

Questioning China: (Mis)understanding strategies in László Krasznahorkai's "Destruction and Sorrow Beneath the Heavens"

ÁGNES BALAJTHY

In his often-cited essay on travel writing, Tzvetan Todorov attempts to define the genre in terms of its thematic concerns: "The 'true' travel narrative, from the point of view of the contemporary reader, recounts the discovery of others, either the savages of faraway lands, or the representatives of non-European civilisations – Arab, Hindu, Chinese, and so on. A journey in France would not result in a 'travel narrative'" (1995, 68). It is enough to refer to W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, a brilliant re-invention of the British home tour narrative (coincidentally, the book was published in the same year as the English translation of Todorov's text) to – at least partially – refute the literary theorist's statement. Yet, it can truly be observed that the most significant pieces of 20th-century and contemporary travel writing are usually set outside of the Euro-Atlantic area; one could mention here Robert Byron's *Afghanistan*, Bruce Chatwin's *Patagonia*, V. S. Naipaul's *India* or Christoph Ransmayr's *Tibet*. This is an international literary trend whose influence has curiously left Hungarian literature unaffected; the last five decades have produced travel narratives that focus exclusively on Central and Eastern Europe. While this is easily explainable in the case of Hungarian authors (like Miklós Mészöly or Péter Esterházy) who published their works in the communist era, it is more surprising that the travel texts written by the younger generation of novelists (for example Noémi Kiss or János Háty) also concentrate on this region. Actually, the only contemporary exception is provided by the oeuvre of László Krasznahorkai, whose writings have been permanently concerned with the issues of the narratability of travel and the literary representation of radical cultural otherness since the beginning of the 1990s. His books attempt to map an almost incomprehensibly heterogeneous cultural landscape which is usually referred to as – with an obviously simplifying metaphor – "the East."

Although India and Japan often appear as the setting of his short stories and novels, Krasznahorkai's deepest interest seems to lie in China. He published his first Chinese travelogue, *Urgai fogoly* (*The Prisoner of Urga*) in 1992, which was followed in 1999 by a short, although exciting reportage entitled *Csak a csillagos ég* (*Only the Sky with the Stars*) that has only been published in a literary journal so far. His third book set in China – the main target of my paper – came out first in 2004 with the title *Rombolás és bánat az Ég alatt* (*Destruction and Sorrow Beneath the Heavens: Reportage*, English trans. 2016; it will be referred to below as *Destruction and Sorrow*).

Although these writings differ in many respects, they share certain common features: they all portray a traveller who admires the ancient Chinese culture, they are interwoven with references to Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and – most importantly – they ignore the political and social reality of China in favour of pondering aesthetic and philosophical questions.

Thus, while the undecidability between the factual and the fictional status of travel narratives is crucial in the Anglophone context of the genre (Holland and Huggan 2000, 7) and it is bound up with the problem of “its place in the literary hierarchy” (Duda 2005, 69), Krasznahorkai's works refuse to have a documentary quality, and – through their highly rhetorized, eloquent use of language – call attention to their literariness. For instance, the first-person narrator of *The Prisoner of Urga* is attracted by the perfection, timelessness and transcendental nature of Chinese culture – therefore, instead of analysing the state of affairs in the country of the late 1980s, he focuses only on its thousands-year-old cultural values. In comparison, Paul Theroux's *Riding the Iron Rooster* (1987), which is also set in China, explores the after-effects of the Cultural Revolution via interpreting external phenomena. The miniature details of everyday life scrutinized by his travelogue are outside of Krasznahorkai's scope of interest. However – precisely because the traveller considers these features as inherent, previously given properties, not as qualities that emerge in the dialogue between the own and the alien – he can only bear witness to his exclusion from the Chinese perception of the world. The more painful the unreachability of the experience is, the more valuable it seems – this self-generating process is described by the narrator as “melancholy”, and it can also be connected to the repetitive structure of the text.

As the title reveals, melancholy is displaced by a more bitter sense of despair in *Destruction and Sorrow*, which explores the endangerment of ancient Chinese traditions. As the book has two different text versions, the first issue in analyzing it is deciding which one to focus on. The 2004 edition is written in the first person and the protagonist-narrator is referred to as Mr László. The identical first name of the author of the protagonist and the narration's quasi-autobiographical mode still links the book to the generic norms of travelogue outlined by Jan Borm (“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”; 2004, 17). The novel's excellent English translation by Otilie Mulzet is based on the second Hungarian edition from 2016, in which the narrative voice switches to third person singular, thus the text distances itself much more from any kind of autobiographical readability and presents itself simply as a piece of travel writing in the broader sense (Borm 2004, 14). In this case the protagonist is called László Stein, bearing a family name that does not reveal anything about his origins: one can say that it signifies merely his Central-Europeanness. He remains the central focalizer of the narrative; what is more, his discourse permeates that of the narrator owing to his use of free indirect and indirect style, but the changes carried out by Krasznahorkai emphasize the fictional dimensions of his figure. Due to the fact

that this is the more recent edition and also owing to its availability in translation, this article will concentrate on the second version, but I will also touch upon the differences between the Hungarian variants (and their English counterpart) when necessary.

(POST)MODERNIST ANXIETIES AND THE RHETORIC OF MOURNING

As opposed to *The Prisoner of Urga*, where the traveller is concerned with “unnameable”, “*verydeep*” questions (Krasznahorkai 2004, 36–37), *Destruction and Sorrow* clearly outlines the goal of the protagonist’s endeavour from the beginning. He is on a quest for the “detritus of Chinese classical culture” (Krasznahorkai 2016b, 15), searching for traces of the ancient Chinese worldview in the post-Maoist “New China” that has created a bizarre, although obviously successful version of capitalism. The quest for the ancient China is not governed simply by intellectual curiosity or a thirst for adventure; already in the first chapter Stein takes a trip to a sacred Buddhist mountain called Jiuhuashan. Portraying him as someone who he tries to learn more about the Buddha, Confucius and Taoism, pondering on the possibilities of a “new metaphysics” that is not “built on any kind of dichotomy” (215), the novel figurates his ambitious project as a pilgrimage. The pilgrimage motif, the intertwining images of inner and outer travel (“he [...] sees clearly that he *is on the right path*, that he had to come here, exactly here, on these muddy roads and these life-threatening serpentine bends”; 15) and the recurring topos of the quest all evoke the spiritual allegories of journey, which can be found both in the Christian and the Eastern philosophical traditions (although the world-views encoded in these variations are far from homogenous.) The allegorical dimensions of Stein’s journey are also enhanced by the allusions to *Divina Commedia*: the modern Chinese metropolis is depicted like the Inferno (“Not only on 5 May 2002 is Nanjing hopeless; Nanjing is *always* hopeless, because there is nothing, really nothing that is more hopeless than Nanjing [...] just hell and hell and grime everywhere”; 54–55), while the relationship of the traveller and his interpreter – who accompanies him everywhere – allude to that of Dante and Virgil.

At the same time, Krasznahorkai’s novel moves farther the conventions of travel writing in the sense that it deconstructs the archetypal tripartite pattern of setting out, seeking adventures and returning home with the aim of “reintegration into society” (Fussel 1982, 208). Instead, the novel can be divided into three travel narratives that mutually interpret each other. The first one is the story of the above mentioned trip to the Jiuhuashan, which follows the transition from the grey and crowded modern China to the sacred place of devotion. The relation of the two worlds can be described as a form of simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, and the mountain adventure becomes the *mise en abyme* of the whole Chinese adventure. The first chapters are followed by the story of Stein’s disappointing “great journey” to the South, whose experiences are reflected upon in the subchapters “Conversation on the Ruins”. In this part of the book, movement is replaced by stasis and storytelling is interchanged by dialogues; the discussions with the members of the Chinese cultural

elite are all centred on the notion of crisis. However, Stein and his companion set out again, and their time spent in Suzhou culminates in an epiphany-like moment, which has been foreshadowed by the story of the Jiuhuashan trip. Disrupting the linearity of the narrative, the novel closes with a chapter in which a previously untold episode of the trip to Jiuhuashan transforms into an allegory that sheds new light on the whole journey. The additional potential meaning that stems from the arrangement of the chapters and subchapters, along with the titles that markedly play upon the topoi of travel writing (“Two Pilgrims”, “The Great Journey”, “The First Steps”, “The Spirit of China”), presume a subsequent interpretative horizon that completes the present tense narration.

The lack of the travel narrative’s traditional elements not only undermines a reading of Stein’s journey as a teleological process of self-realization, but also contributes to the effacement of his origins. Although we learn that he is Hungarian, we do not know where exactly László Stein comes from and where he returns to – his occupation, dwelling place, age and family status remain unveiled throughout the novel. The few times when the protagonist directly reflects on himself in the dialogues, he simply calls himself an aficionado of Chinese classical culture; with his personal background being put into brackets, his portrayal focuses only on the complex relationship that ties him to China. Consequently, *Destruction and Sorrow* does not employ comparison – the typical structuring principle of travelogues – in the customary way. In other words, the novel does not contrast the thinking patterns, customs and reflexes embedded in the traveller’s own culture with the new, alien and subversive impressions gained in the foreign country. Instead, it juxtaposes what Stein knows, anticipates and remembers about China with his freshly gained experiences, highlighting the fact that his return to the new China of the 2000s puts his curious identity construction at risk. During his encounters with Chinese artists and intellectuals, Stein repeatedly raises the question whether there is any guarantee of the continuation of the tradition that is so essential for his self-understanding. Although the analysis of the local intelligentsia is usually optimistic, the traveller’s own reactions waver between absolute desperation and some fragile hope. Whereas the vivacity of the ancient belief system is taken as a fact in *The Prisoner of Urga* (among others, it is embodied in the marvellous Huadan theatre performance witnessed by the protagonist), and the traveller mourns for himself because of his exclusion from the non-tangible, spiritual world of China, in *Destruction and Sorrow* the object of grief becomes the rapidly decaying tradition itself. Hence the intensity of the hyperbolic language of crisis and loss dominating the narrative. The episodes of the journey taken in South China are all structured by the contrast between the previous expectations and the disappointing reality:

At one time, according to the descriptions, the accounts and the drawings, the temples here were magnificent [...] as Stein and the interpreter draw closer, however, once again they are confronted with the infinite damage done by the system of reconstruction in New China, the monstrosity of crudely vulgar taste [...] more and more they fall into a kind of enraged despair which then is transformed into the deepest repugnance (Krasznahorkai 2016b, 69).

As the passage shows, “destruction” is conceived in the book not only as the demolition of a monument; it is understood as the transformation of buildings and landscapes with the purpose of serving the demands of the tourism industry, and as an attitude that is unfaithful to the original aura of the objects to be restored. The Disneyland-like plastic playground surrounding the Jinshan monastery, the monks who ask payment for everything, the fake marble and golden decorations of the distastefully renovated temples become symbolic of this new wave of reconstruction as they only offer a simulacrum of the past: “they are not viewing Jiangtian, but, rather that they have been dropped into a safari park where nothing is real” (69). As a consequence, the travellers feel uneasy even when they find something that is still “real” and unharmed, like the 1500-year-old Grove of Stone Tablets: “we weep for the fact that it is here, we weep for its defencelessness, its endangeredness” (72). Krasznahorkai’s rhetoric of mourning can be reminiscent of a classic of 20th-century travel writing: similarly to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropique*, it presents the distinction of tradition as an irreparable and irreversible, therefore unambiguously tragical event. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of old and new, original and fake, depth and surface, greed and ethic, “a traveller such as him” (13) and the ordinary tourist suggest a worldview that is – as opposed to the traveller’s vision of a “new metaphysics” – governed by binary oppositions. Krasznahorkai’s approach refers back to a certain understanding of cultural encounters that dominated the interpretation of otherness in the first half of the 20th century. His novel evokes the modernist anxieties that has associated the mixing of distinct cultural formations with a sense of distortion, threat and loss. We can find traces of this view in almost every travelogue of literary modernism. In Graham Greene’s *Journey Without Maps* (1936) the isolated villages of the West African wilderness are considered more attractive than the coastal towns which have already been transformed by the arrival of Westerners; in Auden’s and MacNeice’s *Letters to Iceland* (1937) the travellers prefer the Icelandic villagers to townspeople, because they have not been influenced by foreign fashion yet; D. H. Lawrence’s idealizes the island in *Sea and Sardinia* (1921), because it is outside the circuit of history, thus it never changes. Similarly, according to the novel’s argumentation, the Euro-Atlantic influence can only have disastrous effects on China. Krasznahorkai’s prose depicts the spread of globalized New-Chinese culture – epitomized by the image of the shopping mall – as a tangible process that fills the traveller with physical disgust:

and horrifying as well is the spirit of the so-called new China: as one of its most characteristic signs – in the form of the world’s most dispiriting glittering department stores – stands here on the main street, disgorging the most aggressively nauseating Chinese pop music, it relentlessly attacks from the loudspeakers, and as if every single street and corner in the city has been shot up, really, as if every single nook has been amplified with this sticky, infectious, loathsome phonic monstrosity (55).

The hyperbolic use of the tropes of illness, contamination and corruption indicate a perception of cultural hybridity that can be found strongly simplifying. Both English and Hungarian reviewers of the book have remarked that “the complaint of rampant commercialism is familiar, if not trite” (Kerschen 2016), the representation

of contemporary China seems too homogenous (Bazsányi 2004, 21), and its criticism takes the form of a one-sided monologue (Szirák 1998, 74). However, the close reading of the novel can also reveal how the seemingly fixed codes of cultural otherness are subverted by the textual manoeuvres that do not necessarily mirror the narrator's – and the protagonist's – intentions.

CULTURAL OTHERNESS AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

The title of the first chapter (“Introduction into an Obscurity”) simultaneously refers to the actual environment of the journey's starting point (a gloomy, crammed bus station in a foggy Nanjing) and metaphorically to the difficulties awaiting the traveller. “Indescribable”, “unforeseeable”, “unpredictable” – the adjectives proliferating in the account of the uncomfortable bus trip suggest that the protagonist enters into a landscape that is culturally alien to him. Similarly to *The Prisoner of Urga*, it is the local public transport, something by its essence systematic and regular, but still incomprehensible to the European observer that signifies China's irremediable foreignness. Of course, the slow, crammed and unpunctual bus is a familiar, cliché-like element of the literary and visual representation of non-Western destinations, but the text does not aim for a humorous or self-ridiculing effect. Instead, it calls attention to the uncanniness of Stein's situation:

because surely, says Stein to his sleepy companion, still shivering in the cold, both of them, the two white Europeans, cannot understand anything of this at all, they cannot even understand how a bus route like this operates: how could this woman know that she had to wait here, and how could the bus driver know that this woman would be waiting exactly here, in this bend in the road, and at exactly this time, let's say, at around eight o'clock, because you can't speak about schedules at all, that's how it is (Krasznahorkai 2016b, 5).

As Bernhard Waldenfels explains in his phenomenologically oriented work, one has “little control [over] the pull that emanates from the alien in general and especially from an alien culture” (Waldenfels 2011, 40). This first episode of the novel stages this experience, highlighting the fact that the subject who encounters the alien is exposed to a power that he cannot fully control; just like the confused European passengers on the old bus, who lose their normal sense of orientation, he “is not his own master” anymore (75). The first chapter also introduces another trope of China's obscurity, which later on returns in the text several times. The following, strongly self-reflexive passage focuses on a woman who gets on the bus in her soaked clothes:

in vain does he look at that face, as much as he can see from his seat at the back, a completely interchangeable face, almost the complete average of a face... he is incapable of distinguishing it from the others, because it is not possible, because it is exactly the same as thousands and thousands and millions and millions of other faces in this inconceivable mass which is China, and where can this “China” be other than in this immeasurable and inexpressible mass of people unparalleled in world history, this is what [...] renders it so frighteningly massive, so frighteningly unknowable (Krasznahorkai 2016b, 6).

The projection of the presupposed characteristic features of the local culture on one figure, the synecdochic substitution of one person for the whole people, is

another conventional strategy of travel writing. However, in this case the reading of the face transforms into the experience of its unreadability; the rhetoric manoeuvres of defacement juxtapose Western individuality and Eastern collective non-identity, alluding to the central dichotomy of Orientalism. Avoiding the mere reproduction of another cliché, the passage constructs the conflict between the East and the West in such a way that it also reveals one of the paradoxical assumptions underlying the dichotomy: the protagonist feels that the Chinese are “frighteningly” different precisely because he cannot apply the usual signifiers of distinction to them. It should be also mentioned that the representation of the Asians as a homogenous mass marks only the beginning of a hermeneutical process in Krasznahorkai’s text: in the end the same, “completely interchangeable face” is given an individual voice that utters one of the key sentences of the novel.

Whereas the China of the introduction is represented as inscrutably obscure, in the following chapters it is split into two, parallelly existing but radically different worlds – an ancient, atemporal, and a modernized one – and as a result the experience of China’s “frighteningly unknowable” nature seems more restricted and calculable. Playing upon the denotative semantic layer of “obscurity”, the “grimy and hopeless fog” (2) metaphorizes the polluted and technicized modern country, where the remnants of the ancient traditions are preserved only in the form of kitsch and simulacra. As we have seen it above, the traveller’s constant mental and bodily unwellness can be read as a reaction to the modernization that is signified by the metaphors of illness and infernal darkness. What is striking about this criticism is that it always attacks the originally “Euro-American” phenomena. Thus the otherness of “New China” is domesticated from a perspective that constructs Asian metropolises as places that gather together and condense the shortcomings of Western civilization. Whereas the story of the bus trip has illustrated the eventfulness and incalculability of the encounter with the alien due to its circumstances being both familiar (as Waldenfels puts, “the alien begins in ourselves and not outside ourselves”; 2011, 74) and still radically different, in the following chapters the place of the alien is fixed. Its recognition does not lead to the re-evaluation of previous assumptions, only to their reproduction: “He has seen the cities, he has walked along the streets, and here is a world which unfortunately he knows all too well. The supermarkets, the mega shopping centres – [...] the fever to buy” (Krasznahorkai 2016b, 142). It seems that the traveller is not interested in the ways that differentiate the modernization of China from that of the Euro-Atlantic world; he does not address the question whether there are any local strategies of the adaption of Western customs apart from imitation, exaggeration and overstatement. Although the above mentioned meta-reflexive passage stages the unreadability of the Chinese face (and therefore “China” in general), later on the traveller easily deciphers the countenance of the locals:

Why? What’s the difference? – they read this in the people’s eyes: for it to be evening in the morning, or to see nothing, doesn’t bother them – while in this partial withdrawal of the light it is nonetheless perfectly clear: not only is this unnatural fact incapable of throwing them off but also that nothing, but nothing, in this entire godforsaken world ever could;

the grimy, distrustful, morose and immovable faces convey this in their own communicative way, they are going about their business (66–67).

While in *The Prisoner of Urga* the smile and “sympathetic eyes” of Beijing pedestrians suggest an understanding that overcomes the linguistic barrier dividing them from the European traveller, in this case the look and the mimics (or their lack) of the locals denote unambiguous refusal. It is also worth noting that the criticism of the present always implies an idealistic view of the past – the economic and technological developments can be seen as the symptoms of decline when compared to the era of Chinese classical culture. In fact, the attitude of the traveller, who is always disappointed with the present state of affairs, appears as a strange form of nostalgia. In accordance with the word’s etymological origins (nostalgia initially meant homesickness), his longing is both spatially and temporally coded – what constitutes the central paradox of the novel is that he feels attached to a place and a time he has never really belonged to. Stein himself is also conscious of the fact that the object of his desire is an era he has never ever experienced directly. He has only built up a vision of it based on “the descriptions, the accounts and the drawings” (69) for himself; still, he never questions the hierarchical relation between this imaginary past and the actual present. By giving voice to the insatiable longing for an idealized past and laying emphasis upon the aesthetic appeal of alterity, Krasznahorkai’s novel situates itself in the Romantic tradition of travel writing. The construction of Stein’s figure can remind us of the persona of the Romantic traveller seeking “situations which arouse strong feelings and sensations of sublimity or spiritual intensity” (Thompson 119). When he admires the “untouched” landscape of the Jiuhuashan, the depiction of the scenery refers to Chinese landscape painting (“as if they had strayed into the mirage of a painting by Huang Shen or Ying Yujian”; Krasznahorkai 2016b, 22) and the impression made by the sacred Buddha statue on him is expressed via the vocabulary of Romantic aesthetics, deploying the notion of the sublime: “it is beautiful, sublime, exactly the kind of Buddha in which a believer can truly find the Buddha” (24). The episode offers a conclusion that can be extended to the whole novel: the encounter with Chinese classical culture – synecdochically figured by calligraphy, garden art or kunqu theatre – always affects the traveller’s subject as an aesthetic experience. One can argue that the novel’s reflections on aesthetics do not enter into a dialogue only with the Romantic tradition but also (as the book does in other regards as well) with the discourse of literary modernism. The co-existence of two influences is not surprising, as modernist literary travel writing has inherited and re-invented several elements of the Romantic mythology of travel (Fehskens 2014, 309). Thus, *Destruction and Sorrow* re-interprets the modernist principle according to which wholeness can be recreated within the aesthetic sphere – but it does so by linking the possibility of fulfilment solely to Chinese culture, avoiding any kind of reference to Western art. In consonance with aesthetic modernism’s counter-reaction to the crisis of modernity, the novel offers a “discursive construction of atemporal time, an eternal present” (Fehskens 2014, 304), but – generating an unresolved tension that permeates the whole text – also presents this essential beauty as endangered, transient and ephemeral. We need to add that the idea of an imperishable essence is

bound up with the issue of China's spiritual heritage, too. It is not by accident that the traveller's first, evidently aesthetic experience takes place in the shrine of a Buddhist monastery. Before he arrives there, Stein symbolically crumples his map, a device that contains scientific information on the area, "because it doesn't matter what direction they go in, it won't be them who will find Jiuhuashan, Stein calls back over his shoulder, but... but?" (Krasznahorkai 2016b, 21) The unuttered, only implied rest of the answer (something like "it is Jiuhuashan that will find them"), with its disruption of the hierarchy between subject and object, can expand the episode into an allegory on the hermeneutical model of understanding (suggesting that a piece of art – the statue of Buddha – addresses those, who are responsive to its call), but it also endows the sacred mountain with some kind of transcendental power. The novel is interwoven with reflections that merge religious and aesthetic ecstasy into each other; they can be perceived as Krasznahorkai's attempts to translate the "Eastern" world-view that does not separate beauty from morals into the language of Hungarian literature.

PILGRIM, DISCUSSION PARTNER, ANTI-TOURIST: BLINDSPOTS OF THE TRAVELLER'S SELF-FASHIONING STRATEGIES

The narrator outlines that the beauty of the Buddha is "unexpected" by the travellers, but the reason for their surprise is not that the statue is any way different from their former notions of Buddhist art – they find the object astonishing because, as opposed to the "new-made, exasperatingly soulless, primitive, shoddy" (24) pieces, it looks exactly how an authentic statue of Buddha should do. Thus, the text often emphasizes how difficult it is to find those rare and hidden paths that lead to the ancient China, but it never elaborates the fact that the access of the traveller to this world is hindered by his double (both temporal and cultural) separateness. The encounter with cultural alterity does not alter the travelling subject's self-perception; these occurrences rather affirm his self-image. Whenever Stein admires a piece of Chinese art, his epiphanic joy stems from the triumph that at last he has found something that "really" is what it should be; in other terms, something that is immediately recognizable for him, something that perfectly fits his horizon of expectations. We can come to the conclusion that the narrator's most important rhetorical goal is to convince us that the European outsider can relate to Chinese culture as if it was his own – the representation of "classical art" as atemporal and universal can be seen as a strategy that aims at the stabilization of this ambiguity. The passionate tone of the complaints of the otherwise expressly impersonal figure indicates what is at stake: the vanishing of old traditions would also entail the eradication of his carefully constructed self-image.

Stein's constant urge to stage himself as an expert, or – even more precisely – as someone who has been initiated into the secrets of ancient China, becomes especially striking in the interviews in which he almost self-parodistically repeats again and again the same rhetorical formulas which are intended to persuade his partners of his worthiness and the legitimacy of his quest. The interviews are built of unexpectedly lengthy questions and answers, some of them seeming more like a short essay than a piece of an actual conversation. Instead of creating an atmospheric effect or charac-

terizing a figure by their speech, they present discussion as a device of learning about China that is as equally important as gaining empirical knowledge. With placing as much emphasis on what is heard as on visual information (the latter one usually being associated with modern travel), Krasznahorkai's book evoke the pre-Enlightenment, renaissance ideal of "travel as discourse" (Adler 1989, 8). As Adler summarizes, "the art of travel" the young aristocrat of the 16th century "was urged to cultivate was in large measure one of discoursing with the living and the dead – learning foreign tongues, obtaining access to foreign courts, and conversing gracefully with eminent men, assimilating classical texts appropriate to particular sites, and, not least, speaking eloquently upon his return" (1989, 9). Curiously, the behaviour of László Stein, who expresses himself "gracefully" in the conversations with the "eminent" members of the Chinese intelligentsia can be described more accurately by the set of codes governing the 16th-17th century art of travel than (what would follow from the subtitle of the book) by the working methods of a 21st century journalist. The ceremonious gestures of the talk partners, the formal rigour of their utterances and the regulatedness of their communication mark a point of intersection between two distinct traditions: the sophisticated rules of Chinese politeness and the early modern European cult of discussion.

Whilst Stein's questions and explanations are incorporated in the narrative in the form of indirect speech sentences, the answers of the Chinese partner are always directly quoted in typographically separated paragraphs. The asymmetrical visual organization of the interviews might hint that instead of merging the discourse of the other into itself, the text allows it to be visible with its differences. However, these separate paragraphs are framed – and interpreted – by narratorial remarks hinting that it is the interviewees who are responsible for the failure of communication. As opposed to the encounters with the silent pieces of art, these appointments usually prove unsuccessful: they re-affirm in both partners a mutual feeling of alienness and that of not being understood. The reason for the lack of understanding can be illuminated by a reflection on a conversation that – as an exception – turns out to have a positive outcome. Stein is invited to the modest home of Yang Winghua, "the last mandarin", who at last shares his worries, and whose "every verbal communication [...] is a pronouncement" (Krasznahorkai 2016b, 207). This implies that Stein considers the perfect dialogue a series of pronouncement-like utterances that affirm each other's presuppositions. It is not surprising that his inquiries are always concerned with the potential coincidence and not with the difference of opinions: "Stein asks if this impression coincides with Yao's" (77). These interviews can function as *mise en abymes*, since they mirror the ways in which the narrative voice regulates its dialogue with the implicit reader, who is expected to be empathetic and responsive to his pronouncement-like rhetoric. Still, the textual complexity of the novel surpasses the narrator's intentions, indicating the blind spots of the communicative and self-representational strategies epitomized by his double, the figure of the traveller. For instance, in the subchapter containing Stein's interview with Abbot Pinghui, there is a slight discrepancy between his words and his social behaviour. Although addressing his partner with the utmost respect, Stein soon "tries to interrupt" him, "raises

his voice” (141), getting more and more impatient, because the abbot cannot give him proper answers that are worthy of a spiritual leader. The tension culminates when the narration constructs the viewpoint of the accompanying monks, thus putting even more stress on the contrast between the empty, ceremonious formalism of the their religiousness and the subversive behaviour of the traveller, who is driven by an inner desire to learn the truth. “It is now patently obvious to everyone in the room that this European has transgressed every last rule of courtesy and is engaging in something everyone knows to be proscribed. He – the European – considers, however, that he should keep on and that he should disagree with what the abbot is saying” (145). The reading of the episode offered by the narrator is obvious: it is only the European who is passionate about the dilemmas of present-day Buddhism, while the abbot, who keeps talking on his cell phone even during their conversation, might repeat phrases about the unchanged “essence” of tradition but embodies its absolute decay. However, this reading can be undermined by the above quoted passage, which, with its change of perspective, demonstrates that the “European” does indeed appear in a different light from the horizon of the locals than as he perceives himself. Relating this passage with the narratorial remarks on Stein’s manners, we can come to the conclusion that his situation is hopeless from the first, because he “interrupts” and “disagrees” – in other words, he cannot accept the Chinese rules of social interaction, lacking the necessary tact and consideration. Thus, the episodes of the protagonist’s communicative failures can lead the reader to new insights, revealing how and why the ambitious project that aims at mapping the relationship between the ancient and the present-day China cannot become successful. As Edit Zsadányi argues: “Through the succession of not understanding the other the reader might still gain an experience that can bring them closer to the Eastern civilisation. [...] What does not happen in the narrated stories does happen on the level of narrative discourse” (2007, 786).

The crucial reason for the constant potential of misunderstanding is simple: Stein does not speak Mandarin. Whenever he gets talking to someone, they either talk in English or he depends on the mediation of his interpreter, who remains nameless and barely any information is given about his background or his exact relation to Stein. He is introduced as a student from Shanghai, who joins the traveller “out of sheer benevolence and enthusiasm for this topic” (26). This would imply that he is Chinese, but earlier the narrator has referred to him and Stein as “the two white Europeans” (5), which leaves his nationality an open question; we cannot even be certain whether he communicates with Stein in English or in Hungarian. In the beginning of the novel he is portrayed as a down-to-earth person, whose “enthusiasm” for the topic is not stronger than his wish to be comfortable:

the interpreter doesn’t wish to destroy his companion’s wonder at the sight of this transformation and with his own usual cast of mind soothes himself by noting that, well, nightmarish, [...] these are circumstances, he adds soberly, which certainly call for some kind of raincoat and warm clothing [...] But he notes this in vain, for Stein is thoroughly captivated by what he sees, which immediately disappears with the next step (20–21).

While the interpreter “soberly” thinks of “warm clothing” in the rain, Stein comes to the fore as an ascetic person, whose need for bodily comfort is overshadowed by

the captivating, mysterious beauty of the Jiuhuashan mountain. The narration does not simply contrast the two attitudes but emphasizes the superiority of the protagonist, since it constitutes a normative framework of interpretation in which spiritual and aesthetic ecstasy always gains ascendancy over practicalities. The traveller's willingness to suffer for higher goals is also among the motifs that connect his figure to the generic persona of the pilgrim. The seemingly hierarchical relationship of the traveller and his interpreter is reaffirmed by the narratological qualities of the text. Throughout the novel, Stein remains the internal focalizer: the events of the journey are conveyed from his perspective, thus we learn about the subjective impressions of the interpreter only in the rare occasions when his utterances are more or less literally quoted – like the former one about his longing for warm clothing. At certain points the narrative voice switches to third person plural, creating the effect that the two travelling companions share a common point of view: “[I]n the days to follow they do nothing but gape at the ultra-modern buildings of Pudong from the railing of River Huangpu, and they try to remain awake, to clutch at reality, and to forget, forget – to forget what they saw, to beat out of their heads the fact that they saw anything at all” (104). Actually, the dramatic gestures of disappointment and the use of repetition and hyperbole echo Stein's ways of self-expression in the interviews. Any difference of attitude is effaced in the narrative rhetoric that totalizes the experiences of the protagonist, extending them over his companion. Still, the protagonist's sense of superiority is dismantled by the fact that the interpreter does not merely translate; he gains an influence over the discussions with the Chinese intelligentsia that cannot be fully controlled by Stein. During the catastrophic interview with Yao “he asks the interpreter to once again, and continuously now, add an apology. And the interpreter says that he's been doing so constantly. Practically after every sentence” (84). These apologies are obviously missing from the previous passages. It turns out that what we have read so far is not identical with the actual dialogue that goes on in Mandarin: as a consequence, these dialogues have not two but three participants, and neither the Chinese nor the Hungarian one can take it for granted that his words reach the other with his original intended meaning. “Stein is sitting the closest, but Wu speaks so softly that he can hardly hear him, and the interpreter – who tries to wedge himself in closer between them – can also hardly hear him” (255–256). The interpreter, who “wedges” himself in between the interviewee and the interviewer metaphorizes Stein's linguistic and cultural separateness, pointing to the mediatedness of the traveller's experience of China. The interpreter's allegorical figurativity is even more salient in the original Hungarian versions of the text (both the 2004 and the 2016 one) which do not leave only his name and nationality unknown, but also his (or more properly, his or her) gender. Due to the lack of grammatical gender marking in Hungarian, the third person singular sentences do not reveal whether it is a man or a woman who accompanies Stein on his journey, self-consciously playing upon the ambiguity of his or her gender. On the one hand the interpreter is called a “partner”, a “student” and even a “young man” (although written in two words the Hungarian expression “fiatal ember” rather means “young person”, possibly including women as its referents, too). On the other hand, this young person is someone whom Yao “woos”, and

talks to about shopping, and, what is more, after the final, epiphanic meeting with Master Ji Stein “embraces the shoulder” (Krasznahorkai 2016a, 244) of the mortally exhausted translator. For obvious reasons, Otilie Mulzet’s otherwise fascinating translation cannot maintain this ambiguity: the interpreter becomes a “he”, and the original “embrace” is transformed into a “pat” in the English text: “Stein pats him on the shoulder” (265). The intimacy of the embrace creates a powerful image that casts a new light on the relationship of the two Europeans, re-evaluating the implications of the former motif of the interpreter’s being “wedged in between”. Stein’s act (the first instance of any physical contact between him and his companion) can symbolize that he has finally accepted his limits, his dependence on the interpreter without whom he would not be able to carry out his quest. As opposed to this, the English text version’s “pat” remains an insignificant, even patronizing gesture. The untranslatability of the Hungarian original’s textual playfulness is in itself highly self-reflexive because it mirrors the plethora of translational problems and dilemmas that the traveller always tends to forget about.

Stein’s conversations do not only depend on linguistic and cultural mediation, but also entail the use of technical media. In a discussion about what the Five Hundred Literary would do in the other world, (“Su Dongpo would do that, he’d use a washing machine”; 248), Master Ji raises an interesting question: “[A]nd you, he turns to the interpreter, why are you using a camera, why are you using this tape recorder around your neck, do you need it?” (249) Again, while Stein stands for the immediacy of the spoken word, it is his supplement, the translator, who carries his project’s hidden technical apparatus. This passage lets us conclude that the dialogues that are put down in writing are not based on immaterial, inner memories but external documentation, thus evoking a typically Western concept of accuracy, objectivity and truthfulness. The use of the camera – in the Jiuhuashan chapter it is Stein himself who takes a photo with the proud Buddha carving master – is telling in another respect too, since it serves as the metonymic emblem of the tourist, a role that Stein deeply and passionately disdains. Both Stein’s questions and the narratorial reflections are informed by those theoretical and literary discourses that – with their basic assumption originating from Romantic aesthetics (Urry 2002, 20) – construe the distinction between the traveller and the tourist on the basis of the authenticity and inauthenticity of their experiences (Culler 1981, 131). However, as Sándor Bazsányi points out, the passages admiring the beauty of the narrow streets and moonlit canals are not unaffected by the clichés and rhetorical patterns of travel guides (Bazsányi 2004, 21). Similarly, the representation of tourist groups as homogenous, animalistic, uneducated hordes is expressly stereotypical: “[T]he tourists are cheerful, they are yelling and screaming and making a rush at whatever they can, descending upon the marvellous little houses, completely denuded now of last night’s tranquillity” (Krasznahorkai 2016b, 101). As Jonathan Culler’s famous essay exposes, the hatred towards other tourists is paradoxically integral to tourism, and this dislike is always manifest in the discourse of Krasznahorkai’s traveller, who is not an ordinary tourist on a package holiday indeed. His enthusiasm and his knowledge of Chinese culture is far above the level of involvement mass tourism demands from its participants,

but at certain points the text reveals that the construction of an identity based on the difference from tourists is not without contradictions. The first chapters demonstrate that the superiority of the traveller lies in his ability to distinguish between the original and the fake, the untouched and the distorted. His utterances suggest that authenticity is always an immanent property of an object, a building, a piece of art, and it is easily recognizable to the educated eye. However, the story of the trip to Zhou-zhuang shows that whenever discriminating between appearances and real value, context is also a factor that has to be taken into consideration. One evening the travellers stumble upon the ancient town of dreamlike beauty by chance. Wandering along the tiny stone bridges they feel that “nothing has changed here” (98) since the Ming or Qing era. The magic is broken when the next morning the „first air-conditioned luxury bus” (101) arrives, and the quiet streets get crammed with noisy tourists. In Stein’s reading, the moral of the story that operates with metaphors of light and darkness (evening dusk stands for the “marvellous dream” of returning to the past, while daylight signifies harsh reality) is that everything has been conquered by mass tourism. From the point of view delineated in Culler’s study, we can draw attention to another aspect of the episode: the travellers have to leave Zhou-zhuang quickly, if they want to maintain the self-image according to which they are radically different from tourists. Consequently, the title of the subchapter (“In the Captivity of Tourism”) can be linked to the town whose peace is destroyed by the “barbarian attack” of the crowds: “Zhouzhuang is like a prison, it opens at eight in the morning and closes at six in the evening” (102), and to the situation of the two “non-tourists”, who literally have to struggle through the flood of people swarming on to the streets. However, the tropes of imprisonment can also refer to the way the traveller is entrapped in the paradoxical, circular logic of anti-touristic discourse. Although his identity is centred on the idea of not being a tourist (in this sense it is not the Chinese but the tourists who constitute his other), he cannot rely on any external confirmation of this self-image; the source of distinction is only himself. In fact, we can see that Stein is enchanted by “the same narrow streets, the same narrow canals with the same black, slowly drifting boats, the same saltpetre walls and the same gateways and teahouses” (103) that attract every ordinary tourist to the water-towns of Jiangsu.

TRAVELLING AND TEXTUAL PERFORMANCES

Although movement and discussion belong closely together in the “travel style” (Adler 1989b, 1371) represented by the protagonist, as we have seen, we can also notice a certain split between Stein’s behaviour as an interviewer and his attitude towards travel. The interpolations inserted in the dialogues mirror his insistence that a conversation should always follow the trajectory he has previously planned for it: “[T]hey need to try and bring him back to the concrete question”; “Stein senses that the conversation is beginning to meander away from a promising path, so as a way of trying to get back to the subject of the ways of transmission of tradition, he recalls Lai’s words” (Krasznahorkai 2016b, 112). As opposed to the figurative paths of his conversations, the routes he takes in China are far from meticulously planned. He

relies on tips and advices given by his friends, on sudden premonitions and whims, without following a previously given list of destinations or a strict schedule. Thus, while his failure as an interviewer stems from the fact that he always tries to keep the production of meaning under control, his travel performance – serving as a “means of ‘world-making’” (Goodman 1978) and of “self-fashioning” (Adler 1989b, 1368) – self-consciously offers multiple interpretative possibilities, which are enhanced by the narrative. On the one hand, Stein’s physical movement between little towns, industrial metropolises and the countryside – often interrupted by short or even longer breaks – suggest that the pleasure of wandering arises from its incalculable and uncontrollable dynamics. The opening of the chapter entitled “In the Captivity of Tourism” describes the province of Jiangsu as a territory whose unique geographical features quickly make the foreigner lose his sense of orientation:

If a foreigner sets off in this region, he immediately encounters these canals winding back and forth, and the tiny lakes turning up here and there, so it is no wonder if after the first few kilometres he loses his way and, after a short time, he has absolutely no idea where North and South are situated: he has no idea, which means that [...] only quick perception can come to his aid; not to force any earlier-planned destinations [...] but to be content with whatever happens to fall into his lap (Krasznahorkai 2016b, 96–97).

Krasznahorkai’s meandering sentence delineates an ethos of travel characterized by spontaneity, improvisation and the eventness of the unplanned. On the other hand, Stein’s travel practice also enacts the trope of being guided by destiny. For instance, the protagonist finally opts for heading to Shaoxing due to a sudden occurrence: “[N]othing, but nothing else came up which could have influenced his decision, only this sudden sunlight in front of the ticket counter” (122). As this episode demonstrates, the protagonist gets close to the concealed cultural riches of China, when led by intuitive and not rational decisions, but the text’s system of motifs also lets these contingencies be interpreted as manifestations of a hidden, quasi-transcendental order. Playing upon the fact that China’s ancient name means “All that is beneath the Heavens” (271), the tropes of sun, light and sky form a tropological chain in the novel that simultaneously convey the incalculable dynamics of the journey and suggest the potential existence of an invisible power governing it. This ambiguity is maintained in the last chapters in which Stein gives up his prejudices and heads towards the “very citadel of the Chinese tourist industry” (225), following his friend’s mysterious advice: “Go to Suzhou, Tang Xiaodu says one day [...] and he provides no explanation” (224–225). In accordance with the previous episodes that have ironically contrasted the traveller’s expectations with the reality of his experiences, Stein is provided with the final evidence that proves that the “spirit of China” is still alive precisely here, in this world-famous tourist paradise. When he engages in a conversation with a local artist called Wu, the novel presents their discussion as the final goal of the whole journey. The scene of their encounter is the epitome of China’s classical, harmonious beauty: they sit in a hidden teahouse in the Garden of the Master of Nets, an environment that pleases all the senses. While almost all of the previous discussions have taken place in noisy and crowded public venues, this time the narration outlines the “exceptional silence” (236) looming over the room. This motif does not

only evoke the modernist aesthetics' mythology of silence and obscurity (Lindskog 2017, 21), but – as Edit Zsadányi summarizes – also illuminates the role silence plays in another culture: “An indispensable condition of understanding Eastern culture is to be aware of the Eastern concept of emptiness and silence” (2007, 787). Actually, Wu does not promise that Westerners are capable of fully understanding the significance of emptiness: “The essence rests on the surface of emptiness. It leaves room for thought. [...] There is no place in you where you could understand what emptiness is. And the essence of Chinese art is this emptiness” (Krasznahorkai 2016b, 258). The conversation differs from the former ones also in terms of Stein's behaviour, who does not protest against Wu's declaration, calmly accepting his position as an outsider. Nevertheless, the text manifests the effect of Wu's words in the form of the blank spaces unfilled by printed letters that seem to multiply on the last pages of the novel. However, this kind of emptiness is something that can be perceived only via the materiality of the visual medium. Actually, we can notice that the binary oppositions that have operated throughout the whole novel (surface – depth, material – immaterial, visible – invisible) are reiterated in the chapter in a way that subtly undermines their fixed structure and implied value system. When Stein distances himself from the Chinese philosophers who did not need words, he reflects on the shift that affects his self-perception: “[H]e could never imagine life without words [...] Because in order to depict how the eternal emerges from a landscape, some kind of material is necessary” (257). Whilst previously the protagonist has stood for the invisible and the immaterial, arguing for a “new metaphysics” in which words cannot have “any role” (215), this time he articulates his dependence on the verbal and the material. At the end of the conversation he says goodbye to Wu in Hungarian, demonstrating that their communication has miraculously conquered the cultural and linguistic obstacles dividing them: “He leans over to Wu, and following a gay outburst, says right into his ear in Hungarian: He doesn't know how to explain how this is possible, but he has understood, and he understands, every single word” (264). The metaphysically loaded dramatization of Stein's experience is obvious, but, again, it is worth mentioning that the traveller does not communicate with Master Wu via silence – he speaks in his mother tongue, using repetition and litany, forming an utterance that reaches the Chinese ear as a kind of rhythmical and sound effect.

Following the script of Romantic travelogues, László Stein's quest culminates in an epiphanic moment, but Wu's sentences, which sound enigmatic, sometimes even banal, such as “The strength of the heart is boundless” (258), do not generate the same epiphanic intensity in the reader that they create in the fictional world. Thus the protagonist's revelatory experience is transformed through reading into a form of not-understanding; the dialogue of the traveller and the wise Chinese man cannot be relocated to the dialogue of the text and the reader. However, the novel also contains a final, short chapter entitled “What Remains: the End”, which takes us back to the bus trip to Jiuhuashan, during which the poor-looking Chinese woman with the “completely interchangeable face” (6) opens the window near her seat despite the cold rain. When a hostile passenger asks her what she likes about the wind, she gives a curious answer:

So then tell me: Why do you like the wind so much?
 It is clear that the woman is afraid that the man will strike her.
 The wind? She repeats the question. She is really afraid. She tries to muster up some
 reply. No one sees the wind.
 Fine, but why do you like it?
 Well... because it blows. (268)

The dialogue is not completed by any form of narratorial commentary. Its shortness and density invites us to read it as an allegory that sheds new light on the central issues of the whole novel. Contrasting the visible with the invisible has been both Stein's and his Chinese debate partners' favourite rhetorical device, but they used it with the opposite logic. In the discussion with Yao, the university instructor, Stein relies on inductive reasoning, thus he draws the conclusion that the traditional China has disappeared from what he "sees" and "feels" (79). In comparison, Yao argues deductively when he says that the European only sees "the surface" (93), whereas "Classical Chinese culture lives on in the depths" (81). In the context of this particular conversation Yao's argument does not carry much conviction, but the ending of the novel re-evaluates his words. The trope of the wind – something that is invisible but can be felt on the skin, something on the verge of the material and the immaterial – makes the novel's central binary oppositions collapse into each other, re-affirming the existence of the endangered tradition but also designating the traveller's limited capacity to understand it. As a result, our perspective meets with that of the Chinese woman, who has embodied earlier the radical otherness of the culturally alien. However, in order to experience this fusion of horizons, first we need to get from Jiuhuashan to Jiuhuashan. The figure of circle intertwining the end and the beginning becomes a figure of understanding – designating a route taken not by the traveller but by the reader of Krasznahorkai's intricate piece of travel writing.

With its portrayal of the traveller as a pilgrim, its epiphany-centred narrative logic and its attempts to present the encounter with the culturally alien as an aesthetic experience *Destruction and Sorrow Beneath the Heavens* self-consciously evokes the Romantic mythology of travel and the binary oppositions of modernist travel writing. Although the novel's more recent version is written in third person, its narrative is internally focalized through the protagonist, whose directly and indirectly quoted utterances contrast the timeless values of classical Chinese culture with the inauthenticity of the technologically developing "New China". However, the novel's textual complexity exposes the ambiguities of his essentializing rhetoric, often shedding an ironical light on his carefully crafted self-image, and calling attention to the incalculable eventness of the journey.

LITERATURE

- Adler, Judith. 1989. "Origins of Sightseeing." *Annals of Tourism Research* 16: 7–29.
 Adler, Judith. 1989. "Travel as Performed Art." *American Journal of Sociology* 94, 6: 1366–1391.
 Bazsányi, Sándor. 2004. "Jöttem a Jangce partjairól." *Élet és Irodalom* 23: 21.
 Culler, Jonathan. 1981. "Semiotics of Tourism." *American Journal of Semiotics* 1, 1–2: 127–40.

- Duda, Dean. 2005. "Towards a Modernist Travel Culture." *Journeys* 1, 1–2: 68–87.
- Feshkens, Matthew Thomas. 2014. "The Contact Zones of Modernista Travel Literature: Modernism, Modernity, and the Hispanic Atlantic." *Hispanófila* 171: 303–319.
- Fussell, Paul. 1982. *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Holland, Patrick – Graham Huggan. 2000. *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Kerschen, Paul. 2016. "Destruction and Sorrow Beneath the Heavens by László Krasznahorkai". The Quarterly Conversation 44. Accessed February 7, 2019.
- Krasznahorkai, László. (1992) 2004. *Az urgai fogoly*. Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó.
- Krasznahorkai, László. 2016a. *Rombolás és bánat az Ég alatt*. Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó.
- Krasznahorkai, László. 2016b. *Destruction and Sorrow Beneath the Heavens*. Trans. by Otilie Mulzet. London: Seagull Books.
- Lindskog, Annika J. 2017. *Silent Modernism: Soundscapes and the Unsayable in Richardson, Joyce, and Woolf*. Lund: Lunds universitet.
- Szirák, Péter. 1998. *Folytonosság és változás*. Debrecen: Csokonai Kiadó.
- Thompson, Carl. 2011. *Travel Writing*. London: Routledge.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1995. *The Morals of History*. Trans. by Alyson Waters. Minneapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Urry, John. 2002. *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Waldenfels, Bernhard. 2011. *The Phenomenology of the Alien: Basic Concepts*. Trans. by Alexander Kozin – Tanja Stähler. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Zsadányi, Edit. 2007. "A kultúra határa, a határok kultúrája." In *A magyar irodalom története III.: 1920-tól napjainkig*, ed. by Mihály Szegedy-Maszák – András Veres, 776–790. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó.

Questioning China: (Mis)understanding strategies in László Krasznahorkai's "Destruction and Sorrow Beneath the Heavens"

László Krasznahorkai. Travel writing. Otherness. Tourism. Modernism.

This article discusses László Krasznahorkai's *Destruction and Sorrow Beneath the Heavens* in the context of travel literature, focusing on the author's representation of China. The text presents two Chinas: an ancient one, whose beauty can be perceived as a form of aesthetic experience, and a dystopian, modernized New China. The criticism of tourism and globalization evokes the memory of the cultural anxieties articulated by high modernist travelogues. My reading of the novel reveals that its textual complexity surpasses the protagonist's statements, demonstrating the blind spots of the self-representational strategies epitomized by his figure.

Dr. Ágnes Balajthy
 Institute of Hungarian Literary and Cultural Studies
 University of Debrecen
 Egyetem tér 1
 4032 Debrecen
 Hungary
 balajthy.agnes@arts.unideb.hu