SIMULATING THE SACRED IN THEODORE STREHLow'S SONGS OF CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

Theodore Strehlow; Arrernte

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