# John Updike’s last poems

John Updike was always so careful not to make high claims for himself as a poet that he gave his more owlish critics the opportunity to say he wasn’t a poet at all. They should have looked harder. Most of the poems he ever published in book form counted as light verse, but his light verse was dauntingly accomplished. Very few recognized poets could handle the formal element that well, and occasionally there was a serious poem with all the linguistic vigour of the prose that had made his novels compulsory reading.

Nevertheless, and despite a fairly large body of work as a poet, it was as a novelist that he was hailed. Clearly he had poetic qualities as a writer: he had the imagery, the observation, the rhythm, the delight in making words click into their ideal working order. But it was into his novels that he put these things, was it not? Nobody, and especially not other poets, wanted to think of him as a poet as well. Helpfully he appeared to think the same.

But this posthumous volume, *Endpoint,* tells a different story. Consisting entirely of poems he wrote in the last years of his life, it is a serious book indeed. The subject is his approaching death, and it turns out that he started treating it as a special poetic subject several years back. The “Endpoint” poems, written at the rate of roughly one a year since 2002, deal with no other theme, and the “Other Poems” in the book are plainly collected and grouped so as to reinforce the same theme from all directions, and especially from the direction of the past.

The lawn’s begun to green. Beyond the Bay –
where I have watched, these twenty years, dim ships
ply the horizon, feeding oil to Boston,
and blinking lights descend, night after night,
to land unseen at Logan – low land implies
a sprawl of other lives, beneath torn clouds.

In these “Endpoint” summaries the Top Gun technician makes it easy for himself from the mechanical angle: the forms are loose and unrhymed, held together only by the beat of the iambic pentameter. But from the thematic angle there is a strict discipline in operation. Every recollection has to be specific. If it passes that test, it can come from as far back as early childhood.

The way that these poems search their author’s early mind suggests that he has belatedly discovered a modus operandi that he might have used all along. He used the novel instead, with results that we all know. The Rabbit and the Bech novels placed him securely among the high achievers of Team America, up there with Roth and Bellow, and more substantially accredited, as a novelist, than Mailer, Vidal and Salinger. Yet when it came to the last he chose another form.

In his early verse, Updike could be boastful about his sexual prowess. One young woman was recorded as lying in his arms and crying “John!”, so moved was she. Here, at the eleventh hour, he is more regretful about his overmastering, though obviously masterful, early lust.

I drank up women’s tears and spat them out
as 10-point Janson, Roman and ital.

The typeface vocabulary is the tip-off to where those early feelings of virile immortality came from. It was being a published writer that turned him into Errol Flynn. (The priapic actor is tellingly invoked, along with, for other qualities, Jack Benny, Fred Astaire and Lucien Freud. The book is a gallery of role models.) At the New Yorker, natural home of the Jewish upmarket wordsmiths, he was the go-to Goy who could write anything. He revelled in the girl-getting fame.

Details of his earlier life are plentiful in the sequence, giving us a touching counterpoint to the details of his life coming to an end. For that second aspect, no detail is too grim to be recorded. Updike was always a clinical observer of his own body. Right to the wire, he took inventory: he had the mind of a regimental quartermaster. We find him planning the guest list for the last hours: “My visitors, my kin.” And in the “Other Poems”, the famous names would clearly by invited too, if they had not already moved on. For the young Updike, Frankie Laine ranked with Flynn, Benny and Astaire as an incarnation of the all-male possibilities. Like a classical poet calling up a shade from the Halls of Dis, Updike addresses the singer’s ghost through the teenage hormone-laden haze of the Sweet Shop in 1949:

Your slick voice, nasal yet operatic, sliced
And soared, assuring us of finding our
Desire, at our old rendezvous…

The famous faces and voices lay out the terms of the sexual drama that will be the writer’s life. Doris Day bulks large, especially with regard to her bosom, which Updike in his first days of fact-based social research was pleased to discover was as ample as Marilyn Monroe’s, just more discreetly reined in. The teen prodigy was mad about Doris Day and on his deathbed he still is. Philip Roth and Nicholson Baker would acknowledge the tone in which he speaks to her shade:

Give me space to get over the idea of you –
the thrilling silver voice,
the gigantic silver screen. Go
easy on me. Cara, let’s take our time.

The phrase “gigantic silver screen” is uncharacteristically automatic: in a novel he would not have permitted himself to be so ordinary. But poetry was his holiday. A pity, perhaps: though he would have had to live in a smaller house, he might have written the poetry that reported America. He could have given us a lot more about Doris Day. Frank O’Hara became a famous poet largely for a single mention of Lana Turner.

The poetic reporting of America began before Walt Whitman and in the twentieth century even the novelists were doing it. Not many recognized poets wrote as effectively about actual events as John Dos Passos did in the montage passages of his novel USA, the book which, for the future stars of Team America, made their mission clear. But Updike was unusually well qualified to write the kind of poem that gives a news event its historic dimension. Witness his bloodcurdling poem about the death of the golfer Payne Stewart in the private jet

That rode the automatic pilot up and down
like a blind man doing the breast stroke
at forty thousand feet, for hours…

Updike could have reported the nation like this all his life, but he chose another method. Let there be no doubt, though, about the high quality of what he might have done. In a single poem, he did enough of it to prove that he not only had the whole tradition of English-speaking poetry in his head, he had the means to add to it. “Bird Caught in My Deer Netting” deliberately and justifiably echoes Frost in its title, and in the body of the poem we can hear Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Crowe Ransom and…well, everyone, really, Jack Benny included.

How many starved hours of struggle resumed
in fits of life’s irritation did it take
to seal and sew shut the berry-bright eyes
and untie the tiny wild knot of a heart?
I cannot know, discovering this wad
of junco-fluff, weightless and wordless
in its corner of netting deer cannot chew through
nor gravity-defying bird bones break.

It’s a wonderful poem, but we shouldn’t fool ourselves. He wrote very few like it, and usually, even on the comparatively rare occasions when he tried to give it everything, he was led towards frivolity by a fatal propensity for revelling in skill. But his very last book, a book of poems, proves that he always had what it took.

--*New York Times Book Review*, 3 May, 2009