From Sign to Signing

Iconicity in language and literature 3

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Table of contents

"Vision and Prayer"

Dylan Thomas and the Power of X

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1. An iconic poem?

Dylan Thomas's "Vision and Prayer" 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 (see e.g. Fischer and Nänny 1999: xvi–xvii, xxii).[1] Its clear-cut outer form is without parallel among Thomas's poetry, the only possible exception being the somewhat unusually shaped poem "Now" (Garlick 1973: 42). All commentators of "Vision and Prayer" mention the baroque pattern poem and in particular George Herbert's "Easter Wings", which seems to be the model at least for the second part of "Vision and Prayer". Thus Howard Seargent (1962: 65) points out that it is "so reminiscent of Herbert in its hourglass form" and James A. Davies (1998: 193) observes that "the hourglass shape of the stanzas in the second part stresses time already ebbing away". But is the shape of Thomas's poem merely a repetition of Herbert's? In the first place, Herbert's poem is not shaped like an hour-glass, at least not in the first edition of *The Temple*, in which "Easter-Wings", following the model of Simias of Rhodes's "Pterygion",[2] really looks like a pair of wings.

Accordingly, if there is a relationship to Herbert's poem it is, quite literally, an oblique one; the main difference being not just a rotation of 90 degrees but, more importantly, the fact that whereas Herbert's typographical arrangement exactly represents what his title announces, there seems to be no such straightforward relationship between title and pictorial form in Dylan Thomas. To put it differently: what do the remarkable shapes of "Vision and Prayer" represent if spontaneous reaction as well as literary tradition lead us to assume that they are not arbitrary but iconic? There are references to 'wings' in the poem (the

"winged wall" in line i.29, the "Cyclone of his wing" in i.56 and "the wings of the children" in i.91) as well as to time ("To the burn and turn of time" i.11) but all these references are made in the first part, which is not wing-shaped or hourglass-shaped at all but has the form of rhombuses or lozenges.

Perhaps the assumption of a "pictorial significance" is wrong after all (Garlick 1973: 43) or the shape is just vaguely suggestive of a meaning, as Moynihan (1968: 14) seems to think, who speculates that the first part "suggests a movement from nothingness to nothingness yet, because it is diamond-shaped, simultaneously conveys the feeling of richness and value", or Korg (1992: 120), to whom the shape of the stanzas in Part I seems to reflect the idea of "opening that prevails in it, both in relation to birth and to spiritual awakening". Similar impressions are given for the shape of Part II.[3] As an alternative to such negative or mainly associative responses, however, one might consider the shape of "Vision and Prayer" as the iconic image of a basic geometric structure which in itself serves as a sign as well as a symbol pointing to a number of interrelated meanings.

2.   Pyramidal rays

Now let us look at "Vision and Prayer" — and this is meant quite literally. A poem whose first title word is "Vision" and which has such a remarkable shape is, I suggest, to be looked at before it is to be read. In other words, close reading here in the first place means close looking, assuming the role of seer for a moment, deliberately unfocussing one's eyes so that one does not decipher but become aware of the dark shapes against the background of white paper. We thus realize that the one shape is the negative of the other: in the manner of tilting images we see, in Part I, either black rhombs or white triangles (more precisely "tricquets displayed" as George Puttenham has it, quoted by Thomas's editor Daniel Jones [1985a: 273]) and in Part II black triangles or white rhombs. The pattern thus revealed is based on the elementary geometrical form of the letter X, which provides the outline of both shapes.

With a pattern based on the interplay of foreground and background, it may be permitted to think of a 'background' even at this initial stage of approaching "Vision and Prayer". To a reader of seventeenth-century English literature, the X-shaped poem, whose title links the sense of vision and the appeal to God, inevitably recalls one author whom Dylan Thomas is known to have read (Maud 1968: 12 and n. 14) and who was fascinated by this geometrical pattern: Sir Thomas Browne, who in *The Garden of Cyrus* regards what he calls the "quincunx" (St. Andrew's cross) as a basic pattern of creation, giving evidence

of the fact that "nature is the Art of God" (*Religio Medici* i.16; Browne 1964: 16). What is more, human perception of the world is itself an example of this geometrical structure. It is, as Sir Thomas Browne puts it,

> gratefull to the Eye: For all things are seen Quincuncially; For at the eye the Pyramidal rayes from the object, receive a decussation, and so strike a second base upon the *Retina* or hinder coat, the proper organ of Vision; wherein the pictures from objects are represented, answerable to the paper, or wall in the dark chamber; ... (Browne 1964: 167)

This reference to the dark chamber of the camera obscura is further elaborated by Brown's reference to Bovillus, who maintained (in *De intellectu*) that the inner or intellectual reflection also takes place in the shape of a double pyramid with the understanding acting as a lens or focal point between the *res in mundo* and the *res in memoria*:[4]
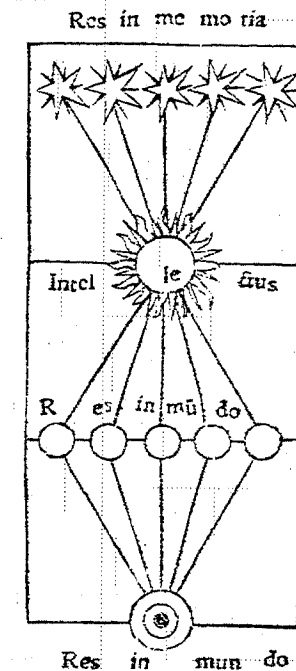
Browne further refers to Egyptian philosophy in which the "geniall spirits" of the divine and the human world "do trace their way in ascending and descending

Pyramids, mystically apprehended in the letter X and the open Bill and straddling Legges of a Stork, which was imitated by that Character"; this goes together with the myth of creation in Plato's *Timaeus* (37B), in which the first creation and the unfolding of the spheres is described as a process to be outlined by the letter X, as the world-soul is divided cross-wise. George Herbert refers to this X-shape of creation in "Prayer (II)", when he speaks of God's "great arm, which spans the east and west, / And tacks the centre to the sphere!" (8–9). The X implicitly appears in the hour-glass image of the following line as well: "By it do all things live their measur'd houre" (10).

Switching from background to foreground again, we now begin to read (or to read more than just the title of Thomas's poem) in order to see whether the suggested concept of the 'double pyramid' is borne out by the words and images of "Vision and Prayer". As the opening lines make clear, its first subject is the birth of an unknown person: "Who / Are you / Who is born / In the next room / ..." When we think of the X as the shape of a stork the theme of a child's arrival may seem quite appropriate. With Dylan Thomas's quaint sense of humour and predilection for bird imagery this is not as far fetched as it may appear, especially since in folk legend, the stork also appears in connection with Christ's cross and as a "tyrant that devours his subject" (Evans 1981: 1074–75). The link between the sun and the bird in stanza 4 ("In / The spin / Of the sun / In the spurning / Cyclone of his wing") makes the 'Egyptian' connotations of the hieroglyphical X on which the poem's shape is based appear quite likely.[5] The syncretism is very much like Sir Thomas Browne's, whose double pyramid not only corresponds to the shape of "Vision and Prayer" but also coincides with Dylan Thomas's general interest in that 'Egyptian' geometrical symbol, manifesting itself, for example, in "My World is Pyramid" (no. 95) — which, although it is not a pattern poem, is very much concerned with symmetrical shapes, the "fellow halves" (II, l. 19). Just as "My World is Pyramid" combines references to Egypt and the Orient with "an English valley", the land of the Bible (the "crossing Jordan"), "the Arctic", and "the South", there is in "Vision and Prayer" a syncretistic link between the Christian belief in the divine child and the "Egyptian" belief in the divine sun-bird. The blending is of course traditional, for the proto-typical Egyptian sun-bird is the Phoenix (being worshipped at Heliopolis, 'Suntown' in Egypt), which has always been regarded as a type of Christ. Like Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and Turtle*, "Vision and Prayer" includes a *threnos* or burial song of birds: at the beginning of Part II, "the burial song / Of the birds of burden" becomes part of a ghostly mock-resurrection, for Thomas's birds are "bearing / The ghost / From / The ground / Like pollen / On the black plume / And the beak of slime" (ii.7–13). Shakespeare's poem draws attention to the iconic expressiveness of the

letter X, too, when, for example, paradoxical contraction goes together with the noticeable use of the letter in "Distance, and no space was seen / 'Twixt this Turtle and his queen" (30–31, my emphasis). The letter is of course also fore-grounded by the repeated reference to the "phoenix" itself (23, 35, 50 56).

3.   Mystical geometry

The emphasis on seeing ("Distance, and no space was seen") reinforces the connection with the letter X as the structural principle of "Vision and Prayer." The outline of Thomas's poem is both an example of the "Vision" or *theoria* to be practised (we have to look at this poem as well as to read it) and an iconic representation of the visual process itself with its double pyramid of rays focussed by the lens of the physical or mental eye and leaving a picture on the retina.[6] Thus, although the first sense impression in the poem is hearing ("So loud" in l. 4, referring to the mother's cry of pain in childbirth; cf. the "moan / Of the mother" in stanza 2), the speaker finds himself indeed in a "dark chamber" into which light streams only when in stanza 2 "the winged wall is torn / By his [i.e. the new born's] torrid crown / And the dark thrown / From his loin / To bright / Light" (29–34). It is impossible to follow up all the implications of this image here but a particularly striking one has to do with the fact that it is the new born's "loin" (the centre of his body) from which darkness disappears, surely with biblical overtones of procreation (e.g. Gen 35:11 "And kings shall come out of thy loins" or Acts 2:30, taking up 1 Kings 8:19, in which the resurrected Christ is called "the fruit of his [David's] loins"). The juxtaposition of "loin" and "light" alludes to "the loins ... girded about" and the "lights burning" of those who expect the arrival of the Lord (Lk 12:35), while "loin", together with the "head of pain" and "thorn" and "crown" is evocative of the loincloth of the crucified Christ. In Thomas's vision, the birth of the child by the "mothering maiden" (i.42), "The adored / Infant light" (ii.28–29) born "For / All men" (ii.26–27) coincides with his death on the Cross. The beams of light which finally, in the last stanza of the poem, are so bright that the speaker is "lost in the blinding / One" enter the "I" or "eye" in a crosswise manner. For the paradoxical, mystical experience of perceiving or being lost in the "deluging / Light" (ii.55–56) means, to put it in the words of St. Paul, to be crucified with Christ.[7]

The lightning that finally answers the speaker's cry has indeed the effect of an X-ray in that it makes hiding impossible ("I would turn back and run / To the hidden land"). The comparison is warranted by the fact that the place of hiding for which the speaker prays is inside the body. He desires to "return" to the

mother's womb, "To the birth bloody room" (ii.21), a wish that is finally
overcome by the speaker's letting himself be discovered, "found" by the "loud
sun" (ii.92).[8] The "once hooded room" (i.47) is replaced with "the cauldron / Of
his / Kiss" (i.49–51), a vessel which corresponds to "the shrine / Of his blazing /
Breast" (i.71–73) and the "world's wound" (ii.99) as well as "the high noon / Of
his wound" which "Blinds my / Cry" (i.65–68). This reference to the Crucifixion
(Garlick 1973: 46; Kidder 1973: 161) synaesthetically combines the penetrating
beams of light with the fire and heat of the mouth by which the speaker is
touched ("a bonfire in / His mouth"; i.43–44).

The mouth is united with the eye in this excruciating experience. Thus from
the context of Thomas's writings it becomes evident that to him kiss and cross
belong together. When one leafs through his *Collected Letters*, for example, one
soon realizes that he fancied the letter X as a sign for 'kiss' at least as much as
Willy Nilly does in *Under Milk Wood* (Thomas 1985b: 43). This is of course a
widespread convention, but the conspicuous way in which Thomas uses the letter
emphasizes his awareness of its potential expressiveness. This is, for example, how
Dylan Thomas signed one of his first letters to his wife Caitlin (Thomas 1987: 248).

<div align="center">
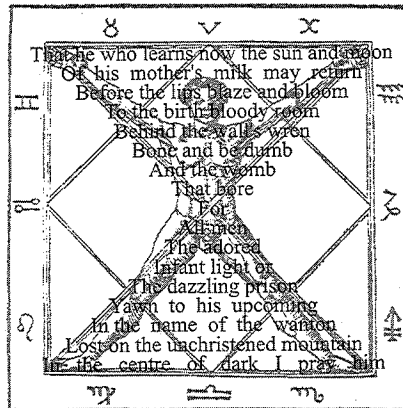
XXXXXX
Caitlin

Dylan X Caitlin

Dylan

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In Thomas's poetry, too, the kiss is visualized as a point of contact, the centre of
crossing lines: notice the position of the word "kiss" (anagram of "iks") at the
end of the third stanza right at the centre of the cross formed by the outlines of
stanzas 3 and 4 together; or notice such a phrase as "O see the poles are kissing
as they cross" in the poem "I see the Boys of Summer" (no. 86, 1. III.6). Here
the crossing lines of vision ("O see") go together with the kissing-crossing.
Vincent Leitch (1992: 341) noticed the similarity to Herbert's poem "The
Search": "East and West touch, the poles do kisse, / And parallels meet". In the
geometrical mysticism to which Herbert's and Thomas's lines are indebted,
parallels meet and cross when they form the infinite sphere which is God himself
(Mahnke 1937: *passim*, e.g. 20–21, 84–86, 173).[9] This mystical notion, which for
Thomas characteristically includes the experience of sexual encounter as a
personal cross(ing) of cosmic dimensions, also appears in "A Prospect of the
Sea" (1937), which is a story about vision (as the title indicates) as well as about
the kissing of a boy and girl and about procreation and genesis (the girl will
"have a baby on every hill"). The geometrical hieroglyphics or 'double pyramids'
of "Vision and Prayer" are not only foreshadowed by the girl's sister living "in

a pyramid" but also by the boy, who realizes that in this encounter his own space
has become "no wider" (and, implicitly, no smaller) than Eden or "the loving
room of the world, and [that] the two poles kissed behind his shoulder blades"
(Thomas 2000b: 93). In one of his early letters to Pamela Hansford Johnson,
Dylan Thomas testifies to the formative influence of this geometrical mysticism
when he tells her: "I lie in the dark and think. I think of God and Death and
Triangles" (Thomas 1987: 129). Powers of overwhelming impact are imagined in
terms of geometrical shapes, just as, indicative of a natural mysticism that
corresponds to the geometrical one, the smallest kind of these shapes is seen to
be inhabited by a divine person. Thus in the same letter Dylan Thomas main-
tains: "The chromosomes, the colour bodies have a god in them that doesn't care
a damn for the howls of our brains." It is of course the letter X (together with
the similarly triangular Y) that, because of its shape, gave its name to the sex
chromosome.[10]

In "Vision and Prayer" the erotic meeting marked by kiss and procreation
and the encounter with the blinding light of the sun or son, which is a death
prefigured by the death on the Cross, are shown to coalesce by the visible cipher
of the letter X.[11] We are reminded by this of traditional constructions of this
letter as the shape of a naked man spanning the globe or the four corners of the
earth, whose centre is his navel. An example is the combination of O and X
(and, implicitly, the rhomb and the X) in Geofroy Tory's *Champ Fleury* (Tory
1973: fol. 18v):
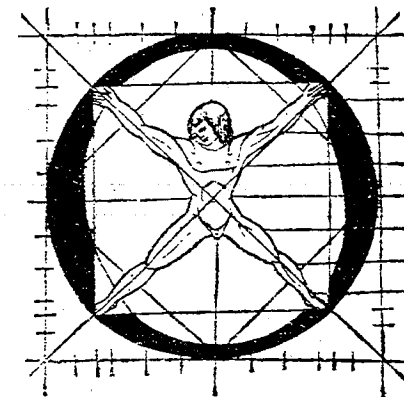
How exactly the shape of Thomas's stanzas fits those X-shaped human letter-bodies can be seen in an example from Agrippa of Nettesheim's *De occulta philosophia* (Agrippa 1987: 284):

That he who learns now the sun and moon
Of his mother's milk may return
Before the lips blaze and bloom
To the birth bloody room
Behind the wall's wren
Bone and be dumb
And the womb
That bore
For
All men
The adored
Infant light or
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

Like the poles that kiss as they cross, this two-dimensional image on the page is to be visualized three-dimensionally as well. Semantically, the spatial or spherical dimension of the lines comes to the fore in expressions like "Cyclone of his wing" (i.56) and "O spiral of ascension" (i.79), which add, as it were, an O to the X (or a circle to the cross, as in Donne's "The Crosse", see note 9). The X marks a globe or cell — or, to return to the image of the beam of light — an interior dark chamber which opens up and unites with another in a process full of pain and terror. The emphasis on space becomes obvious right at the beginning: "Who/Are you/Who is born/In the next room/So loud to my own …?" This unknown person X is born in a room which not only blends with the space of the womb (whose "wren"-bone walls open in childbirth) but also with the space of the poem itself: the characteristically shaped stanza is the room ('stanza' means 'room') in which the child is born, it is a room that is punningly visualized as a rhomb, and even the mysterious wren fits with this dark chamber ("the wall thin as a wren's bone", i.9), for the wren is not just any bird but one whose zoological name is *troglodytes*, which means cave-dweller (cf. *OED* "troglodyte"; "wren bone" is of course also an anagram of "new born[e]").

The "birth bloody room" of the womb and the room that is the space of the poem itself, are connected by a chain of words and images that serve to integrate the second half of the poem's title into the iconic conception of the whole. The

"once hooded room" from which the speaker runs (and to which he later wishes to return), is the space of child-hood as well as the womb in which the embryo is covered by a caul (the amnion). Thomas punningly points this out by juxtaposing the "once hooded room" with the "*caul*dron/Of his kiss", i.e. of him who has a "bonfire in/His mouth" (i.43–44). Similarly, in "From Love's First Fever to Her Plague" (no. 74), the moment of birth is that of the "scissored caul" (3). To be born with a caul, as we know from the beginning of *David Copperfield*,[12] means to be protected from drowning, but in "Vision and Prayer" the caul is scissored, too ("the winged wall is torn/By his torrid crown"), and the speaker will inevitably drown in the "world's wound" of the son. The allusion to the pair of scissors is of course yet another reference to the X-shape of the poem itself (and vice versa).

4. The name of X

These new spaces or rooms, the mouth, "the shrine/Of his blazing/Breast" (i.71–73), the "exhaling tomb" (i.76, which, in the context, is an 'X-hailing' tomb as well), then the "shrine" of the wound (ii.37), later the hollow of the hand in which the speaker's "voice burns" (ii.101) form the counterpart to the "hidden land" of the mother's womb. To move inexorably from the one to the other means proceeding from the speechlessness of infancy to the final speechlessness of the "Infant light" (ii.29; with reference to *infans*, 'speechless'), in which "the sun roars at the prayer's end". In between lies the space or room of language which cannot be avoided by returning "Before the lips blaze and bloom/To the birth bloody room" (ii.20–21). It is the space of the poem itself, in which the speaker, invoking another mouth-cave-image, tolls the tongue of the sleepers (ii.54).[13] Or, to compare once more "From Love's First Fever": "And from the first declension of the flesh/I learnt man's tongue, to twist the shapes of thoughts/Into the stony idiom of the brain" (31–33).

There are, however, differences as well as similarities between the two poems, for the predominantly negative view of language has been replaced in "Vision and Prayer" by a more hopeful or at least ambivalent one. In "From Love's First Fever", the speaker disparagingly (and desperately) exclaims: "The root of tongues ends in a spentout cancer/That but a name, where maggots have their X" (37–38). In "Vision and Prayer", the X or cross as the central pattern or cipher is not merely a sign of death and decay. It is a cipher that turns into an effective word, not "but a name" but the name (i.28) that the "turbulent new born" burns into the speaker, the mark by which the "finding one" relentlessly

claims him his own. In "From Love's First Fever" the X, as Mayer (1995: 41) has remarked, recalls the signature of the illiterate (who has, as it were, no name). By contrast, in "Vision and Prayer", it points, as we think of the letter *Chi* (Jones 1966: 81) for Christ (as in 'X-mas'), to the name above every name (Phil. 2:9), the root and end of all naming.

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).[14] Thomas thus obviously thought of the shape in terms of a diamond. In the context of linguistic self-reflection, the precious stone is the emblem of a language quite different from "the stony idiom of the brain"; it is, moreover, to be contrasted with the speaker lying "still as stone" or praying in the name of the "stone/Blind" (ii.39–40), who want to go on sleeping "In the dark/And deep/Rock" (ii.41–43). With the name of the child being burnt into the speaker he becomes, in the sixth stanza of Part I, like "upright Adam" who "Sang upon origin" (i.89–90). The diamond, whose mineralogical name is *adamas*, is appropriate to this first man praising creation by giving names to it. Furthermore, it is a traditional symbol as well as a name of Christ, whom Gerard Manley Hopkins in "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire" called "immortal diamond" (l. 24; Tindall 1996: 239).[15]

"Vision and Prayer" begins by asking someone who he is. The name is never explicitly mentioned but burnt into the speaker who, as Wardi (1999–2000: 193) recently pointed out, by saying that "in the name/Of no one/Now or/No/One to/Be I pray" (ii.75–80) as it were inadvertently prays "to/Be". And when he says "I/Am found", the speaker actually pronounces the name that has been burnt into him, "I AM" (Ex. 3:13–14). Similarly, in the last lines of the poem: "Now I am lost in the blinding/One" — which also means: Now I am, lost in the blinding one, i.e. having given myself up and having become one with him, I truly am. To Hopkins, "diamond" (24) rhymes with "I am and", meaning "I am all at once what Christ is" (22; Leimberg 1998: 113). When the speaker prays "In the name of the fatherless" (ii.70) he evokes, in the very negation, the "name of the father". And when, after "amen" (ii.86) he "turn[s] the corner of prayer" (ii.87) the letters themselves are turned into "name" (ii.89) and are again enclosed in "damned" (ii.89; read in a crosswise fashion, this suggests that being "damned" means being 'd-name-d'). The letters themselves are thus shown to indicate the way in which Thomas pursues the poetic purpose of "'redeeming the contraries' with secretive images ... saying two things at once in one word, four in two and one in six" (letter to Charles Fisher in 1935; Thomas 1987: 182).

Thomas both avoids the name of Christ and refers to it (ii.35: "unchristened"; ii.92–94: "But the loud sun/Christens down/The sky"). He emphasizes the visible sign that comes before and after the spoken or written word, just as the "Christ-cross-row", the alphabet as it traditionally appeared in horn-books and primers, was preceded (and sometimes followed) by the sign of the cross (Tuer 1979: 64, e.g. illustration on p. 59).[16] But this sign, this vision or theory is nothing without the effective word, the actual being, and this is why we are justified in calling it iconic. What Thomas seeks to drive home is the power of the sign,[17] and in order to do so he chooses a shape that, on the one hand, participates in non-verbal signification (X is a mark, as in the expression 'X marks the spot'), and on the other hand, is a letter of the alphabet (and has a meaning only when combined with other letters). But here again Thomas says four things in two for the X-shape is of course also, on the one hand, a symbol, representing, for example, Christ (or the number ten;[18] the shape of the poem thus points beyond the number nine, which is the limit of the number of syllables[19] in each line) and on the other hand, a spherical diagram that makes visible the coincidence of opposites. The X is thus an icon of the poet's aiming for ultimate *evidentia* or *energeia*, for the (almost) physiological reality and sacramental effectiveness of the word. It is, in the words of Wallace Stevens (in a poem written about a year before "Vision and Prayer"), "The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X" ("The Motive for Metaphor" l. 20, Stevens 1972: 240).[20] The two- and three-dimensional shapes (lozenge and triangle, diamond and double pyramid) of the poem, which are variants and elements of the letter X, are iconic images (and diagrams) of the creative word, which draws its letters from the rays of light, as Thomas put it in the poem called "In the beginning" (no. 87): "the word/That from the solid bases of the light/Abstracted all the letters of the void" (19–21). The vision, as well as the prayer, is one of thing and sign being originally and ultimately identical (the word is to be seen, the sign to be heard). Nevertheless, the cipher of "Vision and Prayer" is *but* an icon of this original word, which can never be fully grasped. It is, by definition, a sign of the unknown, X, giving shape to an account of what the poet most deeply fears and desires.

Notes

1. This is not an attempt at a comprehensive reading of Thomas's complex poem, and even the one particular perspective chosen does not include all aspects relevant to it, such as prosody. But at least I hope to have chosen an approach invited by the poem itself. Thomas's poems are quoted from D. Jones's edition (Thomas 1985a). I am grateful to Professor Inge Leimberg for a number of suggestions.

2. See e.g. in Adler and Ernst (1988: 30–31) the reproduction from a 1545 edition of Theocritus's *Idyllia*.

3. E.g. Moynihan (1968: 134): "The double pyramid may conceivably be seen as springing from an immeasurable ground of hopefulness, passing through dryness, finally coming to an expansive point of exultation and acceptance." Moynihan himself regards his comments as "a completely subjective reaction". Korg (1992: 120) suggests that in "Section II, the convergence of forces or reversal suggested by the stanza form corresponds with the conflict of impulses that is the subject. It also reflects (more particularly by its rhythm) withholding, followed by the yielding of assent". More specifically, Korg draws attention to the emphasis given by the shapes to individual words, e.g. "'I' appearing as the axislike connective between the parts of the last stanza". Cf. also the interesting observation made by McKay (1969: 79), who sees a "spiral of ascension" which is "exemplified, perhaps, in the poems' characteristic diamond and hour-glass shapes which employ combinations of the spiral idea". McNees (1992: 138) suggests that the "emblematic hourglass stanzas of Part 2 visually reinforce the *kenotic* emptying and *pleromic* fulfillment of the eucharistic service". She sees the two shapes as marking "two contrasting times — the first ebbing away from, and the second fulfilling the first" and refers to Davies (1977: 52) who regards the shape of the first part as a "diamond pattern" which "represents, symbolically, birth, and therefore the womb", and the pattern of the second part as cross-like. For the resemblance to the cross, see also Jones (1966: 81). Emery (1962: 257) seems to deny the expressiveness of the shapes altogether: "the self-consciousness of the poet as craftsman belies his *furor poeticus*."

4. The diagram from Bovillus's *De intellectu* (1510) f. 85 is reprinted in Martin's ed. (Browne 1964: 357).

5. Cf. Thomas's sonnet "Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid" (no. 143), which ends: "a hundred storks perch on the sun's right hand" (14).

6. In Max Nänny's classification, the X of "Vision and Prayer" would thus probably be grouped among the "translucent letter-icons" (which "reveal themselves as icons in a flash"; Nänny 1999: 175), although its iconic function is not entirely covered by Nänny's typology, which is concerned with the shapes of letters used in a text rather than the text itself being letter-shaped. Nänny's article nevertheless provides an excellent background for my reading of Thomas's poem, since, focussing on the letter O, it shows how wide the range of letter-icons may be.

7. A close reading of the poem in the context of the traditional mystical concept of the blinding light (or visionary darkness) seems a *desideratum*. It might prove fruitful to take Crashaw's Epiphany hymn as a starting point, which presents the advent of the "Bright Babe" (1) to a speaker "Lost in a bright/Meridian night/A Darkness made of too much day" (16–18) and such iconic implications of the Cross as the chiasmus of "All circling point. All centring sphear" (26). Behind Crashaw's imagery appears, of course, Dionysius Areopagita.

8. The synaesthesia is reminiscent of the beginning of the "Prologue in Heaven" in Goethe's *Faust*. Thomas seems to have been familiar with the play, as his remarks on Louis McNeice's translation indicate (Thomas 1987: 711).

9. Thomas could find the characteristic combination of the meeting parallels and the speaker's own body in John Donne's "The Crosse" (Donne 1952: 26): "Who can deny me power, and liberty/To stretch mine armes, and mine owne Crosse to be?" (17–18) and "All the Globes frame, and spheares, is nothing else/But the Meridians crossing Parallels" (23–24). McNees (1992: 139) is reminded by Thomas's poem "of Donne's insistence on personal crucifixion as a requirement for God's grace."

10. See *OED* "X chromosome". It should be noted that both *sex* and *six* (the number of stanzas in each section) include the letter X.

11. For an introductory historical survey of the mysticism of letters, see esp. Ch. 4 in Drucker (1999: 72–92).

12. Cf. Ackerman (1991: 216): "We must always remember that his favourite prose writer was Dickens."

13. The mouth-bell is another cave which is both closed and open.

14. See also his letter to the director of Dent, A. J. Hoppé (18 September 1945, Thomas 1987: 569), in which he asks that the poem be "printed *exactly* as it should be" and the letter of 6 November 1945, in which he thanks him for having done so (Thomas 1987: 572).

15. The editors of Thomas's *Collected Poems* (Thomas 2000a: 246) cite his letter to Vernon Watkins (15 November 1944) to suggest that Thomas acknowledged "some influence from Francis Thompson, but not from Hopkins, nor from George Herbert". This is in fact not quite what the letter says. Thomas points out that he does not "remember seeing any Hopkins after the poem was finished" (Thomas 1987: 532) but this does not mean, of course, that he denies Hopkins being among the formative (and creatively transformed) influences. The question of Herbert's influence does not arise here because Watkins, in his letter, obviously only mentioned Thompson and Hopkins.

16. Thomas speaks of the "Christ-cross-row of death" in "When once the twilight locks no longer" (no. 90, l. 24).

17. Cf. *OED* "power" $n.^1$ 3.b.: "The sound expressed by a character or symbol; the meaning expressed by a word or phrase in a particular context: = force $n.^1$ 9."

18. See Meyer and Suntrup on the number ten (1987: 591–614) as a sign of perfection (591) and of Christ (598 on the X).

19. See Maud (1963: 160), who notes a few exceptions (the last stanza of Part I and the third stanza of Part II).

20. Other references to the letter X in Stevens, who seems to regard it as a mark of the desired (and feared) unknown origin of the poetic process, include "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together" (Stevens 1972: 295): "Himself, may be, the irreducible X/At the bottom of imagined artifice" (8–9). Cf. also "The Creations of Sound" (Stevens 1972: 250). My attention was drawn to Stevens's fascination with the letter by Firmage (1993: 256).

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