Victorian Poetry, Europe, and the Challenge of Cosmopolitanism

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Stephen Dedalus, in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), attempts to give order and shape to the locations of his identity with the following diagram:

- **Stephen Dedalus**  
  - Class of Elements  
  - Clongowes Wood College  
  - Sallins  
  - County Kildare  
  - Ireland  
  - Europe  
  - The World  
  - The Universe

One could easily draw something similar for Thomas Hardy:

- **Thomas Hardy**  
  - Wessex  
  - England  
  - Europe  
  - The World  
  - The Universe
Like most spatial analogies, the latter one is helpful but also perhaps a little reductive. Where is London, one could ask? Or Oxford? Or should it be Christminster? Stephen’s list also seems oversimplified and deceptively symmetrical in ways that he would not fully understand until much later in the novel, if at all: Jason Howard Mezey notes the telling absence of Great Britain from his topography, for instance. Additionally, one could argue that the structure of both lists misleadingly casts identity as an autonomous growth outward and misses the give-and-take among its different elements. Perhaps the classic Stoic model of cosmopolitanism would be more accurate, which places the individual at the center of a series of concentric circles of collective identity expanding outward. It might be more accurate still simply to write, or continuously rewrite, each of these signifiers on top of each other—a palimpsest of the kind familiar from more postmodern accounts of identity.

My larger point, and in many ways the point of this entire study, is that staging cosmopolitanism is a problem of perspective: sorting between competing identities and understanding when to assert and when to check different affiliations. The same endeavor motivates many of the contemporary theorists I have summoned to provide insight into parallel Victorian efforts. In the manner of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s “rooted cosmopolitanism” or “cosmopolitan patriotism,” The Dynasts explores what it means to be firmly rooted while also floating freely above the locations of identity. The poem, in turn, highlights the conflict that can ensue between these perspectives. At its core, the Immanent Will, the mysterious energy that impels all action in the poem, is simply the logical outgrowth of Hardy’s effort to spatially imagine the kind of interchange between self and outside world that has always confronted cosmopolitan philosophy. Hardy’s force is immanent—within oneself but also paradoxically imposed from outside. Discovering where this Will begins and ends—getting a handle on it, essentially—is the task he confronts in The Dynasts, with all of its complex staging of history and sight for the benefit of his “mental spectator” (4.8), the reader. Throughout The Dynasts, Hardy dramatizes, questions, and reevaluates the different notions of history and identity that came to him via the locations of his life. What The Dynasts is about, finally, is the struggle for perspective. It looks toward the future even in a world where “old Laws operate yet; and phase and phase / Of men’s dynastic and imperial moils / Shape on accustomed lines” (I. Fore Scene. 76–78).

In the preface, Hardy attempted to explain how these potentially contradictory aims could work together: how The Dynasts could function as a patriotic poem—one about England at war, no less—and still be cosmopolitan. He would develop the full significance of England’s role in this wider
European conflict while also looking beyond England in ways that his novel of the same historical period, *The Trumpet-Major*, had neglected:

When . . . *The Trumpet-Major* was printed, more than twenty years ago, I found myself in the tantalizing position of having touched the fringe of a vast international tragedy without being able, through limits of plan, knowledge, and opportunity, to enter further into its events; a restriction that prevailed for many years. But the slight regard paid to English influence and action throughout the struggle by so many Continental writers who had dealt with Napoleon's career, seemed always to leave room for a new handling of the theme which should re-embody the features of this influence in their true proportion. (4:5–6)

Hardy probes what the war signifies to him as an English citizen and as a resident of “Wessex”—which, as in the novels, becomes an actual place name and the home to minor characters already familiar to readers. Old Granfer Cantle of *The Return of the Native* (1878), for instance, becomes Private Cantle of the “Bang up Locals.” In fact, Hardy states that the poem would not exist at all were it not for “three accidents of locality” (4:5), locations that would in turn inform his own artistic priorities. The first of these was the near proximity of King George III’s “watering-place” (Budmouth in *The Return of the Native*); the second, the lingering traces along the coast of defenses made in preparation for a possible invasion; and the third, the fact that this same region was the birthplace of “Nelson’s flag-captain at Trafalgar,” Hardy’s namesake and distant relation Thomas Hardy. Part I, Act 4, for example, begins at the first of these locations, a “room in the red-brick royal residence known as Gloucester Lodge” (4:93). Hardy even adds a footnote for the reader-as-traveler, one of several that show his concern for highlighting the trace remnants of history still dimly visible on the landscape: “This weather-beaten old building, though now an hotel, is but little altered” (4:414). The aptness of King George’s residence becoming a hotel was probably not lost on Hardy: in some sense, he invites his reader to tour the places of the poem with something akin to his own nostalgia and longing to revisit the signs and stories that reverberated through his childhood. Like *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* before it, *The Dynasts* is part poem, part tour guide, intended to coach the reader on how to experience historical places on a satisfying personal level but also as a means toward a more engaged global citizenship.

Just as Barrett Browning sought for the best perspective on Europe—be it as an expatriate observing events from her balcony in Florence or in the
more mobile persona of Aurora Leigh—Hardy endeavors to craft a poetic form wide enough to encompass multiple affinities, points of view, and historical moments. In this chapter, I divide my analysis of these perspectives into three varied but codependent scales of vision in *The Dynasts*. I begin by looking at the larger design of the poem—its distanced, telescopic points of view and the wider perspective on history and national identity provided by its free-ranging spirit commentators. The second section probes the efforts of the poem’s human participants to access something akin to this wider cosmopolitan vision—first Napoleon and then the soldiers themselves, whose experience Hardy dramatically revises in comparison to *The Trumpet-Major*. The third section explores the transformation of the Immanent Will into a force that could bridge all of these perspectives—above and below, past and future, national and international. The chapter concludes by considering the poem’s afterlife during the First World War, which demanded reassessment not only of Hardy’s cosmopolitan vision, as he himself recognized, but of the hopes and expectations of an entire era.

**Cosmopolitanism from Above: Staging Perspective in *The Dynasts***

The philosophical and spiritual superstructure Hardy devised for *The Dynasts* was the end result of some two decades of reflection. One could argue even that the Wessex novels themselves—*The Trumpet-Major*, as we will see, but not it alone—formed another testing ground for concepts of space, travel, and Anglo-European identity that Hardy would revisit in *The Dynasts*. Hardy had a long-abiding interest in what might be called the collapsing space of modernity: the closer but uncertain interchanges between rural and urban, periphery and metropole, and England and the wider world that defined the Victorian era. In *The Return of the Native*, these forces reach a kind of stalemate in Clym Yeobright, who arrives home from the Continent with an expanded mind but still longing for the rooted sense of identity he associates with Egdon Heath: “His imagination would then people the spot with its ancient inhabitants: forgotten Celtic tribes trod their tracks about him, and he could almost live among them.” His exposure to advanced European ideas leaves him with an earnest if flawed moral complexity that Hardy clearly sympathizes with: “Yeobright loved his kind. He had a conviction that the want of most men was knowledge of a sort which brings wisdom rather than affluence. He wished to raise the class at the expense of individuals rather than individuals at the expense of class.” As a result, Clym is
someone at odds with himself, divided between tradition and modernity—a division in turn written on his physiognomy: “In Clym Yeobright’s face could be dimly seen the typical countenance of the future.”\footnote{8} For the world of Wessex, as in Clym’s case, contact with Europe mostly seems to pose problems, as if Hardy doesn’t quite know how to integrate Europe satisfactorily into the vision of the novels. Europe saps Clym’s apparently more healthy Englishness, and later novels, most pointedly *The Woodlanders* (1887), continue to perpetuate a kind of anti-European bias and resistance toward travel outside of the regions of one’s birth. One scene in particular from that novel encapsulates this point. Demanding that a logging train headed by Giles Winterborne give way, Mrs. Charmond’s coach driver blurts out, “you are only going to some trumpery little village or other in the neighbourhood; while we are going straight to Italy.”\footnote{9} With echoes of another Hardy anti-heroine fixated on the continent, Eustacia Vye, the circumstances of Charmond’s demise imply a sort of poetic justice for her disloyalty to Wessex: she is murdered abroad by a foreigner living abroad, the shady “Italianized-American” who appears only once in the novel.\footnote{10} England was going global, speeding up in ways that the novels register uncomfortably, even bitterly at times. In the opening pages of *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Hardy off-handedly mentions “a certain obliterator of historic records who had run down from London and back in a day” to replace the church at Marygreen. This nameless, rootless architect erects “a tall new building of modern Gothic design, unfamiliar to English eyes.”\footnote{11}

As an alternative vision, *The Dynasts* does not simply “sell out” Wessex by embracing globalization. What it does do, essentially, is reposition the deep sensitivity to native attachments and communities on display in the novels. *The Dynasts* remaps the world of the novels as a wider web of such locations and attempts to imagine the future as something more than the gateway to humanity’s physical and spiritual decline, “the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live” that plagues *Jude the Obscure* (a disease, not surprisingly, with roots outside of England).\footnote{12} In *The Dynasts*, Hardy reaches after a more affirmative global existence. Not coincidentally, the poem’s planning and publication took place during the same historical interval covered by Stephen Kern in *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918* (1983; rev. 2003). Writing about the failures of diplomacy that preceded World War I, Kern describes what sounds a lot like the crises underpinning *The Dynasts*: “Individuals behave in distinctive ways when they feel cut off from the flow of time, excessively attached to the past, isolated in the present, without a future, or rushing toward one. Nations also demonstrate distinctive attitudes toward time.”\footnote{13} To uncover the “distinctive new modes of thinking
about and experiencing time and space” brought about by nineteenth-century advances in science and technology, Kern draws almost exclusively on modernist literature and art, with cubism being the most notable example.\textsuperscript{14} Hardy’s notebooks, however, reveal his own ambition to paint a new, revolutionary kind of literary landscape, one that would encompass these spatial and temporal shifts in perception. The first reference to what would become \textit{The Dynasts} dates back to 1874, when he wrote, “Let Europe be the stage & have scenes continually shifting.”\textsuperscript{15} In 1875, after visiting with survivors of Waterloo at Chelsea Hospital, Hardy conceived of an epic poem along classical lines: “Mem: A Ballad of \textit{The Hundred Days. Then another of Moscow. Others of earlier campaigns—forming altogether an Iliad of Europe from 1789 to 1815.”\textsuperscript{16}

As the poem continued to evolve in his mind, Hardy began to envision something that would indeed travel across the breadth of Europe but in increasingly unconventional ways. He wanted to represent life as it is perceived by individuals on the ground but also to probe more deeply into the reality of their experience from other vantage points in space and time. \textit{The Life of Thomas Hardy} quotes some undated notes where Hardy reflects, with oddly specific numbers, “Now these 3 (or 3000) whirling through space at the rate of 40 miles a second—(God’s view)” (449). \textit{The Dynasts} would ultimately deploy something like this advanced, space-age literary technology, although Hardy would also keep the poem grounded in the past in crucial ways, as we will see. In the same series of notes, he recalls what seem like the words of actual soldiers but recasts them within the wider cosmic vision of his planned poem and its governing force, the Immanent Will: “The intelligence of this collective personality Humanity is pervasive, ubiquitous, like that of God. Hence e.g. on the one hand we could hear the roar of the cannon, discern the rush of the battalions, on the other hear the voice of a man protesting, etc.” (\textit{Life} 449). The last stage of the poem’s conception reveals Hardy turning away from a narrative epic or collection of ballads to a verse-drama with a celestial, mobile point of view. In 1886, Hardy noted, “The human race to be shown as one great network or tissue, which quivers in every part when one point is shaken, like a spider’s web if touched. Abstract realisms to be in the form of Spirits, Spectral figures, &c” (\textit{Life} 183). And in 1891, he wrote, “A Bird’s-Eye View of Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century” (\textit{Life} 245). Hardy’s challenge was to look at something utterly familiar to readers but from a new point of view.

After all of this planning, what kind of poem did \textit{The Dynasts} become? On the practical level of readability, Hardy may have attempted too much: in a recent reassessment of the poem, Keith Wilson perhaps best captures its
accomplishment and limitations: “The Dynasts, for all its quirkiness and at times derivativeness, its sometimes laboured blank verse . . . its dutiful progress through Napoleon’s campaigns to the inevitable end . . . is indeed one of the great works of modern English literature, albeit one honoured more in the invocation than in the reading.” Others have not been as kind as Wilson. Comparing The Dynasts unfavorably to Hardy’s novels, Sheila Berger writes, “Rather than being pulled into the process of making meaning, the reader is pummeled with repetitious sight, movement, and narrative into a position of disinterested passivity.” Many of the poem’s initial readers found the poem’s unusual form bewildering as well: The Dynasts, one could argue, dwells in a kind of no-man’s-land of genre, mixing passages of verse, prose dialogue, stage direction, and what Hardy called “dumb shows”—narrative descriptions of a setting or event, such as the action of a battle. Anticipating Berger, at least one Edwardian critic lamented that Hardy had abandoned the form of the novel for a strange “drama of nations” where “[t]he real characters . . . prove to be, not Napoleon, Nelson, Pitt, and the rest, but England, France, Austria and Russia, or even, it may be, Europe.” The critic in turn singled out for highest praise the Wessex portions of The Dynasts, where “we have life, a warm life and a quaint humour of phrase that recall the Thomas Hardy of ‘Far from the Madding Crowd’ and ‘Under the Greenwood Tree.’”

These are criticisms with which, perhaps, all readers of the poem could identify on some level. It is telling that Hardy himself could not settle on what the actual form of the poem was—an “epic-drama”—until the 1909 release of the first one-volume edition. He may have been prompted to settle on this label by A. B. Walkley, the drama critic for the Times Literary Supplement, who attacked the poem for being unstageable and poorly conceived: “Obviously it is not possible for the ordinary theatre. It ‘thinks in continents’ and deals in whole fleets and armies . . . it is on too vast a scale for the ordinary stage.” Hardy took the unusual step of replying publicly to Walkley, perhaps sensing that his criticism got to the heart of what he was attempting. The poem manipulates space and time in ways that could not be rendered on stage but were nonetheless vital to its meaning. “I believe that anyone who should sit down and consider at leisure how to present such a wide subject within reasonable compass would decide that this was, broadly speaking, the only way.” This was a “wide” subject geographically, historically, and temporally, an altogether unique experiment in generic border crossing that sought to trace its protagonists’ roles within larger currents of national and even cosmic identity.

Hardy’s experiments with form and perspective culminated in a peculiar hybrid of ancient and modern that would make the poem tough going for
many readers and perhaps equally tough to locate in literary historical terms. In its formal features and in its representation of history, *The Dynasts* looks backward and forward in a number of senses. The poem’s experimentation with perspective would seem to place *The Dynasts* on the cusp of modernism, but it is typically left out of studies that attempt to claim Hardy’s poetry on the movement’s behalf. Others have suggested that the poem anticipates the quintessential modern form of the cinema: “*The Dynasts* is neither a poem, nor a play, nor a story,” as John Wain says, “It is a shooting script.” Isobel Armstrong takes the parallel a step further, linking it to her concept of the double poem: “It is as if Hardy carries the virtuosity of the dramatic monologue from drama to cinema by superimposing a number of limited and everchanging perspectives on one another.” Although there is no evidence Hardy himself saw the parallel, he did liken it in the Preface to some Victorian prototypes of the cinema, including the panorama and magic lantern. But, again, it seems, *The Dynasts* falls short of being modernist or even fully “modern” in the broader sense of the term: it is difficult to imagine *The Dynasts* becoming a successful film without ruthless excision, whether of the spirit Overworld, which would turn it into a straight war film, or of its historical breadth and human actors, which would perhaps make for an interesting fusion of science fiction and ancient Greek drama but would also no doubt amplify the difficulties Berger attributes to reading the poem. These problems with *The Dynasts: A Film*, however, simply point to why it makes a better poem, why it could be only a poem—or an epic drama. Hardy was deliberately trying to be ancient and modern at the same time, planting one foot in history and another in the future, just as he was writing a vaguely nationalistic poem with cosmopolitan sympathies. The past was who he was, what Europe was, not something that could be evaded. Hardy wanted to dwell on the past as a way of identifying laws of metaphysics still undergirding individual and collective identities, laws that were finally revealing themselves from modern perspectives. Hardy was attempting something like what would become cubism or avant-garde cinema in the hands of a later generation of artists. Unlike these other inventions, however, *The Dynasts* would be an experiment in perspective and genre that could not be repeated—huge, ambitious, totally encompassing—something that could have come only out of the nineteenth century.

Hardy’s own detailed description of the poem’s “supernatural spectators” reveals that he understood he was undertaking something new and old with the spirit apparatus in the poem. He describes them as “certain impersonated abstractions, or Intelligences, called Spirits” (4:6), which he compared to the chorus of ancient Greek drama. Hardy insisted, however, “In point of literary form, the scheme of contrasted Choruses and other conventions of this
external feature was shaped with a single view to the modern expression of a modern outlook, and in frank divergence from classical and other dramatic precedent which ruled the ancient voicings of ancient themes” (4:7). What gives this apparatus its “modern outlook,” I would suggest, and a tentative foothold in what would become “modernism,” is precisely the way Hardy destabilizes the judgments of this Overworld. Its speakers are mere shadows of the divine, and they are often just as confused as the human players on the ground. As a group, the Spirits from a sort of intellectual bric-a-brac, embodying the mental tools that history up through the nineteenth century had handed down to make sense of human events: “Their doctrines are but tentative, and are advanced with little eye to a clear metaphysic, or systematized philosophy warranted to lift ‘the burthen of the mystery’ of this unintelligible world” (4:6). In other words, the spirit apparatus of the poem does not embody one clear world or religious view but all of the different orientations toward God that Hardy entertained over the course of his literary career: a divine essence that is occasionally sympathetic but more often coldly rational and ironic. For example, the Spirit of the Pities and its chorus, which holds the most in common with ancient Greek choruses, was “impressionable and inconsistent in its views,” according to Hardy, “which sway hither and thither as wrought on by events.” The Spirit of the Years “approximates to the passionless Insight of the Ages” (4:7). These Spirits exchange views with “Spirits Sinister and Ironic” and a fourth “Spirit of Rumour,” who underscores humankind’s and the Spirits’ own inability to see the working of the Will. The Spirit of the Years best captures the overall power and limitations of the supernatural spectators in the poem:

_The ruling was that we should witness things_
_And not dispute them. To the drama, then._
_Emprizes over-Channel are the key_
_To this land’s stir and ferment.—Thither we. (I.1.1.95–98)_

The Spirits are gifted with the speed to shift rapidly from one geographic location to the next, developing insights which the reader shares. In the end, however, they remain spectators: they have the power to expose the Will but not direct it in any way. Hardy thus contains our understanding at the same time he sets it free. The Spirits’ variety of perspectives embody changes in notions of place, time, and speed that had taken place up to the beginning of the twentieth century and that could provide a new if still limited outlook on history and culture. Hence as well the peculiar diction and tone of the Spirits, who sound at once archaic or Blakean in the manner of _Europe: A Prophecy_ (1794) but who also inhabit a world contemporary with H. G.
Wells, one in which life exists on other planets and “systems of the suns go sweeping on / With all their many-mortaled planet train / In mathematic roll unceasingly” (I.1.6.7–9).

Ultimately, as readers of The Dynasts, we see earth from above and below, and we are made familiar with the limitations of human vision while being invited to look beyond it. Such is the dual nature of the poem’s rooted cosmopolitanism, a perspective perhaps best captured in the poem’s opening stage direction, one that, as we have seen, Hardy had been contemplating for a long time before he started to write the poem:

The nether sky opens, and Europe is disclosed as a prone and emaciated figure, the Alps shaping like a backbone, and the branching mountain-chains like ribs, the peninsular plateau of Spain forming a head. Broad and lengthy lowlands stretch from the north of France across Russia like a grey-green garment hemmed by the Ural mountains and the glistening Arctic Ocean.

The point of view then sinks downwards through space, and draws near to the surface of the perturbed countries, where the peoples, distressed by events which they did not cause, are seen writhing, crawling, heaving, and vibrating in their various cities and nationalities. (4:20)

The poem periodically returns us to this distanced view and the universal perspective it casts on human events. At the same time, Hardy wishes to dwell near the surface, where “old laws operate yet,” understanding the energy that agitates individual soldiers within their own limited points of view, limitations we all share within our various local, national, and continental spaces. The poem dwells on the failure of a true cosmopolitan idea to emerge in the Napoleonic Era—showing why the world was not ready for it, in some sense, as its human actors struggle to see beyond themselves. Napoleon himself, in fact, the principal human actor in Hardy’s poem, best captures these competing impulses as someone who manipulates national pride at the same time he gestures uncertainly toward a cosmopolitan future.

Cosmopolitanism on the Ground:
The Struggle for a Wider Human Perspective in The Dynasts

The Dynasts is in many ways a critical reevaluation of Napoleon’s efforts to spearhead the nineteenth century’s first movement toward pan-Europeanism. In his memoirs, which Hardy consulted for the poem, Napoleon portrays
himself as “the natural mediator between the old and the new order,” someone who had hoped to initiate a new “European confederacy” (association européenne), one with “the same principles, the same system, every where—a European code; a European court of appeal.” In the future, Europe “would soon have formed, in reality, but one and the same people, and every one, who travelled, would have every where found himself in one common country.”

To liberate Europe, Napoleon invites the inhabitants of other nations to look beyond national allegiances, and for a brief moment this did become the Continent’s future. Napoleon, however, fails to appreciate the power of the national identities he has violated and how, in the wake of his own shift toward authoritarianism, ideals of pan-European progress would begin to sound hollow.

Hardy combines these tactical oversights on Napoleon’s part with certain flaws of character to convey an overall impression of someone ahead of his times, so to speak, but not ahead of himself—someone quick to abandon high ideals in favor of personal dynastic ambition. As the Spirit of the Pities remarks, Napoleon

\begin{quote}
Professed at first to flout antiquity,
Scorn limp conventions, smile at mouldy thrones,
And level dynasts down to journeymen!—
Yet he, advancing swiftly on that track
Whereby his active soul, fair Freedom’s child,
Makes strange decline, now labours to achieve
The thing it overthrew. (I.1.6.33–39)
\end{quote}

Hardy adds a further dimension to this image of Napoleon as self-betrayer: he is not simply a tyrant or megalomaniac but someone whose concepts of government and international relations seem profoundly oversimplified, even outmoded. Despite brief moments of cosmopolitan vision, he lacks the willingness to commit himself in that direction. His obsession with England, for instance, seems underpinned by a belief that by choosing to influence world affairs through trade and finance, England is underhandedly avoiding the full-blown military showdown that Napoleon deems natural between rival states. In attempting to win Tsar Alexander as an ally and a supporter of his “continental system” that would boycott English goods in Europe, Napoleon labels England

\begin{quote}
That country which enchains the trade of towns
With such bold reach as to monopolize,
\end{quote}
Among the rest, the whole of Petersburg’s—
Ay!—through her purse, friend, as the lender there!—
Shutting that purse, she may incite to—what?
Muscovy’s fall, its ruler’s murdering. (II.1.8.38–43)

England’s naval power frustrates Napoleon, but more important, the country’s grip on world markets—the linchpin of the emerging Victorian free-trade empire—hinders his ability to influence other states. Through military conquest and forming alliances, Napoleon hopes to overcome England’s commercial power. Throughout this scene, he has been appealing to a camaraderie he and Alexander share as absolute rulers: “By treating personally we speed affairs / More in an hour than they [ministers] in blundering months” (II.1.8.23–24). International relations, however, have become more complicated, and power gained via laissez-faire capitalism and free trade, as Hardy knows from historical hindsight, will play a more decisive role in determining the status nations hold in relation to each other. Nations that control commerce, and need global stability to do so, would soon begin to co-opt Napoleon’s own rhetoric of European brotherhood. Napoleon’s geopolitical vision boils down to a simple military power play between countries: “I want nothing on this Continent: / The English only are my enemies” (I.4.5.32–33).

Napoleon remains deeply concerned that history portray him as a noble and progressive figure, but Hardy again reveals his tendencies toward oversimplification: he is too quick to justify his more expedient decisions as being forced upon him by fate. Napoleon correctly acknowledges the difficulty of challenging the old order of Europe, but misses how he might have resisted those forces:

I came too late in time
To assume the prophet or the demi-god,
A part past playing now. My only course
To make good showance to posterity
Was to implant my line upon the throne.
And how shape that, if now extinction nears?
Great men are meteors that consume themselves
To light the earth. This is my burnt-out hour. (III.7.9.44–51)

At first, Napoleon’s somewhat fatalistic interpretation of himself might seem to accord well with the forces of history at work in Hardy’s poem: the Immanent Will would indeed seem to undermine the “great men” theory
of history and deny individual attempts to intervene in its course—to disrupt the powerful will of nations. Napoleon, however, misreads his failure: if anything, he is born not too late but too soon. He does not challenge himself to use the power he does have to redirect history and thus is incorrect to imply that his only recourse was to become a “dynast” himself. As the Spirits emphasize, Napoleon is one “of the few in Europe who discern / The working of the Will” (II.1.8.208–9), who has the ability to stand back from events and see larger forces at work. Rather than use this knowledge to effect some kind of progress, as Hardy implies he might, Napoleon chooses to turn away from knowledge of the Will and to act according to established patterns. Holding onto power has become his main concern: he will gild the dome of the Invalides, he cynically observes,

To give them something  
To think about. They’ll take to it like children,  
And argue in the cafés right and left  
On its artistic points.—So they’ll forget  
The woes of Moscow. (III.1.12.86–90)

Napoleon reveals that he is not powerless to shape the actions of the people and that he might channel the national will of France in a progressive direction. But instead he makes conquest and expansion of borders the goals of the nation he leads. Like so many of the leaders in the poem, he has finally become a dynast—motivated by power—but with the added tragedy that he acts while recognizing that his aims are ultimately pointless.

As Napoleon himself gives in to imperial ambitions and imposes French political hegemony in Europe, he so inspires the rest of the Continent: national wills that had been briefly rechanneled begin to remobilize. Speaking of Prussia’s first entry into the conflict, Hardy personifies the collective reawakening of these ancient tribal allegiances:

*The soul of a nation distrest  
Is aflame,  
And heaving with eager unrest  
In its aim  
To assert its old prowess, and stouten its chronicled fame!* (II.1.3.75–79)

Napoleon ends up unleashing nationalist powers rather than containing them, and the Immanent Will soon reverts to its old forms. In the final assessment, it remains difficult to pinpoint just how much Hardy thinks Napoleon might have changed history and laid the groundwork for Euro-
ean union had he steered a less imperial course. He is chief among the “dynasts” in the poem, and more than anyone else, he personifies the contradictions at the heart of the term: on one level, a dynasty aims to implement some kind of ordered, benevolent progress for the future. On a more basic level, however, dynasties simply perpetuate the old order. At the very least, it is clear that Hardy feels Napoleon embodies a moment of lost opportunity—undone by himself and a world still grounded in the dynastic ambitions that dictate political action. Hardy’s Napoleon, perhaps, is less a historical “intermediary” than someone who stranded himself at the crossroads of history.

If *The Dynasts* remains mostly unforgiving of Napoleon, England by no means represents a democratic oasis in a world of dynastic ambition. Napoleon, at least, recognizes the need for change while England stands resolute against modernity or anything resembling a postnational idea of Europe. By portraying England’s leaders in this way, Hardy again broadens our perspective and prevents settled identification with one nationality. In the afterglow of Trafalgar, Pitt’s famous remark that “England has saved herself, by her exertions: / She will, I trust, save Europe by her example!” (I.5.5.75–76) has a double-edged meaning, for at this point in history, aristocratic England sets an ambiguous example at best. King George, for instance, calls Napoleon “[t]his wicked bombadier of dynasties / That rule by right Divine” (I.4.1.98–99). England’s ultimate goal, according to one minister, is that “[t]he independence of the Continent / May be assured, and all the rumpled flags / Of famous dynasties so foully mauled, / Extend their honoured hues as heretofore” (I.1.5.10–13). Hardy also takes pains to reveal the propagandistic uses of Nelson’s victory even as he celebrates it in other respects. Granted, the battle of Trafalgar receives due reverence in the poem, rendered complete with Nelson’s instructions to the surgeon to attend to those wounded who can be saved and his famous dying words, “Kiss me, Hardy” (I.5.4.144). But in the next scene, Hardy shows how easily such acts of individual heroism can be manipulated for suspect political ends. Nelson’s glorified death helps to ensure the commitment of the people in a larger dynastic struggle that is not really theirs. At a rally outside the Guildhall in London, a citizen proclaims, “They say he’s to be tombed in marble, at Paul’s or Westminster. We shall see him if he lays in state. It will make a patriotic spectacle for a fine day” (I.5.5.5–7). The myth of Nelson is undercut in a more macabre way by another citizen who repeats the rumor that the crew of the *Victory* drank the rum in which his body was preserved. Viewing Nelson from these different perspectives serves to forestall Hardy’s own flights of nostalgia. Hardy, recall, felt a dim personal connection to Nelson via his forbear and namesake Captain Thomas Hardy. *The Dynasts* also invites us to
consider the plight of Nelson’s foe at Trafalgar, Admiral Pierre Villeneuve, by devoting a scene to the unjust circumstances that led to his suicide. These multiple perspectives, and the commentary of the Spirits, form complementary parts of Hardy’s comprehensive critique of deceptively stable, nationalist interpretations of events.

The poem explores historical events from multiple social levels as well as multiple national ones, reminding one of the similar shift in focus often attributed to the novel following the Napoleonic Wars. As Georg Lukács argues in *The Historical Novel*, “It was the French Revolution, the revolutionary wars and the rise and fall of Napoleon, which for the first time made history a mass experience, and moreover on a European scale.” For Hardy, however, the epic verse drama would be the genre that most fully encompassed these changes, the one that could best convey this sense of people moving en masse. At the same time, Hardy’s cosmopolitan perspective does not lose sight of the more minor participants in history—how people, especially individual soldiers, operate within and against these collective forces. To illustrate the kind of change in perspective history undergoes in the poem, one needs only to turn to Hardy’s novel of the period, *The Trumpet-Major*, which performs, to some extent, the kind of ideological work Lukács attributes to the historical novel: aligning the interests of all classes of society under the banner of national identity, an identity that before had been more exclusively the property of the aristocracy.

Hardy grounds *The Trumpet-Major* in a local ethos and setting which the global reach of the war, and the disruption it caused to the lives of so many, never really penetrates. The war’s destructive consequences come off more as awkward, somewhat perfunctory intrusions. Soldiers’ deaths are reported or foreshadowed at the ends of passages that otherwise celebrate the spectacle that the conflict has given rise to on a local level. In some sense, Overcombe Mill, where soldiers gather together in moments of camaraderie and good cheer, cannot be integrated with the European stage of the war:

Three others followed with similar remarks, to each of which Anne blushingly replied as well as she could, wishing them a prosperous voyage, easy conquest, and a speedy return.

But, alas, for that! Battles and skirmishes, advances and retreats, fevers and fatigues, told hard on Anne’s gallant friends in the coming time. Of the seven upon whom these wishes were bestowed, five, including the trumpet-major, were dead men within the few following years, and their bones left to moulder in the land of their campaigns.
As revealed here, the trumpet-major himself is killed in the end, exiting the novel “to blow his trumpet till silenced for ever upon one of the bloody battle-fields of Spain” (377). While obviously not denying the death and destruction of war, such passages place the war in a dimly realized future that is always outside the action of the novel, like Napoleon himself—a distant, unreal ogre, his invasion a threat that will never come to fruition. *The Trumpet-Major* exists in an idealized past that has not yet passed out of “the days of high-waisted and muslin-gowned women” (59), to quote the novel’s opening line, a description that also betrays its focus on middle-class, domestic identity and spaces. This is not to suggest that a text focusing on the home-front experience of war inevitably downplays war’s consequences. Hardy, however, seems largely unconcerned with portraying the devastation that war could wreak on domestic life, except to note the eventual demise of some characters. In terms of war, *The Trumpet-Major* recovers a past that Hardy’s audience, with memories of England’s bungled efforts in the Crimea, is invited to look on with a degree of fondness: “For it was a period when romance had not so greatly faded out of military life as it has done in these days of short service, heterogeneous mixing, and transient campaigns” (376).

In *The Dynasts*, the reader travels abroad with these soldiers and learns that locally formed units are in truth destined for a particularly acute form of suffering. Hardy drives this point home in his description of the retreat under Sir John Moore from northwest Spain to Coruna, the low point of British efforts to expel French forces from the Iberian Peninsula. We observe the retreat from the cellar of an abandoned farmhouse where a number of soldiers have hidden themselves. Hardy recreates the impressions of soldiers clinging somewhat tragically to notions of home as they try to make sense of hectic and unfamiliar surroundings. Hardy’s description of the interior stresses the intoxicated, half-blind despair of the deserters:

In the gloom of the cellar are heaps of damp straw, in which ragged figures are lying half-buried, many of the men in the uniform of English line-regiments, and the women and children in clouts of all descriptions, some being nearly naked. At the back of the cellar is revealed, through a burst door, an inner vault, where are discernible some wooden-hooped wine-casks; in one sticks a gimlet, and the broaching-cork of another has been driven in. The wine runs into pitchers, washing-basins, shards, chamber-vessels, and other extemporized receptacles. Most of the inmates are drunk; some to insensibility. (4:266)
War gives rise to a kind of perverse cultural exchange in the scene: soldiers and refugees are thrown together indiscriminately, joined in desperation, but still ultimately alienated and isolated from one another. Eyeing the confusion outside, which includes the destruction of wounded animals and the execution of deserters, one of the cellar inmates remarks,

Would that I were at home in England again, where there's old-fashioned tipple, and a proper God A'mighty instead of this eternal 'Ooman and baby;—ay, at home a-leaning against old Bristol Bridge, and no questions asked, and the winter sun slanting friendly over Baldwin Street as 'a used to do! 'Tis my very belief, though I have lost all sure reckoning, that if I were there, and in good health, 'twould be New Year's day about now. What it is over here I don't know. Ay, to-night we should be a-setting in the tap of the "Adam and Eve"—lifting up the tune of "The Light of the Moon."

(II.3.1.51–60)

In *The Dynasts*, Hardy takes those scenes only dimly foreshadowed in *The Trumpet-Major* and reveals just how isolated, just how unprepared an intensely local upbringing leaves one for contact with other nationalities. Literally, the soldiers have become disoriented: England, it seems, occupies another corner of the universe entirely, with a different god. Time and space likewise seem to operate according to different laws. Hardy, in fact, subtly reminds us here that uniform time keeping and time-zones were inventions that followed later in the nineteenth century, just as earlier in the poem, he underscored such changes by placing one scene at “Rainbarrows’ Beacon,” one of the pre-electric telegraphs along England’s shore that would be lit up in case of invasion—thus spreading the word “quickly” inland. For Hardy, then, the kind of space-time compression that later technological advances helped more visibly to perpetuate had already been set in motion during the Napoleonic period, and his poem records the efforts of the people of the time to cope with these changes.

As the soldiers lie lost in this limbo, the action of the war continues outside as a drama in itself that can be only passively observed. Napoleon himself suddenly appears, leading one deserter to exclaim, “Yes, I could pick him off now!” (II.3.2.9–10). But we sense there is no real possibility of this—obviously, because Napoleon does not die here—but also because he seems to walk on a different stage entirely. The deserters, in contrast, are powerless, displaced spectators of the war, with no real role to play as events, propelled by the Immanent Will, proceed along on a preordained course.
One senses an intense empathy for the soldiers on Hardy’s part as the Spirit of the Pities remarks,

\[
\text{On earth below}
\]

\[
\text{Are men—unnatured and mechanic-drawn—}
\]

\[
\text{Mixt nationalities in row and row;}
\]

\[
\text{Wheeling them to and fro}
\]

\[
\text{In moves dissociate from their souls’ demand,}
\]

\[
\text{For dynasts’ ends that few even understand! (II.6.4.8–13)}
\]

Overall, the spirit commentary lends the conflict an air of tragic inevitability, making it part of a regrettable ongoing historical cycle, rather than, as in The Trumpet-Major, an event locked in an idealized past, when war was more palatable. When juxtaposed with the prose passages above encompassing the soldiers’ points of view, the Pities’ remarks underscore again how Hardy’s unique admixture of genres, of poetry and prose, takes us places the novel alone could not—not even Tolstoy’s great rendering of the same epoch. Its other achievements aside, of which Hardy was well aware, War and Peace (1869) could not perform the same refractive, multi-faceted layering of perspective as Hardy’s epic-drama. That does not make The Dynasts a better work of art, necessarily, but it does remind us that the novel did not render the long poem obsolete either, as much as it may have marginalized its cultural viability in other ways.

A 1920 production of The Dynasts by the Oxford University Dramatic Society testifies in another way to the poem’s remarkable ability to translate across multiple forms. Their rendition of the retreat to Coruna appears to have struck an especially profound chord in audience and performers alike, many of whom had only just returned from the battlefields of the Great War.30 Alienated and hunkered down in a dim cellar—a kind of trench—the players may indeed have felt as if they were reenacting what had only recently passed. The scenes of displacement over which the Spirits brood emphasize the need to envision new ways of international connection, a travel that transforms without destroying in the process. By expanding our view of history and individuals to encompass stages on the scale of identity beyond Wessex, Hardy makes it difficult to see life the same way again. As one review of the Oxford production noted, The Dynasts, “like all great works of art, makes us think greatly, not of ourselves, but of mankind, nor only of England but also of the enemies of England.”31
Cosmopolitanism from the Ground Up: 
Toward a Postnational Immanent Will

Overlooking the retreat to Coruna described in the previous section, the Spirit Ironic remarks, “Quaint poesy, and real romance of war!” (II.3.1.73), to which the Spirit of the Pities rejoins, “Mock on, Shade, if thou wilt! But others find / Poesy ever lurk where pit-pats poor mankind!” (74–75). Their exchange typifies in many ways the ongoing conflict among the poem’s different spirit commentators. More emotionally invested in the drama going on beneath them, the Pities come to represent values of empathy and hope that persist in the face of the tragic events recorded in the poem. The Pities are the only Spirits who seem willing to challenge the blind engine of the Immanent Will, voicing the human will for a God who takes moral, spiritual charge over its agents. At another point, the Pities cry, “Something within me aches to pray / To some Great Heart, to take away / This evil day, this evil day!” (II.6.5.96–98). Implicit in the Pities’ description is the desire that a “soul” emerge to overpower the mechanical forces of the dynasts who merely execute the Will. Hardy’s Ironic spirit replies, “where do Its compassions sit? / Yea, where abides the Heart of It? / Is it where sky-fires flame and flit, / Or solar craters spew and spit, / Or ultra-stellar night-webs knit?” (II.5.6.100–104). The Ironic Spirit reminds the Pities here of the essentially material nature of the universe—filled with movement and energy but missing any kind of spiritual essence or purpose (apart from themselves, that is, and they can only watch). The dynasts of the poem are motivated by this same understanding. As the term implies, they are concerned with maintaining power over the material world and regard individuals as subjects only, means to power rather than spiritual beings or souls. The poem remains stuck at this philosophical impasse. The Heart that the Pities seek must have some sort of location—it must be grounded somewhere—but the universe, as the Spirits Ironic describe it, seems merely to hold infinite stores of matter for the Will and its dynastic agents to act upon. To paraphrase Tennyson, there appears to be no far-off, divine spiritual event to which the whole creation of The Dynasts moves.

The way out of this impasse, however, is for humanity to reinvent a god of compassion and lovingkindness, to advance intellectually and ethically to the point that this benevolent impulse resides immanently within us, as the Will already does. Love thus becomes a powerful collectivizing force in the poem, although its presence is mostly overshadowed by the tragedy of war. The Pities nonetheless never miss an opportunity to emphasize the enduring human capacity for compassionate fellow feeling, even in what is for Hardy the premature, corruptible form of religion. Early on in the poem, as the
Spirits overlook Napoleon’s coronation as emperor, the Spirit of the Pities asks, “What is the creed that these rites disclose?” to which the Spirit of the Years replies,

\[
\begin{align*}
A \text{ local cult, called } & \text{Christianity,} \\
\text{Which the wild dramas of the wheeling spheres} & \\
\text{Include, with divers others such, in dim} & \\
\text{Pathetical and brief parentheses,} & \\
\text{Beyond whose span, uninfluenced, unconcerned,} & \\
\text{The systems of the suns go sweeping on} & \\
\text{With all their many-mortaled planet train} & \\
\text{In mathematic roll unceasingly. (I.1.6.2–9)}
\end{align*}
\]

From one angle, this is Hardy’s proclamation of Christianity’s cosmological demise in the face of nineteenth-century discoveries in science and of its decreasing relevance in other spheres of intellectual life. As noted earlier, the Spirits’ astronomical vantage point recalls the “big picture” of H. G. Wells and other late Victorian pioneers of science fiction. In the *War of the Worlds* (1900), for instance, Wells’s representative Anglican clergyman is utterly bewildered by this post-Darwinian race of Martian beings with “intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic.”

But in another sense, Hardy is less dismissive than Wells and casts Christianity as one of many attempts by sentient beings throughout the universe to understand its workings—to assert some kind of authority over its blind Will. Through the Pities, Hardy also repudiates the idea of a universe governed by survival of the fittest alone and the corollary notion that war was a necessary political exercise in determining who should reside at the top.

The Pities’ reply to the Spirit of the Years contains this crucial revelation about Christianity: “I did not recognize it here, forsooth; / Though in its early, lovingkindly days / Of gracious purpose it was much to me” (I.1.6.10–12).

When juxtaposed with the possibility of the Immanent Will becoming conscious of itself, the Pities’ observation represents a radical affirmation of mankind’s ability to recover itself, to craft new forms of fellowship that grow out of the same need that led to the invention of God. This impulse should not be cast as a rejection of atheism *per se* on Hardy’s part, but he does acknowledge that a space remains for some kind of spiritual, loving force to become the essence of humanity. It is a force, however, that requires human activation.

Consider again another of the poem’s X-ray moments when Hardy lifts the veil on the Will’s hidden workings within the body. Human beings, in essence, become “will tissues”:
[A] preternatural clearness possesses the atmosphere of the battle-field, in which the scene becomes anatomized and the living masses of humanity transparent. The controlling Immanent Will appears therein, as a brain-like network of currents and ejections, twitching, interpenetrating, entangling, and thrusting hither and thither the human forms. (4.160)

At this juncture of *The Dynasts*, as we have seen, the Will brings people together only ironically, in a kind of belligerent anti-cosmopolitanism: they congregate merely to practice killing each other. Nonetheless, the exposure of the will-web implies that human beings are hardwired, so to speak, to act collectively and could, conceivably, serve some entity beyond the nation. Hardy expressed as much in his preliminary notes for what would become *The Dynasts*: “We—the people—Humanity, a collective personality—(Thus ‘we’ could be engaged in the battle of Hohenlinden, say, and in the battle of Waterloo)—dwell with genial humour on ‘our’ getting into a rage for we know not what” (*Life* 449). As with the Immanent Will itself, this connection is already present within human beings—it infiltrates and connects both armies—even if they cannot recognize it among their various local and national subdivisions. Seeing the connection (and acting purposefully on it, unlike Napoleon) is the key to breaking free of the same destructive cycles of history. What the poem finally offers is not the possibility of God in the traditional sense but human beings taking control of their own fate, of the realignment of humanity with the most powerful forces of the universe. In this way, *The Dynasts* embodies a mixture of spiritual and political ambitions not all that different from the ones that motivated Barrett Browning’s “Italy and the World.” As the Spirit of the Pities surmises, “*must not Its heart awake, / Promptly tending / To Its Mending / In a genial germing purpose, and for loving-kindness’ sake?*” (III. After Scene, 96–99).

In geopolitical terms, the evolution of the Immanent Will mirrors a kind of all-encompassing, border-crossing sympathy. One must see the forces that move nations and avoid becoming swept up by them; one must gain, essentially, the perspective that the Spirits hold. The full expression of the poem’s last words, which up to now I have quoted only in part, makes this mandate clear:

*But—a stirring thrills the air*  
*Like to sounds of joyance there*  
*That the rages*  
*Of the ages*  
*Shall be canceled, and deliverance offered from the darts that were,*
Consciousness the Will informing, till It fashion all things fair!
(III. After Scene.105–10)

The Immanent Will’s becoming aware of itself is essentially our becoming aware of it: individuals and nations are encouraged to act with a wider awareness of their interconnectedness. Such a realization, as Herbert F. Tucker suggests, would enable humankind to transcend the more passive, ethically restricted role of the Spirits: “we are enjoined to practice a form of participant-observation that becomes possible only by acknowledging our entanglement within the larger fabric of history of which even Hardy’s immense cinematic canvas is but a small portion.” That cinematic lens, whether embodied in Hardy’s stage directions or in the commentary of the Spirits, sees and reveals hidden connections to readers with vantage points, for instance, that stress the relative nearness of London and Paris when viewed from space: “A view now nocturnal, now diurnal, from on high over the Straits of Dover, and stretching from city to city. By night Paris and London seem each as a little swarm of lights surrounded by a halo; by day as a confused glitter of white and grey” (4.197). Hardy seems to deliberately invoke the religious connotations of “halo” in this instance: there is indeed something magical or holy about masses of humanity living together peacefully and cooperatively. The light of day may expose this vision as a trick of perspective, perhaps, but the poem’s aim is to get readers to look to the future as much as to the reality of the present.

At the point in history covered by The Dynasts, however, the opportunities to dramatize such coming together are rare and mostly form brief counterpoints to the destruction of the war. While war uproots and displaces, it connects as well. Alliances of people come about either to invade nations or to fend off invasion, as when, before Leipzig, “Nationalities from the uttermost parts of Asia here meet those from the Atlantic edge of Europe for the first and last time” (5.80). The fiercest moments of conflict can also lead to poignant scenes of connection, even between enemies. During a momentary truce in the battle of Talavera, the Spirit of the Pities comments,

What do I see but thirsty, throbbing hands
From these inimic hosts defiling down
In homely need towards the prattling stream
That parts their enmities, and drinking there!
They get to grasping hands across the rill,
Sealing their sameness as earth’s sojourners.—What more could plead the
It was just this realization of sameness—and the threat it might pose to the proper business of war—that made the Christmas Day truce of 1914, when some soldiers left their posts to momentarily share greetings with the enemy, the last of its kind. Hand-shaking among enemy combatants stands out precisely because of the potential it reveals for a very different kind of exchange between nations, underscoring a latent tendency in humankind that might begin to flourish under different social circumstances, in a post-dynastic world.

**Coda:**

**World War I and The Dynasts**

*The Dynasts* finally invokes the Victorian faith in progress and a cosmopolitan future, as do all of the poets studied here to varying degrees of confidence: Hardy affirms poetry’s place in envisioning new forms of social, political, and spiritual cohesion. However, just as the Great War became a historical referendum on Victorian optimism, so too would it pass judgment on *The Dynasts*. Hardy later claimed that he would not have ended the poem so optimistically had he known that “so mad and brutal a war” sat waiting just over the historical horizon. The war “destroyed all Hardy’s belief in the gradual ennoblement of man” (Life 398). To say as much was to admit that this most committed of pessimists had let his guard down in *The Dynasts*, choosing to side with an uncertain future rather than the more hardened realism voiced by the Spirit of the Years. Hardy would return to form, in a sense, with the world-weary cynicism of “Channel Firing” (1914), where a spiritually and morally bankrupt Europe gears itself up for the next great conflict, “all nations striving strong to make / Red war yet redder” (13–14).  

If the war made the optimistic ending to *The Dynasts* seem premature, it did not necessarily invalidate it. To some extent, current events were now dramatizing the same fluctuation between ancient and modern and national and international that characterized the poem. Another comment Hardy made around the same time reveals a reaction to the war more akin to that of Pities in *The Dynasts*:

> It was seldom he had felt so heavy at heart as in seeing his old view of the gradual bettering of human nature . . . completely shattered by the events
of 1914 and onwards. War, he had supposed, had grown too coldly scientific to kindle again for long all the ardent romance which had characterized it down to Napoleonic times, when the most intense battles were over in a day, and the most exciting tactics and strategy led to the death of comparatively few combatants. (Life 395)

From this perspective, the war ultimately affirmed the mix of pessimism and optimism that was The Dynasts. Likewise, the struggle for a just peace that followed the conflict, along with efforts to forge a new political framework for internationalism—what would become the League of Nations—would underscore the difficulties Hardy faced when he attempted to craft his own cosmopolitan future in a poem where “old laws” were still in full force. Was any such effort to prove hopelessly naive or doomed to collapse under the weight of its own contradictions? Would human history be forever at the mercy of the blindly destructive Immanent Will? An actual participant in the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, John Maynard Keynes, made perhaps the most famous critical reflection on the poem’s implications for these questions:

The proceedings of Paris all had this air of extraordinary importance and unimportance at the same time. The decisions seemed charged with consequences to the future of human society; yet the air whispered that the word was not flesh, that it was futile, insignificant, of no effect, dissociated from events; and one felt most strongly the impression, described by Tolstoy in War and Peace or by Hardy in The Dynasts, of events marching on to their fated conclusion uninfluenced and unaffected by the cerebrations of Statesmen in Council.36

Keynes was witnessing firsthand just how difficult it was to grasp the forces that moved nations and just how untenable the optimistic conclusion to The Dynasts might be. The hope that the ambitions of leaders and nations could somehow be controlled and predicted by diplomats and treaties seemed vain. Indeed, Keynes’ thoughts run against the grain of the times, when there was a new sense of optimism regarding the possibilities for world cooperation. The goal of the League of Nations, like that of Hardy’s self-aware Immanent Will, was to check nationalistic excess through implementation of an impartial global vision. It was an idea, we know now, that proved premature in a Europe still fully engaged in colonial enterprises and by no means depleted of nationalistic rhetoric. Cosmopolitanism was an ideal that yet had a long way to go.
Hardy’s final words on *The Dynasts* are worth recalling as we attempt to assess this poem’s ultimate statement about war, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism—what it achieves and what it misses. One month before his death in January 1928, Hardy chose to preface a proposed French translation of the poem with the following remarks:

In reflecting on this it appeared to me that there was one very special reason why a version of this drama should be given in French. How many times, in the course of centuries, have the two countries of France and England been drawn into conflicts because of codes or irresponsible governments, when the people themselves would have preferred, quite rightly, to tend to their own business! Such was notably the case in the epoch in which this drama is located—of 1805 to 1815. I said to myself that with the passing of time the perception of that fact would lead French readers to confront the events with neither passion nor prejudice. The whole spectacle, in all truth, can now be viewed, as much in France as in England, as a singular phenomenon in which, as in all war, human reason had little part.37

On one level the passage is a straightforward, routine anti-war expression, but it also raises more complicated questions. First, if governments embody aggressive forces antithetical to the sentiments of most individuals, is it still possible for people to intervene to prevent these forces from burgeoning into international conflict? What does it mean for a people to “tend their own business” in a world where, of necessity, nations must act cooperatively—when the people’s business is increasingly with each other, sometimes with individuals thousands of miles away? What, in sum, are the possibilities for peaceful international exchange?

One could argue that the alternatives to war and firmly entrenched national identities are only dimly realized in *The Dynasts*, positioned as it is historically at the beginning of a century that would only amplify violence on behalf of national interests. Indeed, to read *The Dynasts* is to realize how little has changed in the hundred years that have intervened since its first publication: there remains the feeling that a tenable global vision must emerge, but at the same time, there seems to be a growing need, in the face of the homogenizing tendencies of globalization, to preserve smaller cultural units grounded in common ethnicity and language. Gaining perspective on those levels of identity has, if anything, become more complex than it was for Hardy. *The Dynasts* took cosmopolitanism as far as it could travel in the early twentieth century, and it remains for us to continue to probe its possibilities—to articulate what a cosmopolitan world truly is and to understand the role of poetry and other aesthetic forms in achieving it.