

***Thomas Hardy, Monism, and the Carnival Tradition: the One and the Many in "The Dynasts,"* by G. Glen Wickens. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2002. Xix + 255. ISBN 0-8020-4864-1. \$60 (hardback).**

Thomas Hardy's *The Dynasts* has often been described as an epic account of the Napoleonic Wars. G. Glen Wickens's book uses Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque to counter those critiques of the play that have dwelt on its "sombre epic themes and tragic tone," by relocating "it within the serio-comical genres" (xi) associated with menippean satire and the novel. Much of the book's early analysis focuses on the voices of the Spirits of the Overworld within the play, where the Spirit of the Years appears to strive to create itself as the monological voice of unity within the text and supreme interpreter of the Immanent Will. As Wickens shows, however, this voice is neither consistent, nor is it unchallenged. As with Bakhtin's "authentic novel," the text's low voices bring a laughter that serves as more than comic relief in a tragic tale; rather, they voice an alternative ideological disposition.

Monism is the theory which states that reality consists of only one substance, and that substance is most often thought to be God or Nature. Wickens examines the dynamics within the debates surrounding monism and concludes that, in the late nineteenth century, the philosophy moved "from a materialistic to a spiritualistic theory of the universe" (11). The intent here is to show the dialogic nature of monism, and Wickens argues that the dialogism and movement within the philosophical debate is replicated through the voices of the Spirits in the play: as he writes, "There is not just one voice for any of the main Spirits but many and these never completely merge with a single attribute of human nature" (9). Wickens employs what Bakhtin would have defined as a struggle between centripetal and centrifugal forces within the debate, in order to illustrate how absolute monism, formulated by the likes of the Danish thinker Harald Håffding, who believed that true religion safeguarded the highest spiritual values and provided the stage on which "man is both spectator and actor" (11), was countered by competing definitions. The voice of the Years replicates the absolutist's philosophical stance by speaking for the Immanent Will, but at all points is challenged by the voices of the other Spirits. Wickens ably shows that it is the monological tendency within absolute theories of religion and science that opens them to a Bakhtinian analysis. As each tries to close down all discussions of the unknowable, it becomes "the perfect target for parody" (53).

Hardy's juxtaposition of blank verse and prose is important to Wickens's argument, because it highlights the play's movement between literary genres. The locus of this part of his argument suggests that those characters who are free from the epic scheme represented by the Years, voice their thoughts in prose, as a way of sounding an unofficial, carnivalesque alternative truth: "In our actual reading of *The Dynasts* we confront the mixing of languages, all of which do not lie on the same

plane" (94). The blank verse signals the lofty intentions of those who use it; the prose reveals another mocking, carnivalesque truth. Wickens concentrates on the central figure of Napoleon; a natural subject of the carnivalesque in his part as a decrowner of kings. He demonstrates the contiguity of carnivalesque disorder with warfare, in which orderly ranks are prone to rupture, high idealism falls to human depravity, and solemnity to grim laughter. Armies are depicted as grotesque bodies, in which the generals are the heads and the rank and file the body and limbs. Useful comment is also made on the topsy-turvy language of battle, which resembles that of the "marketplace" and adds to the "carnivalization of war" (143). The epic and the carnivalesque collide at this point, and Wickens claims that Hardy's use of the epic struggle between new and old dynasties is mirrored in the text "as a clash between the novel and older canonical genres" (147). In Bakhtinian thought, the carnivalised novel can never be "canonical any more than Napoleon can be legitimate" (148).

The "power of words, official and unofficial" (169) on the "crowds of war" is addressed. Napoleon is described as an adept manipulator of the crowd in his ability to make "the collective other indistinguishable from his own will" (172). Pitt, meanwhile, relies for his cause "on the eruption of the patriotic crowd" (172). Wickens registers surprise that "critics have not drawn on Bakhtin's account of time-space in the novel" as a way of describing Hardy's way of "organizing and representing the world" (194). The Napoleonic subject matter localizes time, although "Hardy chooses his ordinates to deal with the turning points of the era when history seems to take on some of the logic of the carnival with its crownings and decrownings" (195). Napoleon is also represented at moments of personal crisis. Crisis time, carnival time, and, historic time coincide.

This is a book that needs to be approached with a sound knowledge of the philosophical issues that it embraces, otherwise their inclusion adds little to one's literary understanding of the play. Nevertheless, Wickens's approach convincingly challenges traditional hierarchical ways of organising voices in the text, and suggests new ways of reading Hardy's wider canon. It is difficult in such a brief review to give a full insight into the breadth of this study or the complexity of its arguments, but, suffice to say, he has written a book that is both challenging and illuminating in equal measure. The writing style is always certain and explanations are clearly stated. If this book does not reawaken academic interest in *The Dynasts*, nothing will.

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