"In the labyrinth of invisible pathways": Tropes of Aboriginal Australia in Bruce Chatwin's The Songlines

Ágnes Balajthy

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Abstract: This article reexamines the construction of Aboriginal Australia in Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*. It explores the ways in which this postmodernist travelogue transforms certain patterns of the literary representation of the Central Australian desert, re-inventing and re-contextualizing the 19th century topos of the unmappable land. The analysis of the figurative language of the novel focuses on its master tropes, the map and the labyrinth, suggesting that they both reflect the traveller's inclination to appropriate the Aboriginal worldview and at the same time symbolize the landscape's (and its inhabitants') resistance to being appropriated.

Keywords: travel writing; cartography; cultural otherness; Aborigines; labyrinth; map

Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* is one of the most prominent, and yet controversial examples of the postmodern wave of English travel writing. Its plot is organized around the journey of Bruce, the first-person narrator, who comes to Western Australia in the eighties with the aim of learning more about the Songlines: wandering from settlement to settlement in the Outback he tries to gain an insight into Aboriginal cultures with the help of the local activists of the Land Rights Movement. The book lacks strict narrative linearity; moreover, a considerable proportion consists of a patchwork-like compilation of quotations, anecdotes and diary entries that are supposed to originate from the protagonist's notebooks. The notes evoke the discourses of anthropology, evolutional biology or theology, and even poetry, and represent different strategies of attempting to understand the role of nomadism in human culture. Along with the allegorical portrayal of the characters and the self-effacing rhetoric of the protagonist narrator, the "Notepads" section contributes to the impression of reading—as Casey Blanton proposes—"a novel of ideas" (Blanton 104). However, the "ideas" are not arranged into a coherent pattern in Chatwin's text: as it lacks a solid narrative centre, the various citations and narratorial reflections constantly undermine and destabilize each other's truth value.

The book's playful rhetorical ambivalence definitely contributed to the aforementioned "controversies", which have been partly of a political nature. As Robert Clarke summarizes, "Chatwin's discussions of nomadism have been considered by many critics: celebrated by some for their exemplary postmodernity, criticized by others for their potential conservativism" (Clarke 233). Several scholars have praised the subversive potential of the

text, called attention to its "polyphonic narrative technique" (Thompson 127), the "originality" of its structure (Borm, "'What am I" 12), and also made comments similar to that by Jeff Archer: "Chatwin's novelistic imagination took Central Australia's Aboriginal cultures more seriously than do many of the participants in the current Australian political debates" (qtd. in Clarke 229). Others, like Tim Youngs, considered the appropriation of Aboriginal culture in the book as highly problematic, claiming that the process serves as the affirmation of the otherwise unstable and frustrated Englishness of the authorial narrator (Youngs 75–76). Debbie Lisle also criticized Chatwin's work for reproducing "nomads […] according to romanticised projections of the colonized other" (Lisle 66).

I argue that these dilemmas are inseparable from other, more strictly literature-oriented questions raised by the book. *The Songlines* is categorized by its publisher as "fiction", but it very much presents itself as a travelogue, which is traditionally considered as a type of non-fictional discourse within the Anglo-Saxon cultural context. How are we supposed to read it then? Is the accusation of "misrepresentation" as relevant or legitimate in case of a fictionalized travel account as in case of a "real travelogue" about "real" experiences? Can we link the statements made by Bruce, the protagonist directly to Bruce Chatwin, the author? The reader of *The Songlines* is constantly reminded of the uncertainties permeating a genre that has always been "[s]ituated between fiction and factual prose" (Pfister 265). What is more, through the utilization of heterogeneous and hybrid modes of expression (autobiography, memoir, anthropological narrative, adventure novel etc.) the text reflects on the uncertainty about the status of travel writing itself, raising the question whether it can be considered to be an autonomous genre at all.

In his attempt to create order out of the chaos of countless synonymous, still not equivalent labels (travel account, récit de voyage, travel book, etc.) referring to this group of texts, Jan Borm offers a terminological solution. He proposes that while travel literature or travel writing can be used as a collective term "for a variety of texts both predominantly fictional and non-fictional whose main theme is travel" (Borm, "Defining Travel" 14), the travelogue or travel book—defined as "any narrative characterized by a non-fiction dominant that relates (almost always) in the first person a journey or the journeys that the reader supposes to have taken place in reality while assuming, or presupposing that author, narrator and principal character are but one or identical" (Borm, "Defining Travel" 17)—can be seen as a genre within the larger context of the literature of travel. However, Borm immediately recognizes that the latter definition continues to be problematic, since it relies heavily on the real-fictional dichotomy. He completes his description of the travelogue by adding that the "non-fictional" element is not inherent in the text but situated in the reader's horizon of expectations, similarly to Lejeune's autobiographic pact. As for *The Songlines*, it does not eliminate but undermines the certainty about the existence of such pacts, playing upon the reader's presuppositions concerning the non-fictionality of its content in accordance with Susan Noakes' observation: "travel literature is a primarily rhetorical genre which historically marks itself as primarily mimetic" (Noakes 139).

One minor example from the novel that illustrates the tension between these modes of representation, or, to put it more precisely, the undecidability that is encoded in autobiography as "a figure of reading or of understanding" (de Man 70) is provided by Chatwin's name. We learn in the beginning that the first-person narrator is called Bruce, which makes it easy to identify him with the author whose "signature" can be seen on the book cover. However, the traveller is never addressed by his full name. Moreover, there are at least three other men called Bruce in the text, which highlights the contrast between the

idea of the proper name as the individual "property" of the subject and as a signifier whose signified is constantly changing. The only trace of the assumed family name can be found in Chapter 2, where the narrator retells an old memory: "One day, Aunt Ruth told me our surname had once been 'Chettenwynde', which meant 'the winding path' in Anglo-Saxon; and the suggestion took root in my head that poetry, my own name and the road were, all three, mysteriously connected" (9). The name of the empirical author does appear here, but in a distorted, non-identical form. Moreover, it emerges as a telling name, one of the most archaic literary devices: this passage not only contains a familiar trope—one's destiny being inscribed in one's name—but, by emphasising the interrelatedness of "poetry", "name" and "road" also reflects on its literary techniques, illuminating the autobiographical self's self-fictionalising strategies. Thus, following Borm's useful terminological suggestion we could come to the conclusion that *The Songlines* is a piece of travel writing that simultaneously confirms and subverts the generic norms of the travelogue. (Or, of course, those of the autobiography or those of the novel: the blurring of rigid generic boundaries is bound up in the book with the ambivalence about its fictional/non-fictional status.) The text's resistance to literal classification is one example of the way it eludes any interpretation that operates with strictly discrete and fixed categories. Highlighting the title's self-reflexive potential, it enfolds as a rhizomatic network of pathways that offers multiple, intertwined routes of reading.

From this point on my article will follow a very specific path: it will scrutinize the ways Chatwin's work presents its own vision of Aboriginal Australia for its own purposes, the ways its figurative language re-uses the stereotypes and commonplaces associated with the country and, as the anthropologist Howard Morphy puts it, turns the Songlines "into the symbol of the difference of the Aboriginal community" (Morphy 172). I will pay special attention to the textual effects that undermine the—sometimes—universalising rhetoric of the first person narrator: while he declares that "[m]y reason for coming to Australia was to try to learn for myself, and not from other men's books, what a Songline was" (Chatwin 12), he does so in a book that is interwoven with citations, allusions, fragmented quotes from "other men's books" and his own comments on his reading experiences.

Australia is immediately identified with the Songlines here, in the beginning of the novel, when the narrator explains his motivation for coming to the country. He is not the only one in the fictional world who is fascinated by the Songlines: we learn in the first chapter that his local guide, Arkady, had been "so struck by the beauty of this concept that he began to take notes of everything he saw or heard" (Chatwin 2). The son of Cossack immigrants now had a special task: he had been commissioned to map the Songlines of the area between Alice Springs and Darwin with the help of the local peoples, so that the planned new railway line could avoid sacred sites and did not offend the religious sensitivity of the "traditional landowners". The other job that "Arkady invented for himself was to interpret 'tribal law' into the language of the Law of The Crown" (3). Both "mapping" and "interpreting" can be seen as attempts to make the transition between inherently different mediums and formations of knowledge possible (and as fundamental fixtures of travel writing, these essential properties are thus instantly delegated to Arkady). Arkady is already marked here as a person of "doubling": he is so struck by the beauty of the myth about the Ancestors who are "singing out the name of everything that crossed their path" that "he began to take notes of everything he saw or heard" (2). The second of these sentences repeats the structure of the first, emphasising the parallel between the Ancestors' singing and Arkady's habit of taking notes, but repetition and doubling are already present in the myth, since the Ancestors "sing into existence" what has already crossed their path. Arkady's notes reconstruct the things heard

and seen in their own medium, and this is what his friend Bruce does in his narrative. Furthermore, the protagonist uses his own notebook to record everything that Arkady says: the recurrence of the motif of the notes—along with the similarities in their life stories—creates a parallel between the two lonely wanderers, each of whom can be considered as the other's double. Both men "interpret" and "map" those fragments of an entirely different perception of the world that they get access to. However, difference is inscribed into the chain of repetitions, too: in the form of the difference between "singing out" and writing down, between creation and reproduction, between presence and representation. In general, the functioning of figurative language in Chatwin's text can be described with the help of words referring to the same kind of movement (return, repetition, recurrence), but this movement is by definition paradoxical, since the novel exposes the destabilizing potential of figures of speech that otherwise presuppose fixity. The opening of the novel already hints at the fact that transmitting knowledge about the cultural Other inevitably goes hand in hand with its transformation.

Mapping, similarly to the act of interpretation, implies in the above-mentioned episode two-sided communication: the making of Arkady's atlas engenders an intercultural dialogue instead of accumulating geographical knowledge solely for the railway company's purposes. It seems thus that the cartographic representation does not emerge in this context as a metonym of the colonizing white power but rather as a device of mediation between two different concepts of property and ways of relating to the land. The map of the company's vision would depict, as a proposition about the world that it creates, a political terrain in which secular and sacred sites exist side by side, and which is simultaneously governed by the laws of the modern Australian state and those of the Indigenous peoples' belief systems. Nevertheless, it turns out that the process of mapping is more problematic than it initially seems and Arkady is well aware of it: "I warned the engineer he was being a bit rash" (Chatwin 4). When asked about the reasons for his concern, his answer sheds light on the impossibility of his task: "if you look at it their way […] the whole of bloody Australia's a sacred site" (4). This means that in the end the fully accomplished cartographic project would destroy itself. In one of the founding texts of deconstructive cartography, J. B. Harley argues for the inherent rhetoricity of the map, calling attention to the rhetorical operations—selection, omission, symbolization, etc.—which are always present in the work of the cartographer (Harley 1). If Arkady created a map that really represented the sanctity of the land from an Aboriginal perspective, he would have to avoid the manoeuvres of selection. He would either have to sketch everything using a mile-to-mile scale similarly to Borges's famous short story "On Exactitude in Science", or he would simply draw an Australia-shaped stain on the paper without indicating any point of orientation on it. If maps as cultural technologies are considered "spaces of representation" rather than "representations of space" (Siegert 13), Arkady's unfinished one represents a futile attempt at coupling two systems of knowledge that are incommensurable.

It needs to be added that the resistance to being mapped is a topos that heavily determined the nineteenth century perception of the country, especially that of its vast central area: as Roslyn B. Haynes points out, explorers' written accounts from the era mirror the Eurocentric obsession with subduing "the hideous blank" of Central-Australia to the "domination of the map" (Haynes 4). *The Songlines* re-invents the image of the unmappable land, as it is now not the geographical environment but the cultural-spiritual landscape that resists the objectifying and universalising logic of cartographic representation. However, instead of simply offering a critique of the Eurocentric instrumentalization of geographical knowledge, the book also presents the Songlines as alternatives to the Western conception of cartography: "A song […]

was both map and direction-finder" (Chatwin 13), as Arkady summarizes the guiding and orientating function of Songlines. In another episode American tourists begin to understand a painting of the Honey-Ant dreaming when they realize that it can be read as "a route-map" (26). In a dialogue Arkady explains to Bruce that the melodic structure of the songs consists of motivated and unmotivated signs, just as a relief map: "it seems the melodic contour of the song describes the nature of the land over which the song passes" (108). Thus, on the one hand, it is impossible for Chatwin's Aboriginal Australia to be translated into the terms of Western cartography, but on the other hand it also appears as a place where both cultural phenomena and natural objects have a map-like semiotic quality, as a place where the production of meaning is in a constantly on-going process. Furthermore, the trope of the map also functions on a meta-reflexive level in the novel; the interpretation of the Songlines as a system of direction-finders opens a path towards a deeper understanding of the Aboriginal geosophy which is called by Tony Swain the most important "principle permeating the Law" (Swain 25). The concept of the "songmap" which simultaneously represents the land and exists as a part of it is linked to two other, interconnected aspects of Chatwin's construction of Australia: the country is associated with the desert and its nomadic inhabitants in the figurative language of the book.

Chatwin's view of Australia as a land of nomads is manifested (among other textual layers) in the description of the characters' dwelling places. Alice Springs, the place that is closest to a city in *The Songlines'* world, is depicted in the first sentence of the novel as "a grid of scorching streets where men in long white socks were forever getting in and out of Land Cruisers" (2). The motif of always getting in and out of cars positions Alice not as a home of its residents but as a transitory stop in a constant flux of movement. The internal spaces that serve as the lodgings of the characters either take the form of a heterotopia, since the tent or the caravan is "a place without a place", as Foucault suggests (49), or appear as temporary shelters that bear the marks of transitoriness, like Arkady's town residence in a disused newspaper-shop or Father Terence's little hut with a cross on its roof, whose arms "are lashed together from two pieces of a broken oar" (Chatwin 63). Therefore the text dissolves the dividing line between the architectural and the natural environment, bringing the latter into the foreground: Chatwin's figures with their multiple and mobile identities are metaphorically connected to the scene of their wanderings, namely the Australian desert. The novel begins in medias res in Alice Springs and ends with the trip to a tjuringa house near Alice: we know nothing about the exact details of Bruce's arrival in Australia or about his plans to return to England. This means that two elements from Paul Fussell's tripartite model of the travel narrative—the beginning ("the disjunction from the familiar") and the ending ("reintegration into society", Fussell 208) of the hero's adventures—are evidently missing from the book. Consequently, the novel makes it impossible for the reader to reconstruct Bruce's story as a linear process of spiritual and intellectual development, but it also follows from this that the protagonist's circular route begins and ends literally in the desert: the book's construction of Australia relies only on the images of the arid, mainly uninhabited Outback, with almost no reference to the coastal, urban part of the country.

The desert usually carries negative connotations in the Western imaginative topography: as Tom Lynch explains, "the English language itself is implicated in the widespread Australian inability to see the deserts on their own terms, and hence the subsequent disdain and fear that is frequently expressed for desert places" (Lynch 72). Beyond appearing as a synecdoche of the country, the desert often symbolises the land's irremediable foreignness; an experience that has dominated the literary representations of Australia for a long time. Gail MacGregor observes that "(i)n novel after novel the aspect emphasized in the descriptions of the land,

quite apart from any specific features that might be invoked, is its alienness" (MacGregor 13). One instance of this approach might be D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*, where a sense of uncanniness is suggested by the image of the ghost-like, impenetrable bush and the Southern sky. The alienating effect of the unfamiliar sky is articulated in a language that depicts it as something non-natural: "the huge, electric moon […] Something fully evoked to-night, perhaps provoked, by that unnatural West-Australian moon" (Lawrence 14). My reason for referring to *Kangaroo* is that Bruce also thinks back to Lawrence's words about "that peculiar lost, weary aloofness of Australia" (Lawrence 13) when he looks down at the plain from the top of Mount Liebler. The quotation indicates the protagonist narrator's awareness of the above-mentioned tradition of representing Australia, yet Chatwin's traveller uses other strategies to perpetuate his impressions.

First of all, *The Songlines* distances itself from the symbolism that usually characterizes the representation of desert places and which derives mainly from Biblical stories of the Fall and the forty years of wilderness wandering. In fact, the book that was published in 1987 belongs to those works that both signalled and fostered a conceptual change regarding the central area of the country, suggesting that "the desert has come to epitomise a new perspective, an unsuspected beauty" (Haynes 290). This does not mean a complete break from the Biblical imagery but the re-evaluation of a less central element of the Judeo-Christian tradition: Chatwin presents the desert through allusions to John the Baptist and the early Christian Desert Monks as a site of spiritual renunciation (although the protagonist narrator always distances himself from the explicit articulation of such inner motivations; indeed, he rather projects the desire for spiritual renewal onto the other characters in the novel). What is more, in accordance with the suggestion of the map-metaphor, the narrator argues that the desert in general is characterised by a set of intriguing ambiguities instead of merely being a meaningless and ahistorical void. On the one hand, its surface is perpetually changing, so that it requires not only physical but intellectual mobility from the wanderer, who is always engaged in the semiotic process of reading, and therefore reconstructing his environment: "He must forever be naming, sifting, comparing the thousands of different 'signs'—the tracks of a dung beetle or the ripple of a dune—to tell him where he is" (200). On the other hand, it is precisely its ever-changing, unstable, unconquerable nature that makes the desert remain the same, which is also mirrored in its inhabitants' "timeless and irreverent vitality" (18). Furthermore, instead of emphasising an overall sense of wilderness and incomprehensibility, the descriptive passages in the novel attempt to create the impression that they clearly and accurately record the visual perception of the various landscapes in the desert area. The domestication of the sight of the land is partly achieved through references to European fine arts, which provide easily accessible visual associations: "After about ten miles, the country changed from the yellow-flowering scrub to a rolling, open parkland of bleached grass […] if you soft-focused your eyes, you'd think you were in the lit-up Provençal landscape of Van Gogh's Cornfield near Arles" (287). However, this strategy of visualisation becomes really interesting when the land unfolds itself to the traveller's eyes as it does on Aboriginal paintings: "I was climbing steadily, and, looking down at the plain, understood why Aboriginals choose to paint their land in 'pointillist' dots. The land was dotted. The white dots were spinifex; the blueish dots were eucalyptus, and the lemon-green dots were some other kind of tufty grass" (226). Of course, from a strictly ethnographic point of view the Pintupi paintings that Bruce refers to cannot be described as the mimetic representations of a given geographic area; yet, what this passage emphasises is that the richness, variety and meaningfulness of the desert becomes most visible when it is treated inseparably from the culture of its inhabitants.

Bruce begins to see the landscape through the lenses of Pintupi art when he climbs Mount Liebler, the site of the Perenty Dreaming. He survives the heat and the exhaustion, escapes from the bite of a king-brown and finds a way out of the spinifex, because, as he puts it, "(a)t times I despaired of finding a way through, but always, like Ariadne's thread, there was a way through" (226). The allusion to the Greek myth clearly marks the allegorical dimension of the episode: it can be read as the mise-en-abyme of Bruce's whole journey. The chapter does not present Bruce's adventure as the Western explorer's heroic triumph over the hostile Australian nature, but rather as a process of getting closer to an understanding of Aboriginal ontology according to which a place "contains specific existence potentials" (Swain 36). Without directly imitating the discourse of Aboriginal mythology or deploying the language of spirituality, the text suggests that Bruce finds himself in the reality of a Dreaming track. What appears first only in the form of similarity—"I came out on a knife edge of rock. It really did look like the perenty lizard's tail" (226)—materializes in the end: on the top of the hill the traveller encounters "the lord of the mountain, Perenty himself (227).

However, the text also indicates the limits of Bruce's ability to understand the Aboriginal thought encapsulated in the Songlines. The mentioning of Ariadne's thread is not the only allusion to the story of Minotauros. Indeed, the Songlines are often referred to as the "labyrinth of invisible pathways" (2) in the book. Although in the sentence quoted above Bruce self-mockingly presents himself as a modern but equally lucky Theseus, suggesting that there is always a way out from the labyrinth, the other uses of the metaphor reinforce its more negative connotations: perplexity, incomprehensibility and a lack of orientation. The semantic field of the synonymously-used words "labyrinth" and "maze" also entails the notion of being lost, which is associated with Australia throughout the book, not as an entirely negative experience, and even as a liberating one. As Hughie the New Zealander says, "it's a lovely place to be lost in. Being lost in Australia gives you a lovely feeling of security" (47). But lostness is also connected to the identity crisis and the historical traumas of Aboriginal peoples: "'Australia', Arkady said slowly, 'is the country of lost children'" (116). To sum it up, the use of the Songlines as the master trope of the novel which signifies the otherness of Aboriginal Australia engenders a chain of polarities. Whereas the metaphorical links between the song, the map, the land, and the people enhance the impression of gaining insight into the world of Aboriginal peoples, the images of the labyrinth—the unmappable area, where one gets lost easily—throw a dubious light on Bruce's Theseus-like search for knowledge. It could be said that the tension between the two polarities is not necessarily irresolvable, since it can be explained by the perspectival nature of the objects of cognition. What seems first to be a "maze of wiggly, flamingo-pink lines" on a painting (25) turns out to be the route of the Honey Ant, and Bruce gradually realizes that the "rectangular maze" on Joshua's sand drawing (154) is London Airport. That is, with the help of the proper code the labyrinth-like lines can be read as systems of signs that belong to certain conventions of Aboriginal cartographic representation. Following this logic, we come to the conclusion that the labyrinth and the map represent the two subsequent phases of understanding Australia: what appears initially as meaningless or enigmatic reveals itself later as comprehensible and meaningful. Of course, this interpretative decision presupposes a quantitative view of cultural otherness according to which otherness equals a deficit of knowledge; in the possession of the missing information the Other can easily become transformed into the well-known. I argue, however, that *The Songlines* also stages the encounter with the Other in a more complex way, putting the quantitative approach into brackets.

The complexity of the experience of cultural otherness is dramatized, to give one example, in the story of the lost earth grader. In chapter 33 Bruce joins the local men in the search for a grader that has been borrowed by the Cullen Mob and never given back. After a long drive they arrive at a gap between two hills, where instead of the machine they only find grader tracks: "For miles ahead the landscape was churned up into circles, loops and figures of eight. But no matter how many times we drove round this ridiculous maze, there was still no sign of the grader" (235). In the end Bruce finds the grader on the top of a hillock, but it still remains a question: "How the hell did they get it up there?" (235) The episode is comical and perplexing at the same time. The Cullen Mob imprints tracks on the earth, and thus they repeat the acts of the Ancestors, but they do it with the help of an earth-grader, a tool that in the other parts of the novel stands for the destruction of the traditional I-thou relationship between the land and the Aboriginal subject. Their gesture can be interpreted as a grotesque parody of their story of origins but also as a creative re-writing or continuation of it. Whereas the allusion to the Theseus-myth offered a useful analogy for the European thinking in the episode of the trip to Mount Liebler, the image of the maze ceases to have a domesticating-familiarizing potential here. The trope materialises as an obscure inscription on the surface of the land made by the Aborigines; as a sign that signifies its own unreadability. It casts an ironical light on the strategy that attempts to capture otherness—the otherness of the Songlines, the land and its inhabitants—through a chain of tropological substitutions and associations. The system of semiotic signification collapses at this point, and the map—the trope—becomes one with the territory.

At the end of the novel Arkady happily announces that he is out of job, because the railway constructors have no money to continue with their work. This means that his map is never going to be completed. Bruce goes with his friend to see Titus, the leader of the local Pintupi community, who tells them about the visit of someone from a mining company. Titus quotes the words he told to the representative of the company, who was showing him a geological survey map: "We have different ways of looking at this. We've got a lot of important Dreamings in the area. We've got Native Cat […] and we've got an 'eternal home' for Big Kangaroo. At a guess I'd say he was your oilfield or whatever. But he's been sleeping there since the Dreamtime and, if I have a say in the matter, he's going to go on sleeping for ever" (290-291). Titus's utterance reinforces Arkady's earlier observation about the insurmountable difference between the two ways of looking at things: the norms of the Western cartographic representation are not compatible with the Aboriginal perception of their land. However, Chatwin's novel attempts to map Aboriginal Australia by way of adjusting itself to its alternative logic: the text enacts the network-like functioning of the Songlines (and Aboriginal cultures in general) through its decentred and rhizomatic, "unmappable" structure. At the same time, the narration also indicates the limitations of this strategy of understanding. Indeed, it is precisely the overflowing abundance of metaphorical analogies, comparisons and parallels between the Songlines and the images of Western culture that demonstrates that impossibility of translating the former into the latter, a failure to attribute to it one unequivocal definition. Therefore the opposition between the map and the labyrinth turns into interchangeability: they simultaneously function as the figures of *The Songline*'s reading—and as the figures of the novel's reading of Australia.

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Ágnes Balajthy is a junior lecturer at the Institute of Hungarian Literature and Culture at the University of Debrecen, Hungary. Her fields of research include 20th century and contemporary Hungarian and British fiction, theories of literature and culture influenced by the spatial turn (cultural geography, the poetics of place, literary topography) and travel writing. She is especially interested in the ways literary texts represent cultural otherness, expose the relationship between memory and place, and stage the sensory dimensions of the experience of travel. She also works as an editor and regularly publishes reviews in Hungarian literary journals.
balajthya@gmail.com