Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

41

Poetry Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature

Volume 41

David Galens
Project Editor

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Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature,* (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism,* vol. 20, ed. Ellen McGeagh (Detroit: The Gale Group), 37-40.

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Dannie Abse
1923-

Welsh poet, playwright, novelist, essayist, editor, critic, and physician.

INTRODUCTION

One of the United Kingdom's best-known contemporary poets, Abse has been compared to Philip Larkin and Rainer Maria Rilke. Praised for his honesty, for his balanced view of life, and for his compassion, Abse focuses on modern, daily life. Abse's Jewish heritage, his Roman Catholic education, and his practice as a physician have helped to shape his individual sensibility.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Abse was born to Jewish parents in Cardiff, Wales, on September 22, 1923. Abse became seriously interested in poetry as a youth when his older brother Leo introduced him to *The Left Review,* a political magazine that contained poetry and essays about the Spanish Civil War. Abse's concern for social issues has continued throughout his life. Although his parents struggled financially, the children of the family achieved prominent careers. Abse and his brother Wilfred became physicians, while Leo became a Labour Member of Parliament. Abse attended St. Illtyd's College in Cardiff from 1935-41 and the University of Wales. In 1942 he entered the medical program at King's College in London and then began training in 1944 at Westminster Hospital. From 1951-55 he served as a squadron leader in the Royal Air Force (RAF) at a military chest clinic near Middlesex Hospital in London. Abse married Joan Mercer in 1951 and together they have three children. He was writer-in-residence at Princeton University from 1973-74. He has received numerous awards including the Charles Henry Foyle award for *House of Cowards* in 1960, and both the Welsh Arts Council Literature award and the Jewish Chronicle Book award for *Selected Poems* in 1970.

MAJOR WORKS

Abse's first book of poetry, *After Every Green Thing* (1949) was published while he was still in medical school. This led him to consider leaving school to pursue writing full time. His struggle with his identity as a doctor kept him from writing about his occupational experiences in his early poetry. He wanted to be known as a poet and not a doctor. *After Every Green Thing* has a prominent use of symbolism that Abse rejected in his later poetry. The language and imagery found in *Walking under Water* (1952) differs from the style of his first work, and presents subjects of a more personal nature, for which he would later be known. *Tenants of the House* (1957) and *Poems, Golders Green* (1962) focus on Abse's personal experiences. The shift away from social issues to those of a personal nature results in a conversational tone that is carried through to *A Small Desperation* (1968). His first poems dealing with medical themes appeared in *A Small Desperation* (1968) and *Funland* (1973). Previously, Abse avoided writing about his experiences as a doctor. Howard Sergeant of *Books and Bookmen* praised the poet for the depth and wholeness that resulted from Abse drawing upon his medical experience. The poems in *Way Out in the Centre* (1981) reflect Abse's Jewish background and family life. In *One-Legged on Ice* (1983) Abse continues to explore themes of a personal nature including those about love and his son, while leaving room for the dreamlike and mysterious. In *Ask the Bloody Horse* (1986), the mysterious and strange create a recurring theme of what Abse calls "numinous hauntings." As with his previous volumes of poetry, Abse continues to draw from his personal experiences and Jewish background in *Remembrance of Crimes Past: Poems 1986-1989* (1990). The title

poem describes how he eluded a piano lesson to play in the park, causing the dismissal of his piano teacher. Again in *Arcadia, One Mile* (1998), Abse draws on Welsh literature and his experience as a doctor in exploring the duality of life and death.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Abse's popular success is paralleled by favorable reviews from many critics. Specifically, his poetry is viewed has having a depth that is composed of religious, literary, historical, and emotional layers. He is also lauded for taking on universal themes while maintaining a personal connection. Abse's exploration of dichotomies including personal and professional, love and loss, scientific and artistic, creates tension that runs throughout his poetry. His work has been described as romantic, ironic, dark, mysterious, sophisticated, and socially conscious. The romantic and symbolic style of his early poetry gave way to the more lyric and personal character. It is precisely these qualities that have led many critics to agree that *Funland and Other Poems* (1973) is one of Abse's strongest volumes of poetry.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

After Every Green Thing 1949
Walking under Water 1952
Tenants of the House 1957
Poems, Golders Green 1962
Dannie Abse: A Selection 1963
A Small Desperation 1968
Demo 1969
Selected Poems 1970
Funland, and Other Poems 1973
Collected Poems, 1948-1976 1977
Way Out in the Centre 1981
One-Legged on Ice 1983
Ask the Bloody Horse 1986
Remembrance of Crimes Past: Poems 1986-1989 1990
White Coat, Purple Coat: Collected Poems 1986-1989 1990
On the Evening Road 1994
Selected Poems 1994
Welsh Retrospective 1997
Arcadia, One Mile 1998
Be Seated, Thou: Poems 1989-1998 2000

Other Major Works

Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve (novel) 1954
Some Corner of an English Field (novel) 1956
House of Cowards (play) 1960
O. Jones, O. Jones (novel) 1970
Goodbye, Twentieth Century (autobiography) 1974
A Poet in the Family (autobiography) 1974
Pythagoras (Smith) (play) 1979
A Strong Dose of Myself (essays) 1983
The Dogs of Pavlov (play) 1990
There Was a Young Man from Cardiff (novel) 1991

CRITICISM

Roland Mathias (essay date 1967)

SOURCE: Mathias, Roland. "The Poetry of Dannie Abse: II." *Anglo-Welsh Review* 16, no. 38 (winter 1967): 84-98.

[*In the following essay, Mathias examines the poems in* Tenants of the House *and* Poems, Golders Green.]

"The Water Diviner," printed second in ***Poems, Golders Green,*** is one of several pieces in which Dannie Abse treats either of the predicament of poets as a class or of himself in particular.

> Late, I have come to a parched land
> doubting my gift, if gift I have,
> the inspiration of water
> spilt, swallowed in the sand.

He reflects that instead of transforming 'amorphous mass'

> so that the aged gods might dance
> and golden structures form

he should have built

> plain brick on brick
> a water tower.

In other words, he chose to work on the discipline of form, to make available to himself the power and impetus of tradition, instead of ensuring the one thing necessary to irrigate the verbal desert, a constant supply of inspiration. It would not merely be heavy-handed and insensitive to variations of mood to see in this a realistic analysis of the poetic development of Dannie Abse: it would also be illogical, because the alternatives which the poem sets are not a matter of choice. They are, indeed, not even alternatives. I introduce **"The Water Diviner"** here solely as a possible guide, albeit a subjective one, to literary judgment. If Dannie Abse felt, over the general period of which this poem is part, that the supreme gift, summonable as water is by a hazel stick, had deserted him, how far does his 'feeling' fit what may be said more objectively about ***Tenants of the House*** (1957) and ***Poems, Golders Green***

(1962), the two volumes which contain all the poems which I wish to consider in this article. Was there a barren period for a year or two from 1957?

Tenants of the House, which contains poems written between 1951 and 1956, is, to my mind, the high plateau of Abse's achievement. The organisation of the contents under five headings, *Metaphysical Ironies, Social Ironies, The Identity of Love, The Identity of Place* and *The Identity of the Word,* warns one against the attempt to draw any inferences about the chronological order of composition; but it is interesting, if not significant, that the fourth group includes, in **'Field'** and **'Port of Call,'** two of the weakest and most ineffective poems to come from Dannie Abse's pen at any time. Another poem in the same group, **'Postcard from Cornwall,'** a late, last outburst of Dylanism, is not very much better. But the term 'plateau' justifies itself for the remainder. Of some thirty poems there is scarcely one which is not more successful than all but the very best in ***Walking Under Water,*** his volume immediately previous, and perhaps half of the thirty reach for higher ground yet.

But in ***Poems, Golders Green*** the altitude falls. Not by many feet, perhaps, but, for the climber who has come so far, enough for significance. With the exception of that magnificent poem, **'Return to Cardiff,'** and perhaps **'The Water Diviner'** already mentioned, the first part of the book contains few, if any, pieces which are not in some way flawed. To this extent there is a rough correspondence between Dannie Abse's own feeling about his poetic condition at that time and the contour which I am drawing now. But it was not inspiration he then lacked (inspiration, that is, in the sense of the provision of an idea, an angle, an incident for the poem's forming) so much as the energy and the discernment to cut the secondary material away and carry through the intended theme unobscured to its conclusion. In the second half of the book, however, (and I bear in mind that this again may have no basis in a real chronology of composition) there appears a spinney of poems on high ground which perhaps overtops the little-varying levels of the volume previous. In the centre of the spinney I have for markers **'One Spring Day,' 'Jew,' 'Surprise! Surprise!'** (despite the title), **'After a Departure,' 'Postmark,'** and **'The French Master.'** On the edge, and more doubtfully, stand **'The Magician,' 'The Grand View'** and two of the **'Three Voices.'** It is noticeable that these poems, like **'Return to Cardiff,'** are all (with the exception of **'The Magician'**) more personal in their genesis than the ***Metaphysical Ironies*** and ***Social Ironies*** with which I would wish to compare them. Whether this says anything at all about the nature and development of Abse's inspiration could only be argued against much more biographical information than I possess. But it is at least interesting that he seems latterly to have moved away from the *public* poetry and the hortatory tone formerly so characteristic of him.

If we accept that ***Tenants of the House*** and ***Poems, Golders Green*** both contain poems in number which overtop all but a very few in Abse's two earlier volumes, our next task must be to identify as far as possible the characteristics of this later period of writing, especially those characteristics which, being newly developed, may be held to be the cause or basis of the new success. And here the first to be mentioned must be the poet's continual search for new poetic experience. This, though not the most fundamental, was the most continuous factor involved and one which played second and stoutly in two different phases of Dannie Abse's development. History, evangelical religion, psychology, spiritualism, politics, the Bomb, the Ancient World, social revolution, athletics, football, mountaineering, the circus, the music hall, the railway, otherness—Abse's two later volumes are remarkable for their diversity and versatility. There is no timid lurking behind the facades of well-worn poetic themes. And while this determination to measure poetry against the utmost of modern life is common to many poets writing since the War (one thinks immediately of James Kirkup's poem on a heart operation in a Leeds hospital) Dannie Abse manages to make of his books not frenetic scrabblings together of novelties but architecturally unified compositions. This achievement is supported, in ***Tenants of the House*** and to a much smaller extent in the volume following, by the second characteristic to which I must now draw attention, a characteristic whose pressure towards structural unification was of the most marked kind.

During the years 1951 to 1956 in particular, the poet began to provide a symbolic concept or structure which supported the entire poem and was the poem in everything but the human and apposite moral the reader was intended to draw. Not that such provision was an entirely new thing. There were poems in ***Walking under Water,*** such as **'The Search'** and **'The Occupation,'** which attempted this. There were others, like **'The Clock'** and **'Journeys and Faces,'** in which two or more symbols were provided and the structure depended on the interplay or tension between them. But in all these the narrative line was unsatisfactory—in **'The Occupation'** because it was cluttered and obscured by decorative trivia and a mass of words, in **'The Search'** because it was neither logical nor coherent in mood, in **'Journeys and Faces'** because there was no real interplay and therefore no unification. Only **'The Clock'** offered a movement or dance of symbols which, maintained, was also unifying. But this was a different sort of poem. **'Soho: Saturday Night,'** which essayed a symbolic concept based on grouping rather than development, was able to use existing knowledge in the reader (knowledge of moral as well as narrative patterns) to make a success of parts even if the unity of the whole might be in doubt.

But the poems in ***Tenants of the House*** reveal such an increase in the ability to maintain and clarify this symbolic structure that even the pieces that are relatively unsuccessful remain clear in the memory. Because this is difficult to demonstrate except by what would undoubtedly seem an excess of quotation, I am compelled to choose an example from a poem which is less than a total success, a poem in which the concept is broken by an *ex machina* utterance

which attempts to extend it and comment upon it. But this poem, **'The Meeting,'** has the merit (for my purpose) of providing twelve or fourteen lines together, a nucleus in which the point of the concept can be discerned, a node of the One Dream which envelops the tenement-dwellers as melanchly spring seeds the railway bridges, the canals and the 'streets tangled like string,' and which moves the Meeting in which they wait to understand each other and recognise the leader they hope for.

> Arrive at the Meeting down a flight of stairs:
> regard the glass of water on the table, the rows of empty chairs.
> Whisper of dry voices. The Deaf Man asking: What are they
> saying? And the traffic outside and a clock striking
> the World's Time. Wheels, oil, piston, one dream.
> What are they saying? They are not saying anything, sir.
> The Speaker has not arrived. One day our hands
> will fall: read the writing on the wall.
> Far away the conscripted dead, the scarecrow in the dark
> field, like an artificial ragged ghost.
> But here—the shuffle of feet, the table, the platform, the Chairman
> without a head, waiting for the Unknown Speaker. . . .
> And the lights flickering on and off: Exit dark, Exit dark,
> Exit.

Babel, murmur of many tongues, but One Dream. The sustained concept of the Meeting is magnificently successful until the poet decides that he wants to comment (by some other way than an internal change of mood) upon the limitations of the Dream ('Oh absurd the territories they would voyage to'). This attempt at definition from outside does much to destroy the reader's identification with the generalised post-Eliot mood of the Dream: this one voice disturbing the muttered regrets of Babel undoes the Meeting's desire. The final recapitulation of the Meeting's theme is valiant, but the heckler has made his entry and not even his silence thenceforward can restore a unity so heavily dependent on non-definition.

It is worth noticing, in passing, that the primal force of the poem's concept has been diverted earlier by one or two decorative clevernesses which slide across the path. The contrast with the sad, urban world intended in

> Far from the chessboard fields where cows and horses munch
> sunlight, far from the factories of grass and the trees'
> workshops for artificial limbs

is lost in the off-key ironic inversions. But there will be more to say of this later. For the moment I want to emphasise the importance of the symbolic concept, when presented clearly, in unifying the poem, acting as a vehicle for the *message* which so hortatory a poet as Dannie Abse was then always anxious to give, and in presenting a surface of immediately assimilable detail which the reader associates naturally with the concept (which in its literal aspect is often familiar enough to him). The first and last of these considerations, successfully weighed, give the poem a first level which the reader can accept without difficulty, a guise of easy acquaintance behind which the *message* can fructify.

It ought, perhaps, to be made clear that Dannie Abse's use of a single symbol extended is by no means unique; Auden, Spender and Day Lewis made single-symbol structures not infrequently, and Thom Gunn, writing in the early fifties, developed the practice independently, if ultimately from the same source. Where Dannie Abse differs is in providing a symbolic concept which is familiar or commonplace and in avoiding structures which are themselves esoteric or demand special knowledge even before the probably abstruse philosophical *point* is inserted. This, of course, is a generalisation that can be refuted in detail. If one accepts that every reader has *some* idea, preferably some visual idea, of men in armour fighting a battle hand-to-hand in open country, then Thom Gunn's poem *The Byrnies* struggles into the category that already holds many of the poems in ***Tenants of the House.*** But more often with Gunn there is a concept that appears to exist for its own sake, as in *The Court Revolt,* or is shot through and through with external commentary to such an extent that almost every rag of detail has an interpretation pinned to it. That well-known poem **'On The Move'** is built on a scaffolding of this sort, flying its rags like bunting.

Dannie Abse, on the other hand, allows the percipient reader to concentrate on his second level of intention by making his first familiar and worthy of special notice only for the heightened language and the imagination spent on the selection of detail. Thus **'Go Home, The Act Is Over,'** the last poem in ***Tenants of the House,*** uses the symbol of the big top and a trapeze act to say something about the poet's predicament, and **'The Magician,'** from the volume following, lets a music hall turn reach the point where charlatanry slips unwittingly into real and frightening illusion.

> Sometimes, something he cannot understand
> happens—atavistic powers stray unleashed,
> a raving voice he hardly thought to hear,
> the ventriloquist's dummy out of hand.

This example, of course, underlines again the characteristic I noted first, namely the intent to use poetry to penetrate new alleys of experience or knowledge.

A *caveat* may be necessary, however, before I leave the discussion of the single-symbol concept. Not merely is this much less frequently used in ***Poems, Golders Green***: it is also true that where it is used, as in, say, **'The Abandoned'** and **'The Mask-Maker,'** the resulting poems are not amongst the most successful. It is evident that this method commended itself to Dannie Abse at a particular period of his development as a poet, that period during which the poems in ***Tenants of the House*** were written,

and that its efficacy for his purposes began to diminish thereafter. In discussing the best poems in his last volume I shall have to find other reasons for his success.

What first occurs to me as the substitute quality is no substitute at all, for it was also present in the period 1951-6. I refer to a determined fidelity to experience and a close observation of the nature of that experience, especially experience of the self, of personal relationships and of love. Even as I write this, however, I realise how impossible it is to begin a discussion of it without some indication of Dannie Abse's disposition and cast of mind. Not for him the smart stuff about bizarre and occasional meetings, sardonic narratives of seduction, or bitter and ironic commentaries on the mutual re-charge of isolated egos in temporary collision. He offers instead the nuances of a continuing affection, a fundamental belief in man's spiritual potential, and a willingness to look at a happy relationship or a pleasant possibility at least as carefully as others explore the counterbalancing glooms. *Poem of Celebration* ends:

> Hardly evangelical
> but still my rainbowed heart blessed and thumping.
> Any man may gather the images of despair;
> I'll say 'I will' with an ascending Lazarus voice
> and, like an accident, breathe in space and air.

This 'plus sign,' to which I referred briefly at the end of my first article, is uncommon among modern poets of any quality, and its uncommonness means not merely that the reader finds in such difference an immediate refreshment but also that Abse himself walks in the fields of new and marginal experience which he chooses, making new footsteps as he goes, 'As a Jew,' he wrote four years ago,[1] 'I was brought up to believe that man was essentially good. Didn't I, as a boy, say in my morning prayer: *My God, the soul which Thou hast given me is pure. . . .* ?' He went on to make it plain that Sin as a genetic and theological proposition had been revived by Freud, and as a practical proposition by Auschwitz, and that it was no longer possible for him to accept so simply or perhaps even at all the childhood *credo* he remembered. But he is still no friend to the wry downturn, to the non-committal fragmentisation so fashionable recently, to the ultimate cynicism. In his pages there is such a thing as love and, despite moments of non-communication and despair, there are also spiritual intuitions. I am not trying to make Abse out to be a latter-day Ella Wheeler Wilcox, and it is sad that attitudes are so imitative and subject to the prevailing mood that such a ludicrous disclaimer should be necessary. All I mean is that the reader who is himself not unsanguine will from time to time cry 'True!' with the delighted recognition that one accords to something experienced in life but seldom read in the work of serious modern poets.

This *truth* is the more impressive because it is observed more often than affirmed: it is experimental in attitude and suffers all the setbacks and *longueurs* that are common to experiment. But since it begins from the premise of a known love and warms to any salute from travelling man, the practice of honesty permits a wide range of success and failure in particular enterprises without a resulting desire to strike a general attitude, whether of optimism or cynicism. **'Return to Cardiff,'** for instance, in which

> the boy I was not and the man I am not
> met, hesitated, left double footsteps, then walked on

leaves the reader with no feeling that the poet spoke from a self-congratulatory adulthood, as the hardened metropolitan returning to find 'the whole locus smaller.' The return was an honest attempt to fit the facts to nostalgia, to re-enter that boy's world of magic and misery. It failed: and it failed because it would fail for anybody who was prepared to be truthful about it. The Cardiff the poet was looking for was not even the real Cardiff of boyish experience: it was a city selected and memorised by a man who in so selecting and memorising was in some small way being untruthful to the man he had become. The whole thing was

> less a return than a raid
> on mislaid identities.

In the same spirit he can allow the morning sun to move an unreasoning cheerfulness towards a perception that is more spiritual. Where with others the effect might be no more than a renewal of pride in the self-propitiating blood, Abse begins by recognising that this new morning is outside himself.

> Not my eyes drew up the lawn,
> not my breath blurred on glass.
> All disguises of reality
> are transparently withdrawn
> when living green strokes the grass
> when living blue loads the sky.

'One Spring Day,' out of which speak awe and love, terror and 'sweet inklings,' would in the past, he says, have proved the impulse to faith

> but I mock the exalted mood
> wherein the unconscious sings
> being a twentieth-century man,
> ironic, sardonic, and bored.

Yet it is not either the mood or the moment that the poet mocks and distrusts, so much as himself. He catches the attitudes of his generation at work on his spirit and sets up doubt to watch doubt. Is distrust more to be trusted than a vernal impulse which does not stop at green and blue?

> I was not, I am not, yet will be
> faithless tomorrow and ask
> 'Was it awe or was it love?'
> when colour stared into me.

In the end what remains is an impression of contact almost made, a line to heaven that came clear only for the second before the message was spoken. The experience of this

poem is certainly not universal, perhaps not even common: but there will be some readers, at least, who will know this for an honest attempt to put on record a flicker of feeling, a momentary sixth sense, which has been unfashionable in poetry for a long time.

I have space only for one other example of this honest closeness of observation, which Abse exercises best in the context of a familiar relationship. *Letter to Eurydice* notes the 'lost' periods of the loved one and asserts her right to the privacy of otherness even against her lover and his anxieties about her: this theme is carried, however, on the vehicle of Orpheus's rescue of Eurydice from Pluto. I prefer, therefore, to take **'Surprise! Surprise!'** as an example of the 'straight' observational approach which is characteristic of Abse's work in this period. In this poem he explores that feeling of strangeness which anyone experiences who looks hard and long at a familiar object or feature of his surroundings and who sheds, sometimes without intention, all his previous acquaintance with it.

> Regard an object closely, our own foot
> named, how queer it appears as its toes flex.
> Peer at it with greenhorn observation;
> thus magnified, what incongruous toenails!

This practice of unknowing detachment in a known world extended, the poet finds himself applying it to personal relationships, near and less near: observing the separateness of his wife and the individuality of even her smallest motions, he suddenly finds it incredible that he should ever claim to *know* her and possess her.

> Oh how everything and everybody
> is perplexed and perplexing, deeply unknown.
> What surprises is that sometimes we are
> not surprised, that a door clicks, half opens,
> and we guessed beforehand who would enter.
> Is that why we dare to cry: 'I know Smith'?
> Now who of you, suggesting I raise my head
> from this page, will call my name familiarly?
> You will see, as always, my eyes startled.

It should be sufficiently plain from the examples I have given that Dannie Abse is concerned with an area of human experience which is neither abnormal nor esoteric: it is nevertheless an area not greatly mapped in poetry perhaps because treated observationally and without irony it has no unexpected or dramatic mountains which one may sugar up with snow. 'Sometimes,' wrote Abse in 1963, 'one tells a lie in a poem for the sake of the poem. . . . Oddly, you see, poetry is fiction.' It is my impression that of recent years that 'sometimes' has been remarkably infrequent. He has, if anything, chosen to sacrifice the artifice of the poem to the honesty of the experience it describes.

I have space to refer to Dannie Abse's technical abilities as a poet (which I attempted to assess in my first article) in two contexts only: first, it is noticeable that, particularly in ***Poems, Golders Green,*** his natural rhetoric has been tamed, has been made subservient to the demands of his later poetic approach (as indeed the lines quoted above will make sufficiently plain) and that he now essays a complicated balance between conversational stop-go and the tightened rhythms of a poetic requirement: second, I wish to describe one extension of his rhythmic powers. The use of a refrain as the linking structure of a poem which was so frequently noticeable in ***After Every Green Thing*** and ***Walking Under Water*** does not entirely disappear: it survives in such pieces as the revised version of **'Song'** (retitled **'Song of a Hebrew'**) and **'Emperors of the Island'**: something of the same sort again appears in the antithetical structure of **'Odd.'** But these poems seem to me to depend almost entirely on the impact made by their content when they are read aloud: all, and especially the last, have shed their literary value with the incursion of this emphasis. There are others, more successful, like **'Duality,'** where variations on a refrain, with frequent and repeated antithesis, create a close and individual structure. But what I am concerned with now is a related, but different, development, the use of a nursery-rhyme jingle (which necessarily involves repetition and echoes of previous lines as well as a refrain) to *carry* an allegorical theme. This is exploited with partial success in **'The Red Balloon,'** complete success in **'The Trial'**—in which the refrain goes

> Some say high, and some say low
> To swing, swing, swing, when the free winds blow.

The risks of this are considerable: the refrain is pointed less at the theme than at the obscure politicking underneath most nursery rhymes, and this impression of an obscure but valid antiquity is heightened by halts and hurries in the rhythmic line.

In this last respect again one is conscious of risk, a risk faced and taken.

> A mask is a lifetime, my bad man,
> to replace such a gift nobody can.

The 'my bad man' of the first line has to carry three full stresses and draw plenty of attention to itself. It strikes one as the sort of clumsy fill-in that a fifteenth century jingler, say, might offer, and this impression is undoubtedly what Dannie Abse intends. In other words, he is deliberately banking on the reader's capital, on that almost inevitable familiarity with nursery rhymes which he is invited to take into the poem. That this carries with it an air of mystery and partial understanding is also part of his intention: it deepens and obscures the personal and psychological allegory which is the poem's theme. Occasionally I feel that the *roughness* has been carried too far:

> Quiet prisoner! Why I remember a priest remark
> that he picked up a dog's face in the dark,

The first of these two lines has at least four extra syllables and can be read (without stopping the rhythm altogether) only as a gabble. Nor is there any relief from a potential