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THACKERAY'S *VANITY FAIR* AS A KIND OF VICTORIAN "ANTI-NOVEL"

For all those who know and love Thackeray the words written about him in 1848 by Ch. Bronte sound prophetic: she said in her preface to *Vanity Fair* that his genius "will be understood and duly appreciated only in a hundred years"¹. Well, a century and a half have passed since and heaps of volumes, essays, dissertations are devoted to this classic of the world literature², but can we say that everything is clear with him? Evidently, not. Among other problems connected with his art we should like to talk of the genre characteristics of his *Vanity Fair*.

A brief glance upon the critical evaluations of this book will show us a medley of contradictory opinions, of shifting and changing views as to the nature of the novel, as well as its structure, heroes, the system of images, etc. We can compress these considerations into a summary, full of juxtapositions.

Vanity Fair is a historical novel (A. Elistratova). It is a family chronicle (A. Anikst). It is a vast panorama of life, a mixture of essays, pen and pencil sketches - with a historical perspective (N. Senior, J. Loofbourow).

¹ Thackeray, *The Critical Heritage*. L., 1968, p. 52-53.

² Colby R. A., *Thackeray's Canvass of Humanity*, Columbus 1979; Greig J. Y. G., *Thackeray: a Reconsideration*, L., 1950; Hannay G., *Studies on Thackeray*, Port Washington 1970; Hardy B., *The Exposure of Luxury Radical Themes in Thackeray*, L., 1972; Loofbourow J., *Thackeray and the form of Fiction*, Princeton 1964; Mc Master J., *Thackeray - The Major Novels*, Manchester 1971; Peters C., *Thackeray's Universe*, L., 1987; Rawlins J., *Thackeray's Novels*, Berkeley 1974; Tillotson G., *Thackeray the Novelist*, L., 1963; Алексеев М. П., *Из истории английской литературы*, Л., 1960, с. 419-452; Вахрушев В. С., *Творчество Теккерея*, Саратов 1984; Бурова И. И., *Романы Теккерея*, СПб, 1996; Ивашева в. в., *Теккерея - сатирик*, М., 1958.

Vanity Fair is full of profound social insights, of satirical types (V. Ivasheva). The novel is only a big collection of daguerrotypes, catching glimpses of outer manners of the epoch (W. Roscoe). The book is a reflection of the author's inner world, his subjective experience (J. Loofbourow).

Vanity Fair has no plot which is displaced by the unity of the author's vision (M. Alekseev). The novel's plot and plan are clear-cut and polished (G. Tillotson).

Thackeray's figures are "round" characters, men and women of flesh and blood (G. Saintsbury, E. Forster, A. Kettle). His personages are shallow "sexless puppets" (V. S. Pritchett).

The narrator's standpoint is that of "omniscience", he seems to know everything (A. Elistratova). The author does not know many important things about his heroes (J. Mc Master).

The "cheap tomfoolery" of booth jokes mars the novel (G. Saintsbury). "Doll-like" conventions do not spoil the effect of very-similitude in the book (N. Michalskaja). And so on.

All these and other contradictory evaluations of *Vanity Fair* are in themselves a visual proof of M. Bakhtin's deep insights into the nature of the novel as genre. In his classical work *The Epic and the Novel* (1941) the scholar says that the novel unlike all other genres, is "unready" yet, it is in the state of continual "becoming". With every new epoch in literature it is born anew - just as all the world is recreated in crucial times³.

Of course, M. Bakhtin is rather partial to "his own" genre, he raises it highly above all the rest of other genres making the novel a special "meta-genre". Well, can't we say that tragedy, comedy, lyrics, documental literature are also reborn anew from time to time in history? Are they not changing - and sometimes radically - in the course of historical evolution? The questions remain rhetorical. But our scholar is quite right in stressing the special elasticity of the novel. This is a highly productive form of Art, combining the most simple "nuclear" means of narration with the most elaborate, exquisite ways of rendering devious aspects of reality. German Romantics knew well that the novel can be a fusion of such "elementary" things as a fable, a fairytale, a parable, on the one hand, and subtle psychological analysis, a "socratic dialogue", on the other⁴. Thacke-

³ Бахтин М. М., *Эпос и роман* (О методологии исследования романа: Бахтин М. М., *Вопросы литературы и эстетики*, М., 1975, ц. 447-449, 452, 565 и др.

⁴ F. Schlegel, *Kritische Schriften*, München 1956, s. 153-154.

ray knew the German language well and living in Germany in 1830 he visited Goethe, read the works of Schlegels, Ludwig Tieck, Friedrich Schiller, Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffman, later on he translated some poems by Adalbert von Chamisso, Ludwig Uhland, other German romantics into English. The writer was also very attentive to the art of English and French romantics and - contrary to the opinions of many critics⁵ - the author of *Vanity Fair* deeply imbibed the spirit of the Romantic art with its sharp sense of life, of its peculiarities, grotesque features, its "couleur locale"⁶.

Yet everybody knows that the main source of inspiration for William Makepeace Thackeray was in the English humorous novel ("humorous" is Bakhtin's definition) - from Jonathan Swift to Laurence Sterne. We may call it the satiric-comical novel as well - keeping in mind that Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollet, L. Sterne were simultaneously writers preparing roads for Victorian realists and their psychological analysis. The author of *Vanity Fair* was aware of some cleavage between two kinds of English realistic novel in his time: the first type he called a "gallant story" and the latter a "satire" - see his lecture *Hogarth, Smollet und Fielding*⁷. The writer tried to break barriers between these "high" and "low" art and to produce novels at once farcical, psychological, serious and - in a modest manner - even heroic. He strived towards literature of an universal kind, although with an unequal success, because he was overburdened with Victorian reservations. But simultaneously Thackeray was able to make bold steps forward, to "modernist" innovations forestalling in some ways the technique of James Joyce, Eugène Ionesco, Bertold Brecht, etc.

Vanity Fair was born just from the "low depths" of The British folklore and Victorian mass literature, comprising theatrical burlesques, Punch and Judy performances, broadsheets, popular melodrama, ballads, almanacs of caricatures, etc. The famous "christian Pantomime" must be also taken into consideration⁸. This is one

⁵ See, e.g., Williams Ioan M., *Thackeray*, L., 1968, p. 19-36; Masson D., *Popular Serial Literature*, "North British Review", may 1948, p. 136-141.

⁶ Вахрушев В. С., *Творчество Теккерея*, Саратов 1984, с. 23-24, 42, 133.

⁷ Thackeray W. M., *Works in 17 vol.*, ed. by George Saintsbury. L., 1908, vol. 14, p. 168.

⁸ See: Clayborough A., *The Grotesque in English Literature*, Oxford 1965; Thomsen Ch., *Das Grotesque und die englische Literatur*, Darmstadt 1977; Mayer D., *Harlequin in his Element*, Cambridge: Mass., 1969; Wright Th., *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art*, L., 1875.

of the decisive factors in defining the nature of Thackeray's novel. Many critics do not take into account the original edition of *Vanity Fair*. It was published in 1847-1848 in nineteen monthly issues in yellow covers (the famous "Punch" being the publisher), with little less than two hundred comical illustrations by the author⁹. Such trappings were quite convenient for the writer who wanted to take on the masque of a clown, an entertainer of "brothers in motley" to whom he addressed in a serious-comical vein. But later, as time went by, the novel assumed a more "dignified" literary appearance: figures of clowns disappeared, "booth" covers were removed. So the text lost its "cheap" undertones, having lost its comical "pencil sketches-caricatures. And only very few keen observers of the present century saw it - George Orwell among them. As he remarked in 1944, Thackeray "was primarily a journalist, a writer of fragments, and his most characteristic work (*Vanity Fair* - V. V.) is not fully separable from his illustrations¹⁰.

All these "low" ingredients of the novel, including non-fictional onces, were closely interwoven with fragments of such folklore genres as a fable, a parable, an anecdote, a comical song. But we shall not talk about them although it is quite a fascinating problem. Let us, instead, take notice of the second (though the first in order of appearance) subtitle of the book - *A Novel Without A Hero*. These five words give a terse aphoristic definition, a brilliant substitute of the preface. Its paradoxical quality is like a challenge to vague but commonly accepted Victorian views upon the novel. Comical or not, this genre had to have a clear-cut set of good and bad samples of Human Nature Walter Scott, Jane Austen, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte - all of them KNEW their novel-writing business and if their "positive" heroes were not always up to the point of perfection still the authors were sure about what the IDEAL of such a person was like. With William Thackeray it wasn't so.

Being not a postmodernist, he did not play nonchalantly with the notions of Good and Bad, Beauty and Ugliness. In this respect *Vanity Fair* cannot be considered as an "anti-novel" - a term coined much later by Jean-Paul Sartre who meant LE ROMAN NOUVEAU cre-

⁹ See: Lungwitz W., *Wortschilderung und Zeichenbild in Thackeray's "Vanity Fair"*, Leipzig 1917; Alekseev M., op. cit.

¹⁰ Orwell G., *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters in 4 volumes*. New York 1968, vol. 3, p. 299.

ated by Natalie Sarraute, Alain Rob-Grillet and other French novelists of the middle of our century. But Thackeray was far more radical than his Victorian colleagues when he said in his early comic story *Catherine* (1840), at the end of chapter five: "Surely our novel-writers make a great mistake in divesting their rascals of all gentle qualities; they have such - and the only sad point to think of is, in all private concerns of life. abstract feelings... and so on, how dreadfully like a rascal is to an honest man"¹¹. Thackeray remained a staunch defender of this "terrible" maxim, no matter how he tried to cover it by differen subterfuges in later works. And it became a bone of contention with his critics who - even if they were on friendly terms with the writer - still reproached him for cynicism, "cold sneering at humanity". Such were the words of Rufus Grisworld who also became known thanks to his stabs at Edgar Poe and Walt Whitman¹².

Vanity Fair is constructed as a parody not upon any particular Victorian or any other book, although hints of such kind are not to be excluded (e.g. a set of comic intertextual connections can be found between W. Scott's "*The Heart of Midlothian*" and *Thackeray's masterpiece*). Rather, the novelist aims at his contemporary literature in general. But let us return to Scott. Thackeray was fond of *The Wizard of the North* from his childhood but it was a love "cum grano salis". This ambivalent attitude becomes evident when plots of the above-mentioned novels and two novelistic pairs of heroines are juxtaposed. Whith Scott everything in the narration is clear and simple: Effie (Euphemia, a "well regarded" person by etymology) is virtuous and heroic, she goes to London, this embodiment of hell, to save her sinful, or erring sister Jeanie from utter degradation. The author's aim is to proclaim that bad deeds cannot give happiness to man and the virtue brings peace to the hero if not worldly prosperity. Everything is to the contrary with Thackeray: his "virtuous" Emily must be helped by sinful Becky Sharp, Rebecca went to London and elsewhere not to save her friend but to realise her own selfish and vain desires.

And what is more important - Thackeray's heroines are in fact "dreadfully alike each other", although their characters seem to be utterly dissimilar. That situation runs counter to typical Victorian prose books. And that is the main "metaphysical" point of *Vanity Fair*,

¹¹ Thackeray W. M., *Catherine and other works*, L., 1883, p. 60.

¹² "International Magazine" IV, aug. 1851, p. 24.

its central paradox, its chief item of dissent with the writer's colleagues in novel-writing business. That's why Dickens said that Thackeray "was undervaluing his art"¹³. As for the critics they were much more harsh sometimes though the deep realism of the book was noted by many. But they felt it their duty to give sound advice to the novelist. Thus, A. Hayward proposed that the novel must end in a series of "happy ends"¹⁴. A. B. Maurice said: the writer liked Becky but he was "unjust" to her¹⁵. The same refers to Emily to whom the novelist happened to be not properly disposed¹⁶. There is no lack of defining Becky as an "anti" - image - she is proclaimed "the subtlety of anti-heroines", an "anti-wife", an "anti-mother" and "even the anti-woman"¹⁷.

Such accusations of the author being "unjust" to his own heroines are in themselves a strong proof of the vitality of his craft. Creatures of his imaginations, his characters are perceived and discussed as live beings. Gustave Flaubert said: "Emma Bovary - c'est moi!" Thackeray could also avow that Emily and Rebecca Sharp were quite dear to him. He confessed that at least some of Becky's tastes and preferences were his also. They both preferred bohemian ways of life as more "natural" than the manners of high society¹⁸.

The exasperation of critics and common readers with this pair of heroines was prompted also by the ironical play of the narrator with sacred Victorian notions of moral and amoral behaviour. In fact, is Becky much worse than Emily? A question not to be answered easily. Because these young women have essentially the same philistine ideals - although they differ much from each other in appearance, manners, habits, temperaments, social position, etc. And their careers comically resemble each other; (comically and dramatically too) - both marry officers, lose their husbands, get into serious troubles and after many hardships our heroines get their "happy end", darkened by some inevitable, as the author thinks, circumstances. As Edgar Harden says: "in spite of the differences in men and their

¹³ Dickens Ch., *In Memoriam*, "The Cornhill Magazine", IX, feb. 1864, p. 130.

¹⁴ W. M., Thackeray, *The Critical Heritage*, L., 1968, p. 39.

¹⁵ The Bookman (N. Y.), X, nov. 1899, p. 242.

¹⁶ Whibley Ch., *William Makepeace Thackeray*, Edinburgh 1903, p. 47.

¹⁷ Chandler F., *The Literature of Roguery*, Boston-N.Y., 1907, vol. 2, p. 28.

¹⁸ Wilson J. G., *Thackeray in the United States*, N.Y., 1970, vol. 2, p. 258.

lives, all the inhabitants of *Vanity Fair* are ultimately circumscribed by an inescapable pattern of sameness¹⁹. The sameness, we must add, of the everlasting repetition of the cycles of our personal lives, of generations, historical epochs and so on.

Thackeray does not like to go deeply into the inner recesses of his heroes' spiritual world. But he makes to arouse the readers' curiosity and imagination, involving us into a play (or the intertextual game) of historical, cultural, mythological allusions, hints, oblique references, changes of masques which help us to reconstruct or to guess what is hidden from us in the text. This medley of criss-crossing text layers, if taken in the whole of its multiplicity, helps us to see Thackeray's characters not as "sexless puppets" (although there IS a doll-like quality in them), but as creatures of flesh and blood, as persons alive and kicking. Take Becky Sharp. Literally everything pertaining to her image, each small detail in her appearance, demeanour, her manner of talking is full of hidden, half-hidden or open meanings. Personal names come first. Her full name is biblical, "Rebecca" in Hebrew or Aramaic means "binding". A symbolical feature. Little Becky, like her biblical namesake, tries to "bind", metaphorically, everybody and everything around her - for her private ends, of course. And she is certainly very sharp - in many meanings of this English word which we find in vocabularies. She is a diddler, a connoisseur of almost all belonging to the "silver fork" society, she can bring a sharp pain to men, she is clever, witty, observant, artful, she may be piquant. Well, and as every sharp tool may be blunted, so this witty creature may be outwitted by circumstances, may be dull sometimes.

And, of course, just as thousands of her contemporaries in Europe and America, she is a child of the Napoleonic age, "a napoleon in a petty-coat". This simile is maintained throughout the narrative in many ways. First of all, her mother is a French circus-dancer, Rebecca knows French perfectly and wields it as a weapon in her life struggle. She cries defiantly "Vive LA France! Vive l'Empereur! Vive Bonaparte!" As the novelist remarks ironically, "in those days (evidently, it is the year 1813 - V. V.) in England, to say "Long live Bonaparte!" was as much as to say "Long live Lucifer!" And there is really something "fiendish" about this little indomitable woman, she has charms in her which may bring ruin to men. Her

¹⁹ Harden E. F., *The Discipline and Significance of Form in "Vanity Fair"*, "PMLA", 1967, No. 82, p. 539.

manoueuering in the spheres of domestic and social life resembles comically the French Emperor's actions during his Hundred Days Reign.

Becky's character cannot be reduced to the napoleonic aspect. It has a whole perspective of archetypes - historical, mythological, zoomorphic - which can be treated as a kind of evolutionary explanation to her image as it was developing through milleniums of years. Thus, Rebecca is compared to a spider, a fox, a mermaid, a witch, to Cleopatra, Clytemnestra, etc. Under all these masks the heroine remains essentially the same and only different aspects of her personality are thus revealed. And she "binds" these masks with the help of art. Becky is a talented actress by nature, quite a "theatrical" creature, with special inclination towards circus, operetta and melodrama. M. Bakhtin was right when he spoke about "the theatrical chronotope" of *Vanity Fair*²⁰. This is the theatricality of the English popular mass theatre of the XIX century with its Christmas pantomime, Punch and Judy shows at fairs, burlesques and street scenes of clown's tumblings. And the character of Becky Sharp is Thackeray's bold step in transforming the genre of the English comic novel. She is, so to say, a transitional figure - from a mere picaresque type to a typical realistic representative of the Victorian society and - simultaneously - a symbol "binding" a whole set of archetypes.

If Rebecca "binds" everything about her, involving the people into her intrigues, so the narrator organizes the novel structure, turning the reality into a gigantic merry-go-round of events, episodes - comical, sad, historical and purely personal, remarks and observations by the author. And the colossal image of Human *Vanity Fair* appears before the reader, a huge symbol, a many-faceted, even if partly facetious, construction representing some of the main aspects of Human Existence: 1) its dark metaphysical basis, Destiny as a blind dispenser of good and bad luck 2) its rhythmical movement, the cycles of years, lives, deaths 3) the comedy of existence - with its qui-pro-quos, puns (a real "duel of puns" runs through the story of Rebecca-Jos Sedley relations), jokes, farcical situations. Here the figure of the narrator is prominent.

Many critics of *Vanity Fair* do not understand fully that this novel is, perhaps, the greatest among the novels of the XIX century where the role of the narrator is of the uppermost and special importance. G. Var-

²⁰ Бахтин М. М., *Вопросы литературы и эстетики*, М., 1975, с. 315.

coe says that Thackeray's commentaries in the novel are "not only superficially lighthearted, but even unnecessarily silly". The scholar thinks that Thackeray boasts about his writing technique and this "is done with tongue in cheek", sometimes "with typical self-mocking cynicism"²¹. Nothing is further from truth than these remarks. Although that opinion was widely spread. We cited already Charles Dickens who spoke that Thackeray undervalued his own art. The American writer William Dean Howells wrote in *My Literary Passions* (1895): Thackeray had "the vicious habit of spoiling the illusion" of verisimilitude²². And this was said just on the eve of the XX century when "spoiling the illusion" became quite common with writers whether they were realists or not.

All such opinions reflect the conventional positivistic notions on realism which blend rendering of Truth with its direct looking-glass-like or photographic reflection. The author of *Vanity Fair* looks forward, to the art of our century, although he does not formulate his views in any clear form. The narrator's image in his novel may be regarded as an organic combination of several figures: 1) an undefined and somewhat impersonal speaker, a teller of tales, wearing masks of an eavesdropper, an expert in elegant ironical causerie, etc. 2) a commentator of his own narrative, wearing ironical masks of a stern moralist, a religious preacher, a scholar discoursing upon history, psychology, art 3) a clown (fool, harlequin) tumbling head over heels for the audience's amusement 4) "The Manager of the Performance" as he attests himself in "Before the Curtain" advertisement preceding the novel's narrative part. Perhaps, there are other functions belonging to the narrator. But as for these four, they are the most important for they help to organize the text of the novel so that it becomes a playing ground of different perspectives, points of view - clashing and simultaneously corroborating each other. Thus, the narrator makes everything possible for the reader to accept the novel as a "naive" account of some historical facts and lives of the people. The author posing as a plain man ("I know that the tune I am piping is a very mild one") seems to render things just as he remembers them. But this standpoint of delivering truth "simple and uncouth" is coloured with irony and is turned constantly into a play.

This refers also to the narrator's position in the narrative itself. It was taken for granted at the time of Thackeray and for a long

²¹ Varcoe G., *The Intrusive Narrator*, Uppsala 1972, p. 39, 43.

²² Howells W. D., *My Literary Passions*, N.Y., 1895, p. 135.

period after that a writer (especially in prose fiction) must assume the pose of "omniscience" - he KNEW everything about his or her own story. Well, Thackeray SEEMS to accept it, so he repeats from time to time in *Vanity Fair*: "the novelist ...knows everything", "the novelist, it had been said before, knows everything". And for many generations the critics took these declarations at their face-value! Only recently and only a few of them began to say that "The narrator in *Vanity Fair* is not... in any real sense omniscient, though it is part of his pose"²³. Many critics did not notice that these statements by the "omniscient" author were ironic, were in jest, were the part of the writer's play with "penetrative" readers. We know well that Thackeray also did not conceal his "ignorance". E.g. was Rebecca a mistress of Lord Steyne or not? "Was she guilty or not? She said not, but who could tell...?"

Such a play with omniscience-ignorance position prepares us for another kind of "circus juggling" - in respect of the novel's structure and the essence of Art itself. The author wants to say - how can we rely upon a work of Art when it is only an invention, a lie even pretending to be truth? So he begins - as if in a comical burst of inspiration and "showing off" his creative possibilities - to make experiments with his own text. And it was for such "jokes" that Thackeray was taken to task by Dickens, Howells and some critics. We read at the beginning of chapter 6 of the novel: "We might have treated this subject in genteel, or in the facetious manner". And this suggestion is immediately realized, in the form of two "experimental" little scenes which transpose the heroes into another genres, into the chronotype of the Silver Fork school novel and the "criminal pulp", both genres being parodied. Such a disclosing of the device is regularly practised by Thackeray in the novel when he allows the reader to compare his verbal text with his drawings-caricatures so that we can see discrepancies between them. Our imagination is involved into the play of making guesses, of choosing among variants of "reality" offered to us by the manager of the Performance²⁴. One more example- the end of chapter 8. Here the narrator declares his "profession de foi": "one is bound to speak the truth as

²³ Wilkinson A. Y., *The Thomeausean Way of Knowing the World*, "Journal of English Literary History", 1965, No. 32, p. 384.

²⁴ See: also: Iser W., *The Reader as a Component Part of the Realistic Novel. Aesthetic Effects in Thackeray's "Vanity Fair"* in: Iser W., *The Implied Reader*, Baltimore - L., 1978, p. 101-120.

far as one knows it". Mark the play of overturned positions: Rebecca is "binding" people around her and is bound herself by circumstances, the narrator is "binding" together the text and is obliged or "bound" to tell the truth. This latter obligation is inseparable from a ...lie. Because the author and his "brothers in the story-telling trade" give us "fictitious monsters" only, "tyrants of the play", not real personages. So Thackeray laughs simultaneously at himself who is also included in this *Vanity Fair* show, at his puppet-like heroes who are quite "alive" yet, at his "kyind friends"-naive readers who sincerely believe the fictitious-fictional truth of realistic Art. So this triangle of text-forming agents, Author-Reader-Text, is playfully dealt with, their interrelations are shown as being stable, on the one hand, and wavering, "playful", on the other.

So "the secrets" of Thackeray which Ch. Bronte spoke about are cleared, if partly, by the present time. At least, we are not so dumbfounded by them as V. S. Pritchett who said: "It is strange that a novelist so close to Fielding should leap forward and be close also to Proust and to the idiom of much later novelists"²⁵. In fact, every artist of genius is three-dimensional at once: his roots go back to the past epoch of Art, his texts are contemporary and they contain seeds of future tendencies in them. So it is with our writer. Thackeray was deeply immersed into the world of Victorian values and could not reject them. But there lurked behind these positions a profound scepticism, the disbelief in the accepted order of things. So there is a strong inner tension in *Vanity Fair*, a conflict between Thackeray's thoughts and feelings, running in contrary direction sometimes. We may call this novel a classical Victorian prose fiction and simultaneously it is an "anti-novel", a great work of Art, connecting the XIX century realism with achievements of the past - with Petronius, picaresque romances, Cervantes, Swift, Fiedling, etc. At the same time the book looks forward to bold experiments with the genre, to the texts written by James Joyce, William Faulkner, by the creators of *le Roman Nouveau* - although the connection in the latter case is far from being a direct one.

²⁵ Pritchett V. S., *Master of Ceremonies*, "The New Statesman" 1963, no. 66, p. 942.

TARGOWISKO PRÓŻNOŚCI THACKERAYA JAKO WIKTORIAŃSKA „ANTY-POWIEŚĆ”

Streszczenie

Artykuł prezentuje główne cechy genologiczne *Targowiska próżności*, będącego zarazem typowo wiktoriańską komiczną powieścią społeczną i „anty-powieścią”, łamiącą wiele obowiązujących w czasach Thackeraya zasad pisarskich. Wewnętrzne napięcia w powieści, jej „teatralność”, niespokojny melanz „naiwnego” realizmu i najprostszych form sztuki z misterną grą nakładających się na siebie warstw tekstu autor tłumaczy zgodnie z bachtinowską teorią powieści. Subtelne obrazowanie, postać narratora o wielu obliczach oraz ironiczne gry z „wnikliwym” czytelnikiem, zapowiadają techniki pisarskie rozwinięte dopiero w dwudziestym stuleciu przez takich powieściopisarzy jak Joyce, Proust i twórcy Nouveau Roman. *Targowisko próżności* jawi się więc jako powieść z pogranicza literatury komicznej, prozy wiktoriańskiej i powieści ery modernizmu.