Tilden's Tildes

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First published in 1957, subsequently republished in newer editions, and recently published in Polish as *Interpretacja dziedzictwa* (2019),[1] *Interpreting Our Heritage* by the American mentor and philosopher Freeman Tilden (1893-1980) is a classic study in heritology. It is a relatively new discipline that is also called cultural heritage studies.[2]

Commissioned by the American National Park Service, a thriving institution that had been operating for 40 years and was still developing its operating principles at the time, Tilden's book was a direct result of months of traveling to American national parks and museums.[3] For over half a century, it has set standards in providing guiding services in the United States; the famous six principles of interpretation proposed by Tilden are also used in Europe, including Poland.

Tilden's extraordinary work it is not a traditional textbook for guides and national heritage agencies. Written by an expert in rhetoric, it is a superb book. "I am not a museum expert, and if it were left to me to create a whole museum, I fear I should make sad work of it," Tilden writes in the book. However, since he was a professional journalist, writer, and playwright, we must take this observation with a grain of salt. "But I do feel sure that I am right about establishing the mood and the stance" (p. 88). He considered himself to be an "enthusiastic amateur scholar" of history, including natural history, that is a person who is "the personification of happiness because [he] do[es] what [he] lov[es]" (p. 95).

As the title suggests, this article is meant to be a more or less ordered collection of readerly aberrations and approximations concerning Freeman Tilden's *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Since this article also includes certain mental abbreviations and approximations, I have referred to the tilde.

Interpretation

Tilden states that "[t]his book results from a study of Interpretation as practiced in the many and diverse cultural preserves [...] and from an inquiry as to whether there is such a philosophy, whether there are such basic principles, upon which the interpreter may proceed" (p. 4).

Tilden gives the reader a number of definitions of what he means by interpretation. He notes in the opening sentence of the book that "the word interpretation as used in this book refers to a public service that has so recently come into our cultural world that a resort to the dictionary

[1] Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1977). All quotes come from this edition.

[2] Whose object of study changes constantly: Kowalski notes that as early as at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the term "heritage" meant only material monuments and belonged to the field of art history. Books in the field of heritology were in fact books about conservation. See: Krzysztof Kowalski, *O istocie dziedzictwa europejskiego – rozważania* [On the essence of European heritage – reflections], *Heritologia* series, vol. 3 (Krakow: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, 2013).

[3] Michał Kępski, "Wprowadzenie", in: Tilden, *Interpretacja dziedzictwa* [Polish translation: Poznań: Centrum Turystyki Kulturowej TRAKT, 2019, 19-20.

for a competent definition is fruitless" (p. 3). These words were first published more than 60 years ago. Today, of course, the appropriate definition exists. The popular dictionary of contemporary American English, The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, right after "explanation" and "adaptation, method, or style," provides the following definition of the word "interpretation:" "A teaching technique that combines factual with stimulating explanatory information."[4]

In probably the most universal approximation, Tilden calls interpretation "revelation based on information" (p. 9). He further explains interpretation is meant to convey to the people "something of the beauty and wonder, the inspiration and spiritual meaning that lie behind what the visitor can with his senses perceive" (p. 3-4). This clearly means that, in Tilden's view, a unique personal experience that the interpreter wants to share with others constitutes an important element of interpretation. More specifically, it is an aesthetic experience. Tilden writes that he "sometimes wonder[s] whether almost all of what we are trying to interpret does not fall, at last, into this realm of the aesthetic, in- and out-of-doors. Following this thought, the sod house of the Dakota settlers becomes not merely a bit of social history, but something beautiful, because Man used to full purpose that which he found of the materials at hand" (p. 87). Let us not forget about this mention of "purposeful" beauty; I will come back to it in a moment.

Listing various objects of interpretation, "the national parks and monuments, the state and municipal parks, battlefield areas, historic houses publicly or privately owned, museums great and small" (p. 3), "primitive parks, the unspoiled seashore, archaeological ruins, battle-fields, zoological and botanical gardens, historic preservations" (p. 13), Tilden distinguishes between works of nature and products of culture, but he also notes that "in every wildlife reserve a certain historical context can be found" (p. 60). To some extent, he tries to transform the works of nature into artifacts or perhaps he tries to see them as artifacts. In this sense, heritage, as interpreted by Tilden, may be seen as a collection of cultural constructs or, indeed, as a collection of texts. Consequently, I would like to analyze his theory of interpretation in the wider context of other theories of interpretation, for example, those found in literary studies. To some extent, such an interpretative practice is legitimized by Tilden himself, who compares visiting monuments with reading a novel: "The visitor is unlikely to respond unless what you have to tell, or to show, touches his personal experience, thoughts, hopes, way of life, social position, or whatever else. [...] When a person reads a novel or sees a play, he instinctively measures the fictional behaviour against what he imagines his own character and conduct, under such circumstances, would be" (p. 13).

Tilden is also fully aware of the power of language: "The driving force of effective interpretation is appropriate and ingenious drawing on linguistic means that will move the recipient beyond facts, towards the experience of their spiritual dimension" (p. 15). Indeed, interpretation works if it makes use of apt metaphors.

So, why should we not analyze Tilden's concepts using literary methodology?

According to Tilden, interpretation is 1. discovering and 2. conveying the meaning of artifacts and monuments, also from the domain of natural history, based on a strongly essentialist assumption that such a meaning exists. Therefore, Tilden's interpretative practice involves two stages:

[4] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interpretation, date of access: 30 Oct. 2019.

1. reading (in its unique sense) and
2. creating an informative and stimulating story for the person that interacts with the object of interpretation.

When read against the background of twentieth-century literary theories, Tilden's concept of interpretation seems surprisingly novel.

Intention

In the classic Tanner Lectures on Human Values (1990), Umberto Eco, distinguishing between the intention of the author, the intention of the text and the intention of the reader, stated that the interpreter should reconstruct the intention, the meaning-making mechanism, of the text itself.[5] What the interpreter is looking for is offered to him by the text itself; the text, by the virtue of its coherence, answers the question about its meaning and interpretation. Such an approach was obviously not a new one; it was rather a defensive gesture on behalf of Eco, intended to protect the text from the theory of deconstruction, which also focused on the intention of the text, although referring to it by a different name. The object of interpretation was defined by the most important theoretical schools of the twentieth century, including Russian formalists, structuralists, semioticians (such as Eco), and, in my opinion, twentieth-century hermeneuts would agree with such an approach.

Eco warned against misusing the notion of the intention (i.e. focusing on the author's intention, *intentio auctoris*, as exemplified by the age-old question "What did the author mean?") and imposing on the text the intention of the reader (*intentio lectoris*).

However, it seems that Tilden advises the interpreter to do the latter and focus on his own intention and convincingly present the object of interpretation in such a light so that it can move the audience. According to Eco, this would be a mistake, a manipulation, an overinterpretation, an (ab)use of text. But the theory of Tilden, who was also a fan of Emerson, coincides with American pragmatism, especially with how interpretation operates according to the neopragmatist Richard Rorty. Rorty argues that a given text provides stimuli by which the reader may more or less easily convince himself or others that what he wanted to say about it from the very beginning is true:

> Reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens. [...] It may be so exciting and convincing that one has the illusion that one now sees what a certain text is really about. But what excites and convinces is a function of the needs and purposes of those who are being excited and convinced.[6]

For Tilden, as for Rorty, the intention of the interpreter-reader is the most important. The utilitarianism of Tilden's *intentio interpretis*, however, is unique: it is strongly directed at the recipient of the interpretation, and its "[...] real goal [...] is to stimulate the reader or hearer

[5] Umberto Eco, "Overinterpreting texts", in: Umberto Eco, Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, Christine Brooks-Rose, *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1992).

[6] Richard Rorty, "The Pragmatist's progress," in: Umberto Eco, Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, Christine Brooks-Rose, *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, 105. Translated into Polish by Janusz Grygieńć, Sergiusz Tokariew: Richard Rorty, "Ścieżka Pragmatysty: Umberto Eco o interpretacji", in: Richard Rorty, *Filozofia a nadzieja na lepsze społeczeństwo* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2013). See also: Tomasz Umerle, *Trocki – storczyki – literatura. Miejsce literatury w (auto)biografii intelektualnej Richarda Rorty'ego* (Warsaw: IBL, 2015) to learn more about the impact of Rorty's text on Polish literary studies.

toward a desire to widen his horizon of interests and knowledge, and to gain an understanding of the greater truths that lie behind any statements of fact" (p. 33).

As a pragmatist ("all anybody ever does with anything is use it. Interpreting something, knowing it, penetrating to its essence, and so on are all just various ways of describing some process of putting it into work"[7]), Rorty would not accept such a dualistic, Platonic, division into appearances and reality, surface and depth.

Uses

The visitors, the addressees of the interpretative activity, are perceived by Tilden as an egalitarian community and treated as intelligent non-experts who should be inspired to seek knowledge on their own. Such an egalitarian approach is not particularly popular in literary studies. One of the few similar publications on this subject is Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature* (2006). Felski writes that "ordinary" and professional readers are not separated by an unbridgeable gap, stating that there are four forms of "textual engagement," including recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock, which they share:

> *In the following pages, I propose* that reading involves a logic of **recognition**; that aesthetic experience has analogies with **enchantment** in a supposedly disenchanted age; that literature creates distinctive configurations of social **knowledge**; that we may value the experience of being **shocked** by what we read. These four categories epitomize what I call modes of textual engagement: they neither intrinsic literary properties nor independent psychological states, but denote multi-levelled interactions between texts and readers [...].[8]

I would like to use Felski's four categories to further characterize Tilden's concept in relation to the first "reading" stage of how he interprets material heritage.

Tilden's category of "participation" is conceived of in terms of a direct physical experience that opens visitors to an understanding of natural and human history, "bringing the past to the present, for the stimulation of our visitors" (p. 77). It is in some respects very similar to Felski's "recognition:" "What does it mean to recognize oneself in a book? This experience seems at once utterly mundane yet singularly mysterious. While turning a page, I am arrested by a compelling description, a constellation of events, a conversation between characters, an internal monologue. Suddenly and without warning, a flash of connection leaps across the gap between text and reader" (p. 32). According to Tilden, "participation" leads one to the moment of recognition, which provides an insight into a deeper reality and endows one with a sense of belonging and understanding one's place in the world. Visitors may experience it and the interpreter *must* experience it in order to be able to transform his experience into a convincing narrative that will inspire the audience. This is also a moment, and Tilden states so openly, that brings one joy. Felski would probably refer to such a state as "enchantment," i.e. a state of "intense involvement, a sense of being so entirely caught up in an aesthetic object that that nothing else seems to matter" (p. 63). Tilden openly writes about admiration, especially one inspired by nature, while

[7] Rorty, "The Pragmatist's progress," 93.

[8] Rita Felski, *Uses of literature* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), s. 24.

warning the interpreter against using sophisticated words: "If we are showing the majesty of the Teton Range, we must not do or say anything that would make a toy of this experience. These Alpine peaks know how to speak for themselves, and they speak a language that the world of people shares" (p. 84-85). He further adds that "[a]n object, whether a mountain, a lake, a crystal, a Chippendale or an heroic act, is not made more beautiful by being called beautiful" (p. 85).

Beauty, as I have already mentioned, can result from a purposeful use of a given object, but it can also be an immanent property that will influence the viewer on its own:

> If I were arranging a museum, whether of minerals or other things, I think I should have the visitor see, as he enters, one beautiful, unlabeled thing. If it is surpassingly lovely of its sort, it is of no consequence, at the moment, what its specific name may be. Anyone who wishes to know later will be informed. I would have ample space around it, so that nothing could jostle for supremacy. (p. 87-88)

Tilden advises the reader to share knowledge, which coincides with Felski's third reading category, very carefully: excess information leads to disorientation and interpretation is not about imparting dry facts. Shock, anxiety, and horror play an even smaller role in Tilden's book. In Tilden's view, the principle of pleasure is more important. Still, he acknowledges the fact that recognition, insight into deeper reality, and spiritual elation, similarly to the experience of shock, also move the viewer. Tilden does not really write about "problematic" history; he only briefly mentions the American Civil War; I also found one discreet allusion to slavery. The lot of Native Americans is not addressed at all.

Because Tilden's book is extremely affirmative: "I wish to [...] share mainly positive inspirations and constructive thoughts" (p. 88), I must admit that passion and genuine enthusiasm are shared by the reader.

It is also a humanistic book at its core. In my opinion, Michał Kępski rightly points out in the introduction to the Polish edition of the book that Tilden "interprets nature in a deeply humanistic manner." Because, while Tilden is clearly motivated by his concern for the national heritage, its proper display, and preservation, he is probably even more motivated by his concern for his fellow human being, the visitor who is trying to understand this heritage. Tilden says that the interpreter's task is to guide "[visitors] toward the larger aspects of things that lead toward wisdom and toward the consolations that come from a sense of living in a natural world and a historic continuity that 'make sense'" (p. 36).

I would like to stress the importance of "making sense." Indeed, sense, understood as "the greater truths that lie behind any statements of fact" and the concept of the "whole" are also very important for Tilden:

> Of all the words in our English language, none is more beautiful and significant than the word "whole." In the beginning it meant "healthy." [...]A cardinal purpose of Interpretation, it seems to me, is to present a whole rather than a part, no matter how interesting the specific part may be. (p. 45)

Tilden calls the interpreter "the middleman of happiness." The notion of happiness in Tilden's book is truly captivating for the reader. Tilden stresses the relationship between visiting heritage sites and experiencing happiness:

> [...] the finest uses of national parks, or indeed of any of the preserves that come within the range of interpretive work, lie ultimately in spiritual uplift. This end cannot be reached except through a walk with beauty of some aspect. (. 88)

One may wonder whether by referring to the interpreter as "the middleman of happiness," who will help the visitor feel that he is a part of history, "bring to life [his] hidden capacities for happiness" and "find his place in nature and among men—not excluding remote men" (p. 34), Tilden does not refer to the intention of the author, as if moving from museology to metaphysics. We may also wonder whether Tilden's holistic approach is not a manifestation of his Christian faith, which is present in the entire book, albeit very discreetly, indeed, almost imperceptibly. It is probably not by accident that on page 5 Tilden mentions Jesus when he writes about the fact that all great teachers were at the same time interpreters (Tilden refers to a quote from someone else's text at this point). But at the same time, Tilden warns that one should "never give the nail that last tap" (p. 78) in the process of interpretation. He observes that

> "Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection."
> I would have every interpreter, everywhere, recite this to himself frequently almost 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 natural and manmade treasures. He that understands will not wilfully deface, for when he truly understands, he knows that it is in some degree a part of himself. (p. 38)

translated by Agnieszka Kocznur

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KEYWORDS

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Abstract:
The article focuses on the concept of interpreting national heritage developed by by Freeman Tilden in his classic work *Interpreting Our Heritage* (1957), which is discussed in the wider critical context of literary interpretations developed by Richard Rorty in *The Pragmatist's Progress* and Rita Felski in *Uses of Literature*.

FREEMAN TILDMEN

Theory of interpretation

Umberto Eco

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