

Guides to Perceiving: Novels, Wisdom, and the Limits of Foresight

An essay on Edward Mendelson, the novel, and the improvement of perception

Introduction

In 2006 Edward Mendelson, professor of English at Columbia and literary executor of W. H. Auden, published *The Things That Matter: What Seven Classic Novels Have to Say About the Stages of Life*. The book proposed something that much of the modern academy had spent decades teaching its students not to propose: that great novels are wisdom literature, that they contain serious moral knowledge about how to live, and that the proper response to *Middlemarch* or *Mrs Dalloway* is not only analysis but instruction. Mendelson mapped seven novels, all by English women, onto a human life-arc: *Frankenstein* for birth, *Wuthering Heights* for childhood, *Jane Eyre* for growth, *Middlemarch* for marriage, and three by Virginia Woolf — *Mrs Dalloway* for love, *To the Lighthouse* for parenthood, *Between the Acts* for the future. He read deliberately against academic fashion, treating characters as if they were people whose choices matter rather than as textual effects or ideological symptoms.

The book deserves both admiration and resistance, and the argument between those two responses turns out to be unexpectedly deep. Pressed hard, it opens onto questions in moral philosophy, cognitive science, the psychology of expertise, and the contemplative traditions. This essay follows that argument through four stages. It begins with Mendelson — what his book claims and where it is vulnerable. It then asks what the strongest case is for believing that novels can guide a life at all, and finds that the defensible version of the claim is narrower and stranger than Mendelson's: novels are guides to perceiving rather than guides to acting. It then tests that thesis against a canon of thirteen novels selected explicitly for their perception-enhancing power, asking what they have in common and where they contradict one another. Finally, it asks the question those contradictions force: whether anything at all —

novels or otherwise — can improve the kind of perception we most want, which is perception directed forward, at the life we have not yet lived.

Mendelson's Project

Mendelson's central claim is best understood by what it opposes. By the early 2000s the dominant modes of academic criticism — formalist, historicist, theoretical — shared one negative commitment: that it is naive to read novels as if their characters were people and their plots were lessons. Characters are constructions of language; plots are artefacts of ideology and genre; the critic's job is to see through the illusion, not to consult it for advice. Mendelson's book is a sustained act of refusal. He reads Dorothea Brooke's marriage to Casaubon as a real marriage that went wrong for reasons that recur in real marriages; he asks what Frankenstein owed his creature as a parent owes a child; he weighs Mrs Ramsay's generosity against her coerciveness as one would weigh a friend's.

His best readings are revisionist precisely because of this method. The Frankenstein chapter is the strongest: against two centuries of reading the novel as a parable of scientific hubris — the sin of making the creature — Mendelson argues that Victor's sin is abandoning him. The novel becomes a study of failed parenthood, and suddenly its emotional architecture makes sense: the creature's eloquent grievance is the grievance of the unloved child, and the catastrophe follows not from the act of creation but from the refusal of care. The Middlemarch chapter performs a similar service for marriage, anatomising why intelligent people choose wrongly: Dorothea marries a projection of her own aspirations, Lydgate marries a decoration, and Eliot's analysis of both errors remains more precise than most of what psychology has produced since. And his *To the Lighthouse* chapter quietly dismantles the saintly reputation of Mrs Ramsay, finding in her radiant attentiveness a needier and more coercive force than admirers allow.

The vulnerabilities are equally real. The stage-of-life scaffold is the weakest element: it is procrustean. *Mrs Dalloway* is about many things before it is about "love," and one suspects the seven-stage arc came first and the chapters were fitted to it; three Woolf novels out of seven also unbalances the architecture. Second, the humanist method revives an old

objection. L. C. Knights's famous essay "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" mocked critics who speculate about characters beyond the text's warrant; treating characters as people invites exactly such speculation, and Mendelson sometimes delivers verdicts — on characters, and implicitly on his readers' lives — with a confidence the evidence cannot bear. Third, the all-women canon is presented lightly but never theorised. Is it a claim about women's particular insight into intimate life, or a coincidence of his affections? He does not say, and either answer carries consequences he avoids.

Yet one of these weaknesses may be a strength in disguise. The procrustean frame is arguably generative: by forcing each novel to answer a single existential question, Mendelson obtains sharper, stranger readings than a balanced survey would yield. The Frankenstein chapter works only because he insists on reading the book through parenthood and nothing else. Constraint as a discovery procedure is familiar from elsewhere — formal verse, scientific modelling, the sonnet and the regression alike extract insight by refusing degrees of freedom. The question the book leaves open is not whether its readings illuminate — they do — but whether its premise survives scrutiny: can novels really guide a life?

The Case for Novels as Guides to Living

The strongest argument rests on a claim about what kind of knowledge living well requires. Practical wisdom is not propositional. It is not a set of rules that could be stated, memorised, and applied, but a capacity to perceive what matters in particular, messy, unrepeatable situations. Aristotle called this *phronesis* and observed that it cannot be learned from treatises — which is why ethics, on his account, is acquired through experience and habituation rather than instruction. Martha Nussbaum's contribution, developed in *Love's Knowledge*, is to argue that the novel is the literary form uniquely suited to training it. A novel like *Middlemarch* forces the reader to attend to particulars — this marriage, this self-deception, this slow accumulation of small choices — with an emotional engagement that abstract ethics cannot produce. On this view the form is the content: if moral knowledge were rule-like, a summary would suffice. It is not, so you need the whole novel; the length, the slowness, the immersion are not packaging but the very mechanism of the knowledge.

A second argument is simulational. Novels are flight simulators for social life. The reader rehearses situations — betrayal, grief, ambition curdling, love misplaced — at no cost, and with a privilege reality never grants: access to the inside of other minds. No other technology, including lived experience itself, shows you what it is like to be someone self-deceived from the inside. There is empirical support of a contested kind: work by Keith Oatley and Raymond Mar suggests that readers of fiction score higher on theory-of-mind measures than readers of non-fiction, though whether fiction causes the sensitivity or sensitive people seek fiction remains unresolved.

A third argument is statistical. Your own life supplies a sample size of one, drawn from a narrow class, era, and temperament. Novels expand the dataset. George Eliot put the point directly: art is “the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.”

Against these stand three serious objections. The first is the selection problem: novels are wisdom plus artifice, and nothing in the reading experience tells you which is which. Plots require a shapeliness — consequence, climax, resolution — that life lacks, and learning from novels may teach you to expect your life to be narratively coherent, which is arguably a harm. This is the *Madame Bovary* objection, made with maximum force from within a novel: Emma Bovary is destroyed precisely by reading novels as guides to living. The second objection is biographical: the great novelists were not notably good at living. Why trust Tolstoy on marriage? The skill of rendering experience and the skill of navigating it are different skills, and there is little evidence they travel together. The third concerns calibration: novelistic minds are more articulate, more legible, and more interesting than real ones, so the empathy a reader trains may be empathy for fictional people, transferring poorly to the inarticulate actual person in front of them.

The honest middle position — and the thesis of the remainder of this essay — is that novels are guides to perceiving rather than guides to acting. They refine the questions you ask about situations without reliably supplying answers. This preserves the core of Mendelson’s project while conceding to Flaubert that anyone reading for direct instruction is doing it wrong.

What Follows if Novels Are Guides to Perceiving

The reframing has consequences. First, the value of a novel becomes its discriminating power: how finely it lets you carve up experience. Henry James and George Eliot rank high not for the moral content of their plots but because, after reading them, you can detect varieties of self-deception, or cruelty disguised as kindness, that were previously invisible to you. Novels function less like maps and more like training in connoisseurship — the way a wine course does not tell you what to drink but changes what you can taste. There is a parallel in the philosophy of science: the theory-ladenness of observation. There is no innocent eye; one perceives with the categories one has, and novels install new categories. Hanson's point about physicists seeing different things in the same cloud chamber applies equally to two readers of human behaviour, one of whom has read *The Portrait of a Lady* and one of whom has not.

Second, the moral risk changes location. The danger is no longer bad advice — the *Bovary* problem — but bad perception. A novelist with a brilliant style can install distorting categories as easily as illuminating ones; one should worry less about readers imitating characters and more about, say, a reader learning from Patricia Highsmith to perceive everyone as predator or prey. Style becomes ethically load-bearing: not the decoration on the lesson but the lens itself, and a warped lens warps everything seen through it.

Third — a counter-argument worth holding onto — if perception is where the action is, the novel loses its privileged status. Great history, ethnography, case studies, even gossip done well also refine perception. The novel's distinctive claim, interior access to other minds, has to do all the remaining work, and one may fairly ask whether that access is a genuine epistemic window or merely a convincing illusion of one. We never get to check a novelist's rendering of consciousness against the original. The claim that Woolf shows us what minds are like rests, in the end, on the reader's sense of recognition — which is exactly the faculty a beautiful illusion would also produce.

A Perceptual Canon

Suppose, nonetheless, that the perceiving thesis holds. Which novels train perception best? Setting aside Mendelson's seven, the following thirteen — ten principals and three near misses — were chosen for breadth of perceptual training rather than greatness per se: each installs a different lens.

Jane Austen's *Emma* trains the perception of one's own misperception. Austen's free indirect style gulls the reader into Emma's errors about Harriet, Mr Elton, and Frank Churchill, so that her humiliations are partly ours; the novel is the closest thing fiction offers to a course in epistemic humility. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* trains perception of the ordinary moment: Viktor Shklovsky built his theory of defamiliarisation largely on Tolstoy, and after the mowing scene, or the detail of Karenin's ears, routine experience looks newly strange. Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* teaches micro-discrimination of motive, slowing social interaction to the frame rate at which manipulation becomes visible; Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle constitute a masterclass in perceiving charm as predation. Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* is arguably the perception novel outright: its explicit subject is how habit anaesthetises seeing and what — involuntary memory, jealousy, art — reverses the anaesthesia.

Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* trains distrust of narrators, including the one in your own head, as Dowell fails to perceive his own life in real time. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* renders self-deception from inside, in the deceiver's own curated prose, complementing Ford: Dowell is baffled where Stevens is actively editing. Nabokov's *Lolita* trains resistance — the book seduces the reader with style on behalf of a monster and then makes the seduction itself perceptible; learning to see past beautiful language is a distinct and underrated skill. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* trains perception from inside another cosmology, where the categories themselves differ, before administering its final shock: the reader's own Western, novelistic perspective arrives in the closing pages as a district commissioner planning a paragraph in a colonial monograph. Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* trains an attentional register that conflict-driven fiction never touches — the luminous in the mundane: water, light, an old man

watching his son. And W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* teaches the reader to perceive history in objects and places — railway stations, fortresses, photographs — until the built environment becomes legible as sedimented time.

The near misses extend the range. *The Tale of Genji* trains perception of evanescence; the whole aesthetic of *mono no aware* is a discipline of noticing transience without flinching from it. Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* attempts the hardest feat in fiction — rendering goodness perceptible — and its partial failure is itself instructive. Henry Green's *Loving* trains perception through dialogue alone, withholding nearly all interior access and forcing the reader to reconstruct minds from surfaces, which is, after all, the condition of actual life.

Two caveats attach to any such list. It is circularly canonical: "books that enhance perception" turns out to mean "acknowledged masterpieces," which suggests a back-rationalisation of prestige; a genuinely perception-first list might include pulpy books that happen to see one thing perfectly. And perceptual training is indexed to the reader's blind spots. Proust does nothing for someone already hyper-attentive to jealousy. The ideal canon for any given reader would be chosen against that reader's particular blindnesses — which only they can diagnose, and which, by definition, they cannot.

Commonalities: The Deep Structure

Set the thirteen side by side and four common features emerge. First, none of them depicts good perception; all of them stage perceptual failure. The engine of every one is a gap — between what the narrator sees and what is the case (Ford, Ishiguro, Nabokov), between what a character sees and what the reader is permitted to see (Austen, James), between what habit shows and what is actually there (Proust, Tolstoy, Robinson). Second, the training is done by form, not theme. Free indirect discourse, unreliable narration, slowed time, dialogue-only rendering: these books do not tell the reader about perception; they inflict an error and then correct it. The reader learns in precisely the way the books say their characters fail to learn — by being wrong first. Third, the domain is overwhelmingly intimate and social: other minds, the self, a marriage, a household. Almost nothing in the canon trains perception of systems,

crowds, institutions, or nature; Sebald is the partial exception. Fourth, retrospection: a striking majority are narrated looking backward — Proust, Ford, Ishiguro, Robinson, Sebald, much of *Genji* — and the implicit claim is that perception ripens only with temporal distance.

The deep structure beneath these features is error-driven learning, and here an unexpected connection opens to cognitive science. On predictive-processing accounts of perception, the brain improves its model of the world not by passively receiving information but by generating predictions and registering prediction error. These thirteen novels are prediction-error machines. Each elicits a confident reading — Emma is right about Harriet; Humbert is charming; Stevens served a great man — and then makes the error felt. The same structure is Shklovsky's defamiliarisation restated: habit is a low-error, low-information state, and art forces the error that lets you re-see. And it is Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy, derived from Simone Weil: virtue as "a just and loving attention directed upon an individual reality," with the self's consoling fantasy as the chief obstacle to seeing. Abstracted to a sentence, the canon says: perception fails by egocentric prediction, and improves by structured disconfirmation.

Contradictions

The canon does not, however, speak with one voice. Three contradictions run through it, and a fourth lies in wait for anyone who tries to summarise it.

The first is suspicion versus reverence. Half the list trains a hermeneutics of suspicion: Ford, Ishiguro, Nabokov, and James teach the reader to see through the surface, to distrust charm, to detect the manipulation beneath the politeness. The other half trains the opposite posture: Robinson, Dostoevsky, Green, Murasaki, and Tolstoy in his mowing scenes teach the reader to receive the surface, not to see through it, because the ordinary thing is the luminous thing and suspicion is what blinds you. These are not complementary skills but contrary instructions about the same act. Paul Ricoeur named the split — the hermeneutics of suspicion against the hermeneutics of restoration — and never resolved it. The charitable reading is that the full canon trains a meta-skill: knowing when each posture applies. But no book on the list teaches the

switch, and a reader formed by one half will systematically misread the other.

The second contradiction is that perception and flourishing come apart. The premise of the whole exercise is that better perceiving serves better living; the books themselves keep denying it. Prince Myshkin is the purest perceiver in the set and is destroyed by it. Isabel Archer's clear sight arrives only after it can no longer help her. Proust's narrator's hyper-attention to Albertine is indistinguishable from torture. Stevens's tragedy is not that he could not see but that seeing came when nothing could be done. Within the canon, the correlation between perceptual acuity and a good life is roughly zero, possibly negative; the happy endings, such as Emma's, are achieved by social correction — Mr Knightley's interventions — rather than by vision.

The third is the retrospection trap. If, as half these books insist, life is understood only backwards — Kierkegaard's formula, dramatised by Ford and Ishiguro — then novels cannot deliver what we want from them, namely improved forward-looking perception. They may only train us to write better retrospective accounts of our failures. The books that dramatise retrospective clarity in fact dramatise something darker: that real-time perception of one's own life may be incorrigible.

And the self-referential fourth: these novels argue that knowledge lives in particulars and dies in abstraction — which means that this synthesis, by their own lights, is exactly the wrong way to hold them. Nussbaum, to her credit, bites that bullet, insisting that criticism must stay close to the texture of the works it discusses. It is worth noticing that an essay abstracting commonalities from thirteen novels has just asked its reader to swallow the same bullet whole.

Can Anything Improve Forward-Looking Perception?

The retrospection trap forces the widest version of the question: in the broadest sense, can anything improve perception directed at the life one has not yet lived? The answer, drawn mainly from the psychology of expertise, is yes — but under conditions restrictive enough to explain both why some training works and why wisdom is rare.

The decisive evidence comes from an adversarial collaboration between Daniel Kahneman and Gary Klein, two psychologists who began from opposed views of intuition and converged on a shared conclusion. Perceptual learning requires two conditions: the environment must be regular enough that valid cues exist, and feedback must be fast and unambiguous. Where both hold, forward-looking perception improves dramatically. Chess players, firefighters, anaesthesiologists, radiologists, even poultry sexers develop pattern recognition that looks, from outside, like clairvoyance. Where either condition fails, experience produces confidence without accuracy: stock pickers, political pundits, and admissions interviewers do not improve with decades of practice, because the feedback is slow, noisy, or never arrives. The most sobering datum in the literature is that experienced psychotherapists barely outperform novices on patient outcomes. The domain closest to “perceiving human lives” has feedback too delayed and confounded to teach.

Life as a whole, in other words, is a low-validity environment. The forward-looking perception we most want — about marriages, careers, characters, our own motives — operates exactly where the learning conditions fail. What demonstrably works is anything that artificially repairs the feedback loop. Philip Tetlock’s forecasting research is the proof of concept: ordinary people trained to use base rates, to break problems into parts, and — crucially — to keep score against explicit predictions became measurably better at foresight and stayed better. The active ingredient is not intelligence; it is the conversion of life’s vague, self-flattering feedback into fast, scored feedback. The same logic underlies decision journals, premortems, red-teaming, and surgical checklists: each is a prosthetic feedback channel. So, notably, is another person. Mr Knightley’s function in *Emma* is precisely to be Emma’s fast, honest error signal, and one strong argument for marriage and friendship is epistemic: a trusted other is the only real-time corrective most lives contain.

This returns the argument to the novels with new precision. Their weakness is now exact: they generate prediction error, but they offer no feedback on your life. What they supply instead is a pattern library — a stock of types (the Osmond, the Casaubon marriage, the Stevens-style self-curation) that functions as a set of base rates for human situations.

That is forward-looking exactly insofar as life rhymes, and it rhymes more than the radical-particularity view admits: situations are unrepeatable, but the self-deceptions are not. Tolstoy's famous line about unhappy families is, in this one respect, wrong — the failure modes of lives are highly conserved, and a reader who has met Casaubon on the page possesses a base rate for a certain kind of suitor that no amount of unaided experience guarantees.

Two counter-arguments deserve the last word on this question. First, the calibration toolkit works best on questions that can be scored, and it may quietly redirect attention toward the scoreable. One becomes well-calibrated about outcomes while the unquantifiable things — what this relationship is doing to you — remain invisible. Optimising the measurable is itself a perceptual distortion: Goodhart's law applied to wisdom. Second, Iris Murdoch's objection stands against the entire framing. Perhaps "forward-looking perception" misdescribes the goal. Prediction is about controlling the future; attention is about being adequate to the present. The person who perceives well, in Murdoch's sense, is not the one who saw the betrayal coming but the one who sees the person in front of them without fantasy. That capacity may improve not through feedback at all but through the slow displacement of ego — which would explain why the contemplative traditions, which care nothing for forecasting, converge on attention training, and why their methods (meditation, prayer, fasting from self-concern) look nothing like Tetlock's.

Conclusion

The argument has travelled from a professor's defence of seven novels to the laboratories of judgement research, and the route suggests a settlement. Mendelson is right that novels carry serious knowledge about life, and wrong only about its delivery mechanism. They do not advise; they recalibrate. Their method — eliciting confident misreadings and then disconfirming them — is structurally identical to how perception itself improves, which is why the experience of being wrong about Emma Woodhouse or Humbert Humbert does something that being told about overconfidence does not. But the canon's own contradictions mark the limits of the gift. Novels train two opposed postures, suspicion and reverence, without teaching the switch between them; they demonstrate

repeatedly that acuity and flourishing are different goods; and their deepest insights are retrospective in form, while the perception we want is prospective.

The repair for that last deficiency lies outside literature, in the unglamorous machinery of feedback: kept scores, consulted base rates, premortems, and honest friends. A division of labour emerges. Novels supply the categories — the pattern library of human types and failure modes, the fine discriminations of motive, the attentional registers that habit erodes. The feedback disciplines supply the correction — the scoring that tells you whether your perceptions, so enriched, are actually tracking the world. And the Murdochian tradition stands slightly apart from both, insisting that the highest form of perception is not foresight at all but the just and loving attention that sees what is present without the distortions of self — a capacity for which neither *Middlemarch* nor a decision journal is sufficient, and toward which both, perhaps, are partial means.

What remains true on any account is Flaubert's warning, issued from inside the form itself: the reader who comes to novels for instructions will be misled by the very shapeliness that makes them readable. The reader who comes to have her seeing changed — who expects not answers but finer questions, not predictions but better categories, not a map but a trained eye — is asking fiction for the one thing it reliably gives.