

IN TILLEY'S GARDEN: TRANSCENDENTAL EXPERIENCES



reflections on the work of Christopher Yates Tilley 4

This is Part 4 of a reflection upon the works of Chris Tilley, prompted by his too-early death in March 2024.

I want to do justice to the range and depth, the significance of his work in anthropology and archaeology. My reflections are based on memories, close collaboration, and deep reading of all his writing. His work, now finished, deserves close attention because it deals with matters of wide concern and in such a sophisticated way, dedicated to careful consideration – relationships with environment; respect and acknowledgement of diverse voices; developing secure foundations of knowledge, in experience, modes of engagement with the world, representation and report.

What follows is not an exposition of his ideas but a reflection upon them, something of an exchange of ideas as I unpack how I react. I do look back with

hindsight and wish that the conversation that ended when we parted ways in 1993 had continued. I disagree with much of what Chris came to stand for. I do not think he has the answers. But he always got me to think more carefully.

Part 1 is about our collaboration at Cambridge, two academics provoked to set things right.

In Tilley's Garden: a Summer Long Ago [Link]

Part 2 presents some allegorical associations in something of a play with the mythmaking that I find quite endearing in Tilley's anthropological archaeology.

Mythographic Triptych (annotated) [Link]

Part 3 is based on reading his work since we parted ways in 1993. I offer sketches of some personae in his scenario of experiencing landscape, and some features of a concept map within which his oeuvre might be situated.

In Tilley's Garden: Figures in a Landscape – [Link]

Part 4 is a celebration of Tilley's humanism – valuing individual experience and autonomy, grounding in empirics and critical thinking, focus on life and presence, environmental secularism. I find his humanism most considered, even profound. I think this is what he left in most of us, certainly those friends, family, colleagues, students whom I have heard react to his death – quite a passion for life and the qualities of things.

In Tilley's Garden: Transcendental Experiences – [this post]

The times I spent with Chris Tilley and their memories, the rereadings of his writings overflow with his reflections and judgements. Irreducible. Chris always made me think more deeply about things that matter. In the end, I choose to find a vital affirmation of life in his work.

Tilley's transcendental phenomenology – the fundamental impasse

Tilley largely followed Merleau-Ponty in his phenomenology, with the human body as the primary site of knowing the world, an inseparable mind-body, not just existing in the world but actively participating in its creation through perception, active engagement. This runs to other humans – we understand each other through the same

perceptual, cognitive, and sensory apparatuses, shared intersubjectivity. The door is opened thereby for the lived body to be a conduit of intersubjective understanding, even across time, bridging present and prehistory.

We walk in their footsteps. We dig in the ruins. Vestiges and traces.

Active engagement – Tilley expresses an extraordinary faith in the validity of personal experience. This has many positive resonances and strikes harmonies in contemporary social and political thought and praxis – “trust in experience”. At the same time our sensory, evaluative and cognitive capacities are, in Merleau-Ponty’s “phenomenal field”, largely pre-reflective – Tilley followed this line. There are two associated, though separable, consequences. First, we might be suspicious of words, images, media, because they seem to challenge the immediacy of experience, compromising mindfulness of our being-in-the-world. Tilley holds that we must return “to the things themselves”, an old slogan of phenomenologist Husserl. Text, imagery, numbers are all derivative abstractions and an unstable foundation for knowledge. Second, human experience is not of an objective separate reality, but is of flux, uncertainty, regeneration, a world in constant becoming in and through experience.

A fundamental long-recognized impasse is that pre-reflective experience is on this definition immediate, unmediated, ineffable, inexpressible.

In the end then, there is an existential cul-de-sac, an aporia, no way through. Gnostic presence, being there, is ineffable. One’s own. One might exhort others to join in co-presence, but with only the assertion that similar bodies will make similar experiences. One can only tell about the communion and reverie, indirectly. And this is what he did – write reports that *witness* his direct communion without representing the experience, because he couldn’t. This is why it can be called gnostic presence. And so he didn’t really try to experiment with different media and modes of re-presentation.

Did Chris actually get back to the things themselves? Does it matter?

Tilley’s ataraxia – a celebration of life

Rather than accept this melancholy, Tilley celebrates it as the human condition. He exhorts others to follow, and have faith in the flow of life experience. He

castigates others for their false idols of received teachings and faith in abstract, institutionalized, and mediated knowledge.

With a combative style, Tilley sometimes seems to set himself up as part of a gnostic priesthood who can be present to the real. He held to a platonic separation of the real and the represented, ironic in its professed materialism, about which he was quite clear and accepting. Did he have in mind the figure of the philosopher-king? – now a phenomenologist who knows how to see into reality, in contrast to the majority who will remain fooled by illusions.

My own perspective now on Chris, necessarily partial, memory bound, relying since 1993 only on his writings, is flawed. I see no need or possibility of an objective judgement of his work. What am I left with? He was skeptical of too-easy answers delivered by institutional authority and reached out to everyone with infectious energy in an open invitation to seek authentic vital experience together. This is how I choose to remember Chris.

Tilley's was the garden of Lucretius. We are part of the flux of all things, ever in becoming, past-present, experiencing. Be present to the flux and change and then *ataraxia*, balanced contentment in the imperfect and incomplete, life-affirming, will follow.

Tilley speaks of the living and the dead

Tilley says:

You need to be here.

You need to move.

Take in the view, take it *all* in – sights, sounds, scents, touchings – synaesthesia.

Don't be distracted by what you have read and what you have been told – these are abstractions from the real.

Isn't this a land of marvels? Did you notice that? It's a metaphor, an affinity, connection, association.

They, back then, would have noticed. They were present, aware, and sensitive.

And so may we be – we can share presence, be copresent, because we share the same corporeality, body before culture, before words and images, before time and history, body-one-with-world.

Imagine the processions, the gatherings at the monument, the perambulation from rock to rock, image to image, associations appreciated between ship, shoe, and elk.

A pebble beach in the sky.

Pause.

And then Tilley says:

This is the way it was – and I am making it all up.



There are only ever pre-historic vestiges. Nämforsen 1988.