SIMULATING THE SACRED IN THEODORE STREHLOW'S *SONGS OF CENTRAL AUSTRALIA*

Darren Jorgensen

It may be impossible to reconstruct what it meant for the Arrernte people of Central Australia to have the New Testament translated into their language. The continuing practice of Christianity among the Arrernte shows just how powerful this wealth of stories was for this remote community. This act of translation was reversed by the son of the New Testament's Arrernte translator, Theodor Strehlow, who worked on rendering the song-cycles of the Arrernte into English. These are not so much translations as conversions, as Strehlow wrote them into a poetry of rhythm and cadence that was influenced by Greek and Norse myth. In doing so, Strehlow wanted to simulate his own conversion experience, his own experience of this desert people and their lives. To do so he was forced to turn to that which simulates the sacred in Western culture, in the language of poetry and literature. In reading Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia* (1971) and the story of its composition, we might begin to approach this conversion to Aboriginalism that took place in the desert of Central Australia, and subsequently reconstruct Strehlow's attempt to reverse religious imperialism.

This essay is based on Theodor Strehlow's book, *Songs of Central Australia*, and the context of its composition (Strehlow 1971).[1] *Songs*, published after decades of work in 1971, converts the mythology of the Central Australian tribe, the Arrernte, into the song and verse forms of Western poetry. Strehlow grew up on Hermannsburg Mission Station, east of Alice Springs and amongst the Arrernte people. His father, Reverend Carl Strehlow, was the pastor there, and was responsible for translating the New Testament into the Arrernte language. It is impossible to convey what such a translation might have meant for these people. At most, this rich wealth and heritage of stories might have appeared like a new sun in the sky of these remote, highly cultured people. At the very least, its stories would be interesting, as if they had encountered a traveller from distant parts, with tales of his own country and its knowledge to share. The legacy of this translation is a recent tradition of Christianity that runs to this day in the Central and Western Deserts of Australia. It is certainly possible to view this Christianity, and the impact of the New Testament translation, as a mechanism of assimilation. The Hermannsburg mission shortly preceded a pastoral industry that arrived in Central Australia to employ those versed in English as stockmen. Those adapted to pastoralism would be in a better position to survive the massacres that followed. They would also be in a better position to advocate for their bush cousins as the political recognition of the plight of Aboriginal people became more visible to the Australian public. Across Australia, this pastoral generation remain the great cross-cultural figures of the desert, who understand both bush life and whitefella ways, and who have developed effective strategies to cross between the worlds of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia.

The place of the New Testament for each language group, for each remote Australian culture, was of course different in each case. The Arrernte's adoption of Christianity took on a distinctive Arrernte quality. As Jolien Harmsen notes, 'the Arrerntes adopted Christianity as a kind of "floating dreaming"' (Harmsen 2004). Christian mythology became a part of the dreaming, a part of the mythopoesis by which Arrernte people oriented their lives. In the process of adaptation, it came to contradict the monotheism of Christianity, as the New Testament became one dreaming story among many. Rather than replacing or overturning the Dreaming, it was assim-

ilated into it. David Wilkins reports that this process goes so far as the misunderstanding, and mistranslation, of the term for God, which is in the Arrernte language 'Altyerre' which means 'a Dream; the Dreamtime; the creation period in which totemic ancestors travelled about the unformed land and brought all the physical and spiritual aspects of the world into being, including human laws of behaviour' (Wilkins 1994). So that Arrernte people, including those at Hermannsburg where Strehlow was born, were reading, or listening to, New Testament translations or sermons in Arrernte only to interpret 'Altyerre' not after the Catholic God, but as the Arrernte Dreaming. Therefore the sentence: 'God is the one who made everything' is understood in Aranda more along the lines of 'Everything was created by the ancestral beings in the Dreaming' (Wilkins 1994).

Theodor Strehlow reworked his father's translation of the New Testament to the point that it became an entirely new version (Hill 2002: 539-545). While the father's was comparatively simple, condensed for a people new to the Christian word, the son wanted to improve not only on the translation, but on the Arrernte language itself, turning it from an archaic, static tongue to a dynamic, adaptable system. Some of the elders complained that he was making the Bible too difficult to understand, but Strehlow argued that there should be no effort spared on the part of a people whose own culture was just as nuanced, subtle and intricate for outsiders. This appreciation of the complexity and necessity of cross-cultural knowledge informs *Songs of Central Australia*, imbuing it with a yearning for the conversion of Australian readers to the poetry of this remote Australian people. Having grown up playing as a child amongst the Arrernte people and speaking their language, Strehlow came to record and analyse the Arrernte Dreaming with the knowledge of one who had already been immersed in the sensibilities of the Central Australian desert. *Songs* has been read as a kind of Bible for Australian reconciliation, as it makes the ancient mythos of these Aranda people accessible to the English reader (Rothwell 2003: 197-256). It does not do this after the methods of ethnography or anthropology, but through poetry. Strehlow offers his reader a poetic relationship to the Arrernte people and their universe, taking risks with the subject of his studies in order to bring this subject closer to his audience. This son of a pastor was in a unique position to do this, as one who learned to speak this language as well as English. According to Strehlow's first biographer, Ward McNally, probably after a story told him by Strehlow himself, when he was leaving the mission as a teenager, he was told in Arrernte that '[y]ou are one of us ... We're you're proper people… You belong to us – to the tribe… an' we be waitin' for you when you come back' (McNally 1981: 24). After studying for a qualification in English literature in Adelaide he returned, armed with a knowledge of the European classics, and it was these classics, especially romantic poetry, that he wanted to emulate in translating the Aranda myths. It was just as important for him to translate the cadences and rhythms of the Dreaming as its stories.

Aboriginal beliefs have long been framed by colonial Australia in terms of the Dreaming or Dreamtime; that was a first translation of the Arrernte word 'alcheringa' (Spencer and Gillen 1899: 645). Dreams were given scientific currency in Western discourses through psychoanalysis, this being the pre-eminent science of the psyche in the first half of the twentieth century, the time when Strehlow began work on his *Songs of Central Australia*. Indeed, Strehlow carried with him on his travels a copy of Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (Hill 2002: 147). For Freud, the move from dream to waking is one from unconscious to conscious awareness, from the obscure, religious, inductive and irrational world to the clear, secular deductions of reason. What lent the

notion of the Dreamtime currency as a description of Aboriginal spirituality was this received idea of an unconscious that lay both in the recesses of people's minds and in a distant, pre-historic European past. The Dreamtime makes the ideological operation of the civilising mission of the European colonisers all the more visible, as the name evokes its own passing – the dream from which Aboriginal people are destined to awaken. In literary theorist Fredric Jameson's book, *Archaeologies of the Future*, dreams belong not to the night, but instead to the light of day. He uses Freud's essay, 'Daydreaming and the Creative Writer,' to theorise the place of the dream in everyday life (Freud 1954: 143-153; Jameson 2005: 42-56). Jameson points out that dreams, when brought into the light of day, often bore their audience. The dream represents a wish-ful-filment that is meaningful for the dreamer alone. So that Dreamtime stories, translated by anthro-pologists and children's writers, often testify to colonial rather than Aboriginal desires, as they construct the images of a dying race and the dawning of a new era of civilisation. They often make very boring reading, without any concession to their genre, to the suspense of their story, or the complexity of their characters.

The first non-Indigenous scholars of Arrernte culture, Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen, col-lected creation myths that tell of the separation between Earth and heavens. They report on ladders to the sky that have been lost, trees that no longer reach the heavens, and spears that have withdrawn into the sky. As W.E.H. Stanner writes in 1953:

> European minds are made uneasy by the facts that the stories are, quite plainly, preposterous; are often a mass of internal contradictions, are encrusted by su-perstitious fancies about magic, sorcery, hobgoblins, and superhuman heroes; and lack the kind of theme and structure – in other words, the "story" element – for which we look. (Stanner 1979: 30)

Individual stories of the dreamtime appear preposterous, their details unacceptable to a reasoning consciousness. Yet, as Stanner goes on to write: 'Our own intellectual history is not an absolute standard by which to judge others. The worst imperialisms are those of preconception' (Stanner 1979: 30). The preconception here is the story structure of Western fantasy. Dreamtime tales do not provide the kind of pleasures we have been inculcated to receive as entertainment. The Dreamtime tale is subsequently boring, even childlike. They are thus not taken seriously, because as Stanner writes, these are not proper stories, being full of irrationalities. Dreamtime stories have functioned in ways that are, quite simply, odd and not true to their epic, mythic qualities. Thus they are published, in modified form, as children's tales, and are used as secondary material to authenticate cultural materials, such as artefacts and artwork. It was this situation that Strehlow wanted to correct, by turning to the poetry of these tales, to their profound beauty, which he wanted to translate into verse.

It is worth citing at length the Western Arrernte Rain Song, to demonstrate just how Strehlow was able to render the joy and sensitivity of this poetry. It is also worth citing this song because, after its publication in 1971, *Songs of Central Australia* has remained a rare book, one whose scarcity testifies to just how much it failed to fulfil its concern to bring Australia and Aboriginal Australia closer together.

The Western Arrernte Rain Song

Among the rippling waters he sits without a move –
It is Kantjia himself who is sitting without a move

Moveless like a boulder he is sitting
His hair is bedewed with rain he is sitting

On the fissured rockplate he is sitting
On the rockplate welling with water he is sitting

Bedrizzled with rain he is sitting
Among the rippling waters he sits without a move.

Bedrizzled with rain, a reddish glow overpowers him
Among the rippling waters a reddish glow overpowers him

The sky is clouded with watermoss
the sky sends down scattered showers

over the rockplates the flow is echoing –
over the rockplates green with moss

over the rockplates the flow is echoing –
over [plates] green with moss the flow is echoing

tier upon tier they are hanging moveless into the sky
in heavy silence they are hanging moveless in the sky

shaking the earth, yes, shaking the earth,
calls the voice of the thunder

over the sun-darkened river sands
calls the voice of the thunder, the voice of the thunder

like mountain bluffs the clouds are spreading their shapes
a rainbow spreads its arch over them all

lo, over the tatitaja grass the waters are roaring
lo, the foam crested waters are roaring

lo, the foaming waters are roaring
lo, over the mulga grass they are roaring

veils of rainy mist –
veils of rainy mist cast down their sweeping folds, cast down the sweep of their folds

a misty drizzle is setting in –
it is turning into rain, it is turning into rain.

a misty drizzle is setting in
a steady, soaking rain

miss-covered one,
spread forth your waters!

come, moss-covered one,
come pour forth your waters!

come, foam-crests,
come spread over the waters!

come, drifting twigs
come, spread over the waters!

over the sun-darkened river sands calls the voice of the thunder, the voice of the thunder.

the first storm-showers –
the first storm-showers are falling here and there, are falling here and there

the first storm showers –
the first storm showers are pouring down in torrents, are pouring down in torrents

Through hollows overgrown with mallee
under the mallee trunks, [flood] flow on

a flash of lighting
shivers tree in pieces

a flash of lightning
shocks and terrifies

may yonder flash of lightning shiver the tree in pieces
may it shatter the rockplate in pieces!

moveless like a boulder he is sitting!
his hair bedewed with rain he is sitting

yes, let foam-crests float on the water!
yes, let river-foam float on the water!

overflowing its banks into side-channels
the flood rolls down its waves

the power of the flood has been broken,

it is soaking away into the sand. (Strehlow 1971: 454)

Beyond this poetic translation, this literary achievement, Strehlow turns to musicology to notate and describe the actual singing of these songs, which he had the opportunity of studying from his own recordings of ceremonies. Unlike the anthropologists and other scholars that had preceded him – including his own father – he did not only recite the tales of remote Australian tribes, but translated their context, their sensibility.

Strehlow turns for comparison to the epic tales of Ancient Greece, which were also recited as a part of an oral, mythic culture. In the process, he makes a radical re-reading of Ancient Greek culture. The choruses of Ancient Greece are supposed to have been to a musical accompaniment. However Strehlow radically argues against this idea, instead using Arrernte chants to re-read the interpretation of Greek myths, Greek stories, as sung. Instead, he argues that the great epics of classical times may have been chanted, as the great song-cycles of Central Australia are chanted. In turning to the Greeks, Strehlow reveals his ideological bent. He reproduces the classicist's nostalgia for a kind of unity of the arts, citing classical scholars to the effect that poetry and prose have a common rhythmic basis, and then producing such a unity in the total poetry of *Songs of Central Australia*. He compares the ceremonies of the Arrernte, which separate the chanting chorus that recites the song-cycles from actors who stand in for mythological beings, to ancient Greek performances that also divided its singers and actors. By intoning Greek forms, Strehlow is countering Spencer's and Gillen's primitivist interpretation of Arrernte culture as simplistic, and having a childlike investment in dreams and myths. Instead, Strehlow's Arrernte have the profound depth of a culture that can be considered, like that of Ancient Greece, to be primary, even original. For Strehlow himself, Arrernte culture was indeed a primary one, as he grew up within it. However, and as we shall see, this unique, two-way place that Strehlow occupied would also double-bind the reception of *Songs*.

Upon his return to the Arrernte people, Strehlow was accepted by the tribe almost as one of their own. While he was never initiated, they turned to him as an *ingkata*, a guardian of secrets. The elders of the Arrernte trusted him not only with their stories (which are often secret as well as being sacred) but with sacred objects that were likely thousands of years old, their significance tied up not only with cultural knowledge, but with ceremonial contexts and shamanic practices outsiders could only begin to guess at (Hill 2002: 206-207). Along with Arrernte and, later in his life Liritja myths, Strehlow was entrusted with these objects, to be their custodian at a time of historical crisis in central Australia. It is worth pausing here on the nature of some of these objects, ceremonies, stories and other artefacts. The Central Desert cultures of Aboriginal Australia are generally very ancient, and have developed immensely complex systems of conservation and knowledge transfer. They work by entrusting different people, different parts of the tribe, with different knowledges and objects that are connected to different parts of country. Only by coming together, as one person who knows this and another person that knows that, can a ceremony and social cohesion take place. While the idea of a secret in the western sense has to do with a hierarchy of power, knowledge in Aboriginal desert cultures is instead constituted between people, so that one person does not know that part of the country, or that story, because that person knows something else, is the guardian of another part of the country, and has responsibilities elsewhere. Hence the distribution of secrecy sets up cultural protocols that prevent social collapse.

One part of the tribe does not talk about certain things, or go to certain areas, because if they do it will upset the intricate distribution of knowledge, a knowledge that is only revealed in aspects of its totality at ceremony time; ceremonies that function to keep the tribe as one.

Strehlow was often invited to record sacred ceremonies and dances, and to photograph and take away with him sacred objects, because Aboriginal elders felt they had nobody to leave their knowledge to. They did not trust their children not to sell off such objects, nor did they trust any other whitefellas not to betray the secrecy of such stories. It was within this context of tragedy, this sense of impending doom amongst the elder men, that Strehlow received secret-sacred knowledge and objects (Hill 2002: 226-228). As Strehlow himself reports, 'Aboriginal society collapsed completely some fifty years after the invasion ... the old order seemed to the young people to have been built on lies ... the old songs had lost their appeal to the new generation' (703). The contradiction of Strehlow's work, if not his life, comes into play with force here, because what Strehlow was being entrusted with did not come without conditions. Many elders told him that he must never make the sacred knowledge public, and especially not to show women, as they had entrusted him with this knowledge as its guardian, rather than as its disseminator. The problem that Strehlow confronted was that his own knowledge of these song-cycles was not based on his own memory, as it was for the Arrernte, but in fact lay in his notes, as well as in sound recordings of stories, and film footage of sacred ceremonies. In this sense, his knowledge was not really primary, as the sacred content was technologically displaced by reproducible media; detached from its ceremonial and social context and, most importantly, its place in the country. His inheritance of the sacred is a simulation of it. The simulacrum stands in for its origin, and is a fallen version of it, so that the context for the sacred becomes one of decline and displacement.

This fundamental difference of knowledge systems came to a head more than once in Strehlow's life. After establishing this context for the *Songs of Central Australia*, Strehlow made the mistake of his life by publishing photographs of a sacred ceremony in a German magazine. Now this is in some senses a very Aboriginal approach to knowledge, as Strehlow wanted to reveal to only a part of the world this ceremony, to show this knowledge only to those who would not threaten the fabric of Aboriginal society, this being the German public. However this was also an Aboriginalist's misunderstanding of the nature of knowledge in Western society, for media does not contain knowledge but disseminates it. By contrast, in Aboriginal society knowledge is only knowledge because it is in fact contained by its place in secrecy and country. Several pictures of the Arrernte ceremony made the transition from one modality of knowledge to the other, as the German magazine sold on their rights to the Australian version of *People*, who published them and caused an outrage among Aboriginal people all over the country. Strehlow had made decisions to disseminate the knowledge that he had been entrusted with before this. He was after all the custodian, the guardian, of certain parts of Aboriginal culture, and was therefore empowered to make decisions regarding them.

In the first pages of *Songs of Central Australia*, as if to shock its reader with the tragedy of its circumstance, Strehlow published the photograph of a ground design from the last surviving member of the Ntarea totemic clan, who had since died out. Strehlow, then, as the sole custodian of knowledge about this clan and its ways, saw fit to publish the surviving knowledge of this clan. By publishing the image, Strehlow fulfilled a responsibility to both sides of his double-bind. Yet this proved an impossible bind for Strehlow. As the sole holder of rights to disseminating Aboriginal knowledge, he confronted the problem of a continuity that was no longer a continuity,

of a translation that could only ever be a simulation of its origins. The contradiction played itself out most dramatically in Strehlow's university career. For while the Australian National University and the University of Adelaide funded his travels in the desert, he did not consider them the subsequent and rightful inheritors of the knowledge and artefacts collected there. After all, his acquisitions were made in trust to him rather than to these institutions, and Strehlow kept much of his collection in storage, showed nobody, and published but a little of his actual research, much to the disdain of other academics struggling to obtain research funding (McNally 1981: 88).

Throughout his career Strehlow attempted to solve the problem in different ways. At one point he entrusted recordings that were never to be shown to the national library; but the library misunderstood what he was trying to do, and returned these recordings to him years later in the mail, almost randomly, through the post as though they were overdue books. Later he attempted to find a successor whom he could train up, educate in all this knowledge he had been entrusted with, and eventually give custodianship of the sacred objects in his possession. Not finding an appropriate successor, he instead attempted to establish a foundation to assume the role of custodian for his incredible collection of sacred objects, recordings and other knowledge. Hence, his goal in establishing a foundation (now the Strehlow Research Foundation) was to create a proper institutional context for these objects; to replace their ceremonial and tribal context with a simulation of this sacred, confidential space. This is the reason that Strehlow sold the photographs that would bring him into disrepute – to raise funds for this institutional space. However, it was a venture that would turn him from a champion of the Aboriginal people to one scorned. Again this mistake rested upon a misunderstanding of the nature of knowledge in Western society; I want to suggest that it is a similar sort of misunderstanding that animates *Songs of Central Australia*, but in this case, the misunderstanding is the condition for the book's success. Strehlow's poetic translations hold a miscommunication built into them, for in their original, cultural and ceremonial context, they are quite simply not poetry or song. Yet here they are as poetry and song, deterritorialised as a floating dreaming. The sacred is simulated by Strehlow so that it occupies a different strata of sacred meaning, this being the arts. These translations are like the New Testament translations of Strehlow's father, as they become a kind of floating dreaming but this time in Western culture. In Western culture poetry is of little consequence, as it occupies the nebulous universalism of the arts, that is a fallen version of the ideal life, a substitute for a more fulfilled but now lost historical time.

As much as Strehlow wants to champion the reality of Aboriginal religious identity, his classicism constructs his Aboriginal knowledge as the knowledge of a lost origin. His reproduction of this knowledge was not so much with a view to a future, in which *Songs of Central Australia* would become a kind of guide for a reconciliation between cultures, but is instead a recovery of that which has already been lost; an illumination of where Australia had come from rather than where it is going. Thus it is that *Songs* is written in a form that is already archaic, that has already been written over, like a Greek chorus echoing through the ages. Yet *Songs* is also successful in a simulacral, artistic sense. As Gilles Deleuze's critique of Plato argues, the copy of a copy is itself another original, and becomes itself in doubling back upon itself (Deleuze 1983). This is why *Songs* is literature, as it embodies the vitalism that animates reproduction, although it remains incomparable to its Arrernte origins. In Deleuze's version of the simulation, Aboriginality becomes the quasi-cause of the *Songs*. Aboriginal knowledge is an agent that is carried beyond itself, is

overcoded, to produce a hyperreal that is no longer fallen. The seven hundred songs overwhelm the quasi-cause of Aboriginal knowledge with an excess of Aboriginal identity. This does not replace the original, but instead fulfils its fate with a destiny all its own. *Songs* then becomes a fabulatory process, the final goal of which is the recreation of the Earth, or at least the creation of a new territory. This fabulation is a double becoming, as Aboriginality and classical ideas cross over and become each other; and if this new territory proves a working simulation, it will inject itself back into the Earth.

In this sense Strehlow's text holds within itself the kind of conversions that his father set out to achieve in remote Australia. For to be a missionary is to create a new territory, to create a new, Edenic earth within and around the mission. Strehlow's *Songs* is thus not so much a reversal of his father's mission, which would be decolonisation, but an inversion of it, a colonisation pointing the other way, toward the non-Indigenous world. Yet, just as his father only succeeded in inventing a floating dreaming without the secrecy that would bring it into the Aboriginal sacred, so too Strehlow's choice of classical forms condemned it to the vagaries of the arts in Western culture. In establishing territory for a new version of colonialism, he only discovered the demise of the territory that this colonialism had already written over. In looking forward, he only came to look back. It is this contradiction that has left *Songs* a rare rather than popular book, one whose poetry is written as a eulogy to the past rather than to the future. In setting out to become a testament to the greatness of classical Aboriginal culture, it ceased to be Aboriginal; but its fabulation became an extraordinary artefact of incommensurable knowledge systems.

ENDNOTES

[1] Barry Hill's lucid biography of Strehlow provided much of the inspiration and historical background for this essay, which was first presented at the Bible and Critical Theory Seminar in Newcastle, Australia, during July 2009. Thanks to Roland Boer and the crew for their feedback and good times.

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