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# Into the Wild. A Hide-and-Seek Game between a Narrator and His Character

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# *Into the Wild*

## **A Hide-and-Seek Game between a Narrator and His Character**

**MINART**  
**Roxana**

UFR D'ETUDES ANGLOPHONES

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Mémoire de master 1 PLC - 12 crédits

Spécialité ou Parcours : Littérature Américaine

Sous la direction de M. LUDOT-VLASAK

Membres du Jury : Mme. MANIEZ et M. LUDOT-VLASAK

Année universitaire 2011-2012





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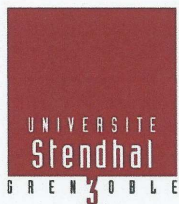
## **Acknowledgements**

I am extremely grateful to M. Ludot-Vlasak for his constant encouragement, guidance and support during the conception and the writing of my study. His advice and suggestions have always been extremely helpful and enlightening.

## **Abbreviation**

The following abbreviation is used in order to refer to Krakauer's novel

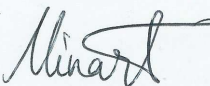
*ITW Into the Wild*



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# Introduction

The present study is an inquiry into the universe of Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild* and his attempts to seize the essence of his intriguing protagonist, Christopher McCandless, a young man who gave up a comfortable life and a loving family in order to take the road and ultimately live off the land in the Alaskan bush. My analysis will develop from the perspective of the narrative of the quest, which is the infrastructure underlying the book as a whole.

Quests and migrations have been, from the beginning of times, two major elements which have shaped mankind and human geography as we know them today. At a social level, history is fuelled with quests for peace, equality and freedom. At a personal level, quests for love, happiness, God and salvation of the soul, material comfort, endless youth, identity, self-recognition or knowledge may shape patterns of life. No wonder then that the notion of quest was taken into account and marked in immortal letters in the Declaration of Independence of the United States adopted by the Congress on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1776. The preamble declares that “ all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and *the pursuit of Happiness*”<sup>1</sup> (Text of the Declaration of Independence) and that people are entitled to replace a government which does not protect these rights.

At a fictional level, the notion of “quest” is an extraordinarily broad fragmented and hybrid notion. It is a very laborious task to define it properly in terms of theme or literary genre and to encompass a history of the quest narrative in the world's literature, if we consider that the existence of a displacement of the subject in space would be enough to label a narrative as quest narrative. Quest and journey are inexhaustible resources in fiction. One does not go without the other.

Starting with the Exodus, the Biblical journey of Moses and his people in quest for the Promised Land, through Chaucer's pilgrimages, the quest for the Holy Grail in medieval romances, Don Quixote's attempt to revive chivalry, the picaresque peregrination in which life itself is a random wandering, the journey of apprenticeship or education in bildungsromans, Gulliver's travels and Moll Flander's overseas quest for emancipation, the inner journeys in the dream poetry and the psychological novels, the imagined journeys in

the science-fiction genre, to the nowadays quest for immortality in the *Twilight* saga, there is an over abundance, better said an infinity of patterns, varieties and variants of the quest narrative, ubiquitous and persistent in all cultures and mythologies.

A quest is broadly defined as a journey towards a goal. The protagonist sets out on a journey he hopes to complete, aiming to obtain the object of his quest and bring it home in order to fulfil a lack in his life. It is what usually happens in fairy tales and mythology, in which case the protagonist has to prove himself worthy by completing an initiatory journey through a great deal of struggle, exertion, shrewdness and wits, overcoming difficulties and villains in order to eventually obtain the object of his quest or the person of his desire. Quests are fuelled by a lack of something or an impulse. These two elements govern the narrative plots in which the protagonist “attempts to renegotiate and remap, albeit satisfactorily or not, various labyrinths of existential tension” (Introduction to *Literature and Quest*, edited by Christine Arkininstall, p. 3). According to Propp, the inciting moment, that is the initiating event that sets the action in movement or triggers it off is a lack of something or a misdeed: a crime, a transformation, a murder, an abduction etc. that needs to be repaired. The quest goes hand in hand with the unfolding of the plot but remains, at the same time, one of the least stable elements in a fairy tale (Propp, p. 91-92).

We shall examine how the notion of quest applies in the case of *Into the Wild*. Our protagonist, Christopher McCandless, was an extremely brilliant young man with an intensely ascetic personality, who set out on a spiritual quest to Alaska. He grew up in a well-off family in suburban Annandale, Virginia. After graduating from Emory University in 1990, he ceased communicating with his family, gave away his \$25,000 college fund to Oxfam charity, took the road and travelled aimlessly across the West of the USA, by car, on foot, hitchhiking, hopping trains and even paddling a canoe across the border into Mexico. In April 1992, McCandless undertook his ultimate adventure. He hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone, with very little food and equipment, into the wilderness. Four months later, a party of hunters discovered his decomposed body in a rusted bus used as a refuge by locals and situated not far away from the Stampede Trail. McCandless survived for approximately 119 days foraging for edible roots and berries, killing game and keeping a journal. One year later, author Jon Krakauer attempted to retrace McCandless's restless journey across the American West and around the wide spaces of the North, during the two years between his college graduation and his demise in Alaska so as to catch a

glimpse of Christopher's essence and understand his inner motivations and frame of mind, putting him in the category of “pilgrims, seekers, misfits, and adventurers.” (ITW, p. 67)

The author himself is a an adventurer as he spent three weeks by himself in a Thoreauvian retreat in the wilderness of the Stikine Icecap region of Alaska and climbed a new route on the Devils Thumb, an experience he described in chapters 14 and 15 of the present book. As a writer and investigative journalist, Krakauer is best known for his writing about the outdoor and mountain-climbing. He is the author of best-selling non-fiction books – *Into the Wild*, *Into Thin Air*, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, and *Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman* – as well as numerous magazine articles. *Into the Wild* is a dense concentrated multi-layered book, readable only with a pen in the hand and a map of the United States in front of the eyes. A minor fact in the local press grew into an article in the *Outside* magazine, then into a book that can be read at the same time as a quest and travel narrative, a biography, a detective novel, an epistolary novel and an anti-bildungsroman. Hence, the difficulty to seize the inner essence of the character who remains an “enigma” (ITW, p. X), as the author announces from the beginning of his story and leaves it to the reader “to form his or her own opinion of Chris McCandless.” (ITW, p. XI)

The major themes the book addresses are the quest for his true self and how finding oneself conflicts with being an active member in society and can be fulfilled only by opposing oneself to the rules and conformism of family and society. Among other larger subjects brought up we may include “the grip wilderness has on the American imagination, the allure high-risk activities hold for young men of a certain mind, the complicated, highly charged bond that exists between fathers and sons.” (ITW, p. X)

Furthermore, the book is built on dualities: McCandless's spiritual quest is followed by the author's detective quest to put together the pieces of the puzzle retracing the protagonist's odyssey; the quests develop between reality and fiction, between success and failure; Krakauer's writing style partakes both of journalistic and fictional conventions; Christopher McCandless evolves between life and fiction. Throughout this study, my main purpose will be to analyse a character's quest between life and fiction, under the literary influences of Jack London, Thoreau, and Tolstoy, his journey across the American West and his great Alaskan odyssey, to conclude with the way he glides from life into fiction acquiring the attributes of a Christ-like figure. At a smaller scale, I shall address the

author's quest for the character's true self and the extent to which the author's and the character's quests are successful.

When confronted with Krakauer's book, I was also confronted with a whole American literary tradition shaped, on the one hand, by the (con)quest of new spaces and, on the other hand, by the achievement of the American Dream. These two trends encompass values which are profoundly masculine. The conquest of new spaces, for example, includes such values as fleeing home and exploring the unknown while putting oneself at trial and living a nomadic life at the margin of society. The American dream is sustained by the capitalistic values of opportunity, individualism, self-reliance, self-sufficiency and upward mobility. In this respect, Christopher is a pure product of his environment, a true representative of both the adventurous explorer and the self-made man.

My quest for the true essence of Christopher McCandless has already been answered by Krakauer with such a profusion of possibilities of interpretation that my role as a reader is to obediently and passively follow and accept the authorial argumentative development and suspend my disbelief concerning vague shadowy unanswered aspects of the story. Therefore, Christopher remains a *terra incognita* to the reader and the effort to seize him remains rather utopian, unless the reader himself or herself were endowed with an adventurous bohemian frame of mind typical of explorers and *Dharma Bums*.

## **Part 1**

### **The Character's Spiritual Quest**

In the introduction to *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest, On the Road to Nowhere*, Ilana Shiloh defines the quest “as a linear narrative, in which the hero sets out to find the object of his desire” (Shiloh, p. 1). The different types of variants of the quest narrative all share three elements in common: a hero (most of the times out of common), the object of the quest (also known as the *telos*, the purpose of the quest) and the journey, that is “the spatial displacement of the subject in pursuit of the object” (Shiloh, p. 1). Quest and journey are inseparable and when we deal with quest, we deal with travel literature.

As far as American literature is concerned, historical events such as the Puritans' and the Pilgrims' voyages to the New World in a pursuit of religious freedom, the Lewis and Clark transcontinental expedition to the Pacific coast and the early settlers' migration westward, shaped American literature to the very core following the patterns of quest and journey. American history began with voyages of exploration, escape or migration. Their counterparts in fiction are three types of American journey patterns as they are defined by Stout in the Preface to his *Journey Narrative in American Literature, Patterns and Departures*, that is the exploration, the escape and the home-founding narratives (Stout, p. XI). As a consequence, we may say that American literature is characterized by journeys, even obsessed with them. Works very diverse in nature, such as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Jack London's *The Road*, Cooper's sea novels, Kerouac's *On the Road*, Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, Walt Whitman's *Song of the Open Road*, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, only to name the most known, they all have in common narrative sequences of voyaging and quest. American literature is a literature of movement, motion and displacement. Literary quest and territorial conquest go hand in hand. So much so, that the push toward the West became the essence of the American Dream.

In accordance with the patterns of history, our journeys are typically westerly, and westerly movement is typically associated with positive values such as freedom and progress. [...] More abstractly, like the westerly march of society, the journey symbolizes Progress, mankind's efforts towards intellectual and moral goals, even the search for meaning itself. At its broadest and most completely divorced from the frontier association, the journey collapses into the allegorical, sunset-directed Journey of Life, a familiar, even hackneyed trope by no means peculiar to American literature. (Stout, p. 6)

The American West is also envisaged as a new Garden of Eden, an unexplored, unstained, innocent space, unsullied by the past, open to challenge, endowed with vast potentialities, promises and a generous dose of adventurousness, a space given as a second chance after the humanistic failure of the Old World (Lewis, Prologue to *The American Adam*). For this new space, literature needed “ [...] a new kind of hero, the heroic embodiment of a new set of ideal human attributes” (Lewis, p. 5). America wanted to break with the past European influence and only wanted to rely on its present and future. The definition that Lewis gives of this newly born hero, the prelapsarian American Adam, contains attributes which could also be applied to the description of our protagonist, Christopher McCandless:

The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero (in praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. Adam was the first, the archetypal man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all before him. And he was the type of creator, the poet par excellence, creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene about him. All this and more were contained in the image of the American as Adam. (Lewis, p. 5)

Similarly to the American Adam, the only way Christopher McCandless could engage in his personal quest was by cutting abruptly the ties with both his family and society, by keeping all the new friends he made along the road at a safe distance. He artificially emancipated himself from his family heritage, “from the stifling world of his parents and peers, a world of abstraction and security and material excess, a world in which he felt grievously cut off from the raw throb of existence” (ITW, p. 22). He made *tabula rasa* with the past and the social conventions, and also flitted away from the weight of affection of his peers. He ran away from any human attachment that could have kept him from fulfilling his mission:

McCandless was thrilled to be on his way north, and he was relieved as well –

relieved that he had again evaded the impending threat of human intimacy, of friendship, and all the messy emotional baggage that comes with it. He had fled the claustrophobic confines of his family. He'd successfully kept Jan Burres and Wayne Westerberg at arm's length, flitting out of their lives before anything was expected from him. And now he'd slipped painlessly out of Ron Franz's life as well. (ITW, p. 56)

Because Christopher is the advocate of self-sufficiency, “standing alone self-reliant and self-propelling” (Lewis, p. 5), doing everything by his own means, with very little help from the others. He won't let himself be influenced, nor caught in this warm human tissue, and pursues his way remorselessly. His detachment from his peers' care, help, feelings, pieces of advice on his ultimate Alaskan odyssey, is so extreme, that seen from the outside, his personal quest becomes too individualistic. Which unfortunately led to his death in the Alaskan bush. Nevertheless, the same self-sufficiency is part of the American values and in this respect, Christopher is the example of a successful representative of the American dream. As a child, he impressed everyone with his original ideas of setting up small businesses which brought him quite a lot of money for his age. Later on, as a high school and college student, he enjoyed academic excellency. When working for Wayne Westerberg, he proved to be a hard worker, extremely ethical and conscientious. For everything else he fancied trying, he was a high achiever.

From what his father, sister and mother tell about him, Christopher launched himself from early childhood into a quest for perfection and excellency in whatever he did. Christopher grew up to be an extremely intelligent and resourceful young man, endowed with a certain number of skills:

It is impossible to know what murky convergence of chromosomal matter, parent-child dynamics, and alignment of the cosmos was responsible, but Christopher Johnson McCandless came into the world with unusual gifts and a will not easily deflected from its trajectory. (ITW, 106)

Thus, from the very beginning, the protagonist is seen as an exceptional person who acquires the fictional aura of a fairy tale character, with an almost miraculous birth to which contributed the supernatural forces of the universe. He seems to be endowed with the qualities of a fairy tale/mythological hero in terms of resourcefulness and wits. But usually a fairy tale hero makes it out alive. Jan Burres, a motherly figure among the people



Christopher befriended during his journey, recalls nostalgically “après-coup” Christopher's knowledge of life and ability to “figure out” and control the unknown and the hazards of his surroundings:

I thought he'd be fine in the end,” she reflects. “He was smart. He'd figured out how to paddle a canoe down to Mexico, how to hop freight trains, how to score a bed at inner-city missions. He figured all of that out on his own, and I felt sure he's figure out Alaska, too. (ITW, p. 47)

Among other attributes that Lewis grants the American Adam is innocence and so is Christopher granted the benefit of “apparent [...] innocence” (ITW, p. 67) by Krakauer, but referring this time to a more mundane subject, that is his lack of sexual activity. Lewis's innocence points at Adam's innocence before the Fall. Christopher's to virginity and purity, values that are part of a larger personal, rather extreme moral code also advocating rigour, honesty, truth, and the Thoreauvian values of Chastity, Genius, Heroism and Holiness. It is like he invented his personal Holy Book that he respected to the letter in an attempt to keep himself exempt of sin. On the whole, Christopher and the American Adam share a certain dose of innocence. Moreover, Christopher's portrait enriches itself with a Mother Theresa-like aura as he gets actively involved in helping those living in the margin of society. Idealistically, he wants to participate in the fight against the Apartheid in South Africa and to address the world hunger issue. His taking the world's inequities to heart and his extreme kindness will help complete his turning into a Christ-like figure, which is the subject of the third part of the present study.

Moreover, just as Crèvecoeur changed his name to James Hector St. John, thus marking a new beginning in his life as well as the breaking with the old tradition of the young United States, so is Christopher christening himself with a new name, Alexander Supertramp and inventing himself a new life. In so much that this intense stubborn idealistic young man did not mesh readily with modern existence, and more than that, he was considered odd, peculiar, atypical, foolish, abnormal, born into the wrong century: “Seemed like a kid who was looking for something, looking for *something*, just didn't know what it was” (ITW, p. 43). Because Christopher is not only a questing but also a questioning hero, engaged in a perhaps utopian search for the meaning of life:

Sometimes he tried too hard to make sense of the world, to figure out why people

were bad to each other. A couple of times I tried to tell him it was a mistake to get too deep into that kind of stuff, but Alex got stuck on things. He always had to know the absolute right answer before he could go on the next thing. (Westerberg on Christopher, ITW, p. 18)

Mary Westerberg recalls Christopher's epistemological quest and hunger for knowledge:

There was something fascinating about him,[...] Alex struck me as much older than twenty-four. Everything I said, he'd demand to know more about what I meant, about why I thought this way or that. He was hungry to learn about things. Unlike most of us, he was the sort of person who insisted on living out his beliefs. (ITW, p. 68)

In addition to this epistemological quest, Christopher is “in search of a raw, transcendent experience” (ITW, p. IX) to be achieved in the heart of the wilderness. At some point in the book, Krakauer analyses Christopher's attitude towards nature and offers the space of Alaska as a pretext “to explore the inner country of his own soul” (ITW, p. 182). A spiritual inner journey for his true self by “[taking] risk-taking to its logical extreme” and “[testing] himself in ways [...] that mattered”(ITW, p. 181).

McCandless wasn't some feckless slacker, adrift and confused, racked by existential despair. To the contrary: His life hummed with meaning and purpose. But the meaning he wrested from existence lay beyond the comfortable path: McCandless distrusted the value of things that came easily. He demanded much of himself – more, in the end, than he could deliver. (ITW, p. 183)

Furthermore, Christopher's life follows specific patterns in American literature and running away from home is one of them. Real life starts where the zone of comfort ends and in order to grasp the true meaning of life, Christopher engaged in an open form of quest throughout the American West. Fleeing home and the domestic world and looking for seclusion in remote inhospitable regions is a masculine enterprise. Alaska appears to be a homosocial environment explored by men only. This impulse to flee a comfortable life, this impetuous urge for freedom, this envy to put oneself at risk, are not in the least values shared by women, which is understandable as they have been associated from the beginning of times with a sedentary existence in a safe domestic space, giving birth and protecting life, nurturing and taking care. Krakauer relates this tendency for adventure and

risk-taking to the rites of passage that youngsters undertake in order to enter manhood. It is what Darwinism called “the survival of the fittest” and what Jack London wrote in capital letters in *White Fang*: “EAT OR BE EATEN”. And going to prove oneself worthy by surviving alone and with scarce means in the Alaskan wilderness was one of them:

It is hardly unusual for a young man to be drawn to a pursuit considered reckless by his elders; engaging in risky behavior is a rite of passage in our culture no less than in most others. Danger has always held a certain allure. That, in large part, is why so many teenagers drive too fast and drink too much and take too many drugs, why it has always been so easy for nations to recruit young men to go to war. It can be argued that youthful derring-do is in fact evolutionarily adaptive, a behavior encoded in our genes. McCandless, in his fashion, merely took risk-taking to its logical extreme. (ITW, p. 181)

What is more, even though Christopher McCandless could hardly be considered a poet or writer in the full sense of the word, nevertheless he left behind several writings, among which postcards, two diaries, a letter addressed to his older friend, Ron Franz, some graffiti in Bus 142 and some scribbles on the margin of pages in his favourite books. Some of these written testimonies shed a light on our hero's values, life credo and literary tastes. For example, the letter sent to Ron Franz partakes at the same time of literary references to Transcendentalism, Jack London and Jack Kerouac. McCandless advocates a life motivated by adventure, Joy and travelling as opposed to “a life of security, conformity, and conservatism”, “a secure future”, a “monotonous security” (ITW, p. 58) which can be damaging to the “adventurous [and living spirit] within a man” (ITW, p. 58). The intensity and the immediacy of experiencing life by oneself is a fundamental value for which both the Transcendentalists and the Beatniks pleaded: “It is the experience, the memories, the great triumphant joy of living to the fullest extent in which real meaning is found. God it's great to be alive! Thank you. Thank you” (ITW, p. 38). Since any belief in tomorrow was illusory for the Beat writers in the post-war age of the atomic bomb, in a chaotic age devoid of values, only the intensity of the present experience mattered. Any commitment or long-term relationship became irrelevant, which McCandless also intuited and put into practice when avoiding the weight of human relationships. If the Transcendentalist experience of life aimed at a personal direct relationship to God so as to recover one's true self and the lost harmony with Nature, for the Beatniks, self-exploration was pursued as far as possible in order to reach self-realization, to liberate the self, to be

“cool”, “hip”, “swinging” (Grellet, p. 335). Christopher offers us a definition of Joy in pure Transcendentalist almost religious terms:

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. [...] You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us. It is in everything and anything we might experience. We just have to have the courage to turn against our habitual lifestyle and engage in unconventional living. (ITW, p. 58-59)

Let's not forget that Kerouac has his own definition of Joy in Part 3, chapter 3 of his famous novel *On the Road*, that is “the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being”, the adjective “ecstatic” giving us a glimpse of the nature of his own quest, which was also a spiritual quest amongst other things.

We don't really know what Christopher McCandless's religious beliefs were, nonetheless the way he uses the notion of God in a Transcendentalist way, in which God is envisaged as an imminent entity in the world and the creator of “all the wonderful things [...] done here in the American West” (ITW, p. 58 and 59). This Joy of existence draws its resources in the nomadic lifestyle, and taking the road, according to McCandless, has to be done “economy style, no motels, do your own cooking, as a general rule spend as little as possible and you'll enjoy it much more immensely” (ITW, p. 59). Idea that recalls that “Chris was very much of the school that you should own nothing, except what you can carry on your back at a dead run” (Walt on his son, ITW, p. 32). It must surely have been Thoreau's *Walden*, which inspired Christopher's ascetic way of life. Thoreau is the advocate of extreme simplicity – living with the bare necessities – and of isolation, both helping focus on “the essential facts of life” and capture the substance and core of things: “I went to the woods because I wished 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 come to die, discover what I had not lived” (Thoreau, p. 343). It goes without saying that Christopher's way of handling the road recalls Jack London's resourceful, adventurous and nomadic life as a hobo hopping trains in his autobiographical *The Road*.

Later on in Alaska, at the peak of happiness during his final and greatest adventure, Christopher concentrated in a poetic yet ascetic and laconic style, his rebirth to the true

essence of things and the major spiritual values that were to guide his life:

*I am reborn. This is my dawn. Real life has just begun.*

*Deliberate living: Conscious attention to the basics of life, and a constant attention to your immediate environment and its concerns, example→ A job, a task, a book; anything requiring efficient concentration (Circumstance has no value. It is how one relates to a situation that has value. All true meaning resides in the personal relationship to a phenomenon, what it means to you).*

*The Great Holiness of **FOOD**, the Vital Heat.*

*Positivism, the Insurpassable Joy of Life Aesthetic.*

*Absolute Truth and Honesty.*

*Reality.*

*Independence.*

*Finality – Stability – Consistency. (ITW, p. 167)*

Furthermore, Christopher's "exultant declaration of independence [...] scrawled [...] [i]nside the bus" while on an "elated" state of mind (ITW, p. 162), resumes his journey, defining it as a "spiritual pilgrimage" and a quest for the true essence of the inner self, away from the bonds of civilization. It is written and signed by his imaginary double, Alexander Supertramp, and refers to himself as in a 3<sup>rd</sup> person narrative, the effect being only a more distinctive frontier between the Alaskan reality with its harsh climatic conditions and the idealized realm of literature and personal reverie and imagination, the latter being the major elements to sustain and motivate our protagonist's bold incursion in the inhospitable Northern lands:

TWO YEARS HE WALKS THE EARTH. NO PHONE, NO POOL, NO PETS, NO CIGARETTES. ULTIMATE FREEDOM. AN EXTREMIST. AN AESTHETIC VOYAGER WHOSE HOME IS THE ROAD. ESCAPED FROM ATLANTA. THOU SHALT NOT RETURN, 'CAUSE "THE WEST IS THE BEST." AND NOW AFTER TWO RAMBLING YEARS COMES THE FINAL AND GREATEST ADVENTURE. THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE TO KILL THE FALSE BEING WITHIN AND VICTORIOUSLY CONCLUDE THE SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE. TEN DAYS AND NIGHTS OF FRIGHT 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. ALEXANDER SUPERTRAMP, MAY 1992 (ITW, p. 162)

It is a declaration of independence rich with interwoven intertextuality. The references underneath the text are numerous: Roger Miller's song "King of the Road", the Transcendentalist self-reliance and individualism. Since God spoke within each man, people should trust their own selves, intuitions and impulses and develop this self-sufficiency which was essential so as to lead an upright and free life. What truly mattered to Christopher was to reawaken the human spirit within himself and this could be done only by rejecting authority, conformity and tradition as Thoreau preached in his "Civil Disobedience". Christopher took on his quest by breaking free from his family, his parents' hypocrisy and especially his father's overdisplaying of intelligence and authority. At the same time he absolutely opposed the "idiocy of mainstream American life" (ITW, p. 53), consumerism, social conventions, conformism and material overabundance. Christopher dismissed social success, considered that "titles and honors are irrelevant" (ITW, p. 20), that "careers were demeaning "twentieth-century inventions", more of a liability than an asset and that he would do fine without one, thank you" (ITW, p. 114) and that a college diploma "was pointless, a waste of time and money" (ITW, p. 114). Which is all the more incongruous since Christopher was born an entrepreneur, a true representative of the American Dream, and from an early age he proved he could make a lot of money exploiting ingenious ideas: "Her son, the teenage Tolstoyan, believed that wealth was shameful, corrupting, inherently evil – which is ironic because Chris was a natural-born capitalist with an uncanny knack for making a buck" (mother Billie about her son, ITW, p. 115).

Moreover, his predisposition for solitude and self-reliance was recorded since childhood:

Even when we were little, [...] he was very to himself. He wasn't antisocial – he always had friends, and everybody liked him – but he could go off and entertain himself for hours. He didn't seem to need toys or friends. He could be alone without being lonely. (sister Carine on her brother, ITW, p. 107)

In an overwhelming modern society, the only place to find solitude was in the heart of Nature, the only element to remain pure, true and good and which could provide inner light

and inspiration. It was only in the solitude and innocence offered by the Alaskan bush that Christopher could find again his true harmonious self. His quest is thus a quest for the truth and the absolute, for a revelatory and regenerative contact with Nature and with the hidden source and essence of things. It resembles captain Ahab's quest in *Moby Dick* as the two stories have a similar unfortunate ending:

Ahab too yearns to penetrate the enigma of the great All, stabbing through the masks of appearance so as to pierce and transfix the malignant metaphysical principle which, mythically, he identifies with the great white whale. But the ultimate Secret in the novel appears unseizable, irreducible to even the most Promethean desire. And the quest-journey ends not in metaphysical initiation, but in a catastrophe from which only the narrator Ishmael escapes, thanks to his reflective elaboration of an existential wisdom allowing accommodation to the residually enigmatic human condition. (Paul Gifford, p. 20, "Getting There or Not – the Fortunes of the Initiatic Journey and the Crisis of Culture" in *Literature and Quest*)

In a similar way, Christopher's quest remains both illusive and elusive, as the whole meaning of things does not seem to let itself be apprehended by only one individual's effort of "[constant] and conscious attention to the basics of life" (ITW, p. 167) as McCandless wrote in his *ars vivendi*. Could his failure be explained by a lack of flexibility and Ishmaelian "accommodation" in thinking the patterns of life? By a too extremist way of judging his peers' drawbacks and especially those of his father whom he never forgave for his concealed past and double life led between two families?

In the end, what we know for sure is that in Alaska, Christopher did eventually reach some kind of deeper knowledge and found some answer to his quest, maybe inspired partly by the solitude in Nature, partly by his readings. He left some underlining and scribblings on margins of literary texts, and it is well known that paratexts may be more informative and meaningful about the reader than the Text itself.

It seems that the answer to Christopher's quest might have been given by Tolstoy's life and writings. The Russian author is known for his "love thy neighbour" philosophy based on Jesus Christ's teachings which bring about his belief in nonviolent resistance and his appreciation for the ideals of chastity and sexual abstinence, which are discussed in *Father Sergius* and the preface to *The Kreutzer Sonata*. Tolstoy's conception of happiness

is to be found in the novella “Family Happiness”, from which Krakauer picked the pieces of text that seemed to move McCandless. These quotations will be reproduced in this essay as they were firstly published in Krakauer's original text. “Family Happiness” deals with the love and marriage of a seventeen-year-old young girl to a much older man and the way relationships between spouses may change over a lapse of time due to different personal life experiences.

*He was right in saying that the only certain happiness in life is to live for others...*

*I have lived through much, and now I think I have found what is needed for happiness. A quiet secluded life in the country, with the possibility of being useful to people to whom it is easy to do good, and who are not accustomed to have it done to them; then work which one hopes may be of some use; then rest, nature, books, music, love for one's neighbor – such is my idea of happiness. And then, on top of all that, you for a mate, and children, perhaps – what more can the heart of man desire? (ITW, p. 168)*

The excerpt above is the one that McCandless underlined. We may notice that the ingredients of the Tolstoyan happiness are the idea of family and domestic life, in close vicinity to Nature. Happiness is not an individualistic value, on the contrary, it only exists when shared with others and when living to help the others. To the ideas of work and enjoyment in arts, is added an element up to now absent in Christopher's quest-journey, that is the presence of a woman seen as an equal partner and companion to a life project and to a possible line of descent. All in all, quite ironically, after two years' rambling away from his family and friends, Christopher seems to come back to the basic traditional value of family, which is only an assumption since it is based on a single line Christopher wrote: “HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED” (ITW, p. 188). The outcome of his quest may have been his going back to a shared togetherness within the human network of society from which he had tried by all means to escape.

This is also sustained by a quotation taken from Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, that Krakauer takes the liberty to use in his text and that I will quote in my turn as it appears in *Into the Wild*: “*And so it turned out that only a life similar to the life of those around us, merging with it without a ripple, is genuine life, and that an unshared happiness is not happiness. ... And this was most vexing of all*” (ITW, p. 188). Life becomes genuine only when given meaning and Lara, the heroine of *Doctor Zhivago*,



discovers it intuitively while all by herself in the midst of the vast Nature:

*Lara walked along the tracks following a path worn by pilgrims and then turned into the fields. Here she stopped and, closing her eyes, took a deep breath of the flower-scented air of the broad expanse around her. It was dearer to her than her kin, better than a lover, wiser than a book. For a moment she rediscovered the purpose of her life. She was here on earth to grasp the meaning of its wild enchantment and to call each thing by its right name, or, if this were not within her power, to give birth out of love for life to successors who would do it in her place.*  
(ITW, p. 187-188)

It is true that we deal in this example with a feminine quest finding its sources in a more feminine mild hospitable nature with “flower scented air”. Still, the revelation of the purpose of her life remains momentary, thus illusive. Nevertheless, this illumination offers a twofold interest: on the one hand, keeping an enchanted eye on Nature in order to seize its deep meaning; on the other hand, the calling of things by their right name recalls the Biblical Adam naming animals, which is more than a mere exercise in linguistic freedom. Naming becomes a symbol for the true meaning of the essence of things and for the human capacity of creation and transformation of reality through the power of language and imagination. Lara's feminine power of creation resides mostly in bearing children, as the naming of things seems to have been Biblically destined to men only. Christopher McCandless and Lara share this “calling each thing by its right name”, but in Christopher's case, the process of renaming takes place in parallel with our protagonist's reawakening to reality. On August 5, one hundred days after he entered the Alaskan bush, Christopher is no longer “lost in the wild” but “trapped in the wild” (ITW, p. 194). Trapped in his own game. Situation which acquires dramatic tension with his plea for assistance, written August 12:

S.O.S. I NEED YOUR HELP. I AM INJURED, NEAR DEATH, AND TOO WEAK TO HIKE OUT OF HERE. I AM ALL ALONE, THIS IS NO JOKE. IN THE NAME OF GOD, PLEASE REMAIN TO SAVE ME. I AM OUT COLLECTING BERRIES CLOSE BY AND SHALL RETURN THIS EVENING. THANK YOU. (ITW, p. 196-197)

Christopher's growing awareness of being confronted to immanent death loads his quest with anxiety. Calling himself by the right name equals salvation. This is why he

signed his SOS note with his right name: Chris McCandless: “Recognizing the gravity of his predicament, he had abandoned the cocky moniker he'd been using for years, Alexander Supertramp, in favor of the name given to him at birth by his parents” (ITW, p. 197). “This is no joke” meaning that the fictionalisation of his life and the going-on reverie were over.

Needless to say that the Romantic Poets of the Old Continent are not part of Christopher’s literary references, however, we may philosophically wonder whether the true essence of things lies either in Reality, or, on the contrary, as a Romantic mind as Keats's wrote in a letter addressed to Benjamin Bailey, in the authenticity of Imagination: “I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination – what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not [...]”

Coming back to travellers, wanderers and other misfits rebelling against society, in his “Postface: L'Oeuvre en route” to the French edition of Jack London's *The Road*, Jean-François Duval offers elements of answer concerning the nature of this inner urge that motivated both Jack London and Jack Kerouac to set out on journeys across the American territory and engage in lived experience:

Et quand on lit sous la plume de Jack London: «J'aimerais mieux être un superbe météore, chacun de mes atomes irradiant d'un magnifique éclat, plutôt qu'une planète endormie. La fonction propre de l'homme est de vivre, non d'exister. Je ne gâcherai pas mes jours à tenter de prolonger ma vie. Je veux brûler tout mon temps<sup>1</sup>», il est difficile de ne pas entendre, en écho, la fiévreuse déclaration de Kerouac dans les premières pages de *Sur la route*: «Les seules gens qui existent pour moi sont les déments, ceux qui ont la démence de vivre, la démence de discourir, la démence d'être sauvés, qui veulent jouir de tout dans un seul instant, ceux qui ne savent pas bâiller ni sortir un lieu commun mais qui brûlent, qui brûlent, pareils aux fabuleux feux jaunes [...]»<sup>2</sup>.» Chez l'un et l'autre même pétulance dans le ton, même allégresse dans la narration – à croire que c'est la route elle-même qui leur dicte leurs propos. (Duval, “Postface: L'Oeuvre en route” to the French edition *La Route* of Jack London, p. 170)

To conclude this first part of my study, Christopher also wanted an extraordinary

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<sup>1</sup> Cité par G. Chérel, *Jack London, le mangeur de vent*, Flammarion, Paris, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Gallimard, coll. « Folio », n° 31, traduction de J. Houbart, Paris, 1997.

and exemplary life for himself and what motivated his yearnings “too powerful to be quenched by human contact [...] [was] the prospect of rough congress with nature, with the cosmos itself” (ITW, p. 67) Krakauer's choice of epigraph which crowns chapter 3 of his book, a quotation taken from Leo Tolstoy's “Family Happiness” is also revelatory of Christopher's inner urge: “I wanted movement and not a calm course of existence. I wanted excitement and danger and the chance to sacrifice myself for my love. I felt in myself a superabundance of energy which found no outlet in our quiet life” (ITW, p. 15).

## **Part 2**

### **A Picaresque Novel**

As it was previously mentioned, quest is sustained by the journey and the best-known example of travel literature is the picaresque novel for which Ilana Shiloh gives the following definition:

an episodic, open-ended narrative, in which a lower class protagonist sustains himself, by means of his roguery, during an extended journey through predominantly corrupt social milieus. The picaresque protagonist is an ambiguous figure, alternately regarded as a rogue or a saint, a conformist or a rebel, a trickster or a noble savage. But from whatever perspective he is considered, the *picaro* invariably remains an outsider. Of dubious heritage and uncertain origin, alienated in a morally disintegrating society to which he nevertheless aspires to belong, he hits the open road to solicit the favors of Lady Luck. (Shiloh, p. 2)

Christopher McCandless's meandering journey across the United States may meet some of the criteria of the picaresque novel exposed in the definition above: he is an ambiguous figure living between civilization and wilderness, both a rebel and an outsider to society, nonetheless his ultimate effort is to rejoin society and his last words were addressed to his peers. He is a clever resourceful and jubilant character, yet he is not the unscrupulous rogue of low degree who travels in the hope of making fortune and all the less the crook with little regard for morality or honour.

*Into the Wild* could also be read as a modern picaresque novel in so far as our protagonist keeps on moving across the American territory. His displacement into space involves a great deal of walking, hitchhiking and even canoeing. The vocabulary of the journey is rich and diverse: “wandering across North America” (ITW, p. IX), “a nomadic existence” (ITW, p. 19), “as he roamed the West” (ITW, p. 21), “getting the itchy feet” (ITW, p. 25), “he stuck up his thumb and took to the road” (ITW, p. 29), “McCandless tramped around the West for the next two months” (ITW, p. 29), “he resumed a life of constant motion, riding his thumb north and west” (ITW, p. 30), “his Northern sojourn” (ITW, p. 67) etc., and the examples are numerous.

Christopher's car is the reliable companion of his adventurous journey as much as the magical horse is the faithful companion of the fairy tale hero: “a car that has spanned the continent from Miami to Alaska, a car that has in all those thousands of miles not given me a single problem, a car that I will never trade in, a car that I am strongly attached to [...]” (ITW, p. 21) We are in front of a modern odyssey accomplished with the modern means of transportation. Nevertheless, “Flying would be cheating. It would wreck the

whole trip” (ITW, p. 68) replies Christopher when Westerberg offers to pay him a plane ticket to Alaska. Which recalls Christopher's self-sufficiency and desire to undertake this journey by his own means. His journey follows the path of a well-established literary tradition of the American *picaro*, be he fictional or real: Huckleberry Finn, Sal Paradise or Jack London, only to quote the most known. With his carefree attitude and sense for adventure, Christopher becomes one of the avatars of the archetypal wanderer, putting into practice in real life the same exultation for the unknown spaces and the open road as the free-spirited mavericks who pushed the Frontier to the Pacific one century before.

In addition to the symbol of the car, the activity of running is envisaged as “an intensely spiritual exercise, verging on religion” (ITW, 112) becoming a metaphor which concentrates all the essence of the movement produced with the strength of one's body only. It recalls Thoreau's “bare necessities” and the attempt to encircle unknown spaces as well as the essential core of things only with one's personal means and resources. As the captain of the cross-country squad in high school, Christopher motivated his team mates into long strenuous runs so as to control their fear of the unknown symbolized by the “strange roads” and “woods” while advancing beyond known landmarks:

He would lead us on long, killer runs through places like farmers' fields and construction sites, places we weren't supposed to be, and intentionally try to get us lost. We'd run as fast as we could, down strange roads, through the woods, whatever. The whole idea was to lose our bearings, to push ourselves into unknown territory. Then we'd run at a slightly slower pace until we found a road we recognized and race home again at full speed. In a certain sense that's how Chris lived his entire life. (ITW, p. 112)

At an individual level, these athletes have something in common with the early European settlers and their anxious quest and conquest of new territories toward the Wild West. Running turns into the metaphor of taking over new territories with rough energy and domesticating them.

Other elements that are necessary to deal with, especially when analyzing a picaresque novel are time and space, for which Bakhtin uses the term *chronotope* (literally, “time space”), borrowed from Einstein's Theory of Relativity:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into

one carefully thought-out , concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (Bakhtin, p. 84)

Christopher's journey spanned more than two years and covered an American space envisaged as a virgin page on which he inscribed in a random manner, his own maze. Moving into space is the essence of the book and the chapter titles, all toponyms, create Christopher's personal labyrinthine literary geography. Mazes can be thought of as symbolic forms of pilgrimage: if people could not afford to travel to the Holy lands, mazes and prayers substituted for such travel. Thus they become laden with a positive significance of salvation, enlightenment and self-knowledge. Which is also Christopher's case: the maze he created supports his quest for the absolute and the time and space he fused into his life experience forged his own personal *chronotope*: “The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of the man in literature as well. The image of man is intrinsically chronotopic” (Bakhtin, p. 85), and when saying this, Bakhtin has in mind Kant's theory presented in “Transcendental Aesthetics”, one of the main sections of *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which the philosopher defines time and space as indispensable forms of any cognition, beginning with elementary perceptions and representations (Bakhtin, p. 85).

Following the same idea of creating chronotopes concentrating a whole adventurous journey, it would be interesting to analyse the way Krakauer uses time when telling Christopher's story *après-coup*. The author usually places an event between at least two temporal landmarks, which creates temporal maps under the shape of closed loops: “In eight days the nation will elect Bill Clinton president. It's been nearly two months now since the body of Chris McCandless turned up in Alaska” (ITW, p. 16). Or another example of the author's attempt to encompass a temporal map around Christopher's demise is the way he opens chapter 7 on a date set late October 1992, fifty days after McCandless's body was discovered in Alaska on the Stampede Trail, to return seven months earlier into time, in March 1992, when Christopher came back to Carthage to work for Wayne Westerberg at the grain elevator, then to come back to the time of the narration again, that is October 1992. It is what Gerard Genette calls “narrative anachronies”, that is temporal shifts between the time of the story (*la diégèse*) and the time of the narration:

Le repérage et la mesure de ces *anachronies* narratives (comme j'appellerai ici les

différentes formes de discordance entre l'ordre de l'histoire et celui du récit) postulent implicitement l'existence d'une sorte de degré zéro qui serait un état de parfaite coïncidence temporelle entre récit et histoire. Cet état de référence est plus hypothétique que réel (Genette, Figures III, p. 79)

Krakauer does not obey the chronology of Christopher's journey, and the events are narrated in a very shuffled manner, supposedly following the progression of his investigative quest and efforts to stick together the loose details of Christopher's journey. This produces the above mentioned anachronies but also a certain number of analepses and prolepses. The narrator shifts quite easily between the known events of our hero's story and fills in the vague slippery unknown aspects of the story with assumptions, speculations and an overabundance of narrative voices, real or fictional, which deepen, double, sometimes confuse the meaning of Christopher's quest. By dint of too much saying about Christopher, Krakauer turns him into a fictional even fictitious entity, and his authorial quest turns into an aporia, as Christopher remains an elusive cryptic character who holds his personal truth and knowledge for himself and will share it neither with the narrator nor the reader.

Closing this temporal parenthesis and the manipulation of temporality by the narrator when telling the story, we should also consider the way the evolution of the chronotope is influenced by another pervasive element in the picaresque novels, the one which Shiloh names "Lady Luck" but which takes on different other terms: chance, good or bad luck, odds, contingency, random, accidental, fortuitous, contingent, occasional, unforeseeable, unexpected, haphazard etc. All these terms are used to define a dimension of existence over which humans have no influence. Jacques Derrida defines chance as a downward movement:

As you know, the words "chance" and "case" descend, as it were, according to the same Latin filiation, from *cadere*, which – to indicate the sense of the fall – still resounds in "cadence", "fall" (*choir*), "to fall due" (*échoir*), "expiry date" (*échéance*), as well as in "accident" and "incident" (Derrida, p. 5)

Chance governs Christopher's journey to the smallest details, especially when the protagonist travels only for the pleasure of the road with no purpose behind: catching raids, having meals offered, meeting by chance the right people at the right time or not, when he is brutalized by a railways employee because hopping freight trains: "Allowing his life to be shaped by the circumstance, he hitched to Lake Tahoe, hiked into the Sierra Nevada, and spent a week walking north on the Pacific Crest Trail before exiting the mountains and



returning to the pavement” (ITW, p. 29).

Nevertheless, when Christopher decided to endow his journey with the ultimate Alaskan adventure and the quest for his true self, chance was a dimension acting against him, to the point that his hubris - “Chris was fearless even when he was little [...] He didn't think the odds applied to him. We were always trying to pull him back from the edge.” (ITW, p. 109) - lack of anticipation and of grasping things in advance, took him by surprise as he became “trapped into the wild” and the consequences are expressed by Derrida in an Epicurean way:

One can fall well or badly, have a lucky or unlucky break – but always by dint of not having foreseen – of not having seen in advance and ahead of oneself. In such a case, when man or the subject falls, the fall affects his upright stance and vertical position by engraving in him the detour of a *clinamen*, whose effects are sometimes inescapable” (Derrida, p. 5)

The element of chance appears as *possibility* at the level of the authorial writing as Krakauer struggles to “get the words right” as Hemingway said in one of his interviews, so as to grasp the true essence of his character's quest or to speculate on the circumstances of Christopher's death and other shadowy aspects of his story. His style partakes both of the investigative journalism and the literature writing techniques. The author strives for an objective and accurate reporting of facts, which compels him to offer the reader full-detailed descriptions of characters, landscapes and circumstances of the story, providing the right names, the right dates and the right places. His description of landscapes is most of the times sober and unembellished, with flat dull sometimes unnecessary details. Nonetheless, Krakauer admitted that as hard as he may have tried to “make sense of McCandless's life and death, yet his essence remains slippery, vague, elusive” (ITW, p. 185) Therefore his style bears the marks of the failure to seize his character, which can be explained by the large use of the epistemic modals *must*, *may*, *might*, *could* and of some adverbs of (un)certainity such as *maybe*, *perhaps*. Thus, the chance, the (im)possibility to grasp the true essence of the character reflects itself at the textual level through the choice of words and specific grammar.

Coming back to what defines the picaresque novel, Ilana Shiloh unfolds this genre into the road story and the quest narrative that she considers antithetical. The road story is a loose episodic open-ended narrative, with an amoral and careless *picaro* in quest for adventure and in defiance of social conventions and existing dominant ideologies,

committed only to himself and to the turns of fortune and chance. On the contrary, the quest narrative is a structured *telos*-directed narrative, closing a deterministic circle, whose romantic protagonist is moral, selfless, the highest embodiment of the human values, and who usually makes it back home safe. In the road story, the journey becomes an end in itself, whereas in the quest narrative, the journey supports the quest. Road and quest narratives have a few elements in common such as solitude, adventure, heroic individualism, the unknown and the capriciousness and absurdity of chance (Shiloh, p. 1-6) We have already seen that *Into the Wild* contains elements of the two trends, since the story starts as a road narrative and turns into a quest narrative the moment Christopher decided to put himself to trial in the Alaskan wilderness. Christopher himself develops as an ambiguous character, torn between the call of the society and the yearning for Nature, yet tending to be more of a Romantic character than a roguish picaresque one.

As far as the nature of the picaresque character is concerned, Christopher follows closely into the path of Jack London, himself a writer and a wandering hobo. *Into the Wild* is rich with references to those living on the margins of society: “bums”, “tramps”, “winos”, “snowbirds”, “drifters” and “sundry vagabonds”, “prostitutes”, “homeless people”, “vagrants”, “pimps”, “hookers”, “the lumpen”, “the lowlife”, “the retired, the exiled, the destitute, the perpetually unemployed” (ITW, p. 44). They are described as an “otherworldly [...] itinerant society” living on little money in trailers, caravans and mobile homes, consuming “cheap, mostly secondhand goods” and reading “used paperback books” (ITW, p. 44). Page 17, Krakauer makes the distinction between “rubber tramps”, that is vagabonds who owned a vehicle and “leather tramps”, who lacked personal transportation and were thus forced to hitchhike or walk. Jean-François Duval distinguishes three main categories of the American vagabond:

*Le tramp* désigne un individu généralement jeune qui nourrit la passion romantique du voyage, qui entend voir du pays, s'enrichir de toutes sortes d'expériences nouvelles, mais qui n'a aucune intention de travailler en chemin. C'est le cas de Jack London, comme, plus tard, sous une forme plus mystique, des Beats et des beatniks qui feront de Jack Kerouac leur héros.

Le *hobo* incarne un autre type. L'étymologie du mot reste hélas inconnue. Certains le font venir de la contraction de homeward bound, expression qui traduit l'aspiration des combattants à rentrer chez eux après la guerre de Sécession ainsi qu'à retrouver un home dont la disparition les voue à l'errance... Jack London cependant n'avance aucune explication pour ce terme dans un article où il s'attache

minutieusement à celle de quelques autres. Cette catégorie de sans domicile fixe est constituée le plus souvent d'hommes jeunes, sans formation particulière, qui parcourent le pays à leur guise, exercent toutes sortes de travaux quand l'occasion s'en présente, et repartent sitôt leur tâche achevée. Par certains côtés, la figure du hobo est proche de celle du travailleur saisonnier, et l'on pense à certains personnages de Steinbeck.

Le *bum*, enfin, est un clochard plus ou moins itinérant qui ne se sépare jamais de sa bouteille (et l'on songe un peu au Charles Bukowski de *Factotum*). Brièvement dit: le tramp, c'est le voyage et le rêve; le hobo, le voyage et le boulot; le bum, le voyage et l'alcool. A condition de substituer la poésie à l'alcool, on pourrait dire que le personnage incarné par Charlie Chaplin dans ses films offre un mixe de trois. (Duval, p. 172-173)

In a postcard to Jan Burres, Christopher calls himself a hobo – he works from time to time – and if we take into account the above definitions, he may also be considered a leather tramp as he is in constant search of new experiences and the Joy of life. But definitely not a bum. Nevertheless, Christopher remains a solitary vagabond, spending only very little time with Jan Burres and her companion, both rubber tramps. As a hobo, Christopher advances anonymously, no identity card, no social number, avoiding the system, wandering aimlessly, creating a labyrinthine trajectory which misleads both his parents and later on, Krakauer, the investigative journalist who wants to piece together the loose parts of his story. Concerning Christopher's moniker, Alexander Supertramp, Simone Chambon and Anne Wicke explain that traditionally hobos took on monicas or monikers, which changed later according to the experience acquired on the road. These monikers participate at the fictionalisation and the construction of an ideal self, which may also be the sign of a malaise or a disquiet:

Si on retrouve des constantes propres à l'écrivain [Jack London], rappelons ici combien cette posture de «vagabond royal» appartient aussi à l'imaginaire américain, de Whitman et Kerouac, combien cette compulsion à bouger en permanence (il se décrit comme une «comète») peut aussi être lue comme un symptôme d'une relation problématique à l'espace américain, à l'impossible ancrage dans cette terre constamment idéalisée” (Chambon et Wicke, p. 78)

Nonetheless, London holds himself in high esteem and takes pride in his hobo status, giving it an Übermensch-like kind of aura when he writes “Sachez que ceux-ci sont les aristocrates du rail, les seigneurs et maîtres, les belliqueux, les nobles primitifs, les

bêtes blondes et chères à Nietzsche” (285) (quotation as it appears in Chambon and Wicke's study, p. 78).

And yet, Christopher was more than a mere vagabond, a Jack London-like modern knight he was, in a quest for self-renewal and the only place to achieve this was in the Alaskan wilderness. In *Histoire de la littérature américaine*, according to Marc Amfreville and his colleagues, *Wilderness* is a notion heavily laden with symbolism, and the Puritans were the first to oppose the “closed garden” of their colony to the vast open space and the hostile forests sheltering wild beasts, dangerous Indians and the Devil itself, in which the colonist had more chances of losing his soul than experiencing spectacular purification. It is for this reason that the Puritans imposed their symbolical interpretation on this indecipherable virgin forest: penetrating Nature and decoding the signs equaled a quest for meaning serving to justify the conquest of the wild (Amfreville, Cazé and Fabre, p. 33-36) Such were the majesty and the destructive potentiality of this newly discovered wilderness, that man felt insignificant and fragile, therefore

it was particularly important for the American Puritans that the scene [of nature] should be a sign and the sign should reveal the intention, and thus the attention of God who thus, among other things, authorized and legitimated their “errand into the wilderness”. (Tanner, p. 19)

The Puritan way of envisaging the wilderness like a book to be deciphered prepares and brings forth London's idealized vision of Alaska compared to a white page, the White Silence ruled by the laws of race, of blood, of heredity, a land where only the fittest survive. Ludot-Vlasak and Pellegrin agree that the Great North is an inhospitable hostile environment, nevertheless it is also a space of the Sublime whose whiteness and destructive force dazzle and terrify the one who dares venture in (Ludot-Vlasak and Pellegrin, p. 82). In spite of all this, Christopher's obsessively personal quest for the ultimate meaning drives him to Alaska where

[...] the “white silence” of the North is the indifferently triumphant demonstration of the All, the arena where the knowable Secret could most unequivocally be apprehended and, as the conditions demanded, lived. The snowfields, mountains, forests, and enormous frozen lakes were [...] the strictest, most spectacular, and unarguable symbols of the universal abyss, the eternal mystery at the heart of nothingness, or the eternal nothingness at the heart of mystery [...] (James Dickey, Introduction to *The Call of the Wild, White Fang and Other Stories*, p. 9-10).

Krakauer's manner of describing Alaska parts with the idealized view shared by London. The latter imposed the Great North in the collective American consciousness as a land of therapy and self-recovery and Christopher was not the only one to follow "the call of the wild":

Alaska has long been a magnet for dreamers and misfits, people who think the unsullied enormity of the Last Frontier will patch all the holes in their lives. The bush is an unforgiving place, however, that cares nothing for hope or longing (ITW, p. 4).

The author aims at demystifying this romanticized image of the North, not "a land of milk and honey" (ITW, p. 4) and cites Edward Hoagland, a writer best known for his nature and travel writing, who says: "Alaska is not the best site in the world for eremitic experiments or peace-love theatrics" (ITW, p. 74). More than that, when Krakauer visits the site of the Bus 142 where Christopher expired, his personal account of the surroundings offers us a "gloomy, claustrophobic and oppressive" (ITW, p. 175) vision of a dangerous inhospitable Alaska and of a desolate landscape around the bus, where scattered delicate bones, the remains of the small game Christopher ate and the larger skeleton of the moose he shot, make up a lugubrious bone yard:

There is something disquieting about this Gothic, overgrown landscape. It feels more malevolent than other, more remote corners of the state I know – the tundra – wrapped slopes of the Brooks Range, the cloud forests of the Alexander Archipelago, even the frozen, gale-swept heights of the Denali massif. I'm happy as hell that I'm not here alone" (ITW, p. 175)

Page 45 in the book, Krakauer goes as far as breaking the myth of London's writings and of the writer himself in quite a blunt and direct manner:

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", "An Odyssey of the North", "The Wit of Porpotuk." 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. (ITW, p. 45)

And yet, when describing Alaska, Krakauer presents it like an almost virgin land, an almost white page on which “only the faint remnants of a packed snow-machine track remained for him to follow” (ITW, p. 161). Signs of the humans' passage are still inscribed on the land. Alaska is no longer a *hic sunt dracones* territory. “By the time McCandless headed into the bush, there was open water flowing on most of the larger streams, and nobody had been very far down the trail for two or three weeks” (ITW, p. 161). The text enriches itself with a prolepsis, announcing Christopher's impossibility to cross the river back to civilization and his future demise. Metaphorically, the Rubicon turns into the Styx river and Christopher can no longer escape from a deadly space:

He never suspected that in so doing, he was crossing his Rubicon. To McCandless's inexperienced eye, there was nothing to suggest that two months hence, as the glaciers and snowfields at the Teklanika's headwater thawed in the summer heat, its discharge would multiply nine or ten times in volume, transforming the river into a deep, violent torrent that bore no resemblance to the gentle brook he'd blithely waded across in April. (ITW, p. 161-162)

The preposition *into* in the title of the book, in addition to the title given to both chapters 1 and 16, “The Alaska Interior”, participate in the creation of Alaska as a semi-fictional closed space, but at the same time as a space of a different nature, artificially endowed with the attributes of virginity, purity and innocence: “Said he didn't want to see a single person, no airplanes, no sign of civilization. He wanted to prove to himself that he could make it on his own, without anybody else's help” (ITW, p. 158). And Christopher succeeded achieving this by leaving behind his watch and map, the main tools to reference and to have some sort of control on his surroundings:

In coming to Alaska, McCandless yearned to wander uncharted country, to find a blank spot on the map. In 1992, however, there were no more blank spots on the map – not in Alaska, not anywhere. But Chris, with his idiosyncratic logic, came up with an elegant solution to this dilemma: He simply got rid of the map. In his own mind, if nowhere else, the *terra* would thereby remain *incognita*” (ITW, p. 173)

Ironically enough, because Christopher lacked a good map, the existence of the

gauging station and of the cable spanning the river that could have helped him reach the other shore for safety, remained “incognita” too. Moreover, “[...] the wilderness surrounding the bus – the patch of overgrown country where McCandless was determined “to become lost in the wild” – scarcely qualifies as wilderness by Alaska standards. [...] But despite the relative proximity of the bus to civilization, [...] in the end the Sushana River site was sufficiently remote to cost him his life” (ITW, p. 164).

Which brings us back to the main purpose of this second part, that is to analyse to what extent *Into the Wild* meets the criteria of the classic picaresque novel, and we have already encompassed some of them: we analysed the quest-bearing journey and the motif of the maze; the spatial and temporal frame which forge the notion of *chronotope*; the way chance and unpredictability influence this spatial-temporal frame; the difference between road story and quest story and how the book partakes elements of both trends; the nature of the character, comparing him to the more famous hobo in American literature that was Jack London; and finally the thick symbolism of the Wilderness in general, in order to tackle the more specific symbolism of Alaska turned into a fake *terra incognita*. As we can observe, the elements in common are quite numerous and yet, *Into the Wild* diverges from the classic picaresque novel by the simple fact that our protagonist dies in the end, which is not the case of the *picaro*.

From this point of view, the book could be also read as an anti-bildungsroman, the novel of a failed spiritual apprenticeship, or referring to Joseph Campbell's theory of the *monomyth* described in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a hero's journey is achieved in three stages, *separation – initiation – return*, and Christopher accomplished the separation and the initiation stages but failed to return home with the “boons”, the revelation, the knowledge to bestow on his fellow men, which is maybe writing an inspiring account of his experience in Alaska. (Campbell, chapter 3 *The Hero and the God*, p. 23)

Last but not the least, I cannot close this second part without saying a few words about Krakauer's personal quest for the essence of Christopher McCandless and how the character was shaped by the author's half journalistic, half literary writing style.

Learning about Christopher's odyssey after his death compels us to satisfy ourselves with what the others may say on the protagonist. Thus, from the very beginning, the knowledge we may have about the hero is indirect, subjective, incomplete, or even biased according to the sources Krakauer used to write his book. There is a degree of distance between the narrator and his character, as the the narrator spent three years doing detective search

following Christopher's track in order to find the pieces of the puzzle and make them fall into the right place. This already existing distance increases between the protagonist and the reader through the filter of the authorial voice but also through the impenetrable veil of death. Which makes it even more strenuous for us to seize the inner essence of the hero and almost impossible to grasp the truth about what Christopher's life really meant.

As I have already said, the author strives to such an extent to grasp the truth about the protagonist, that he turns him into a fictional character. Krakauer was an investigative journalist before becoming a writer, as Hemingway and London were before him. His personal quest is more of a matter-of-fact detective search for evidence, stories, anecdotes, photos, memories and testimonies that make up Christopher's journey. In doing so, Krakauer himself had to follow the protagonist's convoluted trajectory across the American West in order to meet the people who briefly met or accompanied McCandless along his journey. The result of this “meandering inquiry” (ITW, p. X) is the book we are studying today. The author's attempt is to deliver the reader an objective and neutral biography of Christopher's life, yet he announces in the Author's Notice prefacing his work, that “I won't claim to be an impartial biographer” (ITW, p. X). Which is true. We sense from the beginning that Krakauer is attached to Christopher, that he takes his defense against the detractors who critic McCandless's hubris, lack of humility in front of Nature and lack of means and preparation before entering the wild. Krakauer identifies himself so much with Christopher, drawing parallels between their lives, comparing their respective fathers and their experiences as mountain-climbers, that at some point Krakauer makes Christopher's story his own and turns it into a pretext to speak about himself and produces two autobiographical chapters:

L'important est que, si le narrateur emploie la première personne, ce n'est jamais pour parler du personnage principal de l'histoire: celui-ci est quelqu'un d'autre. Aussi, dès qu'il est concerné, le mode principal du récit est-il la troisième personne, ce que Genette appelle la narration hétérodiégétique. (Lejeune, p. 38)

Except for these two chapters, the rest of the book is dedicated to render a satisfactory portrait of McCandless, and in doing so, Krakauer combines journalistic and literary writing together. I have already mentioned the author's concern for accuracy, objectivity and a balanced reporting of events. Whether he succeeded to meet these journalistic standards remains questionable. Nevertheless, his style also includes basic literary techniques and I have already mentioned the use of anachronies, analepses,



prolepses and the shuffled chronology of events. What would be interesting, though, is to analyse the function of the thirty-one epigraphs crowning the eighteen chapters and one epilogue of the book, with the narratological tools offered by Genette in *Seuils*, and see to what extent the epigraphs help enrich the text and decipher Christopher's enigma.

We have seen that when describing natural or urban landscapes, Krakauer uses a matter-of-fact unimaginative style, nevertheless, when portraying people, for example Wayne Westerberg or Loren Johnson, Christopher's grandfather, Krakauer brings into prominence other literary characters. A self-made man, Wayne recalls both the Jeffersonian educated virtuous independent self-reliant farmer and the founding values of the American Dream:

Westerberg, in his mid-thirties, was brought to Carthage as a young boy by adoptive parents. A Renaissance man of the plains, he is a farmer, welder, businessman, machinist, ace mechanic, commodities speculator, licensed airplane pilot, computer programmer, electronics troubleshooter, video-game repairman (ITW, p. 19)

Christopher finds a literary counterpart for Wayne in Pierre Bezuhov, “a reference to Tolstoy's protagonist [...] - altruistic, questing, illegitimately born” (ITW, p. 19). As for Loren Johnson, the way he is described recalls Natty Bumppo, both a contemplative poet and a hunter; “Loren Johnson was proud and stubborn and dreamy, a woodsman, a self-taught musician, a writer of poetry” (ITW, p. 108).

McCandless himself is explicitly compared to James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus on the point of having his illumination by the sea: “He was alone, he was unheeded, happy, and near the wild heart of life. He was alone and young and wilful and wildhearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters and the seaharvest of shells and tangle and veiled grey sunlight” (ITW, p. 31) Christopher walks between life and fiction, bringing to surface different avatars of the archetypal wanderer and embodies successively Natty Bumppo when enrolling in Emory College: “Chris walks in with a scraggly beard and worn-out clothes, looking like Jeremiah Johnson, packing a machete and a deer-hunting rifle” (ITW, p. 119); Huckleberry Finn when paddling his canoe southward to Mexico; Steinbeck's migrant workers when employed by Westerberg at the grain elevator; Jack London's hobos when hopping trains.

And yet, not only does Christopher bring to life different literary characters, but he also acquires a Christ-like figure throughout the journey. People who knew McCandless

start using a religious vocabulary when trying to describe his surroundings, his tendency towards solitude and self-sufficiency or his looks after he returned home from solitary trips: his student room looks “**monkish**” (ITW, p. 22) kept “as orderly and spotless as a military barracks.” (ITW, p. 22); “[...] he was no **recluse** [...] He needed his solitude at times, but he wasn't a **hermit**.” (ITW, p. 45-46). In the summer of 1986, Christopher took his first trip to the Pacific coast and for the first time he loosened tights with his family. When he came back home, “[...] he had a scruffy beard, his hair was long and tangled, and he'd shed thirty pounds from his already lean frame. [...] He was *so* thin. He looked like those paintings of **Jesus on a cross**.” (ITW, p. 118) When Krakauer compares Christopher to other adventurers, he writes: “McCandless was something else – although precisely *what* is hard to say. A **pilgrim**, perhaps.” (ITW, p. 85) Other terms used to describe his journey are “odyssey”, “pilgrimage” or “hegira”.

We can notice the presence of ingredients that would eventually trigger this Christ-like figure for Christopher: asceticism, scarce food, solitude, reclusion in the Mojave Desert, no sexuality, no love affairs. Chastity and moral purity were among the principles he put into practice: “It seems that McCandless was drawn to women but remained largely or entirely celibate, **as chaste as a monk**.” (ITW, p.66)

[...] McCandless seems to have been driven by a variety of lust that supplanted sexual desire. His yearning, in a sense, was too powerful to be quenched by human contact. McCandless may have been tempted by the succor offered by women, but it paled beside the prospect of rough congress with nature, with the cosmos itself. (ITW, p. 67)

Further on, McCandless's quest is enriched with a religious aura when compared to the quest for lonely places of the *papar*, a group of Irish monks, who sailed away as far as Greenland so as to “dwell in peace, undisturbed by the turmoil and temptations of the world [...] They were drawn across the storm-racked ocean, drawn wet past the edge of the known world, by nothing more than a hunger of the spirit, a yearning of such queer intensity that it beggars the modern imagination” (ITW, p. 97). Through an association of ideas, Christopher benefits from the same “courage”, “reckless innocence” and “urgency of [...] desire” as these anchorites. When it comes to speculate on Christopher's demise in Alaska, Krakauer takes as evidence the last snapshot McCandless took of himself and the last message he left to his peers: “I HAVE HAD A HAPPY LIFE AND THANK THE

LORD. GOODBYE AND MAY GOD BLESS YOU ALL!” (ITW, p. 198) Krakauer speculates Christopher might have experienced “ a sublime euphoria, a sense of calm accompanied by transcendent mental clarity” (ITW, p. 197) triggered by starvation and he is positive when declaring that “Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God” (ITW, p. 198).

There is still much to be said about Krakauer's book and there is no easy solution apprehending all its details and subtleties. Yet, I would like to conclude on the function of the hand-made leather belt, an astonishing piece of artifact Christopher left behind.

Just as Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty's odyssey can hold on a single paper scroll, so can Christopher's pilgrimage – without the Alaska episode – be accounted for on a stripe of leather. The belt becomes a specular text mirroring at a tiny level the vast meandering journey that takes a whole book to describe. The effect of this mirroring is a new acquired profoundness of the larger text since an item alone can redouble the whole quest and journey thematic of Krakauer's book as a whole. The comic strip-like drawing acts as a summary text putting together the loose elements of the larger text in a mosaic or puzzle in which the chronological order of the events is respected and presented in a linear way, which is the only way the journey can be traced on an elongated piece of leather. Thus, the *mise-en-abyme* simplifies and clarifies both the protagonist's journey rendered in a labyrinthine way and the shuffled chronology of events in the book.

An accomplished leatherworker, Franz taught Alex the secrets of his craft; for his first project McCandless produced a tooled leather belt, on which he created an artful pictorial record of his wanderings. *ALEX* is inscribed at the belt's left end; then the initials *C.J.M.* (for Christopher Johnson McCandless) frame a skull and crossbones. Across the strip of cowhide one sees a rendering of a two-lane blacktop, a NO U- TURN sign, a thunderstorm producing a flash flood that engulfs a car, a hitchhiker's thumb, an eagle, the Sierra Nevada, salmon cavorting in the Pacific Ocean, the Pacific Coast Highway from Oregon to Washington, the Rocky Mountains, Montana wheat fields, a South Dakota rattlesnake, Westerberg's house in Carthage, the Colorado River, a gale in the Gulf of California, a canoe beached beside a tent, Las Vegas, the initials *T.C.D.*, Morro Bay, Astoria, and at the buckle end, finally, the letter N (presumably representing north). Executed with remarkable skill and creativity, this belt is as astonishing as any artifact Chris McCandless left behind. (ITW, p. 52-53)

The *mise-en-abyme* resumes and clarifies the larger text but it can also bear the foretelling signs announcing the denouement of the story, in our case the “skull and crossbones” (a prolepsis) framed by the initials C.J.M., which predict the hero's later death.

## Conclusion

Much can be still said about Christopher and his spiritual quest. *Into the Wild* has not exhausted its possibilities of interpretation. We could still analyse the extent to which Christopher McCandless's quest and the author's quest are successful. The protagonist's quest could also be envisaged as a parody of a quest, since his odyssey is so artificially designed and so ill-prepared that it makes the reader smile with incredulity concerning its outcome. Ironically, the “fake-fur parka” that Christopher is wearing when entering the wild, stands as a symbol for a fake quest and for a counterfeited *terra incognita* where no more frontier is left to discover.

As for the author, his quest for the true essence of his character, is drowned under such an overabundance of narrative voices and literary references, that the reader no longer hears Christopher's voice. Quite paradoxically, Krakauer's efforts to define Christopher's essence by comparisons with real persons and fictional characters, associations of ideas, analysing psychological and hereditary theories, making loads of suppositions and assumptions etc., only leads to a greater confusion and a greater distance between McCandless and the reader. So many are these voices and literary references that Christopher seems to have no originality, no genuine voice of his own. He has become a textual character, a patchwork of various texts and voices put together. Hence, we may ask ourselves where lies the truth concerning Christopher's enigma.

Nevertheless, the way Krakauer writes about Christopher, turns him into a fictional character with a special quality: McCandless turned into a palimpsest-like character, bringing into prominence different avatars of the mythical archetype of the questing traveller: Natty Bumppo, Dante's Ulysses, Huckleberry Finn, Jack London as a hobo, Steinbeck's migrant workers. Christopher is a modern Ulysses inscribed in a modern Odyssey. Fiction and imagination are what fuelled his pilgrimage. Christopher's entire life is fictional and the essence of his life can be grasped only through fiction.

It is also interesting to see how life fuels fiction so that fiction can influence life in return. Taking the example of Christopher McCandless, literature shaped his personality to the point that he wanted to put into practice and live his life according to principles that other people behold as utopias. Thoreau retired for two years in the wilderness, in order to discover what spiritual truth nature could teach. This experience fuelled his prose work *Walden*. His literature was read and inspired other readers, Christopher being among them.

He followed Thoreau's example and retired in the Alaskan bush in order to achieve his own experience. Unfortunately, it cost him his life. Nonetheless, from anonymity, Christopher became an almost literary character caught between life and fiction in Krakauer's book. Furthermore, Krakauer's Christopher served as a source of inspiration for Sean Penn's movie *Into the Wild*, thanks to which our protagonist entered the realm of art and celebrity. The movie is fiction at its uttermost, as the director took liberties to add invented details to the story, thus turning Christopher into a Romantic character. At present, the movie influences other people, who, if they won't imitate Christopher's experience into the wild, at least they go on pilgrimages on the site of the bus in which Christopher passed away in August 1992. The loop concerning the relationship life-fiction and how they influence and fuel each other is looped.

All things considered, Christopher McCandless has more value and interest as a fictional idealistic seeker for the Joy, the Beauty and the Absolute than as a real person with a security number, and his place is in the realm of the famous questing heroes of the American literature. So, "Hit the Road, Chris!"

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## Key Words

quest, journey, literary heritage, picaresque novel, bildungsroman, odyssey

## Mots-clés

quête, voyage, héritage littéraire, roman picaresque, bildungsroman, odyssee, roman d'apprentissage

## Abstract

My aim in this study will be to tackle Christopher McCandless's personal quest under the influence of Tolstoy, Thoreau and London and analyse the illusive and elusive outcome of this quest. Since quest is supported by travel, I shall also analyse the degree to which *Into the Wild* meets the criteria of the picaresque novel at large. At a smaller level, I shall briefly deal with Krakauer's quest for the essence of his character and the writing style he employed to reach his goal.

## Résumé

Mon but dans ce mémoire est d'aborder la quête personnelle de Christopher McCandless sous l'influence de Tolstoï, Thoreau et London et d'analyser le résultat illusoire et insaisissable de cette quête. Puisque la quête est soutenue par le voyage, j'analyserai également dans quelle mesure le roman *Into the Wild* répond aux critères du roman picaresque. J'aborderai d'une manière très brève la quête de Krakauer de l'essence de son personnage et les moyens d'écriture qu'il a employés afin de parvenir à son but.