WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

'We keep the bread and wine for show'[1]— Consistent Irony and Reluctant Faith in the Poetry of Dannie Abse

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DANNIE ABSE had his first collection of poetry accepted by Hutchinson in 1946 when he was a medical student in London. Although he wishes few of those early Dylan-esque pieces to survive, he has gone on to publish poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction for sixty years, mainly with Hutchinson. Despite that fact, despite the continuing success of his autobiographical novel *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve*,[2] which has remained in print since 1954, Dannie Abse is a writer who has not received the critical attention which he deserves. I will talk about Abse's early activities as editor of the magazine *Poverty and Poetry* in the 1950s and as a member of the 'Mavericks' group of poets; also his roles as doctor and poet; wearing both 'the white and purple coat';[3]

White Coat, Purple Coat

White coat and purple coat
  a sleeve from both he sews.
That white is always stained with blood,
  that purple by the rose.

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[1] *New and Collected Poems 1948–98* (London, 2003).

[2] London, 1954.

[3] The poet talks of his nearly giving up on his medical studies to pursue a full-time literary career in *The Presence* (London, 2007).

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> And phantom rose and blood most real
> compose a hybrid style;
> white coat and purple coat
> few men can reconcile.
>
> White coat and purple coat
> can each be worn in turn
> but in the white a man will freeze
> and in the purple burn.[4]

That final image undercuts those traditional strategies of the inversion of syntax and the end-focusing of the main clause: this emphasises those issues of 'duality' which the poet himself recognises:

> The first voice cries: 'He's not what he seems,'
> but the second one sighs: 'He is what he is,'
> then one shouts 'wine' and the other screams 'bread',
> . . . Now, now, I hang these masks on the wall.
> Oh Time, take one and leave me all
> lest four tears from two eyes fall.[5]

I will discuss the tensions between those roles and examine the ways in which the writer's identity as Londoner and a Cardiff Welshman also underpins his work.[6] In 1986, no doubt on a visit to support both his family and Cardiff City Football Club, Abse 'popped in' to Llandaff Cathedral: 'Inside soaring spaces of worship—Jewish, Muslim or Christian—I feel not just secular but utterly estranged like one without history or memory.' He stops before 'Epstein's dominating aluminium resurrected Christ' and admires the Lady Chapel's reredos and its 'gold-leafed wreaths of wild flowers'. But it is later that weekend, standing in his pyjamas under the 'opera-dramatic clouds' at Ogmore-on-Sea, with the knowledge that from the east 'a cancer sailed in from Chernobyl', that 'my own lips moved'.[7] Four years later he attended fellow poet John Ormond's funeral there and thought the Epstein to be 'a little less dominant'; it is the memory of the man which affects him, not the magnifi-

[4] *New and Collected Poems 1948–98* (London, 2003) Most of the poems quoted from are in this volume, though original collections are listed below. His *Collected Poems 1948–1988* (London, 1989) was, in fact, given the sub-title *White Coat, Purple Coat*. This poem is recited by the character Pythagoras in the play 'Pythagoras (Smith)' *The View from Row G, Three Plays* Dannie Abse, introduction by James A. Davies (Bridgend, 1995).

[5] *Tenants of the House* (London, 1957).

[6] Abse subscribes to, amongst other publications, both *The London Review of Books* and the Cardiff City Football Club fanzine.

[7] Educated at a Cardiff Catholic Grammar, he returned home one day to ask, 'Who's Jesus Price, mama?' *A Poet in the Family* (London, 1974, later included in *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*).

cence of the cathedral.[8] Abse is a spiritual poet, not a poet of religion: '. . . the dull prayers of dead religious maniacs, symbols that have often lost their potency and restrictive disciplines . . . they are barriers, not bridges . . . I have said earlier that Auschwitz made me more of a Jew than Moses did . . .'.[9]

Dannie Abse's Jewish family background was part orthodox, part secular: from an early age he resolutely chooses to be secular:

> When Bernice Rubens attempted to enrol me in a Zionist youth movement I declined . . . We were both Jewish, both Welsh, though in her memoir Bernice Rubens judgmentally insists, 'Dannie Abse, a Cardiffian like myself, but far more Welsh than I . . . his Jewishness strictly secondary.'[10]

But in his writing he addresses those issues of faith, anger and compassion compelled by the events of the twentieth century, Abse's century, the century of particular Jewish tragedy:

> Goodbye, 20th Century.
>
> What should I mourn?
> Hiroshima, Auschwitz?
> . . .
> Goodbye, 20th Century,
> your trumpets and your drums,
> your war-wounds still unhealed.
> Goodbye, I-must-leave-you-Dolly,
> goodbye Lily Marlene.
> Has the Past always a future?
> Will there always be
> a jackboot on the stair,
> a refugee to roam?[11]

Though Abse is not simply a public poet: as he says, '. . . there is hardly an important occasion in my life that is not covertly profiled or overtly inhabited in my poetry'.[12] Dannie Abse was born in 1923 in Cardiff, the last of four children. His father, Rudolph, was the manager and part-owner of cinemas in the Valleys and his mother, Kate Shepherd, 'the prettiest girl in the Swansea Valley',[13] from a more orthodox family, was a fluent speaker of both Welsh and Hebrew. When his grandfather

[8] 'In Llandaff Cathedral', in *Goodbye, Twentieth Century: an Autobiography* (London, 2001).
[9] Ibid.
[10] *The Presence* (London, 2007), p. 44.
[11] 'A letter from Ogmore-on-Sea', in *Arcadia, One Mile* (London, 1998).
[12] Ibid.
[13] See *Contemporary Authors: Biographical Series* ed. D. Bryfonski (Detroit, 1984).

preached in Ystalyfera, 'David spoke to Dafydd'. Abse's childhood and family life are more reflected upon, more refracted, the subject of more variations of interpretation, than those of any other writer from Wales. Of his father he has written:

> When he was gay he told jokes; when moodily sad he would take down his violin and, with eyes closed like a lover, play Kreisler's 'Humoresque' until he became, for all the grey and green world of Wales, a model for Chagall.[14]

His family members, particularly the men, are larger-than-life, expressive, ebullient figures who become characters in his fiction and poetry and autobiographical writings: Leo, the oratorical politician and writer; Wilfred, the successful psychoanalyst; Uncle Isidore, another Chagall-esque fiddler flying over grim roofs. Abse's family and upbringing are a destiny caught between the two poles of rational thought and medical skill and the dreams and ideals of politics, the music of words. Formal religious faith may have been dissipated in the dark mid-century, but to survive and prosper through that century an ironic sensibility and a deep need to believe in the greater purpose of life have been essential.

In *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve*,[15] Abse fictionalised his boyhood and early manhood years in Cardiff. But he did grow up in a warm, supportive and highly stimulating family: brothers Wilfred and Leo were exemplars of energy and intellect in medicine and the law and politics. The clash of ideologies and the rise of Fascism in the 1930s were debated in that household. The two decades of *entre deux guerres* are haunted by horrors past and materialising threats. The young boy's Auntie Cecile and Uncle Bertie never lock their front door in case their son Clive should eventually return from the Great War: this is a figure that reappears as 'Cousin Sidney', actually missing in combat at Dunkirk, in a later poem.

The impressionable boy is taken by Leo to the Memorial Meeting for Jimmy Ford, a Cardiff man who has died fighting Franco in Spain. He hears that 'The Fifteenth Brigade, ragtime idealists, advanced; but Jimmy Ford lay horizontal, akimbo, on the dusty road near the tobacco fields, the vision of a white deserted farmhouse leaking out of his surprised eyes'.[16]

Despite his youth Dannie understands the significance of this loss and the political context of armed struggle; he wishes do something to help:

[14] *A Poet in the Family*.
[15] London, 1954.
[16] *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* (London, 1954).

> If I was bigger perhaps I could go to Spain. It was worth fighting for. Maybe if I got killed they'd have a memorial meeting for me. It was very sad all these young men dying. One week Leo would show me a short story by Ralph Fox in *Left Review*. The next week there would be his obituary. There'd been an article by Christopher Caudwell, then a week later his obituary also. One week a poem by John Cornford, the next another obituary, and so on and so on. Nobody seemed to care except Leo and some of his friends.

He writes later of reading the Spanish poet Miguel Hernandez 'with rapt and growing anger',[17] though he also recognised that 'Righteous the rhetoric of indignation, | but protesting poems, like the plaster angels, | are impotent'. He remembers, too, his disaffection from 'the fashionable "pink" poets of the day—W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, and Cecil Day Lewis'—who 'were content to compose poems that were ordered carnivals of the interior life . . . to give readers pleasure'. Still, Spender's anthology *Poems for Spain*, published in 1940, had '. . . adult moral concerns and protestations [which] engaged my own schoolboy wrath and indignation'.[18] The young Abse 'owned no religious commitment', but, like the seventeenth-century divine, George Herbert, he 'wanted my poems to change the world'.[19] This was the impulse that would lead to his founding of the alternative poetry magazine *Poetry and Poverty* after the war.

Of course, Dannie Abse was too young to be engaged in active service during the war.[20] He followed his brother Wilfred into medicine and was training in Westminster Hospital as the war was drawing to a close. He speaks of being left out of the assignment of trainees who went to Germany to treat the victims of the death and concentration camps, possibly because he was a Jew. Ironically, after qualifying he was conscripted as a National Serviceman and that led, just as ironically, to his deployment and subsequent civilian career in Mass Radiography in London and his specialising in diseases of the chest. His experiences as a commissioned officer in the RAF were later fictionalised in *Some Corner of an English Field*.[21] The central character, Henderson, gives a confessional speech at his 'dining out' dinner:

[17] *A Poet in the Family*, pp. 6–8.
[18] *Contemporary Authors*.
[19] Ibid., pp. 10–11.
[20] For a more detailed examination of Abse's writing on wars see, T. Curtis, '"All Change!" Dannie Abse and the Twentieth Century Wars', in *Wales at War: Critical Essays on Literature and Art*, ed. T. Curtis (Bridgend, 2007).
[21] London, 1956.

> A doctor—but a National Serviceman nevertheless, who has not been quite at ease, quite at home . . . one had to face up to realities. I mean the external reality that is visible around us: the uniforms, the barrage balloons, the homesick faces—the internal reality: the longing to love someone and to be loved, the need for faith in each other and in God, and the terror of longing for something that one can't quite understand . . .

Dannie Abse rose, briefly, to be a Squadron Leader when his commanding officer fell sick, though his experiences of service, as might be expected, were underpinned by boredom and frustration. That slightly inebriated speech by Henderson with its confusion and the need to fix on some certainty beyond the predictable tedium of service life carries the weight of a post-war, post-Holocaust existentialist crisis; it is surely not too far removed from the writer's own feelings and the poems he was writing at that time. It is difficult not to read into Henderson's experiences and attitudes those of the writer.

> Somebody had written: a man's destiny is what he is. That was a lie. Fate was the accident that happened to one, a bomb falling, being called up, conscripted into boredom. It's not what you are that matters so much, thought Henderson, but where you are at a given time. One walked down a dark corridor, with all the vision and wisdom that one had, but if there was an open trapdoor there you fell right through, whoever you were. That was the morality of things, the biological morality of things.[22]

Actual conflict, experienced and imagined, was more acutely realised in the earlier novel: in *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* bombs fall in the young Abse's neighbourhood of Roath and his fictional friend Keith is carried dead from the debris. The character of young Abse walks away from that boyhood sobered by the loss: 'Near the air-raid shelters I heard, also, the waterfall crashing down into its disaster and saw, in the harp of wind, pools of rain-water trembling on the gravel pathway, reflecting shuddering fragments of sky. Pieces of sky, water leaves, hands all fallen, falling in the convalescent sunlight.' He strolls back to a 'home that was never to be home again'.[23]

There was no recourse to religious belief in these circumstances; the Abse family's religious observance had swung away from the Shepherds, his mother's family tradition of orthodoxy, to the rational application of medicine and law and the pragmatism of political action. Dannie Abse

[22] London, 1956, p. 82.

[23] The young Abse was himself injured when a bomb fell close to his house in Windermere Avenue, Cardiff. See *A Poet in the Family*, pp. 43–4.

has never committed himself to a religious belief: he says, 'As for religion, at sixteen I was happy to believe that when water spurts from rock or a bush spontaneously bursts into flame it is time to consult a physician.'[24] It is as if the dedication to a medical training had pre-empted the possibility of faith through mystery. However, as a writer he is constantly 'startled by the visible' and celebrates with irony and joy the peculiarities of our human world.

Clearly, a childhood spent in the shadow of Fascism and a young adulthood in blitzed Cardiff and London as a medical student would characterise and focus the professional man and the professional writer. The two ladies who occupied the room next to his student digs in Aberdare Gardens, NW6, Mrs Schiff and Mrs Blumenfeld, were refugees from Nazi Germany; only later would he fully realise the roots of their sadness:

> After the war years, I, like so many others, in Britain and elsewhere, learnt more and more about the death camps of Europe. I came to realise that what had happened to the relatives of Blumenfeld and Schiff was something that could not be irrevocably suppressed from consciousness, that in one sense I, too, was a survivor, that I could never encounter a German of a certain age-group without seeing him as a one-time inquisitor, that ordinary smoke towering over autumn gardens could trigger off a vision of concentration camps, false teeth, soap.[25]

Although he qualified after the war, Dannie Abse's training had been almost abandoned. The 'butcher's shop', as he called it, had sickened him; hospital life was 'beginning to feel like being in the First World War trenches', and it was much more exciting to read the poets he lists as 'new to me: Rilke and T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas and Alun Lewis' than Conybeare's *Textbook of Medicine*. It was only with Wilfred's support and through his obligation to his father that Dannie completed his training, rather than opting for the life of a full-time writer: the white coat was close to being discarded for the purple coat.

In 1949 Dannie Abse, now qualified as a doctor, started the magazine *Poetry and Poverty*; it had its roots in the Swiss Cottage society, '. . . a remarkably vivid cafe life because of the refugees, mostly Jews, from Austria and Germany',[26] and initially involved two friends, Molly Owen

[24] *The Presence*, p. 44.
[25] *A Poet in the Family*, p. 78.
[26] *Contemporary Authors*.

and Godfrey Rubens.[27] The two coffee bars, the Cosmo and the Cordial, were the haunts of Elias Canetti, who had a 'formidable aura and presence', Erich Fried, Lotte Lenya, Rudi Nassauer and others. *Poetry and Poverty* was always polemical and had the intention 'of publishing good poems (naturally) as well as focussing critically on the imaginative poverty of certain well known contemporary writers'. The first issue was duplicated roughly, but sold a thousand copies. It ran for six years and prefigured the *New Lines*/*Mavericks* rivalry and debate of the later 1950s concerning the form and subject-matter of contemporary poetry. Dannie Abse wanted to argue against what he described as 'The new choir . . . Proudly English they sing with sharp, flat voices | but no-one dances, nobody rejoices'; he preferred the 'Dionysian sin' of Dylan Thomas, the risk-taking of vision and language.[28]

> . . . I did not want to publish civilised, neat poems that ignored the psychotic savagery of twentieth-century life. Why, only the previous decade there had been Auschwitz and Belsen, Hiroshima and Nagasaki—so shouldn't poetry be more vital, angry, rough, urgent—in short, Dionysian? Should not poets write out of an urgent, personal predicament rather than compose neat little, clever exercises?[29]

There was an irony in Abse's and Howard Sergeant's organising of a counter movement to argue against the assumed clubbiness of The Movement and, ultimately, the *Mavericks* venture did not fulfil Abse's desire to promote poems 'written out of the heat of personal predicament and therefore imbued with a strong current of feeling'. He came to see that Alvarez's *The New Poetry* published in 1962 more effectively exemplified the aspirations which he had pursued in the previous decade.

Dannie Abse's work in the decades following the war had, close to its centre, a need to form an objective correlative, narratives and imagery for the mid-century's world war and its subsequent, consequent lurch into the Cold War. Over twenty years later he would characterise the poet's role in the world:

> They were the poems of a much-married man who was almost as happy as possible—yet felt threatened sometimes, and uneasy. For, as a doctor, he was clearly aware of other people's dissatisfactions and suffering. He was increasingly aware, too, of his own mortality—how the apple flesh was always turning

[27] Abse has written often of those years, of particular interest is 'a Meeting with Elias Canetti', in *Goodbye, Twentieth Century: an Autobiography* (London, 2001).
[28] 'Enter the Movement', in *A Poet in the Family*, pp. 150–4.
[29] Ibid., p. 153.

> brown after the bite. In addition, there were those man-made threats: he took his wife to the Academy Cinema in Oxford Street only to be assaulted by a film about Auschwitz; or he would be exposed to the obscene, derelict war images of Vietnam. There was no running away. Writing poetry, too, was an immersion into common reality not an escape from it.[30]

That visit to the Oxford Street cinema is narrated in the poem 'A Night Out'.[31] Written in the 1960s, it tells of a visit to see 'a new Polish film' about the Holocaust. After the depiction of 'the spotlit drama of our nightmares: | images of Auschwitz almost authentic' and the 'trustful children, no older than our own, | strolling into the chambers without fuss, | while smoke, black and curly, oozed from chimneys'. Dannie and Joan Abse and their friends sip coffee 'in a bored espresso bar nearby' and return home to the comfortable surburbs, where the Abses make love 'in the marital bed'. That act may be phrasing a Kabbalistic belief in the need to rebalance the universe when moral chaos threatens; it is a clear, positive response to the negative images the film has planted in their minds.[32]

The world is healed, to an extent, to its only possible extent, by the union in marriage. 'A Night Out' is significant in the context of Dannie Abse's writing: having spent the war as a medical student, and his National Service in the comparative comfort of a Medic's commission, the writer is interrogating his right, any survivor's right, to re-enact the horrors of the Nazis' Final Solution. He asserts that right, that responsibility, more positively in other, later poems, including, 'Not Beautiful', 'Uncle Isidore', 'Case History', 'One of the Chosen' and 'No More Mozart—*Germany 1970*',[33] in which 'The German streets tonight | are soaped in moonlight . . . And twelve million eyes | in six million heads | stare in the same direction.'

Still, in the 1950s and 1960s the demobbed Dr Abse re-entered civilian life and began to build his professional career and family life; though this was done against the backdrop of the developing Cold War and the increasingly urgent threat of nuclear war. His experiences in the RAF, as well as the growing public discussion of the issues of atomic weapons as the wreckage of European cities and societies being reordered, must have meant that he was particularly aware of the fragile hope of the post-war

[30] Ibid., p. 198.
[31] All poems are to be found in *New and Collected Poems* (London, 2003).
[32] This is discussed in more detail by Joseph Cohen in his introduction to *The Poetry of Dannie Abse—Critical Essays and Reminiscences* (London, 1983).
[33] *Funland and Other Poems* (London, 1973).

period. As early as the third collection, *Tenants of the House*,[34] there is a poem which expresses that very real fear of imminent catastrophe, a second holocaust, a nuclear holocaust:

> Oh how much like Europe's Gothic Past!
> This scene of my nightmare's protoplast:
> glow of the radioactive worm.
> Future story of the Blast?

The threat of an impending 'leukaemia in the soul of all' is at the core of a nightmare that, on this occasion, the presence of his wife by his side can not allay and the couplet form can not assuage:

> the grey skin shrivelling from the head
> our two skulls in the double bed,

'Verses at Night' records the deep insecurity of the post-war decade; that was to run in parallel in Dannie Abse's work across the genres with a need to revisit the Nazis' Holocaust; he needs to try again and again to make sense of what had happened in the Concentration and Death camps.

In the same collection 'The Emperors of the Island—*a political parable to be read aloud*' more successfully, because less specifically, creates a trope for the relentlessly destructive nature of humankind:

> There is the story of a deserted island
> where five men walked down to the bay.

One by one they dig a grave and each time one fewer returns until

> Four ghosts dug one grave in the sand,
> four ghosts stood on the sea wet rock;
> five ghosts moved away.

It is polemical, but works both on the page and in performance because it has a lyrical pattern, and it remains as relevant and effective today as fifty years ago.

In Abse's next collection, *Poems Golders Green*,[35] in 'The Grand View' he deals specifically with the question of mysticism and faith:

> For I, too, am spellbound by the grand view,
> flung through vistas from this windy hill,
> am in pure love. I do not know who
> it is that I love, But I would flow
> into One invisible and still.

[34] London, 1957, repr. 1958 and pub. in the USA, 1959.
[35] London, 1962.

He is drawn to the mystics 'in their far, erotic stance', but has to remain rooted to the actual, to the real world. In natural surroundings particularly he is, Wordsworth-like, touched by the need to open himself to larger, more spiritual forces:

> There are moments when a man must sing
> of a lone Presence he cannot see.
> To undulations of space I bring
> all my love when love is happening;
> green directions flying back to me.
>
> There are moments when a man must praise
> the astonishment of being alive,
> When small mirrors of reality blaze
> into miracles; and there's One always
> who, by never departing, almost arrives.

Here he is close to the position of fellow Welsh poet R. S. Thomas, who bird-watching on the moor, or on the coast, also waits for God, for the small mirrors to blaze into miracles. However, the world in his and our century may have offered us more reality than we can bear and far too few miracles.

That collection also included a response to the release from prison of the collaborator and broadcaster for Mussolini, Ezra Pound—'After the Release of Ezra Pound'. Pound the poet, editor, mentor of T. S. Eliot, was, of course, also the collaborator, supporter of Mussolini. Abse's poem takes the form of a reply to a Paul Potts's poem and his forgiveness of Pound; Abse objects that 'Pound did not hear the raw Jewish cry, | the populations committed to the dark . . .' and that if his journey of release between prison cell and his coffin was surely short

> . . . that ticking distance between
> was merely a journey long enough
> to walk the circumference of a Belsen,
> Walt Whitman would have been eloquent,
> and Thomas Jefferson would have cursed.

He finds it impossible to forgive absolutely. In 'Ezra Pound and my father', a chapter in *A Poet in the Family*, Abse describes how his father would persevere with the crackling signals from Italy and Pound's 'gibberish and rhetoric and near obscenity' because they might glean some alternative news on the progress of the war in which brothers Leo and Wilfred were fighting. That 'lousy anti-semite' uttering the 'ravings of an eccentric poet, the paradox of a sensitive Fascist' and his irritating 'nasal harangue' made an impression in that summer of 1943 quite contrary to

the enthusiasm which the young poet had had for the work in Pound's *Selected Poems* borrowed earlier from Cardiff Central Library.[36]

The 'Red Balloon' in the same collection presents an image of anti-semitism from Abse's boyhood and that sense of anger at such racism is continually expressed in his poetry; the most effective, shocking work is 'Case History' with its disarmingly conversational tone and avoidance of a pattern of rhyme:[37]

> 'Most Welshmen are worthless
> an inferior breed, doctor.'
> He did not know I was Welsh.
> Then he praised the architects
> of the German death-camps—
> did not know I was a Jew.
> He called liberals, 'White blacks',
> and continued to invent curses.
>
> When I palpated his liver
> I felt the soft liver of Goering;
> when I lifted my stethoscope
> I heard the heartbeats of Himmler;
> when I read his encephalograph
> I thought, '*Sieg heil, mein Fuhrer*.'
>
> In the clinic's dispensary
> red berry of black bryony,
> cowbane, deadly nightshade, deathcap.
> Yet I prescribed for him
> as if he were my brother.
>
> Later that night I must have slept
> on my arm: momentarily
> my right hand lost its cunning.

The two aspects of Abse the man—doctor and writer, the wearer of the 'white coat and the purple coat'—inform many poems and much of the fiction, autobiography and journal writing; however, there is too the dilemma of the professional doctor who trained through the 1940s and the Jew whose accident of birth meant that he was relatively safe in Britain while the Nazis embarked on their Final Solution to 'the Jewish problem'. At the point of initial qualification the young doctor was not included in the contingent from Westminster Hospital who travelled over to Germany to help with the victims of Belsen and other camps. One of

[36] *Poems Golders Green*, pp. 58–63.
[37] *Ask the Bloody Horse* (London, 1986).

this cohort would almost die as a result of contracting typhus while working to save the fragile survivors of Belsen.

> None of this I knew until much later when I guessed that I was not allowed to join the Belsen team because I was a Jew. Meanwhile, on May 8th, it was Victory Day. With Nan I joined the effervescent singing crowds in Trafalgar Square who were wearing paper hats as at a party.
> I often think about not going to Belsen.[38]

There is regret and an irrational guilt: the grim irony that because he was a Jew Dannie Abse was not a witness, did not almost share the fate of the camp inmates, as his fellow student Hargreaves did, whose month of May 1945 was, in retrospect, a dance macabre, a James Ensor painting. Abse the writer becomes a passionate and angry survivor; of course, the patient in 'Case History' is a collective personification of all those bigots, racists and revisionists who deny the Holocaust and would not stand in the way of another genocide. A doctor's role is to treat patients without prejudice; to treat the symptoms and the sick person in a concerned, but largely objective way. The moral dilemma holds too: at what point may the right hand 'lose its cunning'? And what exactly does that mean? It is ambiguous and deeply unsettling. A touchstone might be Psalm 137: 'If I forget thee O Jerusalem, | let my right hand forget her cunning.' Abse the doctor overrides Abse the Jew: some sort of movement towards healing the wounds of history must take place and the poem succeeds both in expressing his anger, the desire for retribution, and the need to be professionally detached. In both roles, doctor and poet, Dannie Abse wrestles with a moral dilemma, but in each finds resolution through his professional skill.

Perhaps more than any other fact, the wars of his century, our century, form the man and inform the writer. The First World War casts a shadow over the decade of Dannie Abse's boyhood, as does the rise of Fascism and the Spanish Civil War, then the Second World War and its aftermath. 'Three Street Musicians'[39] play '"Roses of Picardy"' and 'now, suddenly, there are too many ghosts about'. In 'Not Beautiful',[40] Doctor Abse gives the lie to a man who'd show optimism in the face of the twentieth-century horrors: '. . . all Hiroshimas, in raw and raving voices, | live skeletons of the Camp, flies hugging faeces, | in war, in famine, he'd

[38] *Goodbye Twentieth Century*, pp. 86–7.
[39] *Funland and Other Poems*.
[40] *A Small Desperation* (London, 1968).

find the beautiful.' It's better to feel anger, the poet says: '. . . to curse is more sacred | than to pretend by affirming. And offend.'

The other major elements in this writer's life, his Jewish heritage and his profession as a doctor, are, as I have indicated, implicated in his response to the wars, but, perhaps surprisingly, medicine is not a focus of his poetry until Dannie Abse is in mid-career. 'Case History' was published first in *Ask the Bloody Horse*, his ninth collection, but the first poems directly dealing with his profession and his experiences in hospital appear in his fifth book *A Small Desperation*, over twenty years into his career as a poet. 'Pathology of Colours', one of the strongest of these poems, in fact, is as much a poem of warfare as a poem of medicine:

> . . . the criminal, multi-coloured flash
> of an H-Bomb is no more beautiful
> than an autopsy when the belly's opened—
> to show cathedral windows never opened.
>
> So, in the simple blessing of a rainbow.
> in the bevelled edge of a sunlit mirror.
> I have seen, visible, Death's artefact
> like a soldier's ribbon on a tunic tacked.

It is a Sixties poem, a Cold War poem of trepidation which conflates the worries of Abse the family man, the man whose family members are protesting against The Bomb, with those of Abse the former RAF officer and the doctor who has dealt with disease and death professionally. The promise of a rainbow is the illusion of a refraction of angled glass. What is a rainbow in any case but a watery illusion, an airy phenomenon you can't touch?

> There are those . . . who wish to compartmentalise my occupations of doctor and poet. Oh there's a doctor, here he's a poet. I don't think I'm that divided. Of course I have conflicts, tensions and I do contradict myself. In that I'm like everybody else, and such oppositions within oneself do help to breed poems. Besides, though I start with the visible, I don't know where I'm going to end.[41]

The Maverick must sing with a scalpel in his hand; and Mavericks were 'poets writing from the centre of inner experience'.[42] Dannie Abse came to realise that the apparently opposed sides of his life were one whole: 'Pathology of Colours' proclaims that agenda in a striking and

[41] Interview with Joseph Cohen in *The Poetry of Dannie Abse.*

[42] From Abse's Introduction to the *Mavericks* anthology; quoted from 'Way out in the Centre', an essay by Daniel Hoffman in *The Poetry of Dannie Abse*, ed. Joseph Cohen (London, 1983).

memorable way. Wearing the white coat, but acknowledging the purple coat, 'The Doctor'[43]

> . . . will prescribe
> . . . the clearest water
> ever, melting ice from a mountain lake;
> sunlight from a waterfall's edge, rainbow smoke;
> tears from eyelashes of the daughter.

After all, when 'The Magician' is at work, 'Sometimes something he cannot understand | happens.'[44] Later poems of medicine also involve the whole of the man, the whole of the poet: in 'In Llandough Hospital'[45] Dannie Abse's dying father is 'thin as Auschwitz in that bed'. It is a moment which changes the poet's life and his view of the world:

> And as a child can't comprehend
> what germinates philosophy,
> so like a child I question why
> night without stars, then night without end.

And in a poem from the same collection, 'Interview with a Spirit Healer',[46] the rational, sceptic Dr Abse dismisses the charade of the healer:

> Let him, in faith stare on. I loathe his trade,
> the disease, and the sanctimonious lie
> that cannot cure the disease. My need,
> being healthy, is not faith; but to curse the day
> I became mortal the night my father died.

The unsettlingly imperfect rhymes underpin the fact that faith is not to be so easily won for Dannie Abse. Some five years later *Funland and other Poems*[47] includes his most successful poem in performance, 'In the Theatre'. This recounts an experience his older brother Wilfred had when training in medicine. He was present 'in 1938, in Cardiff, when I was Lambert Rogers' dresser'. The patient needed to be conscious during the operation and was aware, if distantly, of what was being done to him, of the limited state of surgery at the time: 'more brain damage because of

[43] *Way Out in the Centre* (London, 1981).
[44] *Poems, Golders Green* (London, 1962): also, the play 'Pythagoras Smith'—in *The View from Row G* (Bridgend, 1990)—examines the fine distinction between madness and magic and scientific argument.
[45] Ibid.
[46] *A Small Desperation.*
[47] *Funland and Other Poems.*

the probe's braille path'. When the patient speaks, with 'a ventriloquist voice that cried', it is not his brain that he feels has been violated; he cries out, '. . . You sod | leave my soul alone, leave my soul alone', over and over until

> . . . the antique
> gramophone wound down and the words began
> to blur and slow, 'leave . . . my . . . soul . . . alone . . .'
> to cease at last when something other died.
> And silence matched the silence under snow.

That final line's iambic pentameter secures the gravitas of the poem's effect. If there is a soul in the rational world of practical medicine, in the theatre of surgery, then it materialises as the mess of blood and grey matter. And there is little hope of an afterlife, simply a cold silence.

After his father's death and with his mother in old age, Dannie Abse decided to 'Return to Roots',[48] and bought a house in Ogmore-on-Sea, some twelve miles along the Glamorganshire coast from Cardiff. He says, 'There were pebbles on the beach of Ogmore and perhaps sermons were hidden in some of them.' However, when his mother is dying there is a sense of helplessness: he writes in the poem 'Exit'[49] that she is in 'this concentration camp for one'. It as if our own natural mortality (and by implication God or the gods) can deal us a blow as terrible as that of the Nazis' victims: the practice of medicine brings one up against that realisation more acutely than reading. So where does one find the faith to carry on when life's persistent irony undercuts one's ideals, one's professionalism? May Dr Abse be no more learned and capable than the notorious Dr Mesmer of Vienna and his pseudo-medical magic tricks?[50] Still, the doctor through his stethoscope hears both 'the sound of creation' in the 'young woman's abdomen . . . and, in a dead man's chest, the silence | before creation began'.[51] The poet's visions are eventually informed by the doctor's experiences, though the stethoscope is no relic to be held in awe and included in 'a procession of banners' in 'a cold, mushroom-dark church'. The poet celebrates 'when men become philosophers' not 'priest or rabbi'. The poem ends with one of the strongest verses in Abse's work as he hears, amplified:

[48] The title of a chapter in *Goodbye, Twentieth Century.*
[49] *Ask the Bloody Horse*.
[50] Mesmer is referred to many times by Dannie Abse: see also *The Two Roads Taken* (London, 2003), and *A Poet in the Family* and his novel *Dr Simmonds and Dr Glas* (London, 2002).
[51] 'The stethoscope' from 'Poems 1973–1976', in *Collected Poems 1948–1988* (London, 1989).

night cries
of injured creatures, wide-eyed or blind;
moonlight sonatas on a needle;
lovers with doves in their throats; the wind
travelling from where it began.

The alliteration and assonance, the internal rhyme and para-rhyme launch the poem into a music that is both celebratory and unsettling.

And in that poem from the time of his mother's death, 'Exit',[52] Dannie Abse tried to take solace in the story of David and Bathsheba,[53] for 'out of so much suffering | came forth the other child | the wise child, the Solomon'. The Old Testament story would inform a later, longer poem, one of his mature, significant achievements: 'Events leading to the Conception of Solomon, the Wise Child.' It is Abse's most direct response to the continuing crisis in the Middle East.[54]

Here Dannie Abse reworks the Bible story—a king's infatuation, pursuit and seduction of one of his military commander's wives, Bathsheba the wife of Uriah. The implications of this act for the central characters are echoed in a demotic chorus in the manner of T. S. Eliot's Chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral*.

Since scandal's bad for royal business
the King must not father the child;
so he called Uriah from the front,
shook his hand like a voter. Smiled.

The language of this long poem swings from the Biblical to the ballad, from lyrical poetry to wise-crack innuendo. The narrative progresses from Ancient Israel to the present day. Tribes still fight over the same land; lives, personal and public, are enacted against a constant backdrop of violence. Prayers and pleas rise from all sides, all cultures and beliefs:

Allah Akbar!
Sovereign of the Universe!
Our father in Heaven!
Father of Mercies!
Shema Yisroael!

And then the hush of the land, the desert land:

[52] *Ask the Bloody Horse.*
[53] One of many raids on the Old Testament for narrative inspiration rather than Biblical truth.
[54] *Arcadia, One Mile*.

after the shadow of an aeroplane
  has hurtled and leapt
below the hills and on to the hills
  that surround Jerusalem.

The position which a British Jew takes on the Middle East may be problematic: this is the only piece by Dannie Abse to deal with the issue. Through the previous decades and other collections, however, there has been a number of writings which engage with the Cold War and the Vietnam War. Joan Abse and their daughter Karen were involved in protests at Britain's nuclear arsenal. CND and specifically the Greenham Common Women's demonstration are mentioned.[55] His 'Ham & High' journals record a 'die-in' organised by the Hampstead branch of CND in which 'everybody would lie down signifying that the Heath was planned as Hampstead's Mass Grave' in the event of a nuclear holocaust; at which event he, reluctantly, agrees to read a poem from the 1950s—though he insists, 'I dislike participating in public protests, especially if one is asked to be ostentatious in them. I wish I did not feel that way, but I do.'[56] More explicit and showing more direct anger is his piece about the Chemical Warfare Centre at Porton Down in Wiltshire where he writes: 'I confess that such facts [the shooting of animals in wounding tests] remind me of the medical atrocity experiments of the Nazis in 1942 in Ravensbrück Concentration Camp for women.' Both experimenters used the justification of research into saving the lives of their own army's casualties. And Abse's play 'The Dogs of Pavlov' memorably explores the moral dilemmas of experimentation and manipulation.[57]

The Vietnam War was also a continuing concern for Dannie Abse, expressed in poems such as 'On the Beach', 'Give me your Hands', 'Forgotten', and others. He witnessed that war because it was the first televisual war, recorded, observed, mediated, at a distance from us. It was a decade-long, increasingly absurd conundrum which Britain's natural ally, the USA, had been drawn and then plunged fully into.

I know the geography of the great world
has changed; the war, the peace, the deletions
of places—red pieces gone forever,

[55] 'April 1984', in *Journals from the Ant-Heap* (London, 1986, repub. in *Intermittent Journals*, Bridgend, 1994).

[56] Dannie Abse wrote a regular column for the 'Ham and High'—the popular name for the *Hampstead and Highgate Express*.

[57] For a fuller discussion of Abse's plays see T. Curtis, *Dannie Abse: Writers of Wales Series* (Cardiff, 1985), and James A. Davies's introduction to *The View from Row G, Three Plays.*

> and names of countries altered forever:
> Gold Coast Ghana, Persia become Iran,
> Siam Thailand, and Hell now Vietnam.[58]

The world has changed, as its map has changed from the simplicity of his boyhood atlas.

> In Vietnam, beneath scarred trees,
> unreal the staring casualties.
> Of course I care. What good is that?[59]

But it is a distant war, someone else's war, about which we are powerless.

> Yawning, I fold yesterday's newspaper
> from England, and its news of Vietnam
> which has had, and will have, a thousand names.
> Then I lie back on the tourist sand.[60]

That is the dilemma: the professional man, the happily married man, the successful writer must needs be unsettled, deeply disturbed by the world's conflicts and the inevitable turning of the apple's core to rottenness. So how may faith survive?

In 'The Abandoned', a poem first collected in 1957 but reworked through over forty years and republished in 2001,[61] one may see Dannie Abse's abiding concerns and also his greater skill and confidence in handling imagery and verse forms. In the later version the poet gives two inscriptions; unlike the earlier version in which both quotations were from the seventeenth-century poet George Herbert, the revised poem substitutes one from the Talmud:

> *There is no space unoccupied by the Shekinah*—Talmud.
>
> *. . . thy absence doth excel*
> *All distance known.*—George Herbert.

The poem in its four parts addresses God directly, but in the later version it is with a lower-case 'you', rather than the upper-case 'You', as a more direct address:

[58] 'Forgotten', in *The Yellow Bird* (New York, 2004).
[59] 'Give me your Hands'.
[60] 'On the Beach'.
[61] This was first published in *Poems, Golders Green*, but reworked and extended for inclusion in *Poems, New and Selected*.

God, when you came to our house
we let you in. Hunted,
we gave you succour,
bandaged your hands
bathed your feet.

Wanting water we gave you wine.
Wanting bread we gave you meat.

. . . We have to hold our breath to hear you breathing.

In the second section the simile of waiting for a sign, an intervention by God, as if waiting in a train stuck at a station, is dropped. And in the third section of this poem he writes a villanelle whose key couplet is:

God in the end you had to go
We keep the bread and wine for show.

It is both a sadness and a celebration. In one reading we celebrate the passing martyr, the son of god with the communion mass; in the other we ourselves have passed that stage in our evolution when we need such solace, such symbolism, such a belief in transubstantiation. Also in that villanelle the image of a failed connection as a fused light is replaced by the white horse galloping across the snow 'leaving no hoof-marks in the rain'. The location of the poem is thus moved away from the urban—trains and electricity—towards the rural: in all probability fixing itself in Ogmore-on-Sea in Wales rather than Golders Green and the suburbs of London. Dannie Abse's life in 1957 was offering a different set of images from that of 2001.

In the fourth and final section, particularly in the revised version, he seems completely dismissive of organised religion, specifically the Catholic Church, which is nailed to its responsibilities by the hard, full rhymes[62]

Absurd saints search for the rack.
Plumed Popes begin to doubt, lose track.
'Did the shadow answer back?'

The revised poem edits some of the over-blown images and that final section has three five-line verses, rather than six; it loses the imagery of senility and the somewhat excessive 'do not blaspheme | cursing man'. The climax is reached more clearly; and more forcefully focuses on the white coat experiences in opposition to the purple robes of the high church. The

[62] The poet was educated in a Catholic secondary school, St Illtyd's, in Cardiff.

doctor poet knows that in our bodily suffering we are pushed closer to the need for an Almighty; in the hospital bed, on our death bed, pain and despair may push us to prayer, exhortation, a quick and desperate faith, the insistence of rhyme:

> Listen. Can't you hear again
> an idiot desperate in a house,
> the strict economy of pain,
> a voice pleading and profane
> calling you by name?

The rational man of medicine can agree with Richard Dawkins, Jonathan Miller and others that God the idea has served its purpose and that we are now strong enough to form and accept our own destiny, be shaped by our own actions. And yet, the smells and bells, the music and poetry of religion have a power which may stir for us old yearnings. Again, Abse says in his recent, confessional memoir, *The Presence*,[63] these must be resisted, even in our darkest hours:

> To pray, though, to the gods, or to the God—what arrogance! It is like addressing the vast sky behind the stars and saying, 'Here I am.' Reversed thunder, indeed! As George Herbert indicated, along with other definitions of prayer;
>
> > . . . Prayer, the Church's banquet, Angel's age,
> > God's breath in man returning to his birth, . . .
> >
> > Engine against th'Almighty, sinner's tower
> > Reversed thunder . . .

It is poems not prayers that are central to Dannie Abse's life and they appear liberally in this journal/memoir, both his own poems and others'. He writes:

> When I was a child I believed that God could read even my secret thoughts, my velleities. Later . . . I became agnostic and certainly knew that if God existed he could not be shut within the confines of synagogue, chapel, church, or mosque with all their crazy prescriptions, their regulated liturgies and rites and dead schedules. Later still, on rare occasions, when I have, as it were, fallen through a hole in the air into wonder I have been persuaded that, as Thomas Aquinas wrote, 'The truths of revelations are not the same as the truths of reason.' But I have used these experiences not in the moral realm but in an attempt to write poems while sitting comfortably in my study far from the thistle-eating donkey and the desert of religion.[64]

[63] *The Presence* (London, 2007).
[64] Ibid., pp. 16–17.

He deals with the guilt of losing, of consciously leaving, one of the great religions; he sees his role as a poet fulfilling spiritual needs by articulating the mysteries and truths which present themselves in his life. He proves as unconventional in his relationship with God as that other great post-war poet from Wales, the Reverend R. S. Thomas. Abse has little regard for organised religions, Jewish or Christian:

> So let both ministers propound
> the pathology of religions,
> and pass my gate you zealots of
> scrubbed, excremental visions.[65]

The biblical truths may be no more than 'two drab tablets of stone'.[66] Though the Old Testament is valued for the music of Solomon and 'the beautiful rod of Aaron | first with its blossom | then with its ripe almonds', ancient deities are far in our past: 'The gods, old as night, don't trouble us.' For they have outgrown their usefulness, their power:

> All the old gods have become enfeebled,
> mere playthings for poets. They doze
> or, daft, frolic on Parnassian clover.
> Sometimes summer light dies in a room but only
> a bearded profile in a cloud passes over.[67]

What significance we strive for in our lives must be found in human resources. The young boy at the Seder meal goes to the door to answer the guest's knocking and finds no one. He returns and the glass of wine has been drunk—'a shadow flies | when a light is shone'. And 'The mystery named | is not the mystery caged.'[68]

Dannie Abse's latest book, the memoir *The Presence*, closes with 'Lachrymae' which was included in his latest collection *Running Late* and then 'Postscript January 7th 2007', in which he recalls his uncle Isidore, a colourful character who appeared first in *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve*. Isidore, 'long after a string had snapped' on his old violin, would say, 'Little boy, who needs all the lyric strings? | Is the great world perfect?', 'Uncle Isidore',[69] 'smelly | schnorrer and lemon-tea Bolshevik', has one

[65] 'Even', from *A Small Desperation*.
[66] 'Apology', from *Ask the Bloody Horse.*
[67] From 'The Old Gods', an unpublished poem sent to the author as 'a playful, inconsequential poem' on 30 Aug. 2007.
[68] Ibid.
[69] *New and Collected Poems*.

answer for the sufferings of the world, though: he plays on, after the pogroms and the camps, after the doctor's visit, through the thunder and rain on his violin, 'some notes wrong, all notes wild'. That practice is a model for the writer, too: 'The unutterable, at best, becomes music.'[70]

Dannie Abse has always known that the great world is not perfect. In his practice as a doctor and in his work as a writer, he has for over sixty years found ways of regretting the world's imperfections and celebrating our responses in the face of that. Now, bereaved, but determined, he plays with one string less. It is a sad and important music. In Dannie Abse's 'running late' years, in the years of bereavement, there is no lessening of the writer's powers or his publishing success. But the faith remains reluctant and the sustaining irony, life's grim metaphor, underpins all that happens and all that is written. Having declared that he felt he might write no more poetry after Joan's death, Dannie Abse has, in fact, once more taken and examined the 'spiritual X-rays' that are poems.[71]

The only poem to have survived the poet's critical eye from his first collection, that book drowned by the 'noisy echoes' of Dylan Thomas and other writers, *After Every Green Thing*, sixty years before, is 'The Uninvited', a poem stimulated by his reading of Rilke's eighth letter to Kappus: 'When we are open to important moments of sorrow, then our future "sets foot in us . . ." our destiny begins and "we have been changed as a house is changed into which a guest has entered."'

> They came into our lives unasked for.
> There was light momentarily, a flicker of wings,
> a dance, a voice, and then they went out
> again, like a light, leaving us not so much
> in darkness, but in a different place
> and alone as never before.
>
> So we have been changed
> and our hopes no longer what they were;
> so a piece of us has gone out with them also,
> a cold dream subtracted without malice,
>
> the weight of another world added also,
> and we did not ask, we did not ask ever
> for those who stood smiling
> and with flowers before the open door.

[70] 'Between 3 and 4 a.m.', in *On the Evening Road* (London, 1994).

[71] Joan Abse died in a car accident in 2005: see the obituary by Tony Curtis in *The Independent*, 17 June 2005.

> We did not beckon them in, they came in uninvited,
> the sunset pouring from their shoulders,
> so they walked through us as they would through water,
> and we are here, in a different place,
> changed and incredibly alone,
> and we did not know, we do not know ever.

Strung between irony and faith, perhaps reluctant irony, perhaps with the consistent search for faith, the word comes alive in us and we live through words. The poet Dannie Abse speaks for all of us when he says, 'Though I start with the visible, I don't know where I'm going to end.'