

Kirby Doyle

(27 November 1932-)

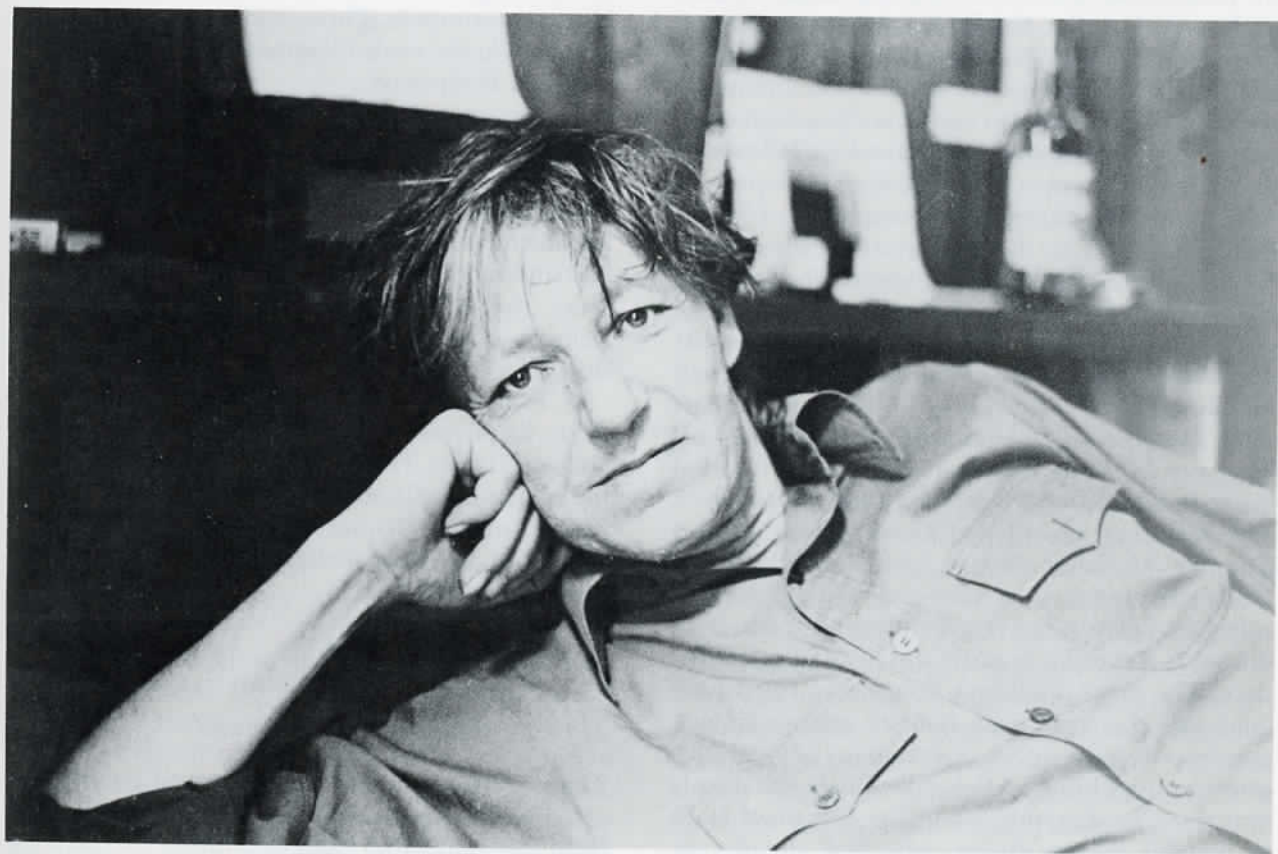
Raymond Foye

BOOKS: *Sapphobones* (Kerhonkson, New York: Poet's Press, 1966);
Angel Faint (San Francisco: Digger's Communication Company, 1967);
Happiness Bastard (North Hollywood, Cal.: Essex House, 1968).

Kirby Doyle first came to prominence during the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance of the late 1950s. His friend and mentor was Lew Welch, with whom he shared a passion for the wilderness of California and the Pacific Northwest. Like many of the San Francisco poets, Doyle rejected the ponderous, self-important verse of the eastern literary establishment. The Beats—preferring Ezra Pound to T. S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams to Wallace Stevens (“Images instead of concepts,” as Charles Olson said)—sought to free their poetry from what

they considered the overrefinements of American academic verse. The San Francisco poets believed that poetry could retain an unconformist, idiomatic expression, while remaining ardent and meaningful in its expression (a lesson learned through their study of the Zen poets of Japan and the Orient).

In a 1980 interview, Doyle recalled his earlier life: “I was born the year Roosevelt was elected to his first term, and Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. This was November 27th 1932, on a snowy Saturday, on Avenue Parnassus in San Francisco.” He attended private schools in Marin County and showed promise as an athlete. “But I was a very independent person at an early age, so by the time I was a teenager I could smoke and drink and do what I wanted to do. Soon I failed every subject it was possible to fail in high school, and got kicked off the football team for smoking.”



Kirby Doyle, 1981

When he was sixteen Doyle falsified his birth certificate and joined the U.S. Army. He was stationed in Okinawa with the corps of engineers. "My job was to run the power station for the base. Big huge tanks of electrical generators that put out an immense amount of power. I had to operate these huge diesel motors, to turn the generators at the same ratio. It was a tender, intricate job, working with these tough, brutish things. It's been the bane of my existence. I learned poetics operating electrical power generators. It's how I learned to touch something too terrible to contemplate, too powerful for resistance, with a blind satisfaction for its own sake—at sixteen years of age."

As Doyle was finishing his enlisted term the Korean war broke out and he was detained an additional year. After his discharge from the army he traveled throughout Europe as a transient laborer and wanderer: "After several years of journeyman-ship in what I call the 'fundamentals of art' I returned to the U.S."

Doyle married in 1953. He and his wife had two children in their first two years of marriage. They moved into married students' housing at San Francisco City College, where Doyle had enrolled in the culinary school in 1955. A few months thereafter he transferred to San Francisco State College to become an art major, "not knowing what else to do."

For Doyle, college life was filled with frustration, confusion, and a sense of waiting for something to happen. One day he showed a fellow student a four-line poem he had written. The student suggested Doyle sit in on a class sponsored by the Poetry Center at the college. To the young Doyle—who claims that by age nineteen he had read only two books (a fairy-tale and a war novel)—poetry was a revelation: "Suddenly the doors of plausibility swung wide open, for the first time in my life."

The Poetry Center at San Francisco State College, run by Ruth Witt-Diamant, was an unusual institution in American academic life. Guest poets and lecturers included Charles Olson, Dylan Thomas, Marianne Moore, and Randall Jarrell. Doyle attended their lectures and readings and enrolled in a class taught by Kenneth Rexroth, conducted in Rexroth's home in the city's Fillmore district. The large Victorian house was filled with bookcases that rose from floor to ceiling; vintage jazz records were strewn about; many of Rexroth's own paintings hung on the walls. Doyle was deeply impressed by Rexroth, whom he described as "a respectable literary figure, who had already enjoyed an entire generation's literary accomplish-

ment, and was accustomed to a Bohemian life."

In 1956 Doyle's wife opened a bookstore on Fillmore Street called The Golden Bough. Through her bookshop and Rexroth's gatherings, Doyle met other poets—Lew Welch, Michael McClure, John Wieners, Philip Whalen, Robert Duncan, Philip Lamantia, and the poet and painter Wallace Berman. Berman published many of Doyle's earliest poems in his *Semina* magazine, typeset and printed by hand. "Wallace Berman was central to the entire aesthetic experience on the West Coast," Doyle later remarked; "there is no way of possibly avoiding this."

Doyle's poems also appeared at this time in the San Francisco State College literary magazine, *Transfer*; in John Wieners's fine journal *Measure*; in a special issue of the *Evergreen Review* devoted to the San Francisco scene; and in Michael McClure's important magazine *Ark II / Moby I*. Doyle was deeply impressed with the young McClure, a handsome introvert: "McClure was the most difficult person I'd ever encountered in literature, and he became very close to what my ideal in poetry was. For some reason he thought I was good. I didn't think so."

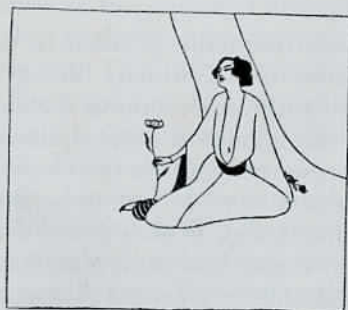
By 1958 Doyle had taken to wearing a threatening black leather jacket and riding a large Norton motorcycle. These, combined with his rugged good looks, made his appearance part hoodlum and part Hollywood.

For several years Doyle pored over a wide range of poetry and other literature, using at the start Louis Untermeyer's anthology *Modern American and British Poetry* as his guide. Doyle favored the Elizabethans and the classics, with Sappho the earliest and most enduring influence: "Sappho represents the quintessence of what Christ artificialized—absolute uncompromising love for all things."

From 1957 to 1959 Doyle composed the thirty-six poems later published under the title *Sapphobones* (1966). They are brief lyrics, most often on the subject of refused or betrayed love. Many of the poems, such as "Grace Abounding," were set to ancient Anglo Saxon melodies and were meant to be sung:

Thy joys, O Blesséd,
thy body so anciently sung,
as there I, strange lover,
thy passions are entombéd won.

The poems speak of a passionate and carnal love, often in a boisterous, swaggering voice, borrowed from the troubadours and exemplified in this untitled poem from the collection:



SAPPHONES

kirby doyle

Front cover for Doyle's first book, a collection of thirty-six poems

O Lady,
 thou earth-eyed & beauty mad,
 I would that you should know
 (here, skinned within
 the distracting garment of this
 lean-faced bravado)
 that I taste a passion,
 a *rage* to be my love with you—

O thine eyes battle my gaze!

Tongue-stuffed & set to babble
 I've locked my mouth
 against such speech—
 fearing brief ridicule
 I become toy-tongued
 & a Liar against love—

By using as his models the love lyrics of Sappho and Catullus, Doyle is seeking to discover the origin of the theme of sexual desire in poetry and a means of expressing this desire in his own verse as well. But often as not, Doyle's early poems are about his own inadequacies in bespeaking his love, as in this untitled work addressed to the mythological heroine, Dido:

Ah Dido,
 were the speeches of Love
 simple ones
 I would break silence with your beauty
 in huge mouthfuls of glistening words—

Words like mad exotic birds fluttering
 from my thorax,
 whipping my speech—
 moist and gaudy feathers

gone from my lips upward—

Doyle's early verse also borrows from many of his contemporaries' work: the noble, grandiloquent tone of the young McClure (hiding, always, a fiery passion); the haiku-like notation of everyday life set forth by Lew Welch; and the delicate, wry observations of Philip Whalen, about whose early work Doyle wrote, "[it is] some of the *cleanest* verse we have, indebted to Pound, but on his own terms."

By far the most importance acquaintance for Doyle in the late 1950s was John Wieners. "Wieners is the very meaning of pure intention, as found in Keats," Doyle has said. "He is a pure poet, an American success. Together we would purvey poetical ethics in our intimacy that amounted to declarations of love between men that had as their forte *legitimacy*, and not criminality." For Doyle, Wieners's first book *The Hotel Wentley Poems* (1958) was "a perfect work."

Wieners reinforced Doyle's dedication to the Sapphic lyric. He imparted to Doyle his deep knowledge of the theories of verse of Charles Olson, with whom Wieners had recently studied at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. But most important, Wieners encouraged Doyle to give equal attention to writing prose. "When a poet writes prose," Wieners said, "something different happens."

Doyle's first novel, *Happiness Bastard* (1968), is the first volume of a trilogy tentatively titled "Th' Couple." As Doyle recalls, it was "written on a sojourn that my lover post-wife and I took to New York in 1959-1960." Typed on long sheets of paper pasted together to form a single roll (unbeknown to Doyle this method of composition closely resembled Kerouac's in the 1957 novel *On the Road*), *Happiness Bastard* is the story of a squalid love affair, related in equally licentious prose. "*Happiness Bastard* is a Romantic fallacy," said Doyle. "It is a mythological American romance between the personae of Tully McSwine [modeled on Tully McSwiney], an Irish

republican hero (who died from a hunger strike in a British prison), and Dolly Madison. These incarnate spirits have a love affair in twentieth-century America."

While Doyle maintained he was a poet writing prose (and that *Happiness Bastard* should be read as a poetic novel), it is clear that the author is trying to break away from much of the formalism and "preciousness" associated with verse. Tully McSwine (Doyle's alter ego in the novel) replies to a woman who asks, "Are you a poet?" "No, not a poet. A vagabond. . . . I stand between the sightless citizen who knows nothing and the Vision of the Poet who Knows all. One is a stillborn whose corpse is manipulated by the civilized machinery of death, the other cannot die. Either stance fills me with horror. I stand between them, rejecting neither though one cannot live while the other can do nothing but. I envy neither. I interpret one to the other. I urge the dead to look at the living, and the living to look at the dead."

Happiness Bastard is a brutal work born of Doyle's own struggle with poverty, drug addiction, and unhappy love affairs. It is also one of the finest of the "poetic" novels of the Beat Generation, worthy of a place next to William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959) and Kerouac's *Tristessa* (1960). Like *Naked Lunch* it is also a work of social satire and black humor.

Happiness Bastard is Doyle's first mature work—free from imitation or youthful contrivance. Doyle excels in capturing the vernacular of the hipster and much of the essence of more conventional American speech as well. Doyle's language here is plastic, pliable, following Charles Olson's belief that the job of the writer is to reinstall words with their original, "primordial" meanings and intensity. *Happiness Bastard* is a difficult and often obscure work, written, according to Doyle, "under the aegis of the same rhythmic projection that Olson and Kerouac only too clearly delineated."

Doyle may have been anticipating charges of capriciousness from critics, when, at midpoint, he interrupts his narrative to interject the plea: "I know nothing of 'good,' 'bad' or 'discipline,' but know only that the act of writing for me involves no less than giving an accurate Voice to my Vision of the planet, and if my Vision is that the planet is 'bad' then that Voice shall be 'bad,' but nothing as simple-minded as this is involved here, for the planet is neither good nor bad nor disciplined nor is it spinning along in heroic couplets nor in any other diagram of precise geometric verbiage as would the Deaf & Sightless Penny-Poets & Politicians have us

believe. . . . rather, the planet operates on its own flux and flow of rhythms and motions and it is my job as a writer to understand and be accurate to them."

Doyle has frequently pointed to the United States Constitution as a primary literary influence on his work as a whole; its succinct (yet nonetheless lofty) style, with an almost Biblical intonation and delivery, represents for Doyle the essence of prosody in its embodiment of unimpeachable clarity, vigor, and jurisdiction. Doyle's sense of the literature as history causes him to view language, literature, and the destiny of a people as inseparable: "It is so simple it's scary. A nation, dissociating itself from its prior genius—and I'm saying that with a great deal of generosity—must of necessity secure its tongue: for if it speaketh in the tongue of that which it was, it is not that which it is. Hence, the preponderance of literary attention in our most learned possibility has been English literature, not American. The American language, ultimately, will be an aboriginal tongue, not a civilized tongue. We are very lucky that we have as a deep reservoir the American Indian."

Happiness Bastard was not published until nearly a decade after its composition. When it did appear, it was published not by an avant-garde literary house but by a publisher of cheap pornographic novels. Doyle was bitterly disappointed upon publication to find his erratic punctuation, staccato prose style, and unconventional spacing had been "corrected" by the copy editor.

In the early 1960s Doyle returned to the West Coast and composed a book of approximately sixty poems, "Crespicule for the Coast," believed to be lost. It was during the period from 1960 to 1965 that Doyle's drug addiction—a problem he shared with many of his contemporaries—precluded any further writing. "I spent many years in Narcotica," Doyle confessed. "So urgent is the poetical expression that the poet is forced to the original urgency. Why should I dabble, attendant upon its announcement, when I can have the gist of my civilization in a needle?"

In 1966 Doyle resumed writing, and the following year *Angel Faint*, the second volume of "The Couple" trilogy, was published by Emmett Grogan's press, the Digger's Communication Company, the mouthpiece of the Haight-Ashbury hippie community. According to its author, "*Angel Faint* was printed on a stolen mimeograph machine, in a limited edition, for underground purveyance."

The plot of this novel has been summarized by Doyle: "This 'angel,' is a minor figure in the grand-

ness of the schemata of the empire of God. But the witness of the criminality of this empire causes him to faint. He falls to the earth and awakens, a man. And his lover is the ancient Carthaginian queen Dido, who has awakened after her anxious assignation with the asp. This story opens in 20th century America. The angel who has fainted from the violence of heaven is now a poet, and sits in their poor chambers on Thanksgiving day."

In lush, hypnotic prose, the book begins: "Today is Gobble Day in Tap City and we offer up our leaden thanks to a death-colored sky and He who lurks beyond. Rain. Rain like weak glue leaking from the sky. . . . Life moves slowly, *greenly* from the lungs of the city. The buildings erupt from the streets like infernal elevators rising from hell. I sneeze from hunger and listen. I hear lavender Chevrolets converse outside the churches in hushed and reverent tones, their inmates within, resynthesized."

Dido returns from the supermarket with stolen groceries for Thanksgiving dinner. After dinner, there are several dialogues between Dido and her angel on the nature of love, followed by several solitary meditations by the angel himself; there is night, then dawn, and an "argumentum" on terror and criminality. The pathetic state of the angel, musing on quasi-philosophical questions of man and God, is often reminiscent of a Samuel Beckett character: "Now, where was I? Or better yet, where am I? It is not difficult to get lost these days, even with nowhere to go. For example, of morning I rise from my fetid bed, stagger off toward daylight on rotting limbs and so compound is my confusion of moral direction and national goals that I find myself pissing in the coffee pot and trying to heat the toilet."

On the third day Dido and her angel leave their chambers and walk down to the San Francisco Bay. Gazing across to Oakland, the angel beholds a vision of "Smiling Jack London." The character of the angel merges now with that of the narrator, who delivers a stern warning to the "mindless cretins of commerce" who poison this water—an act "as viciously insane as poking sticks at caged beasts, and I am happy to report that now and then an arm is lost doing it. So beware, a fish's revenge is to vanish."

Angel Faint ends with the thirty-six *carmina* from *Sapphobones*. They recapitulate the themes of the novel—desire, repulsion, poetry, narcotics, atheism—and remind us that it is indeed a *poet* who is writing prose:

Our Gods are used

and ready to die
yet plenty our heavens with lust—
Love leans forward
eager with lies,
no sound is spoken—
Old Gods, Old Lies,
Violence is broken.

In "A Whisper for Dido," as in Appuleius's age of late antiquity, a plethora of deities, impotent and eclipsed, clutter the landscape; Doyle's novel ushers in a new paganism whose only god is the dualism of love/hate, in the graveyard of modern debris.

Following the publication of *Angel Faint*, Doyle again stopped writing, this time for thirteen years. "A direct line from Sappho to Apocalypse. That's where I found myself. I was sitting at my desk, staring at my Underwood typewriter out over the city and I said if I continue to write this line I'm going to sign the check for my own casket, with this verse. And I am loathe to endorse my death. So I quit, I just quit. I won't do it anymore. This is barren news from here to the grave. If I can just find a job and stay alive I'll be lucky. And that, my friends, was virtually the end of everything public poetica Kirby Doyle until. . ."

Until a day in 1979 when Doyle was walking the streets of San Francisco and noticed a nineteenth-century photograph of a young woman, which had been discarded in the gutter. Dressed in white linen and lace, with golden hair flowing over her shoulders, she could have been the image of Victorian propriety, were it not for her bizarre, mesmeric gaze. Doyle took the photograph home to his dank waterfront basement below the Golden Gate Flier restaurant where he worked as a short order cook. In time, the picture took on talismanic qualities. He christened the young woman "Pre"—"the beginning of life." She became his muse as each night he made careful notes on her strange beauty. These notes formed the basis for an ode to "Pre" that began:

Exercising m'infinite profundity
two pre-lovers post dead
Not a word gone past th' truth.
Sticks of time and stop and now.
Pre allows no crucifix to exist.

"Pre American Ode" is a dynamic, expansive poem of nearly one hundred pages; like Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, it is a poetic cosmogony; and it is the spirit of Olson that is the force compelling the poet:

(first: Pre)

Book 1

1

"... th' buttons are real..."

Exercising in infinite profundity
two ~~post~~ pre-lovers ~~post~~ dead.

Not a word gone past th' truth.

Sticks o' time & stop & now.

Pre allows no cruxification to exist.

Bags o' gold for tumbles.

Pre past each thee she gazes

Not at I nor me at she.

Th' flat-faced sheen o' nigger

no longer her look

& death leaves with scale satisf-action

unborn again.

• Again Pre wins, pretty
before Shrimp.

She mustn't be caught.

Pre wanted, no reward.

No capture essential.

O Olson!
I had a thing
to tell you,
what you are—
Mythoglacial American giant,
Pre loves you.

The dozen years that Doyle lived outside of society (1968-1980) were spent largely in the wilderness of California. For nearly three years he lived alone in a solitary area on Mt. Tamalpais, just northwest of San Francisco. Doyle took Olson's instruction seriously—that any examination of language afresh lay in “discovering this discarded thing nature.” Nature—“the green key” to Doyle—is the true subject of the poetics underlying “Pre American Ode,” the pivot around which all else turns:

Nature, Burbank—
freedom, genius,
vault & lock—
Muir & Jack London
Th' American—
primordial verse & sacred!
Here American Earth
establishing no god,
just Nature, & nature

Along with Olson, Doyle's most durable sources in composing “Pre American Ode” were Sappho and the writings of the American horticulturist, Luther Burbank. As these personae merge in Doyle's poem, nature becomes synonymous with lyric utterance:

Sappho, thy name—lyric!
Freedom is thy name—
I pre gift you, your name.

(Poets have a continuing
relationship with poetry
the godly cannot
comprehend)—

In a “credo” meant to preface “Pre American Ode” Doyle has written: “Free (or ‘American’) verse is the work of Sappho, pre-Viking Norse law, & th' yes of land. These three great causes of freedom are a central compound-forming body inhabiting 20th C. American verse.”

“Pre” is the prime matter that existed *prior* to man; it is destiny—a genius inherent in nature, in the land—preexisting:

thy Genius,
find thy tongue,
thy language,
thy speech;
find within thyself America,
America.
For America,
thou art th' West.

During the composition of “Pre American Ode” Doyle was invited to give informal readings in coffeehouses, jazz clubs, and at City Lights Bookshop in San Francisco's North Beach. Doyle unexpectedly found himself a venerated figure among a generation of younger poets who knew and followed his work. Doyle opened the restaurant where he worked to hold after-hours gatherings so that young poets could read and discuss their works. The group became known as the “Golden Gate Flier Society” and met regularly on Sunday evenings for nearly a year. During this time much of “Pre American Ode” was published in installments in *Beatitude* magazine. In 1981, at the request of Neeli Cherkovski (then editor), Doyle assumed editorship of the magazine.

Concurrently with the final sections of “Pre American Ode” Doyle completed a novella (as yet unpublished) titled “White Flesh” (1980-1982). “White Flesh,” according to its author, “is a three-minute examination of the implausible doctrines that inhibit the love of two people. It is a romantic comedy.” True to the novella form, “White Flesh” is a narrative of approximately one hundred pages, restricted in characters, and focusing on a single event—an encounter between the author and his lover in a city park at evening.

Upon completion of “White Flesh,” Doyle designated “Pre American Ode” as its preface—a gesture of dialectic synthesis made with the intention of further dissolving the boundary between poetry and prose. Doyle also declared his protracted “trilogy” completed, as he gathered together his life's literary output under the title “Th' Couple” (Part I, *Happiness Bastard*; Part II, *Angel Faint/Sapphobones*; Part III, “Pre American Ode” / “White Flesh”). True to Mallarmé's conception of the poet's life constituting a single book, Doyle saw the trilogy not as a post facto summation of his writing career but as a single volume which he had struggled to give shape to over the course of twenty five-years.

Although Doyle shuns the designation “the new novel,” his work is most closely allied in theory and practice to many of the novelists of postwar



Kirby Doyle

France, particularly to the hermetic and philosophical writers Edmund Jabes and Maurice Blanchot. Doyle's use of interior monologue, disembodied narrative voice, disordered spatial and temporal frames, and his obsessions with the phonic substance of language all support his insistence upon *writing as writing*. Indeed, in the final passages of "Th' Couple" we are uncertain as to whether the woman Doyle has pursued throughout the text, once confronted, is not, in fact, the text itself.

In his essays "Eros and Idiom" (1970) critic George Steiner traces the evolution of the romantic

novel from Jane Austen to Flaubert to Jean Genet and William S. Burroughs. In his attempt to ascertain the elements most characteristic of the modern romantic novel, Steiner touches upon two chords which might well be applied to Kirby Doyle as a summation of his major literary themes—that "dark common root of the nerve of cruelty and the nerve of desire" and "the poetics of a new relationship between language and the sexual imagination." These themes and Doyle's contemporary elaborations upon them constitute much of the significance of his robust achievement.