

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE SMITH KIND¹

PIA ALTIERI

[A]ny association of ideas in a man's mind, the vaguest similarity of form or position, even a mere coincidence in time, is sufficient to enable the magician to work from association in his own mind, to association in the material world. (E. B. Tylor 1964 [1865], cited by J. Z. Smith 1982: 21)

Comparison requires the acceptance of difference as the ground of its being interesting, and a methodical manipulation of that difference to achieve some stated cognitive end. (J. Z. Smith 1987: 14)

"Magic" conjures up the thrill of the unexpected, the encounter with the esoteric, and the magnetism of the exotic. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, such expectations characterized magic's *raison d'être* and popular appeal. Quite simply, magic erupts the unfamiliar into the familiar: "Poof, a genie appears; and poof, it disappears!"¹ Such surprising spontaneity marks popular conceptions of magic—where the occult and the everyday meet.

During the early nineteenth century magic condenses via spatial and temporal associations multiple "phenomena" and modes of "thought". When caught in magic's spell, mesmerized audiences encounter contradictory sensory and conceptual data, simultaneously. Take the magician's genie manifestation for example: Out of "nothingness" he appears, and into nothingness, he disappears. Audience members are left to ponder conceptually, what they see, sensorially: "How'd he do that? How'd he materialize someone (or something) right in front of my eyes?"

In the world of magic, the categories fact or fiction, real or unreal do not apply. After all, magic's a trick. What applies categorically, then, is magic's incongruity, its trickery, its simultaneous conceptual

¹ This paper first surfaced as a component to an American Academy of Religion panel speaking to issues of comparison vis-à-vis the Kimberly Patton and Benjamin Ray anthology, *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (2000). Given the panelists' division of labor, my target was to explicate Jonathan Z. Smith's comparative method and his critique of its underlying theory and practice. This published remains true to its original co(n)text in focus, style, and brevity.

and sensory incompatibility put forth in the service of entertainment. This is magic—regardless of which trick is at play. Consider more contemporary, sensational examples such as “death-defying” escapes or disappearing landmarks: “Real or unreal? Possible or impossible?” All irrelevant categories; all moot questions, since magic’s conceptual backing (the magician’s trickery among other things) is never in doubt. Simply put, audiences do not fuss about magic’s incongruity; they delight in it. Indeed, they embrace it.

Magic creates the space for incongruity—the more creatively contradictory and ambiguous the trick’s scenario, the better. This is to say that magic does not fix and rewrite incongruity; it maintains and manipulates it. Moreover, in order for this incongruity to work, it must play upon our customary ways of reasoning and conceptualizing.² Indeed, magic’s bizarre sensory data does not rewrite our common sense conceptual data; it takes it for granted and exists alongside it. Within the space of magic’s frame, sensory and conceptual contrasts remain and are not explained away. Note that if magic’s contrasts were rationalized, then the “magic” itself would evaporate. (It would no longer be magic, but debunked magic.) Suffice it to say, then, that magic strategizes ambiguity, contradiction, and incongruity.

Given magic’s frame, audience members receive magic’s sensory and conceptual data and do not re-script them. These sensory and conceptual data (the real and imagined stuff of the tricks themselves) are projected from magic’s logical structure—the internal mechanisms that remain mysterious to the audience. Magic is esoteric. And, moreover, this esotericism is no secret! Indeed, in order for magic to “work”, its conceptual backings (esotericism and all) must be stipulated. So for efficacy’s sake, magic must operate according to its own laws—laws of magical appropriateness vastly different from those of the everyday. And most importantly, it is precisely the secrecy of these laws that regiments magic’s effectiveness. In this way, “magic structures a secret interconnection of things” associated with the material world—and in so doing, erupts the unfamiliar into the familiar.

Such unlikely merging of familiar and unfamiliar realms is the

² My discussion of conceptualizations and customary patterns of thought relies on Putnam 1975a, 1975b; Voloshinov 1973; and Whorf 1956 [1937], 1956 [1939], 1956 [1940], 1956 [1941].

understanding of “magic” conjured up by E. B. Tylor when he catalogued particular cultures and peoples as “primitive”. According to Tylor’s schema, primitive folk are incongruous (read mysterious) when compared to civilized folk. Primitive folk “misunderstand” the world by “mistaking subjective experiences for objective ones”. Primitives are akin to “ignorant adults” who mistake the magician’s tricks for facts, who mix the occult and the scientific. Indeed, as the theory goes, primitive folk are characterized by unbridled flights of imagination and association—whatever the material context. All this without appeal to reason or, depending upon their progress within their assigned stage of development, with limited appeal to reason. As Tylor and his colleagues saw it, such primitive habits of thought suffocate fledgling modes of rationality and induction. In primitive developmental stages, confusion abounds via unwarranted mental connections—mental connections that are shared, objectified and embedded within primitive material culture itself.³

Jonathan Z. Smith, on the other hand, performs a bit of magic of his own. Taking Tylor’s (Frazer’s and others’) understanding of magic quite seriously, Smith turns them on their head. Smith suggests that it is scholars who work via unbridled powers of imagination and association. It is scholars who are transfixed by an eruption of the unfamiliar into the familiar, who confuse fact for fabrication, who are wooed by unwarranted association, and who mistake their mental labors for comparative “hierophanies” or “essences”. It is scholars who are entertained by the exotic, who court coincidence, who are blind to their pre-interpretive labors. Indeed, to quote Smith, such scholars proceed with their projects “as if a connection simply ‘chose’ to make itself manifest” (Smith 1982 [1980]: 53)! “Poof!” Mental abstraction embedded in civilized material context. Magic!

This is to say that Smith applies nineteenth-century magician models to nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarly models. Come mid-nineteenth century, professional magicians shed their star-and-moon-bespeckled robes; they jettison their wizard titles and superstitions for “prodigious mental acumen”, evening attire, technical skill,

³ I have kept the discussion of nineteenth-century studies on “magic” to a most general level. Should the reader wish to differentiate magic’s scholarly entailments further see among others, the work of E. B. Tylor, J. G. Frazer, and A. van Gennep. For interesting discussion of classificatory issues and scholarly perspectives, see M. Mauss’ *A General Theory of Magic* (1972 [1902]) and E. Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]).

and secrets of the trade.⁴ So too, Tylor and nineteenth- and twentieth-century students of religion. Unwittingly, they follow professional magician standards—jettisoning superstition and theology; and armed with social-scientific tools instead of theological ones, they contrast their civilized, rational selves with those of their objectified, dehumanized data and their “proto-intellectual” predecessors. From this vantage point, well-meaning missionaries and travelers do not measure up to well-trained ethnographers and social scientists, and an us-and-them mentality abounds: “We” are scientists; “they” are not. In the interests of science, throughout our comparative endeavors “we” abstract out accidental variances of context. We strive for order, pattern, predictability, structure. (Found) Natural Laws. Reason. These tools are primary. They are our comparative foci. No need to bother with the how and why of it. We simply do it!

As Smith sees it, what Tylor and his colleagues did was invent rubrics to organize their “discovered” patterns of observation and association. Given their subjective mental abstractions and projected, objective patterns, the social scientific rubric became generative: infinitely applicable, supremely de-contextualizable. Magic! Much like their nineteenth-century professional magician counterparts, social-scientific scholars emphasized their scientific features: smart, “systematic”, inductive, and sound. Like their professional counterparts, scholars kept the internal mechanisms of their methods secret. Hidden. Magical—both to themselves and to others. Simply put, nineteenth-century scholars of religion are blind to their pre-interpreted labors. They are indebted, quite heavily and obtusely, to their powers of non-contextualized, subjective association. They are engaged not in science, but in “magic”. Incongruity.

Magic and science recur as tropes in Smith’s work. But why? What do these “binary” categories have to do with the academic study of religion? As with any category and examples appearing in Smith’s work, magic and science serve to advance a methodological point. They touch, in some way, Smith’s theories, queries, or interests.

⁴ An (unsigned) article, “The imagery of illusion”, in *Harvard Magazine* ([Anonymous] 1999), replete with nineteenth-century magician playbill photos, informed and inspired this overview of magicians’ characterizations in historical context. I am indebted to The Harvard Theater Collection curators for putting together this exhibit, explicating the posters and, along with them, the evolving role of nineteenth-century magicians transitioning into the twentieth century.

Magic and science speak to historical and contemporary problems endemic to the academic enterprise. In particular they speak to issues of comparison.

Smith's 1979 article, "In comparison a magic dwells" (Smith 1982 [1979]), is a prolegomena to comparative method.⁵ In this early piece, he is situating himself in relation to other scholars and their comparative activities. Here Smith is not putting forth a comparative method as such. Instead, he is making explicit the implicit scholarly choices, combinations, and presuppositions. Smith is charting the meta-pragmatics⁶ of existing comparative methods. As Smith sees it, "as practiced by scholarship, comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity (Smith 1982 [1979]: 21).

Prior to 1979, most scholars did not step back and ask the meta-pragmatic questions put forth by Smith. They simply engaged in comparison, following the "hooks and eyes" of "memory and association", basking in the epiphany of a self-satisfying "coincidence", mistaking "subjective experiences for objective ones". Most scholars were privileging similarity over difference, thereby rendering difference invisible, moot, or incommensurable.

This is to say, as Smith sees it, such scholars are themselves entertaining incongruity; they are not doing what they say they are doing. Focusing exclusively upon similarity is not self-consciously engaging in acts of comparison. Indeed, in their acts of comparison, why do scholars choose this instead of that (Smith 1987: xi)? What is their initial interest? To what end? What is the payoff? Unbridled interest and spontaneous coincidence are not self-conscious method. And what then, of difference?

Smith reminds us that comparison is not limited to relations of similarity. *Difference* as well as similarity are entailed in comparison's conceptual backing. Indeed, *every* comparative relation of similarity entails *some degree* of difference. But how similar is similar? When does similarity slip into identity? In terms of comparison—never! Smith

⁵ "Adde parvum magnus acervus erit" (Smith 1978 [1971]), as I understand Smith, is his pre-prolegomenon. In this essay, after having differentiated the comparative endeavor into particular models, Smith organizes them chronologically, walking through each model via its requisite poster-thinker. At this early stage, Smith's survey maps a perceived cline from the bluntly ahistorical to the remotely historical.

⁶ My use of linguistic anthropology's vocabulary and conceptualizations is indebted to Michael Silverstein's lectures and writings. Particularly accessible and relevant material is Silverstein 1987, 1993, 1998, and Silverstein and Urban 1996.

quotes Wittgenstein when reminding us that two things cannot be spatially, temporally, and semantically the same (identical) thing (Smith 1982 [1979]: 35). Indeed, even replicas are differentiable one from another. So how, then, to negotiate *degrees* of difference? How do degrees of difference progress along the comparative cline into *differences of kind*? Put most simply: *How does difference matter?*

The answer, according to Smith is a conscious (re)conceptualization of comparison:

Comparison requires the acceptance of difference as the grounds of its being interesting, and a methodical manipulation of that difference to achieve some stated cognitive end. The questions of comparison are questions of judgment with respect to difference: What differences are to be maintained in the interests of comparative inquiry? What differences can be defensibly relaxed and relativized in light of the intellectual tasks at hand? (Smith 1987: 14)

Whether dissecting predecessors, parasites, or aliens vis-à-vis the academic study of religion, Smith's point is to parse "difference"—in the service of interest and intelligibility. "Near" or "far", "us" and "them", "essence" or "accident", "science" or "magic"—Smith categorically works to precise and place difference within its relational co(n)text. For Smith, this meta-pragmatically regimented modulation of difference is the intellectual task at hand. It is a controlled "playing across the 'gap' [of this in relation to that,] in the service of some useful end" (Smith 1982 [1979]: 35). Only in this way is difference rendered significant; only in this way are meaning and intelligibility possible.

In presenting the chosen data in their co(n)textual complexity, Smith paints the lineaments of their relationship(s) within prior and present socio-historical discursive frames. This is the crux of Smith's multi-layered comparative method put forth in the Patton and Ray anthology (Patton and Ray 2000).⁷ And taken up to a higher, more

⁷ "Comparison", as it intersects with method and theory, has been the focus of Smith's work all along. But just how this category is differentiated and explicated depends upon Smith's *particular* frame and target. Put most broadly, for example, Smith ponders "comparison" under the general rubric "theory". In still other contexts, he moves theory toward application, by ferreting out the relation between the framed and the framing worlds, or the play between form and structure, such as in Smith's articles (e.g., Smith 1982 [1980]: 53-65) and book (Smith 1987) on ritual. Focused down most snugly, Smith parses comparison into "difference" (e.g., Smith 1985 and 2001). In still other places Smith discusses "comparison" at the comparative level proper (e.g., Smith's epilogue to the Patton and Ray anthology [Smith

