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Mistaking Literature for Life: Rereading *Into the Wild*

Taras A. Sak

I. “I now walk into the wild”¹: the life and death of Christopher McCandless

In the spring of 1992, an idealistic young American named Christopher McCandless hitchhiked to Alaska and proceeded to walk alone into the wild north of Mt. McKinley; by summer’s end, his emaciated body was discovered in an abandoned bus by a party of hunters. After graduating from Emory University, two years earlier, he disappeared, changing his name—to “Alexander Supertramp”—and giving all of his savings to charity, before heading west, leaving behind his car and most of his meager possessions, and then burning all the cash in his wallet. In the words of Jon Krakauer, who attempted to chronicle McCandless’s journey in his best-selling account, *Into the Wild* (1996), the young man had “invented a new life for himself, taking up residence at the ragged margin of contemporary American society, and wandering across the continent in search of raw, transcendent experience” (“Author’s Note” n. pag.). Tragically, as Krakauer informs us, “his family had no idea where he was or what had become of him until his remains turned up in Alaska” (Ibid.). The following essay is an attempt to make sense of his untimely death, in light of the recent film adaptation of *Into the Wild* (2007), by focusing upon his relation to literature.

Like Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road” and Kerouac’s *On the Road*, the story of Christopher McCandless concerns a man on a journey. Specifically, it involves a relatively affluent college graduate who forsakes a life of privilege and complacency in order to travel across the U.S., before eventually leaving

“civilization” entirely and entering the vast wilderness of Alaska. It was a romantic, even quixotic journey from which he would never return. I read McCandless’s story, his life and tragic death, less as either a Thoreau-like renunciation of “society” or a fatally naïve miscalculation of the gravity of man’s “struggle with nature” than as one inspired by books, by reading—and, ultimately, by misreading and mistaking literature for life. It is said that he loved and drew inspiration from Tolstoy, Thoreau and, most of all, Jack London. Accordingly, I would like to discuss a few of McCandless’s textual precedents and inspirations, before considering some counter-examples from literature (specifically, *Walden*, “Master and Man,” and “To Build a Fire”). McCandless’s story provides us with a cautionary tale, but one less concerned with the undeniable need for maintaining respect for the natural world than with the equally crucial need for others, for developing a sense of community—and the power, and perils, of literature.

Because of the fragmented nature of the textual record he left behind, and the extreme isolation of his final months, it is perhaps impossible to fully understand what inspired him, or what lessons—if any—he had learned along his journey. He was well liked, and he made a profound impression on many of the people who crossed his path; unfortunately, however, he had remained rather vague about his motivation and he tended to speak in generalities concerning the need for independence, the toxicity of contemporary society, and the beauty of the Alaskan frontier. When he died, slowly and painfully over a period of weeks, perhaps months, of starvation, alone in a broken-down bus used by moose hunters, he was too weak to write much beyond a few scribbled sentence fragments in the margins of his books—or on the walls of the lonely bus that had become his tomb.

Knowing the details of his story, however, does not answer the fundamental question: what exactly happened to “Alexander Supertramp” in the wild? And why did he walk out on his life in the first place? Most commentators have tried to make sense of his journey by approaching it as either a noble escape from society or as a naïve and downright selfish underestimation of the harshness of life in the wilderness. Indeed, McCandless has been a profoundly divisive, even

polarizing figure, inspiring both admiration and, at times, intense anger among commentators. But what if we were to look at his life and death in relation to literature, to the texts that we know inspired him—or even to some that he may have overlooked, yet which held out the possibility of a different ending, of survival, had he learned their lessons? To this end, I would like to examine three authors—Thoreau, Tolstoy, and London—who clearly influenced McCandless, and three of their representative texts, one of which we know he read, and two others about which we can only speculate.

II. Inspiration? Thoreau and *Walden*

It may be best to begin by examining the relation between Thoreau's masterpiece, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854) and McCandless's journey. We know that McCandless was fond of quoting Thoreau, especially the well-known essay on "Civil Disobedience," during his tenure as assistant editorial page editor of his university newspaper, *The Emory Wheel*. He repeatedly returned to the "Higher Laws" section of *Walden*, echoes of which resonate throughout his own writing, including letters to friends and the journals he kept until his death. He also consistently incorporated several of Thoreau's best-known maxims and passages in his own speech, correspondence, and private journals, including the following: "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth" (*Walden* 260); "The universe is wider than our views of it" (252); and "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" (107). But even more than these aphorisms, two passages from *Walden* stand out as particularly appropriate to describe McCandless's worldview. The first is as follows:

By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations. (76)

Thoreau, as we know, continues in this vein throughout *Walden*, critiquing the conformity, complacency, and "quiet desperation" of the unreflective life. McCandless seems to have taken Thoreau at his word, and as he repeatedly

informed the friends he made on the road, he was unbending in his quest for authenticity and the child-like approach to life which Thoreau praises throughout his work. One obvious difference is that Thoreau was living in solitude in the relatively mild Concord woods, whereas McCandless had set off into the still-frozen tundra north of Mt. McKinley. Be that as it may, another passage that undoubtedly served as inspiration is the following:

I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good. (167)

Again, like Thoreau, McCandless saw himself being pulled in two directions—toward the higher, spiritual life, yet also toward a more primal, primitive existence. However, it is certain that his ordeal in the abandoned bus, trapped in the wild with no food and weakened by toxins ingested accidentally, brought him lower than Thoreau had ever ventured, and close enough to this “primitive” level, and to death, that he realized the proximity of the two—the spiritual and the so-called “savage” life. Assuming this leads me to speculate on ways in which Thoreau’s writing, itself, gestures toward this very same point, which McCandless seems to have overlooked or ignored.

Apparently, McCandless had made note of Thoreau’s aphorism, “no man ever followed his genius till it misled him” (quoted in Krakauer 47), but it appears that he neglected to take seriously the possibility that he, too, had been misled—then again, perhaps he did, and perhaps he simply realized this too late, after the spring and summer rains had swelled the brook he had crossed three months earlier, making it an impassible, raging torrent. In any case, another passage from *Walden* to which McCandless repeatedly returned, while apparently misreading it, is the following: “Not till we are lost—in other words, not till we have lost the world—do we begin to find ourselves, and realise where we are, and *the infinite extent of our relations*” (136; emphasis added). Once again, this seems to be a lesson that McCandless learned too late—in this case, that no one can survive without such

“relations,” without a sense of community or fellowship. Another example, taken from Thoreau, might be the following:

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. (*Walden* 254)

Thoreau, as we know, left the woods and returned to society; Christopher McCandless obviously did not. Was this because he had read Thoreau too selectively, or perhaps even misread him? He certainly fell into “a particular route,” making “a beaten track” for himself, which he must have realized would not be sustainable for very long. In fact, the film adaptation of this tragic, final stage of the journey paints a vivid, if disturbing, picture and clearly shows how McCandless, like Thoreau before him, had resolved to leave the woods. But, as Krakauer points out, leaving the wild is not always so simple, and the natural world can be cruel, a fact to which Thoreau himself alluded when describing his harrowing experience of ascending Mt. Katahdin in Maine:

Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful [...] 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 not lawn, nor pasture [...] Man was not to be associated with it [...] There was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. (“Ktaadn,” quoted in Krakauer 172)

Thoreau sensed the presence of this unmistakable “force not bound to be kind to man,” whereas McCandless apparently did not—until it was far too late—and I would like to emphasize this point: namely, that McCandless had cut himself off from all relations before realizing that he had entered “no man’s garden” with no way out. In what follows, I will briefly look at the ways in which two of his other literary “heroes” depicted not only this foreboding presence, but also the need for companionship or community. Perhaps if McCandless had read these texts more closely—for he was undoubtedly familiar with them—he might still be alive today.

III. Lessons Unlearned: Tolstoy and London

A. Tolstoy's "Master and Man"

We know that McCandless loved both the work and life of Tolstoy, as he did that of Thoreau, but it appears that he read *The Death of Ivan Illyich* much more closely than the other, perhaps more relevant Tolstoy text that he was known to have owned—the 1893 short story, “Master and Man,” which is about a greedy landowner who learns, too late, that his life is in fact inseparable from that of his loyal servant, Nikita. “Nikita is alive,” he exclaims, near the end of his story (and life), “and therefore I am also alive!” (80). As Tolstoy describes it, after being trapped in a snowstorm and given up for dead, Vasily Andreyevich, the protagonist, reflects upon “his money, the shop, the house, the buying and selling, [his chief rival’s] millions; and he really cannot understand why [he] had troubled with all those things” (Ibid.). “Well,” he concludes, “he did not know what it was all about [back then]... He did not know, but now I know. No mistake this time; *now I know*” (Ibid.; emphasis in original). With tears in his eyes, certain that he will die but in the hopes that his corpse may yet provide warmth for Nikita, his humble servant, keeping him alive until daybreak, Vasily Andreyevich embraces the man before him, as he had never done before, and acknowledges another Master, and another reason for living.

What is perhaps most interesting about this tale is how, at the moment of his epiphany, the protagonist begins to refer to himself, or rather his previous self, in the third person—much in the way that McCandless does at a crucial point in his own ordeal, as we shall see. There is also the moralistic message that life is to be lived with and for others, not simply for oneself: Vasily Andreyevich’s money, servants, and property cannot save him from death; in Tolstoy’s religious worldview, this supreme act of sacrifice, for the man, Nikita, now recognized as his brother, his friend—perhaps his one, true friend, though one he has badly mistreated and even cheated for years—will ensure him a higher reward than anything offered in this world.

Regardless of our—or Christopher McCandless’s—opinion of this rather didactic aspect of Tolstoy’s story, common to his work in general, one cannot mistake the theme of the tale, the so-called “moral” of the story: it is better to live for others than to simply live for oneself. It appears that McCandless missed this crucial point, in one of his most beloved authors and short stories no less, though to be fair we cannot possibly know what went through his mind in those final, agonizing weeks in the abandoned bus. At any rate, the need for relations or companionship as well as the recognition of the harshness of the natural world are very clearly on display in this work, as they are in yet another well-known story by one of McCandless’s favorite writers, Jack London.

B. London’s “To Build a Fire”

London was, as McCandless repeatedly stressed, his “king,” and the famous tales set in the Yukon Territory may very well have been the main source of inspiration for his choice of Alaska as his ultimate destination. However, as one angry reader wrote to Krakauer—and as Krakauer himself admitted in his book—the “moral” of London’s famous 1908 story, “To Build a Fire” seems to have been lost on McCandless. In this story, an unnamed protagonist disregards an old-timer’s advice and ventures out into the Yukon without human companionship, which would have proven crucial in helping to build a fire. He is, however, accompanied by a wolf-dog, a recurring creature in many of London’s Alaskan tales, though he does not by any means consider this animal his “friend.” Rather, the dog is treated as a beast of burden and, when the climax of the story comes, a mere means to the man’s survival. And yet, the man cannot kill the animal, though he tries—with his fingers numb and the blinding snows growing all around, he becomes too clumsy to lure the wolf-dog close enough and too weak to muster the strength to go through with the act. His plan was to kill the dog and place his now-frozen hands inside the carcass; however, he gives up trying, and desperately runs away in a vain attempt to find a camp somewhere up the trail. He dies in the drifting snows and, after a while, the dog leaves his side to join the other camp, where he knows other men have succeeded in building a fire.

The similarities between this tale and McCandless's tragic death are remarkable. Like the protagonist of "To Build a Fire," he was in fact only a short distance from salvation; though, at the time and under the circumstances, help might as well have been on the other side of the earth. In any event, had he been able to venture a few miles upriver, he would have found several cabins full of food and emergency supplies, even a party of hunters who happened to be in the area at the time. Tragically, he was incapacitated, very much like the man in London's story—only instead of suffering from hypothermia, he was poisoned by some leaves and berries that he had mistakenly ingested, thinking that they were edible.

The most striking parallel, though, may lie in the two doomed men's overconfidence. As one reader wrote to Krakauer (after reading the original article about McCandless, which appeared in *Outside* magazine):

I've run into several McCandless types out in the country. Same story: idealistic, energetic young guys who overestimated themselves, underestimated the country, and ended up in trouble [...] Jack London got it right in "To Build a Fire." McCandless is, finally, just a pale 20th century burlesque of London's protagonist, who freezes because he ignores advice and commits big-time hubris. (Krakauer 71-72)

Even Krakauer, himself, when reflecting upon this and other reactions to the original story he wrote about McCandless, admitted that something ironic and deeply disturbing was at work in this rather selective hero-worship of London:

McCandless had been infatuated with London since childhood. London's fervent condemnation of capitalist society, his glorification of the primordial world, his championing of the great unwashed—all of it mirrored McCandless's passions. Mesmerized by London's turgid portrayal of life in Alaska and the Yukon, McCandless read and reread *The Call of the Wild*, *White Fang*, "To Build a Fire" [...] He was so enthralled by these tales, however, that *he seemed to forget they were works of fiction, constructions of the imagination* that had more to do with London's romantic sensibilities than with the actualities of life in the

subarctic wilderness. McCandless conveniently overlooked the fact that London himself had spent just a single winter in the North and that he'd died by his own hand on his California estate at the age of forty, a fatuous drunk, obese and pathetic, maintaining a sedentary existence that bore scant resemblance to the ideals he espoused in print. (44; emphasis added)

Leaving aside the rather vitriolic and perhaps unfair characterization of London's final years, it is hard to deny Krakauer's point: McCandless, whether it be from hubris, hero-worship, or some other motivation, *selectively* read his favorite authors, foremost among them being London. But is it fair to call him a "burlesque" of these fictional characters? In what remains, I would like to attempt to understand what happened to McCandless, how he overlooked the two crucial lessons mentioned earlier—the need for "friends" or "relations" as well as the acknowledgment of the more dangerous, even deadly aspects of Nature—by building upon Krakauer's intriguing assertion that McCandless somehow conflated fiction with reality, literature with life.

IV. **"Lost in the wild"²: becoming "Alexander Supertramp"**

There is a curious point in Krakauer's narrative, mirroring real life, in which "Christopher J. McCandless" somehow becomes, as it were, his alter ego, "Alexander Supertramp." It begins immediately after he abandons his car in a flashflood and burns the last of his cash, before suffering from heat stroke in the Mojave desert. It would end only in his dying days, approximately a year and half later, along the Stampede Trail in Alaska. What I want to argue is that McCandless slipped into his fictional persona, most noticeably when he began referring to himself in the third person, as either "he" or as "Alex," in his private journals. Here, he assumes a new name and identity, to replace his former self, and he begins to show signs of having difficulty in distinguishing between the two. Likewise, the letters he sent to friends that he had made along his journey are signed "Alexander," as was the graffiti found inside the bus in which he died. There is one journal, which he left for safekeeping with friends in South Dakota before leaving for Alaska

that reads as follows, describing a brush with death as he paddled down the Colorado River to Mexico:

He screams and beats canoe with oar. The oar breaks. Alex has one spare oar. He calms himself. If loses second oar is dead [...] This incident led Alexander to decide to abandon canoe and return north. (36)

And another entry, of many examples in this journal, in which he writes the following:

Alexander buried his backpack in the desert [...] and entered Las Vegas with no money and no ID [...] He lived on the streets with bums, tramps, and winos for several weeks. Vegas would not be the end of the story, however [...] itchy feet returned and Alex left his job in Vegas, retrieved his backpack, and hit the road again. (37)

I submit that “Alex” was now writing his own tale, entering into what Maurice Blanchot and Gilles Deleuze have taught us is the anonymity or impersonality of literature, thereby achieving a kind of distance between himself as narrator and himself as protagonist. As Blanchot describes it, the writer

stops saying “I.” Kafka observes with surprise, with enchantment and delight, that as soon as he was able to substitute “he” for “I” he entered literature. This is true, but the transformation is much more profound. The writer belongs to a language no one speaks, a language that is not addressed to anyone, that has no center, that reveals nothing. He can believe he is asserting himself in this language, but what he is asserting is completely without a self. (“The Essential Solitude” 69)

The problem with this was, of course, that the fictional or figural “Alex” persona became more and more real even as the literal, real-life dangers of McCandless’s situation became increasingly unreal to him. Tragically, he would only return to his senses, so to speak, and be released from the seductive spell in which literature had held him, too late—as was the case with Vasily Andreyevich of Tolstoy’s story. One of the final things he wrote—a distress signal that he had hoped in vain that someone might see—he had signed in his true name, “Chris

McCandless.” And it appears that he, like Tolstoy’s protagonist, learned too late of the need to live with and for others: one of the most poignant notes he left in his final resting place, what he called “the magic bus” out on the Stampede Trail, was a simple statement scrawled in the margins of one of his books: “Happiness only real when shared” (189).

V. “Trapped in the wild”³: mistaking literature for life

According to Jacques Rancière, “in real life, it would be hard to find anybody who mistakes literature for life” (234), which for him is a decidedly literary phenomenon stretching back through *Madame Bovary* to *Don Quixote*. However, it would appear that Christopher McCandless did exactly that—he confused the two, “reality” and “fiction,” abandoning the one while entering the other. Of course, this may be the result of some trauma, alluded to in the film adaptation of *Into the Wild*, resulting in what Freud called the “splitting of the ego” (*Ichspaltung*) as a defense mechanism. In any case, it is clear that he shifted from the first- to third-person—an impersonal voice which Blanchot referred to as the “neuter” (*le neutre*) and which Deleuze, following Blanchot, claimed was the very origin of “literature” as such—and that, as a result, McCandless began to see himself from a distance, as “Alex,” his fictional persona or ego ideal. This may be the point where literature truly begins, as Blanchot argues, or it may be a type of power unique to literature or art, as Deleuze claims. In his words, literature

exists only when it discovers beneath apparent persons the power of an impersonal—which is not a generality but a singularity at the highest point: a man, a woman, a beast, a stomach, a child... It is not the first two persons that function as the condition for literary enunciation; literature begins only when a third person is born in us that strips us of the power to say “I.” (Blanchot’s “neuter”)⁴

Indeed, McCandless was somehow overwhelmed by this power, perhaps intoxicated or seduced by its mystery—as a reader and, crucially, as a writer. In the end, however, the mystery surrounding McCandless’s final months remains

unsolved, and will likely remain so. Why did he really “leave” society in the first place? Was it suicide? Perhaps the latter question must necessarily remain unanswered. In any case, I don’t believe that any possible explanation can be reduced to what is, after all, a rather commonplace affair: conflict with his parents, say, or mental, perhaps even physical abuse suffered at the hands of his father (though these are serious enough, in themselves, and may have played a role in his decision to “disappear”). For me, his motivation lies much deeper than this, and is inextricably entangled with the impersonal power of literature. Again, Blanchot seems to describe this phenomenon best when he writes,

What speaks in [the writer] is the fact that in one way or another he is no longer himself, he is already no longer anyone. The “he” that is substituted for “I”—this is the solitude that comes to the writer through the work. “He” does not indicate objective disinterest, creative detachment. “He” does not glorify the consciousness of someone other than me, the soaring of a human life that, within the imaginary space of the work of art, keeps its freedom to say “I.” “He” is *myself having become no one*, someone else having become the other; it is the fact that there, where I am, I can no longer address myself to myself, and that the person who addresses himself to me does not say “I,” is not himself. (“The Essential Solitude” 71; emphasis added)

The film adaptation of his story, though in many ways very good and quite faithful to Krakauer’s book, tries to force an explanation, laying most of the blame on McCandless’s parents, particularly on his father. I disagree with this, as there is little evidence of abuse in Krakauer’s account, or elsewhere, to support such conjecture. Some would undoubtedly say that McCandless was simply “lighting out for the territory,” in the long-standing American tradition of Huckleberry Finn and myriad other frontier heroes; in other words, that he was attempting to escape from “society” and its rigid codes or expectations. However, one other possible “explanation” (for lack of a better term) may lie in what I am calling McCandless’s “seduction” by literature. He was living a Quixote-like fantasy, where the bounds

between “Christopher” and “Alex”, “he” and “I,” “fiction” and “reality” became hopelessly blurred—and he died as a result, much as Rancière has argued was the case with the fictional Emma Bovary. In other words, he mistook literature for life.

McCandless escaped (from his parents, from modern society, or perhaps even, as I am arguing, from the experience of “having become no one”) into a fictional identity—that of “Alexander Supertramp”—but learned too late that “happiness,” as he scrawled in the margins of his dog-eared copy of *Doctor Zhivago*, is “only real when shared”; that human beings are by nature social creatures, who need a sense of community; and that he was, in fact, writing his own text, one that would end badly because he had now literally become “trapped in the wild” (Krakauer 195; emphasis in original), much as he had become trapped, figuratively speaking, in a tale of his own making. This final text he would sign, at long last, in his own true name. So, when “Alexander Supertramp” once again became “Christopher McCandless,” this extraordinary young man’s story was finished—and with it the vibrant life that had passed into the solitude of the wild and of literature returned, one final time, back into life, where it met its literal and tragic end.

Notes

1. Quoted from a postcard sent from McCandless to Wayne Westerberg (Krakauer 69).
2. Quoted from the interior of the “magic bus,” written by McCandless (163; emphasis in original).
3. Quoted from August 5th, 1992 entry of McCandless’s diary (195; emphasis in original).
4. “Literature and Life,” *Essays Critical and Clinical* (3; emphasis in original).

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