# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

# TCLC 141

Volume 141

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations**

**Janet Witalec**
***Project Editor***


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# Preface

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# Contents

# Lascelles Abercrombie
## 1881-1938

English poet, playwright, and literary critic.

The following entry provides criticism on Abercrombie's works from 1913 through 1999.

## INTRODUCTION

An accomplished poet, playwright, and critic, Abercrombie belonged to the Georgians, a group at the beginning of the twentieth century whose works were characterized by an interest in dramatic form and the adoption of colloquial diction. However, in contrast to his contemporaries, Abercrombie stood alone in his descriptions of the metaphysical landscape. He strove to reveal an otherworldly dimension to feelings and emotions. Although his poetry was not always successful, Abercrombie was admired by colleagues and critics.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Abercrombie was born into a wealthy and aristocratic family on January 9, 1881. He was introduced to the arts at a young age and began writing when he was just nine years old. However, growing up in a family that included a stockbroker father and politically savvy uncles meant that the young Abercrombie was formally educated in the sciences rather than the arts. In 1900 he enrolled at Owens College in Manchester, England, intent on earning a degree in chemistry. He left just two years later, due to familial problems brought on by the Boer War, a conflict waged between South Africa and Great Britain between 1899 and 1902. The war had a damaging effect on the family's finances, which suffered incredible losses. As a result, Abercrombie left school in 1902 to find work and help support his family. Fueled with a desire to make a living as a writer, Abercrombie first worked as a surveyor, then as a journalist in Liverpool. While his rise to literary acclaim was slow, Abercrombie still managed to make a living in his chosen profession. He worked as a journalist for the *Liverpool Courier.* It would not be long, however, before both his personal and professional life would change drastically. In the early 1900s he met and subsequently married an aspiring artist named Catherine Gwatkin. Through Gwatkin, Abercrombie was exposed to numerous influences that would help boost his career. Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, a Cambridge scholar and friend of Gwatkin, used his own credibility to help Abercrombie's work get published in various local publications, including the *Independent Review* and the *Nation.* While these publications did little to garner him fame or fortune, they did help to establish Abercrombie as a man of literary abilities. As a result, in 1908 Abercrombie's first volume of poetry, *Interludes and Poems* was published. In 1912 Abercrombie published *Emblems of Love,* which experienced critical and popular success. This allowed Abercrombie to quit his job as a journalist and pursue his own writing full time. He and his wife relocated to the country, where they lived happily from 1911 to 1914. In their cottage, affectionately named "The Gallows," Abercrombie enjoyed his most fruitful years as a writer. He also enjoyed the company of other writers who came to visit often, including Robert Frost and Edward Thomas. In 1914 Abercrombie moved back to Liverpool. The years of World War I were difficult for him and his peers. As newspapers quickly phased out their literary columns to cover news of the war, Abercrombie had to find other work.

Poor health kept him out of the war and manual labor jobs. While friends helped secure him a Civil List pension, it was not enough to live on. As a result, Abercrombie turned to teaching. He found financial security in academia, although it took time away from his writing. In 1926 Abercrombie became gravely ill. A period of forced seclusion allowed him to return to writing poetry. He completed several poems during this period, and, in 1930, the Oxford University Press published a volume of his poetry. This was an unusual honor, one of which Abercrombie realized the significance. Only one other poet, Robert Bridges, had ever been bestowed this honor while still living. Abercrombie died on October 27, 1938.

## MAJOR WORKS

Although *Interludes and Poems* did not sell well, it did establish Abercrombie as a literary figure in England. It also illustrated his literary style—a style that would remain with him throughout his career—namely, a fascination with the otherworldly and its influence upon this world, particularly the notion of ecstasy, which figures heavily in several of the volume's poems. Abercrombie was greatly influenced by the work of English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy. A poet of the naturalist movement, Hardy believed in the scientific hypotheses of biologist Charles Darwin and philosopher/mathematician Sir Isaac Newton. He often wrote with a sense of tragic gloom, employing spirits and otherworldly apparitions as literary devices. Abercrombie was so enamored of Hardy and his work that he often borrowed stylistic devices, including the assignment of speeches to mystical or otherwise otherworldly bodies. Abercrombie's interest in Hardy led to his writing *Thomas Hardy: A Critical Study,* which was published in 1912. Among the features of Hardy's work that Abercrombie admired was the use of various perspectives to achieve a unified whole within a literary work. While he was working on his study of Hardy, Abercrombie was simultaneously writing his next volume of poetry, *Emblems of Love.* Strongly influenced by Hardy's idea of infusing a work with a unifying framework, Abercrombie sought to apply the principle of love as his own unifying framework. Composed mostly of free verse interspersed with couplets, *Emblems of Love* solidified Abercrombie's literary reputation. These fruitful years also proved controversial as Abercrombie found himself under the literary microscope, criticized by radical stylists for being part of the Georgian movement. In reality, Abercrombie's work most closely resembled the modernism of those who criticized him. Despite the criticism, Abercrombie continued writing. He published *Speculative Dialogues* in 1913, a work greatly influenced by the exultant philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. His work also appeared in *New Numbers,* a periodical that Abercrombie contributed to and published beginning in 1914; and *Georgian Poetry,* an anthology to which he contributed poems. In the 1920s Abercrombie focused his poetic energies on two stage plays, *Phoenix* (1923), and *The Deserter* (1927), which earned him moderate success. Two other verse plays, *The Sale of St. Thomas* (1911) and *Deborah* (1913), are among Abercrombie's most critically admired works. Abercrombie also published books based upon lectures he delivered during 1920s. These works include *An Essay towards a Theory of Art* (1922), *The Theory of Poetry* (1924), *The Idea of Great Poetry* (1925), and *Romanticism* (1926).

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

As a writer, Abercrombie found himself immersed in his stylistic tendencies, a predisposition that was not always received positively by scholars. Critics argued that Abercrombie was too intent upon style, often forsaking the deeper meaning of his writing in his efforts to employ stylistic devices. Other reviewers have noted that Abercrombie's theoretical works illuminate not only his intentions in writing his poetry but also the ultimate failure of it.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Interludes and Poems* (poetry) 1908
*Mary and the Bramble* (poetry) 1910
*The Sale of St. Thomas* (play) 1911
*Emblems of Love* (poetry) 1912
*Thomas Hardy: A Critical Study* (criticism) 1912
*The Adder* (play) 1913
*Deborah: A Play in Three Acts* (play) 1913
*Speculative Dialogues* (criticism) 1913
*The End of the World* (play) 1914
*The Epic* (criticism) 1914
*Poetry and Contemporary Speech* (criticism) 1914
*The Staircase* (play) 1920
*An Essay towards a Theory of Art* (criticism) 1922
**Four Short Plays* (plays) 1922
*Phoenix: Tragicomedy in Three Acts* (play) 1923
*Principles of English Prosody* (criticism) 1923
*The Theory of Poetry* (criticism) 1924
*The Idea of Great Poetry* (criticism) 1925
*Romanticism* (criticism) 1926
*The Deserter* (play) 1927
*Twelve Idyls and Other Poems* (poetry) 1928
*The Poems of Lascelles Abercrombie* (poetry) 1930
*The Sale of St. Thomas in Six Acts* (play) 1930
*Lyrics and Unfinished Poems* (poetry) 1940
*The Art of Wordsworth* (criticism) 1952
*A Tower in Italy: A Legend* (play) 1976

*This collection includes the plays *The Adder* (1913), *The End of the World* (1914), *The Staircase* (1920), and *The Deserter* (1927).

## CRITICISM

### Louis Untermeyer (review date 15 June 1913)

SOURCE: Untermeyer, Louis. "*Deborah*: Mr. Abercrombie's Verse Drama of Life among Fisher Folk." *New York Times Book Review* (15 June 1913): 357.

[*In the following review, Untermeyer assesses Abercrombie's verse drama* Deborah *as one of the finest examples in its genre of its day.*]

Just as the critics have proved, to their own satisfaction, that the classics are dead, that restraint and nobility of thought have perished beneath the blows of a savage and incoherent realism, that a sonorous blank-verse drama cannot be written to-day except possibly in slang, Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie is discovered—and smash go all their solemn predictions and glum assurances. Not that Mr. Abercrombie is any less "modern" than his contemporaries—he is often more brutal than Masefield, more direct and incisive than the Abbey Theatre dramatist—he has, in short, all the qualities that make him a product of his times. But there is one thing that distinguishes him from the rest—he is not alone a more intense person, but a far greater writer. This does not mean that his poetry is "literary" or that it will appeal only to the honest seekers after truth who form societies for the discussion of "The Message of So-and-So." Mr. Abercrombie's work is as unliterary, in the special sense, as Synge's; and it carries no more message than Life does. Take up, for example, ***Emblems of Love,*** his previous volume, and one finds a blank verse which, for color and richness, compares favorably with the best. It is full of a fine carelessness, a rich unconcern, that gives force and a fiery dignity to his utterance. Here are a few lines from **"Vashti"**:

> Given thy flesh, the meaning of thy shape!
> What beauty is there, but thou makest it?
> How is earth good to look on, woods and fields,
> The season's garden, and the courageous hills—
> All this green raft of earth moored in the seas?
> The manner of the sun to ride the air;
> The stars God has imaged for the night?
> Where do these get their beauty from—all these?
> They do but glaze a lantern lit for man
> And woman's beauty is the flame therein.

This is by no means an exceptional passage—Mr. Abercrombie's work is not a loose quilt of rambling pattern with occasional "purple patches"—and it is this very free and even language that makes it difficult to quote. It is almost impossible to take an illustrative passage out of his dramatic interlude, ***The Sale of St. Thomas,*** or a couplet from the brief but exquisite ***Mary and the Bramble.*** Here, as in his earliest volume, ***Interludes and Poems,*** one feels an attitude none the less reverential because it is not narrowly religious. Mr. Abercrombie treats his religion symbolically; he has taken Christian legend and retold it eloquently—and always in the most telling and artistic way—as myth. And it is as myths, in the highest sense, that the artist must use them. For the supreme quality of the world's great legends is that they are weak and contradictory when taken literally; thrilling and convincing, profoundly religious and profoundly true, when taken mythologically and symbolically.

In ***Deborah,*** his latest volume, the symbolism is more apparent and more human. In fact, it is so apparent that the casual reader, concerned with the purely narrative content, is apt to miss it altogether. The scene is laid in a fishing and pilot village on a great estuary; the background is gray water and gray sky. With the exception of a dozen words spoken by a visiting doctor, all the conversation is given to half a dozen uneducated and uncultured men and women. And yet, or rather because of this, how rich the language is!

It was Mr. Synge who said:

> In the modern literature of towns, richness is found only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are far away from the profound and common interests of life. . . . In a good play every speech should be as fully flavored as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by any one who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry.

Mr. Abercrombie's fisher-folk and Mr. Synge's peasants, though they are as unlike as wine and fire, have this in common—their speech is full of a wild and vigorous poetry. In the matter of atmosphere and coloring ***Deborah*** puts one in mind of Synge, particularly in his "Riders to the Sea." But in the latter the sea was the tragic and invisible actor; in ***Deborah*** it is love that is the fierce and fatal protagonist. Love, in the dual rôle of sweetheart and mother, enters the gray world of these folk and sets it blazing with passionate joy and passionate hatred. And it is love that burns out and leaves them in a blackness greater than ever. Mr. Abercrombie has never written anything more tense and terrible than the third act of this play. At its very opening one is shaken and held by such lines as:

> The wind comes out of the open marsh a spirit
> Raving to find naught, all those empty miles,
> To throw itself against, and feeling only
> Its own rage in the air. But when it lights
> Upon these walls, then there's glee in the wind,
> And a din aloft like devils blowing trumpets;
> And then 'twill fall to hissing 'round the eaves
> And fumbling at the thatch for a way in;
> While seemingly, for a blood-beat or two,
> Half of the gale crouches a short way off;
> And then a hundred beasts of wind leap howling,
> And pounce upon the roof with worrying paws,
> And roar to feel the walls not shaken down.

To miss reading ***Deborah*** is to miss the most spontaneous and intense tragedy of our days. And to miss Lascelles Abercrombie is to miss one who reflects much of the spirit of the age.

**Mary C. Sturgeon (essay date 1916)**

SOURCE: Sturgeon, Mary C. "Lascelles Abercrombie." In *Studies of Contemporary Poets,* pp. 11-35. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1916.

[*In the following excerpt, Sturgeon examines the ways in which Abercrombie's poetry represents the age in which it was written.*]

In the sweet chorus of modern poetry one may hear a strange new harmony. It is the life of our time, evoking its own music: constraining the poetic spirit to utter its own message. The peculiar beauty of contemporary poetry, with its fresh and varied charm, grows from that; and in that, too, its vitality is assured. Its art has the deep sanction of loyalty: its loyalty draws inspiration from the living source.

There is a fair company of these new singers; and it would seem that there should be large hope for a generation, whether in its life or letters, which can find such expression. Listening carefully, however, some notes ring clearer, stronger, or more significant than others; and of these the voice of Mr Abercrombie appears to carry the fullest utterance. It is therefore a happy chance that the name which stands first here, under a quite arbitrary arrangement, has a natural right to be put at the head of a group of the younger moderns.

But that is not an implicit denial to those others of fidelity to their time. It is a question of degree and of range. Every poet in this band will be found to represent some aspect of our complex life—its awakened social conscience or its frank joy in the world of sense: its mysticism or its repudiation of dogma, in art as in religion: its mistrust of materialism or keen perception of reality: its worship of the future, or assimilation of the heritage of the past to its own ideals: its lyrical delight in life or dramatic re-creation of it: its insistence upon the essential poetry of common things, or its discovery of rare new values in experience and expression.

This poetry frequently catches one or another of those elements, and crystallizes it out of a mere welter into definite form and recognizable beauty. But the claim for Mr Abercrombie is that he has drawn upon them more largely: that he has made a wider synthesis: that his work has a unity more comprehensive and complete. It is in virtue of this that he may be said to represent his age so fully; but that is neither to accuse him of shouting with the crowd, nor to lay on the man in the street the burden of the poet's idealism. He is, indeed, in a deeper sense than politics could make him, a democrat: perhaps that inheres in the poetic temperament under its shyness. But intellectuality and vision, a keen spirit and a sensuous equipment at once delicate and bountiful, are not to be leashed to the common pace. That is a truism, of course: so often it seems the destiny of the poet to be at one with the people and yet above them. But it needs repetition here, because it applies with unusual force. This is a poet whose instinct binds him inescapably to his kind, even when his intellect is soaring where it is sometimes hard to follow.

One is right, perhaps, in believing that this affinity with his time is instinctive, for it reveals itself in many ways, subtler or more obvious, through all his work. As forthright avowal it naturally occurs most in his earlier poems. There is, for example, the humanitarianism of the fine **"Indignation"** ode in his first volume, called ***Interludes and Poems.*** This is an invocation of righteous anger against the deplorable conditions of the workers' lives. A fierce impulse drives through the ode, in music that is sometimes troubled by its own vehemence.

> Wilt thou not come again, thou godly sword,
> Into the Spirit's hands?
> . . . . .
> Against our ugly wickedness,
> Against our wanton dealing of distress,
> The forced defilement of humanity,
> . . . . .
> And shall there be no end to life's expense
> In mills and yards and factories,
> With no more recompense
> Than sleep in warrens and low styes,
> And undelighted food?
> Shall still our ravenous and unhandsome mood
> Make men poor and keep them poor?—

In the same volume there is a passage which may be said to present the obverse of this idea. It occurs in an interlude called **"An Escape,"** and is only incidental to the main theme, which is much more abstract than that of the ode. A young poet, Idwal, has withdrawn from the society of his friends, to meditate about life among the hills. All the winter long he has kept in solitude, his spirit seeking for mastery over material things. As the spring dawns he is on the verge of triumph, and the soul is about to put off for ever its veil of sense, when news reaches him from the outer world. His little house, from which he has been absent so long, has been broken into, and robbed, by a tramp. The friend who comes to tell about it ends his tale by a word of sympathy—"I'm sorry for you"—and Idwal replies:

> It's sorry I am for that perverted tramp,
> As having gone from being the earth's friend,

> Whom she would have at all her private treats.
> Now with the foolery called possession he
> Has dirtied his own freedom, cozen'd all
> His hearing with the lies of ownership.
> The earth may call to him in vain henceforth,
> He's got a step-dame now, his Goods. . . .

Evidence less direct but equally strong is visible in the later work. It lies at the root of the tragedy of ***Deborah,*** a heroine drawn from fisher-folk, who in the extremity of fear for her lover's life cries:

> O but my heart is dying in me, waiting:
> . . . . .
>
> For us, with lives so hazardous, to love
> Is like a poor girl's game of being a queen.

And it is found again, gathering materials for the play called ***The End of the World*** out of the lives of poor and simple people. Here the impulse is clear enough, but sometimes it takes a subtler form, and then it occasionally betrays the poet into a solecism. For his sense of the unity of the race is so strong that natural distinctions sometimes go the way of artificial ones. He has so completely identified himself with humanity, and for preference with the lowly in mind and estate, that he has not seldom endowed a humble personality with his own large gifts. Thus you find Deborah using this magnificent plea for her sweetheart's life:

> . . . there's something sacred about lovers.
> . . . . .
>
> For there is wondrous more than the joy of life
> In lovers; there's in them God Himself
> Taking great joy to love the life He made:
> We are God's desires more than our own, we lovers,
> You dare not injure God!

Thus, too, a working wainwright suddenly startled into consciousness of the purpose of the life-force muses:

> Why was I like a man sworn to a thing
> Working to have my wains in every curve,
> Ay, every tenon, right and as they should be?
> Not for myself, not even for those wains:
> But to keep in me living at its best
> The skill that must go forward and shape the world,
> Helping it on to make some masterpiece.

And with the same largesse a fiddling vagabond, old and blind, thief, liar, and seducer, is made to utter a lyric ecstasy on the words which are the poet's instrument:

> Words: they are messengers from out God's heart
> Intimate with him; through his deed they go,
> This passion of him called the world, approving
> All of fierce gladness in it, bidding leap
> To a yet higher rapture ere it sink.
> . . . There be
> Who hold words made of thought. But as stars slide
> Through air, so words, bright aliens, slide through thought,
> Leaving a kindled way.

Now, since Synge has shown us that the poetry in the peasant heart does utter itself spontaneously, in fitting language, we must be careful how we deny, even to these peasants who are not Celts, a natural power of poetic expression. But there is a difference. That spontaneous poetry of simple folk which is caught for us in *The Playboy of the Western World* or *The Well of the Saints,* is generally a lyric utterance springing directly out of emotion. It is not, as here, the result of a mental process, operating amongst ideas and based on knowledge which the peasant is unlikely to possess. One may be justified, therefore, in a show of protest at the incongruity; we feel that such people do not talk like that. The poet has transferred to them too much of his own intellectuality. Yet it will probably be a feeble protest, proportionate to the degree that we are disturbed by it, which is practically not at all. For as these people speak, we are convinced of their reality: they live and move before us. And when we consider their complete and robust individuality, it would appear that the poet's method is vindicated by the dramatic force of the presentment. It needs no other vindication, and is no doubt a reasoned process. For Mr Abercrombie makes no line of separation between thought and emotion; and having entered by imagination into the hearts of his people, he might claim to be merely interpreting them—making conscious and vocal that which was already in existence there, however obscurely. There is a hint of this at a point in ***The End of the World*** where one of the men says that he had *felt* a certain thought go through his mind—"though 'twas a thing of such a flight I could not read its colour." And in this way Deborah, being a human soul of full stature, sound of mind and body and all her being flooded with emotion, would be capable of feeling the complex thought attributed to her, even if no single strand of its texture had ever been clear in her mind. While as to the fiddling lyrist, rogue and poet, one sees no reason why the whole argument should not be closed by a gesture in the direction of Heine or Villon.

We turn now to the content of thought in Mr Abercrombie's poetry—an aspect of his genius to be approached with diffidence by a writer conscious of limitations. For though we believed we saw that his affinity with the democratic spirit of his age is instinctive, deeply rooted and persistent, his genius is by no means ruled by instinct. It is intellectual to an extreme degree, moving easily in abstract thought and apparently trained in philosophic speculation. Indeed, his speculative tendency had gone as far as appeared to be legitimate in poetry, when he wisely chose another medium for it in the volume of prose ***Dialogues*** published in 1913.



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