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NOURISHED BY EXPERIENCES: MEANING WITHOUT METAPHYSICS IN THE POETRY OF DANNIE ABSE

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Abstract

Dannie Abse was one of the most prolific Anglo-Welsh writers of recent times, best known for his poetry and also the author of plays, novels and memoirs. However, the full scope of his writing has yet to be widely acknowledged and some commentators have suggested that his work lacks depth and commitment. The present article provides an exploration and analysis of Abse's poetry, proposing an understanding of how he did indeed achieve profundity, though not within an explicit, abstract metaphysical framework. Two major aspects of his mature work are considered in detail: his engagement with his Jewish heritage, particularly through its literature; and the sensitive portrayal of his professional medical experiences and the insights that arose from them. His writing offers no totalising conceptual perspective, but rather a convincing expression of the continued value of the literature of religious traditions for making sense of our lives, a perceptive account of the fragile, bodily nature of our existence and a timely reminder that science has more limitations than is commonly assumed. The depth – ethical, intellectual and philosophical – and commitment that Abse thus expressed are consonant with the insights of two of the twentieth century's most original and influential philosophers, Emmanuel Levinas and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Keywords Judaism, Levinas, medicine, philosophy, religion, science, Wittgenstein.

Introduction: a question of depth

Dannie Abse was one of the most prominent and prolific literary figures with strong associations with Wales during the second half of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first century. His extensive literary work – especially poetry, and also plays, novels and memoirs – was widely read and his poetry readings were very popular. He played significant roles in the literary life of both Wales and London. Two features of his life led to the subject matter of his poetry having distinctive characteristics. First, his upbringing in a Jewish family led to his being well versed in the traditions and literature of his heritage; yet, as a secular Jew, he was also aware of the paradoxes of faith in an era of the ascendancy of science. Secondly, his medical education and his extensive experiences as a practising medical doctor gave him an acute sensitivity to the fragile, bodily nature of our lives, and also a heightened awareness of the limitations of scientific approaches, particularly in the alleviation of suffering. His outlook was strongly influenced by the tragedies experienced by Jewish people in twentieth-century Europe.¹

In view of the scope and quality of Abse's writing, it is curious that his work has received relatively little serious consideration. The writer Vernon Scannell has referred to Abse as a writer who, 'while being given respectful notices in the literary press, has never been awarded the deeply considered evaluation warranted by the seriousness and consistently high quality of his poetry'.² Abse's most systematic commentator, the poet and academic Tony Curtis, has described him as 'a writer who has not received the critical attention which he deserves'.³ Others, while giving broadly positive evaluations of Abse's work, have suggested that his writing lacks philosophical and intellectual depth. Thus, the poet William Oxley has written that 'he needs a stronger philosophical conviction – a more positive element or cosmic commitment – to turn his poetry into really great poetry'.⁴ Again, poet and academic Tony Conran repeatedly criticises Abse's 'middlebrow' approach, seeing it as indicating 'something that can be framed and enjoyed in isolation, like a holiday snap. It tends to imply that people and worlds are knowable', while at the same time recognising that '[t]he paradox is that Dannie Abse does not believe in such knowledge'.⁵

At least some of this criticism seems to arise from a confusion of clarity of expression with lack of depth, a phenomenon that Abse has

himself noted in a discussion of poets such as Edward Thomas, Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams:

There are those poets who present difficulty, and in doing so provide a living for critics. There are other poets ... who are much more lucid and, therefore, don't get the attention they deserve ... the more difficult a poet is, the quicker he'll get attention.⁶

He also wrote of how 'those poets / who write enigmatic nonsense become famously / the darlings of the professors they most despise.'⁷ The lack of serious critical attention appears to have been a personal concern of his, as he wrote of himself in the penultimate poem of his last collection:

Wide awake or half asleep you liked to be
deceptive, yet never babblative enough
to employ the bald serious scholars.⁸

Abse's writing certainly never exhibits the confusion that the term babblative suggests. Indeed, he identifies clarity of writing and stylistic accessibility as being a characteristic of the work of accomplished doctor-writers. This he attributes to their training in 'decoding mysterious signs and symptoms' and their concomitant impatience with those who 'muddy their own waters so as to appear more deep', as Nietzsche expressed it.⁹ Yet, the clarity and accessibility in his own poetry can also be deliberately deceptive, as he explains in the Introductory Note to his first volume of collected poems:

For some time now my ambition has been 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 bottom.¹⁰

This intriguing description of a reading experience shows that Abse certainly aimed at intellectual depth. Moreover, he regarded commitment to both accessibility and depth – or, as he put it, a 'duty to communicate person to person' and being 'unashamed of soul' – as also being characteristic features of Anglo-Welsh poetry, with which he identified.¹¹ Abse's commitment to depth is also apparent in his

expression of dissatisfaction with a tendency to banality and superficiality in some of the 1950s work of the 'Movement' writers, such as Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis, whose work was in part a reaction to the richly evocative poetry of W. B. Yeats and Dylan Thomas:

The new choir that moves in is neat and sane
and dare not whistle in the dark again.
Proudly English, they sing with sharp, flat voices
but no-one dances, nobody rejoices.¹²

In contrast, as the examples in the present article will illustrate, Abse's own poetry shows openness to a rich diversity of human experience, including its religious, professional, scientific and interpersonal aspects.

Abse has written that as his poetry matured he sought a 'conversational' tone,

rooted in common reality ... I looked outward to start from the visible and I was startled by the visible ... Abstract ideas as a partial source for poems ceased to interest me; instead my poems were nourished by experiences, imagined and factual, my own and others', ordinary and extraordinary.¹³

This conversational tone characterises Abse's personal poetic voice, and it becomes increasingly apparent from his work of the late 1950s and onwards. What follows in the present article is an exploration and analysis proposing an understanding of how Abse did indeed achieve profundity, without the need for an explicit, abstract metaphysical framework, by considering two major aspects of his mature work: his engagement with his Jewish heritage, particularly through its literature; and his sensitive portrayal of medical experiences and the insights that arose from them. These are topics with which he continually engaged, with a deliberate awareness of an element of repetition: 'Perhaps without repetition there would be no character, no style.'¹⁴ Where appropriate, Abse's approach will be considered in the context of the writings of leading modern philosophers, particularly Emmanuel Levinas and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the literary analyst Susan Handelman, providing comparisons that demonstrate the depth of his thinking.

Faith in literature

Though both of Dannie Abse's parents were Jewish, his mother was practising but his father was not.¹⁵ As a child he took part in the life of the local synagogue, including Hebrew classes, the latter apparently without great success.¹⁶ Indeed, though he valued being taught biblical stories and listening to sermons referring to current affairs, both in English, his overall view of the synagogue was not positive: 'I did not like the synagogue. I could not understand the Hebrew address to the one God which the elders there uttered so devoutly. Their chanting seemed so ineffably sad and, like God, inexplicable.'¹⁷ By the age of fifteen he had ceased to attend synagogue or to say Hebrew prayers, becoming interested rather 'in the green ordinary world where God only existed because He was absent'; except that, for the young Abse, the ordinariness of the world itself was extraordinary and he already had a resolve 'to start with the visible and to be startled by the visible'.¹⁸

Despite this early renunciation of Jewish practices, Abse's relationship to religion was one of the most pervasive and complex influences in his search for meaning. At one level, he maintained a clear and frequently expressed alienation from organised religion, evident in his vehement dislike of conventional religious practitioners, whom he described as 'God's robots', and in his reaction to religious buildings: 'Inside soaring places of worship – Jewish, Moslem or Christian – I feel not just secular but utterly estranged like one without history or memory.'¹⁹ However, alongside such rejection there are many other, often subtle, levels of interaction with religion in his writing. At a fundamental level, Abse's vocational commitment to writing is itself quintessentially Jewish. The prominent French writer Edmond Jabès has described Jews as the 'race born of the book', 'for Judaism and writing are but the same waiting, the same hope, the same depletion.'²⁰ Moreover, Joseph Cohen has seen Abse's writing as being consistent with central aspects of Judaism, suggesting a relationship to a key concern of Jewish mystics, 'to fathom the mystery of Creation by determining the mysterious relationship of language to it'.²¹ There are certainly in Abse's writing parallels with rabbinic thought patterns, with the 'relentless skepticism of the Rabbis – manifested in the constant search for alternative explanations' and with the uncovering of meaning in the physical world 'without the abstracting, idealizing movement of Western thought'.²² The Jewish literary analyst Susan Handelman has further observed that historically

for the rabbis ‘the primary reality was linguistic; true being was a God who *speaks* and creates *texts*, and *imitatio deus* was not silent suffering, but speaking and interpreting.’²³ Abse showed his engagement with this linguistic reality of Judaism by his multifaceted interaction with its texts. He engaged seriously, if sceptically, with Scripture and even advised his granddaughter to do likewise. His advice to her was that such writing provides access to a valuable kind of experience, and it is not necessary to be devout to learn from the narratives of the Hebrew Bible. He wrote: ‘They do not stale or fade / and may fortify and mollify’, but added that it is best to forgive the ‘triumphalism and the pride’ and to avoid the ‘curses and the ritual stuff’.²⁴

It is particularly the moral complexity of biblical texts that fascinated Abse as he showed, for example, in his extended and complex poetical retelling of the story of David and Bathsheba, which combines elements of the laconic original with a commentary that has been described as sometimes being in the modes of the Music Hall, *Carry On* films and modern tabloid newspapers.²⁵ The original story tells of how an innocent, everyday activity, such as King David taking an evening stroll, can have grave consequences, including an adulterous relationship and the murder of Bathsheba’s husband. Abse’s interpretation also imagines the complicity and moral slide of Bathsheba:

Of course she hankered for the Palace.
Royal charisma switched her on.
Her husband snored at the Eastern Front,
so first a kiss, then scruples gone.²⁶

This exhibits the humour that is characteristic of Abse’s mature writing, yet variations on a refrain, ‘their teeth like milk were white, / and their mouths like wine were red’, repeatedly draw attention to the moral complexity of the actions, indeed to their deadly consequences through allusion to Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’.²⁷ There is a sense of darkness even at the most light-hearted moments, such as the imagined breakfast following their first encounter: ‘the apple-flesh as usual / after the bite turned brown’.²⁸ This is an ominous phrase which, typically for Abse, includes further biblical reference, to the Eden narrative. Thus, beneath the humour are serious considerations of the original text, an example of depth in Abse’s thought – in this case

ethical reflection – that the outward lightness of his writing at first disguises.

Abse also had a fascination with Jewish tales outside the Bible. Indeed, in keeping with a living tradition, he created some himself, such as several stories about Itzig, a kind of religious fool: ‘My neighbour, Itzig, / has gone queer with religion.’²⁹ Itzig’s dog also appears in poems, and can apparently be an important link in his prayerful relationship with God: ‘when I say please God this / and thank God that, / then God always makes, believe me, / the dog’s tail wag.’³⁰ For Itzig, God can answer in mysterious ways. Abse seems in such poems not so much to be making fun of religion as to be seeing the humour in religion. Indeed, Jewish tales often combine truth, tradition and humour, with the latter being an unexpected component of an approach to truth for those more familiar with the dry approaches of Western academic philosophy. Such a synthesis occurs in a poem of Abse’s in which a woman asks a rabbi where the God who once appeared to her as a child has been since:

Rabbi Shatz turns, he squints,
he stands on one leg
hoping for the inspiration of a Hillel.
The Holy One, he answers, blessed be He,
has been waiting, waiting patiently,
till you see Him again.³¹

Here Rabbi Shatz imitates the ancient Jewish sage Hillel, who was asked to explain the Torah while standing on one foot. Abse has said that in this poem he was trying to catch the ‘wry flavour’ of certain Yiddish tales.³² The importance of stories in Jewish thought is an aspect of a cautious attitude to generalisation, so that tales applying principles have a priority over direct statements of principles, described by Handelman as ‘the priority of the concrete embodiment of a thought over its abstract representation.’³³ Abse imaginatively engaged with such traditions but was also aware of the diminishment which they have experienced, as he described in an account of a Kabbalistic rabbi, Baal Shem, who, when he had a difficult task to undertake, would ‘go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer – and what he had set out to perform was done.’ Generations later neither the place nor the prayers were known, nor was the fire lit – all that remained

was the story of how it was done.³⁴ This expresses a key aspect of Abse's attitude to his Jewish heritage – that engaging with the literature provides a valuable approach to exploring meaning in our existence, but that the practices of organised religion have lost much of their spiritual significance.

Abse was also knowledgeable about Christianity, in the first instance at least because he had attended a Catholic secondary school, as 'the only Jewish boy' at St Iltyd's in Cardiff.³⁵ He writes that he did not feel much alienated there, but he seems at times to have been subject to 'inquisitions' by the Christian brother teachers to which he could reply, 'All I believe in, Brother, is wonder.'³⁶ His poem 'The Abandoned' unusually uses explicitly Christian imagery to explore a central theme of post-Holocaust Jewish thought, the apparent withdrawal or hiddenness of God. The importance of this theme to Abse is shown by his repeated revisions of this poem: it appeared in his *Poems: Golders Green* (1962), in revised form in *New and Collected Poems* (2003) and in further revised and expanded form in *Ask the Moon* (2014).³⁷ The original version is prefaced by two quotations from George Herbert, 'Where is my God? what hidden place / Conceals thee still? / What covert dare eclipse thy face? / Is it thy will?', and 'thy absence doth excel / All distance known.'³⁸ The position described in Abse's poem is not atheistic, it is not an absence even of absence; indeed it refers to hiddenness rather than an absence: 'We have to hold our breath to hear you breathing.' Furthermore, Abse suggests a double abandonment: God has abandoned his people and his people have hence abandoned God:

Dear God in the end you had to go.
Dismissing you, your absence made us sane.
We keep the bread and wine for show.³⁹

Just as the tale of Baal Shem suggests that the practices of organised Judaism have lost much of their significance, so this reference to the Eucharist, the central aspect of organised Christian worship, suggests that, for Abse, the practices of Christianity have suffered a similar loss of spiritual content.

Even so, Abse's writing also expresses a persistent worry that he may be missing something about religion, that he is 'like the deaf man / who knows nothing of music or of dance // yet blurts out, observing

musicians play / and dancers dance – Stupid, how stupid.⁴⁰ His poetry sometimes expresses longings for religious experiences, ‘Let me believe in angels for an hour. // Let long theatrical beams slant down / to stage-strike that hill into religion. Me too!’⁴¹ Indeed, he occasionally seems to have had such experiences:

There are moments when a man must sing
of a lone Presence he cannot see.

...

There are moments when a man must praise
The astonishment of being alive⁴²

The language here – ‘sing ... Presence ... praise’ – is evocative of key aspects of the expression of religious faith. This is characteristic of Abse’s alertness to the world around him and of his openness to all types of experience: he does not replace religious dogma with a dogmatic secularism. However, sometimes his descriptions are more ambiguous:

Repeated desert, recurring drought,
sometimes hearing water trickle,
sometimes not, I, by doubting first,
believe: believing doubt.⁴³

This poem intriguingly appears to refer both to spiritual experiences and to the writing of poetry. More frequently, any expression of experiences of ultimate reality in his poetry is deeply uncertain, as in the dialogue poem ‘Hunt the Thimble’ based around the children’s game of the same name:

Is it like that? Or hours after that even:
and darkness inside a dead man’s mouth?

No, no, I have told you:
you are cold, and you cannot describe it.⁴⁴

Here the bleak imagery of the phrase ‘darkness inside a dead man’s mouth’ indicates an intimate knowledge of death that reflects Abse’s medical background. The uncertainties about liminal experiences

which such a background can induce are also apparent in a line in a late poem, 'I was close to Eternity the other night', which, though it evokes Henry Vaughan's famous 'I saw Eternity the other night', describes the side effects of a drug following a medical emergency.⁴⁵ Indeed, it is Abse's knowledge and experiences as a medical professional that are a second source of pervasive and complex influences on his mature poetry, and another key aspect through which his writing achieved profundity.

A suffering doctor

A doctor-poet has been described as 'a creature rare enough in nature to be worthy of special notice', though they include such fine poets as Henry Vaughan, John Keats and Robert Bridges.⁴⁶ It is exceptional for doctor-poets to write explicitly and extensively about their medical experiences in their poetry; thus, Abse's assessment of Keats is that he 'turned away from his fearful experiences at Guy's ... his poetry ... is almost free of medical references.'⁴⁷ In modern times, the leading American doctor-poet William Carlos Williams only occasionally made direct use of his medical experiences in his poems; and the influential Czech doctor-poet Miroslav Holub wrote about medical science rather than medical practice, for his career was mainly in research.⁴⁸ Abse's extensive and explicit incorporation of medical themes in his poetry is thus very unusual: by his own reckoning, twenty-eight out of the 180 poems in his second extended collected poems 'were (are) indisputably medically coloured.'⁴⁹ The collection was itself entitled *White Coat, Purple Coat*, referring to his dual personal commitment to medicine and poetry.⁵⁰ However, like Keats, Abse found his medical training and early experiences as a doctor traumatic: 'as a medical student, I was spiritually bruised by what I had witnessed in Casualty or in Outpatients at Westminster Hospital'.⁵¹ It was only from 1962, with an increasing conviction that 'poetry should immerse itself in common reality, not be an escape from it', that he began to write poems that 'touched strenuously' on his medical experience.⁵²

The first of these poems, 'Pathology of Colours', shows how profoundly such experience could influence his outlook, for whereas rainbows often give rise to feelings of wonder and beauty, for a doctor such colours may be bleakly associated with acute medical conditions:

So in the simple blessing of a rainbow,
in the bevelled edge of a sunlit mirror,
I have seen, visible, Death's artefact
like a soldier's ribbon on a tunic tacked.⁵³

Here there is no Wordsworthian leaping heart, nor is there mention of the covenant with Noah: this rainbow is associated with death and violence. Even in the late 1980s, the memories of his early medical student experiences in the dissecting room at King's College were still sufficiently intense for him to write a long poem meditating on the unpleasantness of such activity and its relationship to life and death:

You, anonymous. Who were you, mister?
Your thin mouth could not reply, 'Absent, sir,'
or utter with inquisitionary rage.⁵⁴

Abse regarded this essential component of medical studies as a violation of a once living person, and it troubled him greatly. A medical education gives students encounters with suffering and death of an intimacy and intensity rarely experienced by other young people. Abse's writing shows that the resulting 'spiritual bruising' – itself a description of unusual intensity – can have a profound and long-lasting effect.

Abse's poetry becomes especially intense when later in life he looks with his doctor's experience at the suffering of those closest to him, such as his dying father:

he's thin as Auschwitz in that bed.
...
so like a child I question why
night with stars, then night without end.⁵⁵

The reference to Auschwitz in such a personal context is likely only appropriate for a writer of Jewish heritage. Yet, the final lines of the quotation, which are also the final lines of the poem, confirm that such heritage does not provide definitive answers for Abse: in this situation he feels that he has no more understanding of death than he did as a child. His experience of his mother's death was also extremely traumatic, in this case expressed in biblical terms:

As my colleague prepares the syringe
(the drip flees its hour glass)
I feel the depression of Saul,⁵⁶

As this poem continues, still with a biblical vocabulary, Abse recalls the story of David and Bathsheba, 'out of so much suffering / came forth the other child, / the wise child, the Solomon,'⁵⁷ and asks a further question:

but what will spring from this
unredeemed, needless degradation,
this concentration camp for one?

He can find no explanation of, or benefit from, his mother's suffering, the intensity of which is again expressed in terms of the Holocaust.⁵⁸ When asked about death in a later interview, Abse first replied, 'You see, I haven't any conscious attitude or *weltanschauung* now about death. I have no view really. Death is zero plus zero', before reflecting and adding: 'Well, I have a view: I find it repugnant.'⁵⁹ Experience of his own illness was also deeply troubling to Abse, as expressed in the probably autobiographical 'Prayer in the Waiting Room':

Banished from health I enter the unknown
as the two did stumbling from Paradise.
...
Now, doctor, magic me.⁶⁰

Here he reverts to biblical imagery to describe the powerfully troubling uncertainty of his experience: illness portends a bleak future, such as Adam and Eve faced on being banished from the pleasures of the garden of Eden. Further, the word 'magic' alludes to the desperation often associated with serious illness, as well as to Abse's fascination with those whose healing abilities appear to depend mostly on charisma, such as Franz Anton Mesmer, the wearer of a purple *cloak*.⁶¹ Despite medicine's many benefits, its ultimate insufficiency in the face of suffering and death makes doctors clearly aware of the limitations of science. Abse was a doctor who did not exalt science unduly, as he explored in a meditation on the insights achievable with a stethoscope:

Should I
kneel before it, chant an apophthegm
from a small text? Mimic priest or rabbi,
the swaying noises of religious men?
Never! Yet I could praise it.⁶²

This contrasts with the almost religious exaltation of science expressed in the writings of contemporary scientific new-atheists such as Richard Dawkins.⁶³ Abse's view of science was more balanced: he recognised and made use of its benefits in his extensive medical work, but he did not base his world-view solely on it.

Abse was strongly affected by the extreme physical and psychic suffering experienced by Jewish people in twentieth-century Europe. He wrote often of the Holocaust, observing that 'Auschwitz has made me more of a Jew than Moses did', and remarking: 'I often think about my not going to Belsen.'⁶⁴ The latter quotation refers most immediately to his not being allowed to travel to Germany to give medical treatment to survivors, as he was a Jew, but also to his own avoidance of the fate of the victims. Abse has suggested that to continue living as happily as possible we suppress the memory of events such as Auschwitz, with consequences of which we are unaware:

So who can tell what psychic devastation has really taken place within us, the survivors, especially for those of us who were brought up in an optimistic tradition, heirs of the 19th century, who believed in the inevitability of human progress, and who thought that the soul of man was born pure?⁶⁵

The latter part of this quotation refers to the teaching he received as a boy that 'man was essentially good', as expressed in the morning prayer: 'My God, the soul which thou hast given me is pure.'⁶⁶ Part of Abse's response to these issues is his play, *The Dogs of Pavlov*, dramatising the controversial experiments of Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram, which explored the propensity of individuals to inflict suffering on others for some supposed higher cause.⁶⁷ This exploration of 'the banality of Evil' – the apparent propensity of many humans to carry out acts contrary to their conscience if instructed to do so by a figure of authority – also questioned the ethics of Milgram's own experiment, which in Abse's re-imagining was carried out by doctors.⁶⁸ He

knew that doctors and scientists are also figures of authority who can claim to be serving some higher cause, scientific enquiry, which he provocatively terms 'the fatherland of Science'.⁶⁹

The psychic damage caused by the savagery of twentieth-century life is also the subject of Abse's long poem 'Funland' and the accomplished play *Pythagoras* that developed from it, in both of which many of his key themes converge.⁷⁰ Both are set in a psychiatric hospital, so here Abse develops insights into aspects of medicine beyond his immediate personal practice. A central character of the play (and also of the poem) is a man who believes himself to be a reincarnation of the eponymous sixth-century BC Greek philosopher, whose thought combined science, mathematics and an intellectual kind of mysticism.⁷¹ An important theme of the play is the clash between the cold scientific approach of the superintendent, Dr Aquillus, and the richer yet apparently delusional imagination of Pythagoras. Pythagoras accuses Aquillus of having no religious intuitions, of not seeing the revelation in the world around him. He expresses regret that even some of his own pupils apprehended the scientific side of his teachings but neglected the ethical and magical sides. A further important theme of the play is the power of the medical profession: 'the doctor-patient relationship is based on the assumption that the doctor has superior knowledge to the patient'.⁷² This power can be abused, as in a scene when the patients are humiliated by being displayed and questioned before medical students. However, it is not always easy to distinguish between the 'sane' and the 'insane' – a visiting journalist mistakes Pythagoras for the superintendent and the superintendent for a dangerous patient – and the doctors can also have trouble making such distinctions. Even so, at the end of the play the cold rationality of science triumphs. Pythagoras prepares to leave the hospital after receiving 'electroconvulsive therapy' to take up a humdrum job rather than his previous profession of stage magician. The last words of the superintendent are, 'Don't call him Pythagoras. His name is Tony Smith.'⁷³ Abse was a poet who resolved to start with the visible and to be startled by the visible, who was astonished by the 'irreducible strangeness of things'.⁷⁴ His plays, which he regarded as the work of a poet,⁷⁵ are among his most expressive accounts of the dangers of a modern world in which a reductive scientific outlook is dominant: in *Pythagoras* the denial of the autonomy, indeed the personhood, of the patients by the medical hierarchy is particularly troubling.

Meaning without metaphysics: philosophical parallels

The profundity of Abse's work can be further appreciated by considering parallels with the writings of leading modern philosophers. To begin with a key example, Abse characteristically remarked that 'Auschwitz made me more of a Jew than Moses did' and wrote of the great suffering of Jewish people in the twentieth century without finding any rationalisation. Here it is pertinent to compare his attitude to that of Emmanuel Levinas, one of the leading Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century, who in his essay 'Useless Suffering' wrote: 'The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity.'⁷⁶ Levinas wrote of 'the obligation for Jews to live and to remain Jews, in order not to be made accomplices of a diabolical project'; and Abse has done so through his extensive, imaginative engagement with Jewish texts.⁷⁷ For example, a poem such as 'Events Leading to the Conception of Solomon, the Wise Child', discussed earlier, could be considered to be in the spirit of *midrash*, 'a dominant mode of Jewish reading of the Bible ... with its imperative to connect with the biblical text, its irrepressible playfulness, and its delight in multiple, polyvalent traditions of interpretation.'⁷⁸ Ancient and modern rabbis have preferred such imaginative interpretation, lying between pure commentary and creative composition, as a means of finding a text's significance for the present moment, rather than the more systematic, academic approach characteristic of Christian theologians.⁷⁹

Abse's antagonism to the institutional aspects of organised religion is consonant with his distrust of hierarchy, but his strongly expressed dislike of non-hierarchical, practising religious believers is puzzling, particularly as he had a close relationship with his religiously practising mother. Here it is useful to consider Levinas's distinction between totalisers and infinitisers.⁸⁰ Abse may have considered 'God's robots' to be what Levinas terms totalisers, seeking control of understanding by focusing on closed orders of knowledge. Indeed, the capabilities of robots are fully defined by the specific set of instructions in the computer code that controls them. In contrast, Abse was himself an infinitiser, seeking creative advance in his life through use of his imagination in ways that were essentially exploratory rather than definitively explanatory. But there are also lacunae in his knowledge, such as his misunderstanding of the nature of prayer. Thus, he wrote a

highly ironic poem about George Herbert's description of prayer as 'reversed thunder', and elsewhere commented, 'yet what is more arrogant than prayer? It's like looking up at the blue sky or towards the darkness behind the vast stars to exclaim narcissistically, "Here I am God."⁸¹ The last phrase of this quotation resonates with the Hebrew *hineni*, an expression occurring at several key points in the Bible. Yet, it is not an arrogant expression, as leading philosopher, and practising Jew, Hilary Putnam has explained, but is rather an offering of oneself: "'hineni!' performs the speech act of *presenting myself*, the speech act of *making myself available to another*."⁸² Abse may also have had unrealistically high expectations for the direct numinous experience in the physical world that he seems to regret lacking. In a poem echoing parts of Matthew Arnold's lament for the fading of religious belief in 'Dover Beach', he writes of looking down from cliffs 'to read the unrolling / holy scrolls of the sea. They are / blank ... / / The tide is out.'⁸³ Yet, even for the prophet Elijah the LORD appeared not in a great and mighty wind, an earthquake or fire but as 'a soft murmuring sound', 'a still, small voice' (I Kings 19. 11–12).

Each language may be considered to be 'a system of concepts as well as forms.'⁸⁴ Abse knew that the power of expression varies between languages: 'Say now in Yiddish: / "Exile. Pogrom. Wandering. Holocaust." / Say now in Hebrew: / "Blessed Art Thou O Lord."⁸⁵ Hebrew is a language particularly associated with religious speech, yet Abse wrote solely in the more secular English, and this may also be a factor in his decision to use his rare numinous experiences to write poems 'sitting comfortably in my study far from the thistle-eating donkey and the desert of religion.'⁸⁶ He has also written that he believed that if one reaches 'God' it is through pleasurable experiences and creative activities: 'And writing poetry, by the way, is a kind of singing and a kind of beautiful work that names things. And the naming of things, itself, ultimately – a country, or a star, a flower or a baby – is a kind of worship.'⁸⁷ The names in this prose statement are notably evocative of Henry Vaughan's great poem of Christian faith 'Peace', again illustrating Abse's openness to the insights of religion as expressed in literature – his outlook is explicitly informed by such insights even though he rejects the practices of organised religion.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, Abse realised that poetry can also be debased, as dramatically demonstrated by the character Mr Poet in a purple plastic coat repeating solely single-word obscenities in 'Funland'.

An important philosophical parallel can also be drawn with the muted response to science in Abse's poetry. Abse was a poet with a high-level scientific education, a man who repeatedly declared his secularity and resolved to start with the visible and to be startled by the visible. He has been accurately described as 'representative of the professional in a technological world who is profoundly disturbed by and suspicious of that modern world'.⁸⁹ It is, therefore, surprising that pure science features so little in his poetry and other writings – he seeks meaning elsewhere. One of the few sustained instances is an early poem addressed to his friend, fellow doctor and poet Alex Comfort. After a description of the work of several distinguished scientists, the poem concludes:

And the old professor must think you mad, Alex, as you rehearse
poems in the laboratory like vows, and curse those clever scientists
who dissect away the wings and haggard heart from the dove.⁹⁰

These lines attribute to Comfort a profound dislike of the reductionist tendencies of science, a view which the poem indicates is also that of the poet. In a later poem that recounts the fundamental discoveries of several notable doctors, Abse describes himself as, 'their slowcoach colleague, half afraid, / incurious', and notes that he had been so even as a boy.⁹¹ Thus, the dearth of reference to science likely partly reflects his personal disposition, but a second factor seems to be his strong awareness of how little we know, and of the interim nature of the knowledge that we presently have:

I should know by now that few octaves can be heard,
that a vision dies from being too long stared at⁹²

Here Abse suggests that we need to be modest about even the apparently great triumphs of modern science for there may be much beyond the reach of our senses. A further likely factor is his revulsion at the misuse of science. His acclaimed poem 'Pathology of Colours' deals not only with acute medical conditions but also with the use of nuclear weapons, 'the criminal, multi-coloured flash / of an H-bomb', and the threat of nuclear war is apparent in several other poems.⁹³ Indeed, military violence is wrong, shameful and often linked to science in Abse's outlook. Furthermore, as previously discussed, his plays *The Dogs of*

Pavlov and *Pythagoras* display a distrust of the application of science when associated with powerful hierarchies.

The muted response to science in Abse's poetry can be more profoundly understood by considering his work in the context of an important aspect of the writings of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein was very concerned by the modern hegemony of scientific explanations, particularly as many of the most important questions about meaning and value in our lives are not scientific questions. Rather these questions require 'a form of life, a set of communally shared practices, together with the ability to hear and see the connections made by practitioners of this form of life'; that is, a culture.⁹⁴ In Wittgenstein's view, our preoccupation with science has led to a craving for generality, a generality that excludes the non-theoretical understanding available to us in music, art, creative writing and shared life.⁹⁵ He wrote that, 'People nowadays think that scientists exist to instruct them, poets, musicians, etc. to give them pleasure. The idea *that these have something to teach them* – that does not occur to them.'⁹⁶ He saw that such non-scientific representations had an integrity that was not amenable to general expression in scientific terms. Indeed, they might be characterised by his term 'imponderable evidence', which refers to insights arising from our full range of sensitivities.⁹⁷ Key features of imponderable evidence are: that it is seen as evidence for a particular judgement; that its value depends on the experience and knowledge of the person providing it; and that it cannot be evaluated, 'pondered', by appeal to general principles or universal law.⁹⁸ Hence, such evidence has specific and fully personal characteristics that contrast sharply with the general and impersonal nature of science. These features, however, are analogous to the characteristics of rabbinic approaches, and they also describe Abse's use of such approaches as a model for seeking meaning in his poems and plays. On such an evaluation, Abse's writing does not lack philosophical depth or commitment; it is rather consonant with the profound insights of one of the twentieth century's most original and influential philosophers.

Abse's sensitivity to suffering was closely linked to his acute awareness as a doctor of the bodily nature of our existence and hence of the fragility of our lives and activities, even apparently refined and abstract activities: 'Poetry is written in the brain / but the brain is bathed in blood.'⁹⁹ Conventional philosophical metaphysics often neglects this aspect of our existence: a focus on our human vulnerability contrasts

Love, read this though it has little meaning
for by reading this you give me meaning.¹⁰⁶

At the same time he was clear that aspects of other persons are always inaccessible, which he expressed in an early poem that seems to be about his wife: 'You raise your eyes from the level book / as if deeply listening. You are further than I call.'¹⁰⁷ Such inaccessibility can decrease with time, so perhaps it is more correct to say that consolation and meaning in Abse's world were found in long-term close personal relationships. Thus, in a later poem, he meditated on how he would like to die: 'finger-tapping still our private morse, "... love you", / before the last flowers and flies descend'.¹⁰⁸ Levinas found in such intimate human encounters a 'glimpse' or 'trace' of God – his view has been succinctly summarised as 'the thought of God arises in humans in all its vividness as one relates to the other'; or, 'The human soul in search of God is referred to a different address: the neighbour'.¹⁰⁹ Abse sought hints of the numinous elsewhere: maybe he was not looking in the most obvious place in his visible world.

The Jewish traditions in which Abse wrote often find meaning in concrete ways without the abstract theorising that is typical of Western thought, and there are many examples of this in Abse's work. One apparently simple instance occurs in his description of an outwardly inexplicable yet meaningful act at a burial:

I do not know why I picked up two small stones
...
and why won't I throw these stones away? Don't laugh.¹¹⁰

The taking of these stones from a gravel path also expresses Abse's originality, for the Jewish tradition is rather to place a small stone on the grave when leaving.¹¹¹ A further poignant example is Abse's description of his dying father sucking a peach, the father's favourite fruit and a gift from his wife, 'perhaps for her sake – / till bright as blood the peach-stone showed'.¹¹² Those who see a lack of depth in Abse's writing have underestimated the significance of such uncovering of meaning without abstract conceptualisation in his work, and his concomitant rejection of the totalising strategies of Western philosophy.

One of Abse's finest representations of the significance of apparently simple things in the visible world is his late poem 'Condensation on a

Windowpane' that evokes the epitaph that Keats, his fellow poet and doctor, asked to be placed on his tombstone, 'Here lies One whose Name was writ in Water':

I want to write something simple
that everyone can understand,
something simple as pure water.¹¹³

The poem laments that to science even water is complicated, it has many structurally complex phases. Even so, Abse writes his wife's name and his own name in capitals with his finger on the glass and recalls their youthful love. Yet with time:

Our names on the window
begin to fade.
Slowly, slowly.
They weep as they vanish.

Thus, in a series of clear word images Abse captures the significance of simple things, the importance of love, the fragility of life and the tragedy of loss. As throughout his writing, he offers no totalising meta-physical perspective, but rather a sensitive and imaginative appreciation of the meaning that he was fortunate enough to find.

In Western societies we live in an age in which religion is often disparaged and in which science is revered, in which individual strength and autonomy are typically prized and in which abstract thought is cherished. In a spirit of Absean clarity, some simple yet valuable observations, contrary to the spirit of our age, may be distilled from the present assessment of selected key themes of his mature poetry: engagement with the literature of religious traditions continues to offer great opportunities for making sense of our lives; the practice of science has more limitations than is commonly assumed; we should always remember the fragile, bodily nature of our existence; meaning can be expressed without abstract metaphysical speculation. The profundity of Abse's thought is also apparent in other aspects of his poetry, such as his early more political work, his portrayal of the bizarre aspects of modern society, his poignant accounts of bereavement and his reflections on old age. To provide an account of such themes in his development as a poet, over more than sixty years of publication, was

outside the scope of the present article, but his work offers many further opportunities for exploration of the originality and profundity of his thought.

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Notes

- ¹ Dannie Abse wrote extensive autobiographical prose, with the most accessible collection being *Goodbye, Twentieth Century* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2001). Born in Cardiff in 1923, he attended local elementary and secondary schools, the latter run by Catholic brothers. During the 1940s he studied medicine at the Welsh National School of Medicine (Cardiff), King's College (London) and Westminster Hospital (London), qualifying as a doctor in 1950. He worked as a specialist chest physician at the Central Medical Establishment Chest Clinic (London) between 1954 and 1989. From 1957 he lived with his family in Golders Green, London, and in 1972 they acquired a second house in Ogmores-on-Sea, south Wales. He spent periods as president of the Poetry Society and as president of the Welsh Academy, and received many awards and distinctions. Abse's first volume of poetry was accepted for publication whilst he was still a student and he continued to write and to publish poetry until his death in 2014.
- ² Vernon Scannell, 'A Vision of the Street', in Joseph Cohen (ed.), *The Poetry of Dannie Abse* (London: Robson Books, 1983), pp. 26–38: p. 27.
- ³ Tony Curtis, "'We keep the bread and wine for show'" – Consistent Irony and Reluctant Faith in the Poetry of Dannie Abse, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 154 (2008), 337–60: 337.
- ⁴ W. Oxley, 'Same Coin, Different Sides – the poetry of Dannie Abse and Leonard Clark', *Poetry Wales*, 20 (1985), 66–88: 76.
- ⁵ Tony Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. 242.
- ⁶ Dannie Abse, in D. H. Brock, 'An Interview with Dannie Abse', *Literature and Medicine*, 3 (1984), 5–18: 17.
- ⁷ Dannie Abse, 'Perspectives', *Ask the Moon: New and Collected Poems 1948–2014* (London: Hutchinson, 2014), p. 311.
- ⁸ Abse, 'Gone', *Ask the Moon*, p. 342.
- ⁹ Dannie Abse, 'Authorship and Medicine', *The Two Roads Taken* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2003), p. 12.
- ¹⁰ Dannie Abse, 'Introductory Note', *Collected Poems 1948–1976* (London: Hutchinson, 1977), p. xi.

- ¹¹ Dannie Abse, 'Introduction', in Dannie Abse (ed.), *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (Bridgend: Seren, 1997), pp. 13–15. The term 'Anglo-Welsh poetry' has, of course, complex connotations. Abse recognised this and his 'Introduction' is followed by a 'Prologue' consisting of twenty-two quotations providing approaches to the term by a wide variety of writers.
- ¹² Dannie Abse, 'Enter the Movement', *New and Collected Poems* (London: Hutchinson, 2003), p. 32.
- ¹³ Dannie Abse, 'Pegasus and the Rocking Horse', *A Strong Dose of Myself* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), pp. 201–20; 218–19.
- ¹⁴ Abse, 'Introductory Note', p. xi. The profundity of Abse's thought is also apparent in other aspects of his poetry, such as his early more political work, his portrayal of the bizarre aspects of modern society, his poignant accounts of bereavement and his reflections on old age. However, to provide an account of the many themes in his development as a poet, over more than sixty years of publication, is outside the scope of the present article.
- ¹⁵ Dannie Abse, *The Presence* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 16.
- ¹⁶ Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 24.
- ¹⁷ Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 21.
- ¹⁸ Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, pp. 28–9.
- ¹⁹ Abse, *New and Collected Poems*, p. 88; Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 450.
- ²⁰ Edmond Jabès, quoted in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 64–5.
- ²¹ Joseph Cohen, 'Introduction', in Cohen (ed.), *The Poetry of Dannie Abse*, pp. 7–14; p. 11.
- ²² Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: the Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (New York: SUNY, 1982), pp. 28, 19.
- ²³ Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, p. 4.
- ²⁴ Abse, 'Inscription on the Flyleaf of a Bible', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 377.
- ²⁵ Tony Curtis, 'White Coat, Purple Coat, Overcoat: the Late Poetry of Dannie Abse', *Poetry Wales*, 34 (1998), 10–16; 15.
- ²⁶ Abse, 'Events Leading to the Conception of Solomon, the Wise Child', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 379. In the Hebrew Bible, the narrative begins in 2 Samuel 11.
- ²⁷ 'Her lips were red, her looks were free, / Her locks were yellow as gold: / Her skin was white as leprosy, / The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she, / Who thicks man's blood with cold'. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', in Helen Gardner (ed.), *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 531.
- ²⁸ Abse, *New and Collected Poems*, p. 382.
- ²⁹ Abse, 'My Neighbour, Itzig', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 355.
- ³⁰ Abse, 'Of Itzig and His Dog', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 201.
- ³¹ Abse, 'Tales of Shatz', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 176.
- ³² Dannie Abse, 'Conversations with Dannie Abse', in J. Cohen (ed.), *The Poetry of Dannie Abse*, pp. 151–81. Quotation on p. 179.
- ³³ Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, p. 66.
- ³⁴ Abse, 'Conversations with Dannie Abse', pp. 179–80. See also Abse, 'The Message', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 239.
- ³⁵ Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 26.
- ³⁶ Abse, 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', *Ask the Moon*, p. 259.
- ³⁷ Dannie Abse, 'The Abandoned', *Poems: Golders Green* (London: Hutchinson, 1962), p. 37; Abse, *New and Collected Poems*, p. 55; Abse, *Ask the Moon*, p. 28.
- ³⁸ Changes in epigraph also indicate his continual engagement with religious thought. In *New and Collected Poems* the first is replaced by a quotation from the Talmud, 'There is no

- space occupied by the Shekinah'; in *Ask the Moon* this is replaced in turn by a quotation from Rainer Maria Rilke's poem, 'Du, Nachbar Gott'.
- ³⁹ Abse, 'The Abandoned', *Ask the Moon*, p. 28.
- ⁴⁰ Abse, 'Encounter at a Greyhound Bus Station', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 239.
- ⁴¹ Abse, 'Watching a Cloud', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 167.
- ⁴² Abse, 'The Grand View', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 66.
- ⁴³ Abse, 'The Water Diviner', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 46.
- ⁴⁴ Abse, 'Hunt the Thimble', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 84.
- ⁴⁵ Abse, 'Side Effects', *Ask the Moon*, p. 321; Henry Vaughan, 'The World', in *Henry Vaughan: Selected Poems*, ed. Anne Cluysenaar (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 113.
- ⁴⁶ A. H. Jones, 'Literature and medicine: physician-poets', *The Lancet*, 349 (1997), 275–8: 275.
- ⁴⁷ Abse, 'Following in the Footsteps of Dr Keats', *The Two Roads Taken*, pp. 26–45: p. 38. 'Guy's' refers to Guy's Hospital in London.
- ⁴⁸ William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems*, ed. Charles Tomlinson (London: Penguin, 2000); Miroslav Holub, *Poems Before and After: Collected English Translations*, trans. Ian Milner et al., 2nd edn (Hexham: Bloodaxe, 2006).
- ⁴⁹ Abse, *Goodbye Twentieth Century*, p. 437.
- ⁵⁰ Dannie Abse, *While Coat, Purple Coat: Collected Poems 1948–1988* (London: Hutchinson, 1989).
- ⁵¹ Abse, 'Following in the Footsteps of Dr Keats', p. 37.
- ⁵² Abse, 'Following in the Footsteps of Dr Keats', p. 41.
- ⁵³ Abse, 'Pathology of Colours', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 83.
- ⁵⁴ Abse, 'Carnal Knowledge', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 264.
- ⁵⁵ Abse, 'In Llandough Hospital', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 98.
- ⁵⁶ Abse, 'Exit', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 241.
- ⁵⁷ Solomon was the second, but first surviving, child of David and Bathsheba.
- ⁵⁸ The use of imagery of concentration camps to describe other types of suffering has caused controversy, notably by Sylvia Plath to describe her personal, inward devastation. Abse was aware of this issue and addressed Plath's work in a sympathetic way in a lecture/essay: Abse, 'The Dread of Sylvia Plath', *The Two Roads Taken*, pp. 125–41. His own use differs to Plath's due to his close identification with his Jewish heritage and as he is describing the suffering of others.
- ⁵⁹ Abse, 'An Interview with Dannie Abse at Princeton University', *The Two Roads Taken*, pp. 229–49: pp. 240–1.
- ⁶⁰ Abse, 'Prayer in the Waiting Room', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 399. See the narrative in Genesis 3 in the Hebrew Bible.
- ⁶¹ Abse, 'The Charisma of Quacks', *The Two Roads Taken*, pp. 46–53. Mesmer was an eighteenth-century Viennese physician and showman.
- ⁶² Abse, 'The Stethoscope', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 186.
- ⁶³ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006).
- ⁶⁴ Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, pp. 105, 135.
- ⁶⁵ Dannie Abse, 'The Experiment', *The Dogs of Pavlov* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1973), pp. 13–14.
- ⁶⁶ Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 106.
- ⁶⁷ *The Dogs of Pavlov* was also published in revised form in Dannie Abse, *The View from Row G: Three Plays*, ed. James A. Davies (Bridgend: Seren, 1990). However, this volume does not include Abse's introductory essay, 'The Experiment'.
- ⁶⁸ Abse, *The Dogs of Pavlov*, p. 55. The phrase was introduced by Hannah Arendt in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994).

- ⁶⁹ Abse, *The Dogs of Pavlov*, p. 121.
- ⁷⁰ Abse, 'Funland', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 144; Dannie Abse, *Pythagoras* (London: Hutchinson, 1979). The play was republished in *The View from Row G: Three Plays* in unchanged form, except that the title became *Pythagoras* (Smith).
- ⁷¹ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 2nd edn (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), pp. 49–56.
- ⁷² Abse, *Pythagoras*, p. 77.
- ⁷³ Abse, *Pythagoras*, p. 80.
- ⁷⁴ Abse, 'The Test', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 184.
- ⁷⁵ Abse, 'Introduction', *Pythagoras*, p. 9.
- ⁷⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', in Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (eds), *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 156–67: p. 162.
- ⁷⁷ Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', p. 164. Levinas ascribes this expression to Emil Fackenheim.
- ⁷⁸ David Stern, 'Midrash and Jewish Interpretation', in *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 1863–75: p. 1874.
- ⁷⁹ A. E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: an Introduction*, 4th edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).
- ⁸⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
- ⁸¹ Abse, 'The Power of Prayer', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 205; Abse, *Goodbye, Twentieth Century*, p. 551.
- ⁸² Hilary Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 74.
- ⁸³ Abse, 'A Letter from Ogmores-by-Sea', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 356. Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach' refers to the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of the 'Sea of Faith'. Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach', in Gardner (ed.), *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*, p. 703.
- ⁸⁴ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 59.
- ⁸⁵ Abse, 'Of Two Languages', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 280.
- ⁸⁶ Abse, *The Presence*, p. 17.
- ⁸⁷ Abse, 'Replies to an Enquiry', *The Two Roads Taken*, pp. 221–8; p. 228.
- ⁸⁸ Vaughan, *Selected Poems*, p. 80. The poem includes the lines, 'My Soul, there is a Countrie / Far beyond the stars, / ... / And one born in a Manger / ... / There grows the flowre of peace'.
- ⁸⁹ Tony Curtis, *Dannie Abse* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1985), p. 113.
- ⁹⁰ Abse, 'Letter to Alex Comfort', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 6.
- ⁹¹ Abse, 'X-ray', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 194.
- ⁹² Abse, 'Mysteries', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 115.
- ⁹³ Abse, 'Pathology of Colours', p. 83.
- ⁹⁴ Ray Monk, 'Wittgenstein and the Two Cultures', *Prospect*, 43 (1999), 66–7.
- ⁹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), pp. 17–18.
- ⁹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 36e.
- ⁹⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), vol. I, p. 119e.
- ⁹⁸ Ray Monk, *How to Read Wittgenstein* (London: Granta Books, 2005), pp. 102–4.
- ⁹⁹ Abse, 'Sixth-Form Poet', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 345.
- ¹⁰⁰ Abse, 'In the Theatre', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 144.
- ¹⁰¹ J. E. R. Squires, 'Mentality', in Ted Honderich (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 586–7. Gramophones were still

current technology when the poem appeared in 1973; consumer CD players first became available in the 1980s.

- ¹⁰² Abse, 'Among a Heap of Stones', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 399.
- ¹⁰³ Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', p. 158.
- ¹⁰⁴ Abse, 'Portrait of an Old Poet', *Ask the Moon*, p. 279.
- ¹⁰⁵ Abse, *The Presence*, p. 228.
- ¹⁰⁶ Abse, 'Postscript', *Ask the Moon*, p. 286.
- ¹⁰⁷ Abse, 'The Moment', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 33.
- ¹⁰⁸ Abse, 'Last Words', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 214.
- ¹⁰⁹ Renée D. N. van Riessen, *Man as a Place of God: Levinas' Hermeneutics of Kenosis* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), pp. 191, 150.
- ¹¹⁰ Abse, 'Two Small Stones', *New Collected Poems*, p. 99.
- ¹¹¹ Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), p. 91.
- ¹¹² Abse, 'Peachstone', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 123.
- ¹¹³ Abse, 'Condensation on a Windowpane', *New and Collected Poems*, p. 300.