Thoreau as a Mirror for Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*

José Joaquín Sánchez Vera

Faculty of Arts and Education

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Supervisor: Magnus Ullén

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Abstract

To tell the nonfiction biography of Christopher McCandless in *Into the Wild* Jon Krakauer uses a plethora of references to Henry D. Thoreau. In this thesis I study how Krakauer uses Thoreau while balancing on the fine line that differentiates the historian from the storyteller. Through an analysis of Krakauer’s use of Thoreau’s economic ideas, liberal ideas, and view of nature and wilderness I argue that Krakauer blurs a pragmatic understanding of Thoreau and uses techniques of fiction to characterize McCandless as a late Thoreauvian transcendentalist. By doing so, Krakauer explains and defends the protagonist’s actions from criticism making him appear as a character whose story is exceptional. However, the characterization of the protagonist as a follower of Thoreauvian ideals by means of a partial and romantic interpretation of Thoreau is misleading and does not provide us with a better understanding of the life of McCandless. Moreover, the romantic image of Thoreau advanced by Krakauer reflects Krakauer, or at least his times; particularly, it reflects Krakauer’s own view of wilderness and his concern for its impending demise. Consequently, I conclude that Krakauer’s version of McCandless’s story is perhaps too biased to amount to a strong historical narrative and be considered proper nonfiction. Nevertheless, the romanticized characterization of McCandless aids Krakauer to write a more appealing story.
Jon Krakauer’s nonfiction biography *Into the Wild*, is the intriguing story of Christopher McCandless, a talented college graduate who inexplicably leaves his family, friends, and all the comforts of civilization in search of ultimate freedom in the Alaskan wilderness. 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 rangers for help without answering why he had driven an unregistered and uninsured car, with an expired driving license, and in a place where it was strictly forbidden. The author speculates: “McCandless could endeavour to explain that he answered to statues 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” (Krakauer, *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.

This essay investigates the use of Thoreau as a mirror in Krakauer’s biography. It suggests that Thoreau is of central importance for Krakauer to advance the moral of his own story, but that the figure of Thoreau he draws upon to that purpose marks at best a partial and rather romantic interpretation of the actual views held by the great transcendentalist. To tell the nonfiction biography of Christopher McCandless in *Into the Wild* Jon Krakauer uses a plethora of references to Henry D. Thoreau, which reveal how Krakauer interprets Thoreau while balancing on the fine line between the role of historian and storyteller.

As Tanya Stone has suggested, the challenge of the writer of nonfiction is the following: facts mean nothing without a person interpreting them; however, the mere action of interpreting facts implies an adaptation of history to suit the interpreter’s preconceptions, attitudes, and ideas. Whether it is clear that it is impossible to tell “the truth”, the writer of nonfiction has to remain as faithful to the historical facts as it is humanly possible if he or she
attempts to create a work of this genre (Stone 86). As a result, the writer of nonfiction has to balance between the role of historian, telling the story as accurately as possible, and playing the role of storyteller, using techniques of fiction to create an alluring narrative (Stone 85).

*Into the Wild* is the intriguing story of Christopher McCandless, a talented college graduate who inexplicably leaves his family, friends, and all the comforts of civilization in search of ultimate freedom, a nobler form of life close 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 independence. Having refused to take 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. Published in 1996, the book became a bestseller almost immediately; it stayed on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for more than two years, and in 2007 was adapted into a movie directed by Sean Penn.

The book is predominantly a biography of McCandless, based on Krakauer’s interviews with family members, friends, and people who McCandless encountered on his way, as well as on the study of evidence such as letters to friends and notes that he left behind 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 his own experience climbing the Devil's Thumb in Alaska. Daniel W. Lehman asserts that people read Krakauer's works such as *Into Thin Air* and *Into the Wild*, “not so much to find out what will happen to his heroes (we already know from the dust jackets of his books that they will die) as to ponder the lessons of their deaths” (466). Moreover, Lehman observes that in order to construct compelling stories, 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, Krakauer displays conflicting evidence that undermines the certitude of the story he tells. Krakauer puts forward his view of McCandless 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 is 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. Krakauer summarizes this binary opposition: “Some readers admired the boy immensely for his courage and noble ideals; others fulminated that he was a reckless idiot, a wacko, a narcissist who perished out of arrogance and stupidity” (Wild xi). Rather than a straightforward biography, *Into the Wild* is thus Krakauer’s own construction of McCandless’s story with outlooks on different perceptions of it.

Using techniques of fiction in the narrative to make the story more appealing, 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 since 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 journey into the wild. 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 since, 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 a certain social, political and historical context (pars. 1-18), the image of Thoreau advanced by Krakauer will reflect Krakauer, or at least his times, as much as it reflects McCandless. Through an analysis of Krakauer’s portrayal of Thoreau’s views of economy, nature and wilderness, and liberalism this essay argues that Krakauer ignores a pragmatic understanding of Thoreau in order to explain the actions of the hero of his book by means of a romantic conception of Thoreau which ultimately reflects his own views of wilderness and its impending demise.

**Economic ideas**

A central motif of *Into the Wild* is Krakauers interpretation of Thoreau as a transcendental economist opposed to market economy and materialism. On the cover of the work the reader gets to know that before starting his journey McCandless had given all his savings to charity. Additionally, Krakauer reports how Chris burns the remaining cash he has: “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 measures himself and those around him: “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where 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 feels aggravated when he discovers 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.¹ Krakauer suggests that, as 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 Thoreau would have been proud of McCandless’s aversion of money and the suggestion that McCandless’s repulsion of wealth was inspired by Thoreauvian principles. Firstly, the main purpose of Thoreau’s economy was to achieve internal 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, to learn from his experiments, grow spiritually, and write. In contrast to the mere accumulation of material wealth, which is the goal of market economy, Thoreau argued that “Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul” (*Walden* 1152). Thoreau’s repudiation for material possessions is likewise reminiscent of McCandless’s actions.

¹ 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).
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 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 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 merely providing for the basic necessities. As he states in a letter to 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” (Krakauer, Wild 33). In sum, Thoreau’s repudiation of material possessions and his economy designed to further the higher purpose of achieving internal growth supports the parallel that Krakauer draws between Thoreau and McCandless.

Yet opposed to the traditional interpretation of Thoreau’s economic ideas other interpretations 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’s fails in his attempt of creating an alternative economy since 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: “Thoreau in 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 lacked liberty and failed to find a path to self-realization in their actual situation (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 pretend 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 internal 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, it becomes obvious that Krakauer’s statement that McCandless would have done Thoreau proud by burning his money is a product of Krakauer’s imagination. Moreover, the supposed pride that Krakauer attributes to Thoreau 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). Thoreau had only meager capital when he went to Walden to solve the problems of earning a livelihood in an honest way while remaining free for a higher goal of self-realization. In contrast, McCandless had enough wealth to do whatever he wanted without the necessity of laboring in something that would “prevent him from a true integrity day by day” (Walden 983). McCandless creates his poverty by artificial means, which might be 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. Thus, the economic ideas expressed in *Walden* are not really a good measure to explain McCandless’s reasons and ideas.
**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. This interpretation seems to be aligned with Leo Marx’s reading of *Walden* which 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 (242-43). Marx distinguishes a number of characteristics that define the pastoral ideal, 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 (Marx 8-9). Krakauer introduces chapter fourteen with an epigraph taken from Thoreau’s *Journal*. In this passage Thoreau describes his recollection of how he ascended along a rocky ridge clad with trees when he passed a point where:

> 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 sub-lime than the crater of a volcano spouting fire.

(Krakauer, Wild 133)
Here we see Thoreau moving away from the wider world to a romanticized nature, a sublime, thrilling place where he gets lost in the upper air and clouds. The picture that he creates seems to be the written representation of Caspar Friedrich’s *The Wanderer above the Mists*, one of the most iconic paintings of German Romanticism. Using this powerful image, Krakauer starts 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. Like McCandless, Krakauer explains he 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” (Krakauer, Wild 135), the last of whom likewise climbed “to find refuge from his inner problems” (Krakauer, Wild 135). Like the Romantics, Thoreau, Krakauer, and McCandless 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 in your thoughts by an overpowering clarity of purpose” (Wild 142). Krakauer uses both Thoreau’s and his own experience ascending mountains to exemplify the kind of escape that McCandless was looking for. This is made clear in the passage where, after Chris gets a ride to the Stampede Trail, he 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” (Krakauer, Wild 7). Moreover, the idea of escaping to a pastoral garden is reinforced by the “declaration of independence” that McCandles 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. (Krakauer, Wild 162)

The parallel between McCandless’s, Thoreau’s, and Krakauer’s experience exemplifies the sort of romantic ideas that can possess a person’s mind and make him or her want to move to a place in nature were life is supposed to be simplified. Furthermore, it also reveals the kind of thinking that can make a person commit 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 for a transcendental experience as Thoreau had done in Walden, while at the same time making McCandless appear as an exceptional figure similar to the widely respected Thoreau.
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 lives a life “in conformity to higher principles” (Krakauer, 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. (Krakauer, Wild 48)

Thoreau tries 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 Franz that Krakauer cites in the same chapter McCandless argues: “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” (Krakauer, Wild 58). In other words, McCandless too set much value on a transcendental form of life where the contact with different horizons, new suns, and everything in the universe was itself a goal, his “success” and “congratulation” in Thoreau’s words.
Finally, the last 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”2. 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 unhandselled globe […] It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever. (Krakauer, Wild 171)

As in the reference to Thoreau’s Journal (Krakauer, Wild 132), Thoreau depicts the “unhandselled” nature in this passage. According to the Oxford English Dictionary Online, “unhandselled” was a term coined by Emerson and used by Thoreau which, in opposition to “handsel”, describes nature as untouched, unused or unproved by the human being. Krakauer uses the epigraph to shed light on the allure that the contact with an untouched wilderness holds in people of a certain kind; thus Krakauer defends McCandless from critics who claimed that his retreat to Alaska was an example of his “stupidity” and “arrogance” (Krakauer, Wild 179). Indeed, later in the 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

2 The Indian name of the mountain today called Mount Katahdin.
Thoreau, cannot simply be stereotyped 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, the pastoral conception of Thoreau’s view of nature that Krakauer relies upon is only partially true. 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. In contrast to the interpretation of Thoreau’s view of nature as an idealized pastoral garden, there are several pragmatic interpretations of Thoreau’s view of nature. Marx observes that although Walden resembles the classic pastoral in form and feeling Thoreau recognizes the presence of industrialization in the woods in almost every chapter of Walden (260); consequently, he recognizes that pastoralism is 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 literary Walden and not in the real Walden (265). Lawrence Buell similarly suggests that the movement to the pastoral garden in Walden is a divisive critique of mainstream values (23). Buell asserts that Thoreau’s notion of value was different to the one 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” (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 explains that Thoreau observed that the European settler’s peaceful community that
represented the pastoral ideal, was not established by peaceful means but rather through violence against the aborigines—this contradicts 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 shows that the pastoral landscape had not existed 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 diametrically opposed to the romantic ideas advanced by Krakauer.

These pragmatic interpretations of Thoreau’s view of nature show that the romantic interpretation that Krakauer draws on to exemplify and explain McCandless actions do not adequately represent Thoreau’s view of nature. It is clear that Thoreau comprehended human affairs as an unavoidable, historical, and organic process, that his pastoral ideal existed merely in his consciousness, and that he even used the pastoral ideal as a critique of mainstream values. McCandless, in contrast, got rid of his map and tried to experience the pastoral ideal in real life. Drawing on a romantic interpretation of Thoreau’s view of nature helps Krakauer justify McCandless’s escape to a symbolic landscape where he could get a respite from society. It should be noted, however, that Krakauer embellishes the story with epigraphs from and references to Thoreau without giving any proof that McCandless had really read the passages. Using excerpts such as the ones taken from Thoreau’s Journal and from “KTAADN”, Krakauer romanticizes McCandless and influences the reader’s perception of his story. All things considered, Krakauer’s references to Thoreau’s view of nature do not clarify McCandless’s possible reasons for undertaking his quixotic attempt to escape into the wilderness. On the contrary, they obfuscate the actual facts by representing McCandless as an
exceptional figure similar to Thoreau, yet basing that figure on a misrepresentation of Thoreau’s pragmatic view of nature.

Furthermore, the references to the “undhanselled 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 since the beginning of his odyssey is corrupted by man. Such is the case with the lake Salton Sea in Anza-Borego Desert State Park, which was “created in 1905 by a monumental engineering snafu” (Krakauer, Wild 49); such is the case with the lower part of the Colorado River which “emasculated by dams and diversions canals […] burbles indolently from reservoir to reservoir” (Krakauer, Wild 32); and 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” (Krakauer, Wild 164). Thoreau’s notion of the “unhandselled” nature reflects Krakauer’s own nostalgic yearning for a time when pastoral hope was possible, a dream that Thoreau knew was doomed already at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Krakauer’s pastoral lamentation might be symptomatic of our own time in history where the processes of industrialization and globalization have produced daunting forecasts of an ecological holocaust. 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 many of Krakauer’s works: in Into the Wild real wilderness does not exist 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 magazine “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). In short, Krakauer uses Thoreau’s
description of the “unhandselled” nature to suggest that the pastoral garden where the transcendental experience is possible is in danger of extinction.

**Liberal Ideas**

Yet another major element of Krakauer’s story in *Into the Wild* is Thoreau’s liberal ideas. Before discussing this aspect, it might be useful to distinguish between two different 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 […] as is more 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. Nonetheless, Watkins’ notions of liberalism can be utilized to assess Thoreau’s liberal ideas and 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 give thus coherence to his actions and ideas. First, there is the episode with McCandless abandoning his car in the desert cited in the very beginning of this essay, where Krakauer argues that McCandless “took as gospel the essay ‘On the Duty of Civil Disobedience’”
(Krakauer, 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 when Chris refuses to obey the law; for instance, the passages when he hitchhikes where it is not allowed (Krakauer, Wild 31), when he hops freight trains (Krakauer, Wild 54), or when he hunts in The Stampede Trail without a license (Krakauer, 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 of 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 thus 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 apparent compulsive refusal to accept rules. As Chris’s father points out: “He refused instruction of any kind” (Krakauer, 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 extremely individualistic and accepts the fanciful possibility of freeing oneself from society and power.

In contrast, a close reading of Thoreau’s essay reveals that the ideas therein express rather 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 the government. His whole argument is anchored in the idea that the individual should act upon his own judgment of what is right, and not just follow the will of government blindly: “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). Thoreau refused to pay his tax bills as a way of making a “peaceful revolution” (Civil 972) against the government which was making an unjust war on Mexico and permitted 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”, and he makes 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” (Krakauer, Wild 28) as Krakauer states; instead, Thoreau considered it his responsibility to break the law only if he found that it overrun 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. Thoreau 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 even be considered authorial.³

³ 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).
Krakauer’s attempt to give some coherence to and redeem the actions of McCandless by arguing that he followed Thoreau’s principles in “Civil Disobedience” thus rest upon a partial reading of the essay. While Thoreau considered it his responsibility to resist the law when it meant 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” (1244-45). Clearly Thoreau’s liberalism is political and culturally-based, and very different from that of McCandless’s which is inspired by Romanticism. Krakauer does not distinguish between these two different notions of liberalism, either because he is ill-informed or because he deliberately uses them to give McCandless a Thoreauvian aura. In any case, Krakauer fictionalizes the story by suggesting that McCandless could have declared to the rangers that he was a follower of Thoreau’s principles in “Civil Disobedience”. The parallels with Thoreau prods the reader to see McCandless as a character who, similarly to other remarkable figures such as Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. (Baym 964), was inspired by Thoreau to embrace nonviolent civil disobedience. However, such was not the case according to the evidence that Krakauer presents.

**Conclusions**

First, each of the three major motifs previously analyzed shows that Krakauer uses a romantic and partial image of Thoreau and fails to take into account the more practical interpretations of Thoreau’s ideas, and that he does so in order to explain McCandless’s actions, defend him from criticism, and make him appear as a unique character. This effort to make McCandless...

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4 The concept where individuals act according to their self-interest depleting the shared resources despite it being contrary to the best of the group in the long term.
appear as an exceptional figure becomes perhaps most clear in the passage where Krakauer rebukes the opinion of readers of his original article who suggest 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 during the years he had seen many people like McCandless who were idealistic and overconfident ad nauseam and ended up in problems: “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 dumbassedness splashed across the media” (Wild 72). Krakauer admits that “Dozens 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 persons who perished in similar circumstances to McCandless, yet defends McCandless claiming that he is not really comparable to the “bush-casualty stereotype” (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, which Krakauer does not hesitate to repeat when he assesses the 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)

Clearly, this defense of McCandless makes his story stand out from the stories of other people who perished in similar situations.
Second, Krakauer’s romantic conception of Thoreau blurs a more pragmatic understanding of Thoreau, and thus blurs also the real reasons that might have moved McCandless toward his tragic death. 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, pointing out that while Krakauer claims that ‘two years passed before [Chris’s] anger began to leak to the surface’ (122), it seems “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 since he does not tell the story in chronological order, which is a further example of his fictionalizing technique. Nevertheless, Lehman comes to the conclusion that Krakauer’s scrupulous reporting and self-probing are combined “to produce compelling historical narrative” (467). However, when this narrative manipulation is seen in relation to Krakauer’s romanticized conception of Thoreau, it becomes evident that it is yet one more means for Krakauer to turn McCandless’s curious history into a compelling story. In contrast to Lehman’s assessment of the story, I would argue then that even though Krakauer presents different perspectives and is extensively researched, the story as he presents it is perhaps too colorful to amount to a strong historical narrative.

5 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 in dangerous back country odysseys looking for self-fulfillment (191).
Finally, Krakauer’s romanticized image of McCandless has the consequence of mystifying his story, which therefore becomes more intriguing and alluring. Perhaps the controversy between the main two conflicting perspectives of McCandless—the brilliant modern-day transcendentalist and the arrogant greenhorn—is Krakauer’s most important capital in making Into the Wild the best seller it is. However, the mesmerizing quality of the story comes with a price: truthfulness is compromised. Indeed, the characterization of McCandless by means of a partial, romantic conception of Thoreau is a sign of a biased interpretation of McCandless’s story. The public is undeniably made aware of Krakauer’s partial rendering of Chris’s story: “I won’t claim to be an impartial writer” (Wild X). Nonetheless, Krakauer states that “Through most of the book I have tried—and largely succeeded, I think—to minimize my authorial presence” (Wild X). Krakauer warns the reader that he interrupts the main narrative with a story of his own youth to cast oblique light on the enigmatic character. Despite this acknowledgement, Krakauer’s utilization of a one-dimensional image of Thoreau combined with the employment of several techniques of fiction—not telling the story in chronological order, inventing what McCandless may have said to the rangers, embellishing the story with epigraphs, and attributing thoughts to Thoreau—indicates that Krakauer plays the role of the storyteller more than that of the historian. In the end, as Tauber suggests, the image of Thoreau that Krakauer advances exposes his own values and ideas in his historical context. Into the Wild’s romantic picture of the “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 a time of alarming environmental degradation, the book expresses Krakauer’s preoccupation with the loss of wilderness and the pastoral garden where transcendentalism is possible.
In conclusion, the picture in Krakauer’s thoreuvian mirror demonstrates that Krakauer systematically draws on a somewhat simplistic and romantic interpretation of Thoreau to tell McCandless’s biography. In fact, despite Krakauer’s pronounced desire for minimizing his authorial presence, he disregards pragmatic interpretations of Thoreau, thus making McCandless appear as a figure that followed the ideas of his idol. As I have argued, portraying the protagonist as a Thoreauvian transcendentalist by means of such a partial interpretation of Thoreau is misleading and does not provide us with a better understanding of the life of McCandless, despite Krakauer’s extensive research. In the end, the Thoreauvian perspective in Into the Wild tells us more about Krakauer than of McCandless, and particularly, about the writer’s romantic view of the demise of an “untouched” nature he considers a pastoral garden enabling a transcendental form of life. Nevertheless, Krakauer’s romanticized characterization of McCandless aids the creation of an absorbing narrative by adding nuances to the enigma of McCandless’s story, highlighting its uniqueness, and creating controversy. Krakauer, in short, uses his own ideas of Thoreau to write his own version of the story of McCandless. This version is perhaps too biased to be considered nonfiction proper, but it is most certainly dazzling and inspiring.
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