

WJEC AS/A Level English Literature
Unit 2: Poetry Post-1900

Dannie Abse
Welsh Retrospective
(Seren)

by Dr Daniel Hughes





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Biography

Dannie Abse (22nd September 1923 – 28th September 2014) was a Welsh poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, and editor, as well as a physician. His prolific body of work is perhaps best known for its combination of Welsh and Jewish cultural sensibilities. Abse's poetry is remarkable for its consistent quality, its formal and expressive clarity, and its personal voice, which often reflected Abse's aspirations and experiences, as well as the rhythms of his occupation, family life and cultural background. Born in Cardiff to Jewish parents, Rudolph (a cinema manager) and Kate, Dannie Abse was the youngest of three brothers and had one elder sister (Huldah). His eldest brother Wilfred became a well-known psychoanalyst, while Leo, the second-oldest, was Labour MP for Torfaen from 1958 until 1983.

As a child, Abse attended Marlborough Road Elementary School, before undertaking secondary education at St Illtyd's College, where the young Dannie Abse was mostly interested in cricket and football. There were few poetry books in the Abse household, and many members of the wider Abse family became doctors (Wilfred became one, as had two uncles, and as would five cousins), which in turn pointed to a career in medicine for Dannie Abse himself. The intellectual aspirations of his older siblings, as well as the relatively comfortable middle-class upbringing Abse enjoyed, meant that as a child and especially as a teenager, he was exposed to the political and cultural dramas of the 1930s, including Marxism, Freudianism, and the Spanish Civil War. Abse, through his brother Leo, read magazines such as *The Left Review*, and the anthology

Poems for Spain (1939), which marked the beginning of his love for and engagement with modern poetry. The influence of his elder siblings not only encouraged him to read and write (essays, initially), but also served to develop Abse's early political persuasions as a socialist. Despite this, poetry was at first a peripheral interest, versus the earlier and enduring passions of football and cricket.

Abse was conscious of his Jewish heritage throughout his childhood. At primary level, his surname contrasted with those of his more stereotypically Welsh-named peers, and at St Illtyd's, Abse was the only Jewish boy in a Catholic institution. Catholicism and Christianity troubled the young Abse. Catholic education seemed obsessed with death, and opposed to romance and sexuality. Abse attended Windsor Place Synagogue, and while he did not enjoy it, the Rabbi there did remark upon and explain the rising tide of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany. Against this backdrop, Abse's mother insisted he take pride in his Jewish heritage, even as the emerging disasters of the 1930s caused Abse to question his faith and belief in God from a young age. Abse had Hebrew lessons, his mother regaled him with Welsh and Yiddish proverbs, and he learnt about Jewish traditions, yet Abse felt that Jews had inherited a code which made them powerless and silent; a cultural inheritance steeped in exile and persecution stood in stark relief against the crimes of the Nazi regime, and his position as the only Jewish child among his school-time peers created a sense of isolation among them, as well as of distance from his own heritage. As he remarked in later life, "What I have inherited

of Judaism is a pious story that has faded on its scrolls and a voice out of earshot.”¹

The outbreak of the Second World War deprived Abse of his brothers, who were both of an age to enlist, and thus Abse temporarily lost his role models as well as the first receptive (if at times reluctant) audience of his writing. In the early 1940s, he unsuccessfully submitted poems to magazines such as *Penguin New Writing* and *The Welsh Review*. In 1942 Abse began studying medicine in Cardiff at the then University of Wales College of Medicine, where he encountered the scholar and published poet S.L. Bethell. When Abse asked Bethell to read some of his poems, Bethell read them and burst out laughing, prompting Abse to temporarily cease submitting his poems to magazines. In 1943 Abse moved to London and continued his medical studies at Westminster Hospital Medical School and later, at King’s College. This new-found independence from his family meant that Abse began to make more personal and professional decisions for himself. Despite the war-time distance from his brothers, Abse also felt under pressure to live up to their accomplishments. In 1944, while living in London and continuing to work privately on his poetry, Abse attended a lecture given by the poet Edmund Blunden. Abse joined the poet for drinks, and shared his poems with Blunden, who praised them. For the first time, Abse read his poetry to his parents. His father was less effusive than Blunden: “I don’t care if he’s Homer. He’s got to earn a living.”²

Abse’s 1943 move to London brought him to the city he would call home for much of the rest of his life. Despite this, and as is evident in *Welsh Retrospective*, Wales remained important to him. Cardiff and Ogmores-by-Sea (where his parents had holidayed and later he

would holiday) were especially important. In London, though, Abse found another city he could love, a place where he could pursue his medical career as well as develop his writing. Living at No. 38 Aberdare Gardens, in the Swiss Cottage area of London, Abse would complete his medical studies and write the poetry that would mostly comprise his first two published volumes. Abse initially did the rounds on wards at Westminster Hospital (1944), before he passed his exams and, due to the demands of the war, was pressed into the casualty department. Alongside his medical studies and poetry-writing, Abse volunteered as a firefighter and played football for the King’s College team. Living in Swiss Cottage also brought Abse into contact with an array of different writers, including Dylan Thomas, then (and perhaps now) the most famous of Welsh writers, who Abse met in a pub. The pair did not discuss poetry, and Abse recalls that their encounter did not go especially well.

However, Abse’s friendships with other writers in the area opened his eyes to new publishing opportunities, including magazines such as *Poetry Chicago*, as well as *Outposts* and *Poetry Quarterly*, which became the first places to publish his poetry. The success of other writers in the area also inspired Abse to collect his poems into a single volume and send them to the publisher Hutchinson, who, in June 1946, accepted *After Every Green Thing* for publication. The volume, which took its name from the Book of Job, would only eventually be published in 1949, by which time Abse had updated the manuscript. This first collection was profoundly influenced by the work of modernists and neo-romanticists (popular modes of writing at the time, including in the shape of Dylan Thomas), which Abse would later regard as “too private”

1 Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2011) p. 334.

2 Quoted by Abse in *Goodbye, Twentieth Century* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2011), p. 18.

for the general reader.³ It did, however, mark the beginning of a long, varied, and successful literary career in multiple modes of writing, even as Abse continued to pursue his medical career because of his father.

Abse decided to specialise in radiography and chest treatment, and completed national service with the RAF in 1951, which temporarily took him to Northern Ireland, before he joined the Central Medical Establishment in London later that year. Abse remained with the RAF until 1955, but continued to work at the CEM as a civilian doctor until he was made redundant in 1982. During the 1950s, three further poetry collections appeared (*Walking Under Water*, 1952, *Fire in Heaven*, 1956, and *Tenants of the House*, 1957, all with Hutchinson), and his first novel, a fictionalised autobiography set in Cardiff, *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* was published in 1954 (again, with Hutchinson). Abse met Joan Mercer (originally from St. Helens, Lancashire) in 1949, who had studied at the London School of Economics and worked in the library of the *Financial Times*. The pair entered into a relationship and married in 1951, moving to Eton Avenue, Wembley, shortly before the birth of their daughter Karen in December 1953. The Abses moved again in 1955, buying a house in Golders Green before the birth of a second daughter, Susanna (they lived next door to the comedian, Bob Monkhouse). A son, David, followed in 1956.

With a comfortable family life in Golders Green, Abse's two careers continued apace. His writing ranged beyond poetry and novels into plays, with the premiere of his first play, *House of Cowards*, taking place at the Questor's

Theatre in Ealing in 1960. Around the same time, Abse began to write medical features for a Sunday newspaper under a pseudonym, to earn some extra money. In February 1961 Abse became involved in the 'Poetry and Jazz' concerts (organised by Jeremy Robson), and these took place regularly for the next decade. By 1963, Abse's reputation as a writer had developed to the point that he was invited to tour the United States by John Malcolm Brinnin, who had earlier organised Dylan Thomas's tours of the US. Indeed, Abse felt "as if I were ghosting for the ghost of Dylan Thomas." He was even advertised as "Dannie Abse – Welsh Poet", on the tour, which took place in April 1964.⁴ In the winter of that year, the health of Abse's father declined, due to bronchitis. From October onwards, Abse spent weekends with his father, who passed away on December 19th, 1964. His last words to Abse were "It's important that each man should know himself."⁵ This poignant statement shadows much of Abse's poetry, as speakers frequently wrestle with their identity. Despite this loss, Abse felt that he led a comfortable, valued life, reflecting that in the 1960s, he wrote "the poems of a fortunate man."⁶ Indeed, to some extent, Abse's poems were poems of middle-class, suburban experience, though this should not serve to understate their value or accomplishment; they capture the lives and feelings of a newly emerging and comfortable, somewhat affluent, section of British life.

As the 1960s progressed, Abse was pleased with the direction of his poetry. His *Poems, Golders Green* had won the Poetry Book Society's Choice of the Year Award in 1962 (judged by Ted Hughes and Anthony

3 Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 159.

4 Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 255.

5 Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 263.

6 Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 271.

Thwaite). Abse had undertaken further tours to the United States, published yet more volumes of poems as well as plays, and continued to simultaneously enjoy his medical career, confining though it sometimes seemed. In the early 1970s, Abse began to long to return to south Wales, and in 1972 bought a second home in Ogmores-by-Sea, which would form the backdrop of a number of poems (including several in *Welsh Retrospective*). Following this, Abse spent a period living in the United States as a writer-in-residence and Senior Fellow in the Humanities at Princeton University (September 1973 to June 1974). As the 1970s progressed and with the Abses once again in their London home, the relative affluence of the 1960s began to seem a distant memory for many, as mass unemployment and strikes disrupted the UK as a whole. Abse's poems consciously eschewed political commentary, retaining their focus on everyday experience. By February 1982, the changing political and economic climate – and particularly the aggressive reduction of the welfare state by the new Thatcher administration – directly affected Dannie Abse, as the chest clinic he had worked at for over 30 years was closed and he became redundant.

After a brief period of illness in 1984 (benign lymphatic meningitis), a productive period of poetry writing commenced, and after several original collections, Abse published *White Coat, Purple Coat* in 1989, which collected a variety of poems from across Abse's career. The title of the collection refers to the twin professions Abse had adopted, and the poems therein are largely medical. Abse had continued to undertake some medical work following his redundancy, but ceased in 1991, shortly after turning 58. Despite the suggestion of different personas inherent in the notion of a 'white coat' and a 'purple coat', Abse recognised that his

medical practice and poetic practice were connected. Indeed, as Abse reflected, medical work requires precision and definition, as does poetry. Shortly after ceasing his medical work, in 1993, another tour of the US followed, and Abse's creative output remained constant, with both new and selected editions appearing throughout the 90s, including *Welsh Retrospective* in 1997. Indeed, as the twentieth-century ended and the twenty-first began, Abse continued to regularly write and publish poems. His third novel, *The Strange Case of Dr Simmons and Dr Glas* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2002.

On June 13th 2005, Joan Abse died instantly in a car accident on the M4. Abse himself suffered slight injuries, but Joan's death led to a period of post-traumatic stress as well as intense bereavement. In the several months following, Abse became listless, remarking that even the death of his eldest brother, Wilfred, could not penetrate his grief: "I realised I could not mourn for more than one person at a time."⁷ To attempt to reconcile himself and to cope with his loss, Abse kept a journal in the year following Joan's death, including in it his immediate memories of the car accident as well as details of his day to day life without Joan. This journal gave him purpose, initially reflecting on his own interior state, before gradually expanding to more broadly consider grief, bereavement, and loss. In 2007, this memoir was published as *The Presence* and would go on to win the Wales Book of the Year Award in 2008. Authors such as Carol Ann Duffy and Owen Sheers praised the book, and Abse received many letters of thanks from readers who had also experienced loss, and who often felt that Abse's book had finally articulated their own deep grief. It is an extraordinary book.

Even in his 80s Abse continued to write and publish, and his final collection, *Speak, Old*

7 Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 530.

Parrot, was published in 2013, a year before his death on September 28th 2014, six days after his 91st birthday. Abse was survived by his three children and several grandchildren. It is difficult, in such a short space, to describe the true variety of Abse's life and work. His biography, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, is thus highly recommended reading, not just for the fullness of its recollections, but for the wit and warmth of Abse's singular, multi-faceted voice.

Contexts

Wales over the last century

In 1923, when Dannie Abse was born, Cardiff was a port city of the British Empire. Cardiff, Wales, and the Empire were about to enter a period of sustained decline and change, the effects of which ripple throughout Wales and the UK today. Within Wales, religious, economic, industrial and feared cultural decline were all evident in the inter- and post-war years. By the time of Abse's death, Wales had entered the 21st century with its own devolved government based in Cardiff. No longer a port of Empire, Cardiff is instead the capital of Wales and home of an emerging and, in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, increasingly assertive Welsh polity, which governs a markedly different Wales to the one into which Abse was born.

Economic decline began in Wales in the 1920s, as coal production began to fall, and was exacerbated by the Great Depression at the end of that decade and the beginning of the next. Between 1920 and 1939, 320,000 people left Wales; just a few years later, in 1943, so would Dannie Abse. In 1945, a Labour government committed to the establishment of the welfare state and a new economic and social settlement was elected in London, with the support of a clear majority of Welsh voters. Nationalisation of key industries such as coal and steel, activist government intervention in and subsidies to the agricultural sector, and the establishment of the National Health Service all enjoyed widespread support within Wales. In 1945, 10% of the Welsh work force were employed in the

agricultural sector, and some 30% worked in the coal or steel industries. Only one in ten families owned a car, and some sections of the country remained without electricity and running water. While the modernisation and investment offered by the post-war settlement were welcomed in Wales, it could not arrest the decline of key industries such as coal, steel, and slate. For example, there were around 120,000 miners in 1945, but this declined to 33,000 by 1975, as oil and gas replaced coal. By the early 1990s, following the dismantlement of the post-war settlement by successive Conservative governments, fewer than 1000 miners remained. Despite the marked decline of coal-mining, it remained a key factor in perceptions of Wales and Welsh culture, especially during the strikes of the 1970s and especially 1980s. The loss of the miners in their confrontations with the Thatcher government was one of a number of traumatic events for those in Wales who wished to preserve longstanding communities and what were perceived to be Welsh ways of life.

Along with this marked decline in heavy industry, there were population shifts within Wales. These were underway at the time of Abse's birth, but over the course of his life, the rural population in Wales, as well as the Welsh-speaking population, rapidly became even smaller minorities, as the English-speaking, town-dwelling majority expanded. While coal, slate, and steel production plummeted, agricultural activity halved as a proportion of the economy by the end of the 20th century. The relatively low price of land in Wales (versus England) led to further changes in the cultural and demographic structures of Wales. Low land prices and the growth of

electronic communications infrastructure (first telephone lines, then the internet) encouraged inward immigration from England into rural Wales, both for employment and for holiday or retirement properties. Centralised policy-making at the UK level led to the construction of east-west, England-Wales road routes such as the A55 and M4, rather than the construction of a transport network which connected Welsh regions and towns to one another. This enabled inward migration and the development of a tourist industry, the effects of which on Welsh communities were and remain sometimes controversial. The increasing acquisition of properties for use as second homes in rural and coastal villages, as well as fears over the linguistic and cultural erasure of Welsh-language communities, remain urgent points of debate today. In the 1980s, these issues led to arson attacks on second homes owned by non-Welsh people as part of a reaction against fears of anglicisation. Migration, combined with the increasing reach of Anglo-American culture through radio and television, exacerbated fears for the future of the Welsh language which also led to the formation of Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg in 1962, which became the most active direct action group in the UK since the suffragettes. From the 1960s onwards, the group successfully campaigned for Welsh-language road signage and official forms (such as tax returns), Welsh-language radio and television channels, and Welsh-medium education. Activists often faced considerable prison sentences as a consequence of their policy of taking responsibility for their non-violent direct action.

In the face of protest and pressure, successive UK governments gradually ceded power to Wales and made official efforts to recognise and protect its language. Cardiff became the capital city of Wales in 1955, though this move was largely symbolic as power lay concentrated in London. The Welsh

Office was established in 1965 and the first Welsh Language Act was passed in 1967, with a second Welsh Language Act replacing it in 1993. In 1969, the Crowther-Kilbrandon Royal Commission on the Constitution was formed and it concluded in 1973 that Wales and Scotland needed devolved governments. In a traumatic defeat for those advocating for greater internal control over Welsh affairs, devolution was overwhelmingly rejected by the Welsh electorate in a referendum in 1979. For those in favour of devolution, disasters of the 1960s such as Aberfan and the drowning of Capel Celyn in the Tryweryn Valley, where a Welsh-language community was evicted to make way for a reservoir for Liverpool, pointed to the unthinking hostility of the centralised British state. These events crystallised and symbolised not just the decline of old, distinctly Welsh ways of life, but in fact their destruction at the hands of an undemocratic state.

Despite the 1979 setback, the ability of Conservative governments to impose their will on Wales in the 1980s, without ever achieving a majority of support within Wales itself, increasingly emphasised a sense of democratic deficit and reignited the devolution debate. By the late 1990s, and with the election of a New Labour government in May 1997 in London which had committed to devolution under the prior leadership of John Smith, a short Yes campaign mustered cross-party support from the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru. A narrow win for devolution in September 1997 led to the establishment of the Welsh Assembly and devolved elections in 1999. Since May 2020, the body has been known as the Senedd, signifying its distinct stature as a seat of government and legislative power in Wales. Concerns of a democratic deficit remain, because of (at times) low electoral engagement as well as the lack of an indigenous, national media within Wales. While a Welsh polity is emerging, and Cymraeg

enjoys a degree of cultural capital it has lacked for much of the last century (as well as far greater legal recognition than perhaps any other time in its history), the establishment of a national, bilingual, inclusive community remains an ongoing and contested goal.

The Second Flowering

Writers such as Abse followed in the footsteps of ‘The First Flowering’ who had begun their careers in the 1930s, the most famous among them being Dylan Thomas. The First Flowering were regarded as the first major sustained manifestation of English-language writing in Wales (more recent literary histories challenge this claim) and, therefore, Abse’s generation of writers were the Second Flowering. This grouping includes writers such as Gillian Clarke, Tony Curtis, John Tripp, John Ormond, Sally Roberts Jones, and Tony Conran. Several members of this generation – Abse, Conran, Roberts Jones, Ormond and Tripp – all left Wales, and spent periods of their lives in London, reflecting the lack of employment within Wales immediately following the Second World War. Abse was well aware that he, and especially other Welsh writers of his generation, lived through and wrote within the contexts of a vastly-changing Welsh culture, in which older models of social and national identity vanished without clear replacement:

[A]ll poets in Wales have witnessed speedy social changes, atrophy of chapel and communal traditions and of employment, the attenuation of a Welsh-speaking rural population, the vandalization of landscape. These cultural

mutations have led to existential anomie, to uncertainty about identity which, in turn, have prompted many to assert their Welshness as if the very core of their being had been challenged.⁸

As Abse suggests, this literary insecurity of identity paralleled and was a response to the broader trends of Welsh life. Notably, just as a Welsh polity emerged even as old markers of Welsh identity faded, so too did official structures for Welsh literature emerge. The greater affluence of the 1960s, as well as state support for the arts, led to the establishment of magazines such as *Poetry Wales* (1967) and organisations such as the Welsh Books Council (1961) and Arts Council for Wales (1967), which marked the beginning of the administrative, publishing, and financial structures needed to sustain literary activity. However, writers such as Conran and Webb noted that this institutionalisation of the literary scene led to an emphasis on Welsh subject matter and themes, sometimes at the expense of diverse perspectives and styles. As women writers gained greater prominence in the 1970s and 80s, new forms and perspectives developed in Welsh writing. Later in the 80s and through the 1990s, the greater awareness of and utilisation of postcolonial theory helped to situate ‘Welsh Writing in English’ “within a global context of national literatures which offered an anglophone element”.⁹

As well as this, the Association for the study of Welsh Writing in English was founded in 1984, and an MA programme in Modern Welsh Writing in English was established at Swansea University in 1986, providing the beginnings of a formal educational and academic approach to the subject.

Abse’s work does not fall into the same thematic terrain as that of R. S. Thomas

8 Abse, ‘A Letter from Dannie Abse’, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, 5.7 (1995), 217 – 219 (p. 218).

9 Diana Wallace, ‘Inventing Welsh Writing in English’, *The Cambridge History of Welsh Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019), p. 568.

and Harri Webb. Indeed, Abse rejects this nationalistic consciousness and can be seen to anticipate newer models of Welsh Writing in English. Abse himself found “something displeasing about the way Thomas miserably castigated himself for writing in English rather than Welsh, as if in doing so he had been a traitor to the Welsh nation.”¹⁰ Abse’s rejection of the models followed by writers such as Thomas should be seen less as a rejection of Wales or Welsh themes and more as a rejection of cultural insularity, and monolithic modes of writing. This opposition can be seen in Abse’s early literary career in London, when Abse rejected the broader attitudes of English poetry as encapsulated by ‘Movement’ poets such as Larkin and Amis. Abse regarded the Movement’s desire for conservative themes and forms, and their vision of English identity, as “parochial and limited by a barely conscious chauvinism”.¹¹ Abse himself edited an anthology which provided an alternative to the Movement perspective, titled *Mavericks*. As Cary Archard notes, this anthology challenges selected and manufactured literary histories (ironic, given the current context), which too often conflate diverse poets into neat categories.¹²

While Abse is a ‘Second Flower’, aware of and effected by the same contexts as other writers, his response is not the same. Around the same time that Abse edited *Mavericks*, his *Ash on a Young Man’s Sleeve* (1954) provided Welsh writing with an alternative place and perspective; the middle-class suburbs of Cardiff as viewed by a Jewish-Welsh narrator. Diana Wallace suggests that “Abse’s concern with hybridity and duality within an international context looks forwards to

the diversity of ‘Welsh Writing in English’.”¹³ Abse’s position as a member of the Welsh diaspora, and his writing, therefore anticipates and engenders the diverse perspectives and styles of contemporary Welsh writing, while maintaining a complex fascination with, and attachment to, Welsh place and identity as manifested in the poems collected in *Welsh Retrospective*. While some writers of Abse’s generation might be perceived to demonstrate an insecurity of, or over-attachment to particular forms of identity, Abse’s work is often characterised by ambivalence, ambiguity, and the negotiation of multiple, overlapping identities.

Judaism, Europe, and Israel

As suggested, the political views and knowledge of his older brothers had a profound influence on Abse during his teenage years. Through them, Abse learnt of Marxism and the emerging ideological conflict between communism and capitalism, as well as of the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War. Abse was the only Jewish boy in a Catholic school during his teens (and therefore the only boy who was against Franco), and his older brothers’ opposition to the war, as well as their encouragement of his writing, provided his first meaningful exposure to poetry in the form of Stephen Spender and John Lehman’s edited collection *Poems for Spain* (1939). This led to Abse’s first engagement with modern European poetry, including the work of Miguel Hernandez (included in *Poems for Spain*): “Here was a persuasive,

¹⁰ Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 447.

¹¹ Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 210. For the full context from Abse’s perspective, see the chapter ‘Poetry and Poverty’.

¹² Cary Archard, ‘Preface’, *Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook*, p. 25.

¹³ Wallace, p. 560.

pleading, prophetic and admonitory voice, and one which, in some unspecified future, I hoped to emulate.”¹⁴ This volume served as a gateway to modern poetry for the teenage Abse, even as he borrowed Leo’s issues of *The Left Review* and heard of a family friend (Sid Hamm) who was killing fighting for the International Brigades in Spain. The result of these influences was that, as a young man, Abse developed sympathies for socialism, and read a broader range of modern poetry than that espoused at his Catholic school. Exposure to poets like Auden, Spender, MacNeice and Cecil Day Lewis led to a developing awareness that a writer could oppose political extremism and write politically without committing zealously to a single world view. While Abse’s earliest poems ignored this valuable lesson and contained “a missionary intention”,¹⁵ his initial engagement with modern poetry and European thought would recur, in influential ways, throughout his life.

Abse’s move to Swiss Cottage would lead to further exposure to the international crises of his time, as well as greater engagement with European writers and writing. At No. 38 Aberdare Gardens, his two neighbours were German-Jewish refugees whose relatives had vanished. During an air raid, one neighbour, Mrs. Schiff, momentarily held Abse’s hand “as if [he] were a relative”.¹⁶ His everyday encounters with the two women were a persistent reminder to Abse of his Jewishness, the first of several friendships with members of the Jewish diaspora, and represented an early exposure to the crimes against Jewish people that Nazi Germany had

committed. Later in the war, in early 1945, Abse volunteered to head to Germany treat prisoners at what his superiors described as an “abandoned camp”.¹⁷ Abse’s superiors refused him permission to join the mission, because, as he would learn later in his life, it was in fact a mission to treat Holocaust survivors at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp: “I often think about my not going to Belsen.”¹⁸ As Abse grew older and learnt more about the outrages of the Holocaust committed by the Nazi regime, it affirmed his sense of Jewishness, as what had happened to the relatives of his neighbours was not something that could be suppressed from his own consciousness: “Yes, Auschwitz has made me more of a Jew than Moses did.”¹⁹ Indeed, some of the obscurity and privacy of Abse’s first collection, *After Every Green Thing*, may be because Abse felt recent history was too awful to write about.

Living in Swiss Cottage meant that Abse lived among the Jewish refugees who had made their homes in that area of London, as well as within a lively café culture of European emigres. Abse’s friends in his early adulthood included writers such as the English-Jewish Emanuel Litvinoff (who later served as a witness at Abse’s wedding), the German-speaking Bulgarian Elias Cannetti, the Austrian Erich Fried, and the German Rudolf Nassauer. The latter three had all moved to London to escape the increasing persecution of Jews taking place within Germany and, after Anschluss in 1938, Austria. Nassauer introduced Abse to the works of the Austrian poet and novelist Rainier Maria Rilke, which became a major influence on

14 Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 8.

15 Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 14.

16 Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 102.

17 Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 135.

18 Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 135.

19 Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 102.

Abse's developing poetry. Rilke's obsession with mortality provided a neat confluence with Abse's medical studies and his increasing understanding of the frailty of the human body. These writers also introduced Abse to the international publishing scene, including American journals (such as *Poetry Chicago*) which would be among the first to publish Abse's writing. His time living in Swiss Cottage also led to a friendship with another Welsh-Jewish writer, Denise Levertov, who Abse would later meet again in 1960s New York City, where they attended demonstrations against the Vietnam War together.

The era of mass air travel began in the second half of the twentieth century, leading to opportunities for Abse to network and travel in numerous countries over the course of his career, including several American tours, time living in the United States as a visiting scholar at Princeton, a tour of Canada, and visits to Israel. Abse first travelled to Israel in 1966 for an Anglo-Israeli Writers' Symposium in Tel Aviv, where Abse felt somewhat uncomfortable with the assertive nationalism of the still-young state. In February 1971, Abse was among a number of poets who toured Israel at the initiative of the British Arts Council. Ted Hughes, D.J. Enright, Peter Porter, and Jeremy Robson also went. Their tour, which featured readings of their own work alongside recitals by Israeli poets, was deemed to be successful, and their work was well-received by local audiences. On this tour, Abse visited the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, and, as a self-described secular Jew, felt he could "barely comprehend the intensity" of the prayers of Jewish pilgrims at the Wall.²⁰ Abse felt that, despite Israel's then recent

victory in the Six Day War (1967), there remained a palpable sense of melancholy and vulnerability in the country, perhaps stemming from the circumstances of its creation and its position as the home of survivors of the Holocaust. Towards the end of the tour, Abse and his fellow poets – as guests of the Israeli state – were pelted with stones by young Arab boys: "Those small boys with stones in their right hands were an omen of things to come."²¹ While Abse's life was marked by attempts at international understanding and reconciliation, the seeds of later conflicts had been sown by the war Abse had lived through as a teenager and young adult.

Reception over time

Abse's earliest poetry was marked by the abstraction and experimentalism of influential poets such as Dylan Thomas, though as noted, Abse himself felt this mode was too obscure. Reflecting on his career in a 1996 essay, Abse suggested that this early influence from neo-romantics (such as Thomas), as well as his medical training, had been bad for his career. The twin influences led to a tendency to write poems based on abstract ideas rather than poems which stemmed from a "true or imagined experience".²² Abse goes on to state that "over the years my poetry has become more conversationally pitched, more linguistically economical, and, I hope, more authentic."²³

This assessment is shared by reviewers of Abse's work. Writing in *The Poetry Review* in 1962, John Smith argues that Abse's *Poems, Golders Green* reduces the cluttered mythology,

²⁰ Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 305.

²¹ Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 307.

²² Abse, 'The Ass and the Green Thing', *How Poets Work* ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), pp. 28 – 43 (p. 29).

²³ Abse, 'The Ass and the Green Thing', p. 32.

romanticism and overly allegorical nature of earlier poems, and instead “catches exactly the tone of suburban man’s anxieties”.²⁴ Fleur Adcock, reviewing Abse’s *Collected Poems 1948 – 1976* in 1977 agrees with this assessment of a 1960s shift, stating that Abse’s poems increasingly reveal and utilise basic facts about the poet as their basis (such that Abse is Welsh, Jewish, a doctor, a father, and a family man), though Adcock notes that the occasionally surreal note remains. In the same year, reviewing *Ask the Bloody Horse*, Tony Curtis describes Abse as “not only a poet in the first rank of Anglo-Welsh writers, but also in the first rank of our religious poets.”²⁵ While Abse and many reviewers praise Abse’s departure from experiment and abstraction, Tony Conran provides a dissenting view. Conran praises Abse’s book-length poem *Funland* (1979) as a “modernist masterpiece” and laments that, in their attachment to less experimental forms, “neither the poet nor his Anglo-Welsh reviewers have known what to do about *Funland*.”²⁶

Tony Curtis’s identification of Abse as a religious poet is slightly unusual, though Curtis’s later observation (in 1991) that Abse is a writer fascinated by duality correlates with the consensus among Abse’s readers that he is a writer, as Richard Poole describes him in 1989, who “worries away at the problem of identity”.²⁷ Slightly later appraisals in 1994 agree with this assessment. Daniel

Weissbort describes Abse as a writer who finds the extraordinary in the ordinary, as a “gifted storyteller” whose work encompasses medical poems, anecdotal poems which draw on legends, and social commentary.²⁸ Like Adcock’s assessment nearly 20 years earlier, Weissbort states that Abse’s poetry draws on his multiple backgrounds and occupations. Similarly, Katie Gramich identifies Abse as “a poet whose complexities stem from the variety of his own identities.”²⁹ Gramich praises the congenial and confessional elements of Abse’s poetic voice. While earlier reviews – and Abse himself – had to some extent disavowed his earliest work, Gramich suggests that within Abse’s *Selected Poems*, there are “startling and marvellous poems from all periods of his career.”³⁰ In the early 2000s, Greg Hill notes that Abse’s engagement with identity has developed into an apparent need to “confront his own persona in a public context”, while noting that Abse’s work engages with themes of cultural inheritance.³¹ In the same year, writing in *New Welsh Review*, Jeremy Hooker notes that Abse is a writer “acutely aware of mortality, but consequently the more celebratory in his treatment of love”.³²

In a sense, Hooker’s assessment points to the enduring influence of Rilke and the Jewish diaspora on Abse’s writing. Jasmine Donahaye’s scholarly analysis of Abse’s work suggests that Abse adopts a position on the periphery of Welsh culture, and that his work

24 John Smith, reprinted in *Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook*, p. 190.

25 Tony Curtis, reprinted in *Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook*, p. 199.

26 Tony Conran, ‘Modernism in Anglo-Welsh Poetry’, *The Works: The Welsh Union of Writers Annual* (1991), pp. 13-24 (p. 19).

27 Richard Poole, reprinted in *Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook*, p. 200.

28 Daniel Weissbort, reprinted in *Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook*, p. 209.

29 Katie Gramich, reprinted in *Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook*, p. 212.

30 Gramich, p. 214.

31 Greg Hill, ‘Startling Disclosures’, *Planet*, 160 (2003) 96 – 98 (p. 97).

32 Jeremy Hooker, *New Welsh Review* 62 (2003) 95 – 96 (p. 95).

does (to an extent) celebrate experiences of Jewish exile. Matthew Jarvis identifies the importance of social space within Abse's prose, while Laura Wainwright analyses connections between the function of memory and the presentation of physical space in Abse's poetry. Broadly, the reception of Abse's work welcomes his decision to drop the neo-romanticism of his earliest writings, while demonstrating the long-running importance of poets such as Rilke and Thomas in his work. Simultaneously, Abse's writing has, for decades now, been highly regarded for its exploration of and engagement with Welsh and Jewish influences, as well as its construction of a voice which speaks of family, professional, and suburban life throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century.

Despite living in London for much of his adult life, Abse remained engaged with Wales throughout his life and *Welsh Retrospective*, published in 1997, collects a number of Abse's poems about Wales. As is evident across the collection, Cardiff in particular remained important to his poetic imagination, as were his trips to his holiday home at Ogmere-by-sea. The poems draw on Welsh places and Welsh-language myth as well as Abse's Jewish heritage. Poems depict members of Abse's family as well as Welsh poets such as Dylan Thomas and Vernon Watkins. For Abse, Wales is a reservoir of memories, myth, and family.

Language and form: ‘The Game’

While his poetic language and form became what might be termed ‘accessible’, Abse’s writing is often shaped by multiple frames of reference (local geography, medical, Welsh, Jewish, religious) as well as the use of allusion, and a mostly straightforward colloquial register is complicated by archaic and specialist diction, the selection of which is often defined by a particular context. Broadly, this description is true of the poems collected in *Welsh Retrospective*, and these features, as well as Abse’s penchant for irony, humour, and story-telling, are all evident in ‘The Game’, which tells the story of a football match featuring Abse’s beloved Bluebirds (Cardiff FC) at Ninian Park.

The opening stanza invites the reader to become swept up in the drama of the impending match: “Follow to where the turnstiles click”. Throughout the poem, the speaker demonstrates a collective identity through the repeated use of plural pronouns such as “we” and “our”. As the last line of the second stanza demonstrates, the speaker is both of the crowd, and poetically rendering it for the reader: “Now, like an injured beast, the great crowd roars.” The indistinct identity of the speaker is fitting given the context, and while the speaker is clearly always on the home team’s side, their specific identity fluctuates as they are swept up in the crowd. For example, in the second stanza, the speaker suggests that “we recall records”, and names former players such as “Fred Keenor, Hardy” who played for Cardiff in the early decades of the twentieth century. Yet, two lines later,

the speaker suggests these were “before our time where someone else was hurt.” Given the collective identity of the crowd, the memories of past players and games become mixed and collective, property of all by virtue of being remembered by some. Similarly, at the start of the penultimate stanza, the speaker exclaims “God sign our souls!”, yet finishes the stanza by describing “Small boys” who “swarm the field for an autograph.” Initially, the boys demanding an autograph speak with the speaker’s voice, yet by the end of the stanza, the speaker is describing them and no longer is them.

Yet, such fluctuation in the speaking voice never impedes the simplicity of the story-telling in Abse’s poem. The fluctuating identity of the poem is also evident in the poem’s specific, yet nondescript title: ‘The Game’ tells us little. While a specific sense of place is quickly established (Ninian Park), the sense of time remains slightly ambiguous – this is a Saturday afternoon at Ninian Park. A playful pun at the end of the opening stanza is suggestive of the understated wit running through Abse’s poetry: “in the Canton Stand / behind the posts, a hundred matches spark.” This pun both sets the scene and furthers the sense of playful ambiguity threaded throughout the poem. As fans light matches, preparing to smoke, they also begin to reminisce, and speak of those other matches and other Saturday afternoons at Ninian Park. The tone of this poem, as one might expect in a collection of retrospectives, is nostalgic, as are the fans the poem describes.

This fluctuating speaking voice and nostalgic tone combine to suggest, as the poem's title does, that this game is something eternal and universal, yet also oddly specific to the place and the people therein.

The register and language of the poem is similarly mixed. Names of specific players ground the poem in its locality and in its fandom, yet there is also an element of comic elevation caused by Abse's frequent allusions to religion and early modern literature; specifically, the Faust legend. The third stanza establishes this religious frame:

The coin is spun. Here all is simplified,
and we are partisan who cheer the Good,
hiss at passing evil. Was Lucifer offside?
A wing falls down when cherubs howl for blood.
Demons have agents; the ref is bribed.

A sense of play and punning pervades the poem as Abse sets Biblical allusion against football terminology: 'A wing falls down when cherubs howl for blood' (a winger – a player – is tackled, the partisan home crowd on the side of good object) and the opposition's 'Infernal backs tackle'. The specific allusion to the Faust legend is confirmed by the suggestion that "Mephistopheles had his joke." In *Faust*,

Mephistopheles is the agent of the devil who appears before Faust when Faust expresses his desire for everlasting knowledge and power. Mephistopheles accepts Faust's soul in exchange. The later appeal ("God sign our souls!") therefore becomes a suggestion of the attachment of the fans to their club. The poem has the qualities of a parable, as its allusive, (comedically) spiritual drama plays out against, and grows out from, a particular place.

Each of the nine stanzas is a quintain, and the rhyme scheme is largely regular, occasionally altered by half-rhymes. The largely colloquial language is heightened by religious and literary allusion, as well as the odd scientific term ('eidetic'). This reading demonstrates that this largely accessible form and language is balanced against a sophisticated depth of reference, a witty, playful use of language and imagery, as well as a subtly complex use of voice; but, significantly, a lack of knowledge surrounding *Faust* or the specifics of Cardiff FC would be no barrier to entry, making this a useful text for the classroom. Abse's gifts as a poetic storyteller allow a clear narrative to develop, which means that the immediacy of perception on a first reading can be developed into depths of understanding.

Themes

Memory and Place

‘The Game’ presents memory as a construction, specifically one connected to identity as well as to the negotiation of particular spaces – in this case, Ninian Park. In ‘The Game’, memory is connected to suggestions of a remembered past that seems to be both atrophying and stuck in stasis:

Memory of faded games, the discarded years;
talk of Aston Villa, the Orient, and the Swans.
Half-time, the band played the same military airs
as when the Bluebirds once were champions.
Round touchlines the same cripples in their chairs.

The past is both “faded” and “discarded”, yet remains called into the present by the act of memory and talk. Despite the decline from past glories (“the Bluebirds once were champions”), the same music plays, and “the same cripples” are present. While the place of Ninian Park is home to multiple generations of fans, presented throughout the poem as a collective, memory displaces the present moment, undermining the poem’s seemingly fixed sense of place: “we are transferred / decades back”. Note again Abse’s playful tone, as he puns on the notion of the football player transferring clubs, emphasising the disrupted sense of place, of the present being uprooted and replaced by memory. Yet, it is suggested that memory is unreliable, as their “eidetic visions blur”; even though memory defines and shapes ‘The Game’ at Ninian Park, it is somewhat nebulous and unreliable.

Just as Abse elevates the events of ‘The Game’ through the use of literary and

religious allusion, so too is the negotiation of memory and place in ‘At Caerleon’ elevated by reference to a mythical past. Caerleon was home to a Roman legionary fortress and, before that, an Iron Age hillfort. In Geoffrey of Monmouth’s pseudohistorical *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136, ‘The History of the Kings of Britain’), which popularised the Arthurian legends, Caerleon is depicted as the capital of King Arthur’s realm. Caerleon has been associated with Arthur by writers over numerous centuries, including Alfred Lord Tennyson, who wrote some sections of *Idylls of the King* (1859–65) while staying in Caerleon. Despite the precise location given by the poem’s title, the sense of place is often refracted and unsettled by memory. Just as ‘The Game’ suggests we are unsettled by memory and the passage of time even if we are affixed to a particular place, ‘At Caerleon’ suggests that time travels through us and the places we inhabit. Relatedly, the former poem nostalgically alludes to a more glorious past for The Bluebirds, and ‘At Caerleon’ crystallises wistful nostalgia into a more serious, though perhaps parodic, lament.

Broadly, ‘At Caerleon’ depicts the present as a degraded, faded continuation of a legendary past. The ‘shadowy spring evening’ suggests twilight and sets the tone of the poem, with twilight being the period in which light fades and is lost, while the confirmation that Caerleon is in ‘ruins’ situates the poem at a point in time far beyond the site’s glory days. Abse mixes the mundane and the mythical offers overt Arthurian allusion as a gang arrives:

Soon the skinhead knights
of the Round Table gang appear.
Bored, they horse around, frab,
and throw empty cans of beer
at each other.

Contemporary slang and chivalric registers clash ('skinhead knights', 'Round Table gang'), and another of Abse's puns plays with the Arthurian frame ('they horse around'). Archaic language, such as 'frab', is also employed to create a sense of temporal displacement and uncertainty. This mixed register and allusion is used to render more serious indications of Caerleon's degradation, and it confuses the poem's sense of time and place, as a 'gang' is rendered as Arthur's court:

The scarred and tattooed
loudest lout
seems to be their King.
The long knife in his buskin
is as keen as Arthur's sword.

We are at Caerleon, the site of the legend, yet the realities of the present space are in stark contrast to its memorialisation in Arthurian myth and legend. The legendary hero is a 'lout', armed with a knife rather than a sword, tattooed and scarred. This gang "bully language / into oaths", another pun which utilises chivalric language and double-meaning to confuse the temporality of the poem: oaths are both pledges of fealty and expressions of coarse language. The group are articulated by the poem's speaker in the imagery of a national and mythical tradition, but they are also described as 'outcast'. The mythical frame is out of place in contemporary Caerleon, and so are they.

It is tempting, and productive, to read 'At Caerleon' within the broader context of Abse's poetry. We could infer that the speaker of this poem is a middle-class speaker failing to identify with, or even humanise, the local

'outcast' youths. Just as early twenty-first century discourse alienatingly described working-class teenagers as 'chavs', so this poem's speaker characterises its subjects as 'yobbos' and a 'lout'. Certainly, the speaker's language is suggestive of classist discourse, and their mythic and literary frame of reference is utilised to create a sense of juxtaposition. It is suggestive, too, of their unease at being unexpectedly joined by others at Caerleon. Once left alone, the speaker seems further alienated, and the final lines become oddly reminiscent of a poet like R.S. Thomas, concerned as it is with national and cultural degradation:

And I'm alone at last,
can lose my reason,
sit upon a stone and play
(paper on a comb) a mournful tune
from an imagined country
that would break the exile's heart,
or summon silhouettes like phantoms
who were coming,
came and now have passed.

The speaker suggests that they lose their 'reason' at this stage in the poem, indicating that this lament is potentially hyperbolic (there are hints of parody of those like R.S. Thomas who professed these cultural fears more sincerely). Yet, despite this, the poem still invokes a cultural memory of Caerleon which is discordant with its present day reality, with the interruption of the speaker's reverie by the 'yobbos' signifying the distance between past and present. There is an indication, too, of the constructed-ness of myth, memory and place: the poet's tune comes "from an imagined country", after all, suggesting that we interpret the speaker's classist construction with a healthy dose of scepticism. The notion that the poet "summon[s] silhouettes like phantoms" points to the insubstantial, potentially artificial nature of their mythic

memories, and the final lines gesture ironically to their supposed impermanence. The silhouettes “were coming, / came and now have passed” not only provides us with senses of time (future events, present events, and the past), but it also suggests that memories – mythical or otherwise – travel through time, places, and ourselves.

As ‘The Game’ suggests, the renderings of place and memory in Abse’s work can be more personal than the impersonal, and potentially parodic, ‘At Caerleon’. ‘At Ogmore-by-Sea this August Evening’ is one such poem, and it immediately introduces a personal perspective and reflective tone in its opening lines, as the relationship between the speaker and the poem’s subject is made clear: “I think of one who loved this estuary – / my father”. The key trope of this poem – music – is also established in the remaining phrase of this first sentence, as the father is identified as a self-taught musician. Performance and perseverance – two qualities of memory – are also suggested by the description of the musician as “self-taught” and “obstinate”. Located on an estuary, between a river and the sea, the poem is sited at a place of flux, and transition. As is common in Abse’s work, the poem suggests the constructed and ambivalent nature of memory, as well as the ways memory shapes our sense of place. Specifically, in this instance, the internal reality of memory is in flux with the external reality of the estuary, as demonstrated by being situated “in a room / darker than the evening outside” and their choice of a “solemn record”. Just as the estuary connects the river and sea, so too are memory and place inextricably linked. It is their choice, in this place, to remain in internal reflection, listening to and lost within memories of their dead father. By opening the poem with “I think”, the speaker situates the poem within a mental place, as much as the physical place identified by the poem’s title.

This suggestion of a mental place rather than concrete physical place is strengthened in the second stanza, as the physical world becomes unreal as night descends: “the gaudy sun sinks into Australia”. The speaker is increasingly lost within the musical performance that signifies their transition into mental, memorial place (“Such power!” they say of the music), and, as night descends, the appearance of the father’s ghost takes place against an interplay of light and dark. The speaker’s reaction to this haunting is a simple question, followed by a welcoming statement: “Father? Here I am, Father.” As we inferred from the first stanza, this haunting reunion is one desired and chosen by the speaker. The third stanza has shifted into the speaker directly addressing their father, and space and time, as well as place and memory, are conflated. The speaker is physically present in a room in Ogmore-by-Sea, but their mental and emotional location is the same place in the past, at the point in time their father taught them to fish. The use of caesura and commas in the final sentence of the stanza creates a pleading tone (“Here, Father, here, tonight”), like a child, asking to be allowed to continue playing, to resume a favourite activity.

In the final stanza the tone suddenly shifts, as the speaker seemingly realises their self-delusion, and exclaims “Senseless conjuration!” Like the unwelcome phantoms of ‘At Caerleon’, and the “faded games”, “discarded years”, and “great phantoms” which cause the “eidetic blur” in ‘The Game’, this memory now impinges on the present in unwelcome ways. It is senseless of the speaker to have conjured this apparition, given its evidently false nature. Indeed, at the first appearance, the Father is lit like “an ordered carnival”, suggesting once again the performative and artificial nature of memory. In the final stanza, the performance comes to an end and the “spotlight fails”, and, closing

the loop with the speaker's initial decision to listen to a "mournful song", the record ceases playing. The speaker is left with "nothing but the tumult of the sea", the final violent image indicating a lack of peaceful resolution to their mournful memory, even as it becomes clear that the speaker knows they can never regain their Father. The poem, as noted, is situated on an estuary, the boundary between one body of water and another, and as the poem ends, the speaker now acknowledges only the sea. The passage of rivers and bodies of water are an ancient metaphor for the journey of life into death, most notably in classical Greek literature and myth, and Abse implicitly alludes to this in his choice of place, the notion of the speaker's dead father aboard a boat, and in the specificity of the final lines.

Both 'At Caerleon' and 'At Ogmore-by-Sea' juxtapose present-day Welsh places with haunting memories, which impinge upon and even supersede the sense of place which exists in the present moment. In the former poem, the intruders are unwelcome and are discordantly juxtaposed against the legendary memories associated with the poem's setting, while in the latter poem, the speaker willingly loses themselves within memory, even as this forces an unwelcome realisation by poem's end. 'At Caerleon' could be insightfully compared with 'A Heritage', and the discussion of memory and place could shift into one of national and cultural inheritance; the mythical in 'At Caerleon', and the industrial and economic in 'A Heritage'. Both poems implicitly ask what sort of place Wales has become, and how this compares to the Wales of times passed. 'At Ogmore-by-Sea' could be compared to 'Return to Cardiff', which similarly depicts illusory memories overlaid on physical spaces which have a personal importance to the speaker.

Like 'At Ogmore-by-Sea', the past-Cardiff of 'Return' is framed in performative terms, to indicate the artificiality of memory.

Identity

'Return to Cardiff'³³ also displays one of Abse's other key concerns: identity. In the poem, we get a sense of the speaker trying, and failing, to reconcile with a past self:

No sooner I'd arrived the other Cardiff had gone,
smoke in the memory, these but
tinned resemblances,
where the boy I was not and the man I am not
met, hesitated, left double
footsteps, then walked on.

As past and present selves meet, neither identity asserts itself over the other, and neither speaks to or reconciles with the other. Even when they occupy the same space ("double footsteps"), the two continue to travel in opposite directions (continuing the motif of time as something we pass through, and which passes through ourselves). The speaker's past and present selves can only move away from one another through time, meeting briefly in the moments of crisis and uncertainty the speaker's return to Cardiff causes. Throughout the poem, Abse's speaker is defined by a place which only existed in an imagined past. The present-day Cardiff simply contains "tinned resemblances" of a city which, upon revisiting it, seems only "a joker's toy façade." The present day Cardiff is simply too different to the Cardiff of the past for the speaker to recognise and, seemingly, this triggers a crisis of identity. Twice, in the poem, the speaker is unable to articulate anything: "Unable to define

33 For an extended analysis of this poem (which is a set text on the WJEC GCSE syllabus) see <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/crew/crew-resources/gcse-resources/>

anything I can hardly speak”, and “Unable to communicate I’m easily betrayed” suggestive of a person who’s sense of self and place is utterly unmoored. If our past defines us, our very identity is challenged, even undermined or erased, when that past no longer exists.

‘Leaving Cardiff’ provides a useful point of comparison, because it contains a similar identity crisis connected to a state of transit, this time from Cardiff (rather than the transition back to Cardiff being the trigger for crisis, as in ‘Return’). Just as the speaker in ‘Return’ suggests the impossibility of his past and present selves reconciling themselves with one another and continuing to exist alongside one another, in ‘Leaving Cardiff’, the speaker articulates the impossibility of a certain identity, and of reconciling the past with the present moment:

For what *who* would choose to go
when *who* sailing made no choice?
Not for one second, I know,
can I be the same man twice.

The question posed again points to the impossibility of fixing down a clear identity: the ‘who’ which made the decision to sail, to leave Cardiff, is, by virtue of having progressed through time, not the same ‘who’ which now experiences leaving Cardiff. Abse’s “not for one second” is to be taken literally, at its most logical extreme, that the relentless progression of time continually changes us and the world we inhabit.

At the core of this grand dilemma is a sense of indecisiveness. The language of the poem is characterised by a mixture of the active and the passive – the speaker states “I wait” and “I prepare”; waiting to leave Cardiff is both something which simply happens, as well as something which the speaker actively enables and enacts. This ambiguity of action and purpose reflects the ambiguity of identity within the poem. We should note that both

‘Return’ and ‘Leaving’ are states and places of transition, much as ‘At Ogmores-by-Sea’ is. Additionally, ‘Leaving Cardiff’ takes on a special significance as the poem selected to open the collection *Welsh Retrospective*: it marks and enacts a departure from Welsh space, and the notion of a speaker who has left – and therefore must, from all points after this throughout the collection, look backwards, through time and space, to a Wales they have left. This provides a point of confluence with the speakers of multiple poems, including ‘Return’, ‘At Ogmores-by-Sea’, ‘The Game’ and ‘At Caerleon’. To paraphrase ‘At Caerleon’, Abse’s speakers look back to an imagined country from a position of spatial and temporal exile, and hence the past, and their memories, become necessary but contested parts of their identity.

Conceptions of identity are contrasted in a somewhat different fashion in ‘Two Photographs’, though ultimately the poem returns to a suggestion of identities which are irreconcilable. The poem initially compares the speaker’s two grandmothers, and juxtaposes them. Doris is portly, formidable, and handsome. Annabella is vulnerable, pretty, slim, and she wears a demure black gown, in stark contrast to Doris’s “lacy black gown”. As the saying goes, they are as different as chalk and cheese, which Abse playfully reimagines as a difference which manifested itself at the moment the two photographs were taken:

One photo’s marked *Ystalyfera* 1880,
the other *Bridgend* 1890.
Both were told to say, ‘Cheese’;
one, defiant, said ‘Chalk!’

In the third stanza, the juxtaposition of the pair reaches greater extremes, and it becomes clear that they were polar opposites; the speaker suggests that, while the speaker liked them both, they did not seem to like one another. The penultimate

stanza puts the two back to back, in the speaker's dream, creating an image from the juxtaposition technique central to the poem. As with many other memories and aspects of the past in Abse's poems, memories become less substantial as the poem progresses, and the two grandmothers now take on "illusory" qualities when the speaker re-examines their photos in the light of day ("these revived waking hours").

The question the speaker poses in the final stanza – "What's survived?" – is typical of Abse's poetry; it is the question implicitly being asked in 'Return to Cardiff' as the speaker documents their alienation at the changed city. In 'Two Photographs', it seems two little has survived to ensure the memory of the two grandmothers will outlast the speaker's memory:

Of two old ladies once uxoriously loved,
What's survived? An amber
brooch, a string of pearls,
two photographs. Happening
on them, my children's
grandchildren will ask 'Who?' – hardly aware
that if this be not true, I never lived.

While objects and images are left to give form to the two women, it is the speaker's memory of them which ultimately confirms – however illusory – the two women's strong, contrasting personalities and sensibilities. Memory gives meaning and context to objects and images, and thus, grants identity. The unspoken, implicit anxiety in the final lines is that the speaker themselves will be forgotten. If identities as distinct as the two grandmothers can be forgotten, then what hope for the rest of us, or the speaker? What use is identity, if it is so easily lost? The speaker's statement that, without the two grandmothers, they would never have lived, confirms this existential crisis.

However, the poem's end is also undercut

by some humorous irony, not least in that the poem the reader is engaging with provides the necessary context and information required to confirm not only the contrasting identities of the two women, but also their relationship to the speaker and, thus, the speaker's own existence. So long as the poem exists, and is read, some maintenance of identity is assured. This ironic humour is even greater when one considers the meaning of the word 'uxorious'; to be excessively fond of and deferential to one's wife. Both grandmothers were "loved uxoriously", meaning they had exceedingly devoted husbands. Therefore, if the speaker's existence is contingent on the existence of their grandmothers, then their grandfathers were perhaps requisites for existence, too, despite their near-total absence from the poem. Indeed, the only slight definition the grandfathers receive is in relation to their deference to the two sharply contrasting, and vivid, grandmothers.

Suggested Exercises

a) Reading & re-reading out loud

Reading out loud can be anxiety-inducing for some students, but it can be an effective way of helping students sharpen their interpretive and observational skills. By combining reading aloud with group discussion and some individual learning/reflection, this exercise aims to build confidence within the group setting as well as enabling students to see how their own observations, interpretation, and learning are improved by discussion and exchange with other students.

To minimise anxiety, emphasise that you will join the students in contributing to a group reading session. Ideally, choose a poem with a similar number of lines to the group size which the class are also familiar with (alternatively, you could break the class up into smaller groups and invite them to read one verse each to one another). Assign a simple reading order, perhaps beginning with yourself, and ask each student to read their line, picking up as each line finishes. Give students an opportunity to air any uncertainty or ask any questions before beginning – someone might be unsure about the exact pronunciation of a word, for example. The poem should be read aloud in its entirety without further comment or direction from you. You should then invite the class to discuss the group reading. How did hearing the poem aloud affect their interpretation of it? Did the group session confirm, or challenge their existing understanding of the poem? Allow the students some time to discuss this, and naturally give them your own observations.

Once the class have had time to discuss their responses to the group reading, ask each student to return to their line within the poem and reflect individually. This time, ask students to write out their line on a fresh piece of paper, and to then annotate it. They should reflect on the group discussion, as well as their own reading of the line, as they now plan how to read the line out loud (once this part of the exercise is complete, the class will read the poem aloud together). Ask them to think about where the emphasis of their oral reading should fall, as well as what tone or emotional state they should try to express. Give them time, if they wish, to undertake a little extra research (is there a word they don't quite understand? Or an allusion they wish to look up for better understanding?). You should also take part in this session and reflect on your line as the students do theirs.

When everyone is finished, repeat the initial exercise but with the new interpretation of the lines taken into account. Ask each student to pay attention to the student next to them. Once the reading is complete, discuss with the students how a planned reading altered their understanding of the poem. This activity could be repeated a third time, with yourself and the class reaching a consensus on how the poem could be read; alternatively, the oral readings could stop here to invite room for discussion and debate about how the poem can be read. 'Can' is a very deliberate choice of word here – multiple interpretations should be encouraged, even as students should inform their interpretation with evidence. Translating written work into performed speech invites students to consider the detail of individual lines, as well

as the tone and mood of poems. By reading as a group, and through discussing their choices, students will see that poetry reading is a test of multiple possible interpretations, rather than an act of unlocking a safe which contains a single, hidden meaning.

b) Poetry Gallery

This exercise is a useful mid-year, or end-of-year, revision session and can incorporate out-of-class preparation with an in-class session. To prepare students for the session, introduce them to what a poetry broadside is (examples can easily be found online): a single unfolded sheet of paper, printed on one side only, which contains a poem as well as material intended to illuminate the poem's content, tone, ideas, and themes. You can use part of one class to introduce students to different examples of broadsides, before inviting them to make their own.

After this introduction, students should be given a week to complete the task:

- ▶ Design and compile a poetry broadside of a Dannie Abse poem.
- ▶ The broadside should offer your interpretation of the poem's mood, tone, themes, ideas and content.
- ▶ The broadside should be clear but visually compelling.
- ▶ Digital and analog designs are both permitted.
- ▶ Class discussion can be used to inform your interpretation of the poem.
- ▶ Once completed, write a 300-word statement which explains which aspects of the poem you decided to depict and explore in the broadside. Think of it as an artist/writer's statement!
- ▶ Bring a hard copy of the broadside and your statement to class.

On the day of the follow-up class, do your best to lay out the broadsides in a gallery

format, so that students can walk around the space, and look at one another's work as well as the accompanying statements. Ideally, the broadsides should be displayed on walls or stands, to reflect their origins as street art, but laying the work out on desks is fine. If there's room, you could allow students to leave written feedback on blank sheets next to each broadside.

Encourage students to note their observations as they consider each other's work, and ask them to think about what they liked about one another's broadsides. What visual choices worked well? Did any broadsides change or expand their view of a particular poem? Do they feel that, collectively, the broadsides reflect their understanding of Abse's work? What did you learn from assembling your own broadside?

This exercise works best as an end of term revision session. It provides the students the opportunity to both revise and review their knowledge of the writer, as well as creating materials they can use for independent study. If possible, scan the broadsides and the statements so that the students can use one another's work in their revision, if they should want to. It might also strengthen student's confidence in interpreting poetry by offering them an alternative, visual way of expressing their thoughts about a poem, which can crystallise their opinions and knowledge ahead of assessment. Finally, it also provides some end-of-term breathing room, breaking up the familiar routine of the classroom and shifting the space from a class into a gallery.

Further Reading

Biographical & historical sources:

Dannie Abse. *Goodbye, Twentieth Century* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2011).

Abse's autobiography is well worth reading, given both the detail and warmth with which he recounts the course of his life. The book offers frequent insights into Abse's relationship with his Jewish and Welsh heritages and his interactions with and thoughts on other writers.

Dannie Abse. 'The Ass and Every Green Thing' in *How Poets Work* ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Seren, 1996). This essay discusses Abse's development as a writer up to that point in time, and details his thoughts on writing poetry.

Cary Archard. *Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook* (Bridgend: Seren, 2009).

This edited collection contains a variety of works by and about Abse. It includes essays by Abse, extracts from Abse's autobiographical fiction, extracts from Abse's journals, several reviews of Abse's work written over decades, a handful of scholarly essays on Abse's work.

Scholarly essays on the poetry:

Tony Curtis. 'White coat, purple coat, overcoat: the late poetry of Dannie Abse' in *Poetry Wales* 34.1 (1998).

James A. Davies. "In a different place, / changed": Dannie Abse, Dylan Thomas, T.S. Eliot, and Wales' in *Beyond the Difference: Welsh Literature in Comparative Contexts* ed. Alyce von Rothkirch and Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004).

Jasmine Donahaye. "A dislocation called a blessing": Three Welsh-Jewish Perspectives' in *Welsh Writing in English* 3 (1997).

Supplementary reading online:

Some of Abse's poems are included in New York University's Literature, Arts, and Medicine Database, which is intended to provide people with materials in the broad, interdisciplinary area of medical humanities. Two poems from *Welsh Retrospective* are among NYU's selection, and feature short annotations by the database's editors:

A Winter Visit <https://medhum.med.nyu.edu/view/11882>

In the Theatre <https://medhum.med.nyu.edu/view/12036>

The British Council's webpage on Abse includes a brief biography, as well as a short critical overview of his writing: <https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/dannie-abse>