

Thoreau as an Oblique Mirror: Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*

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Abstract: *In his nonfiction biography of Christopher McCandless, Into the Wild, Jon Krakauer uses a plethora of references to Henry D. Thoreau. In this article I analyze Krakauer's use of Thoreau's economic ideas, liberalism, and view of nature and wilderness. I argue that Krakauer blurs a pragmatic understanding of Thoreau and uses techniques of fiction to create an appealing story and characterize McCandless as a latter-day Thoreauvian transcendentalist. By doing so, Krakauer explains and defends the protagonist's actions from criticism, thereby making him appear as a character whose story is exceptional. Although the characterization of the protagonist as a follower of Thoreauvian ideals by means of a partial interpretation of Thoreau does not provide us with a better understanding of McCandless's life, Krakauer's extensive research and the critical self-reflection in the text produces a compelling nonfiction narrative. Moreover, the romantic image of Thoreau advanced by Krakauer reflects the preoccupations and issues that concerned Krakauer, or at least his times. Particularly, it reflects Krakauer's own ideas concerning the negative effects of materialism on both ourselves and the natural world.*

Key words: *Jon Krakauer, Henry David Thoreau, Into the Wild, nonfiction, nature, transcendentalism*

Into the Wild is Jon Krakauer's nonfiction biography of Christopher McCandless, a talented college graduate who inexplicably leaves his family, his friends, and all the comforts of civilization in search of ultimate freedom, a nobler form of life closer to nature and divorced from the extreme materialism of American society. After graduating from Emory University, he gives away his inheritance to charity, changes his name to "Alexander Supertramp" and embraces a vagabond lifestyle, travelling itinerantly across the western United States. During this period Chris meets people who admire him for his intelligence and asceticism, yet he avoids intimacy, moving on to the next adventure before losing his independence. Having

refused to make contact with his family for two years, “Alex” embarks on his final odyssey to the Alaskan wilderness. There he expects to find a refuge from the poison of civilization; paradoxically, he dies of starvation, poisoned by toxic seeds.

Early on in the book, Krakauer seeks to explain why McCandless abandoned his car in a national park in the desert. He had done so, Krakauer suggests, because the engine was wet and he could not go to the park rangers for help. In that case he would have had to answer the question of why he had driven an unregistered and uninsured car, with an expired driving license, in a place where it was strictly forbidden. The author speculates: “McCandless could endeavour to explain that he answered to statutes of a higher order—that as a latter-day adherent of Henry David Thoreau, he took as gospel the essay ‘On the Duty of Civil Disobedience’ and thus considered it his moral responsibility to flout the laws of the state” (Wild 28). This is only one of a great many instances in the book in which Thoreau is advanced as a kind of mirror image of McCandless, whose moral profile, as it were, is reflected in the figure of the earlier writer. However, the figure of Thoreau that Krakauer draws upon marks at best a partial and rather romantic interpretation of the actual views held by the great transcendentalist. Within the context of nonfiction, Krakauer’s intention of using Thoreau as a mirror to illuminate different aspects of McCandless’s story works, in the end, to reflect the author’s own role in the narrative of *Into the Wild* as well as the ideological climate of his milieu.

Literary nonfiction, as Markku Lehtimäki explains, functions ambiguously between fictional and factual modes (28). Lehtimäki argues that post-modern cultural relativism implies a logic according to which the universal “literariness” of knowledge acquisition and representation means that there cannot be fundamental differences between fictional/literary texts and non-fictional/historical texts. Indeed, there are always fictive features in historical writing such as emplotment, rhetorical tropes, semantic indeterminacy, ambiguity, etc. (32-33). Despite their common use of these resources, Lehtimäki maintains that there are some formal distinctions between nonfictional and fictional texts. One of them has to do with the claimed intention of the text. “Truth” in nonfiction cannot be guaranteed, so he argues that one aspect that distinguishes nonfiction is the “intentional concept of claiming truth” (44-5). He agrees with Marie-Laure Ryan in defining nonfiction, not by its relation to “reality,” but “by rules that govern the use of the text, and bind sender and receiver in a communicative contract” (44). What dis-

tinguishes nonfiction from fiction then is referentiality, which in nonfiction means that in order to gain access to its object of representation, exhaustive research, through “narrative acts” such as interviews, letters, diaries, testimonies, etc., becomes a required element of the retelling (47). Among other aspects that characterize nonfiction is the self-reflexive aspect. These kinds of narratives often include a reflection on the writing process and on the historical presence of an author in the story. It is this self-reflection that defines the genre of the text and helps to influence the reader’s interpretation of it (83-87). The author’s reflections produce a “reflexive” reading of the text. As Lehtimäki points out, nonfiction in some way reestablishes the relations between writer, reader, and subject, which results in “an ongoing negotiation” between the factual event, authorial rhetoric, and readerly response” (92). At the risk of oversimplifying, nonfiction is thus a generic blend which usually mixes a firm intention of telling the truth through serious research, the use of various fictionalizing techniques, and some sort of self-criticism which asks for a reflexive reading.

The book is predominantly a biography of McCandless, in which its referential base relies upon Krakauer’s interviews with family members, friends, and people whom McCandless encountered on his journey, as well as on the study of evidence such as letters to friends and notes written before his death. However, the book is much more than an ordinary nonfiction biography. Based on a long article that Krakauer published in *Outside* magazine, it is written in a style that resembles a detective story, which pushes the plot forward through reflections and anecdotes from multiple sources. For instance, to throw oblique light on the life of McCandless, Krakauer presents the stories of other men who died in similar circumstances and even narrates stories from his own youth. This makes the text “an auto/biography,”¹ a term that, according to Sidone Smith and Julia Watson, designates a mode of narrative that inserts a personal narrative within a biography (184). Moreover, Daniel W. Lehman observes that in order to create compelling nonfiction narratives, Krakauer reveals and criticizes the reporting methods that he uses as he presents different perspectives that participate in reconstructing the historical events in his works (467). Indeed, in *Into the Wild* Krakauer problematizes the construction of his text:

1 Observe that the slash marks the fluid boundary between biography and autobiography which “blends them into a hybrid” (Smith and Watson 7).

I won't claim to be an impartial biographer. McCandless's strange tale struck a personal note that made a dispassionate rendering of the tragedy impossible. Through most of the book, I have tried—and largely succeeded, I think—to minimize my authorial presence. (Wild x)

Besides this warning, Krakauer also displays conflicting evidence that undermines the certitude of the story. He writes an apologia for McCandless, presenting him as a well-educated young man with an above-average intellect and remarkable spiritual ambitions. This depiction is interwoven with other people's views, and juxtaposed to the opinion of readers who saw McCandless as a "dreamy half-cocked greenhorn" (Wild 73) and who criticized Krakauer's article for glorifying what they thought to be a pointless death.

Using techniques of fiction to give the narrative a literary form and aesthetic, as well as to give valuable insights into the life of McCandless, Krakauer refers to a wide variety of writers, in particular to Jack London, Leo Tolstoy, and, as already mentioned, Henry D. Thoreau. Critics of *Into the Wild* have usually analyzed the text with Jack London as a backdrop due to the fact that Krakauer states that London was Chris's favorite writer and *Call of the Wild* his favorite book. The present essay, however, analyzes *Into the Wild* with a focus mainly on Thoreau, who is the most cited writer in Krakauer's book. The many epigraphs and citations that draw parallels to Thoreau's life and ideas play the role of examples inspiring McCandless's actions. Using these references, Krakauer portrays McCandless as "a latter-day adherent of Henry David Thoreau" (Wild 28), who wandered "across North America in search of raw, transcendental experience" (Wild ix). This suggests that McCandless can be seen as a modern-day Thoreauvian transcendentalist. But as Alfred I. Tauber reminds us in "Henry Thoreau as a Mirror of Ourselves" readers at different points in time interpret Thoreau in different ways according to their own values and ideas in specific social, political, and historical contexts (pars. 1-18). Consequently, Krakauer's romantic portrayal of Thoreau's views of economy, liberalism, and nature will reflect those of Krakauer, or his times, as much as it reflects those of McCandless.

Economic Ideas

A central motif of *Into the Wild* is Krakauer's interpretation of Thoreau as a transcendental economist opposed to market economy and materialism. On the cover of the book the reader learns that before starting his journey

McCandless had given all his savings to charity. Additionally, Krakauer reports how Chris burned the remaining cash he had, “in a gesture that would have done both Thoreau and Tolstoy proud” (Wild 29). Moreover, when Krakauer addresses the relationship between McCandless and his parents, he starts the chapter with an epigraph of a passage from Thoreau’s *Walden* highlighted by Chris. Using this passage, Krakauer illustrates the kind of strict moral code by which McCandless measured himself and those around him: “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, an obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices” (Wild 117). This passage does not only suggest why Chris felt aggravated when he discovered that his father lived as a bigamist for years, but it also reflects the higher principles he might have followed when burning his money. McCandless’s opposition to market economy and materialism seems to be aligned with the traditional interpretation of *Walden* as an experiment that attempted to create a transcendental and organic form of economy opposed to the market economy of antebellum capitalism.² Krakauer suggests that, like Thoreau, McCandless desired truth before money, which explains why he tried to invent a new economy for himself.

The traditional interpretation of Thoreau’s economic ideas indeed supports Krakauer’s supposition that McCandless’s repulsion for wealth was inspired by Thoreauvian principles. Firstly, the main purpose of Thoreau’s economy was to achieve personal growth. Thoreau went to the woods, as he himself explains, “because I wanted to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (Walden 1028). In short, Thoreau went to Walden Pond in order to use as much time as possible doing what he really wanted to do, that is, learning from his experiments, growing spiritually, and writing. Opposed to the mere accumulation of material wealth, which is the goal of market economy, Thoreau stated: “Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul” (Walden 1152). Thoreau believed that all the luxuries and comforts of life beyond the basic necessities were “hindrances to the elevation of mankind” (Walden 987). Moreover, he claimed that “a

2 See for instance Parrington: “*Walden* is the handbook of an economy that endeavors to refute Adam Smith and transform the round of daily life into something nobler than a mean gospel of plus and minus” (392).

man is far more rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone” (Walden 1023). Richard Grusin suggests that Thoreau’s economy was not only about avoiding any kind of luxury or superfluity. He argues that the emphasis of Thoreau’s “discussion of necessities is as much on getting rid of possessions as on preventing their acquisition” (Grusin 46). Similarly, Chris wants to avoid superfluity, which would prevent him from the joy of living, instead merely providing for the basic necessities. As he stated in a letter to Wayne Westerberg, a friend for whom he had worked: “I wish I hadn’t met you though. Tramping is too easy with all this money. My days were more exciting when I was penniless and had to forage around for my next meal” (Wild 33). In sum, Thoreau’s repudiation of material possessions and his economy designed to achieve a higher spiritual purpose supports the parallel that Krakauer draws between Thoreau and McCandless.

In contrast to the traditional interpretation of Thoreau’s economic ideas, other critics assess Thoreau’s economic design as a practical philosophy that approved using the advantages of the market economy. Revisionist critics such as Michael T. Gilmore argue that Thoreau failed to create an alternative economy because his economy at *Walden* was essentially based in the same capitalistic ideas that he criticized (44). Later critics have attempted to solve the disagreement between traditional and revisionist interpretations. Brian Walker, for instance, argues that Thoreau’s anti-capitalist ideas can be understood as a practical philosophy to achieve liberty and self-realization, not isolated from the market economy, but within it: “[*Walden*] combines ancient philosophical practices and modern economic calculation to set out a strategy by which citizens may realize their liberty” (849). Indeed, Thoreau addresses *Walden* particularly to “poor students” (981), those who were not “well employed” (988), and those “who have accumulated dross, but know not how to use it, or get rid of it, and thus have forged their own golden or silver fetters” (988). In other words, Thoreau addresses the problem of people who could not find a path to self-realization within their economic and/or personal situations (Walker 853). In reality, Thoreau used the market economy in order to achieve a life with freedom left for his “proper pursuits” (Walden 995). A clear example of this is the construction of his cabin in the woods, where he considered it acceptable, and even advantageous, to use money to buy different materials:

Though we are not so degenerate but that we might possibly live in a cave or a wigwam or wear skins to-day, it certainly is better to accept the advantages, though so dearly bought, which the invention and industry of mankind offer. In such a neighborhood as this, boards and shingles, lime and bricks, are cheaper and more easily obtained than suitable caves, or whole logs, or bark in sufficient quantities [...] With a little more wit we might use these materials so as to become richer than the richest now are, and make our civilization a blessing. (Walden 1001)

In this light, it is clear that Thoreau did not aim to remove himself from the market economy as Krakauer suggests McCandless did; on the contrary, he supported the use of the benefits of capitalism, even while using the market as little as possible and only if doing so would further the higher goal of freedom and spiritual growth.

Krakauer's statement that Thoreau would have been proud of McCandless's drastic aversion to money is based on the traditional interpretation of Thoreau's economic views, yet it is an idealized interpretation which does not take into account the practical philosophy that Thoreau applied in *Walden*. As a result, Krakauer's statement that McCandless would have done Thoreau proud illustrates Krakauer's use of a technique of fiction to characterize McCandless as an adherent of Thoreauvian economic principles. Krakauer reiterates this rather forced analogy: "Bullhead City doesn't seem like the kind of place that would appeal to an adherent of Thoreau and Tolstoy, an ideologue who expressed nothing but contempt for the bourgeois trappings of mainstream America. McCandless, nevertheless, took a strong liking to Bullhead" (Wild 40). Krakauer is clearly reminding the reader of the singularity of the protagonist who disliked money and mainstream values, despite the fact—or rather because of the fact—that he was "flipping Quarter Pounders at McDonalds" and living "a surprisingly conventional existence, even going so far as to open a savings account at a local bank" (Wild 40). McCandless created his poverty by artificial means, which might have been inspired by Thoreau's condemnation of the market economy and materialism. Yet by burning his money and attempting to remove himself from the market economy by living off the land, McCandless clearly opposed Thoreau's practical economic philosophy, which tried to find a balance between the inescapable forces of the market economy and the freedom to pursue one's life goals.

Consequently, the economic ideas expressed in *Walden* are not an accurate measure to explain McCandless's reasons and ideas. Krakauer's use of Thoreau's material repulsion say more about Krakauer's own cultural

context. At the time of his writing *Into the Wild*, it was becoming evident that more economic growth with its correspondent increasing economic wealth was not helping people achieve self-fulfillment, as Alan Durning's *How Much is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth* (1992) suggests. This book points toward evidence that showed that consumption, past a certain point, was not making people happy. On the contrary, the exponential increase in consumption was increasing the rate of ecological destruction. Thoreau's ideas on economy might not function as a good mirror of McCandless but they certainly reflect an awakening and disturbing question in Krakauer's contemporary America.

View of Nature and Wilderness

Another major idea used by Krakauer in *Into the Wild* is Thoreau's idealization of nature and wilderness as a romantic pastoral garden where one can retreat from civilization. The interpretation that Krakauer uses seems to be aligned with Leo Marx's reading of *Walden*, where he argues that *Walden* was the report of "an experiment in transcendental pastoralism" (242). Marx notes that *Walden* is organized like many American fables: the story begins with the main character withdrawing from society into nature; the main part of the plot takes place in the woods where Thoreau puts into practice Emerson's transcendental prescriptions; and the book ends with a return to Concord after having successfully been redeemed through the method tested (242-3). There are a number of characteristics that define the pastoral ideal, as proposed by Leo Marx and Lawrence Buell, all of which are suggested by the references to Thoreau that Krakauer uses in *Into the Wild*.

The first aspect of the pastoral motive is the will to escape from an "artificial" world, from civilization to nature, from sophistication to simplicity, and from the city to the country (Buell, *Environmental* 31; Marx 8-9). Krakauer introduces Chapter Fourteen with an epigraph taken from Thoreau's *Journal*, where Thoreau describes his recollection of how he ascended along a rocky mountain:

I lost myself quite in the upper air and clouds, seeming to pass an imaginary line which separates a hill, mere earth heaped up, from a mountain, into a superterranean grandeur and sublimity [...] That rocky, misty summit, secreted in the clouds, was far more thrillingly awful and sublime than the crater of a volcano spouting fire. (Wild 133)

Here we see Thoreau moving away from the wider world to a romanticized natural setting, a sublime, thrilling place where he gets lost in the upper air and clouds. The picture created seems to be the written representation of Caspar Friedrich's *The Wanderer above the Mists*, one of the most iconic paintings of German Romanticism. With this powerful image Krakauer opens a chapter where he compares his own personal experience with McCandless's to explain why he believed that McCandless did not intend to commit suicide when walking into the Alaskan bush. Krakauer explains that like McCandless, he himself had himself a conflictive relationship with his father and fantasized about climbing remote mountains. His reasoning, again like that of McCandless, "was inflamed by the scattershot passions of youth and a literary diet overly rich in the works of Nietzsche, Kerouac, and John Menlove Edwards" (Wild 135), the last of whom likewise climbed "to find refuge from his inner problems" (Wild 135). Like the Romantics, Thoreau, Krakauer, and McCandless all seem to have felt the necessity of escaping from a complex reality, their problems, and expectations of their parents or society. In order to do so, they needed to find a place away from people, and what place could be farther away from civilization than the pinnacle of a mountain? Being in contact with wild nature made Krakauer, like Thoreau in the epigraph, experience a feeling of awe that made him forget the problems of everyday life and live intensely in the present. Krakauer writes that in such an environment

The accumulated clutter of day-to-day existence—the lapses of conscience, the unpaid bills, the bungled opportunities, the dust under the couch, the inescapable prison of your genes—[...] is temporarily forgotten, crowded from your thoughts by an overpowering clarity of purpose. (Wild 142)

Thoreau's and Krakauer's own experiences ascending mountains exemplify then the kind of escape that McCandless was looking for. This is made clear in the passage where McCandless gets a ride to the Stampede Trail and confesses to the driver of the pickup: "I don't want to know what time it is. I don't want to know what day it is or where I am. None of that matters" (Wild 7). Moreover, the idea of escaping to a pastoral garden is reinforced by the "declaration of independence" that McCandless scrawled in the abandoned bus he used as shelter in Alaska:

TWO YEARS HE WALKS THE EARTH. NO PHONE, NO POOL, NO PETS, NO CIGARETTES. ULTIMATE FREEDOM [...] ESCAPED FROM ATLANTA, THOU SHALT

NOT RETURN 'CAUSE "THE WEST IS THE BEST" [...] TEN DAYS AND NIGHTS OF FREIGHT TRAINS AND HITCHHIKING BRING HIM TO THE GREAT WHITE NORTH. NO LONGER TO BE POISONED BY CIVILIZATION HE FLEES, AND WALKS ALONE UPON THE LAND TO BECOME *LOST IN THE WILD*. (Wild 162)

The parallels among McCandless's, Thoreau's, and Krakauer's experiences exemplify the sort of romantic ideas that can conjure the desire to flee the complexities of urban life and return to a simpler, more "natural" state of being. Furthermore, they also reveal the kind of thinking that can make a person make the avoidable mistakes that ended up costing McCandless his life. Thus, the parallel is a means to argue that McCandless was not suicidal but was leaving society in search of a transcendental experience as Thoreau had done in *Walden*.

A further aspect of the pastoral motive is the celebration of idleness and a sense of solidarity with the universe (Marx 249). This aspect is suggested in one of the passages that McCandless highlighted in *Walden*, and which Krakauer uses as the epigraph of Chapter Six. Thoreau declares that a man following his genius and living life in close contact with nature achieves an existence "in conformity to higher principles" (Wild 48):

If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy [...] that is your success. All nature is your congratulation [...] The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the highest reality...The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched. (Wild 48)

Thoreau tried to depict the ineffable delight that nature provides when observing it and living in conformity to it. This sheds some indirect light on McCandless's view of nature as a source of fulfillment and joy and suggests the philosophy which might have set McCandless's soul on his Alaskan odyssey. In a letter to Ronald Franz that Krakauer cites in the same chapter, McCandless argued: "The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun [...] [joy] is in everything and anything that we might experience" (Wild 58). Thus, McCandless placed too much value on a transcendental way of life where the contact with different horizons, new suns, and everything in the universe was itself a goal—as well as, in Thoreau's words, his "success" and "congratulation."

Finally, another aspect of the pastoral motive mentioned by Marx is a sort of “felicity represented by an image of a natural landscape” (9). According to Marx, the natural landscape is a terrain either unspoiled or, if cultivated, rural (9). Chapter Seventeen in *Into the Wild*, “The Stampede Trail,” begins with an epigraph taken from Thoreau’s “Ktaadn.”³ In this passage Thoreau describes the landscape:

Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man’s garden, but the unhandelled globe [...] It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever. (Wild 171)

As in the reference to Thoreau’s Journal (Wild 132), Thoreau depicts the “unhandelled” nature in this passage. According to the Oxford English Dictionary Online, “unhandelled” was a term coined by Emerson and used by Thoreau which, in opposition to “handsel,” describes nature as untouched, unused or unproven by the human being. Krakauer uses the epigraph to shed light on the attraction people of a certain type feel toward contact with an untouched wilderness. These quotes taken from Thoreau’s writings are tools that aid Krakauer in his defense of McCandless from critics who claimed that his retreat to Alaska was an example of his “stupidity” and “arrogance” (Wild 179). Indeed, later in the same chapter Krakauer states that “Even staid, prissy Thoreau, who famously declared that it was enough to have ‘travelled a good deal in Concord,’ felt compelled to visit the more fearsome wilds of nineteenth-century Maine and climb Mt. Katahdin” (Wild 182). If Thoreau, who has been mythologized as an exceptionally brilliant figure, felt compelled to escape to wild places, then McCandless, as an adherent of Thoreau, cannot simply be belittled as the typical bush casualty. What is more, Krakauer points out on the following page that “McCandless wasn’t some feckless slacker, adrift and confused, racked by existential despair. To the contrary: His life hummed with meaning and purpose” (Wild 183). That purpose was, as suggested by the epigraph, a sort of awe experienced by being in contact with the natural landscape.

However, just as we saw in the previous section that Krakauer simplifies Thoreau’s economic outlook, he arguably reduces the complexity of Thoreau’s understanding of nature by ignoring pragmatic interpretations of

3 The Indian name of the mountain today called Mount Katahdin.

Thoreau's view of nature. Marx observes that, although *Walden* resembles the classic pastoral in form and feeling, Thoreau recognized the presence of industrialization in the woods in almost every chapter of *Walden* (260); consequently, he admitted that pastoralism was doomed and that the "Walden site cannot provide a refuge [...] from the forces of change" (253). Indeed, Thoreau accepts the process of industrialization when he states, "I will not have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by its smoke and steam and hissing" (*Walden* 1045). Marx concludes that Thoreau placed his pastoral ideal simply "in his craft," in the writing of the literary *Walden* and not at the real *Walden* (265). Buell similarly suggests that the movement to the pastoral garden in *Walden* is a critique of mainstream values (*American* 23). Buell asserts that Thoreau's notion of value was different from that of his neighbors, which was based on exchange, and therefore Thoreau's expression of "pastoral hedonism becomes an indictment of the deadening pragmatism of the agrarian economy" (*American* 12).

Other critics like Ning Yu affirm that in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* Thoreau criticized the American pastoral inspired by the "new geography" of Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Ritter (307). Yu highlights that Thoreau's observations included the realization that the "peaceful" communities established by European settlers, which supposedly represented the pastoral ideal, were in actuality not created by peaceful means but rather through violence against the aborigines, thus contradicting the definition of the pastoral. Thoreau observed also that the encroachment of industrialization indicated the imminent end of the myth of the American pastoral, and that the force of wild nature would eventually destroy industrialization and humanity to create something else. In short, Thoreau showed that the pastoral landscape was an illusion from the beginning and that he saw no future for it (322). Thoreau considered humanity and its products as a part of an "organic process of life-death regeneration" (326), a view which is substantially different from the romantic ideas advanced by Krakauer.

These romantic and practical interpretations of Thoreau's views on nature embody two different pastoral representations. While the romantic one helps Krakauer explain McCandless's actions, Buell argues that "American pastoral representation cannot be pinned to a single ideological position" (*Environmental* 44). He explains that the retreat to nature typical of the pastoral ideal can be a form of "willed amnesia" (*Environmental* 49) or a kind of "willful retreat from social and political responsibility" (*Environ-*

mental 44). Nonetheless, the same retreat “means something different when held up self-consciously, as by Thoreau, to appeal to an alternative set of values over and against the dominant one” (Environmental 49-50). Indeed, as previously shown, Thoreau comprehended human affairs as an historical, organic process. He used the pastoral ideal as a critique of mainstream values; his view of nature was a pragmatic one despite its romanticism. While Thoreau’s pastoral ideal was merely an intellectual construct used as a means to reject the values of his community, McCandless got rid of his map and tried to experience the pastoral ideal in real life. McCandless’s complete break with the clock and the map seems more an example of “willed amnesia” than a conscious strategy. The young man’s view of nature reflects only idealism and naivety. It should be noted that Krakauer embellishes the story with epigraphs and references to Thoreau without giving any proof that McCandless had really read the passages. Excerpts such as the ones taken from Thoreau’s Journal and from “Ktaadn” influence the reader’s perception of his story and promote the idea that McCandless was as an exceptional figure similar to Thoreau. In this way, the use of Thoreau’s ideas on nature reflects, as I aim to show, more of Krakauer’s own idealism than the thought process of Chris McCandless.

The references to “unhandselled nature” suggest one of Krakauer’s typical themes: namely, the modern-day tragedy of the loss of wilderness. Krakauer reveals how every place in “wilderness” that McCandless visits from the beginning of his odyssey has been corrupted by man. Such is the case with the Salton Sea in Anza-Borego Desert State Park, a lake “created in 1905 by a monumental engineering snafu” (Wild 49); such is the case with the lower part of the Colorado River, which is “emasculated by dams and diversions canals [...] [and] burbles indolently from reservoir to reservoir” (Wild 32). Most ironically, such is also the case with the “wilderness” surrounding the bus on the Stampede Trail: “the patch of overgrown country where McCandless was determined ‘to become lost in the wild’ [...] scarcely qualifies as wilderness by Alaskan standards” (Wild 164). Holding a degree in environmental studies, Krakauer is well aware of the exploitation of even the most remote natural landscapes, which have left “no blank spots on the map” (Wild 173). This is a recurrent trope in Krakauer’s oeuvre: “real” wilderness does not exist in *Into the Wild*, and so it is invented in the imagination of the protagonist. Similarly, in *Into Thin Air*, Krakauer ruminates on the commercialization of Mount Everest, and

in his article in *Time* “Will there be any wilderness left?” Krakauer predicts that a genuine experience of the wild country will be difficult to find in the twenty-first century and advocates the preservation of “empty places” (pars. 7-11). Thoreau’s pastoralism and notion of “unhandselled” nature reflects then Krakauer’s idealism and his nostalgic yearning for a time when pastoral hope was possible.

I believe that Krakauer’s idealistic view of nature put forward through the romanticized figure of Henry David Thoreau might be symptomatic of a time in history where the processes of industrialization and globalization had produced daunting forecasts of an ecological holocaust. As Buell suggested just one year before the publication of *Into the Wild*:

Environmental holocaust now seems not only a potential by-product of nuclear attack but also an imminent peril in its own right [...] The “age of ecology,” as Donald Worster has termed the present era, may not lead to more than a marginal change in social attitudes toward or public policy concerning further technological buildup; but even if it doesn’t, indeed perhaps especially if it doesn’t, pastoralism is sure to remain a luminous ideal. (Environmental 51)

Buell sees a mark of the relevance of pastoralism in “the contemporary tradition of environmental apocalypse literature” (Environmental 51) which included books like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1964), John Bruner’s *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975), and Jonathan Schell’s *The Fate of the Earth* (1982) (Environmental 51). Krakauer began writing McCandless’s story a decade after the last of these books was published, and several decades after ideas like “the age of ecology” began having any impact in the general public. Nonetheless, *Into the Wild* was written following the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 and published just some months before the Kyoto Climate Change Conference. Debates about ecology had reached full volume, and were reflected in books like Bill McKibben’s *The End of Nature* (1989), the first book on the impact of global warming for a general audience. Its message was that there could no longer be found any place on earth that lay beyond the devastating touch of humans. McKibben writes:

We have changed the atmosphere, and that will change the weather. The temperature and rainfall are no longer to be entirely the work of some separate, uncivilizable force, but instead in part a product of our habits, our economies, our ways of life. Even in the most remote wilderness, where the strictest laws forbid the felling of a single tree, the

sound of the saw will be clear, and a walk in the woods will be changed—tainted—by its whine.⁴ (47)

In this context it is no surprise that Krakauer uses Thoreau's ideas on nature; he is after all not the first, but one of the greatest naturalists of American literature. Once again, the transcendentalist's ideas on nature might not clarify McCandless's possible reasons for undertaking his quixotic escape into wilderness, but they do reflect Krakauer's own ideas, or at least the worries about environmental degradation of his time, a moment in history when it was no longer possible to find an "untouched" place in nature.

Liberalism

Yet another major element of Krakauer's story in *Into the Wild* is Thoreau's liberal ideas. Before introducing this aspect, it is useful to distinguish between the two notions of liberalism which Robert Watkins examines. The first one is a form of liberalism that has its roots in politics and culture. This kind of liberalism is "informed by individual rights and freedom as well as recurrent tropes of individualism and independence, from the Western Pioneers to the solitary naturalist to the entrepreneur" (Watkins 7). Moreover, such liberalism places the rights of the individual above government and power, which Watkins suggests has become a set of principles to which the American people adhere unconsciously (Watkins 7). In contrast, the second notion of liberalism is inspired by romantic thinkers and poets such as Wilhelm von Humboldt and Lord Byron, and "is not so much deliberate and rational [...] intuitive, Romantic, and impulsive, and [...] interested in the freedom of self-making apart from society and away from power" (Watkins 8). Watkins considers McCandless's retreat to nature in *Into the Wild* a "Walden-esque trope" of escaping an impure society to a pure nature, thus positioning both works as representatives of this romantic kind of liberalism (8). As discussed previously, the interpretation of *Walden* as an escape to a pastoral garden is an oversimplification of Thoreau's multifaceted philosophy. Nonetheless, Watkins' notions of liberalism can be uti-

4 A mark of the resurgence of Thoreau's ideas on nature and economy at the time is the fact that McKibben also references several passages from Thoreau's writing. At one point he laments his destructive consumerist behaviour and compares himself to Thoreau at Walden: "I live on about four hundred times what Thoreau conclusively proved was enough" (90).

lized to assess Thoreau's liberal ideas as well as the ones Krakauer uses to characterize McCandless.

In several places Krakauer reads Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" as an expression of romantic liberalism in order to characterize McCandless as an adherent of Thoreau and thus give coherence to his actions. First there is the episode when McCandless abandons his car in the desert, cited in the very beginning of this essay, where Krakauer argues that McCandless "took as a gospel the essay 'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience'" (Wild 28). As presented in that passage, Thoreau's essay appears as an expression of romantic liberalism which indiscriminately refuses to accept the laws of the state. This explains many passages where Chris refuses to obey the law; the passages when he hitchhikes where it is not allowed (Wild 31), when he hops freight trains (Wild 54), or when he hunts in the Stampede Trail without a license (Wild 6). Secondly, in Chapter Twelve Krakauer tries to explain the paradox that McCandless was a "vocal admirer of Ronald Reagan" and had co-founded a Republican club in college despite his pronounced aversion to money and conspicuous consumption, and his interest in subjects such as race and inequity in the distribution of wealth (Wild 123). "Chris's seemingly anomalous political positions," Krakauer suggests, "were perhaps best summed up by Thoreau's declaration in 'Civil Disobedience': 'I heartily accept the motto—'That government is best which governs the least'" (Wild 123). In order to draw a parallel between Thoreau and Chris, Krakauer boils down the ideas of Thoreau's essay so that they appear to be summarized in a simple motto. Read on its own, Thoreau's aphorism certainly illustrates McCandless's apparently compulsive refusal to accept rules. As Chris's father pointed out: "He refused instruction of any kind" (Wild 111). This just underlines the fact that Krakauer's interpretation of "Civil Disobedience" as a rejection of every kind of imposed law expresses a romantic form of liberalism which is exceedingly individualistic and accepts the fanciful possibility of freeing oneself from society and power.

A close reading of Thoreau's essay reveals that the ideas within the text express instead a political and cultural liberalism. In the essay, Thoreau expounds what he thinks should be the rights and duties of the individual in relation to government. His whole argument is anchored in the idea that the individual should act upon his own judgment of what is right, and not blindly follow the will of government: "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right" (Thoreau, *Civil* 965). Following this principle, Thoreau argues that if the government requires the individual

“to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine” (Civil 970). The refusal to pay his tax bills was a way of making a “peaceful revolution” (Civil 972) against the government, which was waging an unjust war on Mexico and continued to permit slavery. Thoreau did not want to give his dollar to the state so that it “buys a man, or a musket to shoot one with,” but he makes it clear that he had never declined paying the highway tax (Civil 976). His aim is unmistakable: “To speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government” (Civil 965). This reveals that Thoreau did not consider it his moral responsibility “to flout the laws of the state” as Krakauer states. Instead, Thoreau considered it his responsibility to break the law only if he found that it overran the rights of other human beings. The kind of liberalism expressed by Thoreau then is the liberalism that recognizes the individual as an independent and higher power, placing his or her rights over the power of government. In contrast with McCandless, Thoreau did not aim to remove himself from the structures of power and society; he considered himself a “citizen” whose goal was to educate his fellow-countrymen to “prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious state” (Civil 979). As it turns out, the only thing that McCandless might have taken as a gospel was the title of the essay, “Civil Disobedience,” which cannot be considered authorial.⁵

Krakauer’s attempts to give some coherence to and redeem the actions of McCandless by arguing that he followed Thoreau’s principles in “Civil Disobedience” rests upon a partial reading of the essay. While Thoreau considered it his responsibility to resist the law when it overran the rights of other people, McCandless’s hedonistic actions, such as driving his car inside a nature reserve or hunting without license in a national park, must rather be said to contribute to what Garret Hardin has called “the tragedy of the commons” (1244-5)⁶. Clearly Thoreau’s liberalism, besides being inspired by the romantic idea of escaping from society into nature, is also politically and culturally based. This inclusion of political and cultural commentary in

5 The title that Krakauer uses was given to the essay in a compilation of essays after Thoreau’s death. The first version of the essay was delivered as a lecture under the title “The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government,” and the title of the first printing was “The Duty of Submission to Civil Government Explained” (Civil 964).

6 The concept where individuals act according to their self-interest, depleting shared resources despite the best interests of the group in the long term.

Thoreau's own work thus substantially differs from the liberal ideas of McCandless, which appear to be inspired only by Romanticism. Krakauer does not distinguish between the two different notions of liberalism that Watkins describes, either because he is ill-informed or because he deliberately uses them to give McCandless a Thoreauvian aura. Krakauer, then, fictionalizes McCandless's story by suggesting that he could have declared to the rangers that he was a follower of Thoreau's principles in "Civil Disobedience." The parallels Krakauer draws with Thoreau prod the reader to see McCandless as a character who, similarly to other remarkable figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Baym 964), was inspired by Thoreau to embrace nonviolent civil disobedience. As I have tried to show, however, this is not the case according to the evidence that Krakauer presents.

Conclusion

Each of the three major motifs previously analyzed shows the ways in which Krakauer does not take into account the more practical interpretations of Thoreau's ideas found in his published works and journal entries. Additionally, through his explanations of McCandless's actions, Krakauer defends him from criticism while at the same time making him appear as a unique character. This effort to make McCandless appear as an exceptional figure becomes perhaps most clear in the passage where Krakauer rebukes the opinions of readers of his original article, some of whom suggested that McCandless was similar to other "dreamers and misfits" (Wild 4) who had previously died in the Alaskan wilderness. One of those readers, an Alaskan schoolteacher, criticizes McCandless severely, stating that over the years he had seen many people like McCandless, idealistic and overconfident ad nauseam, who ended up finding themselves in life-threatening situations. Quoting the schoolteacher, Krakauer writes:

McCandless was hardly unique; there's quite a few of these guys hanging around the state, so much alike that they are almost a collective cliché. The only difference is that McCandless ended up dead, with the story of his dumbassness splashed across the media. (Wild 72)

At one point Krakauer also admits that "[d]ozens of marginal characters have marched off into the Alaska wilds over the years, never to reappear" (Wild 73). He even narrates the stories of some of the individuals who perished in similar circumstances to McCandless, yet he continues to defend

his protagonist, claiming that, despite superficial similarities, he cannot be compared to the “bush-casualty stereotype” (Wild 85). Krakauer compares McCandless with these other “marginal characters”:

Like Waterman and McCunn, he displayed a staggering paucity of common sense. But unlike Waterman, McCandless wasn't mentally ill. And unlike McCunn, he didn't go into the bush assuming that someone would appear to save his bacon [...] [McCandless] wasn't a nutcase, he wasn't a sociopath, he wasn't an outcast. McCandless was something else—although precisely what is hard to say. A pilgrim, perhaps. (Wild 85)

The romanticized picture of Thoreau that Krakauer advances is central here, since it seems to be the very element that exonerates McCandless from the criticism directed against him, and helps to elevate his story above those of other, tragic sojourners.

All in all, the use of fictionalizing techniques together with the romantic conception of Thoreau blurs the real reasons that might have moved McCandless toward his tragic death⁷, and results in a potent narrative mixture that elevates the story to a more controversial level. Lehman claims that there is a clear connection between McCandless's discovery of his father's life as a bigamist and McCandless's immediate reaction of wandering in the Mojave Desert, where he became lost and nearly died of dehydration. Lehman points out:

Curiously Krakauer tells us that “two years passed before [Chris's] anger began to leak to the surface” (122), but it is rather clear that Chris's reaction to his father's deception surfaced almost immediately in a dramatic way. (475)

Krakauer makes it difficult for the reader to understand the connection between Chris's hazardous flight to the Mojave Desert and his father's adultery/bigamy because he does not tell the story in chronological order. In any case, it is clear that Krakauer employs several techniques of fiction—narrative anachrony, inventing what McCandless may have said to the rangers, embellishing the story with epigraphs, and attributing thoughts to Thoreau—all of which indicate that, as Krakauer warned in the preface, he is

7 Similarly, Caroline Hanssen suggests that Krakauer misinterprets Jack London's cautionary purpose, and wrongly states that McCandless tried to live out Jack London's fantasies, preventing an understanding of McCandless and the kind of person who embarks on dangerous back-country odysseys looking for self-fulfillment (191).

not an impartial biographer. Nevertheless, Lehman comes to the conclusion that Krakauer's scrupulous reporting and self-probing are combined "to produce compelling historical narrative" (467). I would like to agree with Lehman, as Krakauer does not fail to observe the "communicational contract" of nonfiction. In the preface he offers an implicit reflection on how his subjectivity colors the story throughout the book, and he displays his willingness to minimize his "authorial presence" through the extensive research and presentation of the perspectives of different people who knew or met McCandless during his travels. These elements provide the reader with enough tools to make a reflexive reading of the text and allow for individual interpretations of the story's factual adequacy. Here we can see one of the strongest powers of nonfiction: the reflexive reading proposed by the author, added to the controversy between the two central yet conflicting perspectives of McCandless—the brilliant modern-day transcendentalist and the arrogant greenhorn—is perhaps Krakauer's most important capital in making *Into the Wild* the best seller it is.

Finally, the romanticized interpretations of Thoreau's ideas aid Krakauer in giving his story a universal relevance. In the end, as Tauber suggests, the image of Thoreau that Krakauer advances exposes Krakauer's own values and ideas within his historical context. *Into the Wild's* romantic picture of "unhandselled" nature is indicative of Krakauer's view of wilderness as an irreplaceable "antidote to the alienation and pervasive softness that plague modern society" (Will par. 11). In an age of conspicuous consumption, when it started to become evident that more wealth was not equivalent to more happiness, Thoreau's ideas reflect the questioning of values that started to emerge in the 90's in the general American public. Similarly, in a time of alarming environmental degradation, the picture of Thoreau's pastoralism evidenced Krakauer's preoccupation with the loss of wilderness and the garden where transcendentalism was possible.

In conclusion, even though the reductive inclusion of Henry David Thoreau's writings does not, after careful analysis, provide us with a better understanding of the motivations and reasons behind McCandless's fatal flight from society, the literary techniques utilized by Jon Krakauer work together to create an appealing narrative and, as we have seen, to hold up a mirror to the author as well. The auto/biographical genre allowed the story of Alexander Supertramp to reveal the worries and preoccupations of both Krakauer and his milieu concerning the negative effect of materialism on both ourselves and the world around us.

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