

From the Diary of Peter Doyle and other poems, by John Gill. Alembic Press. 76 pp. \$4.50 (paper). Distributed by The Crossing Press, P. O. Box 640, Trumansburg, N. Y. 14886

Without question, one of the great loves of Walt Whitman's life was the Washington streetcar conductor, Peter Doyle. But whether their friendship involved sexual intimacy or not, whether Whitman's interest in the younger man confirms a homosexual reading of some of the images in the Calamus poems, or whether theirs was a frustrated and finally bitter relationship that perhaps neither of them fully understood--these are the literary questions that swirl around the two surviving photographs picturing Whitman and Doyle together and the small packet of letters that records the decline of their friendship during Whitman's years in Camden.

John Gill has attempted to retrieve from Whitman's shadow the other half of this friendship--the sensitive but half-literate young man whom Whitman left in order to visit his dying mother in Camden, a visit from which he never returned. In a poem first published in *The Mickle Street Review* #2, "From the Diary of Peter Doyle," Gill expresses the pain and frostbitten desire of a lover who has been abandoned. His fictional Doyle feels "like I'm some kind of cosmic joke"; he looks at the "good grey poet" through other eyes than the rest of the world, which only argues over whether the poet's works are "pure and manly" or "obscene and dirty" while Doyle remembers "your kisses so hearty and so neutral!" Gill's interest is not in speculating about the historical Peter Doyle, but in exploring through Doyle what he calls in other poems "the divided life."

This "divided life" is a sense of loss that shows up in odd little ways throughout the book. The songs of birds, for example, remind the poet of his own melancholy, occasioned by love. A passenger in a car

leaving Toronto imagines his lover running alongside and holds the image inside himself like a "hot stone I'd swallowed." A sleeper awakening in the middle of the night imagines that, by straining, he can touch someone who is not there. The sound of crickets and cicadas at the end of summer seems to be "grinding the year to bits." A would-be lover who can think of half-a-dozen examples of the abundance of love in nature cannot reach the hand of his mate across the table. These timeless, faceless instances of the "divided self" amplify Gill's most impressive evocation of the sense of loss in the title poems "From the Diary of Peter Doyle."

Fortunately, there are also poems in which this sense of loss is resolved. A poem on "Silence" finishes with an image of "a child on the breast looking up at its mother/that's the kind of silence I mean." An old man who falls in love with a young male gardener and is rejected by him turns to writing as a way to unify himself again. One has the sense that many of these poems have done that for their author, and that they are offered for the solace of lovers who, like Peter Doyle, feel that they are living divided lives.

--Geoffrey Sill