

gestive work. In my view, what Lang takes for religion is not religion at all but a farrago of dead, empty ritualism and cerebral, oppressive dogma. This is part of what Joyce, too, understood religion to be. But it is not the whole story. This cannot be told unless we investigate the genesis of his religious sensibility and examine its development and self-expression with the two complementary perspectives that the author of the book seems to lack: a sufficiently sympathetic understanding of the faith that Joyce considered he had lost and some degree of critical detachment from his proclamations of having done so.

I read part of *Ulysses and the Irish God* while pacing up and down the study hall in Clongowes where a diminutive James Joyce once studied himself, more than a hundred years ago, and where his modern successors now read *A Portrait* as part of their English course. As George Steiner recently remarked, life can sometimes resemble the plot of a bad novel.<sup>2</sup>

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Sheldon Brivic, "Joyce's Consubstantiality," *James Joyce: New Perspectives*, ed. Colin MacCabe (Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1982), p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> "University Hails the Prodigal," *The Independent*, 12 October 1994. Steiner made this remark during his inaugural lecture as Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Oxford, some fifty years after he had failed his doctoral examination there. Steiner gave the lecture in the same auditorium in which the examination had occurred.

THE VERBAL EMPIRES OF SIMON VESTDIJK AND JAMES JOYCE, by E.M. Beekman. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi BV, 1983. 211 pp. \$25.00.

Despite his status as one of the Netherlands' most important twentieth-century writers, Simon Vestdijk is little known outside his native country. In his book *The Verbal Empires of Simon Vestdijk and James Joyce*, E.M. Beekman attempts to redress this situation by drawing a parallel between the careers, ambitions, and achievements of the Dutch novelist and his Irish counterpart. To this end, he

pursues a comparative study based on Joyce's *Ulysses* and the Vestdijk novels *Mister Fisher's Inferno* and *Else Bohler*. By far the lion's share of attention is devoted to a comparison of *Ulysses* and *Mister Fisher's Inferno*, however. The book also contains a brief but useful appendix of the Dutch, Flemish, and Afrikaans words that appear in *Finnegans Wake*.

Beekman begins his book with a brief chronology of Vestdijk's life. Born in the Dutch village of Harlingen in the northern province of Friesland in 1898, Vestdijk studied medicine in Amsterdam and was a practicing physician for several years before devoting himself completely to writing in 1937. Once he traded the stethoscope for the pen, Vestdijk proved himself a prolific man of letters. By the time of his death in 1971, he had published fifty novels, twenty volumes of poetry, four collections of short stories, twelve collections of essays, one libretto, and a memoir, in addition to numerous translations and critical works. Like many of his contemporaries, Vestdijk was somewhat ambivalent in his critical assessment of Joyce; he praised *Ulysses* but balked at *Finnegans Wake*, describing the latter work as nothing more than "glorified Esperanto" (30).<sup>1</sup>

Beekman begins his comparative study by providing a concise summary of *Mister Fisher's Inferno*. Published in 1936, it is Vestdijk's second novel. Like many of his works, it takes place in the town of Lahringen, an anagram of Vestdijk's birthplace. Appropriately enough given its title, the novel opens with a citation from the "Hades" episode of *Ulysses*: "—They say a man who does it is a coward, Mr Dedalus said.—It is not for us to judge, Martin Cunningham said" (U 6.341-42). Even without having read the novel itself, one is immediately impressed by the striking—and often unnerving—structural and stylistic parallels between Vestdijk's work and the great Blue Book of Eccles. Like *Ulysses*, *Mister Fisher's Inferno* takes place on a single day: 3 September 1908. The book represents a day in the life of a certain Mr. Fisher, an advertising man and petty tyrant who enjoys tormenting his wife and instigating public mayhem, and is written to a large extent using the interior monologue technique pioneered by Joyce. As in *Ulysses*, the circumstances of the novel are rather uneventful. During the course of this twenty-four-hour period, Mr. Fisher drives away his wife's last remaining friend, is summoned to the police station to explain why he hired two local winos to disrupt the town parade, obtains evidence that his arch-nemesis and inquisitor, the chief of police, attempted to molest his maid, strolls about town and on the beach, takes a nap, goes home, goes to bed, has a nightmare in which he is put on trial, and wakes up relieved that it was all a dream. It is only after leaving Beekman's

summary, however, and actually reading Vestdijk's novel that these resemblances become truly striking.

Both books begin early in the morning around breakfast time. The mail arrives, and a conversation takes place between the main character and the person who delivers the milk. Hoof and mouth disease and Hamlet are recurring topics of conversation throughout both works, and in both the matutinal bowel movements of the main characters are described in loving detail and at great length. Coincidentally, during their morning toilets, both men entertain visions of tropical splendor. Neither Bloom nor Fisher has had sexual intercourse with his wife in many years. The fathers of both men committed suicide (hence Vestdijk's opening quotation), and both had uncles named Richard who were bullying tyrants. Both characters take leisurely strolls on the beach, fall asleep, are involved in barroom altercations, and are accused of nefarious, obscene crimes at surreal, nightmarish trials.

In addition to these similarities of character and plot, stylistic correspondences are also legion. For example, both Bloom and Fisher dread the arrival of late afternoon, Bloom because of Molly's adulterous assignation with Blazes Boylan and Fisher because of his appointment with the chief of police. Throughout both novels, the two men constantly remind themselves not to think about these impending meetings:

The nursery rhyme had finally taken form, Mr. Fisher felt free and relieved, he nodded to his image in the mirror, and walked on. He felt in his pocket for his wallet, but withdrew his hand. No, law book better with Duyfjes. Check up on the witnesses: to protect myself against Eveking. Evening king: funny name for a chief-of-police. Everything else is lies, of course. . . . No, no, he can't touch me. Don't think about it anymore, he can't touch me.<sup>2</sup>

Nice wine it is. Taste it better because I'm not thirsty. Bath of course does that. Just a bite or two. Then about six o'clock I can. Six. Six. Time will be gone then. She. (U 8.851-53)

Fisher is also given to distinctly Bloomian musings and has a penchant for citing his favorite reference work, the *Winkler Prins Encyclopaedia*. In the following passage, Fisher gazes at clouds drifting by and thinks about the fact that they will never return:

Experience everything that lies between birth and death in one second, in one second. *Now*. You certainly wouldn't be bored. Perhaps boredom . . . is not boredom anymore, but pain, or what? Once read in Schopenhauer or who was it, that time doesn't exist, that it's a figment of the human imagination, but then, if one could speed up time or

squeeze it together, and then abolish it, there would be simultaneously demonstrated, that before that time . . . that before that time. (Vestdijk 48)

Compare this with the following Bloomian rumination:

Chinese eating eggs fifty years old, blue and green again. Dinner of thirty courses. Each dish harmless might mix inside. Idea for a poison mystery. That archduke Leopold was it no yes or was it Otto one of those Hapsburgs? Or who was it used to eat the scruff off his own head? Cheapest lunch in town. (U 8.869-73).

At another point in the book, Mr. Fisher dozes off on the beach. In a passage clearly based on Molly's monologue, Vestdijk attempts to capture the evanescent thoughts of someone on the verge of sleep:

and they bring the olive branch to the little merry fellow Noah with his pigs horses buffalo spring and fall but mostly spring to here where I . . . little boy . . . on the beach . . . big warm hand warm . . . blue glistening ship . . . to here where I . . . sit . . . sssit . . . sss. ssss . . . sssss . . . ssssss. (Vestdijk 127)

(Vestdijk is clearly going for the onomatopoeic effect here. Mr. Fisher is literally making *zs*; in Dutch the verb "to sit" is *zitten*.) In another passage, Mr. Fisher savors a meal: "Carefully, disparagingly, he tasted the amber-coloured apple sauce again . . . but it melted on the tongue, it filled the palate with a pleasant jelly-like, slightly bitter sensation" (Vestdijk 104). This passage corresponds to a similar one in *Ulysses*: "Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. . . . Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine" (U 4.01-05). The clear stylistic similarities between these passages obviate the need for commentary.

Despite the fact that Beekman himself informs us that one critic found over fifty plot parallels between *Mister Fisher's Inferno* and *Ulysses*, he insists that "such superficial resemblances . . . hardly warrant serious study" (43). Beekman defends these parallels with the rather vague contention that the resemblances "are not identical in fictional intension [*sic*]" (43). Unfortunately, he does not go on to define just what he means by "fictional intention." Obviously, the milkman in *Mister Fisher's Inferno* is not meant to be interpreted as a symbol of Irish nationhood. Nevertheless, the parallels are so obvious and the circumstantial evidence so overwhelming that these similarities cry out for explanation.

Beekman writes that Vestdijk's pastiche of Joycean technique in *Mister Fisher's Inferno* was not "instigated by idolatry" but is, rather,

"an original and brilliant adaptation of such techniques to suit specific requirements" (4). Again, Beekman fails to explain what these "specific requirements" might be or in what way Vestdijk's "adaptation" was "original and brilliant." Further on, he writes that the

relationship between Joyce and Vestdijk was not a negative fawning on the part of the Dutch author but more of an affinity. It seems that Vestdijk might have found in Joyce a fiat for what he was to consider crucial in his development as a writer. (4-5)

Be this as it may, the structure and plot of Vestdijk's work—as well as its stream-of-consciousness technique—are clearly derivative of Joyce. In this light, it seems that what we have in *Mister Fisher's Inferno* is the young Vestdijk writing what was only his second novel, apprenticing himself to Joyce, and, by so doing, encountering the great master on his own turf. Yet Beekman repeatedly stresses the originality of Vestdijk's work, stating time and again that Vestdijk was no mere imitator of Joyce. But, as far as *Mister Fisher's Inferno* is concerned at least, methinks he doth protest too much.

Throughout the book, Beekman has an unfortunate tendency to veer away from his ostensible subject—the verbal empires constructed by Vestdijk and Joyce—into lengthy and predictable surveys of the stream-of-consciousness technique, for example, or the concept of the epiphany. While certainly relevant in themselves, these topics have been extensively and competently covered in other works. Moreover, Beekman's perhaps too zealous application of the comparative method—involving such disparate fields as Bronislaw Malinowski's anthropological studies of Melanesian matriarchy and Sergei Eisenstein's theories of montage—results in broad and all-encompassing pronouncements that are rarely supported by more than a series of quotations.

Since no translator is credited, one can only assume that Beekman wrote the book in English. While his command of the language is impressive, it is far from idiomatic. As a result, the work as a whole suffers from a certain stiltedness and would have benefited enormously from a thorough going-over by a native English-speaking editor. In addition to these stylistic considerations, typographical errors and misspellings abound. This reflects poorly on Editions Rodopi, the book's publisher, which has some one hundred English titles in its Costerus series on American and British literature.

Beekman does hit on one aspect of genuine similarity between Joyce and Vestdijk, however. He writes:

There is an aspect of Joyce's work which one might almost call Dutch. It embraces the use of epiphany and a devotion to detail which in-

cludes the most ordinary. . . . How can this be better illustrated than by the paintings of the great Dutch masters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? (39)

This "metaphysics of the ordinary," as Beekman calls it,

will describe as delicately a meal of grilled mutton kidneys as it will describe the rapture of love when a woman presses her lover to her breasts. . . . It can negotiate readily between the level of copulating flies on a windowpane and the spiritual realm of transmigrating souls. (39)

This is a perceptive comment on Beekman's part, and it seems only appropriate that a Dutchman make the link between Joyce's concept of the epiphany and the fastidious attention to detail that is so characteristic of the Dutch. It is perhaps also interesting to note that one of Joyce's favorite paintings was *View of Delft* by the Dutch seventeenth-century master Jan Vermeer.

One has not learned anything new about Joyce's work after reading *The Verbal Empires of Simon Vestdijk and James Joyce*. What is perhaps more unfortunate, however, is that in many respects Beekman defeats the very purpose of his book by trying to explain away the echoes and imitations of *Ulysses* in *Mister Fisher's Inferno*. Perhaps a more profitable approach, both for readers of the present work and for the growth of Vestdijk's international audience, would have been simply to write a study of Vestdijk's oeuvre, noting *Mister Fisher's Inferno's* obvious debt to *Ulysses*.

Reviewed by James Geary

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Simon Vestdijk, *De Poolse Ruiter* (The Hague: Bert Bakker/Daamen N.V., 1963), p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Vestdijk, *Meneer Visser's Hellevaart* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Nijgh and Van Ditmar, 1988), p. 63. All translations from *Mister Fisher's Inferno* are my own. All italics within translated passages are Vestdijk's. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text as Vestdijk.