Foreword

This study hopes to achieve three general goals: to provide an introduction to the work of the Dutch novelist and poet, Simon Vestdijk; to delineate a particular continental interpretation of Joyce's work; and to present an example of how modern prose works can be studied as examples of metonymic art.

Simon Vestdijk was born in 1898 in Harlingen, a harbor on the west coast of Friesland, and died in 1971 in Doorn, the same Dutch town where Wilhelm II spent his years of exile after the First World War. He studied medicine in Amsterdam but never practised as a physician on a regular basis. When already in his thirties, Vestdijk made his debut with a modest volume of poems in 1932, and announced himself as a novelist two years later with a novel celebrating adolescent love. For some forty years thereafter, Vestdijk published a veritable avalanche of narrative prose, poetry, essays, and philosophical studies, which make him the most important Dutch writer of this century, and one of the masters of modern literature.

While his life may lack dramatic interest, an intellectual biography would reveal an astonishing mind of great versatility and profundity. A candidate for the Nobel Prize from 1957 until his death, Vestdijk wrote pioneering essays on Joyce, Emily Dickinson, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Proust, Thomas Mann, Rilke, and Valéry; works of criticism on poetics, religion, astrology, the psychology of fear, and on the symphonic work of Mahler, Bruckner, and Sibelius; published translations from German, French, and English (Kreisler, Brehm, and Tügler; Verlaine; Dickinson, Poe, Stevenson, Lowe, and Conan Doyle). Furthermore, he published some fifty novels, twenty volumes of poetry, four collections of short stories, a dozen collections of essays, a libretto for an opera (set to music by Willem Pijper), and a book of memoirs. Altogether, his oeuvre includes more than a hundred volumes.

Obviously, an achievement of this magnitude cannot be dealt with in a single volume, for it soon would lapse into mere cataloguing. This would be of little service to readers unable to read Vestdijk in his native language. The most profitable way to approach him, it would seem, is the comparative one: pursuing this method, the present study allows a reader
to gain purchase on this vast literary domain via the work of James Joyce, while at the same time adding a new critical opinion to the Joyce canon.

A study of the relationship between Vestdijk and Joyce discloses a passionate obsession with language both writers shared. Both ruled great verbal empires which they lorded over as if fiefdoms to rival reality. For all their differences, both Vestdijk and Joyce were wordsmiths who, in the final analysis, took the very act of literary creation as their reconduit theme, fashioning characters who lived and died by the word. And so a consideration of Joyce helps to isolate themes in Vestdijk's work which will persist throughout his career.

To lift the discussion beyond parochial boundaries, I have attempted to place it within a consideration of modern literature. Since I interpret the major mode of modern fiction to be a metonymic one, the present study has the ulterior design of linking epiphany and the literary symbol to metonymy. This triad is discussed not only as stylistic devices but also as psychological tools for the modern novelist. Two other major concerns of this study contribute to this larger ramification. One is Vestdijk's original use of myth while the other is the discussion of the 'Gorgonian' nature of language. It is hoped that in this fashion Vestdijk's achievement will be seen in terms larger than his native tradition.

To some the present examination may seem too detailed, but it merely reflects the extraordinary richness of Vestdijk's imagination and style; to infer less would fail to do him justice. Secondly, an oeuvre which grappled so unflinchingly with its material, should be presented with all its nuances and paradoxes. Language is a baffling medium and while the discursive mind savors its denotative meanings, the creative one despairs of its connative riches. With superior talents, the intellectual and the creative aspects inform one another as form and content without ever being satisfied with stasis. 'Kinetic' is a keyword for Joyce, while 'motility' serves a similar function for Vestdijk. No apodictic verdict can be legislated for either author.

To critics writing in Vestdijk's native language it may seem that elements which are peculiarly Dutch were ignored. This was a conscious choice, however, and their exclusion is not meant to deny them veracity. Neither have I overemphasized one critical tenet over another, unless a preoccupation with language as style and context can be interpreted as such. Feeling compelled to draw from various critical idioms only underscores the variety of responses Vestdijk's work can elicit. Otherwise, I have merely attempted to show an individual talent and its modern tradition.

A word about the translations in the text. Unless otherwise noted, they
are all mine. The translations from Veldijk's work were intended to be as faithful a rendition of the original as possible without lapsing into literalism. However, they do not pretend to be felicitous samples of English prose because their purpose was to illustrate critical points which often address themselves to elements a superior translation would not tolerate.