

"The Soul of Things:" Spirituality and Interpretation in National Parks

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"Thousands of naturalists, historians, archaeologists and other specialists are engaged in the work of revealing, to such visitors as desire the service, something of the beauty and wonder, the inspiration and spiritual meaning that lie behind what the visitor can with his senses perceive." -- Freeman Tilden

These words appear in what may be the single most widely read work among National Park Service interpreters: Freeman Tilden's *Interpreting our Heritage*.¹ Originally published in 1957, the work has appeared in three editions, has included forewords from several directors of the National Park Service, and serves to this day in Park Service training as the canonical statement of the principles of interpretation, the official term the Park Service uses to refer to its educational program. With the separation of church and state and the status of national parks as sites for recreational tourism, one might presume "beauty and wonder ... inspiration and spiritual meaning" to be *belles paroles*, poetic language meant to evoke a mood, but that does not deeply inform the philosophical foundations of the Park Service's educational enterprise. Quite the opposite turns out to be the case. More central than a commitment to scientific literacy or instilling patriotic values, the evocation of personal spiritual meaning stands at the core of

¹ Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967[1957]), 3-4.

Tilden's agenda for interpretation. Given the fact that Tilden's work has been required reading for Park Service interpreters for nearly fifty years, and given the fact that each year national parks receive 350 million visitors, each of which is exposed to interpretation at some level, the lack of attention to Tilden's work represents a lacuna in the study of religion in American culture. This article will argue that Tilden's vision of interpretation is one in which the visitor is to be transported into a deeper, more universal reality through a sensual and contemplative encounter with particular material objects and sites. In analyzing Tilden's thought I will show that while it borrows on broad themes within Western philosophy and theology, it is particularly influenced by the religious philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson and takes shape as an expression of "spirituality," a religious mode that is particularly prominent in contemporary America and that is characterized by personalism, an emphasis on "experience," and that is largely lacking in (but not devoid of) doctrinal and institutional expression.² In terms of theoretical implications, Tilden's agenda offers an opportunity to reconceptualize relations among religion, nature, and the state. For in laying down guidelines for the facilitation of spiritual encounter, mediated by a state enterprise, between the individual and the

² Sociologists have noted a popular tendency to distinguish between "spiritual" and "religious." In reference to those who use the word "spiritual" to discuss their religiosity (here using "religiosity" in its broader academic sense), I highlight four characteristics that represent an amalgamation of the work of several scholars. "Personalism" encompasses what scholars have referred to as individualism with an emphasis on creative self-expression, self-growth, and the conscious molding of religiosity to one's personality, life history, private goals, and so forth. "Experience" refers to encounter with divine or higher realities that goes beyond reasoned thought and involves emotion, intuition, the senses, and may range from less intense "feelings" to the achievement of mystical union. See Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 67-68, 76-79, 119-148; *Spiritual Marketplace* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 33-35, 173-179; Brian Zinnbauer, et al., "Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36 (1997): 549-564; Bron Taylor, "Earth and Nature-based Spirituality: Part I," *Religion* 31 (2001): 175-193.

material world, Tilden's work presents a facet of American civil religion that has remained almost entirely ignored in scholarly literature.

Freeman Tilden's relationship with the national parks began officially in 1941 when he was hired as a "literary consultant." Previously Tilden had worked extensively as a freelance journalist and writer. Born in Malden, Massachusetts, in 1883, Tilden began by writing book reviews for his father's newspaper and, following high school, went on to write for a variety of literary and general interest publications: most notably *World's Work* and *Century Illustrated Magazine*. As a foreign correspondent he traveled widely and wrote on a range of topics, and even found time to write fiction and translate a series of plays. Despite this breadth of experience, however, Tilden was not satisfied with his literary work and longed to do "something serious," and this led to his involvement with the national parks. With the support of the National Park Service and various foundations, he toured across the country visiting parks, talking with staff and visitors, advising administrators on park policy, and eventually gathering material for a book on the meaning and significance of national parks. The first work resulting from this research, *The National Parks: What They Mean to You and Me*, addresses a general audience and includes descriptions and reflections on a large number of individual parks.³ While this work met with broad success, going through nine printings in its first sixteen years, it is the second work, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, that has proved to be of most enduring importance. While enjoying only a limited popularity among the general public, this work continues to be widely used by park interpreters up to the present day.⁴

Interpreting Our Heritage seeks to provide Park Service interpreters with a useful and accessible guide to the principles

³ Tilden, *The National Parks* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1967 [1951]).

⁴ Biographical information in this paragraph has been culled largely from "Freeman Tilden, 96, Dies, Author of Books on Parks," *Washington Post*, Obituaries (C4), May 18, 1980.

of interpretation. In so doing Tilden addresses what he sees as a significant problem for the Park Service: while all recognize the superlative quality of the resources that national parks preserve, far too often those resources lie largely untapped due to the inability of the interpreter to communicate the value and meaning that "lie behind what the visitor can with his senses perceive."⁵ The problem, Tilden argues, is that those who are charged with educating the public are not themselves sufficiently educated as to how, in principle, their enterprise ought to proceed. Tilden thus offers *Interpreting Our Heritage* in order to teach the teachers in national parks, to provide them with a set of guidelines for dealing with the wealth of material at their disposal and to help them to evoke among visitors an appropriate appreciation of the resources that national parks preserve. To accomplish these goals, Tilden fashions a set of broad guidelines and illustrates them with a wide variety of examples. He divides the core of his work into a series of chapters explicating each of his six principles of interpretation:

- I. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
- II. Information, as such, is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based on information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
- III. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
- IV. The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.

⁵ Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 3-4.

V. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than to any phase.

VI. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.⁶

For the purposes of the study of religion, Tilden's work is notable in that it presents the interpreter as one who facilitates the "enrichment of the human mind and spirit."⁷ Countering what seems to be either a prevailing tendency or a common failing of interpreters, Tilden argues that the interpreter must lead visitors behind the mass of dull, brute facts and unconnected sense experience to "reveal the universal" and communicate a "spiritual ... whole."⁸ This experience, while it may involve an encounter with foreign, majestic, sublime, and distant realities (the immensity of the geologic time scale, the material remains of significant historical events, the complexity of ecological systems, etc.), must, Tilden argues, speak to the individual personality of the visitor. When stimulated to imaginatively transport themselves into a national historical scene, a prehistoric landscape, or into the eyes of an ancestor, visitors are led to "a certification of spirit."⁹ This notion of spirit does not simply refer to a supernatural essence, but rather to a nexus of intellect, imagination, and passion that is the product of interpretation. Concerning the relation of interpretation and conservation, Tilden quotes a Park Service manual and follows with commentary: "Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection.' I would have every interpreter, everywhere, recite this to himself

frequently like a canticle of praise to the Great Giver of all we have, for in the realest sense it is a suggestion of the religious spirit, the spiritual urge, the satisfaction of which must always be the finest end product of our preserved and natural wonders."¹⁰ While Tilden makes reference to a supernatural being, the "religious spirit" and "spiritual urge" refers to the linking of knowledge, love, and action as found in the quoted motto. Through the process of learning and coming to love, Tilden suggests, the visitor builds a personal connection to a universal reality, "knows that it is in some degree part of himself." This intellectual, impassioned movement defines spiritual growth for Tilden. In the following I will elaborate on Tilden's religious agenda for interpretation and provide some of the philosophical and religious contexts for his views.

The broad conceptual roots of Tilden's work are clearly visible from the outset of *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Drawing on the philosophical tradition of German Idealism, Tilden describes the unique opportunity that national parks provide the visitor: "here he meets the Thing Itself -- whether it be a wonder of Nature's work, or the act or work of Man. 'To pay a visit to a historic shrine is to receive a concept such as no book can supply,' someone has said; and surely to stand at the rim of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado is to experience a spiritual elevation that could come from no human description of the colossal chasm."¹¹ The phrase "Thing Itself" refers to Immanuel Kant's *Ding-an-sich*, the reality that lies behind perception and that remains, according to Kant, fundamentally unknowable to the workings of "pure reason."¹² Tilden's allusion trades on the notion that reality at base cannot be fully known through intellection. But whereas Kant stresses that the "thing" can never be encountered "in itself," that reality is always mediated by perception, Tilden asserts that in national parks this does not

⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁸ Ibid., 5, 25.

⁹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰ Ibid., 38.

¹¹ Ibid., 3.

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Paul Carus (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1977), 38.

hold true. Tilden argues that through perception the Thing Itself can indeed be encountered directly and that it is only language, whether in books or through verbal description, that fails to render a full encounter with reality.

Although no direct allusion is made, Tilden's stress on intuition parallels Friedrich Schleiermacher's conception of religious experience. Responding to Enlightenment skepticism regarding religion, Schleiermacher asserted that precisely because pure reason could not yield contact with ultimate reality, one should not abandon religion for its lack of a purely rational basis. Following this line of argument, Schleiermacher saw the basis of religion as the encounter with the deepest realities through "feeling," an experience that goes beyond reason and speaks to the individual as a whole.¹³ Tilden echoes these sentiments in his principles of interpretation, asserting that interpretation goes beyond information, "must address itself to the whole man rather than to any phase," and is thus properly termed "revelation."¹⁴ Further, Tilden quotes words of praise for a teacher who "never forgot that the *feeling* of an exhibit ... [was] quite as important as its factual truthfulness," a concern that Tilden associates with "universality of mind" and an ability to "project the soul of things."¹⁵ At a broader level, the notion that reality must be "felt," that deep, personal connection with truth goes beyond reason and can only be evoked and not simply demonstrated, and that such experience is in itself spiritual, informs the breadth of Tilden's work.

¹³ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, trans. Terrence Tice (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1969), 54-58.

¹⁴ Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 9. The religious overtones of Tilden's use of the term "revelation," in the second principle and elsewhere, are clear. Tilden writes of "revealing ... the spiritual meaning that lie[s] behind what the visitor can with his senses perceive," "the genius of the *revealer* ... who uncovers something universal in the world," and, describing a particularly moving account of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, "This was Interpretation: the revelation of the soul of a city." *Ibid.*, 3-4, 5, 19. The second of the three quotations is Tilden's quote of a sermon by Harry Emerson Fosdick, who was speaking of Jesus.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

Tilden's unattributed quote within the citation above further demonstrates the influence of German Idealism. While I have been unable to discover the source on which Tilden draws, the uncommon phrase "to receive a concept" echoes the language of G. W. F. Hegel. In Hegel's philosophical system, the physical, temporal, and material progression of history is the unfolding of the Concept and the process through which humanity and God achieve self-consciousness. Within this system, therefore, not only do the material and the ideal manifest themselves through each other, but so too do the personal and the universal. This for Hegel is the movement of Spirit.¹⁶ Tilden is very much in line with this way of thinking when he writes that in the endeavor to "uncover something universal," interpretation must at the same time be a revelation of personal meaning.¹⁷ Further, this holistic model of interpretation "deals not with parts, but with a historical -- and ... spiritual -- whole."¹⁸ While Tilden's work lacks the philosophical depth and rigor of Hegel's thought, nevertheless Tilden's assertion that the experience of the materiality of history involves both an encounter with universal truth and the revelation of personal meaning echoes, in a very broad way, Hegelian logic.

While these allusions to German Idealism are, in terms of their vocabulary, fairly direct, Tilden's work is by no means a systematic elaboration of this philosophical tradition. Much closer to the ethos and aesthetic that Tilden displays is the tradition of American Transcendentalism, which was influenced by German Idealism. Alexander Kern has pointed out that Transcendentalists viewed nature as symbolic of deeper spiritual realities and combined that belief with an emphasis on individual

¹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 1, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 185-199.

¹⁷ Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 5, 9, 11-17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

freedom and distinctiveness.¹⁹ In the introduction to her collection of Transcendentalist writings, Catherine Albanese stresses the theme of correspondence: how universal, spiritual realities were seen by Transcendentalists to be reflected in the world of particular, human, and material existence.²⁰ The clearest and most influential exponent of this view, and the figure quoted most often and most prominently by Freeman Tilden, was Ralph Waldo Emerson, who claimed that in the presence of nature “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God,” and who in his essay “Nature” shows individual human experience, both spiritual and material, to be one of infinitely rich and constant, if often unrecognized, communion with universal realities.²¹

In his emphasis on the reflection of the universal in the individual, Emerson is particularly well-suited to Tilden’s spiritual agenda. The role of the interpreter in National Parks, according to Tilden, is to “reveal the universal” and connect it to

¹⁹ Kern, “The Rise of Transcendentalism, 1815-1860,” in Harry Hayden Clark, ed., *Transitions in American Literary History* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1954), 251.

²⁰ Catherine L. Albanese, ed., *The Spirituality of the American Transcendentalists* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1988), 21-24.

²¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1971), 10 et passim. The prominence of Emerson in *Interpreting Our Heritage* is unmistakable. The chapter expounding the first principle of interpretation both begins and ends with a quote from Emerson. The fourth principle of interpretation is based on a quote from Emerson. Quotes from Emerson stand as epigraphs for the chapters on the sixth principle and for the crucial final chapter, expounding on Beauty, that was added in the 1967 revised edition. While he quotes Emerson’s most famous essay, “Nature,” Tilden’s reading also includes several more obscure works, such as “History,” “Wealth,” and the lesser known, shorter essay that is also entitled “Nature.” Further, Tilden and Emerson share similar philosophical and literary tastes: the English Romantics, German Idealists, and Plato. And of course, none of this is surprising given the fact that Tilden was a man of letters raised in New England near the end of nineteenth century. See Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 11, 17, 33, 38, 44, 46, 47, 51, 66, 84, 90, 92, 94, 106, 114.

“something within the personality or experience of the visitor.”²² The latter emphasis constitutes Tilden’s first principle of interpretation, for which he quotes Emerson in support: “The world exists ... for the education of each man. There is no age, or state of society, or mode of action in history, to which there is not something corresponding in his own life.”²³ Tilden thus argues that the interpreter should not simply present biology, geology, or history as a set of objective structures, but rather as phenomena that relate to individual, subjective experience. In this way Tilden intends national parks to provide an experience of *personal* enrichment. Without a subjective connection to the visitor, the materials or the site being viewed will remain dead and lifeless. The visitor will lose interest and the exercise in interpretation will fail.

This view of the personal character of universal truths requires a certain degree of restraint or humility on the part of the interpreter. In order for visitors to feel a sense of personal connection, they also have to participate actively in the process of the revelation of those truths. As visitors lack any specialized knowledge of the site, their opportunity for personal investment comes in the form of emotion and imagination, something that the interpreter cannot simply provide by way of lecture. In discussing the fourth principle of interpretation, Tilden again returns to a quote from Emerson to emphasize personal relation: “Truly speaking, it is not instruction but provocation that I can receive from another soul.”²⁴ The interpreter does not provide the visitor with a spiritual experience. Rather, they stimulate the visitor to use their imagination, their memory, and their personal experience to bring the materials or the site into a subjective whole.

²² Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 5, 9.

²³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1979), 5-6, quoted in Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 17.

²⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” in *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, 80, quoted in Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 33.

While the six principles serve as keystones to Tilden's theory of interpretation, he is not satisfied with such multiplicity at the core of his work. In a chapter entitled "The Priceless Ingredient," Tilden writes that his six principles may be conceived as a manifestation of the single principle of love. Tilden reasons as follows: the visitor has not come to the park in order to gather facts. Even if visitors do not know what, exactly, they are looking for in coming to a national park, they will leave dissatisfied if they are not personally moved by the experience. If interpreters are to answer this unspoken call for a deep, personal experience, if they are to spark visitors to establish a spiritual connection between themselves as individuals and more universal realities, interpreters must hold both a love for the visitor and for the material. Without this, Tilden argues, the interpreter will be unable to achieve the evocation of passion that is the goal of interpretation. Tilden's assertion would be virtually nonsensical if "love" was taken to mean a romantic, erotic bond, and indeed, he immediately disabuses the reader of such an understanding of the term. Rather, he proposes love as a metaphysically unitive principle that ties individuals to each other, to the material world, and to the highest and most abstract truths all at the same time.

This conception of love is Greek in origin and Tilden cites Plato's *Symposium* to elaborate: "Love is something more than the desire of beauty; it is the instinct of immortality in a mortal creature ... He who has the instinct of true love, and can discern the relations of true beauty in every form, will go on from strength to strength until at last the vision is revealed to him of a *single science*, and he will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty in the likeness of no human face or form, but absolute, simple, separate and everlasting...."²⁵ In this passage from Socrates' speech on love, in which he relates the words of

²⁵ Plato, "Symposium," in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Random House, 1892), 332-335, quoted in Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 94. Tilden's quotation contains much paraphrase, but enough is reproduced verbatim to indicate that the translator is Jowett. The emphasis is Tilden's.

the priestess Diotima, love is presented as a progression. At first, love begins with an appreciation for the beauty of an individual person and a single bodily form. Later, the lover sees that beauty is not confined to a single body and so begins to love beauty in all bodily forms. With a growth in wisdom, the lover sees the beauty of souls, of activities and laws, of knowledge in all its forms, and finally comes to appreciate the form of Beauty itself, which is eternal, indivisible, and metaphysical even as it is reflected in a temporal, material world full of difference. This links mortal human beings with an immortal and universal truth even as it links them to a multitude of material objects and natural principles. In using this quote from Socrates to elaborate his central principle, therefore, Tilden intends interpretation as the revelation of larger truths to take on the characteristics of a Platonic progression. It is not only, for the visitor, a growth in knowledge or wisdom, but a heightening of appreciation and passion that comes to encompass the world broadly conceived, including both physical particularity and scientific truths. Tilden thus links the personal, spiritual experience that interpretation is meant to stimulate with the variety of material objects and the historical or scientific training through which the interpreter works.

To summarize, then, Tilden presents a vision of interpretation in which the visitor experiences a spiritual elevation through the revelation of universal truths that are, at the same time, deeply personal, subjective realities. This religious vision participates in a rich and varied philosophical/theological tradition, drawing on German Idealism, Platonism, and American Transcendentalism. Further, it is the last of these three, particularly the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson, that takes precedence in Tilden's work and shapes how he reads the other traditions.²⁶ Tilden's thought is

²⁶ Scholars have noted that the Transcendentalists read the prominent German Idealist, Immanuel Kant, through the lens of English Romantics such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle, both of whom Tilden cites. *Ibid.*, 90, 92. Further, Tilden shares with the Transcendentalists and Coleridge the

not, however, purely Emersonian. Through tracing the differences that separate Tilden's thought from Emerson's, I will illustrate the contemporary religious mode of spirituality. Specifically, I will show how Tilden's vision eschews doctrinal specificity and emphasizes spiritual fulfillment that is personal, pluralistic, and works through a strategy of implication.

The first and most prominent of these differences concerns the conception of the personal relation to nature and history. As I have shown above, the understanding of human, material particularity as a manifestation of metaphysical unity informs the thought of both Emerson and Tilden, but for Tilden, the unitive metaphysical principle is clearly in the background. Admittedly, Tilden does, through a quotation, refer to interpretation as the endeavor to "reveal the universal."²⁷ And it is also true that he makes reference to teachers who through "universality of mind" became great educators or interpreters.²⁸ But while these references to the universal participate in the opening phase of Tilden's exposition, it must be noted that they drop out of the discussion for the great bulk of the work. In between references to a unitive principle in the opening chapter

characteristic twisting of Kantian categories whereby the Thing Itself is directly apprehensible by the individual. *Ibid.*, 3. Regarding Greek philosophy, scholars have stressed how the Transcendentalists absorbed the Platonic doctrine of the forms, and particularly the Neoplatonic emphasis on the ascension from the many to the one. Tilden's sole citation of the *Symposium* discusses this doctrine of ascension and Tilden uses it to elaborate the central principle of his theory of interpretation. *Ibid.*, 94. See Albanese, ed., *The Spirituality of the American Transcendentalists*, 6-7; Paul Boller, *American Transcendentalism, 1830-1860: An Intellectual Inquiry* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), 34-63.

²⁷ Tilden quotes a sermon by Harry Emerson Fosdick to illustrate the role of the interpreter: "There are two kinds of greatness. One lies in the genius of the gigantic individual who shapes the course of history. The other has its basis in the genius of the *revealer* -- the man or woman who uncovers something universal in the world that has always been here and that men have not known. The person's greatness is not so much in himself as in what he unveils ... to reveal the universal is the highest kind of greatness in any realm." Interpretation is for Tilden clearly in this latter category. Quoted in Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

and its reappearance in the final chapters on love and beauty, Tilden writes almost exclusively of the appeal to the particular, human, and personal experience of the visitor.

By way of contrast, consider the following passage in Emerson's essay, "Nature": "Standing on the bare ground,-- my head bathed in the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,-- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty."²⁹ In this passage, Emerson's personal experience becomes melded into a universal consciousness. His personal history, his localized situation in time and space, his social environment -- all these disappear in an experience of transcendence. This mystical union of the personal and the universal can be read as the culmination of Emerson's philosophy. But although he was heavily influenced by Emerson, nowhere in *Interpreting Our Heritage* does Tilden use such mystical language himself. While Tilden's writing does occasionally evoke sentiments of awe, wonder, and personal transformation, those passages are absent of any reference to a metaphysical universality.

This is curious due to the fact that Tilden cites the very passage that serves as the philosophic foundation for Emerson's rapture. I revisit Tilden's quotation of this *locus classicus*, from the *Symposium*, but here I add his commentary that clarifies the divergence from Emerson.

"Love is something more than the desire of beauty; it is the instinct of immortality in a mortal creature ... He who has the instinct of true love, and can discern the relations of true beauty in every form, will go on from strength to

²⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, 10.

strength until at last the vision is revealed to him of a *single science*, and he will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty in the likeness of no human face or form, but absolute, simple, separate and everlasting....”

Now, I should be somewhat less than honest if I were to pretend that I understood in fullness what Socrates meant by the above. I rather think that Jowett, who so admirably translated the Platonic works, was himself occasionally puzzled. Maybe the Greeks had an intellectual slant that does not quite exist in the modern world. But I have the satisfying feeling that a tremendous truth is here involved.³⁰

The quotation of Socrates’ speech sketches the hierarchy on which Emerson’s mystical vision is based: an ascension from the many to the one, from the material world of variety and difference to the metaphysical principle of the simple form of beauty. But Tilden distances himself from any mystical interpretation of this passage. His claim to not fully understand could be read as a simple statement of humility, but the fact that he himself refers to “special” beauty as a manifestation of “general” beauty and that he cites several secondary sources on Plato in addition to directly citing the *Symposium* suggests that he is not simply at a loss.³¹ Rather, he downplays the mystical implications of the doctrine of ascension, suggesting that such ways of thinking may “not quite exist in the modern world.” In place of any clear doctrinal affirmation of this philosophy, as one finds in Emerson, Tilden claims a certain degree of ignorance and only a “feeling” of truth. Regarding any intense, emotive associations that one could make based on this Platonic doctrine, Tilden’s reserve is clear: “For the moment, I see in the quoted

³⁰ Plato, “Symposium,” 332-335, quoted in Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 94. See note 25 above.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

words of Diotima a curious likeness to the present stage, at least, of our interpretation, when it is good. We start from related or unrelated fact and strive toward a revealing generalization, but finally simplify again in the direction of a statement, or a projection of a feeling, that will satisfy any situation because it deals with some element of interest common to all our preservations and common to all visitor experience.”³² This is indeed a far cry from Emerson’s mystical appropriation of Platonic philosophy. And despite Tilden’s statement that such a philosophy of love lies at the center of his work, his explication of the concept displays a lack of any of the animating, vivifying language that characterizes his other examples of interpretation.

A return to an earlier reference to universality will clarify the positive elements that replace the metaphysical emphasis of Emerson. Tilden writes of great teachers who “by universality of mind instinctively went behind the body of information to project the soul of things.”³³ Note here that Tilden here associates “body” with a mental, linguistic phenomenon while “soul” refers to a physical reality. This reversal of traditional associations illustrates a value system in which the physical and the spiritual, while distinct, are not hierarchized in the same way as they are for Emerson. Tilden continues: “One of his pupils said of Dr. Bumpus: ‘He thoroughly enjoyed his stay upon this planet, which he found so full of a number of things ... And he enjoyed pointing out these things in a new light.... He never forgot that the *feeling* of an exhibit and the need for it to tell a story were quite as important as its factual truthfulness.”³⁴ Immediately after this reference to universality of mind, Tilden has placed a quote that celebrates the multiplicity of the world (“so full of a number of things”) and, mirroring his later substitution for a clear doctrine of metaphysical unity, emphasizes “the *feeling*” that interpretation may project. This “feeling” goes beyond intellection (“factual truthfulness”) to

³² *Ibid.*, 94.

³³ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Original emphasis.

embrace a wide range of mental experience (emotion, attitude, intuition, sense perception, etc.). Rather than emphasizing a unitive principle, as Emerson tends to do, Tilden argues that this broader experience requires that interpretation “tell a story.” Tilden here means that interpretation should draw visitors into another subject position and cause them to see through the eyes of the characters of the narrative. Such a shift in their subjectivity is itself contact with a spiritual reality. Tilden offers a quote to reinforce this point: “the soul of a landscape is a story, and the soul of a story is a personality.”³⁵ The emphasis on personality within the context of narrative shifts the focus away from union with an abstract universal and toward an experience of another particular subject. Further, this transposition of subjectivity occurs through contact with and interpretation of a material intermediary (in this case, a landscape), and links that material and the personality of the visitor under a conception of soul.³⁶

For Emerson, “It is the universal nature which gives worth to particular men and things.”³⁷ It is exactly here that Tilden moves away from Emerson. For Tilden, the universal is not a goal or a resting point, but rather a means through which

³⁵ Tilden attributes this quote to G. K. Chesterton. I have been unable to confirm this citation. Quoted in *ibid.*, 29.

³⁶ The stress on narrative also requires that interpreters be, in some sense, poets. *Ibid.*, 27. The rhetorical aim of the interpreter does not rest within any concept of art for art’s sake, however. Rather, rhetoric serves spirit: “The lifeblood of satisfying interpretation flows from the proper and ingenious use of exactly those devices of language that take the hearer or reader beyond the observed fact to, or at least toward, a certification of spirit. ‘I disbelieve,’ said Garth Wilkinson, in ringing tones that are fit to be engraved on the memory of every interpreter, ‘in what is called the severity, strictness and dryness of science ... We have found practically that metaphor is a sword of the spirit, and whenever a great truth is fixed, it is by some happy metaphor that it is willing to inhabit for a time: and again, that whenever a long controversy is ended, it is by one of the parties getting a hand on a metaphor whose blade burns with the runes of Truth.’” I have been unable to locate this citation from Wilkinson. Quoted in *ibid.*, 30.

³⁷ Emerson, *Collected Works*, Vol. 2, 4.

the visitor imaginatively enters into another particular consciousness. In *Interpreting Our Heritage*, no effort is spared to convince the reader that interpretation must appeal to the individual, particular experience of the visitor. Such an experience of transportation into another mind is the goal and not, as in Emerson, an illustration of the universality of the Divine Mind. This difference manifests even in the conception of universality itself, which in Tilden’s quotation of C. E. Merriam takes on a nationalist dimension:

“The underlying design is of course to set up a group of the living, the dead, and those who are yet unborn, a group of which the individual finds himself a part and of which he is in fact glad to count himself a member, and by virtue of that fact an individual of no mean importance in the world. All the great group victories he shares in; all the great men are his companions in the bonds of the group; all his sorrows are by construction his; all his hopes and dreams, realized and thwarted alike, are his. And thus he becomes although of humble status a great man, a member of a great group; and his humble life is thus tinged with a glory it might not otherwise ever hope to achieve. He is lifted beyond and above himself into higher worlds where he walks with all his great ancestors, one of an illustrious group whose blood is in his veins and whose domain and reputation he proudly bears.”³⁸

Such an experience of ethnic unity is absent from Emersonian conceptions of communion with higher reality. In this quotation

³⁸ C. E. Merriam, *The Making of Citizens* (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 1966), 166-167, quoted in Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 12.

the “higher worlds” include physical territory (“domain”), distinctive identity (“reputation”), and bodily kinship (“blood”). As Tilden promotes the imagination of the subjective experience available in the foreign eras or places being interpreted, Merriam’s view is much more amenable to Tilden’s emphases than is Emerson’s.

Tilden’s stress on interpretation as an act of animation echoes his particularistic philosophy. Tilden praises the contemporary researchers at Jamestown who, through exposing the physical contours of the site, “made it finally possible to people that little first settlement ... and give the ancient inhabitants flesh on their bones and blood in their veins.” The encounter with the particular, physical dimensions and details are meant to create an imaginative embodiment of the historical material at hand, as Tilden illustrates further with his appreciation of the “multitude of homely details that bring the [historical subjects] into touch with our own daily experience.” Tilden considers this imaginative exercise so crucial for interpretation that he raises subjective experience to an ontological status, at least metaphorically. He writes of one of his efforts at interpretation: “Charming as was that ancient ruin ... I found it almost impossible to make it real.” He contrasts this with a later visit to the site after it had undergone further excavation: “What a difference those bricks and those exposed walls made! Somebody had lived here; this was part of a town; it now had a being.” Through these and other examples, Tilden presents the effort to bring cultural and natural historical material to life as one that requires that visitors enter into the story of a place and experience it through the eyes of another.³⁹

While Tilden’s work clearly shifts the emphasis of Emerson’s personalism from an encounter with an abstract universal to an imaginative transportation into another particular subject, it would be a mistake to see these two as competing philosophical systems. They differ in emphasis and not substance. A more crucial difference, however, arises outside of

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

their conceptual tendencies. Tilden’s spiritual vision is, and I do not mean this in a pejorative way, vague: what he means by “universal” is never systematically elaborated, the elements of individual personality to which the interpreter appeals are, perhaps necessarily, evoked only anecdotally, and what constitutes “spiritual elevation” is likewise never expounded in a rigorous way. For all the relative lack of precision and clarity, however, it would be a mistake to say that this lack of articulation makes Tilden’s work “less” religious than a work that is more systematic and definitive in its use of religious language. Rather, I would argue that this vagueness is a crucial and distinctive element of the mode of religiosity in which Tilden’s work participates.

A clear adoption of a single religious system would be highly inappropriate for the exercise of educating state employees, and Tilden was certainly aware of this. Whether he felt constrained or not, the promotion of a spiritual vision of broad, expansive contours, one amenable to a range of competing or mutually exclusive viewpoints, was Tilden’s only option for religious expression in this context. But such breadth and lack of definition need not be seen simply as dilution. Rather, these features, through the trademarks of spirituality (personalism and an emphasis on experience) evoke religiosity within a context of pluralism. The key to this enterprise promoting personal spiritual experience in a national, public space rests on a strategy of implication, and here Tilden also makes comment.

In the final chapter of the 1967 revised edition, Tilden expounds on the concept of Beauty as a central principle for interpretation. In terms of the interpretation of nature, Tilden makes a distinction between “the visitor’s sensuous contact with scenic and landscape beauty” and “the beauty of the Adventure of the Mind: the revelation of the Order of Nature.”⁴⁰ Tilden argues that the former aspect of beauty cannot be interpreted, but

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

must be experienced through utterly personal and direct contact. Nevertheless, the interpreter does play an important role:

It is axiomatic that natural beauty, as perceived by the organs of the sense, needs no interpretation: it interprets itself. Here the interpreter acts only as a scout and a guide. He leads his groups to the most alluring scenes he has discovered, and is silent. Would you varnish the orchid? He refrains even from using the word “beauty.” To suggest that his visitors are to consider either the scene or the song of the hermit thrush as beautiful is even an affront. They *know*. In this aspect beauty is a precious personal possession. It is the individual’s shock, his apprehension, his discovery: and what he discovers is more than what he sees or hears. He has discovered something of himself, hitherto unrealized. No; we do not interpret this aspect of beauty. It is an exhibit.⁴¹

Although Tilden claims that natural beauty interprets itself, the very fact that the interpreter has led the visitor to a particular place indicates a certain formative role in shaping visitor experience. Furthermore, for the interpreter to fall silent in those particular places shows a powerful rhetorical technique. The interpreter has the floor, so to speak, and to lead visitors to a place and then fall silent may serve to focus visitor attention in distinctive ways. Tilden contends that this silence aids personal spiritual reflection on the part of visitors and may even suggest to them a sense of ownership. The selectivity and silence of the interpreter do not indicate an abandonment of interpretation, but rather the use of powerful interpretive tools.

These aspects of implication, that is, selectivity and a silence that encourages personal reflection, include a further

⁴¹ Ibid.

dimension suggested by the “they *know*,” the notion that visitors already know that a place is beautiful without being told. Earlier in *Interpreting Our Heritage* Tilden anticipates this claim when he writes “These Alpine peaks know how to speak for themselves, and they speak a language that the world of people shares.”⁴² Tilden here argues that visitors know a place is beautiful because that place speaks its beauty to them directly as individuals. This spiritual communication is thus both individualistic and universalistic: the apprehension of beauty is a “precious personal possession” and “a language that the world of people shares.” But one need not accept Tilden’s modified Transcendentalism to appreciate the effectiveness of interpretation’s use of religious and aesthetic modes that it does not provide itself. Scholars of Romanticism have noted that medieval and early modern Europeans did not regard mountains as places of beauty and personal spiritual fulfillment. Rather, mountains were seen as horrible, frightful, and dangerous places, as the German word for nightmare, *Alptraum*: “Alp-dream,” indicates to this day.⁴³ So whether visitors behold “Beauty” itself or they participate in the broad cultural stream of Romanticism that encourages them to encounter Alpine scenery as a place of sublime transcendence, interpretation need not make use of explicitly religious terms in order to facilitate a spiritual experience. Simply by leading visitors to typically Romantic scenery, falling silent, and letting the broader cultural environment do its work interpreters may imply a religious experience without invoking it specifically. Tilden recognizes the strategy of implication explicitly when he writes that interpretation “aims not to *do something* to the listener, but to *provoke the listener to do something to himself*.”⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., 85.

⁴³ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd edition (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967), 44-66; Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (New York: Norton, 1959), passim.

⁴⁴ Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 111. These sentiments, here expressed in the additional chapter of the 1967 edition, reemphasize Tilden’s fourth

Of course, a strategy of implication involves certain sacrifices in terms of efficiency. The interpreter cannot guarantee any particular kind of valuation of the park. This broad encouragement of spiritual experience may allow for visitors to interpret the park within a range of competing or mutually exclusive religious viewpoints. But what this religious endeavor lacks in terms of precision it may make up for in terms of volume. While some, perhaps most, visitors may slide over the spiritual implications that the interpreter attempts to provoke, a certain percentage are likely to find their religious predispositions stimulated to a significant degree. Furthermore, many who do not find themselves greatly moved may nevertheless experience slight and or subtle shifts in their attitudes towards the park, shifts that may take on a spiritual dimension. Given the tremendous number of visitors to national parks, interpreters need not start a religion in order to have an effect on religiosity in America. Whether stimulating a multitude of small movements, a small percentage of significant change in a large volume, or both, a broad strategy of spiritual implication may tap into certain religious potentials that are not accessible to more narrow approaches that demand a high level of commitment. The spiritual agenda that Tilden promotes thus suggests an economic logic, shaving religious capital off the edges of the mass of visitors and profiting from a vast repetition of minor spiritual exchanges. Here, too, Tilden is more explicit than one might expect.

principle of interpretation: "The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation." Ibid., 9. Further examples of Tilden's explicit recognition of a strategy of implication come in a chapter entitled "Nothing in Excess" where he exhorts interpreters to "cultivate the power that lies in understatement" (which of course requires that some kind of statement is already in evidence). Ibid., 80 et passim. Furthermore, this strategy of implication is bound up a certain degree of vagueness that Tilden finds acceptable. Tilden writes that general and brief references to "beauty" are appropriate, "For now you are establishing a mood, and the generalization, concerning which there would seldom be any disagreement, leaves the person free choice." Ibid., 85. As has been discussed above, given the cultural environment this free choice is likely to go in certain particular directions.

In the opening chapter of *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Tilden proposes a fundamental distinction: "For the consideration of the interpreter, I offer two brief concepts of Interpretation, one for his private contemplation, and the other for his contact with the public. First, for himself: Interpretation is the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact. The other is more correctly described as an admonition, perhaps: Interpretation should capitalize mere curiosity for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit."⁴⁵ As this article has shown, the first, "private" concept is actually included in interpretation meant for the public. Tilden's distinction would be nonsensical unless he meant that the revelation of truth should suffice, in and of itself, for the interpreter who is already motivated and well-advanced in the appreciation of the interpretive materials. But this is not true for the visitor, and here a closer reading of the distinction between these approaches is necessary.

This first concept operates on a binary of hidden/revealed, manifest/latent, surface/depth, etc. Interpretation is, simply, the revelation of truth for the sake of truth, and the interpreter either understands or does not, is either shallow or deep, knowledgeable or ignorant. Interpretation for the interpreter thus has two sides. The second, "public" concept brings in the notion of economy and gradation. Here interpretation should "capitalize" and enrich. It is revelation of truth expressed in the language of economic growth. Interpretation for the visitor should cause curiosity to grow, nurture religious potential, deepen spiritual awareness -- a logic that works not through a simple binary but along a scale or range. Interpreters and the audience thus stand in relation to one another as entrepreneur to enterprise or gardener to garden.

Tilden applies a similar logic to the interpretive resources themselves. Arguing against the notion that the sacrality of national parks ("the arks of our covenants") may require a complete restriction on their availability, Tilden writes

⁴⁵ Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 8.

“We can *use* these precious resources, so long as we do not *use them up*. Put it this way: We should not dissipate our capital, but we should zealously dispense the interest.”⁴⁶ The interest from such capital, in light of the previous quotation regarding visitors, would not simply be consumed, but rather invested. That interest would cause an increase in the spiritual growth of the visitor, perhaps modest in some cases, more dramatic in others. Both in relation to visitors and to material, therefore, Tilden makes use of an economic logic of spirituality.

* * *

In departing from Emerson, Tilden does not simply dilute the religious vision of Transcendentalism. Rather, Tilden’s retreat from a unitive metaphysical principle shifts his focus onto interpretation as an imaginative transportation into another time, place, and subject. It is this movement from particular to particular that Tilden recognizes as spiritual growth and expansion. But beyond this shift in the notion of personal relation to higher reality lies a perhaps more decisive difference: the form and definition of the religious vision itself. In presenting a religious agenda in a broad, flexible, and unsystematic exposition, in blurring the parameters within which spiritual reflection can take place, Tilden provides a framework for creating a sacred space amenable to the demands of a largely secular and pluralistic public environment. Such a model of interpretation works through a strategy of implication, tapping into broad cultural trends of individualism, Romanticism, and nationalism to further a religious program while avoiding the inappropriate assertion of an explicit doctrine. Finally, this strategy operates under a logic of gradation. Rather than trying to elicit a dramatic change of spiritual beliefs, a switch in religious affiliation, or a commitment to join a particular group, Tilden’s model of interpretation intends a broad encouragement of a loosely defined spiritual growth, thus sending shallow roots

⁴⁶ Ibid., 100.

across a broad plain and shooting occasional deep roots where the soil is more favorable.

Tilden’s agenda for interpretation presents a nexus of spirituality, nature, and the state. Current work on spirituality, and particularly nature spirituality, has had little to say about the possible role of state institutions. Likewise, studies of civil religion have not discussed the place of spirituality in any nationalist enterprise. This essay suggests that the broad, loosely defined, personalistic, and experiential religious mode of spirituality may serve to create, in subtle but wide-ranging ways, religious attachments among private individuals and public spaces. The promotion of a spiritual love of country here takes on literal dimensions.