

2017

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Recommended Citation

Dennis, Sarah (2017) "The Sepulchres of the Fathers Revisited," *Criticism*: Vol. 59 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol59/iss3/9>

THE SEPULCHRES OF THE FATHERS REVISITED

Sarah Dennis

*"Not Altogether Human":
Pantheism and the Dark Nature
of the American Renaissance* by
Richard Hardack. University
of Massachusetts, 2012. Pp. 304.
\$29.95 paper.

In common retellings of the development of the American Renaissance, transcendentalism has taken on a "transcendent" quality. Rather than relying on continental Romantic discourse and antiquated aesthetic standards, it purported to do something new: in Emerson's words, to convey an "original relationship to the universe."¹ Emerson's predecessors, namely Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, only appear to reinforce the self-directed empowerment that transcendentalism affords. Democratic ideology appears to flourish in Emerson's calls to self-reliance now, of course, that popular culture has preserved Emerson's more inspiring natural aphorisms at the expense of the rest of his oeuvre. But as Richard Hardack clarifies in his latest book, *"Not Altogether Human": Pantheism and the Dark Nature of the American Renaissance*, "common perceptions of Emerson as a champion of self-reliance misread his understanding of 'self' and 'reliance'" (40). As Hardack convincingly argues, Emerson's transcendental turn emerged from a deeply embedded nexus of cultural tensions, including debates about the nature of democracy, representation, and the constitution of bodies, exposed through the once-again emerging doctrine of pantheism.

In true Emersonian style, Richard Hardack unfolds his intricate argument from this fundamental

premise: transcendentalism is not the philosophy of self-reliance and interconnection through Nature that readers frequently interpret it to be (13). Emerson's connection with Melville, which Hardack describes as "parallel and a form of call and response" in reference to pantheism, is perhaps a more salient connection for understanding the complications of transcendentalism in its historical moment than Emerson's other contemporaries (11). Hardack roots this critique in a change of terms: instead of focusing on outmoded assumptions about transcendentalism, Hardack addresses pantheism, which he defines as: "a distillation of Emersonian transcendentalism that deified a 'racialized' nature as universal natural law" (3). Hardack initially identifies direct references to pantheism in texts by well-known American Renaissance writers, such as Hawthorne and Melville, then moves into a broader scope of query, considering pantheistic ideology in a variety of texts produced by well-known authors for both public and private consumption. The frequency of these references to pantheism is notable; perhaps the most compelling example of this lack of critical attention is addressed in Chapter 1, where Hardack discusses Emerson's early reference to Pan in a draft of "Nature," later edited out to read as the term "nature" (54). The embedded ideology of pantheism

in Emerson gives him license to explore "the politically unconscious wing of American transcendentalism" and to accomplish its "underlying cultural work" (6). Pantheism allows Emerson to configure the world in terms of established racial and gender hierarchies that reaffirm the authority and posit the cohesiveness of white male identity.

Identifying Leon Chai's *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance* (Cornell University Press, 1990) as the precursor to this reinterpretation, Hardack embeds his critique in deft archival work that complements Chai's own expansive, transnational archive. Some of the key players in Hardack's history of American pantheism, such as Goethe, are familiar in light of scholarship by Chai, but other archival discoveries, such as his connection between Jonathan Edwards's influence on Unitarian development and, subsequently, the void for pantheism created in its wake, promise to shape scholarship on the American Renaissance in new and dynamic ways (24, 30). By Hardack's own admission, few scholars are currently examining the impact of pantheism on American literature, and the book, at times, feels removed from the critical conversation on early and nineteenth-century American literature as a result. But Hardack's book does not presume to be

following established lines of critical inquiry, and his method, though very current in terms of its use of neo-Marxist theory, diverges from contemporary critical trends in terms of its exacting focus on close reading and its limited scope of interest in terms of primary texts. The argument succeeds because of this intense attention to texts like Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852), Emerson's essays and correspondence, and, to a lesser extent, Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860). Readers get a clear sense of how profoundly embedded pantheism is in the fabric of these key texts and how its omnipresence reveals social and political discord specific to the cultural scene of transcendentalism.

Hardack derives his theoretical perspective primarily from Slavoj Žižek, who becomes key in Hardack's discussion of the commodification and fragmentation of bodies discussed in Chapter 4. Žižek offers a method for discussing what Hardack identifies as the transition to a subject constructed ideologically facilitated by transcendentalism. For Hardack, transcendentalism is an ideology that masks the mechanisms of its production and seeks to obscure its own temporality in order to divorce issues of social inequity from the construction of the white male self. In Žižek's terms, "'objective reality' itself is constituted through the subjective act of transcendental

synthesis"; the subjective must masquerade as a universal truth in order to affect transcendental truth (23). Hardack uses Žižek and complementary neo-Marxist critics, such as Franco Moretti, to unseat the primacy of transcendentalism through its historically grounded complement, pantheism.

Hardack's argument takes shape over four chapters, each dedicated to elements of pantheism that bear on Emerson and Melville's engagement with the topic. Chapter 1 lays out the history of pantheism in the American imaginary, invoking a myriad of print sources that attempted to define and debunk pantheism in the nineteenth century. Hardack's central claim, that "pantheism became a surrogate, subterranean creed for many nineteenth-century writers in the United States, encompassing less a theology than a methodology of self-representation" (50), foregrounds the question of what these authors may have been resisting in their turns to pantheism. Hardack focuses on democratic, scientific, and theological representation in this chapter and meticulously charts out the role that pantheism took on for both its tentative supporters (for whom "the seductive god," to borrow Hardack's chapter title, helped to effect unity among citizens and provide a balm to the modern spirit) and its many detractors. Hardack's archive reveals that pantheism was a contested belief

system that often threw suspicion upon those who showed too much interest in the rites of Pan, and bred suspicion among those authors who failed to find desired unity within a thematic approach to pantheism. To this end, Hardack identifies two works of fiction, Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* and Melville's *Pierre*, that demonstrate their authors' disenchantment with pantheism as their market positions became more tenuous. This connection with the material production of texts and the proliferation of pantheism among select nineteenth-century literary circles becomes a salient point in later chapters as well.

Chapter 2 purports to catalogue all of the ideological elements that pantheism came to define itself against, an enormous task that results in organizational difficulties, which Hardack acknowledges by stating that the chapter may read as a discrete collection of points but that it seeks to bring these points together under the overarching logic of pantheism (62). The chapter achieves its goal with varying degrees of success. Most problematic is Hardack's relatively brief look at race as a galvanizing point for pantheists, who envisioned the aesthetics of pantheism in terms of black femininity as a way to cement white male identity. While Hardack does invoke postcolonial and race theory (through Franz Fanon and W.E.B. Du Bois primarily, though more contemporary

critics also play a role) in describing the racial dynamics of pantheism in texts like *Billy Budd* and *The Marble Faun*, the discussion belies the wealth of critical discussions of race in early and nineteenth-century America that contributes to the conversation. Hardack's discussion of Native American identities as a counterpoint to pantheism's reinforcement of hegemonic power also needs further development, especially in terms of what makes this instance of Othering distinct from representations of black Otherness. The other aspects of "Not Me" produced in the wake of pantheistic thought are well conceived, especially Hardack's looks at anthropomorphic identity and how modes of transportation, such as ships, decenter the perspective of pantheism in Melville between "ecstatic reverie and dead-wall reverie," a beautiful turn of phrase. Overall, however, the chapter needs to engage further with critical discourse on race beyond construction of racial Otherness.

Chapters 3 and 4 consider the constructedness of pantheism both in terms of metaphor and corporeal presence. Chapter 3 focuses on language and representation, ultimately drawing a poststructural mode of linguistic representation into conversation with nineteenth-century conceptions of American democratic representation. As Hardack deftly illustrates, "the line between inward and outward—like

the line between self and All, parts and wholes, figurative and literal—is eroded by pantheistic thought” (122), a problem that becomes the undoing of Melville’s Ishmael. Melville’s Ahab ultimately becomes the central point of resistance to pantheistic representation; he is a character “who will merge neither with Nature nor with the democratic mass” (148) but still accepts the ideological authority of each. Chapter 4 builds from Ahab’s paradox by bringing corporeal presence and approaches to whiteness into focus. This final chapter is the magnum opus of the book: it is an exhaustive look at the relationship between pantheism and the previously discussed thematic areas of interest (namely, race, natural sciences, and representation), materially manifested, in an expansive range of primary texts. Fissures in pantheistic thought appear as wounded limbs, dismembered bodies, and missing teeth (181, 89, 195). The compulsion to manipulate and mutilate racialized and gendered bodies both reinforces the primacy of pantheistic stratification and, at times, emphasizes the irony of pantheism’s compulsion to unite through the natural world. What ultimately emerges from this struggle is further solidification of male camaraderie, or the privilege of bachelorhood evident in a number of Melville’s works. Hardack ultimately concludes through Melville that “if the U.S. economy

is predicated upon the usurpation of bodies, all pantheism can do is echo its opposition in the usurpation of voice” (223).

Not Altogether Human redresses a key oversight in American literary studies and, in doing so, develops a meticulously crafted account of pantheism and its relationship to American transcendentalism. Hardack reinvents key American transcendentalist texts for the contemporary generation of scholars, and his discussions of pantheism should inform discussions of transcendentalism in both literary studies and perhaps studies in the visual arts, where revisions of a luminist philosophy expressed through American Renaissance paintings could benefit from Hardack’s scholarship. Hardack’s work should also inspire further conversations about race and representation in terms of nature; pantheism, as Hardack demonstrates, provides a ready, embedded vocabulary for interested critics.

Sarah Dennis is an assistant professor of English at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, IA. Her research focuses on representations of the visual arts in nineteenth-century American literature.

NOTE

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature Addresses and Lectures*, vol. 1, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903–1904), 3.