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Yosemite as a Mythical Place

Yosemite is a mythical place. At least it is for me and the countless others who have been there only in imagination. For us it is a part of modern folklore, a symbol of some wild quality of nature that reminds us of our status in a larger order of things.

Known without visiting it, how does Yosemite enter one's consciousness? Surreptitiously, I suspect, for I cannot recollect a time when I was not aware of it as one of the beautiful natural places of the world. The very name is sonorous, and once heard is not easily forgotten. It conjures images of cascading waterfalls, towering forests, a place free from the relentless demands of twentieth-century civilization.

These are, of course, all illusions, because modern civilization long ago invaded Yosemite with the damming of Hetch Hetchy. Yet even that involved a confrontation between John Muir and Gifford Pinchot over preservation or development, a confrontation that took on the dimensions of an epic--almost eschatological--struggle not inappropriate to a mythical place.

So I have never visited Yosemite. Nevertheless my knowledge of it is not entirely vicarious. A few years ago the pilot of a transcontinental flight on which I was flying announced that Yosemite could be seen below. From 30,000 feet that part of America all looks like a great geological brain of wrinkled gray rock with dark clefts, and no remarkable features stood out. But pilots have to be trusted, and I took an obligatory photo in a sort of ritual attempt to capture the image of somewhere I felt I already knew.

The surface appearance of brains reveals little about the character of the consciousness within them, so even with my photo I am none the wiser about Yosemite, though now I occasionally wonder whether some places might possess a geological form of consciousness revealed only in an intense *genius loci* which sustains their mythical status.

In Yosemite this may not endure. I read in a California newspaper of traffic jams, crowded camp grounds and the complaints of a couple from San Jose that the Park stores did not sell their favorite type of coffee beans. Yosemite, it seems, is now filled with people searching for a dream of wilderness yet unwilling to relinquish material comforts. It is a victim of its own popularity.

The trouble with real mythical places is they can be loved to death. I could visit Yosemite one day, but that would merely contribute to its demise. To help preserve the myth I will stay away.