TOTALITY.ZIP: How Melville, Joyce, and Beckett Unzip the World

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Abstract

This paper examines how Melville, Joyce, and Beckett face the impossibility of capturing a total world's complexity in a single work of fiction. Three ways of taming such complexity are identified: a radical subjectivity underscoring the immense complexity of the self; flight into realms of the unknown; and the neglecting of interdependencies that might link elements of the whole. The analogy announced in the paper's title arises at its close, where on being unzipped, the sudden legibility of ZIP files parallels the loosing of a totality, whose complexity fiction may simulate yet never zip back up.

*I*n the modernist age, the increasing amount and complexity of knowledge about the world made it impossible to capture the whole of the world (or even one whole world) in a book of fiction. Any writer attempting to write a book of fiction had to in some way or other reduce the complexity of the world in its totality before being able to transfer any substantial parts of it into art. Taking my examples from works by Melville, Joyce, and Beckett, I'd like to illustrate three possible ways of reducing the world's complexitiy in modernist fiction.

(1) **Radical subjectivity, i.e., employing a first-person point of view—resulting, however, in the paradoxical finding that the self, the inside world, is even more complex than the outside world.**

The first chapter of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* begins with a sentence clearly underlining the narrator's subjectivity: "Call me Ishmael."[1] This is to say: 'I am a man with a name which will identify me as an individual, and everything I will tell you will be told from my individual point of

view.' Ironically enough, this is exactly *not* what Melville's narrator does: instead, the narrator and his individual point of view are of no conceivable significance over vast parts of the novel, and Melville even makes his narrator tell us a lot of things which, following the rules of narrative probability, this narrator cannot know.

The narrative and the narrator's perspective already begin to disintegrate in the very first paragraph of the novel proper. After having told us to call him Ishmael, the narrator continues:

> Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.[2]

The self's point of view starts to disintegrate into a paratactical sentence pattern, and this reflects the fact that the world which surrounds the self is disintegrating from a well-ordered universe into a casual and coincidental conglomeration of mere details. Henceforth, in the narrator's mind information is organized by simply listing several things, naming one thing after the other without pretending to know the exact relationship between things. Melville's syntactical structures break down into paratactical listings of fragments, because perfect sentences cannot hold the world any more.

Like Melville, Joyce (in *Dubliners*) starts to narrate the world from a first-person point of view, which, however, he soon gives up again. This tendency is explained by Stephen Dedalus (not a first-person narrator, but the quite personal and subjective narrative point of view of a third-person narrative) in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

> The narrative is no longer purely personal. The personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea. This progress you will see easily in that Old English ballad *Turpin Hero*

> which begins in the first person and ends in the third person. (*P* 215)

The artist "flowing round" persons and actions is an artist encompassing everything in his or her book: everything is conceived and told from a purely personal perspective—not the perspective of the author, of course, but the perspective of the narrative voice (even if this voice, like Stephen's in *A Portrait*, strictly speaking is not the narrator himself). This is a way out of the complexity of the modern world: if the narrator is telling everything from his or her own point of view, he or she is licensed to tell the world not in the complex state it really is (which would be beyond grasp and understanding of any single person), but rather in the simplified and fragmentary form in which it is always perceived and witnessed by the individual. In order to increase this process of simplification and fragmentation of the world even more, Joyce in *Ulysses* invents the technique of the interior monologue as a means to reduce narration to an extremely subjective, first-person point of view again. Simplification means unification, but fragmentation, on the other hand, means that in spite of the integrating first-person point of view, the narrated world is disintegrating once more: in *Ulysses*, one subjectivity leads to another, and the relations between different points of view have somehow to be organized.

In the works of Samuel Beckett, the first-person point of view is even more important than it is in the works of Melville and Joyce. The most important artistic shift in the development of Beckett's fiction is the shift from third-person narrative to first-person narrative we find in his stories and novels of the late 1940s. Again, however, the decision to reduce the world to what the self perceives of it does not really make matters simple enough to be narrated without difficulties. Beckett's short story "First Love" starts with the first-person pronoun and the self's perception of the world, but this perception is marked by doubt and by the knowledge that the world beyond its grasp may be much more complex:

> I associate, rightly or wrongly, my marriage with the death of my father, in time. That other links exist, on other levels, between these two affairs, is not impossible. I have enough trouble as it is in trying to say what I think I know.[3]

This quite basic Beckettian gesture of saying "I" and reducing the world to simple statements, while at the same time the self becomes more and more insecure of itself and the most trivial facts of the world, is to be

found again in the very first sentences of *Molloy*, the first part of Beckett's trilogy of novels: "I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there."[4] These sentences clearly show that the lack of knowledge is part of the first-person situation, and this lack of knowledge (and of any kind of orientation in the world) is becoming increasingly more overwhelming in the course of Beckett's fiction writing. The very first sentences of *The Unnamable*, the third and final part of Beckett's trilogy, show that the narrative voice, in spite of being a highly subjective, self-related voice, is losing the world's seemingly simplest things out of its grips: "Where now? Why now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that."[5] The simplest questions about oneself become much to complex to be dealt with in any successful way. In order to successfully reduce the world's complexity, other narrative tricks have to be employed.

(2)   Flight from overly complex, overdetermined territory (the self, home, modern society) into realms of the unknown, of something new, something trivial—resulting, however, in the necessity to explore the world at an ever-increasing speed.

As the narrative voice soon finds out in the course of its unsuccessful attempts to find shelter in the realms of the self, the impossibility of dealing with the world does not result from the vast amount of things which are unknown to the individual—it rather results from the complexity of all the things that are known but not understood. Melville's Ishmael, therefore, after having told us about his problems with the reality of his inner self, lists several reasons for his flight into the vastness of the sea and onto the small space offered by a whaling ship:

> By reason of these things, then, the whaling voyage was welcome; 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, mid most of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air.[6]

Here, however, in the closing lines of Melville's first chapter, a new problem of all the self's attempts to get to grasp on the world emerges: one particular fragment of reality—the whale—is transforming itself into a series of phenomena, i.e., it is tranforming itself into a whole world which again is too expansive to handle. Although in *Moby-Dick* the

narrative world is reduced to nothing but a ship and a whaling voyage, this voyage soon becomes as all-embracing and complex as the world can be: the whaling voyage turns out to be a trip around the whole world, and the novel covering this voyage turns out to become a book of 135 chapters, a book with chapters about nearly everything conceivable in the world. On his one small whaling ship, Melville soon discovers gigantic masses of information which have to be somehow organized and narrated in order to make the reader understand his book.

And what Melville has to get a grasp on and organize in the body of his novel are bits of *information* indeed, whereas what Joyce has to organize in *Ulysses* are merely bits of *knowledge*. There is, as the basics of information theory tell us, a fundamental difference between information and knowledge: you can tell a person anything, but you can only inform this person of something he or she does not know already—information is knowledge which for the informed person is new. Melville in *Moby-Dick* tells us something that is new to us (virtually none of his first-time readers had ever been on a whaling voyage, nor did they know much about whales and the complicated ways of hunting these creatures); Joyce, on the other hand, tells us something which every reader knows already. We are all quite familiar with what Joyce narrates in *Ulysses*: everyday life in the streets of an ordinary city. Leopold Bloom leaves his house in order to avoid a certain knowledge, so the problem here is not that so many things are unknown, the problem is that certain things are too well-known. Bloom wanders the streets of Dublin with attention to detail, but he always finds his own problems everywhere.

Like Bloom, Beckett's characters are wanderers. Beckett's first-person narrators are expelled from home, they try to get away from somewhere or something, but they tend to become slower and slower in their progression, until they are barely able to move while lying on their backs in the dark. A successful flight from the self and other things that are all too well-known, however, would quite contrarily to this mean that the wandering individual is able to gradually increase the speed of his or her flight, since the more you learn of the unknown world, the harder it becomes to still find worldly things that remain unknown and can distract you from yourself.

The wandering self is looking for the freedom to start anew from scratch, a freedom which can only begin after getting rid of all the overly complex burdens of the ever more complicated world one is carrying around in the form of one's material and immaterial belongings. In Beckett's novel *Malone Dies*, the narrator longs for this kind of freedom

but knows that before being able to achieve it, he has to face what he calls his "pensum":

> Yes, I have a pensum to discharge, before I can be free, free to dribble, free to speak no more, listen no more, and I've forgotten what it is. There at last is a fair picture of my situation.[7]

Much earlier in the book, Malone attempts to make of catalogue of all his belongings, which seems quite a simple task to fulfill, but he never succeeds. At least one of the reasons is that in his wanderings (which now means: the wanderings of his mind) he cannot keep up with the speed in which his personal world is growing: "I disposed of things I loved but could no longer keep, because of new loves. And often I missed them. But I had hidden them so well that even I could never find them again."[8]

Even though Malone is not successful, he has at least discovered the last and perhaps most basic way of reducing the world's complexity: the decision to neglect all causal or other relationships (which always tend to make things more complicated), and instead just to list isolated fragments of the world one after the other.

(3)   Reducing fiction to catalogues of arbitrary and accidental details of the world, neglecting the complex interdependencies that may exist between these details—resulting, however, in the fact that the more one includes, the more seems to remain excluded.

In a way, much of Melville's *Moby-Dick* is sheer catalogue: having boiled down the world to the subject of the whale and its pursuit, Melville and his narrator want to tell us everything about this one and only subject, which is only possible by treating one sub-subject after the other. Soon a process starts which seems to be a never-ending one: if you tell your audience one thing, there are so many other things which remain to be told. Even Melville's chapter titles bear witness to this phenomenon. In chapter 55 of his book, for example, Melville finds eloquent words about the topic named by the title: "Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales."[9] If there are "monstrous" pictures, however, there must be others as well, so Melville deals with these in chapter 56: "Of the Less Erroneous Pictures of Whales, and the True Pictures of Whaling Scenes."[10] This, however, cannot justifiably be the end of Melville's talking about pictorial representations of the whale, insofar as Melville still has to name all the

"true pictures" in their widespread diversity, which he does in chapter 57, nicely entitled: "Of Whales in Paint; in Teeth; in Wood; in Sheet-Iron; in Stone; in Mountains; in Stars."[11]

We see here that Melville, although employing paratactical structures in order to compose catalogues of very concrete phenomena, sometimes falls victim to a tendency to lose hold of the particular and lose oneself in statements of a general nature. At least in part this is due to the fact that Melville tries to be all-inclusive: in his novel, he wants to capture the totality of his topic, and for this reason he sometimes transforms his inventories into a systematics with a tendency towards generalization. In his semi-scientific chapter on "Cetology," for example, he tries to come to grips with his complex subject matter in the following peculiar way:

> Already we are boldly launched upon the deep; but soon we shall be lost in its unshored, harborless immensities. Ere that come to pass; ere the Pequod's weedy hull rolls side by side with the barnacled hulls of the leviathan; at the outset it is but well to attend to a matter almost indispensable to a thorough appreciative understanding of the more special leviathanic revelations and allusions of all sorts which are to follow.
>
> It is some systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera, that I would now fain put before you. Yet it is no easy task. The classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed.[12]

This passage shows a certain dilemma Melville in *Moby-Dick* faces again and again: he wants to tell a story, but there are so many strange and unknown details involved in the whalers' world, "indispensable to a thorough appreciative understanding" by the reader, that Melville either has to explain all these things "at the outset" when no reader knows why he or she should read such explanations, or has to constantly interrupt his narrative. The problems faced by Melville here are the problems of succession, the problems of a logical sequence: even if you are capable of telling the reader *everything* about a given topic, the question remains in what order all this should be best dealt with. If Melville decides to give a general description of some special procedure before his narrative reaches the point where the readers need this knowledge, Melville has to refer back from his linear narrative to the previous remarks: "That whale of Stubb's so dearly purchased, was duly brought to the Pequod's side, where all those cutting and hoisting operations previously detailed, were regularly gone through."[13]

The more complex the system of having to refer backwards and forwards becomes, the more obvious it also becomes that if you choose a linear narrative structure, the succession of details which relate to the reader becomes an endless one. In the first sentence of his 60th chapter, for example, entitled "The Line," Melville finds it high time to explain a certain device:

> With reference to the whaling scene shortly to be described, as well as for the better understanding of all similar scenes elsewhere presented, I have here to speak of the magical, sometimes horrible whale-line.[14]

In the next chapter ("Stubb Kills a Whale"), Melville can continue his story, but then again, with the first sentence of chapter 62 ("The Dart"), he has to interrupt his narrative: "A word concerning an incident in the last chapter."[15] Now the harpooneers' most important dart is explained in every detail, but still this is not enough, for both the line and the dart cannot fully be understood without knowing another device, so Melville adds another chapter ("The Crotch"), which starts: "Out of the trunk, the branches grow; out of them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters. / The crotch alluded to on a previous page deserves independent mention."[16] In this way, Melville starts a process which never really ends: each and every subject is "productive" in that it leads to some other subject which also deserves mention.

James Joyce in *Ulysses* (and later in *Finnegans Wake*) equally starts processes which never end: his novel consists of lists and catalogues which are ended only by the book's going into print. Out of the trunk, the branches grow, and out of Joyce's lists, his additions on the galley and page proofs grow. In the end, all these catalogues of fragments of the world are supplemented by (or even supplanted by) catalogues of ways in which to speak about fragments of the world (and perhaps about the world as a whole, after all). In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce radicalizes this tendency even further: here he puts the fragments of the world not one after the other, but rather squeezes them into each other, and at the same time he squeezes different ways of speaking about the world into each other. Even in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce cannot really achieve totality, of course, but here he finds ways of simulating a whole by collecting and integrating fragments.

Every whole consists of fragments, of particulars, but this unfortunately does not mean that if you get hold of the particulars, you also gain a whole at last. The narrator of Beckett's *Molloy* realizes:

> For the particulars, if you are interested in particulars, there is no need to despair, you may scrabble on the right door, in the right way, in the end. It's not for the whole there seems to be no spell.[17]

The problem is that if you name one aspect of the world, you lose hold of totality, and in order to regain totality, you would have to name *all* other aspects of the world, too, which of course is impossible, unless you reduce the world to a level on which all the world's aspects are limited to a managable set of possibilities. This in a way is the Beckett principle: going back to basics, he looks out for fields of investigation where everything can be boiled down to just a small set of possibilites. One example are the "twelve possibilites" that occur to Watt, the hero of the eponymous novel. Beckett lists all the possibilities which are theoretically conceivable, but exactly this theoretical approach marks the whole system as a non-adequate way of coping with the non-theoretical world:

> Twelve possibilities occurred to Watt, in this connexion:
> 1. Mr. Knott was responsible for the arrangement, and knew that he was responsible for the arrangement, and knew that such an arrangement existed, and was content.
> […]
> 12. Mr. Knott was not responsible for the arrangement, but knew who was responsible for the arrangement, but did not know that any such arrangement existed, and was content.[18]

Beckett, however, does not leave it at such an only theoretically possible, practically absurd arrangement. He goes still one step further. After having listed what is a more than exhaustive catalogue of possibilities, he even adds: "Other possibilities occurred to Watt, in this connexion, but he put them aside, and quite out of his mind, as unworthy of serious consideration, for the time being."[19] This, if anything, is the Beckett principle, his way of going on to write in the face of the acknowledged failure to do so: Beckett invents and shapes arenas out of words, small worlds indeed, in which he can exhaust all possibilities—but after having done so, he looks out for and finds ways for still finding more (impossible) possibilites. This principle in a nutshell can be seen at work in his late dramatic piece *Quad*, a pantomime script describing four walkers walking an arena, following a neat system of constant motion.

Beckett carefully makes sure that in various respects, all possibilities are covered:

> Together all four complete their courses. […] Unbroken movement. […] Four possible solos all given. Six possible duos all given (two twice). Four possible trios all given twice. […] All possible light combinations given. […] All possible percussion combinations given. […] All possible costume combinations given. […] *Players*. As alike in build as possible. […] Sex indifferent.[20]

Beckett here (and elsewhere) invents a closed system in a closed space, where everything is reduced to just a few possibilities, so that Beckett on the field of his invention can achieve totality indeed. At least so it seems—but then suddenly Beckett opens up the whole system again and thus contradicts totality. At the end of the *Quad* script, after all this detailing of 'all possibilities given,' we read the following remark: "This original scenario . . . was followed in the Stuttgart production by a variation"![21] Where there is still room for the development of new variations, totality still cannot be wholly achieved.

So, to sum up our findings: where Melville is still looking for a logical sequence in which to arrange a never ending (and therefore arbitrarily ended) catalogue of fragments, i.e., of particulars, Joyce tries to be virtually exhaustive by covering everything possible. Of course, he cannot literally succeed in doing so, however, and it is Beckett who really is exhaustive (and exhausted), because he drastically limits the scope of his world before cataloguing all possibilities. Beckett in his later works even tries to compose them out of abstract concepts of the mind instead of arbitrary relics of the outer world, because only by abstraction a kind of totality can be achieved.

Totality is like Pandora's box: once you open it, you can never hope to close the box again. The Joycean imperative is the "O tell me all" of *Finnegans Wake*'s "Anna Livia" chapter, but strictly speaking, telling anyone "all" about anything is only possible by simply saying 'All' or 'The Whole' or 'Cosmos' or 'One'—if you add 'two,' you cannot stop adding all other numbers; as soon as you specify what the 'whole' and the 'all' comprises, you lose hold of totality. This is the fundamental and unsolvable problem of all integrative approaches: once a process of integration has been started, there is also a counter-process of disintegration.

Totality is only possible as a ZIP file: TOTALITY.ZIP, so to speak. If you use modern personal computers, you know what this means:

everything is included in ZIP files, but you cannot read it and cannot work with it, unless you unzip it. As soon as you begin to unzip the world, however, the temptation arises to zip it again, to put everything back into Pandora's box—but exactly this you can't do.

It seems that the unique artistic quality of *Finnegans Wake* lies in the way in which this tricky book simulates totality, although totality cannot be achieved. Joyce here at the same time reduces and multiplies everything by always saying quite different (and indeed opposite) things at the same time. As a result, everybody, everything, every place and every time in *Finnegans Wake* is somebody else, something else, somewhere else and some other time. Each one thing is (or rather seems to be) everything, and thus Joyce makes the impossible possible by "Putting Allspace in a Notshall" (*FW* 455.29).

A simulation of totality is attempted in *Moby-Dick* and *Ulysses*, too, but only by way of succession, of sequential catalogues. If Joyce in *Ulysses* employs a specific "art" and a specific style of writing for each chapter, this aims at totality by suggesting that all arts and all modes of style are presented—but this of course is not the case. We can always think of an "art" or a stylistic mode *not* present in the text. The same can be said of *Moby-Dick*, where Melville tries to say something about the whale from the points of view of quite diverse disciplines or fields of knowledge (the whale in the fine arts, in history, in the Bible, in biology, in the law, in economics, and so on), employing quite different modes of speaking (contemporary jargon, quasi-philosophical musings, the pathos of sermons, Shakespearean blank verse, different modes of pidgin or broken English, and so on), but still every reader could name certain disciplines or modes of style *not* to be found in the text. If you start to catalogue the world by naming one phenomenon after the other, you will never be able to get through it. The only possible way out of this dilemma is to break down the principle of succession and make an inventory of the world by naming (or suggesting) all phenomena at the same time. In *Finnegans Wake*, the inventory of the world is not made finite by any kind of logical sequence (which would have to end somewhere)—in principle, the inventory is infinite, and the complete world is transfered into a never-ending book of fiction.

Of course, the forgivable conception that everything is included in *Finnegans Wake* is not really true: it is not hard to think of something *not* present in that book. Nevertheless, the simulation of totality is there, even up to the point where readers, scholars and interpreters have in innumerous cases been able to 'find' or 'discover' something in the body of the text which, as could be proved by one way or other, could not have

been in Joyce's mind while he was working on the book. So, even *Finnegans Wake* does not achieve totality in fiction, and even *Finnegans Wake* is incomplete; it sometimes even plays with incompleteness by cutting, abbreviating or pasting fragmented words, sentences or paragraphs onto or into each other. But *Finnegans Wake*, this novel which solves all questions of sequence and succession by saying different things at the same time and by bringing the incomplete last sentence full circle with the incomplete first one, in a way is a complete picture of incompleteness.

Notes

[1] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or The Whale* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1988) 3.

[2] Melville 3.

[3] Samuel Beckett, "First Love," *Collected Shorter Prose 1945-1980* (London: John Calder, 1984) 1.

[4] Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1979) 9.

[5] Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, *The Beckett Trilogy*, 267.

[6] Melville 7.

[7] Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, *The Beckett Trilogy*, 284.

[8] Beckett, *Malone Dies*, 228.

[9] Melville 260.

[10] Melville 265.

[11] Melville 269.

[12] Melville 134.

[13] Melville 415.

[14] Melville 278.

[15] Melville 287.

[16] Melville 289.

[17] Beckett, *Molloy* 27.

[18] Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: John Calder, 1970) 86-87.

[19] Beckett, *Watt* 87.

[20] Samuel Beckett, *Quad*, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1986) 451-53.

[21] Beckett, *Quad* 453.