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Storytracking the Academic Study of Religion

The Arrernte and "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" stand at the crossroads of two other storytracks, a crossroads in the academic study of religion. In returning to the Numbakulla story, we have come full circle, but now I will trace a storytrack that intersects the one developed in the first two chapters. At this crossing a number of issues are raised, such as what is meant by the term *religion*, how comparison serves the study of religion, and what constitutes the use and interpretation of texts in the study of religion.

On several occasions during the 1950s and 1960s,[1] Mircea Eliade referred to an Arrernte text he had concocted, in accordance with his generic understanding of religion, to establish explicitly that "the religious" is synonymous with "the sacred center." In 1987 Jonathan Z. Smith extensively criticized this aspect of Eliade's work, showing, first, that Eliade's principal examples—the ancient Near East, India, and the Arrernte—do not support the pattern he attempted to establish, and second, that while the "religious" is expressed and enacted in terms of "place," it is done so in a manner much more complicated and varying than Eliade allowed.

The storytracks of Eliade and Smith are two courses along which the academic study of religion has developed. To analyze their crossing on this so-called Arrernte example offers the opportunity both to further develop and clarify storytracking as theory and method (important in drawing this work to some ending, if not a conclusion) and to reflect critically on the academic study of religion.

Eliade's Storytrack

Eliade's storytrack traces patterns throughout the history of religions. The outline of these patterns and relationships is discernable in the paragraphs preceding his

presentation of the "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" example in *Australian Religions*: "For the Australians, as well as for other primitive societies, the world is always 'their own world,' that is to say, the world in which they live and whose mythical history they know. Outside this familiar cosmos lie amorphous, unknown dangerous lands peopled by mysterious and inimical ghosts and magicians. . . . These strange lands do not belong to their 'world' and consequently still partake of the uncreated mode of being."[2]

In Eliade's view, primitive societies and archaic peoples are exemplars of the religious life. They are the least affected by history, which Eliade often saw as "terrifying."[3] Australians, as *ab origine*, are exemplary of the religious life. Their supposed primordiality is why Eliade, along with so many others, was interested in Australian aborigines. As hunter-gatherers, though contemporary, they are acknowledged for being preagricultural, remnants of the Stone Age.[4]

For Eliade, cosmos ("world" or "home") is a religious conception. It is the real, the known, and the familiar. That domain outside of world or cosmos is chaos, uncreated and unreal. Cosmos has positive connotations: home and familiarity. The area beyond cosmos has negative connotations: dangerous, inimical, strange, uncreated and chaotic. People know the world in which they live not only physically but also as "mythical history," that is, the story of its origination, of its first inhabitants: "Yet even the most arid and monotonous landscape[5] can become a 'home' for the tribe when it is believed to have been 'created' or, more exactly, transformed by Supernatural Beings. Giving shape to the land, the Supernatural Beings at the same time made it 'sacred.' The present countryside is the result of their work, and they themselves belong to a realm of being different from that of men."[6]

Cosmos, home, and land (more or less synonymous) are "sacred" (i.e., religious) because they are given shape and meaning by supernatural beings. Eliade's view of religion depends on the existence of separate (i.e., ontologically distinct) realms (the realm of humans and the realm of supernatural beings), separate kinds of being (humans and supernaturals), and separate kinds of time (human time and the time of the primordium, the beginning time): "The epoch when the Supernatural Beings appeared and began to transform the world, wandering across immense territories, producing plants and animals, making man as he is today, giving him his present institutions and ceremonies—this epoch was the 'Dream Time.' . . . This mythical time is 'sacred' because it was sanctified by the real presence and the activity of the Supernatural Beings."[7] The human world is dependent on the supernatural world in that it was created, given order, and made "real" by divine action, which occurred in the beginning time. Myth, as narrative, presents the history of the actions of the supernatural beings in the beginning time. The presence and action of the supernatural beings in the beginning time are the grounding for reality, cosmos, order, and meaning—in short, for the religious.

While myths tell the history of creative actions of the supernatural beings in the remote time of creation, this time can be "reactualized" by human beings through the enactment of ritual. As Eliade wrote: "But like all other species of 'sacred time,' although definitely remote, it is not inaccessible. It can be reactualized through ritual."[8] Ritual is modeled on the creative and transformative actions of the supernatural beings. To perform ritual is to replicate the acts of the gods, and thereby it is a means of reactualizing the beginning time, the religiously most potent time: "Everything which fully *exists*—a mountain, a water place, an institution, a custom—is acknowledged as real, valid, and meaningful because it came into being *in the beginning*."[9]

Eliade builds a tightly interrelated special vocabulary: *religious, primitive, cosmos, supernatural being, in the beginning, real, meaningful, valid, myth* (i.e., sacred history), and *ritual*. Human beings are religious when they live in a world that is created, transformed, or founded by supernatural beings in a primordial time whose history is recounted in myth. Human beings act religiously when they replicate and thereby reactualize the creative acts of the gods.

While "in the beginning" denotes the religious in temporal terms, it is the center that denotes the religious in spatial terms. To make this point Eliade calls on the Arrernte example of "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole." In the midst of this account, Eliade writes: "This pole is charged with important symbolism and plays a central role in ritual. The fact that Numbakulla disappeared into the sky after climbing it suggests that the *kauwa-auwa* is somehow an *axis mundi* which unites heaven and earth. . . . the *axis mundi* . . . actually constitutes a 'center of the world.' This implies, among other things, that it is a consecrated place from which all orientation takes place. In other words, the 'center' imparts structure to the surrounding amorphous space." [10] The center place is then the religious place. It is where human beings have access to the supernaturals who withdrew back into their world at the conclusion of their creative actions in the beginning time, and it is the place that provides orientation—and thus defines cosmos, real, and meaningful—for religious human beings. Eliade dramatizes the importance of this center by citing the instance in which the Tjilpa ancestors died when they broke their pole: "Seldom do we find a more pathetic avowal that man cannot live without a 'sacred center' which permits him both to 'cosmicize' space and to communicate with the transhuman world of heaven."[11]

Eliade's view of religion largely determines the religious in his culturally and historically specific studies; that is, only what conforms with this view is seen as religious. By the time Eliade arrives at the study of Australian religions, it appears that his understanding of religion has become for him the primary reality. The abstract and universal character of his view of religion corresponds with his view of hierophany, that is, that the truly real stands, in principal, apart from its specific historical manifestations. His understanding of religion provides a grid, a lens, by which not only to recognize the patterns and actions that define religion among cultures throughout the world but also to simulate aspects of a particular tradition so that it will adequately fit the reality. His abstract model is no longer a map of some territory; rather it engenders the territory. In his study of Australian religions, Eliade is certainly not developing and revising his theory of religion with Australian data (an accommodative process), nor is he apparently content to understand and interpret Australian culture by the instantiation of his model of religion on

Australian cultural and historical materials (a projective process). While evidence of the latter operation is present, Eliade is, to an extent, also creating an Australian aboriginal simulacrum based on his generic understanding of religion. However, this critique of Eliade's study of religion must not be confined only to his study of Australians. His approach to comparison and his essentialist understanding of religion are academically questionable in the extent to which they unite to create simulacra of religions, as in the Numbakulla text.[12]

Eliade's approach to and understanding of religion have in many respects established the academic study of religions throughout the world. His introduction of categories of place—time and space—not only assisted in the study of diverse religious traditions but also provided a language not explicitly theological at a time, the mid-1960s, when the academic study of religion was being established in state-supported American universities.[13] Much of the academic study of religion remains, to some extent, on this storytrack. Although I think it is no longer so fashionable to base an academic study of religion explicitly on Eliade's work, I believe it will be a long time before the essentialist and nonscientific[14] foundations implicit in his seemingly neutral categories and methods will be adequately acknowledged and critically engaged. But it may no longer be possible to fully realize the degree to which studies conducted in this manner have created simulacra that are now considered, indeed have become, primary realities. Storytracking may at least reveal the otherwise tacit methods. The study of religion from the perspective of Eliade's storytrack involves using the methods of comparison to recognize, in the diversity of cultures, the familiar patterns of "the religious," as he understood it, despite their being dressed in a multiplicity of culturally specific guises. The comparative task focuses on identifying, and simulating where necessary, sameness despite diversity. From Eliade's track, one sees as religious what conforms with the definitive patterns; one simulates examples to fill gaps and thereby complete the patterns. The task appears to be directed less at comprehending religion as it occurs throughout the diverse world, though this is often the stated motivation, than at establishing a particular generic view of religion as the pervasive reality.

Smith's Storytrack

Jonathan Z. Smith's storytrack critically evaluates principles, methods, theories, and approaches to the academic study of religion. For Smith, religion is a "mode of constructing worlds of meaning, worlds within which men find themselves and in which they choose to dwell. . . . It is the quest, within the bounds of the human, historical condition, for the power to manipulate and negotiate one's 'situation' so as to have 'space' in which to meaningfully dwell."[15] According to Smith, as an academic term, *religion* denotes a second-order category or idea that has existed in the human imagination only during the last few centuries. Religion, but not specific religions, "is solely the creation of the scholar's study."[16] Religion is an academic category by which to study aspects of the diversity of culture. It is not the study of a given set of phenomena that can be distinguished by being somehow religious (as Eliade's approach would have it). Smith holds that "there is no data for religion."[17] The study of religion for Smith necessarily demands being "relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his [the religion student's] primary expertise, his foremost object of study."[18] Thus for Smith, the question of theory, of approach, is everything.

In part because of Eliade's powerful and persistent emphasis on place, whose character is relevant to the way in which people designate order and meaning, place has become a common and widely discussed religious and cultural category. In some respects, following Eliade, place has been a persistent concern of Smith's approach to the study of religion. He holds that "once an individual or culture has expressed its vision of its place, a whole language of symbols and social structures will follow."[19] Widely discussed is his articulation of place in terms of the two categories, or kinds of religious maps, that he labels "locative" and "utopian." A locative vision of the world emphasizes place, whereas a utopian vision values being in no place.[20] Numerous works within the academic study of religion have followed from Smith's discussion of these categorizations. Unfortunately, many of these studies, by taking Smith's categories as definitive, use them as a grid or a lens to see (or to simulate?) familiar patterns in specific religions. Indeed, the locative category correlates well with a centered view of the world as described by Eliade. But to my reading, Smith's discussion of place is much richer and more complicated.

What Smith describes as maps makes better sense to me if they are thought of as mapping *strategies*. Locative and utopian as categories represent the extreme positions on a continuum. Neither, in practical terms, is possible to obtain or maintain for any length of time or on any significant scale. The very impossibility of these positions indicates that they are ideals, goals, or tendencies rather than categories. Furthermore, in almost every real situation, the closer one becomes to either of these positions, the more interesting and powerful the other appears—which demonstrates that locative and utopian are interdependent, rather than separate, positions. In actual religious cultures, the interaction between these polar positions is what is almost always operative, not the realization of either position. Smith's locative and utopian categories, then, become only ways of describing religious strategies, all of which then occur as the play between the incongruities.

Smith describes a third map, or as I prefer, mapping strategy, that supports my interpretation. Perhaps because he leaves it unlabeled, I believe it has also gone unnoticed. This strategy focuses on Smith's favorite theme, incongruity, or the issue of fit. As Smith considers comparison, mapping, living, and scholarship, he acknowledges, following Paul Ricoeur, that "incongruity gives rise to thought."[21] It is the presence of difference, the lack of fit, that makes things interesting. Incongruity is the sign of vitality: "The dimension of incongruity . . . appears to belong to yet another [besides locative and utopian] map of the cosmos. These traditions are more closely akin to the joke in that they neither deny nor flee from disjunction, but allow the incongruous elements to stand. They suggest that symbolism, myth, ritual, repetition, transcendence are all incapable of overcoming disjunction. They seek, rather, to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought."[22]

Importantly, Smith believes that similar dynamics should also be present in the methods of the academic study of religion. This similarity is expressed in terms of incongruity. Of the academic enterprise, he writes: "We need to reflect on and play with the necessary incongruity of our maps before we set out on a voyage of discovery to chart the worlds of other men."[23] This correspondence will be dealt with more fully later in this chapter.

Smith's understandings of myth and ritual follow closely his views on the importance of fit in regard to place. In sharp contrast with Eliade, Smith rejects the long tradition of scholarship that upholds the distinction between the primal moment of myth and its secondary application. He believes that "there is no pristine myth; there is only application."[24] In other words, myth as narrative is used by cultures as a "strategy for dealing with a situation."[25] Smith believes that religious cultures use myth to instigate comparison between the elements in the narrative and the aspects of the lived situation to which it is applied. Myth, more than a charter, is the instigator of thoughtful comparison: "There is delight and there is play in both the fit and the incongruity of the fit between an element in the myth and this or that segment of the world or of experience which is encountered. It is this oscillation between 'fit' and 'no fit' which gives rise to thought. Myth shares with other forms of human speech such as the joke or riddle, a perception of a possible relation between two different 'things.' It delights, it gains its power, knowledge and value from the play between."[26]

In Smith's understanding of ritual, incongruity appears to play a different role. He understands ritual largely in terms of its measure of control. Smith argues that in the course of life, it is usually impossible to control what happens. Ritual solves this problem because it "*represents the creation of a controlled environment* where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced *precisely* because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful."[27] Thus, for Smith, ritual resolves the incongruities that are experienced in the course of life. Unlike myth—which itself creates and plays among incongruities in the thought-provoking processes that are religious because they engage in a "mode of constructing worlds of meaning"—ritual resolves the incongruities that are a given aspect of life. Seen from another angle, Smith holds that ritual is performed in marked-off places. A ritual place "is a place of clarification (a focusing lens) where men and gods are held to be transparent to one another."[28] Consistent with his view that ritual resolves incongruity, ritual is seen as clarifying or as focusing, as the domain where those things that do not make sense outside of the ritual space are clarified and resolved.

Incongruity is key to Smith's understanding of both myth and ritual as principal components of religion. However, the respective role of incongruity for the two differs significantly. On the one hand, myth introduces incongruity in order to give rise to thought and thus stimulates and motivates the meaning-creation mode that Smith defines as religious. Ritual, on the other hand, seems to work at resolving the incongruities that are present in life outside of ritual. Here there seems to be a shift in Smith's appreciation of the provocative nature of incongruity. Ritual appears to serve the ideal, the "ought"—determined somehow outside of and prior to the respective rites—by resolving incongruity and by clarifying. In this way ritual articulates both the recognition of incongruity and its fictive resolution.

Smith's storytrack runs crosswise to Eliade's. The latter is a noncritical and nonself-reflective trajectory, bearing little if any motivation to engage Smith's track. But as a highly self-reflective approach, Smith's track gains strength and clarification in the process of criticism and comparison with other tracks. Smith is a persistent critic of Eliade. He occasionally seeks out common data precisely to criticize what he believes is Eliade's methodologically unsound reliance on familiar patterns and established concepts. He goes beyond criticism to demonstrate a more reasonable (in his view) methodology, grounded on a close reading of the common data. In one major instance, Smith takes the opportunity to criticize and compare his and Eliade's approaches by focusing on the Arrernte text "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole."

Crossed Tracks

Smith's Critical Analysis of Eliade's Interpretation.

Smith presents an extensive criticism of Eliade's reading of the "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" in "In Search of Place," the first chapter of his 1987 book, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. In Smith's analysis, Eliade focused his interpretation on nine elements of the myth.[29] To evaluate Eliade's interpretation of the Arrernte text, Smith compares Eliade's account with its source, Spencer and Gillen's *The Arunta* (1927). Smith shows that only one of the nine elements in Eliade's interpretation "can be accepted as Eliade has proposed them." Three elements (3, 6, and 9) are rejected entirely; five elements (1, 2, 4, 5, and 8) require revision.[30] Eliade's presumed pattern of "center" forces him to "misread the text." Smith writes: "By focusing on the false causal relationship—from broken pole to corporate death—Eliade has missed the actual structure of the narrative."[31] In response to his discovery of Eliade's misreading, Smith offers "an alternative understanding of the myth."[32]

By analyzing the sources of the text,[33] Smith discovers that the first part of the text—where Numbakulla creates the world, ending with his climb up the pole—occurs only in Spencer and Gillen's *The Arunta* (1927). The second part of the text—dealing with the travels of the ancestors, the breaking of the pole, and the death of the ancestors—is published in both the 1899 and 1927 editions of Spencer and Gillen's work on the Arrernte. Corroborated by Theodor Strehlow's observation that the Numbakulla prologue was concocted for Spencer in 1926,[34] Smith concludes that this portion is "an awkward hybrid,"[35] probably "a Christianized reinterpretation of Arandan myth."[36] Smith proceeds to his alternative reading by "putting aside the misleading and extraneous prologue of the myth of Numbakulla and his ascent up the pole."[37] Thereupon Smith restricts his analysis to the incidents of the broken pole and the death of the ancestors. He reports that he examined ninety-four incidents recorded by Spencer and Gillen but ignored by Eliade[38] in order to interpret these two incidents "set within their narrative frame."[39]

In his presentation of an alternative understanding, Smith focuses on four of the ninety-four incidents that make up the ancestral travels. All four incidents are intended to illustrate Smith's conclusion that the ancestral narrative is "an itinerary: the ancestors journeyed from this place to that; something happened; for this reason, the place is called 'so and so'; a feature in the present topography either was formed by or memorializes this event; the ancestors moved on to another place."[40] In light of what Smith believes is the typical narrative structure as determined by his analysis of the broad narrative context, he argues that the incidents of the broken pole and the dying ancestors are "not extraordinary, highly dramatic events to be lifted out and focused upon as having special cosmic significance. They are commonplace happenings within the myths of ancestral times."[41] Smith contends that "Eliade has missed the actual structure of the narrative. Each incident has two parts (again, typical of ancestral narratives): event and memorial."[42] He concludes his analysis: "By dissevering the double structure of event-memorial, Eliade has missed the generative element of the myth. It is, above all, an etiology for a topographical feature in the aboriginal landscape of today. It is the memorial that has priority."[43]

Smith cites the academic literature on the Arrernte and on the Australian aborigines in general to support his extension of this alternative reading into a description of the Arrernte understanding of place: "It is anthropology, not cosmology, that is to the fore. It is the ancestral/human alteration of and objectification of the landscape that has transformed the undifferentiated primeval space during the Dreamtime into a multitude of historical places in which the ancestors, though changed, remain accessible. This is expressed in the myths."[44]

Although Smith acknowledges that there are numerous issues that might be productively considered in this myth text,[45] he centers on the "event/memorial" pattern because it "will allow us to juxtapose two quite different understandings of the Tjilpa myth and, by extension, two quite different ways of conceiving of place within the study of religion."[46] In other words, Smith selects the issue that has the most potential to engage an intersection of storytracks that define the academic study of religion.

In Smith's analysis, the establishment of Eliade's pattern of the "sacred center" depends on only the Arrernte example and the Near Eastern examples that Eliade drew on from the pan-Babylonian school. Having criticized the Arrernte example, Smith turns to the Near Eastern examples, where he determines that "there is no pattern of the 'Center' in the sense that the Pan-Babylonians and Eliade described it in the ancient Near Eastern materials."[47] This leads Smith to conclude that "the 'center' is not a secure pattern to which data may be brought as illustrative."[48]

Smith compares anew the Arrernten materials with the ancient Near Eastern materials. In contrast to Eliade's comparative style, Smith finds that it is the differences that are most illuminating and provocative. In the Arrernten view of place, he argues, topographical features are a byproduct of ancestral journeys, while the ancient Near Eastern materials reflect a strong intentionality and deliberateness concerning the construction of place.[49] When freed of the expectations concomitant to the pattern of the "Center," Smith suggests that we might "classify and compare differences with respect to place."[50]

From an academic perspective, Smith calls into question Eliade's pattern of the "Center" on the grounds that the principal examples Eliade uses to establish the pattern—Arrernten and ancient Near Eastern—do not hold up to critical evaluation. In this criticism of a major element in Eliade's tightly interwoven set of concepts that articulates his view of religion, Smith calls into question Eliade's whole theory. Smith also criticizes the academic method that is more or less synonymous with Eliade's program, that is, comparison motivated by the desire to find similarity or sameness. Since Eliade's understanding of religion is not so much theoretical as it is ontological, Smith's challenge is far more than academic.

Critical Analysis of Smith's Alternative Interpretation.

To appreciate Smith's work on the Arrernte, it is important to comprehend that he is not, strictly speaking, presenting (as he states) an alternative to Eliade's interpretation. They are not reading the same texts. Eliade concocted an Arrernten text driven by his view of religion. Thus, Eliade's intention in presenting the Arrernten text is not explanation or illustration, as Smith considers it to be. Smith divides Eliade's text presentation into two parts: a prologue, relating Numbakulla's acts of creation, and the broken pole and ancestral death incidents extracted from an ancestral narrative. Smith uses an historical argument to set aside the prologue, allowing him to focus on the ancestral narrative. His interpretation of the prologue as the product of Christian influence is presented summarily.[51]

In not following further the interpretative study of the prologue, Smith pursues the Arrernten conception of place, which he finds discernable in the ancestral narratives. He is motivated to interpret Arrernten myths by his interest in establishing a theory of ritual based on "place" and in challenging Eliade's views and academic methods. The broken pole and ancestral death incidents in Eliade's account are only two of more than ninety incidents that Smith interprets in the myth text from Spencer and Gillen's *Native Tribes*. Although Smith focuses his interpretation on these two incidents, his interest is in the whole narrative, and thus the text he interprets is technically not the same as that considered by Eliade.

The broken pole incident is within the accounts of the so-called "middle wanderings" of the Tjilpa ancestors, which were recorded by Gillen sometime between April 17 and May 15, 1897. The Arrernte raconteurs were almost certainly aboriginal-English-speaking "police trackers" or "stock boys" who worked for Gillen at Alice Springs, or perhaps they themselves were the storytellers.[52] These accounts are divided into four sections, each one confined to the one group, or "column" in Gillen's terms, of traveling Tjilpa ancestors. Spencer edited Gillen's journal for inclusion in *Native Tribes*. His revisions were significant, but compared to other examples of his editing, the published account generally reflects Gillen's journal. For *Native Tribes*, Spencer maintained the group (or column) designations, numbered from one to four, as indicated by Gillen. However, for the publication of these accounts in *The Arunta*, Spencer reorganized them. The first and fourth groups were exchanged in identification, as well as in place. Spencer added significant general commentary and several pages of new material between the first (the former fourth) group and the second.

In the attempt to confirm Smith's view of the structure of these narratives, I have analyzed the entire story in a manner similar to Smith's;[53] that is, I have divided the narrative into camps or named places.[54] I was able to identify ninety camping places,[55] mostly on the basis of place names (see Table 1). A few places are indicated but not named. For each camping place, I noted and tabulated the significant actions. Based on the analysis of these camping places, I can make a number of observations.

The narrative, as Smith indicates, is an itinerary. Camping places are almost always named and frequently their location is described, often in reference to places known to late nineteenth-century European Australians. These nonaboriginal identifications were, I suspect, developed by Gillen's informants for his benefit or added by Gillen since they would be both unnecessary and irrelevant to aborigines. Occasionally the route of travel is described, almost always with reference to waterways or mountain ranges. On two occasions, the ancestors traveled underground; on other occasions, they entered and exited the ground but did not travel.

Although not in the published text in *Native Tribes*, Gillen's journal account notes that a pole, the *kauaua* or *nurtunja*, is erected at every camp. As Smith indicates, the presence of poles is consistently significant. The length of these poles appears to be important: longer seems to be better; short poles may be cause for embarrassment.

Ritual performances are the single most common type of event at a camping place, being performed at fifty-four of the ninety places. Often the ceremony is described by Gillen as *quabara undattha*, which Spencer usually renders as "sacred ceremonies" or "Engwura." Circumcision rites (*ariltha*) are performed on twenty-one occasions, most of them in addition to other ceremonies. A long series of ceremonies called *ampurtanurra* (in *The Arunta* Spencer presents this term as *ungperta-ngarra*) and associated with the Tjilpa group is performed seven times.

A dominant narrative feature, associated with forty-six camping places, is who is present at the location when the ancestors arrive, that is, who they meet when they arrive at a camping place. Those who are met are almost invariably identified by totem group, social subclass,[56] relative age, and gender. Occasionally the people encountered at a specific location also originated there; that is, the narrative describes them as having "jumped up" there. The names of these individuals are frequently given by Gillen, indicating their importance to the Arrernte, but the names are almost never included by Spencer. Almost without exception, the narrative indicates whether or not these persons have rituals (i.e., I think, whether they own the right to ritual performance) and a pole. Sometimes, if a pole is present, its general length is indicated.

Descriptions of the interactions between the ancestors and those people found in the camping places constitute the bulk of the narratives for many camping places. The narratives usually recount whether or not ceremonies are exchanged or shared between groups.[57] Often there are ritual exchanges. On several occasions the male

Table 1. Tjilpa Ancestral Wanderings: Analysis of Events at Camping Places

	Camp Place Name	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	Memorial	Meet Others	Leave Others	Comments
	Group I													
1	Okira [Okarra]	X												
2	Therierita [Therievula]	X	X	X									Man	
3	Atymikoala [Atnymechoala]	X	X											
4	Achilp-ilthunka [Achilpa ilthuka]	X					X				Stone where man was killed & buried	Wildcat man from Salt Water country		Name means "where Tjilpa cut man to pieces"
5	Unchipera wartna [Irrimiwurra]	X												Did not see two Opposum women
6	Aurapuncha [Kalearatunimma]	X	X							X		Smelled & saw Plumtree men		Went into ground, arose as Plumtree men
7	[Unartaonunga]	X	X											
8	Erlua	X											Few at various spots	
9	[Oralta]	X	X										Two men	
10	Arwura-puncha [Awurapuncha]	X	X									Ulpmerka men from Quinurnpa	Two men	Two parties join
11	Urangunja	X	X									Two Magpie women		
12	[Ilpaletta]	X												
13	Ilchartwa-nynga [Ilchaartwanynga]	X		X							Stone on end to mark dancing place			
14	Alawalla	X	X							X				Akakia trees shed plums like flood
15	Incharlinga [Incharulinga] On to Salt Water Country [Allia]	X	X							X				
	Group II													
16	Yungurra	X												Led by men with large erect penes
17	Imanda*	X	X		X							Frog, Tjilpa, White Bat, Little Bat	Some men	Divided into two groups
18	Itnuna-twuna	X	X									Purula Frog woman		
19	Ooraminna	X	X	X		X						Men suffering Erkincha & Unjiamba man & woman	Three Frog men	Initiate two women
20	Urthipata [Urthipita]	X	X									Unjiamba man & woman		Seen by Witchetty Grub man Ungperta-ngarra
21	"Small hill on Emily Plain" [Atnyraungwuramu-nia]	X	X								Stone marked camp site			
22	Okirra-kulitha [Ochirakulitha]	X	X	X										
23	Irpai-chinga [Irpaichingga]	X	X									Witchetty Grub people		
24	Achilpa-interninja	X	X										One man	Man came from tjurunga
25	Okilla-la-tunga	X	X									Purula woman (Unjiamba)		

(continued)

Table 1. *(continued)*

	Camp Place Name	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	J	Memorial	Meet Others	Leave Others	Comments
	Group II													
26	Ulir-ulira [Urliturtirra]	X	X				X	X			Name means "where blood flows like river"		Ungperta-ngarra	
27	Ertua [Ertoa]	X										Two women (Wild Turkey)		
28	Arapera	X	X	X				X				Purula woman (Tjilpa)	One man	Initiate woman
29	Ilchinga [Ilchingga]	X							X		Stone marked spot	Bulthara woman (Unjiamba)		Men tired
30	Ungwurna-la-warika	X	X								Name means "where bone is stuck"	Two Bulthara women (Unjiamba)	One Purula man	
31	Ilchi-lira [Ilchieleara]	X	X									Two Unjiamba men & one Unjiamba woman	One Purula man	
32	Ituka-intura	X	X	X								Large group Tjilpa men & women	Local Tjilpa	
33	Arara	X	X											
34	"Spot on Harry Creek" [Ultundaukartwa]	X			X							Smelled Tjilpa man, Unjiamba woman		
35	[Inkakilla]	X										Unjiamba man		
36	Ungunja [Unchelka]	X	X									Panunga man (Unjiamba)		
37	Apunga	X	X											
38	Burt Plain [Amullalinternika]	X					X					Bandicoot men & women		
39	Ilthwarra [Ilthwara]	X	X	X										
40	Hann Range gap [Oknicocherthera]	X										Carpet-snake man		
41	Ilchinia-pinna [Ilchinjapina]	X	X											Heard bullroarers in distance
42	Utachuta	X	X	X								Bandicoot men		Place where sound had come from
43	Inta-tella-warika [Intatelawarika]	X										Old Parula man (Tjilpa)[b]		Too tired to carry pole, dragged it
	Group III													
44	Yungurra	X												
45	Urapitchera	X	X		X						Tjurunga represents head	Pigeon men & women	Purula man	
46	Itnunthawarra	X	X											
47	Iruntira	X											Bulthara man	
48	Okir-okira	X												
49	Aratherta	X	X									Panunga woman (Large Beetle)		
50	Chelperla	X	X			X							Old leader	Ungperta-ngarra Rested
51	Ungapakunna	X												
52	Ningawarta	X	X											
53	Alla (the nose)	X	X					X				Purula woman (Wattle Seed)	Two Kumara men	
54	Kupingbungwa	X					X							
55	Enaininga	X		X										
56	Iranira	X		X									Purula man	
57	Okinchalanina	X	X						X				Old Purula man	Made necklets, armlets, & forehead bands

(continued)

Table 1. *(continued)*

Camp Place Name	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	Memorial	Meet Others	Leave Others	Comments
Group III													
58 Lilpuririka	X					X						Old Pununga man	
59 Ilartwiura	X	X			X					Hole where kauaua stood			
60 Elunjinga	X	X	X										Ungperta-ngarra
61 Alpirakircha	X	X	X								Old Kumara man Tjilpa	Same man as found	Man had nurtunja (pole)
62 Untimara	X	X									Purula & Kumara women (Tjilpa)		Women had nurtunga
63 Ungatha	X								X			Man suffering Erkincha	
64 Udnirringintwa	X	X			X				X	Tjurunga for dead; hill for parra mound			
65 Alkirra-lilima	X	X			X						Old Panunga man (Unjiamba)		Ungperta-ngarra; man had nurtunga
66 Achichinga	X			X							Old Panunga man (Unjiamba)		Tried to take pole from man
67 Appulya Parachinta	X	X	X								Old Bulthara man (Eagle Hawk)		Man without pole
68 Arrarakwa	X		X								Panunga man (Tjilpa)		Man making pole
69 Erutatna	X	X								Place on creek where pole stood		Old Bulthara man	Ungperta-ngarra; man had pole
70 Unthilil-wichika	X	X	X								Old Bulthara man (Honey Ant)	Honey Ant people	Parties mixed
71 Kurdaitcha	X	X	X								Large group Tjilpa of all classes		Parties mixed
72 Unnamed	X										Large group Water Beetle		Parties did not mix
73 Okinyumpa	X									Stone marked place where pole broke			Broke pole, "tired & sad," did not do ceremony
74 Unjiacherta	X									Tjurunga for dead; hill for place of death	Large group of Unjiamba of all classes		
Group IV (leaving Yungura)													
75 Erloacha [Ertoatcha]	X	X										Two men	Led by man with big penis that dragged ground
76 Yapilpa	X										Dancing woman		
77 Ulpmaltwitcha	X	X											
78 Urichipma [Uritchipma]	X									Name means "place of pichis"; stone			
79 Kurupma	X	X										Man	
80 Poara	X	X	X				X				Hawk woman	Several men	
81 Irpungartha [Irpungartna]	X	X	X								Hawk woman		
82 Al-lemma	X										Hawk woman		
83 Ariltha [Arilta]	X	X	X	X							Hawk men & women		Leader had big penis
84 place near Lake Macdonald	X	X									Hawk men & women	One man	
85 Irincha	X										Fish man		Ungperta-ngarra

(continued)

Table 1. *(continued)*

Camp Place Name	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	Memorial	Meet Others	Leave Others	Comments
Group IV													
86 Alknalilika	X						X				Quail women		
87 Inkuraru	X		X							Stone marks spot where ariltha done			Tjurunga deposted
88 Irti-ipma [Irlipma]	X	X										One man	
89 Unnamed	X										Bulldog Ant woman		
90 Kuntitcha	X		X								Bandicoot men like Inapertwa	One man	Killed men
Then went north to Salt Water													
Totals	90	54	21	4	6	5	5	2	5	14	46	27	

[a]At this point in the itinerary of Spencer and Gillen's *The Arunta*, there are many extra stories.

[b]This old man opened a vein and blood flooded the country and drowned the Achilpa men.
The drowned men went into the ground.

Source is Spencer and Gillen, *Native Tribes*, pp. 402–417, and Gillen's unpublished journals. Camping places are numbered and named.
The square bracketed names indicate where Gillen's journal differs from the published account.

A = Pole erected.

B = Ceremonies performed.

C = Circumcision performed.

D = Changed language.

E = *Erkincha* (sexual disease) present.

F = Blood drunk; usually young men give arm blood to thirsty elders.

G = Sexual intercourse performed.

H = Bodies painted by men.

I = Travel underground.

ancestors have sex with a woman met in a camp. In one incident much is made of the fact that this sexual act is in violation of the ancestors' ritual law. The spread of a sexually transmitted disease called *Erkincha* is considered the result of this ritual violation. The Tjilpa ancestors observed another group performing cannibalistic acts. Sometimes, because those encountered at named camping places owned ceremonies, they were able to avoid the traveling ancestors, even to avoid sexual intercourse with them. This suggests the power or potency of owning rites. A minor but significant narrative element is that, unbeknown to the traveling party, they are sometimes seen by others as they pass a given location, or others are in the vicinity of a place but the traveling party does not see them.

Another significant inclusion (twenty-seven instances) is whether a person or persons are left at the camp when the ancestral group moves on. Who they are—number, class, totem identity, name, gender, and age—is usually given, as sometimes is the reason for their being left. Commonly, the narrative notes that a descendant of a person left behind by the ancestors presently lives at that place.

There are several minor themes of significance identifiable in these "wandering" incidents. Memorials are indicated for fourteen of the camps. Typically these are stones or hills that arise at a camping place to memorialize some event, sometimes just that the place is a campsite. Three of these memorials are unnamed places, with simple descriptions of a geological feature, indicating where the pole was erected at the camp. Two of these are *tjurungas* that are kept in storehouses, each representing a deceased ancestor. One group of stones marks the burial place of a man the traveling ancestors killed for his offensive sexual conduct. A group of stones arose to mark a dancing place. Two memorials are hills that arose to mark the place of a significant event—one where a group of ancestors died, the other where a ritual mound had been formed. One group of stones marks where a group of ancestors were drowned and entered the ground.

Only six places (and two of these can only be discerned from Gillen's journals) have place names connected in any way—at least in any clear way to a non-Arrernte speaker[58]—with the distinctive appearance or character of the physical place they designate.[59] At six of the camps groups of men either contracted or died from the disease named *Erkincha*.[60] Two of the memorials are associated with the death of ancestors due to this disease: one records the appearance of a group of *tjurungas* and the other the appearance of a large hill to mark the spot where they died.

At four camps the ancestors changed their language, and at four camps the old men who had grown tired were refreshed when the young men cut their arms and gave the old men large drinks of their blood. At one camp the young men drank their own blood.

The ancestral leaders of these groups have very long, erect penes, which are so cumbersome that they threaten the progress of the groups. On one occasion, an ancestor's penis digs a furrow in the ground as it is dragged along. These descriptions of genitalia occur only in Gillen's journals, although occasionally Spencer attempts a highly euphemistic reference.

According to Smith's understanding, "ancestral narratives," as widely distributed in Australia, have the structure of an "itinerary," which he describes in terms of five elements:

1. the ancestors journeyed from this place to that
2. something happened
3. for this reason, the place is called "so and so"
4. a feature in the present topography either was formed by or memorializes this event
5. the ancestors moved on to another place.[61]

Smith illustrates this pattern by presenting two incidents from the Tjilpa "wanderings" narratives. The first one accounts for the name Uritchimpa, meaning "the place of the pitchis," and the second selection accounts for the name Ulirulira, meaning "the place where blood flowed like a creek." However, from the preceding analysis we now know that of the ninety places only six are in any way, at least explicitly in the text, connected with the etiology of the place or place name, and for only one of these is there a relatively clear association of the place name with the events the narrative describes as occurring in that place. Smith emphasizes element number 4, the event/memorial structure, as that which most characterizes the actual structure of the whole itinerary. Yet at only fourteen out of ninety camping places is there any mention of a memorial, and only four of these memorials are landscape features that correspond with significant ancestral events described in the narrative.

Thus, in Smith's analysis of the five elements, numbers 3 and 4 are not only atypical but actually quite exceptional. This leaves only structural elements number 1, the ancestors journeyed from this place to that; number 2, something happened; and number 5, the ancestors moved on to another place. Elements 1 and 5 are effectively the same, the coincidence of point of origin and terminus; thus there remains only the rather indistinctive iterative structure of elements 1 and 2: the ancestors travel to a series of places, at each of which something happens.

Smith continues his analysis by showing that the Tjilpa narratives are consistent with the general pattern he has described: "The Tjilpa ancestors come to a place. They meet an individual or another group that has a sacred pole and/or other sacred objects. (Indeed, the lack of a pole is thought worthy of notice.) These objects are shown to the Tjilpa. Some mode of social interaction transpires between the wandering Tjilpa and the indigenous inhabitants—most usually a ceremony, but sometimes acts of violence or sexual intercourse. The Tjilpa ancestors then move on."[62] This sets the context in which Smith focuses directly on the two incidents of interest to Eliade: the broken pole and the resulting ancestral death.[63] Smith's analysis is intended to demonstrate the "event/memorial" structure of these two incidents and to show that Eliade did not see this structure.

Certainly, as far as Smith's alternative explanation of the "broken pole" incident is concerned, his emphasis on "event/memorial" identifies structural elements that appear in at least these two episodes of the "wandering" narratives, although, at least according to my analysis, he overstates his evidence by calling them "typical narrative units."[64] More significantly, Smith's alternative explanation that "the generative element of the myth . . . is . . . an etiology for a topographical feature in the aboriginal landscape of today"[65] cannot be supported by the text he analyzed.[66] The narrative clearly assumes the prior existence of every one of the camping places and almost all of the features of the landscape. In only a few cases, such as those in which a hill or stones arose as a memorial, does the landscape become transformed as a result of the presence of the ancestors, and these hills remain unnamed. In only one incident is it relatively clear that the name of the place is the result of events recounted in the narrative. Although some attention is directed in the narratives to the location of named camping places, every one of them existed before the ancestors visited them, as did the waterways and mountains. The prior existence of these places is emphasized in that for over half of them, people are present when the group arrives and the names of places are given to identify travel destinations.

Although Smith holds that "an alternative understanding of the myth [i.e., the Arrernten myth presented by Eliade] must be proposed,"[67] the effect of his approach is to partially reconstruct the myth, presenting isolated exceptional incidents as typical, to support an alternative understanding. But Smith and Eliade are not "reading" the same text. Smith's alternative amounts to another reconstruction of a text drawn from elements selected from the Spencer and Gillen published sources.

The Academic Study of Religion

Storytracking is a method by which to construct and compare narratives of coherence that present various interpretive perspectives about a given subject. In the preceding sections I have constructed partial storytracks for Mircea Eliade and Jonathan Z. Smith. I chose to focus on these two scholars because of the measure of their contribution to the academic study of religion. In constructing these tracks I have attempted to examine some basic principles underlying their work. I have constructed each narrative in anticipation of, and in hopes of, illuminating the crossing of these tracks. In the previous section, the crossing of these tracks was concretized by focusing on the "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" materials. Storytracking provides the frame for comparison, in which each perspective accounted for may in turn be occupied as the position from which to evaluate other intersecting storytrack perspectives. Storytracking prepares us to first take up Smith's position to evaluate that of Eliade and then to stand in Eliade's to evaluate Smith.

Thus, for example, from the perspective of Smith's track, Eliade is undone—he is wrong and is replaced. Eliade's view of religion, his understanding of the comparative enterprise, his treatment of the Arrernte—all are "wrong," at least in some respects; minimally Eliade's claims are overstated. His views and positions are to be replaced, decidedly with those presented by Smith. Yet, from the perspective of Eliade's storytrack, it might be said that Smith has been too narrow; he has not looked broadly enough to Arrernten and other Australian aboriginal materials. What of the emu-footed man? What of the casuarina tree that serves as a ladder to the sky?[68] What of the broad ritual use of poles? And so on. Do these not function in some ways as center places? Do they not designate religious importance? What of the aboriginal conjunction of the present with mythic time? Are not all aboriginal acts somehow repetitions of the acts of the mythic ancestors? And, most important of all, Smith surely cannot deny that this understanding of religion fits so many cultures other than the Arrernte, so many, in fact, that it is impractical even to attempt to recite them all. Given this, how could the Arrernte not also fit?

Any of dozens of points of comparison could easily be pursued in this fashion. However, a more powerful frame of comparison is offered by storytracking when the comparative vantage is apart from any of the storytracks traced. Here storytracking is a method of critically evaluating and extending the purposes and interests of the various stories tracked. In this case, the crossing of Smith's and Eliade's storytracks gives me the opportunity to comprehend and attempt to advance issues and approaches related to the academic study of religion. By comparing Smith and Eliade on the basis of my own interests and concerns, I am able to more fully understand them, but I am also able to more fully understand and meaningfully engage in the academic study of religion. I will not only place Eliade and Smith in the context of issues I select; I will also attempt to show how the storytracking approach suggests meaningful development of these issues.

Religion

What is meant by *religion*? For decades it has been a term widely discussed and controversially defined. Most religion scholars have grown weary of the effort and have lost interest in the discussion despite the widely accepted principle that a word that cannot be defined is a word of limited academic value. Such a conundrum as the title by which the field—the academic study of *religion*—is identified is no small reason for broadly felt discomfort and embarrassment.

Eliade's understanding of the term *religion* is based on an a priori belief about what it means to be human. Although he seemed uninterested in its academic history, he unhesitatingly used the term to identify the human perception of that which has impetus and origin beyond human agency, most frequently termed "the sacred." It is synonymous with the real and the true. Religion, that is, the human apprehension of and response to the sacred, is grounded in that which is received, revealed, and discovered. The sacred breaks into the human world from other-than-human realms and in doing so gives the human world meaning. Although the sacred is itself ineffable, it nonetheless manifests itself in distinctively religious patterns that make up a category of phenomena. With respect to their origin and structure those things that are religious are sui generis, that is, unique. Eliade held that the study of the religious for nonreligious interests, such as sociology and anthropology, is reductive and misses the religiousness of the subject. Religion is adequately comprehensible only to those who know the distinctive patterns of manifestation and appreciate that they are manifestations of "the sacred." It seems that the fundamental premise for this view is outside of the academic purview. Eliade's is an essentialist view of religion. Yet it must not be forgotten that, as shown in chapter 2, this essentialism, in practice, becomes a pervasive relativism.

Eliade understood human history as only a stream of unrepeatable events and accidents, having no meaning. Seemingly overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of history, he sought to ground whatever meaning was found in history in extrahistorical reality. Meaning arises in the experience of history, or to cast it more in Eliade's mood, "suffering becomes intelligible and hence tolerable"[69] only when seen in the light of the extrahistorical, which Eliade identified as evidenced in myth ("sacred history"), the accounts of the actions of supernaturals. History makes sense only in light of the story of the gods. The historically concrete is secondary to the extrahistorical because it is on the basis of the extrahistorical that the historically concrete can be comprehended as meaningful. Eliade's abstract generic understanding of religion correlates with the extrahistorical grounding of meaning. It makes it possible for him to identify as meaningful the otherwise random and unrelated concrete elements of diverse cultures through time. Eliade's generic understanding of religion functions in the study of religion as the extrahistorical does in the history of religion. His understanding of religion is more real, more dependable, than any of its historical and geographical manifestations. Apart from the meaning bestowed on history and culture by his model, the concrete historical and cultural materials are meaningless and random.

Jonathan Smith's understanding runs counter to Eliade's view. For Smith, religion is a mode of human creativity. It is always historical and cultural. Religion owns no particular set of data; it is a category invented only a few centuries ago to facilitate a peculiarly Western and academic effort to make sense of a diverse human world. The term is significant primarily within the academic community that invented it, and it is not a term that arises from or is somehow part of the identities of those subjects that are designated by its use. Smith directs the understanding of religion to a "mode of constructing worlds of meaning." For Smith, religion is human-based and this-worldly. He reinjects history and human historical actions as the ontological basis for comprehension and meaning. The unique,[70] the extrahistorical, are in themselves incomprehensible realities, if indeed they exist, unsuitable for academic study because no reference can be made to them other than the historically and culturally specific.

To Smith, religion and its many constituent subdivisions are always propositional, always in the process of development and refinement. It remains at least possible that the academic constructions termed *religion* can be deconstructed, rejected, or replaced. History (encompassing the cultural), for Smith, is the realm of greater reality when compared with academic constructs. It is the absence of fit, the gap between academic construct and the subject reality that vitalizes the academic process, which is always negotiable.

The storytracking perspective offers insight into Eliade's and Smith's strategies of defining religion. The technical difficulty faced in the definition of religion is that many of the subjects that students of religion want to include make absolute claims. The claims are routinely described as being based on a spiritual, nonobservable, and ineffable reality. Taken individually, these claims are seen as uncompromisable, unconditional. For example, religions commonly make claims about the creation of the world, the existence of world-creating gods, the foundation of truth, and the destiny of human beings and the entire world. The problems arise in the attempt to comprehend and affirm these unconditional, often mutually exclusive and unverifiable claims, both individually and collectively. The very character of the academic enterprise, demanding verifiable sources and a rational argumentation, seems to oppose the subject studied. I believe that both Eliade's and Smith's definitional strategies have been developed in the attempt to resolve this confounding problem.

To define religion as the ineffable or based on the ineffable, as Eliade often seems to do, allows the acceptance of multiple unconditional claims. All such statements fall equally within the domain of the unexplainable. The price paid by this strategy, at least as an academic strategy, is high. Given an interactionist approach to interpretation and given that interpretation is the work of the study of religion, the subject reality must have a structure that constrains instantiations of theory made upon it. The ineffable or the incomprehensible has no graspable or identifiable structure; thus it will allow any arbitrary interpretations made of it. Studies of religion based on this kind of nondefinition are "religious" in character; that is, they are conducted on the basis of nonpublic experiences defined and described within a single identifiable religious perspective. To hold that all religion is founded on the incomprehensible is to negate the particularity and distinctiveness of religions in any terms other than the diversity of human responses to the unfathomable. This approach mystifies religion beyond the reach of academic study. Directed toward the study of the history of religions, this approach focuses on apprehending "the sacred" in its diversity of historical and cultural manifestations, based on the unquestioned premise that the sacred manifests itself as "the center" and "in the beginning." This approach, when presenting itself as the *academic* study of religion, has been an insufferable admixture of religiously and academically motivated studies, interpretations, and preceding simulations, reflected oddly in the commonly used field name "religious studies." To the extent to which the study of religions is understood as being inseparable from apprehending the ineffable, or even the study of patterns of manifestation based on an a priori unverifiable assumption, the field falls short of being academic, though it may serve the beliefs of religious scholars. The difficulty with this understanding of religion is that the study of religion must become, in part, the manufacture of simulacra, bearing only the flavor or terminology of various historical and geographical specificity so as to appear real. Unchecked, this approach may becomes a weightless system, a self-referential hyperreality, unmoored from any reality outside itself and making reference to nothing that it has not itself constructed.

Smith's strategy, meanwhile, shifts the grounds to the "lookers," the academics. Religion is an affair of the academy. In this strategy, religion is an academic category used to investigate how a variety of human cultures engages in the business of making the world meaningful. Truth claims, statements of belief, and so on are seen in this perspective as methods by which cultures make life meaningful. This approach "saves" religion as a legitimate and possible subject for academic study. Yet, from the perspectives of those subjects that are identified as religious, this view may appear to dilute and even to deny what they consider singular and unconditional claims, to ignore that ineffable source that is most fundamental. From the perspective of some, indeed most, specific traditions, the academic study of religion, understood in these definitional terms, may seem uncaring and hostile. Furthermore, when religion is defined so broadly and vaguely as a "mode of constructing worlds of meaning," few human actions are immediately excluded as potentially religious.

Despite these problems, Smith's views must be developed if there is to be hope for an academic study of religion. Storytracking suggests ways to contribute. It suggests, following Smith, that *religion* is a term that makes sense only when seen in a ludic frame—the frame of metaphor, irony, and joke. Religion, in this light, is seen as not only embracing the mutually exclusive, the logically incompatible, but also thriving on the insights offered by such a double or multiple perspective. Current metaphor theory, that, for example, presented by Lakoff and Johnson,[71] holds that metaphors are preconceptual; that is, they are the materials from which concept networks are constructed. Metaphors are powerful precisely for the reason that they not only conjoin but also equate two things that clearly are not even in the same category. To appreciate its power, religion must be seen in similar terms.

By permitting perspectives in conflict and by embracing perspectives that are mutually exclusive, storytracking enriches the academic understanding of religion. By inviting multiple and conflicting truths and objective perspectives, storytracking qualifies truth and relativizes objectivity, yet qualified truth and relative objectivity are oxymoronic. Indeed, a storytracking approach to the academic study of religion, as it appears in this second frame of comparing perspectives from the outside, participates in the realm of such structures as oxymoron, metaphor, joke, and play. This approach to the academic study of religion must be appreciated as engaging that frame of mind in which one may both accept objectivity and truth in the radical sense of singularity and, at another phase of the oscillation, qualify and relativize such positions. A storytracking approach both appreciates the distinctiveness, authority, and groundedness of each subject perspective and acknowledges that, when compared, the perspectives may conflict with one another, be mutually exclusive, or claim to be based in realms beyond academic purview.

There are correspondences between this storytracking view of religion and Smith's discussion of a third, unnamed map. In this map, people allow incongruities to stand, seeking "rather, to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought."[72] According to this view, in practical terms, all religious actions, all that we would term *religion*, exist in the middle territory of negotiating differences, playing among incongruities. Indeed, these are the key dynamics and operations Smith identifies as religious. Religions, then, are vital on precisely the same terms as they are foundational to the academic study of religion. The name I would suggest for Smith's unnamed, third map—or as I prefer to understand it, mapping strategy—would be "religion."

Category theory is another related perspective from which to consider the definition of religion. The strategy by which the academic study of religion has attempted the definitional task has been to use what George Lakoff has called a classical theory of category.[73] Classical category theory is an objectivist theory in which a category is seen in set theoretical terms. The feature that distinguishes any member of the set must distinguish all members of the set. Certainly a review of definitions of religion confirms that this key distinctive feature is invariably sought. The most common distinction of religion has been the belief in god. This is the definitional criterion, but it also functions in studies of religion even when definitions are not explicit. For example, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century studies of small-scale cultures, then called "primitives," centered on "high gods" because their presence was the distinctive feature that marked the existence of religion.

Lakoff's analysis of classical theory shows that it is inseparable from a set of "familiar ideas": (1) Meaning is based on truth and reference; it concerns the relationship between symbols and things in the world. (2) Biological species are natural kinds, defined by common essential properties. (3) The mind is separate from and independent of the body. (4) Emotion has no conceptual content. (5) Grammar is a matter of pure form. (6) Reason is transcendental in that it transcends—goes beyond—the way human beings, or any other kinds of beings, happen to think. It concerns the inferential relationships among all possible concepts in this universe or any other. Mathematics is a form of transcendental reason. (7) There is a correct, God's-eye view of the world, a single correct way of understanding what is and is not true. (8) All people think by using the same conceptual system.[74] Lakoff's analysis has, it seems to me, remarkable implications for the issue of defining religion. It appears that no matter how religion is defined, the definition will be constrained by the familiar ideas wedded to the operative category theory, in this case the classical theory. Not only are these ideas central to Western thought, but also many of them are fundamental to Judeo-Christian thought. Defining religion is then doubly grounded in classical category theory and the Western religious view.

Lakoff shows that while classical category theory and its assumptions have been espoused, categories generally function more in the terms of his proposed prototype theory of category. Although the theory is complex and cannot be considered fully here, we can immediately appreciate the significance of developing categories, and thus definitions, on the basis of prototypes, or "best examples." Once a best example is generalized as a category, other examples may be included by principles of extension. Lakoff's view illuminates the existing practice of defining religion, as well as the difficulty experienced in attempting to state definitions. Although I have not made a full study of definitions of religion, it seems clear that in most of them Christianity, or more broadly Abrahamic traditions, has served as the "best example" of religion.[75] Other "religions" have been incorporated in the category by some principle of extension. For example, some traditions feature belief in more than one god. While the prototype calls for belief in a single god, multiple gods may be included by a principle of extension. Other principles have functioned. For example, rendering the Western religious ideas of a belief in God in terms of the generic "ultimate concern" allows the religion category to include even traditions that are nontheistic as long as they seem to hold some principles or beliefs as being beyond question. Chains of extensions serve to increase the category still centered on the best example.

Even these simple extensions of category make utterly complicated, if not impossible, the statement of a distinctive defining feature demanded by classical category theory.

While religion, as a modern academic category, has developed more on the order Lakoff describes as a prototype theory, it has carried out its definitional task in classical theoretical terms, and it has attempted to support the underlying assumptions of the theory. Definitions of religion are never open in the sense of being negotiated in light of the diversity of experiences one may encounter geographically and historically because the tacit assumptions doubly bind us. Hidden to the definitional process is the prototypical role of Western monotheistic traditions, and it hides the favorite ideas that are implied by the operative classical category theory. Doubly bound by tacit elements, the definition of religion can never be more than the production of a precession of simulacra, asserting itself as a colonist map that engenders a world in denial of all incongruous territory.

It is often noted that Eliade's understanding of religion was most influenced by his studies and personal experiences of Indian mysticism. However, it cannot be doubted that his discourse about religion and his studies of the history of religions rest firmly on distinctively Western assumptions of classical category theory.

Of Smith's understanding of religion in light of this discussion, more can now also be said. By emphasizing map rather than mapping strategy, it seems to me that Smith reveals a residual classical category theory. He wants containers in which to put examples of things that share the same set of distinctive properties. He names the locative and utopian map categories. He discusses their distinctive characteristics and offers examples that fit into these categories. By doing so, he encourages others who perhaps unwittingly hold a classical category theory to use these categories as models for other analyses. Thus, his third, unnamed, fuzzy category remains entirely overlooked. However, I believe that Smith, through his persistent attention to difference and incongruity, broadly challenges classical category theory and the ideas that accompany it. Furthermore, it almost goes without saying that Smith's view of religion—at least, what I have teased out of his third, unnamed mapping strategy—would displace Christianity or Abrahamic traditions as necessarily the "best example" of religion. Or at least it would demand these traditions to be seen anew. Should the implications of classical category theory be recognized as concerns in the academic study of religion, Smith's many studies that emphasize incongruity would provide a productive point from which to begin a reexamination and revision. The results would be a radical transformation of the discipline.[76]

Comparison

Comparison[77] is a focal issue in Smith's critique of Eliade. Eliade's understanding of comparison is to use familiar patterns as a grid or measure against which to comprehend the common patterns or structures among the disparate data of diverse cultures and to thereby apprehend the presence of "the sacred." The cultural elements that match the given patterns are recognized as religious or as aspects of religion.

Eliade's method is a morphological style of comparison that shares much with comparative anatomy, which served historically as its source. Morphological comparison is structural, ahistorical, and phenomenological. Even the developmental implications of such terms as *primitive* and *archaic* were not seen by Eliade as growth, progress, or development in time. Demanding historical and cultural needs have motivated this understanding of comparison. Eliade's work in religion responded to the conditions that arose in the late nineteenth century with the explosion of knowledge about thousands of cultures the world over, which was a byproduct of Western colonialism and a product of the rise of modern anthropology. This expansion was accompanied by a shift in the use of the term *culture* from the singular form of the word, which denotes the extent of development of a people, to the plural, *cultures*, which denotes the set of traits, practices, and patterns that distinguish every group from all other groups of people. In the face of such diversity, every effort had to be made to discover common bases—categories and patterns—by which the diverse peoples of the world might be interconnected. Eliade's program served this need in the area of religion. It served to define the religious for all cultures, no matter how exotic or different.

However, as the twentieth century progressed, it became apparent that the continued use of this comparative method tended to diminish, even deny, the differences that distinguish one culture from another. The success of this morphological comparative method had the effect of finding, or simulating if not present, the same patterns in every culture, no matter how otherwise diverse. For example, Eliade's discussion of the sacred center drew on ancient Near Eastern, Indian, and contemporary Australian aboriginal cultures to represent the same religious pattern. Cultural and historical particularity and distinction were overlooked in the quest for universality.

Jonathan Smith challenged this comparative method, demonstrating that when materials are carefully presented in their historical and cultural particularities, they do not so precisely fit the familiar patterns. He showed that it is the distinctiveness, the incongruities, raised by comparison that are the more interesting. Differences give rise to thought; they demand the refinement of theory and method. Smith presented a model of comparison motivated by the discovery or illumination of difference. The gain is a fuller appreciation of the historically and culturally specific. Eliade's approach to Arrernte culture not only filtered out much but also concocted what did not exist. It allowed to survive only highly select passages in the Arrernten source texts, and these were severely transformed into simulacra. The surviving passages were the structural elements that matched, or at least suggested, the comparative grid Eliade used. Only the items that confirmed or suggested the "sacred center" and its associated premises were seen. When correlate items were not found, they were concocted. This process amounts to the deterritorialization of the Arrernte. Smith's approach, in contrast, placed the items that were of interest to him and Eliade in their broader cultural and historical Arrernten and aboriginal contexts in order to more carefully evaluate them, especially from the point of view of the culture concerned. His interpretive efforts were focused on and motivated by the differences that

were revealed in this kind of comparative operation. As Smith describes the process: "A comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge. It lifts out and strongly marks certain features within difference as being of possible intellectual significance, expressed in the rhetoric of their being 'like' in some stipulated fashion. Comparison provides the means by which *we* 're-vision' phenomena as *our* data in order to solve *our* theoretical problems."[78]

The storytracking approach engages at least two comparative frames. One type of comparative operation is framed within the subject field, determined by the various intersecting storytrack perspectives. Each storytrack is a valued perspective. The sum of storytracks that have a common intersection makes up the subject. In series, each storytrack provides a place from which to comparatively evaluate all other perspectives at play in the subject. Another type of comparison, consistent with Smith's approach, arises in being relentlessly self-conscious as the one constructing and comparing the storytracks within a cultural and historical situation. The frame, the category of sameness in which differences are examined, is of the scholar's choosing. Smith insists that the scholar must be relentlessly self-conscious in selecting theory and method or in choosing issue and subject, for these choices shape all that follows. The storytracking approach affirms the importance of this self-consciousness while acknowledging the enormous complexity and problematicity of comparison. This second frame raises, and must somehow address even if temporarily, the issue of comparison itself, which as Smith described it is this: "How am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of two things?"[79] Or as Jacques Derrida wrote in his characteristic style: "We must first try to conceive of the common ground, and the *différence* of the irreducible difference."[80]

Storytracking focuses on the issue of comparison by problematizing the relationship between and among the items compared, expressed effectively through the metaphors of *gap* and *play*. Storytracking follows Smith's lead in this respect: "Comparison requires . . . a methodological manipulation of difference, a playing across the 'gap' in the service of some useful end."[81] Also: "Comparison . . . is an active, at times even a playful, enterprise of deconstruction and reconstruction which, kaleidoscope-like, gives the scholar a shifting set of characteristics with which to negotiate the relations between his or her theoretical interests and data stipulated as exemplary."[82]

Storytracking attempts a self-consciousness in two frames at once. That is, it attempts to recognize at once two kinds of gaps—the gaps among the proposed perspectives that constitute the drama of the subject and the gap that exists between the scholar (the storytracker or the comparer) and the field of the subject. Storytracking holds that comparison is possible only through the interaction of these two frames.[83]

Certainly comparison may occur in a serial fashion by indwelling any one or more of the perspectives represented as the complex subject. This comparison is facilitated or made possible by the identification, however fortuitously,[84] of the point of intersecting tracks. In the present example, we have shown that it is possible to compare Eliade to Smith and Smith to Eliade. The terms of the comparison are grounded at the crossing of their tracks, the identification of sameness or an arena of relatedness. Such comparison might be motivated to find either similarities or differences, but it can never be legitimately performed without conceiving of common ground. The common ground is always, in some sense, a category. The category frames the comparison. It determines the terms of the comparison. It assumes that the subjects to be compared have at least some representation in the category that controls the comparison; otherwise comparison would be impossible. Comparison is considerably enriched if a prototype theory of category is self-consciously employed.[85]

A second kind of comparison (theoretically inseparable from the first because it precedes and shapes it) arises in the acknowledgment that the storytracker (the scholar, "the looker") has perspectives entirely separate from those of the subject studied. It is this perspective that shapes the vocabulary, the limitations, the type of category theory, and the extent of the storytracks charted within the chosen subject of study. It is this perspective that determines the terms of the comparison, accomplished largely by the selection of the intersection points of two or more storytracks. The academic operation that facilitates self-consciousness of this influence is itself comparative. The academic's storytrack, though often more tacit than the tracks of the subjects, also intersects them. The academic operations that are required to maintain legitimacy of the interpretations of the subject studied are comparative. The results of an academically framed comparison are on the order of constructing a gestalt, that is, some view of the whole that is different from the sum of its particulars.

Comparison represents the academic field of play. As the academic establishes the terms of comparison by designating storytracks and crossing places, this person creates and constructs domains of interplay between the motivating interests and needs of an academic study and the elements of the subject studied. The terms of comparison and the comparative analysis are the tools the academic wields or, to maintain the metaphor, the equipment or toys or moves by which the academic plays. The interplay may be infinitely creative, yet it is subject to the rules and boundaries that ensure the legitimacy of interpretations and the demonstration that interpretations created by comparison are adequately constrained by the structures of the subject reality.

Interpretation

Interpretation, I argue, is the principal academic operation. All description, presentation, translation, and explanation imply interpretation. All comparison supports interpretation. Interpretation is motivated by the perceived condition of incongruity, incredulity, and incoherence. Interpretation is motivated by the emotional force of surprise or confusion. Interpretation is directed toward overcoming the gap, filling the chasm, by the creation and discovery of coherence. Certainly, coherence must be seen as a temporary and local achievement, serving issues external to the subject. Incongruity or incoherence is always a condition of particular relationships with a given subject, not a condition inherent to the subject. Coherence must be won through the application of local and temporary criteria of order and meaning. The interactionist approach to interpretation, to my understanding, is necessary.

In the case examined, Eliade did not appear to interpret his subject at all. Rather he presented the Arrernten example of "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" as illustration or exemplification of patterns apparently already won. But, the storytracking analysis showed that even these apparent presentations were not without elements of interpretation, although tacit. In an interactionist model, Eliade used a projective method, that is, he kept his theory of religion invariant and reconstructed his subject, although beyond legitimate limits, to cohere with his theory. But from another point of view, both more satisfying and disturbing, it has been shown that, at least in this case, Eliade was not so much interpreting Arrernte culture as simulating how religion—the generic and universal religion he held to be the foundation of reality—ought to manifest in this culturally specific aboriginal setting.

Smith presented an alternate interpretation to Eliade's, which Smith had, through criticism, deemed to be erroneous. His treatment of his sources was for the most part overt and clear. The style of Smith's presentation suggests an openness to the interplay between an accommodative style of interpretation, that is, where theories are adjusted in light of the subject, and a projective style of interpretation, that is, where theories are held invariant and instantiated on the subject. However, his interpretation that the structure of the ancestral narratives coheres on the principal of "event/memorial" engaged in a projective method of interpretation that, like Eliade's, overstepped the limits of legitimacy. Further, but at a different level, it may be suggested that Smith, rather than interpreting the Arrernte, was simulating a difference dressed in Arrernte garments to serve the terms of his preceding conviction about the importance of difference in comparison in order to criticize Eliade and to establish his own position.

Notably, both Piaget and Erikson, who developed the models of accommodation and projection, saw them as interdependent, interactive, and oscillatory.[86] While it is possible to analyze human development into stages at which one or the other process is dominant, both are necessary to psychologically healthy human development. Either strategy practiced exclusively eventually constitutes pathology. Both psychologists represented the interaction and interdependence of these methods in the terms of play, that is, an oscillatory interplay of accommodation and projection. Academic studies can find inspiration and direction in these studies. Interpretation may be analyzable in terms of the distinctive interpretive methods: accommodation and projection. Yet in practice both must, in principal, be present. One is dependent on and interactive with the other. Each realizes its potential in terms of the force and constraining effect of the other.

Academic methods are often seen as linear and progressive, perhaps not unrelated to theories of human development. Accommodation is a process of theory formation. Theories are subject to alteration and development initiated by a response to the incompatibility of theory with data. However, as theory is refined, it attains a less negotiable status. Once this status seems clear, argumentation is replaced by exemplification, and eventually simulation replaces interpretation. Yet, this process and the implied logical sequence, are misunderstandings of theory and interpretation. Theory is of interest only as long as a "maybe not" accompanies the "maybe." Theory is only one element in the required pairing that results in the construction of meaning. Theory and subject are always two sides of a chasm that must be in an interactive process of negotiation. While it may be possible to isolate and identify an instance of a projective method of interpretation, all instances should have some residual awareness that accommodation is also necessary. When theory is firmly established, exemplification becomes simply a covert practice of projective interpretation. Interpretation is always a process.

Simulation, which differs from exemplification in not having to be immediately constrained by subject reality, is in itself not illegitimate. However, it runs the high risk of being immediately devoured as real. In the absence of the real, simulacra, though hyperreal, are usually not distinguished from the real. Reality devours simulation. The tendency is toward pure simulacra.

The storytracking approach firmly confirms the importance of the interpretative process. It is not a neutral or higher perspective from which to choose among other approaches. Rather it is a method of exercising responsibility in a situation in which the scholar accepts the creative freedom of interpreting the subject studied. A multiperspectival approach concedes at the outset that it is not possible to choose a single perspective, a single paradigm or model, that will produce truth or full satisfaction.[87] Storytracking rejects monism, pursues the multiperspectival, and requires that critical self-consciousness be present throughout the entire interpretive process.

The storytracking approach requires the oscillation or play between two concerns or two methods of interpretation, that is, accommodation and projection, and two logical frames, that is, the subject frame, which is autonomous to any attempt to study it, and the frame that conjoins the subject to the perspectives and processes by which it is studied. The second frame is defined as enabling the interactive interpretative enterprise that conjoins theory and subject, interpreter and interpreted. It affirms the absolute chasm between the interpreter and the subject interpreted by demanding that the construction work of interpretation, which attempts to temporarily bridge the chasm, be done self-consciously and self-critically.

The storytracking approach acknowledges as necessary and unavoidable the impact of the "lookers" on those who are being "looked at." It affirms their inevitable interdependence while, at the same time, it depends on the absolute autonomy and independent existence of the "looked at." The storytracking approach willingly accepts that subjects can never be wholly known; indeed, to be wholly or fully known makes little sense, given that meaning and knowledge are products of an ongoing, interactionist interpretive process. Storytracking celebrates the creative and constructive roles of explanation and interpretation without shirking the responsibility to strictly discipline such creativity. It accepts that the whole explanatory enterprise is as thoroughly motivated by the explainer's quest for self-knowledge as by any neutral, merely academic, or humane interest in the subject. The storytracking approach

demands, in Sartrian terms, an openness to freedom and the accompanying acceptance of responsibility in the spirit of play.[88]

Style

The criticism of academic work rarely includes elements of style. Although style might be informally noticed, it is rarely considered to have more than incidental impact on the importance, acceptability, and influence of an academic work. I suspect we miss much by ignoring academic style—by which I include rhetorical, interpretive, presentational, and argumentational, as well as literary, styles. The comparative consideration of Eliade and Smith is revealing.

Whereas Eliade performed interpretation, if this be our critical perspective, as a covert operation, held tacit by the terms of a particular rhetorical style, Smith presents his interpretation openly, clearly, and almost formally. The differences in style are of considerable interest. Smith's critical rational style appears to engage not only Eliade's reading of a specific text but also Eliade's whole program; some might feel that Smith is critical even of Eliade himself. The precision and force of Smith's criticism may be mistaken for a sharpness of tone. Interestingly, whereas Smith makes his case on the basis of attention to detail and on the criticism of another scholar's work, the resulting impression may be (ironic, it would seem to me) that Smith has more personal involvement (in the sense of an ax to grind) than the less formal, less self-conscious style used by Eliade, which masks his creative and constructive operations, thus making them difficult to evaluate in something like self-evident knowing. Furthermore, in light of the style of Smith's factually detailed criticism of Eliade, evidence (such as that which I have presented) that suggests that Smith inadequately presented his sources may appear, in comparison to Eliade, unproportionately damaging to the influence of his work.

Eliade's style, when seen in the framework of simulation, is immediately recognized as consistent with his understanding of reality. His style expresses the strength of and confidence in his conviction about the reality and truth of his understanding of religion, expressible both in his generic essentialist terms and in the specific terms of any culture whatsoever. Eliade's style of presentation, uncomplicated by the seemingly qualifying character of theorization and argumentation, capitalizes on the power of the real to devour simulation. Thus Eliade's style understandably may have a more highly persuasive effect on his readers than Smith's more scientific style. Traditional academic style is facing an increasing challenge from the mounting pervasiveness of the elements of style that accompany simulacra. The generation of reality by the abstract and generic has the effect of appearing self-evident, a condition accomplished because it is self-referential. Indeed, as the territory of modernity, or should I say postmodernity, becomes the hyperrealities of simulation, it seems to me that the academic enterprise—at least as I have characterized it, as being distinguished by interpretation—is faced with a potentially fatal threat.

On the one hand, academically explicit styles of presentation are often criticized and may be dismissed by nonacademics out of hand because of their density of argument, self-consciousness, and seemingly endless diversions. Academics, on the other hand, often distinguish the success of an academic work in the terms of standards of style of presentation and dismiss as unacademic works that fail to meet these criteria. Rigid, yet largely tacit, assumptions about academic presentation sorely need to be challenged. I find myself particularly irritated by the implications of the common and rather ubiquitous distinction between "academic" and "creative."

Storytracking as a method of constructing narratives of coherence serves as a perspective or means by which to examine and include elements of style in the evaluation of academic works, as well as other literary subjects. Style contributes powerfully to the achievement of a sense of coherence, to the advancement of persuasiveness, and to the impact realized by many works.

Loss of Subject

The comparison of Smith's and Eliade's studies of Australian aboriginal religions in terms of how these studies represent and are based on actual Australian peoples is revealing. Despite the fact that these scholars represent two of the most influential approaches to the academic study of religion, neither is primarily interested in any Arrernte reality.[89] Neither scholar did field study; neither knew the Arrernte language; neither went to Australia. Neither Eliade nor Smith demanded that his published sources or his own interpretations of these sources be evaluated in terms of the extent to which they represent or misrepresent Arrernte realities. Neither consulted archival materials. The published sources on which Eliade depended for his presentation of the Arrernte are highly limited. Smith consulted more sources, but he was far from thorough.

In this study I have shown that as a result of academic studies, the real Arrernte are lost, hidden by overpowering academic interests and the overwhelming ideas implicit in the academic theories and methods. I have also shown that the Arrernte is an academic construction, a hyperreality that has to some extent destroyed and engulfed real people.

It is ironic that the only book that attempts a broad presentation of Australian aboriginal religions is Eliade's *Australian Religions*, a book written by a scholar who never visited the country, who spoke none of the languages, who probably never met an aborigine, who was uncritical of his sources, and who in the final analysis was interested in the Australians largely to demonstrate the reality of his generic understanding of religion. It is doubly ironic—though it demonstrates how efficiently reality devours simulation—that an important cultural example that Eliade presented as representing *ab origine* can be shown to owe its existence to Western and Christian influence as borne by the Lutheran missionaries and others on the Arrernte, as well as to the constructions of the Arrernte by such Western figures as Frank Gillen and Baldwin Spencer. The simulated soon act in accordance with their hyperreality.

Should the seminal studies in many areas in the academic study of religion and other academic disciplines be subjected to the kind of storytracking method presented in this work, I would not be surprised if it were found that many of these

studies have less interest in the subject named than in theoretical and academic issues and with the scholar's own cultural, historical, and even personal needs. It is possible that whole fields of study are made up of floating simulacra, almost wholly self-referential.

It is the proposition of this book that academic agenda are unavoidable for all academic studies. The issue is not to rid these perspectives from academic studies but to develop methods, such as storytracking, by which to maintain a clearer and more complete understanding of the extent and character of the influence of these perspectives on the subject studied. Doubtless in the process of gaining self-understanding and understanding of the world, the most common method any community has had available is the comparison of itself with other communities. The comparisons done by the academic community, I propose, are different from those performed by all other communities, perhaps only with respect to a necessary, relentless self-consciousness and by the insistence that the named subject must be required to be the actual subject presented in academic reports.

8

End Game

I approach the last chapter, mindful of one of the clearest things I have learned from this work and to which I alluded near the end of chapter 2: we usually achieve something different from, and quite often the opposite of, what we seek. This invites me to engage in some logic play, but there are remarks I must also make.

Origination and Storytrack Crossings

There is a kinship between concerns with origination and the crossings of storytracks. The search for the absolute grounding of origins serves as a deterrent to the knowledge that no such grounding is possible. Jean Baudrillard argues that at the point when it is acknowledged that there is "no longer a God to renounce his own, no longer a Last Judgment to separate the false from the true," there arises a nostalgia for the real. When this nostalgia assumes full meaning, "there is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality—a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity . . . [a] panic-stricken production of the real."[1] The late nineteenth century was, of course, when "being presence" was first broadly questioned, and it was no accident that this challenge corresponded with the rise of the modern social and natural sciences.

In seeking origins, Freud and Róheim were attempting to locate a point in time when they could engage in an exchange between the many otherwise incompatible genres and concerns with which they were interested: dream, mythology, and clinical science; psychology and anthropology; phylogenesis and ontogenesis; the primal crime scene and the primal scene in infant sexuality; the normal objective flow of

time and the timeless time that allows one to meet the people of the origin (aborigines) face to face. It is in positing the origin that they attempted to locate a convergence of these many disparate genres and concerns. Seeking origins is one way to construct the joining of these many ill-fitting and incompatible concerns into an explanatory narrative of coherence.

The quest for origins in these terms remains viable despite the scorn shown to this endeavor today.[2] However, because of the temporal location of the origin, the approach is severely restricted to simulation without reference beyond the model. Origins are never real; they are always simulacra. What is needed is a means of locating, without impossible spatial or temporal restriction, a temporary place of exchange among ontologies, categories, worldviews, and perspectives, while at the same time requiring the self-conscious evaluation of the impact on the subjects studied through the selected academic constructs. Storytrack crossings are intended to be such temporary places of exchange, places that demand relentless self-consciousness. Storytrack crossings function something like "the origin" without the universalist, finalist expectations; without the implication of singularity; and without the nostalgia for full meaning. A storytrack crossing can occur in any space or time and even without a single definite spatiotemporal location. The stories whose interactions define the crossing place may extend in any combination of directions in space and time, real or metaphorical. It is at these crossings that we can negotiate exchanges, do comparisons, deconstruct and reconstruct categories, critique and create interpretations, and engage the self and the other. The crossings are themselves constructs; they do not exist independent of storytracking.[3]

Objectivism and Subjectivism

Things are often the opposite of what they appear. In this work I have found that what appears to be objectivism—ethnography and essentialism—is often anything but objective. One can argue that the multiperspectivality of storytracking—as relativistic and arbitrary as it is—achieves something approaching objectivity.[4] Yet this objectivism is deceptive in that the subjectivity of the storytracker is hidden by the storytracking process. This disappearance of the storyteller, effected by the storytelling process, is common to all modes of presentation. As we sit down to listen to a story, we are fully aware of the storyteller and the storytelling situation, but as the storyteller engages us in the story, if he or she is a good storyteller, the storyteller disappears behind the story, which by being told commands the focus of our attention. The simulation becomes real. As we enter the movie theatre, we are aware of those around us. In anticipation of giving ourselves to the storytelling, we find ourselves annoyed at the crunch of popcorn bags and the wiggling of our neighbors. But shortly after the lights dim and the credits end, we lose much of our awareness of the theatre and the flickering devices of telling the story. While experiencing the story, most of what we encounter, although only shadows on a screen, seems true and real. Those things that appear to be concocted or artificial are the things on which we focus in the full light of day during our postmortem criticism. Yet, all is concocted; nothing is literally as it appears.

These final comments must serve as a preconclusion, a closing of the book before it has ended so that its writer and readers can see it in another light. I must remind you that in this work I have been the storytracker and that I have chosen storytracks and crossings for reasons only some of which are fully known to me, only some of which are academic, and only some of which are academically justifiable. Although I have endeavored to be relentlessly self-conscious, I, too, often disappear (at least as an object to myself) in the process of story making.

This leads me to address what I have attempted to achieve: nothing more nor certainly less than doing what I do, being what I be,[5] as a person, as an academic, and as one situated in a storytrack I recognize as remarkably peculiar in human history.[6] Although I have presented storytracking in the terms of an approach (a method) to history, to comparison, to definition, and certain other academic enterprises—all exempified and grounded historically and culturally in Central Australia—I cannot recommend it without qualification as something for others to use or to attempt to apply. I have spoken of it in those terms only because that is the principal way I know how to articulate to myself and to the community with which I identify some sense of what I do to meaningfully and responsibly engage the world in which I find myself.

I have wanted to take seriously the shortcomings of a too quick and too pervasive objectivism without giving up the possibility of reading texts critically and decisively. To stand nowhere is pessimistic, if not nihilistic. I have wanted to own a subjectivism I find inevitable and personally meaningful and enjoyable. This acknowledgment is necessary to be responsible. But to hold that the place where I stand is the only real place is arrogant and indefensible.

Storytracking and the Other

We often accomplish the opposite of what we intend. There is another reason that I must object to seeing storytracking in any totalistic terms, as anything like a usable method to comprehend history, religion, and culture. Storytracking emerges from a most peculiar situation. It attempts to address issues that arise in a specific worldview and at a particular time in history. There is much irony in this position, and it demands humor. The issues emerge among those who for historical and cultural reasons (though this explanation rests on the historical and temporal assumptions that are the heritage of "Western man," the very heritage with which we struggle) find themselves attempting to make sense of a world made up of many cultures, peoples, languages, religions, histories, genders, and life-styles. It is an urgent agenda. It is a perspective that seeks to comprehend, appreciate, and understand all these perspectives in their own terms. The most commanding issue in the present is the recognition that the categories, the approaches, and the assumptions on which this seemingly selfless and humanistic endeavor has proceeded have determined, and often

concocted, what we have understood and appreciated as our subjects. In conflict with our intentions, the endeavor has been characterized by dominating power and often violence toward our subjects. Often, invariably it almost seems, we have made of them what we have wanted and needed. They have been ignored, oppressed, suppressed, and destroyed by our intended generosity and magnanimity.

The contemporary response to this shocking effect has been to turn to relentless self-consciousness—to deconstruct the categories, processes, and assumptions on which our way of being (albeit one of which we are now embarrassed) depends. Presently we are at a stage no longer interested in gaining final resolution or totalization, "the method." The alternative it seems is to joyfully embrace the unresolvable, the indeterminate, and the ambiguous. In the philosophical realm (including the philosophical discussions within many academic disciplines), where these issues are most broadly addressed, this embracing of indeterminacy assumes a pervasiveness and exclusivity that is in tension with itself and with the world. That is, there are no limits to the domain of indeterminacy. Indeterminacy is the current form of totalization. Perhaps this embrace of ambiguity as our goal is fashionable, but it is self-denying and self-defeating. If we are to study culture, if we are to study history, we must stand somewhere; we must do something; we must, temporarily at least, set aside ambiguity and indeterminacy despite our knowing full well the implications and the costs of doing so. This situation reminds me of Zeno's paradox. While we may certainly choose to sit and contemplate the impossibility of ever reaching our goal of crossing the room—because we must forever span half the remaining distance to the other side, whatever distance we cover—most of us, sooner or later, need to cross the room. Most of us, sooner or later, will put the contemplation of Zeno's paradox aside, get up, and cross the room.

Furthermore, in the domain of the human sciences, the peculiarity of the view of embracing absolute indeterminacy contrasts sharply and irreconcilably with the majority, if not the totality, of the subjects of these studies. Almost all human beings, outside this peculiar contemporary group, have held and do hold views of the world that appear to contrast irreconcilably with a view of eternally embracing indeterminacy and ambiguity. Religious traditions commonly, though I believe not invariably, are characterized by a firmly objectivist worldview, as demonstrated by their beliefs in gods, ancestors, origins, creation, and eternity. I acknowledge that this belief is overwhelmingly shaped by the influence of the view of culture I criticize and seek to surpass. None of these traditions, none of these people, seeks as its principal concern the appreciation and understanding of all of the peoples, all of the perspectives, and all of the truths in the world and in the terms of those who hold these views.

To hold as our goal the achievement of this understanding by any means, including any contribution of what I term *storytracking*, is to insist on a position of hierarchical superiority to our subjects in that it implies that we can understand them, even if they cannot even imagine what we are talking about as we do so. Such a claim, to my thinking, is to fall prey once again to the ills of our heritage as "Western man." We achieve the opposite of what we seek. We prove to ourselves, once again, that we are at the apex of the process of human development. We again embrace an objectivism, albeit a godless objectivism, and the superiority that it is our present task to reject.

But we have the choice to make no claims other than to do what we—here I identify with the academic community that demands acknowledgment of the irreconcilable plurality and difference of peoples and cultures in the world—as a peculiar group of people do to be what we are: oddly self-reflective, resolutely godless, playing peculiar academic games with the cultures and histories of the world, and trying to break the cycle of achieving the opposite of what we always believe are highly laudable humane projects to help realize peace and understanding in the world.

When the issues of understanding are framed in terms of oppositional categories—objectivism/subjectivism, male/female, mind/body, abstract/concrete, public/private, sacred/profane—as they are at present and when we realize that neither pole, by itself, is at all acceptable, then we are bound by way of resolution to accept nonresolution. In a strict and narrow-minded rationalist frame, this can be the dark, nihilist option of facing meaninglessness or infinite regression. I prefer another mood, another tack. In storytracking I have attempted to embrace the vitalizing oscillatory movement between opposing positions. I have attempted to hold together, without loosing either one, and those tendencies and values at both poles of the opposition that explicitly deny one another. In storytracking I have sought to both embrace indeterminacy and, at least momentarily, to deny it. Things may be both what they appear and their opposite. The human capacity to engage in such an enigmatic operation is what we sometimes call "play."

Notes

Notes to Chapter 1

1. This is the same gap that, in distinguishing sign from signified, makes representation possible, that gives sign a stake in reality. Signs represent or refer to something that they are not. The reality of signs is on a different order than the reality to which signs refer. The gap is what constitutes the poetry of signs, the foundation of their power to signify.

2. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1962] 1970).

3. Such retrenchments are often disguised by a sort of liberal, too-quick openness to alternative ideas.

4. "Normal science" means "research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice." Kuhn, *Scientific Revolution*, p. 10.

5. I choose the word *text* here because of its common use in the academic study of religion and other human and social sciences to denote the common object (and sometimes subject) of study. I suspect that the common reference to biblical authority as text has influenced the use of this word in at least the academic study of religion. The term *text* as I am using it here corresponds more closely with the term *work* as discussed by Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-structuralist Criticism*, edited by Josué V. Harari, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 73–81. Discussing primarily literature, Barthes charts the change taking place in our ideas about language and literature. He understands *work* to refer to the "concrete, occupying a portion of book-space" while the text "is a methodological field." *Text* then refers to aspects of literature, which Barthes describes as follows:

> 1. Text is not a defined object. It exists only as discourse. The text is experienced only in an activity, a production.