

Night Thoughts: the Surreal Life of the Poet David Gascoyne

Robert Fraser

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David Gascoyne published his first collection of poems at the age of sixteen and his first novel a year later. At nineteen he established himself as England's leading authority on Surrealism. Shortly thereafter he began keeping a journal: "no vice is more particularly mine than sloth... *nothing* I have written so far is of the least value". The contradictions do not stop there. Politically Trotskyite-Royalist, poetically radical-conservative, Gascoyne was a Christian mystic subject to periods of amphetamine-induced psychosis and acute depression, and, at the time of his death in 2001, a gay man happily married to a woman. Only an especially sensitive biographer could present a coherent picture of so paradoxical a character. Robert Fraser, in *Night Thoughts: the Surreal Life of the Poet David Gascoyne*, the first biography, is not up to the task.

The authority of Gascoyne's *A Short Survey of Surrealism* is remarkable, given the brevity of his involvement with the movement: it lasted from 1933 to 1936, and although he met Breton, Dalí et al, Gascoyne was an enthusiast and proselytiser rather than a central figure. Fraser is correct to describe him as "an enraptured onlooker appreciative of what these people had to tell him about literature and allied arts, excluded all the same from the socio-sexual force field that bound many of the more gregarious Surrealists into a homogenous [*sic*], mutually self-regarding group." However, Fraser has not grasped the full extent of Gascoyne's sense of exclusion.

Gascoyne's astonishing early success was a triumph of autodidacticism. Dropping out of formal education at the age of fifteen, he began a precocious programme of reading, and would be a lifelong haunter of the Charing Cross Road bookshops. In retrospect, many of his early poems, even the Surreal ones that made his name, such as "And the Seventh Dream is the Dream of Isis" and "The Cubical Domes", have a musty, studied air that betrays the bookishness of their author. The poems may have been conceived in the excitable whirl of Parisian café culture, but they were born in quiet hotel rooms, or Gascoyne's bedroom in his parents' house in Teddington. His poetry requires solitude, whether as theme or precondition, in order to achieve intensity and fluency. Exemplary in this regard are his religious and metaphysical poems, and his masterpiece, "Night Thoughts", with its haunting address, "Greetings to the solitary."

Fatally, Fraser has little time for introverts, preferring to relay gossip about the more flamboyant characters in the narrative while Gascoyne hovers sketchily in the background. Having failed to take the measure of Gascoyne's isolation, Fraser cannot hope to explain the impulsive artistic affiliations, the contradictory political sympathies, and the conflicted sexual behaviour that shaped Gascoyne's life. It was isolation that led him to over-identify with the Surrealists, and indeed with the French (Philippe Soupault took the bait, hailing Gascoyne as "a French poet writing in English"). Other, more obviously fragile allegiances soon followed: in 1936 Gascoyne joined the Communist Party and went to Spain to make radio broadcasts for the Ministry of Propaganda. He was out of his depth, as he and his Party colleagues soon realised.

It is time for Gascoyne to be claimed and read as an English poet. He cited a list of Surrealist antecedents that included Shakespeare, Marlowe, Young, Coleridge, Blake, Beddoes, Lear, and Carroll, and even admitted to speaking French in an “*onglay*” accent. Ultimately, he over-identified with his native country too. During times of personal crisis his Englishness intensified into a Royalist patriotism, which could combine spectacularly with persecution mania, impelling Gascoyne to try to contact Harold Wilson, or storm Buckingham Palace to warn the Queen about Scientologists plotting world domination.

Although he cautions against reading Gascoyne's later work through a Surrealist lens, Fraser does not provide an alternative context. Whereas Gascoyne came to see his Surrealist work in terms of his Christian mysticism, Fraser calls the latter a “fundamental reorientation”. The failure to make the case for Gascoyne as a religious poet is one of the many missed opportunities here. A true assessment of Gascoyne's achievement must centre on the work collected in *Poems 1937-1942*, in particular the extraordinary sequence “Miserere”, which led Breton to excommunicate Gascoyne from Surrealism at a meeting in Montmartre in 1946: “I am told that you have become not only a Communist but a Roman Catholic”, Breton declared. This was untrue, but Gascoyne made no reply, happy to distance himself from the movement.

With admirable humility, Fraser chastises himself for botching an interview with Gascoyne: listening back to the tapes, he realises “just as he was getting to the vital point of information, I had impatiently chipped in.” Unfortunately, Fraser does not learn from this incident, and continually directs our attention towards an insignificant detail whilst overlooking the important issue. We are told that Gascoyne was “stunned” to find himself falling in love with Joan Greenwood: “Despite a fifteen-inch difference in height between them, they took to one another.” Surely the fact that Gascoyne was homosexual is more noteworthy than the height difference? Bizarrely, height is mentioned again when Gascoyne gets married: “there was a general feeling that this solution, this entente, would fail... and not simply because of what was known of David's sexuality. The difference in height between the two of them, for a start, was almost as noticeable as it had been between him and Joan Greenwood...” To be clear, Gascoyne's sex life alternated between brief, passionate affairs with men and depressive asexual *longueurs* with the women on whom he relied for financial and emotional support. The verdict of Gascoyne's friend Salah Stétié is incisive: “He lacked the courage to be an outright homosexual, yet would not risk a fully-fledged relationship with a woman. Like his poetry with its slightly *démodé* vocabulary, his life lacked tenderness, the common touch, even slang.” Fraser dodges the issue, insisting, “The enigma of his sexuality remained”.

Night Thoughts is helpful in bringing together several insightful portraits of Gascoyne from the women in his life, including Meraud Guevara (“David is a brain, like a flower at the end of a long stem”), Antonia White (“In spite of his youth and freshness, often something dusty and wilted about him”), and Anne Goossens, who found Gascoyne “dashing but disembodied, as sexless as an archangel”. Kathleen Raine calls Gascoyne “a spiritual vampire” and likens his “instinctual egotism” to that of an animal, a cuckoo or a parasitic plant. Prophetically, she wishes he would find “some good motherly soul... whose existence is justified, in her own eyes even (principally) by being able to contribute to the creation of works of genius that she admires.” Gascoyne eventually married Judy Lewis, whom he met during one of his spells in a psychiatric hospital where she was working as a therapist. These women describe a troubled, troubling personality that Fraser all but ignores, as when he mentions in passing the shocking fact that Gascoyne attempted to strangle two women, and then explains away the second attack as frustration at writer's block.

The most vivid, if not altogether reliable, portrait of Gascoyne remains the one he himself provided in the engrossing *Journals 1936-42*. Like all his best work, *Journals* emerges from a profound solitude; but for all its candour, it contains curiously few references to family life, and fewer still to Benjamin Fondane, who was so crucial to Gascoyne's mystical-philosophical enquiries. Fraser notes these omissions but does not address the issue of self-mythologizing, saying rather vaguely that while the journals are “confessional in intent” they “often worked as strategies of disguise, or perhaps of displacement”, before resuming his unconvincing attempt to paint Gascoyne as a social butterfly. Readers familiar with *Journals* will search these pages in vain for the restless, existential intelligence of the Gascoyne they reveal.

There is a persistent sense of a mismatch between biographer and subject, and Fraser seems willing to return to the stalest of bunfights in order to maintain his interest, taking pot-shots at everyone from Heidegger to Miloš Forman. The most ill-advised of Fraser's peremptory judgements concern Auden. Fraser finds Gascoyne's “Farewell Chorus” superior to Auden's “September 1st, 1939” (and cites Auden's line about a “low dive on forty-second street”: the line should read “I sit in one of the dives / on Fifty-Second Street”). But Fraser's only argument appears to be that Auden subsequently edited his poem, whereas Gascoyne found “less to regret, nothing to alter” in his own. He then takes a swipe at Auden for going to America: “Unlike some, [Gascoyne] would not slink away...” This is name-calling rather than criticism; besides, Gascoyne chose not to stand as a conscientious objector out of apathy and fear of prison. He subsequently failed his medical and acted in farces for ENSA. To put it mildly, the relative merits of Gascoyne and Auden need to be more carefully evaluated.

That careful evaluation is not Fraser's strongest suit is further demonstrated by his attempted close-reading of Sartre's nightclub song “Dans la rue des Blancs Manteaux”, which Gascoyne translated. According to Fraser, the song, which describes executions during the French Revolution, employed a “swaying rhythm” that evoked “the bodices as they fell” (sadly, that should read “bodies”). Gascoyne, we are told, sacrifices this rhythm, but sneaks in “an echo from a well-known Beatles song”. Fraser must be referring to the line about the executioner having “a hard day's work ahead of him”. The allusion to the Beatles is imaginary, but the spurious reading takes a baffling and sinister turn when Fraser adds a reference to Gascoyne's wife: “The Beatles were favourites of Judy's; perhaps the *hommage* swung two ways, like the heads.” Heads do not swing from the guillotine, they roll.

Fraser's prose is over-egged (Gascoyne's editor has “the patience of six Griseldas”) and clumsy: when Gascoyne goes to school, “The regime, he soon found, was regimented”; when Germany invades France, “Eluard hung grimly put.” Fraser has a particular weakness for the eccentric detail that enables a descriptive flourish: for example, we are told that one of Gascoyne's acquaintances, Peter Watson, owed his wealth to “the commercial savvy of a father whose Maypole Dairy Company had cashed in on the need for margarine during the Great War.” Why are we told all this? Because it allows Fraser to say “Peter by contrast was pure, refined butter.” *Night Thoughts* is also littered with typos: some pages contain multiple instances of misspelling, repeated words or grammatical confusion. Names seem to pose a particular difficulty: Anne Ridler becomes “Ann Ridler”, Peter Brook becomes “Peter Brooke”, Wendy Mulford becomes “Wendy Milford”, Enzensberger becomes “Eisenberger”, Kierkegaard becomes “Kiekegaard” – and who could the celebrated novelist “Irish Murdoch” be? Equally regrettable are the instances of misquotation. These range from the sloppy (“*Finnegan's Wake*”, Henry James's “*In a Cage*”) to the jaw-dropping: Eliot did not call April a “cruel month” in *Burnt Norton*, he called it the “cruellest month” in *The Waste Land*. Such errors extend to Gascoyne's own work: a prose poem is set as verse, “Snow in Europe” contains the line “Now midnight's icy zero feigns a truce”, and a visionary tribute to Paul Eluard is made risible when “Softly, sincerely” becomes “Softy, sincerely”.

“I am a poet who wrote himself out when young and then went mad”, Gascoyne liked to say. In fact, he endured three spells in psychiatric hospitals, amounting to a period of just under a year; but he encouraged the belief that he had spent decades in institutions because he felt ashamed at having fallen short of the ambitions detailed in *Journals*. Isolation, shame and self-mythologizing were central facts of his artistic life, but they are barely mentioned here. Even when Gascoyne's self-promulgated myth appears in his obituaries, Fraser lets it pass without analysis, focusing instead on the address of the cemetery where Gascoyne is buried: “the Jane-Austenian-sounding Chawton Lane”. To end with such a distracting, irrelevant detail is characteristic of this biography, which, given the current undervaluation of Gascoyne's work, amounts to a dereliction of duty.