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## **“Reported Missing”: A Preliminary Study of David Gascoyne’s Personas**

**Abstract:** This paper strives to explore the possibility of establishing a basic framework for the study of David Gascoyne’s literary *vie intellectuelle* – the framework which would consist in a map not only of identities and their changes but also of their erasure, abandonment and falling away. Examining some of the essays, journal entries, aphorisms, poems and interviews penned or spoken throughout his long career, I rely on the poet’s own words to illuminate the subject and let me look into the crucial relationship between the emerging pattern of Gascoyne’s affirmations, dismissals and withdrawals on the one hand and, on the other hand, what might be the essence of his *écriture*.

**Keywords:** existential, existentialism, modernism, poetry, postmodernism, surrealism, David Gascoyne

I do not believe it would be an overstatement to say that trying to put in some single perspective the places which David Gascoyne, an English *intellectuel*, has been assigned in the studies of literary history means exposing oneself to a singular chaos. The problem seems to start on a rather general level. David Gascoyne: a man of letters, obviously; a playwright, quite probably; a fiction writer, one could say; possibly a philosopher; a poet if there ever was one, in any case. Sure enough, one might very well consider other labels too – these five will in likelihood come to mind first, though. How appropriate are they? How well do they fit that which was crucial – and that which the poet himself thought crucial – in his engagement with life?

One could hardly deny his being a *littérateur* of sorts, of course. But Gascoyne seems to have despised literature almost as much as the most intransigent Dadaists did – and his profound mistrust of the literary cannot be enclosed within the narrow space of his pre-War surrealist years. In the journal entry from January 22-23, 1940 – written when he no longer frequented the French surrealist circles – Gascoyne still openly professes distaste for what he will much later, in “Introduction to *A Short Survey of Surrealism*,” contemptuously call “*belles-lettres*” (vii), and does so with no lack of passion: “I should always have said that to be ‘literary’ was one of the last things on earth that I wanted to be; I should have said that I conceived literature and life as being in insoluble contradiction one with the other and that I was on the side of life against literature (distortion, romantic deception – at best petrification)” (*Collected Journals* 280-281). The same disgust with the (merely) literary is expressed a few years later in “Introducing Kenneth Patchen.” Here the “*belles-lettres*” view of literature is juxtaposed with the Dada anti-literary revolt, the former being seen as representative of the irredeemably corrupt cultural institutions of the present West:

At a moment of universal intellectual and moral degradation when the values on which Western civilization is supposed to be based were every day being spectacularly compromised by most of the official spokesmen of the society, Dada was perhaps the sole visible sign indicating the existence of at least a tiny remnant among the living who were still determined not to participate in this general passive surrender of spiritual integrity, not to accept the terms of betrayal. (166-167)

And the poet does in fact appear to have never quite renounced such an attitude. "I still like Dada because it is anti-literature," Gascoyne tells his interviewer, Lucien Jenkins (52), in 1992. These words should probably be read against the background of the poet's conviction that not only "[t]he post-1918 phase of revolt against all that 'respectable' literature can stand for what was undoubtedly a healthy purge" (Gascoyne, "Introduction to *The Magnetic Fields*" 396) but that "intermittent outbreaks of such 'anti-literature' as the international Dada period produced" are the indispensable "nourishment without which the human spirit would soon wither away."

Was he a playwright? Just like Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*, Gascoyne's *Night Thoughts* might be construed as "a play for voices" (Thomas, no pag.) – but the English poet subtitled it "*Radiophonic Poem*," and seems to have considered *Night Thoughts* precisely that even more than thirty years after he wrote it ("The Poet and the City" 126). In the late 1940s Gascoyne did compose a more typical play – but, although he succeeded in having it staged (Fraser 234-235), its script has not been and never will be published: the play, the poet confesses in "Introductory Notes to *New Collected Poems 1929-1995*" (XXXIV), has been lost for good.

His being a fiction writer is similarly problematic. Gascoyne the fictionist did write fiction but failed to complete anything except for one short story, "Death of an Explorer," one novella, *April*, which occupied him between 1937 and 1938 but which was printed only in 2000, and, as he mercilessly summed it up, "an adolescent semi-autobiographical novel" ("A Note on Myself" 110) – *Opening Day*, "a precocious effort" ("Man of Principle" 240) whose publication he quickly came to view with distaste. As *Collected Journals* show, numerous other fiction projects – most notably "Epilogue to an Escapade," which was to have been an "autobiographical work" (Scott 157), and "Benighted in Babylon," the novel Gascoyne worked on in the early 1940s (*Collected Journals* 307-310) – were embarked upon only to be abandoned after a few years. By the end of the war Gascoyne had stopped writing novels and short stories for good: "As far as writing novels is concerned, I always had more difficulty with working out the plot satisfactorily than with anything else, and after many fruitless struggles, always had to give up the project in the end [...]. I think I have gradually lost whatever aptitude for prose-writing I may once have had, mainly through lack of practice, partly brought about by 'writer's block,'" he reflected in 1979 in "Introductory Notes" to his *Journal 1936-37* (14). And while throughout the 1980s Gascoyne once more found himself working on an autobiography ("Duclos Entretien" 24), in the end the promised book also failed to materialise.

Perhaps he might best be referred to as an existential thinker, then? But if Gascoyne was a philosopher at all, he was also one who, "although already aware of the unsatisfactory and misleading nature of all such abstractions" ("The Most Astonishing Book in

the English Language" 143), still spent years labouring "to give expression to [his] teeming thoughts concerning the critical and problematic mid-century state of mankind and the world" only to become finally convinced that from the start the whole effort had been bound to end in a botch. Sometimes Gascoyne will blame his own incompetence here. He sums up "this would-be magnum opus" – which bore the grandiose title of "*The Sun at Midnight: Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Dialectical Materialism in the Service of a Theocratic Revolution*," and which, he confesses some thirty years after forsaking the venture, "was to have been a synthesis of post-Marxist, post-Kierkegaardian theory, supported by a metaphysical basis that I amateurishly dubbed 'Logontology'" ("The Most Astonishing Book in the English Language" 143) – in the following way:

I embarked, soon after the end of the War, on the composition of a work intended to embody the fruit of my amateur philosophical speculations by outlining the possibility of formulating what I called "dialectical supermaterialism," proposing to reconcile metaphysics with revolutionary ideology by means of what I chose to nominate with the neologism "logontology" (logos ontology). This is no place, however, to interpolate even the briefest summary of a work predestined, on account of my complete lack of the necessary training and discipline, to an inevitable failure. (*Collected Journals* 381-382)

And "The Most Astonishing Book in the English Language" shows it was not that Gascoyne was embarking upon the venture unaware of what he later saw as his inadequacy: he recalls "persevering in the attempt to get an outline of all this written, despite an uneasy awareness of being far too uneducated to be able to work on it professionally" (143).

But there are also many passages in which the poet will be adamant that the project failed because it was as unnecessary as it was self-defeating – and dangerous – to begin with. The dangers of what was to have been his "magnum opus" and its potential incompatibility with its supposed aim are merely hinted at in "Le surréalisme et la jeune poésie anglaise," another essay in which Gascoyne admits his being ill-prepared to face up to the task ("C'était une belle idée," he comments, "mais je n'avais ni la formation ni la vocation nécessaires pour me risquer à lancer cette nouvelle philosophie dans le monde de l'idéologie" (22)) – but the poet addresses both issues quite openly three years later, in his interview with Michel Rémy:

C'est vrai que vers la fin de la guerre, je voulais écrire un livre qui aurait traité de la philosophie du "surmatérialisme dialectique"... Vous voyez, Marx parle du monde extérieur et Kierkegaard du monde intérieur de l'âme et c'était pour moi une tentative de relier les deux... J'avais aussi l'idée d'une "logos-ontologie" que j'ai d'ailleurs trouvée justifiée ensuite dans Heidegger, et j'aurais fait une grande place aux présocratiques qui ont toujours été trop négligés des philosophes comme Parménides ou Héraclite... [...] mais je n'ai jamais eu vraiment d'entraînement philosophique et j'en suis resté au stade des citations... On peut être frappé en ce moment du retour à quelque chose de proche de cette façon de penser, mais je ne voudrais pas ériger cela en philosophie, je crains de devoir dire que toute philosophie débouche sur les dogmes et la philosophie existentielle ne convient pas à l'enseignement dans les collèges ou les écoles. ("En guise de préface" 7)

The last sentence is very blunt. The mistake Gascoyne does not want to make would be to return now to such explorations and let them crystallise into a philosophical position, the latter being inevitably tainted with the kind of rigidity that leads to dogmatism, betrays the very principle of the search and makes sure that its initial promise is not made good on. Tied firmly with such misgivings, what haunts Gascoyne's writing is a profound doubt concerning the revelatory efficacy of all systematised thinking and, more generally, of all thinking that falls into the confines of what Heidegger calls "thinking as re-presenting" ("Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking" 62) – as well as an acute awareness of the risk involved in following whatever path such ultimately misleading "thinking" might lay down before us. Interviewed by Michèle Duclos the same year, Gascoyne again refuses to mince his words, giving voice to a mistrust of all language and conceptualisation that seems to go well beyond Heidegger's longing to be "released from re-presenting" ("Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking" 69): "il me semble que tous les mots, toutes les formules trahissent ce qu'ils souhaitent dire. C'est pourquoi je suis arrivé à ne pas vouloir parler de Dieu ni de Vérité" ("Duclos Entretien" 38).

It is perhaps scarcely surprising, then, that when Gascoyne found himself trying to re-capture the spark which had led him to embark on his "would-be magnum opus" in the first place – when he found himself attempting to re-imagine the venture, rediscover what was essential in it and find a way of writing it that could possibly transcend at least some of the limitations of "thinking as re-presenting" – he soon came to regard his efforts to reinvent the project as deeply unsatisfactory. The text which I believe might well be seen as closest to being just such a return to the essence of both "logontology" and "surmatérialisme dialectique" is of course the second *Sun at Midnight: Notes on the Story of Civilization Seen as the History of the Great Experimental Work of the Supreme Scientist*, the slim volume which recycles the title of the abandoned project – and which proclaims the whole undertaking to be no "longer absolutely necessary" (17). Gascoyne gives the following account of how the second *Sun at Midnight* came to be written – and of what it has turned out to be: "While still in hospital I began composing a series of aphoristic paragraphs in which I attempted to fix the more vivid insights that had come to me while I was 'out of my mind'" ("The Most Astonishing Book in the English Language" 148). Alan Clodd "read some of these pages," Gascoyne continues, and,

apparently not finding them incomprehensibly delirious, he encouraged me to write more. Eventually I passed on to him some fifty pages of what may be described as "inspired writing" [...]. By the time I'd fully recovered comparative sanity, I found the book somewhat embarrassing and could no longer identify myself with many of the maxims and often cryptic pronouncements contained in it. (148)

I examined briefly but four of the identities in terms of which one might want to understand David Gascoyne. While the short list could be made longer, the tone of the discussion would not change much – and Gascoyne himself would not have objected to it either, being acutely aware of his "the sense of 'the discrepancy between precocious promise and minimal published,'" or indeed completed, "work" ("Afterword to *Collected Journals*" 401). Nor would the mood change much if one considered what must be his

most unquestionable vocation, that of the poet, that is – the label he has been usually assigned, and which he appears to have acknowledged (“A vrai dire, je ne suis pas arrivé à produire assez de poésie ni à atteindre le niveau que je m’étais fixé” (“Le surréalisme et la jeune poésie anglaise” 23)) – or the rather curious ways in which he will at times express a recognition of his calling: “I am a poet who wrote himself out when young and then went mad,” he tells Lucien Jenkins (53). As the words were spoken in 1992, one might be easily tempted to see them as meant to summarize his achievement in some way. Roughly two-thirds of Gascoyne’s published poetry was written before the manuscript of *Poems 1937-1942* was sent to the publisher in 1942 (Fraser 202); while about 180 pages of Gascoyne’s *New Collected Poems* are filled with texts he had published by 1943, the collection’s final, “Later Poems (1956-1995)” section takes up the rather underwhelming space of just 24 pages.

“I am a poet who wrote himself out when young and then went mad.” What these unsentimental words seem to effectively do is put Gascoyne’s calling *sous rature*. David Gascoyne: was he just a failed poet, then? A poet who never delivered what he could have delivered, and thus a marginal figure, a merely minor poet? Or rather *un poète manqué*, perhaps? The sentence itself is quite interesting. Could “I am a poet who wrote himself out” be paraphrased as: *I am a poet who ceased to be a poet*? Would it then imply that the vocation of the poet may allow for (and conceivably entail) a fundamental self-contradiction – or what seems to be the possibility of a crucial failure? Or perhaps we are given here to understand that the practice of poetry transcends composing poems – a suggestion that one might be tempted to reconcile with the previously formulated reading of Gascoyne’s sober self-judgement?

No adjective modifies the crucial noun. One could take it as implying that Gascoyne came to see himself as a poet who practised poetry in what Heidegger proclaims to be the essential sense of the word – who put into practice the sort of poetry which is “truly essential” (“Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry” 52) and which “will force us to decide whether we shall take poetry at all seriously in the future, and whether the presuppositions that we bring along with us will enable us ever to stand within poetry’s sphere of influence.” If Hölderlin was for Heidegger “in a preeminent sense *the poet’s poet*,” his poetry being “sustained by his whole poetic mission: to make poems solely about the essence of poetry,” so does Gascoyne, one might argue, understood himself-as-a-poet. That said, it would hardly be surprising if one still found oneself wondering if and how we could narrow that identity down a bit.

Was Gascoyne a *modernist* poet, for instance? I introduced him as “an English *intellectuel*,” so perhaps – provided one sees my phrase as uncontroversial enough in spite of Gascoyne’s assertion that he “belong[s] to Europe before [he] belong[s] to England” (qtd. in Scott 270) – one would not be in the wrong to refer to him as an *English* poet? Alan Munton asserts that “Gascoyne was a foreigner to ‘Englishness’ from the moment he set out for Paris in 1935” (34), and explains that Gascoyne’s “modernism” (35) is of specifically “European” sort. Emphasizing the French connection, Stephen Spender writes that “Gascoyne, who has lived in Paris, probably has more in common with his French than with his English fellow poets” (48), and a famous friend of the poet’s, Philippe Soupault, goes so far as to tell Kathleen Raine that “David is not an English poet, he is a French poet

writing in English” (qtd. in “Introduction to *Selected Prose 1934-1996*” 15), suggesting an idea not as outlandish as it might seem, for Gascoyne published texts in French and translated a substantial body of the nineteenth and twentieth century French poetry. Moreover, as Spender duly notes, Gascoyne indeed spent a significant part of his life – including the years of his formative encounters – in France; before the war, he wrote in response to the intellectual ambiance of Paris, and not London, and the majority of the writers and thinkers he found himself most influenced by – such as Breton, Fondane and Jouve – were or at least wrote in French, first and foremost within and as a contribution to the traditions of the French literary (but certainly not only literary) culture. Characteristically, whenever Gascoyne juxtaposes “poetry” and “poésie” as he is ever fond of doing, he is inclined to stress his affinity with the latter and not the former, the fact that the bulk of his poems were written in English notwithstanding – and, furthermore, his differentiation does tend to be evaluative, “poésie” fairly regularly outranking mere “poetry.”

Gascoyne never really identifies himself as “a French poet.” It must be said, though, that only seldom does he refer to himself as an English poet, and if he does, then often only indirectly so – and usually with the apparent aim of distancing himself from some particular poetic lineage rather than embracing anything like the English poetic tradition. In “Answers to ‘An Inquiry’” he struggles to set himself apart from French surrealism, stating that while the (French) “Surrealists themselves have a definite justification” to write “poems without the control of the reason,” “for an English poet with continually growing political convictions it must soon become impossible” (55). And Gascoyne’s talk with Rémy seems just as revealing here. Asked point blank what would be “un courant ou une tradition poétique” (“En guise de préface” 5) a part of which he could see himself as, Gascoyne answered that if he was influenced by anything, it was “peut-être, une idée générale de ‘totalité chrétienne’” – and that he felt “[e]n un sens [...] en continuité avec une certaine tradition métaphysique spécifiquement anglaise,” an artful and artfully cautious answer if ever there was one. The word “poétique” has somehow got lost altogether, vanishing from the reply which actually turns out to be Gascoyne’s attempt to remove his persona from the world of literature – and, slanting the discourse towards the religious, to corrode the bonds between the poetic and the literary, or perhaps do away with both categories. What is more, the poet discusses what he considers to be his influences instead of naming the tradition he feels he belongs to – and even the landscape of these influences turns out to be ambiguous, as he places himself uncertainly (“peut-être”) between a vague, placeless and timeless “idée générale de ‘totalité chrétienne,’” an arguably religious horizon he nevertheless fails to delineate in any detail, and a hardly much less obscure “certaine tradition métaphysique spécifiquement anglaise,” the latter being perhaps more than just an influence (“je me sens *en continuité* [my italics]”), perhaps not quite so (“[e]n un sens”). If Gascoyne appears to have seen himself as either a poetic failure or “un poète manqué,” perhaps he ought to have described himself – with regard to what his main vocation was, at least – in terms of dispossession and displacement, understood not as one-time occurrences but as ongoing events?

But before one accepts Gascoyne’s harsh judgement on himself, it is necessary to ask to what extent it might be safely assumed that his *œuvre* – and, as he insists, all his literary/poetic life – is indeed blighted by the threat of sterility and all-but-constant frus-

tration. Taking into consideration the scant number of publications or even completed works, clearly visible against the massive background of forsaken or merely envisioned projects, one could hardly argue that all of Gascoyne's disparaging accounts of his own work are wide off the mark. And yet he did renew his efforts to write again and again, writing in spite of the chronic spells of silence, even when unable to complete a piece, fragment after fragment; writing though refraining from publishing; publishing only to dismiss the efficiency of his work – and, once he had started to despair of the relevance or efficacy of some of his more recent writings, abandoning them only to write on (in) the newly rediscovered drama of "passion and frustration," at least at times driven, as the speaker in "A Prelude to a New Fin-de-Siècle" suggests (299), by "that sense / Of expectation, imminence and pressing need / To express something that just must be said." That drama – or "drame," to use here the French word suggested by Rémy, who speaks of "le drame de l'écriture gascoynienne" (*David Gascoyne* 110) – thrives on tensions, involving torment as much as release, and its dangerous course naturally allows for little stagnation: new exigencies would focus Gascoyne's attention now and then, and while not too many of his "pressing need[s]" appear to have faded away, the ones that remained throughout his long poetic life were clearly transfigured. Still, the poet obviously did abandon more than a few of his early aspirations, failed to complete more than a handful of his projects, suffered some extended periods of "the block, or *crampe* as the French call it" ("Introductory Notes to *New Collected Poems 1929-1995*" xxxvi), certainly one of the reasons why he could plausibly describe his "output" as "the strict minimum of work on which a poet's reputation can plausibly rest" – and, whenever asked for an authoritative overview of his literary career, would hesitate and then fall silent, change the topic, or give contradictory accounts of what it had been like, as if seeking to deny the validity of any reading that would aim to throw into sharp relief, bring together and finally reconcile in an overreaching narrative both his efforts and their hiatuses.

These discrepancies and withdrawals will not yield a regular pattern, and seem to refuse to cohere. In their light, the more linear and systematic views of the development of Gascoyne's work – e.g., the stories of "Gascoyne's development from precocious theorist and practitioner of Surrealism into a religious poet of major significance" ( Roger Scott 2), of Gascoyne's "progress from surrealism to Hölderlin" (Kathleen Raine, *Defending Ancient Springs* 57) and further "to the perennial doctrine," or of the poet's "intensely personal struggle to gain wholeness" (Ryan Arthur LaHurd 342) as well as "inner unity" – prove vulnerable and may be easily dismantled. But it appears to me that to claim that there is no development whatsoever in Gascoyne's *œuvre*, or that its vicissitudes could never yield anything but an impression of utter incoherence, is to tell an equally questionable story. If the emerging universe of Gascoyne's writing reveals itself as a body of fractional projects, incomplete views and commitments that often clash with each other – a body of fragmentary movements and the chasms they reveal, which together play out a drama whose vistas allow for no finality and obtain only to the extent they subvert, obliterate or transcend themselves – it obviously cannot but be one of change. While these fragments and their reorganising, failing patterns resist one's attempts to take hold of them, being as unstable and as elusive as the ceaselessly disintegrating personas they relate to, the personas through which and with which Gascoyne enacts himself, *there is* an unconceal-

ing here that can be borne witness to and known; and I hope that the loose sketch I have been trying to chalk out does not entirely fail to point towards this coming-into-the-open, indicating at least the space in which it is occurring and in this way allowing the reader's gaze a chance to be led towards where one may catch a glimpse of something of the nature of this unconcealing.

There appear to be two dimensions to it. Firstly, there is what one might construe as a strategy implemented, consciously or otherwise, by David Gascoyne (whether one chooses to see the later as a person or a shadow cast by the text of "his" writing). Here, the reader may seek to lay bare the poet's motivations or purpose, identify his techniques and delineate the territory. This facet of what is coming-into-the-open might be baffling, one could find it unfamiliar or disturbing – but it can be thrown into some relief; one feels capable of both understanding and narrating it; it feels very human, too. The other dimension of the unconcealing is vast, obscure and profoundly uncanny. Gascoyne's *écriture* is not creative of it, nor could the poet ever control or limit it in any way. It strikes me as posing, to quote from Gascoyne's "Thalassa: the Unspeakable Sea," "[u]ltimate challenge to language" – and, indeed, to all thought: there is, one could say, something to attend to, something to live with; something that can only be discovered through its inaccessibility and lack; something which nevertheless can never quite be recognised, and still less identified; something that, if one cared to truly come to know what can be known of it, one would have to allow to reveal itself, if only through its failed presence/absence, in its influence on us – and so something which we must let ourselves be un-grounded, stripped bare and made utterly vulnerable by.

Anything like a further exploration of the latter of the two realms of that (which is) unconcealing is beyond the scope of the present paper – and cannot but be postponed. The first of them needs, and can be given, a moment of careful attention right now.

Whether one deems it biased or not, Gascoyne's harsh self-assessment cannot be conveniently explained away as mere affectation on his part. Nor can the poet's tendency to undermine the significance of his endeavours – especially in the context of those of his ventures which appear to invite the reader to construe them as self-subverting and thus also threatening to unravel Gascoyne's ambitions in general – be convincingly construed as stemming solely from what might be his humility, his lack of self-confidence or his penchant for pranks. And I maintain that just as the disposition in question would by no means be only occasionally witnessed if one attempted to map the poet's pursuits, so would its presence turn out to be anything but marginal. To seek to trace something like a faithful image of Gascoyne's intellectual life as I see it enacted in his *écriture* is to uncover more and more evidence that he is given to forsaking what not long ago seemed to have been a compelling activity, or its so far quite satisfactory direction – that he will almost routinely act on an impulse to distance himself from his commitments to the activities he would eagerly pursue, to free himself from the double burden of their legacy and of having been a part of it, to spoil anything like an emerging line of his intellectual development with its well-established past and a probable future, to succumb, one could say, to a Rimbaudian urge "to depart" ("Departures" 45). It is as if he was trying all the time to erase his mark, attempting to undermine his own substantiality – eagerly but not quite consistently, as if aware that carrying out such an erasure runs the risk of it becoming a

positive statement in its turn. Were one to endeavor some reconstruction of Gascoyne's intellectual biography, the blank spots, tensions and caesuras would instantly start coming into the light, subverting one's efforts to make sense of one's subject matter – but what is happening here is in no way a simple a one-way process. Having departed, Gascoyne's literary self re-inscribes itself into the text – whose nature has changed by now, and whose transformations, discontinuities and failures have reshaped the subject as well: for he will acknowledge his being a writer, an activist, an existential thinker ("A Kind of Declaration" 166) – many of the vocations he has been trying to disassociate himself from, the one whose professed failure cost him most, that of the poet, included.

For instance, when Jenkins asks Gascoyne whether he thought "of himself as a religious poet" (47), the poet replies: "I suppose I cannot deny that I am one." The answer confirms, even if reluctantly, both elements of the supposition – and replaces Jenkins's past reference with a present one. Actually, even the poet's mental institution episodes which one could interpret as a follow-up to the final loss of his poetic powers are perfectly liable, in the context of his poetics, to being read as experiences very much related to the vocation – and indeed, Gascoyne would at times construe them as neither peripheral nor detrimental to his poetic project, however traumatic they may have been:

I do not regret for a moment having been out of my mind. It seems to me now that in fact I went far deeper into it than I'd ever been before, and that having been able to return as sane as I am now, I can think of what happened to Larry, the Rodent and Mac in a way that helps me to understand the true cost of sanity better. If I've told you as much about those three characters as about myself, that's no doubt above all because they all chose to discharge themselves – from life. "The whole world is our hospital," says Eliot, and I'm still here only because I've learnt to live with it. ("Self-Discharged" 227)

Far from making it impossible for Gascoyne to return to poetry, his being "certifiably insane" (215) was thus actually a vital contribution to the poetic (in the surrealist sense of the word) project he was so much involved in. Not only did the distressing episodes turn out to have been a most fruitful exploration of the kind which was necessary for the endeavour but they also helped the soteriological "drame" at the heart of Gascoyne's poetry to come to something like a breakthrough. The ambiguity and ambivalence one finds oneself stumbling upon here will be re-encountered as soon as one examines most of the other identities the poet has subverted/guardedly re-embraced. And perhaps, since neither of these actions cancels the other one out, nor could they be convincingly resolved into anything like a synthesis, nor would it be fair to simply note their irreconcilability and abandon the whole troubling issue, one just ought to bear witness to it as it is without striving to escape from the knowledge of or put an end to what belongs to "our inescapable ambivalence" ("Blind Man's Buff" 458) – perhaps one just ought, in other words, to allow oneself to stay with the presencing of what in the end belongs to that which Gascoyne's *écriture* seeks to lay bare: the dizzying "chaos," "the essential confusion" that is "the inescapable condition of man"?

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