1: *Vanity Fair:* The Structure of Self-Refutation

Vanity Fair is a work of disturbing complexity of structure and style. We are going to try to come to an understanding of that complexity by attempting to fit the book into some established generic forms of narrative fiction, to observe how it refuses to fit, and ultimately to account for the reasons for that refusal. Our question is: How fully can *Vanity Fair* be described as a dramatic action, an apologue, or a satire?[1]

Vanity Fair as Dramatic Action

Vanity Fair certainly wears the face of a dramatic action. It contains the materials of dramatic interest common to novels of Thackeray's period: love unprofessed, poverty unrelieved, and so forth. The elements of the plot are so completely familiar to us as the elements of sentimental romance that we assume that they are being used in the way

[1] These categories are defined by Sheldon Sacks in *Fiction and the Shape of Belief* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1964).

of that conventional art form, which is the way of dramatic action. But things are not so simple. A dramatic action, as distinguished from a satire or apologue, seeks to heighten our sympathetic involvement with a set of characters and a situation and win from us the strongest possible commitment to a particular dramatic outcome. There are several ways in which Thackeray does the opposite of this. For instance, though readers have testified to the unique realness of his characters,[2] the compelling immediacy of their presentation, the narrator tells us frequently that they are not real, that they are puppets, and that this is all a kind of light entertainment. If the dramatic experience is premised upon a willing suspension of disbelief, then Thackeray's methods are designed to reawaken that disbelief, or at least to make us conscious of the wilful act and examine the criteria by which it is wilfully done. The effect of the puppet metaphor in this context is that, if we take the narrator at his word, the work must be an apologue, where, as in a fable, the characters are vehicles for truths more important than themselves. But Thackeray's characters refuse to accept such second-class citizenship. The significant fact about the puppet metaphor is, after all, that it is constantly belied by the puppets' vitality. The drama compels us to a concern for them which the narrator assures us is foolish and based on the misconception that they are real. The metaphor is powerful because it is not how we perceive the characters naturally. Here, then, is an

[2] Cf. chap. 3 for a complete discussion.

example of a fact to which we shall be constantly returning in this chapter in larger terms: that the force of Thackeray's narrative and his narrator's perception of it are harshly at odds, in that the narrative is trying to achieve fulfillment as compelling drama, and the narrator denies it that satisfaction, by a number of techniques that we will now examine.

But first a cautionary note should be sounded. We are going to talk about the contradictory forces of sentimental drama and an artistic self-consciousness that largely destroys the illusions on which dramatic involvement is based, and this raises a problem. Thackeray writes with a hypothetical reader very much in mind: one of that reader's characteristics is an intense desire for a strong dramatic experience — Victorian novel-readers are historically famous for reading in hopes of a good cry. Only with such a desire will one feel the full effect of Thackeray's refusal to grant it to us. The conclusion of *Vanity Fair* is meant to gall and frustrate. Those who feel that ending to be otherwise must try to reconstruct Thackeray's reader — the reader who reads to weep, the reader who could read Bulwer's ending to *Great Expectations* with no sense of inconsistency. Only then will we realize that the marriage of Dobbin and Amelia remains a consummation devoutly to be wished long after Thackeray has logically demonstrated the unfeasibility of it.

In a dramatic action, the author must clarify our commitment to certain possibilities of action and against others, so that he may control our

dramatic involvement and give us a coherent experience. Does Thackeray seek such a unified effect? Let us follow the progress of the rhetoric through a representative passage – Dobbin's battle with Cuff, the school champion [*VF* 5].

Cuff is presented as the representative of all the social forces that bring Dobbin undeserved contempt and misery. Dobbin is found reading the Arabian Nights, that traditional sign of unworldly idealism and the powers of fancy. The world intrudes: "Dobbin looked up. The Fairy Peribanon had fled into the inmost cavern with Prince Ahmed: . . . and there was everyday life before honest William: and a big boy beating a little one without cause" [p. 62]. Cuff's victim is the very boy who brought Dobbin shame by revealing his father's low occupation. The stage is set for an unambiguous confrontation between ideal virtue and worldly wickedness; Dobbin will be likened in the next lines to David against Goliath. Dobbin performs, but the narrator's speculations about his motives are not comforting to our dramatic alliances:

> I can't say what his motive was. Torture in a public school is as much licensed as the knout in Russia. It would be ungentlemanlike (in a manner) to resist it. Perhaps Dobbin's foolish soul revolted against that exercise of tyranny: or perhaps he had a hankering feeling of revenge in his mind, and longed to measure himself against that splendid bully and tyrant, who had all the glory . . . in the place. Whatever may have been his incentive, however, up he sprang. . . , [p. 62]

Even though we may feel ourselves able to thread our way through the irony and arrive at a probable judgment being hit at here, the act of struggling, the need to pause, and the possibility of ignoble motives are all damaging to the making of a clear and strong dramatic commitment. Dobbin has done the right thing, but the narrator has asked too penetrating a question. The conventional character of the situation, and the conventional rhetoric in which Thackeray narrates it (Arabian Nights, David and Goliath, and so on) encourage a view of the event as a moral dichotomy – David vs. Goliath, Arabian Nights idealism vs. a cruel reality, awkward virtue vs. superb arrogance; the interruption by the speculative narrator destroys the simple purity of the categories – there is some Cuff in Dobbin, for instance. Rhetoric (and here conventionality of plot action must be included in that term) has lied, by encouraging us in a too easy moral response that the objective critical spirit of the narrator easily exposes.[3] This pattern describes every part of Dobbin's experience. Consider the familiar shape of the complete action: Dobbin

[3] It is interesting to note that Thackeray's interruption is, in terms of dramatic characterization, basically misleading. There is, after all, no Cuff in Dobbin. Dobbin can be foolish, but never cruel or vengeful. Since the interruption is not helpful in understanding Dobbin, and is in fact misleading, we cannot explain the interruption in terms of dramatic necessity. That is, Thackeray is not interrupting to correct our dramatic involvement, but simply to disrupt it, without factual cause, and as a matter of policy – pure dramatic situations must be disrupted, just as smooth water cries out for a stone to be thrown in it. Our "too-easy moral response" is in this case accurate, and it is the "exposure" of that view which proves ultimately false. The interruption is false for Dobbin, but true for mankind, and it is this sort of narrative structure, in which the particular dramatic present has only secondary validity, that we are attempting to characterize.

fights in defense of one who has wronged him, against physical odds and in the face of prejudice. He wins, winning respect and popularity in the process. Cuff acknowledges his crime and accepts the blame for the fight ("It's my fault, sir. . . . I was bullying a little boy; and he served me right"). Cuff becomes Dobbin's tutor. Dobbin becomes the best friend of the youth he defended, who helps Dobbin's father prosper by bringing him socially respectable patronage. Dobbin gains self-confidence, academic success, and his father's respect. His father's economic success leads to his becoming an alderman, and Dobbin's career as a gentleman is assured. Only by recognizing the complete conventionality of the plot can we appreciate the effect of the narrator's cynical re-interpretation of it. He tells us, for instance, that Dobbin's popularity is for the wrong reasons; he is cheered not because he is right, but because he wins, and the cheers smack of hypocrisy – "Now all the boys set up a shout for Figs as would have made you think he had been their darling champion through the whole battle." Cuff's self-abasement proves a cunning bit of politics, winning him back all his lost status. George Osborne's letter to home shows that he has failed to catch the moral of the experience; in fact, Dobbin's damsel in distress turns out to be a whore, who loves and seeks the ravishment, for George would always rather be abused by wealth and blood than befriended by common virtue.

But Thackeray sees deeper than this, for Dobbin himself fails to comprehend the moral nature of

his experience. Cuff tutors Dobbin, but the narrator emphasizes not Cuff's condescension but Dobbin's astonishment at it. He feels himself unworthy of such companionship, which makes us distrust the morality in whose defense he fought. Dobbin's father rewards him as much for his associates as for his character, and he pays him in public and in cash, the coin of the realm we thought Dobbin was opposing. Dobbin's self-enslavement to George, the representative of the worst elements of the system he began by battling so heroically, completes his capitulation.

This is something other than a dramatic outcome against our wishes; this is rather a reinterpretation of a dramatically perfect pattern, to the destruction of all clear dramatic commitments. Since what we called Virtue has enrolled in the service of what we called Worldliness, we are left with nothing that we may surely hope for. But the perfection of the conventional plot structure – familiar to all readers of Victorian young men's literature, a genre now known only by its best, Hughes' Tom Brown books – is what we are likely to overlook. Amelia's history as a whole is the exercising of a cynical insight upon a conventional romance. The bare plot summary shows no signs of a revolutionary aesthetic: Downright, honest D meets A and loves her at first sight. But A loves D's best friend G. Her family is ruined, and the match is broken off by G's worldly father. G defies his father, insists on honoring his love for A, and is banished from the family. D, sacrificing his own love, arranges a marriage between G and A. The young husband is heroically

killed in the defense of England's liberty. She vows eternal loyalty to his memory. D is stationed in India. A suffers from poverty, unbeknownst to D. But the cruel father-in-law is reconciled at the sight of his grandson, so like his dead son, and promises to provide for him in a gentlemanly manner. D learns of her poverty, rescues her, wins her love through years of devoted service, and they are wed. Surely, few of us read works of such unflinching ordinariness.

Amelia's plot is as conventional in its parts as in its whole. Let us take the time to document one example of the conventions in which Thackeray openly works. When Dobbin first sees Amelia, he is love-struck in the manner of a Victorian convention [*VF* 5; 1:70-71].

> He had arrived with a knock so very timid and quiet, that it was inaudible to the ladies up stairs: otherwise, you may be sure Miss Amelia would never have been so bold as to come singing into the room. As it was, the sweet fresh voice went right into the Captain's heart, and nestled there.

The bird imagery ties this to the convention by which love or sex erupts at any instant of unguarded proximity to nature. In Victorian novels, people only go outside for proper or improper sexual purposes. Some examples will suggest the universality of this belief: In *Coningsby*, Coningsby loves Edith, but lacks an opportunity to declare himself until they are caught in a rainstorm and take refuge in a fishing cottage. Two paragraphs of nature de-

scription – such as, "a soft breeze came dancing up the stream," – and it fairly bursts out of him –

> "Edith!" he said in a tone of tremulous passion, "Let me call you Edith! Yes," he continued, gently taking her hand, "let me call you my Edith! I love you!"
>
> She did not withdraw her hand. [Bk. 7, chapt. 5]

Once outside the bounds of civilized society, there is no hesitating. In *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,* Browning uses the convention to explain the paradox that two perfectly innocent and sexless young people have fallen. Mertoun illicitly loves Mildred, and the following is all the explanation we ever get of how they fell:

> *Tresham*: Have you seen Lacy Mildred, by the way?
> *Mertoun*: I . . . I . . . our two demesnes, remember, touch;
> I have been used to wander carelessly
> After my stricken game: the heron roused
> Deep in my woods, has trailed its broken wing
> Through thicks and glades a mile in yours, – or else
> Some eyass ill-reclaimed has taken flight
> And lured me after her from tree to tree,
> I marked not whither. I have come upon
> The lady's wondrous beauty unaware.
> And – and then . . . I have seen her.
> [*Act 1: 2; 155-164*]

The source of the convention in the Actaeon myth

is explicit here. For a final example, in *Tom Brown at Oxford*, Tom discovers his love through a moment's contemplation on the Hawk's Lynch, a promontory (chap. 32), his friend Hardy declares his love there (47), and Tom's love is first reciprocated in a nature outing which Hughes introduces wittily with, "Has any person, of any nation or language found out and given to the world any occupation, work, diversion, or pursuit, more subtly dangerous to the susceptible youth of both sexes than that of nutting in pairs?" (34). Hughes is joking at the convention he is about to use, joking at the fact that every reader knows why he is sending his young people out nutting.

Dobbin's fall for Amelia, then, is offered to us in terms so familiar that we cannot question it, except through hindsight later. Thackeray then forces us to question it with a basic technique of the parodist – he takes the convention literally, and finds it literally foolish. He sensibly suggests that he who falls in love at first sight falls in love with superficialities. The observation questions not only the grounds for Dobbin's love, but the grounds for our easy countenance of it. But the power of that turn on the convention depends on our accepting it initially as rhetorically persuasive. We must realize that there is an entire conventional romance within this book – we must come to understand how an intelligent reader could say of reading *Vanity Fair*, "I rejoice to read again a good old-fashioned love story"[4] – so that we may recog-

[4] Thackeray's *Letters*, 2:313.

nize the means by which Thackeray makes it into something else.

If we return to the Dobbin-Cuff fight, we may note another way in which the narrator's methods seem hostile to the ends of drama. Again, Dobbin has been roused from dreams and is confronted by injustice. The reader who takes a strong stand with Dobbin and against Cuff finds this done to him:

> . . . there was everyday life before honest William; and a big boy beating a little one without cause. . . .
>
> "Take that, you little devil!" cried Mr. Cuff, and down came the wicket . . . on the child's hand. – Don't be horrified, ladies, every boy at a public school has done it. Your children will do so and be done by, in all probability. Down came the wicket again; and Dobbin started up. [*VF* 5; 1:62]

Thackeray invites the reader to make moral alliances, and then shows him how he has condemned himself. Such an interruption upsets our dramatic involvement in two ways: first, by picturing us wielding the wicket, and suggesting that the victims and the bullies are the same people at different ages, it confuses our moral stand considerably; but of equal interest, by generalizing the action to all boys in all schools at all times, it weakens our interest in drama's primary end – the illusion of intense and particular reality. The issue is, which is first in importance, Cuff and George, or the condition of the English public schools; this is the difference between a dramatic and an apologic

orientation. The plight of Pamela, to take a clear example, does not need, nor would it profit by, any attempt to validate her experience by reference to its representativeness. Though Richardson suggests that it is "about" Virtue Rewarded, we are not misled; it is fundamentally "about" Pamela and Mr. B, who testify to their own existence and significance by themselves, as unique creatures. Thackeray's interruption corrects our inclination to read the scene this way and directs us toward an apologic orientation.[5]

Vanity Fair as apologue

An apologue, according to Sacks, is "a work organized as a fictional example of the truth of a formulable statement or a series of such statements" [p. 26]. We can immediately see that *Vanity Fair* advertises itself as an apologue. Here, as in all his works, Thackeray habitually refers to his art as fable, or sermon, often with a blunt statement that our response to the text should be to take the moral. Here the moral is repeated often

[5] Sacks brings light here. He discusses the ways Dr. Johnson minimizes our involvement in *Rasselas*' episode of the stoic and his daughter's death; he speaks of Imlac's generalization to Rasselas about such men – "Be not too hasty . . . to trust, to admire, the teachers of morality: they discourse like angels, but they live like men": "What is most important about Imlac's prediction at this moment is its generality. . . . Since the genuineness of the wise man's grief is conveyed by careful contrast to the spuriousness of his moral dicta, it is absolutely necessary that we regard meretricious pretensions as typical of "teachers of morality," since for purposes of the apologue the pretensions of a single moralist are irrelevant. Imlac's brief rejoinder at once reinforces our propensity to find in the episode only its thematic contribution . . . and prevents us from interpreting the seer's spuriousness as idiosyncratic" (p. 58).

— *Vanitas vanitatum*, all is vanity — and the novel apparently ends when it is felt that the truth of this has been fully demonstrated. Thackeray in his letters describes his purpose as the description of the moral state of a society, not the telling of a story; he says, "What I want is to make a set of people living without God in the world. . . ." [*Letters* 2:309] And Thackeray throughout his career describes the relationship between reader and text that he seeks by the phrase *de te fabula*, meaning that the reader is the subject of the tale. Our attention is thus ultimately directed, not toward Cuff and Dobbin, not toward the universal fact of such things happening, but toward the fact that we have done it. That the novel appears to be about fictional characters in action proves to be an illusion; the novel begins to look like a grand rhetorical machine to bring the reader unawares face to face with himself. In this perspective the Cuff-Dobbin fight seems a trap laid to encourage us to make pure moral judgments which turn out to condemn us, and to leave us to resolve the conflict. This is a joke fundamental to Thackeray's method, and it, like much of his humor, is based on the difference between the way we read and the way we live. We read romantic novels with an easy moral absolutism and live according to a more pragmatic creed. By casting us as the characters of his novel, Thackeray asks us to account for the discrepancy.

But the machinery of apologue that *Vanity Fair* sports is not conclusive evidence that an apologic intention is controlling the structure of the novel.

As Sacks observes, the error to demand or assume an apologic orientation is historically a common one in talking about the novel, especially so for Thackeray's generation; from the time of Defoe if not earlier, the novelist has found it convenient to "mistake" his creation for an apologue, as the best defense against moralist critics who demand of it some demonstrable moral "use." The claim to a moral purpose, and the pose as preacher or parabolist, are necessary features of the Victorian novelist's public image.[6] And since one of Thackeray's main interests is the proper function of the novelist, and since he likes to joke that his art is alternatively more serious and less serious than the archetypal "novel," his claims to an apologic power cannot be valued highly without corroboration in the experience of the novel itself. But *de te fabula* is more than machinery; it describes the only way in which a large part of *Vanity Fair* can be read.

Thackeray's new orientation shows clearly in his death scenes, because here we expect the dramatist to seek the most intense concentration on the dramatic here and now. The almost indelicate submersion of self in the texture of the death scene, which we expect from Victorian novelists, is described by Fitzjames Stephen with characteristic lack of restraint: Dickens "touches, tastes, smells and handles it [death], as if it were some savory dainty which could not be too fully appreciated."[7] Though we would want to quarrel with some of

[6] Cf. Richard Stang, *Theory of the Novel in England, 1850-1870* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1959), p. 68.

[7] Stang, p. 62.

the implications of this, it accurately reflects the reader's sense of an intense involvement with the physical situation. Thackeray attends to different aspects of the experience – with the death of Mr. Sedley, for instance [*VF* 61; 3:229ff.].

> There came a day when the round of decorous pleasures and solemn gaieties in which Mr. Jos Sedley's family indulged, was interrupted by an event which happens in most houses. As you ascend the staircase of your house . . , you may have remarked a little arch in the wall right before you, which at once gives light to the stair which leads from the second story to the third . . . and serves for another purpose of utility, of which the undertaker's men can give you a notion. They rest the coffins upon that arch. . . .
>
> That second-floor arch in a London house . . . what a memento of Life, Death, and Vanity it is . . . if you choose to consider it, and sit on the landing, looking up and down the well! The doctor will come up to us too for the last time there, my friend in motley. The nurse will look in at the curtains, and you take no notice. . . . Your comedy and mine will have been played out then, and we shall be removed. . . . Your son will new furnish the house, or perhaps let it, and go into a more modern quarter.

From this Thackeray begins a philosophical discussion: "Which of the dead are most tenderly and passionately deplored? Those who love the survivors least. . . ." Some words that pass between Mr.

Sedley and Amelia allow Thackeray to return to generalities by way of a curious Thackerayan gambit, the hypothetical action by his character. "Perhaps as he was lying awake then, his life may have passed before him. . . . Which, I wonder, brother reader, is the better lot, to die prosperous and famous, or poor and disappointed?" [p.234]. Of course Thackeray chooses the latter.

Clearly, then, Mr. Sedley's death has been used as a text for a discussion of our own. We have watched the scene being played out, we are given a strong sense of the physical locale (" . . . sit on the landing, looking up and down the well!"), but the coffin and funeral are ours. We even get a deathbed speech – in fact two alternative ones – but they are both ours:

> Suppose you are particularly rich and well to do, and say on that last day, "I am very rich. . . . I leave my daughters with ten thousand pounds apiece, . . ."
>
> Or suppose, on the other hand, your swan sings a different sort of dirge, and you say, "I am a poor blighted, disappointed old fellow, . . ." [Pp. 235-236]

Mr. Sedley's experience, considered with its alternative, is offered to us as a model; the details of his death are supposed for the purposes of the discussion ("his life may have passed before him . . ."), the discussion being implicitly more important than the particular instance. The effect of the opening passage is indeed to make us put down the book and go contemplate our own stairwell,