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Presentation Summary

Mythos and Wildness: Thoreau's Anthropology of Self

My paper tracks Thoreau's central but elusive concept of "wildness" through an examination of the related topic of myth. Throughout his writings, Thoreau links wildness and myth, especially and most explicitly in his essay "Walking." For Thoreau, a key enemy of wildness is conceptual abstraction, a divorce of self and world much older than the scientific rationalism of Bacon and Descartes. The roots of such abstraction lie in an extensive program of demythologization beginning with the Hebrews (esp. the prophets) and with Greek philosophy (esp. Plato's attack on the poets). The great demythologizers eventually vanquish a non-rational and wilder *mythos* mind, establish and solidify the conceptual boundaries that come to define the Western intellectual tradition, and alienate the human subject from the objective world.

As Thoreau sets out to pursue a wilder mythological consciousness for himself, he actually exploits such alienation, resulting in a double stance by which he not only becomes wild but also becomes the observer and documenter of his own wildness—a process I call the anthropology of self. By becoming the primitive other and studying himself, Thoreau is both observer and research subject in a reflexive brand of anthropological field-work. Furthermore, although Thoreau lived and wrote long before the birth of social science as we know it, his findings and conclusions about primitive consciousness—conclusions reached mainly through his own pursuit of such a consciousness for himself—strikingly prefigure fundamental findings and conclusions by later scholars who studied primitive cultures in great depth and detail. The groundbreaking but underappreciated findings of Thoreau's "anthropology of self" in the 1840s and 50s are largely borne out by subsequent scholarship (most of it in the 20th century) that mapped out the distinctive features of primitive consciousness. Thoreau sought a myth-making consciousness and began remythologizing the world long before other thinkers began to discover just what kind of world had been demythologized in the first place.

Using the work of modern "students of the wild" (i.e., post-19th century scholars of mythological cultures, including Claude Levi-Strauss, Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Otto, Gary Snyder, and others) and Thoreau's own writings, I identify definitive features of the *mythos* mind: the mythological approach is fundamentally *relational* (as opposed to skeptical or objective), *concrete* (rather than abstract), and radically *local* (rather than universal or other-worldly). Through close readings of selected passages from Thoreau, I then spell out the ways in which Thoreau uses such an approach to help mend Western civilization's deep and long-standing discontinuities between 1] human *culture* and wild nature, 2] human *home* and wild nature, 3] *intellect* and wild nature, and 4] human *time* (i.e., diachronous, historical conceptions of time) and wild nature. In cultivating his own mythological consciousness, Thoreau presents a wide—and wild—conception of nature as the rightful, paradigmatic source of all human activity.