Self and Other

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In a chapter called “The Symphony,” Ahab muses about the natural beauty of the scene before him: “The pensive air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman’s look, and the robust and man-like sea heaved with long, strong, lingering swells, as Samson’s chest in his sleep.” A little later we are told, “That glad, happy air, that winsome sky, did at last stroke and caress him; the step-mother world, so long cruel—forbidding—now threw affectionate arms round his stubborn neck, and did seem to joyously sob over him, as if over one, that however wilful and erring, she could yet find it in her heart to save and to bless” (Melville, 1851). The way Melville plays here with the stepmother stereotype echoes a textually remote and seemingly minor reference to Ishmael’s memory of a childhood dream (in “The Counterpane” chapter) that follows an episode when his stepmother, “who somehow or other, was all the time whipping me, or sending me to bed supperless,” packs him off to bed at two o’clock on a summer’s afternoon. After an agony of restlessness, young Ishmael sleeps, then wakes in terror in a room “now wrapped in outer darkness.” He sees nothing, hears nothing, but senses that “a supernatural hand seemed placed in mine,” the hand of a “nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom” that grasps the hand of his arm hanging over the counterpane. Whose hand it is—his stepmother’s, perhaps, or his mother’s—remains “a mystery.” In any case, Ishmael’s sensation upon waking up with Queequeg’s arm thrown over him “in the most loving and affectionate manner,” such that “you had almost thought I had been his wife,” reminds him of the uncanny experience of the supernatural hand—
except for the absence of terror—the associative linkage to the childhood event being the resemblance between the patchwork of the quilt and the tattoos on Queequeg's skin.

What Melville refers to as Ahab's "step-mother world" can easily be regarded as relating not only to the immediate physical environment that for the moment manifests balmy air and heaving sea, and to the macro-cosmic universe inscribed in the microcosm of the novel, but perhaps even more directly to the inner world of unconscious fantasy peopled, as Joan Riviere points out in her discussion of Kleinian object relations theory, by "a world of figures formed on the pattern of persons we first loved and hated in life, who also represent aspects of ourselves" (1955, 346). Whatever the correspondence between real persons in his life and the representational figures in the imaginary worlds of his novels, Melville—who had no stepmother—displays in Moby Dick an array of relationships that resonate with meaning in the context of object relations.

Even as this theoretical vantage point may affect one's reading of literature, so also may literature have implications for the development of psychoanalytic theory—just as works by Sophocles and Shakespeare so notably had for Freud in his formulation of the oedipus complex. Exactly because of the as-if nature of literature, that is, because it is in a special sense not-real—in almost the same way psychoanalytic treatment is as-if and not-real and transferential—literary texts provide a privileged realm of observation comparatively insulated from outer reality by virtue of their fictive, fantastic, imaginary nature. The figures of the worlds of clinic and culture remain forever separate yet forever parallel, as Shakespeare in effect implies when he writes about the similarities of the "shaping fantasies" of the "seething brains" of lovers, madmen, and poets in the famous discourse on imagination by Theseus in A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Since the experience of relation to an object necessitates the presence, or virtual existence, of an experiencing self, one question to be asked is whether Moby Dick delves into the nature of psychological being. There are several passages in the text that appear to address the psychological dimensions of existential problems. Clearly psychological is the quest of Bulkington, whose fearless "deep, earnest thinking" and search after "mortaly intolerable truth" Ishmael regards as being "the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea." Another such passage occurs when, meditating on "the universal cannibalism of the sea," where all creatures prey upon each other in contrast to "the verdant
land" of "this green, gentle, and most docile earth," Ishmael declares, "In
the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but
encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life." "Push not off
from that isle, thou canst never return," says Ishmael, who does push off,
and does return—though when he returns he cannot be quite the same
person he was when he left New Bedford. The precariousness of the soul
of man engulfed in a cannibal sea, in a novel that has cannibalism as one
of its important leitmotifs ("cannibal old me," thinks Ahab of himself), in
some sense corresponds to the precariousness of the infantile soul in an
intrapsychic world that is charged with fantasies of oral-sadistic, cannibal-
istic behavior, according to Melanie Klein (1932, 188). Be that as it may,
there can be no doubt that Melville portrays the peril of something like
psychological fusion, a kind of "oceanic feeling" (as Freud called it) of
total dedifferentiation of self and other, or self and world, when he speaks
in a comic vein of the risk to a dreamy "sunken-eyed young Platonist" like
Ishmael—who has "the problem of the universe revolving" in his mind
—of losing his perch on the masthead: "At last he loses his identity; takes
the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue,
bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature" and plunges into the
"Descartian vortices" of what sounds suspiciously like an oceanic version
of the Oversoul of American transcendentalism.

Like Bulkington's search for "mortally intolerable truth," Ishmael's
"itch for things remote" and his reaching after "the image of the ungrasp-
able phantom of life" amount to exploratory behavior of the same high
order as that of the questing adventurer Campbell describes in The Hero
with a Thousand Faces: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common
day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there en-
countered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this
mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man"
(1949, 30). This exploration, says Melville in the "Cetology" chapter, "is
a fearful thing," a groping "down into the bottom of the sea after them
[whales]" that is tantamount to having "one's hands among the unspeak-
able foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world." Melville's almost
obstetrical phrasing appears to correlate in part with that of Norman O.
Brown's Kleinian reading of the hero's task of exploration: "To explore is
to penetrate; the world is the insides of mother . . . Geography is the
graphy of the mother's body" (1966, 36). Brown also thinks about
the hero's progress along genital lines: "The wandering heroes are phallic
heroes, in a permanent state of erection, pricking o'er the plain" (50).
Such views of the psychology of questing activity can be placed beside the more person-oriented ideas of Mahler (1975), who sees children's motility in terms of the tasks of separation and individuation, and Bowlby's view of how exploratory behavior complements attachment behavior: "It transforms the novel into the familiar and by this process turns an activating stimulus into a terminating one" (1969, 239). To register Bowlby's point in a broader context, exploration complements attachment by transforming the novel but potentially dangerous environment into a familiar and hence psychologically secure one. Lichtenberg treats the impulse of infants to explore their environment, asserting themselves in regard to it, as a more or less independent motivational system. He says recent experiments indicate that "infants at four months are motivated to explore stimuli that have no direct immediate connection with caregivers and to act assertively [in order] to be the cause of an effect on the nonhuman environment. When they experience themselves as being the initiators of a predictable effect, this experience triggers an affect of pleasure" (1989, 129). But as Lichtenberg recognizes, exploratory-assertive behavior can apply to, and be facilitated by, relations with caregivers.

The question asked by Alfred Kazin, "Why does Ishmael feel so alone?" (1956, vii), can be responded to by emphasizing that he does not remain alone. What enables Ishmael's somewhat blind venture into the unknown to become richly meaningful is the presence of certain facilitating figures, notably Queequeg, so that the hero's journey can be conceptualized, in part, as the self's assimilation of benign properties and dispositions in some psychological others, and his disengagement from the impediment of destructive impulses represented by other psychological others, notably Ahab.

In a sense, then, Ishmael's voyage outward from New Bedford depicts a voyage inward that maps an evolving psyche. One of the more remarkable expressions of Ishmael's developing selfhood occurs when he and his shipmates witness "Leviathan amours in the deep," as well as the scene of the birth of a baby whale. The spectacle of the Grand Armada of whales fearlessly indulging "in all peaceful concernsments," and reveling "in dalliance and delight" even in the midst of being attacked by man, causes Ishmael to remark, "But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy." This astonishing assertion of a sense of profound spiritual and psychological stability
intimates the existence of something like what Stern refers to, in a rather reifying way, as the “core self” (1985, 11). In contrast, Ishmael refers to this centrality not as a structure but as a state of being represented as a soothing, joyful, self-generated, caretaking process. In any case, Ishmael’s bold claim both resembles and contrasts with Ahab’s hubristic declaration of psychic invulnerability after having his ivory leg snapped off: “But even with a broken bone, [the soul of] old Ahab is untouched; and I account no living bone of mine one jot more me, than this dead one that’s lost. Nor white whale, nor man, nor fiend, can so much as graze old Ahab in his own proper and inaccessible being.” In contrast to “his body’s part,” he says, “Ahab’s soul’s a centipede that moves upon a hundred legs.” Wonderful as Melville’s visions may be, the psychological reality probably is that no self, so long as it remains in existence, can ever be totally invulnerable to threatening influences. Such is the implication of Stern’s conception of “the sense of self at any moment” as a “network of . . . many forming and dissolving dynamic processes,” always in flux (199), which is to say, in terms of the systemic model sketched in Chapter 2, a more or less steady state, or comparatively stable-but-dynamic equilibrium of states, yet one always with the potential for catastrophic change such as we see exhibited by Pip after his “abandonment.”

A special complication of the representation of self in literature, one by no means peculiar to Moby Dick, appears whenever an author unconsciously portrays a protagonist’s self in multiple form, especially when the characters in question seem to be separate and autonomous figures at the narrative level (Rogers 1970). Several critics have commented on the presence of this phenomenon in Moby Dick. Newton Arvin hints that Ahab is something less than a whole person when he remarks, “He has ceased to be anything but an Ego; a noble Ego, to be sure; a heroic one; but that rather than a Self” (1950, 177). Richard Chase mentions that in Melville’s works “Ahab is the one fully objectified character who is both father and son” (1949, 49). Leslie Fiedler contends that “Ishmael is, then, but one part of the split epic hero . . . whose other part is Ahab” (1962, 547). They are secret sharers, psychologically speaking, yet unlike Conrad’s presentation of this motif in “The Secret Sharer,” Melville provides readers with only furtive hints of what the sailor and his captain have in common. One such hint surfaces when Ishmael contemplates his identification with Ahab’s vengeful quest after Ahab orchestrates the ritual vow of drinking to the death of Moby Dick from the “chalice” end of the harpoons: “A wild, mystical, sympatthetical feeling was in me; Ahab’s
quenchless feud seemed mine.” When Ishmael declares much earlier, “No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world,” he does not mention at whom he was angry. The later passage tells us that he shares Moby Dick with Ahab as an object of hostility.

The topic of being angry leads naturally into a discussion of the portrayal of other in the novel. Ahab is angry at Moby Dick—but who or what does Moby Dick represent? Arvin suggests that, psychologically, “Moby Dick is thus the archetypal Parent; the father, yes, but the mother also” (1950, 173–74). This interpretation depends to a considerable extent on two features of Melville’s life that Arvin emphasizes earlier in his biography: the loss of his father at the onset of puberty and his claim, in old age, that his mother had hated him.

Assuming, for heuristic purposes, the validity of Arvin’s inference that Moby Dick combines psychological representations of both parents makes room for brief consideration of two passages in the novel that help to delineate certain object-relational features of Moby Dick. One is that he has no features. As Ahab puts it in his jocular comments on the physiognomy of whales, and their habit of showing only their backsides (tails), “If I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen.” Melville appears to have in mind what God says to Moses: “I will take away my hand, and thou shalt see my back parts; but my face shall not be seen” (Exodus 33:23). Hence Ahab hates inscrutability:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond. But ’tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate. (1851, 139)

In contrast to God’s remark to Moses, that his face shall not be seen, good-enough mothers, according to Winnicott, instinctively utilize their own faces as a psychological mirror to reflect back to their infants some sense of what is going on in themselves (1971, 111–12), the point being
that Ahab’s reverie (“I say again he has no face”) implies a significant degree of withholding behavior on the part of the combined parental other. Melville’s marked attention elsewhere to the mammalian nature of whales appears to run counter to such withholdingness. Ishmael watches mother whales nursing their infants, and Starbuck sees “long coils of the umbilical cord of Madame Leviathan, by which the young cub seemed still tethered to its dam.” Yet the whiteness of Moby Dick (and sometimes that of the sea) becomes associated with milk, frequently in negative, threatening contexts (the “milky sea”; “milk-white fog”). The text may be thought of as responding to this threat of aggression by turning with violence against the maternal other, in a passage positively Kleinian in tenor, when we are told that “when by chance these precious parts [the teats] in a nursing whale are cut by the hunter’s lance, the mother’s pouring milk and blood rivallingly discolor the sea for rods.”

As far as Ahab is concerned, Moby Dick is a persecutory other, threatening annihilation. From a Kleinian point of view, it is the bad breast (“the persecutory breast”) that becomes “the prototype of all external and internal persecutory objects” (1952a, 202, 200). In Moby Dick psychological threats and attacks against the self take various forms: the “demasting” of Ahab’s leg, usually read by Freudsians as symbolic castration; the form of oral engulfment (“I saw the opening maw of hell,” says Jonah in Father Mapple’s hymn); and the form of the perilous enticements of the womb-like head from which Queequeg “delivers” Tashtego: “Had Tashtego perished in that head, it had been a very precious perishing; smothered in the very whitest and daintiest of fragrant spermaceti; coffined, hearsed, and tombed in the secret inner chamber and sanctum sanctorum of the whale.” More generally, the sea itself constitutes a threatening environment: “However baby man may brag of his science and skill . . . yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him” (italics added). But unlike Ahab’s, Ishmael’s collective experience of his stepmother world remains an ambiguous one. His stepmother is not all bad. “She was the best and most conscientious of stepmothers,” he tells us, not without some measure of irony. And Ishmael, in keeping with his symbolic name (“God shall hear,” Genesis 16:11), survives, just as Jonah survives when, as Father Mapple informs us, “God heard” his plea. An attentive, responsive parental aurality thus seems to mitigate the imagined dangers of a potentially engulfing orality.
The psychological entities so glibly referred to in object relations theory as *self* and *other* cannot truly be considered apart from each other except for analytical purposes, so that in the strictest sense what are always being dealt with are conditions of intersubjectivity. One kind of intersubjectivity manifested in *Moby Dick* takes the form of oedipal rebellion against authority. Ahab's quarrel with a whale superstitiously rumored by sailors to be not only ubiquitous but also immortal appears to be a version of Melville's never-ending quarrel with God (Thompson 1952). The form of religious worship Ahab preaches and practices is that of defiance. As he addresses the "trinity of flames" of the static electricity illuminating the ship's masts and rigging during a storm, he worships the spirit of fire: "I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance." As a rebellious, hubristic tragic hero, he will strike through the mask of all existence: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me." The defiant secret motto of the novel, as Olson reminds us (1947, 53), appears in the scene where Ahab "baptizes" in the name of the devil the harpoon that will eventually strike Moby Dick: "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!" If religious rebellion symbolizes psychological rebellion of son against father, the appropriate talion punishment for this oedipal crime is castration, symbolized in the story by Ahab's loss of his leg in his first encounter with *Moby Dick* (Arvin 1950, 172).

At another level in the story, Ahab himself represents the figure of authority against whom others make their oedipal rebellion, as in the contest of "knights" and "squires" like Starbuck and Stubb with that "grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab." His lesser soul overmatched by a madman, Starbuck must capitulate to Ahab's commands: "I plainly see my miserable office—to obey, rebelling." Melville dramatizes a comic version of the rebellion theme when Ahab verbally drives Stubb below for daring to hint that he might have the decency to muffle the stomping sound of his midnight pacing with a piece of tow on the ivory leg. Stubb feels mistreated: "He might as well have kicked me, and done with it," a thought leading to the wondrous fantasy of the Queen Mab chapter in which Stubb relates to Flask the crazy dream he had the night before about being kicked by Ahab: "... and when I tried to kick back, upon my soul, my little man, I kicked my leg right off! And then, presto! Ahab seemed a pyramid, and I, like a blazing fool, kept kicking at it." Later in the dream "a sort of badger-haired old merman, with a hump on
his back" bends over and invites Stubb to kick his rear. To Stubb's dismay, "his stern was stuck full of marlinspikes, with the points out."

In addition to this oedipal grotesquerie, with its suggestion of the futility of a son attacking the armed and impenetrable phallicity of an invincible paternal figure, Melville weaves dozens of other allusions to rebellion into the fabric of his novel, one of them taking the form of the embedded narrative about the quarrel between Radney, the overbearing mate from Martha's Vineyard, and Steelkilt, the "desperado from Buffalo." They have an argument that leads Steelkilt to threaten to murder his captain if he dares to flog him as punishment for fighting with the mate. Later Steelkilt's rebellion against tyranny takes the form of desertion from the ship—as does that of Tommo, the protagonist of Typee. In real life, Melville himself deserts from the Acushnet in the South Seas.

Because the oedipal aspects of Moby Dick have been well attended to by various critics, I pass over much else that might be said along these lines in order to concentrate on preoedipal features of intersubjectivity in the novel, especially issues that need to be considered by a theory of object relations incorporating concepts from attachment theory.

In attachment theory the themes of separation and loss become the essential locus of all anxiety, in contrast to the classic Freudian loci of seduction, incest, castration, and libidinal repression. Given this perspective, the episode of Pip's abandonment takes on as much psychological significance as does the loss of Ahab's leg, especially if Pip be thought of as another double, or aspect, of the venturing hero. Melville meditates in connection with Pip's temporary abandonment about "the awful lonesomeness" of swimming in the open ocean: "The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?" From the hour of his rescue, adds Melville, "the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was. The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul." Ahab later attributes this abandonment not to Chance or Fate but to the "frozen heavens." He rails at them: "Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him." As for the nature of the effect of abandonment on Pip, the psychological realism of it seems perfectly comprehensible in the context of Winnicott's hypothesis about the effect of traumatic separation in childhood: "If the mother is away more than x minutes, then the image fades. . . . The baby is distressed, but this distress is soon mended because the mother returns in x plus y minutes. . . . But in x plus y plus z minutes
the baby has become *traumatized*" (1971, 97). In this case the eventual return of the mother does not repair the alteration resulting from her absence, "so that primitive defenses now become organized to defend against a repetition of 'unthinkable anxiety.'" Madness, continues Winnicott, "simply means a break-up of whatever may exist at the time of a personal continuity of existence."

Abandonment and a cluster of related themes are by no means confined to the story of Pip. In asking, "Why does Ishmael feel so alone?" Kazin stresses his isolation and homelessness: "As his name indicates [the Biblical Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, are outcasts], he is an estranged and solitary man. . . . Ishmael is not merely an orphan; he is an exile, searching alone in the wilderness" (Kazin 1956, vii-viii). Kazin sees Ishmael's "homelessness" as a function of spiritual disbelief, regarding him as "modern man, cut off from the certainty that was once his inner world. Ishmael no longer has any sure formal belief. All is in doubt, all is in eternal flux, like the sea" (viii). Arvin, taking a psychobiographical approach, reminds us that Melville must have felt abandoned by his father, who quickly slipped from prosperity to financial ruin to insanity and then into death when Melville was twelve years old, a critical time, presumably, because of the reawakening of oedipal conflict at the onset of puberty:

His death was the direst and most decisive event emotionally of Herman Melville's early life. Deprived of an idolized father on the very verge of adolescence, the boy Melville underwent—can there be any doubt?—an emotional crisis from whose effects he was never to be wholly free. In the midst of a general insecurity, the most vital embodiment of security, the security of fatherhood, was forcibly wrested from him and the frightening sense of abandonment, the reproachful sense of desertion, must equally have been intense and overwhelming. . . . He was to spend much of his life divided between the attempt to retaliate upon his father for this abandonment and the attempt, a still more passionate one, to recover the closeness and the confidence of a happy sonhood. (1950, 23)

A kind of reversal of this situation occurs in the episode concerning the whaler *Rachel*. The captain of the *Rachel* has lost his own son overboard while chasing Moby Dick. When he pleads with Ahab for assistance in the search, Ahab refuses because of his obsession to hunt for the whale instead. Ironically, the *Rachel* rescues Ishmael in the end: "It was the devious-cruising *Rachel*, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan."

The innumerable references in the novel to such themes as separation,
abandonment, and homelessness may be thought of as constituting an emotional backdrop foregrounded by important relationships. As I pointed out earlier, Ishmael does not remain alone, nor does Pip, because of the crucial bonds they form with Queequeg and Ahab, respectively.

Fiedler and Arvin approach interrelatedness in the novel by treating the relationship of Ishmael and Queequeg in terms of sexuality. Fiedler, who suggests that *Moby Dick* “must be read not only as an account of a whale-hunt, but also as a love story,” a story of “the redemptive love of man and man,” reads it as depicting “the peculiar American form of innocent homosexuality” (1962; next several references, 531–39). Finding a parallel in Ahab’s furtive attachment to Fedallah, Fiedler claims that “the dream of a dark-skinned beloved implies a sense of breaching a taboo, reaching out toward a banned erotic object” as distinct from what some might suppose to be the dream of a humanistic transcending of a social taboo. After quoting the passage “I found Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife,” Fiedler remarks, “It is worth noting that Ishmael tends to think of himself in the passive, the feminine role.” Fiedler associates “the boy’s special sin of masturbation” with the hand of “splintered heart and maddened hand,” and the hand young Ishmael dares not drag away from the supernatural apparition of his nightmare. Concerning the passage where Ishmael says that Queequeg “pressed his forehead against mine, clasped me around the waist, and said that henceforth we were married,” Fiedler discounts Ishmael’s quick disclaimer: “. . . meaning, in his country’s phrase, that we were bosom friends.” Fiedler insists, “This is Platonism without sodomy, which is to say, marriage without copulation: the vain dream of genteel ladies improbably fulfilled in a sailor’s rooming-house by two men.” Arvin, among others, reads the relationship of Ishmael and Queequeg not only as erotic but also as definitely pathological, specifically as reflecting the same impairment of “capacity for heterosexual love” as Ahab’s symbolic castration (1950, 174).

For whatever reason, these otherwise perceptive readers of Melville elect to take rather literally what both immediate and more remote contexts might encourage others to take figuratively. Fiedler and Arvin also read selectively, ignoring such passages as these: the one in which Ishmael comments on his own awareness of “the unbecomingness of his [Queequeg’s] hugging a fellow male in that matrimonial style”; the passage immediately following Queequeg’s declaration that they were married:
“In a countryman, this sudden flame of friendship would have seemed far too premature, a thing to be much distrusted; but in this simple savage those old rules would not apply”; and this one: “His story being ended with his pipe’s last dying puff, Queequeg embraced me, pressed his forehead against mine, and blowing out the light, *we rolled over from each other, this way and that, and very soon were sleeping*” (italics added). One may argue that such passages serve to punctuate Melville’s sexual and matrimonial metaphors, semantically marking them in such a way as to heighten (but not confuse) readers’ awareness of the measure of their deviance from social norms. One might even go so far as to argue that Melville instinctively and unconsciously mobilizes some measure of reader anxiety about crossing racial and sexual boundary lines the better to call readers’ attention to what he has to say about the importance of human attachments in general.

Melville emphasizes this importance throughout the novel by generating numerous images of attachment, especially images of hands grasping and ropes connecting, thereby valorizing the relationship of Ishmael and Queequeg (and Pip and Ahab) in the process. In addition to the umbilical coil of Madame Leviathan, positive images of attachment are notable in the following instances. In one chapter Melville tells us of the “monkey-rope” that connects Ishmael (aboard ship) to Queequeg (on the whale’s carcass): “So that for better or worse, we two, for the time, were wedded. . . . An elongated Siamese ligature united us. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother; nor could I any way get rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed.” In the emotionally tonic chapter called “A Squeeze of the Hand,” where sailors process chunks of fat in tubs of previously boiled whale blubber by squeezing them, Ishmael says that “I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules.” “Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly loving feeling did this avocation beget” that Ishmael is moved to declare, “Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come: let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.”

The images of grasping hands and connecting ropes merge in the memorable dialogue between Pip and Ahab. Pip cries, “Ding, dong,
ding? Who’s seen Pip the coward?” As Ahab responds, “Oh, ye frozen heavens! look down here. Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him,” he offers his hand to lead Pip to his cabin. “Here, boy,” he says, “Ahab’s cabin shall be Pip’s home henceforth, while Ahab lives. Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings.” And Pip responds, “What’s this? here’s velvet shark-skin” as he gazes at Ahab’s hand. “Ah, now, had poor Pip but felt so kind a thing as this, perhaps he had ne’er been lost! This seems to me, sir, as a man-rope; something that weak souls may hold by. Oh, sir, let old Perth now come and rivet these two hands together; the black one with the white, for I will not let this go.” Elsewhere another passage implies that a good grasp has as much meaning for Ahab as for Pip. As the carpenter fashions a new ivory leg for Ahab, the captain remarks, “This is a cogent vice thou hast here, carpenter; let me feel its grip once. So, so; it does pinch some.” When the carpenter replies that the vice can break bones as well as hold them, Ahab answers, “No fear; I like a good grip; I like to feel something in this slippery world that can hold.”

Images of interpersonal connection such as “cords woven of my heart-strings” and the monkey-rope are not merely decorative metaphors. They have much the same kind of integral significance in the novel that the image of string does in a case described by Winnicott of a very disturbed seven-year-old who attempts to deal with his fear of separation, and to deny it, by using string and related images. The boy’s depressed mother cares for him until the birth of a sister when he is three years and three months old: “This was the first separation of importance, the next being at three years eleven months, when the mother had an operation. When the boy was four years nine months the mother went into a mental hospital for two months” (1971, 16). By this time the boy has begun to manifest a lot of anger and regression. When Winnicott engages him in a “squiggle game” (mutual drawing on paper that has diagnostic implications), he realizes that among ten of the drawings there are images of a lasso, a whip, a crop, a yo-yo string, a string in a knot, another crop, and another whip. When Winnicott points out this thematic redundancy to the parents, they mention having noticed that their son has been obsessed with anything and everything having to do with string, and having been worried when he had recently tied a string around his little sister’s neck! At Winnicott’s suggestion, the mother brings up the theme of string with her son. She finds him to be “eager to talk about his relation to her and
his fear of lack of contact with her,” and from the time of this conversa-
tion, at least for a long while, the boy’s play with string ceases and his
behavior improves.

Not all the images of cordage and other connectives in *Moby Dick* have
positive connotations. Images of perilous and trammeling lines accen-
tuate, by contrast, the possibility of negative or pathological attachments.
“All men live enveloped in whale-lines,” we are reminded in a passage
foreshadowing Pip’s momentary entanglement in a whale line—from
which Tashtego’s knife frees him. “All are born with halters round their
necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that
mortals realize the silent, subtle, everpresent perils of life.” Both Fedallah
and Ahab die with whale-line halters round their necks. “Hemp only can
kill me!” laughs Ahab in his fury, citing prophetic words in much the
same manner as Macbeth repeats the witches’ claim he need fear “none of
woman born”—and hemp it is that does kill Ahab in the end when he
stoops to clear fouled line connected to the harpoon now fast in the flesh
of Moby Dick: “The flying turn caught him round the neck, and voice-
lessly as Turkish mutes bowstring their victim, he was shot out of the
boat ere the crew knew he was gone.” The death-dealing rope, symbolic
of Ahab’s monomaniacal obsession with his pathological connection to
the object of his hatred, forms a contrast to his comparative absence of
positive ties, his distance from important others, and his symbolic isola-
tion. A career of forty years at sea has separated him from home: “When
I think of this life I have led; the desolation of solitude it has been; the
masoned, walled-town of a Captain’s exclusiveness. . . . what a forty years’
fool—fool—old fool, has old Ahab been!” And he wonders what has so
driven him “against all natural lovinings and longings.”

At the beginning of the epilogue to *Moby Dick* Melville places this
passage from the Book of Job (1:16): “And I only am escaped alone to
tell thee.” In doing so he once again appears to emphasize the isolated
condition of the sole survivor of the *Pequod*, his separation from the
others. But Ishmael is no longer strictly alone. The life-sustaining support
he finds in Queequeg’s buoyant coffin may be taken as representing the
support of a now-internalized “good object.” Formerly he was attached
to Queequeg, the internal bond being represented by such images as the
monkey-rope. By the conclusion of the novel the psychological buoyancy
of this relationship has been internalized. That internalization may be said
to recapitulate an experience mentioned earlier. At the Spouter Inn Quee-
queg becomes “a bosom friend” whom Ishmael thinks of as a paternal
figure: "George Washington, cannibalistically developed." And Ishmael describes the transformation that accompanies the process of attachment this way: "I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world." The "melting in me" mentioned by Ishmael corresponds exactly to what Bolas describes as the infant's experience of "the transformational object," a formulation by which Bolas seeks to emphasize that the intersubjective experience of mothers by infants is a process: "The mother is less significant and identifiable as an object than as a process that is identified with cumulative internal and external transformations" (1987, 14). In a sense, then, Ishmael's transformative experience of the effect of Queequeg on his life may be thought to reproduce the benign transformative experience of encounters in real life with inspiring figures such as Jack Chase, the Captain of the maintop of the warship United States, to whom Melville dedicated Billy Budd, experiences that repeat in turn his experience of his father as a loving person, and of his mother as something other than a demanding stepmother.

Like the mythic hero whose cyclical journey returns him to his home, Ishmael returns home not so much geographically as psychologically. As one critic observes in treating the recurrence of the word strange in the text of the novel in the context of Freud's commentary on the uncanny, Ahab is "the casting away castaway who experiences self and world as places of radical, uncanny homelessness," while Ishmael succeeds in domesticating the strangeness of his soul and its travails: "In Moby Dick selfhood is defined relationally in terms of homelessness, that is, in terms of jeopardy, of the specter of abandonment or annihilation—of non-relation" (Kimball, 1987, 544-46).

Although no tidy summation of the complex representations of object relations in the world of Moby Dick seems possible, a number of related implications may be thought to emerge from this reading. One is that our theory of human motivation may be liberated from the prisonhouse of libido theory without dispensing with sexuality altogether. Another is that, preposterous and unempirical as the suppositions of the Kleinian school of early object relations may seem, they do find some confirmation in the realities of adult fantasy as expressed by a representative literary text. Still another implication is the necessity of giving self parity with other in all formulations concerning human subjectivity. Perhaps not least among the implications of this reading has to do with the merit of an
expansion of attachment theory in such a way as to pay greater attention to permutations in adult life of early forms of attachment behavior, and to make room for the meaningfulness of representations of attachment in fantasy—fantasies of authors in their stories and even the fantasies of fantasied characters, such as Ahab’s passing, wistful, futile yearning for a stepmother who will throw “affectionate arms round his stubborn neck” and “find it in her heart to save and to bless.”