



## About Chris McCandless

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Man is “a great miracle” precisely because of his dramatic contradiction: because it is, without remedy, an indissoluble knot of wisdom and madness <sup>1</sup>(Eugenio Garin, 1992).

A man’s name does not go around the world by chance, even more so if that man, in the course of his short life, has done nothing to make this happen. Personally, I must say that I learned about McCandless’s story almost twenty-five years after his death, through the film dedicated to him; in the days that followed, almost in the grip of an obsessive ideation, I read Krakauer’s book and searched a lot on the internet. It looked like a bottomless pit: the more I read, the more I had the impression of a phenomenon that went far beyond media success. And the more I searched, the more the horizon line seemed to recede. The film had greatly impressed me, the book deeply moved me. Yet, I knew from experience that emotions, even when intense, hardly acquire the lasting essence of feelings [1]. Meanwhile, the search continued. When I then discovered that the Magic Bus is still today a sort of pilgrimage destination and that McCandless has come to be spoken of in terms of a source of inspiration for the new generations, thinking back to some of Krakauer’s intuitions and the autograph fragments read towards the end of the book, then the need to seek has subsided; the need to perform a psychic autopsy on a boy who had been dead for years has diminished while the meaning of that experience has opened up under my gaze.

Much has been written about the reasons that prompted McCandless to embark on his journey. Regardless of his descent

from a family devoted to adventure and love of nature, the attention of the most reliable sources has focused on the difficult relationship with society and an equally difficult, if not frankly conflicting, relationship with his parents. Let us now try to reflect on both issues. McCandless was certainly not a misfit, he had charisma and people liked him. Both from the film and from the book it becomes clear how those who met him during the trip would have liked to keep him with them, how lovable and pleasant he was in his company. Many people opened their doors to this young tramp. The same would seem to be said for his childhood and adolescence [2]. Those who instead attended it in the period, so to speak, between their first and second life, to be clear during their university years, spoke of a progressive exacerbation and isolation, both towards people and towards society [3]. We must understand the latter as a system of rules and conventions aimed at the “civil” coexistence of men, obviously placed in a specific historical and cultural context. But what does “civil” mean? Anyone who knows history knows well that the human being, for his evolutionary progress (social, historical, cultural) has paid a price, democratically divided into equal parts. In a sense, the more civilized a society, the higher the price to pay. Contemporary Western man, civilized by definition, pays for his reassuring existential condition at the cost of “inauthenticity”. Remarkable authors of the weight of Pirandello, Jung, Freud or Tolstoy just to name a few, have highlighted in different ways how contemporary man undeniably wears a mask, a superstructure aimed at covering an instinct evidently incompatible with “civilized” living.

or. ver. “L’uomo è “un grande miracolo” proprio per la sua drammatica contraddittorietà: perché è, senza rimedio, un nodo indissolubile di saggezza e follia”, in Erasmo da Rotterdam, *Elogio della Follia*, Oscar Mondadori, 1992, Forward pag. XXV

So one could ask “better the instinctive life of primitive man or the masked condition of civilized man?”; this is not the place to answer this question, instead let’s clarify the first point we are trying to reflect on: Chris McCandless wanted to realize his own authenticity and for this he had to start from scratch: zero money, zero technology, zero links with the past, to the necessary time. I don’t think he hated society; he simply recognized its profound conditioning. From the pages of Krakauer, McCandless, whose personological complexity eludes easy definitions, appears at times as a narcissistic, highly competitive young man, not at all disinterested in money, on the contrary with a nose for business and even defined by the author as an “incorrigible histrion”, in summary a man of our times, integrated into the system and with wide margins of success. I believe all of this must have been true, but I also believe that aware of it as only a few know how to be, Chris McCandless was trying to get rid of it. His personal fight against an inner demon. beyond all conventions, this boy, connoisseur of anthropology and social sciences, had probably felt on his own skin the searing heat of the ethical, moral and in general existential degeneration that we, living in this moment, know has become one of the great problems of the man of the third millennium, slave of the god of money, detained in his own narcissistic inner isolation.

Now, however, I have to contradict myself, or perhaps it is just a question of one part responding to another: I don’t believe at all that these are wars that can be won with proclamations like the one just expressed, instead I feel much closer to the young American who, in the midst of his own solitude, wrote “For two years he has been walking around the world [4]. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. The ultimate in freedom. An extremist. An aesthete traveler whose home is the road. Escaped from Atlanta. You will never have to return because the west is the best. And now, after two years on the road, comes the final great adventure. The climax of the battle to slay the false being within himself and victoriously conclude the spiritual pilgrimage... Ten days and ten nights of freight trains and hitchhiking took him to the great white of the North. Never to be poisoned by civilization again, he flees, and only walks in the extreme lands. And again, addressing the skull of a grizzly found inside the Magic Bus, he writes “hello ghost bear, the beast inside each of us”.

Who shouldn’t have returned? Who was to be killed? Chris McCandless’s was certainly an initiatory journey. He didn’t want to prove anything, he wasn’t looking for anything as he himself wrote, I believe he simply wanted to complete his symbolic death so that a rebirth could take place, a choice no different from the desert anchorites of the first centuries of Christianity. Perhaps not surprisingly, McCandless too had lived alone in the desert at the beginning of his journey. An experience basically no different from Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, who, in an attempt to make the super-man, had to retire to the mountains for ten years before returning to the world of men from whom he had to once again detach himself to understand, in the end, that what he tried to alienate from were nothing but his own projections with which he finally, peacefully, reconciled.

The real great obstacle to this inner journey could be accomplished, and here we are at the most dramatic point in McCandless’s story, was the deep bond with his family of origin. Krakauer has written of psychoanalytic interpretations according to which the young man was moved by inferiority complexes due to his modest stature rather than by unresolved Oedipal issues [6]. I still agree with Krakauer that these were “cheap” psychoanalytic interpretations on an “absent patient”; however, being an insider, I cannot refrain from proposing my own interpretation, which I express by recognizing in advance the impossibility of confirmation as much as the potential unpopularity: Chris McCandless deeply loved his family; that he loved his sister is known to all, but I think he was equally attached to his father and mother as well. It was necessary for him to go beyond that feeling because something greater had to take place. He had to look for a reason that could authorize him to abandon them, to betray them. But betraying has the same etymology as *trado*, ferrying, crossing, moving in a new direction, and what most possessed him was the need to fulfill himself, at the cost of any sacrifice [7]. Leave what you have...then come and follow me, Jesus said one day to those who asked him how to attain eternal life (Mark 10, 17-30). So he went to dig into his family’s past, he found the skeletons he needed in the closet, the tormented origins of the relationship between his parents, and this gave him enough reasons to cut the cord, to legitimize his choice without looking back. It seems that during his journey he sometimes spoke out against his father and mother.

For someone who didn’t hold a grudge like McCandless, it’s not inconceivable that those rants could cover up a sense of guilt for having abandoned them [8]. Let us now focus on his father, the most controversial figure in Chris’s life: Walt McCandless was a man who brought together the children of his first and second marriage, traveled with them all, who quarreled fiercely with both wives, but did not it can certainly be said that he was an abusive father much less emotionally distant. He too stated how pleasant it was to be with Chris. Absent for work yes, but it doesn’t seem that the son was angry with him for this. Perhaps ethical issues affected Chris more. Beyond everything, I simply believe that the boy felt he had to leave his natural father driven by the inner need to go to another father. And if we think that he died inside the sleeping bag his mother had sewn for him, then another piece of the puzzle falls into place, because it doesn’t seem to me that our young American was the type to ignore things like this. I felt a sort of need for modesty in seeing the private affairs of these spouses treated as if they were the real cause of their son’s death and I say it sincerely, as a man and as a psychologist [9]. This is the reason why I chose not to read the book written by Chris’s sister, as if I had sensed a psychologizing drift, by now too widespread, which sees the conflict with mom and dad as the only cause of dissatisfaction for every human being. If so, the mountains should be filled with poor wretches awaiting death; at Monte Pellegrino there would not even be space to plant a Canadian two-seater.

Therefore, summing up McCandless’s psychological condition, the young man would not appear to have developed

psychopathological symptoms during his life such as to suggest a condition of mental illness. However, the fact remains undeniable that, in his childhood, both he and his sister experienced what is defined as “witnessing violence”, i.e. those circumstances in which the child witnesses’ violent dynamics within the family context without however being directly target. The consequences of similar experiences can be very serious but, be it resilience, ego strength or who knows what, I believe that McCandless’s story cannot be reduced exclusively to this [10]. However, there is undeniably a link between the witnessing violence of his childhood and the beast inside each of us of which McCandless speaks: the human being is born immersed in an absolute instinct, of total conditioning by the environment and tends, in the luckiest cases, to inner peace and psycho-physical balance despite any previous condition. All religions speak of this, initiatory paths, spiritual practices. Although I am not a practitioner and have never declared myself in this sense, I deeply believe that Chris McCandless was following this path, his path, and this makes the story even more powerful. Chris McCandless’s story doesn’t speak to people’s conscience, it goes deeper. It doesn’t matter if my parents fought when I was a child, if I grew up in a violent neighborhood, if my people are at war with each other. What matters is the beast inside each of us and what we can do to get rid of it, but not before acknowledging its existence.

Chris was never alone on his journey, and the beast wasn’t his only companion.

Toward the end of the book, Krakauer writes that “unlike Muir and Thoreau, McCandless ventured into the forest not so much to reflect on nature and the world in general as to explore the inner landscape of his own soul. He was soon to discover what Muir and Thoreau already knew: Inevitably, a prolonged stay in a hostile environment shifts attention as much outward as inward, and it is impossible to live off the land without developing a subtle understanding, and a strong emotional connection., with the earth itself and everything in it.”

And so, accepting Krakauer’s suggestion, we must conclude that there were at least three travelers’: Chris, the Beast and his Soul.

To all those who have written about McCandless, who have criticized or praised him, but who have nevertheless focused on the “technical” aspect of the story, on his death, on his more or less adequate equipment, on his hunting and botanical skills and on its diet, I would like to ask each of them a simple question: do you believe in the soul?

I think Chris McCandless believed it. I also believe that he understood that the more we talk or write about the soul, the more we move away from it. That’s why he never talked about it even though his story oozes soul from all sides.

I don’t want to add more on the subject, instead I want to explore another aspect of McCandless’s life in Alaska: “an extended stay in a hostile environment shifts the attention both outside and inside” writes Krakauer; this is the meaning

of a spiritual approach to existence while having to deal with its more pragmatic aspects, with priorities, with needs. This is the meaning of yoga, the discipline of action without desire, in which success and failure do not count, only the action to be performed at the very moment in which we live the experience counts and nothing more. The Bhagavad-Gita recites “yoga ... is not for those who eat too much or for those who eat at all, nor for those who have the habit of sleeping too much or for those who, on the contrary, always stay awake” and again “Whoever adjusts his meals properly and his efforts, the efforts in action and the part to be assigned to sleep and wakefulness, the yoga that destroys suffering belongs to him” (Canto IV, vers. 16-17); it seems to me that McCandless lived like this or at least that he aspired to this: the yoga of the act, the practice of actions disinterested in their own outcome, beyond joy or pain; how can we not think about it when it happens that, at a certain point, McCandless’s life becomes pure necessity for survival, hunting and sustenance, and only at that moment does he write: “I was reborn. This is my dawn [10]. Real life has just begun. Thoughtful living: Mindful attention to the basics of life and constant attention to one’s surroundings and its correlates, such as a job, an assignment, a book, anything that requires effective concentration (the circumstance has no value. It has value as you relate to a circumstance. True meaning lies in your personal relationship to a phenomenon, what it means to you). The great sanctity of food, the vital warmth. Positivism, the joy of aesthetic life. Absolute truth and honesty, Realism, Independence, Resolve, Stability, Consistency”.

Again the Bhagavad-Gita: “He who, detached from everything, meeting fortune or misfortune, feels neither joy nor hate, here is the one who is consolidated in wisdom (canto II, verse 57)”, and again “When one is unified through the unitive discipline, the soul purified, the sensitive faculties mastered, when one has identified one’s soul with the universal soul, even if one acts one is not contaminated (Canto V, verse 7). Chris McCandless lived as an ascetic, as an anchorite, as a yogi. He practiced the detachment of the senses from worldly things so dear to Meister Eckart and Buddhism. He made himself a witness of impermanence. He doesn’t care whether he lived or died and whether he died of starvation or intoxication. He doesn’t matter. What matters is what was accomplished through him and that his story touched the hearts of many. Life can lose meaning if we think that the best epilogue is to die of old age. The important thing in life is to fulfill yourself and I believe McCandless has succeeded in this endeavor. Many have focused on his phrase “joy is real only if shared” and have interpreted it as a form of repentance; I don’t believe it, I prefer to think that his experience, authentic beyond any reasonable doubt, went through death and reached many people just as an example of sharing the joy lived during his extreme experience. In this you have hit the target Chris, you can sleep peacefully.

McCandless had the intuition according to which the meaning of life experiences is not determined a priori but on the basis of what each individual attributes to them, the same idea expressed by Jung in the Red Book. It is evident that the

young man was very interested in the meaning of things and this approach to existence made him feel very close to me right away, belonging to me too. I've often wondered how I came to know his story twenty-five years after his death. Yet the points of contact were many. Most of my friends had seen the film and quite a few people I know had at least heard of it. Despite my interest in Eddie Vedder (who scored the soundtrack for Sean Penn's film) and my love of adventure, I had never met him on my way. I tried to give my answer: live a period without electricity in a wild territory and explore it on horseback. Hunting large game in the night and gutting it on the spot to preserve the meat. And then again feeling the deep sense of freedom that the North American territories and roads are able to transmit to you, making certain readings and above all letting yourself be crossed by other perspectives. All experiences that I had to have first in order to understand the meaning, however partial, of Chris McCandless's life. For all this, and I'm glad about it, I think I've known the story of him after such a long time.

As already mentioned, understanding that human beings need an ontogenetic recapitulation to recover the meaning of existence was one of McCandless's great intuitions. A meaning in the subjective sense, the need to return to a beginning during the journey from which to start over [11]. This is one of his greatest legacies. The man of the future, before turning his gaze convincingly forward, will need to better understand the evolutionary path from which he comes, both from a natural and psychic point of view, because there can be no future if we are not able to choose for our luggage the most important things from our past. If in twenty-four years this young American, without any master or initiator, has managed to touch certain inner latitudes, the same ones with which some cultures have taken centuries to get in touch, then it means that similar experiences are still within the reach of being human, despite the internally anoxic reality in which we live.

I believe that Chris McCandless represented, in his dramatic story, a renewed existential form of spirituality beyond any doctrine, any consolidated practice, any learned knowledge. Some of the autograph fragments I read led me to believe that he was able to experience moments of enlightenment of a very high standard. All this has had dramatic consequences but, if I have

seen correctly, I think McCandless was aware of it and ready to pay the price.

Chris McCandless died like a chthonic deity, immersed in the endless cycle of living and dying, reabsorbed still alive by the Great Mother Earth. Yet his story also expresses the sense of the solar deities, turned towards the Absolute, to life beyond death and the fact that we are still here talking about it is a testimony to it. Krakauer seems to have had the same idea who, commenting on his last self-portrait, wrote: "With one hand he addresses his farewell note to the lens and with the other he offers a serene and courageous greeting to the world...Chris smiles, and his gaze is unequivocal: McCandless was at peace, blessed as a monk who goes to the Lord".

## Conclusion

In concluding these pages, in some ways as extreme as McCandless's journey was, I hope that the words of that last message, serene at the moment of death, can now sound renewed and help to understand why they have been so much a source of trust and inspiration: "I have had a happy life and I thank the Lord. Goodbye and God bless you all. Christopher Johnson McCandless."

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