

DAVID GASCOYNE
NEW COLLECTED POEMS
(ed. Roger Scott)
ENITHARMON
£25.00

As David Gascoyne is a poet who really matters, this is a book that really matters. Inside the dark Byzantium purple and gold lettering of the hardcover is what I look for in poetry: intelligence, seriousness, radicalism, artistry. If there are two overall approaches to poetry, the vatic and the ludic, I am more an enthusiast for the former. Gascoyne, though he has his lighter moments, is not the most playful of poets, but is surely among the most prophetic. To read him is to receive endless messages from an endless messenger, literally a Hermetic poet. He is a teacher of the faculty of intuition. For gravitas and poignancy, I admire such verse-making, and sense-making, as the second section from 'Fragments Towards a Religio Poetae':

The way to Life is through the entrance into Night:
The recognition of the Night wherein each man
Must have at first existence: knowing not
The Whole, and yet believing that he knows,
And through such blind belief made blind to Truth.
Truth is that Truth must first remain unknown to me:
That in the unknown dark I feel alone.
In this state only can true being wake
To knowledge of itself through consciousness
Of the non-entity that it is born from and of the desire
For Being, Truth and Light and Human Day.

That the new collection also includes notes on the poems affords us the following valuable insight:

My reluctance to give any definite expression of my persistent residue of faith resulted in the fragmentary nature of the Religio Poetae... Awareness of the pitfalls besetting specifically philosophical poetry inhibited me from risking the completion of this particular poem altogether.

The ever self-doubting, self-deprecating Gascoyne is ambitious enough to commence a grand poetical-philosophical work but shies away from finishing it. The result is a highly readable sequence. A workmanlike egoist would have written a vast book. Gascoyne offers ten sections. It's not a million miles from the eight sections of Geoffrey Hill's poem 'Tenebrae'—a title used 40 years earlier by Gascoyne—but Gascoyne is more of a philosopher to Hill's musician, and the messages conflict. Gascoyne is the true Christian hermit musing on authenticity; Hill is lamenting the lapse into sensuality, his own and society's, accentuated by the perfect jingles of his verse. Religio Poetae? That should send the jugglers scurrying. (The phrase is from Jacob Boehme.)

Perhaps the first thing to say about *New Collected Poems* is that the inevitable has been postponed again: it is not a Complete Poems. It certainly contains previously

unpublished and uncollected poems, the former in an appendix, the latter earmarked in the list of contents with an ‘uncoll’ after the title. Roger Scott’s preface clearly says it is not a Complete, without exactly saying why. As Gascoyne’s is not an enormous oeuvre, one might ask why. Is there more to be discovered? We could also ask why there is a selection ‘From *Roman Balcony*’ and ‘From *Holderlin’s Madness*’ rather than the whole books. (Gascoyne wasn’t keen to reprint *Roman Balcony* but changed his mind.) Scott does say that he did not wish to follow the forensic procedure of Archie Burnett’s *Philip Larkin: The Complete Poems*. Perhaps Enitharmon is holding out for a Complete Poems further down the line? Some Gascoyneans are asking for a Complete Poems and Prose. We will have to wait; the manna is still falling. We are witnessing the slow birth of a posthumous poet and it’s a task that calls for multiple midwives. It can only be a labour of love. This is how poetry works on the margins. Enough intelligent people gather themselves into a constituency and vote their poet into high office. The poet no longer collaborates in the production of his books; that collaboration is for others only. They must try to respectfully attain to the level of style that Gascoyne demanded of himself.

Though the book is incomplete, it will undoubtedly help us to know the poet more thoroughly. Gascoyne is time-consuming. Proper scrutiny pays off. Shallow opinions of him are the result of shallow immersions. Those who dip their toes see a Surrealist and a Christian—a contradiction in terms—cancelling one another out. Invisible in mirrors, Gascoyne is suspected by the Van Helings of the poetry world. He was a dangerous outsider in the most gentrified of artforms. There were black marks. Not unlike Allen Ginsberg and Harry Fainlight after him, Gascoyne the person was stigmatised by mental instability, homosexuality and drug-addiction. MacSpaunday—the four horsemen of the champagne apocalypse, MacNeice/Spender/Auden/Day Lewis—were posh boys, Gascoyne not, another stigma. All this is superficial compared to his natural strangeness. He wrote in 1937 of attaining to ‘an enrichment and an *approfondissement* I did not have before, a greater understanding of solitude, poverty and despair, and of the nature of human relationships’. As a bohemian mystic, stable relationships were hard to come by, thus stability. All the while, a highly intelligent, erudite and good-looking young man was performing heroic feats in the literary and artistic world without winning the acclaim he deserved. MacSpaunday was a limited company. Gascoyne moved in and out of fashion quickly, more labelled than understood. His poem ‘The Chariot’ is one of the more unfashionable from the traditional-cum-surrealist book *Man’s Life is This Meat*. It is a timeless religious poem that, arguably, portrays the luminous blaze of his early career. Poetry is the chariot, Gascoyne the poet merely a disposable charioteer. It is a rejection of the star system. Something in it—a sense of abandon—reminds me of Baudelaire’s electrifying four-quatrain lyric ‘Lament of an Icarus’ as well as Yeats’s iconic four-quatrain ‘An Irish Airman Foresees His Death’. Gascoyne seemed to cultivate unsuccess, damnation, outsiderdom as a type of anti-laurel, against the credentialist grain. ‘The Chariot’ is a poem that places him in a family of British poet-mystics which includes Richard Rolle, Emilia Lanyer, Henry Vaughan and Francis Thompson.

In vain the firmament postpones its doom:
Its orbs disintegrate with hollow roar,
The chariot grinds their debris into dust
And rides into the infinite once more.

Unlike those mystics, Gascoyne is a cynosure of English modernism. One of the book's tantalising additions is a selection from a sequence called 'Ten Proses'. Here we see the man with the greatest claim to be the English Rimbaud at his most Rimbaudian. As *Illuminations* was one of the holy books of the Surrealists, Gascoyne here responds to the urbanity of Rimbaud's prose poems with a dazzling if cerebral city sheen of his own:

In New York and other cities, cities of the Future, there are overhead railways along the sides of buildings. The windows of the trains glint in the sunlight or the frenetic glare of enormous electric signs as they pass, dizzily, leaning swiftly outwards as they swerve sharp corners.

Here perhaps is an example of why we might reasonably demand a Complete. The price of the new hardback is £25 but we only get four of the 'Ten Proses'. That said, four is an improvement on none. The Gascoyne legacy is, to quote from Blake's *Jerusalem*, 'ever-expanding in the bosom of God'. The 'proses'—note the Frenchification—are intriguing, here presented alongside another prose poem from 'Automatic Album Leaves.' The third of the 'Ten Proses' is a fine description of an urban gargoyle, which shows Gascoyne's silk-spinning imagination at work, shaking off the Rimbaud influence to find his own voice within the Rimbaud technique:

Shafts of pale light are directed across vari-surfaced planes set at conflicting angles. We become aware of a mysterious and inhuman figure gradually moulding itself into actuality against this faceted background: Titan's forehead, bull's eyes, ultra Romano-Semitic nose, bald, lipless mouth, chin vanished or never existent. When fully materialised, this neo-Gothic gargoyle speaks:

"I carry in my breast the secret of renunciation."

And we have to acknowledge that this strange mask possesses at least one thousandth part of the world's total beauty.

This is a modernist poem that takes us into the territory of old Christendom, sensitive souls who withdrew from the realm of war and power-mongering to practise their arts and devotions, monks of the illuminated books. Such is reality today, though retreat is mostly found in the neoliberal nightmare of academia. The poem begins with a cubist vista of 'vari-surfaced planes set at conflicting angles' through which breaks the more Catholic aesthetic to deliver its riddle. Much later in 1982, one of the very few poems he managed to write after 1950 takes the first line of *Illuminations* as a starting point: 'The hare sent up his prayer to the rainbow / Through the spider's fine-spun filmy web...' Another fine poem 'Elsewhere' begins with a famous Rimbaud epigraph: 'Real life is elsewhere'. Like Dylan Thomas—the self-declared 'Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive'—Gascoyne was a teenage genius; unlike Thomas, he read Rimbaud liturgically and in the French.

Elsewhere I examine the 'uncoll' and find a tribute to another French poet, the perfect sonnet 'Hommage à Mallarmé'. One of Gascoyne's virtues is to move between free and formal verse, sandbagging neither, each benefitting from his having worked on

the other. His more formal verse retains an intelligence of tone and sense of artistry. This sonnet doesn't seem fustian, or formally self-congratulatory. It feels new, it looks and sounds modern today. He describes his solitary state in a deft detail: 'here dreams a single rose within a glass'. A better-known sonnet is the moving 'The Plummet Heart', a short elegy for Hart Crane. He was just too young to have met Crane in London or Paris, but quickly grew to know Crane's work by heart, and assimilate the legend. We can appreciate the sonnet all the better for the inclusion of a facsimiled fair copy in the appendix. Gascoyne intuitively knows the sonnet is a form for mystical poetry, not just love poetry. His innovations are undeniable but understated. The point is to encapsulate his feelings about Stéphane Mallarmé and Hart Crane, not to present technicalities, but his unique craftsmanship is palpable. He prioritises rightly. One of his many gifts is that of modern sonneteer.

Another uncollected poem from 1934, 'They Spoke of a New City' expresses his ambivalence toward the Soviet project, challenging its herd mentality as well as its limited artistic sensibility: 'To them the words of Lenin were / More beautiful than any poem and they had / An incorrigible dialectic to bind together their / Images of flags and tools and workers unions'. Reality has remained squalid and the ideological cheerleading is merely a consolation. It's not a right-wing poem. Though disillusioned, its peroration is hopeful. Already a doyen of David Archer's *New Books* on Parton Street and of Geoffrey Grigson's *New Verse* magazine, Gascoyne was up to speed with literary leftism. The poem parodies socialist realism, not socialist idealism. His mixed feelings about the CCCP are in advance of many of the other 1930s poets, of Orwell, and are a measure of both his engagement and honesty. An urban poet is disappointed by the communist *city*. Again it's Gascoyne's willingness and ability to make sense, both prosodically and philosophically, that wins my attention. From a journal: "I want depth, solidarity, experience. Poetry that will say something definite. Emotion, a raised voice, but clear and coherent speech." This poem is lower than his gold standard, but broadens his gamut. It is the inhumanity of the city that calls forth the humanity of the poets. Urban poetry is a force for the good where ills and evils abound. Another early poem 'The New Isaiah', thankfully made available by Roger Scott for the first time in decades, is an impassioned warning to denizens of the 'world-metropolis' that things are going to rack and ruin, and seems to prefigure London in the blitz, as well as the loss of empire. Anyone who'd read it in 1932—and taken it seriously—could not say they hadn't been forewarned.

A new Isaiah walks the City streets
with burning coals of fire on his head
who cries his warnings to the careless crowds
 who heed him not but arm themselves for wars,
who whet their swords for one another's blood,
who go a-whoring with their own inventions
deaf to the cries of one who sees their fate:
'As Rome fell, ye shall fall, as falling ye are now.

A new Isaiah walks the City streets
with burning coals of fire on his head:
'The world-metropolis is built on dust,

with fruitless labour, by the sweat of lust...'

The earlier *Selected Poems* makes categorical division look easier because you have early poems, surrealist poems, and Christian poems, mirroring perhaps Kierkegaard's idea of spiritual development from narcissistic to aesthetic to religious. *New Collected Poems* shows that such segregation does not account for uneasy overlaps. Though Kierkegaardian, Gascoyne is less an 'either/or' than a 'both/and' poet... politically, aesthetically, sexually, religiously. This can confuse readers. What links all his work is a nagging subversion, a discomfiting truthfulness, a spirituality made magnetic by its Manichean, bipolar plunges from ecstasy to depression, darkness to light. There is something of the 'mystical anarchist' about Gascoyne, to use the phraseology of Norman Cohn. It undermines, it exhumes, it forecasts black suns. Another very early poem is a brilliantly weighted, sympathetic satire of an elderly military couple who seem to personify the exhaustion and senescence of the British Empire after WW1.

Here comes a colonel, at his side
His wife, with drooping shoulders, dressed in black.
They neither of them speak a word.
The colonel walks with hands behind his back.

It's as well-crafted a piece of vernacular verse as the Movement would specialise in twenty years later, but it's not a celebration of little England. Ruthlessly, it speeds its parting guests goodbye, letting them embody all the young Francophile is fleeing from; yet it's also an elegy for old age. Gascoyne dismissed work from this period as juvenilia, his apprenticeship in Imagism. However it's good to note a poem such as this when one considers his various later experiments. He writes in manifold metres but, for me, counteracts modernist bias against pentameter. He uses it regularly, and well. You quickly forget it's pentameter and lose yourself in the music and meaning. He makes it work. There are stunning lines: 'Tomb of what was, Womb of what is to be.' Diehard modernisers may find too much pentameter and rhyme within this book. In this respect Gascoyne is closer to the Auden/Larkin/Hill modus operandi than the Pound/Williams/Olson. Gascoyne's advantage over the English poets is his full scale immersion in the European artistic and philosophical vanguard, as it was happening. His traditional craftsmanship is always touched with foreign sparks. He regularly breaks out of regularity, and is a formidable free verse pioneer.

Another unpublished poem tells how Gascoyne made his giant leap. 'Epilogue to an Episode' narrates how the adolescent poet takes a bus at Charing Cross, presumably after leaving bookshops, reading Breton as he goes. One of the stanzas is of psychogeographical interest, a life-changing epiphany:

For the first time on a lurching top-deck seat,
Spelling out Breton's high-flown phrases' spell
I felt the toxic thrill
Of letting-go normal surface-hold to sink, though still awake,
Into wild mental regions far beyond the pale
Of reason and beneath the genteel veil of
Calm, commonsense and compromise. His exhortations made

South Kensington, Earls Court and quiet Kew
Seem built above volcanoes' buried mouths,
Strained violently to bursting-point in the green sunset glow
By the tense imminence of the super-real...

This poem has a very different tone to that of the nada-gazing, world-lamenting poet. It's a Wordsworthian tone of joyous nostalgia, and youth in revolt. The beginning is startling: 'An adolescent brooding on a bomb / Of hatred of appearances, longing to crack / The gimcrack and exasperating crust of everyday, / Frustrated by the gunpowder's failure to explode...' Whatever pain he was feeling at the time seems to have been blown away by his encounter with the imperatives of Breton, the exhortation to surrealism. Why unpublished? Perhaps Gascoyne was uncomfortable at exposing his happier side in print? It's a remarkable dialogue between his pre and post-surrealist selves, in which he paints his surrealistic period in a realistic way. Note how he ends the stanza with the word 'super-real'. This is a valuable poem to read, a skin-shedding document, a heart-warming intimation. He is looking back a decade on, able to both appreciate and deprecate himself. The poem was one of two unpublished typescripts found by Roger Scott in the papers of South African female composer Priaulx Rainier, who set Gascoyne's amazing poem-for-voices 'Requiem' to music. A 1938 elegy for the dead-to-be of WW2, 'Requiem' is the best of Gascoyne: religious in substance, modernist in style. (A quote would not do it justice.)

High seriousness, mental refinement, spiritual urgency, Gascoyne's virtues are tempered by a Dürer-esque melancholia. An interesting story from Robert Fraser's 2012 biography tells how the poet and academic Stephen Romer lent Gascoyne's diaries to a friend, poet Keith Bosley, who mocked them for their despondency: 'You can tell what's wrong with this fellow. Nobody ever blew his raspberry!' A chastened Romer subsequently took Gascoyne's black bile as a dangerous example, and something to avoid. Is it? Postmodernism scoffs at existentialism. Perhaps it was a mistake to lend the diaries rather than the poems to a newcomer. When one considers the gravitas of Gascoyne's work, one might as easily ask if such melancholy *was* avoidable for the benighted poet. Besides, a raspberry-blowing levity is not exactly a noble alternative. Also found among Priaulx Rainier's papers is an illuminating metapoem: 'Dead End' is reminiscent of his published poem 'Apologia' in which he writes of 'that most scrupulous truth which I pursue / When not pursuing poetry. – Perhaps / Only the poem I can never write is *true*'. What matters is not melancholy but authenticity. Gascoyne's sincerity draws the reader back to find the poems more satisfying than before. He wins the reader's trust and doesn't abuse it. Had I known him, I certainly would not have wished to blow Gascoyne's raspberry.

It has become more difficult, more
Tiresome and more painful than before
To write the poem that perverse desire
To write a poem leads to. Most
Difficult of all lines is the first;
And hard again when one has written five
Or six, to clear away the mist
And seize an image (while excitement's still
Alive) and plant it in the shallow shifting soil

Of the first stanza: like a fist,
A flag, a lantern, or a door. That done,
It then should need less effort to move on:
To choose from many possibilities the one
Route that will take me to the end
By way of the most interesting
Scenery.

Strangeness, finesse... no matter what the mood, the poetry is mood-enhancing. A beautiful antidote to the despair of atomisation is found in an early mystical poem 'Morning Dissertation'. This is a long-lined, unrhymed sonnet in which the poet addresses a second person singular that is really himself but also, subliminally, the second person plural of his readership. It is a great example of a redemptive poem, brilliantly doing what most poetry aspires to do. His voice makes you feel reconnected. Gascoyne has other things to do, shamanising and shielding himself from the era of fascism, a poet who, like Georg Trakl, had a deep consciousness of evil but who, unlike Trakl, looked hard for solutions in poetry, philosophy and the tradition of radical Christianity. Arguably, Gascoyne is Christo-pagan. Another unrhymed mystical sonnet 'Spring MCMXL' (i.e. 1940) envisages the Spring goddess, Persephone, painfully emerging from the underground realm to a battle-scarred London. Beginning Eliot-like with the unsettling nursery-rhyme quote 'London Bridge is falling down', the poem is consolatory but has a tragic atmosphere. It gravely invokes history and mythology, uniquely witnessed, written in lines of irregular metre:

London Bridge is falling down, Rome's burnt and Babylon
The Great is now but dust; yet still Spring must
Swing back through Time's continual arc to earth.
Though every land become as a black field
Dunged with the dead, drenched by the dying's blood,
Still must a punctual goddess waken and ascend
The rocky stairs, up into earth's chilled air,
And pass upon her mission through those carrion ranks,
Picking her way among a maze of broken brick
To quicken with her footsteps the short sooty grass between;
While now once more their futile matchwood empires flare and blaze
And through the smoke men gaze with bloodshot eyes
At the translucent apparition, clad in trembling nascent green,
Of one they can still recognize, though scarcely understand.

This more than justifies its 'dipping into the myth-kitty' (in Larkin's silly but negatively influential phrase). A European war poem can call upon a European goddess without making things worse. The poem rings true, an imaginary portrait of what must have been an emotive scene, Spring dawning on the warzone, its titular date prefiguring the Blitz, though it was first published in 1942. It's a poem sagaciously balanced between hope and despair, limning a shell-shocked population who have seemingly forgotten Spring's benison, but by extension a people living in a

bellicose, patriarchal society that has suppressed its feminine instincts and intuitions—what author M. Esther Harding in her classic book calls *Women's Mysteries*—and buried the ‘Sophia’ in masculine philosophy. England needs Eleusis, the poem seems to say, it needs rebirth, a Spring to kill off empire. This is assuredly not socio-realism, but the details of the ‘broken brick’ and ‘sooty grass’ do a lot of work, lending authority to the contemporary myth-making. It is not surprising that Gascoyne was closely associated with the poet Kathleen Raine, another modern English mystic. Both featured in *Penguin Modern Poets 17*, along with W.S. Graham, as late as 1970; but the trio had done a U.S. reading tour in the early ‘50s courtesy of John Malcolm Brinnen. One of Gascoyne’s most charming poems is ‘A Little Zodiak for Kathleen Raine’, a twelve-poem sequence.

This cluttered book contains many treasures, notes, dates, photos, drafts, et cetera. almost a portable museum. The bibliography itself is an education. The poems share pages, mercurial, copious. Roger Scott’s doctoral study *David Gascoyne: From Darkness into Light*, and other editing projects such as *The Fire of Vision: David Gascoyne and George Barker*, have culminated in a serious scholarly edition which prepares the way for a major 20th century English poet to be finally studied as such. Gascoyne neither attended university nor joined what he called the ‘professariat’, but it seems inexorable that, along with Mina Loy, he will be a star of English faculties of the future, generating employment in eternity. And why not? England’s always been a bit lacking in first-rate literary modernists. The other great Englishman of the movement, D.H. Lawrence, is celebrated by Gascoyne in a magnificent poem ‘After Twenty Springs’, musing on Redbeard’s posthumous recognition by English readers. Now it’s Gascoyne’s turn. Curious neophytes can turn to the 1994 *Selected Poems* for a sparser, more pristine, seemingly editorless text, but Scott’s is an essential book for the more than curious. It also sends out a message to those who may not take the trouble to read it. Following on from the 2012 publication of the first Gascoyne biography—which seems to be doing for Gascoyne what Alexander Gilchrist did for William Blake—this 2014 volume is enshrining a neglected poet and a neglected body of work in the English pantheon. (Gascoyne, elected a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1996, was always taken more seriously in France than England.) It is a commonplace to think of so-called poetic immortality in terms of whether a poet will be ‘read in a hundred years’. Well, with David Gascoyne’s centenary coming up in 2016, the biography and this *New Collected Poems* are incontestable proof he will meet that criterion, despite the English Channel of ignorance he had to swim against. The alchemised light he attained to was as hard-won as it was well-read.

ON RE-READING JACOB BOEHME’S ‘AURORA’

Now no one can deny
That what the blessed shoemaker foretold
Is come about indeed. Babel stands builded high
About us. Nothing avails to save
The old world like a brand from burning. We must die
Before our eyes can see. The dead must live
Before lament and mourning cease to be
The only song heard rise from earth’s vast grave.

All shall at last affirm
The Being Boehme faithfully recalled
To have become again real at the final term
Of chaos. Out of the triple void
Of no religion, no communion, no hope, Boehme
Foresaw the sun at midnight would be seen
To rise with rays like healing wings and shine
On the whole world man's fears had else destroyed.

Niall McDevitt

New Collected Poems - George Oppen once wrote of his aesthetics, "I have not and never did have any motive of poetry / But to achieve clarity." In...Â George Oppen once wrote of his aesthetics, "I have not and never did have any motive of poetry / But to achieve clarity." In this latest edition of New Collected Poems, editor Michael Davidson assembles Oppenâ€™s work to reveal the personal and aesthetic changes that marked the poetâ€™s variegated career.