

Mandalas of Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish:
Geometric Soul-Images in Melville's *Moby-Dick*

by Laura Strudwick

In Chapter 89, "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish," of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, the narrator Ishmael satirizes the concept of material possession with the metaphor of fast-fish and loose-fish. It was the one unwritten law among nineteenth-century American fisherman: A fast-fish is a catch that is tied to the whaling boat; the boat's crew owns this fish. If the line snaps and the fish floats free from the boat, it becomes a loose-fish. It is then available for recapture by any of the nearby competing vessels. In the last paragraph of the chapter, Ishmael cracks open the metaphor to reveal its universality:

What are the Rights of Man and the Liberties of the World but Loose-Fish? What all men's minds and opinions but Loose-Fish? What is the principle of religious belief in them but a Loose-Fish? What to the ostentatious smuggling verbalists are the thoughts of thinkers but Loose-Fish? What is the great globe itself but a Loose-Fish? And what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too? (*M.D.* 310)

Existentialist and satirical tones radiate through this chapter, as they often do in Melville's epic.

What does it mean to be a "waif," the term for a loose-fish without an owner? Such a fish is an orphan or an exile. And how are we, the readers, simultaneously both loose and fast? The tension between connection and alienation is central to the fast-fish/loose-fish metaphor. The above paragraph is an emblem of the entire epic: When one is loose—exiled from the community, disoriented within oneself, or estranged from God—one seeks connection. When one is tied too fast to anything, one seeks freedom.

This paradox of existential desire and discomfort pervades *Moby-Dick* and reveals itself through recurring images of four geometric mandalas that I discovered in the text. These mandalas correlate with Louise Cowan's graphic organizer describing the four literary genres of

tragedy, comedy, lyric, and epic (Fig. 1). The four mandalas mirror the movements of the characters' psyches and also reveal the ability of the epic genre to encompass the other three genres. By giving attention to these elusive, geometric images, one can recognize the epic's psychological and generic underpinnings rising from the depths. Mandalas that carry these meanings are buried under the waves of text. When the reader identifies these visual images, the mandalas break the surface of the reader's consciousness, bringing up patterns that underlie a fundamental dimension of the text.

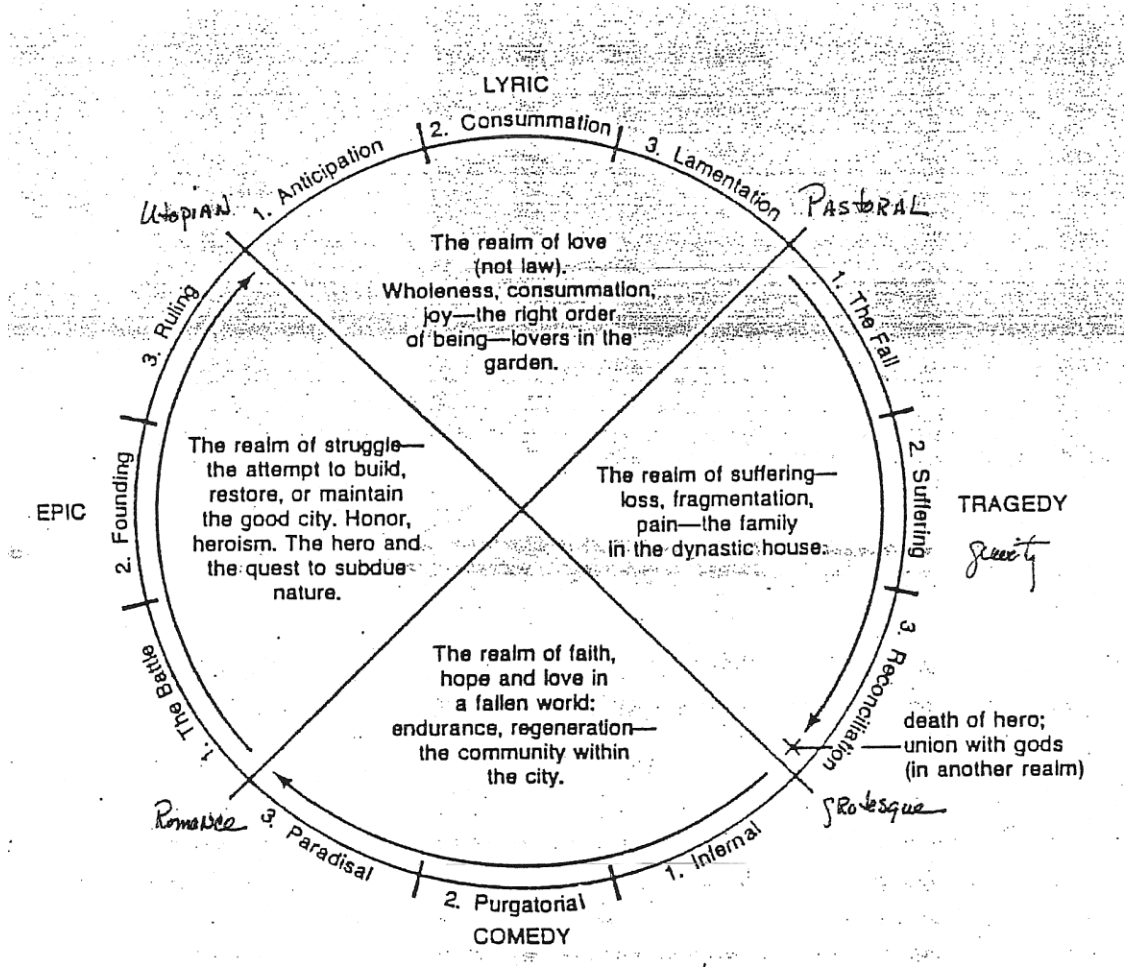


Figure 1 Louise Cowan's diagram of the genre wheel

In discussing *Moby-Dick*, Bainard Cowan characterizes the shift from classical epic to the novel-epic: a primary goal for the characters is “to find a niche in the social system that is both outside and inside it” (*America*, 222). *Moby-Dick* seeks such a niche as its themes swing between the poles of exile and community. The four mandalas recur in patterns in the text, sometimes meshing with each other in complex imagery that, when analyzed, reveals insight into the character’s psychological conditions.

My first mandala is titled the *Island of Exile* and corresponds to Cowan’s description of the genre of tragedy (Fig. 2). It is the image of a singular point in a vast space, be it a literal or figurative ocean. The singularity, i. e. an individual character in the story, inhabits the realm of suffering, loss, pain, and exile. This character is adrift and isolated from the community and is frequently lost within him- or herself as well. The result may be insanity, despair, or desperation. In these *Island of Exile* situations, the characters are like loose-fish and therefore seek connection with something bigger than themselves, such as God or a community. In keeping with tragedy, however, the connection is frequently left unaccomplished.

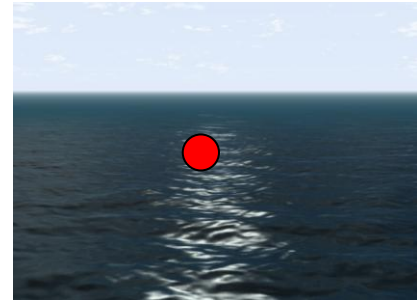


Figure 2 *Island of Exile* image: one point or figure alone in the middle of an ocean.

I call the image associated with comedy the *Microcosmic Island*: a community of beings coexisting on an enclosed vessel, again literally or figuratively, at sea (Fig. 3). This image



Figure 3 *Microcosmic Island* image: one vessel at sea with a microcosmic community on board.

includes the cooperation of a community of figures. Cowan’s description of comedy emphasizes groups of people: “the community within the city”; “the neighborhood.” Sometimes the characters collaborate successfully in healthy relationships, and sometimes they

struggle with and irritate each other in dysfunctional bondage.

My third mandala correlates with the genre of the lyric; I have named it the *Island of Participation* (Fig. 4). This image is either one circle or concentric circles with a center point. This mandala represents the lyric moment of “wholeness, joy, integration” (Cowan). Space and time expand, the circle is held open, and the numinous, or sacred, infuses the experience. Lyric mandalas are temporary returns to a divine experience, retrograde stops along a spiral path, and moments of enlightened healing that later sustain and inspire the participants’ psyches in tragic times.

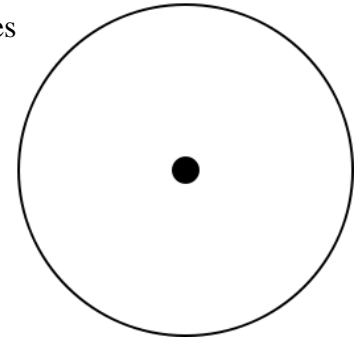


Figure 4 Island of Participation image: a circle with a midpoint

Lastly, the fourth mandala is a *3+1 mandala* (Fig. 5). It is a triad of three lines that is connected by a fourth element, a point at the lines’ intersection. Triads symbolize balance, while quaternities represent wholeness. The *3 + 1 mandala* indicates a transition into a state of completion. This image relates to the epic genre as a realm of struggle that leads to an all-encompassing quaternity of completeness. Its potential permutations mirror the other three mandalas, supporting the idea that this mandala symbolizes the epic genre, the one genre that includes the other three (3+1).

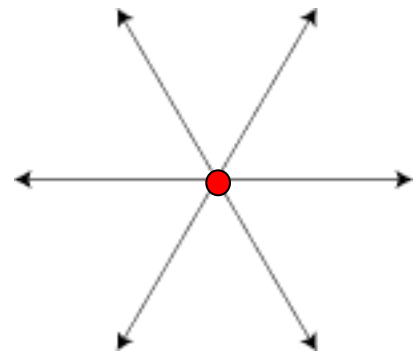


Figure 5 Quaternity mandala, 3+1: three lines with connecting point at the intersection.

Mandalas have long been considered emblematic of inner mysteries. Adam McLean characterizes alchemical mandalas as “keys which unlock the mysteries of the soul’s architecture” to discover the symbolic “gold” within (9). Similarly, these four mandalas are keys to the soul’s movements. Epic is movement, journey, and quest, with moments of lyric stillness, comic connection, and tragic alienation. These are all experiences throughout the same journey.

The four mandalas provide a framework through which the reader can glimpse the soul movements of the characters of *Moby-Dick*, and perhaps relate those movements to him- or herself. Furthermore, the mandalas are better understood if they are viewed as three-dimensional and animated. The circular images appear flat on paper, but one can think of them as spherical, and further, add spiraling dimensions that radiate in all directions—up, down, and inward. Biophysicist and author Jill Purce emphasizes the soul's movement in a mandalic pattern, a pattern that centers and orders, and ultimately reflects a greater cosmic pattern (22). The four mandalas also constantly move, mapping the shifts in the characters' psyches.

Depth psychologists, particularly C. G. Jung and those who follow his ideas, recognize that the psyche often moves in a spiral pattern. Jung imagined the individuation process¹ as a spiral (Jung 278), and psychologist Edward Edinger similarly describes the psyche's spiral as one with alternating loose and tight connections between the ego (the organizing principle of one's personality) and the Self (the vast unconscious within a person): "The process of alternation between ego-self union and ego-self separation seems to occur repeatedly throughout the life of the individual [. . .]. Indeed, this cyclic (or better, spiral) formula seems to express the basic processes of psychological development from birth to death" (Edinger 3-4). *Moby-Dick's* themes of alternating alienation and connection, as well as the spiral structure of its plot, reflect Jung's and Edinger's hypotheses of the psyche's spiraled movement.

Images of *Islands of Exile* permeate the text of *Moby-Dick*. One example is Father Mapple who ensconces himself in his "little Quebec" of a ship-shaped pulpit, elevated above the congregational masses, preaching his sermon on Jonah (*M.D.* 47). Mapple describes Jonah's descent: "He goes down in the whirling heart of such a masterless commotion that he scarce heeds the moment when he drops seething into the yawning jaws awaiting him" (*M. D.* 52).

¹ The individuation process can be defined as the individual soul's journey of linear progress toward greater and greater integration between one's conscious factors and the realms of the personal and collective unconscious.

Father Mapple continues: Jonah is engulfed “where the eddying depths sucked him ten thousand fathoms down [. . .] and all the watery world of woe bowled over him” (*M. D.* 53). Jonah is pressed down and suffering, a mandala of tragedy. Father Mapple composes an image of Jonah alone in the dark, exiled in the belly, in limbo inside a whale-cavern that swims through the underworld ocean. Jonah is within, and what he is within is beneath. Jonah is inside his raft, contained in a vessel that takes him somewhere with a purpose that is out of his control. He is adrift and separate, but in a horrifying double sense. Bainard Cowan summarizes critics’ reactions to this section of *Moby-Dick*: “This ‘Jonah’s whale,’ critics have rightly argued, is less approximate to Ishmael’s total image of Moby Dick than is the magnificent-terrifying ‘Leviathan’ of the Book of Job” (*Exiled* 83). I suggest, however, that the inclusion of Jonah is unrelated to the whale as a symbol of terror, and that the white whale symbolizes a force, Nature or God, while Jonah represents the human soul’s complex relationship of both exile and intimacy to this force. It is no accident that this sermon precedes the plot of the novel. It prefigures and foreshadows the images of exile to come.

Pip, alone and afloat in the sea in Chapter 93 “The Castaway,” is a powerful image of a momentary exile that results in lunacy. Pip had leapt from the whaling rowboat in terror and was left behind for an hour in the ocean, “another lonely castaway,” as the boat continued to chase the whale (*M. D.* 321). Ishmael, as narrator, shares his understanding of the experience of being alone in the sea: “But the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it? [. . .] Pip’s ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably” (*M.D.* 321). Pip glimpses eternity while floating in the measureless ocean: “Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes [. . .] 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 [. . .]" (*M.D.* 321-322). This vision is not lyric, though; it is terrifying and maddening for young Pip. After the *Pequod* rescues him from the water, he then becomes a loose-fish in every sense of the symbol. He has lost his mind and orientation, and the images in the sea have "drowned the infinite of his soul" (*M.D.* 321).

Psychologically, after his immersion in the unconscious, Pip cannot return to reality. He is adrift and insane, a tragic character.

Moby-Dick frequently tracks a spiral path; the plot alternates from images of distance and alienation to images of connection in a back-and-forth, wave-like rhythm. Chapter 94, "A Squeeze of the Hand," is an example of the epic's spiral structure, moving the reader into the communal *Microcosmic Island* mandala. Immediately following Pip's isolated exile, the crew of the *Pequod*, which Richard Slotkin calls an "island-universe," works together to squeeze the lumps out of the gooey whale spermaceti collected in large barrels (Slotkin 538). This experience of communal kinship transmits an ecstatic, numinous feeling to Ishmael. He invokes spiral imagery: "After having my hands in [the spermaceti] for only a few minutes, my fingers felt like eels, and began, as it were, to serpentine and spiralize" (*M. D.* 322). He connects with his shipmates by squeezing their hands within the liquid: "I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborer's hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget [. . .]" Ishmael grows sentimental towards the men, his "dear fellow beings," and, in a rapturous expression of hyperbole, he wishes to "squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness." Finally, he dreams of "long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti" (*M.D.* 322-323). This image is both comic and lyric, both ridiculous and religious at the same time. Bainard Cowan points out that "there are no concentric circles and stunning arrays of cosmic order here, but instead an ecstatic melting into one undifferentiated whole" (*Exiled* 159). These

handshakes form a tangled, messy web of human connection, analogous to Caryl Emerson's description of Louise Cowan's comic terrain: "a motley vision of the world, one teeming with co-existent diversity" (379). Ishmael feels bonded and tied fast to his fellows. By way of this microcosmic event, Ishmael can then translate this bond to a feeling of connection with all of humanity—a reversal from his first words that smacked of exile, "Call me Ishmael" (*M. D.* 18).

The supreme image of order, on the other hand, is Chapter 87's "Grand Armada" of whales encircling the three men in the boat, an *Island of Participation* mandala. The three men in the boat, representing the dot in the center of the whale circle, are offered a beatific vision of life and nature, the psychological Self: "we glided between two whales into the innermost heart of the shoal, as if from some mountain torrent we had slid into a serene valley lake. [. . .] Yes, we were now in that enchanted calm which they say lurks at the heart of every commotion" (*M.D.* 302). This lyric mandala of whales spirals down into the depths with mother and infant whales tied fast to each other. Slotkin calls this image "the Nantucket vision of earthly paradise" (542), and it is a return to Eden, for a moment. "Temporality has for a moment lost all its destructiveness. Nature reveals itself in a timeless moment [. . .]" (Cowan, *Exiled* 155). Ishmael later recalls this numinous experience to sustain and tie fast his soul to this "insular Tahiti" in troubled times "amid the tornadoed Atlantic" of his being (*M.D.* 225, 303). The lyric moment progresses clockwise on the genre wheel into tragedy when an injured whale thrashes his way into the circle, opening the enclosure as he opens the bodies of his fellow whales with the sharp blade tied fast to his body. The epic keeps on moving.

All of the $3 + 1$ mandalas involve Captain Ahab in some way. His character ties the epic together. In one $3 + 1$ mandala, Ahab is intimately tied to three characters who act as doppelgängers to him. He bonds fast to Pip after the latter's initiation into madness. Ahab's second double is Fedallah the Parsee, and his third double is the white whale in a $3 + 1$ mandala.

Ahab is the center point; his three doubles circulate around him as if magnetically attracted. Ahab is the galvanizing force holding the images, and the narrative, together. Similarly, Ahab forms the center point in another $3 + 1$ mandala when he makes the pact with his crew to hunt Moby Dick: “‘Advance, ye mates! Cross your lances full before me. Well done! Let me touch the axis.’ So saying, with extended arm, he grasped the three level, radiating lances at their crossed centre” (*M.D.* 141). Ahab infuses the triadic mandala of lances with his electricity and finalizes the pact with drink that “spiralizes in ye” (141). Ahab is connected to the sky and lightning, while his three mates’ eyes look in the other three directions, Stubb and Flask sideways and Starbuck down. The mandala’s four directions are complete because Ahab forged the connections.

Like Jonah, Captain Ahab is a tragic figure. He has an intense, intimate relationship with the whale and also with God. He is tied fast to his anger and revenge at Moby Dick and God; at the same time, he is loosed from any sense of satisfaction or comfort in his relationship with those two symbols or in any relationship with the human community. The crew of the *Pequod* seems incidental when Ahab takes center stage. The community of sailors are a mere casualty of his singular mission, while Ahab stands alone, ever chasing his obsession—whatever it is that lies behind the metaphorical mask, even if “there’s naught beyond” (*M.D.* 140). God and the white whale have laid a claim on him—he is tied to both through the loss of his leg. The opening of his wound—his “dismasted” leg—forges his unbreakable bond with his persecutor. Ahab’s pain is palpable and often loudly expressed: “‘it was Moby Dick that dismasted me; Moby Dick that brought me to this dead stump I stand on now. Aye, aye,’ he shouted with a terrific, loud, animal sob, like that of a heart-stricken moose” (*M.D.* 139). No one on the *Pequod* can empathize with Ahab’s anger, not even his doubles Pip and Fedallah, and so he remains—alone and screaming, an *Island of Exile* within himself.

In the climactic final chapters, beginning with Chapter 133 “The Chase—First Day,” the furies of Ahab and Moby Dick clash in a foaming spiral. The white whale whirls around Ahab’s boat. The whale opens his jaws and closes them over the boat, splitting it in two. His jaws make the movement of fast, by closing, and loose, by opening: “both jaws, like an enormous shears, sliding further aft, bit the craft completely in twain, and locked themselves fast again in the sea” and then he “loosed his hold for the time” (*M.D.* 410). In that quick succession of the whale’s opening and closing and subsequent swimming “swiftly round and round the wrecked crew,” Ahab falls into the sea, like Pip before him, and floats helpless at the center of the whirlpool (*M.D.* 410). The whale circles Ahab with such power that a spiral forms in the water, pointing into the depths, where both Ahab and whale will soon go, together. Ironically, in this mandala of exile with Ahab at center point, the two participants—Ahab and whale—are indispensable to the formation of the mandala. Ahab is no longer alone.

Immediately after his rescue from the harrowing whirlpool, Ahab reinforces his sense of isolation: “Starbuck is Stubb reversed, and Stubb is Starbuck; and ye two are all mankind; and Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbors!” (*M.D.* 413). The “one deep pang” in Ahab’s great heart is described in geometric terms: “for even in their pointless centres, those noble natures contain the entire circumferences of inferior souls,” an unresolvable geometric paradox (*M.D.* 411-412).

Ishmael repeatedly puns on the concepts of “loose” and “fast” throughout the climax. The whale makes his own *3+1 mandala* when, on the second day, he tangles himself in the lines of the three boats chasing him: “But at last in his untraceable evolutions, the White Whale so crossed and recrossed, and in a thousand ways entangled the slack of the three lines now fast to him, that they foreshortened” (*M.D.* 416). This *3+1 mandala* characteristically encompasses more than one genre: comedy and tragedy lock tightly as the reader experiences both heightened

tension and respect for the whale's clever ruse. When Ahab cuts the line, Ishmael winds the concepts of looseness and tightness together again: "Caught and twisted—corkscrewed in the mazes of the line, loose harpoons and lances [. . .] then twice sundering the rope near the chocks—dropped the intercepted fagot of steel into the sea; and was all fast again" (*M.D.* 416).

But to be literally tied to the whale, as Fedallah and Ahab are at the end, trumps every other image of a fast-fish. First the Parsee meets his death, tangled in the ropes embedded in the whale's flesh: "Lashed round and round to the fish's back; pinioned in the turns upon turns in which, during the past night, the whale had reeled the involutions of the lines around him, the half torn body of the Parsee was seen" (*M.D.* 423). The involutions of wrapped lines evoke another image of spirals, this time spirals that bind rather than open. Soon after, Ahab's "treacherous line [. . .] snap[s] in the empty air!" (*M.D.* 424) as he tries to pursue the whale on day three. The whale breaks the *Pequod* to pieces and Ahab mourns that he is "cut off" from his ship: "Oh, lonely death on lonely life!" (*M.D.* 426). He was never emotionally connected to the community of his crew, and now the last possible connection, the ship itself, is severed in two, and Ahab is loosed. So he turns to the whale: "let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale!" (*M.D.* 426). He spears the whale, gets wrapped in the rope attached to the harpoon, and is pulled into the depths, fastened to his enemy in death. Ahab is a waif, a stray soul, in a sense kidnapped by Moby-Dick, who is himself a loose-fish, free and uncaptured. In a cruel mockery of their free spirits, Ahab and Moby-Dick are now tied fast to each other—two rogues unwillingly bound together.

The last images of *Moby-Dick* prismatically reflect all four mandalas. When the *Pequod* sinks, it spirals down in a whirlpool of concentric circles, the flag and bird fast to the mast as a tragi-comic center point. This image, as it moves, reproduces all four of the mandalas: the last dot of the flag, alone in the sea; the community perishing together, connected in death; the

concentric vortex with ship in the middle; and the spinning figure of the $3 + 1$ mandala creating centrifugal force with its six lines radiating and slashing through the water. The epic ending includes all four shapes. And last of all, Ishmael alone on his coffin-lid raft, adrift until another *Microcosmic Island*, the ship named *Rachael*, brings Ishmael the orphan into its communal fold.

The earth itself often feels like an *Island of Exile* in space, contributing to the individual and collective sense of separateness in this life. Stubb, in a rare moment of contemplation, asks Flask, “I wonder, Flask, whether the world is anchored anywhere; if she is, she swings with an uncommon long cable, though” (*M.D.* 385). Ahab also feels like “the skewer seems loosening out of the middle of the world” (*M.D.* 391). The desire for connection and wholeness moves along its own axis as the soul approaches and retreats within the center and around the edges of the circumference. Melville, in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, offers a paradoxical image that recalls his fast-fish/loose-fish metaphor: “I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling” (545). To extrapolate from Melville’s bread metaphor, then, an unconnected, exiled piece—a person adrift or loose—would long for reconnection with the whole, a pursuit that is innate, if all are made from the same spiritual stuff. It is not only possible to be simultaneously a fast-fish and a loose-fish, it is the reality of the experience of this life. The epic form with its four mandalas reveals this paradox.

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