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RESHAPING MYSTICAL GEOMETRY OF "VISION AND PRAYER" BY DYLAN THOMAS AS ITS POSSIBLE RE-INTERPRETATION

Although Dylan Thomas and his poem "Vision and Prayer" (1944) are usually not attributed to a specific kind of visual/concrete or "shaped poetry," his highly enigmatic and daring poetical articulation displays some interesting typographical features that can qualify him to be included in the label. It is a unique experiment of a kind mainly because of its two distinct geometric shapes, i.e. diamond and hourglass, within the two equal Parts, with six stanzas in each one of them. These shapes create a kind of "mystical geometry," since they differ both in their pictorial presentation and the content matter. The paper tried to follow various attempts in English literature that might have served as a source of inspiration for Thomas in the works of George Herbert, Sir Thomas Browne, and W.B. Yeats. It also presents previous critical interpretations that revolved mainly around the themes of birth, death, and re-birth Resurrection of Jesus Christ, since religious imagery and poetic language seem to invite such an approach (Tindall, Burdette, Kidder, Bauer). However, a combination of Derridean deconstruction/restructuring and computer-assisted pictorial manipulation of the text produced yet an interesting experiment in analysis, having brought together all the stanzas into a 'grand diamond' shape. The newly reshaped version of the 'poem' opened up possibilities for interpretation while pointing out the central geometric shapes that emerged in the process.

Keywords: visual poetry; mystical geometry; religious imagery; 'grand diamond' shape; re--interpretation

1. DISTINCTIVE AND DIVERSE POETIC VOICES IN MID-1930s BRITAIN

Having been aware that poetry in Britain was moving more and more towards social and urban topics after the Great Depression, as exemplified in the early poems by W. H. Auden and the Auden Group[1], some other emerging poets of the period opted for a different kind of poetic expression. One of them was an exuberant young man from Swansea, Wales, Dylan Marlais Thomas (1914-1953) who admired the Auden Group's "push" for simple diction and imagery, as well as their handling of larger public issues in their early poems, but was more interested, albeit for a short while, in surrealist poetry, whose main proponents in Britain were David Gascoyne and George Barker. Due to his affinity for expressionism and surrealism, his early works are often connected to *The New Apocalypse Movement* which he refuted despite the claims that he was the most important proponent of this kind of poetic expression in the early 1940s. His poetic articulation was, afterwards, labelled as "neo-Romanticism", which, in due time, became associated, primarily with his poems. The reason for such a label was seen, primarily, in his emotional evocations of childhood spent in the pastoral landscapes of his native Wales that was easy to grasp and reminiscent of the Romantic poetry that millions of British people had already been familiar with through their education and popular acclaim, and it is no wonder that it was well received. It seems that the complex and mostly unintelligible poetry of his immediate Modernist predecessors and the highly politicised social agenda of his contemporary fellow poets have become too difficult to both understand and appreciate at the bottom level. Thomas appealed to the wide readership with his new and innovative style, which was, at the same time, different yet not so complex to deal with. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that he was still searching for his distinctive poetic voice and that his modest background and a lack of proper education seemed to be a major obstacle when compared to his contemporaries.

It was a sheer stroke of fortune that Geoffrey Grigson, a journalist for *The Morning Post*, had started his own periodical *New Verse* in 1933. The new literary magazine had opened its pages to the lines of promising English poets, mainly from Auden's circle, but also to Barker, Gascoyne and Dylan Thomas, as well as to the French poet

1 Besides Auden, writers associated with this group are Christopher Isherwood, Louis MacNeice, Cecil Day-Lewis and Stephen Spender. Although they never worked together, they were of similar ages and of middle-class origin but educated at prestigious universities (Oxford and Cambridge), and their poetry reflected their leftist (later on even Communist) views and preoccupations with the working class and oppressed masses in general.

Paul Éluard, one of the founding members of Surrealist Movement. *New Verse* also published the works of the Swiss sculptor, painter and printmaker Alberto Giacometti, who was considered to be a proponent of 'concrete poetry'. This kind of poetic articulation and literary/pictorial style is sometimes described as visual poetry, because of its insistence on creating a striking typographical effect on paper/canvas/cloth rather than relying on the conventional verbal analysis or the explanation of the meaning of diverse language elements. Although various kinds of such poetry had been discovered in different parts of the world and different periods, it was the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who revived this form of pictorial expression in his collection *Calligrammes* (1918).

Although the majority of studies on concrete poetry in Britain refer to four names: Ian Hamilton Finlay, Edwin Morgan, Bob Cobbing and Dom Sylvester Houédard (Thomas 2019: 2-3), and "Vision and Prayer" is usually not attributed to this avant-garde branch of poetry, it certainly displays some interesting typographical features that can qualify it for the label. Notable exceptions are *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, which states how "Dylan Thomas's "Vision and Prayer" is comprised of stanzas arranged in geometric forms in spatial dialogue with the verse itself, a trait also consistent in John Hollander's[2] *Types of Shape* (1969)" (Greene et al. 2012: 1417), and Matthias Bauer who wrote how this poem "seems to be the most obviously visual and iconic of his poems, if 'iconic' is taken in one of its most simple senses, that is, the visual shape of a text imitating a particular meaning." (Bauer 2001: 167)

2. ATYPICAL SHAPE AND STRUCTURE OF "VISION AND PRAYER"

"Vision and Prayer" was first published in *Horizon* in January 1945[3], and most critical interpretations agree that the poem belongs to his "womb-tomb" period (Moynihan 1964: 632). In contrast to his earlier poetry which appears to be joyful and carefree

2 Joh Hollander, a former Professor of English at Yale University, experimented for decades with diverse kinds of shapes that he trans-created into his own version of poetry. He had called them 'pattern poems' because their printed format presented a graphic/pictorial form of some familiar object that corresponded to the subject of the visible text. Hollander applied all kinds of objects into his shapes, such as a skeleton key, an old Mazda lamp, a bell curve, the beach umbrella, an arrow-sign, a cat, a swan, and a variety of letter-shaped poems implying love, or love crisis. (Hollander 1991: 30-98)

3 It was republished in *The Sewanee Review* (Vol. 53, No. 3, Summer 1945), and subsequently, in his fourth collection of poetry *Deaths and Entrances* (1946). The poem was reprinted many times in all the subsequent editions of Thomas's poetry, the last one issued on the occasion of his hundredth birthday. This New Centenary edition is used throughout the paper as the source.

and mostly related to his childhood and youth in pastoral Welsh landscapes, his war and post-war poems are laden with religious, i.e. Christian, imagery and symbolism, as well as themes of birth, rebirth and death. As Moynihan aptly describes:

> "The pervasive influence of the Bible certainly had much to do with his treatment of these subjects. And age - his shift from an obsession with genesis and womb, to the objective world that suffers and loves, to the formulation of a vision of perpetuity - surely had just as much to do with the shape the poetry assumed. In fact, rather than the early poetry building toward the thematic unity of the later poetry, the opposite would appear to be the case - the final poems bring out the thematic and symbolic unity inherent in the early poems." (Moynihan 1964: 632)

The poem consists of 12 stanzas divided into two equal Parts (Part I is in the shape of a diamond, whereas Part II has an hourglass shape), with six stanzas in each part, 102 lines each, which differ both in their pictorial presentation and in the content matter. Each stanza is comprised of 17 lines, where line 9 serves as a dividing verse between each subsection above and below within the stanza. The overall outcome is 204 lines of verse, and the poem is, without doubt, one of Thomas's most complex, as well as most complicated ones.

The first stanza in Part I of the poem has the shape of a diamond:

Who
Are you
Who is born
In the next room
So loud to my own
That I can hear the womb
Opening and the dark run
Over the ghost and the dropped son
Behind the wall thin as a wren's bone?
In the birth bloody room unknown
To the burn and turn of time
And the heart print of man
Bows no baptism
But dark alone
Blessing on
The wild
Child. (Thomas 1945: 413)

The 'diamond' is made up of two joined triangles, where the lines begin with a single word (Who) and become larger as the words continue in the upper part of the triangle, only to start descending at line 10 ("In the birth bloody room unknown...") towards the final single word in the first stanza (Child) (Goodby 2016: p. 165). The central, median, otherwise not visible, break (shown above as a red line for the sake of clarity) divides not only the stanza into two sub-parts, or in the shape of two seemingly identical triangles, but it also serves as a key to the main issue in the stanza. It is a macabre scene, where a narrator hears the womb opening and some invisible woman giving birth to the wild Child.

Although the poem and the first stanza begin with the interrogative 'Who', it soon becomes obvious that the poet, probably, refers to the Immaculate Conception that has led to the birth of God's Child (Jesus Christ), who is "wild" because it was born out of wedlock. The words such as "ghost", "the dropped son", and "baptism" make the poetical references and such an interpretation rather obvious. The shape of a lower triangle is reminiscent of a woman's womb(as it has been perceived by the majority of critics),which can be understood only when seeing the stanza in its printed form.

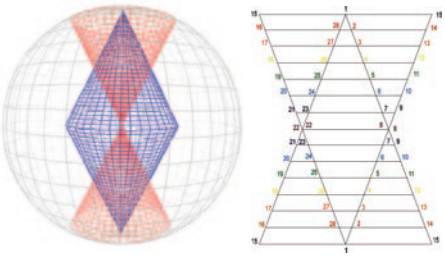
The same pattern is repeated consistently throughout the remaining five stanzas in Part I, whereas in Part II, it assumes the shape of an hourglass or two inverted triangles where the central line is the single word:

In the name of the lost who glory in
The swinish plains of carrion
U n d e r t h e b u r i a l s o n g
Of the birds of burden
Heavy with the drowned
And the green dust
A n d b e a r i n g
The ghost
F r o m
The ground
L i k e p o l l e n
On the black plume
And the beak of slime
I pray though I belong
Not wholly to that lamenting
Brethren for joy has moved within
The inmost marrow of my heart bone. (Thomas 1945: 419)

Thomas wanted to create the appearance of a perfect balance and that is the reason why, in most editions of this poem, there have been some blank spaces left between the letters in certain words (as indicated in the stanza above) to preserve the illusion of the perfect shape. It comes as no surprise that anybody who had dared either just to read, or to offer a critical analysis of this multifaceted poem, had to observe closely its geometric shapes.

3. POSSIBLE INFLUENCES ON THE GEOMETRIC SHAPES AND SYMMETRY IN "VISION AND PRAYER"

It is not certain how Dylan Thomas came to the idea of using these two geometric forms/shapes for his enigmatic poem. When placed next to each other on a piece of paper, these two shapes are similar because of their (inscribed) triangles, but, also, contrary, for they appear as turned upside down. Nevertheless, such a representation is shown in one of the diagrams W.B. Yeats used in the Chapter "Foundations" in his highly complicated treatise *A Vision* (1925). It suited his ideas of 'double cones', where, in order to illustrate how his imagined gyres function (figure to the left below), he applied a doubled form of the double cone. Its presentation below shows clearly its symmetrical geometric features (figure to the right below):



(Finneran 1997: 658-660)

In the centre is the diamond shape, and on each side is one hourglass. For Yeats, the Diamond shape represented the *Original of the Celestial Body*, and the *Spirit* moved within it as a single gyre. The two of them combined (*Spirit* and *the Celestial Body*) are permanent unchangeable Principles (pure knowledge and spiritual reality), or the *Solar* element in his complex cosmic system, which is deemed to be an objective and collective element in Yeats' system of duality. The Hourglass shape stands for the *Lunar* element as an individual and subjective feature. Without going into further elaboration of Yeats' concepts, it should be noted that such an approach of joining

together hourglass and diamond shapes is central to Robert K. Burdette's intricate analysis of "Vision and Prayer". It relies precisely on these esoteric and mystical elements of gyres and geometry. (Burdette 1972: 98-120) Burdette presents the actual shape of the poem as Thomas had insisted on being published, and gives his own, at times, quite hermetic interpretation, claiming that the theme of rebirth (which Yeats discussed in the Chapter "Process" of his book *A Vision*) provides enough evidence for his comparison with "Vision and Prayer." The same claim could be applied to Sir Thomas Browne and his book *Garden of Cyrus*, where, as Sharon Cadman Seelig pointed out, "the driving force of this treatise is not scientific inquiry, but rather the pursuit of the idea of order in nature, Browne's desire to see and to show ´how nature Geometrizeth, and observeth order in all things´" (Seelig 2008: 32). Thomas expressed a similar notion about mystical geometry in a letter addressed to his intimate friend Pamela Hansford Johnson: "I lie in the dark and think. I think of God and Death and Triangles" (Ferris 1987: 129). Despite Thomas's affinity to Yeats and his poetry, as he wrote, again, to Pamela Hansford Johnson in 1933 (Walker 2019: 215), and occasional readings of his works, there is not enough evidence that he considered this book of Yeats' even as a possible inspiration, so Burdette's interpretation is more imaginative and overtly abstract than academic or critical.

Most literary experts have recognised the similar geometric pattern/shape in the well-known poem "Easter-Wings" by the English metaphysical poet George Herbert. It was published in his posthumous collection *The Temple* (1633) in an unusual way – sideways, or horizontally, and the poet arranged the words in such a manner that it clearly resembles the outspread wings, as shown below:

(Bryant-Scott: 2019)

While reading the poem, a reader can simply turn the book 90 degrees to the left and read it without problems (Tobin 2010). However, most modern editions display it in a normal, vertical way, which is the same method Dylan Thomas has duly applied in his graphic presentation of the hourglass in Part II of "Vision and Prayer".

Professor Vendler (1975) and other critics paid particular attention to the structural appearance of the lines that might have appeared as a novelty to the English readership when the poem was published. Nevertheless, such a practice has been known for a long time in other literary traditions, and, in this poem, Herbert revived the ancient method of *technopaegnion*. It is the term that originated in ancient Greece, and it denoted a poem in which the words, or, sometimes, mere letters within the words, were arranged visually to create some recognizable shapes (the term in Greek means 'shaped poetry'), usually found in natural settings. These poems were referred to in Latin sources as *carminae figurate* and were mostly in the shape of a square or a rectangle (Greene et al. 2012). It is quite a demanding process, during which the graphic and iconic (pictorial) elements are observed simultaneously with their linguistic and symbolic properties. The reading of lines/words without looking at the poem at the same time will give no result since the full perception of *technopaegnia* can be achieved only by visual means.

Almost all the consulted critics and interpreting academics of "Vision and Prayer" sought to find the real sources of inspiration for this poem, in addition to Herbert's experiments with geometric shapes. Professor Tindall claimed that Dylan Thomas read some of Herbert's poems, including "Easter-Wings," which can be labelled as "figured poems", like Lewis Caroll's famous "The Mouse Tale" from *Alice in Wonderland*. (Tindall 1996: 240) However, Matthias Bauer mentions how, contrary to some claims, Thomas acknowledged "some influence from Francis Thompson, but not from Hopkins, nor from George Herbert" (Bauer 2001: 179).

Other sources pointed out the works of Sir Thomas Browne – a person with diverse interests and even greater knowledge of issues that exceeded his profession as a physician in Norfolk in the 17th century. The best term to describe him and his enormous knowledge would be a polymath – the person versatile in so many domains that encompassed not only science and medicine, but also religion and, notably, its esoteric aspects. In addition, Browne was quite fond of inventing or coining new words, which he had happened to be the first one to use or write down. Although a prolific author, whose first major work was *Religio Medici* (*The Religion of a Doctor*, 1642), his last two books are of particular importance for Dylan Thomas and the poem discussed in the paper. They had been written as two interrelated, yet antithetical philosophical discourses, and each one of them retained a certain kind of duality both in terms of their subject matter and form.

The first one, published in 1658, came out as the result of his interest in about 40-50 Anglo-Saxon burial pots, having been excavated at Walsingham near Norfolk in

the mid-17th century. The title reflects Browne's scholarly interest but also displays his fine erudition: *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial, or, a Discourse of the Sepulchral Urns lately found in Norfolk*. The first compound word in the title means 'a large pot' (*Hydria*) in Greek, whereas the second one (*taphos*) means a 'tomb', therefore, the English translation as *Urn Burial* (the original spelling was *Urne Buriall*) is quite appropriate. In this book, especially in its Fifth chapter, Browne celebrates a human being as 'a noble animal,' who is equally splendid in its ashes as it has been in his life. However, he expands his musings in the second, supplementary or companion volume of an even more elaborate and complicated title: *The Garden of Cyrus*, or *The Quincuncial Lozenge, or Network Plantations of the Ancients, naturally, artificially, mystically* (1658). The word that seems to be even more troublesome is *Quincuncial*, which has been derived from '*quincunx*'. It is the Latin term for the geometric shape of a rectangle, which Browne had borrowed from the famous Roman philosopher Quintilian. The frontispiece of *The Garden of Cyrus* actually, quotes the text from Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* (*Institutes of Oratory*), Book VIII., Part 3.ix:

> "Quid [illo] quincunce speciosius, qui, in quamcumque partem spectaveris, **rectus** est?"; or, roughly, "What more beautiful [way to plant trees] than **the quincunx**, that, from whatever direction you regard it, presents straight lines?" (James Eason, *The Garden of Cyrus: Quincunx*)

The quote appears under the pictorial representation of the '*quincunx*' (Fig. 1), which is the geometric pattern of five points arranged in such a way that they form a cross, with four of them giving a rectangle or a square (*rectus*), and the fifth one happens to be in the centre. It is the shape of a rhombus, or a diamond, which was taken as a possible basis for different letters, once the printing press had been invented by Gutenberg in the mid-15th century. In this book, Browne tries to explain the evidence of the '*quincunx*' in nature, in diverse forms and shapes that he enumerates with the precision of an experienced, practical scientist, but, also, in arts and some mystical and esoteric interpretations of the pattern. In his view, all these examples can be taken as the visible proof of "the wisdom of the God". Without going any further with the elaboration of Browne's complicated geometrical symbols, suffice to say that he believed that the most adequate iteration of the '*quincunx*' is a diagonal cross inscribed into the circle. His idea is revisited in an interesting text by Matthias Bauer, who provides several illustrations, presented below:

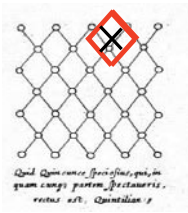


Fig.1: Browne's '*quincunx*'

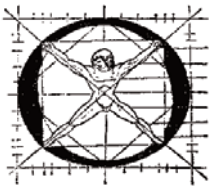
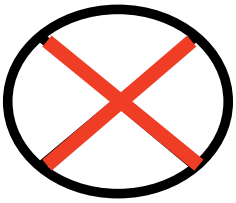


Fig. 2: "O" and "X"

Fig. 3: *De Occulta Philosophia*

In his article, Bauer develops this geometrical symbolism even further. In his view, the crucial element of Browne's treatise is the letter 'X' that corresponds to the five points of the '*quincunx*', but also contains the reflection of Egyptian pyramids. (Bauer 2001: 170) Bauer supports further his arguments with a picture of the man inscribed in a pentagram (Fig. 3), from Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettelsheim's *De Occulta Philosophia libri III* (*Three Books of the Occult Philosophy*, published in Latin in Cologne, 1533). (Bauer 2001: p. 174) Bauer also illustrates his claim with the letters "O" and "X" (Fig. 2) he found in the book by the Renaissance French typographer Geoffroy Tory's book *Champ Fleury ou l'art et science de la proportion des lettres* (*Champ Fleury or the Craft and knowledge of proportion of letters*, published in Paris in 1529) (Bauer 2001: 175).[4]

Nevertheless, one needs to mention one more important example of the diagonal cross. This time it is placed within a rectangular shape (figure left below):



Such a representation of the letter "X" within a circle reveals two sets of triangles, as illustrated above. From a horizontal view, one can discern Herbert's wings, and the vertical triangles recall Dylan Thomas's hourglass. On the other hand, Browne's perfect shape of "X" includes the circle that covers the five points in the diagonal intersection of two lines that form the cross (figure above right). It is not a traditional vertical cross, but the diagonal one, which is known in heraldry as St. Andrew's cross. According to the Christian legend, Andrew was one of the original twelve Apostles.

4 The book is available online, both in French and English, and can be accessed at: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b86095803.

After Christ had been executed and ascended to Heaven, Andrew continued to preach his teachings. He was, eventually, captured by the Roman Governor of Patras in Greece, Aegates, who condemned him to the same fate as Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, Andrew thought he was unworthy to be crucified on the upright cross, and embraced the diagonal one, thus sending a strong message about his unbroken faith. Since he was believed to have visited many countries during his mission, his cross can be found in diverse insignia of southern Ukraine, Armenia, and, most notably, Scotland in the form of a white diagonal cross on a blue background, referred to as "The Saltire".

It is highly unlikely that Dylan Thomas was even remotely aware of scholarly deliberations about Sir Thomas Browne, which continued for several centuries after his ideas had been elaborated in these aforementioned two discourses. Despite his avid interest in the Romantics, who, especially S. T. Coleridge, had found the concept of the '*quincunx*' omnipresent in Brown's explications, Thomas was too young when the reprint of *The Garden of Cyrus* was published in 1927. He seemed equally unaware of the renewed interest in Browne's theories that Lytton Strachey expressed in 1906, but there is a slight possibility that he might have come across Browne in his father's lavish library, which he had collected as a teacher of English at Swansea, but, again, given that he did not pursue further education after the age of 16, he would return to these ideas only during his writer's block from 1942-1944. During this time he was involved with writing scripts for patriotic films (such as *Fuel for Battle*, or *Our Country*), which supported the British World War II efforts, and did not write any poems, and when he finally did, in the summer of 1944, his mind was preoccupied with dark issues of death. If one takes into account the horrors of World War II, which caused him and his family to escape from London to Wales and back, and Thomas's perplexed mind caused by his chain-smoking, heavy drinking and domestic quarrels with his wife Caitlin Macnamara, it is no wonder that his first post-war collection of poetry was entitled *Deaths and Entrances* (1946). As John Goodby explains:

> "Its eponymous title is derived from John Donne's last sermon, 'Death's Duell', which presents birth as an entrance from the womb, one kind of tomb, into this world, another kind of tomb: 'deliverance from that death, the death of the wombe, is an entrance, a delivering over to another death', our mortal existence being nothing but ´dying Life, and living Death´." (Goodby 2013: 313)

Most of the poems he composed once he regained his voicedealt with religious topics. The most famous of them, apart from the eponymous poem that gave the col-

lection its title, are: "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London", "The Conversation of Prayers", "The Hunchback in the Park", "There was a saviour", "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" and "Holy Spring". Even with his other poems, such as seven "Religious Sonnets", entitled "Poems for a Poem" (1935), "Vision and Prayer" deserves to be explored with a careful consideration of its religious overtones and undertones, as expressed in sometimes rather cryptic poetic language. It pervades the poem's topics, but also the style Thomas develops for the purpose.

4. PREVIOUS TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE POEM

Although with the application of diverse schools of critical thought, literary analyses have become more complex, and, the more recent ones, having been published on the occasion of Dylan Thomas's Centenary (before and after 2014), began to question severely Thomas's pronounced interest in geometrical forms in "Vision and Prayer" from a different perspective, most critics usually apply familiar, traditional literary methods when analysing this poem. They primarily focus on the language of the poem and the abundant imagery associated with it, and refer to certain groups of words surrounding either the main theme in Part I: birth of a child or nativity, and death or mourning leading to a re-birth in Part II. Without knowing both the poet's Welsh and Christian (Protestant Presbyterian) background, and the context of circumstances he was exposed to when composing the poem (World War II), one could easily interpret the poem on a plain level as a sorrow/mourning of the father over the dead child. However, the child is not just any male boy, but a heavenly son, the Son/Child of God, i.e. Jesus Christ. He had been sent to Earth to warn and redeem people who expected a Messiah or the Saviour. His mission was intertwined with his vision, and, if the analysis continues in this vein, it would have to disregard other signs and hints that Thomas carefully concealed. A rather intense imagery evokes the coming of Christ and the light that obliterates darkness from the child's loin. It is a possible reference to the Biblical notion of procreation, but this juxtaposition of light and loin (in addition to Thomas's usual excessive use of alliterations) may also refer to the loincloth Christ wore when crucified. Part II ("Prayer") starts with the image of a burial song of departing birds, which can be understood as a mock resurrection. As Tindall explains: "'The burial song' of these dark birds of resurrection implies both birth as well as death: for tomb is womb" (Tindall 1996: 244-245). In line with his argument, Tindall concludes that "'The heart bone', as other union of death and life, is the poet's creative instrument, of which his son and his poem are products" (Tindall

1996: 245). Another way to interpret Part I must be performed as an extended exercise that wants readers to imagine a process of producing a poem, or, poetry, in general. It is the method Tindall applies in his detailed analysis. For him, one can see the process of birth on two levels. The first one seems to be a rather naturalistic, very physical aspect of creating poetry that can be equalised with a woman/mother giving birth to a child. It is recreated in Part I, stanza i. (furthermore, quoted lines from respective stanzas in each Part will be referred to throughout the paper as: I.i.1, I.ii.5, etc.), but from behind the wall, where a poet/father hears "the womb Opening" coming from "the birth bloody room unknown." Cries are so "loud" that he can hear them distinctly from "Behind the wall thin as a wren's bone" (I.i.9), and a "dropped son" comes to turbulent times in this world ("To the burn and turn of time" – I.i.11). It is strange that a "man"/"father" seems not to welcome (t)his offspring of his with joy ("the heart print of man Bows no baptism" – I.i.12-13), but leaves his parental/creator's duties to some unknown, "dark" forces to perform the blessing of "The wild Child" (I.i.15-16). This is the gist of stanza I, as being retold in plain words, as Burdette has done consistently in his analysis.

However, there are some puzzling issues that can only be explained on a metaphorical, elevated level. It is what Tindall does, since he sums the story in a few sentences at the outset of his interpretation, and concludes: "All the rest is metaphorical" (Tindall 1996: 239). The puzzling issues relate to "a wren's bone" and "the heart print of man". A cluster of words containing "a wren's bone" is repeated three times in Part I (stanzas i., ii. And iii.), and once more in Part II (II.2.). For Tindall, these words seem to suggest two things – they can be understood as "a former or future wing." (1996: 241), but they also "commonly imply sex and death" (Ibid.). If understood as the flapping of the wings, it denotes a departure from this world towards heaven. However, there is no doubt about the connection of "a wren's bone" to a male sexual organ, which is "becoming a phallic snake" and 'writhes down' (I.iii.3), reaching sexual fulfilment (Tindall 1996: 245) Given that this interpretation of Tindall's dates way back to 1962, when Freudian undertones in deciphering Thomas's exuberant use of words associated with free practice of sexual urges dominated the critical attitudes (although Tindall, in his introduction, refutes such simplistic labels for Thomas – Tindall 1996: 9), his understanding of this expression is not altogether convincing. If taken literally, one needs to bear in mind that a wren is a rather small, round brown bird with tiny legs that, according to folk legend, was hiding under the eagle's wing in the great bird's attempt to reach the highest point in the skies. When the eagle could no longer fly due to its exhaustion, the wren came from under his

wing and continued to fly even higher. It made him the king of the birds, whereas, in Celtic tales, wrens symbolize determination, optimism and happiness, and, more importantly, a good sign for the future. This explains Tindall's view about "a former or future wing," but, as in many other critical points in his analysis, there are too many uncertainties. It is rather obvious in his introduction, where he openly states that the answer to these questions "depends on which of the several meanings of diamond and wing you prefer" (Tindall 1996: 240). And a sentence or two later: "In either case, the poet meant them to be where they are; but what he meant and what he meant for us to conclude remain dark" (Ibid.).

As for "the heart print of man", Tindall develops his argument by equating it with a process of composing, or, even, giving "birth" to a poem, or leaving the poet's distinctive mark on it as in a "footprint". Sounds coming behind the thin wren's wall (or obstetrician's bloody room) are poems being painfully delivered from the womb (Tindall 1996: 241). The analysis continues by bringing together the human with the divine child (Christ) and presenting the poet/father as an alternative Godlike Creator to the Sun/Son.

Such a comparison is further developed in Tindall's creative analysis, which served as a starting point for some other critics. One of them, Rushworth M. Kidder, while giving credit to Tindall's explanations as the best one to date, offers some of his own:

> "Faced with a vision of a holy birth, the narrator describes his reaction, offers a prayer, and is overwhelmed by an unexpected result. Few referential or allusive images appear; the vocabulary is simple, and syntax (once missing punctuation marks are supplied) causes no problem. Although questions of interpretation arise, ambiguity is not a central element, for this poem depends less on the delights of conundrums than on the emotional and dramatic investment that the poet makes." (Kidder 1973: 158)

Kidder explored three types of religious imagery in Thomas's poetry, so his analysis centres on "the holy birth" of Jesus Christ. It is interesting to note that Kidder became interested in Thomas as a doctoral student under the actual guidance of Professor Tindall, who was the mentor for his doctoral dissertation, out of which Kidder's book emerged. Tindall was among the first critics who asked the right questions about two intertwined issues: form and theme, and he saw many similarities with other English poets, particularly Gerald Manley Hopkins, who had also used the shape of a diamond in their poetry ("That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire"). However:

> "The shapes of the stanzas are significant and ambiguous. A diamond, carrying for Thomas the meaning of Hopkins' "immortal diamond", must stand for light, vision and eternity. Yet Thomas'

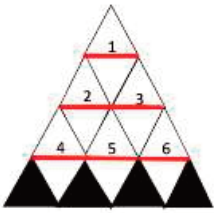
> diamonds are often black as coal. Even such diamonds, however, hold light, promise vision, image, art and bring things forth." (Tindall 1996: 239)

In his subsequent analysis, fifty years later (Tindall's *The Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas* was originally published in 1962), Matthias Bauer provides an additional piece of information regarding the poet's insistence on keeping the layout of his poem intact, as he had sent it to his American publisher:

> "In a letter to his American publisher (James Laughlin), Dylan Thomas, returning the proofs of "Vision and Prayer", insisted that the shape had to be "absolutely symmetrical" with "no variations in the straight diamond lines" and their "complete reversal" in Part II (Thomas 1987: 542–43). Thomas thus obviously thought of the shape in terms of a diamond." (Bauer 2001: 176)

5. AN ATTEMPT TO OFFER A DIFFERENT YET MEANINGFUL ANALYSIS OF "VISION AND PRAYER"

Thomas, obviously, had good reasons to have the appearance of his poem as he had imagined it. However, one should try to expand his shape to, at least, two compact sets of stanzas. In Part I, one could use the shape of a 'grand diamond', i.e., all the six rhombus-shaped stanzas presented as a whole. The result is reminiscent of a triangle/pyramid, which needs to have four more triangles at the bottom (in black) to complete the shape:



The lines in red subdividing diamond-shaped stanzas 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 into two parts (triangles again!) could be observed as a hidden message. They are contained in the longest lines (line 9), which cuts the shape into two equal triangular subsections within each stanza:

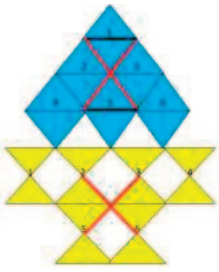
1 Behind the wall thin as a wren's bone?
2 And the midwives of miracle sing

3 Who bore him with a bonfire in
4 And the lightnings of adoration
5 The cloud climb of the exhaling tomb
6 Young from the canyons of oblivion!

When the first and last lines of the six stanzas in Part II are joined and read together in the same manner by placing together lines 1 and 17 within each stanza as a continuous flow of verse, the result is a combination of 12 lines as follows:

1 In the name of the lost who glory in
17 The inmost marrow of my heart bone
18 That he who learns now the sun and moon
35 In the centre of dark I pray him
36 That he let the dead lie though they moan
53 Under the night forever falling.
54 Forever falling night is a known
61 For the country of death is the heart's size
62 And the star of the lost the shape of the eyes.
79 And the known dark of the earth amen.
80 I turn the corner of prayer and burn
97 One. The sun roars at the prayer's end.

A similar approach could be applied to Part II with hourglass shapes, but they must be perceived as joined with diamond shapes. The result is reminiscent of a large diamond, where rhomboid shapes in blue are juxtaposed with hourglass ones in yellow. Of course, a different arrangement is also possible, where the shapes from Part I will be mirrored with those in Part II, and in the same order – stanzas 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 (or 7-12), but they must be presented as two sets of three equal shapes on top of each other to attain some kind of visual appearance:



The diagonal cross (in red) is revealed both in the joint rhombus shapes (in blue) when all six diamond shapes are placed next to one another, and a single hourglass emerges at the centre when the red cross is outlined with two black horizontal lines. However, it is not possible to achieve the same effect when applying the same method to six hourglass shapes (in yellow) following the same principle of adding one in the first row, two in the second, and three in the third one. When the four hourglasses are placed in the first row, and two more beneath them in the second, as shown above, another diagonal cross (in red), emerges, as well as four diamond shapes (in white) that appear between hourglasses. The outlined hourglass shape within the set of joined six diamond shapes produces a new hourglass, as follows:

Behind the wall thin as a wren's bone ?
In the birth bloody room unknown
To the burn and turn of time
And the heart print of man
Bows no baptism
But dark alone
Blessing on
The wild
Child.
There
Crouched bare
In the shrine
Of his blazing
Breast I shall waken
To the judge blown bedlam
Of the uncaged sea bottom
The cloud climb of the exhaling tomb
(Thomas 1945: I.i.10-17+ I.v.1-9)

A daring interpreter can see the substance of both main themes in such a newly constructed "stanza". It contains the image of a delivery room (the birth of a child), but, also, "the tomb" as an obvious association of death and rebirth through resurrection.

The second possibility is the intersecting of rhomboid and hourglass shapes when all the shapes are combined in a large, 'grand diamond':

The two diagonal crosses (in black) are strikingly revealed both in the joint rhombus shapes (in blue) when all six diamond shapes are interspersed one to another with six hourglasses. The central shape is a diamond again (in yellow, since it takes its upper part from the lower triangle of hourglass 2, and the lower triangle belongs to the upper part of hourglass 5, but is outlined with black lines of the rhombus). When excised from its original place within the poem, this central diamond shape reads like this:

F o r
A l l m e n
T h e a d o r e d
I n f a n t l i g h t o r
The dazzling prison
Yawn to his upcoming.
In the name of the wanton
Lost on the unchristened mountain
In the centre of dark I pray him
And the star of the lost the shape of the eyes.
In the name of the fatherless
In the name of the unborn
A n d t h e u n d e s i r e r s
Of midwiving morning's
Hands or instruments
O in the name
Of no one
Now or
(Thomas 1945: II.ii.10-17+ II.v.1-9)

This second newly constructed diamond-shaped "stanza" reveals the scene of the crowd witnessing "his upcoming" (ascension/resurrection) that takes place "on the

unchristened mountain" (Golgotha, where Christ has been crucified). Christ is evoked in the lower triangle ("the star of the lost"), but also referred directly to Him in "the adored infant," but also in "the fatherless" and "the unborn". An unnamed speaker prays to Him "in the centre of the dark" on behalf of: "the wanton," "the fatherless," and "the unborn." One must add the last one at the very bottom of this constructed stanza: "of noone" (II.v.8-9). Thomas indeed uses the same wording "in the name of" three times in the upper triangle of his original Part II, stanza v. As a matter of fact, the wording is repeated, since he opened it with stanza i. of Part II, although he refers there to "the lost" ones:

> *In the name of the lost who glory in*
> *The swinish plains of carrion* (Ibid., II.i.1-2)

Thomas will use this phrase again in the final stanza of Part II: "In the name of the damned," and also obliquely "In the name of the undesirers in the midwives mornings." (II.v.4-5) "In the name of" is the formula often heard in the Christian prayer: "In the name of Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit/Ghost." Once more, there is a direct quote from the Bible (Matthew, 28:19), or, at least, a reference to it, where Jesus issues a direct command (the Great Commission) on the mountain of Galilee ("unchristened mountain"?) to his disciples to: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". St. Andrew, having been crucified on the diagonal cross, immediately comes to mind, since he continued his Teacher's mission and was executed because of it. However, the choice of Thomas's words in this allusion to the Trinitarian formula is puzzling. The adjective "wanton" denotes an irresponsible, wicked, cruel, even malevolent person, but also a person of lustful, promiscuous, lecherous, bawdy behaviour. If it is associated with the Father (i.e. God), it is clearly blasphemy, since "the fatherless" refers to the Son, who had been begotten through the intervention of the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary (the Immaculate Conception). However, Thomas refers to the wanton people who are bored (they "yawn" at his upcoming), and are, definitely, "unchristened" and not part of the baptized, Christian community. Tindall makes it clear that the "unchristened mountain" refers to "unbelievers," although he makes an intertextual hint to Dante's Purgatorial mountain that does have a name (Tindall 1996: 245). One can embark again on these kinds of analyses that are mostly based on the close reading approach, but it would be, primarily, the process of retelling other critics' views or quoting some of their interpretations without probing into the unchartered territories. In the same way, one can try to apply a kind of literal

Derridean deconstructing of the poem, which has been done to some degree above, in order to play with the existing shapes and show that, even in such a process, "Vision and Prayer" can offer multiple possibilities to re-interpret both its form and speculate freely about newly "discovered" meanings. Despite some interesting findings that arise from the subsequent restructuring of some lines and shapes, it should be borne in mind that Thomas had clearly instructed his American publisher James Laughlin to print the poem as he had submitted it, since he added some blank spaces in some lines for such a purpose. Accordingly, his wish should be respected by adhering strictly to the available editions, both printed and electronic ones, nevertheless, his "unchartered territories" should be more frequently visited and interpreted even within the framework of unorthodox experiments. That is why it is better not to pursue any more this type of analysis, because it can lead to a dead-end or utter confusion.

The aforementioned exercise in different placements of diamonds and hourglass shapes can also be considered abstract and un-academic/uncritical, since, it is very likely, that no one attempted to analyse the poem in this manner. Yet, with the help of modern technology, it is difficult to speculate if Thomas had ever thought about it in this way. As Walford Davies aptly said in his more recent study of Thomas.

> "Today, we have even that ridiculous disguise and escape from genuine 'poetic' form – the automatic centralizing of lines made so thoughtlessly easy by PCs. Such artificial facility is nowhere near the inward craft that went to the making of 'shape' poems such as Herbert's 'Easter Wings' or Vaughan's 'The Waterfall' or Thomas's 'Vision and Prayer'. In Thomas's poem the religious tribute is increased by the ambiguous emblematic diamond and hourglass 'shapes' created, because they are controlled by concentration, thematic relevance and the human voice, not by simple print-off." (Davies 2014: 17)

6. CONCLUSION

The paper tried to accommodate some of the most important facts related to the tradition of "shape" poems in English regarding a specific experiment with Dylan Thomas's poem "Vision and Prayer". It rearranged the lines from both parts of the poem having followed the newly imagined pattern that could emerge once the stanzas from diamond and hourglass shapes have been joined into a single geometric whole. The outcome was not only interesting, but also reminiscent of two principal geometrical objects outlined in the poem's pictorial pattern (i.e. rhombus in the pictorial version of a diamond, and two sets of triangles as hourglass). When the lines from intersected stanzas are reproduced in an artificial form, the shape of an hourglass

comes out of the grand diamond, whereas the shape of a diamond emerges from the joined set of hourglass lines. Instead of appearing randomly placed together and making no sense as deconstructed from the original poems, these two newly re-constructed shapes opened some possibilities for further elaboration and interpretation. Perhaps, Dylan Thomas himself would have considered such an attempt in line with his ideas about the visual aspects of his poetry, which could complement his otherwise powerful auditory features that still resonate among his readers. And even more so among his academic interpreters, using the new technologies, and willing to search for new unchartered territories he had amply provided eighty years ago when he created "Vision and Prayer" as the perpetual source of wonder and inspiration.

This was such an attempt, open to new possibilities for interpretation that still need to be discovered.

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PREOBLIKOVANJE MISTIČNE GEOMETRIJE U PJESMI "VISION AND PRAYER" DYLANA THOMASA I NJENE MOGUĆE RE-INTERPRETACIJE

Sažetak:

Iako se Dylan Thomas i njegova pjesma "Vision and Prayer" (1944) obično ne vezuju za vizuelnu/konkretnu ili "oblikovanu poeziju", upravo ga veoma enigmatska i smjela poetska artikulacija u ovoj pjesmi, koja iskazuje zanimljive tipografske karakteristike, kvalificira da ga se podvede i pod takvu oznaku. Riječ je o jedinstvenom pjesničkom eksperimentu ponajviše zbog dva posebna geometrijska oblika – romba/dijamanta i pješčanog sata – u okviru dva jednaka dijela pjesme sa po šest strofa. Ovi oblici tvore specifičnu vrstu "mistične geometrije", jer se razlikuju kako po slikovnoj pojavnosti, tako i po svojoj sadržini. U radu se daje osvrt na različite pokušaje u engleskoj književnosti koji su mogli poslužiti kao inspiracija za Thomasa i to u djelima Georgea Herberta, Sir Thomasa Brownea i W. B. Yeatsa. Istovremeno se navode i neke prethodne kritičke interpretacije (Tindall, Burdette, Kidder, Bauer), koje su se uglavnom kretale oko tema rođenja, smrti i ponovnog rođenja (uskrsnuća) Isusa Krista, budući da religiozne pjesničke predodžbe i pjesnički jezik prosto nameću takav pristup. Međutim, kombiniranje derridijanske dekonstrukcije/restrukcije i kompjuterske slikovne manipulacije teksta rezultiralo je zanimljivom analizom nakon što su sve strofe spojene u oblik "velikog dijamanta". Nova, preoblikovana verzija ove "pjesme" otvorila je mogućnost drugačije interpretacije ukazujući na centralne geometrijske oblike koji su se pojavili u tom procesu.

Ključne riječi: vizuelna poezija; mistična geometrija; religiozne predodžbe; oblik 'velikog dijamanta'; re-interpretacija

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