

AN INTERPRETATIVE APPROACH TO THE POETRY OF DAVID ROSENMANN-TAUB

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In his native land, the Chilean poet David Rosenmann-Taub is considered a *vate* – a bard, or seer – in the sense that his poetry speaks to the totality of the human being. He achieved prominence at an early age with his first books in the 1950s: world renowned critics such as Alone and Miomandre remarked on the audaciousness and intensity of his imagery, the variety and profusion of tones, meters, rhythm and rhyme found in his poetry, and the “heartrending violence of his poetic expression”.¹ The poet and his work virtually disappeared from the public eye from the early 1960’s until the beginning of the millennium; however, since he resumed publishing with a major house in 2002, critical reception in Chile for his works has again been favorable.² Nevertheless, up to now, no general critical approach to the poetry has been established, and there exists little analysis of the thematic content or formal characteristics of individual po-

ems. This study will discuss key thematic and structural elements of his poetry, and describe a potentially useful interpretative method. The exploration of the theme of consciousness in his poetry will then serve as an introduction to Rosenmann-Taub’s imagery, style, philosophical thought, and poetic expression.

ROSENMANN-TAUB’S POETIC PROJECT AND THEMES

The poetic project of David Rosenmann-Taub is to understand and express the world and the human condition as precisely as possible. In an interview with Laura Castellanos in the Mexico City newspaper *Reforma*,³ he states:

Not to lie, but to say the truth with precision, with certainty, as in a scientific investigation that has reached its ultimate consequences: that is a challenge.

- 1 The information cited above, as well as other biographical information, comes from the web sites of Cervantes Virtual and of the Corda Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the poet’s oeuvre.
- 2 According to José Ignacio Silva, the poet is “...one of the most legendary Chilean writers of the moment”; and recent recipient of Chile’s Premio Nacional Armando Uribe has called him “the most important and profound living poet in the entire Spanish language.”
- 3 Throughout this paper, all of the poet’s comments are translations from the original Spanish by the Corda Foundation.

To accept this challenge is the real challenge. I don't see a difference between science and poetry. The function of art is to express knowledge in the most exact way possible; otherwise, it has neither function nor destiny. I came to the world to learn. If I don't learn, I am less than nothing: I murder my time. It's already a lot to know a truth, almost a utopia and, sometimes, a complete utopia. To express constitutes the domain of true poetry." (Castellanos)

As Rosenmann-Taub confronts the dual challenge of understanding and expressing the nature of the world and the human condition, his knowledge of the natural sciences and modern physics grounds his poetry in the modern era: his ambition to "know a truth" has its roots in scientific inquiry. In addition, his musical and artistic knowledge and talents combine with his linguistic abilities to permit him to precisely express in his poetry the truths that he discovers.⁴ Critics have often described Rosenmann-Taub's poetry as hermetic, incomprehensible to all but a few select initiates. Although it may appear that way to the reader at first glance, closer scrutiny shows this description to be

ill-founded. The poet's own stated intention is to learn: he declares: "Everything is for the sake of meaning. Poetry, when it is poetry, expresses knowledge in the most essential form." (Castellanos). His objective is to challenge the limits of language and create the linguistic resources to transcend them in order to express with artistic rigor his understanding of the world.

Themes that Rosenmann-Taub explores in his poetry include the consciousness or lack of consciousness in mankind, the presence of death in life and life in death, the nature of God, the nature of the universe, and the immutable aspects of the human condition. With its emphasis on universal themes and its paucity of historical and cultural references, the thematic content of his poetry is difficult to contextualize.

FORMAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ROSENMANNTAUB'S POETRY

One of the most important aesthetic qualities of Rosenmann-Taub's poetry is its economy of language. His unusually terse and even telegraphic style necessitates a rich semantic lexicon, a departure from the conversational style employed by other contemporary Latin American poets.⁵ He

4 Biographical information from the Corda web site indicates that the poet's academic background includes coursework in physics, natural sciences, and philosophy. He is also a former teacher of Spanish, a fluent reader in half a dozen languages, and has been writing poetry from the age of three. He is an accomplished pianist and has composed and recorded over one hundred CD's of his own music for piano and other instruments. And, among his multiple talents, Rosenmann-Taub, using pen and ink, chalk, charcoal, and pastel, has created over eight hundred drawings.

5 Commencing with the "exteriorismo" of Ernesto Cardenal and continuing with the "anti-poesía" of Nicanor Parra, the tendency of contemporary Latin American poets has been towards a conversational style with a simplified lexicon, in general motivated by their desire to connect with a broader audience as they write on social, political, and cultural themes.

often employs a series of metaphors, connected by colons or commas, to describe an unstated subject or to examine a given theme from a multiplicity of angles, both objective and subjective; these metaphors, which may range in length from a single adjective or noun to a short phrase to an entire sentence or stanza, conjure up mental pictures that could fill pages of prose description. The poem *Academia* (“Academy”) from his book *El Mensajero*, illustrates this technique:⁶

Academia

¿Bazar: grúa: merced
de cilindros: península:
migala: itinerario
de hiedra: aparador
frondoso? El sanedrín
del pupitre, en la audacia
del tapete: mi aljibe.

Academy

Bazaar: crane: mercy
of cylinders: peninsula:
spider: itinerary
of ivy: leafy
sideboard? The Sanhedrin
of the desk, in the audacity
of the discussion: my cistern. (11)

The poem is a series of nine metaphors describing the academic system, and its title is itself the subject of the metaphors. The first word of the poem, *Bazar*, summons up the image of the university as a market where

people from all over the world buy and sell a myriad of products. The word may also stimulate the reader to imagine the university as a business, where students, teachers, and administrators are merchants and treat their lives as objects of commerce. The second word, *grúa*, conjures up the image of a construction site: the metaphor suggests that just as the crane is a powerful tool when used in construction of buildings, the university experience is a powerful tool in the construction of the intellect, career, and social standing of the individual. In addition, the crane metaphor suggests that education is simply a tool, neither to be glorified nor condemned. Finally, just as one pays for a crane and the skill of the crane operator determines the tool’s effectiveness, so too the individual pays for his university experience, and his skill in using this tool determines its effectiveness in obtaining his own goals. The poet condenses all these images and ideas into two one-word metaphors. By the end of the poem’s nine metaphors, the reader has been exposed to nine different concepts of the university in a poem of only twenty-four words.

In addition to its economy of language and wealth of metaphors and other literary tropes, Rosenmann-Taub’s poetry is noteworthy for the vast lexicon that he employs and the neologisms he creates in search of semantic precision. Finally, the poet is extremely conscious of the phonological characteristics of the words he employs: he personally scores and records his poetry to

6 In all cases, the books are those published by LOM Editorial, and the translations are mine.

ensure that rhythm, meter, dynamics, intensity, and even pitch assist in the interpretation and understanding of his work.

INTERPRETATIVE METHOD

When analyzing Rosenmann-Taub's poetry, the reader must overcome the semantic challenges that the poem presents in order to understand the work. For non-Spanish readers, the poem must first be translated from Spanish to English; the importance of understanding all the ramifications of each word is so critical in this dense style of poetry that all definitions must be considered, and multiple definitions may become semantically relevant as the analysis proceeds. Using this initial translation, the reader attempts to achieve a basic understanding of the poem's thematic content: in addition to examining the poem's words, phrases, and tropes, both by themselves and in conjunction with each other, the reader also studies the text as a whole, to identify the subjects of apostrophes, sentences, implicit metaphors, and even of the poem itself. As an example, poem XVIII from *El Mensajero* begins with "Tú – rumor – atisbas: / mástil de los límites: / aspa / de la encina." ("You – a rumor – discern: / mast of limits; / sail / of the holly tree.") (23). Since the poem has no title, its subject is initially

unknown; *Tú*, the apostrophized subject of the first line, is unknown; and "mástil de los límites" and "aspa de la encina" are both implicit metaphors with unknown referents. The reader needs to compare these metaphors as well as study them in the context of the poem as a whole to eventually identify their referent and understand their meaning and import. In this first phase of analysis, the reader may attempt alternative meanings and translations of both Spanish and English vocabulary and may make assumptions about the relationship between apparently incongruent and unconnected words and phrases in order to arrive to a basic understanding of the poem's thematic content. The process is one of gradual discovery: as with scientific inquiry, the reader formulates and tests hypotheses through experimentation with different definitions and translations. Since the poems contain multiple levels, apparently contradictory interpretations may surface; however, unlike the contradictions found in the poetry of the "critical poets", these contradictions provoke further analysis on the part of the reader, to enable him ultimately to arrive at even deeper levels of meaning.⁷ Although readers may vary in the way they approach the poetry, the density, intellectual orientation, and metaphorical language that are

7 Thorpe Running analyzes a generation of modern Latin American poets, starting with Octavio Paz and Jorge Luis Borges, who, concerned with the limits of language as initially explored by Stéphane Mallarmé, César Vallejo and Vicente Huidobro, write what is commonly termed "meta-poetry" and what Octavio Paz terms "critical poetry": poetry that is aware of itself and negates itself. This poetry, with its philosophical foundation in modern literary theory, denies the possibility of real communication between author and reader, due to the arbitrary and subjective nature of the signifier (17-25). Unlike the irreconcilable contradictions found in the "critical poem" which lead the reader into ontological inquiry, the contradictions of Rosenmann-Taub's poetry drive the reader into deeper teleological reflection; the two apparently similar types of poetry are in actuality diametrically opposite.

its fundamental characteristics channel the reader into this type of interpretative method.

Once the reader can paraphrase the meaning of the poem based on his own initial understanding of its tropes, the poem's metaphors and paradoxes may be further contemplated to expand and deepen his comprehension. Other formal elements of the poem are examined to see how they contribute to and confirm the meaning gained so far: rhyme, rhythm, stress, sound, silence, punctuation and even the placement of words on the page may all give clues to the poem's thematic content. Although the poem may be read in different ways, the reader is assisted in his interpretive efforts by the fact that the prosodic and linguistic elements of the text unite to confirm the poem's primary message, much as a crossword puzzle ultimately and self-evidently confirms its correct solution.

In a final stage of interpretation, the reader attempts a more comprehensive paraphrase of the poem. Here, he may utilize external words, phrases, images, and concepts that are related with those encountered within the poem to expand and deepen his understanding, at all times remaining faithful to the poet's work. *Quince*, Rosenmann-Taub's recently published book in which he provides commentaries on fifteen of his own poems, demonstrates the poet's own orientation to the study and understanding of his poems. In these commentaries, virtually every word or phrase of each poem is expanded, discussed, and related

to other words of the poem, to other poems in which the word or phrase occurs, and to words and images external to the poem as well. These analyses demonstrate the importance of sound and rhythm and also illustrate the poet's use of words within words and even letters within words: all contribute to the elucidation and development of the poem's theme.

The process of deciphering the implicit and complex metaphors, neologisms, and oxymorons of Rosenmann-Taub's poetry asks the reader to delve more deeply into his own being and worldview. The time and effort that the reader employs in discovering the poem's meaning makes his ultimate understanding more rewarding and gives it a more lasting impact.

THE THEME OF CONSCIOUSNESS

As a defining element of the human condition, consciousness is one of the central themes found in the work of Rosenmann-Taub; his poetry deals with the manifestations of consciousness in nature and in the human being, as well as the relationship between consciousness and action. For the poet, human consciousness contains an ethical component: as a conscious being, man's highest obligation is the complete, continual, and uncompromising exercise of his consciousness throughout his life. In order to illustrate the poet's conception of this complex theme, I examine three of Rosenmann-Taub's poems that deal with consciousness: *LA CITA* from *El Mensajero*, (2004), *Con su sogá oportuna me ahorca* from *Cortejo y Epinicio*, (2002) and *En*

el naufrago día de mi nave más bella from *Auge* (2007). *LA CITA* speaks of the human being's tendency to exist in the condition of a living death and his aversion to pursuing a conscious life as it explores the similarities between life and death and the possibility of vitality in death. *Con su sogá oportuna me ahorca* suggests that consciousness exists throughout nature and that a conscious life may be glorious in whatever form it appears. *En el naufrago día de mi nave más bella* once again demonstrates to the reader the omnipresence of consciousness, and also suggests that the use of both a subjective and an objective consciousness can help to direct the individual to lead a life that is tranquil, correct, and ethical in the face of whatever personal disaster may befall him. Each poem carries the message that higher and/or different levels of consciousness are possible, available, and desirable for the individual.

LA CITA

*Preguntarán en casa
por mí. ¡Tanto feriado sin tu zarpa!
Sepelio, ¿no me amas?
Paulatino diluvio.
Neutralidad. Borneo hacia el estuco.
Dios, celoso: “¿Te aburro?”*

The Date

They'll be asking at home
for me. So much time off without your
paw!
Burial, don't you love me?
Gradual flood.
Neutrality. I twist towards the stucco.
God, jealous: "Am I boring you?" (15)

As stated above, the reader's first task is to achieve a basic understanding of the poem's thematic concept. This two-stanza poem begins as an internal monologue; however in the second line of the poem, the speaker enters into a dialogue with an unidentified being, and from this point on, the work alternates between monologue and dialogue. In the first sentence, *Preguntarán en casa por mí.*, the impersonal subject may be the speaker's family, his friends, or even himself, and his home might be either literally his own dwelling or, figuratively speaking, his body or his consciousness; and as the speaker indirectly announces that he will be absent in the future, he recognizes that at some point he will be either dead or unconscious. In the next sentence, *¡Tanto feriado sin tu zarpa!* the speaker apostrophizes an as yet unidentified entity; the *tu* suggests that this entity is known intimately. In the last line of the stanza, *Sepelio, ¿no me amas?*, the speaker apostrophizes Death as *Sepelio* and asks if It loves him; taking into account the poem's title, which suggests courtship, the speaker appears to be courting Death. To understand this poem, it is crucial to identify the *tu* in the second line of the first stanza: *¡Tanto feriado sin tu zarpa!* Since in the first line the speaker refers to a moment in the future when he will be dead, and since he courts Death in the third line of the stanza, the poem's first stanza obviously deals with life and death, so the second line must refer to life or death as well. If the *tu* of the line represents Death, then the speaker is characterizing death negatively: death's paw terminates the "time off," the "holiday" or the "vacation" of life. The

implied *tu* of *amas* in the third line refers to *Sepelio* and it thus seems logical that the *tu* of the second line would represent *Sepe-lio*, or Death, as well. The speaker says, in effect: “Death, what’s taking you so long? Why don’t you want me?” However, the poet’s use of the word *feriado* to emphasize the positive aspects of life in direct contrast with the *zarpa* of Death, and his use of exclamation marks to punctuate this phrase strongly indicates that Death’s paw is negative. Since the positive conception of Death in the following line that the speaker adumbrates as he courts It contradicts this prior negative vision, this interpretation does not appear logical. Conversely, if the *tú* of the second line apostrophizes Life instead of Death, then the “paw” is now a metaphor for the vicissitudes of Life and the opposite of the “holiday” of unconsciousness and Death. This interpretation of “paw” is thus more congruent with the speaker’s courtship of Death in the next line: in this interpretation, Life is negative in the second line and Death is positive in the third, instead of Death being contradictorily seen as negative in the second line and positive in the third. Furthermore, the entire first stanza now has a unified theme, i.e., the movement of the individual towards death: in the poem’s three lines, the speaker first acknowledges his future death, then desires to liberate himself from the hardships of Life, and finally flirts with Death to establish a more intimate relation with it.

diluvio, may be understood as the gradual submergence of the individual in a sea of unconsciousness over time: his life gradually becomes saturated with death. The poet reinforces this metaphor with the next image, *Neutralidad*; again the poet conveys a sense of death, since life always has values, whether positive or negative, and it is only death that is neutral. In that same line, *Borneo hacia el estuco* is a third image of death. A building material that is used to hide structural components of buildings with a smooth surface, stucco metonymically represents life’s superficial (and therefore false) aspects; when one “twists toward the stucco,” one turns away from the real life to a superficial life, which is comparable to death. Stucco’s color is white – the neutral color of death. In addition, the word *estuco* contains the word *tú* (you); accordingly the line may read “I twist towards you,” and signify that the speaker turns towards another person and away from himself. Finally, as opposed to the word “turn”, the verb “twist” implies a movement that is both intentional and unnatural; with this lexical choice the poet suggests that the individual does not simply drift unconsciously towards death but intentionally seeks it, even though it might be unnatural and require contortion. In the last line of the stanza and of the poem itself, God, jealous, asks the speaker if He bores him: “¿Te aburro?”. With this question, God seems to be representing nature, life and consciousness, all that the speaker has been rejecting throughout the poem. This question parallels the question in the last line of the first stanza in that both are rhetori-

The second stanza continues to develop the theme of the individual’s movement towards death. The first metaphor, *Paulatino*

cal, and both reveal in an ironic or cynical way the essence of the human condition. In the first stanza, the speaker announces his impending death and exclaims over the difficulties of his life; in this context, his rhetorical question demonstrates his desire for death. In the second stanza, the speaker describes his descent into a living death of unconsciousness; the reader sees that the final question may only be answered in the affirmative: yes, life and consciousness are indeed boring to the speaker. Thus, in the second stanza the speaker describes life as containing death: the slow deluge of time saturates and drowns him and his consciousness, he becomes neutral, and he turns toward the false and superficial, until it becomes apparent that life is boring and the speaker prefers death.

We may thus paraphrase our initial understanding of the poem in the following way. The speaker knows he will ultimately die; he is so overcome by the hardships of life that he actually desires death. On his "date" with Death, he asks, "Don't you love me?": a flirtatious question with which he courts Death. In the second stanza, the speaker describes more precisely his lived experience: his days pass and his life slowly disappears into a sea of unconsciousness, just as the earth becomes saturated with water during a slow downpour; he finds himself in a state of neutrality that is the equivalent of death; and he voluntarily turns towards a superficial life and away from his real life. Starting with the speaker's acknowledgment of death at the beginning of the poem and ending with God's own cynical

acknowledgment of the human condition, the entire poem illustrates the human being's movement towards Death.

An alternative reading of the poem is also possible. The poem is found in the chapter of *El Mensajero* entitled *Vitamortis*; the poet's linking of the two Latin words which signify life and death strongly suggests that for him, life exists in death as well as death in life. Accordingly, we now accept the other interpretation of the *tu* in the second line: the *zarpa* is the paw of Death, instead of the paw of Life, and since mankind is on holiday without it, the speaker here celebrates the positive aspects of life. The word *Sepelio* refers to the entire ceremony of death, which includes the embalming, the service, the burial, and the wake: in this interpretation, *Sepelio*, connoting an "active" death, speaks now of the presence of life in death: it is a party which the speaker wishes to attend. Thus, instead of being solely an exposition of the presence of death in life, this reading indicates that the poem has two different foci: while acknowledging the inevitability of death, the first stanza celebrates life and even suggests the possibility of vitality in death, and the second stanza demonstrates the presence of death in life and suggests that man is inevitably doomed to death and unconsciousness, even while he lives.

The poem's rhyme and rhythm patterns tend to confirm this second interpretation. In the first stanza, which deals with life, the three lines all terminate in the rhyme "a-a", a sound that is open; this may be

a representation of life, as the condition of being open to new experience. In the second stanza, which deals with death, the three lines terminate in the rhyme “u-o”, a sound that is closed, and thus reminiscent of death. Also, in the first stanza, the phrases are long, different rhythms abound and the exclamation marks suggest a certain vitality, and the speaker is always present, whereas in the second stanza, the phrases are short and choppy, with heavier accents and abrupt terminations, and the speaker has disappeared by the final line. Finally, unlike the first stanza, in which the accents of the phrases are similar to that of normal speech, each of the first three phrases in the second stanza has only three accented syllables, the fourth phrase only two, and the last phrase only one.

Interpreted in this way, the poem is a simultaneous reflection on the presence of death in life and of life in death. The two states of being, different faces of the same coin, are (con)fused throughout the poem: the poet describes death in life at the same time that he suggests the vitality of death.

As I pointed out in the introduction, contrasting readings can serve to deepen the reader’s investigation into the poem’s thematic content; as he studies these two interpretations, the reader may find himself examining his own life to see which interpretation holds more truth for himself personally; as he does so he may understand that the arbitrary circumstances of his own life are the basis for his interpretation. In this regard, the last line of the

poem bears further scrutiny. “Do I bore you?” God asks, jealous of Death, his competitor, whom man apparently consistently prefers. This line, along with the poem in its entirety, suggests that man lives much of his life in an unconscious mode and this final comment further highlights man’s lack of engagement with life. The word *celoso* in that last line, however, opens up a new viewpoint. Why is God jealous? Perhaps He asks if He is boring the speaker because He Himself is bored. He is omniscient, and has nothing left to discover; perhaps that leads him to the emotion of jealousy of the human condition precisely due to the human being’s *lack* of knowledge. Unlike God, man is *not* omniscient; he has the good fortune to be able to use his intelligence to examine the questions that frustrate him, and, in so doing, to develop his consciousness. Thus, buried in this last line, the word *celoso* gives the reader the antidote to the poem’s seemingly dominant orientation towards death.

The poem asks the reader to consider many questions: “Which do you choose, death or life? Do you abandon yourself? Is death an intrinsic and inseparable part of life which manifests itself in the form of routine, neutrality, and falseness? Are you afraid of death?” If understood as interpreted above, the key word *celoso* in the poem’s last line may spur the reader’s curiosity and motivate him to explore these philosophical questions.

Based on these additional contemplations, I may take the place of the speaker and

paraphrase the poem again as follows: “I understand that the circumstances of my life are arbitrary and I know only that I am mortal. Due to the arbitrary nature of my existence, I may celebrate my life or curse it: I may consider the unconsciousness of death as an escape from a life that at times seems unbearable, or I may consider that my own death may be the beginning of a new life. When I examine my life, I see that it resembles death in many ways: I allow the routine of daily life to lull me into an unconscious state for long periods, I stop thinking and making decisions, and I actively and intentionally turn away from myself and my real life to live a life that is not my own. On the one hand, God’s question is both cynical and rhetorical: the life and consciousness that He personifies bore me, since I gravitate towards death in the midst of my life. On the other hand, it *is* interesting to me to understand the mysteries of life that surround me; unlike the omniscient God who has no unknowns to explore, I have unanswered questions and the capacity and desire to explore them; in so doing, I expand my consciousness.”

The poem comes from the book *El Mensajero* (*The Messenger*); the speaker is the “messenger” who awakes the consciousness of the interested reader. Rosenmann-Taub’s speaker demonstrates his intimate connection to mankind as his monologue details his own movement towards death in life at

the same time that he explores the possibility of vitality in death and the rationale for living a more conscious life.

CON SU SOGA OPORTUNA ME AHORCA

This second poem comes from the poet’s award-winning book *Cortejo y Epinicio*, originally published in 1949, reprinted with extensive changes in 1978, most recently reprinted by LOM Editorial in 2002. Untitled, it is identified by its first line: *Con su sogá oportuna me ahorca*.⁸

V

*Con su sogá oportuna me ahorca
la baldía intemperie de duendes:
estropajo que arrimo de emblema:
ataúd enroscado, azacel.
Una gota de agua me anhela.*

*Es danzar con la hostil deserción:
el presagio al revés y cumplido.*

*Por cordura de harapos guarduños
aflojar lo postrero. ¡Es huirme!*

*Va a caer y mi sino se tensa,
abrevando la fiebre en cenit:
alfiler que se incrusta en la greda.*

*¡Sí! ¡Permíteme oír cómo cae
esa gota de agua, Dios mío!*

8 The second and third of the poems analyzed in this study are numbered but not named in their respective books; instead, they are identified in the table of contents by their first line, as I have done above.

V

With its timely rope
 the sterile inclemency of elves hangs me:
 swab that I bring close as an emblem:
 coiled coffin, azazel.
 A drop of water desires me.

It is to dance with the hostile desertion:
 the portent reversed and fulfilled.

Through the wisdom of cutpurse tatters,
 to let go of the last one It's to flee myself!

It's going to fall and my fate tautens,
 slaking the fever at its zenith:
 a pin that's set in fuller's earth..

Yes! Let me hear how falls
 that drop of water, my God!

Like the preceding poem, this poem is an interior monologue: in the first two stanzas, a series of implicit metaphors describes a common unidentified subject. The first task of the reader is to identify this subject, and the poet's use of colons and commas to relate these implicit metaphors helps the reader in his task.

The first two stanzas speak either literally or figuratively of death. In the initial hyperbation of the first stanza the speaker declares that he loses his life to its sterile trivialities, and, since the hangman's rope is "timely", he apparently does so happily. In the fourth line, the *ataúd enroscado* is another metonymic representation of death. That same line contains the image of the *azazel*,

which, in the Jewish tradition, is both a demon as well as the scapegoat upon whom all personal and social problems are blamed. When one blames another for one's problems, one avoids the reality of one's own life; thus, this image, linked to the preceding metaphor of the coiled coffin by a comma, also reinforces the stanza's theme of death. As well, the second metaphor of the poem -- *estropajo que arrimo de emblema* -- situated before and after two images of death, and both preceded and succeeded by colons which strongly suggest equivalence, must also refer to death: the word *estropajo* also means "worthless thing" or "worthless person"; so the *estropajo que arrimo de emblema* as, for example, a tattered flag that represents a troubled country, is yet another metaphorical representation of the speaker's devaluation of himself and his life.

The second stanza continues the theme of the preference for death and the individual's perception of the lack of value in his life; as in the first stanza, the colon helps clarify the meaning of the images. The phrase *hostil deserción* signifies the desertion of oneself: as in the first two lines of the poem, the image conveys the individual's willingness to abandon himself. The image of a portent *al revés y cumplido* may also be considered a representation of death, in contrast with the more normal as-yet-unfulfilled portent that refers to the individual's future life.

All six of the images in these two stanzas thus speak of the desirability of death and the ways that the individual seeks it. Yet in the midst of these images of death ap-

pears its opposite: the drop of water that represents life and consciousness not only exists but “desires” the speaker. In the first two lines of the third stanza, the speaker equates the wisdom of the poor thief who steals to survive with the *aflojar lo postrero* and *¡Es huirme!* Using the word *huirme* the speaker now identifies with the drop of water: just as the water finds its freedom, so also does he: he feels the tension of his own destiny linked with that of the water about to fall. The drop *abrevando la fiebre en cenit* – evoking the story of Icarus and his wings of wax – ends its life evaporated, as extinct and useless as a worthless pin set in the clay of the earth. The speaker thus recapitulates the life of this drop of water as he suggests its consciousness in the first stanza, and describes the trajectory of its life and death in the third stanza. Finally, the speaker invokes God as he pleads for the ability to experience his real life – the brief span of time between the instant when the drop of water is freed, during which it performs its function of “slaking”, and the moment of its death.

The poem may be initially paraphrased as follows: “I happily accept a living death as I lose my time in the daily distractions of my life; and I bring this worthless swab close to me as a symbol of my life’s worthlessness. My life is that of a corpse in a coiled coffin; and as I blame others for my difficulties, I again avoid the reality of my own life. I constantly seek to abandon myself, and I insist on remaining with my own self-fulfilling and self-fulfilled prophecies instead of opening myself to an unknown future and

all that life may hold in store for me. Yet, in the midst of this living death, a consciousness beckons to me: the consciousness of a drop of water “desires” me. And with the latent wisdom of a poor thief who breaks the law to survive, along with the help of that drop of water, I miraculously escape from this trap of a living death. I witness the brief but glorious trajectory of the drop’s life, from the tension that gives it birth to its instantaneous “death” by evaporation, similar in importance to a worthless pin, stuck in clay; and I beseech God’s permission to experience my life with real consciousness, the consciousness I have just witnessed in that insignificant drop of water.”

With the understanding gained from this paraphrase, we may re-examine the poem’s images to explore its themes on a deeper and more personal level. The word “timely” in the first image emphasizes that I welcome death; I need to evaluate my daily activities and long-term life objectives to see if that idea is indeed true for me. The swab, the coiled coffin, and the scapegoat *Azazel* symbolize the movement towards death as well; how much do I value my life, and how do I show myself that I value it, as opposed to these three symbols that represent only the worthlessness, avoidance, and end of life? The phrase *Por cordura de harapos garduños* calls attention to my own latent wisdom. Breaking societal laws, the poor thief uses his own brand of wisdom to obey a higher law: that of survival; do I, with many more resources than he, use my own wisdom to escape from my own living death? The speaker exclaims *¡Es huirme!*

– “It is to flee myself!”: yes, this escape is indeed unusual, desirable, and miraculous. As my life merges with that of the drop of water and I open myself to the unknown, my fate “tautens:” am I truly open to exploring unknown physical, mental, or spiritual aspects of myself? If this is the moment of death, am I ready to proceed to the next stage? Describing the trajectory of the drop of water, the poet uses the word *abrevando*; with its similarity to the words *abreviar* and *breve*, the word suggests the brevity of life. Also, if the phrase *en cenit* refers to the drop of water instead of the fever, the poem now suggests that a person’s life has a trajectory with apogee and perigee. Therefore, this line indirectly asks me how I can best realize the “zenith” of my brief life. In the last stanza, the speaker is clear about what *he* wants from life: he begs God for the consciousness that the drop of water symbolizes. I ask: “Does consciousness exist everywhere? If consciousness exists in that drop of water, what is my responsibility to my own consciousness, which has so much more capacity? If I become conscious, may I also live my life to its fullest?”

With these questions, the reader may witness the lack of consciousness in his own life, the factors that cause it, and its results; he may observe the consciousness that exists in nature; and he may perhaps emerge with a desire for a higher level of consciousness in his own life.

The poem’s powerful images assist the reader in this process of awakening. The hangman’s rope, the coffin, the demon/

scapegoat, the dance with “hostile desertion” and the fulfilled portent all metaphorically represent death and death in life; in contrast to all these negative images, the drop of water, a humble manifestation of nature, takes on life, and lives with apparent consciousness and purpose. The final stanza, with its exclamatory “Yes!” and plea to “hear” – to internalize the conscious life of that drop of water – is the most forceful affirmation of all.

EN EL NÁUFRAGO DÍA DE MI NAVE MÁS BELLA

The final poem that this paper will consider, also untitled but with the first line of *En el naufrago día de mi nave más bella*, comes from the poet’s 2007 book *Auge*, appears on the website of the Corda Foundation, and is also found in *Quince*. Like the preceding poems, this one also deals with consciousness; it incorporates many of the ideas already presented and in addition leads the reader into new insights.

LVII

*En el naufrago día de mi nave más bella
me encaramé sobre su mastelero
para mirar el mar.*

*No había mar: no había ni su huella:
no había ni el vacío de ese día postrero.*

Sólo había mirar

Miré el mirar del navegar que espero.

LVII

In the shipwreck day of my most beautiful ship

I climbed its highest mast

To look at the sea.

There was no sea, there was not even its trace:

There was not even the void of that final day.

There was only looking.

I looked at the looking of the sailing I await.

This poem is also in the form of an internal monologue. In the first line of the first stanza, the speaker finds himself in the moment of a personal disaster of great magnitude. The implicit metaphor *mi nave más bella* which occurs in this line is one of the poem's central metaphors; it has no clear referent and thus invites the reader to inhabit both the metaphor and the poem personally. For example, the metaphor might be the individual's greatest life achievement, a life well lived, a career, a relationship, family, or social success; in these cases, it is the defining aspect of the human being. Another equally compelling interpretation of *mi nave más bella* is the entirety of the individual's life; in this interpretation, the "shipwreck" then represents the individual's death.

The speaker extends the metaphor in the second line of the first stanza. The *mas-terero* of this metaphorical "ship" represents two possible perspectives. It may represent the pinnacle of the success (i.e., the "most

beautiful ship") that preceded the disaster (the "shipwreck"), and, simultaneously, as a part of the wrecked ship, the disaster itself; alternatively, it may be the speaker's simultaneous review of his past life and his realization of his imminent death. In either case, with his ascent of this "highest mast," the speaker positions himself to see both of these perspectives: either his success and his failure, or his life and his impending death. The speaker's intention is to *mirar el mar*, the speaker's present or future environment⁹; the infinitive "to look" implicitly suggests intelligence and will as well as visual capacity; and thus represents the consciousness of the speaker.¹⁰

In the first line of the second stanza, the speaker's view from his new vantage point reveals that the entire external world that he thought was real has disappeared, and in the stanza's second line the temporal context of the disaster is erased as well. By the last line of the stanza everything has disappeared, including even the speaker's own ego; now there is only pure consciousness: the "looking." *Mirar* is here used as both an infinitive and as a verbal noun and is translated as a gerund: "looking."; it thus contains both verbal and nominal qualities and metonymically symbolizes consciousness even more forcefully than the simple

9 If the shipwreck metaphorically represents a personal disaster in the speaker (or reader's) life, and if the "most beautiful ship" represents, for example, one's career, marriage, family, or belief system, then the extension of this metaphor suggests that the "sea" is the environment – the social, familial, economic and/or psychological contexts – against and in which this disaster takes place.

10 Since the basic attributes of consciousness are intelligence, will, the capacity to process information, and the actual reflective process itself, and since the act of looking embodies all of these, "to look" may be interpreted as a metonymic representation of consciousness.

infinitive *mirar* of the first stanza.¹¹ Furthermore, the poet suggests in the third line that consciousness has now become omnipresent as well, with his use of the word *sólo*: *Sólo había mirar*.

Whereas in the second stanza external reality and internal awareness disappeared, in the third stanza they return. The phrase *Miré el mirar* signifies that the speaker understands consciousness as existing both internally and externally. The *del navegar que espero* may be understood as the contemplation of the speaker's future; thus the line paraphrased may read: "My own internal consciousness contemplated an external consciousness contemplating my own consciousness contemplating my future." The speaker thus introduces the idea of two kinds of consciousness: one internal and subjective, and the other, external and objective. In this stanza, the expression of consciousness takes on even more force than in the preceding stanza: not only does the verb "look" appear both in its infinitive and gerund form, but in addition, the other verb, "await," implies consciousness as well.

The final extension of the poet's original metaphor is that of the *navegar*, the "sailing;" the author locates it as the object of the verb *espero*, which in Spanish means "to hope" as well as "to wait," so this verbal noun metaphorically represents the speaker's future:

the *navegar que espero* may be understood as "the future that I anticipate." External and internal reality have reappeared, along with the speaker's ego and sense of time; and whereas in the second stanza consciousness is non-localized, here in the third stanza it is situated in the speaker.

As noted above, the verb *mirar* implicitly suggests intelligence and will as well as visual capacity. Utilized in its dual capacity as infinitive and verbal noun, the verb indicates intention and action as well, and thus represents consciousness in the poem. Its multiple appearances in various forms and tenses throughout all three stanzas indicate that the central theme of the poem is consciousness: its existence, its contrast with internal or external reality, and its application to one's own life.

Based on the analysis thus far, the poem may be paraphrased as follows. Experiencing either a life-changing event or the moment of one's death, the speaker acts to view his world from a new perspective, one that contains both his past and his present. He realizes from this new perspective that everything is different: his external world with all of its various contexts, including even its temporal context, has disappeared. His own sense of self has disappeared as well: in this moment of epiphany, he realizes that nothing exists except consciousness. Recovering his own internal consciousness,

11 Here, the infinitive expresses the intent to look while the verbal noun expresses the act of looking itself; combining the attributes of both verb and noun and translated as a gerund, the word *mirar* manifests both the ontological and teleological dimensions of consciousness.

the speaker, observing himself both objectively and subjectively, contemplates his own consciousness, which now focuses on his future, as he is reborn either into this life or the next.

In his own analysis of the poem in *Quince*, Rosenmann-Taub deepens his development of these themes with his technique of using words within words. The verb *me encaramé* which contains *cara*, the Spanish word for “face”, as well as the word “me” twice, suggests that one must “face” one’s situation, and even more importantly, face oneself. The “sea” is a sea of consciousness; the *mirar – m-ir-ar* – to go, by way of the sea – signifies that one “goes,” or lives, through consciousness. The “no’s” of the second stanza, which negate space and past time, are counterbalanced by the implicit “yes’s” of consciousness (*mirar*) and future action (*el navegar que espero*)(83-84).

Once again we see that the poem’s contradictory metaphors reinforce its principal theme. In the first stanza, the *nave más bella* is now a “shipwreck” and its *mas-telero* now serves only as a vantage point from which one may regard the sea; thus, my greatest achievement in life, now either reached or destroyed, is nothing more than a vantage point from which I can understand my world and myself better. In the second stanza, these metaphorical representations of my life and external world

-- the ship and the sea¹² -- disappear; time disappears, since what happened yesterday for me does not exist anymore, except as a memory; and even I myself disappear, as I look and contemplate. All that remains is consciousness: the “looking”. In the final stanza, my ego returns. However, now understanding the universality of consciousness, I contemplate my future – “the sailing that I await” – from an objective as well as a subjective viewpoint, in order to live my life correctly.

In addition to contemplating the poem’s imagery, the reader may additionally consider its tone, which, despite the catastrophic nature of the disaster that has apparently befallen the speaker, appears calm, rational, and objective throughout the work: the verbs that describe the speaker’s actions are cognitive rather than emotive, and his reaction to the “shipwreck” day of his “most beautiful ship” is also objective rather than emotional. This objective style communicates serenity, and the use of the infinitive and verbal noun instead of active verb forms in the second stanza contribute to this feeling as well. In the last stanza, the poet represents the speaker as conscious of (or looking at) his own consciousness from an external point of view as well as an internal one to add to this emotion of serenity, since one becomes calm as one examines a situation objectively and from different angles.

12 Although the sea never appears, it exists implicitly, since the ship is apparently “shipwrecked,” which can only take place at sea, and in addition, the speaker’s intent in the first stanza is to look at the sea.

In this poem, the speaker lives in time, but neither his past life nor his prior ways of thinking control his future, whether in this world or the next. The alternating portrayals of action and reflection that take place throughout the poem indicate that both are essential to conscious life. The poem expresses the concept that consciousness resides both inside and outside of the human being as it describes the conscious evaluation of reality and the orientation of oneself towards the future that the individual might experience at any turning point of his life, including the moment of his death. Calmness and serenity enter the reader as he inhabits the poem personally and views his own past from both objective and subjective perspectives. Finally, it appears that the speaker acts with a sense of ethics towards himself since, in the face of disaster or death, he acts in accord with the highest part of himself: his consciousness and his intelligence. Interpreted in this way, the

poem is a model for correct behavior in a chaotic and unjust world.

In addition to the portrayal of Rosenmann-Taub's development of the theme of consciousness in his poetry, the analysis of these three poems has provided the reader with an opportunity to observe the application of the interpretative method proposed at the outset of this study, as well as to experience firsthand the poet's lexicon, imagery, and poetic style. The density and complexity of Rosenmann-Taub's oeuvre gives the reader unusual interpretative challenges and forces him to be assiduous and creative in his interpretative efforts. However, the rewards of Rosenmann-Taub's poetry lie as much below the surface as above: the beauty, power, and precision of his poetic imagery are in the service of the themes on which he writes; and the enterprising, persistent reader will be well rewarded for his work.

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* El trabajo “*An Interpretative Approach To The Poetry Of David Rosenmann-Taub*,” de Kenneth Gorfkle, de la Universidad de Carolina del Norte, recibió el premio de la Fundación Corda en el 2008 en la categoría de ensayos para estudiantes de maestría y doctorado. El jurado internacional fue integrado por un distinguido grupo de profesores e investigadores: Carmen Alemany, Ph.D., Universidad de Alicante, España; Jaime Concha, Ph.D., University of California, San Diego; Teodosio Fernández, Ph.D., Universidad Autónoma de Madrid; Gwen Kirkpatrick, Ph.D., Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.; Cristián Montes Capó, Ph.D., Universidad de Chile; Naín Nómez, Ph.D., Universidad de Santiago de Chile; Matías Rafide, Academia Chilena de la Lengua; Álvaro Salvador, Ph.D., Universidad de Granada, España; Virginia Sarmiento, M.A., Corda Foundation, New York; Miguel Ángel Zapata, Ph.D., Hofstra University, New York. La Fundación Corda abrió su convocatoria para los premios del 2009; en su página de Internet, www.PremiosCorda.org se pueden ver los requisitos, los montos de los premios, cómo contactarse, preguntas frecuentes y una lista de los ganadores de los premios del 2008.