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Vernon, John. Peter Doyle: A Novel [review]

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Ron Padgett reminds us that Whitman himself was a schoolteacher and had a history of working humanely with children, and he reprints three of Whitman's 1840s *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* articles on education, where the poet avers, "We consider it a great thing in education that the learner be taught to rely upon himself. The best teachers do not profess to *form* the mind but to *direct* it in such a manner—and put such tools in its power—that it builds up itself." These early statements about education anticipate, of course, Whitman's developing aesthetics and his projection of democratic readers who would also be taught by the poet to learn to rely upon themselves. Padgett's book is an American pedagogical primer, encouraging teachers 150 years later to follow Whitman's lead.

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JOHN VERNON. *Peter Doyle: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 1991. \$22.00.

A colleague of mine recently observed that the era of magical realism in fiction was over and that we were now entering the era of "magical New Historicism." Count this novel by John Vernon as one of the first in that emerging genre. Vernon rewrites nineteenth-century literary and cultural history, and his narrative is rich with gender (re)construction and with clashes of class and with up-to-the-minute racial re-balancings (the Indians in this book are both very much "other" and very much victims of white racism and imperialism). *Peter Doyle* is a novel about power, knowledge, and subjectivity—the New Historical triumvirate; characters are literally constructed and deconstructed before our eyes, as is history itself. The book begins with Napoleon's death and moves us through the aftershock of that death half a century later in America, where the idea of western empire is still working itself out in the post-Civil War years.

In Vernon's rebuilt history, where the focus is on the peripheral, Walt Whitman plays a central role. Whitman has been quoted in many novels, has appeared as a character in several others, has even been the subject of a couple, but he has never been so fully fleshed out as in this one: Vernon has given us a vividly realized fictional Whitman. We first meet Vernon's version of Walt in New York in 1869 and follow him through his troubled relationship with Peter Doyle (who in this novel is not what you supposed, but far different), then we see him again in 1872 during an imagined visit with Emily Dickinson and follow him through his stroke, and then we accompany him on his train journey to the West (here moved from 1879 to 1873), which eventually takes him to Greeley, Colorado, where Peter Doyle has ended up. We see the poet finally in 1886, once again with Doyle, who pushes him in a wheelchair at Emily Dickinson's funeral.

Vernon, who teaches at the State University of New York at Binghamton (and who has written several books of literary criticism in addition to two previous novels), has shuffled and juggled a lot of information in order to

construct this wild historical fantasy, and it is a testament to his talent that he is able to maintain an air of plausibility through a narrative that is built on so many outrageous historical fictions: among other things, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman have a memorable conversation in Amherst; Peter Doyle falls in love with Josie Meeker, daughter of the social reformer Nathan Meeker, and accompanies the Meeker family out west to help found Greeley, Colorado; and in 1821, during Napoleon's autopsy, the former emperor's penis is removed and becomes a much-sought-after relic—it is worn for years in a pouch around Doyle's neck. In the ultimate distillation of the "Emperor-has-no-clothes" joke, Vernon uses this shrunken relic as the cursor that moves us across the changing screens in this novel—from St. Helena to London through New York, Amherst, and the vast American West. The novel works a little like the recently popular "Where's Waldo" children's books: on the novel's crowded and cluttered cultural canvas, we keep looking for Napoleon's willy, and, sure enough, it continues to pop up in surprising places.

Part of the point of the book is the culture's obsession with relics, with pieces of past greatness that it can claim, possess, worship, and imagine as still generative. The novel is filled with relics and in fact functions in and of itself as a kind of relic—the characters seem severed and shrunken (and mostly fraudulent) pieces of the actual historical figures who are forever lost, but who, even in their relic-reductions, still manage to generate fascination. Even Emily Dickinson demands a lock of Whitman's hair—"A hoary lock. Mixed tussle hay of head and beard. I trust the crop is abundant. Could you spare me just enough for a nutshell?"—and gets her copy of *Leaves of Grass* autographed by the author. Everyone wants a piece of everyone else to carry around, and a lot of people—from Napoleon's heirs to Peter Doyle to Timothy Stokes (a wonderfully decadent Dickensian dealer in used body parts)—especially want to get their hands on the emperor's shrivelled organ, which becomes the empty signifier of power and of spent power.

Vernon uses Dickinson's letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson as the model for the letters he has her write to Whitman, and he uses Whitman's letters to Anne Gilchrist as the starting point for Walt's letters to Emily. The letters back and forth between Dickinson and Whitman, printed in full, provide one of the real pleasures of this text; it's a game that initially threatens to wear thin quickly, but Vernon manages to weave parts of Dickinson's actual letters with imagery from her poems to create a consistent and convincing tone, just as he weaves Whitman's actual letters, his various prose pieces, and his conversations with Traubel into a convincing post-Civil War Whitman voice. The correspondence evolves and allows us to track the development of a vital relationship. We thus have collected in this novel the complete fictional correspondence of Whitman and Dickinson, and it is often as hilarious as it is illuminating. "Mr. Whitman," writes Emily in 1869, "I never read your Book before, having been told it is disgraceful. But when R W Emerson called it the book of the Age, I blushed for my Ignorance and purchased a Copy—keep it in the Piano Bench where it won't bite father. Mr. Higginson says your chiefest Error was not that you wrote your Book but that you neglected to burn it afterward—but I say since the world is Hollow, and Dollie's stuffed with Sawdust, we had better not so readily expose our Feelings." By the time

Vernon contrives to have the two great poets meet, we are almost convinced that they would have been oddly compatible. Responding to some poems (and some criticism) that Emily sends him, Walt writes:

Yes, I agree with you—folks want poets to indicate more than the dumb beauty of objects. I shall mind your admonition—it answers my turn—and I guess you’ll heed mine. I don’t sit in judgment no more than you, but allow the sun to fall around helpless things. The poetical quality is not marshaled in rhyme and traditionary metrical laws nor in abstract addresses to things that go off half-cocked, Miss Dickinson. You put too much over-emphasis on complicated contrivances. Remember that nothing beats simplicity. . . . [Y]ou say too many enigmatical things—but I do know that beauty grows loosely like lilacs or roses from a bush, profuse and impartial. Be *natural*. There, I’ve frankly unbosomed myself. I know you have no more deference for Mrs. Grundy than I—so we make a pair.

The Whitman here is gentler, more figurative, less furtive, and more deferential than the actual epistolary Whitman, but Vernon’s Dickinson has brought these qualities out in Walt—he learns from her just as she learns from him: they madden and fascinate each other.

Dickinson becomes one of the first cross-dressers in the novel; she makes her forays into public by dressing as a boy, and it is as a barefoot boy that she confronts Whitman face to face. Cross-dressing in this book becomes a frequent and complex trope, having to do with the fluidity of gender boundaries that eventually makes the nature of Whitman’s affection for Peter Doyle all the more cryptic. Whitman’s sexuality is a “topic” here, but the relationships that Vernon portrays undo any restrictive reading of that sexuality. As a good exercise in New Historicism, this novel interrogates the nature of subjectivity, and some surprising sexual shifts allow for a less determinate formation of subjectivity than the discursive bounds operating in nineteenth-century America might suggest.

Vernon is quite innovative in embedding criticism of Whitman’s poetry in the narrative; often the Whitman character enacts a kind of self-criticism as he recalls images and lines from his early poetry and questions what had once seemed certainties. Walking to Brooklyn ferry in 1870, Whitman’s mind plays over and critiques “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”:

Every so often, for fifteen- or twenty-minute stretches, some trapdoor hooked up wrong in his head unlatched by surprise and all the contents dropped out. Suppose a string of beads broke and went scattering every which way, but then on your hands and knees retrieving them you couldn’t remember what all they were for or how the beads pertained to the string in the first place. When it happened like this, Walt had to stop and stand there to let his mind slowly fill back up while people skirted his rooted bulk as they would any inconvenient obstacle. . . . Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes—what a parcel of idiots they were. Men and women crowding fast around—go fuck yourselves. You are more curious to me than you suppose, but your incessant caterwauling makes me sick. . . . Closer yet I approach you. I considered long and seriously of you before you were born, and concluded the batter got spoiled in the pot. Others will enter the gates of this ferry and stink it up too. Others will lay their arms on my neck. . . . What is it, then, between us? Nothing. Walt sat there glumly on the bench. His poems were nothing.

There is some magical realism here—including a wonderful evocation of the alchemical creation of a nasty little homunculus whose one vital missing part engenders in him (?) an insatiable desire to lay claim to Napoleon's atrophied member—but there is also a heavy dose of cultural criticism that turns many of the characters peculiarly bleak and flat, from Napoleon's heirs to Horace Greeley to Nathan Meeker to the Ute Indians who massacre Meeker and his workers at the Indian agency where he is determined to transform the savages into farmers. The book embeds a strong ideological critique, as the author playfully professes in the afterword: "I have shamelessly mixed history and fiction in a speculative attempt to correct history's minor errors while accurately describing its major ones." All the historical characters here thus feel like homunculi—made of dead parts, deformed and obsessive—while the actual homunculus-character seems fresh and alive, as do some of the other fictional characters who have no historical counterparts. But of all the historically based characters, Whitman comes most alive (even if, in the last half of the book, he vanishes for vast stretches), and the novel makes fascinating reading for anyone interested in Whitman and his times.

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