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Address : Ruang Redaksi Indonesian Journal of Social Sciences
Gedung FISIP Universitas Airlangga
Jalan Airlangga 4-6 Surabaya 60286, Indonesia
Phone: +62 31 5011744 Web: <http://journal.unair.ac.id>
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Problems in Reading Chatwin's the Songlines: A Reader-Response Perspective

Masalah-masalah dalam Membaca Karya Chatwin the Songlines: Sebuah Perspektif Respons-Pembaca

Diah Ariani Arimbi¹

Department of English Literature, FIB, Airlangga University, Surabaya

Abstract

Bruce Chatwin's the Songlines purposes problems that need to be taken into account before the object-whether the world or the text-can be treated. As the author, Chatwin problematizes his text in order to obligate the involvement of the reader in the text substantially, in the process of signifying the text. By making the text's genre controversial, Chatwin challenges the reader and intrigues him/her with such a problematic categorization. He constructs and deciphers a text within a text which may lead into a crisis of interpretation. He also fills the text with numerous other texts which accordingly places the text in the intertextual networking. And this what makes this particular writing becomes the source of dialectical dialogue between the text, its author and its reader as well.

Keywords: text, reading process, reader, genre, intertextuality

Abstrak

Karya Bruce Chatwin yang berjudul *the Songlines* mengandung berbagai permasalahan menarik yang perlu dipertimbangkan dalam perspektif respons pembaca. Chatwin memperlakukan teks yang mewajibkan keterlibatan pembaca dalam teks secara substansial, dalam proses penandaan teks. Dengan membuat genre teks kontroversial, Chatwin menantang pembaca. Chatwin membangun dan sekaligus membongkar teks dalam teks yang dapat mengarah ke krisis interpretasi. Ia juga mengisi teks tersebut dengan teks-teks lain dalam jaringan intertekstual. Hal inilah yang membuat *the Songlines* menjadi sumber dialog dialektis antara teks, penulis dan pembaca.

Kata kunci: teks, proses membaca, pembaca, genre, intertekstualitas

Reading Chatwin's Text

Bruce Chatwin's literary writings have been known to always possess problems of reading. Chatwin's writings are famous for moving between genres, styles and narrative aesthetics. Charles Bruce Chatwin was born in Sheffield England, on 13 May 1940 and died on 18 January 1989 due to HIV-AIDS. He was an English novelist and also a prolific travel writer. In 1982 he won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for his novel *On the Black Hill*. He had written numerous writings from literary works, interviews, letters, documentaries, to newspapers articles. His writings style was known to be philosophical and his writings had shown

strong innate story telling abilities (Utz 2001). In particular, his fourth literary work, *the Songlines* (1987), forces the reader into an encounter with the surface structure and deep structure of the text. In its reflexivity-a characteristic of many modern texts, whether novels, paintings, or films, the Chatwinian text explicitly opens a gap between the representation and that which is represented, between the language that makes up the work and the work that it unfolds. In Chatwin's *the Songlines* (1987), the thematic desire represented in the text mirrors the reader's for the text. This doubling calls the reader's attention to his/her own activity which results in a subversion of the textual.

¹Correspondence: Diah Ariani Arimbi, Department of English Literature, FIB, Airlangga University, Jalan Airlangga 4-6 Surabaya 60286, Indonesia. Phone +62 31 5035676. E-mail: fib@unair.ac.id

In general, theoreticians like Roman Jakobson and Roland Barthes argue that realism aspires to repress its own reality. The worlds upon the pages are effaced in the reading to allow immediate penetration into the textual world to which they refer. Jakobson (1971) in "On Realism in Art" believes that art has lost its own reflexivity:

The history of art has been equally slipshod with respect to scholarly terminology. It has employed the current vocabulary without screening the words critically, without defining them precisely, and without considering, the multiplicity of their meanings.

Jakobson (1971) explains his statement by giving an example from painting. He asserts that painting becomes a sort of "ideogram" where "Recognition becomes instantaneous," thus "We no longer see a picture". Barthes (1968) extends Jakobson's argument into the literary realm, and in *Writing Degree Zero* he affirms:

Writing, on the contrary, is always rooted in something beyond language, it develops like a seed, not like a line, it manifests an essence and holds the threat of a secret, it is an anti-communication, it is intimidating. All writing will therefore contain the ambiguity of an object which is both language and coercion: there exists fundamentally in writing a 'circumstance' foreign to language, there is, as it were, the weight of a gaze conveying an intention which is no longer linguistic.

Barthes suggests that writing is indeed not free from what is written. Writing which is free in the beginning is finally bound, and then links itself in chains with circumstances outside the writing itself. Writing then becomes inescapable in its own process of alienation. The importance of the text is emphasized, and becomes the point of departure in the process of signification. In this notion, the reader must ignore his own activity. The text must do nothing to remind him that he is reading and that the textual world unfolds as his eyes move down the page. From the perspective of that reading, a text does not intend problems of reading.

The Songlines, on the other hand, calls attention to the operations of the literary dimension and the reader's encounter with it. Hence, it poses problems. Confronted by the problematic Chatwinian text, the reader cannot remain a passive voyeur of the

referential dimension of the text. Like his other reflexive texts such as *In Patagonia* (1977), *What am I Doing Here?* (1989), *the Songlines* (1987) yields its pleasure only to the reader who is willing and able to confront the problems of reading posed by the text. The text draws the reader into being involved and into being active. As Wolfgang Iser writes in "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach": "during the reading process, there is an active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection". *The Songlines*, as other works of art, is not a complete text, and it must be completed by its audience and/or its readers. Without the reader, the text loses its significance and importance. As Janice Radway in "Interpretive Communities and Variable Literacies The Functions of Romance Reading" suggests that "books are always read within a set of specific circumstances, and their final meaning and impact may well be a function of the way those circumstances constitute the reader as a social being". Like the text he encounters, the reader must be playful in spirit, devising his own reading strategies in relation to the text. One of these reading strategies that a reader may use is to draw the text into the picture. It elicits his active participation in the problems of reading posed by the text. Margaret Wimsatt (1987), in strategizing her reading of Chatwin's *the Songlines*, reviews:

Chatwin's mind is pictorial (perhaps the reason for his success at Sotheby's?). And he transmits strongly to the reader the eerie, cobwebby effect of this mesh over all Australia, and the sense of how real it is to the Aborigines-even the watered down versions which are all they will allow the invaders to share.

Accordingly, Chatwin's text is located in the system of exchange. This notion implies that Wimsatt's analysis demonstrates the reflexivity of the text itself. Thus, the text does not merely reveal the activity of writing but the activity of reading as well.

Although much of contemporary art, like Narcissus, gazes itself at its own reflection, certainly a given art-whether it is a film, a painting, or a literary work- may appear to be about something other than itself. But this subject matter may really be just a means for the artist to engage in a reflexive speculation. The reflexive text does indeed unfold a textual world, but that world is contested as it is constructed. A text like *the Songlines* may be read in two radically divergent ways. The first is a reading

that may read the text by attending to the text's referential dimension. The second is the reading which may read the text by stressing the operations of the literal dimension. This duplicity results in the classification of the genre of the text. Yet, it is in fact this duplicity that constitutes the text to be appealing for Michael Ignatief (1989):

A metaphysical novel about nomads and wandering, set in the Australian outback, which like all of his work was unclassifiable. Was this anthropology, fiction, an essay, disguised autobiography? It was all of these. His best work redrew the borderline between fiction and non-fiction....

The resolution of Ignatief's problematic reading of Chatwin, interrogates the interplay between the text and the audience.

The Problematic Genre

Although Philip Mosley finds difficulty in categorizing Chatwin's *the Songlines*, in his essay, "Laying Down the Law: Bruce Chatwin's *the Songlines*: An Australian Aboriginal Concepts of Land," he suggests that the-text "may best be understood as fictionalized travel writing" (Mosley 1990). Another critic, David Birch (1995), also regards that the text as "Bruce Chatwin's fictionalized account of his travels in Australia". Thus, one possible way for an "intertextuality reading" of the text would be to situate it in relation to travel writing and fiction. Literary theoreticians, like Mikhail Bakhtin have argued, that a text enters into a dialogue with the literary past, for it is at once written and real in relation to other texts in the intertextual network. In categorizing literary genre, reference to other texts is legible. As Bakhtin (1973) writes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*:

A literary genre, by its very nature reflects the most stable, "eternal" tendencies in the development of literature. The undying elements of the *archaic* are always preserved in the genre. True, these *archaic* elements are preserved in the genre only thanks to their constant *renewal* and, so to speak, contemporization. Genre is always the same and not the same, always old and new simultaneously. A genre is reborn and renewed at every stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of the given genre.

This gives the genre life. Therefore the archaic elements preserved in the genre are not dead, but eternally living.

It is precisely this renewal and renovation which give credit to Chatwin's *the Songlines*. Critics and reviewers of the text continually negotiate its genre. A critic, Andrew Harvey (1990) regards the text and summarizes it as:

Part adventure-story, part novel-of-ideas, part satire on the follies of "progress," part spiritual autobiography, part passionate plea for a return to simplicity of being and behavior. *The Songlines* is a seething gallimaufry of a book, a great Burtoniangalimatias of anecdote and speculation and description, fascinating, moving, infuriating, incoherent, all at once.

While David Rieff (1990) supporting Harvey's opinion also claims that,

The *Songlines* is really part travel book, part meditation on the idea of nomadism, part collection (in the sections Chatwin calls "the moleskin notebooks") of the random quotes, diary entries, and observations that have consoled Chatwin, or invigorated him, or perhaps, egged him on his travels over the last 20 years.

Jane Dorell (1990), on the other hand, has a somewhat different view toward Chatwin's *the Songlines*. She believes that the text is a novel of ideas. As she argues that,

[Chatwin] weaves a narrative from these themes. From the Aboriginal myths and legends, from his reflections on man's nomadic and aggressive nature which he illustrates with long extracts from writers as diverse as Ardrey, Rimbaud, IbnBatuta and Lorenz, and finally from descriptions of the life and customs of the outback which are often hilarious and which bring one happiness back to earth after a long passage of ethnophilosophy.

Still concerning about the text's genre. Another critic, Edmund White (1990) categorizes the text into a different genre:

Set in Australia among the aboriginals, *the Songlines* claims to be a novel, but it reads more like an intellectual adventure story for a brainy Hardy Boy (a fair definition of Bruce himself, who's always out there stalking not Big Game but big games-intellectual ones, that is).

On the other hand, Walter Goodman (1990) views the text as more like White's idea. He considers it "rather as a travel book of a special, speculative sort..." Graham Huggan (1991) views Chatwin as "the author as anthropologist: a professional writer whose personal experience is skillfully transcribed into the contours of pseudo-ethnographic fiction". As the author of the text, Chatwin himself puts his claim on the genre of this text. In his latest book, "*What am I Doing Here?*", published before he died, in an essay entitled "Kevin Nolans," he writes about the process of writing *the Songlines*:

Early on I saw it was useless to lay down the law 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 non-fiction. "Fiction" I insisted. "I made it up."

And others, who are unable to classify the text, simply mention it as a book, without referring it to a certain genre.

The shift of the genres itself invests the text with new meanings. It is the flexibility of the genre that offers a new reading of the old form. When the reader's expectations are satisfied, it is apparent that it proposes immediate access to the textual world it unfolds. Thus, it poses no problem in reading. When the reader's expectations are deceived, the text is then highly valued because its devices to access to the textual world are laid bare. The reader must endeavor to collaborate with the text to meet his/her expectations. This is the circumstance into which *the Songlines* falls, and it constitutes problems in reading the text.

The Problematic Author and the Narrator

A literary work is never "simply there" waiting for an objective reading. In addition to constructing an approach to the text, a reading engages in the construction of the author. That is, one's notion of the author is itself an artifice. Michel Foucault (1991) in "What is An Author?" writes that "The author's name is not a function of a man's civil status, nor it is fictional; it is situated in the breach, among the discontinuities, which gives rise to the new groups of discourse and their singular mode of existence".

The author is seen as a construct, then, he/she also functions as the "unity of discourse" (Foucault 1972). Foucault, in "What is An Author?," further argues:

The author also constitutes a principle of unity in writing where any unevenness of production is ascribed to changes caused by evolution, maturation, or outside influence. In addition, the author serves to neutralize the contradictions that are found in a series of texts. Governing this function is the belief that there must be at a particular level of an author's thought, of his conscious or unconscious desire—a point where contradictions are resolved, where the incompatible elements can be shown to relate one another or to cohere around a fundamental and originating contradiction.

Accordingly, the name of the author who becomes "the principle of a certain unity of writing" is more problematic when his name refers to the name of the narrator, and vice versa. Chatwin's "I" in *the Songlines* is an especially problematic critical object. In Chapter One, the narrator is introduced by his companion, Arkady, "A Pom by the name Bruce", the same first name as the author's. In the following chapter, the narrator gives more accurate accounts for his name:

One day, Aunt Ruth told me our surname had once been 'Chettewynde,' which meant 'the winding path' in Anglo Saxon; the suggestion took root in my head that poetry, my own name and the road where, all three, mysteriously connected.

Reviewing this connection between the author and the narrator, Hart L. Wegner (1994) in his essay, "The Travel Writer as Missionary in Reverse, Bruce Chatwin's *the Songlines*," affirms:

Although the narrator is once again quite autobiographical, he is also the most important character in Chatwin's works and in a peculiar way "imagined." With finality the wanderer has turned away from his former life, his English world, just as Bruce Chatwin abandoned his promising career as the youngest director of the art auction house Sotheby's to become a wandering writer. Subject and object, writer and that which is written become one.

Thus, within this context, a reader may read *the Songlines* and conclude that the author is not really the cause of what he writes, rather he is the

product of his writing. This, perhaps, suspends the common sense which says, "Can anyone really deny that there is someone, an author, who sits at a table in his comfortable hotel room in Alice Springs and produces his book?" But, the author as a product of the writing fits precisely within the reader-response perspective which switches the reader's attention from the author to the operations of reading that construct the author and his persona. The name is the same, but the reference is different. In each case, the name refers to the particular way in which the reader organizes and assimilates the text that constitutes an authorization. Therefore, the meaning in this sense is produced in the active interplay of the text and the audience. The narrator and the reader engage in the construction of the author.

The Problem of Intertextuality

The Songlines is perhaps one of Chatwin's books which is rich with intertextual references. His text is thick with allusions to the canon of Western literature. The second half of the book is full with the quotes from Pascal, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Gautama Buddha, Lorenz, Darwin, and so on. This becomes problematic when Chatwin does not provide the "logical" connection conjoining these quotes. In the section entitled "From the Notebooks," Chatwin presents pages of excerpts supporting his belief in nomadism. Roger Clarke (1990) in his review of *the Songlines* objects Chatwin's disjointed construction. He argues that,

It seems Chatwin has fallen in an old trap - he is instinctively drawn to the spiritual, yet somehow shys away with a lot of anthropological musings on fossils and the sabre toothed, great beast, who preyed on man's early ancestors. It is crammed with quotations from the most esoteric sources, and is clearly the result of many years' deliberation. Chatwin tried to write a book on nomads and failed-this then is its shattered remains. Chatwin doesn't seem up to the magnificence of the questions he poses, and occasional chapters retreat into a shell-shocked and quivering palsy learning-pages and pages of quotes, albeit very illuminating ones. The whole story achieves as glazed, unsatisfying tone. He sees rituals, hears about Dreamtime, witnesses the exploitation of the Aborigines. But he never makes a connection.

Clarke's critique on Chatwin seems to lower Chatwin's canonical status. For Clarke, Chatwin fails in his authorial role: he fails to interpret his readings to his readers.

Clarke and many other critics seem to fail to situate Chatwin's text as to its relation to an intertextual network. Those critics mistake Chatwin's text for conventional single plot text for which an unproblematic truth is available. Echoing what Roland Barthes calls "The Death of the Author," Chatwin's text is dislodged from the point of origin by giving numerous excerpts from the other authors. In this way, Chatwin loses his authority, by becoming just another text's reader. Chatwin is then creating a reality or a construction which is at best understood in relation to other realities and constructions of literature. Chatwin seems to believe that a word means nothing without quotes. He calls attention to these quotes by thematizing the operations which link the text and reality.

For Chatwin, *the Songlines* functions as what Roland Barthes (1977) in *Image-Music-Text* defines as "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable center of cultures". Barthes further explains that "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash". The quotes in "From the Notebooks" are bound with a unifying theme promoting Chatwin's philosophy of nomadism:

The more I read, the more convinced I became that nomads had been the crank handle of history, if for no other reason than that the great monotheism had, all of them, surfaced from the pastoral milieu....

More specifically, the Aborigines' Songlines are the tissue of Chatwin's quotes which he posits in "From the Notebooks." His quotes range from East to West; from China to London; and from Buddha to Pascal, in order to illustrate the various centers of cultures of the world. One should read Chatwin's *the Songlines* in terms of an intertextual network. Yet, by presenting other texts within a text without a verbal connection, Chatwin establishes a space between these quotes which produces meaning in the gap. Still, a danger lingers in this kind of "paper cutouts" (Howard 1990). It risks reducing the text to a series of enigmas without a thorough signification.

Reading Chatwin cannot be just a matter of combining sources or allusions, for that would be to posit a final signified, thereby effacing the problems of reading that the text poses. The text itself becomes reflexive because the expectation and the desire in the text mirror the reader's expectation and desire for the text. Accordingly, Chatwin thematizes the role of the reader by disjointing these quotes.

The Reflexivity of the Text

In general, one can distinguish between the movement of a story and the movement of the discourse that represents it. Chatwin brilliantly depicts the difference between the movement of the story and the movement of the discourse by inserting his thought about nomadism:

My two most recent notebooks were crammed with jottings taken in South Africa, where I had examined, at first hand, certain evidence on the origin of our species. What I learned there—together with what I knew about the Songlines—seemed to confirm the conjecture I had toyed with for so long: that Natural Selection has designed us—from the structure of our brain-cells to the structure of our big toe—for a career of seasonal journey *on foot* through a blistering land of thorn-scrub or desert. If this were so; if the desert were 'home'; if our instincts were forged in the desert; to survive the rigours of the desert—then it is easier to understand why greener pastures pall on us; why possessions exhaust us, and why Pascal's imaginary man found his comfortable lodgings a prison.

The following section entitled "From the Notebooks" totally stops the movement of the story. The discourse proceeds, but the story does not. Those pages which are devoted to the journey of the narrator, and the long periods of time when the narrator travels, is summarized in this section. Here the story proceeds at a far greater pace than the discourse that represents it. In doing so, Chatwin calls attention to the reader's expectation in relation to the movement or progress of the narrative. The book's reflexivity makes the reader aware of his own intention. The author destroys the reader's motivation for a desire of a plot resolution.

"From the Notebooks" makes the book more problematic as it is filled with other texts. Thus, *the Songlines* is reflected from within by the placement

of texts within the text. This is a Chatwinian literary device which is also displayed in his other book *In Patagonia*. Chatwin offers multiple realities by placing those texts. The use of "the frame within the frame" suggests that Chatwinian nomadism refers to cross-cultural references. His notebooks are but the fragments of the text. Because of its particular frame, the reader experiences and evaluates accordingly. The text as a whole, in fact purports to be a document of sorts, the manuscript of the narrator's memoir that he writes along his journey. The multiple realities that Chatwin offers in *the Songlines* include not merely his writing, but also his readings. His readings juxtapose his writing:

Outside, it was so hot and muggy that I went back to my room, switched on the air-conditioner, and spend most of the day reading Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia*.

It was an awkward, discursive and unbelievably long book and Strehlow, by all accounts, was an awkward cuss himself....

Strehlow died at his desk in 1978, a broken man. His memory was served by a dismissive biography which, when I glanced at it in the Desert Bookstore, struck me as being beneath contempt. He was, I am convinced, a highly original thinker. His books are great and lonely books...

Reading the *Songs*, I got the impression of a man who had entered this secret by the back door; who had the vision of a mental construction more marvellous and intricate than anything on earth, a construction to make Man's material achievements seem like so much dross—yet which somehow evaded description.

The multiple realities suggested by the interplay of the writing and readings recorded in the manuscript purposes that *the Songlines* is less concerned with any particular reality than with its own status of book. Moreover, Chatwin's reading of Strehlow serves as an evidence that any writer operates in relation to the production of past writers; every text exists within an intertextual network. *The Songlines* is a perfect example of a text which exists in relation to other texts. The intertextuality of *The Songlines* underscores the disparity between the plot and the story. The quotes in "From the Notebooks" indicates the story while the novel provides the plot. This is somewhat problematic because it enables the reader

to be caught between the text and its reflexion. As it appears to be a text about a text, *the Songlines* implicates the author as a reader of anterior texts, thereby suggesting that any text marks an encounter with the intertextual network that it at once rereads and rewrites.

Problematic Self-Representation of the Text

Chatwin's investigation of textuality certainly involves textual narcissism. The world alluded to in the book becomes a pre-text for the book. The story of the activity represented in the book is then the book itself. In *the Songlines* this directedness is thematized in Chatwin's reconstructing of the Songlines:

The mud fell from their thighs, like placenta from a baby. Then, like the baby's first cry, each Ancestor opened his mouth and called out, 'I AM!' 'I am-Snake... Cockatoo— Honey-ant... Honeysuckle... And this first 'I am!,' this primordial act of naming, was held, then and forever after, as the most secret and sacred couplet of the Ancestor's song.

Each of the Ancients (now basking in the sunlight) put his left forward and called out a second name. He put his right foot forward and called out a third name. He named the water-hole, the reedbeds, the gum trees-calling right and left, calling all things into being and weaving their names into verses. The Ancients sang their way all over the world. They sang the rivers and ranges, salt-pans and sand dunes. They hunted, ate, made love, danced, killed: whatever their tracks led they left a trail of music. They wrapped the whole world in a web of song...

Parallel to the Songlines that he recomposes, when the narrator recollects his notebooks, he sings his existence, and leaves "a trail of music." For the narrator, his trail of music is his book and the songs that he sings in his notebooks. Like the Ancients, in every place where he puts his "left foot" and "right foot," and calls "a name," the narrator writes the memoir of his being a nomad. Chatwin's recomposing of the Songlines displays that the progression of the narrative line tends toward the writing of the book itself, which renders the narrator's memory in the form of a text. This conclusion serves to construct a kind of closed circuit. When a book concludes we are accustomed to leaving its finite domain of meaning and returning to the quotidian world which is our reality. The ending of *the Songlines* is the beginning of its representation into this reality. *The Songlines* functions as a text bridging the textual reality within to Chatwin's reality.

Indeed, Chatwin is a remarkable author. He constructs and deciphers a text within a text which may lead into a crisis of interpretation. With *the Songlines* he purposes problems that need to be taken into account before the object-whether the world or the text-can be treated. As the author, Chatwin problematizes his text in order to obligate the involvement of the reader in the text substantially, in the process of signifying the text. To read a text is also to construct or constitute it, just as to write about reality is to invent it. By making the text's genre controversial, Chatwin challenges the reader and intrigues him/her with such a problematic categorization. Moreover, he fills the text with numerous other texts which accordingly places the text in the intertextual networking. Yet, the existence of interplay game in *the Songlines* underscores its meaning.

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