Writing where the road stops

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POETRY: GERALD DAWE reviews **Endpoint** and Other Poems by John **Updike**

OVER 40 YEARS ago, John **Updike** was emphatic about what he called his "subject" – "the American Protestant small-town middle class. I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules. Something quite intricate and fierce occurs in homes".
In his writing life, which ended this January with his death in his late 70s, **Updike** explored that middle world with extraordinary fidelity, imagination and relish. His novels, full of the lived world, make up a mass of the physical, sexual and cultural tones of middle America as it stretched itself from the 1960s boom-boom into current uncertainties and economic melt-down.
Updike is a version of America that many grew to dislike, particularly his nemesis, Gore Vidal, but for those who followed the extensive life of Rabbit, **Updike's** best-known fictional creation, and the compendious volumes of short stories and literary and art criticism, **Updike** could do little wrong. He wrote on the cusp of everyday lives; saw history and politics not as a wider picture but in the minutiae of the people next door. And reproduced in story after story, novel after novel, the very fabric of American suburban life, cut adrift from its once all-powerful 19th- to mid-20th-century industrial roots, capturing as well the distinctive civic landscape that grew up within plains, at the edge of forests, alongside railways, around factories and highways.
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Updike's writing is not on the road, but where the road stops. To his detractors there is an abiding sense of complacency and introversion in the work, as if the world beyond the Atlantic or Pacific seaspray doesn't really count, even though in some of his fiction and in much of his criticism, there is a passionate curiosity about different cultures, artists and writers than the exclusively American.
But **Updike** is the ideal target: white, male, protestant, middle-class, whose imaginative obsessions and great, tragicomic mischievousness are focused upon the sensual, political and cultural significance of being these very things. Looking at **Updike**, the northern world seems to be etched in his face, his style of dress; his demeanour.
Harvard-educated, a one-time staff writer for The New Yorker and a long-standing contributor to it and all the other well-known establishment American outlets, **Updike's** career reads like the classic American dream.
Just like his own place, Shillington, Pennsylvania, where he grew up (and could never quite leave), with his teacher father and "writerly" mother, **Updike's** background influenced just about everything he did and said, and his religion (which he never left) was part and parcel of his sense of the world about him.
Updike was also a poet. And it is in his poems, the best of them that is, that his achievement as an artist is best profiled.
In the Preface to his Collected Poems: 1953-1993(reprinted in February) **Updike** had written that "the idea of verse, of poetry, has always, during forty years spent working primarily in prose, stood at my elbow, as a standing invitation to the highest kind of verbal exercise – the most satisfying, the most archaic, the most elusive of critical control" and of the opening poem, "Why the telephone wires dip and the poles are cracked and crooked", commented that it "conveyed, with a compression unprecedented in my brief writing career, the mythogenetic truth of telephone wires and poles marching across a stretch of Pennsylvania farmland. I still remember the shudder, the triumphant sense of capture, with which I got these lines down, not long after my twenty-first birthday". Further volumes have appeared since Collected Poemsincluding America(2001) and now the posthumous **Endpoint** and Other Poemsbring the imagined life to a close.
Poems about failing health, mortality, memory, the "pastness" of the past, along with the light verse which neatly calibrates a vicarious responsiveness to passing moments in his societys follies and misdemeanours, turn **Endpoint** into a moving journal of the life which **Updike** knows he will have to leave behind.
Family and friends, mentors and mannerisms, lifestyles and longings are all caught up in the terse, conversational confessions of these poems:

I think of these I loved and saw to die:
My Grandpop in his nightshirt on the floor;
My first-wife's mother, unable to take a bite
Easter dinner, smiling with regret;
My mother in her blue knit cap, alone
On eighty acres, stuck with forty cats,

Too weak to walk out to collect the mail,
Waving brave good-bye from her wind-chimed porch.

These frank poems of commemoration will not suit the more acerbic taste of those who see sentimentality creeping from the pores of **Endpoint** yet there is a depth-charged realism here too and an Augustan rigour which brings the mind into play as well as the heart:

In the beginning, Culture does beguile us,
But Nature gets us in the end. My skin,
I notice now that I am seventy-five,
Hangs loose in ripples like those dunes on Mars
That tell us life may have existed there –
Monocellular slime in stagnant pools.
After a Tucson movie, some man in
The men's room mirror lunged toward me
With wild small eyes, white hair, and wattled neck –
Who could he be, so hostile and so weird,
Due for disposal, like a popcorn bag
Vile with its inner film of stale, used grease?
Where was the freckled boy who used to peek
Into the front-hall mirror, off to school?

Updike seems like an undying presence; a force of human nature that produced, (almost in keeping with the industrial tradition out of which he and his characters emerged) over 60 books. **Endpoint** is up there with the best of them. Gerald Dawe's most recent poetry collection is Points West(2008). His selected prose , The World as Province,is forthcoming. He is Heimbold Professor at Villanova University, Philadelphia(2009). He teaches at Trinity College, Dublin.

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