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Chatwinesque, or Travel Writing as a Narrative Genre

What has changed in travel writing since Bruce Chatwin? Why have his books become the universal pass in the bag of each young traveler with literary aspirations? And, why do so many critics still look down their noses when reading his works? Focusing on In Patagonia *(1977) and* The Songlines *(1987), this article investigates Chatwin's role in changing the idea of what a travelogue should (or could) be. Ambiguously juggling between documentary honesty and literary invention, Chatwin proposed a concept of travel writing as an autonomous narrative genre. In a world where travel writing had to redefine its meaning and face the new dynamics of globalization, he discovered a way to give back a voice to places and render them "cloths woven with stories."*

The first editor of *In Patagonia*, Susannah Clapp, coined the term "Chatwinesque" in response to the *narrative turn* Bruce Chatwin imposed on contemporary travel writing with this book. Though Chatwin did not like the definition of "travel writer" and simply referred to his texts as "searches", he contributed to revolutionizing travel theory by the means of an original metaliterary approach that investigated the reciprocal inferences between spatial movements and poetic ones. This innovative pattern invoked differing opinions to his texts – such as the above-mentioned *In Patagonia* or later *The Songlines* (1987). While some critics considered these books as the holy bible of contemporary travelers, others perceived them to be a collection of lies. The following article outlines the causes of this contradiction and describes the role Chatwin played in the contemporary debate on travel theory. If travel writing, as Bill Buford once stated, has always showed a "wonderful ambiguity between fact and fiction", Chatwin's books turned this dialectics, which for centuries has been the unsolved weak point of this literary genre, into a conceptual key to redefine it as a narrative type.[1]

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[1] Susannah Clapp, *With Chatwin. Portrait of a Writer*, London: Cape, 1997, p. 3 and passim. The two mentioned travelogues are Bruce Chatwin, *In Patagonia*, London: Cape, 1977, and Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*, London: Cape, 1987. Buford's definition is taken from his Editorial, in: *Granta* 13, 1984, p. 5. On Chatwin's "searches", see Nicholas Murray, *Bruce Chatwin*, Bridgend: Seren Books, 1993, p. 12. I broadly analyzed the theoretical questions raised in the next pages also in: Luigi Marfé, *Oltre la fine dei viaggi*, Firenze: Olschki, 2009.

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Firstly, it would be appropriate to briefly outline the story of *In Patagonia.* Chatwin embarked for South America in December 1974. Two years beforehand, he had been invited by Francis Wyndham to work as a columnist for the *Sunday Times Magazine.* This position enabled him to write whatever he wanted and travel anywhere free of charge. Chatwin accompanied the mathematician and archeologist Maria Reiche on her searches for the Nazca Lines in Peru. He told the story of an art collector living in Soviet Russia, described the exploitation of Algerian migrants in France, and published various other inquiries and interviews. Chatwin particularly liked the eclectic approach of the periodical as it avoided putting forward political purposes and simply aimed to narrate strange stories with a fresh style. In 1974, however, the editorial policy changed: Chatwin was expected to send articles with a more pragmatic approach and reduce his travel expenses. According to stories that circulated about him, Chatwin supposedly sent a telegram to the editor and disappeared. The telegram read: "gone to Patagonia".[2]

Why Patagonia? The title of the typescript proposed by Chatwin to the Jonathan Cape editorial one year later was *To the End.* Chatwin believed Patagonia to be the most remote and uncontaminated country in the world: "the safest place on Earth, somewhere to live when the rest of the world blew up". By actually going there, Chatwin discovered that his ideas were both correct and incorrect at the same time. They were correct because the inhabitants of Patagonia were in effect a community deeply isolated in their "story of exile, disillusion and anxiety". They were incorrect on account of the fact that European emigrants who had settled there had not attempted to preserve the spirit of ancient Patagonia, but rather the vanishing traditions of a Europe that no longer existed. It was, as Clapp stated, "a multinational collection of expatriates and exiles, many of whom felt most at home with themselves when they were abroad".[3]

In the exposition of *In Patagonia*, Chatwin wrote that the real reason of his journey was to research an exotic object. He pretended that his grandmother's glass-fronted cabinet hosted some odd curiosities from all over the world. When he was a child, Chatwin was especially fascinated by a piece of skin of an extinct animal, the Mylodon, which was given to his grandmother by her cousin, the sailor Charley Milward. Chatwin was supposed to inherit the skin, but when his grandmother died, it disappeared. Thus readers are told that Chatwin embarked on a long journey in search of the Mylodon's skin, to the regions of Patagonia where Milward claimed to have found it. At the end of this seemingly impossible quest, after having traversed the whole region, Chatwin happened to find

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[2] See Nicholas Shakespeare, *Bruce Chatwin*, London: Harvill-Cape, 1999.

[3] Chatwin, *In Patagonia* (see note 1), p. 3–4; Clapp, *With Chatwin* (see note 1), p. 25.

himself deep inside an isolated cave. Instead of the skin, all he found were some pieces of fur immersed in dung:

> I walked the four miles from Puerto Consuelo to the Cave. It was raining but the sun dipped under the clouds and sparkled on the bushes. The cave-mouth gaped, four hundred feet wide, into a cliff of grey conglomerate. […] The ceiling was shaggy with white stalactites and the sides glittered with salt encrustation. Animal tongues had licked the back wall smooth. […] The floor was covered with turds, sloth turds, outside black leathery turds, full of ill-digested grass, that looked as if they had been shat last week. […] "Well", I thought, "if there's no skin, at least there is a load of shit".[4]

This ironic attitude gave a Quixotesque aspect to Chatwin's travel. *In Patagonia* offered a rewriting of the eternal story of the hero's quest: "my piece of dung wasn't exactly the Golden Fleece, but it gave me the idea for the form of a travel book, for the oldest kind of traveller's tale is one in which the narrator leaves home and goes to a far country in search of a legendary beast", he wrote some years later in *Patagonia Revisited* (1985). At the same time, however, Chatwin proved that the stereotypes writers traditionally associated with travel are invalid and not convincing in the fragmented world of post-modernity. In past centuries, travelogues were written in order to describe far away places to readers unable to travel; nowadays mass media is responsible for circulating detailed images of the whole world. Thus, travel writing needs to find its literary necessity on a different poetic level.[5]

Chatwin responded to this challenge by inventing a new type of travel narrative. His reference models were books such as *Une Saison en infer* (1873) by Arthur Rimbaud, *Putešestvie v Armeniju* (1933) by Osip Mandelstam, *The Road to Oxiana* (1937) by Robert Byron and *A Time of Gifts* (1977) by Patrick Leigh Fermor. Agreeing with these authors, he put forward the concept of an original "metaphysics of walking", which stated that any destination is unattainable and that travel consists of nomadic and never-ending wandering. Some years before, this had already been the main theme of his first unedited book, a "wildly ambitious and intolerant work" outlining the story of human wandering called "the nomadic alternative". No publishing house accepted it, but from that point on Chatwin suffered from a "great illness" which, according to Charles Baudelaire, is provoked by the dread of staying home (*horreur du domicile*). Chatwin once wrote that Mandelstam "had an idea that the production of words in the larynx was dependent on the action of the feet" and "he had to be walking, when actually writing a poem". Describing Mandelstam's creativity, Chatwin was also describing himself.[6]

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[4] Chatwin, *In Patagonia* (see note 1), p. 195.

[5] Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux, *Patagonia Revisited*, London: Cape, 1985, p. 17.

[6] Bruce Chatwin, Introduction, in: Osip Mandelstam, *Journey to Armenia.* Translated by Clarence Brown, London: Redston, 1989. The texts quoted in the passage are: Arthur Rimbaud, *Une Saison en infer*, Bruxelles: Alliance typographique, 1873; Osip Mandel'stam, Putešestvie v Ar-

This existential approach to travel ensured that *In Patagonia* was an overnight success. It became a worldwide bestseller, won many awards and was viewed as a classic to all those who decided to leave home and travel. This status resulted from the extensive reworking of the first version that the director of Jonathan Cape, Tom Maschler, demanded from Chatwin. Due to this reshuffling, completed with the decisive help of Clapp, *In Patagonia* incorporated what Gilles Deleuze would later define as the "logic of contingence". The reader experiences Patagonia as a series of detached images, strung together by the author like pearls on a necklace. Clapp's memory of her work is as follows: "it was obviously important not to streamline the loops and extravagances out of existence. It was also important to provide readers with a way of dealing with them. The book was not to be an adventure story, but nor should it be a series of cameos". In the final version, locations seem to be inserted into a literary project which shaped them according to the traveler's movements.[7]

Chatwin's books were commended by writers such as Paul Theroux, Salman Rushdie, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Paul Auster, Luis Sepúlveda, and Winfried G. Sebald. Such international attention confirms Chatwin's role in the evolution of a post-modern aesthetics over the last thirty years. These writers praised him for his ability to juggle varied linguistic registers and literary genres without forgetting that he was writing a narrative. With this in mind, Enzensberger commented that Chatwin had a "sublime disregard for the categories of fiction and non-fiction" and that "*In Patagonia* has been called a documentary and a travelogue, but neither of these odious terms will fit. It showed the hand of a story-teller who did not fall for the illusion of originality". This same ability to endlessly discover new narrative threads also impressed Rushdie. In *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), he wrote that Chatwin "was a magnificent raconteur of Scheherazadean inexhaustibility, a gilt-edged name-dropper, a voracious reader of exoteric texts, a scholar gipsy, a mimic, and a giggler of international class. He was as talkative as he was curious, and he was curious about everything".[8]

The people Chatwin encountered during his travels were, however, not so enthusiastic. Someone said Chatwin lied and deliberately misrepresented their

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meniju, in: *Zvezda*, 5, 1933, p. 103 – 125; Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana*, London: Cape, 1937; Patrick Leigh Fermor, *A Time of Gifts. On Foot to Constantinople from the Hook of Holland to the Middle Danube*, London: Murray, 1977.

[7] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, Paris: Minuit, 1980.

[8] See these reviews in particular: John Updike, The Jones Boys, in: *The New Yorker*, 21/3/1983, p. 126 – 130; Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Much Left Unsaid, in: *Times Literary Supplement*, 16/6/1989, p. 657; Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, London: Granta, 1991; Paul Theroux, Chatwin Revisited, in: Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux, *Nowhere is a Place. Travels in Patagonia*, Vancouver-Toronto: Douglas-McIntyre, 1992, p. 11 – 17; Winfried G. Sebald, Das Geheimnis des rotbraunen Fells. Annäherung an Bruce Chatwin aus Anlass von Nicholas Shakespeare's Biographie, in *Literaturen* 2, 2000, p. 72 – 75 (this review later appeared in: Winfried G. Sebald, *Campo santo.* Edited by H. Meyer, München: Hanser, 2003, p. 215 – 222).

real life; others said he stole their stories for financial gain. Ironically, one charge cancels out the other one. If Chatwin was a liar, how could he be a thief of what he himself had invented? On the other hand, if he set out to steal someone else's story, how could he be branded a liar? The real reason behind such spiteful reactions is due to the fact that, according to many readers, Chatwin broke the implicit agreement made between a travel writer and his reading public: documentary honesty. By pretending to write a travelogue, he would have deceived the people he met and in turn exploited their stories for his own economic advantage. John Pilkington, a traveler who went to Patagonia some years after Chatwin, identified the problem as follows: "I believe Bruce Chatwin knew very well, as he wandered through Patagonia in early 1975, that he was not going to give its residents a fair hearing […]. Indeed, having met them superficially, he may have been afraid to delve too deeply, suspecting that underneath they might be rather dull. To liven up the narrative of *In Patagonia*, he focused his attention on an array of larger-than-life characters […] and where details were missing he made them up".[9]

The most accurate book concerning Chatwin's ambiguities is without a doubt *La Patagonia de Chatwin* (1999) by Argentinian writer Adrián Giménez Hutton. This work discusses the results of two years' research on the very people described by Chatwin. According to Giménez Hutton, Chatwin misrepresented the reality he saw in Patagonia by constantly omitting important details, using fictional categories, and adding false captions to real photographs. Sometimes this approach could unwittingly reveal comic effects. For example, Chatwin wrote that upon opening the telephone directory of Buenos Aires to a random page, he found only the surnames of immigrants listed. This is commented on by Giménez Hutton: "I tried with a present phone book and I found a Romanov after a whole page of Romano and before four of Romero; […] the Rose and the Rothschild were more than twenty, but the Rodríguez occupied eighteen pages. I think that Chatwin did not shoot at random, but chose voluntarily. […] Argentina is a country of immigrants rather than exiles. But Chatwin loved exile and, where he did not found exiles, he invented them".[10]

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9 See John Pilkington, *An Englishman in Patagonia*, London: Century, 1991. Actually, Pilkington is not a trustful witness, since his book contained some mistakes in the individuation of Chatwin's places.

10 Adrián Giménez Hutton, *La Patagonia de Chatwin*, Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999, p. 21: "hice la prueba con una guía telefónica actual y encontré un Romanov después de una página entera de Romano y seguido de cuatro de Romero; […] los Rose y los Rothschild superaban los veinte, mientras que los Rodríguez ocupaban dieciocho páginas. Me inclino más a pensar que lo de Chatwin fue elección y no azar. […] Argentina es eso, un país de inmigrantes. No de exiliados. Pero Chatwin era un amante del exilio, y donde no encontraba exiliados, los inventaba"; my translation, L.M.

Critics such as Charles Sugnet and Tim Youngs criticized Chatwin's approach, as according to them it led to a superficial representation of non-European countries. Sugnet, in particular, evaluated Chatwin's works in the canon of travel writers published by the magazine *Granta* during the eighties. He pointed out that the travel theory proposed by the editorial of this magazine displayed the same errors that other postcolonial scholars had charged against orientalism. *Granta* travelers based their meta-textual idea of travel on Joseph Conrad, but at the same time could (or perhaps would) not free themselves from the ambiguities of colonialist discourses: "for *Granta*, travel means a rational, detached, slightly disillusioned writer making a foray out from the centre to the peripheries, where he sees that, as usual, the peripheries are uncivilized". Among Chatwin's works, Sugnet especially criticized the travelogue *A Coup* (1983) on Benin, but the problem was a broader one. Chatwin always described places aesthetically and Sugnet considered this to be a false approach.[11]

Before writing *In Patagonia*, Chatwin had recognized the same risks in a critical essay on Robert Louis Stevenson entitled *The Road to the Isles* (1974). According to Chatwin, the author of *Treasure Island* (1883) was not a real wanderer, since he constantly sought the approval of his bourgeois readers. In order to seduce them, he could not free himself from the chains of western culture and dedicate his entire life to the "nomadic alternative". Chatwin wrote that "Stevenson yearned for adventure, but he hadn't the stomach for it; on the whole, he travelled in a world made safe for aesthetes" and became "the forerunner of countless middle-class children who litter the world's beaches, or comfort themselves with anachronistic pursuits and worn-out religions". However many critics recognized the figure of Chatwin in this portrait of a "perennial boy with the pack on his back, always happier to be somewhere else". Indeed, as had happened to Stevenson, *In Patagonia* quickly became the tourist guide for lots of avid middle-class youngsters.[12]

One of the most impressive peculiarities of *In Patagonia* is the portrayal of the author as a character. Like Stevenson, Chatwin only dressed up for the part of the wanderer and played the role of the nomad rather than ever really becoming one. He was always impassive, expressionless, and discreet: a model in pose rather than an individual. Manfred Pfister argued convincingly that this process of auto-stylization allowed Chatwin to portray himself as the main hero of his

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[11] See Charles Sugnet, Vile Bodies, Vile Places. Travelling with Granta, in: *Transition* 51, 1991, p. 70–85; and Tim Youngs, Punctuating Travel: Paul Theroux and Bruce Chatwin, in: *Literature & History* 6, 2, 1997, p. 73–88. Chatwin's article on Benin is: A Coup, in: *Granta*, 10, 1983, p. 107–128 (later collected in: Bruce Chatwin, *What Am I Doing Here*, London: Cape, 1989, p. 15–35).

[12] Bruce Chatwin, The Road to the Isles, in: *The Times Literary Supplement*, 25/10/1974, p. 1195–1196 (then collected in: Bruce Chatwin, *Anatomy of Restlessness.* Ed. by Jan Borm and Matthew Graves, London: Cape, 1996, p. 129–139).

work. He often quoted the esoteric precept by Noël Coward: "never let anything artistic stand in your way". From his perspective, this statement was an invitation to take art seriously and not to consider it as something detached from everyday life. Together with the above-mentioned ambiguities, this aesthetic conception invested Chatwin with a "serendipity of the glance" that made him assess each event, person, or place he encountered in terms of their narrative potential. The secret behind the "absolute eye" of his style consists precisely in his ability to reveal this talent. As the Italian editor Roberto Calasso noticed, his travelogues were similar to those of François-René de Chateaubriand. Both these authors believed the traveler to be a restless searcher of images, one who goes abroad with the auto-referential aim to discover new stories for his books.[13]

In this regard, Theroux has often related an episode that he considered important in terms of representing Chatwin's ideas on travel. Once, during a conversation, he asked Chatwin why *In Patagonia* was so lacking in adequate description of the material details of the journey. Theroux would have said: "I think when you're writing a travel book you have to come clean". Chatwin would have laughed and replied: "I don't believe in coming clean!"[14] I do not know whether the story is real or not, but it serves to illustrate that the role *In Patagonia* plays in the canon of contemporary travel writing does not have to be evaluated on the basis of documentary truth. Chatwin put forward a theory of travel, which explored the implicit narrativity of places, encounters and landscapes. He "helped to change the idea of what travel writing could be"[15], since he modified this literary genre in such an innovative way that it substituted ontological worries with narrative considerations.[16]

Since the time of Herodotus, travel writing primarily concerned searching for new stories: according to the Greek etymology, the *histôr* is in fact a seeker. Despite his denials, Chatwin was a real travel writer due to his passion for looking at things as narrative objects. Referring to this, Clapp quoted another episode of Chatwin's life, which serves to counterbalance Theroux's anecdote. One day he went to a small antiquarian in Ludlow where he saw two Sumatran javelins on sale. Back in London, he discussed this with Jonathan Hope and asked him to buy them, one for each of them. He then disappeared on one of his travels. Hope went alone to the antiquarian and discovered that the objects were

[13] See Manfred Pfister, Bruce Chatwin and the Postmodernization of the Travelogue, in: *LIT* 7, 1996, p. 253–267; and Roberto Calasso, Chette-wynde, in: Bruce Chatwin, *Sentieri tortuosi. Bruce Chatwin fotografo. La fotografia vista da Roberto Calasso*, Milano: Adelphi, 1998, p. 11–15.

[14] See Theroux, *Chatwin Revisited* (see note 8), p. 11–17.

[15] Clapp, *With Chatwin* (see note 1), p. 25.

[16] Chatwin expressed similar ideas in an interview with Michael Ignatieff (An Interview with Bruce Chatwin, in: *Granta*, 21, 1987, p. 23–27), when he was asked about the reliability of *In Patagonia* and ironically answered: "I once made the experiment of counting up the lies in the book I wrote about Patagonia. It wasn't, in fact, too bad. There weren't too many".

not Sumatran javelins, but rather umbrellas from Sri Lanka. However, it seemed a good bargain and he bought them. After some time, Chatwin returned to London and told everyone that Hope had cheated him. When they met again, Hope explained to Chatwin the events which had taken place and tried to give him one of the umbrellas. Chatwin refused. His retort was: "No thanks. I'd rather have the story".[17]

"Chatwinesque" is the art of drawing highly improbable chances together. Having realized that the processes of globalization took away any trace of mystery and otherness from places, Chatwin replaced the impossible search for the picturesque with a restless quest for strange anecdotes, eccentric conversations, and bizarre details. The underlying postulate of this technique is that a well-constructed story can describe a place more effectively than any documented analysis of it. Clapp observed that Chatwin "had plausible fictions, tales which were taken as gospel by some listeners, as jokes by others and which left many with the sense that they had when reading his books, of being dangled between fact and fiction". His approach to travel writing involved the postmodern precept of mixing together every cultural tradition. *In Patagonia* – as Nicholas Shakespeare put it – is a sort of "literary equivalent of his grandmother's cabinet": it includes only marginal individuals, unobtainable objects, unread books, and very odd characters. Considering this extreme country as the ideal landscape for weird destinies – as in the case of Butch Cassidy's and the Sundance Kid's escape – Chatwin enabled the space to acquire new symbolic meanings, demonstrating Theroux's statement that also "nowhere is a place".[18]

What Chatwin proved with his books was that space exists in order to be narrated. Similar to the German paronomasia, which connects the place (*Ort*) to the word (*Wort*), Chatwin described the act of wandering as a movement that binds together space and imagination since its routes are always "songlines", or, in plain English, narrative journeys. The theory of travel he implicitly supported gave space to the same poetic potential that in novels is usually reserved for time. If the substance of a novel – as Paul Ricœur wrote – is that of *narrated time*, Chatwin's travelogues are literary representations of *narrated space.* Indeed, they move away from the idea that places – to continue Ricœurian terminology – are nothing but "cloths woven with stories" and their identity depends on the stories they enclose.[19]

This form of poetics, which was initially explored in *In Patagonia*, was later polished and sharpened in *The Songlines.* This travelogue outlines the journey that Chatwin undertook with Rushdie in the desert of central Australia. In the mid-eighties he was an international writer at the peak of his career, but he still

[17] Clapp, *With Chatwin* (see note 1), p. 111.
[18] Clapp, *With Chatwin* (see note 1), p. 8.
[19] Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, Paris: Seuil, 1983–1985.

did not know how to deal with his ideas on nomadism. The aborigines' Dreamtime – the legendary paths that the tribal ancestors walked while creating the world with their songs – became the sudden solution to his obsession. By highlighting the intimacy between the urge to travel and the art of storytelling, the songlines gave him a vivid image for his poetics. "The whole of Australia could be read as a musical score. There was hardly a rock or creek in the country that could not or had not been sung", Chatwin wrote, reflecting on the aboriginal myth: "One should perhaps visualise the songlines as a spaghetti of *Iliads* and *Odysseys*, writhing this way and that, in which every episode was readable in terms of geology".

Whilst Chatwin was writing *The Songlines*, he already knew that death was upon him. Finishing the book was literally a race against time, and many sections had to be written quickly. When the book was finished, the editorial board was not sure how to classify it: was it fiction or non-fiction? Chatwin protested: "Fiction. I made it up".[20] It was a joke, but it was also his ironic way of expressing the idea that travel writing is a form of literary invention. Like the aboriginal Ancestors, who, "by singing the world into existence, […] had been poets in the original sense of poesis, meaning creation", Chatwin collected and narrated the stories of the places he visited. Showing that places could not exist if there is no one to recount them and vice versa claiming that literary creation always has to start by walking, his journeys turned into meta-literary experiments. "In Aboriginal belief, an unsung land is a dead land", Chatwin explained, "if the songs are forgotten, the land itself will die".[21]

Travel writing became with Chatwin an autonomous narrative genre, that filled what E. M. Forster always referred to as the insufficiency of the novel: the talent for letting the space sing its song. According to Chatwin, the "end of travels" which Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced to us in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) bases itself on the fact that the present age, with its frantic movements, takes away from us the idea that wandering could be an act of literary creation, one that shapes places and redefines men's identity. On the contrary, Chatwin always insisted on considering the writing of places as a narrative quest. All his travelogues represent metaphorical pursuits of voices and stories which were hidden in the landscapes he crossed. Thus Chatwin staged an existential experience that renegotiated the shape of a traveler's personality by the means of the narratives he encounters. In this regard, Wyndham wrote that when "reading Chatwin one is acutely conscious of authorial control and therefore, simultaneously, and intoxicatingly, of the alluring danger of loss of control, of things getting out of hand". Wherever he was, whether in the central town square of Timbuktu or in a

[20] Bruce Chatwin, Songs of a Friend for Life, in: *The Times*, 20/1/1989, p. 16 (later collected in *What Am I Doing Here*, London: Cape, 1989, p. 63–64).
[21] Chatwin, *The Songlines* (see note 1), p. 13–14, 52.

monastery on Mount Athos, the question Chatwin asked himself – "what am I doing here?" – was also his way to call into question the category of identity. According to the Latin phrase *solvitur ambulando*, Chatwin linked the description of travel to the narration of personality. For him, "what am I doing here?" was a trick way of asking "who am I? who is the other?" and thus to open up the possibility of literature to represent reality.