

## **Hexarengay—Origin, Challenges, Example, and Exegesis**

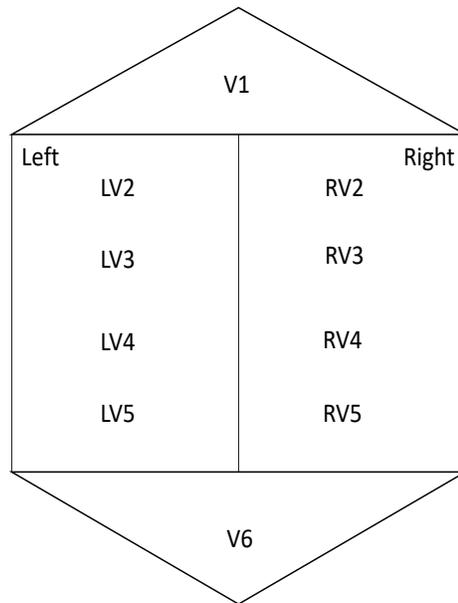
by Lew Watts and Charles Trumbull

The idea originated in a phone call in early April 2020, set up to discuss possible publishing venues for some rengay we had recently completed. (A rengay, invented by Garry Gay, is a 6-verse linked poem of alternating 3-line and 2-line haiku.) In the 15 months since we started writing rengay together, we had been relatively successful—of the 25 rengay completed, 16 had been published or accepted for publication.

One clear characteristic of our rengay was that our verses reflected our personalities and backgrounds, and they were quite different. Each of our classic-form rengay was broadly shaped by whomever wrote the first verse (V1), and the first author usually specified a theme in advance. The actual trajectory, however, was invariably set by V2, which often as not (and we tried to make it often) caused the poem to veer off in an unexpected direction. We mused that there could have been many other possible V2s, each leading to a completely different poem. Would it be possible to explore this critical choice of V2 in a new form?

After discussing, and thankfully discounting, such ideas as a linear increase in the number of verses per row (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.), as in the “net renga,” “star renga,” and other geometric forms that others have tried<sup>i</sup> we settled on a simpler idea: in response to V1, the second author would provide two V2s to set-up a pair of parallel but different directions for verses 3, 4, and 5. Finally, we thought that symmetry could be maintained by ending the rengay with a single V6 that would bring closure and “lock down” the poem.

We envisaged a structure like this:



Because it had the shape of an elongated hexagon, we gave it the name *hexarengay*. We immediately recognized several challenges:

V1 should have sufficient “breadth,” or openness, to trigger two very different V2s and subsequent themed threads. For aesthetic reasons, we decided that V1 should be shaped as a triangle, with a short first line and longest third line.

The two-line V2s should both link to V1, but should send the poem in different directions.

In our earlier work with regular rengay, apart from agreeing on a theme in advance, we rarely explained our verses as we posted them, preferring to do so only when the whole composition was complete. To identify and maintain two narratives was difficult, however, so we decided that each poet would explain his thinking process behind each proposed verse as we went along.

The V3s, V4s, and V5s should extend the two (right and left) threads.

The single V6 would be difficult but key to the poem. It had to achieve four things: linkages to *both* V5s; a completion of the chains of thought in the left- and right-hand columns; a sense of closure (ideally also echoing V1); and formatted as an inverted triangle, with the first line the longest.

As an example, here is our first hexarengay:

**In Hoc Signo** (Charles Trumbull, *Lew Watts*)

backlit  
by a supermoon  
The World's Largest Cross

*in the valley of the fallen*  
*a new descanso*

*effing huge*  
*her new cruciform tattoo*

Père Lachaise—  
so quiet the resting place  
of Marcel Marceau

tattered parchment map  
scratched through at the spot  
where the treasure lies

*on mute*  
*dead to the pantomime*  
*of a royal wedding*

*a lone cygnet . . .*  
*gliding across the backbone*  
*of the Milky Way*

leading the danse macabre  
skeleton in a mitre

nighttime raid—the bombardier  
sets the crosshairs on Dublin

*a trinity of backfires*  
*at a four-way stop*  
*zig, zig, zig*

We offer here an exegesis of the poem based on each poet's notes and thoughts shared at the end of each verse. We do so to emphasize the expanded scope possible with the form. As one of us wrote after completing the poem, "interesting that we cover a lot

more territory and dig a lot deeper with this form than with a regular rengay. I'd say much more than twice as much."

First Verse (V1)—Charlie: A couple years ago I was driving from Chicago to New Mexico and passed a monument ballyhooed as "The Tallest Cross in the World" at Groom in the Texas Panhandle. When I got home, I checked and was satisfied to learn that at 66 m, the Millennium Cross over Skopje, Northern Macedonia, was actually 8 m taller than the Texan cross.

Second Verse, Left (LV2)—Lew: The largest cross in the world is actually in the Valle de los Caídos (Valley of the Fallen) in Spain. In my mind, I linked "in the valley of the fallen" to what I've seen while driving in southern New Mexico where, in one stretch of road, there were so many crosses/shrines marking deaths of loved ones in highway accidents—these are called *descansos* within the Hispanic community.

Second Verse, Right (RV2)—Lew: The largest cross in the US is at Effington in Illinois. As an adverb, "effing" is UK slang for "fucking." I imagined examining the cruciform tattoo in moonlight.

*Charlie here decides that the left column's emerging thread will be "death." For the right column, he takes the word "cruciform" from RV2 and chooses a theme of "shape (of crosses)".*

(LV3)—Charlie: I was shifting to a similar location [to Valle de los Caídos], picking up on the word *descanso*, literally "rest" in Spanish, and of course the silence of a dead mime. While lightening the mood a bit, I wanted to take this chain in a more somber, reflective, memorial sort of direction, as opposed to RV3 (which I finished first).

(RV3)—Charlie: I wanted to continue the exploration of shape. I considered various shapes of crosses and landed on X, which marks the spot where the treasure is buried. "Scratched through" is supposed to represent the result of years and years of long, dirty, pirate (distant British echo of effing R.L.Stevenson!) fingernails picking away at that spot (echoes of Lew's implied tattoo needle in RV2). "Parchment" because I didn't want to have to say "treasure map," and because parchment is made of skin.

(LV4)—Lew: Overall, this verse speaks to my personal boredom over all things royal, particularly televised weddings. But . . . as a follow-up to LV3, “on mute” links back to the great mime artist, Marcel Moreau, “dead” continues our theme, and “pantomime” again alludes to a stage performance as well as containing the word “mime.”

(RV4)—Lew: Continuing the shape theme, the Northern Cross is an asterism colloquially known as the “backbone of the Milky Way.” It is largely contained within the cross-shaped constellation Cygnus (The Swan); a baby swan is called a cygnet.

(LV5)—Charlie: Linking to [performance] pantomime, the danse macabre is known as “the dance of death.” The death theme is continued and accentuated with reference to a “skeleton in a mitre.” I recall seeing an old etching showing the pope at the head a group doing the danse macabre. I thus linked the pope to Lew’s “royalty” via the pope’s hat, the mitre.

(RV5)—Charlie: My “nighttime raid” was written to play on the night and sky images in Lew’s RV4, as well as to continue the exploration of the cross form and suggest the similarity between an Irish cross and a bombsight. Pretty surreal, I guess!

*To repeat, V6 now has to achieve four things: linkages to both V5s; a summation of the left and right threads; a sense of closure (ideally also echoing the first verse, V1); and an inverted triangle shape..*

(V6)—Lew: (1) “Zig, zig, zig,” the final phrase, is a quote from the opening of “Danse Macabre,” a poem by Henri Cazalis (which Camille Saint-Saëns set for orchestra with the same title). Cazalis explained the phrase as “death in a cadence.” And so “Zig, zig, zig” in V6 caps “death,” the theme of the left-hand thread. Uttering the same word three times (a “trinity”) emphasizes that V6 is shaped like a triangle. For the right thread, the words “trinity” and “backfire” relate to RV5’s “Dublin” (Trinity College) and a bombardier’s crosshairs, while 4-way stop recapitulates the shape theme of the right-hand thread. Finally, through an assonance-echo with the first line of V1 (as well as suggesting the three little backfires in the first line of V6), “zig, zig, zig” provides closure to the hexarengay.

Oh, and the title? It just came to us, in a dream.

We recognize that the hexarengay form is not for everyone—it can certainly be challenging. But after completing more hexarengay since “In Hoc Signo,” we can definitively say that it provides a fascinating extension of Garry Gay’s original form. Try it!

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<sup>i</sup> See *Bare Bones of Renga, Lesson 10*, by Jane Reichold, April 2011.

(<https://www.ahapoetry.com/Bare%20Bones/RBless10.html>)