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**”CERTAIN ROUTES TO UNCERTAIN LANDS”: SOME REMARKS
ON THE DIFFICULTY OF MAPPING DAVID GASCOYNE’S ÉCRITURE**

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The paper ventures to investigate the possibilities of mapping David Gascoyne’s *écriture* and outlines the basic problems which anybody attempting such a task will sooner or later face. I seek to find out what is the actual nature of the allegedly critical shift – in the English poet’s outlook as well as in his literary style – that appears to have taken place sometime between 1936 and 1939, exactly when and how it happened (if happen it did, that is) and what its significance for Gascoyne’s poetic development may have been. The paper addresses also what I believe is an all too common misunderstanding that consists in separating the English poet’s early *écriture* (which is at times most curiously seen as including his “surrealist phase”) from his later writing – the separation all but invariably accompanied by the belief that it is Gascoyne’s later output which is properly mature and thus worth studying, unlike his earlier, supposedly jejune literary *œuvre* – and interrogates the possibility of construing Gascoyne’s poetic journey in terms of anything like a development, expansion or growth.

Keywords: alchemy, existential, existentialism, modernism, surrealism.

Michel Rémy, by far the most inspiring and authoritative critic of David Gascoyne’s *œuvre*, rather clearly suggests that a closer inspection of the latter cannot but reveal a profound (if subtle) change that in some ways parallels Martin Heidegger’s legendary *die Kehre*. “More and more the subject of ideological doubt and deep suffering due to solitude, gloom and poverty” (Rémy, 1999, p. 125), plagued by a growing sense of the looming “black catastrophe that can lay waste our worlds” (Gascoyne, 2014) and increasingly aware of the *nihil* that had by then entirely consumed what may have once been the heart of the Western world, the English poet succumbed at last to the overwhelming sense of the crisis and allowed himself “to plumb the depths of despair, as Hölderlin had done” (Rémy, 1999, p. 125). Against all expectations, letting himself become totally vulnerable and surrendering to the sheer horror of the harrowing ordeal without attempting to evade it or seeking to control or limit the anguish it was inflicting in any way turned out to be curiously liberating and empowering experience – so much indeed, Rémy explains, that it led David Gascoyne to a verge of a fundamental

existential breakthrough and made it possible for him “to reorientate himself towards a poetic that sought for its own spirituality by a combination of influences [...]. Gascoyne’s poetry became an unrelenting epidermic search for its own essence, for a prophetic quality, religious in the widest sense of the word, a quest for a synthesis that would mean spiritual revolution.”

Now were one to look for some landmark period that would span the experiences and events of capital importance to the emergence of that “poetic” which Rémy writes about, or at least to the first conscious formulations of that “poetic,” the available traces could hardly fail to point one towards the months that follow September 1936 and are covered by the first, and the first two or three dozen pages of the second, of the English poet’s published journals; when might such a period exactly end – if, indeed, it could be said to have ever ended at all – is a much more baffling issue. According to Peter Levi, “[t]he turning point” in Gascoyne’s “poetic” career “is *Hölderlin’s Madness* (1938) at the time of his discovery of that great poet in Jouve’s 1930 translation, for which when he found it (in 1937) David at about twenty-one was exactly ripe”; Derek Stanford seems to be of a like mind when he argues that at the time of the volume’s publication the poems of *Hölderlin’s Madness* “showed that [Gascoyne’s] talent had come of age: revealing also extraordinary depth of understanding in one so young” (Stanford, 1947, c. 46). While certainly more reticent to speculate on when the formative transformation could have actually ended, in his introduction to *April* Roger Scott too singles out the year 1937 as Gascoyne’s time of redefinition: “This year would be crucial in his development and would effect an urgent and essential change of direction in his poetry and in his personal philosophy,” the critic states (Scott, 2000, p. 10), suggesting that what propelled the change was “in part” Gascoyne’s “dissatisfaction with Surrealism and an exchange of letters with Benjamin Fondane,” and “in part” his “discovery in the autumn of Pierre Jean Jouve’s *Poèmes de la folie de Hölderlin*.” And not only will the English poet himself concur with such a view much later – “[i]n the autumn of 1937,” a fifty years older Gascoyne explains in what was later printed as introductory notes to *New Collected Poems* (Gascoyne, 2014c, p. xxxi), “my discovery of a copy of the 1930 edition of Pierre Jean Jouve’s *Poèmes de la Folie de Hölderlin* in a book-dealer’s box on the Paris quays marked a turning point in my approach to poetry. I had not so much become disillusioned with Surrealism as begun to wish to explore other territories than the sub- or unconscious, the oneiric and the aleatory” – but in the light of already the very first entry of his *Collected Journals* there seems to be precious little doubt as to whether he realized at the time how decisive the changes he had just become aware of might well turn out to be. “There is no longer any doubt that a new period in my development is just about to begin,” writes Gascoyne (Gascoyne, 1991b, p. 10), adding that what the “new period” originates from is neither some passing disenchantment of his nor mere confusion – and that its urgency he cannot and will not play down: “I have undergone a difficult crisis during the last month, from which I come out chastened. I have to admit that nothing I have written so far is of the least value, and very nearly came to the conclusion, once and for all, that all writing is ‘no use’ anyway” (Gascoyne, 1991b, pp. 10–11). That the poet is quite in the right when he asserts that the “difficult crisis” has been a life-changing event his subsequent writings seem to testify to; however, if one examines them attentively, one is bound to discover that what he claimed to have just “undergone” – what he thought to have “come out” of by the time he wrote that entry dated September 22, 1936 – pretty soon turned out to be but a prelude to, or an early stage of, his progressive descent into “the extremity of night,” as the speaker of “*Dichtersleben*” puts it (Gascoyne, 2014a, p. 137).

Collected Journals certainly appear to provide sufficient evidence to substantiate the claim that the “crisis” must have been sweeping indeed – and that the literary persona of the poet him-

self would not only be inclined to authorize, but also participate in the recreation of his (literary) life in terms of an initiatory death-and-rebirth scenario. In the entry from September 24, 1937, written almost exactly one year after the first journal entry, Gascoyne confessed that it was only then that he had (reluctantly) started to consider taking up poetry again: “Half against my will, in spite of my previous convictions, I am beginning to believe once more that I may be a *poet*” (Gascoyne, 1991b, p. 128) – become “a *poet*” once more, that is to say, having passed through long months of what could perhaps be described as Gascoyne’s first pale intimation of “writer’s block,” the spectre that would repeatedly come to haunt him after the outbreak of the war:

Until I wrote *Hölderlin’s Madness* a few days ago, I had scarcely written poetry of any kind for well over a year. (The last poem I wrote, Summer 1936, the “Elegiac Stanzas in Memory of Alban Berg,” was perhaps a vague, only semisuccessful attempt to find a new direction. I may now rewrite it...) Anything of the kind I may write from now on will be entirely different: no more themeless improvisations, no more “pure” effect. I want depth, solidarity experience. Poetry that will say something definite. Emotion, a raised voice, but clear and coherent speech (Gascoyne, 1991b, p. 129).

In consistence with the take on the issue espoused by Levi, Stanford and Scott, the pre-pen-ultimate, Lautréamonttinged sentence implies that the cardinal “change” was neither concerned solely with literature nor even primarily involved with the literary (or the lyrical) – and it could of course be read just as legitimately as suggesting that the “entirely different” new “poetic” that Gascoyne now desires must transcend the world of “*belles-lettres*,” destroying the deceptive sense of security its ivory towers may promise or, often secretly, impart, and transgressing its laws (amongst the most sacred of which would obviously be, as Brian Merrikin-Hill seems to imply, that of “separating” (Merrikin-Hill, 1986, p. 275) the poet’s “high spiritual thought” or “exploration of the depths” from “their lives as ‘honnêtes hommes,’ as Claudel implied in his letter to Madame Romain Rolland quoted by Pierre Emmanuel in his final lecture,” but also the no less urgent commandment of striving to keep one’s writing “pure” – confined to paper, that is; concerned above all, if not solely, with the pursuit of literary excellence, and as such ultimately indifferent to “the man” and her or his predicament); after all, in the English poet’s eyes any genuine act of “poésie” will also be a perilous gamble – and one whose potential success, scope, intensity or even very being might in fact be reliant on the very risk it involves: “le danger réside en ce qu’en écrivant on met en jeu un renouvellement de la vision, et on peut échouer,” Gascoyne will tell Rémy in the 1980s (Gascoyne, 1984, c. 8). That the “difficult crisis” did indeed reach well beyond mere “literature” is what we are being given to understand also in “A Note on Myself” – a tiny piece in which Gascoyne’s spell of unproductivity is said to have been even longer: “For eighteen months I was unable to write a line of poetry; and did little other work except the collecting of material for a book on Arthur Rimbaud” (Gascoyne, 1980, p. 110). Published in March 1937, “A Note on Myself” is also the poet’s first fullyfledged declaration of the outlook of a resolved “searcher” (Gascoyne, 1997, p. 22) – whose business is to perform (or perhaps participate in a collective performance of) an endlessly unfolding, interminable liberation; consequently, such an outlook might be considered “ripe” only if “ripe[ness]” means knowing that no one is nor can ever be “exactly ripe,” as Levi is convinced Gascoyne had become by the time he came across Jouve’s translations of Friedrich Hölderlin. “Having passed through surrealism, communism, mass-observation etc.,” Gascoyne announces in “Note on Myself” (Gascoyne, 1980, p. 110), he “no longer” has “any desire to be connected with any particular

group, ideology, or programme,” but instead wishes “to be entirely free” in order to “develop” his “individual preoccupations,” which are said to “centre round” the collective “problem” of the times – “the inner problem of modern man: the necessity for greater consciousness of himself [sic]: as a social being, as a psychological being and as a spiritual being – too great a problem to be perceived from a single, fixed point of view.” What these words – written, one should note, in the first months of 1937 – testify to is above all Gascoyne’s focus on and pressing concern with what he construes (or perhaps will soon come to construe) as comprising at the very same time the stage, one of the principal actors and thus also a co-writer of the alchemical drama’s ad-libbed script – with “consciousness,” that is to say, with the spouse and the mother of “critical intelligence,” the aim of whose dangerous transformative travails is not only to expand and open, but to revolutionize and in fact reinvent what gave birth to it. “What is the *mercurial* element in the work? The faculty of achieving complete *consciousness* and thus becoming a true *mirror* of the Macrocosmos,” Gascoyne will write more than forty years later in the postmodern Hermetic aphorism entitled “*The Finally Open Secret*” (Gascoyne, 1970, p. 25) – and the answer which he provides to a related question concerning the nature of “consciousness” (“What is complete consciousness *of*?”) too seems to trace itself to and with the words of “A Note on Myself.” In the latter essay, the urgently needed “greater consciousness” is characterized as being that “of modern man [...] as a social being, as a psychological being and as a spiritual being” – and according to the speaker of *The Sun at Midnight*, the “complete consciousness” would have to be that of “[t]he reality of the external world of humanity in Nature; the reality of the world of the psychological depths and processes within the individual himself [sic] and all men” (Gascoyne, 1970, p. 25).

The problem which I have already hinted at and which the last paragraph may have drawn the reader’s attention to is whether, from the viewpoint of Gascoyne’s “poetic,” there might ever be any identifiable end to that critical, formative breakthrough which is said to have somehow led to the emergence of that “poetic.” Firstly, the “difficult crisis” and the major renewal it is thought to have caused, or at least driven the poet towards, constitute just one “process” in an open-ended (presumably till his death, that is) pattern of redefinitions from whose workings it could be extracted only arbitrarily; secondly, it is not only that the formative “crisis” that sup-posedly results in the new “poetic” is *already* a part of it – many (or perhaps all) of the crises which will come in time to plague that “poetic” may well be seen as belonging to it, too, as being nothing but expressions or manifestations of its Mercurial disposition: what that “poetic” works through, after all, are precisely crises – and what it seeks to bring about is as pervasive, intense and “difficult” a “crisis” as can be. The notion of the landmark stage’s *clôture* would certainly seem incoherent if one subscribed here to Rémy, who, construing Gascoyne’s literary “travail mercurial” (Rémy, 1984, p. 105) in Nietzschean terms as “[e]space sacré et maudit de toute la mémoire du monde et du désir de pouvoir qu’il faut précipiter, chimiquement, l’un en l’autre,” insists it is “une véritable mise en scène, en raccourci, de l’histoire de l’homme dans la prolifération des origines et des fins, toujours à recommencer.” At any rate, *Collected Journals* – one of the stages on which the drama Rémy refers to unfolds, as the English poet himself suggests in the entry dated July 14, 1941 (“It is obvious to me, now, that the fundamental ‘subject’ of this journal, the central theme, giving it continuity and cohesion, providing its real *raison d’être*, is the kind of process referred to in the preceding entry” (Gascoyne, 1991b, p. 304), writes Gascoyne; the crucial “preceding” entry deals with the Jungian “‘process of individuation’” seen as “the alchemical ‘Magnum Opus’” (Gascoyne, 1991b, p. 302) – testify to how difficult it would be to precisely locate something like the beginning of the “process” which Scott dares yet to describe as “an urgent and *essential* change

of direction [my italics],” and even more so to the virtual impossibility of establishing its end: one life-consuming realization follows another, and whenever Gascoyne occasionally happens to announce some truly momentous rebirth, fragmentation and despair are almost invariably bound to soon ensue. For instance, in the informative entry from October 10, 1939 which the poet devotes to reviewing his journal life in terms of a Baudelairean “alchimie de la Douleur” (Gascoyne, 1970, p. 27) and which is tellingly entitled “*Vita Nuova*” (Gascoyne, 1991, p. 274), Gascoyne solemnly proclaims what at the time must have appeared to him to be presumably the final breakthrough in his endeavour to create the *lapis*: “I have truly emerged at last from the dark, constricting chrysalis of the last few years of my life and now *I am*. Everything – inner and outer, and the whole relationship between them – is now clear. I have accepted the great fundamental contradiction, and have died of it; and am risen again; and now the old Contradiction is no more.” The sense of elation gradually wears off, though, and some five months (or twenty-four pages) later, in the entry dated March 19, 1940 and given the equally telling (and already familiar to the reader) title of “*Le Monde Désert*” (Gascoyne, 1991b, p. 298) we find as stark a description of an infernal experience of “the Void” as can be: the fragmentary, scattered notes refer to “[a] frightful interior aridity” and “[a]imless nostalgia,” and the English poet confesses to having “slept almost all day long yesterday, all night and most of today as well. Out sheer boredom, mostly. *Spleen*” – and to feeling utterly frustrated, isolated and lost: “I accomplish nothing. I don’t know where I’m going. I am terribly alone. Shambles and dereliction. The War drags slowly on and on.” Naturally, Gascoyne’s luminous experience of what he construed as the beginning of his “*Vita Nuova*” may have been genuine – just as the interpretation of it he presents his readers with might have been perfectly valid had he not judged that all in all painfully transient state as ultimate.

The pattern emerging from the two entries discussed above seems to repeat itself with variation throughout *Collected Journals*, although Gascoyne is usually much more reticent to declare his (apparently not infrequent) revelations or recognitions final – and the ending of the book, which collects the two previously published journals together with their recently recovered follow-up as well as his newly written afterword, is anything but conclusive; in fact, later on – certainly well into the 1950s and presumably until his death in 2001 – Gascoyne would also keep so far unpublished fragmentary journals and notebooks, whose aim appears to have been by no means distant from the one he intended for those presently available in print. And of course, as Rémy so felicitously suggests, it is by no means only Gascoyne’s *cahiers* and journals, but all of his *œuvre* – all that comprises or belongs to its “poetic,” all that the latter draws on, effects and puts to play – which ceaselessly enacts the intricate drama that spans both rupture and healing, loss as well as deliverance, and which concedes to no *clôture*. That drama’s initial formative stage – which, when provisionally isolated (for it too can ultimately be only a fiction, of course, even if in no way necessarily quite a useless one – or, to employ what would seem to be a more fitting word, a myth), becomes a symbolic sigil of the “mysterious potency” of the Mercurial play in its endless unfolding, self-deferring and “ripe[ning]” – might thus best be said to grow “deep down, rhizome-like,” to anticipate here the Deleuzian phrase (see the presentation of “the radicle-system, or the fascicular root” in (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 6–7) which Rémy uses in “The Entrance of the Medium” (Rémy, 2001, p. 22), throughout all of the germinating stages of the alchemical theatre it cocreates and invigorates. Now were I forced to single out and bring into focus anything like the breakthrough phase in Gascoyne’s poetic life, I would pick out the period which starts before September 1936 and ends sometime between the very last days of the year 1942 and December 1943. I would do so, however, following in the footsteps of Michel Rémy’s, and not of Roger Scott’s – even though the dates I am suggesting here are the ones submitted by Scott and not by Rémy.

The time I would tentatively single out begins thus with the year of what the poet himself referred to as his “‘Crise de Conscience’” (Scott, 2002, p. 157) in the course of which not only did he fall silent for presumably the very first time, but began to willfully explore the realities of that silence, and ends with either the final days of 1942 (it being the time by which both all the entries of *Collected Journals* and all the texts of *Poems 1937-1942* had been written) or with the somewhat delayed publication of *Poems 1937-1942* (Benford, 1986, p. 10) – because, firstly, it is the “lurid glare and sense of apocalyptic revelation” (Blackburn, 1961, p. 135) of Gascoyne’s latter volume which have generally come to be regarded as his “main contribution to Poetry” (in spite of the English poet’s having later written – and, according to Blackburn, most commendably so – “verse which shows wit, tenderness and insight”) – and, secondly and much more importantly, because, whether one agrees with or calls into question Elizabeth Jennings’s claim that it was only through his explorations, torturous and always risky, of the “spiritual” landscapes of *Poems 1937-1942* that Gascoyne “found his own voice” (Jennings, 1961, p. 190), the complex, tension-ridden text of the collection does very easily lend itself to be seen as simultaneously the portent, the seal and the symbolic matrix of that new “poetic” whose most general outline Rémy sketches out in his *Surrealism in Britain*. And, it would appear, Scott is hardly disinclined to agree with such a suggestion either:

In May 1943, Gascoyne jotted down the synopsis of a proposed autobiographical work, “Epilogue to an Escapade,” on the blank rear leaf of his copy of Collin de Planchy’s *Dictionnaire Infernal* (Paris, 1863). This aborted project was clearly intended to be a retrospective examination in eleven chapters of his earlier engagement with Surrealism (and presumably with Communism) and with “Surrealist Personalities.” The last two chapter headings are particularly interesting in their relevance to my discussion of the context of the production of the poems from the years 1938-41 (as well as *Hölderlin’s Madness*): X. “Crise de Conscience”; XI: “Departure on a New Quest, Summer 1937.” The new collection, *Poems 1937-1942*, published in December 1943, represents in a very real sense the product of this “New Quest” following his first contact with Jouve and Fondane and dissatisfaction with Surrealism: here is a crystallisation of his developing philosophical framework and rapprochement with his own psyche, together with the search of a poetic language which looked above all to acknowledge and to privilege the spiritual (Scott, 2002, p. 157).

My dates, however – unlike those of Scott’s – would never not aspire to provide, or even point to, any “very real” disambiguation. Their “crystallisation” is not lasting and does not produce anything aggressively palpable – nor even aims to. Instead – and it is here that I feel faithful to Michel Rémy’s understanding of what the formative crisis in Gascoyne’s “poetic” life consisted in and of when it took place – what I would want them to be seen as partaking of is precisely that haunted, hallucinatory semireality which the “poetic” so arrestingly expressed by the texts published in *Poems 1937-1942* seeks to uncover and explore. Insubstantial and, to remain within the metaphorical framework of that which Gascoyne calls in his preface to Fondane’s *Le Mal des fantômes* “the realm of Ambiguity, which is certainly par excellence that of Ghosts” (Fraser, 2012, p. 179), spectral, their boundaries are half transparent and can become material only momentarily, at all other times letting in that which one might expect them to keep away – and indeed, while I will be mostly focusing on those writings of the English poet’s which he produced between the second half of 1936 and the Summer of 1943, by no means will I try to restrict myself only to

discussing these texts of his as they cannot be separated from the writing which comes before or after them (nor, as has already been said, from what appears to be merely their context). And one could in fact well argue that the dates I have just suggested putting a spotlight on are “in a very real sense” misleading: what they attempt to do is not so much “represent” as entice – lure one into setting out on a search for something, or some echo at least, of that which might be only endlessly sought between their brackets: the central, originative point of that supposedly new “poetic”; the “very real” crux of the “‘Crise de Conscience’” which has made it possible; the actual beginning of Gascoyne’s (“poetic”) “crystallisation”; the final irreducible “eternal Mystery” (Gascoyne, 2014f, p. 298) of the “poetic” whose pursuit he considers so urgent.

Chimeral and sigillike, my dates would thus best be seen as above all intended to help the reader recognize at last what Michel Rémy appears to understand as the rhizomorphic structure – of all those heterogenous, unceasingly germinating processes of the “‘Crise’” (one ought to note here that just like the English noun “crisis,” the French word “crise” can also signify both a situation of uncertainty, extreme difficulty or grave danger and a formative stage or a turning point), of the metamorphosing “turning point” that is neither singular nor plural (and neither con-fined to a given period nor beyond all time locations), of the “urgent and essential change” that “turning point” brings about and of their nested, systemic interdependencies, to be sure; however, one could just as well see as essentially rhizomatic the nature of the “poetic” which the French critic endeavours to shed some light on, of David Gascoyne’s *écriture* in general and of the two’s dynamic interrelatedness; and one might no less persuasively echo Rémy and claim that “the Surrealist spirit” (Rémy, 2001, p. 22) – one would not be wrong in the least to exchange here “the Surrealist spirit” for the alchemical disposition, or the fundamentally existential impulse – “resides, and runs deep down, rhizome-like in Gascoyne’s world view” and his “poetic” project. I submit here that the reading of “the rhizome” which, even though in no way could it be hoped to amount to *the* key to the understanding of the drama of the English poet’s writings, might nevertheless prove of great help in explorations of the latter – the reading which, one could argue, underlies Rémy’s suggestion – is one that need not diverge much from Deleuze and Guattari’s proposition. Firstly, the “rhizome” that Rémy is referring to surely also emphasises “the radicle-system” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 6) being “radically” interdependent and given to what Gascoyne will at times refer to as “Convergence” (Gascoyne observes in “A Kind of Declaration” that “whether we like it or not we are all ‘members of one another,’ and it is coming increasingly to be grasped that the era that has already begun is essentially that of Convergence. Everything seems to be in the balance, polarization is intensifying in every domain and each problem is seen to be becoming less and less capable of being considered apart from every other one” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 167) – to the ongoing processes of diversification, expansion and hybridization Deleuze and Guattari famously speak of (“[p]rinciples of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7), that is. Secondly, Rémy too could very well be construed as envisioning “the rhizome” as “multiplicities” rather than as multiple – and therefore as neither one nor many (“[p]rinciple of multiplicity: it is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive, ‘multiplicity,’ that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 8). Thirdly, as the French critic’s words on the “rhizomatic” nature of “the Surrealist spirit” that haunts Gascoyne’s *écriture* clearly show, what Rémy denotes by the word “rhizome” is, due to its/their self-transcendent nature, certainly as capable of potentially interminable regeneration, or, better, reconstitution, as Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizome” is (“[p]rinciple of asignifying rupture: against the oversignifying breaks separating structures or cutting across a

single structure. A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 10). Last but not least, instead of misconstruing “the rhizome” as a given whole or wholes, the interpretation Rémy could well be seen as having in mind would present it/them as ceaselessly emerging through continually ad-libbed renegotiation(s) of its/their relationship with its/their environment – and therefore, in Gascoyne’s own parlance, as inexhaustibly “mysterious” (“[p]rinciple or cartography and decalomania: a rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model. It is stranger to any idea of genetic axis or deep structure” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 13).

If one decided to take a closer look at such a perspective on the “rhizomatic” character of the supposedly breakthrough ““Crise de Conscience”” David Gascoyne underwent – which is to say on the “fracture d’ordre idéologique, sinon spirituel” (Rémy, 1984, p. 14) that the English poet was becoming more and more painfully aware of sometime between October 1936 and November 1937 – one might find out not only that his experience of the ““Crise”” continued well beyond the boundary the latter date establishes but also that the predicament which preceded and to a great extent brought about the ““Crise de Conscience”” was not terminated by the ““Crise”” in the least: that which gave rise to the “fracture” of the ““Crise”” could be seen as the breakthrough’s very substance, the *materia prima* that the ““Crise de Conscience”” grew from and gave a shape to – and it continued to run through Gascoyne’s œuvre, even if transfigured, after the critical “fracture” had started to emerge. The crisis in the sense of a harrowing experience most likely to lead to either the demise or a radical redefinition and the crisis understood as the decisive moment of change that puts an end to the ordeal and resolves the tension between the end and a new beginning are here fundamentally inseparable – and apparently co-existent. Rémy, who just as Roger Scott relates the critical “fracture” to the subsidence of “Gascoyne’s direct involvement with Surrealism” (Rémy, 2001, p. 21), concurs:

[Gascoyne] last appeared in their midst on the occasion of the Surrealist Object Exhibition at the London Gallery on Cork Street in November 1937, but not *in presentia*. He contributed an object to the Exhibition, and three poems to its slim catalogue. Interestingly, the object, *The Half-Back’s Honeymoon*, was constructed in London from notes sent by Gascoyne from Paris.

Then, especially with the impending threat of war and increasing psychological tensions, Gascoyne grew dissatisfied with Surrealist activity. More and more preoccupied with the onslaught of the forces of negation and fragmentation, with the loss of spiritual centre and the fragmentation of the individual, he tried to find a way out, or at least to discover traces of hope and the possibility of regeneration in Kierkegaardian existentialism [sic], in Christian symbology and hermeticist propositions. Gascoyne’s poetry became haunted by all the ineffectuated virtualities of man, the constantly deferred presence of truth, the inaccessibility of the ultimate Presence, and the groping of Man through the forests of symbols supplied by various philosophies and systems of thought (Rémy, 2001, pp. 21–22).

If to find oneself in such a drama is to discover one is quite in the dark – “[n]ot until the blindfold is removed does one begin to realize that one is forever blind,” runs the opening aphorism of Gascoyne’s “Blind Man’s Buff” (Gascoyne, 1998a, p. 457) – what Michel Rémy’s words succeed in illuminating above all is how acute the sense of utter confusion, despair and estrangement which the ““Crise of

Conscience” entails must be. Little in the passage indicates where the tentative “way out” would actually lead – nor are we presented with anything like a clear idea about what exactly is to be left behind. Furthermore, as I have already suggested, the “fracture” whose shape Rémy construes as revelatory of the conditions that precipitated the emergence of Gascoyne’s “poetic” turns out to have hardly been fully repaired or healed by the (ongoing) emergence of the latter – in fact, one could claim on the basis of the account of Gascoyne’s “poetic” project Rémy sketches out in the passage cited above that once the venture of “tr[ying] to find a way out” is embarked upon, the anguish the seeker is plagued by might even grow worse. While what the “poetic” which Gascoyne is committing himself to (finding) promises is “at least” the discovery of the “traces of hope and the possibility of regeneration” – even if, it may be, not of the unfathomable and doubtful “way out” – what it deals with, embraces and becomes “haunted by” when pursued is all the more urgent consciousness of “the Fault.” “Gascoyne’s poetry,” Rémy explains, “became haunted by” not merely human “ineffectuated virtualities,” but also by “the constantly deferred presence of truth” and “the inaccessibility of the ultimate Presence” – by the loss of both all epistemological certainty and all existential grounding: what is lacking is that which would have made it possible for us to transcend our fundamental confusion as well as that which might have once constituted the very ground of our being. Consequently, to be “haunted by” such knowledge of “the Fault” is also to suspect that one’s search may in the end consist in little more than “groping [...] through the forests of symbols supplied by various philosophies and systems of thought,” that more than anything else it will be Baudelairean seeking less for a “way out” of our quandary, perhaps, than for a way *through* the systems of elusive correspondences where one’s chance of orientating oneself, of finding one’s “way,” depends on being able to properly relate one changing set of potentially healing symbols to another, to conjugate them in a momentarily auspicious environment – the task which one pursues (all but) blindly, attempting to find and follow not so much a clear path to a more stable or more comprehensive “Convergence” (there are precious few such routes, if any, in the wilderness that is being searched) but rather what Gascoyne calls in “Odeur de Pensée” the “subtle odour” of “[t]hought,” the “odour” which never seems to last for more than a moment nor quite remains itself but which is what may yet prove just enough to bring about the much needed “regeneration,” being creative of genuine “light”:

Thought’s odour is so pale that in the air
 Nostrils inhale, it disappears like fire
 Put out by water. Drifting through the coils
 Of the involved and sponge-like brain it frets
 The fine-veiled walls of secret mental cells,
 Brushing their fragile fibre as with light
 Nostalgic breezes [...] (Gascoyne, 2014d).

Seeing little more than that one is “forever blind,” lost time and again within the labyrinthine “coils” of one’s “involved and sponge-like brain” – grotesquely depicted in the poem as simultaneously a lump of tangled and gross (or grossly exposed) flesh as well as a mazelike building of both a monastery where enlightenment is sought and the prison in which one is confined to wait one’s life out, forgotten and alone (hence “[t]he fine-veiled walls of secret mental cells”) – one is seeking to pick up a hint of the “subtle” and evanescent “[t]hought’s odour” in the mirages of the internal maze, by conversing with the spectres that haunt the “secret mental cells” and re-

tracing what one is “haunted by,” its manifold faces and the stages of its transformations. As the quest progresses, the knowledge of “the Fault” slowly becomes an increasing awareness of the character of one’s search, and the latter soon starts to shade into an intimation of being “haunted by” the knowledge that it is through such “groping” that one might “discover traces of hope and the possibility of regeneration,” the intimation soon to grow into a shadow of the insight that what one is “haunted by” may also be those very “traces,” as unsettling as they are innervating. Relentlessly irritating (“Brushing”) the “fragile fibre” of “[t]he fine-walled walls of secret mental cells” and, no less unnervingly, all too quickly evaporating so that not even “the last breath” of it appears to remain, the “[t]hought’s odour” may eventually be either experienced as – or allow for the intimate event during which one lives out – some “obscure” and “[d]eep presaging excitement” of the sought-for (even if perhaps unconsciously) healing “light”:

[...] And it’s then we sense
Remote presentiment of some intensely bright
Impending spiritual dawn, of which the pure
Immense illumination seems about to pour
In upon our existence from beyond
The edge of Knowing! (Gascoyne, 2014d)

A rather peculiar enlightenment experience is being referred to here – or rather hinted at, for to speak of our “sens[ing] / Remote presentiment of some intensely bright / Impending spiritual dawn” is to speak of a premonition of a still more obscure and still more promising premonition, or of an apocalypse that lifts the veil to reveal another, “[r]emote” and still deeper revelation, one which “we sense” is just about to come: what “we sense” is *not* “some intensely bright / Impending spiritual dawn” but merely its “[r]emote presentiment.” That curious doubling, suggestive of some distance or difference that not only postpones the “spiritual” event but separates and distances it from itself, as it were – note the enjambment that removes from the “spiritual dawn” its luminosity and radiance, that which makes it what it is, one could say (“some intensely bright / Impending spiritual dawn”), and the participle “[i]mpending,” the signal word of promise and assurance as much as of suspension, and thus also of the assurance that the promise will not be delivered on any time soon – is echoed in the rendering of that whose “presentiment” we are said to “sense.” What “seems about to pour / In upon our existence from beyond / The edge of Knowing!” is not the “intensely bright / Impending spiritual dawn” but its “pure / Immense illumination” – the distinction that might be read as reminding the reader that the “illumination” spoken of here is not enlightenment itself but rather its signs or its expression, that which is to enlightenment what smoke is to fire or, perhaps, what sunbeams are to sunlight or to the sun. Or it might be that it *is* an “illumination” indeed, of sorts, only one which illumines its own possibility – and so must be self-announcing, and therefore self-deferring as well. That self-withdrawing nature of the enlightenment event which the speaker of “Odeur de Pensée” seeks to evoke becomes clearer still as soon as one realises that it is not the “spiritual dawn” that is said to presently appear to be “about to pour / In upon our existence from beyond / The edge of Knowing!” but the latter’s marks or display, its “pure / Immense illumination,” which would seem to mean that the radiant “spiritual dawn” itself is right now still more “[r]emote,” unapproachable and unknown – and yet it is *not* quite absent.

Attempting to grasp what the “intensely bright / Impending spiritual dawn,” or even its “illumination,” essentially are would thus be very much like striving to isolate and pinpoint

the “‘Crise de conscience” that David Gascoyne underwent. Just like the intangible “spiritual” experience of “Odeur de Pensée,” the “fracture d’ordre idéologique, sinon spirituel” which Rémy mentions turns out to be ceaselessly self-displacing and self-disseminating. Both events are neither present nor absent, having no particular location nor being ultimately placeless either; to try to ascertain their being is only to find out how apparitional (the intricate structure of that self-receding apocalypse’s fundamental uncertainty relies also on the crucial word “seems” – the half-intuited “[r]emote presentiment” reveals a trace of the alluring “spiritual dawn” in the “pure / Immense illumination” which only “*seems* about to pour / In upon our existence [my italics]”) and elusive they are; to search for them – and a search for them is what one may undertake only when lured by a half-glimpsed sight of a mirage of what one could from now on be tempted to believe might be found in the end – is to follow their ever-changing traces in the same way one could want to follow the hints of the “[t]hought’s odour.” Since the “odour” is frustratingly “subtle,” merely half-intimated at best, and even then only momentarily so – so “subtle” indeed that one striving to follow its all but impalpable transitions has to rely on discovering not so much what it is as what “it is not” or, rather, what “it is not like” – that which we are so dimly aware of is not even quite the “[t]hought’s odour” (“odour,” it ought to be pointed out here, not in the sense of a scent but denoting the spirit or the mood of “thought” instead) but rather its traces – its everrenewed failure to be found no less than its ever-varying failure to disappear, the inexpressibility that keeps promising its presence, its ceaseless differing from itself:

Thought has a subtle odour: which is not
 Like that which hawthorn after rainfall has;
 Nor is it sickly or astringent as
 Are some scents which round human bodies float,
 Diluting sweat’s thick auras. It is not like
 Dust’s immemorial smells, which lurk
 Where spiders nest, in shadows under doors
 Of rooms where centuries have died, and rest
 In clouds the blackening cracked floors
 Of sties and closets, attics and wrecked tombs... (Gascoyne, 2014d)

Now what has somehow managed to come to the fore in these last paragraphs is the vocabulary of the alchemical Œuvre. First hinted at in Gascoyne’s poem by the Hermetic buzzword “subtle” (see Jung’s gloss on Mylius’s description of “Mercurius as an ‘intermediate substance’ (*media substantia*)” (Jung, 1989, p. 241), the Great Work could have been then brought to one’s attention both by the Mercurial, contradiction-ridden nature of “[t]hought’s odour” and by the complex, labyrinthine character (evoked also by the imagery of “the coils / Of the involved and sponge-like brain”) of the latter’s impossible pursuit, and finally pointed at by what appears to be the nature of the “spiritual dawn,” which is unknown yet manifest, unseen yet “intensely bright” – what is known of it is just a hint of its “pure,” which may be to say so clean and clear as to be perfectly transparent, “[i]mmense illumination,” or the latter’s hauntingly imperfect absence – just like the lapis, whose character too could only be intimated by means of flagrantly self-contradictory representations (and even then of necessity only partially and faultily so): “‘a stone but not a stone, a stone unknown and known to all,”” Zosimos is said to have written of the agent/goal of the Grand Œuvre (Roberts, 1994, p. 70). Since the word “essence” – which is, as has already been said, yet another trademark alchemical

notion, one easily brought to mind here by the adjective “subtle” – refers as much to an extract from a natural product as to a perfume or indeed an “odour” (as well as denotes, it goes without saying, immaterial phenomena and those properties in virtue of which a given thing can be called by its name), the poetic alchemy I have been seeking to briefly outline may be quite legitimately summed up as one whose material comprises the language, the imagery and the procedures of the art of “concentration of imaginative essences” (Gascoyne, 1970, p. 5) or of their transmutation; the “essences” spoken of here, be they distillates of “thought” or its evanescent “odour,” ought best perhaps to be envisioned as selfdiffering – just as the search of the “[t]hought’s odour” for its own “essence” would be. Moreover, the alchemical formulas of “Odeur de Pensée” I sketched out above may well help clarify what it is that allows Rémy to insist on the close affinity between “the Great Work” and David Gascoyne’s literary or rather poetic “groping” for and “through the forests of symbols supplied by various,” and often seemingly incompatible, “philosophies and systems of thought” – or, more precisely, the affinity between “groping” through and for various “influences,” or rather their transmutations through which the “[t]hought’s odour” can be briefly sensed, its healing potential momentarily actualized, and “the Great Work” dramatically remade into an “obstinate, unending search” for its (very own) means, but also for its contexts and premises:

This obstinate, unending search is encapsulated in [Gascoyne’s] later interest in the symbolic meaning of the alchemical quest, the transformation of poison into remedy or, more precisely, the search for the antidote lodged inside the poisoned fruit. Writing becomes, then, the simultaneous apparition and disappearance of traces. It is in this intrinsic restlessness, this endless self-questioning that the permanence of the Surrealist spirit resides, and runs deep down, rhizome-like in Gascoyne’s worldview. In 1982, in the text he wrote as the preface to the catalogue of Roland Penrose’s exhibition of recent collages, he refers to Surrealism as an integral part of the quest which started with neolithic rock painting and aboriginal graffiti [...]. The cardinal point of David Gascoyne’s work, as first indicated by *A Short Survey*, has never ceased to be the experience of Difference and the mercurial element at the core of its writing (Rémy, 2001, p. 22).

Were one to follow Rémy’s view that it was that “fracture d’ordre idéologique, sinon spirituel” that led David Gascoyne to attempt to find “non pas tant des solutions que des *voies*, des *frayages* d’espoir, tour à tour chez Kierkegaard, Pascal, Chekhov, Martin Buber, Berdiaev, tenant ainsi de donner à ses lectures de Jouve une *perspective* philosophique” (Rémy, 1984, p. 15), and that Gascoyne, by the time he started seeking to marry and transform those influences, had *already* become engaged in what would soon emerge as his poetic “recherches alchimiques” (Rémy, 1984, p. 105) – the venture on the one hand clearly indebted to the poet’s former “surrealist quest for the philosopher’s stone” (Rémy, 1999, p. 126), on the other hand strongly reminiscent of what the project of the alchemical “*ars regia*” (Burckhardt, 1997, p. 23) is according to its traditional expositions, which Gascoyne was soon to become thoroughly acquainted with – were one to assume such a perspective, it would turn out that in David Gascoyne’s œuvre (or Œuvre) the alchemical drama has never been discrete from the poetic one. The starting point of the rencontres between the two is lost and irretrievable. I would submit, though, that what the poet must have been initially drawn to was *already* alchemy infused with, and seen through, the unmistakable colours of his poetic “search” – the “search” whose nature might have already been to no negligible extent alchemical even when Gascoyne was only starting

to try out the possibilities of its “Convergence” with alchemy; the suggestion is one Michel Rémy would probably be eager to endorse as well, as the following passage from his *David Gascoyne* appears to evince:

[...] il n'est pas étonnant que David Gascoyne se soit intéressé aux recherches alchimiques, non seulement par une sorte de prédisposition centrale au surréalisme, que fascinaient la quête de la Pierre philosophique et la transformation qu'elle permettrait du plomb en or, mais aussi par l'engagement qu'elles représentaient de l'individu dans un travail de promesse constante, hors de toute identité fixe; l'espace de l'alchimie est un espace de production et de différenciation, un espace de substances transitoires, provisoires, un espace d'opposés sans cesse reportés l'un à l'autre sans que ce rapport puisse s'épuiser, un espace d'effraction des presences autant que de sollicitation de la Présence Suprême (Rémy, 1984, p. 105).

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**“ПЕВНІ ШЛЯХИ ДО НЕПЕВНИХ ЗЕМЕЛЬ:” ДЕКІЛЬКА ЗАУВАГ ПРО ТРУДНОЩІ
КАРТУВАННЯ ТВОРЧОСТІ ДЕВІДА ГАСКОЙНА**

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Зроблено спробу дослідити можливості картування творчості Девіда Гаскойна. Звернено увагу на фатичний культурний зсув поета щодо світогляду та літературного стилю, що мав відбутися впродовж 1936–39 рр., та впливу цього зсуву на авторський розвиток по-езії. Звернено увагу на типові непорозуміння, яке розмежовує ранній (у певному сенсі сюрреалістичний) та зрілий етапи поетової творчості. Це розрізнення часто ґрунтується на твердженні, що лише пізніша творчість поета достатньо зріла та варта уваги, на відміну від ранішого періоду наївного експериментування. Мандрівку поетичною творчістю Гаскойна показано як розширення, розвиток та зростання.

Ключові слова: алхімія, екзистенціалістський, екзистенціалізм, модернізм, сюрреалізм.