

## Approaching Perfection

In 1999, David Berman sang the greatest opening lyric of all time: “In 1984, I was hospitalised for approaching perfection.” He stretches the first two words across two bars, then crams the rest, which have twice the number of syllables, across one. We gallop to that final hilarious, melancholic word, and in a wonderful moment of formal grounding, we believe what he says precisely because of how perfectly he’s said it. Yet songs, even songs by accomplished free verse poets, need to rhyme, and the couplet goes awry: “Slowly screwing my way across Europe, they had to make a correction.” Less rhythmically varied than the first line, we’ve left its heady autogenesis and arrived at a world more balanced and clichéd (*Europe* was where you spent your glory days?). Yet Berman has in another sense achieved the ideal of formal self-justification once more, as the first line’s perfection has been hospitalised, sanitised, corrected. It would be easy to read this as an allegory of artistic genius being crushed by an oppressive bureaucracy. But Berman’s uneven intonation doesn’t carry a sense of self-assured conviction, of aggrievement at an injustice done to an isolated self. The hospital workers I think of aren’t bureaucratic lackeys, but concerned, probably underpaid civil servants. We might more profitably read the lines as an allegory of the incoherence of perfection pursued entirely on one’s own terms, an incoherence which requires others to come in and clean up the incomprehensible mess – “broken and smokin’ where the infrared deer plunge in the digital snake,” as the next line goes.

In a justly celebrated essay, Iris Murdoch argued that “the idea of the individual” and “the idea of perfection” are deeply intertwined. In viewing another person with love, which means to attend to them in their individuality, we must recognise the “inevitable imperfection” of all our descriptions of them and strive towards evermore perfect ones, an evermore perfect moral vision (27). In her example of a step-mother M coming to reevaluate her daughter-in-law D, Murdoch imagines a conceptual volte-face, M coming to see D as “not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful” (17). This process is interpersonal in the sense that M approaches perfection through her attitude toward another, but is it a scene of dialogue?

M’s activity is peculiarly *her own*. Its details are the details of *this* personality; and partly for this reason it may well be an activity which can only be performed privately. M could not *do this* thing in conversation with another person. (22, italics in original)

It’s notable that Murdoch qualifies the idea that it “can only be performed privately,” then takes a more emphatic tone for the idea that it can’t be performed in conversation, as if conversation were the true bane of moral reasoning. Perfection is rather achieved on our own, through a form of “obedience” – a “patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, a thing, a situation” (39). This, she notes, is also how a great artists regard their work, “so that aesthetic situations are not so much analogies of morals as cases of morals,” and “virtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good” person (40). Murdoch is responding to the behaviourist tendencies which surrounded her in the 1950s, tendencies that claimed a diminished role for the inner life in moral reasoning. But we might wonder what happens when an individual’s ideal of perfection is private, when their horizon seems myopic or fantastical to others. Twentieth-century art furnishes us with particularly clear examples of this, artists wrestling with the fact loving regard of a reality outside themselves can create only “the infrared deer plunge in the digital snake,” let alone “the Baddelaries partisans are still out to mathmaster Malachus Micgranes and the Verdons catapulting the camibalistics” (Joyce, 4).

Stanley Cavell's concept of moral perfectionism places the perfectibility of our lives in a more dialogic context. Perfectionism involves becoming what Emerson calls one's "unattained but attainable self" (125, quoted in Cavell, *Cities* 13). In a group of Hollywood screwballs Cavell labels "remarriage comedies" we see this ideal realised through endless talk. In *The Philadelphia Story*, C. K. Dexter Haven (Cary Grant) says to Tracy Samantha Lord (Katherine Hepburn) "that's no good, that's not even conversation" – a formal principle for the genre serving as a species of what it justifies, for here conversation is used to try and "get those eyes open" (Cavell, *Cities* 42). Hepburn has just called herself an "unholy mess of a girl," her words blunt instruments to describe herself and others. Part of Murdoch's picture is that if one focuses on reality with the obedient attention she describes, one will replace the crass generalities of abstract moral theorising ("good," "just," "fair"), what Bernard Williams called "thin" ethical concepts, with what Williams called "thick" ethical concepts, terms that are more particular insofar as they both describe a situation and make a normative judgement about it ("vulgar," "refreshingly simple") (Murdoch 31; Williams 143-45).<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is with respect to these terms that Murdoch reintroduces a role for others' words:

M could be helped by someone who both knew D and whose conceptual scheme M could understand or in that context begin to understand. Progress in understanding of a scheme of concepts often takes place as we listen to normative-descriptive talk [the application of thick words] in the presence of a common object. (31)

Notice, however, that Murdoch does not imagine an interpersonal dialogue – M is learning *from* someone else, as is made clear by the analogy Murdoch makes between such a process and an art critic teaching us to "see more" (31). In the example we have seen from *The Philadelphia Story*, not only must conversation be collaborative, but it creates a form of what Cavell calls "being together" (*Pursuits* 146) that *in itself* resists an overly abstract moral vision, the lonely self-flagellation of "unholy mess of a girl."

The process we have seen in *The Philadelphia Story* is also central to realist fiction. Here's what Darcy says at the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, referring to his initial, pompous proposal to Elizabeth:

I cannot be so easily reconciled to myself. The recollection of what I then said, of my conduct, my manners, my expressions during the whole of it, is now, and has been many months, inexpressibly painful to me. Your reproof, so well applied, I shall never forget: 'Had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner.' Those were your words. You know not, you can scarcely conceive, how they have tortured me; though it was some time, I confess, before I was reasonable enough to allow their justice. (Austen 352)

Conversation, then, is what creates such a shift in Darcy's self that he cannot be "reconciled" to who he was, how he then saw the world and the language he used ("my expressions"). Of course, he does engage in the private process described by Murdoch, yet it seems that private process is the mere unfolding of the cataclysm created by talk. In fact, the moments of *private* revelation in nineteenth-century fiction are often moments where the healthy process of talk in Austen has gone wrong, and morality seems impossible rather than about-to-be-achieved:

---

<sup>1</sup> Susan Wolf's reading of *The Philadelphia Story* applies Murdoch in similar ways, without reference to Cavell.

Yet Dorothea had no distinctly shapen grievance that she could state even to herself; and in the midst of her confused thought and passion, the mental act that was struggling forth into clearness was a self-accusing cry that her feeling of desolation was the fault of her own spiritual poverty. (Eliot)

Her mind, assailed by visions, was in a state of extraordinary activity... As I have said, she believed she was not defiant, and what could be a better proof of it than that she should linger there half the night, trying to persuade herself that there was no reason why Pansy shouldn't be married as you would put a letter in the post-office? (James, *Portrait* 419)

Thus the central tragedies of both of these heroines – Isabel's of feeling she must remain with, and accept the judgements of, an awful husband is a greater tragedy than Dorothea's of finding a good marriage too late – is that they must fall back on a private process of moral vision rather than engage in the dialogic process of growth in Austen. Their internalisations of the accusatory voices of their husbands ("the fault of her own spiritual poverty," "no reason why Pansy shouldn't be married") are ghostly persistences of conversation, marking Cavell's claim that perfecting one's moral vision is inexorably tied to such an activity. Both characters end up making decisions which are only half-understood by those around them, the isolating quality of which is underscored in Dorothea's crushing response to her sister's request that she explain how she came to marry Ladislaw – "No, dear, you would have to feel with me, else you would never know." Her love, her way of attending to the world, places her so at odds with her sister that it has made basic empathy ("feel with me") an impossible ideal. We are not, however, in a position where there's a question of whether art *itself* will be radically misunderstood – that must wait until a later James novel, *The Ambassadors*, in which Lambert Strether succeeds (through a good deal of talk, among other things) in upending the puritanical morality of Woollett Massachusetts and arrives at a more sympathetic understanding of Chad Newsome's Parisian affair. Yet he seems unable to apply this tolerance to his own life, refusing Maria Gostrey's "offer of exquisite service, of lightened care, for the rest of his days," her offer that he stay with her in Paris (394). He claims he must return to Woollett because he must be "right" – "Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself" (395). This almost unaccountable return to a puritanical morality which the rest of the novel has so strenuously resisted is almost a *ne plus ultra* of Jamesian ambiguity, where the rest of the novel's revelations of moral complexity are unwound in a final turn, the complexity of upending the complexity to which we had become accustomed. James' style is now so subtle that it threatens to resist comprehensibility altogether. Such artists will struggle to find conversation, living in an uncertainty parallel to that of their characters.

Forster's *Howards End* takes the trope of the brilliant young woman marrying a dull older man and turns it into an explicitly political problem. Margaret Schlegel is brilliant, "socialist" (whatever that meant in Britain in the first decade of the twentieth century), and somewhat unaccountably decides to marry the recently widowed, much older, and crassly materialist Henry Wilcox, owner of the Imperial and West African Rubber Company. Her marriage appears in explicitly instrumentalist terms, not "poetry" but "prose... I'm not running it down – a very good kind of prose, but well considered, well thought out." Love becomes the space, then, not of careful attention to a world in its rich particularity, but of what Weber calls "planful adaptation to given interests," wherein one abstracts the world into means to some formal, rational end – here, "fortune" (Weber 107-108). For "marriage was to alter her

fortunes rather than her character” – instrumentality is paradoxically what *allows* her to claim an autonomous realm of aesthetic perception, the poetry that persists beneath her prosaic life. Yet we immediately start to see her “think conjugally” as the narrator says, taking on some of her husband’s viewpoints: “If Wilcoxes hadn’t worked and died in England for thousands of years, you and I couldn’t sit here without having our throats cut. There would be no trains, no ships to carry us literary people about in, no fields even. Just savagery.” The irony of this claim lies in its profound revaluation of the reality that leisure class aesthetic cultivation is based on exploitation – is based on an imperialist system that codes other nations as “savage” to justify plunder. That the “savagery” of plunder subtends Margaret’s current reality should make that reality unjustified, yet here she has her aesthetic cultivation justifying savagery, acting out Benjamin’s claim that “there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (4.392). Margaret has her first premonition of Henry’s attraction through his jealousy, specifically when she defends Leonard Bast. Leonard is a working-class man who feels tragically alienated from the cultural life Margaret and her sisters enjoy – “of a heritage that may expand gradually, he had no conception: he hoped to come to Culture suddenly, much as the Revivalist hopes to come to Jesus. Those Miss Schlegels had come to it; they had done the trick; their hands were upon the ropes, once and for all.” This tragedy is not wholly missed by Margaret, but not wholly grasped either – “He’s vulgar and hysterical and bookish, but don’t think that sums him up. There’s manhood in him as well.” This challenge to the imperialist brio for masculine action – the Wilcoxes’ pastimes, we learn early on, are motoring and playing sport – sets in motion the desire for possession which Margaret is happy, for the sake of her own possessions, to accept.

Here, what Lukács calls reification becomes a problem of love – the increasing specialisation of the spheres of society, each one becoming like a disassociated fragment in a capitalist production process, makes Cavellian sympathetic dialogue, Murdochian patient attention, impossible. Margaret sees that her world of culture is an alien world to Henry, just as in his office Margaret thinks

She might have been at the Porphyryon, or Dempster’s Bank, or her own wine-merchant’s. Everything seems just alike in these days. But perhaps she was seeing the Imperial side of the company rather than its West African, and Imperialism always had been one of her difficulties.

Capitalist enterprise appears to her as an abstract, inhuman process, interchangeable between enterprises rather than subtended by the realities of specific, concrete labour (the company’s “West African” side), just as poetry is indistinguishable noise to Henry. The one man in the novel who has the genuine interest in art to respond to it, meanwhile, cannot enter into the rarefied world of cultured discourse due to its specialisation – Leonard didn’t have the right education, and time has run out now. So Margaret and Henry have conversations, but do not come to sensorily understand one another’s visions – Margaret often seems to treat him as an abstract authority, uncritically accepting what he says. Even when she has discovered a past affair he had, she returns to the “considered,” the “well thought out” – she feels “she was being practical” in issuing Henry’s thin categorical judgements about the very woman he had an affair with, Leonard’s wife Jackie. Margaret’s letter to Helen reads “The Basts are no good.... not at all the type we should trouble about. I may go round to them myself in the morning, and do anything that is fair.” Where Margaret earlier engaged in debating societies, making superfine distinctions, she now accepts this capitalist’s blunt, cruel, practical morality.

Of course, the autonomisation of art was registered more profoundly in other twentieth-century novels and poetry, the sense of having no collectivity to understand increasingly complicated language often registered in the works themselves – in *Finnegans Wake* Joyce calls *Ulysses* “usylessly unreadable” (179), and gives an impossible ideal for the reader of the *Wake*, “sentenced to be nuzzled over a full trillion times for ever and a night till his noddle sink or swim by that ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia” (120). We have reached a point where perfection, in morality and art, is incompatible with collectively accessible language, requiring either coterie comprehension or sanitised publicity. What would change this situation? Here is the full passage of the Benjamin quote I gave above:

[“cultural treasures”] owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain. (4.392)

To “brush history against the grain” is to recognise the “anonymous toil” that actually transmits culture to us, the “West Africa” side of the Wilcox enterprise that Margaret dimly perceives to be more real than its abstract realisation in the imperialist office. Benjamin claims

the past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption... there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one... our coming was expected on earth... like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. (4.390)

He is saying that we get to moral vision – we realise what we are responsible for – not by attending to an individual in front of us (as Murdoch would have it) or even simply by talking to them, but by attending to the history of human labour that is obscured by capitalist oppression, a history whose horizon of perfection that is the redemption of that labour, and which we come to realise as incumbent upon ourselves to realise. This horizon of perfection *must* be shared with others, and it also grounds what may seem abstract due to its specialisation – usylessly unreadable books – in a concrete history that, while not necessarily making them comprehensible, at least shows their aesthetic perfectionism to be one shared with the anonymous toils that subtend them.

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes “every current of fashion or of worldview derives its force from what is forgotten. This downstream flow is ordinarily so strong that only the group can give itself up to it; the individual – the precursor – is liable to collapse in the face of such violence, as happened with Proust” ([K2a,3]). Murdoch might be seen as recommending we attend to what crass generalities of abstract moral theorising (“good,” “just,” “fair”) omit – the richly textured life embodied in words like “bumptious.” Benjamin too recommends we give our obedient attention to what is omitted in an abstraction (“give... up to it”), yet the abstraction he criticises is that of capital, which forgets the labour of human history. Murdoch says such attention must be private, but this is because her focus is on looking at the present, rather than the past with its immense weight. Seeing three trees, Proust’s narrator “felt that they were concealing something... if my mind was thus to collect

itself, to gather strength, I should have to be alone.” After struggling with what their correspondence to his past might be,

I chose rather to believe that they were phantoms of the past, dear companions of my childhood, vanished friends who recalled our common memories. Like ghosts they seemed to be appealing to me to take them with me, to bring them back to life. In their simple, passionate gesticulation I could discern the helpless anguish of a beloved person who has lost the power of speech, and feels that he will never be able to say to us what he wishes to say and we can never guess. Presently, at a cross-roads, the carriage left them. It was bearing me away from what alone I believed to be true, what would have made me truly happy; it was like my life.

Proust here feels the full “force” of what is forgotten, and yet cannot recapture “what alone I believed to be true.” *Approaching* perfection, but not reaching it. In the final song on *American Water*, the album which opens with the line with which I began, Berman sings “Some power that hardly looked like power/ Said, I’m perfect in an empty room.” Replace “empty” with “cork-lined,” and we have Proust, trying in vain to resurrect the full weight of the past on his own. To *reach* perfection, Benjamin suggests, we must leave the room, and become part of a collectivity through which the past may force itself.

## Biography

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice: The Collector’s Edition*. Cambridge University Press, 2025.

Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings and Howard Eiland, Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Belknap Press, 2006. 4 vols.

———. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin MacLaughlin, Belknap Press, 1999.

Cavell, Stanley. *Cities of Words*. Harvard University Press, 2004.

———. *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Harvard University Press, 1981.

Eliot, George. *Middlemarch*. Project Gutenberg,

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/145/pg145-images.html>. Accessed 28 Feb. 2026.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Modern Library, 1950.

Forster, E. M. *Howards End*. Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2946/2946-h/2946-h.htm>. Accessed 28 Feb. 2026.

James, Henry. *The Ambassadors*. Edited by Nicola Bradbury, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

———. *The Portrait of a Lady*. Edited by Michael Anesko, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Joyce, James. *Finnegans Wake*. Faber & Faber, 1975.

Proust, Marcel. *Within a Budding Grove*. Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/63532/pg63532-images.html>. Accessed 28 Feb. 2026.

Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: A New Translation*. Edited and translated by Keith Tribe, Harvard University Press, 2019.

Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2011.

Wolf, Susan. "Loving Attention: Lessons in Love from The Philadelphia Story." *The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 163–80.