

# Dictionary of Literary Biography

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Volume 27:  
Poets of  
Great Britain  
and Ireland,  
1945-1960

Dictionary of Literary Biography • Volume Twenty-seven

# Poets of Great Britain and Ireland, 1945-1960

Edited by  
Vincent B. Sherry, Jr.  
*Villanova University*

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## Plan of the Series

... Almost the most prodigious asset of a country, and perhaps its most precious possession, is its native literary product—when that product is fine and noble and enduring.

Mark Twain\*

The advisory board, the editors, and the publisher of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* are joined in endorsing Mark Twain's declaration. The literature of a nation provides an inexhaustible resource of permanent worth. It is our expectation that this endeavor will make literature and its creators better understood and more accessible to students and the literate public, while satisfying the standards of teachers and scholars.

To meet these requirements, *literary biography* has been construed in terms of the author's achievement. The most important thing about a writer is his writing. Accordingly, the entries in *DLB* are career biographies, tracing the development of the author's canon and the evolution of his reputation.

The publication plan for *DLB* resulted from two years of preparation. The project was proposed to Bruccoli Clark by Frederick G. Ruffner, president of the Gale Research Company, in November 1975. After specimen entries were prepared and typeset, an advisory board was formed to refine the entry format and develop the series rationale. In meetings held during 1976, the publisher, series editors, and advisory board approved the scheme for a comprehensive biographical dictionary of persons who contributed to North American literature. Editorial work on the first volume began in January 1977, and it was published in 1978.

In order to make *DLB* more than a reference tool and to compile volumes that individually have claim to status as literary history, it was decided to organize volumes by topic or period or genre. Each of these freestanding volumes provides a biographical-bibliographical guide and overview for a particular area of literature. We are convinced that this organization—as opposed to a single alphabet method—constitutes a valuable innovation in the presentation of reference material. The volume plan necessarily requires many decisions for the

placement and treatment of authors who might properly be included in two or three volumes. In some instances a major figure will be included in separate volumes, but with different entries emphasizing the aspect of his career appropriate to each volume. Ernest Hemingway, for example, is represented in *American Writers in Paris, 1920-1939* by an entry focusing on his expatriate apprenticeship; he is also in *American Novelists, 1910-1945* with an entry surveying his entire career. Each volume includes a cumulative index of subject authors. The final *DLB* volume will be a comprehensive index to the entire series.

With volume ten in 1982 it was decided to enlarge the scope of *DLB* beyond the literature of the United States. By the end of 1983 twelve volumes treating British literature had been published, and volumes for Commonwealth and Modern European literature were in progress. The series has been further augmented by the *DLB Yearbooks* (since 1981) which update published entries and add new entries to keep the *DLB* current with contemporary activity. There have also been occasional *DLB Documentary Series* volumes which provide biographical and critical background source materials for figures whose work is judged to have particular interest for students. One of these companion volumes is entirely devoted to Tennessee Williams.

The purpose of *DLB* is not only to provide reliable information in a convenient format but also to place the figures in the larger perspective of literary history and to offer appraisals of their accomplishments by qualified scholars.

We define literature as the *intellectual commerce of a nation*: not merely as belles lettres, but as that ample and complex process by which ideas are generated, shaped, and transmitted. *DLB* entries are not limited to "creative writers" but extend to other figures who in this time and in this way influenced the mind of the people. Thus the series encompasses historians, journalists, publishers, and screenwriters. By this means readers of *DLB* may be aided to perceive literature not as cult scripture in the keeping of cultural high priests, but as at the center of a nation's life.

*DLB* includes the major writers appropriate to each volume and those standing in the ranks immediately behind them. Scholarly and critical counsel has been sought in deciding which minor figures to include and how full their entries should be.

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Wherever possible, useful references will be made to figures who do not warrant separate entries.

Each *DLB* volume has a volume editor responsible for planning the volume, selecting the figures for inclusion, and assigning the entries. Volume editors are also responsible for preparing, where appropriate, appendices surveying the major periodicals and literary and intellectual movements for their volumes, as well as lists of further readings. Work on the series as a whole is coordinated at the Brucoli Clark editorial center in Columbia, South Carolina, where the editorial staff is responsible for the accuracy of the published volumes.

One feature that distinguishes *DLB* is the illustration policy—its concern with the iconography of literature. Just as an author is influenced by his surroundings, so is the reader's understanding of the author enhanced by a knowledge of his environment. Therefore *DLB* volumes include not only drawings, paintings, and photographs of authors, often depicting them at various stages in their careers, but also illustrations of their families and places where they lived. Title pages are regularly reproduced in facsimile along with dust jackets for modern authors. The dust jackets are a special fea-

ture of *DLB* because they often document better than anything else the way in which an author's work was launched in its own time. Specimens of the writers' manuscripts are included when feasible.

A supplement to *DLB*—tentatively titled *A Guide, Chronology, and Glossary for American Literature*—will outline the history of literature in North America and trace the influences that shaped it. This volume will provide a framework for the study of American literature by means of chronological tables, literary affiliation charts, glossarial entries, and concise surveys of the major movements. It has been planned to stand on its own as a vade mecum, providing a ready-reference guide to the study of American literature as well as a companion to the *DLB* volumes for American literature.

Samuel Johnson rightly decreed that "The chief glory of every people arises from its authors." The purpose of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* is to compile literary history in the surest way available to us—by accurate and comprehensive treatment of the lives and work of those who contributed to it.

The *DLB* Advisory Board

## Foreword

The fifteen years following World War II is now an identifiable period in the history of modern British poetry. At its center is the group of poets known as The Movement, which emerged in the mid-1950s. Conservative and formalist in practice, neoclassical in outlook, these poets were reacting against the romantic writers of the "New Apocalypse" in the 1940s, while their normative attitudes created the opposition of the Mavericks in the 1950s. All three groups produced anthologies with polemical prefaces, which express, all in all, the concerns recurring to many of the poets who found these years a first flourishing period. Thus the 1940s and 1950s reveal a lively variety of tastes and allegiances among poets. In an important sense, too, the war preceded and provided for these literary groupings.

Writing in the face of global ideological war, poets of the New Apocalypse shunned the political commentary of many 1930s writers. Assaulted by the physical experience of war, seeking to reach an equal level of emotionally and sensually charged awareness, they exaggerated the mannerisms of earlier romantics such as Dylan Thomas. Thus G. S. Fraser insisted, in his introduction to *The White Horseman: prose and verse of the new apocalypse* (1941), that the poet was no ideologue but an imaginative mythmaker. To fulfill this role, the poet should shift his source of energy and force a tap into the subconscious mind. Unlike some surrealists of the 1920s, however, Fraser stressed the need to control the arbitrary imagery of the dream flow through intellect and will. Will can allow rhetoric to do the work of the imagination, Yeats had cautioned, and most verse of the New Apocalypse seems even more forced than obscure. Norman MacCaig and Vernon Scannell would later repudiate the poetry they wrote under this influence, while Edwin Morgan soon parodied the practices he had followed. Nonetheless, the New Apocalypse remained an influential force, continuing to generate discipleship and reaction into the 1950s.

This reaction found its chief expression in the introduction to Robert Conquest's anthology of Movement poets, *New Lines* (1956), including work by Conquest, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, D. J. Enright, Thom Gunn, John Holloway, Elizabeth Jennings, Philip Larkin, and John Wain. The most typical and obvious sign of Conquest's reactionary

stance is his tendency, in assessing the common qualities of his writers, to define by negatives. Thus the poets shared "a negative determination to avoid bad principles." Such principles were notions related to "great systems of theoretical constructs" and "unconscious commands," terms hinting at the political and literary excesses of the 1940s. Along the same lines, Kingsley Amis, writing a Fabian tract on romanticism, would associate the ideological extremism of the recent war with the emotional and imaginative excesses of romanticism, which could lead one, he suggested, to believe in causes that are not one's own, that are not subject to the approval of the individual's reason.

If poets in The Movement were cynical, in Conquest's words, about the "collapse of public taste" in the previous decade, they were also attempting to regenerate the sensibility. A new humanism stressed the value of individual intelligence, the power of reason to check and guide the emotions, the use of traditional forms as a means of control. Paradoxically, though, control most became a problem when there was too little to be controlled. A certain hollowness, a drably mechanical quality, lingers in some poets' attempts to revive traditional verse forms. Davie most frequently attained the intelligent lucidity and classical economy the others sought. His literary criticism, moreover, most notably his *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952) and *Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (1955), served as a touchstone for most poets in The Movement. Davie rejected the work of most modernists, who had dislocated syntax to accommodate their hard images and imaginative leaps, and reclaimed a conventional prose syntax for rational statements in verse. This emphasis moved, in practice, in two directions, toward two models. The native, plain speech of Thomas Hardy appealed to Davie and Larkin as an idiom for clear discourse. Wain, and Davie occasionally, handled a more sententious kind of statement, the witty cerebrations of William Empson, but other poets found it easier to imitate Empson's stylistic mannerisms than to capture his elusive intelligence.

That a number of poets in The Movement were also novelists helps to explain their capacity for anecdotal narrative, their attention to concrete setting and realistic characters, and their aptitude for social observation in verse. Thus Amis could write

poetic miniatures of social comedies such as *Lucky Jim*. Enright found scenes for many poems among the working classes, whom he described sometimes in comic but never in patronizing tones. Larkin's much-anthologized "Mr. Bleaney" typifies The Movement poet's observation of character from the outside, through the details of Bleaney's room, while his "Church-going" expresses the empiricist's skepticism about matters of religion and myth. This element of imaginative shyness in some Movement poetry, however, became a target for critics. The *TLS* reviewer of *New Lines* disliked the "fear of the irrational," a sensibility at odds with "the deepest springs of poetry."

This critic seems to have reacted to the categorical principles of the introduction, not to actual poems. In fact, the backgrounds and tastes of the poets were more pluralistic, their practices more varied, than is commonly recognized even now. Larkin, after all, had passed through a Yeatsian phase in the years of the New Apocalypse. Wain was capable of admiring Dylan Thomas's *Collected Poems* even while he deplored the excesses of romanticism. Elizabeth Jennings, who shared the other poets' dislike for mystification, could preserve a deep religiousness in her poems. Thom Gunn, as the poet most conspicuously different from others in the group, also shows the range of variation within its central concerns. The emphasis on control through poetic form and wit reaches a kind of savage intensity in some of his early poems, and reveals a disturbing parallel in the experience of power through psychological domination. Other poets were sometimes critical, moreover, of those central values of restraint, reason, and form. Davie's "Limited Achievement," for example, might be read as a critique of restrained poetry in particular, programmatic confinement in general.

More eclectic than narrowly programmatic, The Movement could have included a number of other poets not featured in Conquest's anthology. These writers seemed to be extending, in various ways, the general reaction against the excesses of the 1940s. Thus Charles Causley progressed through the 1950s to the tightly formal structures of his mature work; he emphasized increasingly the value of graceful simplicity, while the essential conservatism of The Movement shows in his restoration of the ballad form. Similarly, C. H. Sisson apprenticed himself to the classical authors he was translating, attempting to develop for his own poetry a manner of elegant plainness. Anne Ridler evolved a metaphysical style whose forceful clarity seems related not so much to seventeenth-century models as

to the standards of The Movement. Thomas Kinsella committed himself to the forming and ordering power of verse, and so moved into alignment with poets who were, as the *TLS* reviewer of *New Lines* had put it, "makers rather than bards." Similarly, in the face of religious divisions in Northern Ireland, John Hewitt resembles Movement poets in preferring individual reason over group compulsions, and expresses his medial stance in politics through deliberated, thoughtful cadences. The most striking case of a poet developing in step with The Movement, and with literary history, is Norman MacCaig, who appeared in *The White Horseman*, then abjured those surrealistic excesses and engaged in his "long haul to lucidity" through the 1950s and 1960s.

Reaction against The Movement came so quickly—*Mavericks* (1957), edited by Dannie Abse and Howard Sergeant—that it seemed merely a reflex action, venting resentment at exclusion rather than expressing a considered poetic stance. But Abse, exchanging letters with Sergeant to introduce their collection, goes beyond cynicism; he sustains a coherent argument for specific qualities in poetry. While he does not deny the importance of discipline and form and stylistic finish, he questions the neat formulas of Movement poets, and challenges a flat, empirical, merely referential character in their language. Not a tool of reference, the poetic word might be a unit of resonance; not a window on a world that is already there, but a medium for conjuring what is possible to imagination. He aimed thus at recovering that "mysterious, permanent element in poetry that irradiates and moves us and endures down the centuries"—phrases that hint at his link with the romantic and apocalyptic poets of the previous decade.

Since a school of mavericks is a contradiction in terms, these writers might be expected to vary considerably in practice from Abse's precepts. Nonetheless, the most important poets in the collection conformed in different ways to his principles. Abse's own poems could open easily, empirically, then reverse their perspectives, provide surprises that evoke the mystery behind the matter. Jon Silkin cultivated the oracular voice of the prophet, and joined the vatic privilege, at various levels of effectiveness, with urgently personal and political concerns. Michael Hamburger's early work reveals some parallels with Yeats, whose aesthetic ideals and symbolist principles help to produce a poetry of formal perfection and mysterious power.

Other poets, likewise opposed to the apparent clarities of The Movement, used symbolist techniques and mythic or religious subjects. John

Heath-Stubbs, who was associated with the romantics in the 1940s, developed Celtic and Mediterranean myths as poetic material, and absorbed some of the techniques of French symbolism through his translations. Norse myths joined with Catholicism to provide the imaginative medium for George Mackay Brown, an isolated and rather eccentric figure, who sought to recover in verse the enchantment of ancient legends. More facile, the early poetry of James Kirkup indulged in automatic writing to release the mythic and archetypal patterns of the imagination, though, like MacCaig, he tempered the excesses in late volumes. *Patmos and Other Poems* (1955) linked Robin Skelton to the apocalyptic prophet John of Patmos, and to the New Apocalyptic writers of the 1940s, while a Jungian influence led him to the subconscious in search of archetypal configurations. Thomas Blackburn's poetry could move through Yeatsian incantations toward a type of visionary religious experience, while his incipient madness gives the verse its peculiar intensity. Jack Clemo's physical handicaps largely confined his awareness to his native landscapes of Cornwall and the religious indoctrination from his mother, but his symbolist techniques and Calvinist preoccupations joined him with these other poets in the 1950s.

Various regional and Celtic in their affinities, a number of poets ranged far from the central, normative, up-to-date, "BBC" tones of The Movement. Local, ancient, rooted, the culture of the south Cumberland coast provided much of the substance of Norman Nicholson's poetry, while his verse dramas display patterns of primitive ritual still limned in the folk life. R. S. Thomas, finest of the Welsh poets, focuses in detail on the landscapes, customs, and peculiar temperaments of his rural parishioners. Unsentimental, unidealized in view, Thomas's poems show, in their strong accentual beat and shapely cadences, a quality of tough, proud craftsmanship, characteristic of the countryman. Roland Mathias has used the cultural history of Wales imaginatively as a poet, and promoted it as an editor, while Leslie Norris and John Ormond have followed in the tradition of Welsh lyricism. Hugh MacDiarmid's earlier achievements with the Scots dialect helped Tom Scott and Sydney Goodsir Smith to reclaim it for their poetry. The musical density of Scots, the knotty particularity of

its words, seemed to limit its scope, however, to lyric and descriptive verse.

A separate line of dissent from The Movement appears in the work of Edwin Morgan: experiments with open form, combining the projective verse of the American Black Mountain poets with concrete and phonic poetry. Morgan's pyrotechnical flair also harkened back to the modernists, who provided a point of reference for poets at odds with the conservative mainstream. Thus Christopher Logue followed the lead of Pound in his creative remakings of classical literature, while his resistance to established tastes led him into the counterculture of pop poetry, play- and poster-poems in the 1960s.

Many poets included in this volume of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* continued to refine their practices in subsequent decades, and some would significantly alter their styles. Nonetheless, the historical situation and critical debates of the 1940s and 1950s shaped alternatives for developing talents, and so exerted a formative influence on many careers. The most important force, The Movement, helped to launch at least three of the major poets in the period: Davie, Gunn, and Larkin. Kinsella is also a superior talent, while the achievements of Hamburger, Silkin, and R. S. Thomas will probably gain greater recognition. It is fair to say, however, that few poets dealt directly and intelligently with the chief historical influence on them, the atrocities of World War II. (Henry Reed's verse is a notable exception.) The approach of the New Apocalypse to war was obviously compulsive and sensationalist, but the attitudes and practices of The Movement remained defensive and reactionary. Keith Douglas, killed late in the war, had written poems penetrating to the intellectual and emotional paradoxes of combat. Largely disregarded for his imaginative daring by Movement poets in the 1950s, he would draw the admiration of such poets as Geoffrey Hill, Ted Hughes, and Charles Tomlinson, who began publishing in that decade, but who belong temperamentally to the next generation. Continuing to develop at odds with the standards of The Movement, these and other poets were also responding to new pressures, and will be included in the forthcoming *DLB* volume *Poets of Great Britain and Ireland Since 1960*.

—Vincent B. Sherry, Jr.



# Acknowledgments

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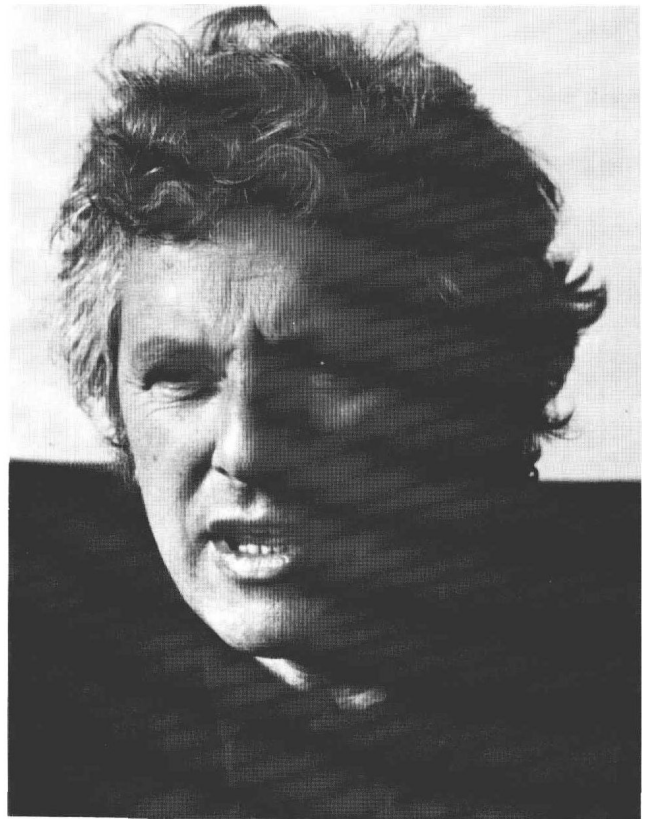
## Dannie Abse

(22 September 1923- )

Daniel Hoffman

University of Pennsylvania

**SELECTED BOOKS:** *After Every Green Thing* (London: Hutchinson, 1948);  
*Walking Under Water* (London: Hutchinson, 1952);  
*Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* (London: Hutchinson, 1954; New York: Criterion, 1954);  
*Some Corner of an English Field* (London: Hutchinson, 1956; New York: Criterion, 1956);  
*Fire in Heaven* (London: Hutchinson, 1956);  
*Tenants of the House* (London: Hutchinson, 1957; New York: Criterion, 1958);  
*The Eccentric* (London: Evans, 1961);  
*Poems, Golders Green* (London: Hutchinson, 1962);  
*Dannie Abse* (London: Vista Books, 1963);  
*Three Questor Plays* (Lowestoft, Suffolk: Scorpion Press, 1967)—includes *House of Cowards*, *Gone*, and *In the Cage*;  
*Medicine on Trial* (London: Aldus, 1968; New York: Crown, 1969);  
*A Small Desperation* (London: Hutchinson, 1968);  
*Demo* (Frensham, Surrey: Sceptre Press, 1969);  
*O Jones, O Jones* (London: Hutchinson, 1970);  
*Selected Poems* (London: Hutchinson, 1970; New York: Oxford University Press, 1970);  
*The Dogs of Pavlov* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1973);  
*Funland and Other Poems* (London: Hutchinson, 1973; New York: Oxford University Press, 1973);  
*A Poet in the Family* (London: Hutchinson, 1974);  
*Collected Poems 1948-1976* (London: Hutchinson, 1977; Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977);  
*Pythagoras* (London: Hutchinson, 1979);  
*Way Out in the Centre* (London: Hutchinson, 1981);  
*Miscellany One* (Bridgend, Mid Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press, 1981);



*Dannie Abse*

*A Strong Dose of Myself* (London: Hutchinson, 1982);  
*One-Legged on Ice* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983).

**OTHER:** *Mavericks*, edited by Abse and Howard

Sergeant (London: Editions Poetry & Poverty, 1957);

*Modern European Verse*, edited by Abse (London: Vista Books, 1964);

*Corgi Modern Poets in Focus*, volumes 1, 3, and 5, edited by Abse (London: Corgi, 1971, 1971, 1973);

*Poetry Dimension 2-7*, edited by Abse (London: Robson, 1974-1980);

*My Medical School*, edited by Abse (London: Robson, 1978).

"Way out in the center," the title of his 1981 volume of poems, is how Dannie Abse situates his own work in relation to that of his contemporaries. In a series of six annual anthologies of poetry and criticism (*Poetry Dimension 2-7*, 1974-1980) he has acknowledged by the catholicity of his taste the "variousness and lucidity" of British poetry. On a map of the territory that ranges from the romantic primitivism of Ted Hughes to the modernist sophistication of Charles Tomlinson, from the chthonic depths of Geoffrey Hill to the plangent ironies of Philip Larkin, Dannie Abse occupies an identifiable place, at once in the central British tradition of poetry as a social act of communication and yet "way out" at a distance from the work of his principal fellow poets. Introducing his *Collected Poems* (1977), he says that his ambition is "to write poems which appear translucent but are in fact deceptions. I would have a reader enter them, be deceived he could see through them like sea-water, and be puzzled when he can not quite touch the bottom." Further, he would "wish to look upon the world with the eyes of a perpetual convalescent." Among his abiding themes is the relationship, in art and in belief, between truth and illusion; and as for being "a perpetual convalescent," the phrase implies Abse's openness to experience, his humanistic optimism. For this "convalescent" is in fact a medical doctor whose experience of life, sickness, and death informs his poetry. He well knows the limits of the doctor's art; yet "convalescence" suggests the possibility of recovery from the ills of life. For Abse such recovery, such redemptive knowledge, comes from the poet's insight into what the doctor cannot see. The claims and attitudes to experience of the physician and those of the poet are among the dichotomies whose tensions give Abse's work its interest and its power.

Abse was born to Kate Shepherd and Rudolf Abse on 22 September 1923 in Cardiff, Wales. His father part owned and operated several motion-picture theaters in the Welsh valleys. Abse attended

St. Illtyd's College, Cardiff (1935-1941; matriculation, 1940), and the University of South Wales and Monmouthshire (1941-1942). He received his medical training at King's College, London (1942-1944), and Westminster Hospital (1944-1947 and 1949-1950), and is a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and a Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians.

During postwar service as a squadron leader in the R.A.F. (1951-1955), Dr. Abse was posted to a military chest clinic near Middlesex Hospital in London. He has remained on its staff as a civilian chest specialist. He married Joan Mercer in 1951; they have three children and live in the London suburb of Golders Green. Abse's first book of verse, *After Every Green Thing* (1948), appeared when he was twenty-five and in medical school. Since then he has published eleven volumes of poems, three novels, and eight plays. Along the way he also edited a little magazine, and wrote a survey of British medicine (*Medicine on Trial*, 1968), an autobiography (*A Poet in the Family*, 1974), and a collection of essays (*A Strong Dose of Myself*, 1982). He was given the Charles Henry Foyle New Play Award in 1960 for *House of Cowards* (published in *Three Questor Plays*, 1967) and received a Welsh Council Award in 1971. Abse is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 1973-1974 he was Poet in Residence at Princeton University, and he frequently visits the United States.

Although Abse's parents were financially insecure in the 1930s, one brother and several relatives went on to become physicians, and his other brother, Leo, became a prominent Labour M.P. "There were few poetry books in the house," but young Abse "was exposed to the adult dialogue of the thirties . . . between Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx," as "interpreted and argued by my two elder brothers." Abse was attracted to John Lehmann and Stephen Spender's anthology, *Poems for Spain* (1939), where he first found "poets whose adult moral concerns and protestations engaged my own wrath and imagination. Their voices had a passionate immediacy and their language was fresh, of the twentieth century." Abse's own writings are consistently focused on "moral concerns." From 1949 to 1954 he edited a desultory little magazine entitled *Poetry and Poverty*. His play *The Dogs of Pavlov*, based upon experiments by the psychologist Stanley Milgram, explores "how men would obey commands that were in strong conflict with their conscience," and thus grapples with what Hannah Arendt, referring to the Holocaust, called "the banality of evil." Abse's poems, though not usually political, address

responsibility to others and to oneself. The subtitle of Joan Abse's biography, *John Ruskin*, can as well apply to her husband: *The Passionate Moralist*.

Publishing his *Collected Poems* in 1977, Abse reached no farther back than 1948; nothing appears from his first book, which he has dismissed as "apprentice work," in the vein of "the then fashionable neo-romantic school," with diction "too florid and approximate," "themes too arcane, too private," and the "unpremeditated influences . . . of Dylan Thomas and Rainer Maria Rilke." In *Walking Under Water* (1952) Abse moved away from such joint-stock lyricism toward a more individual diction, attempting in time to avoid both the stridency of political verse ("A voice shouting . . . becomes the raised voice of anonymous humanity") and the opposite anonymity of "pure song" that "has no particular voice in it." "In the 1950s, I still wished to tell it slant and tell it eloquently . . . not conversationally, flatly, but with my voice not too far away from song." At this time Abse identified the Dionysian element in poetry—his own, and poetry generally—with the romanticism he was soon to modify.

The principal movement of British poetry in the 1950s was the one which modestly accepted the designation The Movement, defined by Robert Conquest in his introduction to the anthology *New Lines* in 1956. Here nine disparate poets (among them Philip Larkin, Donald Davie, D. J. Enright, Thom Gunn, and John Wain) were said to share a common aesthetic, free from the arbitrary claims of "great systems," "theoretical constructs," and "unconscious commands." Tied down by neither "mystical" nor "logical compulsions," this new British poetry, "like modern philosophy—is empirical in its attitude." A quarter-century later this aesthetic looks like merely a continuation of the commonsensical English lyrical tradition of Hardy and Graves, but at the time *New Lines* stirred up considerable controversy, in which Dannie Abse played a part. Together with Howard Sergeant, Abse mounted a rival anthology, *Mavericks* (1957), protesting that The Movement poets "distrust the image and seem to fear primary Dionysian excitement," as though "afraid of the mystery conversing with the mystery." Accordingly Abse and Sergeant present their rival nine (including Michael Hamburger, Jon Silkin, Vernon Scannell, South African poet David Wright, and Abse). Neither the *Mavericks* nor The Movement was really a movement, each of the poets going his own way subsequently. But *New Lines* did dramatize the repudiation by some of Britain's leading poets of the grandiloquence of wartime

poetry and the rhetorical indulgences of Edith Sitwell and Dylan Thomas, and so reflected their sense of the shrunken possibilities of life in postwar Britain. For Abse, however, the Dionysian element of poetry, as of life, resists the drabness of the quotidian. His own poetry would continue to seek it, though the tone, the style in which he expressed "the mystery conversing with the mystery," would soon become less rhetorical, more a conversational voice of unmistakable individuality.

That Abse was torn between the Dionysian and the drab quotidian is inferable from *Tenants of the House* (1957), with its title's allusion to the "dry thoughts in a dry season" of T. S. Eliot's "Gerontion." In "Poem of celebration" Abse writes, "This world confirms my senses. // Swaying and drunk with seeing / the near magnificence of things, / I cry out a doxology," a passage he might have written ten years later but for that last word, and goes on to affirm,

How else may I give thanks, give praise,  
but to trap a visible poem  
in the invisible cage and leave it there?  
Look. I'm back again to where you are.  
I came through a hole in the air.

At this time, as he recalls, he devised "markedly rhythmical structures which progressed as an allegorical or symbolic narrative." These "parable poems" include two of his most successful on overtly political themes: "New Babylons" deals with the pressures of conformity, while "Emperors of the island" is a "political parable" on the lust for power. The parable structure is universalized in "The race," an allegory in which Past, Present, and Future contend in a fated confusion of identities. The balladlike couplets of "The trial" trace the permutations of guilt and identity, the fate of the man whose self is his mask: "I must seek my own face, find my own grave." The theme is explored in "Leaving Cardiff," as the poet, departing from his boyhood home, muses, "Not for one second, I know, / can I be the same man twice." It is elaborated in "Duality"—"Now, now, I hang these masks on the wall. / Oh Christ, take one and leave me all / lest four tears from two eyes fall."

In *Poems, Golders Green* (1962), Abse's individual style becomes clearer, as do the sources and ramifications of his dualities. In "Return to Cardiff," the journey "seemed less a return than a raid / on mislaid identities." One, or rather two, of these identities may be inferred from the title of this volume. *Poems, Golders Green* is a virtual oxymoron,

proposing that poems can be found in, or made from, this Jewish suburb, a community at once a part of London and so unlike the rest of England that it has no pub. The English poet returning to Cardiff finds his mislaid identity as a Welshman; the British poet is also a Jew.

The principal poem in his earlier work expressing his Jewish identity had appeared in *Walking Under Water* as "Song," retitled "Song for Dov Shamir" in Abse's *Collected Poems*. This poem, written after the establishment of Israel in 1948, had originally been published as a translation from the Hebrew of an invented Israeli poet. Abse included it among some poems he sent to T. S. Eliot at that time, and "Eliot, who did not know about my Dov Shamir impersonation," advised "that I should do more Dov Shamir translations because they were better than my own work!" Now, more than a dozen years later, having sloughed off the singing voice of "Song for Dov Shamir," Abse treats his dual identities without impersonation. In "After the release of Ezra Pound" Abse explores the difficulty of forgiving Pound, who "did not hear the raw Jewish cry, / the populations committed to the dark." In "Red Balloon," Abse presents a narrative in which the simple, balladlike quatrains present a surreal image of a red balloon—"It was my shame, it was my joy" that "sailed across the startled town," making "the girls of Cardiff sigh," "but to no one dare I show it now / however long they swear their love."

"It's a Jew's balloon," my best friend cried,  
"stained with our dear Lord's blood."  
"That I'm a Jew is true," I said,  
said I, "that cannot be denied."

The "best friend" cries, "Your red balloon's a Jew's balloon, / let's get it circumcised," but the balloon resists the "dirty knives" with which the boys lunge at it; so they turn upon him and beat him up. This fable invokes by allusion the ball thrown, with such dire results, in the traditional ballad "Sir Hugh, or The Jew's Daughter," based on the putative ritual murder of Hugh of Lincolnshire in the year 1255 (the motif recurs in the tale of Chaucer's Prioress). The dream of the boy in Abse's "Red balloon" recalls the whole, complex history of the Jews in England.

Other poems in *Poems, Golders Green* turn from the fabulous to the quotidian. In "Public library" and "The shunters" the diminished possibilities of contemporary life are traced in such images as "bed-sitting rooms," "rainy, dejected railway stations," "the tired afternoon drizzle" in which the

smoke of "proletarian" engines "fades into industrial England" and their "hurt, plaintive whistles . . . punctuate / the night, a despair beyond language." Yet England's other face, the pastoral, is evoked in "Summer's Sunday song," if only later to be disowned.

In "Odd" Abse's dichotomies are still more clearly limned. This poem proclaims the poet's divided nature, half as family man and householder in a respectable suburb with lawn and rose bushes, where

Sodium lamp-posts, at night, hose  
empty roads  
with gold that treacles over pavement trees.  
.....  
If a light should fly on in an upstairs room  
odds on two someones are going to sleep.

But when "From the sensible wastes of Golders Green / I journey to Soho where a job owns me" (the job is his post as a chest physician at the clinic), "the dark is shabby with paste electric / of peeporamas, brothels, clubs, and pubs," and here, if a light shows in an upstairs room, "odds on two someones are going to bed." In Golders Green "I want to scream" and thus "by the neighbours, am considered odd." But he reacts to Soho with the same impulse and is considered odd by his friends there, too. The poet is *odd man out*—or rather, in, for his involved detachment makes possible his participation in experience. The job that "owns" him is dual, as his life is: in his job as poet, he will make poems from Golders Green and from Soho, from the dualities of London and Cardiff, being British and a Jew, being a bourgeois family man and a bohemian, a believer and a skeptic, a man of imagination and a man of reason, a doctor and a poet. Indeed, the tensions between imagination and reason's skepticism striate Abse's work throughout.

At this point, in "The water diviner," he deals with reordering and the regenerative power of imagination (which of course subsumes religious faith). "Late, I have come to a parched land / doubting my gift, if gift I have," says his water diviner. He tries "To hold back chaos," to transform "clay, fire, or cloud, / so that the aged gods might dance"; perhaps he had better "have built, plain brick on brick, / a water tower." And yet,

sometimes hearing water trickle,  
sometimes not, I, by doubting first,  
believe; believing, doubt.