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CHRONICLES OF NARCISSISM

Notes about a Logic Named Humankind

Urbino (Italy), December 15th 16th 17th, 2014

**GO WHERE YOU WANNA GO BUT NO MORE APPOINTMENTS.
NOTES ON NARCISSISM AND «THE WILD»**

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«Happiness is only real when shared»
(Chris McCandless)

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I will introduce my presentation about narcissism recalling the fact that every psychoanalyst should learn to work on literary cases, as well as on those of his patients.

I am a psychoanalyst and I like learning this kind of work first of all from Freud himself.

Freud dedicated instructive and beautiful pages to Dostojewski's novels, Heine's works, Shakespeare's tragedies, and even to Leonardo's masterpieces. In all these cases, we have rich materials to understand the innovative concepts and the themes that Freud introduced in the history of thinking.

Today I will try to give you a little example of this work about narcissism, that is one of the most relevant and discussed concepts in psychoanalysis. I will introduce you to a true story, which has been told in recent years by a book and a movie, whose title is *Into the Wild*.²

Both of them are quite famous, very interesting and moving too.

The book *Into the Wild* (Jon Krakauer, 1997) became a national bestseller with millions of copies sold. The protagonist, Chris McCandless, was also the subject of a 2007 documentary. The abandoned bus where he set up camp and ultimately died has become a pilgrimage destination. A notebook at the site is filled with comments from those who traverse the twenty-two miles between the bus and the nearest road to pay tribute. These comments attest to the impact of Chris's life, though years have passed since his death. The story of Chris McCandless has reached mythical proportions.

I have just written on the board the statement you can read: "Happiness is only real when shared". This statement introduces us to our seminar, and is taken from the journal written by McCandless, the unlucky protagonist, before he died of starvation in Alaska in 1992.

He took this sentence from *Doctor Zhivago*, the famous novel by Boris Pasternak: it was the last book he read. I quote: «And so it turned out 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.»

If we'll be able to approach this story without preconceptions and stereotypes, we can understand something about the boundary between health and psychopathology.

1. AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH AS INTRODUCTION

I was 23 years old - the same age as Chris McCandless - when I visited the Grand Canyon for the first time. It was a great experience and a very breathtaking landscape. I had never seen something like it before. Furthermore, I refer here to the words of Theodore Roosevelt (the American President since 1901 to 1909), when he saw the Grand Canyon for the first time in 1903: «In the Grand Canyon, Arizona has a natural wonder which is in kind absolutely unparalleled throughout the rest of the world. I want to ask you to keep this great wonder of nature as it now is. I hope you will not have a building of any kind, not a summer cottage, a hotel or anything else, to mar the wonderful grandeur, the sublimity, the great loneliness and

2 Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, USA, 1997. The book is an expansion of his article on Christopher McCandless titled *Death of an Innocent*, which appeared in the January 1993 issue of *Outside*. A decade after its publication, Sean Penn directed a film version with a soundtrack by Eddie Vedder, starring Hemil Hirsch, Kristin Stewart and William Hurt. You can also go to the videoclip from Smithsonian Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYcP3brBJ3s>, or to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR98wPYYqhc>



beauty of the canyon. Leave it as it is. You cannot improve on it. The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it.»

But my personal view and Roosevelt's view were very different from McCandless's one.

Let's ask ourselves what it means to experience the beauty. I think it has nothing to do with nature, but with human relations, especially the more genuine and deep ones. A brief note about this. For example, in my practice, I was told by a man the first time he had sex: his girl, stripping herself, nicely said, «...and then let's take off our bathrobes!»

He was admired and responded enthusiastically to her gracious offer.

In the Penn's movie, we will see a scene in which McCandless meets a girl (Tracy) along his way. But his view (i.e. eyes and thought) was very different from that of my patient. The young and pretty hippy girl fell in love with him, but he turned her down and conducted himself to reject that pleasant experience. He behaved in this illogical and disappointing way because in that occasion he experienced anxiety (or anguish). Different views, different choices.

In order to escape the anguish you are willing to do anything. As you know, you would always like to go to «Alaska» when things are not going well where you are. Isn't that so?

Let us consider a statement written by G.B. Contri about a criterion that distinguishes health and psychopathology. I quote: «Psychic health is the individual's inherence in the “realm of appointments” (...) And psychopathology represents all forms of the suppression of this inherence, like the most diverse forms of withdrawing from an appointment that is a profitable partnership». ³ This is especially true in the case of narcissism: the narcissistic subject does everything to get away from each appointment. For this reason I have titled my presentation «Go where you wanna go, but no appointments».

In my presentation I will use many excerpts from Krakauer's book, which traces faithfully the history of McCandless until his death.

2. A SHORT SUMMARY ⁴

Christopher McCandless was born in [California](#) in 1968, and was the first of two children to Walter (employed as a specialist for NASA) and Wilhelmina (his secretary, who assisted him in his work). Chris was raised in a “comfortable upper-middle class” family. He was close to his younger sister, Carine, an important figure in his life.

Chris and Carine had six half-siblings from Walt's first marriage. Walt was not yet divorced from his first wife, when Chris and Carine were born. Chris did not discover his father's first marriage until he was 18.

In May 1990, McCandless graduated from [Emory University](#) in Atlanta (Georgia) with a [Bachelor's degree](#). By the end of the summer, he left his family driving a Datsun through

³ G.B. Contri, *The Realm of Appointments*, Milan 2008 (translated by Rosanna Pediconi. Revised by Luca Flabbi and Maria Gabriella Pediconi)

http://www.studiumcartello.it/Public/EditorUpload/Documents/INTERNATIONAL_PAPERS/GBC_Real_m_Appointments.pdf

⁴ *In the following pages I have used several quotes: some of them are from the book by Jon Krakauer. Other quotations are taken from the site* <http://www.enotes.com/topics/into-wild>, or from other summaries available online, such as <http://www.webenglishteacher.com/krakauer.html>



Arizona, California and South Dakota. When a storm flooded his car's engine, he left the car and at the same time buried the license plates. «In April 1992, McCandless went from [North Dakota](#) to [Fairbanks, Alaska](#), to live far away from civilization. He was last seen alive in April 1992 by a local worker, who gave him a ride from Fairbanks to the head of the [Stampede Trail](#). The man noticed that the guy had minimal supplies and no experience, but he could not do anything to stop him.»⁵

After hiking along the snow-covered Stampede Trail, he found an [abandoned bus](#), used by local hunters, and began to live there. He had a few kilograms of rice, a semi-automatic rifle, several books including one on local plant life, and some camping equipment. He had not brought with him a compass nor a map: a choice that cost him his life!

In July, after living in the bus for three months, he decided to leave the place, but unfortunately he found the trail back blocked by the [Teklanika River](#), which was then considerably higher and swifter than when he crossed it in April. Unknown to McCandless (!) there was a hand-operated rope that crossed the river not far from where he had previously crossed.

When he was very near to the end, he posted an S.O.S. note calling on anyone passing by to help him because he was too weak: «Attention Possible Visitors. S.O.S. I need your help. I am injured, near death, and too weak to hike out. 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, Chris McCandless. August? ».⁶

His body was found in his sleeping bag inside the bus by a local hunter, in September 1992. McCandless had been dead for more than two weeks and was only 30 kilograms. His official cause of death was [starvation](#). His journal was investigated, among others, by John Krakauer, a writer and alpinist, who tracked the young man's travels, seeking to understand his motives for going on the road and the cause of his death.

He wrote in his Author's note:

«A surprising number of people have been affected by the story of Chris McCandless's life and death. In the weeks and months following the publication of the article in Outside, it generated more mail than any other article in the magazines history. This correspondence, as one might expect, reflected sharply divergent points of view: Some readers admired the boy immensely for his courage and noble ideals; others fulminated that he was a reckless idiot, a wacko, a narcissist who perished out of arrogance and stupidity—and was undeserving of the considerable media attention he received.»⁷

Roger Ebert, a famous US film critic, wrote in 2007: «Sean Penn's spellbinding film adaptation of this book stays close to the source. We meet Christopher (Emile Hirsch) as an idealistic dreamer, in reaction against his proud parents (William Hurt and Marcia Gay Harden) and his bewildered sister (Jena Malone). He had good grades at Emory; his future in law school was right there in his grasp. *Why did he disappear from their lives?* (my emphasis)».⁸

That's the question we want to address now.

3. BRIEF COMMENTARY ON TEN SELECTED SCENES FROM THE FILM

5 I. Krakauer, ibidem.

6 J. Krakauer, ibidem.

7 J. Krakauer, ibidem.

8 <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/into-the-wild-2007>



N. 1 McCandless' breaking with his family after graduating.

See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kb83JKfxYn8>

Chris graduated from high school in 1986. After expressing to his father his thankfulness for all he had done for him, he left his family. With no definite itinerary, Chris journeyed to the Pacific Coast. In a few words, he disappeared without a trace. He confessed his intent with these words: «Since they won't ever take me seriously, for a few months after graduation I'm going to let them think they are right, I'm going to let them think that I'm "coming around to see their side of things" and that our relationship is stabilizing. And then, once the time is right, with one abrupt, swift action I'm going to completely knock them out of my life. I'm going to divorce them as my parents once and for all and never speak to either of those idiots again as long as I live. I'll be through with them once and for all, forever.»⁹

In this scene we see the first important steps of his decision. His mind was full of resentment toward his parents. From that moment on he proceeded along his pathological pathway.

N. 2 The sudden conclusion of divorcing from his parents.

See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAAedFvnP0>

This scene shows us a discussion between McCandless and a certain Westerberg, the employer who had taken a liking to him. Chris had idealized Alaska to escape from everyone: we see him shouting against society («Society, society!»). Westerberg asks him: «But what are you talking about?». Chris: «You know, parents!». And the other replies, shaking his head: «You're sick!»

Westerberg told in an interview: «Alex talked a lot when we got together. It was pretty obvious he didn't get along with his family». He didn't concern himself with McCandless's family problems: «Whatever reason he had for being pissed off with them, I figured it must have been a good one. Now that he's dead, though, I don't know anymore. If Alex was here right now, I'd be tempted to chew him out good: 'What the hell were you thinking? Not speaking to your family for all that time, treating them like dirt!'».¹⁰

Westerberg's latter conjecture was a sharp good analysis of the relationship between Chris and his father: both of them were stubborn and high-strung. So, their conflict was inevitable. Eventually, Chris rebelled and when he finally did, it was with characteristic immoderation.

Narcissism in both of them brought forward so much tragedy.

It is the same conflict which was well represented and idealized in a famous song written by Cat Stevens, *Father and Son* (1970).¹¹

Not only. Please, take note that his claim was the same as John Lennon in his song *Gimme some truth*.¹² Rebellion against fathers was the leitmotif of the mentality of '68: the same culture as Chris' father. And again: who does not remember the great success of the song *Born to be wild* (1968)? It became famous as part of the soundtrack in *Easy Rider* (1969).

⁹ J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.

¹⁰ J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.

¹¹ <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/catstevens/fatherandson.html>

¹² «I'm sick and tired of hearing things / From uptight, short-sighted, narrow-minded hypocritics / All I want is the truth Just gimme some truth / I've had enough of reading things / By neurotic, psychotic, pig-headed politicians / All I want is the truth Just gimme some truth. / No short-haired, yellow-bellied, son of tricky dicky / Is gonna mother hubbard soft soap me With just a pocketful of hope / Money for dope Money for rope (...) All I want is the truth now / Just gimme some truth (...)».



N. 3 An illogical inference leads Chris and Carine to get a wrong conclusion about their sense of identity.

The facts. Wilhelmina (called Billie) and Walt's relationship began when she was a young secretary and he was her married boss. In the later few years, he would father two more children with his first wife (Marcia) and two with Billie: Chris and Carine. So Carine says: «Dad was already married, which made me and my brother two illegitimate children». She was convinced that their father was lying to both women. Marcia finally escaped with her six children, and Billie repeatedly vowed to leave Walt, raising her children's hopes, but she never followed through.»

My comment: why “two illegitimate children”? Both of them grew up with a father and a mother, who could certainly have had their own personal lives. But there is another issue: What kind of relationship did Walt and Billie had? We can suppose it was not satisfactory enough for the two of them. That's the problem. Kids always have the freedom to choose how they want to think, live and judge the situation.

N. 4 A very fateful day.

See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6pXGJaI0uc> (Italian)

Chris's journal entry for January 11 (1991) begins with these words: «A very fateful day». After traveling some distance south, he beached the canoe on a sandbar far from shore to observe the powerful tides. An hour later violent gusts started blowing down from the desert, and the wind and tidal rips conspired to carry him out to sea. The water by this time was a chaos of whitecaps that threatened to swamp and capsize his tiny craft. The wind increased to gale force. The whitecaps grew into high, breaking waves. With his own words: «In great frustration, he screams and beats canoe with oar. The oar breaks. Alex has one spare oar. He calms himself. If loses second oar is dead. Finally through extreme effort and much cursing he manages to beach canoe on jetty and collapses exhausted on sand at sundown. This incident led Alexander to decide to abandon canoe and return north».¹³

So he left the stubby metal boat and started walking north up the deserted beach.

Please take note that «he keeps journals in which he sees himself in the third person as a heroic loner» (R. Ebert). What does this writing style mean if not a false sense of identity, a severe confusion between fantasy and reality of everyday life? One with a fluent knowledge of the English language may also note that the above quote is written in an almost primitive manner: McCandless abandons the use of most articles and the repetition of various pronouns, so his text almost seems like a telegram. This is an interesting detail.

N. 5 He presented himself under a false name: “Alexander Supertramp”.

The scene shows Chris seeking accommodation at a charity that deals with homelessness. There he declares to be called “Alexander Supertramp”. The name he chose shows a strong trait of his superego, or haughtiness. In fact, a few minutes later, while walking down the street, he sees a young couple, dressed in an elegant way, through a restaurant window.

What happens? At that moment he sees himself in that boy who belongs to the high society. This hallucination leads him to run away from there, even refusing the bed. He really wants to

¹³ J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.



escape from any form of civilization, including a simple conversation between a boyfriend and girlfriend. This episode shows us more than others the process of identification: at first Chris takes a model of civic life, and then rejects it. The nature and the Wild have nothing to do with all this.

N. 6 His obstinate rebellion against rules.

During his travels he even worked at a McDonald's: «One thing I do remember is that he had a thing about socks» - says Zarza, the assistant manager - «He always wore shoes without socks. But McDonald's has a rule that employees have to wear appropriate footwear at all times. I was surprised he ever got hired (...) He could do the job - he cooked in the back - but he always worked at the same slow pace, even during the lunch rush, no matter how much you'd get on him to hurry it up. It was like he was off in his own universe.»

«I don't think he ever had relationships with any of the employees after work. When he talked, he was always going on about trees and nature and something like that. (...) When Chris finally quit," Zarza admits, "it was probably because of me. When he first started working, he was homeless, and he'd show up for work smelling bad. It wasn't up to McDonald's standards to come in smelling the way he did. So finally they delegated me to tell him that he needed to take a bath more often. Ever since I told him, there was a clash between us. And then the other employees—they were just trying to be nice—they started asking him if he needed some soap or anything. That made him mad. But he never showed it outright. About three weeks later, he just walked out the door and quit.»¹⁴

Here is another trait of his narcissistic character, because he does not want to take care of himself and so despises other people.

N. 7 Chaste as a monk: how he refused the advances of Tracy, the pretty hippies' daughter.

See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGWnUVp8SXw>

Among the residents of the Niland Slabs was a seventeen-year-old named Tracy. She fell in love with McCandless during his week-long visit: «She was this sweet little thing," says Burres, «the daughter of a couple of tramps who parked their rig four vehicles down from us. And poor Tracy developed a hopeless crush on Alex. The whole time he was in Niland, she hung around making goo-goo eyes at him, bugging me to convince him to go on walks with her. Alex was nice to her, but she was too young for him. He said he couldn't take her seriously.»¹⁵

«There is little evidence that he was sexually active as a teenager and even less to suggest that he slept with any woman after graduating from high school. (Nor, for that matter, is there any evidence that he was ever sexually intimate with a man.) It seems that McCandless was drawn to women but remained largely or entirely celibate, as chaste as a monk.

Chastity and moral purity were qualities McCandless mulled over long and often. Indeed, one of the books found in the bus with his remains was a collection of stories that included Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in which the nobleman-turned-ascetic denounces "the demands of the flesh." Several such passages are starred and highlighted in his text, the margins filled with cryptic notes printed in McCandless's distinctive hand.

¹⁴ J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.

¹⁵ J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.



And in the chapter on *Higher Laws* in Thoreau's *Walden*, a copy of which was also discovered in the bus, McCandless circled: «Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it.»

Chastity can also be a sign of a pathological way of thinking, as in this case. The sexual life of human beings is hindered and inhibited by psychopathology. It always happens from early childhood. In this delicate area of experience, nature is mute: there are no laws or rules (instincts), unlike what happens to animals. The human sex life depends on the thoughts of the person, who can accept or reject any kind of excitement. According to Freud, narcissism is perhaps the form of psychopathology in which sex life is less developed and less invested.

N. 8 **Being an heir to someone: a question to dodge.**

See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Owixihm4BPA>

«After leaving the Slabs, Chris made his way to Salton City, California, in January of 1992 where he met Ronald Franz, an older gentleman who had lost his wife and son (both of them brutally murdered) and recovered from alcoholism, becoming 'a devout Christian'.»¹⁶

Franz questioned Chris many times about his lifestyle; and Chris explained to him that he chooses to live his life this way and described his future Alaskan adventure. The two men create a father-son type of relationship and spend much time together.

Eventually, Ronald asks Chris if he can accept to be adopted by him. This is a sincere desire of the old man, but Chris refused. Even now! He decided to leave him and went back to Carthage, South Dakota. This was the most touching contact he made.

The refusal to think of oneself as heir to someone is an issue that goes hand in hand with the previous point. It is precisely what Freud called *The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex*. Here I recall the title of one of his essays (1924).¹⁷

N. 9 **His agony and death.**

See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2k-oo2TT-0>

The author, Jon Krakauer, went back to where Chris died a year later to try to gain a greater understanding of the young man. Krakauer believes McCandless went into the wild «to explore the inner country of his own soul». Here's the tragedy.

Chris McCandless resumed his solitary life at his camp after finding the Teklanika uncrossable. He caught enough to subsist for a month, and apparently spent that time hunting and reading. At the end of that time, he "made the mistake that pulled him down." On July 30, his journal indicates that he was "extremely weak". He faulted "pot.seed" for his predicament. There have been many conjectures as to what exactly caused Chris's "precipitous decline." It is possible that he ingested potato seeds he had brought in with him, which become toxic. More probably, he might have mistakenly eaten a toxic plant that closely resembles the other kind of edible potato.

Did he die of hunger or was he poisoned by the seeds of the wild potato? There is still a debate about this. But the point is: what could he do when he realized the river was in flood season, that is before losing the strength to hunger? He could throw himself into the river and seek salvation drifting downstream. He would have had a chance. Why did he not do it?

¹⁶ <http://www.enotes.com/topics/into-wild>

¹⁷ S. Freud, *The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex*, 1924, S.E. vol. XIX, pp 171-179.



N. 10 What were his last thoughts and desires?

The final scene is perhaps a gift that Jon Krakauer as first, and then Sean Penn give to Chris's parents, showing the reunification of their son with them while he is dying. They infer that this is his last thought and desire. I think that it depends on the meaning of the sentence I showed you at the beginning of my presentation: «Happiness is only real when shared».

Should we think that his was a case of repentance?

What does it mean to share something with someone else?

4. HIS FAVORITE AUTHORS HAD BECOME HIS MASTERS

Krakauer's *Into the Wild* contains the entire series of the books that McCandless read avidly while he identified with those authors. They are: Jack London, Henry D. Thoreau (*Walden, or Life in the Woods*) Mark Twain (*Huckleberry Finn*), G.K. Chesterton, Lev Tolstoj and Boris Pasternak.

«McCandless had been infatuated with London since childhood, because of his fervent condemnation of capitalist society, his glorification of the primordial world. Mesmerized by London's turgid portrayal of life in Alaska and the Yukon, McCandless read and reread *The Call of the Wild*, *White Fang*, and other books. 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.»¹⁸

«The dominant primordial beast was strong in Buck, and under the fierce conditions of trail life it grew and grew. Yet it was a secret growth. His newborn cunning gave him poise and control.»

(Jack London, *The Call Of The Wild*)

«All Hail the Dominant Primordial Beast! And Captain Ahab Too!

Alexander Supertramp - May 1992»

(Graffito found inside the abandoned bus on the Stampede Trail)

«Jack London is King. Alexander Supertramp»

(Graffito carved into a piece of wood discovered at the site of Chris McCandless's death)

«Everything had changed suddenly—the tone, the moral climate; you didn't know what to think, whom to listen to. As if all your life you had been led by the hand like a small child and suddenly you were on your own, you had to learn to walk by yourself. There was no one around, neither family nor people whose judgment you respected. At such a time you felt the need of committing yourself to something absolute—life or truth or beauty—of being ruled by it in place of the man-made rules that had been discarded. You needed to surrender to some such ultimate purpose more fully, more unreservedly than you had ever done in the old familiar, peaceful days, in the old life that was now abolished and gone for good.»

¹⁸ J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.



(Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago* passage highlighted in one of the books found with Chris McCandless's remains. "Need for a purpose" had been written in McCandless's hand in the margin above the passage.)

«Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, an obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices.»

(Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* passage highlighted in one of the books found with McCandless's remains. At the top of the page, the word "truth" had been written in large block letters in McCandless's hand.)

In other words, McCandless was disobedient to society, but only in appearance.

He truly always obeyed to one theory, that of his masters.

Doing so, he was naïve, much more than they were, and gave his body over to a fatal experiment following a romantic and ascetic theory.

5. A COLLECTIVE CLICHÉ, OR "THE WILD" AS A FALSE THEORY TO EMBRACE UNTIL DEATH

The interesting and well documented book of Krakauer has another merit. The author reports many testimonies collected in the American press about the death of McCandless. He does not believe that the young man had voluntarily sought death in those extreme lands: he thinks of McCandless as a victim of poisoning. Nevertheless, he gives voice to those who believe that the behavior of the young man was almost mad because he was guilty of grave imprudence, such as in this case:

«The most strident criticism came in the form of a dense, multipage epistle from Ambler, a tiny Inupiat village on the Kobuk River north of the Arctic Circle. The author was a white writer and schoolteacher, formerly from Washington D.C., named Nick Jans (...):

"Over the past 15 years, 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. McCandless was hardly unique; there's quite a few of these guys hanging around the state, so much alike that they're almost a collective cliché. The only difference is that McCandless ended up dead, with the story of his dumbassness splashed across the media.... (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 bigtime hubris)....

His ignorance, which could have been cured by a USGS quadrant and a Boy Scout manual, is what killed him. And while I feel for his parents, I have no sympathy for him. Such willful ignorance ... amounts to disrespect for the land, and paradoxically demonstrates the same sort of arrogance that resulted in the Exxon Valdez spill, just another case of underprepared, overconfident men bumbling around out there and screwing up because they lacked the requisite humility. It's all a matter of degree.

McCandless's contrived asceticism and a pseudoliterary stance compound rather than reduce the fault (...) McCandless's postcards, notes, and journals (...) read like the work of an above average, somewhat histrionic high school kid. Or am I missing something?"



The prevailing Alaska wisdom held that McCandless was simply one more dreamy half-cocked greenhorn who went into the country expecting to find answers to all his problems and instead found only mosquitoes and a lonely death. Dozens of marginal characters have marched off into the Alaska wilds over the years, never to reappear. A few have lodged firmly in the state's collective memory.»

Krakauer also relates the stories of some other young men who vanished into the wilderness, such as Gene Rosellini, called “Major of Hippie Cove”, John Waterman, Carl McCunn and [Everett Ruess](#), an artist and wanderer who went missing in the [Utah desert](#) in 1934 at the age of 20. In general, we can say that in the thirties of the last century, the canyon lands of Utah, Arizona and New Mexico were a region nearly as sparsely populated and wrapped in mystique as Alaska is today.

6. FOLLOWING FREUD: A FEW WORDS ON THE DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

Some people see in McCandless a myth, others consider him a madman and a suicide case. Many Alaskans have long been exasperated or downright hostile over the mythologizing of Chris McCandless. I am referring in note some links to websites that contain several opinions on psychiatric diagnosis of McCandless.¹⁹

I choose to report here the contribution of Roxy Wilding (a British counsellor and psychotherapist) who considers that of McCandless «a story of broken attachment and unhealed wounds.»

She writes in her paper: «I do not think it is too fanciful to imagine that damaged and ruptured attachment, the deepest of all human wounds, sits at the root of the world's troubles. If we feel we cannot be loved, we turn inwards where we perpetually experience the early pain of rejection, or we lash out in our rage and agony, causing pain to others so we may not feel ours so keenly. “Into the Wild” so eloquently illustrates the lengths a person will go to, to escape their pain. When one is lost inside, there is no safe place, and not even the vastness and allure of one of the world's most breathtaking and terrible landscapes can offer a place to hide.»²⁰

I am not of the same opinion, and I have two main points to support my opinion:

- 1) It is true that McCandless was one that “cannot be loved”, as Wilding writes, but in the sense that he refused any offer of love to him by the people he met on his way. In this way he extended dramatically hatred for his parents: wanting to hit them without mercy, he struck mercilessly at all the others and, in his imagination, the whole world.
- 2) His story is not “a story of broken attachment”, but of imputability. It is indeed a choice at a crossroads.

We are interested in identifying the characteristic of his pathology. In my brief comments to the scenes I showed, I have highlighted some features of his narcissism.

¹⁹ <http://www.adn.com/article/forget-chris-mccandless-has-craig-medred-gone-wild>
<http://www.farnorthscience.com/2007/10/13/media-watch/into-the-wild-the-false-being-within/>
<http://theadventureblog.blogspot.it/2007/11/was-chris-mccandless-crazy-literally.html>

²⁰ R. Wilding, *Into the Wild* (2007), directed by Sean Penn. Chuck Zlotnick/Paramount Vantage, New Directions
In *Psychotherapy and Relational Psychoanalysis Journal*, 3:228-231.



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We can say he was unable to collaborate with peers, because he refused any form of collaboration, while he developed a monothematic idea (Alaska, the Wild). At the same time, he was able to numb his affects towards anybody and refuse any appointment.

He was unable to love anyone else, or better, with Freud's words, he loved only «what he himself would like to be», according to the narcissistic type of the choice of an object.

We must not forget that Freud defined properly psychosis “narcissistic neuroses”.

In the psychosis we find a sharp devaluation of any other person. In contrast, we find in the neurosis an overestimation of the other. In the first case, the narcissistic subject falls in love with himself (!), in the second the neurotic subject falls in love with another one. These two extreme cases provide us with important information about the possibility of treatment of a mental illness. The chances of success of an analytic treatment exist only for those individuals who recognize their neuroses and are willing to correct it, abandoning any form of falling in love through the work of transference.

In my opinion, the case of McCandless is very useful because, according to the documents we have, it is an example of a person who was not treatable.

I would like to recall his statement “Happiness is only real when shared”. Let us ask ourselves what it means “to share” in this case.

I find it appropriate to conclude by quoting the great Italian mountaineer Walter Bonatti (1930-2011): «Some people, due to their moral cowardice, see no more in mountain-climbing than an escape from the harsh realities of modern times. This is not only uninformed but unfair. I don't deny that there can be an element of escapism in mountaineering, but this should never overshadow its real essence, which is not the escape but the achieving of a goal.»²¹

Bonatti shows us a very correct judgment: you can reach a goal, whatever it is, only through a work done in partnership with another.

²¹ W. Bonatti, *Montagne di una vita*, Baldini Castoldi Dalai 1995 (my translation).