornell University, read, caught a night-sleeper-train to Ohio, arriving this morning. This evening, in an hour's time, I do my little act at Kenyon University, then another night train, this time to Chicago, I never seem to sleep in a bed any more, only on planes and trains. I'm hardly living; *I'm just a voice on wheels* (Ackerman 1991, 42, emphasis added).

In fact, whilst the tours provided him with the money he desperately needed, they also exacerbated his marital problems and the decline of his health. When he set out on his fourth tour on October 19, 1953, his health was already greatly deteriorated—he had been suffering from recent blackouts—but contrary to his mother's and wife's advice to stay at home he once again left for America.

2.2. Stravinsky in America: Anglo-American Connections

In 1914, the outset of World War I and the inception of the 1917 Russian revolution forced Stravinsky and his family to flee Russia. He firstly settled in Switzerland and then moved to France in 1920. Two decades later, on the verge of World War II, his life was

clouded by personal loss: following the death of his daughter, Stravinsky lost his first wife to tuberculosis, and later his mother. In 1939 he moved to the U.S. In this sense, similar to Thomas, Stravinsky left for America looking for an escape, not only due to the war and the inevitable Nazi occupation, but because of his personal and tragic circumstances. He had already toured America from his homes in Europe and he also had had commissions from overseas before his move. In 1929 he was invited by the University of Harvard to assume the position of the Charles Eliot Norton Professor for the 1939-1940 academic year, a position he accepted and from which he presented a series of lectures on poetics that would later be published in 1942 under the title of *Poétique musicale sous forme de six leçons*.

After Harvard, Stravinsky moved on to conducting in many cities including New York, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Minneapolis and Washington, establishing California as his home base for more than twenty years. He remarried in 1940, to Vera Sudeikina. When the war ended the Stravinskys could have moved back to Europe, but according to Griffiths (1992), the couple had acquired a close circle of friends and Stravinsky had more commissions and collaborations for composition in America than in Europe (1992, 138). The both took U.S. citizenship in 1945.

Throughout his life Stravinsky developed what Ares Yebra calls the “Stravinsky constellation”—the numerous close relationships, collaborations and projects that the composer developed and which proved to be decisive to his establishment as a cultural icon of the twentieth century (2021, 4). The composer’s move to America only contributed to the expansion of his constellation, which included the musico-literary relations he established with a series of British writers. The first of these was Aldous Huxley, whom Stravinsky developed a very close relationship with. When Stravinsky was looking for a possible librettist for *The Rake’s Progress* in 1947, it was Huxley who suggested Wystan Hugh Auden as a likely candidate (Craft 2003, 119). Auden was one of the many British writers who had emigrated to America in January 1939, not long before the dawn of the war he had been warning about for a decade in his poems. According to Davenport-Hines (2004), Auden left for America because he was greatly displeased at the popularity and renown that came with being the cultural leader of young English partisans. Hostility towards him ensued; he was believed to have treacherously deserted Britain in the middle of a crisis. Wasley points out that by moving to America, the poet was taking a stance on his desire to escape national identity, which he thought no longer mattered (2013, 51). Stravinsky and Auden’s opera premiered in 1951 and the composer named Huxley the “Rake’s godfather” (Allis 2013, 2). It was Auden in turn, continuing the chain of introductions among artists, who mentioned Thomas to Stravinsky one day in 1950 when he arrived late to meet the composer. Auden excused himself by saying that he had been helping Welsh poet Dylan Thomas sort out some difficulty. After that, natural curiosity led Stravinsky to read some of Thomas’s work, laying the foundations of what finally became a projected collaboration, which will be fully explored in the subsequent sections.

3. THE OPERA THAT NEVER WAS

In 1952, the first offer of a collaboration between Stravinsky and Thomas took place: the English film producer Michael Powell proposed that Stravinsky compose the music for a short film which was to be a scene from the *Odyssey* and which Thomas had already agreed to write the script for. However, this collaboration never materialised due to a lack of funding (Craft 1979). The next year, a second possible collaboration emerged: the project of an opera set to music by the composer with a libretto written by Thomas.

When the proposal from the Opera Workshop of Boston University arrived in the form of a telegram on May 21, 1953, Thomas was enthusiastic (Ferris 1978, 291). The proposal initiated the point of departure for the collaboration and the exchange of letters that ensued. At the time, Stravinsky was in Boston conducting *The Rake's Progress*, and Thomas went to visit him at the Copley Plaza Hotel, where he was staying. On May 23, Thomas wrote a letter to Caitlin in which he was unable to contain his excitement:

We can get a boat from London, direct but slow, to San Francisco, and then fly to LA in an hour or so. Outside Hollywood, and a huge easy house in the hills, we are to stay for the month with Stravinsky. I've seen him, just now, in Boston, and we thought of an opera and it is—for me—so simple that the libretto can be written in the time we are there. That's not just optimistic: it can, and will be [...]. We'll go back from Hollywood to Laugharne, and, in the winter, we'll go to Majorca. There'll be plenty of money. This time it's working... (quoted in Ferris 1978, 290).

The opera that Thomas was going to write with Stravinsky could have become the felicitous culmination of his work. Firstly, his ideas for the project brought together his love for sound and music, and also his extensive theatrical background. Secondly, the subject of the opera was to be based on his recurrent themes of life and death, whilst also bringing together his horror of war, the anxiety he felt about the near-extinction of human life and his fascination with the re-invention of language.

Since Thomas's ideas for the opera were never fully set out in writing, his plans can only be reconstructed from the accounts of his friends. For this reason, whilst there is a consensus on the main topics he wanted to explore, there are some details where we find discrepancies. There is no doubt that Thomas envisioned a mostly barren world, a consequence of an atomic catastrophe. According to Stravinsky, during their meeting in Boston the writer had talked about what "his" opera would be like. The opera was going to be about "a recreation of language" and "the rediscovery of our planet following an atomic misadventure" (Craft 1979, 87). To this Lycett adds that it would also include an exploration of the origins of the universe (2004, 353). Williams qualifies the opera as a kind of utopia where language would be free of socio-historical constraints (2014, 162). Homing into the specifics, according to Philip Burton, the scene would take place in a desolate setting, a cave, where a young man and a young woman, the sole survivors of the devastation, would have to search for life again. The youth would have floundering memories of life prior to the catastrophe, and according to Burton, "the incident that made Dylan's imagination glow was when the

boy tried to remember and explain to the girl what a tree was” (quoted in Goodby 2013, 423). However, Brinnin asserts that Thomas had also thought of an alternative where the protagonists could be creatures from outer space “who, by some cosmic mischance, find themselves on an Earth recently devastated and silenced by global warfare” (1995, 216). Brinnin’s version also recounts the symbol of the tree differently, an aspect which will be further commented upon in section 3.2. Nevertheless, these themes are not hitherto unseen in Thomas’s previous interests and works, and this section includes an examination of his interest in music and theatre, his fascination with language, the influence of the war and his recurrent themes of life and death in relation to his later work.

3.1. Musical and Theatrical Background

As we know, one of the most characteristic features of Thomas’s diction is the central role that sound and rhythm occupy in his poetry. For some, his work at times compromises its meaning and lacks clarity in favour of sound (Greenway 2016, 53). In Thomas’s own account, “I wanted to write poetry [...] because I had fallen in love with words [...]. What mattered was the *sound* of them [...], as the notes of bells, the sounds of musical instruments, the noises of wind, sea, and rain, the rattle of milkcarts [...]. What I was going to *say* through them, would come later” (Davies 1971, 154-55, emphasis in the original).

To understand the poet’s relationship with music itself, it is necessary to go back in time to his life in Swansea. Thomas grew up with a close friend named Daniel Jenkyn Jones, a Welsh composer who studied English Literature as well as Music at the London Academy of Music. They met when they were young, and as adolescents they collaborated in writing songs, operatic scores, and experimental musical compositions (Lycett 2004, 37; Goodby 2013, 127). Over time, Jones became the literary trustee to the poet’s estate and edited the volume *Complete Poems* (Sadie 1995, 698). Apart from Jones’s influence, Thomas’s contact with music included having Elizabeth Lutyens as a friend (Lycett 2004, 231) and his being sent to review a musical interpretation of Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* during his time working as a reporter for the *South Wales Daily Post* in 1931 in Swansea (Ferris 1978, 73). Years later, in 1947, he also told his parents that he was going to write an opera for William Walton; however, Walton finally decided on another person to write his libretto (Ferris 1978, 218). Stravinsky himself acknowledged that the writer knew the libretto of *The Rake’s Progress* well and that he was able to discuss operas that he enjoyed (Craft 1979).

With respect to Thomas’s extensive theatrical background, we might again return to the figure of Daniel Jones. Their friendship lasted their whole lives and it even developed into a relationship of a more professional nature: Jones set the radio version of Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood* (UMW) to music. Since 1939, Thomas had been reading and acting on the radio from time to time, but this significantly increased from 1943 onwards. Particularly relevant was his “Quite Early One Morning” (1945), a BBC broadcast that signified the beginning of UMW with its sleeping community. As one of the works for which Thomas became most widely known, the UMW play for voices was greatly influenced by World War II, where

Thomas's idea was to write about a village that was certified as mad, but which was actually one of the only sane places in an insane world. Its first broadcast took place in 1953, and it was designated as "the best radio play ever written" (Davies 2014, 135).

3.2. Words and Language

As we have already mentioned, Thomas's libretto was presumably going to centre upon a young woman and a young man, the sole survivors of an atomic catastrophe, who would rediscover language and the physical world after the devastation. Nevertheless, there is another detail about the opera where versions do not exactly match. This concerns the symbol of the tree. Burton's account (in Goodby 2013) and Fitzgibbon's (1965) coincide in the fact that the young man in the scene would have had memories of life and language before the catastrophe. More precisely, Thomas told Fitzgibbon that he envisaged a tree in his new Garden of Eden whose leaves would contain a single letter of the alphabet. In this way, "when the fresh winds blew and the Tree of Knowledge shed its leaves, the second Adam would re-create, for the second Eve, all words and languages" (Fitzgibbon 1965, 343). However, Brinnin describes this tree, and the young man's memories, somewhat differently. In the conversation he had with Thomas after the meeting with Stravinsky, the author portrayed the tree as pushing up out of the desolate Earth, and the protagonists as having to name the tree and learn its functions. This would then lead to the search for names and definitions for everything on the planet (1995, 216).

Be that as it may, what is clear is that words were never only Thomas's tools, they were also the object of his work. He considered language as a material object, the medium of poetry to be "deployed according to its sonic echoes and patterns, its timbres, colours and connotations, rather than simply according to the dictates of its denotative content" (Goodby 2013, 123). Christie observes that his was a relentless interest in "the aboriginality and autonomy of language" and gives the early example of how the poet wrote his own adaptation of the Johannine gospel in 1933, which begins with "In the beginning was the word..." (2014, 166). In this poem, Thomas revealed his anxieties towards "the nature of language and the relationship with the world and self" (Goodby 2013, 153), both presented at the stage of creation and as interconnected objects.

Goodby observes that Thomas's fixation with the birth of the poem in his works reveals his nonconformist mindset (2013, 125). At this point it is useful to compare Thomas to Auden during this period. According to Goodby, the responses of Auden and Thomas to the crisis of the 1930s were similar, as both imbued their poetry with an apocalyptic tenor and traditional verse forms. Again, in the 1940s, the poets converged in the spirit of national unity (Goodby 2013, xiv). That said, their main difference lay in their mindset and formal response towards high modernism (Goodby 2013, 59). Auden is one among many who commented on the 'violent' aspect of Thomas's poetry, which Goodby translates as "a mark of excess and oddity" (2013, 156). Indeed, where Auden departed from experimentalism, Thomas saw this response as superficial and

focused on the roots of the linguistic and physical aspects of the self (Goodby 2013, 61). The main implication of this was that Thomas's concern with words lay bare his captivation with the interconnections of the word, the world and the self. Returning to the image of the tree in the projected opera, what is particularly interesting is its agency, that is, its capacity to construct language and meaning. The tree represents the natural world as a whole, and all the objects of the world which are granted the ability to speak. What is more, because the leaves contain the letters of the alphabet, words go beyond the abstract plane and acquire a physicality. In the opera it is the Earth that physically facilitates both remembering and language recreation for the self, thus foregrounding their corporeality, their interrelation and their interdependence.

3.3. War and Atomic Annihilation

During World War II, Thomas managed to avoid conscription due to his poor physical health, his animosity toward fighting and his number one concern: writing. Nevertheless, he was still exposed to the violence of war since he was in London during the bombing raids and was witness to the effects of the devastation of bombs in other cities such as Bradford and Coventry (Goodby 2013, 303). Thomas's response was to write poems such as "A Refusal to Mourn, the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" (1944) and "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" (1945), where he specifically dealt with the bombing of civilians. Years later, the horror and the shock of war had not yet left him. During his fourth tour in the U.S. in 1953, Liz Reitell, Brinnin's assistant and Thomas's lover, recalls a night when an incredibly drunk Thomas, wildly rambling on the violence and horrors of war, "became hysterical about blood, mutilation, burning and death," and only calmed down to cry when Liz took his hand (Lycett 2004, 365).

The detonation of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki only seemed to Thomas to further prove human's insanity (Jones 2014, 232). In reaction to these tragedies, he planned to undertake two projects—*In Country Heaven* and the opera with Stravinsky—to deal with the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic contexts that the world was experiencing. *In Country Heaven* was to be a long poem whose parts would be constituted by his already finished poems "In Country Sleep" (1947), "Over Sir John's Hill" (1949) and "In The White Giant's Thigh" (1950). The poem was to begin with God weeping over the destruction of the Earth and it would gradually transform into an "affirmation of the beautiful and terrible worth of the Earth," thus introducing a flicker of light in his exploration of the inevitability of death (Jones 2014, 231).

In line with this celebration of the beauty and worth of the natural world, the projected collaboration with Stravinsky was to be set in a pseudo-Garden of Eden. Interestingly, Fitzgibbon conceptualises the project of the opera as a "Paradise Regained to follow the Paradise Lost of the unfinished *In Country Heaven*" (1965, 343). Indeed, what is particularly revealing is the relationship between life and death, one of the author's favourite themes, in his plans for the opera. On the one hand, Thomas was clearly aware and fascinated by

the idea of the Earth on its course towards destruction. On the other, he could not avoid addressing the world's capacity for resilience and renewal. In fact, Burton asserted that Thomas's opera "was about life triumphing over death" (quoted in Goodby 2013, 361). As such, the creation and the birth of language, as well as the annihilation of Earth, are manifestations of a process in which according to Tindall, the poet found what Baudelaire called "the horror and ecstasy of life" (1979, 15).

4. STRAVINSKY AND DYLAN THOMAS: A CORRESPONDENCE

To complete the picture of what the potential collaboration of the opera could have entailed, we turned to the search for and examination of the correspondence between the artists, primary sources that would shed light on how this relationship initially played out. However, whilst Thomas's letters were readily accessible as they are included in *The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas* by Ferris (2000) as well as in the English edition of Craft's *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (1979), Stravinsky's letters to the poet proved more difficult to trace.

In a letter by Stravinsky dated 1955 and addressed to Bielefeldt of the publishing company Boosey and Hawkes he wrote "I am sorry to give you a negative answer but, indeed, I do not want to let the correspondence I had with Dylan Thomas be published during my lifetime. I have already been asked to release some Dylan Thomas letters and I have always refused" (Craft 1982c, 390). The other reason why Stravinsky's letters were not as easy to come by is largely attributable to the figure of Robert Craft, an American conductor and writer who became a central figure in the composer's life. After Stravinsky's death, Craft became the trustee and executor of the composer's intellectual inheritance. This led to Craft's editing and publishing of the composer's correspondence, as well as many other documents. However, Craft is a controversial figure since his publications have largely controlled the image and narrative that we have today of Stravinsky's life (Joseph 2001; Cross 2003). Although part of the composer's lifetime correspondence was edited and published by Robert Craft in three volumes under the title *Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence*, the letters addressed to Thomas were not included in the selection.

4.1. Letters from Thomas to Stravinsky

Thomas wrote two letters to Stravinsky in the months before his death and they dealt with their meeting in California, the plans for the opera and the negotiations with the University of Boston. These letters are reproduced in the English edition of *Conversations with Stravinsky*.¹ The first letter from Thomas to Stravinsky is dated June 16, 1953, and was written from home, The Boat House, in Laugharne, Wales. In the letter, the poet recalled

¹ For an unknown reason, these letters are not included in the Spanish volume *Conversaciones con Igor Stravinsky*—the Spanish being a translation from the German edition *Stravinsky Gespräche mit Robert Craft* (1961). What is more, the Spanish edition includes a section on Auden, his letters and *The Rake's Progress*, whereas the English version does not.

their previous meeting in Boston with gratitude, and, more importantly, he showed the composer his eagerness to set up a second meeting in September or October. Thomas hoped that they could start discussing the libretto for the new opera and was clearly very excited about it: "I've been thinking a lot about the opera and have a number of ideas—good, bad, and chaotic. As soon as I can get something down on paper, I should, if I may, love to send it to you [...]. I'd be enormously honoured and excited to do that" (Craft 1979, 89). He also mentioned not having heard anything from Sarah Caldwell from Boston University. This is particularly important because Thomas's sponsorship, expenses and poor financial situation take centre stage in his second letter, dated September 22, 1953.

A long six months passed between Thomas's writing of his first and second letters to Stravinsky. Writing once again from home in Laugharne, the poet justified the delay in his reply by saying that he wanted to make sure that the dates when he was able to go to the U.S. were confirmed. In the letter, he mentioned that he would arrive on October 16, but that he would be busy with lectures and poetry readings until the end of the month. He proposed to travel directly to Los Angeles to begin working on the project. With no reservation he also told Stravinsky that his main concern was money. His financial situation is alluded to almost humorously, as he wrote about the fact that his children were growing up and that he did not know how he could afford to continue paying for their schooling. To pay for the trip to Los Angeles, he hoped to get a contract to take part in a poetry reading or lecture. Finally, there is a reference in this letter regarding Stravinsky's desire to keep this collaboration secret, which must have been discussed in their meeting in Boston: "I'm looking forward enormously to meeting you again, and to working with you. I promise not to tell anyone about it—(though it's very hard not to)" (Craft 1979, 91). Once again, although the poet is greatly troubled by the finances of the project, the letters show that he could not wait to begin and to tell the world about it.

This eagerness to start the project with Stravinsky is particularly significant when contrasted to our earlier mention of what the U.S. entailed for the Welsh poet. In contrast to his words of "I'm just a voice on wheels" written to Caitlin, which bore witness to his weariness and disappointment, in his letters to Stravinsky he could not contain his excitement. There is, then, a renewed enthusiasm for his work—a very positive attitude that can be observed in the ready use of adjectivization. Perhaps, the excitement stemmed from imagining the project itself, and the enthusiasm to get to work, or maybe factors such as his being already quite sick, while the exacerbation of his economic problems at this stage in his life also led him to see this project in a much more encouraging light. However, Thomas's ideas and intentions for the opera are very much dependent on whom he was speaking or writing to. It must be acknowledged that it was not all undiluted happiness. Just before Thomas left for the U.S. for the last time in October 1953, Fitzgibbon met with him in London. He remembers that the poet felt a certain fear towards being able to match the intellectual ability and greatness of Stravinsky. For this reason, amid Thomas's feelings of excitement and flattery, there was also a slight underlying sense of insecurity (Fitzgibbon 2004, 44; 344).

4.2. Letters from Stravinsky to Thomas

After being unable to find Stravinsky's letters in any volumes or editions relating to the artists, we found that five documents relating to the topic of the projected opera were housed in boxes at the Harry Ransom Center in Texas, and we were able to gain access to them. At this stage it is necessary to underscore the significance of being able to retrieve Stravinsky's letters since they have not been previously published. We have received permission from the Harry Ransom Center, as well as from the Stravinsky Estate, to publish them and include them in our article (Dylan Thomas Collection, see 7. Appendix). The documents in the Harry Ransom Center in Texas comprise the following: the Boston University telegram by Sara Caldwell, a letter addressed to Robert Choate and the three letters that Stravinsky wrote to Thomas.

The first, chronologically, of the documents is the telegram of May 1953 that Sara Caldwell—at the time Director of the opera seminar programme at Boston University—sent to Thomas (see 7. Appendix, 7.1. Telegram). The telegram contains the details of the proposal for the poet to write a libretto for Stravinsky. She wrote that Boston University could offer \$1,500 in advance and then a similar amount once the project was completed. The message also mentioned Stravinsky's wish to meet Thomas early in the summer at his home in Hollywood. The second document housed in the Harry Ransom Center is a letter addressed to Robert Choate, head of the project at Boston University, written in June 1953 (see 7. Appendix, 7.2. Letter 1). This letter is a response to the proposal the university mailed on June 26, and it is essentially an emphasis on Stravinsky's part of the fact that the project would not involve excessive nor endless production costs. Finally, and most importantly, the remaining three documents are Stravinsky's missing letters addressed to Thomas between June and September 1953.

Stravinsky's first letter to Thomas (see 7. Appendix)

1260 NORTH WETHERLEY DRIVE
HOLLYWOOD 46, CALIFORNIA

June 22, 1953

Air Mail

Dylan Thomas Esq.
The Boat House
Laugharne
Garmartenshire
Wales, Great Britain

Dear Dylan Thomas,

Though it made me very sad to hear that you broke your arm, I was glad to have news from you. Indeed I hope that by now you have completely recovered and your bones don't crack any more.

Your idea of coming here in September or October is wonderful. I am not going away until later in the fall.

Therefore, if you can accommodate yourself on the convertible sofa in our living room - - our home is rather small unfortunately *)- - you will be our most welcomed guest and you and I could work out something very authentic.

So far, no news from the people of Boston University. They must be on vacation by now and this may account for the delay in their reaching a decision.

When I left Boston, Sarah Caldwell did not show any doubt as to their ability to raise the money necessary to finance the project. But they had to round up their backers and this is always a slow process.

Anyhow, even if they drag somewhat, I sincerely wish that you will journey to these shores as you are now planning to do.

Please let me hear from you before long,

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

{Signature: *Igor Stravinsky*}

{Handwritten}

*) but I always keep
good Scotch and
Claret handy

Stravinsky's reply to the poet was almost immediate, and the overriding theme of the whole text, although maybe not as explicit as his following one in August, dealt with the finances of the project and his sincere wish to start working with Thomas.

Stravinsky's second letter to Thomas (see 7. Appendix)

August 26, 1953

Air Mail

Dylan Thomas Esq.
The Boat House
Laugharne
Garmartenshire
Wales, Great Britain

Dear Dylan Thomas,

Since I last wrote you two months ago I have been layed [*sic*] up for a while due to the necessity of my undergoing surgery (for the prostate). I am very well now and back to daily routine. During this interlude I thought a lot of you and our project.

Dean Choate wrote me at the end of June advising me he had wired you that he needed some more time to get financial action. I answered him what you may read in the enclosed copy. I do not think there was any other policy to follow.

Now, will the Boston people be willing to put the money down in the coming fall for a rather important undertaking, the completion of which will take at least two years, ... that is the question to which I do not pretend to know the answer.

Of course we should not tell anybody about it - - because should the rumor be spread we would be cutting the grass under our feet - - but my suggestion is that we could be very well get things started (in secret) right away, and if the Boston deal goes through we would have things already under way (but never tell them that we have actually begun to work until all the contracts are signed). On the other hand, if the Boston project is a failure, then we would have something of our own to produce and for which we should well be able to find an underwriter, either here or in Europe.

But all this first requires our getting together now in order to discuss and fix the general outline of our work. This basic work cannot be done by correspondence.

Are you still planning to come here in September or October? I do wish you are... I am staying in California till around December 20, but I will be busy conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic in a group of concerts from November 14 till November 21.

Let me have your feelings on all this.

I hope your arm is all right now and the whole thing is but a bad dream for you.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

Encl.

{Signature: *Igor Stravinsky*}

Financial concerns intensify in Stravinsky's second letter. It seems to be clear here that Stravinsky's original interest in keeping the project a secret had to do with his lack of confidence in Boston University's providing the necessary funding. Nevertheless, what is most significant was his wish to keep to their commitment, to meet Thomas again in person and to start working regardless of the money they were to receive from Boston University.

Stravinsky's third and final letter to Thomas (see 7. Appendix)

September 26, 1953

Air Mail

Dylan Thomas Esq.
The Boat House
Laugharne
Garmartenshire
Wales, Great Britain

Dear Dylan Thomas,

So happy to have news from you at last...

I realize quite well what are the financial problems confronting you.

I am going to do my utmost to help by asking my friends Huxley and Isherwood here whatever practical suggestions they may have in order to try to arrange some lectures for you locally.

Whenever I will [*sic*] know something more precise I will advise you in New York.

Your coming visit is causing us all great joy and we are impatiently looking forward to seeing you arrive.

I am as eager as you are to actually see “our” (yes) work started.

Bon voyage,

A bientôt,

[Signature: *Igor Stravinsky*]

As we know, neither Stravinsky’s first letter (June 22) nor his second (August 26) received a reply from the poet until three months later, on September 22. Four days later, in his third and final letter to Thomas, Stravinsky wrote that he was “so happy to have news from you *at last...*” (emphasis added). The composer’s interest in bringing this opera to a successful outcome was further confirmed in his ideas of arranging lecture engagements for Thomas through Huxley or Isherwood so he could pay for his stay in Los Angeles. Nevertheless, his letters do provide a contrast to Thomas’s since his replies were almost immediate and even denote a certain insistence on the composer’s part. Of course, financial matters played a very important role in the process, but these letters also confirm the fears and anxieties that Fitzgibbon maintained that Thomas was feeling at the time. Be that as it may, the excitement of both artists towards the project was evident, but Thomas’s death on November 9, 1953 brought their plans to a sudden end.

5. FINAL REMARKS

The short-lived relationship between Stravinsky and Thomas allows us only to imagine what their dreams of an opera could have become. The Welsh poet’s wish to aesthetically depict the newly arisen fear of nuclear bombs, as well as to become reconciled with a world that had been altered to the core by the war was never realised. Neither was Stravinsky’s endeavour to write a second great opera with a British writer, one whom he clearly admired and of whom he thought that “the only thing to do was to love him” (Craft 1979, 87). With our paper we have been able to critically examine the circumstances which led to this project, especially in relation to the aftermath of World War II. Whilst the themes Thomas wanted to portray in his opera were not wholly new to his work, he did envision a certain endurance and revival for humanity. His wish to further experiment with the creation and denotation of language within a musical and theatrical setting entailed a new level of ontological exploration.

In addition, gaining access to the correspondence between the artists has enabled us to fully understand the picture of the projected collaboration with the incorporation of aspects such as Stravinsky’s wish to protect the project—and also keep it a secret, against possible financial adversities—but also the genuine economical precarity in

which the poet found himself in his final years of life and sickness, which is a recurrent topic in the letters. What is more, alongside the contents of the letters, the texts bear witness to the genuine friendship and affection that arose between the creator of the Harvard *Poetics* and the Welsh poet, explicit in the tone and affection of the register used. Further proof of this is the *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas* that Stravinsky composed in 1954 as a tribute to the poet after his death. This is the only composition that results from the merging of the work of both artists: a dirge-canon and song for tenor, string quartet and four trombones. It was created after Thomas's poem "Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night," which was addressed to the poet's dying father.

Beyond the musical value and the high praise that the *In Memoriam* has received, what particularly caught our attention was that the rhythm, metre and syllabic patterns in the musical piece greatly differ from Thomas's original intention in his poem. It is possible that an examination of how the original text is displayed on the score will lay the groundwork for our future research. Nonetheless, the *In Memoriam* is the final piece of evidence that demonstrates the affection between the artists and is left almost as an anecdote of what could have been a magnificent joint project. Perhaps, as Griffiths puts it, *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas* was "an elegy not only for the poet but for the aborted collaboration" (1992, 163).

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APPENDIX

1. Telegram

<p>CLASS OF SERVICE</p> <p>This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol above or preceding the address.</p>	<h1>WESTERN UNION</h1> <p>W. P. MARSHALL, PRESIDENT</p>	1220	<p>SYMBOLS</p> <p>DL=Day Letter</p> <p>NL=Night Letter</p> <p>LT=Int'l Letter Telegram</p> <p>VLT=Int'l Victory Ltr.</p>
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The filing time shown in the date line on telegrams and day letters is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination

BA057

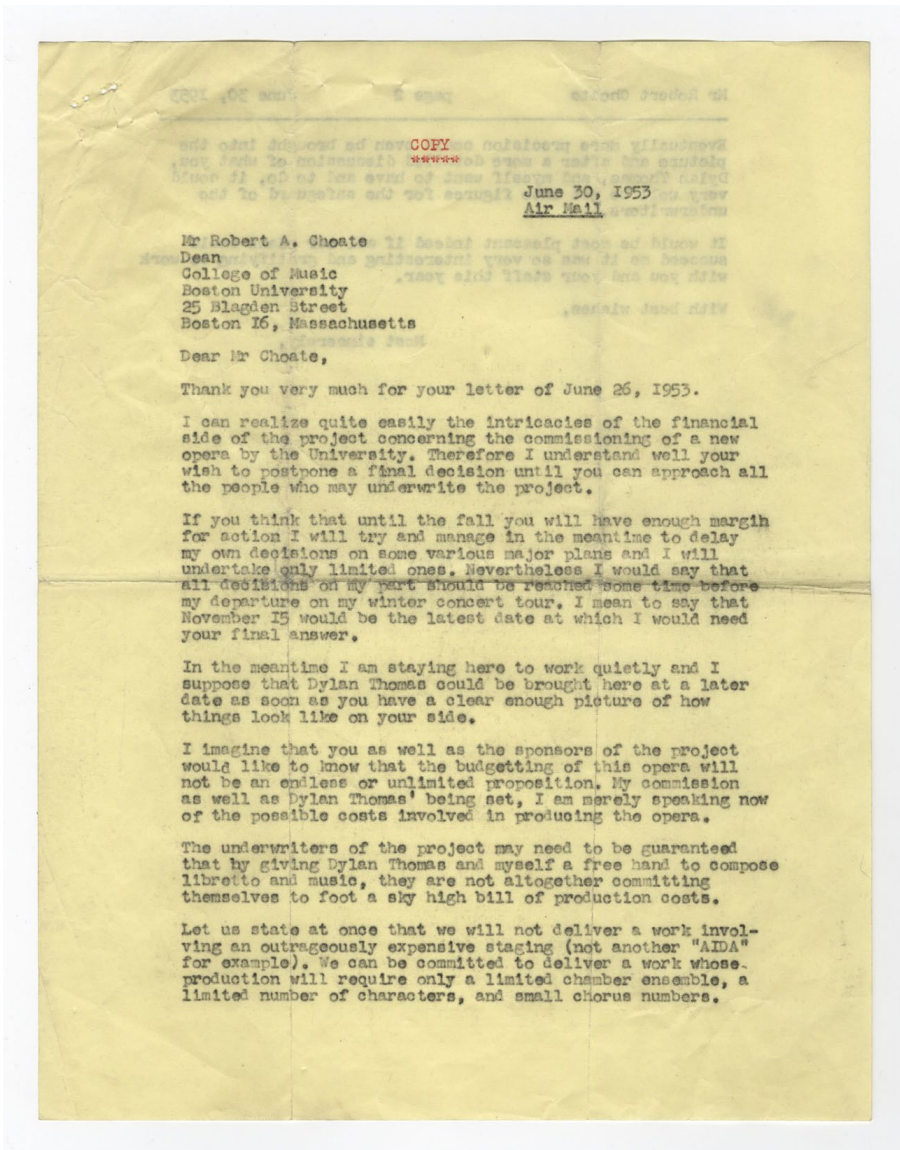
B.LLC136 LONG NL PD=BOSTON MASS 20 1953 MAY 21 AM 3 41

DYLAN THOMAS, CARE JOHN MALCOLM BRINNON=
 YU YMHA 92 ST AND LEXINGTON AVE NYK=

WOULD YOU AGREE IN PRINCIPLE TO COMPOSE AN OPERA LIBRETTO FOR IGOR STRAVINSKY WHO WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS THE SUBJECT AND PROJECT WITH YOU IN HIS HOLLYWOOD HOME IN JUNE. AFTER YOU MEET WITH STRAVINSKY AND REACH AN AGREEMENT WITH HIM BOSTON UNIVERSITY OPERA WORKSHOP COULD OFFER YOU \$1500. IN ADVANCE AND \$1500 ON COMPLETE OF LIBRETTO. WIRE ME IMMEDIATELY AS STRAVINSKY LEAVES HERE FRIDAY MORNING= SARAH CALDWELL DIRECTOR OPERA WORKSHOP BOSTON UNIVERSITY 25 BLADGEN ST BOSTON..

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE

2. Letter 1



Mr Robert Choate page 2 June 30, 1953

Eventually more precision could even be brought into the picture and after a more detailed discussion of what you, Dylan Thomas, and myself want to have and to do, it could very well be put into figures for the safeguard of the underwriters.

It would be most pleasant indeed if all our plans could succeed as it was so very interesting and gratifying to work with you and your staff this year.

With best wishes,

Most sincerely,

[The following text is a mirror image of the typed letter above, appearing as bleed-through from the reverse side of the page. It is upside down and difficult to read.]

3. Letter 2

1260 NORTH WETHERLY DRIVE
HOLLYWOOD 46, CALIFORNIA

June 22, 1953
Air Mail

Dylan Thomas Esq.
The Boat House
Laugharne
Garmartenshire
Wales, Great Britain

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When I left Boston, Sarah Caldwell did not show any doubt as to their ability to raise the money necessary to finance the project. But they had to round up their backers and this is always a slow process.

Anyhow, even if they drag somewhat, I sincerely wish that you will journey to these shores as you are now planning to do.

Please let me hear from you before long,

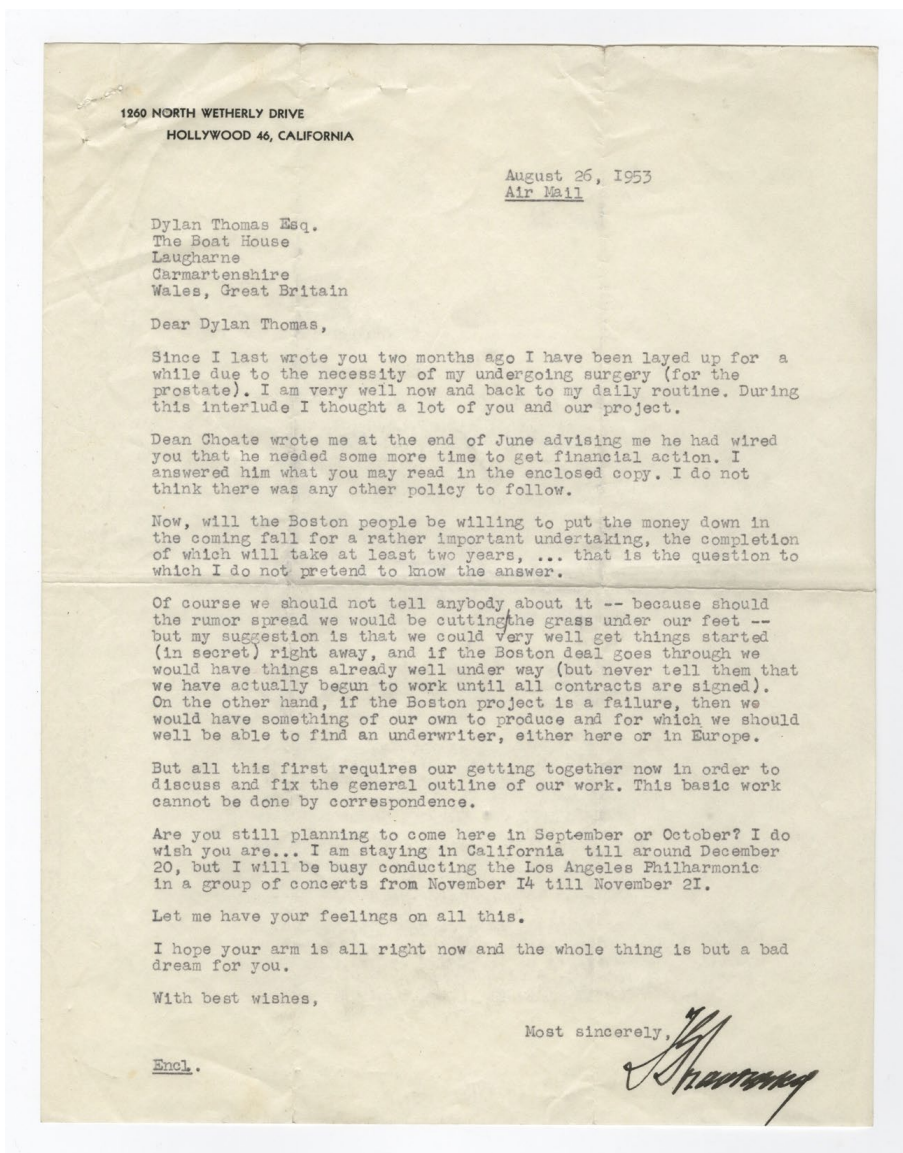
With best wishes,

Sincerely,

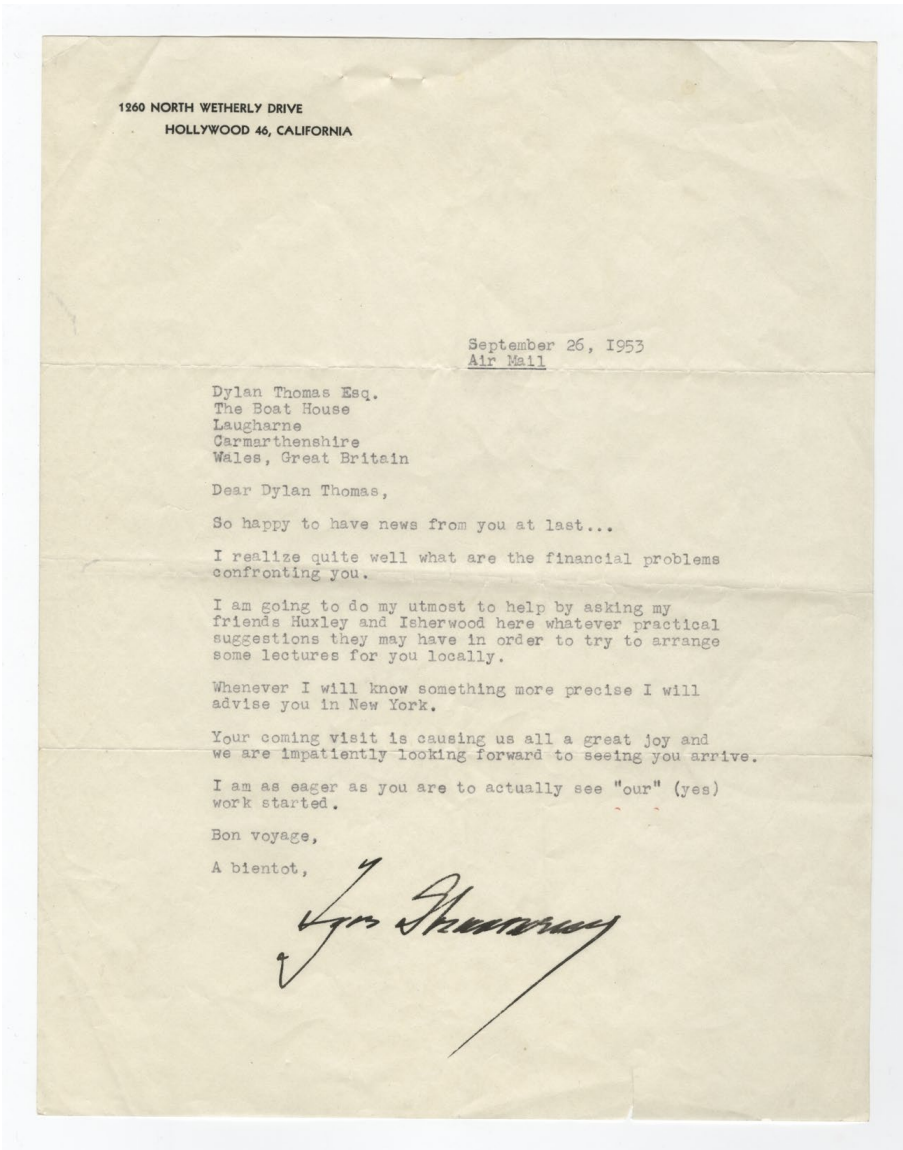
Jim Harrison

*x) but I always keep
good Scotch and
Oleat handy*

4. Letter 3



5. Letter 4



Dylan Thomas Collection, [box 9.7], Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Reprinted by permission of the Stravinsky estate.

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Lucía Bennett-Ortega is an FPU predoctoral researcher at the University of Granada, Spain, and a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the University of Illinois, Chicago (2024). Her main research interests include critical posthumanism, disability studies and feminist criticism. She is a member of the Research Project 'The Posthuman Wound: Subject and Agency in the North American Literature of the 21st Century' (PID2022-137627NB-I00).

Marta Falces-Sierra is a Senior Lecturer in English Language and Literature at the University of Granada. Her research interests include discourse stylistics, comparative studies between literature and music, musical narrative and intermediality. She is part of the research project 'A Microhistory of Spanish Contemporary Music: The International Peripheries in Dialogue' (MICINN, PGC2018-098986-B-C31).