

*Bruce Chatwin and the Aboriginal Story "Murgah Muggui".
Threading Songlines and Webs of Lives.*

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Abstract: This essay works within the lines of the *partnership* literary theory and it focuses on the importance of analogical thinking in literary criticism. Its aim is to demonstrate how the literary text (in all its possible expressions), especially in postcolonial literatures, is influenced by 'native' oral traditions and narratives that work within an analogical rather than logical framework. The Aboriginal mythological story "Murgah Murrui" and Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (1987) will be shown as working within similar narrative structures. Chatwin is inspired by an Aboriginal world-view, mirrored in his use of an analogical style and language that imitates and evokes the rhythms of oral narrative. In both *The Songlines* and "Murgah Murrui" the expression of a *partnership*, life-enhancing and cooperative mode is an ancient instrument of wisdom, unveiling the immutable and sacred truths of the universe.

Key words: Songlines, Aboriginal myth, partnership studies.

Based on Eisler's "Cultural Transformation Theory" (1987), this essay is one of the results of the ongoing project on *partnership* and literary studies, implemented since 1998 at Udine University.¹ Whereas Riane Eisler and her colleagues at the Centre for Partnership Studies apply this model mainly to social and educational fields, our research includes linguistic, literary, cultural and postcolonial critical contexts (Riem, 2003A/B, 2004, Riem *et al*, 2007). Drawing upon the most recent investigations on the interactions between Western and 'indigenous' societies, the project aims at representing "other" possible patterns of constructing the self in his/her relation with the feminine sacred and a *partnership* society, where the dynamics at work are caring and sharing, rather than exploiting and dominating. The research focuses on the interactions between "equalitarian" and "dominator" modes of living, and those counter-discursive strategies (both linguistic and thematic) used by some significant writers in English to move away from the cultural hegemony and ideology of the Empire, and recover a historical and mythical "past", with specific attention towards "native" narratives connected to the land as mother. This generates *partnership* relational processes, and promotes respect for the variety and complexity of world cultures, languages and literatures, at local, national and international levels.

In Chatwin's work we can see how the inner and geographical quest of his main characters corresponds to this profound desire for *partnership*, harmony and peace,

where the separation of self and other, self and the world, self and the spirit can be healed. In order to fill the inner emptiness derived from a progressive disconnection from the sacredness of Mother Earth, the colonizing *mind* acts in a sort of madness, an alienation which gives rise to an insatiable and voracious urge to possess and exploit. In his 1987 *travelogue*, Bruce Chatwin transformed his first idea of writing a scientific theory on *nomadology* into a quasi-Aboriginal narrative, (often criticized by aboriginals as just another form of appropriation of their culture and traditions), of his wanderings across the Australian continent. He originally intended to show how humanity, in the process of becoming *human*, had acquired a strong migratory drive or instinct to walk long distances through the seasons. As human beings became more and more sedentary, this inborn wanderlust was repressed into the unconscious, but it continually surfaces because the conditions of settlement often distort and annihilate a true contact with *one-Self*, thus provoking violence, greed, territoriality, status-seeking, or a frantic search for the *new*. Aboriginals, in spite of the terrible consequences of colonisation, still maintain their nomadic drive, also in their storytelling and mythology; they still preserve the profound consciousness that life is only a 'passage' to somewhere else: everything is temporary, even those possessions that are so dear and fundamental to the Westener.

The Songlines can be seen as a very *intellectual* and *Western* text, influenced by post-modernist theories, forms and style (Riem 1993, 11), and a depiction of what white society loses in becoming sedentary and thus violent and aggressive: our inner drive to walk the paths of life, when inhibited or repressed, is the cause of our restlessness:

The Songlines starts with an investigation into the labyrinth of invisible pathways which Australian Aboriginals call the "Footprints of the Ancestors" or "The Way of the Law". Europeans know them as "Songlines" or "Dreaming Tracks". (...) I hoped to use this astonishing concept as a springboard from which to explore the innate restlessness of man. (...) Early on I saw it was useless to lay down on a subject so tenuous and decided to write an imaginary dialogue in which both narrator and interlocutor had the liberty to be wrong. This was a difficult concept for English-speaking readers. I had a running battle over whether the book should be classified as fiction or nonfiction. "Fiction" I insisted. "I made it up". A Spanish reviewer had no such difficulty. *A libro de viaje* was a travel book and a *novela de viaje* (...) there was *Don Quixote*". (Chatwin 1987, 16).

In connecting his own narrative mode with the Aboriginal Songlines he so much admires, Chatwin wants to underline how narration, nomadism, song and sacredness are tightly linked and intertwined, for the best art can only be spiritual and sacred. On the basis of his own travels to Australia, Chatwin creates "Bruce", a sort of autobiographical narrative *persona*, and tries to explain the causes of Western restlessness and aggression in contrast to the harmonious Aboriginal culture in Australia:

I had a presentiment that the 'travelling' phase of my life might be passing. I felt, before the malaise of settlement crept over me, that I should reopen those notebooks. I should set down on paper a résumé of the ideas, quotations, and encounters which had amused and obsessed me; and which

I hoped would shed light on what is, for me, the question of questions: the nature of human restlessness. (Chatwin 1987, 180-1)

Accompanied by Arkady Volchok, his fictional friend and guide through the territories of Aboriginal mythology, the globetrotter Bruce experiences first-hand the catastrophic consequences of Western colonisation and exploitation of the nomadic and *thus* peace-loving Aborigines. Possibly inspired by Salman Rushdie, who accompanied Chatwin on one of his trips, Arkady is an Australian descendant of the nomadic Cossacks in Russia, who, after travelling the world (Java, India, Afghanistan, Israel, Italy, Greece, and France), abandons all the constraining fetters of civilisation in order to dedicate himself entirely to saving the *endangered* Aboriginal culture. He prefers the wisdom of the ancestral *Dreamtime* to the spirit-numbing materialism of the "Old World." His job is to ensure that Western construction and oil companies in the area of Alice Springs do not destroy Aboriginal sites when building new roads or railway tracks or drilling for oil. Arkady, often idealised as the *outsider* from Western consumerism and materialism, accompanies the narrator, whose ultimate goal is to uncover the enigmatic Aboriginal creation myths of the *Dreamtime*. The heart of Aboriginal civilization and culture is a profound and constant relationship with the sacred *dream* of the land that the whites systematically destroy; thus, while *walking about* Australia with Arkady, narrator and reader realize that Western technological expansionism is destroying the very foundations of Aboriginal culture, and possibly our own:

'To wound the earth', he answered earnestly, 'is to wound yourself, and if others wound the earth, they are wounding you. The land should be left untouched: as it was in the Dreamtime when the Ancestors sang the world into existence'. (Chatwin 1987, 13)

Ancient and traditional Aboriginal knowledge (or rather wisdom) works within the framework of analogy, rather than under the rule of a restraining form of intellectual reasoning, that is connected with a *scientist* approach to life and Reality. Analogy has been banned from Western scientific approach to Reality with the Galileian and Cartesian fracture between world and spirit. Analogical thinking and its symbols, which underlie myths, sacred oral wisdom and spiritual texts of all world traditions, cannot be reduced to a closed system of signs that can have only *one* unequivocal *meaning* and explanation. In the world of analogical thinking things have a qualitative rather than quantitative relationship, which cannot be fully demonstrated or accounted for in numbers or words. Images, words, archetypes must be searched through the inner echoes they create in our Spirit; they are the imprint of the Soul, a sort of psychic DNA; they embody in sound and figure a journey where the point of finitude is both the threshold and the beginning of infinitude. Contrary to this, the *scientific* use of language implies that we have demonised the *mists* of Imagination (as intended by Coleridge, that is as the instrument of the Soul to unveil true knowledge) and need to establish the exact relation between words and concepts. Clarity, precision, discernment, judgement, discrimination are all key notions for scientific intelligence and intelligibility. Words are *used* as means by which we *signify* the real thing, and that is all. In analogical, mythical and archetypal thinking, the word has a true creative power that is renewed and transformed each time that specific word is pronounced, sung, acted or written, renewing not only itself, but also the person who uses it. A term is only a shadow of the word and we cannot restrict it to a single, determined and specific meaning. When

language becomes a means, human beings a system to be disclosed and transferred, and reality a global network of *communication*, the result is the *nominalism* of our contemporary technocratic society, which has brought our world to a dead end. Expansionism and exploitation, connected to a use of language as a means to impose our power, led to the greatest world financial crisis since the Depression.

One of the terrible consequences of colonisation in all its forms, is that many *minority* languages are lost and/or absorbed into the dominating *English/es*. When a people loses its language it loses its soul, for the two are closely interconnected; this explains the constant process of assimilation, absorption and annihilation practised by all colonizing powers, where whatever is *local* (even Sanskrit in India) has to be cancelled or studied, that is, rendered an *object* of study, rather than a subject speaking his/her own truths. The human being is his/her word, both in the physical, intellectual and spiritual sense: I can touch a stone and name it, then understand its intellectual content and realize how profoundly tied it is to the mystery of the universe and a spiritual reality.

This is how Arkady describes this power of the Aboriginal word to preserve their world:

... The surest way of judging a man's intelligence was his ability to *handle* words. Many aboriginals, he said, by our standards would rank as linguistic geniuses. The difference was one of outlook. The whites were forever changing their world to fit their doubtful vision of the future. The Aboriginals put all their mental energies into keeping the world the way it was. In what way was that inferior? (Chatwin 1987, 137)

The idea of inferior versus superior, typical of a colonizing dominant mode gives rise to a sense of separation from one another and from the world of the spirit; this is the 'original sin', the only source of human suffering. The sole remedy and healing for white society is to reconnect the ties between spirituality, matter and everyday life; it is to acknowledge the fundamental unity of life and all creatures animate and inanimate—great or small, human, bird, beast, stone, rock, water, hill, spinifex—they represent the living veil of divinity. The language of logical precision uses words as knives that can cut and split one *continuous* life into a series of mechanical and unrelated parts: it is Virginia Woolf's "luminous halo enveloping us from beginning to end" (1966, 106) juxtaposed to a series of gig-lamps symmetrically ordered. With such a partial language all kinds of destructive manipulations and violence are possible. Rationalistic language has been used against the Earth and its creatures, against one part of humanity, the 'others'; it has been used to exploit, enslave, torture and murder. Therefore the 'evil' person, living inside this mental prison, is both tormenter and tormented, his/her idea of being separated from the pain of others being a mere illusion and delusion. Profound Aboriginal wisdom, which is not mental but intuitive and immediate, spiritual and heartfelt, shows how this sense of separation and duality leads to evil, injustice, and suffering, physical, mental and spiritual, because it is a disavowal and denial of a cosmological and *Theological* Unity and wholeness (or holiness). *Good*, therefore, is *right*, it avows and acknowledges Unity, beyond (or rather within) the multiplicity of creation. Another level of consciousness, after the recognition of *wholeness*, is goodness, or disinterested Love for others, mystical devotion, divine Love, perfect love, compassionate love, knowledge of the pain of others, understandable through our own. Philosophy—love for wisdom and the wisdom of love—means that only through *love*

can we understand one another's points of view. In the *Bhagavad Gita* Lord Krsna says: "This world is my own cosmic feeling and nothing else." When individual feeling merges with the feeling of the superior or divine Self, then one can perceive Truth: "This Truth is called Consciousness or God. The world is nothing but Consciousness" (Muktananda 1989, 283).

Cosmogony, anthropology, and theogony interact and interlace one with the other through analogy, and often find their best expression in creative art, poetry, song and narration. The Aboriginal story "Murgah Muggui" is a perfect example of this interlacing of different levels of interpretation and stratified and interconnected meanings that may seem to contradict one another but only at a superficial reading. In Aboriginal culture, every detail of life, plants, humans, creatures, stones, objects of daily use, territories are like *web-sites* sacred to Life. The multiple-level of understanding shown in each mythological story has the function of activating analogical intuition, therefore giving instructions to the Aboriginal in connection with all systems of life: biological, social, psychological, spiritual. Their symbols do not arise from the mind only, but derive from the holistic experience and power of mind, body, sex, heart, soul, and world, all moving together in a *partnership* dimension. This is the dream-body language of ancient rituals, the thinking of magic and poetry, storytelling and song. This explains how the songlines work as an instrument of geographical and physical navigation across the Australian land:

There were people who argued for telepathy. Aboriginals themselves told stories of their song men whizzing up and the down the line in trance. But there was another, more astonishing possibility. Regardless of the words, it seems the melodic contour of the song described the nature of the land over which the song passes. So, if the Lizard Man were dragging his heels across the salt-pans of Lake Eyre, you could expect a suggestion of long flats, like Chopin's 'Funeral March'. If he were skipping up and down the MacDonnell escarpments, you'd have a series of arpeggios and glissandos, like Liszt's 'Hungarian Rhapsodies'.

Certain phrases, certain combinations of musical notes, are thought to describe the action of the Ancestor's feet. One phrase would say, 'Salt-pan'; another 'Creek-bed', 'Spinifex', 'Sand-hill', 'Mulga-scrub', 'Rock-face', and so forth. An expert song-man, by listening to their order of succession, would count how many times his hero crossed a river, or scaled a ridge - and be able to calculate where, and how far along, a Songline he was.

'He'd be able', said Arkady 'to hear a few bars and say, "This is Middle Bore" or "That is Oodnadatta" - where the Ancestor did X or Y or Z.'

'So a musical phrase,' I said, 'is a map of reference?'

'Music', said Arkady, 'is a memory bank for finding one's way about the world'. (Chatwin 1987, 119-20)

Similarly the Aboriginal story "Murgah Murrui"² works like a musical symphony; the words of which it is composed function as an interconnected system of symbols that explains reality in all its multiple levels of experience: material, emotional, intellectual, spiritual. Murgah Muggui is a *bunna* (cannibal) and a great *wirreenun* (witch) and she obtains her male victims by taking the form of a seductive beautiful young woman who first feeds them, invites them to camp the night with her and when they are fast asleep

she paralyses, kills and eats them. They are all married and therefore they break the *Law* in sleeping with her. This goes on for a long long time, victim after victim, till one day Murgah Muggui meets Mullyan, a cunning, strong and clever man, who is suspicious of her and only feigns sleeps and kills her on the spot. Her spirit is then turned into Murgah Muggui, the spider, who still spins her fine web traps, devouring her many victims enmeshed into the beautiful gold and silver threads of her web.

In Aboriginal Law a man can have more than a wife, but a married man cannot have extramarital affairs. The story thus defines and describes social behavioural codes, where Murgah Muggui lures her victims to stray from the socially accepted path and, to kill them, uses a sharply pointed *gunnai*, a tool used by men together with spears, axes, knives or other such weapons. Rather than owning instruments to fight and kill, women traditionally use instruments to cure and care: for food gathering, cooking and healing, such as dilly bags, wooden bowls, digging sticks, for their life is focussed on the ritual natural cycles of life-death-rebirth. Women can create another human being in the 'dark cave' of the vagina, but are at the same time directly connected to death, for, "whatever is begotten born and dies" (Yeats "Sailing to Byzantium" 1974, 104, l.6).

This Aboriginal Dreaming story shows a breaking of the Law that leads to death and destruction and is therefore meant as a form of instruction. At the same time, it must be interpreted in a mythological and analogical sense rather than only in a realistic-moralistic one. This narration is consonant with a feminine and *partnership* vision: it creates a tapestry rather than a straight line, it weaves intricate patterns together, it presents details that are always useful in understanding not only the sequence of events and their meaning, but most of all the significance of the spiritual design underlying our lives. Everything is related, connected, and part of the texture of our life, where every breath of wind makes the spiderweb dance into a different possible meaning.

On a spiritual level, Murgah Muggui is the initiator, old witch or Crone, in (one of) her physical appearance(s)—the eight-legged spider—embodying the infinite possibilities of trans-mutation of feminine or earthly power, in all its cycles: the four directions, the four seasons, the four stages of human life—childhood, youth, maturity, old age, corresponding to the Goddess in her four manifestations: virgin/lover, wife, mother and crone. Murgah Muggui passes through all four before being trans-lated into another form: she is young and beautiful like a virgin, seducing as the lover/prostitute, representing the wilderness of the land where men hunt for their prey. Next she becomes the wise and caring wife, comforting, giving food and shelter. Finally, as the old Crone, she is the Life/Death/Life Force (Pinkola 1992, 130-1), the incubator of new lives, based on the belief in an immanent feminine divinity who ruled all life cycles in the wheel of Time in a spiralling motion. The Hindu *Maya* is often represented as a spider; pre-Hellenic *Athena*, spinner of fate, once had the name of *Arachne*, in her spider incarnation; Pueblo Indians called Spider Woman the creatrix of the universe; in Ghana She is *Anansi*; in Haitian voodoo She is the spiderwoman known as Aunt Nancy; in the *Mundaka Upanishad* the spiderweb is an image of the manifestation of Supreme Being, emanating from inside, like the threads made of the spider's inner *substance*. Murgah Murrui spins the destiny (<Latin *destino*, that which is woven) of those men who go hunting for their initiation into the mysteries of the sacred land and the dark feminine presiding over it.

The spider and her web, built on an inclined angle that seems to reproduce the Earth's axis, the Goddess and her spiralling cosmos made of concentric worlds and planes of existence, Aboriginal songlines and Chatwin's storytelling, are all woven together within an ever-renewing cycle: like moving, interpenetrating energies they fertilize, transform and constantly regenerate each other. In their world the word is always *symbol* (not the simple *term* identifying something 'objectively'): when we speak in/of Truth we actually trans-form our humanity and *evolve* as human beings. When one *reads* texts working within this kind of analogical system, s/he is not simply an exegete, *exigités*, a guide in the forest of meanings, but must become a hermeneut, *hermeneutikós*, an ally of the messenger God Hermes, who introduces new everchanging meanings, bringing reciprocal fecundations between cultures. Hermes, like the Vedic Indra, God of the thunderbolt and tempest, is cunning and ironical, like the Native American *trickster*: he tricks you into *other* meanings that transform you from inside. Analogy after analogy, symbol after symbol, suddenly you are traversed by a flash of revelation, and the mystery of things stands in front of you, clear, for a shaft of seconds, then is gone again, into the intricate network of life. Hermes always *mediates* between worlds, he is *psychopompus*, he renders visible all night processes, associated with dreams, shadows and watery reflections, the ebb and flow of the sea. He helps us bridge the gap between silence and meaning, because only the poetic, analogical word can encompass, only for an instant, the ineffable, which engulfs us again, connecting us with the inexplicable forces beyond rational understanding: poetic word, songline, intricate pattern, soaring effulgent flight, brilliant fire, trail of stars.

NOTES

¹ The international research project on *Partnership* and literary criticism that I coordinate involves the following institutions: the Universities of Udine (Faculties of Modern Languages and Education), Milano, Lecce (Italy), Bangalore and Mysore (India), of Sydney (Australia), and the *Centre for Partnership Studies* (California).

² Katie Langloh Parker transcribed this story. In 1862, an Aboriginal girl saved the six-year old Katie Langloh Parker from drowning and, from then onwards, Katie passionately worked with Aboriginal culture: Aboriginal women trusted her; they thought she was a respectful and intelligent friend. Thus, she was one of the first white women to have the privilege to listen and transcribe Aboriginal women's stories and myths. This lore would never be shared with a man anthropologist, because it transmitted 'secret' and sacred ancient spiritual wisdom *belonging* to women only. Recently, Johanna Lambert collected, re-issued and commented some of the stories Langloh Parker transcribed ("Murgah Murrui", Lambert, 1993, 54-60). For an analysis of some other stories from Johanna Lambert's volume, see: Riem 2003C, 2006, 2007 A, B, C; on Katie Langloh Parker's biography see: Miur ed. 1982).

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