

Encompassing the Southwest Spirit in Jacob Trapp's poems.

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Introduction

Jacob Trapp, Unitarian minister, who served in Utah, Colorado and New Jersey before moving to Santa Fe in his later days, wrote extensively on the American West. Intertwined with parish life anecdotes and Christian imagery are figures of the American Southwest familiar to those who made the pilgrimage to Chimayo, witnessed Hopi potters displaying their handicraft in run-down markets and heard the distant songs of Navajo *hataali*.

As irrelevant as Jacob Trapp's poetry may seem to a secular reader, it serves nonetheless as a raw testimony on the passing of an era with the progressive deterioration of traditional habitat and native ways of life through acculturation and the confrontation with so-called modern progress.

Trapp's poetry captured the moment when virgin territories that had once enthralled pioneers and missionaries moving west ceased to convey a sacred feeling of intimacy with Nature to become spoilt, littered tracts of lands, not so different from what man had erected in the East. Jacob Trapp praised creation through its multiple ravishing manifestations (landscapes, man's spiritual outbursts, animals, weather) as an embodiment of God's presence in our lives while at the same time pleading for a merging with the natural beauty close at hand in what constituted an appeal for organic symbiosis akin to the oceanic feeling discussed by thinkers such as Arthur Koestler.

This desire to unite with Nature could be well attributed to his embrace of Unitarianism at the age of 30 after being expelled from the Reformed Church. Needless to mention that the Unitarian movement, which counted among its ranks renowned poets such as Waldo Emerson for a while, has for some time now welcomed followers of different creeds and cultural heritage. However simplistic it may sound, we may assume that most Unitarian ministers tend to celebrate universality of experiences over specificity of perceptions, reaching out over breaking up and merging instead of dividing.

Jacob Trapp tried to represent what may be coined unsophisticatedly the Spirit of the West. Yet, in outlining exotic traits and local characteristics for his readers, he contributed to define a geographic entity spiritually and emotionally as a whole experience that could not merely be reduced to the folklore traditionally associated to it.

While closely examining some of the poems that belong to his South-West writings, I will try to assert the bearing of Unitarian values on the way Jacob Trapp describes his intimate relationship with Western figures and landscapes. Then, I will stress that through a nostalgic recollection of things past, he was able to account for the consequences of acculturation on bodies and minds, spirit and flesh, landscapes and handicrafts, thus making mine an interpretative definition of his work based on distinctions which would not have been to his Unitarian liking.

A recollection of things past

Trapp's poetry can be interpreted as a Unitarian minister's grip on the treasures of the American Southwest. Part of the Unitarian doctrine relies on the assumption that Jesus, who must not be mistaken as God, conveyed the "logos", the word of the Almighty on Earth.

Interestingly enough, Jacob Trapp named one of his collections of poems after two heroes from the Navajo mythological pantheon, the Stricken Twins.¹ The brothers were crippled: one was lame, the other blind. They wandered through the desert weeping and singing until their cries of despair finally moved the *Yei*, the Navajo sacred deities, who decided to provide them with love and support. Thus, ceremonies were born out of "logos". Healing took place after words had echoed through the vastness and desolation of Earth. Community was acknowledged through the hearing of individual pleas. Most of Trapp's poems recount the reverberation of lost words and unheard voices in the desert. The landscapes riddled with petroglyphs and dwellings of an extinct civilization (the Anasazi) make absentees present in an ominous way as stated in *Desert Mystique*. Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde are "silent cities of stone where ghosts walk silver sand under a midnight moon".²

The rocky formations are a maze of lost trails, "giant petroglyphs, Palaeozoic, Mesozoic, cut into mountainous slabs tossed up (...) by molten seas" that so impressed Georgia O'Keeffe who is remembered in *Georgia O'Keeffe in Abiquiu*.³ As a minister, Jacob Trapp probably tended to many funerals that certainly prompted a liking for writing epitaphs and speeches in memoriam of the departed. Some of his poems are in fact short epitaphs where Trapp fondly

remembers the existence of those mourned by the community, such as in *Maria Martinez, Povi-Ka, Flower Leaf*.⁴ Sometimes, Trapp makes up the lives of the dearly bereft as in *Epitaph for Soccora*. The woman, unknown to Trapp, comes to personify all anonymous deceased individuals who are forgotten by family and friends. Jacob Trapp came across her broken tombstone “lying alongside splintered boards and rusty nails (...) in Jesus Rio’s woodlot and junkyard on Camino del Monte Sol”.⁵ As the desert wind swept away sand and dust, her name, her birth and death dates had been partly erased, ascertaining death claim on oblivion. Trapp is willing to recover the logos. He is tracking down the remnants of what things were, hence his fascination for remembrance of people’s lives.

As a Gospel reader and a follower of Christ’s teachings, Jacob Trapp developed empathy for individuals whose life or death mirrored a sense of powerlessness: “Socorra means help. Whom did she help? (...) Was life a gift to her or a burden ? (...) Who cares?”⁶ Feelings of abandonment permeate Trapp’s poems. Thus, in *Santa Fe Blacksmith*, Jacob Trapp recalls the small workshop of an Indian blacksmith, who was always eager to share his knowledge with the pupils of the school nearby. Once a place where intelligence and craft were passed down to the next generation, his work shop turned into a dilapidated building, despised by all, unworthy of passers-by’s notice: “people pass, snuffing out a cigarette or tossing aside an empty can or bottle. But nobody stops (...) the anvil on Apodaca Hill stands silent and gathers rust”.⁷ Trapp was stirred into celebrating the lives of the modest yet toiling Hispanics and Native Americans, the dignity of the voiceless and the beauty of the poor and powerless. He acknowledged the superiority of Christian values over what I will simply refer to as capitalistic and Darwinist morals. His depiction of the American Southwest was coloured by Gospel imagery turning individual experiences into epitomes of the life of Jesus. Thus, the birth of “another illegal immigrant in an alien land” becomes the re-enactment of Jesus’ birth in *Nativity* which might encourage readers to view immigrants’ fate in the light of the Holy family fleeing the slaughter of the innocents under Roman Rule.⁸ Space and time collide to celebrate the universality of Christ’s sufferings. New Mexico’s *Belen* (which means ‘crib’ in Spanish) is “itself a manger where the union of earth and sky brings forth new life, innumerable Bethlehems yet to be.”⁹ However loaded with Christian similes and metaphors, his poems should not be misjudged as a succession of images picked up from the Gospel. Some Unitarians advocate studying different religious beliefs and practices since Christian values are not authoritative and exclusive of foreign spiritual insights.

Melting with Nature: Hispanic and Native American wisdom

Jacob Trapp didn't fail to perpetuate this tradition of religious open-mindedness as his personal analysis of Tao and collaboration with rabbis in his New Jersey parish demonstrated. While in the Southwest, he could not fail to delve into the mysteries of Native American ceremonies and religious narratives and more than often mentioned Hopi, Zuni and Navajo lore, beliefs or rituals. What undoubtedly appealed to the Unitarian minister was the pantheistic conception of God (its incarnation in Natural beings and things) expressed by Native American traditional communities.

The rejuvenation of life through the never-ending repetition of natural cycles is another manifestation of God's gift to mankind, his Will to grant Earth and man, the ability to never die and always start anew. In *The Desert Lives*, every aspect of creation competes for water: "rain-resurrected insects are licked up as food for lizards, lizards in turn become aqueous sustenance for thirsty hungry roadrunners".¹⁰ In *Desert Mystique*, Jacob Trapp cries out "We are agonists here under this desert crown of thorns".¹¹ Yet, this agony is the promise of a new future. In the desert, man is more attentive to the simple, yet unmistakable signs, of rebirth: "the desert lives (...) in myriads of plant-wells storing the rain of one brief shower for a hundred dry tomorrows" (*The Desert Lives*).¹² Jacob Trapp surrenders to the beauty of Nature and condemns the self-made man who, oblivious of Nature's order and cycles, believes he can master natural forces. A product of the American Dream, the self-made man has famous ancestors, the long list of conquerors who came to deprive Native Americans of their intimate and subordinate relationship to the sacred land. In *Brief Tenure*, Jacob Trapp belittles the Spanish invaders who were adamant that their strength and grandeur lied in the measurement of the surface area their empire covered. The "sun-bleached of earth" is contrasted to the "plywood, tarpaper, concrete and stucco" of Anglo settlers who eventually will have "to consent to the earth".¹³ Man toils hard to forget about his insignificance by building, erecting and destroying in fury and sound. These egotistical attempts at establishing his pre-eminence over Nature are opposed to the stillness of the land, its "strange tranquillity, its strange disquietude" in *Desert Mystique*.¹⁴ Trapp points out the meaningless of the babbling and drivel characteristic of the occidental man and praises the Pueblo Indians because "none of them is self-made" but spring from earth and impersonate Nature and gods through their drumming and dancing (*Pueblo Indians*). They inspire Nature and Nature inspires them: indigenous people, be they Hispanic or Native, as opposed to white settlers

turned blind by their greedy pursuits, are able to grasp the poetry and hidden beauty of life.¹⁵ Their gaze goes beyond appearances. Jacob Trapp thus recalls one santero he visited in Tesuque who “could see a forest in a grain of sand, a Saint Francis of Assisi in the sun-grayed trunk of a fallen tree” (*Santero*).¹⁶ Jacob Trapp communes with a pantheistic world where death enables man to merge with Nature, “to be at rest and take flight no more, save perhaps as a cactus in bloom or a scarlet-tipped ocotillo”.¹⁷

Jacob Trapp’s poetry is a celebration of the senses: to be granted the supreme gift of merging with Nature, you have to keep eyes wide open and prick up your ears to the “soundless saying of sand” (*Desert Mystique*) and “silence melt[ing] into rivulets of song” (*The Song to the Singer*).¹⁸ To the skilled observer, boundaries are blurred. Flesh and soil interpenetrate each other when the Santa Clara Potter’s fingers “speak to the clay” and the “clay speaks to her fingers”.¹⁹ The *Adobe House*²⁰ acts as a reminder that man emerged from “obsidian underworlds”²¹ and was shaped by Changing Woman-Mother Earth according to Navajo and Pueblo myths. All handicrafts are viewed as a way to reach out to the creators since “creativity conjures forth the creators” in *Pueblo Ceremonial Dance*.²² Only by considering his body as water, soil and wind, can the individual embrace the wholeness of his existence and sympathize with mankind in its dazzling array of meaningful others. The desert offers him the opportunity to understand this while he contemplates the meeting of land and sky. Indeed, “rock and sky are wedded”.²³ This merging with Nature is itself reminiscent of the presence that permeates all, “visible, touched and tasted in the bread and wine of communion” received near the mountains of Cristo Rey by a bilingual assembly (*Cristo Rey*).²⁴ There, in the desert, among people who acknowledged with humility the presence of creative spirits in natural elements, Jacob Trapp sensed that God, whatever he may be, could not reside in the polished manners, the small talk and the “make believe” of Western civilisation’s advocates. Something had been lost in the process and the West seemed the one place where the God of origins was to be heard, felt, touched and seen. Thus, some of his poems set in the East provide a stage for the drama of estrangement. As people “go about, or lean toward one another, glass in hand, drowning in sound (...) surfac[ing] to an apparent play of light”, he longs to resume his conversations “with others who are not here”.²⁵ In *Cocktail Party* as in *Christmas Eve*, the narrator is baffled by the vacuity of highly construed re-enactments of joy. Those deceptive moments are the reversed image of his blissful encounters with universality in the West. Only by “returning to tactile sense”²⁶, “by edging over to an open door” and being “momentarily set free to birdsong at dusk”²⁷, can he experience love and life again through Otherness and Nature.

Acculturation and its consequences

After residing in the West from 1930 to 1945, Jacob Trapp was sent to New Jersey. He accepted this new call with faith but never ceased to praise Nature and urged his readers to “melt into it” disregarding the uproar of the city.²⁸ According to some of Trapp’s poems, modernity bred techniques and tools that prevented the new generations from behaving like children of earth. In *The Killers*, Trapp mourns over the loss of “our earth of yesterdays”.²⁹ The timelessness of myths gives relevance to the experience of wholeness and enables past and present to merge, individual and community to unite with Nature. Acculturation makes it possible for division to occur by threatening the passing on of traditional ways. While the Pueblo celebrations might have been considered as frozen in time, they participated in the rejuvenation of earth since chanters and drummers called forth rain and the blessings of the gods. The apparent spontaneity of cocktail parties in the East is contrasted with the cyclical nature of ceremonies in the West: the highly ritualized patterns of dances and songs made room for other artists to come. Modernity in Indian lives is not only seen as a disruptive element but as an event that paradoxically brings life to a stand-still. Thus, in *The Killers*, Trapp laments that “past, disfigured and betrayed, was drained of life and gouged of eyes”.³⁰ The Indian, once a creator, becomes a silent mourner, a dishevelled figure who struggles to remember his ancient knowledge, a mute singer who remains faithfully glued to the spot where once loomed majestic mountains. Over the cliff’s edge at Truchas Peaks, one may notice “broken bottles, tin cans, junked automobiles”³¹ and at the feet of the Zuni Mesas, “Mother Earth, from sacred silver spruce and spurred towhee of the east to blue spruce and sacred longcrested jay of the west lies littered with cans, beer bottles.”³² The four winds have long stopped to echo the sacred songs but blow junk against wire fences in *Acculturation*. While Mother Earth rejoiced in the embrace of past singers, dancers, ecstatic penitents and craftsmen, she is now literally smothered by layers of modern junk. While wind and breath were once omnipresent, they have left room for a stifling atmosphere characterized by the absence of melodies. Thus, Gallup, an off-reservation town raided by desperate Natives who drown their despair in booze, is described as a meaningless juxtaposition of “paved streets, concrete gutters and a grim clutter of buildings unshaded by trees.”³³ Sacred Movement has been replaced by sickly stiffness. Roads, cars and trains helped to further reduce distances but travellers withdrew from ancient knowledge. The acculturated West has become a desolate

location where transmission cannot happen. Thus, the Navajo maiden resents that the songs taught to her grandmother by “flowing waters and singing blades of grass” are lost forever.³⁴ In the past, stories were told and “changed in the telling”, “opening up to the new”. Aguilar, the wise man, left an opening in every design “so the spirit would not be closed in” but acculturation left no hope and the young man is deaf and blind like Aguilar in his old age. “The birds awake at dawn to sing but he cannot hear, the morning sun throws a soft light over his bed but he cannot see.”³⁵ Like Aguilar or the petrified *Sagebrush Woman*, the old recipients of knowledge stand still, the last remnants of a civilization once brimming with joy and confidence. They have become the desert’s solitude themselves, “motionless wind-sculptured figure[s], dumb with encrusted silences, [their faces] turned back unseeing toward a desert-blighted shack where something lived that would not be forgotten.”³⁶

At the end of his life, Jacob Trapp returned to the American Southwest and settled in Santa Fe where among others pursuits, he did leatherwork and wood sculpture. One of his friends recalls that he loved driving along dusty roads for hours without any given destination. One day, absorbed in the contemplation of nature, he realized that he had forgotten his wife at the gas station where he had stopped a few hours earlier on. In spite of the many alterations in landscape, despite the social changes brought by acculturation, Jacob Trapp had retained the ability to merge with nature and uncover its hidden beauty. The reading of his poems may well nourish a nostalgia for a primitive Edenic Southwest, conjuring up sepia images of proud figures standing heroically against the passing of time. Yet, his appeal to unite with nature has never been so compelling for individuals bent on escaping the shackles of modern days in search for some elusive silent meaning. Further studies may try to determine whether Trapp’s parish work among Native communities was reflected in his poetry and to what extent his attitude towards ritual practitioners differed from that of other missionaries and Christian ministers.

¹ Trapp, Jacob. *The Stricken Twins : How Song Began*. Santa Fe: Oasis, 1984.

² Trapp, Jacob. “Desert Mystique” in *The Stricken Twins : How Song Began*. Santa Fe: Oasis, 1984, page 42.

³ Trapp, Jacob. “Georgia O’Keeffe in Abiquiu”, op.cit., page 69.

⁴ Trapp, Jacob. “Maria Martinez, Povi-Ka, Flower Leaf”, op.cit., page 70.

⁵ Trapp, Jacob. “Epitaph for Soccora”, op.cit., page 92.

⁶ Trapp, Jacob. Ibid, page 92.

⁷ Trapp, Jacob. “Santa Fe blacksmith”, op.cit., page 60.

⁸ Trapp, Jacob. “Nativity”, op.cit., page 53.

⁹ Trapp, Jacob. “Belen”, op.cit., page 93.

¹⁰ Trapp, Jacob. “The Desert Lives”, op.cit., page 43.

¹¹ Trapp, Jacob. “Desert Mystique”, op.cit., page 42.

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- ¹² Trapp, Jacob. "The Desert Lives", op.cit., page 43.
- ¹³ Trapp, Jacob. "Brief Tenure", op.cit., page 44.
- ¹⁴ Trapp, Jacob. "Desert Mystique", op.cit., page 42.
- ¹⁵ Trapp, Jacob. "Pueblo Indians", op.cit., page 45.
- ¹⁶ Trapp, Jacob. "Santero", op.cit., page 90.
- ¹⁷ Trapp, Jacob. "Where to find Mary Austin", op.cit., page 86.
- ¹⁸ Trapp, Jacob. "The song to the singer", op.cit., page 48.
- ¹⁹ Trapp, Jacob. "Santa Clara Potter", op.cit., page 64.
- ²⁰ Trapp, Jacob. "Adobe House", op.cit., page 82.
- ²¹ Trapp, Jacob. "The song to the singer", op.cit., page 48.
- ²² Trapp, Jacob. "Pueblo Ceremonial Dance", op.cit., page 46.
- ²³ Trapp, Jacob. "Adobe House", op.cit., page 82.
- ²⁴ Trapp, Jacob. "Cristo Rey", op.cit., page 83.
- ²⁵ Trapp, Jacob. "Cocktail Party", op.cit., page 120.
- ²⁶ Trapp, Jacob. "Christmas Eve", op.cit., page 121.
- ²⁷ Trapp, Jacob. "Cocktail Party", op.cit., page 120.
- ²⁸ Trapp, Jacob. "The Sound of Silence", op.cit., page 99.
- ²⁹ Trapp, Jacob. "The killers", op.cit., page 122.
- ³⁰ Trapp, Jacob. Ibid, page 122.
- ³¹ Trapp, Jacob. "Truchas, New Mexico", op.cit., page 62.
- ³² Trapp, Jacob. "Acculturation", op.cit., page 61.
- ³³ Trapp, Jacob. "A Navaho Maiden's Lament", op.cit., page 84.
- ³⁴ Trapp, Jacob. Ibid, page 84.
- ³⁵ Trapp, Jacob. "Tse Doh: the old one", op.cit., page 88.
- ³⁶ Trapp, Jacob. "Sagebrush Woman", op.cit., page 7.