

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 wretch to be snatched out of life just at his entrance into it; the 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 handsomest 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

parson did not hear these words, for he paid little regard to them, but went on lamenting, whilst the tears trickled down into his bosom. At last he cried out, "Where is my little darling?" and was sallying out, when, to his great surprise and joy, in which I hope the reader will sympathize, he met his son in a wet condition indeed, but alive and running towards him.

HENRY FIELDING *Joseph Andrews* (1742)

FICTIONAL DISCOURSE constantly alternates between *showing* us what happened and *telling* us what happened. The purest form of showing is the quoted speech of characters, in which language exactly mirrors the event (because the event is linguistic). The purest form of telling is authorial summary, in which the conciseness and abstraction of the narrator's language effaces the particularity and individuality of the characters and their actions. A novel written entirely in the mode of summary would, for this reason, be almost unreadable. But summary has its uses: it can, for instance, accelerate the tempo of a narrative, hurrying us through events which would be uninteresting, or *too* interesting — therefore distracting, if lingered over. It is easy to examine this effect in the work of Henry Fielding, because he was writing before the technique of free indirect style, in which authorial speech and characters' speech are fused together, had been discovered (see Section 9). In his novels the boundary between these two kinds of discourse is clear and unambiguous.

Parson Abraham Adams is a benevolent, generous, unworldly man, but he is also a great comic character — one of the most memorable in English fiction — because he is constantly entangled in contradiction. There is always a disparity between what he believes the world to be (full of people as altruistic as himself) and what it is really like (full of selfish opportunists); between what he preaches (a rather austere dogmatic Christianity) and what he practices (ordinary instinctive human decency). This contrast between illusion and reality (which Fielding borrowed, with

acknowledgment, from Cervantes's characterization of Don Quixote) makes him a constant figure of fun — but a sympathetic one, because his heart is in the right place even if his judgment is unreliable.

In this excerpt, Parson Adams is lecturing the hero, Joseph, about his impatience to marry his sweetheart Fanny, with whom he has just been reunited after a long and hazardous separation. Adams subjects the young man to a lengthy sermon, warning him against lust, and lack of trust in Providence. He invokes the example of Abraham in the Old Testament, who was ready to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to God if required. This homily is quoted verbatim, "shown". Just as Adams has declared that we should always serenely accept the sacrifices God demands of us, his principles are put cruelly to the test: "At which words one came hastily in, and acquainted Mr Adams that his youngest son was drowned." This is the baldest kind of summary. "Acquainted" seems a coldly formal word in the context, and we are not even told who "one" is. The lamentations of the bereaved father and Joseph's attempts to comfort him are also summarized — but Adams's rejection of Joseph's counsel is "shown", quoted in full, "Child, child, do not go about impossibilities . . .", to emphasize the contradiction between his practice and his preaching.

Fielding is playing a risky game here. On the one hand we register the contradiction as the comic confirmation of a familiar character trait; on the other hand there is nothing funny about the death of a child. Our inclination to smile at Abraham Adams's failure to live up to the sacrificial piety of his biblical namesake is checked by the pathos of his situation, and the naturalness of his grief. We hesitate, uncertain how to respond.

Fielding has, however, prepared a way out of the impasse, for the characters and for the reader. After a few more lines of lamentation from Mr and Mrs Adams, and vain attempts to console them by Joseph, Adams discovers that his son has not been drowned after all. And it is not long, of course, before Adams blithely resumes his sermon to Joseph about Christian resignation.

The narrator's explanation for the child's survival is that "The person who brought the news of his misfortune had been a little

too eager, as people sometimes are, from, I believe, no very good principle, to relate ill news, and having seen him fall into the river, instead of running to his assistance, directly ran to acquaint his father of a fate which he had concluded to be inevitable," leaving him to be rescued by somebody else. This explanation is acceptable partly because it belongs to a series of examples of human folly and spitefulness that run through the novel; and partly because *it comes very quickly after the event*. If the character of the messenger had been filled in in more detail, and his speech describing the incident given in direct form, the whole tempo of the scene would have been more "lifelike" and its emotive effect quite different. The circumstances of the drowning of the little boy would have acquired a distressing particularity, and the comic mood of the novel would have been destroyed irremediably. When the report was shown to be false we might, as readers, have felt that we had been exploited. Fielding avoids these unwanted effects by a judicious use of summary.

## 27 Telling in Different Voices

Christie is that year's Bachelor Catch. While the winter snow lies impacted month after month, and half Europe starves, and the bombers overhead carry food for Germany instead of bombs, and the gas dwindles to a flicker and the electric lights waver, and strangers stand close to each other for comfort — Christie shines before Grace like a beacon of hope and promise. He is all clear-cut, up-standing (but only in marriage) masculinity. Christie is Grace's ambition. Not a diploma, not a career, nor the world's recognition, not any more. Just Christie.

She loves him. Oh, indeed she does. Her heart quickens at the sight of him, her bowels dissolve with longing. But she will not, she cannot, succumb to his embraces. He takes her on his boat, well chaperooned (yes, he sails) and up mountains, rather less chaperooned (yes, he climbs). He offers to buy her a flat (yes, he can afford to) but no she will not. No diamonds, thank you, Christie. No wrist watches. No gifts, no bribes, my dearest. Chocolates, yes, oh thank you! And orchids, and invitations to dinner and a taxi ride home, and yes, a kiss, and yes, you may touch my breast (how wicked we are!) and quickly, quickly, goodnight, Christie. My own, my love, my dearest dear. I would die for you but I will not sleep with you.

Christie stops off at Soho on the way home and spends an hour with a tart. How else will he survive?

She loves him. She means to marry him. How else will she survive?

FAY WELDON *Female Friends* (1975)