

Language lies at the heart of our current environmental crisis. As Bate notes, literature "[affects] how we understand ourselves, how we think about the ways in which we live our lives"². When discussing or writing about the environment, we must

¹ Undergraduate student at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of the New University of Lisbon (FCSH-UNL), currently in the final year of his BA (Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures – English and North American Studies). Co-author (with Ana Brígida Paiva) of a paper entitled "Rebelling in Macau through Cross-cultural Matrimony: Emotional Landscape(s) and Strategies of Acceptance and Exclusion in Henrique de Senna Fernandes' 'The Bewitching Braid' (1993)", presented at the *International Conference on Macau Narratives* (FCSH-UNL/CETAPS/CHAM) at the Orient Museum (09/05/2013) and already submitted for publication. Participation in a discussion panel, held at the same Conference, entitled "Narrativas Pessoais em torno de Macau: A Viagem para Portugal e o Processo de Adaptação de Jovens 'Nascidos e Criados' em Macau".

² This article is dedicated to all professors from the English and North American Literature department of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, New University of Lisbon (FCSH-UNL), with special thanks to Professor Ana Isabel Queiroz (FCSH-UNL/IELT), who taught me everything I know about Eco-criticism, and to Professor Miguel Alarcão (FCSH-UNL), for his support and contribution to make this publication possible.

therefore be aware of how we represent the natural world if we are to change our understanding of, and actions towards, it. As such, a study of literature that includes nature metaphors is not only current, but an imperative one.³

The corpus which will be the object of our analysis is Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996), a non-fictional account of Chris McCandless' rejection of globalized society and subsequent journey into the Alaskan wilderness where, after 112 days of attempting to transcend himself, he dies of starvation. Being a non-fictional text, *Into the Wild*'s representations of Nature are the literary sample which is supposed to be closer to "reality"; however, there are still subtle metaphors present throughout the narrative.⁴ The purpose of this article is to analyze three metaphors used in literary contexts and to understand if one is able to move past these metaphors into a place of understanding the nature of man's relationship with wildernesses.

Ecocriticism is a word still not registered in the Oxford English Dictionary, whereas *eco-centric*, *eco-feminist*, and *eco-friendly* are, the last one being added in 1989. Most people are more familiar with the term "environmentalism", which refers to a concern with the environment, whereas ecocriticism "addresses how humans relate to non-human nature or the environment in literature" (Johnson, 7). This study is mainly concerned with eco-criticism as a means of analyzing how metaphors can be unethical. According to Laurence Coupe, eco-criticism involves examining literature as a means of moving "beyond duality, beyond the opposition of mind and matter, subject and object, thinker and thing, [only then] there is the possibility to 'realise' nature" (1).

In order to specifically demonstrate the origins of Krakauer's metaphors, Romanticism, as a reaction to the Enlightenment period, will be briefly examined in comparison to current reactions to globalization. Regarding Romanticism's relationship with eco-criticism, it would seem that many eco-critical texts do begin with or acknowledge the Romantic period as one of the milestones in the "nature writing" genre. However, the intuition to search for this "symbiosis" both precedes and follows the Romantic period. The idea of connecting with nature as a means of reconnecting with the self has remained with many cultures, since there has been industrial forces threatening nature and simpler ways of living. The most recent

resurgence of Romantic thinking could be viewed as a response to globalization and the environmental crisis. Globalization has stirred up a variety of social movements and political activism, as has the environmental crisis; however, as our understanding or ways of seeing the world change, so must our understanding of literature and the use of language that reflects that world. Romanticism, as it occurred traditionally in the eighteenth century, favoured nature "[which] was least touched by the hand of man, high mountains, deep forests and windswept lakes" (Cranston, 15). In 2000, Laurence Coupe's *The Green Studies Reader* represented a movement to formally marry green studies with Romantic literature by using the term "Green Romanticism"(13), apparently for the first time. Coupe's book examines traditional Romantic writers such as Henry David Thoreau and William Blake as early eco-critics, linking the green to the romantic explicitly in history.

If we consider that "our perception of nature is a human construct [that can be] revealed through study of metaphors"(Adkins, 2), Krakauer's wilderness text becomes a poignant source of man's need for an environmental ethos and a shift in conceptualization which is hampered by the excessive use of metaphorical representations of Nature. Regarding this, in "Into Thick Air: Metaphors That Matter", Katherine Ericson identifies six metaphors (objective, enemy, animal, disease, spirit, goddess) used by Krakauer in another one of his books - *Into Thin Air* (1997); however, there is no mention that Krakauer uses a distinct, and more simple, group of metaphors in *Into the Wild*: Nature as a refuge, Nature as an objective, and Nature as an antagonist. Thus, for the remainder of this article, we will proceed to the analysis of these three metaphors which are present in the text.

The first metaphor to be examined is Nature as a refuge, a place of healing. As such, individuals idealize natural places as a means of offering solutions to their own existential problems. It seems that individuals are able to find solace and peace in nature; they are able to think in ways they would be unable to do in urban spaces, which are commonly associated with stress, congestion, claustrophobia, and powerlessness. If one considers the history of medicine or pharmacology, nature can, in fact, heal us physically.

Although it is likely that Romantic thought still remains in contemporary consciousness, and many of its poets have certainly contributed to an appreciation of natural spaces, the environmental movement seeks an ethic that Romantic thinkers throughout history have not always come to. In reaction to industrialization, the Romantic Movement favoured Jean Jacques Rousseau's concept of nature, one still removed from man's touch. From this

statement, it is obvious that nature, in opposition to man, the culture maker, is more desirable because of its apparent ability to provide transcendence, inspiration and freedom. The problem lies in the fact that globalization has obliterated much of the natural world that the Romantics and earlier periods knew and inhabited. As Cheryl Glotfelty noted in 1996, "we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. We are there." (xxi). Although there is a large body of people that longs for a simple, yet hard, life offered by a nature which no longer exists, it may be that they seek this life only in contrast to the complexity and convenience of our current culture. This sentiment abounds with Krakauer's protagonist and points to a growing environmental problem – and perhaps, more importantly, a spiritual one as well: we have not yet learned how to work with culture as a means towards happiness. Krakauer's "romantic types" look for narratives of a time when celebrity gossip did not trump family values and people found solace in home life. The problem is that these narratives are out of date. These texts inspire individuals to act because they see nature as the only means of spiritual renewal. However, by focusing on what we "get" out of nature, we create the idea that nature is a resource to be mined, such as a lumber yard or an oil platform, which is unethical. Also, because nature is not as plentiful in an age of globalization, individuals in Krakauer's text (himself included) are forced to seek remote wildernesses instead of city parks and back yards. Also, these individuals often go to remote places alone. As such, both man and nature are at risk of disappearing. Reading and taking inspiration from old perceptions about the reality of nature, Krakauer's men apply them to current wilderness places, creating a very dangerous discrepancy. Man's ability to live in wildernesses is no longer the norm; in fact, it is rare today. Texts, then, like Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) are powerful in their representation of the natural world as a place of transcendence and beauty; yet today the wild does not offer these experiences. Animals have been pushed closer to one another in the face of encroaching urban development, making contact with them potentially more dangerous. Wildernesses are disappearing daily, forcing would-be romantics and nature enthusiasts to seek out farther, deeper, and higher spaces more remote from civilization and, in many cases, rescue.



Krakauer's subjects, however, do not work within these new concepts, and we see that Romantic visions of nature prevail at the outset of their adventures. As Amy Clary notes, Krakauer's heroes are guided by "literary maps" as opposed to geographical ones (175) and the danger lies in the fact that with "wilderness areas [that] are understood solely as symbols or metaphors instead of as unique physical places ... it becomes too easy to ignore the political and ecological forces that threaten them" (168). For Chris McCandless of *Into the Wild*, the literary maps that brought him to Alaska were provided by Henry David Thoreau and Jack London, the latter whom he claims in one of his now famous graffiti is "KING", and uses it as a catalyst to burn his money, abandon his parents and hitchhike into Alaska.

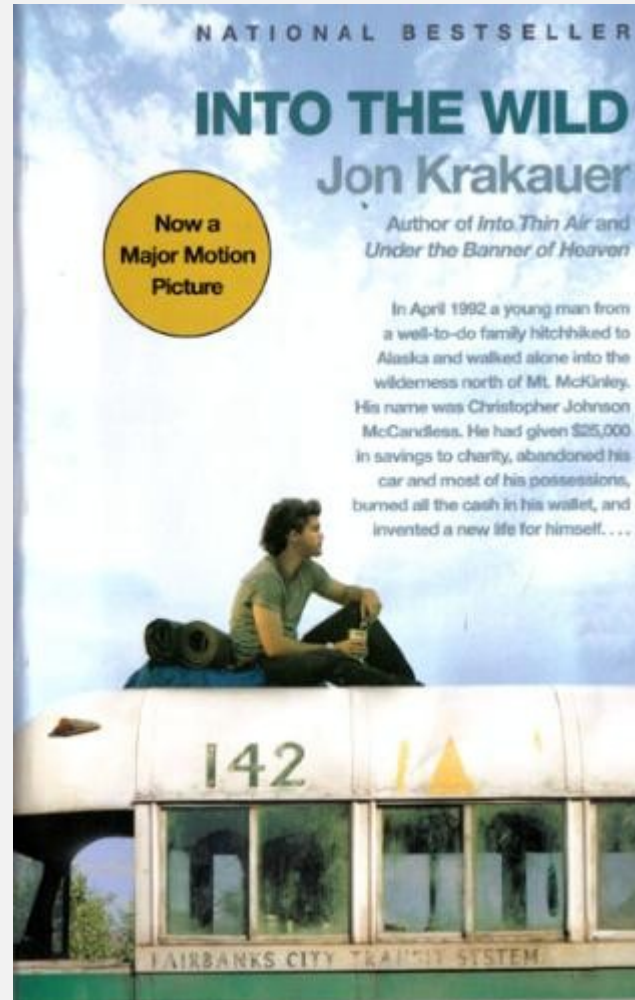
McCandless was said to have been moved to visit Alaska by Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*. Even the title *Into the Wild* evokes London's first chapter in *The Call of the Wild*, "Into the Primitive", demonstrating London's pervasive voice. Of course, Chris McCandless's story is not unlike Buck's (incidentally, McCandless's own dog was named Buck): born into a life of privilege and destined to follow in his father's footsteps, Buck is taken (McCandless, on the other hand, chooses to go) into the wilds of Alaska, where he learns to survive without the comforts of society while discovering his newly awakened primitive identity. Obviously, there are major differences in that Buck is a dog and McCandless does not become primitive, although he does discover a new identity. Most importantly, London writes of Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush, a time when it was possible to change one's life entirely if one could make his way there. Alaska, in particular, as a refuge is not an implausible metaphor for this time. However, the idea that Alaska offers McCandless the only opportunity for reinvention is a

foolish one. Perhaps it might be suggested that, in a time when globalization has minimized the amount of wilderness places, we learn alternative ways to find our identities within the urban spaces that surround us by looking inward, rather than outward, for healing. Instead, McCandless preferred to live in a world that exists primarily in the values offered by the literature he read. Amy Clary notes that *Into the Wild* is "so awash in literary references ... that its emphasis on the literary seems to preclude any consideration of the materiality of the 'wild' into which McCandless walks" (168). Literature is able to convey the values of any particular culture and, as such, London's early twentieth century Alaska differs immensely from Krakauer's Alaskan landscape in the early nineties. In the end, McCandless misunderstood the complexities of London's writing, choosing instead only the ideas that served his journey.

Chris McCandless's trip to Alaska "was to be an odyssey in the fullest sense of the word, an epic journey that would change everything" (Krakauer, 22). However, the idea that nature can somehow solve one's problems is a faulty one. Nature is no more a refuge for one's spiritual problems than it is a dumping ground for one's unwanted material garbage. This attitude results, quite often in Krakauer's text, in death because it causes individuals to ignore signs of danger and trek ill-prepared into isolated places. McCandless thought he could invent a whole new life for himself by going to Alaska. As Krakauer writes, "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... People from Outside, ... they'll pick up a copy of Alaska magazine, thumb through it, get to thinkin', 'Hey, I'm goin' to get on up there, live off the land, go claim me a piece of the good life'" (4). McCandless was one of those, guided by literary maps (not just magazine articles) as opposed to literal ones, a point which contributed to his death. He took Thoreau's writings as "gospel" (28) and was fascinated by Jack London's "glorification of the primordial world ... [but 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" (44). The many problems with Chris's seemingly ideal plan include the fact that he did not know how to hunt, had little provisions and did not understand that "winter, not summer, is the preferred season for traveling overland through the [Alaskan] bush" (165). As Krakauer notes:

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* (174).



Chris McCandless's intentional rejection of a map (in order to create wilderness in his mind) is a key contention with many of Krakauer's readers. Amy Clary argues that Chris McCandless did not die in the Alaskan wilderness because he intentionally disposed of a topographical map; he died because "he carr[ied] too much of the past with him – too much literary history, and too much nostalgia for wild frontier landscapes...that can no longer be found in most of the contemporary U.S." (172). Perhaps this also explains Chris's decision to go forward into Alaska without a map. While McCandless was undoubtedly influenced by Jack London and Henry David Thoreau, Clary claims that McCandless "misread" the principles of their texts (177) and

overlooked the "literary nature" of the narratives (Krakauer, 179). What mattered to McCandless was the "idea" of wilderness, the "idea" of living off the land (176), rather than the material reality of Alaska's drastically changing sub-arctic conditions.

Into the Wild's refuge metaphor seems to support an opposition between nature and culture, especially since Chris McCandless was seeking a spiritual overhaul and, it is posited by the book, that he indeed achieves it in the wilds of Alaska. Krakauer writes that Chris was "satisfied...with what he had learned during his two months of solitary life in the wild" (168).

Although this part of *Into the Wild* does reinforce that nature is a refuge from one's problems, it does note that what Chris learns, in part, is that society is necessary, that "happiness is only real when shared" (189). It seems that, from his lonely vantage point in the wilderness, he looks to society now as a means of reconnecting. However, this understanding is a subtle one and may be overlooked by those looking to follow in McCandless's footsteps.

After believing nature to be a refuge, nature then becomes man's objective. If this "thing" can heal us or make us happy, we have to have it. A problem with this, besides the fact that it permits man to attain the object at whatever cost, is that it breeds competition and risk-taking among the seekers, leading many to believe that they are separate from one another, as well as separate from the object. Jon Krakauer's text is rife with the prevailing attitude that man is not connected to nature, rather that nature, usually a wild or desolate landscape such as the Alaskan tundra, is the object of man's desire. With regard to separateness, Krakauer's hero does "connect" with nature physically by traversing its various landscapes, but a fundamental understanding that man and nature cannot be separated is missing, that "we" and "it" might simply be thought of as "us". Without this idea, it is easy to believe that nature is below man and can therefore be conquered, manipulated, controlled.

Despite Chris McCandless's apparent love for natural places, he contributed to the objectification of those places. Almost everyone who encountered Chris McCandless knew that Alaska had become his objective: "Charlie: But like I was saying, Alaska, - yeah, he talked about going to Alaska..." (42); Jan Burres: "I thought Alex had lost his mind when he told us about his 'great Alaskan odyssey,' as he called it. But he was really excited about it. Couldn't stop talking about the trip." (45); Ronald Franz: "He confided that he was biding his time until spring, when he intended to go to Alaska and embark on an 'ultimate adventure'"(51); Wayne Westerberg: "That spring, however, McCandless's sights were fixed unflinchingly on Alaska. He talked about it at every opportunity" (66). More than an objective, Alaska had become his obsession.

However, objectives can make one blind to reality, to the obvious: one cannot "conquer" something that one is intrinsically a part of, nor is Alaska a safe place to test this theory. As one of the last true wilderness places, Alaska is unforgiving and those not prepared for its hardships are bound to find real danger. McCandless demonstrates his idea that Alaska was conquerable, which indicates his understanding of it as an object, by arriving there ill-prepared (he carried more books than he did food) and to many who responded to Krakauer's *Outside* magazine article (the article which was later adapted into the actual *Into the Wild* book), this added up to a "willful ignorance [that] amounts to disrespect for the land" (Krakauer, 72). Although *Into the Wild* does make a strong argument about the kind of person McCandless was (someone who was not suicidal or mentally ill), it does allow that he misunderstood the land he thought he could vanquish. Krakauer offers McCandless's diary entries from his stay in an abandoned Alaskan bus as evidence that he intended to eventually walk out of the bush; that he did not have a death wish. These entries, however, also present his overarching desire to subjugate the land. Krakauer notes, "... Under the heading "LONG TERM" [McCandless] drew up a list of more ambitious tasks: map the area, improvise a bathtub, collect skins and feathers to sew into clothing, construct a bridge across a nearby creek, repair mess kit, blaze a network of hunting trails"(165-166). By adding trails, mapping the area, and fashioning bathing facilities, McCandless's intentions would ultimately rob the land of the very essence he sought it out for. This demonstrates his poor understanding of his place and role within nature.

The metaphor of separateness is not a new one. It is a standard idea that students in the western tradition learn that one of the primary conflicts in literature (ergo in life) is "man versus nature". This third metaphor materializes only after Christopher McCandless enters into wilderness places, such as the Alaskan tundra, and discovers that nature is not the way they thought it would be; however, this is due to their misconceptions of the true "nature" of nature. Nature as an antagonist comes from the idea that nature (when personified) simply refuses to comply with man's desire to conquer it, which is rooted in the objective metaphor and denies nature's rights. More than denying nature the right to exist outside our metaphors, we fight against nature that does not submit to our will. Here nature is a worthy antagonist, almost equal in that it is often difficult to defeat it (and in some cases it is not even defeated). Although this metaphor promotes violence against nature, it does acknowledge nature's power and some kind of equality with man. Also interesting is that nature here means to harm; as Katherine Ericson points out, "[t]hese creatures... fight to the death. So humans have the right

to destroy in order to preserve themselves and emerge triumphant"(88). If one finds himself in a fight for his life, respect for the enemy is foolish, even suicidal, and preservation is reserved solely for the self. Rowe furthers this idea by writing that "when Mother Nature is conceived as a harlot or witch, we need feel no sympathy for her. We are not flesh of her flesh, and we owe nothing to her. We are important and she is not, a perilous falsehood (143).

Into the Wild presents antagonistic metaphors; however, Krakauer is able to undo them later in the book by retracing McCandless's steps. Chris walks into "the wild" quite easily, hearkening to the siren call of the Alaskan mountain range. At first, Chris's adventure is free of any antagonists: he is lent some boots and a small homemade lunch from Jim Gallien, who dropped the hitchhiker off at the Stampede Trail; he literally walks the trail until he conveniently finds an abandoned bus outfitted with a bed and a stove; he has relatively decent luck hunting small but sufficient game and lives quite comfortably for the majority of 116 days. The first encounter with the idea that nature is an antagonist comes when Chris kills a moose. Due to his lack of knowledge about preservation methods for Alaska (he consulted hunters from South Dakota), the meat began to spoil more quickly than he was able to prepare it. McCandless here works against flies, maggots, and rot for six days before "abandon[ing] the carcass to the wolves" (Krakauer, 167). He considers the waste of the moose meat "One of the greatest tragedies of [his] life" (167). McCandless implies in his journals that he is responsible for the waste and not nature when he writes "I now wish I had never shot the moose" (167), which points clearly towards an environmental ethic. The similarity between Chris and Coleridge's Mariner is somewhat obvious, although purely coincidental. Like the Mariner shot the Albatross in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), Chris killed the moose. The Mariner was cursed and underwent multiple hardships at sea; McCandless had to deal with his own difficulties in the wilderness. Instead of nature, both characters, viewed from an eco-critical perspective, ought to be seen as their own, real antagonists. Secondly, McCandless's ease in attaining the object of his desire is reversed when he attempts to leave Alaska. Upon reaching in April the Teklanika river, which he was required to cross, it was half-frozen and permitted his passage. In July, when Chris again tried to cross the river, it was "at full flood, swollen with rain and snow melt from glaciers high in the Alaska Range, running cold and fast...The water, opaque with glacial sediment and only a few degrees warmer than the ice it had so recently been, was the color of concrete. Too deep to wade, it rumbled like a freight train" (170). In order to return home, Chris (afraid of water) would have to 'negotiate' the river. In his journal,

he wrote "Disaster. ... Rained in. River look impossible. Lonely, scared" (170). Certain that he would be unable to defeat the river, Chris returned to what Krakauer describes as "the fickle heart of the bush" (171). Chris's understanding of nature has shifted into an antagonistic force where previously he had "walked" into the wild, but he is now "trapped" in it. Nature here seems most vicious: allowing a man to pass into its folds, enjoy a stay there, then allow him to see his way out, and prevent him from leaving, ever. Krakauer, however, does achieve an ethic here because, during his journey to the bus one year after Chris's death, he notes that McCandless was, in fact, not trapped in the wild. There was a gauging station about twenty minutes from the Stampede Trail with an aluminum basket used to ferry hydrologists from one side of the river to the other. When Krakauer arrives at the station, the basket was on Chris's side of the river (the bus side) and, had he known about the station (if he had carried with him a topographical map instead of a literary one), "salvation" would have been his (174). Although it seems that nature was an antagonistic force that Chris McCandless was, at times, up against, Krakauer clarifies that Chris was really up against himself in going to and dying in Alaska.

When we discuss our current environmental crisis, we might note the use of "our"; it is our crisis in the sense that we are also responsible for it. Our conception of nature as a refuge, object, or antagonist allows us to ignore recycling initiatives or throw garbage into the ditches from a car window without remorse. Literature, of course, is not to blame for the metaphors we use, but it can also be a tool for change or not. Becoming aware of how we use language to understand everyday reality is possible when writers include ethical metaphors in their texts, or, at least, reflect upon the negative implications of using outdated modes of perception. Ecology offers a view of nature that is inclusive of man. Together, man and nature are one system in the universe and until we are able to understand that our separateness is simply an illusion, nature (and oftentimes we forget that this includes man) remains in peril.

It has been our purpose in this article to highlight literature's responsibility towards the Earth, by demonstrating that ethical uses of language can change our actions. By looking at Krakauer's unethical metaphors and ourselves, in the same manner he has looked at his metaphors and himself, one is able to move into a place of understanding about the nature of man's relationship with wildernesses. "Getting away" to nature does not serve nature or man. As many of Krakauer's characters realize, their problems simply await them. Nature, as a refuge, eludes protection. The refuge metaphor leads Krakauer's characters to objectify nature and compete against one another to obtain it; as such, it is argued that objectifying nature

creates the opportunity for man to take risks that he fails to see are real and deadly. Regarding nature as an antagonist: this metaphor is a result of the first two and is the most prolific one in Krakauer's texts. We think that if nature is standing in our way, or threatening our lives, we must take the necessary actions to prevent human loss because humans are superior to nature. Also, the necessary actions can include leaving pollution behind, commercializing wildernesses, altering the land or weather systems, and wasting natural "resources".

In conclusion, the environmental crisis as we currently know it reflects our own struggle to come to terms with modernity. As such, nature, in addition to the use of eco-criticism as a means to better understand nature through literature, shows us that it is possible to change; it is necessary to change, and it is our responsibility to change, by searching for an alternative and eco-critical paradigm of nature representations in literature.

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