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Hunting and Writing the Whale: Masculine Responses to the Maternal in Herman Melville's Moby-Dick

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HUNTING AND WRITING THE WHALE: MASCULINE RESPONSES
TO THE MATERNAL IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *MOBY-DICK*

by

SETH HAGEN

Under the Direction of Mark Noble

ABSTRACT

“Hunting and Writing the Whale” investigates the persistent resurfacing of the maternal body in *Moby-Dick* and examines how the masculine identities of the characters Ishmael and Ahab are constructed in response to their anxieties toward the maternal. Drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva and contemporary theory of womb envy, I argue that Ishmael and Ahab each struggle with defining and maintaining their identities in the presence of a maternal body that both attracts and repulses. Whereas Ahab’s dogged attempt to maintain a fixed identity results in annihilation, Ishmael embraces a more fluid existence informed by a maternal semiotic that he endeavors to manage through the project of writing.

INDEX WORDS: Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Ahab, Ishmael, Maternal, Masculinity, Kristeva, Abject, Womb Envy, Polylogue

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SETH HAGEN

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my wife, Rand, and my daughters, Lila and Alice, whose love and support sustain me.

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1 INTRODUCTION: TROUBLED MASCULINITY IN *MOBY-DICK*

Traditionally, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* has been considered a masculine book. Indeed, the major narrative interests of Melville's masterpiece—the all-male sea quest of the *Pequod*, the monomania of its captain Ahab, and the self-journey of the tale's chronicler, Ishmael—seem, at least on the surface, to preclude both female characters and representations of femininity. Women are almost entirely omitted from novel—only Mrs. Hosea Hussey and Aunt Charity enter the frame—and the brevity of their scenes speaks to the relative insignificance of their impact on the narrative whole. Indeed, as Melville scholar Leland S. Person notes, “[c]ritics have generally agreed that *Moby-Dick* is a man's book and that Melville's representation of sea-faring manhood inscribes a patriarchal, anti-female ideology that reinforces nineteenth-century gender separatism” (“Cassock” 1). In the last few decades, however, scholars have begun challenging this traditional assessment of *Moby-Dick* as a book about and for men only. Roughly speaking, these challenges take two approaches: one exposes the way in which the novel's portrayal of masculinity is destabilized; the other examines the many instances in which femininity is inscribed into the novel.¹ These investigations and readings have shown that while *Moby-Dick* leaves women almost entirely off-stage, it presents the all-male world of the *Pequod* as both engaged with the feminine world and troubled—or at least unconventional—in its masculinity. As a result, these new lines of inquiry unsettle traditional assumptions about the book's complicity with the dogma of nineteenth-century patriarchy.

Nonetheless, the debate over the novel's ideological position with respect to gender is far from settled. For example, Robyn Wiegman takes issue with the critical positions of Robert K. Martin and Joseph A. Boone, who each assert in different ways that *Moby-Dick* imagines male bonding as a force that challenges patriarchal power (736).² Wiegman, on the other hand, argues that this assertion fails to consider the ultimate fact that the novel excludes women (749). In essence, she poses the difficult question:

why does it matter whether *Moby-Dick*'s male-bonding "feminizes" the values of traditional patriarchy if that recalibrated system still omits women?

Although scholars like Wiegman, Martin and Boone debate the legitimacy of what they see as *Moby-Dick*'s proposed solutions to the gender problems of patriarchy, Melville's novel may not posit a solution to this issue at all, offering instead a complicated critique of the way masculinity is constructed. I argue that the personalities of Ishmael and Ahab depict a deeply-troubled masculinity—one constructed in reaction to its anxieties over a feminine, maternal presence. The persistent resurfacing of maternal imagery in the novel, particularly the figurations of birth and wombs, is inexorably linked to the novel's portrayal of Ahab's tragically-flawed masculinity and Ishmael's journey of the self and quest for identity. Ahab's tragic quest and Ishmael's project to write the whale (and ultimately the narrative that makes up the novel) are similarly born out of an ambivalent and conflicted reaction to the resurfacing of a maternal presence that may both create and consume identity and may both nurture and destroy the body.

Few scholars have thus far focused on the function and significance of the maternal in *Moby-Dick*. Joseph Allen Boone connects birth imagery in the novel to a succession of "rebirths" experienced by Ishmael and ties maternal imagery to what he reads as Ishmael's self-discovery of his own "interior spaciousness"—an inner reservoir of "love, peace, mildness—traditionally labeled as feminine although not exclusive to either sex" (*Tradition* 246). Mark Hennelly offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of the novel's maternal and womb imagery as manifestations of the American anxiety toward the "American Eve" as both "mother and sexual object" (288). That is, Hennelly expands on the notion of the American Adam—the term coined by R.W.B. Lewis for the continuing American fantasy of living out a new Edenic paradise—by examining this figure's anxieties with respect to the American Eve (she who promises comfort and satisfaction while concomitantly threatening destruction). Yet Hennelly concentrates more on masculine responses to a notional feminine presence in *Moby-Dick* than on responses to a specifically maternal quality. Edwin Rose makes passing reference to the white whale as a "toothed womb" that dismasts and ultimately destroys Ahab while seeming to reject Ishmael (543). Rose, however, is not predominantly concerned with maternal or womb imagery in the novel, but with the themes of annihilation and

ultimate ambiguity in *Moby-Dick*. Rita Bode provides the only sustained and substantial study of the maternal in *Moby-Dick*. In her essay, she asserts that a maternal-centered paradigm offers a productive and viable alternative to the destructive hunt. This maternal principle, Bode argues, ultimately acts as a kind of “saving presence” for Ishmael (197). She uses the maternal imagery in *Moby-Dick* to build her case that the novel posits a kind of proto-eco-feminism—a vision in which neither animals nor women are legitimately commodified or appropriated (193).

Although scholars generally pay only scant attention to the maternal in *Moby-Dick*, this significant element of the novel demands further analysis in new directions in order to provide a fuller understanding of its meaningful role in Melville’s opus. Rita Bode’s observations raise important complications; the maternal in *Moby-Dick* not only offers an alternative model to the masculine aggression of the hunt, but is also directly implicated in that aggression. In this thesis, I examine the psychological connection between male aggression and the maternal in order to argue that the persistent resurfacing of maternal imagery in the novel—particularly the figurations of birth and wombs—reflects the anxieties of Ahab and Ishmael in struggling to reconcile their constructed masculine identities with the presence of the maternal. Studying Ahab’s and Ishmael’s responses to this maternal presence reveals a highly conflicted and equivocal relationship between these characters and the maternal body. On the one hand, this equivocation, which oscillates between attraction and terror, exemplifies what Julia Kristeva theorizes as the abjection of the maternal body—the process of jettisoning and pushing away the mother’s body in order to define one’s identity. On the other hand, the equivocal responses of Ahab and Ishmael also exemplify the defensive dynamics of womb envy as articulated by contemporary theorists.

This thesis identifies and explains *Moby-Dick*’s troubled masculinity and anxiety toward the maternal by locating those passages in which maternal bodies breach the text’s surface, and it then examines Ishmael’s and Ahab’s responses to these breachings. The second section of the thesis establishes the novel’s persistent longing for the maternal and presents passages of birth, womb, and umbilical imagery as a way to both demonstrate and establish the presence of the maternal in the text and introduce the concepts that will be explored in greater detail throughout the thesis. The third section of thesis presents the

theoretical foundations—namely, Kristeva’s notions of the maternal *chora* and the process of abjection as well as an overview of contemporary theories of womb envy—that will be used to analyze the function of the maternal in *Moby-Dick*. The fourth section studies how Ahab’s character is both repulsed by the maternal and envious of it, responses that help explain his drive to compete against and destroy it. In this section, I consider how, for Ahab, whale and mother are aligned and analyze how Ahab’s quest to destroy the whale can be explained in part by Kristeva’s theory of maternal abjection and contemporary notions of womb envy. The fifth section focuses on Ishmael’s character as an alternate model of masculinity also substantially constructed in reaction to the presence of the maternal. In this section, I consider how Ishmael, in contrast to Ahab, is able to better reconcile himself to the maternal body and power without destroying himself.

By demonstrating how anxieties with respect to the maternal construct the alternate masculinities of Ishmael and Ahab, this thesis continues the critical effort to reevaluate *Moby-Dick*’s treatment of both masculinity and femininity. The project further challenges the notion that Melville’s novel offers a simple endorsement of masculinity or celebration of the world of men, and it suggests that Melville’s novel deconstructs masculine identity as something formed in ambivalent reaction to an unsettling yet alluring maternal presence. Finally, the thesis helps validate the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva and contemporary womb envy theorists by demonstrating how these psychoanalytic concepts of the late twentieth century help unpack some of the complexity in Melville’s mid-nineteenth-century characterizations of Ishmael and Ahab.

2 SOUNDING AND BREACHING: MATERNAL ABSENCE AND PRESENCE IN *MOBY-DICK*

Melville laces references to and figurations of the maternal throughout *Moby-Dick* that evoke both a maternal absence and presence. With respect to its absence, the maternal is excluded (along with the feminine, generally) from the insular masculine setting and frame of the novel. As Richard Brodhead notes, *Moby-Dick*

is a masculine book in the obvious sense that it is all about men and men's activities. . . . But it is masculine too in its deepest fantasies: What is the hunt for the enormous sperm whale Moby Dick if not a quest for absolute potency, a quest in which the aggressive assertion of masculine strength calls up a fantastically enlarged version of that strength as its imagined monster. (9-10)

Brodhead's analysis points out that, at least ostensibly, *Moby-Dick* is masculine not just in its setting and characters, but also in its fantasies and unconscious. Yet, as Rita Bode observes, Brodhead's statement also "articulates the imbalance at the heart of the *Moby-Dick* world that gives the novel a pervading sense of something missing, something lost" (182). Bode thus in part affirms Brodhead's assessment of the cloistered masculinism of the novel, while asserting that this isolated men-only world is presented not as a panacea, but as a cosmos fundamentally out of kilter and incomplete. Specifically, Bode identifies the maternal at the heart of the novel's conspicuous feminine void: "While the near-absence of women most obviously conveys this imbalance, the novel's sense of longing focuses more specifically on the maternal" (182).

Throughout the novel, Melville severally expresses this yearning for a lost maternal presence—an absence that seems to haunt not just Ishmael and Ahab, but Starbuck and Flask as well. Both Ishmael and Ahab lost their mothers as young children. In "The Counterpane" (Chapter 4), Ishmael recounts being

cruelly punished by his stepmother for “trying to crawl up the chimney”—an action symbolically evocative of trying to return to a maternal presence or space (Melville 37). Ahab, whose mother “died when he was only a twelvemonth old” (Melville 48), beseeches the elemental lighting in “The Candles,” lamenting “my sweet mother, I know not. Oh, cruel! what hast thou done with her?” (Melville 373). Starbuck’s caution and pragmatism as first mate seem grounded in responsibility and obligation toward his “young Cape wife and child,” a mother-infant dyad whose presence or memory seems to travel with him and impart “latent influences” on his deliberations and conduct (Melville 102).³ And as *Moby Dick* charges the *Pequod*, Flask’s thoughts also turn to his mother: “I only hope my poor mother’s drawn my part-pay ere this” (Melville 423). This maternal yearning, expressed by most of the characters to whose thoughts we are privy, indicates desire, longing, and absence in the all-male world. For Ishmael, Ahab, Starbuck, and Flask, the maternal—or the lost or absent maternal—holds a significant place in their consciousness. Accordingly, despite escaping from land and its maternal presence, the masculine world of the *Pequod* is rendered as discontent, pining for the very presence it turned away from (or—in the case of the motherless Ahab and Ishmael—from which it was turned away). Ishmael’s assesses the world of Ahab as the “step-mother world, so long cruel—forbidding,” making a direct association with the cruelty of life and the absent mother (Melville 405). Ahab also attributes his plight, his “eternal tossings,” with his lost mother; he addresses the sea as a surrogate: “O sea, in whose eternal tossings the wild fowl finds his only rest. Born of earth, yet suckled by the sea; though hill and valley mothered me, ye billows are my foster-brothers” (Melville 376). And within the context of this repeating theme of lost mothers, it is ultimately the *Rachel*, maternally searching for its own lost child, that returns to save Ishmael— orphaned by both his mother and the *Pequod*—as its child: “It was the devious-cruising *Rachel*, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan” (Melville 427).⁴

If the actual maternal is lost or physically absent from *Moby-Dick*, its figurative presence is profusely manifested. Three of the dominant figurative forms in which the maternal surfaces in the novel are births, umbilical lines, and wombs. Early in the novel, Ishmael reenacts a birth travesty with Queequeg’s hairy poncho-like garment:

I took it up, and held it close to the light, and felt it, and smelt it, and tried every way possible to arrive at some satisfactory conclusion concerning it. . . . There was a hole or slit in the middle of this mat, the same as in South American ponchos. . . . I put it on, to try it, and it weighed me down like a hamper, being uncommonly shaggy and thick, and I thought a little damp. . . . I went up in it to a bit of glass stuck against the wall, and I never saw such a sight in my life. I tore myself out of it in such a hurry that I gave myself a kink in the neck. (Melville 33)

The image in the mirror that so terrifies Ishmael is one of his head protruding from the “shaggy and thick” slit in the hairy and “a little damp” mat—an image not unlike that of the newborn child emerging from the mother’s vagina. In this birth parody, Ishmael evinces both a strong curiosity and willingness to investigate maternal spaces as well as disgust and horror of the same.

Ishmael similarly demonstrates an ambivalent and conflicted response to the maternal in “The Counterpane (Chapter 4), as he reflects on his childhood experience of being confined in his room for an extended period by his stepmother as punishment for “trying to crawl up the chimney” (Melville 37). The maternal association of this reverse-birth imagery is compounded by the nightmare Ishmael experienced while restricted to his bed. He remembers that

Instantly, I felt a shock running through all my frame; nothing was to be seen, and nothing was to be heard; but a supernatural hand seemed placed in mine. My arm hung over the counterpane, and the nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bedside. For what seemed ages piled on ages, I lay there, frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand; yet ever thinking that if I could but stir one single inch, the horrid spell would be broken.

(Melville 37)

Punished by his surrogate mother for symbolically seeking the womb, Ishmael dreams of a supernatural maternal presence that waits by his bed and holds his hand. The phantom mother he has sought out comes to him, and offers him the comfort of her hand, yet this consoling gesture invokes not solace but

petrifying terror in Ishmael. Thus again, Ishmael equivocates between attraction and repulsion to the maternal manifested through images of birth.

In “Cisterns and Buckets” (Chapter 78), Tashtego is figuratively birthed from the sinking decapitated head of a whale through Queequeg’s “great skill in obstetrics.” In this scene of rescue, Ishmael does not participate except insofar as he is the author of its retelling—a retelling that plays up the scene as a birth parody. And while recounted in comedic tones, the episode also reveals an ambiguous, anxious perspective of birth:

Queequeg with his keen sword had made side lunges near [the bottom of the whale’s head], so as to scuttle a large hole there; then dropping his sword, had thrust his long arm far inwards and upwards, and so hauled out poor Tashtego by the head. He averred that upon first thrusting in for him, a leg was presented; but well knowing that that was not as it ought to be, and might occasion trouble; —he had thrust back the leg, and by a dexterous heave and toss, had wrought a somerset upon the Indian; so that with the next trial, he came forth in the good old way—head foremost. As for the great head itself, that was doing as well as could be expected (Melville 272).

Here, despite Ishmael’s playful storytelling, the all-male (or whale-male) birth scene reveals the precarious line between life and death in birth. Tashtego (and Queequeg) nearly drown, and the maternal head sinks into the shark-infested sea.

This birth scene then causes Ishmael to ponder dying in the womb-like or vaginal space within the whale’s head. Yet, despite this meditation on death, Ishmael’s contemplation of entombment (or entombment) does not reveal fear but instead, a mental attraction to the maternal body:

Now, 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 that secret inner chamber and sanctum sanctorum of the whale. Only one sweeter end can readily be recalled, the delicious death of an Ohio honey-hunter, who

seeking honey in the crotch of a hollow tree, found such exceeding store of it, that leaning too far over, it sucked him in, so that he died embalmed (Melville 272-3).

Again in this scene, Ishmael turns to maternal imagery—here the inner “sanctum sanctorum” likened to a hole in a “crotch” capable of sucking in a man and embalming him in the sweetest and daintiest of fluids. The language here combines attraction (“precious,” “daintiest,” “delicious”) with death. Unlike the scene of Ishmael in Tashtego’s poncho, or Ishmael’s encounter with the maternal phantom, here, there is surprisingly no repulsion intermixed with Ishmael’s attraction to the maternal space even though that maternal space seems capable of sucking him in to his embalmed grave.

If Ishmael’s meditation on birth in “Cisterns and Buckets” leads his mind to a perilous yet enticing maternal space, elsewhere in *Moby-Dick*, birth is rendered in strikingly horrific and monstrous terms. This is particularly the case when birthing is imagined without a mother—that is, as a male act. In the chapter “Moby Dick” (Chapter 41), Ishmael describes how the whaleman at sea “is wrapped by influences all tending to make his fancy pregnant with many a mighty birth” (153). Ishmael then explains how the terrible notion of the white whale was formed in this way, incorporating itself with “half-formed foetal suggestions of supernatural agencies, which eventually invested Moby Dick with new terrors unborrowed from anything that visibly appears” (153). Here Ishmael, imagines a kind of male birthing—although the whaleman’s imagination is seemingly gendered feminine, impregnated by unspecified influences at sea, the conception is nonetheless that of a man—the whaleman. The result of this male birth is the monstrous conception of the white whale, here described as phantasmatic and fluid; something that incorporated itself with a half-formed notional fetus to form some kind of new, unidentifiable terror.

The figuration of monstrous male birthing is repeated in “The Chart” (Chapter 45). Here, Ishmael describes how Ahab, or some part of him, gave birth to “his one supreme purpose” to wrathfully hunt and destroy Moby Dick:

that purpose, by its own sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own. Nay, could grimly live and burn,

while the common vitality to which it was conjoined, fled horror-stricken from the unbidden and unfathered birth. (Melville 170)

Thus, for Ahab (at least as told by Ishmael), the unswerving quest to destroy Moby-Dick seems to have violently birthed itself from out of Ahab. It forces itself into independent existence while the balance of Ahab that witnesses the birth recoils from it and flees in horror. Thus, whereas Ishmael's attraction and repulsion to the maternal both ebb and flow, Ahab—at least in this initial encounter with the maternal—more unambiguously pulls back from its presence.

Moreover, when Ahab contemplates the event of birth—both of himself and of his fellow man—he does so in terms of misery and confusion. Soliloquizing as he interprets the doubloon, Ahab declares: “From storm to storm! So be it then. Born in throes, ‘tis fit that man should live in pains and die in pangs!” (Melville 333). Here, Ahab associates and equates the misery and pain of man with the trauma of birth for the child and mother. His language is perhaps consciously ambiguous; it is not clear whether man is born in his own throes, those of his mother, or both. In any event, for Ahab the pains of life and pangs of death emanate from the throes of birthing.

In addition to these allusions and figurations of birth, *Moby-Dick* contains evocative womb imagery. Shortly after Ishmael fantasizes death in the “sanctum sanctorum,” in “The Grand Armada” (Chapter 87) his whale boat is drawn into the center of a vast whale pod—into a maternal and womb-like space. In this “innermost heart of the shoal,” Ishmael can only hear the warring outside world of men fighting whales, but not feel it. He is trapped and “must watch for a breach in the living wall that hemmed us in; the wall that had admitted us in order to shut us up” (Melville 302). Sucked in and shut within this “living wall” and “innermost fold,” Ishmael seems to live out a version of his fantasy of being entombed within the womb. And like the “Ohio honey-hunter,” the whale-pod womb is a place of bliss and harmony. Behind the living wall, Ishmael and his fellow boatsmen are visited by cows and calves that “evinced a wondrous fearlessness and confidence” (Melville 302). The whalers are moved to caress the whales with the instruments usually reserved for killing, and Ishmael gazes into the water to

watch nursing mothers and suckling calves, some still umbilically tethered to their mother. This experience has a profound and lasting impact on Ishmael's constitution; he reveals:

And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concerns; yea, serenely revelled in dalliance and delight. 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 and joy. (Melville 303)

Thus, as Ishmael enters this walled womb of the pod, he finds not the "pains" and "pangs" Ahab associates with the space, but a wellspring of comfort. Moreover, Ishmael internalizes this wombed space, fixing within his being a maternal locus of "mute calm," and "eternal mildness and joy." Whereas Ahab's self is assailed by the cruel maternal, Ishmael finds safe harbor from storm raging at the border of his self and the world in the womb-like space he has notionally incorporated at the core of his being.

Elsewhere in the novel, manifestations of the womb both entice and threaten oblivion. Just as the womb of the whale head takes in Tashtego (and the honeyed crotch sucks in the Ohio honey-hunter and the whale pod draws Ishmael's boat to within its living walls) womb-like vortices appear throughout *Moby-Dick* threatening to devour man and boat alike. In "The Masthead" (Chapter 35), Ishmael describes being lulled by the sea as he is perched high above on the mast. He explains the precariousness of the position, how he becomes lifeless, rocked only by waves and the ship—a situation that resembles that of the fetus, substantially inert save for the rocking of the maternal body. Ishmael reveals how, in this precarious, helpless position, one's identity seems to vanish as one hovers over the vortex:

There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gentle rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at

midday, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. (Melville 136).

Here the feminine sea rocks away Ishmael's identity and threatens to swallow him whole into its womb-like vortex. Yet, the rocking hypnotism that lulls Ishmael into an oblivious state is not the focus of Ishmael's horror; rather, it is the return from the intrauterine-like oblivion and the resurgence of his sense of identity and self that frighten him.

Like Ishmael, Ahab also seems aware of this association between figurative wombs, vortices and oblivion. In "The Log and Line" (Chapter 125), Ahab punnily addresses the Manxman, playing on the "Isle of Man" and its geopolitics: "Here's a man from Man; a man born in once independent Man, and now unmanned of Man; which is sucked in—by what?" (391). In talking about the Manxman, Ahab could be talking about himself—he too was "unmanned." And this threat to identity, this "unmanning" is the result of being sucked in by some kind of vortex or womb that Ahab cannot speak out loud. For the Isle of Man, it both broke away from and then was subsumed—was unmanned—by the mother country, England. For Ahab, he was unmanned by the—the great toothed womb that threatens to swallow him whole (he "doesn't bite so much as he swallows") (339).⁵ And unlike the biblical and womb-like whale that swallowed Jonah to rebirth him as a revitalized man of faith, *Moby Dick* threatens to swallow Ahab into oblivion with no possibility of rebirth.

The figure of the vortex—the swallowing womb—appears most prominently at the end of the novel. In the last chapter (before the Epilogue), the *Pequod* and all the crew aboard are sucked down into the sea:

And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the *Pequod* out of sight. (Melville 426)

This all-consuming vortex swallows the ship and its crew whole, not unlike Tashtego's whale head, or the Ohio honey-hunter's tree crotch. It is in the wake of this devouring, malignant womb that the mother-like *Rachel* returns: "It was the devious-cruising *Rachel*, that in her retracing search after her missing children,

only found another orphan” (Melville 427). Thus the novel concludes as Ishmael is rejected from one devouring maternal presence and rescued by a second beneficent figuration.

In addition to figurations of birth and the womb, the final major category of maternal imagery that proliferates throughout *Moby-Dick* is that of umbilical tethering. *Moby-Dick* is a novel full of ropes—ropes that violently tether harpooner to whale, that pull Fedallah and Ahab to their deaths, and that symbiotically and beneficially bind man to man. Ishmael dedicates whole chapters to different kinds of lines. In “The Line” (Chapter 60), he describes the danger of tethering the other end of a whale-harpooned line to the boat, noting the speed with which the whale can run out the line which would cause “the doomed boat [to] infallibly be dragged down after him into the profundity of the sea” (Melville 228). In this respect, the cost of violently imposed, forced umbilical tethering is to be dragged by the mother-figure-whale into nothingness. Ishmael further notes the fetus-like precariousness of the whale boat’s position with respect to the umbilical line: “the whale line folds the whole boat in its complicated coils, twisting and writhing around it in almost every direction. All the oarsmen are involved in its perilous contortions” (Melville 228-9). This fetal vulnerability turns from precarious to life-threatening once the mother-like whale is struck with the harpoon line, an act that causes “all these horrible contortions [to] be put in play like ringed lightnings” and which makes the “very marrow in [the whaleman’s] bones to quiver in him like a shaken jelly” (Melville 229). This iteration of maternal, umbilical imagery therefore strikes terror in the whaleman, presumably including Ishmael himself. Indeed, the fear proves well-founded, as Ahab is garroted by the line with which he harpoons Moby Dick, and is dragged by the neck to his quick oblivion. Fedallah too becomes entangled in the lines thrust into the white whale and is fatally bound to the symbolic womb-of-a-whale for all the whalemens to see.

In “The Monkey-Rope” (Chapter 72), Ishmael describes a different kind of rope—the monkey rope that attaches from Ishmael’s waist to Queequeg’s as Queequeg balances on the floating whale corpse like a birling lumberjack. Ishmael, in fact, chooses umbilical language to describe the cord:

So that for better or worse, we two, for the time, were wedded; and should poor

Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that instead of cut-

ting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake. So, then, 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 (255).

Interestingly, the umbilical relationship Ishmael figures is not mother-to-child, but twin-to-twin. Nonetheless, this relationship both recalls the womb and involves a kind of maternal-like dependence and responsibility, with one's twin's sustenance and survival dependent on the other's. Although Ishmael finds this responsibility "dangerous," the situation leads him to philosophize a theory about the interconnectedness of all humanity through umbilical-like relationships: "I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals" (Melville 255).⁶ In other words, every man depends on another—his banker, his pharmacist for his survival. Although Ishmael presents the monkey-rope as life-sustaining, it is not without the element of precariousness that so often characterizes the position of whalers with respect to the hempen whale line.

Ahab also shares a relationship to the umbilical in addition to the violent harpoon line that ultimately causes his demise. In "The Log and Line" (Chapter 125), Ahab, in a moment of rare tenderness and compassion, speaks of his bond with Pip in umbilical terms:

Oh, ye frozen heavens! look down here. Ye did beget this luckless child [Pip], and have abandoned him, ye creative libertines. Here, boy; Ahab's cabin shall be Pip's home; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart strings. (392)

In this passage, Ahab returns to the theme of longing for a parental or maternal presence that has seemingly forsaken mankind. He then offers himself as a kind of surrogate mother for Pip. As Ahab imagines this kind of maternal or umbilical relationship, he revises the terms to purge the relationship of its strictly maternal, feminine quality; Ahab imagines being tied to Pip with cords not of the uterus but of the heart. Thus, Ahab displays both a desire to emulate the maternal, and a need to co-opt and transform maternal power into a more safely masculine or non-gendered terms. The statement can be understood as Ahab's intention to supersede the maternal and make her presence and power obsolete. A mere three paragraphs

after Ahab's declaration of maternal-like intent, however, the viability of such a relationship is subtly called into question. The Manxman derogates Ahab's and Pip's daftness, while he observes a disintegrating line: "But here's the end of the rotten line—all dripping too" (392). This repetition of umbilical imagery, now in grotesque and horrific terms undermines Ahab's earlier metaphor, suggesting that there is something both rotten and untenable with Ahab's umbilical connection to Pip. And indeed, like the monkey-ropes that Ishmael suggests makes every man dependent upon his fellow, it is Ahab's monomaniacal descent to oblivion that ultimately drags his surrogate child Pip to his death.

3 THEORIZING THE MATERNAL: ABJECTION AND WOMB ENVY

In the previous section, I have traced how, throughout *Moby-Dick*, the characters of Ishmael and Ahab display a persistent yearning for the lost mother as well as how the maternal body pervasively—if ephemerally—resurfaces. In this section, I turn to two prominent areas of theory—Julia Kristeva's understanding of the subject's relation to the maternal *chora* and its subsequent abjection of the mother and contemporary theories of womb envy—in order to more precisely analyze the psychodynamics at work between Ishmael and Ahab and the maternal. Both areas of theory place the mother and the maternal at the core of masculine identity formation and speak to the kind of ambivalent masculine response toward the maternal so pervasive in *Moby-Dick*.

3.1 *Chora* and Abjection

Julia Kristeva, like Jacques Lacan, seeks to understand the process by which a human being becomes a subject. That is, she advances a theory that seeks to both define the human subject—the sense of a coherent, autonomous self that humans feel—and explain how the subject comes into being. Both Lacan and Kristeva see the subject proceeding from an undifferentiated existence, a state of being in which the infant child cannot distinguish between itself and its environment. For Lacan, this state is termed the "Real;" Kristeva calls it the *chora*. The Real and the *chora*, however, are not precisely the same. The Real, for Lacan, is a kind of primordial soup, a world experienced as an animal rather than a human

(Žižek 63). Whereas the Real is grounded in human's essential animalistic existence, the *chora*, in Kristeva terms, is centered around the infant's existence as part of its mother's body.

The maternal *chora*, while central to Kristeva's theoretical system, eludes finite or concise definition. The term derives from Plato's *Timaeus* and is often translated as "womb" or receptacle (McAfee 18). However, Kristeva does not use *chora* to denote a specific space; rather, it is more a state of fluid existence in which the infant lives that is governed by the mother's rhythms, vibrations, and energies. Kristeva asserts that "the drives, which are 'energy' charges as well as 'psychical marks, articulate what we call a *chora*: a non expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" (*Revolution* 25). In other words, the free flowing *chora* is a nonverbal state or enveloping aura through which the infant is regulated by the mother, and in some sense, communicates with the mother. Noelle McAfee, in her survey of Kristeva's work, understands the *chora* to refer to how an infant's psychic environment is oriented around its mother's body before the infant is able to clearly distinguish the borders of its own body and identity. She explains:

In this early psychic space, the infant experiences a wealth of drives (feelings, instincts, etc.) that could be extremely disorienting and destructive were it not for the infant's relation with his or her mother's body. An infant's tactile relation to its mother's body provides an orientation for the infant's drives. (19)

The *chora* holds several aspects that are of key significance to Kristeva's theory of the subject and which are relevant to an understanding of the maternal presence in *Moby-Dick*. First, although the *chora* is something in which only the prenatal and early infant fully exists, it continues to impact the developing subject. As an initial matter, then, a certain parallel exists between Kristeva's notion of the lingering *chora* and the appearance of the maternal in *Moby-Dick*: in both cases, the maternal is ostensibly left behind, but continues to haunt or resurface for the subject.

One facet of the *chora*'s continuing influence on the subject is through what Kristeva calls the "semiotic." Kristeva uses "semiotic" to refer, in part, to a kind of pre-verbal signifying such as the babbles and coos of a baby. Yet this semiotic means of signification is not wholly usurped when the child

enters into language; rather, Kristeva posits that the semiotic continues to exist below the surface of language and within the speaking subject (McAfee 26). She includes in the semiotic any “distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof, engraved or written sign, imprint, trace, figuration” (*Revolution* 25). Thus, this maternally originating *chora*, gives birth both to the subject and to symbolic language, and it continues to exist as the site on which the subject and language are written. It can be imagined as a kind of blank receptacle which always exists and cannot be destroyed.⁷ Moreover, out of the *chora* comes the semiotic—the semiotic is essentially the means of communication in the *chora*—and this “archaic, unconsciously driven . . . mode of signifying” remains as undercurrent in symbolic signification, occasionally seeping out to disrupt “the more orderly, symbolic effort of [verbal] communication” (McAfee 39).

Kristeva’s account of the emergence of the subject from the *chora* also departs from Lacan’s theorization of subject formation. Both Lacan and Kristeva posit that the human is made subject by its entrance into the symbolic order of language; through language, the subject is able to differentiate itself from others and one thing from the next. Lacan understands the key phase of this process as occurring during the mirror stage, which occurs when the child is approximately six to eighteen months old (Evans 115). In the mirror stage, the child first recognizes itself in a reflective surface and identifies its image as a coherent version of itself. This self-awareness is inexorably coupled with a sense of a gap—a division between the self that one feels and the more complete image of the self that the subject observes in the reflecting surface (115-6). The subject is tantalized by the illusory wholeness of a seamless, replete self—an image and notion that makes the subject more acutely feel its lack. For Lacan, human desire is born out of the gap between the subject and its notional complete self; the subject strives to define itself, to acquire identity, and to pursue happiness in an impossible attempt to attain wholeness. The siren call of the illusory whole self and the subject’s experience of lack drive the subject into language, for without language, the subject cannot articulate its desires and cannot chase its more complete self. (Evans 116). It is thus *through* language that the human animal is made subject.

Kristeva, like Lacan, believes the subject to be the product of language, but for Kristeva, the crucial process of becoming a subject commences earlier than Lacan’s mirror stage and is oriented around

the mother as opposed to the reflected image of one's self (*Revolution* 48). In Kristeva's conceptualization, the infant first imagines that it is part of mother; only through the process of rejecting, pushing away, or jettisoning that which the infant associates with the mother, does the infant become a subject in process (*le sujet en proces*) (Oliver 60). As the subject in process emerges from the *chora*, its primary mode of communication changes from the semiotic to the symbolic signification of language. Importantly, for Kristeva, there is no finality to the process of subjectivation; the subject is always in process and is always pushing away that which it associates with the maternal. This process of pushing away or "radically excluding" is what Kristeva calls "abjection." However, because the maternal can never be fully or finally abjected, the semiotic dimension of communication forever remains a companion to the symbolic realm of signification (McAfee 26). Moreover, the subject forever remains "in process" or "on trial" (*en proces*), in the sense that its borders are never fixed but must be continually delineated or adjusted; accordingly, Kristeva's "claim that alterity is within the subject undermines any notion of a unified subject" (Oliver 13).

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva most fully develops her theory of abjection. She explains that, in order for the subject to determine its own boundaries and sense of self, it must delineate itself from the maternal *chora* and body. It is only by distinguishing itself from its mother that the subject can identify itself. Yet although the subject continues to abject the mother in order to construct its own existence and autonomy, the subject never wholly succeeds—the subject is always *le sujet en proces*. Kristeva posits that the semiotic—the drives and energies that reside in the maternal *chora*—can never be destroyed or irrevocably banished; therefore, the meaning and identity that the self has constructed is forever imperiled by collapse into the undifferentiated maternal. Noelle McAfee explains:

What is abjected is radically excluded but never banished altogether. It hovers at the periphery of one's existence, constantly challenging one's own tenuous borders of selfhood. What makes something abject and not simply repressed is that it does not entirely disappear from consciousness. It remains both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one's

own clean and proper self. The abject is that which does not respect boundaries. It beseeches and pulverizes the subject. (46)

Because the very existence of the subject is contingent upon its boundary from the mother, those events, images, and experiences which Kristeva calls the “abject” that call attention to this boundary’s instability result in a human reaction of horror—a defensive response to distance the destabilizing threat. Kristeva explains that the abject is experienced as

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome, Not me. Not that. But not nothing either. A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. (*Powers 2*)

One category of such threats are those that remind the self that it is merely an animal, whose system of meaning is merely constructed over a fundamental, primal nature. Accordingly, the subject recoils at an open wound or corpse, because that wound or corpse reveals how the subject is merely flesh and subject to die and rot, thus breaking down the border between constituted subject and mere object. Another category of threats are those that cause the subject to recall its own origins as part of the mother’s body and its status as something abjected—excluded from that body. Accordingly, the subject reviles bodily expulsions. Barbara Creed, in her study of the abject in horror films, suggests that wombs may be the utmost in the abject in that they contain a new life that will pass from inside to outside, bringing traces of internal contamination (blood, afterbirth, feces) with it (49). Creed cites Christian doctrine (which rewrites the genesis of humanity without wombs) and purification rituals as evidence of patriarchal society’s ancient and long-standing need to abject, turn away from, or sanitize the birth process (49).

What is particularly abject for the subject about the womb and the mother's body is that it calls attention to the subject's unstable identity as well as its own abject status. Kelly Oliver, in his monograph on Kristeva's work explains this abject reaction to the maternal body:

The 'subject' discovers itself as the impossible separation/identity of the maternal body. It hates that body but only because it can't be free of it. That body, the body without border, the body out of which this abject subject came, is impossible. It is a horrifying, devouring body. It is a body that evokes rage and fear. (60).

Oliver notes that the child, particularly the male child, "feels rage against the mother because her carrying him in her womb compromises his identity. How can he become a man when 'he' was once a woman? He was once part, now the expelled waste, of a woman's body" (61).

Through processes of abjection, the self is precariously constructed by jettisoning and radically excluding objects, images, and ideas that threaten its independence and constitution, while the abject ceaselessly beckons and lures the subject toward the place where meaning and the constructed self break down. For the abject is not wholly disgusting to the subject, it is also enticing and alluring. Although abjection is necessary to maintain distance from collapse into the *chora*, the *chora* appeals because the subject recalls it as a place of plenitude, a place in which it felt whole and complete and in union with its universe—its mother. Kristeva, like Lacan, sees the presymbolic, presubject as the unfallen state of human existence—the only phase or experience in human life that is experienced without a sense of lack or incompleteness. She asserts that the male child, to take up his "socially prescribed sexual identity," must split its mother into the abject mother and the sublime mother (Oliver 61; Kristeva, *Powers* 157).⁸ In other words, the subject longs for a narcissistic union with its mother—what McAfee terms its "first love" and yet maintains "a need to renounce this union" in order to preserve its status as subject (48).

Thus Kristeva posits a subject that maintains—much like the experience conveyed in *Moby-Dick*—an ambivalent relationship towards the maternal *chora* and body. Kristeva, like Ishmael's narration, tells the story of subjects that, in seeking to define themselves, both radically reject the maternal and yet are hauntingly beckoned by its insistent resurfacing.

3.2 Womb Envy

Womb envy, in its contemporary iterations, intersects with Kristeva's theory of how the human proceeds from womb to *chora* to subject in process. The counterpart to Freud's notion of penis envy, womb envy refers to a narcissistic wounding of the male subject, and the term is often associated with Karen Horney, who first used the term in 1926 (Bayne 152). Carolyn Eschbach, a practicing psychiatrist and scholar, asserts that "[a]mong the envies, envy of the womb may be considered the most primordial" (49). The term refers to envy on the part of the male subject's conflicted response to the mother's womb—the "nurturing inner space that encompasses and contains, providing total care to the fetal child within its confines. But the same womb necessarily excludes those who are not inside, and it ultimately expels the one who is" (Eschbach 49). In the terms offered by Eve Kittay and Carolyn Eschbach, womb envy addresses the womb's physical, sexual space as well as the metaphorical generativity and receptivity associated with it (Kittay, "Rereading" 385, Eschbach 54). Envy is what a subject feels toward an individual (with whom the subject identifies) who possesses a desired object or trait (Kittay, "Womb Envy" 96). Kristeva, among others, offers ample evidence of the process by which the male subject—indeed all subjects—strongly and essentially *identify* with the mother; the challenge, in Kristevan terms, is how to differentiate oneself from the mother. However, males, unlike females, experience envy of the mother because the mother possesses the womb and its associated capacities—objects and abilities to which the male subject lacks access.

Womb envy suggests an acutely negative response to the womb and its associations experienced by men that goes beyond or is layered upon the abject response. Evidence of womb-envy can be drawn from antiquity to present. In antiquity, the womb was defined as a dangerous place; for example, in Greek mythology, it was imagined as inhabited by an angry dog (Silver 410). Early Christianity associated it with a place of sin, evil, and suffering (410). In modernity, it became a place of impurity, contagion, danger, and became linked with hysteria (410). Such examples evince a long-standing view by men and patriarchal culture of the womb as threatening.

Eve Kittay, Carolyn Eschbach, and other contemporary theorists draw on Kleinian object-relations and Klein's concept of primal envy to understand the dynamics of womb envy (Bayne 153). Klein holds that the infant is overcome with "primal" envy for the mother's breast, access to which it cannot control. To manage this undesirable feeling—this inability to regulate the source of nourishment and comfort—the child conceptually splits the mother—or the mother's breast—into two discrete objects. The good breast is the one which is there when the baby wants it and which gratifies the child (Kittay 106). The bad breast is the one that is absent when desired and that causes the infant pain and frustration. (Kittay 106). Klein, in articulating "primal" or "breast" envy in the infant, distinguishes between greed and envy. She observes:

Greed is an impetuous and insatiable craving, exceeding what the subject needs and what the object is able and willing to give. At the unconscious level, greed aims primarily at completely scooping out, sucking dry, and devouring the breast: that is to say, its aim is destructive introjection; whereas envy not only seeks to rob in this way, but also to put badness, primarily bad excrements and bad parts of the self, into the mother, and first of all into her breast, in order to spoil and destroy her. In the deepest sense this means destroying her creativeness. One essential difference between greed and envy, although no rigid dividing line can be drawn since they are so closely associated, would accordingly be that greed is mainly bound up with introjection and envy with projection. (181)

Thus, the infant not only splits the mother into good and bad objects, but projects its own bad feelings onto the bad mother or breast. In effect, the subject writes its own negative emotions and associations onto the notional bad mother/object.

Eschbach holds that the envious man—overcome with conflicting feelings towards the womb (the cryptic inner space that distinguishes woman for her childbearing capacity *and* is central to her sexuality)—splits the womb into good and bad objects (Eschbach 55-6). The good womb is a place of comfort and bliss, and the bad womb is the womb that forcibly expelled the subject. Sexual attraction by men to women can thus be a source of anxiety or dread, in that male identity, "originally immersed in the 'fe-

maleness' of the mother, may be threatened by heterosexual intercourse if it stirs fears of being sucked into a greedy womb" (citations omitted, Eschbach 57). Clinical observations support this notion; many male analysands have divulged their fantasies of the vagina as an "insatiable, cannibalistic organ . . . [that] threatens not only the man's penis, but also his sexual identity and status as a male" (Montgrain 172).

As Kittay explains, under Kleinian theory, once the object is split into mono-faceted, one-dimensional objects, the subject (as observed by Klein in her clinical work) employs several defenses against envy: idealization, devaluation of the object, devaluation of the self, appropriation (a greedy incorporation of the object), stirring up envy in others, and stifling the feelings of love while increasing the feelings of hate ("Womb Envy" 106). Kittay explains how, when a subject idealizes the mother, he splits the mother into an abstract, pure, and perfect notional representation (107). For example, the good mother may be idealized and associated with the beneficent Nature and fertility—abstract notions as opposed to actual women (107). Actual women, on the other hand, may provoke anger in the subject as they consistently fail to meet the standards and impossible ideals created by the subject. A subject devalues the object of envy—the womb or the maternal—by disparaging, hating, or seeking to destroy the womb/mother and its unsettling manifestations (108). As another defense, the male subject may devalue himself. Kittay explains:

As a defense against womb envy it is particularly inadequate in a culture of male dominance, where masculinity is importantly related to positions of power or to physical domination (e.g., in our own culture a man who loses a position of importance or some form of power says that he "no longer feels like a man"). Where a man's self-devaluation results in a questioning of sexual identity, then docility, noncompetitiveness, or effeminacy may be an aberrant response to excessive womb envy; when confronted with his wife's or lover's pregnancy and delivery, such devaluation may lead to depressive and suicidal tendencies. A contrary but alternative response is extreme aggressivity and hostility, which might be used to cover the sense of inferiority. (109)

Here, Kittay suggests that some men, struggling with womb envy, perform a kind of effeminacy that devalues them in their culture whereas other men perform a kind of hyper-aggressivity towards women to mask an inner feeling of inferiority or devaluation.

With respect to the defense of appropriation or incorporation, the male subject fantasizes a kind of internalization of or fusion with the womb in order to ward off awareness of envy. Eschbach explains that, in this case, a “regressive yearning for the nourishing, sheltering womb may emerge” (63). In one typical form of this fantasy, the male subject notionally incorporates the womb as a hollow life-giving organ and fantasizes about being able to give birth by himself. In such incorporation fantasies, the male subject may also fantasize about being able to nurture or nurse another (64). In a second typical form of the appropriation fantasy, the subject imagines being able to re-enter or merge with the womb “in order to claim this primordial, protected, and exclusive space for oneself” (Eschbach 63).⁹ Eschbach indicates that these merger or fusion fantasies may express a wish to greedily devour, or to “rediscover a universe without obstacles, rough edges or differences” (65, quoting Chasseguet-Smirgel 511). One manifestation of this fantasy is falling into the sea—an event evocative and associative with returning to an intrauterine state (66). When a man defends against womb envy by stirring up the envy of others, he attempts to put himself in the position occupied by the womb or womb-holder. By making others envious of him, he seeks to appropriate the power associated with the womb. Kittay explains that this behavior is often directed by men towards women through displays of power or status (“Womb Envy” 115). The insistence of superior power by men over women may indicate underlying feelings of inferiority and enviousness of women’s womb-centered power.

The final category of Kleinian defenses against envy is that in which the subject stifles his feelings of love while intensifying his feelings of hate. In this type of reaction, the bad object—here, womb—eclipses the good object, resulting in a hostility toward female organs or other associations with childbirth or nursing. In this defensive reaction, the intensifying feelings of hate can spoil the future enjoyment of the object’s goodness and the gratitude that comes with such enjoyment (Kittay “Womb En-

vy” 120). As Kittay explains, this defense to womb envy can result in escalating destruction and violence by the envious man:

Envy of the woman interferes with the gratification of seeing life emerge and empathetically reliving the best moments of symbiosis and the experience of parental power and generosity available in nurturing a child. But the destruction of life does not yield the sought-after gratification. Since the transposition of values has been accomplished to deal with the envy, and since there is anger at the failure of gratification, the destruction is renewed, fueled now with greater anger. (120)

In other words, Kittay (following Klein) sees male impetus towards destruction as self-escalating in its inability to offer meaningful gratification. Anger produce unsatisfying violence and destruction; the dissatisfaction generates more anger which, in turn, begets further destruction.

4 AHAB AND MOBY DICK: ABJECTING AND ENVYING THE WHALE

4.1 Ahab and Abjection

Barbara Creed, in her analysis of the maternal in horror films, extends Kristeva’s notion of the abject to what Creed terms the “monstrous-feminine” (1). Creed’s study is particularly useful in reading *Moby-Dick* in that she connects the role of the abjected mother to representations of monstrosity—a connection I will pursue in Melville’s novel as it relates to the white whale as a monstrous mother/womb, particularly as beheld by Ahab. Creed identifies one rendering of the abject monstrous-feminine as that of the archaic mother, an ancient figure who gives birth to all things. This abjected archaic mother is both fecund and yet a “primordial abyss” (18) as the child forms its subjectivity; she is a “cannibalizing black hole from which all life comes and to which all life returns,” a source of deepest terror. As abyss, she threatens to swallow the self, to erase its boundaries, and dissolve its subjectivity. Yet despite this danger, the abyss also lures the subject with a promise of primal bliss and harmony.

In addition, Creed analyzes how horror films frequently represent the womb as monstrous—as a site that threatens the subject in multiple ways. Noting the ancient fear of the womb as a place associated with the devil and madness, Creed explains one facet of the horror of the womb:

Woman's maternal function is held abject and horrifying because her ability to give birth links her directly to the animal world and the great cycle of birth, decay, and death.

Awareness of his links to nature reminds man of his mortality and of the fragility of the symbolic order. (47)

Like Kristeva, Creed identifies the “maternal body and the act of childbirth as one which induces the image of birth as a violent act of expulsion through which the nascent body tears itself away from the matter of maternal insides” (101). Through this violent process, the child's body needs to wholly remove itself from the maternal body in order to be fully within the symbolic order. Creed suggests that the womb represents the utmost in abjection because it “contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination” (49). In other words, the womb provokes a special terror distinct from most abject experiences in that other sources of abjection that cause the subject to recoil merely threaten the subject from the outside, and thus can be more readily pushed away. Moreover, the womb horrifies because it confronts the subject with its own abject status as contaminated object, with the fact that the subject was expelled and pushed out and away from its mother. Although, in *Moby-Dick*, the white whale may be different things to different characters (and readers and critics), for Ahab, the white whale is monstrous, and its monstrosity for him seems particularly linked to its feminine, maternal associations. Indeed, Ahab's monomania—his single unswerving task to destroy the white whale—can be understood as a form of violent abjection of the maternal.

In “The Chart” (Chapter 45), Ahab's desire to destroy the whale is described as having violently birthed itself, while that part of Ahab “to which it was conjoined, fled-horror stricken from the unbidden and unfathered birth” (Melville 170). This recoiling, fleeing, horror-stricken response to birth precisely describes abjection (particularly as Creed identifies its figurations in horror fantasies)—casting away that which horrifies in its potential to unravel the subject. The imagery of the ripping away of a conjoined,

unbidden, and unfathered birth is made monstrous for Ahab because it threatens the very integrity of the self he is so fixed on maintaining and asserting. The birth-monstrosity confronts Ahab with his animal-like origins and once-status as a pre-linguistic being without the capacity to define or assert itself in the world. Moreover, Ahab may associate birthing with monstrosity—as a danger to be avoided or destroyed—because it challenges the subject’s status *qua* subject by confronting the subject with its own abject status. That is, while Ahab, as subject, may experience some sense of control over his own identity and boundaries by jettisoning the maternal and the abject, birth reminds him that he too is abject; he too was radically excluded by his mother from her body. This realization by the subject of its own abject or excremental status threatens to disintegrate the subject’s position as a coherent, meaningful self. The passage from “The Chart” reflects this double-edged blade of the abject birth; Ahab’s hatred for the white whale both is violently abjected by Ahab and seems to violently abject Ahab.

The metaphorical birthing of Ahab’s hatred for the whale raises two further points: first, it indicates an association by Ahab of maternal with the loathed or abject; and second, it signals a connection between this maternal abject and the white whale. With respect to the former point, Ahab’s discomfort with the maternal seems to emanate from the trauma Ahab imagines occurring during parturition. As this thesis has observed, Ahab associates what he ascertains to be the universal suffering of man to the pain of birth; in “The Doubloon,” he declares, “Born in throes, ‘tis fit that man should live in pains and die in pangs!” (Melville 333) In this lament, Ahab connects the separation of birth with a pain and suffering not known to the prenatal child. The trauma of birth may be especially exacerbated as conceptualized and internalized by Ahab because of the subsequent repeated trauma of his early and permanent separation from his mother. Left motherless as a twelve-month old infant, Ahab seemingly conflates the two events; that is, he associates the pain of losing his mother with pain of parturition. This wounding, this pain of being expelled and pushed away, abjected, and abandoned by the mother is again echoed by Ahab in “The Dying Whale” (Chapter 116). Here, Ahab after addressing the expiring whale and then the sun, hails the sea: “Then hail, for ever hail, O sea, in whose eternal tossings the wild fowl finds his only rest. Born of earth, yet suckled by the sea; though hill and valley mothered me, ye billows are my foster-brothers”

(Melville 376). Ahab acknowledges a sense of being pushed off, cut adrift, and untethered in a world of inadequate (for the sea, hill, and valley cannot love Ahab) foster mothers. Not only does this convey a sense of loss, but also of abjection—the devaluation of the self as worthless or excremental to the abjecting body. The dual pain of loss and being abjected by the mother, is again suggested in “The Candles,” as Ahab addresses as surrogate father the elemental electricity that sets much of the *Pequod* aglow:

Oh, thou magnanimous! now I do glory in my genealogy. But thou art but my fiery father; my sweet mother, I know not. Oh, cruel! what hast thou done with her? There lies my puzzle; but thine is greater. Thou knowest not how came ye, hence callest thyself unbegotten; certainly knowest not thy beginning, hence callest thyself unbegun. I know that of me, which thou knowest not of thyself, oh, thou omnipotent. (Melville 373)

Ahab, in accusing the omnipotent or elemental forces of the world for his mother’s disappearance and absence, reveals the sense of cruelty he feels at her being taken away from him (or him being taken away from her). The passage also reflects the excruciating uncertainty Ahab experiences in contemplating his mother. He feels lost, uncertain of his origins, knowing only that he was begotten and begun. He knows not whence his mother went. Rather than blame her for leaving and abjecting him and rather than facing his own potential sense of guilt (of too successfully abjecting his mother into oblivion), he blames the unseen, but all-powerful cosmic forces. Ahab’s self-aggrandizing assertion of his superiority over the omnipotent elemental forces reveals an insecurity perhaps rooted in his anxieties over his own abject, worthless status; the vengeance-fuelled rage that Ahab feels towards the forces he associates with his own isolation and lonely drifting (his own abjection) he directs here at the unseen. But it is ultimately Moby Dick, the great blank canvas of a whale onto which Ahab focuses and writes his hatred.

As Kristeva posits, the dynamics of abjection are complex; the subject does not simply loathe and radically jettison the abject, the subject also is attracted to it. In fact, one energy may draw fuel from the other—the dangerous allure of the abject, its calling the subject back into the undifferentiated may well inspire the response of radical expulsion. Accordingly, despite Ahab’s abject response to the maternal and his violent assertion of self against unknown origins, he is also attracted to *chora*-like figurations

throughout the text. The overlapping of allure and abjection is evident in Ahab's famous speech in "The Quarter-Deck" (Chapter 36). Here, Ahab first articulates his quest to destroy the white whale:

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. (Melville 140)

This passage reflects Ahab's desire to access the unseen force that shapes and animates life—a force or realm akin to the *chora* or the archaic mother. And yet Ahab's attraction to this force is coupled with the urge to violently abject and destroy—to phallically thrust through the womb- and whale-like wall.

Ahab's attraction to the maternal and the *chora* seems bound up in his obsession with whales. In part, Ahab's fixation with whales may emanate from the historic symbolic association between whale and womb, for this association is not merely personal to Ahab but traces back at least as far as the biblical story of Jonah and the leviathan. The text of *Moby-Dick* repeatedly aligns the womb/maternal with whale; Father Mapple delivers his sermon on the story of Jonah's rebirth from the belly of the leviathan, and the novel underscores the whale's figurative linkage with the maternal through such passages such as the birth travesty in "Cisterns and Buckets," the "living wall" womb of the whale pod in "The Grand Armada," and the pervasive imagery of harpooning—violent tethering to whale bodies. Ahab's personal association with the whale and the *chora* is illustrated in "The Sphynx" (Chapter 70), in which he beseeches a severed whale head (an object later associated with the womb that births Tashtego) to divulge its secret knowledge:

Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest. That head upon which the upper sun now gleams, has moved amid the world's foundations. . . . Thou has been where bell or diver never went; hast slept by many a sailor's side, where sleepless mothers would give their lives to lay them down . . . O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel out of Abraham and not one syllable is thine. (Melville 249)

Here, Ahab connects the whale again to inscrutability and access to ancient, primordial scenes and wisdom that is as profound as it is unutterable—a description that seems to aptly apply to the archaic *chora*.

Although the whale at times embodies for Ahab an association with attractively mysterious *chora*, the white whale serves Ahab as a hated cathexis of absent maternal presence. For Ahab, the white whale attracts and envelops his hatred and inspires his violent abject response because it offers him a body, substance, and object to abject that his lost mother cannot. Ahab, as a twelve-month old on the border of language and meaningfully entering the symbolic realm, was wrested away from his mother, an event that seems to have heightened his sense of the mystery of his origins, of his mother as what Creed refers to as the “archaic maternal.” His missing, mysterious mother makes it more difficult for Ahab to push her away, to differentiate himself from her body in order to claim his own. So, taking nature as his substitute suckling mother, he seeks to push the natural world away, the world that is described as Ahab’s “step-mother world, so long cruel” (405). The quintessential embodiment of that surrogate, natural maternal for Ahab is the white whale.

As Kristeva posits, the subject becomes a subject and continues *en proces* through ongoing abjection. Through this process of repulsing the maternal foil, the subject comes to delineate its boundaries and mark itself off from its mother and the world around. One would, then, expect a subject, such as Ahab, to experience great anxiety with respect to his identity when the origins and boundaries of that identity are especially and poignantly unclear; and this is precisely the case with Ahab. Ahab is bent on knowing to what extent he controls himself as subject and what extent he is written by the maternal body; in one of the final chapters, he soliloquizes:

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper and natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? (Melville 406)

Ahab here identifies his own crisis of abjection—the split between the mysterious drives and charges of his maternal *chora*—the nameless, unscrutable thing that still semiotically underpins and commands him—and the symbolic order and the self-assertion of the constructed self named “Ahab.” Paradoxically, his drive to assert and stabilize himself by abjecting and destroying the whale only further destabilizes his sense of self—in seeking to define himself, he wonders what it is that drives him toward such a definition.

Dennis Williams, in his Lacanian reading of *Moby-Dick* investigates this very aspect of Ahab’s precarious subjectivity; he analyzes how Ahab’s self is constructed around a void that threatens the collapse of Ahab as subject. For Williams, this void is the Lacanian Real of the pre-subject, a close cousin and near synonym for the Kristevan *chora*. Williams asserts that “Ahab’s intense and tempestuous monomania certainly qualifies him as clinically ‘neurotic’” in his “fundamental stance or orientation toward the void produced by the subject’s primordial traumas” (63). Williams understands neuroses like Lacan (and Lacanian Bruce Fink) as centered obsessively around the question of “What am I?” (63). Indeed, in passages such as that excerpted above from “The Candles,” Ahab makes his obsession with this question manifest (“Is Ahab, Ahab?”). The fundamental tension that threatens to rip apart Ahab is one between “megalomaniacal self-assurance and anxious uncertainty” about who or what he is (Williams 63).

Williams analyzes the function of the white whale “as a kind of fetish object at the center of Ahab’s libidinal economy” which in substantial part serves to deflect attention from a “‘deeper’ problematic” (73). The deeper problematic that William identifies is Ahab’s obsession with the trauma of the “cut” or the “castration” that Lacan conceptualizes as occurring when the subject enters into the symbolic realm of language. Noting the recurrence of vortices in the novel and the “nature and symbology” of Ahab’s wound (i.e, a castration of his leg), Williams asserts that the blankness of the white whale infuriates Ahab in that it reminds Ahab of his own original and vestigial blankness (73-4). In other words, the whale both threatens and reminds Ahab of his own association with blankness—the Kristevan *chora* out of which Ahab emerged and which, despite Ahab’s efforts to push away, continues to resurface (like *Moby Dick*) and threaten to return him to blankness. While Williams notes the correlation between Ahab and the “primordial trauma” —that is, entering the symbolic realm, he stops short of positing why Ahab

struggles mightily with the void whereas other subjects do not (for every subject experiences the primordial trauma). One possibility, alluded to earlier, is that for Ahab, the earlier trauma of parturition¹⁰ was redoubled by the permanent separation from his mother as an infant.

Williams astutely analyzes how the whale functions both to allow Ahab to construct his subjectivity and to threaten it. However, interpreting the Ahab-whale dyad in Lacanian terms, Williams does not connect the whale to the maternal. Nonetheless, in its threatening aspect, *Moby Dick* can be likened to what Barbara Creed articulates as the “archaic mother.” As archaic mother, it is connected to the abyss or *chora* from which all things emanate and all things return; it destabilizes and threatens Ahab not only its potential to swallow him into oblivion, but also in its ability to descend into the secret depths of existence and return to the surface. The *chora*-like primordial terror of these depths over which Ahab rides are aptly figured by the episode in which Pip, abandoned by his whale boat, goes mad. As Ishmael describes it, Pip’s soul is drowned, but:

Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad.
(Melville 321-2)

Pip’s trip to the fluid primal world evokes a trip to an intrauterine, primordial state, an association strengthened by the passage’s reference to the world as one of origins, of “God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom,” a place where life is formed and set in motion. After Pip’s immersion in this figurative *chora*, he loses the ability to negotiate the symbolic order in ways meaningful to his shipmates. It is as though he speaks more from the logic of the semiotic than the symbolic. Ahab realizes his precarious position afloat above this unraveling deep; in “The Dying Whale” he addresses the sea, acknowledging both the deep and his status as but one of many things exhaled or pushed out of the void: “All thy unnamable im-

minglings float beneath me here; I am buoyed by breaths of once living things, exhaled as air, but water now” (Melville 376).

As Dennis Williams observes, Ahab’s obsession with Moby Dick and its inscrutable nature (“That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate” Ahab confesses in the “The Quarter Deck” (Melville 141)) defensively covers a deeper wounding in Ahab. Williams assesses this as the castration of the subject—the lack and the split that divides the subject upon entering the symbolic order. In Kristevan terms, the subject also is split between a semiotic self and a symbolic self—a self that is animated by semiotic rhythms and articulated in symbolic terms. This split, like the scar that runs from Ahab’s tip to toe and has worked down into his bone, deeply divides Ahab; it is a fissure that Ahab, unable to reconcile his two halves, labors to paste over by insisting on his symbolic self. In “The Candles,” Ahab addresses the “clear spirit of fire” that both made him and burned him with the seam-like scar. He accepts this external power, yet insists upon his own self-mastery: “I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here” (Melville 372). This aggressive assertiveness of self comes across as strikingly defensive—a kind of psychological reflex to protect Ahab from the fear that he was part of, and still remains attached to, the semiotic. Moreover, it explains Ahab’s monomaniac mission as one of abjection.

Ahab’s fears of the semiotic maternal center on the white whale in part because the whale, like the semiotic has threatened Ahab’s physical and psychological boundaries. His monomaniacal desire to destroy the whale “took its instant rise at the precise time of his bodily dismemberment,” the loss of his leg in the jaws of Moby Dick (156). The white whale thus is made all the more abject—all the more threatening and all the more necessary for Ahab to radically exclude—by demonstrating that even the limits of Ahab’s body are subject to revision. Indeed, as Ishmael recounts, Ahab’s loss of his leg to the white whale drives him insane: “then it was, that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad” (156). This description evokes the Kristevan *chora* of blurred pre-linguistic existence and, in fact, unravels Ahab as Ahab. It is because of this experience, this visit to the *chora*, that

Ahab turns to monomania—the singular task of remaking himself, of confirming his identity through destroying the stand-in for the abject, consuming *chora*.

Thenceforth, Ahab relentlessly rails at the idea that the semiotic animates him; to prove that it is Ahab and not God (or the maternal semiotic) that lifts his arm, he must destroy the embodiment of that semiotic (that personified impersonal)—the loathesome inscutability that is the white whale. His quest to destroy the whale, to abject it with impossibly absolute finality, is one to preserve himself as a static, fully-constituted subject. The unswerving monomania to destroy the whale is equally bent on maintaining his singular identity—in a sense, on rejecting that he is a *subjet en proces*. He ultimately answers his essential question regarding who lifts his arm, and his answer reveals his tragic vision; rejecting Starbuck's entreaties to call off the perilous hunt as the quest approaches its disastrous conclusion, Ahab declares "Ahab is for ever Ahab, man" (Melville 418). Ahab declares that he is a subject, with a name, of which he is sole captain.

His resolute determination to claim ownership over his self and his determination not to be remade, to insist on the existing borders of his body and self meets its tragic conclusion in his final confrontation with the white whale. He harpoons Moby Dick, but is caught around the neck by the line. Lassoed by this figurative umbilical cord to the great white mother/womb, he is pulled suddenly and permanently into the abyss that has so persistently haunted him. This final image adeptly captures the fear of the abject by enacting the fundamental terror to the subject—the obliterating return to the *chora*'s abyss. Read psycho-allegorically, oblivion is the consequence for Ahab's attempted self-calcification; his attempt to rigidly enforce Ahab-as-for-ever-Ahab, to deny his existence as a *subjet en process* leads to a structurally unsound subject that ultimate collapses into nothingness.

4.2 Ahab and Womb Envy

Abjection aptly articulates Ahab's conflicted response of attraction to and violent repulsion of the resurfacing maternal imagery in the novel, and his relation to Moby Dick in particular. Analyzing Ahab's responses to the maternal through the critical lens of womb envy further enriches the nature of this con-

fliction. I have discussed how the white whale stands in as place-holder for the maternal and as an abject embodiment of the womb that beckons and terrifies. Ahab's response towards this manifestation of the abject dramatizes his struggle for subjectivity, but such response is not a uniquely masculine response. That is, abjection of the mother does not uniquely define the male subject in process; abjection defines the subjectification of both sexes against an alluring and threatening maternal presence. Womb envy, on the other hand, describes a specifically male response, for envy, as Kittay has noted, is for something that the subject does not have ("Womb Envy" 96). Thus, womb envy sheds light on Ahab's actions and identity construction as uniquely masculine responses to the abject womb. Like abjection, womb envy strongly animates Ahab's behavior.

Womb envy, like Kleinian primal envy of the breast, operates primarily through the dynamic of splitting the womb into good and bad counterparts. It can thus be understood as an unconscious, psychical strategy to manage the destabilizing ambivalence of abjection, a way to compartmentalize the enticement and revulsion of the abject vortex. For womb envy is not merely envy of the particular, physical organ but that of the complex of the womb's physical, sexual space as well as the metaphorical generativity and receptivity associated with it (Kittay, "Rereading" 385, Eschbach 54).

Like abjection, womb envy emanates from a pre-oedipal wounding of the subject. Both abjection and womb envy stem from a conflicted response to the mother's womb—a space that both provides total care for the infant and one that expels the infant. Womb envy posits that whereas girls and women can reconcile their ambivalent response to the mother's womb through the realization that they too possess a womb – a sheltering, nurturing space, and the capacity to generate and expel another life, boys and men suffer a narcissistic wounding in their inability to satisfactorily internalize or appropriate the complex of the womb. Like penis envy, which Freud posits women suffer from their perceived castration, womb envy is born out of lack.

Ahab, as I have suggested, possesses a strong sense lack seemingly born out of his pre-oedipal, narcissistic wounding. Kleinian psychology holds that primal envy originates from the child's out-of-control feelings at being able to regulate the presence of the nurturing mother. By splitting the mother

into good and bad objects, the child can love the present mother and hate the absent one. For Ahab, he cannot seem to remember the present mother to be loved. It is therefore no surprise that the white whale as maternal signifier and figuration of the womb is so loathed. As such, the white whale reduplicates for Ahab the early trauma of maternal separation; in its breachings and soundings, it resembles the mother who comes and goes at its own whim. Living out the infant's fantasy, Ahab has dedicated himself to studying the kinetic patterns of the whale/mother, trying to predict its mysterious and unseen course in the ocean, and he is maddened to near frenzy when, at last finding the whale, it sounds again.

Envy, according to Klein, involves projection: putting the bad feelings, the bad parts of oneself, into the mother in order to spoil and destroy her, and to ruin her power and creativeness (181). So too with the blank canvas of the white whale does Ahab project the bad parts of himself in order to spoil and destroy the whale in all of its imagined power. It is through the various defenses to envy identified by Klein and applied by Kittay to the complex of womb envy that we see precisely how Ahab projects himself onto the whale.

Through the defense of idealization, the subject splits the mother into a hyperbolically pure and good object and a loathesome object. As such, Ahab's attraction to representations of the *chora* and the spaces and realms of hidden knowledge, and his sentiment for his "sweet mother" are associated with what for Ahab is the "good womb." This good womb is associated with an all-knowing, all-powerful nature—the realm behind the wall that Ahab wishes to push through. Ultimately however, the hated "bad womb" for Ahab looms larger and overshadows its good counterpart. Onto this split object that abandons and expels Ahab, Ahab ascribes "outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it" (Melville 140). Indeed, even Ahab seems to be aware of his own process of projection onto the whale: "That inscrutable [malice] is what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him" (Melville 140). Thus, with respect to both splits of the womb, Ahab has distilled and hyperbolically idealized the maternal qualities—an all-powerful and creative Nature on the one hand, and an inscrutable and punishing evil on the other.

Ahab also exemplifies behavior consistent with devaluing the object of envy, the second category of defense to womb envy. Devaluing can involve denying the worth of the womb object as well as more aggressively and violently seeking to damage or destroy the womb object. With respect to the former behavior, not only does Ahab command the hunt of whale after whale, but in so doing, he displays a lack of interest in harvesting the hunted whales for their valuable oil that unsettles his fellow whalers. This disregard suggests he has more interest in killing as an act of murder than as a means to a productive end. If the whale represents the womb for Ahab, he is able to carry out his destructive urges while simultaneously denying its value.

While Ahab devalues and destroys other whales, it is obviously Moby Dick as maternal substitute that most animates his hate and destructive wrath. Catherine Silver notes that how envy, as formulated by Klein, is linked to the need to control and dominate the (m)other in order to gain control over the self (411). Eve Kittay notes how extreme aggressivity and hostility such as that of Ahab's can serve to mask or cover the envier's inner sense of inferiority ("Womb Envy" 109). Ahab increasingly declares and asserts his power as he nears encounter with Moby Dick. In "The Candles," he taunts and defies lightning and claims to be both indomitable and superior in power the elemental forces: "I own thy speechless, placeless power" (383). In "The Needle," he seeks to prove his mastery over the elements, declaring that "Ahab is lord over the level loadstone" as he remagnetizes the compass (389). Relying on the Parsee's prophecy, he asserts until nearly the very end that he is invincible and incapable of failing in his mission to destroy the white whale. This puffery, self-aggrandizement, and megalomania presents Ahab as dominant over the whale/mother and yet smacks of overcompensation—the extroversion of confidence to mask a deep-seated sense of vulnerability and inferiority. The target on which Ahab seeks to ultimately demonstrate and prove his power and mastery is the great white womb of Moby Dick. He cannot accept its superior power without facing his own comparative impotence.

As I have argued, despite his insistence on self-mastery, Ahab ails from a deep inner split that, like an active fault, threatens the fixed structure of the identity he has constructed over it. If the external (symbolic) Ahab is forever Ahab, then so too the inner insecurity (semiotic) ceaselessly asks "Is Ahab,

Ahab.” This questioning and insecurity may well take a specifically masculine dimension; as Kelly Oliver notes with respect to abject reactions to the womb, the male subject “feels rage against the mother because her carrying him in her womb compromises his identity. How can he become a man when ‘he’ was once a woman? He was once part, now the expelled waste, of a woman’s body” (61). Here again, abjection and womb envy coalesce: the male subject’s realization of its own abject, unwanted status, its position as inferior to the possessor of the womb drives both abjection and devaluation and hatred of the womb. In order for Ahab to finally reconcile the battle between his inner semiotic and external symbolic, he seeks to destroy the whale, thereby symbolically banishing the abject maternal and the unraveling semiotic. Only then can the symbolic Ahab stand triumphant and the masculine Ahab establish his independence from and superiority to the maternal.

In addition to devaluing the womb, Ahab demonstrates the defensive behavior of incorporation. Typically the womb envious may seek to incorporate or appropriate the womb by fantasizing about internalizing or fusing with the womb in order to ward off awareness of its envy. This is in part manifested by a “regressive yearning for the nourishing, sheltering womb” (Eschbach 23), a sentiment in part reflected in Ahab’s pining for the “sweet mother” he “knows not.” In other fantasies, the subject may imagine being able to give birth or nurture a dependent. Ahab’s figurative birth of his hatred for the white whale is perhaps one nightmare variation of such a birth fantasy. And with respect to nurturance fantasies, Ahab acts out a kind of maternal relationship with Pip as his dependent/infant, protecting and sheltering him in his cabin—itsself a womb-like space aboard the *Pequod*—even going so far as to imagine being bound to Pip by umbilical like heart strings. Eschbach and Chasseguet-Smirgel also identify fantasies such as falling into the sea and entering realms full of undifferentiated, unboundaried existence as manifestation of womb-incorporation fantasies. Ahab’s ruminations on the secret worlds seen by the whales—worlds like the primordial soup figuratively visited by Pip—may well represent this type of fantasy. Finally, Ahab’s very attraction to the sea may be a means of pursuing and investigating a kind of intrauterine fantasy.

With respect to the defense of stirring up womb envy in others, Ahab, as Captain of the *Pequod*, inducts the crew in a ritual of hatred against the white whale, the symbolic womb. In “The Quarter-

Deck,” Ahab articulates his hate for the “inscrutable malice” that he sees embodied in the white whale, and leads his crew in a kind of communion of hatred—drinking from the sockets of killing harpoons. Emma Bayne, in her survey of womb envy notes how some theorists, following Bruno Bettelheim, identify male induction rituals as a kind of male enactment of birth—bring men through a passage into a new realm (154-6). Here, after stirring up murderous passions against the envied/loathed object, Ahab rehearses a birthing ceremony that brings his fellow whaleman together against a sworn common enemy.

In the final dimension of Kleinian defenses to envy, the subject stifles its feelings of love toward the maternal while escalating its feelings of hate. Indeed, Ahab ultimately turns away from contemplating his “sweet mother” to write his wrath upon the white whale. This turning away from the maternal with finality is dramatized in Ahab’s scenes with Starbuck in “The Symphony” and “The Chase—Second Day.” In “The Chase—First Day,” Starbuck entreaties Ahab to stop his monomaniacal mission of violence by presenting him with scenes of domestic comfort in Nantucket; he speaks of his own wife and child and he causes Ahab to imagine his own boy and mother thinking of him far away. Ahab seems wistfully—even if only momentarily—drawn to this vision of maternally centered bliss. Starbuck begs Ahab, “this instant let me alter the course” to return home, but Ahab turns back to continue “jamming” himself towards his destructive end (406). In this passage, Ahab reveals—at least for a moment—a softer side, a side that quickly retreats within his hardened exterior such that by “The Chase—Second Day,” Starbuck cannot find the soft, maternal-loving part of Ahab: “Great God! but for one single instant show thyself” Starbuck cries with desperation. But in response, Ahab returns that “Ahab is for ever Ahab, man” (418). Thus Ahab’s love for the good womb is eclipsed with finality by his great hatred for the bad womb.

Kittay describes this final defense against envy—escalating feelings of hatred—as particularly corrosive to the subject. Men who seek to destroy life in order to assert a power competitive with women’s power to create life do not reap the sought-after gratification. This dissatisfaction further fuels the rage against the womb, leading to more destruction and more satisfaction. Such destructive dynamism, such impetus towards violence, well-describes Ahab’s monomania. No amount of slain whales will slake

Ahab's fire. He has perhaps chosen Moby Dick—the famously indomitable whale—because unconsciously, Ahab knows that to enact his violence on Moby Dick means an end to Ahab's pain—not by destroying the ultimate object, but by enabling an end to Ahab. Unable to obtain gratification through violence, Ahab sets his course for self-annihilation.

5 ISHMAEL AND THE WHALE: AMBIVALENT ABJECTION AND THE PROJECT OF WRITING

5.1 Ishmael and Abjection

If Ahab's method of abjection ultimately causes what it, at least ostensibly, seeks to stave off—that is, being swallowed by the archaic mother into primordial and unbounded oblivion—then Ishmael's relation to the object ultimately proves more sustainable. Like Ahab, Ishmael too is long motherless, a fact that seemingly heightens Ishmael's sensitivity to the object maternal. And like Ahab, who, in the absence of a mother, feels persecuted by the “cruel step-mother world,” Ishmael was subjected to the punishment of a cold and callous step-mother—one who was always whipping Ishmael and who once confined him to his bed for sixteen hours. Moreover, despite Ishmael's sometime-attraction to the maternal, he too manifests an object response to its presence. In “The Counterpane” (Chapter 4), Ishmael recounts how he was confined to a dark room as punishment for trying to crawl up the chimney. In his isolation, Ishmael panics as he feels that a supernatural hand seemed placed in his and that a mysterious spirit sat close by his bed: “My arm hung over the counterpane, and the nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bedside” (Melville 37). Not only does this scene reflect, as I have previously argued, an ambivalent and conflicted response to maternal presence, but it also evokes the very uncanniness of abjection. In fact, Kristeva's description of an object encounter aptly captures Ishmael's experience with the phantom hand. Kristeva describes the object as

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries [the subject] as radically separate, loathe-

some. . . A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. (*Powers 2*)

What is the phantom hand, but an uncanny experience of being revisited by a lost former maternal presence? Ishmael cannot ascertain exactly what the meaning of the sensation is, but this inscrutability or meaninglessness weighs heavily on him. Alone in the dark, visited by an unseen presence, Ishmael is indeed on the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, and the terror that petrifies him may well be the terror of annihilation.

Like Moby Dick for Ahab, Ishmael’s phantom is evocative of the abject archaic mother that threatens to consume. And like Moby Dick, Ishmael’s phantom seems to resurface and haunt him throughout the narrative. Rita Bode connects this maternal “silent form or phantom” that holds Ishmael’s hand to the many other phantom presences that Ishmael recounts in the narrative (187). In the opening chapter, “Loomings,” Ishmael introduces the first such phantom – “the ungraspable phantom of life” (Melville 20). In explaining the magnetism of the sea, Ishmael refers to the story of Narcissus,

who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.

Here, the phantom, like the abject maternal, both allures and threatens to destroy. It beckons the subject, like Narcissus, to plunge into oblivion. Moreover, Ishmael describes the ungraspable phantom as connected to an understanding of identity—an image writ on water—a metaphor analogous to the understanding of subjectivity posited by Lacan and Kristeva. Like Lacan, Ishmael seems to understand the deceptive integrity of the self’s reflection in the mirror—an image composed over an ungraspable void or gap.¹¹ And like Kristeva, he seems to conceptualize the ungraspable phantom under the surface image as a kind of attractive, if dangerous, fluid semiotic realm. Ishmael cites this understanding of the relationship between the surface image of identity and its ungraspable inner substance as the “key to it all” – suggesting that this realization is a (or the) major epiphany of his narrative. Later in “Loomings,” Ishmael again

evokes the phantom as he introduces the tale of his whaling journey: “the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air” (Melville 22). Juxtaposed with the earlier phantom reference, this passage suggests that the inscrutable whiteness of Moby Dick that has floated into his inmost soul represents for Ishmael the embodiment of the mystery of the self—the ungraspable blank, the unseen semiotic upon which we all are writ and upon which we all write ourselves. Later in the novel, Ishmael again returns to the notional phantom in terms that both evoke Moby Dick as metaphor and suggest the potentially perilous futility of seeking the grasp the ungraspable substance of one’s identity: “But in the pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed” (Melville 196). Such passages make evident how Ishmael associates Moby Dick with an ungraspable phantom of the *internal*. In contrast, as I have suggested in this thesis, Ahab, identifies Moby Dick with an *external* presence—something threatening from without. And despite the dangers of the inward turn, of being led on through barren mazes or being whelmed, Ishmael reveals an interest in pursuing and investigating the phantom whereas Ahab seems interested only in destroying it. In other words, whereas Ahab’s response to Moby Dick as embodiment of the abject maternal is one dominated by hate and fear, Ishmael hints early in the novel as to what for him is a more curious and less fearsome response toward the same.

If one accepts this ungraspable phantom that swims before the heart of Ishmael as the “key to it all” (as Ishmael encourages his readers to do)—as the impetus for Ishmael’s sea-quest—then Ishmael’s journey is not merely one of geographical movement, but one of self-exploration and discovery. Moreover, because the phantom as manifested for Ishmael (as it also is for Ahab) is linked to both whale and the maternal, Ishmael’s self-journey can be understood in Kristevan terms as one of a *subject en proces*—a self that is perpetually being defined in reference to an archaic semiotic maternal (Oliver 9, note). This understanding helps explain what the text portrays as Ishmael’s fascination with the maternal.

Throughout the text, Ishmael investigates and writes about the maternal in several passages. Looking at these passages together, it appears that as the narrative progresses, Ishmael's response to the maternal becomes less ambivalent; whereas the earlier passages reflect an attraction to the maternal conflicted with a recoiling horror consistent with abjection, the later passages are less marked by an instinct to push or turn away or to radically exclude. The scene from "The Counterpane" is characteristic of Ishmael's earlier more conflicted response to the maternal; he both pursues and is terrified by the phantom mother. Even earlier in the novel, in "The Spouter-Inn" Ishmael explores Queequeg's vaginal-like garment, but is terrified by his image in the mirror—an image of his head protruding from the "hole or slit" in the middle of the "shaggy and thick . . . and a little damp" mat" (33). In terms of abjection, this image horrifies because it blurs the boundary between Ishmael's body and the maternal body, threatening to unravel the self by confronting it with its own abject status. It makes Ishmael face what Kelly Oliver calls the "impossible separation/identity of the maternal body" that the subject hates because it cannot be free of it (60). This "body without border, the body out of which this abject subject came, is impossible. It is a horrifying, devouring body. It is a body that evokes rage and fear" (Oliver 60). And indeed, as Ishmael witnesses himself emerging from the vaginal mat, he declares "I never saw such a sight in my life. I tore myself out of it in such a hurry that I gave myself a kink in the neck" (Melville 33). Thus, Ishmael's curious exploration is cut short by his confrontation with the abject; symbolically, he quickly tears himself away from the "horrifying, devouring body" in an attempt to maintain the integrity of his own boundaries and to preserve himself as distinct subject.

By the time Ishmael turns to sea; however, he seems to have shed a significant portion of the fear and loathing that so marks his earlier encounters with the maternal. In "Cisterns and Buckets" (Chapter 78), he witnesses and describes Queequeg's delivery of Tashtego out of the sinking whalehead. Where there once was horror, there is now comedy. Despite Tashtego's (and Queequeg's) near death, Ishmael recounts the scene lightly, as a kind of birth parody: Tashtego is delivered "in the good old way-head foremost. As for the great head itself, that was doing as well as could be expected" (Melville 272). The turn from tragedy to comedy may be interpreted as a kind of successful abjection through writing; Ish-

mael's focus is not on the horrific associations of birth or the fine line between life and death in birth, but on making the scene into a joke. In other words, Ishmael is now able to stage-manage the action and the abject. He is able to push away the maternal—to distance the abject—through the process of writing and thereby help maintain his integrity as subject.

That Ishmael has to some extent reconciled himself to the abject maternal is confirmed in the passages that immediately follow the birth parody in "Cisterns and Buckets." Instead of recoiling in horror in the face of the devouring maternal, Ishmael fantasizes with some wistfulness about being consumed and embalmed in a semiotic, womb-like space. He imagines taking Tashtego's place, smothered and perishing in "the very whitest and daintiest of fragrant spermaceti; coffined, hearsed, and tombed in that inner chamber and sanctum sanctorum of the whale" (Melville 272). He can think of only one "sweeter end . . . , the delicious death of an Ohio honey-hunter, who seeking honey in the crotch of a hollow tree, found such exceeding store of it, that leaning too far over, it sucked him in, so that he died embalmed" (272-3). Thus expanding on the idea of the whale head as womb, Ishmael contemplates a second vaginal, womb-like space—the honeyed crotch that sucks in and embalms its hunter. In both whale head and honeyed tree-crotch, Ishmael imagines a sweet oblivion—an oblivion again associated with whiteness and the maternal. Yet this time, unlike the experiences of the shaggy mat and the phantom hand, Ishmael embraces rather than recoils from the symbolic resonance of the maternal. Whereas Ahab's violent abjection of the maternal overwhelms his attraction to the same, in Ishmael's psychodynamics, the lure of maternal—as least insofar as it is quarantined in his writing—seems to overpower his revulsion to it.

Ishmael's exploration of the maternal continues. In "The Grand Armada," Ishmael tells the story of his whaleboat being towed into the "innermost heart" and "innermost fold" of an immense whale pod. Inside the body of this multi-whale organism, Ishmael again figures the scene in womb-like terms. He describes being trapped within "the living wall that hemmed us in; the wall that had admitted us in order to shut us up" (Melville 302). Instead of merely imagining being sucked inside the womb of a honeyed crotch or whale head, Ishmael now actually lives his fantasy. And inside this womb of the pod, Ishmael encounters not horror but harmony and peace—an oasis from the maelstrom of violence of the hunt encir-

cling the perimeter of the pod. Looking through the surface of the water, Ishmael sees an underworld of mothers nursing their suckling calves, some still umbilically attached. Like the ungraspable phantom of life that is the key to it all, Ishmael looks in upon the “inscrutable creatures at the center freely and fearlessly indulg[ing] in all peaceful concernments” (Melville 303). Witnessing this maternal world under the surface transforms Ishmael; he explains that as result of this encounter, he has internalized this wombed space:

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 and joy” (Melville 303).

The imagery of the scene suggests that Ishmael is able to look through the watery surface of his image, to look past the construction of his self, and see at his core a watery and maternal world. It is as though he is able to momentarily gaze through Lacan’s mirror and behold the Kristevan semiotic. Ishmael draws analogy between the construction of his self and that of the whale pod—an external surface under siege formed around a peaceful core—a core that is overwhelmingly maternal in nature. This analogy comports with Kristeva’s *subject en proces*, who through abjection continues to form and delineate the self. The outer chaos is evocative of how Noelle McAfee explains the perpetual struggle with the abject; what is abjected is radically excluded, but never banished altogether and the abject continues to challenge the tenuous borders of selfhood (46). The peripheral war between whalers and whale resembles the battle of abjection; the whaler try to reduce the inscrutable semiotic whales to fixed meaning—to a quantifiable, knowable, and usable substance (oil) and the semiotic threatens to obliterate the warring subject. However, the analogy breaks down in that Ishmael seems to view the semiotic core—the *chora* of the pod—as a kind of paradise. That he overlooks or ignores its danger—and Ishmael’s boat is indeed in severe danger of being crushed to bits within the living walls of the pod—perhaps again demonstrates that for Ishmael, the *chora* appeals more than it repulses, that the bliss he associates with the maternal is sweeter than the pain of losing himself, and that whereas Ahab has chosen a self rigidly bounded through

violent abjection, Ishmael is moving toward a more fluid construction of self, a self more at ease with the violation of its boundaries.

Ishmael further demonstrates his fascination with the maternal as he ponders the monkey-rope, the line that attaches his waist to Queequeg's as Queequeg dangles over the side of the *Pequod* to flay a whale. Unlike the harpoon line associated with Ahab that Ahab attempts to use simultaneously to bind himself to and to wound or destroy the abject mother/whale, Ishmael figures the monkey-rope as a kind of symbiotic, nurturing, and benign connection between men. Ishmael conceives of the monkey-rope between him and Queequeg as both wedding the couple and joining him with his twin with a "Siamese ligature" (Melville 255). The connection is one of symbiosis, but also one fraught with danger; if Queequeg should sink into the sea's abyss, so too will Ishmael follow. Yet Ishmael seems to enjoy his umbilical responsibility here; as in "Cisterns and Buckets" and "The Grand Armada," Ishmael turns from the immediate to the imaginative or philosophic. Here, the monkey-rope causes Ishmael to contemplate how the world of men is, in essence, one of umbilical tethering. In other words, he refigures the world of men in maternal terms as he notes how a man depends on his banker or pharmacist for sustenance and support and how the severance or corruption of such bonds imperils the parties at both ends of the metaphysical cord. "The Monkey-Rope" thus stands as further evidence of how Ishmael is able to contemplate the maternal, to appreciate its peril, and nonetheless gravitate towards it. Perhaps Ishmael is less concerned with abjecting the maternal than his captain. On the other hand, Ishmael may simply have found a more sustainable means and less (self-) destructive means of abjecting than Ahab. Namely, Ishmael is able to distance himself and process his relationship to the maternal through the medium of writing. The way in which he presents the maternally-evocative scenes in "Cisterns and Buckets," "The Grand Armada," and "The Monkey-Rope" and then ruminates on the significance of each suggests a distancing, a way of reflecting back on the maternal encounter. Writing thus serves Ishmael as a means of defense by quarantine against the maternal attraction—a way to fantasize about re-entering the *chora* without actually doing so—and a method of abjection less violent and more sustainable than that of Ahab.

Mary Ellen Pitts, in her Lacanian analysis of Ishmael, examines the function of Ishmael's writing as a means by which Ishmael explores and manages his identity. She understands Ishmael's act of telling—the narrative exercise—as one through which Ishmael can confront his status as (what in Lacanian terminology is) a split or fragmented subject (176-7). Accordingly, the journey of narrative serves as a journey of fantasy for Ishmael, allowing him “a means of seeking through language to recover (discover), the fragmented identity” (178). Pitts argues that through writing, Ishmael pursues the “phantom” of his identity, just as Ahab seeks to recover his identity through pursuing (and destroying) the white whale (178). She argues that this phantom component of identity exists in the Lacanian realm of the imaginary—it is the part of the self that is forever lost as the subject passes into language through the mirror stage. The capture and integration of the phantom self would theoretically return the subject to a position of wholeness and completeness—the pre-symbolic/pre-linguistic state of the Lacanian Real and Kristevan *chora*. In this way, the narrative form functions for Ishmael as a symbolic means to pursue and construct an identity through exploring the various fragments of himself; the fragmentation of the narrative thus mirrors the fragmentation of Ishmael's identity. Pitts concludes that from this project, the identity that Ishmael creates is one as wanderer; his identity is created as kinetic, unfixed, and fluid (179).

Pitts aptly captures the paradoxical quality of Ishmael's identity: he has an identity as a wanderer, but his wandering causes his identity to lack stability or singularity (other than being a wanderer). Ishmael's narrative of the whale hunt together with its digressions into cetology, its twists and turns into history and metaphysics, its genre-hopping from sea adventure to Shakespearean tragedy to whaling treatise, reflects not so much a move toward synthesis as a restless, but nonprogressive, searching. The wandering, investigatory nature of the text finds no final resting point, no mooring among the seas and channels it explores. Understood as a reflection of the mind of Ishmael, the narrative displays a dissatisfaction with any single inquiry it makes; this continuous turning may not result in stitching Ishmael's fragmented self together but instead provoke further anxiety over his lack of coherence. As Ishmael says in trying to comprehend and make sense of the terrifying whiteness of the whale “in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught” (159). Ishmael seems aware of writing project as

one of meaning making; he foresees that the failure to impose a unified meaning on the narrative jeopardizes not only the coherence and significance of the text, but also of his self. The novel concludes, however, without delivering coherence to either the narrative or to Ishmael. With the monologism and singularity of the Ahabian annihilated, Ishmael is left to float precariously on, at the mercy of the currents and ultimately the course set by the devious-cruising *Rachel* that saves him. Thus if writing enables Ishmael's identity as wanderer, it also establishes his radically contingent status; he can exist so long as he, shark-like, keeps moving and keeps writing.

Ishmael's acceptance of the contingency of his identity—one maintained through perpetual wandering and writing—is informed by a relationship to the maternal markedly different than that of Ahab. For, if Ishmael's response to the maternal is less violently engaged with the abject than Ahab's, one might expect Ishmael's identity—his notion of self—to be less maintained and fortified than the rigid assertion of Ahab as a static and fully-constituted subject (“Ahab is for ever Ahab, man”). And in fact, this is so. The very first words of Ishmael's narrative—“Call me Ishmael”—introduce the narrator as something beyond the name. These words perhaps suggest that Ishmael is an alias, but they also suggest that the narrator hesitates to encapsulate himself within a name and that whoever he is, he is something more fluid than can be fixed by a name. Mary Ellen Pitts similarly notes how Ishmael's famous opening line both suggests a wish to disguise identity and that he “lacks an identity and chooses a name that reflects his status as wanderer, or that since the voyage he has refused any but an archetypal identity” (174). This refusal to accept a fixed identity or self is again suggested by Ishmael in “Loomings” which describes the folly of Narcissus becoming too enamoured with the self-image in the mirror. Ishmael instead chooses to investigate the watery depths beneath that surface image. As the narrative unfolds, this fluidity of character and identity is reflected both in Ishmael's continuing exploration and redefinition of the boundaries of his self and in Ishmael's writing, which tends to unravel and refract his topics more than it lays claim to a singular perspective.

One such exploration and blurring of Ishmael's boundaries occurs in “The Counterpane.” Waking in bed with Queequeg's arm thrown over him, Ishmael recalls his childhood memory of the phantom

hand. The counterpane patchwork of the quilt blends with the tattooed arm of Queequeg, confusing Ishmael as to whether Queequeg or the quilt has enwrapped him. This sensation leads Ishmael to remember how as a child, his arm hung over the counterpane as the unimaginable phantom held his hand. In both the present moment and the recollection, Ishmael portrays a blurring—an inability to discern the border between body and quilt or body and phantom. Ishmael states that “it was only by the sense of weight and pressure that I could tell that Queequeg was hugging me” as distinguished from the counterpane (Melville 37). He then associates this sensation with the terror he experienced in not being able to discern what silent form or phantom once held his hand. Yet, what once caused Ishmael fear—that abject terror of being unable to know the borders of one’s body vis a vis the maternal body or presence—now is experienced as comforting. Queequeg takes the place of the phantom hand, and in his corporeality, soothes rather than terrifies Ishmael.

The scene from “The Counterpane” also marks another kind of blurring—that of Ishmael’s sexuality. He describes his relationship with Queequeg as that of husband and wife, with the night in bed together in effect consummating the marriage. The scene not only melts the border between body and sheet, or Queequeg and the phantom mother, but also between Ishmael’s gendering (he plays the wife) as well as between his heteronormativity and his homoerotic and homosocial attraction to Queequeg. Ishmael’s less vehement and violent response to the abject maternal thus corresponds to a self and identity that both remains in substantial and obvious flux and is prone to dissolution. The fluidity of his sexuality—as evidenced by his homo-social or -sexual relationship with Queequeg is pushed to the point of near dissolution in “A Squeeze of the Hand” (Chapter 94). As Ishmael squeezes the spermaceti with his fellow whalemen, he approaches a kind of melting rapture, seemingly dissolving like the pearly globules he himself squeezes:

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it . . . Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing

their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say, --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. (Melville 323)

Aside from the homoeroticism conveyed by Ishmael, the passage also describes Ishmael's own dissolution ("I myself melted into it") as well as a dissolution of the boundaries between men ("let us squeeze ourselves into each other"). And Ishmael associates his blissful dissolution not only into sperm—a quintessentially male substance—but also into the maternal *milk* of kindness. Again, Ishmael's fantasized blurring or unboundaried existence is associated with the maternal and with a maternal bliss (like the honeyed crotch) that enraptures rather than terrifies.

The blurred gendering and sexuality of Ishmael suggested in "The Counterpane" and "A Squeeze of the Hand" is more fully developed throughout the book; Ishmael engages not only in the conventionally masculine pursuit of hunting, but also the conventionally feminine pursuit of weaving. If Ishmael's exterior is like the warring masculine realm of whalers combatting whales in "The Grand Armada," then his inner core is the feminine and maternal realm of the pool at the pod's heart. Leland Person notes how the narrative deconstructs the conventional binary of masculinity (man or not man) and sexuality (heterosexual or homosexual) by exposing these psychological or cultural constructs as artificial and unstable—in a sense, as fragile as Ahab's rigid façade ("Cassock" 3). Person argues that the narrative reveals the essence of these identity characteristics to be in truth fluid like the sea (3). As one example of such fluidity, Person cites "The Tail" in which Ishmael considers the qualities that make up the whale tail in terms that "comically deconstruct" what is first presented as a phallic symbol to emphasize its intermingled feminine and masculine qualities (4). And Person identifies the figure of the mincer, who literally wears the phallus of the whale as a coat as the ultimate example in which the narrative reflects an understanding of how masculinity can both be fabricated and "put on" (6).

Carolyn Porter also notes the fluidity of Ishmael's narrative personality. She observes a pattern within Ishmael's narrative that invokes boundaries only to cross them and finally, blur them (73). As Ishmael does with the line between masculinity and femininity in describing "The Tail," and with boundaries of his sexuality in "The Counterpane," he handles other subjects in like fashion. Ishmael blurs the boundary between land and sea, between whale and human, and between mammal or fish to name but a few examples. Moreover, the structure and style of the narrative itself is blurred and unstable—what Richard Brodhead calls a "hyperactivity of style" (17) and what Porter analyzes as using "one discourse to satirize another" (100). Robert K. Martin suggests that the narrative is ultimately "hermaphroditic" in that "the heterogeneity of the novel's final shape is [an] attempt to create a form that encompasses forms, a 'symphony' or 'marriage' that brings together opposites" (*Hero* 67). Indeed, the narrative is by turns whaling or nautical manual, sea adventure, Shakespearean drama, cetology, philosophical surmise, anatomy, scientific treatise, and whaling history among others. In its consistent inconsistency, its starting and stopping, and its construction and dissolution, it reflects a dissatisfaction with linearity, singularity, and fixedness. It reveals a preference for multiple voices and for multiplicity of accounts and meaning. It displays a searching, wandering quality. In other words, in its style and structure, the narrative reflects Ishmael's encounter with the semiotic and his attempt to integrate and manage that experience.

If, as Kristeva holds, abjection is necessary for the subject to remain as such, why does Ishmael remain intact as a subject while Ahab is obliterated despite his radical abjection? Two observations speak to this question. First, it would be inaccurate to suggest that Ishmael is not exposed to abjection; while Ahab's abjection takes the more obvious, explicit form of seeking to violently destroy the abject object, Ishmael's journey of the self is also marked by abjection, albeit in a more subtle form. Ishmael conveys an abject, horrified reaction to the inscrutable phantom that resurfaces throughout the narrative, whether in the terrifying phantom hand, or the "whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled" him (Melville 159).

Second, although Ishmael is arguably as terrified as Ahab by the inscrutable blankness at the heart of his identity—a horror articulated at some length in "The Whiteness of the Whale"—Ishmael's

method of dealing with it proves more successful than Ahab's. Whereas Ahab impossibly seeks to destroy the archaic mother—the irreducible gap at his core—by punching through his pasteboard existence and annihilating the indestructible marker of his own oblivion, Ishmael is content to accept this core inscrutability. He may turn and investigate the vortex, he may swim in its outer currents, but he does not test his mettle against its. Moreover, as I have suggested, his method of approaching the inscrutable seems to be to refract it through his writing project. Through writing, he is able to imagine and fantasize oblivion as blissful without attempting to experience it first-hand. Further, through writing, Ishmael is able to manage the whiteness, to limit its limitlessness, to philosophize on its significance—all methods of psychological defense and distancing that enable Ishmael to set—at least temporarily—the boundary between his identity and the formlessness out of which he came.

A further manner in which Ishmael is more successful than Ahab in managing his relationship with the abject by turning towards community and human fellowship as a means by which to tether his identity. Ahab is predominantly a solitary figure—his monomania makes room for no other man (be it Starbuck's appeals to his good nature) or woman (what affection or bond he shares with his wife does not sway him from his task)—and answers to no one or thing save himself. Thus, when the rigid façade of his identity begins to cave in, there is no one left to throw him a life buoy. In contrast, as Laura Barrett argues in her comparative analysis of abjection in *Moby-Dick* and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, Ishmael is able to resist oblivion and to maintain his (fluid) identity through the bonds he develops with Queequeg and the other whalers (20). Barrett identifies the many instances of blurred borders and boundary transgressions in *Moby-Dick* and suggests that the world Ishmael presents in his narrative is one in which the line between the abject and the self, between the *chora*'s vortex and the subject becomes increasingly difficult to find. In this blurred world, if Ishmael's identity cannot be fixed on the semiotic quicksand at its center, then perhaps it can be attached to the relationships it makes with other subjects. In contrast, Ahab's tragic construction of identity is wrongfully premised on the notion that his self is static and singular—one consistent self for both himself and the world. But Ishmael accepts his self as dynamically *en proces*, multiple, and essentially contingent upon others—a self like the body attached by

the monkey-rope. In this kind of reversed polarity of the Cartesian *cogito*, others interact with a subject they call “Ishmael” (or at least, that we are to call “Ishmael”), therefore Ishmael exists. Without these other subjects to interact with Ishmael and to confirm the presence of his body and mind, Ishmael too would risk collapsing into the abject.

5.2 Ishmael and Womb Envy

In the above discussion of Ahab, I made the case that Ahab’s anxieties with respect to the womb (and his lack of the womb) are significantly linked to the dysfunctional defensive behavior giving rise to his tragic demise. One would perhaps expect Ishmael to experience the narcissistic wounding of male lack as rageful; like Ahab, Ishmael’s sense of lack not only derives from trauma of parturition from his mother, but is doubly compounded by the fact that he permanently lost his mother as a child (and that this lost mother was replaced by a cruel, punishing surrogate—his stepmother). At the heart of both characters, then, is a maternal void and a sense of wonder at their origins. But whereas Ahab deals with the pain of primal and womb envy—the inability to assert power over the presence or absence of his mother—by lashing out at the maternal symbolic, Ishmael seeks no such destructive course. In Ishmael’s case, this separation from and inability to control access to the nurturing maternal has not developed into an obsessed vilification of the bad mother or womb. Ishmael does manifest some anxiety towards the complex of maternal attributes associated with the womb—an anxiety marked in part by Ishmael’s abject response to the phantom hand and appalling whiteness of the whale—and Ishmael’s attraction to the symbolic womb, to the inner sanctum sanctorum and honeyed crotch, suggests a kind of potential envy. Yet, just as Ishmael manages abjection more successfully than Ahab, if Ishmael envies the womb, he also manages this envy with less damage than his Captain.

With respect to the defense of idealization, Ahab splits the mother or womb into a good object and bad, with the bad object—the menacing Moby Dick—drawing Ahab’s obsession and eclipsing the good object. The opposite seems the case with Ishmael; the pull of the nourishing security of the good womb seems to overshadow his fear or hatred of the bad. Although he is petrified by the phantom mater-

nal hand and appalled by the whiteness of the whale (a whiteness associated with his own maternal or original void), he tries to crawl up the chimney, he identifies the maternal center of the grand armada as a personal source of “eternal mildness and joy” (Melville 303), and he fantasizes about the aforementioned inner sanctum sanctorum and honeyed tree-crotch. Perhaps Ishmael’s punishing step-mother has served to absorb much of the negative associations he projects onto the bad womb or perhaps Ishmael has simply learned how to deal with his yearning for the maternal in a manner that does not provoke rage or threaten. Indeed, Ishmael demonstrates an acceptance of inscrutability, indeterminacy, and fluidity that suggests an acceptance of his lack of power to dictate or pin down meaning—an acceptance of his relative powerlessness *vis a vis* the flow of the primal mother. Moreover, whereas Ahab, in his isolation from fellow humans may retain a sense being ejected and discarded (*i.e.*, abjected) from the mother—an experience that drives his anger—Ishmael, in his bonding and fellowship with others (chiefly Queequeg) may feel less expelled or worthless. Jettisoned by his mother, Ishmael tethers to others while Ahab is locked in his humiliation and rage. Ishmael’s ability to find other viable sources of nurturance is suggested by the way in which Queequeg’s clasp in “The Counterpane” blurs into Ishmael’s recollection of the phantom maternal clasp suggests that Queequeg—a substantial “life-buoy” for Ishmael—serves to an important extent as a maternal substitute. Indeed, after Moby Dick destroys the *Pequod* and leaves it to sink, it is Queequeg’s coffin-made-life-buoy that springs from the swallowing (maternal) vortex to save Ishmael (Melville 427).

Certain womb-envy defenses are not clearly manifested by Ishmael’s character; namely, Ishmael does not demonstrate a proclivity towards devaluing the subject, and he does not lash out or seek to destroy the worth and value of the womb or the womb-holder. Ishmael’s narrative often overlays the whale with maternal or womb symbolism, but Ishmael’s attitude toward the whale is one of fascination and endless investigation rather than dismissive or subordinating. In addition, Ishmael does not defend against womb-envy by stirring up feeling of envy in others. In fact, as the narrative progresses, he fades from its stage (other than as narrator)—a disappearing act inconsistent with the envious behavior of subject bent on proving his superior power. Further, it is not apparent that Ishmael stifles his feelings of love toward the womb/maternal or that he escalates his feelings of hate toward it. Rather, the opposite seems true—

over the course of the narrative, Ishmael gravitates toward rather than away from the good womb or mother.

In fact, analyzing Ishmael's behavior in terms of the womb-envy defense of devaluing the self, the narrative attests to kind of healing or therapeutic progress. At the very start of the narrative, Ishmael informs the reader that his turn to sea was prompted by both antipathy towards others—the urge to “methodically knocking people's hats off” and a self-hatred manifested in ruminations on killing himself (“I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet”) (Melville 18). This generalized misanthropy and attraction to his own death represents a devaluation of self symptomatically consistent with the narcissistic wounding suffered as motherless subject. Permanently pushed off and jettisoned like excrement from his mother, Ishmael, like Ahab, demonstrates self-loathing and devaluation. The fact that in his turn to sea, he leaves behind women, and most notably mothers, suggests an initial fear or loathing of the feminine and maternal. Yet, as this thesis has traced, Ishmael gradually reconciles himself to the maternal presence he finds at sea. Unlike Ahab, his encounters with the maternal in “Cisterns and Buckets,” and the “Grand Armada” indicate an attraction to representations of the womb and an association of blissful peace with the maternal.

Perhaps the strongest manifestation of womb envy by Ishmael is in the form of the defense of appropriation or incorporation. In a typical mode of incorporation, the male subject fantasizes a kind of internalization of or fusion with the womb, that may manifest as a “regressive yearning for the nourishing, sheltering womb may emerge” (Eschbach 63). This regressive yearning aptly characterizes Ishmael trying to crawl up the chimney as well his imagined phantom maternal hand. In another typical form of the appropriation fantasy, the subject imagines being able to re-enter or merge with the womb “in order to claim this primordial, protected, and exclusive space for oneself” (Eschbach 63). This form of fantasy is manifested by Ishmael in his imagined confining within the inner sanctum sanctorum of the whale and imagined embalmment in the honeyed tree-crotch. Through incorporation, the male subject may also fantasize about being able to nurture or nurse another (Eschbach 64), such as Ishmael does with respect to Queequeg and the umbilical monkey-rope. Further, Ishmael's turn to sea as well as his extended medita-

tions of what lies under the waves and his gazings into the water are perhaps evocative of intrauterine manifestations of incorporation fantasies in which the desire to rediscover an undifferentiated and fluid world and existence (Eschbach 65).

If this behavior reflects Ishmael's envy of the womb, it leads not to dysfunction—as it does tragically with Ahab—but to a kind of balance or fluid stability that Ishmael achieves, perhaps therapeutically, through the project of writing. The act of writing, of creating one's identity through language, can be understood as a therapeutically positive incorporation defense to womb envy. Ishmael, denied the maternal power to create, nurture, and push away life, approximates something similar through writing. He takes something from the void within and expresses it and pushes it onto the page; he asserts some control over the creation of his own (written) identity, and via this creative birthing, experiences a kind of vicarious maternal experience of parturition. The narrative, completed, out of his hands, and published, is to Ishmael as Ishmael is to his mother: forever separate—in a sense, orphaned. It is perhaps through Ishmael's investigations into the maternal—his fantasies of wombed spaces—that he achieves an understanding to emulate or draws the maternal power that allows him to persist as a subject through writing. In effect, he learns to manage—at least provisionally—his anxiety and envy of the womb. This is not to say, however, that Ishmael has written away such anxiety entirely or that he has found a stable and secure identity; as a subject in process, Ishmael is always being rewritten. Rather, Ishmael's writing project merely helps make giving in to this perpetual revision less traumatic for him than it is for Ahab.

6 CONCLUSION: *MOBY-DICK* AS POLYLOGUE

That Ishmael has drawn understanding from his encounters and fantasized immersions with the maternal is also evident in the form and style of his narrative. In fact, his product closely resembles what Roland Barthes described as Kristeva's semiotic project: a displacement of the "*already-said*" and a subversion of "the authority of monologic science and filiation" (Barthes 19, qtd in Moi 1). As Carolyn Porter points out, Ishmael is adept at using one narrative method or style to satirize and explode the one pre-

vious (100). As a result, the fragmented, unraveling, and autophagic style of Ishmael's narrative culminates in a text that both undermines the "already-said" and challenges the authority of monology; it favors multiplicity over linearity and fluidity over rigidity. Indeed, the narrative pits the fluidity of Ishmael's perspective against the monologic mania of Ahab; as the novel ends, Ishmael remains afloat on the semiotic while Ahab's world order of the Pequod is sucked into the vortex.

Ishmael's affinity for multiplicity, fluidity, polyvalence, and indeterminacy produces a text of a deeply inflected with the semiotic. Toril Moi, in her introduction to *The Kristeva Reader*, describes Kristeva's fundamental and overarching desire as the wish

to produce a discourse that always confronts the *impasse* of language (as at once subject to and subversive to the rule of Law [*i.e.*, symbolic order]), a discourse which in a final aporetic move dares to think language against itself, and in so doing knowingly situates itself in a place which is, quite literally, untenable. (10)

Ishmael's narrative achieves something of the kind; in his narrative, no single approach to his subject—be it the whale or the journey into his identity—seems to suffice; the constant turning and autophagic narrative undoing reflects an acknowledgment of the *impasse* of writing—of reducing thought and experience to language-- and amounts to kind of elaborate aporia.

Kristeva, in *Desire in Language*, promotes a more semiotically-inflected language in her analysis of a particular form of the novel that she calls the "polylogue." A polylogical discourse is marked by a "numerated, phrased infinity" made up of a "multiplied, stratified, and heteronomous subject of enunciation" (*Desire* 173). It is what Kristeva calls "transfinite" – it "functions not only as a plural dialogue between the subject of enunciation and his identity," but also as a plural dialogue "*in relation to the very realm of language*" (173). In other words, in a polylogue text, the author speaks with him or her self in multiple conversations and voices that overlap and contradict. Moreover, in the polylogue novel, the very act of writing announces or articulates the shape of the author's identity; it performs the "illocutionary act" of asserting the identity of the author. The polylogue also engages with language as language; just as it opens the text and the author to polyvalence, it announces and demonstrates the polyvalence of lan-

guage itself. Thus, for Kristeva, the polylogue novel draws from both *poetry* and the *narrative* as she defines those terms, while culminating as neither. For Kristeva, “poetry” is “a return to the near side of syntactic articulation, a pleasure of merging with a rediscovered, hypostatized maternal body,” and “narrative” is “the fulfillment of a request, the exchange of information, the isolation of an ego amenable to transference, imagining and symbolizing” (174). Interestingly, in her discussion of the polylogue (for which she uses Phillippe Sollers’ *H* as her prime example), she actually—if rather obliquely—references Melville’s *Moby-Dick*.¹² In describing how the reader of a polylogue text is pulled into its flow and rhythm, she asserts that the reader first hears

a rhythm-sound-voice-scanning. But this is merely a bridge, like the bridge of a ship on the high seas, evoking Moby Dick and Melville, taking you toward the dissolution of symbolic linking, toward the dissolution of rhythm after that of the sentence, toward empty and mute instinctual drive, toward the clashes of matter: “better to perish in this wailing infinity than to be thrown back to the lands.” (178, citations omitted)

Although her allusion, in a strict sense, evokes *Moby-Dick* only for the image of ship-bridge above the watery depths, her description of the reader’s trip aboard the polylogue neatly parallels that of the crew aboard the *Pequod*. Moreover, her citation to *Moby-Dick* suggests the very polylogue quality of that text. Indeed, not only does the narrative of *Moby Dick* approach the wailing infinity of the vortex at its conclusion, but Ishmael’s text itself achieves a strongly polylogue quality. In its poetic musings, it finds a semiotic-like rhythm and logic of association and explicitly expresses the pleasure of merging with the maternal body and realm; in its narrative trajectory, it fulfills—at least in part—the implied request of its reader and delivers “the isolation of [Ishmael’s] ego.” Yet, like a polylogue, it is not wholly defined by either or both qualities. In its fits and spurts, its starts and stops, its multiple angles, voices, and genres, it conveys a plural dialogue with itself, with the impossibilities of encapsulating the self, with language, and with the limitations of language.

In its approach to writing and in its self-conscious attempt to unmake a singular narrative, *Moby Dick*—in a way—prefigures Kristeva’s project to remake language and literature in more semiotic terms

that unravel the (phal-) logocentrism of Western culture. Richard Brodhead argues that what sets *Moby-Dick* apart as a great work is the stand that it takes “toward literature itself” which is in part manifested in its “unwillingness to do one literary thing at the expense of another” (4, 6). Brodhead observes *Moby-Dick*’s resistance to pursuing its story straightforwardly and its fundamental anxiety about the nature of being that drives both the structure of the novel and defines its characters (4). The novel disavows its singular status as a sea narrative or as cetology or as any one of the many forms it takes—suggesting it is simultaneously all and none. It reflects what James McIntosh calls a “fluidity or multiplicity of mind” and what Melville’s friend, Evert Duyckinck called with some disdain an “intellectual chowder” (McIntosh 24). As such, with its own unique associations and pendulous swings between action, digression, philosophy, and poetry, it achieves what Broadhead observes as a distinctive “rhythm,” a musical or semiotic feature that again calls to mind Kristeva’s polylogue (Brodhead 5).

Considering *Moby-Dick* as polylogical poses an ostensible conflict: is the book, as traditional criticism would have, hyperbolically masculine, or do its polylogical qualities reveal that it in actuality pulses with what Kristeva associates with the semiotic—with the language of the feminine maternal? But what seems contradictory may actually be ironic complexity—irony similar to that inherent in the construction of masculinity as posited by Kristeva and womb theory alike. That is, the construction of masculinity, whether the aggressive, dominating, and hyperbolic form performed by Ahab or the experimental fluidity carried out by Ishmael, is contingent upon a feminine, maternal other. The masculinity of the book, like that of its two primary characters, may seek to push the maternal and the feminine asunder—to radically exclude them in shaping the masculine text and self—but the project of abjection is, Kristeva reminds us, always incomplete. Masculinity cannot irrevocably banish femininity or the maternal from its borders; to the contrary, the masculine self, formed out of the maternal body and born into subjectivity from the *chora*, is in its essential fiber coursed through with the semiotic maternal.

If *Moby-Dick* presents an understanding as to the way in which masculinity is necessarily contingent upon and intertwined with femininity and the maternal, Robyn Wiegman’s criticism of the novel re-surfaces: so what if the novel re-adjusts conventional understandings of masculinity and the values of tra-

ditional patriarchy to take greater account of the feminine or maternal element if the reformulated notions still exclude women (749)? It is unarguably the case that the novel and its characters turn to sea to enter a male-only society, but the novel does not assert this female-free realm as ideal or a solution to the anxieties of shore-life. Wiegman's criticism overlooks the fact that in its flight from women, the all-male society of the *Pequod* proves untenable—it collapses into the vortex. Moreover, what Ishmael discovers is that, while he may flee from women, the feminine and the maternal are always with him and in him.

Despite Wiegman's dismissal of the novel's "feminized" patriarchy, the polylogism of Ishmael and his narrative asserts a discourse fundamentally at odds with the monologism of patriarchy. Leland Person describes the novel's awareness of how masculinity is put on (like the mincer puts on the phallus of the whale); *Moby-Dick* parodies, rejects, and exposes as dangerously brittle Ahab's mode of aggressive, phallic masculinity—a masculinity Person associates with the Jacksonian era's "archaic male ethos" of aggressive masculinity and its predominant character type, the Masculine Achiever—in order to reveal the destructive and self-destructive power of such phallogentric characters" (6). Polylogism does not simply adjust or soften phallogentrism, it rejects both its language and logic and replaces them with the flux of the semiotic maternal. Kristeva speaks of the polylogue, and indeed her project as a whole, in terms of revolution. To replace the phallogentric language and logic of the everyday with the semiotic is to change radically the very terms of our thought.¹³

As Richard Brodhead has suggested, the questioning, unraveling, multiplicitous, semiotic, and ultimately polylogical quality of Melville's novel may emanate from a fundamental anxiety of being (4)—an anxiety this thesis more specifically traces back to the masculine subject's negotiation of the absence and presence of the formative maternal. In presenting a (proto-) polylogical text, Melville turns away from the monologism of Ahab—a monologism associated with the predominant form of masculinity of Melville's day. Yet if the novel succeeds in stepping outside the prevailing monologism of the time, it finds no lasting solace in the polylogue of the semiotic. If anxiety drives Ishmael to sea and sets his narrative project in motion, the end of the text by no means signals an end of Ishmael's troubled identity. Ishmael's turn to the semiotic may enable his survival whereas the Ahabian world collapses, but Ish-

mael's identity remains unstable and in flux, unfixed and confused. Indeed, in one of the last images from the text, Ishmael is "buoyed up by that coffin"—the marker of monologism's death—as he "float[s] on a soft and dirge-like main" (427). He floats—he survives—but only precariously so on a shark-filled sea. And although he is saved by the *Rachel*, his well-being is cast into doubt—for not only is the *Rachel* "devious-cruising" but after the disastrous experience aboard the *Pequod*, there is ample cause to be wary of the dangers entering into yet another worldview, another shipworld with its own monologic fiefdom.

The Epilogue to *Moby-Dick* thus fails to resolve the tensions and problems Ishmael excavates and exposes in the course of his narrative. Ishmael's survival may suggest that polylogism is ultimately more enduring than Ahabian monologism, but this kind of allegorical reduction of the plot into singular meaning seems paradoxically contrary to the very notion of the polylogue. Yet perhaps paradox if not a fundamental untenability is at the heart of polylogism. Ishmael may find coherence in his identity as a wanderer, but that coherence is built on continuous flux. And if Ishmael is somehow fixed as a "wanderer," then doesn't such an identification collapse polysemous potential into a kind of singular existence? For to enforce polyvalence and flux over singularity and stasis is to impose one logical structure over another, in a sense, to replace one tyranny with another.

On the other hand, this impasse, this place of untenability, to which *Moby-Dick* leads us is precisely the aim of Kristeva's project that Toril Moi identifies. On these terms, then, Ishmael's narrative succeeds in the political and philosophical intent of the polylogue; it "produce[s] ... a discourse which in a final aporetic move dares to think language against itself, and in so doing knowingly situates itself in a place which is, quite literally, untenable" (Moi 10). If Ishmael's narrative exposes the untenability of monologism, it also calls attention to the arbitrariness of its own privileging of polyvalence. But in so doing, the polylogue forces its reader to confront the rule of language and see how we are bound by a symbolic order. Ishmael's narrative may not free him (or his reader) from language, but in tapping and releasing a kind of semiotic power, the discourse forces phallogocentric language to face its failures and begin to collapse upon itself. Ultimately then, Ishmael's narrative may less represent a program for living than it serves as a political act against the tyranny of language. Read politically, the aporetic manifesto of

his narrative might be found in Ishmael's statement, "I try all things; I achieve what I can" (Melville 273). "Try" here carries the double meaning of "attempt" and "boiling down the body of the whale into precious essence." In the first sense, the statement reasserts Ishmael's privileging of multivalence, fluidity, and openness over narrowness and singularity. In the second sense, the declaration suggests the conscious application of transformative violence, of melting down the structures and monologism of the world into their more precious semiotic constituent. And if Ishmael and his narrative indeed try *all* things, he and his text are not excluded from the trypot. Ishmael may fail to use existing language and logic to produce a tenable alternative, but in this very failure, Ishmael has achieved what he can—an elaborate aporia that confronts the reader with a discourse that thinks language against itself.

NOTES

1. Examinations of how Melville complicates and destabilizes masculinity in *Moby-Dick* include Joseph A. Boone's "Male Independence and the American Quest Genre: Hidden Sexual Politics in the All-Male Worlds of Melville, Twain and London" and Chapter 5 ("Male Independence and the American Quest Romance as Counter-Traditional Genre: Hidden Sexual Politics") in Boone's *Tradition Counter Tradition*; Chapter 10 ("Ahab's Queenly Personality: A Man is Being Beaten") in David Leverenz's *Manhood and the American Renaissance*; Sanford Marovitz's "Ahab's 'Queenly Personality' and Melville's Art;" Chapter 3 ("Our Hearts' Honeymoon") of Robert K. Martin's *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* and Martin's "Melville and Sexuality" in *A Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*; Chapter 6 ("A Thing Writ in Water: Allan Melville's Epitaph") in Neal L. Tolchin's *Mourning, Gender, and Creativity in the Art of Herman Melville*; Tara Penry's "Sentimental and Romantic Masculinities in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*;" Leiland Person's "Gender and Sexuality" essay in *A Companion to Herman Melville* and his "Melville's Cassock: Putting on Masculinity in *Moby-Dick*;" Julian Rice's "Male Sexuality in *Moby-Dick*;" Mark Hennelly's "Ishmael's Nightmare and the American Eve;" William Baurecht's "To Reign is Worth Ambition: The Masculine Mystique in *Moby-Dick*;" Robert Shulman's "The Serious Function of Melville's Phallic Jokes;" and Sarah Wilson's "Melville and the Architecture of Antebellum Masculinity."

Essays that investigate how femininity is inscribed into the novel include Rita Bode's "'Suckled by the Sea': The Maternal in *Moby-Dick*;" June McMaster-Harrison's "'What Hast Thou Done With Her?' Anagogical Clues to the Lost Feminine;" Elizabeth Schulz's "The Sentimental Subtext of *Moby-Dick*: Melville's Response to the 'World of Woe;'"

2. Robert Martin, in *Hero, Captain, and Stranger*, reads Ahab's destruction as a "cataclysm of patriarchal aggression," and interprets Ishmael's survival as signaling "the restoration of the feminine and the maternal to a world that has forsworn all softness and affection" (70). In this reading, Ishmael is "re-

stored to the lost maternal principle from which he has been exiled” (70). Joseph A. Boone, in “Male Independence and the American Quest Genre: Hidden Sexual Politics in the All-Male Worlds of Melville, Twain and London,” argues Melville examines the “psychological connection between the self-sufficient male identity and an acknowledgement of the ‘feminine’ within man” (195). Wiegman disputes the assertion that these readings help exonerate Melville from promoting an anti-female ideology (749-51). She argues that while Melville, in *Moby-Dick*, may assert a feminine-influenced masculinity to temper the status quo aggressivity and misogyny of patriarchy, the system he offers in replacement is still one that excludes women. In other words, instead of admitting women into the structures of society and power, Melville merely co-opts and “colonizes” the feminine into a masculine world that perpetuates its exclusion of women (749).

3. Rita Bode similarly observes how Starbuck’s thoughts and actions are strongly influenced by the notional presence of his wife and child (183).

4. Numerous scholars have noted the *Rachel*’s function as a maternal presence or the return of a lost mother. Rita Bode reads the return of the *Rachel* as affirming the “mother’s saving presence” (197). Mark Hennelly also reads the *Rachel* as a saving maternal force (288). Newton Arvin interprets the *Rachel* as “the vessel that is itself a symbol of bereaved motherhood” (174). Joseph Allen Boone analyzes the ship as the “loving mother” that returns to reclaim Ishmael (247). Edward J. Rose reads the novel’s ending as the “orphan Ishmael taken back once again. . . by the tender and sorrowful mother, Rachel” (545).

Melville (or Ishmael as narrator) repeats images of orphans and children separated from the mothers in several places throughout the novel. In “The Life-Buoy,” Ishmael describes the plaintive wails of seal pups crying for their lost dams (or vice versa) (Melville 392), an image of separation and tragic abandonment that prefigures the *Pequod*’s loss of its masthead watchman the next morning. Earlier, Ishmael describes how in the whale hunt, the hempen whale line can tangle with a whale cub’s still-attached umbilical cord (“the maternal end loose”), thus trapping the cub (303). Pip speaks of being abandoned by Stubb (400); Ahab assails the Gods for abandoning Pip (392).

5. Edward J. Rose, in his study of annihilation and ambiguity in *Moby-Dick* understands the white whale as a kind of “toothed womb” (543).
6. Melville apparently goes out of his way to figure the monkey-rope as a kind of umbilical cord. In a footnote to the text, he reveals that while the monkey-rope is found on all whale ships, such ropes tether the man overboard to the ship, rather than another man (see Melville 256). Melville changes facts to emphasize the cord’s umbilical symbolism.
7. In *Timaeus*, Plato likens the *chora* as a receptacle to a mother and describes it as a space “which exists always and cannot be destroyed. It is a fixed site for all things that come to be” (52b-c). Noelle McAfee carefully traces how Kristeva’s notion of the *chora* is distinguished from Plato’s (19-20).
8. Kristeva here seems to be drawing on and adapting the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein. Kleinian psychoanalysis holds that the child reconciles traumatic objects such as the mother’s breast into good objects and bad objects. The good breast represents the breast that is available, nurturing, and comforting when the infant wants it. The bad breast is the breast that is absent, that leaves when the child needs or wants it. Klein posits that subsequent relationships are significantly determined by the infant’s initial experience with these split objects. [Need cite, need to verify].
9. Kittay describes how the appropriation defense works against *breast* envy: “To defend against envy, the infant greedily internalizes the breast so that he or she thinks that it becomes entirely his possession and controlled by him” (“Womb Envy” 109).
10. In the Kristevan framework, the “primordial trauma” begins earlier than as conceptualized by Lacanian psychoanalysis.
11. Mary Ellen Pitts, in her Lacanian analysis of Ishmael, also notes the similarities between this passage and Lacan’s formulation of the mirror stage.
12. Jennifer Wing, in her dissertation “Resisting the Vortex: Abjection in the Early Works of Herman Melville,” notes this Kristeva’s reference to *Moby-Dick*. Wing understands Kristeva as holding that *Moby-Dick* “serves as a viable example of the semiotic—that language that seeks to convey the energies and drives that reside in the *chora*” (193).

13. Kristeva's polylogue aims at freeing language from the reductionist pressures of monologism—the kind George Orwell hyperbolizes in *Nineteen Eight-Four*. Orwell's "Newspeak" represents a language has been so severely reduced by singular logic of those who control it that it becomes impossible for those within the language to think anything other than what is politically orthodox.

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