"Before the practice, mountains are mountains, during the practice, mountains are not mountains, and after the realization, mountains are mountains"

– Zen Master Seigen

University of Alberta

Metaphor and Ecocriticism in Jon Krakauer's Mountaineering Texts

by

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Abstract

This study examines Jon Krakauer's three mountaineering texts, *Eiger Dreams*, *Into the Wild*, and *Into Thin Air,* from an ecocritical perspective for the purpose of implicating literature as a catalyst of change for the current environmental crisis. Language, as a means of understanding reality, is responsible for creating and reinforcing ethical ways of understanding our relationship with nature. Krakauer's texts demonstrate the dangers of using metaphor to conceive nature by reconstructing the events of Chris McCandless' journey to Alaska, his own experience climbing The Devil's Thumb, and the 1996 disaster that occurred during his summit of Mount Everest. By acknowledging that metaphors, which include nature as a refuge, object, and antagonist, Krakauer also speaks to the Western habit of conceptualization through binaries. This study aims to highlight Krakauer's method of dismantling these environmentally unethical metaphors, and subsequently the Western binaries that support them, through the use of metacognitive reflection, writing, and diction.

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Introduction

In *Environment Ethics*, Joseph R. Des Jardins states:

> For many people in our culture, and especially for many in policy-making positions, science and technology offer the only hope for solving environmental problems…[and] although turning to science and technology in the hope of a quick fix is tempting, environmental challenges are neither exclusively or even primarily problems of science and technology. Environmental issues raise fundamental questions about what we as human beings value, the kind of beings we are, the kinds of lives we should live, our place in nature, and the kind of world in which we might flourish. (4-5)

Language, then, is at the heart of our environmental crisis. As Bate notes, literature "[affects] …how we understand ourselves, how we think about the ways in which we live our lives" (1). When discussing or writing about the environment, we must be aware of how we represent the natural world if we are to change our understanding of and actions toward it. It seems that the West understands reality through binaries (Frye 123-25, Eagleton 90). These binaries include good/bad, body/mind, I/other, love/hate, I/nature, culture/nature, male/female, master/slave, object/subject, and civilized/primitive (Coupe 119). These dualisms are hierarchical and are at the root of metaphor, which Greary writes "is a way of thought long before it is a way with words…metaphor has been seen as a cognitive frill, a pleasant but essentially useless embellishment to 'normal' thought. Now, the frill is gone. It [is] increasingly plain that

metaphorical thinking influences our attitudes, beliefs, and actions in surprising, hidden, and often oddball ways…" (3). As such, a study of literature that includes nature metaphors is not only current, but imperative.

Statement and Justification of Problem

The purpose of this thesis is threefold: firstly it aims to highlight literature's contribution to the ecocritical movement by demonstrating ethical uses of language; secondly, it examines problematic metaphors used in mountaineering texts which reveal the binaries rooted in Western thinking and illustrates that these metaphors are dangerous because they not only prevent ethical behaviour towards nature, but they encourage risk taking among those seeking wilderness spaces; and, finally, this thesis posits that one is able to move past these metaphors into a place of understanding about the nature of man's relationship with wildernesses through an examination of the self.

Corpus

Jon Krakauer began writing about wigs, architecture, and fire walking for magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *Smithsonian*, and *Outside*. His ability, however, to capture the spirit of mountaineering set him apart and gave him the inspiration for three books: *Eiger Dreams*, *Into the Wild*, and *Into Thin Air*. Although Krakauer is the author of three other non-fiction narratives, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, *Where Men Win Glory*, and *Three Cups of Deceit*, his first three texts all center on mountaineering and wildernesses. After writing about the deaths of his companions on Mount Everest in *Into Thin Air*, Krakauer moves away from

nature and into other journalistic fare. Each of his works is engaging; however, the first three offer insight into why he stopped writing about mountains.

Eiger Dreams is a collection of magazine articles written by Jon Krakauer from 1981 to 1990. These articles reflect his early experiences with mountaineering culture and provide insight into the evolution of Krakauer's understanding of nature. Nevertheless, *Eiger Dreams* does not offer an environmental ethic, but rather showcases protagonists misunderstanding their natural environment.

Into the Wild is a non-fiction 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. It is also the story of Jon Krakauer's journey to gain more meaning from Chris's death by retracing his 2-year pilgrimage but with the appropriate tools and, some would say, attitude towards nature.

Into Thin Air chronicles Krakauer's 1996 ascent of Mount Everest under the guidance of Rob Hall. Krakauer attempts to understand why he is one of the few individuals to survive after the team becomes trapped on the mountain during a notoriously difficult storm.

Characters that believe nature is one of a series of problematic metaphors dominate these three texts. Krakauer is able, however, to move toward an environmental ethic by including himself as a protagonist and providing metacognitive reflection in his prologues and epilogues. *Eiger Dreams*, *Into the*

Wild, and *Into Thin Air* show that how we conceptualize the world around us, ultimately determines how we act toward it.

Methodology

Ecocriticism is not yet a word in the Oxford English Dictionary. *Eco-centric, eco-feminist*, and *eco-friendly* are, the last 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 nonhuman nature or the environment in literature" (Johnson 7). This study is mainly concerned with ecocriticism as a means of analyzing how metaphors can be unethical. According to Laurence Coupe, ecocriticism 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). Ultimately, there is an overarching demand to reach an "environmental ethic" or an understanding that humans are not separate from what we call nature nor are we superior to it, that nature has value intrinsically. Jonathan Bate states that the most important ecocritical questions to be asked are "How can we reconcile 'culture' and 'nature', two forces which are traditionally opposed to each other? What indeed do we mean by 'nature'? How and why do we dream of living in unity with 'her'?" (vi). Firstly, Bate touches on a primary concern, which is the problem of duality, of considering the world in terms of oppositions. Secondly, he illustrates the problem with language and the conceptualization of 'nature', which is a central study in ecocriticism. Lastly, Bate underscores the idea or desire to achieve oneness with

the seemingly separate nature, or an 'environmental ethic'. These primary questions guide the analysis of Jon Krakauer's mountaineering texts. It should be noted here that, although this paper is intended to provide literary insight, a higher purpose is at work; without an Earth, literature does not exist.

In order to demonstrate the origins of Krakauer's metaphors specifically, Romanticism, as a reaction to the Enlightenment period, will be briefly examined in comparison to current reactions to globalization. With regard to Romanticism's relationship to ecocriticism, it would seem that many ecocritical texts do begin with or acknowledge the Romantic period and its attempt to "critique…the Enlightenment's aspiration to master the natural world and set all things to work for the benefit of human commerce…[and] search for a symbiosis between mind and nature, the human and non-human" (Coupe xvii). 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, particularly in the West, since there has been an industrial force 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 a variety of social movements and political activism, as has the environmental crisis; however, as our understanding or way of seeing the world changes, so must our understanding of the literature and use of language that reflects that world. Romanticism as it occurred traditionally in the 18th century favoured nature "that was least touched by the hand of man, high mountains, deep forests and wind swept lakes"

(Cranston 15). Rousseau's Romantic legacy created a wealth of literature that expresses the value of nature, the imagination, heightened emotion, and simplicity of life, while expressing concern over, and even contempt for, industrialism, rationality, conformity, and tradition. In the 1950s, poets such as W.H. Auden and Dylan Thomas were "unmistakably romantic" (Cranston 151). In the 1960s, critics started noting that "romantic traits" were popping up in fiction leading some to believe that there "might be a new romantic movement underway" (Alsen 9). Charles Hoyt noted Romantic themes in the work of the Beat Generation, who represent the "Youth in Revolt"; Saul Bellow and J.P. Donleavy, whose "picaresque romps" are indicative of the "Glorification of Energy and Passion Unconfined"; Thomas Pynchon and Joseph Heller take up the theme of "Unleashed Imagination" while "Social Protest" is covered by James Baldwin and finally J.D. Salinger fills the "Cult of the Self" void (Alsen 10). All of these writers, though not in concert with one another under the umbrella of a Romantic revival, indicate that movements can echo one another and hint at the fact that we are perhaps in the throes of another romantic-esque wave, as indicated by our current overuse of the word "green". In 1973, Raymond Williams discussed the use of "green language" in Wordsworth and Coleridge (Coupe 50); in 1991 Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* examined the "green" aspects of Romantic thought; and finally, in 2000, *The Green Studies Reader* represented a movement to formally marry green studies with Romantic literature using the term "Green Romanticism" (Coupe 13) for, maybe, the first time. This last 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.

A close reading and analysis of Krakauer's texts comprise the bulk of the study. When we examine the word "nature" we are examining something that is signified by human culture, something that therefore has no "intrinsic merit, no values and no rights" (Coupe 2). Coupe further notes the aim of green studies by stating that it "does not challenge the notion that human beings make sense of the world through language, but rather the self-serving inference that nature is nothing more than a linguistic construct" (3). Insofar as this thesis is concerned, "nature" as a concept must be qualified. Although nature is often defined as "a force that is responsible for physical life (Cambridge Dictionary), or a "phenomenon of the physical world" (Oxford Dictionary), it will here refer specifically to the physical world that appears to be opposed to the world of humans. It is unfortunate to use a definition that seems to reinforce a binary between what appears to be man and what appears to be the "other/physical" world in a study regarding the negative implications of dualistic thinking; however, as earlier stated, metaphors are important markers of cognition and without the idea of the separation, the separation itself might not be discussed. With regard to Krakauer's texts, "nature" will serve to denote such things as mountains, weather systems, trees, rivers, animals, and plants; wildernesses as "opposed" to urban spaces.

Finally, many feminist writers explore the idea that nature is feminine and, as a result, is conquered, destroyed, and objectified. It is theorized that because

women are "dominated by biology", because of the dominance of the menstrual cycle, the primitivism of birth, and the animalism of breast-feeding, that nature is assumed to be female. Time, logic, and reason are privileged as male and superior to women and nature. Women are "reproductive", where as men are "productive" culture makers. Of course, not only are these ideas separate, they are hierarchical: one (the male concepts) is privileged over the other (the female concepts). Although Krakauer often uses female pronouns in his metaphors, male domination of women or the objectification of women as a colonial space will not be explored in this paper. Nature, in Krakauer's texts, is viewed as one part of the "human/non-human" binary regardless of gender representations. It is acknowledged that an eco-feminist reading could certainly be made of Krakauer's texts, however, it will not be made here.

Chapter Outline

If we consider that "our perception of nature is a human construct…[that can be] revealed through study of metaphors" (Adkins), Krakauer's wilderness texts become poignant sources of man's need for an environmental ethic and a shift in conceptualization. *Eiger Dreams*, *Into the Wild*, and *Into Thin Air* offer up three distinct metaphors: Nature as a Refuge, Nature as an Objective, and Nature as an Antagonist. Katherine Ericson identifies six metaphors (objective, enemy, animal, disease, spirit, goddess) used by Krakauer in *Into Thin Air*; however, she does not mention that Krakauer uses a distinct group of metaphors, as has been identified here, as a larger overarching journey towards a necessary ethic in all of his wilderness texts. Ericson does note the movement towards an ethic of

"humility, submission, and attention" (91), in *Into Thin Air*; however, she simply equates the metaphor of nature as a goddess with an environmental ethic, which is faulty. Krakauer's metaphors (Refuge, Objective, Antagonist) illustrate three main binaries at work in the western consciousness: Nature vs. Culture, Subject vs. Object, and I vs. Nature.

In Chapter 1, I discuss Romanticism's relationship to ecocriticism for the purposes of uncovering why nature seems to be in opposition to culture and why nature is preferred. Also, this chapter aims to demonstrate how the metaphor of nature as a refuge is established and to prove that it is not an ethical mode of understanding wildernesses. I discuss the idea that since nature and wilderness writing often reflect the conceptualizations of their time, relying on "outdated" representations of nature (metaphors that do not consider the fact that nature, currently, is in crisis) can prove fatal for both man and nature. As such, I posit that Jon Krakauer's texts might serve as cautionary tales not only about bringing maps and using proper gear when climbing mountains, but about the imperativeness of understanding and respecting nature as one part of a larger system to which we also belong, and writing about nature from just such a point of view.

In Chapter 2, I discuss how nature as a refuge creates the idea that nature is an objective, which, in turn, breeds desire and competition. Being that Krakauer uses competition as a defining marker of mountaineering, it is no surprise that many of his protagonists view nature as a trophy. This chapter works with, firstly, the idea that this metaphor is also unethical but that it also encourages risk-taking in places already dangerous. This has, as the chapter notes, contributed to many

deaths in each of Krakauer's texts; however, it seems to be par for the course, an attitude that is equally unethical as it contributes to the third metaphor.

Therefore, the image of nature as an antagonist is created by both previous metaphors and is discussed in Chapter 3. By imbuing nature as a refuge, these images make it into an object. Once Krakauer's characters attempt to act upon these false beliefs, they are met with what seems to be an antagonist (but is really just proof of the fallaciousness of their earlier thinking). When nature "resists" being conquered, Krakauer's characters wage war against what appears to be five distinct kinds of antagonists: a siren, an animal, an enemy, hell and a goddess, rather than admitting the truth (nature is not an object or refuge). This idea of war is precisely what contributes to the destruction of nature because, as shown in this chapter, when in a fight for one's life, one need not be concerned with the welfare of the enemy; in fact, it becomes one's intent to destroy it.

Chapter 4 is not about metaphors but rather the undoing of them. Because his mountaineering texts are in part memoirs, Krakauer is able to demonstrate how metaphors are created, how individuals use them to justify their actions, and how he was able to abolish them. Firstly, Krakauer functions as the writer and provides epilogues and prologues in which he deeply reflects upon the texts themselves and his experiences as both a writer and climber. Secondly, he is a principal character in *Eiger Dreams* and *Into Thin Air*, directly affecting the characters and plot. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, he acts as a chorus, interrupting his own stories to reflect upon the action, provide insight, and ask questions. It is his journalistic obsession for finding the truth that implores him to

examine his own foolish use of metaphors that move the books toward an ethic. It is also this metafictional examination of the self, Krakauer writing about Krakauer writing about Krakauer climbing, that gives him the authority to examine others and move past the dominant metaphors in his life. Without Krakauer's narrative and choral voices, and character, the texts do not attempt to reach an environmental ethic. In fact, *Eiger Dreams*, which has the least amount of and most shallow notes about his writing process does not, in my opinion, reach an environmental ethic at all.

Jon Krakauer's mountaineering texts note the tendency of climbers to think of mountain climbing as a metafiction, as a game. In this way, they are able to avoid the possibility that, when seeking the truth, there is nowhere else to go but inward. By including himself and his writing process in the narratives, Krakauer provides a first-person account of how western thinking must be tempered with practicality, logic, and egoless-ness; that, in fact, one might find what he was looking for awaits him at his point of departure.

Chapter 1: Nature as Refuge

The first metaphor to be examined is Nature as Refuge, as a place of healing. As such, individuals idealize natural places as a means of offering solution to their existential problems. As discussed earlier, this metaphor is complex because it is partially true. It seems that individuals are able to find solace and peace in nature; they are able to think in ways they are unable to 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. Nature's ability to restore man's spirit, however, comes from the binary between the urban and the natural. At times, literature (Romantic, pastoral, science fiction, biblical) reinforces this binary by offering visions of nature as holy, pure, virginal, clean, and simple. In the Bible, for example, spiritual revelation seems to come from atop the mountains: Christ gives a sermon on the mount (*King James Version*, Matthew. 5:11), Moses brings the tablets down from Mount Sinai (*King James Version,* Exodus. 34:29), Christ's temptation places him on a mountain (*King James Version,* Matthew. 4:8), and the Garden of Eden is typically idealized as a utopia. Although it is likely that Romantic thought will remain in the contemporary consciousness, and many of its poets contributed to an appreciation of natural spaces, the environmental movement seeks an ethic that Romantic thinkers throughout history have not always come to. In fact, many Romantic poets and artists reinforce a binary believed to exist between culture and nature. For example, one might look to Wordsworth's "The world is too much with us late and soon" which describes in 1806 that "we are out of tune" as a

result of our "Getting and spending" (Heaney 114). In reaction to industrialization, the Romantic Movement favoured Jean Jacques Rousseau's nature, one that is most 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. Currently, we might view our green movement as a similar kind of reaction to forces of industry and capitalism as the Romantic one. There is plenty of evidence to support that this is true. The term "Green Romanticism", for example, proves that our current reaction echoes an older one. The problem lies in the fact that globalization has obliterated much of the natural world that the Romantics and earlier periods had. As Cheryll 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). The binary then between nature and culture is made wider by the fact that the environmental crisis is, as Glotfelty furthers, "a by-product of culture" (xxi). Although, there is a large body that longs for a simple, yet hard life offered by a nature that 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 protagonists 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 to happiness. We find ourselves inundated with ATV and RV commercials, travel advertisements, and an entertainment industry all prompting us to take a break, escape, and get away as if urbanity is our problem. In fact, the

problem lies in our inability to understand urbanity's use as part of the path to lasting happiness, not a road block on it. Instead, Krakauer's "romantic types" look for narratives of a time when celebrity gossip didn't trump family values and people found solace in home life. Again, the problem is that these narratives are out of date. The purpose of examining the use of the word "nature" and its meaning is important to this argument because, as Stan Rowe offers, nature as a word "[has] no clear referent; [it is] diffuse and can mean a whole range of things depending on one's cultural background and education…as environmental deterioration encourages a reevaluation of our relationship to the world, old words and phrases obstruct the way forward" (139). Secondly, 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 fountain of youth, which is unethical. Also, because nature is not as plentiful in an age of globalization, individuals in Krakauer's texts (himself included) are forced to seek remote wildernesses instead of city parks and back yards, which speaks to the extent of our spiritual depravity. 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, suggests Amy Clary (172), Krakauer's men apply them to current wilderness places, which creates 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* 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. In the same way that Marilyn Gaull describes that no one was able to escape the Industrial Revolution (4), no one is currently untouched by globalization. Currently, globalization and global warming have created new concepts of nature as rare, endangered, and volatile. 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*, Jack London and Henry David Thoreau provide the literary maps that brought him to Alaska; for Jon Krakauer himself (acting as the protagonist in *Into Thin Air*), John Menlove Edwards, Kerouac, Muir, Thoreau, Thomas Hornbein and Eric Shipton served as guides; for some of Rob Hall's clients, Krakauer excluded, his own Romantically inclined advertisements were enough to lure less-than-capable individuals to attempt to climb the world's highest mountain.

Into the Wild

Influential Romantic writers have, at times, represented nature as having the ability to "restore the spirit of man" (Lacey 3). Chris McCandless finds this suggestion in the works of Henry David Thoreau and Jack London, the latter whom he claims in one of his now famous graffitos is "KING", and uses it as a catalyst to burn his money, abandon his parents, and hitchhike into Alaska. Krakauer's most popular and highly influential book, *Into the Wild*, charts this young man's journey. It ought to be noted here that McCandless perhaps misunderstood, or ignored, the complexities of London's writing. Indeed, London does offer a vision of the wilderness that many would find appealing, but he also writes from a cautionary perspective regarding, as in "From Dawson to the Sea," how to get *out* of the wilderness (Raskin 199).

McCandless was said to have been moved to visit Alaska by Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, a title that echoes the siren song that drew many to Mount Everest in *Into Thin Air*. 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 that of 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 where 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 foolish. Perhaps it might be suggested that in a time where globalization has minimized the amount of wilderness places that we learn alternative ways to find our identities within the urban spaces that surround us by looking inward for healing rather than outward. 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 Alaska differs immensely from that of 19th century writers describing the discovery of new lands in the West. These latter texts, Adkins notes, use metaphors of hell and chaos to highlight "the danger (physical and spiritual) of wilderness and reinforce the need to conquer and domesticate it" (3). Amy Clary suggests that it is McCandless' "internalization [of the] representations of wilderness that abound in American letters and popular culture…[that allow him to] treat rural Alaska as a mythical place" (169). Furthermore, she adds, "[if] the materiality of wilderness is not acknowledged or taken seriously, it is all too easy to let wild landscapes be developed, domesticated, and degraded" (184). Moreover, McCandless misunderstood the complexities of London's writing, instead choosing only the

ideas that served his journey. Raskin supports this notion by examining Chris's "inspiration" and concludes that he "read too little, too much, not deeply enough…If he had genuinely grappled with London, the author he called 'King,' he might have walked out of the wilderness as he had walked into it, or perhaps never left home in the first place" (202). While in Alaska, he continues to take guidance from literature rather than nature. After shooting a moose and failing to preserve the meat, resulting in excessive waste, Chris turns to Walden's "Higher Laws" and writes "THE MOOSE" next to a passage describing that men who attempt to "preserve [their] higher or poetic faculties…[have] been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food…" (167). Realistically, had Chris truly been an adherent of Thoreau's, and was familiar with this passage's message, he may have reconsidered his trip to Alaska based on the inevitability of his killing and eating animals to survive. In fact, it seems that Chris wanted to emulate Thoreau (especially as described by Emerson in the introduction to *Walden and Other Writings*); however, Thoreau had "a strong common sense" (Atkinson xvii) that seemed to elude McCandless at times.

Chris McCandless' trip to Alaska "was to be an odyssey in the fullest sense of the word, an epic journey that would change everything" (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 texts, 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; Krakauer thought his problems with his father would be overcome if he climbed the Devil's Thumb. The problem with the metaphor of wilderness as spiritual refuge is that it evokes action. 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). *Into the Wild* is similarly misread and McCandless' bus (he found, and died in, an abandoned bus along the Stampede Trail) has now become "a pilgrimage site for some who, after reading the book, feel compelled to follow in his footsteps" (Clary 169). Ironically, Clary notes, this has only brought increased traffic and garbage to the area.

It seemed that Chris was trying to do two things: "Kill the false being within and conclude the spiritual revolution" (163) and achieve some resolution regarding his parents' seemingly artificial lives. Chris McCandless' Romantic ideals began, perhaps, in response to the globalized contemporary world that his

parents subscribed to. He came from a well-to-do nuclear family from Virginia. His father, Walt McCandless, "is an eminent aerospace engineer who designed advanced radar systems for the space shuttle and other high profile projects while in the employ of NASA" (19); and his mother, Billie McCandless, was a businesswoman who helped her husband launch his own "prosperous consulting firm" (20). His parents

> …didn't flaunt their modest wealth but they bought nice clothes, some jewelry for Billie, a Cadillac. Eventually, they purchased the townhouse on the bay and the sailboat. They took the kids to Europe, skiing in Breckenridge, on a Caribbean cruise. And Chris…was embarrassed by all that…[Chris] the teenaged Tolstoyan, believed that wealth was shameful, corrupting, inherently evil… (115)

As a young man, Chris made a startling discovery while on a summer road trip to see some old family friends: "Long after falling in love with Billie, long after she gave birth to Chris, Walt continued his relationship with [his first wife] Marcia in secret, dividing his time between two households, two families…Two years after Chris was born, Walt fathered another son…with Marcia" (121). Knowing that he, his sister and mother, represented the "other family" was only compounded by the fact that his idea of the perfect nuclear family had been betrayed. Chris, here, is against his father's duality, and this puts Chris in a position to become aligned with different ways of thinking and being. He revealed at one point to his sister Carine that Walt and Billie's deception "made his 'entire childhood seem like a fiction'" (122). Chris began to resent the world his parents, and father in

particular, represented, and "his sense of outrage over injustice in the world at large grew" (123). The romantic ideals that Chris embraced following the discovery of his father's secret life simply did not allow for Walt's immoral behaviour.

McCandless, in a letter to Carine before his Alaskan odyssey, stated that he planned to "*completely knock [our parents] out of my life. I'm going to divorce them as parents once and for all and never speak to those idiots as long as I live*" (64). The deep resentment McCandless held towards his parents was apparent to almost everyone who met him, and it was "The prevailing Alaska wisdom…that McCandless was simply one more dreamy half-cocked greenhorn who went into the country expecting to find answers to all his problems…" (72). During the Romantic period it was suggested that "only escape from the sophisticated modern world…was to villages and country places which had not been corrupted by the industries, luxuries and cultural institutions of cities" (Cranston 17); however, this idea still rings true today. Clary notes that wildernesses have "long been associated with personal freedom, adventure, and escape (169), which explains why McCandless was so enamoured of London's tales of "wilderness and savagery [which]…emerged in response to increasing industrialization and urbanization" (180). 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). 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).

Although Alaska seems to be wilderness, Dana Phillips is quick to remind, "An awareness of the long-term human manipulation of the environment ought to be fundamental to ecology" (81). Phillips includes a reminder that breaking soil for ten thousand years, hunting game for a million years, and setting fires for a hundred thousand years has robbed even remote places of true wilderness status (81). 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). As a result of this, Henssen writes, "our forays into the desert, the woods, or the mountains require us to inject peril in order to recapture the danger inherent in desolation" (196). 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 (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 is complex because of its popularity. It seems to support a binary 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). Later, when Chris is unable to cross the river and returns to the bus, he underlines passages in *Doctor Zhivago* (having run out of paper) that more than imply that nature is in fact oppositional to culture and really is a refuge:

Oh, how one wishes sometimes to escape from the meaningless dullness of human eloquence, from all those sublime phrases, to take refuge in nature… (Passage underlined by McCandless) (189).

McCandless "starred and bracketed the paragraph and circled "refuge in nature" in black ink" (189). Krakauer reveals that Chris writes "HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED" in the margin of the book. He imagines that Chris's time in the wild has provided him with the healing he so desperately sought when he writes:

> It is tempting to regard this latter notation as further evidence that McCandless's long, lonely sabbatical had changed him in some significant way. It can be interpreted to mean that he was ready, perhaps, to shed a little of the armor he wore around his heart, that upon returning to

> civilization, he intended…[to] stop running so hard from intimacy, and become a member of the human community (189).

Although this part of *Into the Wild* does reinforce nature/culture binaries and posits 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". It seems that from his lonely vantage point in the wilderness, he looks to society now as a means of reconnecting which helps blur the binary line between the two. However, this understanding is subtle and may be overlooked by those looking to following in McCandless's footsteps.

Into Thin Air

Krakauer provides an analogy from John Menlove Edwards as an early epigraph, which serves to underscore *Into Thin Air*'s use of the refuge metaphor. Menlove describes the planet Neptune, which contains a mountain and a group of unintelligent inhabitants who "each lived tied up in their own string" and "had got the habit [of] …chasing the clouds of their own glory up and down all the steepest faces in the district" (31). The interesting point in Edwards' story is that "they all came back uplifted" (31). The protagonists of *Into Thin Air* have more varied reasons for being drawn to Mount Everest than McCandless' singular Alaskan motivations, but they all share something in common: they are drawn. Jon Krakauer takes part in a guided expedition led by Rob Hall, who appears to exploit the Romantic idea of transcendence (the metaphor) for a profit: "convinced that an untapped market of dreamers existed with ample cash but insufficient experience to climb the world's great mountains on their own, Hall

and [Gary] Ball launched an enterprise they christened Adventure Consultants" (35). In fact, Hall used the word "dreams" four times in his brochure for the enterprise, playing on the romantic ideals of potential clients. He offers, also, to put them in touch with what Kant would describe as the sublime but Hall describes as "something special beyond the power of words to describe" (37). Groups that fall prey to the idea that nature is a refuge include the South African team who hope that summiting Everest would be a symbol of a new post-apartheid Africa (99), and Maurice Wilson, "an idealistic, melancholic Englishman", recognizing a much-needed opportunity for the publicity he was seeking in order to share his foolish beliefs about how to cure the "myriad ills of human kind" (93). Each group thought that by climbing Everest, their problems would be solved, which also creates the objective metaphor. Scott Fischer's expedition (in friendly competition with Rob Hall's) would garner him the recognition he thought he deserved; Rob Hall was looking for fiscal profit; Sandy Hall-Pitman wanted fame; Krakauer thought he'd be relieved of his boyhood desires once and for all. However, when nature is perceived as a genie, one enters into it blind. Krakauer is apt to note that news of the first ascent of Everest on May 29, 1953 by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Sherpa, coincided with Coronation Day and carried with it "a symbolic hope" that Britain had begun a new age (*Air* 20). The conquest of a previously unattained point in their old Empire is representative of how connected fear might be with powerlessness; thus, accentuating the importance of the first ascent of Everest by British climbers (a Eurocentric idea). There are even some who were able to recognize the dangers

of climbing Mount Everest, but were still unable to resist the possibilities. The legend of Mount Everest had a "magnetic" pull on men much like that of a siren: "Everest has always been a magnet for kooks, publicity seekers, hopeless romantics, and others with a shaky hold on reality" (92). Although many voices of reason tried to dissuade the likes of Krakauer and others, Denman and his Sherpa Tenzing "[were] powerless to resist the pull of Everest" (92) regardless of the fact that Tenzing recognized the ridiculousness of Denman's plans. Tenzing states, "Any man in his right mind would have said no. But I couldn't say no. For in my heart I needed to go, and the pull of Everest was stronger for me than any force on earth" (93). The Khumbu region of Nepal, which is regarded by western visitors as an "earthly paradise, a real-life Shangri-La" (47), holds a surprisingly incredible allure.

Nature, which society has now encroached upon substantially, hardly represents the freedom it did to the likes of Thoreau; for Krakauer's men, only extreme nature will satisfy the urge to escape. However, as seen in *Into Thin Air*, globalization has made even the most remote places, such as Everest, a commercial attraction, thus complicating the risks that Krakauer's men are already taking by being there in the first place. As more of nature's retreats are paved over, more people are forced to seek higher, farther, more difficult refuges from the institutions that essentially enable them to do the seeking. Krakauer points out this irony when he notes that Rob Hall has to take clients with money up the mountain because he couldn't make a living being a mountaineer. The very thing that compounds his situation is the same thing he solicited to the mountain;

inexperienced climbers with disposable income. Both the inexperienced climbers and the guide, however, believe that they have something to gain by climbing mountains, which creates a desire for and subsequent objectification of mountains.

Chapter 2: Nature as Objective

Amy Clary writes: "in order for wild land to be protected by legislation, it must be understood as a physical entity, and not simply a symbol or metaphor (180). While nature writers also influence Krakauer, he allows himself to examine these influences and takes responsibility for his actions (and thereby his thoughts regarding nature). Our reality, with regard to Krakauer's mountaineering texts, is that individuals are continually risking, and losing, their lives because of inherently naïve or false ideas about our relationship with the environment. Therefore, it is imperative that one does not promote attitudes that are incongruent with the current reality with regard to mountains and wilderness places because there are instances of individuals, inspired by one text or another, who attempt to recreate these experiences and end up dead.

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 world of mountaineering is rife with the prevailing attitude that man is not connected to nature, rather that nature, usually a mountain's peak, is the object of man's desire. With regard to separateness, Krakauer's heroes do "connect" with nature physically by traversing its peaks and walking among trees, but missing is a fundamental understanding that man and nature cannot be separated, 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. As Stan Rowe offers that introducing new language can help "convey the ecological truth that people are not wholes but inseparable parts of Nature", he also considers the difficulty in overcoming the connotations of the word 'nature', which has "frequently been applied to the other-than-us, the wild, rough, crude, its meaning steeped in apathy, suspicion, even hatred" (140). We don't like to think of ourselves as animals or "wild, rough, crude" and therefore we divorce ourselves from nature under this definition. Henning writes, "If…we see ourselves as separate from the world it is easy to dismiss our actions as irrelevant or unlikely to make any difference" (38). With this kind of thinking, Krakauer's characters often do not act for nature or for their fellow men, but for themselves.

Eiger Dreams

Mountaineering is a sport dominated by risk, ambition, and loss, all of which stem from conceptualizing nature as an object. Man, the subject then, is thus pitted against man, and, in remote and dangerous places, this easily leads to disaster. The title of Krakauer's collection of short non-fiction is also the title of the first article: "Eiger Dreams", a title that suggests the Eiger is an objective that it is something dreamed about and sought after. This metaphor, in Krakauer's later texts, stems from a misunderstanding that a communion with or submission of nature will provide one with a solution, usually to some deep-seeded existential problem that could otherwise be solved with an examination of one's self.

Krakauer uses the article "A Mountain Higher Than Everest?" in *Eiger Dreams* as the basis of Chapter Two in his book *Into Thin Air*. The chapter, however, being modified has significantly less detail than the article and, since the article was written first, it will be studied as it is presented in *Eiger Dreams*. Namely the article discusses the discovery and subsequent questioning of Mount Everest as the highest peak on Earth. The story of the discovery of Mount Everest as the world's highest mountain is not without its own metaphors. Firstly, the blatant ignorance of the Tibetan name for the mountain in place of one that honours British Surveyor General, Sir George Everest, evokes a colonial history and supports the metaphor of nature as object to be conquered. "Chomolungma", as the Sherpa people call it, means "Goddess Mother of the Land". This more traditional name signifies nature as a positive female authority demanding respect and devotion. It is fitting, then, that the British group in 1852 decided to usurp the title in favour of one giving power and honour to a man. Following the confirmation of Mount Everest as the highest point on Earth, Krakauer writes, "it wasn't long before men decided that Everest had to be climbed" (117). In fact, it was declared a "matter of universal human endeavor, a cause from which there is no withdrawal, whatever losses it may demand" (117). Objectifying the mountain as a "matter of universal human endeavor" means that conquering this piece of land not only signifies its separateness from man, but also proves that man has had an early desire to be more powerful than and dominant over natural entities. The first men to stand atop Mount Everest were hailed as heroes; Tenzing Norgay became famous in India, Nepal, and Tibet, while Edmund Hillary was knighted.

Since their submission of the mountain, Krakauer writes, "more than two hundred men and women have struggled to the top…and thousands of others have failed, all of which has involved the expenditure of untold millions of dollars, amputations of dozens of frostbitten toes, and the loss, at last count, of more than a hundred human lives. All those who made these sacrifices were firm in the belief that in doing so they were pursuing the biggest trophy in mountaineering" (119). The mountain as trophy causes individuals to pursue their desire regardless of preparedness, conditions, or risk; Krakauer's epilogue proves this because he discusses that they were using metaphors and that it caused their deaths. As such, this metaphor creates the opportunity for death and loss in addition to cementing the existential wedge between humans and nature.

In "The Burgess Boys" and "A Bad Summer on K2" Krakauer discusses a catastrophic storm that took place on K2 in 1986. Krakauer notes that the majority of the climbers camped on the Baltoro Glacier in north east Pakistan that summer "had their sights set on a single summit: K2" (149). Climbers had grown reckless, it was being suggested, and they "now commonly begin their ascents with the understanding that if things go wrong, the bond between rope mates – a bond that was until recently sacrosanct – may be discarded in favor of a policy of every man for himself" (150). This self-centeredness is only natural given the understanding that we are separate from nature; we must also then be separate from one another. This attitude, in dangerous and remote areas of the world, is, however, deadly. The climbers on K2 in 1986 are described as using "siege tactics" in a "game that did not lack for high stakes and long odds" to achieve "the most coveted prize on

K2…[the] South Pillar" (150). A game suggests unreality, which is an ignorant attitude to carry along on a climb of the world's highest mountains. Not only does it reinforce the objective metaphor, but promotes competition rather than cooperation. Not surprisingly, during this summer, the "carnage" meant one out of five climbers died (161). As the summer progressed "and the mountain prevailed" there were climbers who used additional climbing ropes and safety measures, and others who packed it altogether, but "for many, the lure of the summit proved stronger" than the rising death toll (153). Krakauer is quick to point out that, for many, climbing Everest or K2 is a dream that consumes people for years and when the summit is within reach, climbers "might be inclined to take a few more chances than [they] normally would" (156). The common thread among all of the deaths on K2 in the summer of 1986 was that "'a lot of people…had a lot to gain by climbing [it]'" (162). However, it is the climber that imbues the mountain with glory or refuge, although the sport certainly boasts its heroes to new levels of fame and small fortune. The climber deems the mountain as a gainful entity, and by seeing the mountain as such, the climb is perhaps doomed from the start, for even if he reaches the top, he fails to understand the meaning behind his actions. Perhaps the climber will not die, but he or she may not find the glory or happiness he or she is looking for because it does not exist in misplaced objects.

Krakauer begins "Chamonix" with an oversexed image of Mont Blanc as a woman: "Each night the snow line, like the hem of a slip, pushes farther down [its] ample granite hips" (84). Similarly, he writes in *Into the Wild* that a photograph of the Devils Thumb in Alaska "held an almost pornographic

fascination for me" (*Wild* 135). In these last two references, nature personified as a woman becomes an object of desire as such. Here the carnal objective motivates Krakauer to pursue the mountain almost twenty years later.

Into the Wild

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. Referring back to the refuge metaphor, McCandless's angst toward his father must have been quite deep for him to seek Alaska in this way. 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.

Jan Burres, Chris's vagabond friend, reveals that Chris was not the only one to think of Alaska as an object: "'I thought he'd be fine in the end…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'd figured all of that

out on his own, I felt sure he'd figure out Alaska, too'" (46). Alaska, however, is not a place to be "figured out" or negotiated with; it certainly isn't comparable to "scoring" a place to sleep at a mission. 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* article, this added up to a "*willful ignorance [that] amounts to disrespect for the land*" (72). Although the book *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' 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" (165-6). Chris' intentions, he claimed in his interactions and letters to others, was to completely remove himself 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" (22). This also cements the idea that city and country are different, city being less desirable, yet he plans to

urbanize the area surrounding the bus. Here, however, he appears to be making plans to civilize the Alaskan wild he claimed to love for being wild. By adding trails, mapping the area, and fashioning bathing facilities, McCandless' 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. Most nature lovers, even basic environmentalists, understand that leaving a "footprint" following interaction with the natural world is undesirable. McCandless in this instance intended to leave more than a footprint. McCandless, Krakauer notes, is often compared to a length of kooks and oddballs attempting to assert themselves in the wild, including Sir John Franklin "not simply because both men starved but also because both were perceived to have lacked a requisite humility; both were thought to have possessed insufficient respect for the land… (181-82).

Driven by the basic desire to achieve his goal of getting to Alaska, McCandless didn't seem to have much of a post-arrival plan, "By design McCandless came into the country with insufficient provisions, and he lacked certain pieces of equipment deemed essential by many Alaskans: a large-caliber rifle, map and compass, an ax. This has been regarded as evidence not just of stupidity but of the greater sin of arrogance" (180). Assuming one can live off the land simply by will and desire alone demonstrates the idea that nature is like a grocery store, that it will simply be stocked with everything you need when you arrive in it. This harkens back to the refuge metaphor, but also shows that once an individual reaches the objective, he must be prepared to face the reality that nature is not an object or refuge, but a real place.

Into Thin Air

Into Thin Air presents perhaps most clearly that Krakauer's subjects see mountains as objects, or trophies. It is interesting to note, however, that the idea of being separate from nature has larger consequences: the idea that we are separate from one another. "Mountaineering tends to draw men and women not easily deflected from their goals…Unfortunately the sort of individual who is programmed to ignore personal distress and keep pushing for the top is frequently programmed to disregard signs of grave and imminent danger as well" (185). Here, Krakauer implicates the individual as part of the problem; later, as nature becomes hell, there is a second instance of men forgoing their bond with one another. Anatoli Boukreev exemplifies the dangers of the ego in such extreme places, although instructed to "bring up the rear, stay close to the group, and keep an eye on everyone…[he] slept late, took a shower, and departed Base Camp some five hours behind the last of the climbers" (155). Although, and perhaps because, Boukreev was considered one of the top climbers in the world, "he just wasn't a team player" (155).

The metaphor of nature as objective reinforces the role of ego in climbing and may also be to blame for the team's inability to recognize Scott Fischer's predicament. Already fatigued from making a push for the summit, Scott disguised the fact that he was suffering from another bout with a "gastrointestinal parasite, *Entamoeba histoltica*…which [made him] break into these intense sweating spells and get the shakes" (211). Instead, Scott "'was acting like Mr.

Gung Ho, getting everyone psyched up like a football coach before the big game" (210). After suspecting a problem, Beidleman rethinks asking about Scott's welfare "'but he was Scott, so I wasn't particularly worried'" (212). Because Scott had built up his reputation as a hard-nosed climber, his comrades wondered about his well-being, but they assured themselves that he was as tough as he'd always led on to be. Later, Krakauer notes that the objective metaphor may have pushed Fischer to take needless risks because he was in competition with Rob Hall for clients and summit ascents and perhaps because, as Beidleman remembers, "it was supposed to be Scott's job to turn clients around [if they hadn't reached the summit by two p.m.]. I didn't feel comfortable telling clients who'd paid sixty-five thousand dollars that they had to go down. So Scott agreed that it would be his responsibility. But for whatever reason, it didn't happen" (208). Similarly, Rob Hall could have refused to give Doug Hansen the top (as though it were his to dole out) a second time, but this would have gone against his desire for the objective. Krakauer explores Hall's decision not to turn Hansen around well after the established turn-around time: "It doesn't seem far-fetched to speculate that because Hall had talked Hansen into coming back to Everest, it would have been especially hard for him to deny Hansen the summit a second time" (237). In both of these instances, the objective metaphor causes needless risk-taking, which, as Krakauer explores in his book, ultimately results in both guides' deaths.

Katherine Ericson notes Scott Hall's phrasing, "We've got the big E figured out" and Doug Hansen's claim that "It's in the bag!" both of which reinforce the idea

that Mount Everest is not only an object, but an attainable one. Hierarchy is very important in this metaphor; without it, man does not achieve fame or an ego boost. Krakauer's heroes each demonstrate the notion that nature is not only separate from man, but below man and, as such, must be held down or conquered as a means of reinforcing man's supremacy over nature.[1] Krakauer includes the following in an epigraph to chapter eighteen: "Everest was the embodiment of the physical forces of the world. Against it he had to pit the spirit of man" (251). In ecocriticism, this attitude towards domination is at the heart of the problem and serves to illustrate that our actions are a direct result of our erroneous belief that we are supreme. The British colonial attitude is pervasive even in the naming of Everest; despite "native appellations (as well as official policy encouraging the retention of local or ancient names)" (16), Sir Andrew Waugh named the mountain Everest. This is also a demonstration that ego has been associated with Everest from the beginning. Krakauer explains that when he himself began to climb, "Achieving the summit of a mountain was tangible, immutable, concrete. The incumbent hazards lent the activity a seriousness of purpose that was sorely missing from the rest of my life" (*Air* 23). Here the idea that the summit of the highest peak on earth is tangible lends itself to the idea that Krakauer believes he is above nature, but not by much and needs to reassert his supremacy. Krakauer admits that "the culture of ascent [is] characterized by intense competition and undiluted machismo" (23). This machismo, on Everest, ultimately proves fatal and comes from the idea that nature is something to be attained by man, and it's a

[1] This idea is also present in the Bible. For example, Genesis 9:2 states that animals, the lesser form, shall fear man, in Genesis 3:23 Adam is given the task of "till[ing] the ground".

race to see who can “bag the top” first or add another notch to his belt by ascending in a particular style or on a lesser-known route.

Ironically, Everest has most certainly become a true commodity; the government of Nepal, however, began with good intentions: “[they] recognized that the throngs flocking to Everest created serious problems in terms of safety, aesthetics, and impact to the environment” (25). As a solution, Nepal raised the fee for climbing permits from $2,300 for a team of any size, to $10,000 for a team of nine; additional climbers were charged $1,200. A year later, Nepal, not seeing a reduction in climbers, raised the fee to $50,000 for a team of five and charged an additional $10,000 for each addition climber above that. China, however, “charged only $15,000 to allow a team of any size to climb the mountain from Tibet and placed no limits on the number of expeditions each season. The flood of Everesters therefore shifted from Nepal to Tibet, leaving hundreds of Sherpas out of work” (25). Within three years, Nepal again raised its fee to $70,000 per team and charged an additional $10,000 for additional climbers beyond a team of five. Krakauer notes that it is this very subject that got him onto the mountain in first place: he was there to report on the commercialization of Mount Everest; however, as a result of this commercialization or objectification of nature, he ended up writing a book about what is now known as the 1996 Mount Everest disaster.

Krakauer also notes that in the conquest of Everest, the mountain began to resemble a micro-society, as toll routes are set up and fees charged for safe passage (80). Krakauer uses a set of descriptors that solidifies this as one of the

central conflicts in the book when he recalls Hall stating that "the route's a bloody freeway this season" and by stating that the seracs are "buildings" (83). Although Hall previously believed that the American group who'd set up the toll route were "'violating the spirit of the hills'" (80), he eventually came to see the logic of being compensated for developing safe, standardized pathways and began putting in the route and collecting the fees himself. Hall's actions indicate that colonial ideologies are still at work in the idea that nature is an object and remind us of McCandless's instinct to urbanize the bus area.

Krakauer was sent to Mount Everest, which had become "…the most coveted object in the realm of terrestrial exploration" (16), under the guidance of Rob Hall who, recognizing the risks of climbing professionally, that one had to "keep upping the ante. The next climb had to be harder and more spectacular than the last" (35), turned to guiding instead and became a part of the ever-growing commercialization of Mount Everest. He notes that "There's a limitless supply of clients out there if you offer them a good product" (35), that "product" being the top of Everest.

Initially, Krakauer declined to take the assignment given his disdain for what he considered to be a "yak route". Everest, in recent years, had become more accessible and therefore less worthy of ascension in his mind. As far as objects go, it had become common because of Dick Bass types (a rich Texan with little climbing experience) (23) who, in the minds of elite climbers, contributed to (or initiated) the commercialization of the peak. Folks like Sandy Pittman, "a millionaire socialite-cum-climber" (119) who came to Everest with more

technological devices and fashion magazines than climbing knowledge, jeopardized ascents and may be considered responsible for the deaths of otherwise excellent climbers. While the elitism might be idealistic, it seems there is truth in it. Perhaps, inexperienced climbers shouldn't be on Everest, a point explored by *Into Thin Air* holistically; however, without the incoming funds from these aspiring alpinists, people like Rob Hall wouldn't be "bagging the top" nearly as often nor paying the bills. However, Krakauer describes that, "there were many, many fine reasons not to go, but attempting to climb Everest is an intrinsically irrational act – a triumph of desire over sensibility" (XVII). So Krakauer made his way to Everest.

Beck Weathers confirms the newly found ease of ascending the world's highest peak: "Assuming you're reasonably fit, and have some disposable income, …the biggest obstacle is probably taking time off from your job and leaving your family for two months" (24). Although presented as somewhat of a Romantic, Hall was equally interested in profitability; he agreed to take Krakauer on as a client for a lowered fee but "the balance would be bartered for expensive ad space in [Outside] magazine, which targeted an upscale, adventurous, physically active audience – the core of his client base" (71). Further to the commercialization of Everest is the inclusion of Sandy Pittman who "epitomized all that was reprehensible about Dick Bass's popularization of the Seven Summits and the ensuing debasement of the world's highest mountain" (124) because she brought with her a myriad of technology and the pleasure-seeking accoutrement of high society: her own Internet, phone, and fax capabilities (122); devices that had to be

carried up the mountain by a Sherpa who later died due, in part, to exhaustion. While some climb Everest to conquer it, some seek the effects that the conquering holds: "minor celebrity, career advancement, ego massage, ordinary bragging rights, filthy lucre" (140). After pretending to accept the assignment purely as a reporter, Krakauer concedes that his desire to climb the mountain was at the heart of his decision to leave his wife for two months. She, on the other hand, does not hear the call: "I guess I knew on some level that you might not be coming back, and it seemed like such a waste. It seemed so fucking stupid and pointless" (87). Indeed, she had married Krakauer partially because he had, at the time, recently decided to "quit climbing and get serious about life, but [he'd] failed to anticipate the grip climbing had on [his] soul" (87). Doug Hansen, Krakauer's closest friend on the team, had been to Everest once with Hall but had been forced to turn around only 330 feet below the summit due to the late hour and poor snow conditions. Doug admitted to Krakauer, "there hasn't been a day since that I haven't thought about it" (72). Doug was hoping to "get Everest out of [his] system" so that he could move forward with his relationship with his girlfriend Karen Marie (73).

Mount Everest as an object of desire appears to force men to take unnecessary risks and ignore important warning signs. Even the Sherpa culture, Krakauer notes, is founded on this kind of machismo "that makes many men extremely reluctant to acknowledge physical infirmities…Those who do become sick and openly acknowledge it, moreover, will often be blacklisted from future employment on expeditions" (113). It is this mentality that accounts for

Ngawang's decision to ignore Scott's instructions to come down the mountain and instead ascend, and to continually deny that he had become inflicted with a case of HAPE (High Altitude Pulmonary Edema), which inevitably took his life.

Ngawang's actions demonstrate that these men are playing at this endeavor as though it were a game; by ignoring the reality that Mount Everest is a dangerous place and not a metaphor, they are able to continue playing rather than turning around and safely returning back to their lives. This reiterates Krakauer's epigraph to the book: "Men play at tragedy because they do not believe in the reality of the tragedy that is actually being staged in the civilised world". The objective metaphor posits that men then are the subjects and, as seen in the next metaphor, it also turns those subjects against the object (should it resist submission) first, and one another shortly after.

Chapter 3: Nature as Antagonist

The metaphor of separateness is not new. It is standard that students in the western tradition learn that one of the primary conflicts in literature (and ergo in life) is "man versus nature". This third metaphor materializes only after Krakauer and his subjects enter into wilderness places, such as Alaska and Mount Everest, and discover that nature is not the way they thought it would be; however, this is a due to their misconceptions of the true "nature" of nature. As Roderick Nash states "Rivers [have] a right to be (or function as) rivers, mountains to be mountains, wolves to be wolves…" (147). However, 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 of our metaphors, we fight against nature that does not submit to our will. An early and primary example of environmentalism, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* discusses "our war against insects…[and] weeds" by use of deadly chemicals (34). Nature as an antagonist in Krakauer's world takes four forms: Nature as a siren, nature as an animal or monster, nature as an enemy, and nature as hell. In "Tops and Tales: Mountain Anecdote and Mountain Metaphor", W.H. New discusses the idea that wildernesses, mountains in particular, "divide" the land, which makes them natural antagonists of man's conquest (113). Interestingly, however, the antagonist metaphor presents a shift in the hierarchy of the binary. Here nature is a worthy antagonist, almost equal in that it is often difficult to defeat (and in some cases is not 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, and, 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 for the self-alone. 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).

Krakauer's diction when describing mountains is particularly revealing. Using the siren metaphor, he describes the "blue tongues" of frozen waterfalls and glaciers, the "lips" under which he seeks shelter, "faces" which resist climbers, and a "bosom" upon which to dance in victory. The siren lures her victims into a trap and then holds them hostage. At other times, the mountain is a biting, ripping animal with "fins", "spines", steep "flanks", large "fir limbs", "teeth" and "frost feathers". Nature the enemy has arms, shoulders, feet, ears, and intention. The enemy kicks, mocks, creeps, and defeats. Nature as hell (no personification here) is based on man's fear of death, and as such causes Krakauer's men to turn against one another in order to survive. In this way, hell is similar to nature as an object in that it breeds antagonism among the protagonists.

Eiger Dreams

In "Eiger Dreams", Krakauer begins by recalling a scene from the Clint Eastwood film *The Eiger Sanction*, in which Eastwood, an assassin, receives information

about his next target. Eastwood learns that the target intends to climb the Eiger mountain; with this information Eastwood concludes his work is already done: "I tried to climb it twice, it tried to kill me twice…" (1). This article launches the book's overarching metaphor: nature is out to get us. Krakauer writes that the Eiger has "'defeated hundreds and killed fourty-four…Those who fell were found – sometimes years later – desiccated and dismembered. The body of one Italian mountaineer hung from its rope, unreachable but visible to the curious below, for three years, alternately sealed into the ice sheath of the wall and swaying in the winds of summer'" (1-2). This last image reminds us of a Hollywood adventure film in which the remains of pirates are left displayed on the gallows to serve as a warning to other pirates. In short, the Eiger has not only killed those who have tried to climb it, but has done so with malevolence. Nature as a vengeful force invites only more malice and increases the desire to defeat the antagonist. Krakauer further describes the Eiger's legend: "Even when the skies over the rest of Europe are cloudless, violent storms brew over the Eiger, like those dark clouds that hover eternally above Transylvanian castles in vampire movies" (2). This article not only reinforces a mythology that the Eiger is evil, but it seems to cement within the public a desire to overcome it in the same manner as heroes always beat the bad guys; in this analogy, an evil vampire. Staff Sergeant Carlos J. Ragone was denied a leave from his service when his superiors learned he intended to climb the Eiger. Ragone goes anyway, unable to resist the mountain's lure. He reveals to Krakauer, also attempting the mountain that October, that the excursion may "'cost [him his] stripes'" but that summiting the "'mother'" might

earn him a promotion (2). The prevailing attitude here is that the mountain is a sufficient antagonist worth defeating, but a deadly enough force to warrant fear and retreat. If nature is conceived of in this manner, then the environmental crisis currently affecting the Earth is going to be a costly one.

"Valdez Ice", the third article in Krakauer's *Eiger Dreams,* contributes to the antagonistic metaphor whole-heartedly. Although infamous for the Exxon Valdez oil spill, Valdez, Alaska is home to world-class ice climbing. Here, Krakauer not only presents the icefall as a malignant force, but personifies it as a blood-thirsty animal: "throughout the winter months frigid temperatures and the damp marine air conspire to glaze the downtown streets with a treacherous armor of black ice. But the most impressive ice formations are found on the lower flanks of the mile-high peaks that bristle like shark's teeth, in row after jagged row, just beyond the edge of town" (27). "Conspire" suggests malice and intention to harm, "armor" evokes an image of war, and "shark's teeth" denote predation - later on, a climber is referred to as "getting lunched on" (38). Krakauer's use of language at the outset of this article allows the reader to accept that the protagonists attack and retaliate against the ice formations in Valdez, which, as we see in *Into the Wild*, is not an approach that many Alaskans favour from outsiders with little understanding and respect for their land. Indeed, Krakauer later evokes an image of cityscape and colonization, also one not welcomed by the men and women who have carved out an existence in the harsh and unforgiving walls of Alaska's mountain ranges. Krakauer writes of "icicles the size of skyscrapers – towering pillars and bizarre curtains of…ice" (28). These urban metaphors suggest a

"business as usual" attitude towards the ice falls, that one ought to be able to reach the top of a skyscraper via elevator; pillars and curtains are constructions of man, and are therefore emotionless and subverted. Krakauer recounts John Weiland and Bob Shelton's ascent of an icefall named Wowie Zowie in 1987. The two men, equipped with "working replicas of the weapon that was used to assassinate Trotsky", engaged in a fierce battle with the icefall:

> Shelton reached an overlap in the giant icicle, a point where the pillar above overhung his position like a ragged, rotting awning. 'I scrunched up under the overhang as tight as I could…and fired in another screw. Then I leaned out past the lip of the roof, got my ice axes planted on the face of the pillar, yelled down for Jonny to watch my ass, and went for it: I swung out on my arms, cranked off a pull-up, and started front-pointing on up the pillar. (30)

This scene reads like something out of a war story, or an excerpt from Orwell's "To Shoot an Elephant". Using words and phrases such as "fired" and "went for it" are evocative of trench warfare, while "got my axes planted on the face of the pillar" elicit the killing of a large animal such as a gorilla or elephant. Rather than garner sympathy for the icefall, however, these images contribute to the heroism of the climbers, which subverts any chance of an ethic. Indeed, Krakauer writes "not only are those who first subdue a given waterfall immortalized…but they earn the right to name the cascade as they see fit" which is colonial by definition (36) and reminds of the British using Everest instead of Sagarmatha.

The article "On Being Tentbound" reinforces the idea that the mountain is both a refuge and antagonist. The premise of the article is that, while one might desire an outing in the backcountry spurred on by "glossy, coffee-table books" (42), nature can take one hostage (43) and thus, the narrative provides foundational skills to survive such an "incarceration" (43). "On Being Tentbound" offers a glimpse into the main metaphor at work in *Into the Wild,* that literary representations of nature are often skewed and as such lure men to the mountains like a siren.

"The Flyboys of Talkeetna" explores the lives of men who make it their business to fly a variety of aircraft in and around the Alaskan mountains and glaciers. These men are often portrayed as fighting against the naturally brutish landscapes; their world is "an alien world of black rock, blue ice, and blinding-white snow" (53). One of the more popular destinations is Mount McKinley, which is described as having "snaggle-toothed defenses ... [that] rise sharply" (52). Pilots, as if in a war scenario, "bear down on the fast approaching mountain [walls]" (52), "attack high [passes] directly" (52), and "[spy]" (54) clouds that foretell imminent danger. Of course this kind of narrative sells; people love adventure stories, especially ones that put them in the driver's seat. As previously discussed, however, the driver's seat soon becomes a pair of boots.

"Club Denali", the title for the sixth article in Krakauer's *Eiger Dreams*, denotes a special group of people who are privileged by their acquisition of the mountain's highest point. Some even garnered congratulations from President Kennedy for their feats (67). Krakauer begins this piece by sharing that before one

might attempt to climb Mount McKinley, or Denali, as it is also known, one must "sit through a tape and slide show depicting the perils of venturing onto the highest mountain in North America" (64). While the presentation apparently shows "thundering avalanches, storm-flattened tents, hands deformed by horrible frostbite blisters, and grotesquely twisted bodies being pulled from the depths of enormous crevasses," Krakauer notes, it is "ineffective" (64). Firstly, this kind of film reminds of a desensitization measure before one goes into war: exposure to images of survivors and victims, and damage to property. Again, we are given a war metaphor, which creates an antagonistic understanding of our environment. Krakauer isn't shy about presenting Denali in this light; he notes that McKinley "had killed more climbers than the Eiger…and was one of the most hostile climates on Earth" (65). McKinley, not Mount McKinley, personifies the mountain into a ruthless serial killer. The film is ineffective against the power of man's desire to conquer the "enemy" or to achieve the "trophy".

Krakauer moves between the killer metaphor and the object metaphor when he states that a climber of Mount McKinley, in addition to paying a hefty fee, subjects himself to "three weeks of exceedingly cruel and unusual punishment [and] he does it not in order to commune with nature, but because he …wants very badly to add the pinnacle of North America to his trophy collection" (68). In order to do this, climbers must "gang up on the West Buttress – the easiest way up the mountain" (68). Here Krakauer manages to not only represent the mountain as a means of punishment, but a trophy and a giant opposition to man's desire. As for the punishment, it turns out to be a head-to-head battle with

air that “bites”, “sledgehammer winds”, and “hellish cold” (69). In terms of the mountain being both an object of war and an objective, the climbers set up a large camp at 14,300 feet outfitted with deep bunkers that “ lent [it] a battlefield air, as if a barrage of incoming artillery might be expected at any moment” (71) which served “as a launching pad for assaults on the upper peak” (70).

While nature is being vilified, the people who stand against its power are shown to be not only interesting characters, but slightly charming and brave. Adrian Popovich, or Adrian the Romanian, went to Denali without a tent, a shovel, or a stove. He planned to buy water and other goods from those parties who came with the necessary tools suggesting that money still held weight in the wilderness (it didn’t). Although the park ranger deemed Adrian’s lack of preparedness “suicidal”, Krakauer still seems to bear affection toward him, which could be misconstrued by young Chris McCandless types as respect. Having failed previously to summit Denali, Adrian spent the remaining winter obsessing about the elusive peak. Adrian reminded the other climbers, “‘this a very big mountain. You make one little mistake, it really kick your ass’” [sic] (70). Although Adrian’s attitude is cocky and his approach to mountains disrespectful, Krakauer still manages to encourage the reader to get behind the Romanian. We leave the article with an image of Adrian reflecting upon yet another Denali failure, but with his eyes fixed still at the summit and on the title of being the first Romanian to climb the mountain as others, including Krakauer, retreat. Krakauer himself, like Adrian, “grossly underestimated the mountain” by bringing an old sleeping bag, cheap tent, and “neglect[ing] to pack a down jacket, overboots, a

snow saw, or any snow pickets" (78). The mountain, this time, was better equipped. He underestimated the power of his enemy and figured he didn't need these things to summit a mountain that "succumbed to three hundred freds and hackers a year" (78). This suggests that only difficult mountains deserve one's respect and attention to detail. After deciding that the mountain was indeed more powerful and less willing to concede than Krakauer had previously considered, Krakauer "bid his comrades in arms adieu" (82). Ending on a war image negatively impacts one's understanding of the experiences offered by Mount McKinley and demonstrates a lack of environmental ethic on Krakauer's part.

In "The Burgess Boys", an article that follows the eccentric mountaineering lives of twin brothers Adrien and Alan Burgess, one of their escapades in particular stands out as a testament to the lack of understanding that mountains aren't killers. The twins were on K2 in 1986 when a major storm occurred in the Himalaya. Adrian describes the mountain as the perpetrator of the damage to their camp:

> It looked like it'd been 'it by a fuckin' bomb…'alf the tents were flat, two bodies were lying nearby, all that showed of another body was this frozen 'and sticking out of the snow. The survivors said a fourth body was still buried somewhere, they didn't know where, and that a Tamang porter 'ad gone crazy after the avalanche, thrown off all 'is clothes, and run off into the night. All I could think was, 'Oh man, is this shit really 'appening?' [sic]. (138)

Another war image again, suggesting the mountain is an enemy, means that the "survivors" owe nothing to their antagonist, creating a lack of ethic; yet here the victims are traumatized, making the mountain a cruel enemy indeed.

In "Gill", nature as an antagonist takes on an interesting spin. Famous for "bouldering" or climbing smooth, round, seemingly impossible boulder-like rocks, John Gill believes "the boulder's steep face is a puzzle to be solved with finger strength, creative movement, and force of will" (14). Although Gill says he isn't interested in attaining summits, like many of Krakauer's protagonists, he still projects the idea that nature is an object to be attained and, as such, an antagonist: "boulder climbs are termed 'problems', (as in, 'Did you hear that Kauk finally bagged that way heinous problem across the river, the one that had thrashed all the Eurodogs?')" (16). A problem to be solved is no less antagonistic than a malevolent summit to be achieved, especially considering that John Gill is a research mathematician, one who is up against problems as a career. In math, it might be noted, the "problem" is the antagonist that stands in the way of the "solution" or the objective. And although he isn't looking for summits, he does have an objective: stylistic solutions to his boulder "problems" in the form of an "elegant fashion…a smooth flow, using some unexpected simplicity" to reach his goal is also part of the goal. The real problem with Gill's philosophy is that when we see nature a problem to be fixed or solved, we view ourselves as above nature, capable of solving or fixing rather than as a part of nature or inseparable from it. Krakauer represents Gill as someone who is different from other climbers, one who is close to an environmental ethic, but this is incorrect: "Others still, see

nature as a game that ought to be played according to specified rules; Gill, however, breaks these rules by climbing boulders, feats previously considered unworthy until Gill began to perform them with uncharacteristic style and form" (19). Lastly, Gill also sees bouldering as a source of satisfaction, which is problematic. As a student of Zen meditation, Gill feels as though he is not "entirely successful on a boulder problem if [he doesn't] achieve that feeling of lightness" (24). This projects the idea that nature is a refuge or a supply closet of existential calm. By projecting our own personal desires onto nature and perceiving the physical environment as a source of spiritual renewal or "mystical experience" (25), we represent nature as simply another resource, albeit a spiritual resource, to be mined; it becomes an objective to be attained.

Into the Wild

Into the Wild presents antagonistic metaphors; however, Krakauer is able to undo them later in the book by retracing McCandless' 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" (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 ("I now wish I had never shot the moose" 167), which leans in the direction of an environmental ethic. Chris, not nature, is the real antagonist. The hierarchy of the binary is reversed because Chris thought it "was morally indefensible to waste any part of an animal that has been shot for food" (166). Chris places the animal on the same plane as himself; respect for and proper preservation of the moose meat is equally as important as his need for a substantial food supply. Secondly, McCandless' ease of attaining the object of his desire is reversed when he attempts to leave Alaska, creating a siren metaphor. After Chris fares the better part of four months in Alaska, he feels as though he has "concluded the spiritual revolution" (or mined the resource) and is ready to return to civilization (163). Krakauer is adamant about this point: Chris intended to leave Alaska, as many believed McCandless was suicidal and had no intention of returning to society. Although McCandless had made up his mind to leave the Stampede Trail, the siren, it is posited, refused to let him go. Upon arriving in April the Teklanika river, which he was required to cross, 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 snowmelt 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). Back at the bus, the wild slowly kills Chris McCandless. With his food supply running low, Chris forages and eats plants, roots, and seeds. Thin and weak, Chris eats wild potato seeds, which, unknown to him, were contaminated with an alkaloid-concentrated mold (194). The mold, or rather the toxic swainsonine in the mold, prevents the body from metabolizing any amount of food (195) ultimately causing Chris to slowly and painfully starve to death. However, the potato seeds would not have become moldy (and would not have caused his death) in the first place had Chris taken care to store them properly, not in "damp, unclean Ziploc bags – an excellent culture for the proliferation of mold" (194). During this starvation period, Chris writes "**DAY 100! MADE IT!** BUT IN WEAKEST CONDITION OF LIFE. DEATH LOOMS AS SERIOUS THREAT. TOO WEAK TO WALK OUT, HAVE LITERALLY BECOME TRAPPED IN THE WILD…" (195). Chris's understanding of nature has shifted into an antagonistic force where previously he had "walk[ed]" 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'd 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.

Into Thin Air

Nature as hell is not a new idea. Nash writes that in contrast to the Garden of Eden, which was "ordered, fruitful, well-watered, well-tended", wilderness (outside of Eden) was "a Godless place to which humans were banished to unending toil and pain" (34). Adkins recalls the Harriman expedition to Alaska in 1899, of which John Burroughs and John Muir were a part. Burroughs suggested that the place was similar to "the valley of Death", while others described it as desolate, cold, perilous, austere, and terrible (3). Further, Rowe reminds us of Hobbes' version of nature which "imagines selfish savage individuals roaming the wild world like lone wolves, in constant fear of violent death…" (141). This metaphor imagines, at least, that man is part of nature but that, like the nature we are a part of, we are savage and alone. The idea of "lone wolves" also serves to underscore the sense of competition that accompanies a place such as hell. Rowe goes further to point out Robert Ardrey's idea, "'Man is a predator whose natural instinct is to kill with a weapon….We are the children of Cain'" (141), which

means that we are subject to our environment, slaves to the evil that seems to embody the physical space. This statement fuels the tragedy of those who died on Mount Everest because it suggests that it was not only natural forces the men were "fighting" against, but one another.

By using an excerpt from Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* as an epigraph to chapter fifteen, Krakauer suggests that the mountain itself has intention, acts deliberately, has a "purpose of malice, with a strength beyond control, with an unbridled cruelty that means to tear out of him hope and fear…to annihilate all he has seen, known, loved, enjoyed, or hated…by the simple and appalling act of taking his life" (207).

When first asked to join the expedition, Krakauer, entranced, "said yes without even pausing to catch [his] breath" (28). However, upon arrival at Everest Base Camp, Krakauer describes

> Walking to the mess tent at mealtime left me wheezing for several minutes. If I sat up too quickly, my head reeled and vertigo set in. The deep, rasping cough I'd developed in Lobuje worsened day by day. Sleep became elusive, a common symptom of minor altitude illness. Most nights I'd wake up three or four times gasping for breath, feeling like I was suffocating. Cuts and scrapes refused to heal. My appetite vanished and my digestive system, which required abundant oxygen to metabolize food, failed to make use of much of what I forced myself to eat; instead my body began consuming itself for sustenance. (72)

Jon Krakauer is in hell. We, and the climbers, are reminded of the risk involved with Mount Everest as the expedition passes memorials to the dead on their way to base camp (53). Further along, Krakauer stumbles upon a human body lying in the snow; he is "shocked and disturbed" (110). However, upon discovering a second body, "Few of the climbers trudging by hadn't given either corpse more than a passing glance. It was as if there were an unspoken agreement on the mountain to pretend that these desiccated remains weren't real – as if none of us dared to acknowledge what was at stake here" (111).

Once on the mountain proper,

> The wind kicked up huge swirling waves of powder snow that washed down the mountain like a breaking surf, plastering my clothing with frost. A carapace of ice formed over my goggles, making it difficult to see. I began to lose feeling in my feet. My fingers turned to wood. It seemed increasingly unsafe to keep going up in these conditions. (128)

As they climb higher, they move deeper into hell: "Brain cells are dying. Capillaries in our retinas were spontaneously hemorrhaging. Even at rest, our hearts beat at a furious rate" (161). Climbers began to forget to put their boots on, to clip into ropes, or to wear their harnesses correctly. Krakauer says of his idealized South Col: "If there is a more desolate, inhospitable habitation anywhere on the planet, I hope never to see it" (169).

The actions taken by Jon Krakauer, and others on Mount Everest in May 1996, indicate that they believed mankind to be separate from one another, not responsible to one another. Krakauer writes, "There were more than fifty people

camped on the Col that night…yet an odd feeling of isolation hung in the air….I felt disconnected from the climbers around me – emotionally, spiritually, physically...We were a team in name only…" (171). Krakauer and his teammates may not be entirely responsible, however, as they are all affected by some form of debilitating high-altitude sickness, fatigue, shock, and cold (211). They are "victims" of the hellish mountain. When it became apparent to everyone that Hall, Fischer, Harris and their respective clients were facing death, a desperate plea went out for an additional radio so that Camp Two could "communicate with the survivors in Hall's team to coordinate a rescue" (228). Woodall, the recipient of the SOS, replied with a simple "no" (229), indicating that in hell each man is on his own, there is no need for camaraderie or ethics. When faced with the opportunity to make an additional five hundred dollars to aid in the rescue of Doug Hansen and Rob Hall, Lopsang replies to Andy Harris, "…I am supposed to take care of just my group" and abandons Harris to attempt the effort alone. Harris, as a result, dies (239). The Japanese team displays similar notions of survivalism when they discover a member of the Ladakhi expedition "lying in the snow, horribly frostbitten but still alive after a night without shelter or oxygen, moaning unintelligibly" (253). The Japanese climbers simply climbed on and rationalized later, "'We didn't know them. No, we didn't give them any water. We didn't talk to them. They had severe high-altitude sickness. They looked as if they were dangerous'" (253). The fact that the Japanese noted the Ladhaki's had "severe high-altitude sickness" might have *implored* them to stop, but as one of their members explains, "above 8,000 meters is not a place where people can

afford morality" (253). *Above* 8, 000 meters, then, is where hell really exists. After surviving the experience and able to write about it, Krakauer reinforces the siren metaphor by wondering if he and the others had simply been led into "an apparent death trap" when signing up for a guided expedition of Mount Everest (8).

Most of Rob Hall's expedition do, despite the conditions on Mount Everest, reach the summit, but much like McCandless, they realize that getting to the top of Everest (or into Alaska) is not the true challenge; getting back down is. Krakauer, after summiting Everest, narrowly misses a catastrophic storm personified as a an animal that denies passage and misdirects: "Beidleman knew they were on the eastern, Tibetan side of the Col and that the tents lay somewhere to the west. But to move in that direction it was necessary to walk directly upwind into the teeth of the storm. Wind-whipped granules of ice and snow struck the climbers' faces with violent force, lacerating their eyes and making it impossible to see where they were going" (215). Beidleman describes the scene as "total chaos" (215). Disoriented, blind, frozen, oxygen-starved, and weak the climbers become trapped in the raging tempest and begin to realize they are in very real trouble (215). Thomas F. Hornbein describes the Khumbu Glacier as "a world not intended for human habitation" (61). When faced with the reality of their situation, when encountering their own mortality, many of the climbers panic as though being dragged into a fire: "Sandy was hysterical; she kept yelling over and over, 'I don't want to die! I don't want to die!'", and Charlotte Fox describes "'My eyes were frozen. I didn't see how we were going to get out of it alive. The

cold was so painful, I didn't think I could endure it anymore. I just curled up in a ball and hoped death would come quickly'" (218). Beck Weathers, who was in the worst condition due to his blindness and frostbite, was "crumpled in the fetal position, not moving a whole lot….when all of a sudden [he] mumbles, 'Hey, I've got this all figured out.' Then he kind of rolls a little distance away, crouches on a big rock, and stands up facing the wind with his arms stretched out to either side. A second later a gust comes up and just blows him over backward into the night, beyond the beam of my headlamp. And that was the last I saw of him" (223). Here hell is so unendurable that it causes Beck Weathers to hurry nature's course along. In this case hell is worse than death, implying that being on Mount Everest is worse than death.

Those who had made it back to the tents on the South Col had to decide whether to attempt a rescue of Beck Weathers and Yasuko Namba, both of whom were presumed to be dead, or leave them on the South Col and focus the energies of the team toward rescuing themselves and move down to Camp Four; they decide to "let nature take its inevitable course" with the near-dead climbers (260). Nature's "inevitable course", of course, is death.

After abandoning their teammates and arriving at Camp Four, the "survivors" come to understand that Doug Hansen, Yasuko Namba, Beck Weathers, Scott Fischer, Makalu Gau, and Andy Harris were reported dead. Krakauer explains his own reaction to hell: "…my mind balked and retreated into a weird, almost robotic state of detachment. I felt emotionally anesthetized yet hyperaware, as if I had fled into a bunker deep inside my skull and was peering

out at the wreckage around me through a narrow, armored slit" (257). Krakauer revisits the war metaphor by describing his mental "bunker" and touches on the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome and shock, common experiences of those who have reported being to "hell and back".

In fact, it is this kind of trauma that creates a fifth antagonist: God. Many of the climbers encounter what they believe to be a vengeful god or spiritual force when near death or greatly affected by the hellish environment. Nature as a goddess is a complex metaphor as it is dependent upon cultural beliefs regarding the nature of God. As Katherine Ericson notes, the Tibetan Buddhists do not believe in the metaphor of "nature as a goddess" because they believe nature *is* a goddess. For Krakauer and his western counterparts, nature is personified at times and acts like a goddess and seemingly provides transcendence from hell. For the Tibetan Buddhists, Sagarmatha *really is* an antagonist who is rightfully seeking vengeance against them because they failed to protect her from commercialization. In both views, however, we move one step closer to an ethic because nature (as a goddess) is above man; still separate, but at least above.

For the people of Everest, the mountain has been linked intrinsically to religious thought likely from the beginning as evidenced in the local names ascribed to it: "goddess, mother of the world," "Seat-of-God," and "goddess of the sky" (16). All note the supremacy of the mountain and associate it with a power that holds dominion over man, "Buddhism as it is practiced in the high reaches of the Khumbu has a distinctly animistic flavor: the Sherpas venerate a tangled mélange of deities and spirits who are said to inhabit the canyons, rivers, and

peaks of the region. Any paying proper homage to this ensemble of deities is considered crucially important to ensure safe passage through the treacherous landscape" (132). These deities are vengeful and angry; without their favour, the physical spaces become forces against which the climbers must fight.

In the epilogue to *Into Thin Air*, Krakauer cites an Internet posting written by a Sherpa orphan that demonstrates the idea that if man is not able or willing to live in harmony with nature, nature does not respond kindly:

> I have never gone back to my homeland because I feel it is cursed. My ancestors arrived in the Solo-Khumbu region fleeing from persecution in the lowlands. There they found sanctuary in the shadow of "Sagarmathaji," "mother goddess of the earth." In return they were expected to protect that goddess' sanctuary from outsiders.
>
> But my people went the other way. They helped outsiders find their way into the sanctuary and violate every limb of her body, crowing in victory, and dirtying and polluting her bosom. Some of them have had to sacrifice themselves, others escaped through the skin of their teeth, or offered other lives in lieu… (299)

Later, when Beidleman's group attempts to get off Mount Everest by climbing down the Lhotse Face, large stones showered down upon them, catching one Sherpa in the back of the head. Beidleman and Klev Schoening watched helplessly as "The force of the blow chipped a divot as large as a silver dollar from the Sherpa's skull, knocked him unconscious, and sent him into cardiopulmonary arrest…[then] a second rock came down and smashed into the

Sherpa; once again the man took the impact squarely on the back of his head" (262). Klev and Beidleman were, at that point, forced to wonder "'What's going on here? What have we done to make this mountain so angry?'" (262). Krakauer's text suggests Sagarmatha's anger could be the result of a variety of things: "sauce-making", their presence alone (which the epilogue suggests), man's disrespect for nature as evidenced by polluting the mountain with bodies and oxygen canisters, man's ego as evidenced by gloating and waving flags on top of Everest, man's commercialization of the mountain such as exchanging money for accessing the land (which would make Sagarmatha a prostitute according to Tibetan beliefs).

The article "A Mountain Higher Than Everest?" centers on the history of the contenders for the highest peak title. Nearby Anye Machin was considered at one point, but it seemed to resist measurement and was thought to be "'jinxed' by a curse that had brought misfortune to 'every explorer, flyer, and adventurer after even briefly sighting this so-called god mountain'" (124). It was believed that Anye Machin was the "dwelling place of the gods" by the aboriginal people who lived at its base (120). By placing god within nature, we are, if we believe in gods, forced to respect and honour, and if we do not, the gods will seek revenge in some form. In this instance, Anye Machin refused to be measured.

Not only are the Buddhist gods vengeful toward and critical of man's immoral actions, but they hold men responsible for one another. The irony in their passing the Ladakhis' "prayer flags and pitons" as they moved towards the summit is not unnoticed by Krakauer. In contrast to the western beliefs about responsibility and ego, Lopsang Jangbu, a devout Buddhist, felt that he was

responsible for Scott Fischer's death; he "pounded his chest and tearfully blurted 'I am very bad luck, very bad luck. Scott is dead; it is my fault. I am very bad luck. It is my fault. I am very bad luck'" (272). Here Lopsang demonstrates also the idea that he thought of Scott as a friend, not a customer (Dummit 4).

Krakauer and many others have described transcendent-like experiences while in nature. This contributes to the metaphor that nature is god, but a critical look also notes that these experiences occur, at times, when the physical/mental state of the climber is poor or at risk. While climbing along the summit ridge, Krakauer experiences "a strange, unwarranted sense of calm. The world beyond the rubber mask was stupendously vivid but seemed not quite real, as if a movie were being projected in slow motion across the front of my goggles. I felt drugged, disengaged, thoroughly insulated from external stimuli" (188). One might question whether this is exactly what he was looking for, transcendence. If so, the experience is so fleeting that he, or any other climber, would have to continually seek it from various extremes. On the top of Mount Everest, he "had the sensation of being underwater, of life moving at quarter speed" (189). Krakauer does state that the literature of Everest is rife with accounts of hallucinatory experiences attributable to hypoxia and fatigue: "In 1933, …Frank Smythe observed 'two curious looking objects floating in the sky' directly above him at 27,000 feet: '[one] possessed what appeared to be squat underdeveloped wings, and the other a protuberance suggestive of a beak. They hovered motionless but seemed slowly to pulsate'" (201). Furthermore, Krakauer states,

> Gradually, I became aware that my mind had gone haywire…and I observed my own slide from reality with a blend of fascination and horror. I was so far beyond ordinary exhaustion that I experienced a queer detachment from my body, as if I were observing my descent from a few feet overhead. I imagined that I was dressed in a green cardigan and wingtips. And although the gale was generating a windchill in excess of seventy below zero Fahrenheit, I felt strangely, disturbingly warm. (201)

Indeed, there is a sense of the spiritual or intuitive among climbers. For example: "Crusty old alpinists who've survived a lifetime of close scrapes like to counsel your protégés that staying alive hinges on listening carefully to one's 'inner voice'. Tales abound of one or another climber who decided to remain in his or her sleeping bag after detecting some inauspicious vibe in the ether and thereby survived a catastrophe that wiped out others who failed to heed the portents" (81). "Within three hours of leaving the Col, Frank decided that something about the day just didn't feel right. Stepping out of the queue, he turned around and descended to the tents" (173). These people seem to suggest a positive experience with a spiritual force, rather than a negative one, but they also suggest that the disaster awaiting the climbers that summer was preplanned and intentional.

Chapter 4. Nature as Nature: Achieving an Environmental Ethic

Ecology tends to view the environment or biosphere holistically, each part relating to and inseparable from the next. In the West, we typically use binaries to make sense of our world. Phenomena arise and we determine whether they are good or bad, beautiful or ugly, honest or false. However, this creates otherness that often places the self above something else. As such we tend to hold on to the view that things have to be a certain way, our way. When presented with another view, one that may reverse the hierarchy that we believe to be "right", we become fearful and aggressive, which creates a desire to be "right" and thus take risks, as is evident in Krakauer's works. Through ecological reflection, one can begin to gain insight or a more open way viewing the way one thinks, judges, acts. From this, the individual has the capacity to develop compassion for the world or biosphere that he is interwoven into.

Binaries, by definition, present us with two problems: the idea that the universe is not holistic, and the idea that one of the pairs in the binary has more value than the other. Dualism is a hierarchical way of organizing a universe that may not need organizing at all. Of course, hierarchies are imposed upon the terms of the binary by the culture conceiving of the terms and, thus, the West by and large is in a spiritual and environmental crisis. Westerners are often judging, making value statements, and organizing the world we perceive into oppositions. However, this kind of "Aristotelian either/or" logic carries with it stress and anxiety (Nagatomo, n.p.). For example, the September 11th 2001 attacks immediately called for a declaration of good and evil; popular films such as

Transamerica depict the undesirability, and at times immorality, of life without clear sexual binaries; and high school English courses focus their narrative studies on the premise that conflicts arise between two opposing forces: man and nature, man and society, man and himself. In order to overcome these dualisms, and the hierarchical ordering that is inherent in them, Western thinkers need to recognize a common experience in all living things, an idea offered simply by ecology, and let go of the desire to assert oneself against an opposing force or binary. In short, we need to move from "me"-centered thinking to "we"-centered. It is evident from his texts that Krakauer, as a person and a non-fiction writer, has a meditative personality concerned with truth and knowing. It is through meditation or reflective practice that he is able to attain some enlightenment about his role in the lives of his characters and the world at large. Jonathan Bate writes that ecocriticism is about "modern Western man's alienation from nature…[and] the capacity of the writer to restore us to the earth which is our home" (*Song of the Earth* vii). Krakauer is partially successful in doing just this.

Despite overwhelming metaphors that demonstrate man's separateness from and desire for supremacy over and nature, Jon Krakauer does, in each one of his mountaineering texts, offer a post-metaphor reflection in the form of forwards, epilogues, and occasionally a personal narrative, on the problems with seeing nature as a refuge, object, and antagonist. He often reflects on how these metaphors have affected him personally and the men he writes about. While he doesn't much discuss the effects of this kind of conceptualization on nature (he mentions Scott Hall's garbage removal event), however, he does come to an

understanding that metaphors and mountain climbing are a dangerous combination, which is, as noted earlier, a vital step in moving toward the protection of the environment. He also manages to unravel each metaphor with the insights gained from his reflection.

Krakauer spends a great deal of his writing attempting to rationalize the act of climbing and is thereby able to examine himself: "Mountain climbing is comprehended dimly, if at all, by most of the non-climbing world. It's a favorite subject for bad movies and spurious metaphors" (*Eiger Dreams* x). Some climb because it offers a drug-like experience in which the body releases a host of endorphins causing the climber to feel "happiness" or some other temporary satisfaction. Chris McCandless, perhaps more philosophical, was "seeking to kill the false being within" (163)when he went to Alaska. Some climb for money, some for fame, some for purpose. Krakauer, he alludes, climbed for many of these reasons. When he examines the folly of these motivations, he is particularly harsh on himself, more so than his characters. Regardless of why they climb, it seems that a number of these men begin to wonder if what they were seeking is what they left behind. In a way, many of them are searching for home, not hell, but only by going to hell are they able to recognize the former, an experience that Krakauer has at the end of *Into Thin Air*[2]. The last reason Krakauer offers for climbing is that these individuals are simply mad, which, at first, seems plausible given some of the characters, but by including himself in the text and by placing

[2] Notably, Aaron Ralston similarly reflects upon his motivation to climb when he is trapped by a boulder in Blue John Canyon, Colorado. He discovers through his reflection that nature is not the antagonist but rather it is he "the human catalyst" that created his deadly situation (107-8). His book, *127 Hours: Between a Rock and a Hard Place,* reveals Ralston's eerie reminiscence of Chris McCandless.

himself in close proximity to each of the obsessed climbers, Krakauer persuades us to believe otherwise. Indeed this is the entire purpose of his personal narrative in *Into the Wild*, to convince us that McCandless is not a suicidal lunatic, but rather a boy searching for an authentic experience on the outside of a superbly complex, modern society. Additionally, by including himself as a character and narrator, Krakauer forces readers to consider our own ideas about the relationship we have with ourselves, others, and the environment.

Into the Wild

Firstly, an examination of precisely how Krakauer moves through each metaphor and gains insight into how they shape his life. *Eiger Dreams* is Krakauer's collection of mountaineering articles. He writes a final article especially for the book titled "The Devil's Thumb", which also serves as the basis of Chapters 14 and 15 of *Into the Wild*. Krakauer adds very personal details and soulful reflection about why he imbues nature with qualities it does not possess, which is why, despite the fact that both texts offer the same outcome, the narrative will be primarily discussed as it appears in *Into the Wild*.

As a young man, Krakauer headed toward Alaska "to change [his] life"; climbing the Devil's Thumb was part of "a scheme for righting what was wrong in [his] life" (164) that included going alone and staying in the Alaskan bush for over one month. As the narrator of his own journey, it is clear that Krakauer has moved beyond thinking of nature as a refuge:

> Writing these words more than a dozen years later, it's no longer entirely clear just *how* I thought soloing the Devil's Thumb would transform my

> life. It had something to do with the fact that climbing was the first and only thing I'd ever been good at. My reasoning, such as it was, was fueled by the scattershot passions of youth, a literary diet overly rich in the works of Nietzsche, Kerouac, Menlove Edwards…(*Eiger Dreams* 165)

Krakauer also notes that he was guided by literary maps rather than logic and that his desire was to solve his problems. The problem, of course, is that nature is not capable of solving our problems and is not always represented ethically in literature. John Menlove Edwards, highly influential on Krakauer as both a climber and writer, "climbed not for fun but to find refuge from the inner torment that characterized his existence" (*Eiger Dreams* 165). Krakauer is able to show that Nature is not a refuge for Menlove by noting that he was "deeply troubled…[and ended] his life with a cyanide capsule…" (165). Moving away from society to gain a perspective on or understanding of our societal problems provides only temporary relief, but no real solution. As a modern society, we need to learn to work within an urban framework to achieve lasting happiness. But for Krakauer anyway, "the Thumb beckoned like beacon…if only I could somehow get to the top of the Devil's Thumb….everything that followed would turn out all right" (166). Krakauer blends the refuge and objective metaphors; his older narrative voice regards these ideas as foolish, which makes his text lean toward an environmental ethic. Krakauer reflects on his own experiences with climbing the Devil's Thumb while revealing an approach to nature that personifies it as both animalistic and feminine, and, as such, an object to be taken. Krakauer notes that the "mountain had been lurking in the recesses of [his] mind for about fifteen

years" and goes on: "I owned a book in which there was a photograph of the Devil's Thumb, a black-and-white image…[that] looked particularly sinister: a huge fin of exfoliated stone, dark and smeared with ice. The picture held an almost pornographic fascination for me" (*Wild* 135). Upon arrival, the Stikine Icecap (which surrounds the Devil's Thumb) is "an immense, labyrinthine network of glaciers that hugs the crest of the Alaskan panhandle like an octopus, with myriad tentacles that snake down, down to the sea from the craggy uplands along the Canadian frontier" (167). He moves from a sexualized female object to an antagonistic animal very quickly. The need, then, to conquer such a beast, is intensified by the idea that this fixation has shape shifted, lured him there under false pretenses. As Krakauer attempts to cross one of the "frozen arms" (167), he realizes that he is ill-equipped, "my ten-foot curtain rods seemed a poor defense against crevasses that were forty feet across and two hundred fifty feet deep" (169). He mentions later in *Into the Wild* that, "unlike McCandless", he is accompanied by three Alaskans, a topographical map, and rock-climbing hardware (173). This older version of Krakauer is much wiser than his former curtain-rod toting self and recognizes that he survived by "chance" (*Wild* 155) and that "Eighteen years after the event, I now recognize that I suffered from hubris, perhaps, and an appalling innocence…" (155). By stating this, he is able to reverse the idea that McCandless's metaphorical ideas about Alaska were reasonable.

As a young idealist, however, he believed that in opposition to the mundane features of his post-adolescent life, "Climbing *mattered*. The danger

bathed the world in a halogen glow that caused everything – the sweep of the rock, the orange and yellow lichens, the texture of the clouds – to stand out in brilliant relief. Life thrummed at a higher pitch. The world was made real" (*Wild* 134). Here Krakauer implies that mountain climbing, as an act, transforms the world out of its banality; that without this communion with nature his life would simply have to be "managed" (*Wild* 134). Krakauer, an admitted Romantic, looked to writers like Nietzsche, Kerouac, and John Menlove Edwards (135) to guide him towards the mountain ranges. Krakauer often quotes these and other Romantic types, such as Muir and Thoreau, when providing epigraphs in his own works. Later, though, he describes his "literary diet [as] overly rich" (*Eiger Dreams* 165). Krakauer reveals the following about his decision to climb the Devil's Thumb: "In 1977, while brooding on a Colorado barstool, picking unhappily at my existential scabs, I got it into my head to climb a mountain called the Devil's Thumb…I never had any doubt that climbing the [mountain] would transform my life. How could it not?" (*Wild* 135). Later on, Krakauer demonstrates that, like McCandless, a troubled relationship with his father, Lewis was at the root of his "brooding". Lewis, a preeminent doctor, had begun "preparing [Krakauer] for a shining career in medicine, - or failing that, law as a poor consolation" (148) before Krakauer was 5 years old. Lewis favoured winning, competition, and ambition. Krakauer, obviously, did not go to medical school, nor did he attend law school. Rather, he spent his time studying environmental sciences and stumbled into a writing career by accident. His father and he did not speak for some time due to Jon's enrollment into a college "where

no ivy grew" (148) but as his father's mental health declined, Krakauer realized what his father couldn't: "the Devil's Thumb was the same as medical school, only different" (150). It was an objective. Krakauer, perhaps in an unconscious attempt to overcome his Oedipal crises, managed to climb the Devil's Thumb – barely: "When I decamped from Boulder for Alaska, my head swimming with visions of glory and redemption…it didn't occur to me that I might be bound by the same cause-and-effect relationships that governed the actions of others" (151). Krakauer's admission that he associated the Devil's Thumb with "glory and redemption" indicates the very attitude that blinded him to the reality of his situation - climbing such a mountain alone was incredibly dangerous. This attitude also underscores the rationale other, less fortunate individuals used to make their way to places like Alaska and Mount Everest without the necessary skills or equipment. Krakauer, as is usually the case with the refuge metaphor, was met with a violent and unexpected storm, instead of Eden, which derailed his path up the north wall. He then lights his father's tent on fire in a marijuana-induced stupor, and is forced to sleep in the snow while waiting to descend from the mountain he'd failed to "conquer". Due to his father's grooming for tenacity, Krakauer attempted a lesser route and made his way to the peak of the mountain. He describes climbing with likely the same marked Romantic idealism that encouraged him in the first place, that

> …[a] trancelike state settles over your efforts; the climb becomes a clear-eyed dream. Hours slide by like minutes. The accumulated clutter of day-to-day existence – the lapses on conscience, the unpaid bills, the bungled

> opportunities, the dust under the couch, the inescapable prison of your genes – all of it is temporarily forgotten, crowded from your thoughts by an overpowering clarity of purpose and by the seriousness of the task at hand. At such moments something resembling happiness actually stirs in your chest… (143)

While this seems to reinforce the refuge metaphor, Krakauer's experience is short lived. After summiting the Devil's Thumb, he hitches a ride back across Frederick Sound and into town. The captain of the boat, more concerned with real life, the timber fall, and his family, doesn't believe or care that Krakauer, gleaming with pride, had achieved the peak. Krakauer's refuge and objective only spawn disappointment:

> The euphoria, the overwhelming sense of relief, that had initially accompanied my return to Petersburg faded, and an unexpected melancholy took its place. The people I chatted with in Kito's [bar] didn't seem to doubt that I'd been to the top of the Thumb they just didn't much care…Less than a month after sitting on the summit of the Thumb, I was back in Boulder, nailing up siding on the Spruce Street Townhouses, the same condos I'd been framing when I left for Alaska. I got a raise, to four bucks an hour, and at the end of the summer moved out of the job-site trailer to a cheap studio apartment west of the downtown mall… I thought that climbing the Devil's Thumb would fix all that was wrong with my life. In the end, of course, it changed almost nothing. But I came to appreciate that mountains make poor receptacles for dreams. (155)

This shift in understanding proves that idealized wilderness metaphors are problematic because they are untruthful. While recounting his own misadventures in the wild as a means of defending or shedding light onto Chris McCandless, Krakauer reveals his own naive ideas about nature. After believing that Alaska would solve all of his problems, he is met with a deep loneliness, which reminds him of all he left behind: "The closest thing I'd had to human contact since the airdrop, the distant lights triggered a flood of emotion that caught me off guard. I imagined people watching baseball on television, eating fried chicken in brightly lit kitchens, drinking beer, making love. When I lay down to sleep, I was overcome by a wrenching loneliness. I'd never felt so alone, ever" (152). This loneliness points to man's need to connect with others and that wandering into remote places alone only reminds us of this fact, rather than solidifying man as an island. Krakauer also reflects on the idea that nature is not really an antagonist, but rather *he* was:

> Because I wanted to climb the mountain so badly, because I had though about the Thumb so intensely for so long, it seemed beyond the realm of possibility that some minor obstacle like the weather or crevasses or rime-covered rock might ultimately thwart my will…[After emerging from the disabling storm] I made it back to my tent intact, but it was no longer possible to ignore the fact that the Thumb had made hash of my plans. I was forced to acknowledge that volition alone, however, powerful, was not going to get me up the north wall. I saw, finally, that nothing was. (*Wild* 151)

At last, Krakauer writes, "I was a raw youth who mistook passion for insight and acted according to an obscure gap-ridden logic. I thought climbing the Devil's Thumb would fix all that was wrong with my life. In the end, of course it changed almost nothing. But I came to appreciate that mountains make poor receptacles for dreams" (155). Krakauer is able to see that Nature (the Devil's Thumb) is not a refuge because his problematic relationship with his father and his crummy job were waiting for him when he arrived home. In fact, he admits that his relationship with his father was only resolved after the "intervention of time" (149), that "two decades after the [revelation of long-held family secrets] I discovered that my rage was gone, and had been for years. It had been supplanted by a rueful sympathy and something not unlike affection" (148). Unfortunately for Krakauer, his realization came after his father had begun a slow progression into post-polio syndrome, self-medication, suicide attempts, and psychiatric hospitalization. Krakauer has a final revelation about his father that comes not from climbing a mountain or hiding out in the wilderness, but from witnessing and meditating upon his father's demise: "His struggle to mold me in his image had been successful after all. The old walrus in fact managed to instill in me a great and burning ambition; it had simply found expression in an unintended pursuit" (150).

Into Thin Air

Despite his revelations in *Into the Wild*, Krakauer is unable to ignore his boyhood dream of climbing Mount Everest. Only this time, he doesn't see nature as a refuge: "People who don't climb mountains – the great majority of

humankind, that is to say – tend to assume that the sport is a reckless Dionysian pursuit of ever escalating thrills. But the notion that climbers are merely adrenaline junkies chasing a righteous fix is a fallacy, at least in the case of Everest. What I was doing up there had almost nothing in common with bungee jumping or sky diving or riding a motorcycle at 120 miles per hour" (140). Instead, he posits that, based on the "ratio of misery to pleasure [which] was greater by an order of magnitude than any other mountain I'd been on; I quickly came to understand that climbing Everest was about enduring pain. And in subjecting ourselves to week after week of toil, tedium, and suffering, it struck me that most of us were probably seeking, above all else, something like a state of grace" (140). Although this does sound a great deal like the refuge metaphor, Krakauer points out early on what Thomas F. Hornbein learned, "at times I wondered if I had not come a long way only to find that what I really sought was something I had left behind" (43).

After nine of his companions perish on Everest, Krakauer seems to have finally internalized what he was seeking in his climbing life. Upon returning home after the disaster, he notes that he "marveled at the fecundity of the Seattle spring, appreciating its damp, mossy charms as never before…The ordinary pleasures of life at home – eating breakfast with my wife, watching the sun go down over Puget Sound, being able to get up in the middle of the night and walk barefoot to a warm bathroom – generated flashes of joy that bordered on rapture" (282).

Krakauer is able to dismantle the objective metaphor by stating: "climbing mountains will never be a safe, predictable, rule-bound enterprise. This is an

activity that idealizes risk-taking; the sport's most celebrated figures have always been those who stick their necks out the farthest and manage to get away with it…when presented with a chance to reach the planet's highest summit, history shows, people are surprisingly quick to abandon good judgment" (287). Objectifying nature and believing in the separateness of mankind is an example of bad judgment.

He writes only a page later, "Although we left the Col as members of three distinct expeditions, our fates were already starting to intertwine – and they would become more and more tightly bound with every meter we ascended" (173). Krakauer writes this from the perspective of a narrator post experience, and is therefore able to understand, as a result of the disaster, that man is indeed intrinsically connected to one another, inseparable even, undoing the objective and antagonist metaphors. Furthermore, he opens *Into Thin Air* with the following, which undermines both metaphors:

> Straddling the top of the world, one foot in China and the other in Nepal, I …stared absently down at the vastness of Tibet. I understood on some dim, detached level that the sweep of the earth beneath my feet was a spectacular sight. I'd been fantasizing about this moment, and the release of emotion that would accompany it, for many months. But now that I was finally here, actually standing on the summit of Mount Everest, I just couldn't summon the energy to care. (7)

Firstly, he states that there was supposed to be a "release of emotion", but his idealization of this interaction with the mountain proves false. Secondly, he

realizes that he is supposed to act in a manner congruent with his idea that nature is a refuge, but this metaphor has made its way to a "dim, detached level" of his consciousness. Lastly, and most importantly, he begins the book with a portrait of himself standing on top of Mount Everest. Purposefully anticlimactic, this indicates that Krakauer does not believe this moment to be the most important in the narrative. Rather, *Into Thin Air* chronicles his struggle to get off the mountain and to realize why he was there in the first place.

He furthers the idea that nature is not an antagonist, but rather that man often stands in his own way. After learning of the death toll, he mentions: "The magnitude of this calamity was so far beyond anything I'd ever imagined that my brain simply shorted out and went dark. Abandoning my hope of comprehending what had transpired, I shouldered my back pack and headed down into the frozen witchery of the Icefall…" (276). Part of the reason he reacts so strongly to this information is his recognition of his responsibility in his teammates' death as opposed to the mountain's: "The plain truth is that I knew better but went to Everest anyway. And in doing so I was party to the death of good people, which is something that is apt to remain on my conscience for a very long time" (xvii). Krakauer understands his personal responsibility in the Mount Everest disaster; he writes, "no more than two or three hours have gone by in which Everest hasn't monopolized my thoughts. Not even in sleep is there respite: imagery from the climb and it's after math continues to permeate my dreams" (296). For his part, he mistook Andy Harris for Martin Adams, and reported that Andy had "arrived safely at the tents" (228). Andy's family was radioed with the good news, only

later to be informed that, because of Krakauer's confirmation, Andy had not been looked for. In fact, Andy was now missing and reported dead due to the amount of time that had passed between Krakauer's message and the discovery of his mistake. This kind of error is grave enough to make Krakauer second guess why he went to Everest, why he acted the way he did, why he climbed at all, why he survived and others did not. Secondly, his presence as a reporter "may have caused Hall and other guides to take risks they would not normally take" (Lehman 469). In a post-Everest interview, Beck Weathers admits Krakauer's presence

> …added a lot of stress. I was always a little concerned with the idea…this guy's going to come back and write a story that's going to be read by a couple of million people…it's bad enough to go up there and make a fool of yourself if it's just you and the climbing group. That somebody may have you written across the pages of some magazine as a buffoon and a clown has go to play upon our psyche as to how you perform, how hard you'll push. And I was concerned that it might drive people further than they wanted to go…(142).

That Krakauer presents this implication in the body of his narrative demonstrates an "almost unprecedented willingness to reveal and to second-guess the reporting methods that make his narratives possible" (Lehman 467). This demonstrates Krakauer's search for the truth about his role not only on Mount Everest that May, but about his role in the lives of others and the world in general. He writes that he was simply unable to move on with his life afterwards, unlike others. Lou Kasischke writes to Krakauer: "I learned some important things about life, others,

myself. I feel I now have a clearer perspective on life. I see things today I never saw before" (295). However, at the time of writing *Into Thin Air*, Krakauer, unable to do so, "continued trying to make sense of what happened up there, and…obsessively mulled the circumstances of [his] companions' deaths" (*Air* n.p.). It is the fruit of this questioning that I believe, based on the epilogue and prologue to each of his books, allows Krakauer to recognize, discuss, and finally do away with metaphors. Because he was partly responsible for the deaths of his climbing team, he is no longer able to view nature as an antagonist, refuge, or objective. Nature is simply nature. Everest is simply a dangerous and remote mountain. Not only does Krakauer no longer believe in these metaphors, he stops writing about mountains and wildernesses.[3] Perhaps we can be inspired by Krakauer's texts to examine our desire to be more than just "reader/voyeur adventurer[s]" (Dummit 4) rather than to repeat his mistakes in willful ignorance of the obvious meaning of his texts.

[3] His next three books, instead, are about Mormonism, a football player turned army recruit, and another journalist's false memoir about building schools abroad.

Conclusion

When we discuss our current environmental crisis, we might note the use of "our"; it is our crisis in that we are 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 guiltlessly. Until we are able to change our way of thinking, that is to realize nature has value intrinsically and should be protects as such, we may continue to destroy the Earth beyond repair. Literature is not to blame for the metaphors we use, but it can 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, and false, modes of perception. Krakauer's texts lie in this grey area; although *Into the Wild* and *Into Thin Air* move toward an ethic, their popularity may hinder a deep reading, one that moves beyond the unethical metaphors presented by the majority of the characters in each book. These texts could easily inspire future readers to "go out and conquer a mountain" or "live off the land" as the main protagonists do. Unfortunately, because Krakauer's texts are most often shelved in the "Adventure" section of a bookstore, people, like McCandless, might simply read their own desires into the narrative and then act upon what has seemingly "inspired" them to do. Most of the mountaineering culture is characterized by egotistical desire and, as such, there is a tendency to see the world through binaries (the right way to climb, the best lines). Binaries, as mentioned, define Western thinking, and therefore reinforce metaphors that require one of the signs to be "good" and the "other" to be "bad".

It is this kind of thinking that prevents most of the west from realizing nature in ways that other cultures do. Ecology offers a view of nature that is inclusive of man. Together, man and nature are one system in the universe. 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 the purpose of this thesis to highlight literature's responsibility to 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.

In Chapter 1, I argue that nature has become analogous with refuge because of the binary that seems to exist between culture and nature. Nature, however, is not responsible for solving the problems that seem to be brought on by globalization. In fact, we are. However, it seems much easier to endure the stress and anxiety associated with the city for an appropriate amount of time and then take a well-deserved quarterly break to unwind. "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.

Chapter 2 discusses how the first metaphor ultimately creates the second, which creates the third. If nature is a refuge, a solution to our problems, we must have it, and we must have it before others do. The refuge metaphor leads Krakauer's characters to objectify nature and compete against one another to obtain it. This chapter explores the idea that man also sees himself as innately

separate from his fellow man, which does not allow for nature to be seen as an equal with its own rights because it creates dissention among people. It is argued that objectifying nature creates the opportunity for man to take risks that he fails to see are real and deadly. I argue that if climbing a mountain is like playing a game, then death isn't a true possibility. Again, man here is poorly served by his own foolish ideas.

In Chapter 3, I offer five antagonists (animal, siren, enemy, hell, goddess) and demonstrate how we use them to justify our disrespect for nature. 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". This metaphor is a result of the first two and is the most prolific in Krakauer's texts. It seems that nature is trying to tell us something, and man sees this as confrontation: perhaps Chris McCandless wasn't supposed to be in Alaska; perhaps Krakauer should never have gone to Everest. However, as mentioned earlier, desire is hard to let go of and Westerners are often ruled by ego. As such, nature does not have much of a fighting chance.

In the last chapter, I retrace how Krakauer is able to reach an environmental ethic in two of his texts: *Into the Wild* and *Into Thin Air*. By accepting responsibility for his actions toward nature and his fellow climbers Krakauer begins to realize who the real antagonist is, what the real objective was, and where he might really find what he was looking for. He includes in both texts

lengthy epilogue and prologue information detailing his metacognitive struggle as both a writer and climber. Because Chris McCandless and nine climbers from the Everest expedition each died, Krakauer realizes that mountain climbing is not a game, and that metaphors that posit otherwise are very dangerous indeed. He offers, after his realization, new ways of seeing nature and himself. Nature sheds some of its "otherness" and Krakauer is able to conclude that it exists, as he does, in its own right. Together, Krakauer and nature have reached a powerful understanding that underscores Krakauer's movement away from mountaineering writing.

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 Krakauer's writing, shows us that it is possible to change, it is necessary to change, it is our responsibility to change.

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