

euphoria and security of the collective dance. One of Kundera's most appealing characteristics is that he never claims a heroic martyr's status for himself, and never underestimates the ordinary human cost of being a dissident.

I don't know how this passage reads in the original Czech, but it works remarkably well in translation, perhaps because it is so brilliantly visualized. Kundera taught film in Prague for a period, and this description shows a cinematic sense of composition in the way its perspective shifts between the aerial panorama of Prague and the longing upward gaze of the narrator as he runs through the streets. The floating ring of dancers itself is like a filmic "special effect". Grammatically this extract consists mostly of one immensely long sentence; its clauses are the equivalents of "shots", joined together by the simple conjunction *and* in a flowing sequence that refuses to give priority to either the narrator's sense of irony or his sense of loss. They are inseparably intertwined.

## 25 Staying on the Surface

And there is much to talk over. "What do you fear from her?" asks Flora, her big weight lying on top of Howard, her breasts before his face. "I think," says Howard, "we compete too closely in the same area. It makes sense. Her role's still bound too tightly to mine; that traps her growth, so she feels compelled to undermine me. Destroy me from within." "Are you comfortable there?" says Flora, "I'm not squashing you?" "No," says Howard. "Destroy you how?" asks Flora. "She has to find a weak core in me," says Howard. "She wants to convince herself that I'm false and fake." "You have a lovely chest, Howard," says Flora. "So do you, Flora," says Howard. "Are you false and fake?" asks Flora. "I don't think so," says Howard, "not more than anyone else. I just have a passion to make things happen. To get some order into the chaos. Which she sees as a trendy radicalism." "Oh, Howard," says Flora, "she's cleverer than I thought. Is she having affairs?" "I think so," says Howard. "Can you move, you're hurting me?" Flora tumbles off him and lies by his side; they rest there, faces upward toward the ceiling, in her white apartment. "Don't you know?" asks Flora. "Don't you bother to find out?" "No," says Howard. "You have no proper curiosity," says Flora. "There's a living psychology there, and you're not interested. No wonder she wants to destroy you." "We believe in going our own way," says Howard. "Cover yourself up with the sheet," says Flora, "you're sweating. That's how people catch colds. Anyway, you stay together." "Yes, we stay together, but we distrust one another." "Ah, yes," says Flora, turning on her side to look at him, so that her big right breast dips against his body, and wearing a puzzled expression on her face, "but isn't that a definition of marriage?"

MALCOLM BRADBURY *The History Man* (1975)

I SUGGESTED earlier (Section 9) that the novel is supreme among the forms of narrative literature in rendering subjectivity. The earliest English novels – Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Richardson's *Pamela* – used journals and letters to portray the inner thoughts of their characters with unprecedented realism; and the subsequent development of the genre, at least up to Joyce and Proust, can be seen in terms of a progressively deeper and subtler exploration of consciousness. So when a novelist chooses to stay on the surface of human behaviour we register the absence of psychological depth with a surprised attentiveness, and perhaps uneasiness, even if we cannot immediately put our finger on the reason.

Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* is such a novel. It concerns a sociology lecturer who has just written a book called *The Defeat of Privacy*, dedicated to the proposition that "there are no more private selves." Howard Kirk believes that the self is an outmoded bourgeois concept, that individual human beings are mere bundles of conditioned reflexes; and that the only way to be free is to identify the plot of History (with the aid of Marxist sociology) and co-operate with it. By staying on the surface of behaviour and environment, the discourse of the novel imitates this bleak, anti-humanist philosophy of life in a way which seems to satirize it, yet gives the reader no privileged vantage-point from which to condemn or dismiss it. Although the story is told mainly from Howard's point of view, in the sense that he is present at most of the events it describes, the narrative does not enable us to judge his motives by giving us access to his private thoughts. The same goes for the other characters, including Kirk's antagonists.

The novel consists of description and dialogue. The description focuses obsessively on the surfaces of things – the décor of the Kirks' house, the bleak, dehumanizing architecture of the campus, the outward behaviour of staff and students in seminars, committees and parties. The dialogue is presented flatly, objectively, without introspective interpretation by the characters, without authorial commentary, without any variation on the simple, adverb-less speech tags *he/she asks/says*, without even breaks between the lines of speech. The "depthlessness" of the discourse is further emphasized by its preference for the present tense. The past tense

of conventional narrative implies that the story is known to and has been assessed by the narrator in its entirety. In this novel the narrative discourse impressively tracks the characters as they move from moment to moment towards an unknown future.

The effect, at once comic and chilling, of this technique is particularly striking in scenes of sexual intercourse, where one would normally expect to find an internalized account of the emotions and sensations of at least one of the participants. In the passage quoted here, Howard Kirk is in bed with his colleague Flora Benidorn, "who likes going to bed with men who have troubled marriages; they have so much more to talk about, hot as they are from the intricate politics of families which are Flora's specialist field of study," and they are talking about Howard's relationship with his wife Barbara.

There is of course comedy inherent in the idea of having sex in order to talk, especially about one's lover's marriage, and in the contrast drawn here between the intimate physical contact of the couple's bodies and the abstract intellectualism of their conversation. But there is more than comic incongruity in the way the dialogue zig-zags between the physical and cerebral, the trivial and the portentous. When Howard says his wife wants to convince herself that he is false and fake, he articulates the central issue of the novel. Flora at first seems to evade it with a gesture towards eros: "You have a lovely chest, Howard." His rejoinder, "So do you, Flora," is funny, but the joke is at whose expense? We have to make up our own minds, just as we do on the more momentous question. Is Howard false and fake? Or is his "passion to make things happen" a kind of integrity, a manifestation of energy in a world of moral entropy? The absence of interiority, which would help to decide such questions, throws the burden of interpretation back onto the reader.

Many found the text's refusal to comment, to give unambiguous guidance as to how its characters should be evaluated, disturbing, but this is undoubtedly the source of its power and fascination. It is interesting in this connection to compare the BBC Television adaptation of the novel. The script, by Christopher Hampton, was

very faithful to the original novel, and the production was extremely well cast, directed and acted. Anthony Sher was stunning in the role of Howard Kirk – but, as an actor, he had to give an interpretation of the role, and, probably inevitably, chose to portray him unambiguously as a despicable manipulator and exploiter of other people for his own gratification. In this way the television version took back much of the burden of interpretation which the novel had planted firmly in the audience's lap, and to that extent it was, though hugely enjoyable, a less challenging piece of work. (It has to be said, too, that in the rendering of the scene quoted here, one's attention was somewhat distracted from the witty dialogue by the visible evidence of Flora Bendorn's beautiful chest.)

## 26 Showing and Telling

"You are too much inclined to passion, child, and have set your affections so absolutely on this young woman, that, if G – required her at your hands, I fear you would reluctantly part with her. Now, believe me, no Christian ought so to set his heart on any person or thing in this world, but that, whenever it shall be required or taken from him in any manner by Divine Providence, he may be able, peaceably, quietly, and contentedly, to resign it." At which words one came hastily in, and acquainted Mr Adams that his youngest son was drowned. He stood silent a moment, and soon began to stamp about the room and deplore his loss with the bitterest agony. Joseph, who was overwhelmed with concern likewise, recovered himself sufficiently to endeavour to comfort the parson; in which attempt he used many arguments that he had at several times remembered out of his own discourses, both in private and public (for he was a great enemy to the passions, and preached nothing more than the conquest of them by reason and grace), but he was not at leisure now to hearken to his advice. "Child, child," said he, "do not go about impossibilities. Had it been any other of my children, I could have borne it with patience; but my little prattler, the darling and comfort of my old age – the little sweetest, best-tempered boy, who never did a thing to offend me. It was but this morning I gave him his first lesson in *Quae Genus*. This was the very book he learnt; poor child! it is of no further use to thee now. He would have made the best scholar, and have been an ornament to the Church; – such parts and such goodness never met in one so young." "And the handso-mest lad too," says Mrs Adams, recovering from a swoon in Fanny's arms. – "My poor Jacky, shall I never see thee more?" cries the parson. – "Yes, surely," says Joseph, "and in a better place; you will meet again, never to part more." – I believe the