"Ways of seeing"

Reflections on Alastair McIntosh's *Poacher's Pilgrimage: An Island Journey*[1]

Richard Foggo

richardfoggo@gmail.com

In every work of genius we recognise our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Ralph Waldo Emerson

A friend listens after the stranger. In listening, he follows the departed and thus becomes himself a wanderer. Martin Heidegger

If, below the level of consciousness, our imagination is at work tidying up the chaos of sense experience, at a different level it may, as it were, untidy it again. Mary Warnock

Sometimes a book comes to you at just the right time, a gift providing more than mere facts or entertainment[2]. Like a *lens* through which things are brought more sharply into focus and *seen* aright. One might call this gift *'insight'*. One should treasure any book that gives true insight. Alastair McIntosh's wonderful new book *Poacher's Pilgrimage* is just such a treasure. As many of its reviewers have remarked[3], there is no one thing that this rich, evocative account of the author's 12 day trek across the main islands of the Hebrides, from the far south of Harris to the very northernmost tip of Lewis, is *about*; no one insight that this book *gives*. There is a superficial sense in which this is true. This is a broad-ranging and complex book. It might be described as a series of reflections on the life and culture of the Hebrides; on religion and spirituality, not least the connection between distinctively Celtic forms of Christianity, expressed primordially in and through the Gaelic language, and those

[1] Alastair McIntosh, *Poacher's Pilgrimage: An Island Journey* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2016). References within text are to *Poacher's Pilgrimage*. I am extremely grateful to Alastair McIntosh for the time he took to comment on this essay. It has been improved significantly by his generous comments, any weakness that remains is mine alone.

[2] I was very pleased to receive a copy of Alastair McIntosh's *Poacher's Pilgrimage* as a gift from my friend and teacher John Sturrock. To think is to thank. What follows is my way of thanking John for this gift, which has led me to think.

[3] Including David Robinson, "Pilgrimage of Grace", Scotsman, 18 August 2016; John Sturrock, Scottish Legal News, 5 August 2016.

more recent forms tied to Rome and Geneva; on war and peace and the author's fascinating role as a deeply spiritual Quaker teaching non-violence at military college. The list could go on. It's an eclectic book, as McIntosh himself says, 'immersed in *God*, *war* and *faeries*' (p.233)[4].

Whatever value one might find in what follows, anyone yet to read *Poacher's Pilgrimage* should rest assured, in so doing they will learn a great deal. But its value doesn't lie merely in its impressive mastery of a broad and complex range of issues. I found myself quite deeply affected by *Poacher's Pilgrimage*, affected in a way that not even being a sucker for scholarly virtuosity can quite explain. I was not so much impressed as *moved* or *stirred*. Not a bluntly emotional reaction as if surprised or shocked, but as I stated at the outset, a more nuanced and contentful experience of a *bringing into focus* or, perhaps better, a *being brought into focus*. That's not been true of a book for some time, which led me to be curious about the qualities of this particular book – and consequently books in general - that might justify such a response. Why and how can books *matter? Why* this book? *How* in general?

If not by being a series of informative reflections on important themes, what is the source of the affective power of *Poacher's Pilgrimage*? An obvious starting point is to look beyond content to form and style. *Poacher's Pilgrimage* has a rather fragmented or, better, fragmentary form. In the space of a page or even a paragraph the focus of the text shifts (effortlessly) between deeply subjective, almost confessional, autobiography to reflections on the grand themes of 'space and time and consciousness' (p.xvi). This to-ing and fro-ing feels very much like being let in on a *conversation*. Not the various conversations McIntosh recounts in the book with some of the wonderful Hebrideans he encounters - the formidable Morag McLeod or John MacAulay or arch-atheist Dr Finlay - but rather the conversation McIntosh is having with himself in writing the book, and, critically, attempting to have with us, his readers. As McIntosh says:

> Ever since, the walk has kept on walking in my mind, and this chronicle describes the action, but as deepened by seven years of subsequent reflection. (p.xv)

It is the conversation that emerged from the subsequent reflection that is doing the deep work here. In reflecting through writing, McIntosh uncovers layers of unnoticed significance and meaning in the already rich experiences he had over those 12 days. There is an endlessness to this *archaeology* of meaning – it is not clear that McIntosh will ever feel he has said all there is to say about his Hebridean pilgrimage. This shows itself in how we find perspective and triangulation at play in *Poacher's Pilgrimage* as much as statements of certainty and settled fact. We get a very real sense that McIntosh doesn't entirely know where he is going and where he might end up.

---

[4] As an addendum to the "official blurb" on his website McIntosh describes the book as "woven through the walk is a study of war and nonviolence in our times from first hand experiences, J.M. Barrie's use of Hebridean faerie lore to explore war trauma, island spiritual experience and Christian theology for the future, human ecology and climate change, Celtic mythology and some implications for space, time and consciousness, and the development of what I call 'an ecology of the imagination'"
http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/poacherspilgrimage/index.htm

> I seek the source, but, more and more, it eludes me. There is no single point of source. (p.116)

This is of course intended to signify as much a fact about McIntosh the author of a book, seven years hard toil in the writing, as McIntosh the pilgrim walking across the difficult terrain of the Hebrides. The trek across Harris and Lewis was neither easy nor did it ever quite turn out as planned. McIntosh writes a book with a very open, conversational style which at times challenges the idea of settled meaning and authorial privilege. One does not and perhaps even should not know where the best conversations will end and many will contain false steps, and surprises[5]. McIntosh's style, which is full as much of questions and self-doubt as answers and fact, displays an *openness* and *humility* that invites the reader *in*.

The deep point here is that the style of writing in *Poacher's Pilgrimage* matches and mirrors the very subject of the book. And it is in this deeply *reflexive* – self-referential - moment where, for me, the book's real value lies and where we may glimpse the basis on which it might distinctively and deeply *affect* its readers. By 'reflexive' I mean that themes are not simply described, *as if from a distance or from the outside*, but rather they are *exemplified* or *embodied*[6] *in* and *by* the very text itself. The most obvious example of this reflexive quality is the sense that in reading its 285 pages one may very well feel (as I did), despite not having taken a single step[7], that one has undertaken one's very own *pilgrimage*, a spiritual journey or *immram*[8] (p.18).

McIntosh quotes the great Welsh poet R.S. Thomas, talking of an abandoned chapel: 'people are becoming pilgrims again, if not to this place, then to the recreation of it in their own spirit'. McIntosh goes on in his own words: 'there's something stirring in a lot of us that feels the urge to place that compass on the map, to let the needle swing – the wider and the wilder, the better' (p.xvi). Perhaps here then is the *stirring* I felt in reading *Poacher's Pilgrimage*; the recreation of it *in my own spirit*?

In a way that I will say more about, this is a book that risks bringing to life, or better, bringing *back* to life the very idea of *reading* – from the skim and cursory glance, perhaps ever more typical of busy urban life, to something slower and more spiritual, more suited to the wilder, more remote landscapes at issue[9]. Not just the rugged landscapes of the great outdoors but also those inside the mind. It must strike the reader as odd then, in a book so obviously about 'the great outdoors', for McIntosh to say: 'I felt my quest was to explore the mind' (p.18). But for McIntosh there is no exploring one without exploration of the other. The land is shaped by consciousness, just as consciousness is shaped by the land; as

---

[5] For rules of conversation – flouting Grice's maxims - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooperative_principle

[6] For more on "performative reflexivity" see David Wood, *Philosophy at the Limit* (London: Routledge, 1990)

[7] I read *Poacher's Pilgrimage* while on holiday in Tuscany. I remained largely still in the unforgiving Tuscan sun.

[8] "I felt my quest was to explore the mind, but as an *immram* or *iorram* – a word that literally means a 'rowing'. It was used by the Irish monks to describe a pilgrim voyage, usually without a destination, and often with a tendency to slide towards the Otherworld."

[9] In bringing back to life the very idea of reading there is of course implied a bringing back to life of a corresponding form of writing.

McIntosh puts it: '. . . psychology that contours to the landscape, or landscape that contours the psychology' (p.16).

We get a very powerful sense in reading *Poacher's Pilgrimage* of the living spirit of the land and people encountered but also equally of the living spirit of Alastair McIntosh. Such sacred spirit is given a name in *Poacher's Pilgrimage*:

> The *sì* or *sìth*: that twinkling sense of living laughing spirit danced through nature. (p.111)

What greater prescription might there be for life than this? What greater purpose might there be for any book than to seek to (re)create such a *twinkling sense of living* in others? *Praised be that good, unruly spirit, which comes like a hurricane* [10].

> Let us dance *deiseil* around one another . . . (p.235)

We get a clear insight through reading *Poacher's Pilgrimage* of what it might be to become *sìth*, to move beyond a superficial relationship to what we find around us, but instead to learn to *read* the land and in so doing read ourselves. Reading is seeing, but it is more than mere seeing, more than taking at face value; *it is to find meaning in that which we see*. It requires that we invest ourselves, project ourselves outward so that we find ourselves, in the act of reading, somewhere *between mind and world*, the purely inner and the outer[11].

Although consciousness is essentially shaped in this way, conscious recognition – self-consciousness - of the intertwining – *chiasma* - of land and spirit is an achievement increasingly lost to those too busy or bored to notice it[12]. An abiding lesson of *Poacher's Pilgrimage* is that achieving this deeper form of consciousness, a consciousness replete with meaning, is not a *given*; it is a struggle that so much of the modern world seems designed to keep us from. In this way, McIntosh follows in the tradition of Marxist and subsequently Freudian theory in supposing that our everyday consciousness, shaped by the power dynamics of our culture and polity, inclines toward a *false consciousness*. There is in the everyday a tendency to 'limit down reality' (p.208), to suppress the twinkling sense of living.

---

[10] I cannot but think of Nietzsche here: "Be like the wind when it rushes forth from its mountain-caves: to its own piping will it dance; the seas tremble and leap under its footsteps. That which gives wings to assess, that which milks the lionesses: Praised be that good, unruly spirit, which comes like a hurricane… Praised be this spirit of all free spirits, the laughing storm, which blows dust into the eyes of all the dark-sighted and melancholic! You higher men, the worst thing in you is that you have, none of you, learned to dance as you ought to dance—to dance beyond yourselves! What does it matter that you have failed? How many things are still possible! So learn to laugh beyond yourselves! Lift up your hearts, you good dancers, high! higher! And do not forget good laughter!" Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, On Higher Men

[11] 'Gaelic tradition implies that the distinction between wilderness and humanised space is mirrored in the human psyche. The sìthean – the encapsulation of wildness personified – is, he suggests, 'a metaphor of the imagination' (p.149). This is at the heart of the dilemma of philosophical *idealism* in which the subject and object find expression together in consciousness, in a way that does not reduce one to the other, in particular reduce the object to a fantasy of the subject. *Esse is Percipi*.

[12] Boredom like that captured in the profoundly depressing anecdote in *Poacher's Pilgrimage* of the Arabic brothers playing with matches in the Intercontinental Hotel in Geneva (p.xviii)

While there are general truths here – as I shall develop – McIntosh's interests are not so directly philosophical. In *Poacher's Pilgrimage* such truths as can be found in this vicinity are profoundly historically and culturally situated. In a way that is intended to resonate with my description above of the depth of meaning McIntosh drew on in writing *Poacher's Pilgrimage*, the meaning that the world has to offer is not a simple nor indeed single thing. For one thing, meaning is very often *condensed*, *coalesced* around people, things and places (not least, for McIntosh, around the sheilings, temples and wells of the Hebrides). In an exchange with his friend the atheist Dr Finlay of Shawbost[13] at *Teampall Eòin* – a holy place dedicated to John the Baptist – we find McIntosh reflecting on the complexity of meaning:

> What we can see today will rest on layers and layers of what was there before. Layers and layers of meaning and interpretation, that say different things to many different people.
>
> 'Layers and layers and layers,' he muses. [. . .]
>
> 'Sometimes in these places, all that's left are the places themselves.' The history has otherwise all gone. 'We'll never get to the bottom of it all. Never at all.'
>
> What matters, he suggests to me, is what comes into the mind. The imaginative possibilities. 'The layers of stories that we weave through time and how these speak to us today.' (pp.237-8)

Just as McIntosh the geologist recognises the sedimented layers in the Hebridean rocks around him, McIntosh the writer recognises the *sedimentation of meaning* in things, places and in particular words. Our words shape our consciousness, so much so that a limitation in language can be a limitation in awareness. *We see what we say, not say what we see*[14]. So our tendency to limit down reality is reflected in how we *choose* to talk about things; how, indeed, we are *able* to talk about things. When later in *Poacher's Pilgrimage* McIntosh reflects back on the conversation with Finlay at *Teampall Eòin*, rather like a semantic archaeologist, he provides a linguisto-geological explication that demonstrates a great deal about how we risk limiting down reality through a poverty of linguistic imagination:

> My next destination, *Teampall nan Crò Naomh*, is usually translated, rather squarely, as Holy Cross Church. But this misses out on Doctor Finlay's 'layers and layers of meaning and interpretation'. *Naomh* means sacred, consecrated, or held in sanctuary, so 'holy' is good enough. Normally, however, the Gaelic for cross is

[13] It is worth noting the way McIntosh acknowledges the wisdom of those he meets – the Elders and the Sages. These are typically practical people, but whose "qualities of presence speak as deeply as their purely technical skills" 206. This openness to the practical and philosophical wisdom of others is something that will come to matter as the argument of this essay unfolds.

[14] This expression is found in Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) trans., Theodore Kisiel. It is also a notion that finds expression in John Berger : "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled." John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972).

> *crois*. But *crò* has in fact a much wider semantic range. It suggests enclosure. A circle, a needle's eye, a cattle fold, a hut-lie cell and even, the heart and the blood that circulates. (p.258)

Who could imagine that in the tiny, simple word *crò* there is so much to hear? We might think of *Poacher's Pilgrimage* as seeking to take the limits off reality and encourage us toward a 'wider semantic range' in all things. I shall come on to talk about how one widens one's semantic range, a transition to and through something which might very well be called, as McIntosh does, 'enlightenment'[15] (p.270).

In reading *Poacher's Pilgrimage* we are being invited by McIntosh to *not be on the outside* of his journey; to meet him in the middle, meet him half way. The reflexive moment is what I might rediscover for myself about such reading (of the land and the self), from reading about McIntosh's experience of so doing. *Poacher's Pilgrimage* attempts to bring about the recreation of *it* - this acknowledgement of a way to experience things - in my own spirit. It seems to matter deeply to McIntosh that things come to matter deeply to us, his readers.

> It's not about belief. More, about experience. Ways of seeing. The ground of being from which our deepest selves emerge. The further reaches of consciousness . . . (p.267)

This sense of 'not being on the outside' and the invitation through reading to be *inside*,[16] helps explain a central theme of *Poacher's Pilgrimage*: the claim that *we don't know what we are inside of* (pp.17-19). This is a deeply provocative and awkward phrase: how can we not *know* what we are *inside of?* We are, as a species, smart. Did we ever know? How is it that we have lost this knowledge and how might we regain it? There are two critical elements that go to make up the basic claim: there is the fascinating issue of *what* exactly we are *inside* of; and the distinct but not separate issue of *our way of coming to know* what we are inside of and why exactly we have allowed ourselves to become disconnected, lost and disoriented, from that way.

My claim is that what we have lost is our ability to relate to ourselves and the world in a way that is best understood as a generalised form of *reading*, where 'reading' is a way to *find the meaning in things*[17]. It is in exploring how we might come to *see the meaning in things* that we find a grand theme in *Poacher's Pilgrimage*: *an ecology of the imagination*:

---

[15] It would I think be appropriate to note the "light" in "enlightenment" and to perhaps go on to note the connection such a word may have with *seeing*, and with the *twinkling* sense of living of the *sìth*.

[16] One might be wise here to acknowledge but politely decline the invitation to see this as suggesting *there is nothing outside the text* and that therefore it is "the text" that we are inside of. In the context of a wide ranging semantic externalism in which meaning is "out there" and not for instance "brain states" one is acknowledging something that risks sounding "spooky" but it can at least be understood without (yet) supposing we are caught up solely in a world of textual meaning. It would be worth pointing out that such a claim is not actually Derrida's but is a misquotation used as a stick to beat him. [reference]

[17] There is much that could be said here about the science and neuroscience of such a claim. On the surface, the point is captured in the distinction between the seeing of mere marks on a page, and seeing those marks as pregnant with meaning.

> One of my questions to myself had been how to encapsulate what I hoped this walk would be. It helps to have a rubric to get started on. To be able to say to oneself: 'I'm off to try and find the lost Isle of . . .'
>
> Like Bateson, I felt my quest was to explore the mind, but as an *immram* or *iorram* – a word that literally means a 'rowing'. It was used by the Irish monks to describe a pilgrim voyage, usually without a destination, and often with a tendency to slide towards the Otherworld. *Mind*, however, was not the nuance I was after. Mind in today's mainstream culture, is too bound up with reason and cognition, too much a hall of mirrors that reflects its own consensus trance realities. I was yearning for something deeper.
>
> There must be more than mind alone in that so-very-reasoned sense of things . . . That's what opened up a sìthean on the hillside – a connection to a greater and creative sense of living being. *We don't know what we're inside of!* I'll take it for the rudder of my immram: a voyaging through, a voyaging towards, *an ecology of the imagination*. (p.18)

Hungry for theories and we may find ourselves unsatisfied by the incomplete way this imaginative ecology (or ecological imagination?) is worked through in the book. You will find no scientific explanation of this provocative phrase[18]. But *Poacher's Pilgrimage is* an ecology of the imagination in a more profoundly satisfying way than any mere theory that we take or leave, that is judgeable by being true or false. That would be to be on the outside, taking a dispassionate view from nowhere, a view from 'sideways on'. Nothing about this book is sideways on. Rather it functions more as a *living embodiment or performance* of such an ecology from which we can find ourselves genuinely *educated*, 'drawn out' of ourselves into a more insightful, enlightened state[19].

What work then is the word 'imagination' doing here? In reading *Poacher's* Pilgrimage, the deeply situated image that comes to my mind is the mist of the Hebrides taking the hard edge off things so that the imagination may shape what is seen, may bring more sharply to mind what is more possible than actual. Essential to this image is a contradiction or better tension – which McIntosh calls *antisyzygy*[20] (p.146) - between a blurring and a focusing that could

[18] I see it as critical to McIntosh's endeavour that ultimately what he is about it not reducible solely to narrow *Logos* as defined by science. Just as there is something deeply depressing when George Lucas tries to explain the Force in Star Wars in terms of the presence of midichlorians, one would be tempted to accuse McIntosh of not understanding the full significance of his own insights to suppose, in the end, that it's all about vibrations in a certain set of neurons. That is not to say that the neuroscientific and other empirical facts in this vicinity are not profoundly important - no neurons, no consciousness – and worthy of examination in their own right. But very little in *Poacher's Pilgrimage* is reducible to such. Unlike Willard Van Orman Quine and other materialists who ontologically "prefer desert landscapes", McIntosh prefers an infinitely richer, wilder environment.

[19] Here we find a powerful echo of Plato's critique of writing in *Phaedrus* and a deep connection to the Celtic oral tradition.

[20] 'in his book *Scottish Literature*, Professor G. Gregory Smith coined the corkscrew term, "Caledonian antisyzygy", to capture what he saw as the quality of a culture that can entertain two seemingly contradictory worldviews, held together in creative tension. Like a battery with a high "potential difference" or voltage between the terminals, this produces cultural energy.'

easily be mistaken for dreaming or hallucinating but is perhaps more distinctive of the *perceptual imagination*, that is, the *power of the imaginal to shape seeing*, for the possible to shape the actual. It is clear that for McIntosh, following the deep Celtic traditions of the Hebrides and similar, the world of *Mythos* lies below that of *Logos*[21] (p.145) and is *there* to be seen. Exposure to the mythical cannot be dismissed as a mere dream but is rather a deeply situated *seeing* - a *second* sight - of a sort that is becoming lost[22] (pp.151-52). But just as this speaks of how we might alter our concept of seeing the world around us, to avoid ourselves over-determining or being overwhelmed by reality – a holding back from the merely given, to allow the possible to be seen – it speaks to a simultaneous more inward self-perception in which one's identity is equally there to be re-imagined and re-created.

I do not decry the sense of second sight that McIntosh develops in *Poacher's Pilgrimage*; one that is replete with mystical and supernatural qualities such as Norman Macleod's precognition of the events of the Falklands war (p.151). Although as a matter of fact the defence of second sight as *prognostication* does not much resonate with my own experience, I think it would be to miss something critical in McIntosh's intentions to close one's mind to such possibilities. Despite my openness, however, I think McIntosh's conception is unnecessarily limited; it is a *species* of a broader *genus*. What matters - what we must recover - is *attunement to meaning as such through sight*. That meaning may very well show itself in many ways including the ways McIntosh articulates but it doesn't have to. It doesn't have to be about *seeing* the future, or the dead, or God in Nature; it is simply to see seeing not as a blank confrontation with a world devoid of meaning but to see the world *as* it *is*, in all the ways that it *is* and might be. This 'as' is one of the most powerful distinguishing symbols of our exalted status as sentient human beings: to see your lover's face *as* the deepest well imaginable from which all your strength is drawn is possible only to those for whom *meaning* is there to be seen. That face is the same physical object seen when, for instance, the dog responds to a call but the dog does not see the face *as* a face; the dog could not, for instance, lose itself in that face, in those eyes. This, then, is not only to move beyond the brute *causal* conception of seeing that is currently dominant due to its impeccable scientific credentials: light waves reflecting off the surface of objects stimulating our optic nerves, causing certain neurons to fire, which in turn dispose us to emit noises: see dog, say 'dog'. But it is also to break from the Scots – Humean – conception of experience which has meaning as a cloak thrown over things, and very much only in the eye of the beholder. It is the most objectionable narcissism to suppose that the depth found in one's lover's face is there only due to the strength of the perceiver's desires. Such meaning is *there* to be seen, acknowledged and appreciated, without that reducing to an ego-centric projection.

> It's been a day without redundancy, a day when every tiny thing came filled replete with meaning, right through to the worms and even ants. (p.96)

[21] I wonder whether 'lies below' is quite right? That suggests a logical priority, when I think it is more that the mythical lies hidden behind or within the logical. McIntosh however describes *Mythos* as 'the underlying ground'. I am more generous in supposing that there are many ways in which the world shows itself, beyond *Mythos* and *Logos*.

[22] Fascinating account of the loss of second sight in move away from Scotland.

Of course, the model here is *reading.* Whatever one is doing when one engages with a text one is rarely engaging directly with a system of graphemes and marks onto which one has to actively project to find meaning. Rather, the meaning in the text is what one encounters directly and only through an active restriction (or, for instance, a medical condition) do we see (or attend to) the marks. We *see through* the symbols to the meaning.

While this account is *phenomenologically* (experientially) satisfying it leaves an *ontological* mystery: what is this meaning if it is not the product of human consciousness? Was meaning *there* before there was consciousness? Is there meaning in the falling of a tree in a forest or (to use an example from *Poacher's Pilgrimage*) in the industry of ants, if there is no-one there to appreciate it? I think one should resist supposing that such questions are as urgent as they might appear[23]. In particular one might prefer to see the reductive imperative behind such questions not as benign but as ideological, an exercise of socially determining power. My sense is that in *Poacher's Pilgrimage* McIntosh rather backs himself into a corner through presenting an overly narrow conception of *Logos* that 'wallows in the monotonous materialism of its ever-so-logical positivism' (p.145). Against that background, the only place to go when one is not discussing the bare facts of science is into the realm of magic and the mystical. In so doing McIntosh sacrifices too much ground to the monotonous materialists. While McIntosh is happy with such a stark, digital distinction between nihilistic *Logos* and magical *Mythos* I think reality is more analogue, blended. For instance, if we return to the Greeks, including Aristotle, there are more cognitive virtues - ways of seeing - than just *poesis* and *nous*, which are tied to *Mythos* and *Logos* respectively. There is *techne*, which is the way of seeing of the *artisan* or *craftsman*; there is *sophia*, which is the way of seeing of the *philosopher* who contemplates the ultimate ends of all things; and there is *phronesis* which is the way of seeing of the practically wise and moral man. None of these ways of seeing seem to me reducible to either a nihilistic, scientistic *materialism*, which denudes the world of as much meaning as possible, or a *mysticism* (or *panentheism*[24]), which risks granting to the world too much meaning, and meaning of the 'wrong' sort.

In *Poacher's Pilgrimage* McIntosh asks the right question:

> What is the meaning that gives meaning to meaning? What, for that matter, gives meaning to anything? (p.181)

I am not sure that in the end McIntosh provides an entirely satisfying answer to this fundamental question. In explaining why, it may be that McIntosh does not quite follow through to its conclusion the logic of one of the most obvious lessons that his pilgrimage discloses – captured in Finlay's profound 'layers and layers and layers' – and so he closes down too quickly his own semantic range. Given the endlessness of meaning, there seems little reason he would want or need to limit himself to only two categories of Being, narrowly

[23] I am conscious I am asserting a position here not arguing for it. A philosopher like Simon Blackburn would argue strongly against the sort of line here being developed, see Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[24] In *Poacher's Pilgrimage* McIntosh defends something he calls 'panentheism', which he distinguishes from the more familiar 'pantheism'. The distinction appears to be between the claim 'God is nature' (pantheism) and 'God is both in and beyond nature' (panentheism). P.53

defined, with their associated ways of seeing. The ontological question: 'what is meaning?' feels distinctly less urgent, when one doesn't feel obliged to have to give an answer that can be crammed into a rather tight box.

But it is a question none the less. One conclusion we might draw is that meaning is not encountered blankly; the meaning that is *there* to be found in the world or in a text is only as fine-grained and convincing as the sentiment and sensibility that encounters it. Think back to the example of the depth of semantic range in the description of seeing one's lover's face, or any of the many rich descriptions McIntosh offers in *Poacher's Pilgrimage*. Such semantic range is only possible due to corresponding emotional range, range which not everyone has. Meaning is therefore neither purely objective nor subjective but is rather 'response-dependent'[25]. So, just as we usher out the Scots philosophy of taste by the front door – meaning is there, not projected - we welcome it in through the back door – meaning is only there to the extent we have the sensibility to appreciate it. Critically this notion of appreciation or response-dependence – which we can trace through the Scots to the Greeks and their ways of seeing - is amenable to development and refinement.

For me, the realms of *Mythos* and *Logos* are better understood simply as different realms of *meaning* which are encountered in distinct ways of seeing. Given the dominant ideology of the contemporary world, there is legitimate reason to highlight something called *'second sight'* to distinguish it at least from the scientistic *'first sight'* which reduces vision to a vibration of the optic nerve. I accept that this is an explicitly thinner concept than the thicker one that McIntosh focuses on and risks not being deemed worthy (by McIntosh) of the title 'second sight'[26]. Here I am pushing these thoughts further than McIntosh does, and in a different direction.[27]

Where there is agreement is the claim that it is important to be connected to both realms – *Mythos* and *Logos* - and to oneself in equal measure. Just as with J.M Barrie's *Mary Rose* (p.79) or the young man in the fairy knoll[28] (p.16), one must guard against getting lost in

[25] See John McDowell, 'Values and Secondary Qualities', 1985. See Blackburn 1998, p.104 for a critique of McDowell.

[26] I am also here assenting to the use of the phrase 'second sight' as a way to register a connection to a concept that McIntosh does not deploy, but which is deployed by philosopher John McDowell: *second nature*. See John McDowell, *Mind and World* (London: Harvard, 1996). McDowell draws a contrast between the logical space of nature (the realm governed by the laws of nature as described by natural science) and the logical space of reasons (which marks out the realm of human reason and justification). It is essential to McDowell's argument that human interaction as an exercise of reason in the sense of acting for a reason is seen as entirely natural. This helps explain where I differ from McIntosh – I understand *Logos*, the realm of reason, in a much broader sense than McIntosh in particular to mean such things as "acting for a reason", "having a reason to . . .". McIntosh seems to limit his conception of *Logos* to a familiar cultural phenomenon involving a scientistic materialism. So for me some of what McIntosh wants to talk about when he talks about *Mythos* is already bound up with a richer conception of *Logos.* I don't think that difference makes a difference to the argument being developed by McIntosh nor my reflection on it.

[27] I suspect McIntosh's commitment to a *panentheism*, which I decline to accept, would lead him to suppose that there exactly is meaning there in and for itself in the world, and that meaning is God. My rejection is humble and open to reappraisal so I will not press home any perceived advantage.

[28] A tale told by the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell of Tiree: two young whisky-laden men enticed into a roadside dwelling where there is dancing. One, suspicious, puts an iron needle in the door post which resists enchantment; the other is entranced, and found 12 months later near death still dancing. McIntosh claims this is

Mythos, lost in ungrounded meaning and dreams, where the risks include (spiritual) emaciation and self-harm (p.170). Just as one must guard against being dominated by *Logos* (narrowly defined), in which the risks are a nihilistic materialism which, ultimately, through dislocation and disconnection, makes possible the harming of others, spiritual and physical. McIntosh talks of an 'ecosystem of the mind' and in so doing implies the need for a sense of balance. We are, for McIntosh, a society profoundly out of balance, with the land around us and with ourselves. To reconnect, we must become the type of person who can 'mediate between the inner and the outer'; such a person can 'unblock the wellsprings of life's energies' and 'heal the violence of our times' (p.171). This in turn reconnects with an earlier insight, which related not only to the living spirit of the land and people of the Hebrides but to the author of a book about such a land and such people:

> The *sì* or *sìth*: that twinkling sense of living laughing spirit danced through nature. (p.111)

Poacher's Pilgrimage is a book full of such connected, twinkling human beings and is, I would suggest, more importantly, a manual for its readers to become such, written by a living laughing spirit who dances through nature.

In parenthesis: this is perhaps not only R. S. Thomas's concept of *re-creation* but also opens us up to a potential way to reconsider (re-imagine) David Hume's notion of the abiding *self* being no more than an artefact of the imagination, weaving together fundamentally fragmented sense impressions, in to an apparent whole. And of course Hume saw the imagination equally at play in (re)creating our idea of an external world, which again is imagined out of mere sense impressions. It is fascinating that Hume saw the deep power of the imagination at play in the creation and re-creation of both the self and world[29]. Would it not be wonderful to rescue this profound thought from the superficial portrayal of it as a source of deep *scepticism* - a shaking in our confidence that the self or world exist - but instead, using McIntosh's conception of the imagination and the imaginal, of the 'poetic making of the world' (p.145) - to see it as a positively redeeming thought? A disconnecting of the imagination from the merely fictional (as if there is no truth in poetry!) but more a blurring of reality in which new (redeeming) possibilities for self and world are created.

So what we have to hand here in *Poacher's Pilgrimage* is a text that seeks to educate us not through the communication of facts – whether a lecture or even a sermon – but by, in the very act of reading, opening us up to the potential to reimagine the world and ourselves simultaneously, not though just a merely *different* self and world but a *better* self and world, a *redeemed* self and world. *Poacher's Pilgrimage* is then for me an exercise in what, teasing

---

more than just a parable about alcoholism, but is rather reveals 'a portal to the unconscious and progressive depths of meaning'.

[29] It was precisely this that awoke Kant from his dogmatic slumbers – for Kant, the transcendental synthesis of the imagination is the unifying function of consciousness that is the condition for subjective and objective experience. Imagination is at the root of perception and self-perception. There is no more profound consideration of these issues than is found in John Llewelyn, *The Hypocritical Imagination: Between Kant and Levinas* (London: Routledge, 2000)

out a golden thread through the history of philosophy back to Plato and Aristotle, the great philosopher Stanley Cavell calls '*moral perfectionism'*.

Cavell spends a great deal of his time explaining both conceptually and historically what he means by the phrase 'moral perfectionism'. To help me draw out what I find at the core of my experience of *Poacher's Pilgrimage*, I want to identify a connection between McIntosh's approach to writing and consequently his conception of how his book may be read, with this notion of perfectionism.

For Cavell, perfectionism involves two dominant themes:

> The first theme is that the human self – confined by itself, aspiring toward itself – is always becoming, as on a journey, always partially in a further state. This journey is described as education or cultivation. Since an emphasis on cultivation is an essential feature of perfectionism, the ease with which perfectionism can be debased into a form of aestheticism or preciosity or religiosity is a measure of the ease with which perfectionism can be debased, as philosophy can be, or religion.
>
> The second dominating theme is that of the other to whom I can use words to discover in which to express myself is the Friend – a figure that may occur as the goal of the journey but also as its instigation and accompaniment. Any moral outlook – systematically assessing the value of human existence – will accord weight to the value of friendship. But only perfectionism . . . places an absolute value on this relationship.[30]

It seems plain to me that Cavell's first dominating theme of perfectionism captures wonderfully that sense in McIntosh of how in the pilgrimage, the self and world are experienced as *intertwined* and *becoming*; what I called above 'chiasmic'. It is the journey of the self toward a greater, but never attainable *perfection*. What matters most and what distinguishes perfectionism from an elitism (that McIntosh would no doubt reject) is the work done here by the words 'never attainable'. This is the difference perhaps between the common notion of *pilgrimage* as aiming at a specific destination such as the Camino de Santiago ('the Ways of St James') converging on Santiago de Compostela, and the Celtic/Irish notion of *immram* or *iorram*, which McIntosh appears to favour, in which no destination is quite ever reached or even aimed for. Rather like *Poacher's Pilgrimage*, one can experience the latter while on the former – McIntosh is actually aiming for the Butt of Lewis - but it's the more Celtic notion that matters most here – the transformation experienced by McIntosh may well have been possible whether he reached his actual destination or not[31].

[30] Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (London: Harvard, 2004) pp.26-27. It will be clear to those who know his work that my words in this essay are deeply indebted to the work of Stanley Cavell.

[31] In conversation I heard McIntosh say that pilgrimage is a state of mind, possible even in walking to the local bus stop.

> I seek the source, but, more and more, it eludes me. There is no single point of source. (p.116)

In articulating this first dominant theme of perfectionism, Cavell also helps us identify and name some of the ways such journeys may become debased: *aestheticism*, *preciosity* and *religiosity*. It seems clear to me that while never quite succumbing, McIntosh at time flirts with each of these debasements in *Poacher's Pilgrimage*, in particular the last. The more 'preachy' he is, the less convincing he becomes. I have already declared that despite the pull of *Poacher's Pilgrimage* I do not, for instance, find myself moved in the direction of a *panentheism*. The key point, however, is that the risk here is not *falsity*, as it would be if *Poacher's Pilgrimage* were presenting a theory, but rather *overindulgence* and *sentimentality*, which are vices perhaps more suited to a performance. I shall return to these risks again.

The underlying idea is of the self not as singular - an indivisible monad or ego - but as essentially *split*, *doubled*, such that it is always relating in experience to a possible (future) form of itself, in a way that can guide and cultivate, that can lead to a better state[32]. At points McIntosh seems to recognise this doubled structure of the self:

> I'd find myself, as it were, looking at myself with a transcendent clarity. It was as if the me was watching me, but from a place more than me. (p.244)

That the word 'possibility' is so prominent here matters greatly. Openness to a better self (and so to a better world) is not a given, nor close to guaranteed. We are fallen and many are not listening[33]. We have, as McIntosh puts it, become a society, for the most part, that 'no longer knows what it is that we might be part of', lost to the meaning-structure of the world, a society that has cast out poetry and the imagination (p.145), 'with its more shallow sense of temporality and commodification of space' (p.106). We are no longer twinkling; we no longer carry the holiday in our eye[34].

Cavell's second dominating theme – the friend – helps answer the question, how and where might we find our way out of the wilderness, out of the false consciousness I mentioned above? Where might the interruption of the mundane everyday come from that might instigate the possibility of cultivation and betterment, of becoming a 'connected human

---

[32] This is a notion that has its root in Plato's myth of the cave, in Aristotle's *phronesis*, through to existentialism's *authenticity*.

[33] If I knew more about theology I would perhaps talk about 'the Fall', 'sin', 'salvation' and 'redemption'. For more on the theologico-philosophical underpinnings here see Stephen Mulhall, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[34] Above I indicated I felt obliged to draw a comparison between Nietzsche's "good, unruly spirit" exhorted to dance, and the *sìthean* "twinkling sense of living laughing spirit danced through nature" so central to McIntosh. Equally here, in close proximity to Cavell, I find myself inclined to quote Cavell's "hero" Emerson: "A man is but a little thing in the midst of the objects of nature, yet, by the moral quality radiating from his countenance, he may abolish all considerations of magnitude, and in his manners equal the majesty of the world. I have seen an individual, whose manners, though wholly within the conventions of elegant society, were never learned there, but were original and commanding, and held out protection and prosperity; one who did not need the aid of a court-suit, but carried the holiday in his eye; who exhilarated the fancy by flinging wide the doors of new modes of existence; who shook off the captivity of etiquette, with happy, spirited bearing, good-natured and free as Robin Hood; yet with the port of an emperor, — if need be, calm, serious, and fit to stand the gaze of millions." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Manners", 1844

being' (p.161). Philosophers and theologians have talked variously about *wonder*, *awe*, *anxiety*, *nausea*, and *boredom* as sources of existential interruption, experiential assaults on an inherent complacency or complicity in the forgetfulness of deep meaning leading to enlightenment. McIntosh talks at various points of being 'tripped out', of the main switch tripping, the fuses blowing and the logic circuits melting[35]. Deep, deep moods and experiences without direct objects (so not fear or lust) that can strip away the diversions and inauthenticities of life. This might suggest that the resources we require to become open to our possible future self lie solely within us. The critical point is to decide whether at this moment of deep, deep crisis, an individualism is plausible or indeed even possible.

At first glance, McIntosh seems torn on this point. He seems to relish isolation, talking approvingly, for instance, of the claim that civilisation is only 4 days deep: 'the trappings fall away and we open to a world more primal' (p.174).

> No planes or cars or fire engines. No fingers tapping texts on little screens, or kettles rumbling for another cup of tea. Not even moaning wind or birdsong. Only silence. Sheer silence. (p.117)

Even in those solitary, silent moments, however, there is always a connection to others, to community. McIntosh talks of the presence of 'unseen companions' (p.31) on the walk, a presence which disrupts a sense of absolute isolation. These companions are not just the absent interlocutors fuelling the pilgrim's internal conversation (for example, the two airmen of chapter nine) but also the human echoes, or 'embedded presences' (p.19) that speak from sacred places, not least the ruined shielings, temples and wells that so define McIntosh's pilgrimage. Human spirit and culture leave a trace on the landscape. In the Hebrides (and wider) this trace includes the echoes of the Clearances, voices that speak still from out of violence, upheaval and abiding trauma. My suggestion, a suggestion that binds McIntosh and Cavell together, is that at precisely this moment, when the fuses blow, however alone, the inescapable value of community, at least in the form of friendship, is confirmed.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger talks of the stripping away (in the Corinthian 'twinkling of an eye'[36], *augenblick*) of the superficial everyday meaning-structures into which we are thrown, in and through the vertigo of *anxiety*, which arises at the moment we confront our own deaths. In the *nothingness* that is disclosed in that anxious moment, in which our ties to the familiar are cut, there is the redeeming hearing of an uncanny (*unheimlich*) voice[37]. He describes that voice as the 'voice of conscience' and at one point, critically, describes it as 'the friend each of us carries with us'[38]. Cavell does not deny that such a transformative moment may play out solely within the confines of the self but it remains difficult to see how an individual through their own resources alone might break free from their fallenness in and distraction by the mundane everyday. Can one redeem *oneself*?

---

[35] This trope is referred to at various points in *Poacher's Pilgrimage* including p.172 and p.275

[36] Note here the connection between the *sìthean* twinkling and the twinkling of Corinthians 15:52: "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."

[37] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/20/heidegger-being-time-critchley

[38] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* sect 34, p.206

Cavell simply allows that that interruption, the 'tripping of the switch' may come from *hearing the voice of an other*[39].

Through his reading of Freud (not Heidegger) in *Poacher's Pilgrimage,* which he uses to unlock the deep meaning in J. M. Barrie's now forgotten masterpiece *Mary Rose*, McIntosh explicitly acknowledges the disruptive power of the uncanny. In the face of the uncanny, 'such a world,' says McIntosh, 'now pivots on the cusp of anxiety and terror' (p.169). What has been hidden becomes visible; what is familiar become strange (ibid.). Freud exposes the deep structure of the psyche that explains why in the face of trauma, our confrontation with the uncanny creates a defence mechanism that numbs us. In as much as the trauma of (modern) life numbs us, we are lost to the deep meaning structure of the world, resigned to a shallow, thin sense of now (p.116). A structure which is not a thing, not a some-thing for science to prod, it is a *nothing* out of which, if we are not numbed into silence, may come poetry and song. If the trauma is not too overwhelming, and we can stand to hear the song or indeed stand to sing it, then perhaps what we have here is the deepest source of the stirring McIntosh talks about?

At the culmination of McIntosh's pilgrimage, something wonderful happens. Confronted by the remarkable sight of hundreds of breeding snails on top of dead leaves – 'love is living in the midst of death' (p.274) - McIntosh breaks spontaneously into song. Fearing he is being heard, McIntosh's ego is silenced through 'sheer embarrassment'. At that awkward moment in which the self's uncanniness is disclosed, as the brute fact of one's existence becomes all too plain, McIntosh says: 'a voice fills my imagination . . . And the voice – that is both me and beyond me – says: THERE IS NOBODY HERE, BUT EVERYBODY IS HERE' (Ibid.). *The friend(s) that each of us carries with us.*

At the risk of my own circuits blowing, at the point we begin to speak of the temporal underpinnings of this 'transitory, evanescent' (p.245) experience, we reach perhaps the furthest reaches of McIntosh's thinking and thereby his most explicitly philosophical moment (reference to Plato is a sure sign of philosophy). The awakening, however transitory, of a mode of experience 'replete with meaning', marks a move beyond a 'shallow sense of temporality' in which we are trapped in a 'thin now' to a deeper sense of temporality in which the now contains (instead) all eternity:

> Time, said Plato, is 'a moving image of eternity'. Could it be that memory is a peering in on what's already there? And the second sight, a widening of the slits in mental reindeer bone; and that this is why the seers will say it's like "remembering the future", and that it can go both forwards and backwards?
>
> In short, could it be that everything that ever was, or waits to be, *just is*? Is that what we're inside of; we who, perhaps, also 'inhabiteth eternity'?[40] (p.208)

[39] My preference is to suppose this is to hear the voice of a human other. It may be open to others to talk instead about God.

[40] Also 'This, [T.S. Eliot] said, is where we meet "the intersection of the timeless moment". For me, such timelessness unveils the deeper mysteries. "Do this in memory of me," said Jesus at the Last Supper. The

So here then is *an* answer, if not *the* answer, to the foundational question, 'what are we inside of?'. A potentially unexpected answer as the notion of 'being inside' perhaps suggests a purely spatial rather than temporal relation. I have sought, following McIntosh, to trace out an existential trajectory in which we are awoken from a (be)numbed state through exposure to the uncanny, the unhomely, guided by a friend to avoid becoming lost in the disorientating trauma of that experience, which opens up a 'deeper way of seeing', which we can use to find our way back 'home'.

> Oh yes, it's 'just' nostalgia. But curiously I'm also feeling happy that it's come upon me. It opens up a deeper way of seeing. It reminds me that partaking is the fabric of experience, what sets the sail for seeing so much else. And that for all the hurly-burly of the world, I still have sentient capacity. And that nostalgia is *nostos-algos*, Greek words that mean 'returning home' and 'grief'. And that this great longing is what's called me here; this sailing home, this pilgrimage of slowly walking home. (p.63)

Although risking being overly subjective, the notion of the now not as a self-contained unit cut off from the past and future, but understood as a 'remembering the future' ensures an appropriate place for all the *tenses* – past, future, present - within the now. The now as *living present* made up of a projection of the past onto our future, which puts before us a horizon of possibility from which we choose a path, a next step[41]. The 'shallow, thin now' is shallow and thin in the sense of chronically lacking possibility. What we now have is a 'now' replete with meaning in the sense of a horizon of possibilities. The horizon can be infinite, limited existentially only by the impossible possibility of our own deaths. *Layers and layers and layers.* The choices within that horizon can however be shaped by the contribution of others, not just told directly in conversation, but in stories told, in the guiding and instituting legends and myths that saturate our consciousness[42]. Out of this one can begin to trace a deep conception of human identity in which the self is not an indivisible ego, but, in a way that resonates with Hume's idea that imagination plays a critical role in determining our identity, is instead *a centre of narrative gravity*[43]. We find ourselves and the world in the stories we tell ourselves, and the stories others tell for us. The fulfilment of writing is being read and the sense of writing that is to be prized above all is that which, in the experience of being read, takes the reader out of the shallow, thin now of facts conveyed, into the living present of

---

bread, the body, as the fabric of the universe. The wine, the blood, its animating spirit. Here anamnēsin as "memory" in the original Greek infers the calling back of real presence. And that, from outside space and time, as the apocatastasis – the revelation of the true underlying nature of all things. That too, as Parousia – being "alongside" the "presence" or the "essence" – the so-called "second coming" of the Cosmic Christ that always is, always was, and always will be if we just wake up, which is "enlightenment".

[41] There is a great deal implied in these references. In referring to 'living present' I mean to imply a connection to Edmund Husserl's phenomenology of internal time consciousness. This is difficult material; a commentary worth reading is Robert Sokolowski, *Husserlian Meditations: How Words Present Things* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

[42] A critical text on the temporal and historical institution of meaning is Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry' with commentary by Jacques Derrida. Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), trans. John P. Leavey, Jr.

[43] See Daniel Dennett's "The Self as Centre of Narrative Gravity" in F. Kessel, P. Cole and D. Johnson, eds, Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1992

possibilities in which their story, and thus their identity can be recast. In the twinkling of an eye – as that eye is cast over the page – all will be changed. As I stated above, I take McIntosh to take his *being read* very seriously indeed.

There is for me an astonishing convergence between McIntosh in both his subject matter and his commitment to a reflexive, deeply performative form of writing, and the tradition I am calling, after Cavell, *perfectionism*. It is therefore no surprise to find the deepest expression of perfectionism grounded not in *Logos* but in *Mythos*, in the stories we tell. While McIntosh finds his perfectionist truth in Celtic mythology, for Cavell the founding myth of perfectionism is Plato's myth of the cave in the *Republic,* in which our vision is of participating in the founding of a *city of words*, participating through an educative conversation in which I am improved and that itself models the very society we seek to found:

> Obvious candidate features are its ideas of a mode of conversation between (older and younger) friends, one of whom is intellectually authoritative because his life is somehow exemplary or representative of a life the other(s) are attracted to, and in the attraction of which the self recognises itself as enchained, fixated, and feels itself removed from reality, whereupon the self finds that it can turn (convert, revolutionise itself) and a process of education is undertaken, in part through a discussion of education, in which each self is drawn on a journey of ascent to a further state of that self, where the higher is not determined by natural talent but by seeking to know what you are made of and cultivating the things you are meant to do; it is transformation of the self which finds expression in the imagination of a transformation of society into something like an aristocracy where what is best for society is a model for and modelled on what is best for the individual soul, a best arrived at in the view of a new reality, a realm beyond, the true world, that of the Good, sustainer of the good city, that of Utopia.[44]

In reading *Poacher's Pilgrimage* I found myself thrown into just such a conversation. But remarkably of course I was not there walking with McIntosh through the Hebrides. By embodying a disconcerting, to-ing and fro-ing – what McIntosh calls a 'forwards and backwards' (p.208) - which is like a conversation with a friend, *Poacher's Pilgrimage* itself as text functions as an active interlocutor. *Poacher's Pilgrimage* is *the singing of a song that stirs*. The essential value of the friend - and why we need both dominant perfectionist themes, the journey with a friend - is that in the love of the friend we find a source of sufficient safety and comfort to prevent the uncanny from overwhelming us and causing our numbing psychic defences to be raised. But it is not a romantic or sentimental love, but a challenging and provocative love for a friend who exemplifies what we might imagine ourselves to be but are not (yet). In this asymmetry, a recognition that the friend embodies the virtues I aspire to but which I do not yet possess, lies the idea of education, and friendship as educating, cultivating. In a way that reveals the poverty of contemporary language, and its conversion to jargon, we

[44] Cavell, Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome 6-7

have here friend understood as 'role model' and 'mentor'. I think McIntosh might well agree with Heidegger that we must each *choose our own heroes*[45].

In bringing this reflection to an end there is a sense that I have not done justice to the richness and sincerity of *Poacher's Pilgrimage*. I have sought to focus on developing an argument for how it might be possible for some marks on a page, these particular marks, to stir a person's soul. I have picked out two essential qualities: first, this is a book about stirring souls, about igniting that twinkling sense of living laughing spirit danced through nature, and is so in a deeply reflexive way. In that way *Poacher's Pilgrimage* is *cainnt drùidhbhteach* (p.20). Secondly, this book is at its heart an encouragement to see the world in a certain way. That is why I have fixed on the phrase 'ways of seeing' (which McIntosh borrows from Berger[46]) as the title of these reflections. Even the insight that there is more than one 'way of seeing' opens up exciting and important possibilities for us all, especially in these darkening days.

I have one final question to ask: does it matter whether I see the world (exactly) as McIntosh does? Would McIntosh recognise his intentions in writing *Poacher's Pilgrimage* in reading this essay on his work? This essay, in the end, perhaps says more about me than it does about the book it purports to be about or indeed the writer of that book. At the outset of this essay I talked about *Poacher's Pilgrimage* as providing the gift of insight. Of course, this essay itself is no more than the expression of that insight – the insight is not something other than my expression of it. But I also said it came *at just the right time*. Why some books come to move or stir, to catch our imagination, while others, perhaps even more worthy, remain untouched on our bookshelves is an important question. There is unlikely to be any satisfying answer that can be given without a deeply personal and contextual account: why exactly this book at exactly this time, and not another? *Timeliness* is essential so I should perhaps be more explicit about the essential timeliness of *Poacher's Pilgrimage.* First, it was a gift from a trusted friend and teacher, whose recommendation stirred interest. But that was not enough. More vitally, I was moved by *Poacher's Pilgrimage* because it reignited in me a passion familiar from my life as a philosopher[47], now waned enough to no longer motivate philosophical action, but sufficiently present as a memory with attendant sense of loss for there (still) to be something akin to grieving and loss. In engaging with *Poacher's Pilgrimage* I found myself as much being read by the book as reading it. In a manner more familiar from forms of therapy, I found *Poacher's Pilgrimage* worked on my silent grief and allowed an expressive release through a provocation to think and to write, including the writing of this essay. Have I over-reached? Are the things I say I found within *Poacher's Pilgrimage* actually *there* or are they merely the projections and wish fulfilments of a lost philosopher? Of course, no answer to this question can be given in advance and separate from whatever value a reader of this essay may find in it. In seeking an answer, whatever clarity he possesses about his own intentions, even McIntosh would not be *primus inter pares.* Indeed as with any therapeutic relationship I would expect that in reading this essay McIntosh, even in rejecting it wholesale, would in some way become clearer about the limits of his own

[45] Being and Time, 352. Also tangential but a fascinating article on the myths and heroes of comics: http://faculty.georgetown.edu/blattnew/topics/docs/ThomsonHeroes.pdf
[46] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin: London, 1972)
[47] I studied and taught philosophy before changing career.

intentions and the nature and extent of his subconscious desires, as they have manifest themselves in his choice of words. He may learn much or little, and this may very well take him further in his own journey, which above I suggested may be endless[48]. To make the point in the context of psychoanalysis, just as there is *transference* (from analyst to analysand) there is *counter-transference* (from analysand to analyst). In being anxious about having over-reached I have risked going in the wrong direction. Too much? Too deep? To bring McIntosh and Cavell into proximity one last time; I am reminded of what Cavell says about such risks:

> Naturally I do not deny that some readings are irresponsible in fairly straightforward ways. But 'reading in,' as a term of criticism, suggests something quite particular, like going too far even if on a real track. Then the question would be, as the question often is about philosophy, how to bring the reading to an end. And this should be seen as a problem internal to criticism, not a criticism of it from outside. In my experience people worried about reading in, or over-interpretation, or going too far, are, or were, typically, afraid of getting started, or reading as such, as if afraid that texts – like people, like times and places – mean things and moreover mean more than you know. This is accordingly a fear of something real, and may be a healthy fear, that is, a fear of something fearful. It strikes me as a more discerning reaction to texts than the cheerier opinion that the chase of meaning is just as much fun as man's favourite sport (also presumably a thing with no fear attached). Still, my experience is that most texts, like most lives, are under-read, not over-read. And the moral I urge is that this assessment be made the subject of arguments about particular texts.[49]

So here then I stand, fearful, exposed, with no *a priori* defence against an accusation of having missed the point of *Poacher's Pilgrimage*. But as I said at the outset, I wonder whether there is a point here to be missed? Whatever we make of that deep question, in the end though it is important that the pupil (reader) break from the master (writer) to avoid risking the originality and autonomy of the pupil's thinking. I have set out some regards in which I don't share McIntosh's way of seeing things. I am reminded of the conversation in *Poacher's Pilgrimage* with Graham of Durham which ends with Graham declaring 'Eee . . .ye'r doin' my head in!' (p.267). At points in reading *Poacher's Pilgrimage* I felt like Graham. However, authenticity and sincerity help keep McIntosh out of the more obvious traps. But those differences are outweighed by the similarities. Whatever the differences, I take there to be some affinity between me and Alastair McIntosh for which I am deeply grateful.

Leith, October 2016

[48] One of the points about the notion of self as centre of narrative gravity is that there is no end to the telling and retelling, and the complex ways in which identity conditions are maintained across retellings, revisions.
[49] Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* (London: Harvard, 1981) p.35