The Normativity of Nonstandard Emotions:
An Essay on Poignancy and Sentimentality

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines a particular quality of emotion experience that has received little attention in contemporary philosophical and psychological studies of the emotions. This is inversely proportional to the significant attention it receives in literature. I will refer to it as poignancy. Poignant emotions, such as nostalgia and the lyrical feelings pervasive in poetry, are emotions about time’s passage, or the fleetingness of things.

My inquiry concerns the normative evaluation of such emotion experiences. Episodes of nostalgia and lyrical emotions are typically experienced as profound while they last, but they are also notoriously apt to be dismissed as sentimental, even by those who feel their pull. Sentimentality is a term of censure that exclusively targets emotions and emotionality; if an emotion is sentimental, then something about it is supposed to be false and wrong. But what are the merits of this charge against poignant emotions? When one has a nostalgic or lyrical emotion episode and reproaches oneself for being
sentimental, who is correct—the person in the first moment, convinced by the emotion, or the person in the next, who doubts or retracts it?

To adjudicate these disputes, we must turn to what I call the *standard model of emotion evaluation* that has emerged in the philosophy of emotions. This is a normative apparatus that enjoys wide consensus, but it has been built to evaluate the standard stock of examples in the literature, such as fear. Its application to nonstandard cases has not been undertaken. A major task of this dissertation is therefore to analyze poignant emotions in such a way that renders them evaluable on this model. However, once these analyses are in place, it turns out that the normative evaluation of poignant emotions yields surprising conclusions. In spite of their stigmatization, nostalgic aestheticizations of the past are much less vulnerable to the charge of sentimentality than commonly assumed. And lyrical feelings about the fleetingness of things are almost entirely immune to the charge, in a way that risks undermining our critical discourse about such emotion experiences.
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This work is about the idea of the past. It is dedicated to my grandparents.

Arthur Blonk (1919-2004)
Huberta Blonk (1925-2009)
John Howard (1919-2005)
Patricia Howard (1924-2007)
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Introduction

This dissertation is concerned with a particular quality of emotion experience that has received little attention in contemporary philosophical and psychological studies of the emotions. This is inversely proportional to the significant attention it receives in literature. I will refer to it as poignancy.

Poignant emotions are a mixture of happiness and sadness directed at endings brought about by the passage of time, or at the idea of such endings. A poignant emotion is consciously focused on a particular time construed in terms of such an ending, or on the fact of life’s transitoriness as a general condition of the world. The feeling of poignancy is native to what Philip Larkin called “the long perspectives / Open at each instant of our lives” (111). It is a general name for the prototypical affective experiences associated with those vistas.

I will concentrate on two specific emotion types which fall under the broader heading of poignancy. While their intentional objects are different enough to warrant considering them distinct emotions, I will treat them both as ‘forms’ of poignancy insofar as they share the latter’s characteristic phenomenology and way of construing its object. The first and best known of these emotions is nostalgia, a bittersweet longing for an irretrievable past. The second lacks a name in English more specific than poignancy itself, but because it is often expressed in and evoked by poetry, I will call feelings of this type lyrical emotions. Lyrical emotions are focused on the fleetingness of things, which may be combined with a sense of the pathos of the present moment: the particular vantage point from which the long perspective opens up, and one confronts that fact.
My question is about the normative evaluation of such emotion experiences. Episodes of nostalgia and lyrical emotions are often experienced as profound. And yet, as David Pugmire has observed, “emotions of the putatively profounder sorts” (Sentiments 129) seem especially prone to be accused of sentimentality. Sentimentality is a term of censure that exclusively targets emotions and emotionality, and while it is used to express various distinguishable criticisms of them, the central idea is that if an emotion is sentimental, then something about it is both false and wrong.

Bearing out Pugmire’s claim about putatively profound emotions, nostalgia and lyrical emotions are often suspected of sentimentality (indeed, as we shall see, they are among that charge’s natural targets). Nostalgia, in particular, is a widely stigmatized emotion. Sometimes accusations of sentimentality come from the outside, as when one person regards another’s feelings as maudlin. But because poignancy is typically a solitary experience that is not associated with overt expression or action, the charge of sentimentality just as often takes the form of private, self-directed criticism. In that case, one experiences a poignant emotion, and then reproaches oneself for being sentimental. But when this self-criticism occurs, who is correct: the person in the first moment, convinced by the emotion, or the person in the next moment, who doubts or retracts it?

The task of this dissertation is to attempt to adjudicate these difficult disputes, and, just as importantly, to examine our resources for doing so. To answer these questions, we must turn to what I will call the standard model of emotion evaluation that has emerged in the philosophy of emotions. The standard model provides a way of determining what has been called an emotion episode’s fittingness: roughly, an emotion episode is a fitting type of thing to feel if its actual intentional object really possesses the
relevant property that one ascribes to it in the grip of the feeling. I will situate the charge of sentimentality within this literature. In particular, I believe that the common critique of poignant emotions as sentimental can fruitfully be interpreted as a critique of their basic fittingness. So, once we possess all of the necessary information about a particular episode of poignancy, we are in a position to use the standard model to assess it for sentimentality. But it will turn out that this is anything but straightforward. Feeding these “nonstandard” (Stocker, “Nonstandard” 407) emotions into the standard model of emotion evaluation yields surprising conclusions, both about these emotions and about the charge of sentimentality itself. I will survey these conclusions as I preview the individual chapters below.

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The structure of the standard model—or the ‘formula’ for a fitting emotion episode—imposes a natural order onto my investigation. To test a poignant emotion episode for fittingness, first we must have in mind its actual intentional object, then we must determine the formal object of that type of emotion, and finally we may assess whether the actual object instantiates the formal one. The chapters of this essay will loosely follow that pattern.

In Chapter One I briefly set the stage, establishing the terms of the discussion before looking into poignant emotions themselves. First, I lay out the standard model of emotion evaluation, which is a set of widely-held claims about how emotion episodes are to be justified. I pay particular attention to a conception of emotional fittingness drawn
from Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2000a) and Ronald de Sousa (1987; 2011). I then turn to sentimentality, the main charge against poignant emotions. After describing the dominant account of sentimentality, I suggest that the concept of fittingness provides a helpful way of cashing out the accusation of sentimentality. The merits of that accusation can be tested by applying the standard model to an emotion episode so accused.

In Chapter Two, I illustrate the range of actual intentional objects taken by poignant emotions. After discussing my use of the term ‘poignancy’ itself, I argue that the prevalent characterizations of nostalgia give a false impression of the kind of past that may figure in it. I develop a counterexample to those accounts, which I call Proustian nostalgia, and replace them with a pluralistic view of nostalgia’s actual objects. In contrast, the challenge of determining the actual objects of lyrical emotions is not that they have been mischaracterized, but that they have not been much analyzed at all. While they are familiar, they are also enigmatic; and so I attempt to draw out the similarities between different examples to give an idea of the range of cases I mean to group under this name.

With a sense of their actual objects on the table, we can move to the next key step in applying the standard model: the formal objects of poignant emotions. In Chapter Three, I explore the possible properties that could serve as nostalgia’s formal object or standard of correctness. The literature on formal objects assumes that formal objects are fairly easy to specify. In the case of nostalgia, however, it is more difficult. I propose a series of adequacy tests that any property must meet in order to count as the formal object of an emotion, and after using them to reject several initially attractive contenders, I
argue that nostalgia’s formal object is *something desirable in a memory*, understood in a particular sense. Establishing this will allow us to begin making fittingness assessments of episodes of nostalgia. But it already gives the lie to the wholesale stigmatization of the emotion, according to which nostalgia is always sentimental: if sentimentality is unfittingness, then that blanket statement is false.

Chapter Four uses the framework of the previous chapters to investigate the fittingness implications for a particularly problematic type of nostalgic experience, of which Proustian nostalgia is often a variety. Following Svetlana Boym (2001), I call this *reflective nostalgia*. Nostalgia counts as ‘reflective’ when it is felt in the context of the self-questioning with which we began: a feeling which strikes the nostalgist herself as somehow illusory or aestheticized, directed at an imagined past instead of the real one. When this awareness does not diminish one’s longing, there is a strong case for thinking that such emotions are inveterately sentimental: willful self-indulgences in fantasy. However, I will argue that when sentimentality expresses the charge of unfittingness, this sort of emotion experience is often *protected* from sentimentality just where it seems the most guilty of it. Furthermore, reinterpreting the charge of sentimentality to describe some other kind of defect does not help. I conclude the chapter by proposing a diagnosis of the normative unease surrounding nostalgia, which dissipates once it is understood in the context of the general operation of memory and the mental representation of temporally distant events.

Chapter Five does for lyrical emotions what Chapters Three and Four did for nostalgia, establishing their formal object and assessing their fittingness in the context of self-doubt. Here, the formal object is less difficult to ascertain; I argue that the best
candidate is *transience*, again understood in a certain sense. However, this raises a novel problem which I call the overinstantiation dilemma: the relevant sort of transience is instantiated by everything, or nearly everything. This seems to generate the result that whenever lyrical emotions occur, they are fitting. Therefore, in spite of our experiences of self-doubt about them, lyrical emotions are never sentimental. Moreover, if a robust normative discourse about a state depends on the possibility of differential evaluations of episodes of that state, it seems as though there cannot be a robust normative discourse about lyrical emotions at all. I explore a variety of ways of addressing this puzzle (including rejecting the standard model), but argue that with respect to fittingness, something close to these extreme implications is unavoidable. To the best of our ability to judge, lyrical emotions can hardly ever be said to be unfitting; and our resources for canceling out this strange result, such as by criticizing these feelings in other ways, are limited. It is a platitude about the emotions that they give meaning to our lives—but, as it turns out, the emotions most intimately associated with thoughts about life’s meaning frustrate our attempts to assess them.

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Finally, a few words are in order about what motivates this project in the context of the philosophy of emotions, and about the methodology I employ.

As stated at the outset, poignant emotion experiences have not been of central concern to philosophers of emotion. This does not mean that they have been entirely ignored. Since William James (1884), many philosophers have noted the existence of
quiet, contemplative, or ‘aesthetic’ emotions. Still, two things must be said about their representation in the literature. First, such emotions are hardly ever explored in their own right. Instead, when they are mentioned, it is usually to acknowledge them as difficult cases waiting in the wings, while more conventional examples, such as fear, occupy the spotlight. This is understandable, since the primary goal of most of these discussions has been to establish a general theory of emotions or emotion evaluation, using simple examples to stand in for any emotion. But now I believe we have a plausible model of emotion evaluation, and the time is right to switch from establishing it to *applying* it, in a sustained and rigorous manner, to richer cases. It is widely acknowledged that informative emotion evaluations must wade into the specific details of the emotion types in question, and the situations in which they manifest.¹ Doing so serves the dual purposes of continuing to put the standard model to the test, and yielding fresh substantive results about hitherto unexplored cases.

Second, because poignant emotions are pervasive in art, it might be hoped that the literature on aesthetic emotions would give more attention to such feelings. However, that has not been the case. One reason may be that it is routine among philosophers to understand aesthetic emotions in the narrow sense of a spectator’s emotional response to an artwork. Aesthetic emotions, in other words, are treated as the emotions of audiences. From there, studies of them tend to gravitate toward a few persistent puzzles: the paradox

¹ For examples of statements to this effect by the architects of the standard model, see de Sousa (1987; 2011), who argues that there is no single standard of correctness for all emotions: just multifarious formal objects for multifarious emotions. Likewise, D’Arms and Jacobson write that “it is necessary to examine our actual emotions piecemeal, in order to articulate differences in how each emotion presents some feature of the world to us when we are in its grip” (“Sentiment” 746). These views are compatible with what might be called the emotional particularism propounded by Rorty (1980; 2004), which favours local investigations of emotions over grand theories thereof.
of fiction (how can audiences have real feelings about fictions?) and the puzzle of imaginative resistance (why do audiences resist imagining fictional truths which clash with their moral attitudes?). To be sure, there is much to be learned from these problems, and in Chapter Four I will draw on responses to the paradox of fiction myself. But this conception of aesthetic emotions leaves out emotions which are relevantly ‘aesthetic’, but which can take hold in everyday life, independent of extant artworks. Certain forms of nostalgia, and lyrical emotions as a type, are like this. Often they are responses to images or scenes in life which are not artworks, but which are of the sort that strike artists as being fit for artistic expression. Thus, the desire to describe and express them is regularly among the reasons that art is created in the first place—even though having one of these experiences is not dependent on producing or appreciating an actual artwork, such as a poem.²

This intimate but contingent relationship between nostalgia, lyrical emotions, and art leads to my point about methodology. Beginning in Chapter Two, this essay relies to an unusual extent on examples from fiction and poetry. This is for two reasons. First, as I have said, a great deal of literary art involves the representation and evocation of these experiences. The passage of time is one of literature’s perennial themes. Literary works therefore provide an indispensable cache of case studies. This is worth emphasizing. For the most part, I present these examples as plausible expressions or descriptions of emotions in and of themselves, rather than as pieces of writing which stimulate emotions in readers. This is simply to say that when I quote (for example) Virginia Woolf’s

² Cf. Frijda and Sundararajan, who treat as one subject “Emotions depicted in poetry, experienced or imagined by its poets, and evoked in the readers of such poetry” (227, my emphases).
description of Lily Briscoe’s strange, amorphous longing in *To the Lighthouse* (2000), the feeling I am investigating is first and foremost the one attributed to Lily Briscoe, and not necessarily our feeling as we read Woolf. I will simply take it for granted that the emotions attributed to fictional characters, and articulated in the voices of poems, are experiences that will be familiar, or seem plausible, to the reader firsthand.

The other reason for concentrating on literary examples is simple. One motivation of this enquiry is the very importance that literature accords to experiences of poignancy. As I have said, they are treated, almost paradigmatically, as profound. The philosophical investigation of these emotions is therefore one way of taking literature seriously.
Chapter One

The Normative Apparatus

In this chapter, I put forward the normative apparatus that I will employ in the subsequent chapters. It is comprised of two composite sketches, assembled from widely-held views in the literature. The first is of a generic model of emotion evaluation, placing particular emphasis on the notion of an emotion episode’s fittingness. Combining the contributions of D’Arms and Jacobson (2000a), de Sousa (1987), and Peter Goldie (2004), I illustrate an intuitive picture of how emotions are to be evaluated, which I call the standard model of emotion evaluation. The second sketch is of the dominant account of sentimentality, a concept whose definition is contested but which is usually described in terms of two fundamental intuitions. Major contributors to this literature include Michael Tanner (1976-7) and Pugmire (2005). In my view, the charge of sentimentality can typically, though not always, be interpreted as a charge of unfittingness. I will refer to the practice of critically investigating whether emotion episodes are sentimental (or maudlin, kitschy, and so forth) as the discourse of sentimentality.

1.1 The Standard Model of Emotion Evaluation

Emotions are subject to normative criticism.¹ The scenes are familiar. We counsel children not to be afraid of the dark, and tell ourselves the same thing when we walk

alone at night. We accuse family members of overreacting to our mistakes, and of being insufficiently impressed by our successes. We know we should let go of our resentment to patch things up with a romantic partner, and we are offended when a friend chuckles at a hateful joke.

These examples represent different standards we typically use to evaluate emotion episodes. Fear of the dark is an emotion that is not appropriate in type to its object: that is, without special reason to think otherwise, darkness is not dangerous. Overreactions and underreactions are critical descriptions of emotions that invoke a standard of proportionality, according to which an emotion episode ought to have a certain strength and duration determined by the circumstances. To judge that one’s resentment is sabotaging one’s relationship is to recognize a standard of strategic or prudential value: emotions can help or hinder our wider purposes. Finally, in the case of malicious amusement, an emotion is assessed for moral appropriateness, and ruled objectionable on that basis.

It has become common to separate these standards of evaluation into two categories. In an influential paper, D’Arms and Jacobson have argued that the first two standards in our list, appropriate type and proportionality, alone constitute what they call an emotion’s basic “fittingness” (“Moralistic” 66). Fittingness criteria are thus set apart

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Indeed, my concern is with the evaluation of particular emotional episodes, by which I mean occurrent “feelings” (Frijda, Laws 199). This is also the point of my references to emotion ‘experience’. I am not discussing unconscious or dispositional emotions, or sentiments. The restriction of normative interest to occurrent emotions is one shared by many emotion theorists, such as Greenspan (1988), Mulligan (1998), D’Arms and Jacobson (2000a), and Lambie and Marcel (2002). The most prominent figure interested in emotions in the dispositional sense, due to his psychoanalytic approach, is Wollheim (1999). Goldie (2000) emphasizes the diachronic or narrative structures of emotions, but still makes room for the evaluation of discrete episodes, as we will see below.
from other standards of emotion evaluation: the question of whether a given emotion
episode fits its object in type or degree is entirely distinct from the question of that
emotion’s moral or prudential value. For example, the fact that a joke is cruel may give
one an overriding moral reason not to laugh, but that does not change the fact (ex
hypothesis) that the joke is a fitting object of amusement. The same goes for prudential
value. It may be a threat to one’s career to feel hilarity at a delicate social function, but
that in itself says nothing about the justification of the amusement one is struggling to
contain. Instead, it simply gives one a strategic reason to stifle one’s laughter. D’Arms
and Jacobson liken the concept of emotional fittingness to the concept of truth value: like
beliefs, emotions can fit or fail to fit the world. And just as the truth of a belief is
unaffected by the inconvenience of believing it, the fittingness of an emotional response
is unaffected by the inconvenience of feeling it. According to this picture, in the same
way that all beliefs are in principle truth-ev
aluable, all emotions are evaluable for basic
fittingness. The criteria of fittingness pertain to the constitutive features of every
occurrent emotion episode: there is always some object at which the feeling is directed,
and some duration and degree of intensity.

In virtue of what might an emotion episode fail to fit the world? D’Arms and
Jacobson claim that emotions present their intentional objects as possessing properties
that warrant the emotional response in question, and it is these presentations that can be

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3 It may or may not be the case that all emotion episodes are evaluable for prudential and
moral value as well. The dispute comes down to whether one treats an emotion which
seems strategically or morally neutral as thereby (a) having a strategic or moral value of
a certain sort (i.e. a value greater than some other possible emotions and not as valuable
as others), or (b) not having any strategic or moral dimension at all. I will not attempt to
decide that question here.

4 Talk of fitting ‘the world’ is loose, of course: the object of emotion need not always be
a concrete thing, but could instead be a proposition.
correct or incorrect. Many theorists of the emotions have proposed that each emotion type (e.g. anger, guilt, and so on) is defined by the particular property that episodes of that emotion present their objects as instantiating. According to de Sousa, this defining property is an emotion type’s “formal object” (Rationality 20), which is always at least implicitly ascribed to the actual object, or target, of an episode of that emotion type. So, for example, if the formal object of the emotion type fear is dangerousness, then in any particular episode of fear—say, recoiling from a growling dog—one implicitly or explicitly ascribes dangerousness to the growling dog. The formal object is, “by definition, the standard of correctness” (122) for each episode of emotion: only if the dog is actually dangerous will one’s fear be correct. Correctness here means that the type of emotion is fitting in this situation.

It should be clear that this conception of emotional normativity has to do with the warrant or justification of emotions that do in fact occur, rather than with the idea that one ought to feel something even when one does not. The claim that dangerousness is the formal object of fear only means that, if there is an episode of fear, its object ought to be dangerous. It does not follow that if there is something dangerous, one ought to fear it.

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5 Cf. Kenny (1963) in philosophy, and Lazarus (1991) and other ‘appraisal’ theorists in psychology. Instead of properties, Lazarus writes in terms of “core relational themes” or underlying situations, but the idea is the same: “Each individual emotion or emotion family is defined by a specific core relational theme” (121). This view spans the cognitivist/noncognitivist divide: Prinz (2004) incorporates Lazarus’ formulation in his own ‘embodied’ appraisal theory.

6 I will remain neutral about the Aristotelian idea that some emotions are rationally required, in the sense that in certain circumstances it is defective not to feel a particular way. For examples of arguments along these lines, see Taylor (1975) and Helm (2001). The idea of required emotion episodes is irrelevant to the cases of poignancy that I will focus on, which are clearly instances in which there is no such requirement. The normative problems surrounding them revolve around the question of whether one should not feel them when one in fact does.
The instantiation of the formal object, then, is what establishes that an emotion episode of a certain type—fear, anger, etc.—is fitting. However, as we have seen, D’Arms and Jacobson propose that a fitting emotion episode must not only be of an appropriate type, but also be proportionate in ‘size’. Fear may be an appropriate type of emotion to feel when confronted with something dangerous, but it is nonetheless possible to overreact to something even when it poses a legitimate threat. For example, unless one is allergic, being trapped in a car with a bee presents a risk of harm without licensing frenzied terror. To determine whether an emotion episode is proportionate, there must be norms of proportionality governing the range of appropriate durations and degrees of feeling. We might imagine a norm of commensurate intensity and a norm of commensurate duration, such that the level of fear should reflect the level of danger, and should subside after the danger has passed. While it is obvious that the application of such norms will be highly context-sensitive, it is also clear that they exist, as anyone who has ever been told to “move on”, on more than just pragmatic grounds, can attest.

To sum up so far, an emotion episode is fitting if it is of the appropriate type and it is proportionate. For it to be of the appropriate type, its actual object (e.g. the growling

\[\text{7 Some others who have noted this include Goldie (2004), Nozick (1989), Stocker and Hegeman (1996), and Taylor (1975).}
\[\text{8 This example is of an appropriate emotion type with an inappropriate level of response. I agree with D’Arms and Jacobson that this is the standard predicament of a disproportionate emotion episode. It is also possible to respond to something, to an inappropriate degree, with an equally inappropriate emotion type. However, when the emotion type is not even appropriate, it seems as though any level of response would be disproportionate. In that scenario, considerations of proportionality seem to collapse into considerations of appropriate type. The two sorts of consideration are distinct, but only when the type is appropriate does it become possible to clearly appreciate the independence of the proportionality dimension.}
\[\text{9 I will discuss some of the difficulties surrounding the determination and application of proportionality norms in Chapter Five, concerning lyrical emotions.}
dog) must actually instantiate the formal object of the emotion type (e.g. dangerousness, if the emotion type is fear). For it to be proportionate, it must satisfy norms of commensurate intensity and duration. Once we possess all of this information about an emotion episode, we can describe what could be called the facts of the case: that is, an account of whether the particular object of emotion does in fact instantiate that emotion’s formal object, and, if so, what a proportionate emotional response would be under the circumstances. For example, this might be a statement holding that the object of one’s fear does instantiate the property of dangerousness, and since the threat is ongoing and critical, ongoing intense fear is appropriate.\(^\text{10}\)

Already contained in this conception of emotional fittingness is the fundamental idea that emotions are not self-justifying. Indeed, for there to be conceptual space for emotional normativity at all, it cannot be the case that feeling afraid justifies one’s fear. Instead, the facts about the formal object’s instantiation and the applicability of the norms of proportionality—external to the feeling—are what allow us to assess that emotion’s fittingness.

This is brought out clearly in Goldie’s (2004) model of the form that emotional justification must take. In his cheerful example, you are presented with a maggot-infested piece of meat. Naturally, you think it is disgusting, which in Goldie’s terminology is to

\(^{10}\) It might be contended that this formula for fittingness has counterintuitive consequences: for example, it would apparently be unfitting to fear a mugger whose gun is a realistic toy, and so not actually dangerous. Although to my knowledge D’Arms and Jacobson do not address this type of case, I think it is reasonable to accept this implication but insist on a distinction between fitting and \textit{intelligible} emotion episodes (cf. Greenspan’s (1988) distinction between appropriate and \textit{understandable} feelings). Gerrymandering the concept of fittingness to avoid such consequences seems analogous to gerrymandering the concept of truth to avoid having to say that conscientiously-acquired, understandable beliefs can still be untrue. This sort of scenario, then, is useful for helping to sharpen the idea of fittingness.
ascribe a response-dependent or “emotion-proper” (253) property to it, namely disgustingness. You also feel visceral disgust toward the meat. Between these three elements—the infested meat, the ascription of disgustingness, and the experience of disgust—what justifies what? Goldie argues that the ascription of disgustingness cannot justify the feeling any more than the feeling can justify the ascription: both of these fail to provide the external standard that is required. To say that your disgust is warranted by your assessment of the meat as disgusting is not much better than saying that the feeling is warranted by itself.

As Mikko Salmela has put it, emotion episodes “cannot be justified by themselves, but only by reasons” (399). The only place to look for those reasons—that is, the only thing that can supply a justificatory standard—is, Goldie says, the meat itself. It is what justifies both the ascription of disgustingness and the experience of disgust. However, “the meat itself” is shorthand for a description of the facts of the case outlining how the criteria for fittingness are satisfied. In other words, what plays the justificatory role is not just the actual object of emotion, but rather a set of claims along these lines: “The formal object of disgust is *proximity to contamination*.¹¹ The situation of being confronted with the infested meat does in fact instantiate the formal object of disgust; so disgust is an appropriate type of emotion to feel. And in this case, given how close you are to the meat and how contaminated it is, disgust is appropriate for such-and-such an

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¹¹ Here I follow Lazarus, who holds that disgust’s core relational theme is “Taking in or being too close to an indigestible object or idea (metaphorically speaking)” (122).
amount of time, to such-and-such a degree of intensity.” This set of reasons is what I have called the facts of the case. They are what make this emotion episode fitting.\footnote{One might think that only the claims about the instantiation of the formal object do any work to justify the ascription of the emotion-proper property of disgustingness. That is, it may seem that \textit{proportionality} norms play no role in the latter. Perhaps this is so, but in some cases—such as the ascription of eeriness vs. the ascription of terrifyingness—it is at least conceivable that norms of proportionality are involved in justifying the ascription of such properties. Because I am more concerned here with the justificatory route from the facts to the experience itself (in which proportionality norms are incontestably operative), I will set this issue aside.}

Goldie captures this in a sketch of the generic form of emotion justification, with the arrows representing the direction of justification (adapted from 254):

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(1)] Justified ascription of emotion-proper property to actual object of emotion
  \item[(2)] Justified emotional response
  \item[(3)] Justifying reasons
\end{itemize}

Plugging Goldie’s example into this model, at (1) is the ascription of disgustingness; at (2) is the experience of disgust; and the justifying reasons at (3) are the facts of the case, specifying that the object of one’s disgust does in fact instantiate contamination, and that disgust is justified for such-and-such a duration to such-and-such a degree. The upper prongs, (1) and (2), together constitute an emotion episode: an intentional affective experience in which one implicitly or explicitly ascribes an emotion-proper property to the actual object of emotion. The fittingness of an emotion episode depends on facts and standards beyond its borders, down on level (3). As Goldie concludes, “the justifying route is only from the bottom up” (255).
This model is helpful for clarifying the place of response-dependent or emotion-proper properties in emotion evaluation: that is, on one of the upper prongs instead of on the justifying level. The reason this is useful is that when D’Arms and Jacobson discuss fittingness, they sometimes write as though it is the ascription of a response-dependent property, such as disgustingness, that does the normative work of certifying a feeling as fitting:

considerations of fittingness…bear on whether the emotion’s evaluation of the circumstances gets it right: whether the situation really is shameful, funny, fearsome, and so forth. (“Significance” 132)

However, as they also say, we are in need of “criteria for when these response-dependent evaluative properties obtain” (“Moralistic” 74). Goldie’s model allows us to see that it is the satisfaction of these criteria that justifies an emotion episode, which includes both the ascription of the response-dependent property and the feeling itself. And I have suggested that in particular, the criteria that are needed are claims about proportionality and the instantiation of the formal object.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{13}\) This is essentially the same point made by de Sousa (2011) in response to Salmela’s suggestion that the formal objects of emotions should be response-dependent properties. De Sousa notes that Salmela admits that not just any response-dependent property, but rather a merited one, justifies an emotion: and in Salmela’s example of frighteningness, what merits the ascription of frighteningness is dangerousness. I agree with this in the case of fear, though I will refine the point somewhat in Chapter Three, when trying to decide on nostalgia’s formal object. While de Sousa is correct that such properties are never themselves what can justify emotion episodes, when it comes to some emotion types, the most we can do to specify the formal object is to name the response-dependent property, on the understanding that further reasons are needed to say when it is instantiated (as Salmela and D’Arms and Jacobson admit). Those further reasons, not the
This bottom-up model, then, is the standard account of how to justify an emotion, whether we are evaluating it for fittingness or along some other normative dimension. For example, if one were to launch a moral defense of an episode of jealousy, then moral reasons are what would occupy the justificatory bottom level. However, unless otherwise specified, when I refer to the standard model, I will mean the above way of working out the justificatory relations in the context of fittingness. In other words, for my purposes, the bottom level of the standard model is inhabited by reasons pertaining to the fittingness of an emotion episode.

The general conception of emotional normativity and justification described above enjoys broad acceptance in the literature, and intuitive appeal. I have adopted D’Arms’ and Jacobson’s way of articulating the notion of an emotion’s fittingness as an independent normative standard, analogous to a belief’s truth value. From de Sousa, I have taken the notion of formal objects as the kind of property that enables us to make fittingness assessments. Finally, I have borrowed Goldie’s specification of the direction of justification, including a clarification of the role of response-dependent or emotion-proper properties in emotion evaluation.

It should be clear that the standard model is neutral on the perennial ‘constitutive’ question about the cognitive requirements on emotions as such. However we describe the ascription of properties to objects—that is, however we analyze emotional ‘judgments’ ‘perceptions’, or ‘construals’ of or about situations—nobody denies that some such thing response-dependent property, are what justify the emotion; but we cannot always spell out those reasons and include them in the name of the formal object in a way that is both plausible and informative. The example of nostalgia will illustrate this. In any case, what all theorists of emotional normativity agree upon is that we cannot do without some criteria, or standards of merit, external to the emotion experience itself. What controversy there is has only to do with how those are to be described.
occurs in the standard cases. Regarding the constitutive question, I am sympathetic to arguments by Phoebe Ellsworth (1994), Remy Debes (2009), de Sousa (2011), and D’Arms and Jacobson (2000a) that the debate is more terminological than usually recognized. If we move toward a more capacious characterization of cognitivity, many of the traditional battle lines cease to mark substantive disagreements. At any rate, like D’Arms and Jacobson (2000a; 2000b), I will discuss emotional normativity in such a way that it does not matter whether one subscribes to judgmentalism (e.g. Solomon 1993; Nussbaum 2001) or some manner of perceptual account of emotions (e.g. de Sousa 1987; Greenspan 1988; Roberts 2003; Prinz 2004). This is similar to the way in which normative and applied ethics can at least typically be conducted on metaethically neutral grounds. What the standard model requires is something that any theory of the nature of emotions, if it is descriptively adequate, has a place for.

1.2 Sentimentality and Unfittingness

In philosophy, sentimentality has generated a small but vociferous literature, in which there are many opinions on what it is and what is wrong with it. For example, although it is usually agreed that sentimentality is a quality of emotion episodes and not a distinct emotion type, writers diverge on the size of the class of emotions which can be had ‘sentimentally’. Some hold that only pleasantly tender emotions (such as affectionate sympathy) are eligible for sentimentality, while others hold that sentimentality can infect any kind of emotion, including putatively negative ones (such as indignation). Similarly,
while there is nearly universal consensus about sentimentality’s general defectiveness, there are disagreements about exactly what is defective about it.

Despite these disputes concerning its nature and its wrong-making features, certain themes surface frequently enough that it is reasonable to speak of a dominant view of sentimentality, which admits of slight variations. Two claims stand out in particular. The first widely shared view about sentimental emotions is that, in experiencing them, one is “misrepresenting the world” (Midgley 385)—that the sentimentalist is in some way “false-colouring an object in his thought” (Savile 339). Various mechanisms of misrepresentation figure in these accounts.

One is that sentimental emotions project or impose a property, or properties, onto a real object that lacks it. For example, Mark Jefferson holds that “[t]he qualities that sentimentality imposes on its objects are the qualities of innocence,” and that this usually involves “gross simplification” (527). Joseph Kupfer, although more liberal about the nature of the qualities imposed, agrees that what sentimentality does is “replace imaginative exploration with familiar image” (549, my emphasis). Likewise, de Sousa holds that sentimentality is “viciously projective” (Rationality 321). When it operates by means of projection, a sentimental emotion falsifies its object by seeing something in it that is not really there.

Projection is not the only way of misrepresenting an object of emotion. Other accounts emphasize the scenario in which certain qualities of an object, incompatible with the sentimental emotion, are ignored or expunged. If one skirts facts about the object of an emotion which are “of overriding significance” (Pugmire, Sentiments 132) to the appropriate emotional response to it, this too constitutes a falsification of the object.
Pugmire rightly notes that not all selectivity is distorting—it is only problematic to omit truths which are “pertinent to the kind and weight of emotion that is thereby aroused” (134). Thus, projection is not necessary for misrepresentation: the object may legitimately have some properties that invite the emotional response in question, but such a response still distorts the object if other properties somehow ought to outweigh them.

These two general means of distortion are not mutually exclusive. One may project some emotion-apt properties onto an object that lacks them, and simultaneously edit out those qualities of it which interfere with the emotion in question. Indeed, the notion of imposing some qualities lends itself to the idea of occluding certain others. It is therefore common for discussions of sentimentality to describe the mechanisms of misrepresentation interchangeably, such that the projection of innocence onto some thing is regarded (usually plausibly) as erasing a more somber reality. In summary, then, the first pillar of the dominant account of sentimentality is that a sentimental emotion misrepresents, distorts, or idealizes its object, either by adding something false, leaving out something true and significant, or both.

The second widespread claim about sentimentality concerns the source, rather than the object, of the implicated emotion. This claim trades on the idea that emotions are ordinarily and properly motivated by the things that they purport to be directed at: the ideal is a straightforward affective responsiveness to the world. In contrast, sentimental emotions are often thought to be motivated not by something in the world, but by the desire to experience the emotion in question. This characterization is usually credited to Oscar Wilde, who remarked that a sentimentalist “desires to have the luxury of an
emotion without paying for it” (80). The image of luxuriating in an emotion is echoed by others, who hold that sentimentality involves “the attempt to use something to secure a desired feeling” (Pugmire, Sentiments 135), and is “more concerned with the feelings as such than with their purported object” (Hamlyn 279). Thus, sentimental emotions are accused of harbouring a disagreement between their focus of attention, or the thing that the emotion is supposed to be about, and their motivating aspect, which is actually the desirability of feeling that way.

These two elements, misrepresentation and faulty motivation, are combined in the dominant account of sentimentality. The desire to feel a certain way motivates the sentimentalist to misrepresent the purported object of their emotion—the real thing, we might say, on which the emotion is only loosely based. Thus, depending on what types of emotion are eligible (for example, all emotions or just pleasant ones), sentimentality is characterized as “distorting reality to get a pretext for indulging in any feeling” (Midgley 386), or a feeling that “idealizes its object under the guidance of a desire for gratification and reassurance” (Savile 340). This two-step model underlies another common description of sentimental emotions as being cut off from the world, floating in a void, or divorced from their natural contexts (cf. Tanner; Pugmire 2006; de Sousa 1987). The disconnection of sentimental emotions from the world is another way of stating that they misrepresent their objects, and are motivated and sustained by something else, namely the attractiveness of a certain emotion experience.

14 Wilde’s characterization of a sentimental emotion as unearned, or purchased on the cheap, is an enduringly popular trope, and spreads to accounts of the related concept of kitsch. Cf. Scruton: “Kitsch deprives feeling of its cost” (193). I will return to kitsch in Chapter Five.
The general description of sentimental emotions as involving these two elements is what I will call the dominant account. On this account, sentimentality is not a neutral description of a feeling, but always a term of disapprobation. The tenor of the literature is revealing: the above authors variously refer to sentimentality as corrupting, dangerous, insidious, defective, lazy, soft, cheap, cowardly, hollow, craven, contemptible, and profane. And, to paraphrase Tanner, it is specifically a disease of the feelings. In sentimentality, we have a normative concept—one of relatively few—uniquely tailored to emotions. Of course, things other than emotion episodes can be labeled ‘sentimental’—artworks, personalities—but this is always a way of associating those things with sentimental emotion episodes.

For the most part, I will follow the tradition of understanding sentimentality as a ‘thick’ normative concept, which includes significant descriptive content and which serves as a term of censure. However, two points need to be made about this. The first is that there will be an exception: in Chapter Four, I question whether a form of nostalgia which seems to match the above description of a sentimental emotion is actually defective. There, for the sake of clarity, I will distinguish between descriptive sentimentality (which is normatively neutral), and vicious sentimentality (which is not).

Second, even when sentimentality is considered a normative rather than just descriptive term, it is not always easy to say just what is supposed to be wrong with it. I believe it is therefore fruitful to locate the charge of (vicious) sentimentality in the context of the standard model of emotion evaluation. The writers I have surveyed use the term ‘sentimentality’ to voice a variety of criticisms about emotion episodes. The term

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15 Even writers such as Pugmire, who allow for certain benign cases of sentimentality, use such terms to describe the paradigmatic cases.
seems to be a way of articulating an emotion’s unfittingness, its immorality, its usefulness, or perhaps other things besides. When evaluating whether an emotion is truly sentimental, then, we must ultimately look beyond that label and ask which of these normative standards is being appealed to in that guise. As such, the term is not perfectly reliable as an indicator of a given emotion’s (alleged) defect; instead, the accusation of sentimentality is an invitation to specify the latter. For this reason, I do not think it is important to settle on a definition of sentimentality, and labour to exclude rival conceptions. Sentimentality and other terms in its orbit (for example, mawkishness) simply provide a rich vocabulary which is used to express a host of more specific normative complaints.

Nonetheless, it is clear from the recurrent theme of misrepresentation and distortion that the charge of sentimentality has a prima facie claim to be interpreted as an evaluation of unfittingness. As we have seen, a sentimental emotion purports to be directed at some real thing (or, if fictional, some realistic thing), but that thing does not (or would not really) have the essential property that the emotion episode construes it as having. It is not that the emotion type itself is categorically deserving of condemnation, but that it is manifested in a situation in which the reasons external to the feeling do not support it. This seems just to be the picture of an emotion experience that is unfitting because it is not an appropriate emotion type to feel in the circumstances. So, although later there will be occasion to explore other interpretations of the charge of sentimentality (i.e. as the charge of unfittingness due to disproportionality, the charge of uselessness, and the charge of immorality), I will prioritize an interpretation of sentimentality as unfittingness due to inappropriate emotion type.
Just as it is more philosophically promising to test the merits of the sentimentality charge in terms of the concept of unfittingness, it is worth pointing out that this somewhat esoteric concept is also thereby shown to have a clear everyday application, albeit dressed up in different language. Talk of ‘fittingness’ in general, as D’Arms and Jacobson recognize, “may sound recherché, but ‘fittingness’ is simply intended as a technical term for a familiar type of evaluation” (“Moralistic” 72). At least in the context of the particular emotions we will turn to now, the more familiar form of evaluation that ‘unfittingness’ takes is the charge of sentimentality.
Chapter Two
Poignant Emotions and Their Intentional Objects

On the standard model of emotion evaluation, for an emotion episode to be fitting, its actual intentional object must instantiate the formal object of the emotion type in question. In Chapters Three and Five, I will explore the possible candidates for the formal objects of the poignant emotions that are our subject: nostalgia and lyrical emotions, respectively. First, however, it is important to have a sense of the actual objects that would instantiate the formal ones. The formal object may only be implicitly ascribed, a way of construing or presenting an object; the actual object, on the other hand, is what is consciously focused on in the emotion experience. Before deciding on an emotion’s standard of correctness, we must look more closely at the range of particular things that episodes of these emotion types are typically about.

In the case of nostalgia, this task is especially pressing, because discussions of the emotion have been dominated by false claims about the necessary conditions on its occurrence. These mischaracterizations specifically concern the type of past time that can figure in an episode of nostalgia, claiming that nostalgia is the result of comparing the ‘contents’ of two different times. I therefore call these content comparison accounts. The most popular of these views, which I call the poverty of the present requirement, doubles as a diagnosis of nostalgia as a kind of emotional escapism; and so adopting this requirement makes negative normative evaluations almost inevitable. However, this view is belied by a series of counterexamples which I will collectively label Proustian nostalgia. Proustian nostalgia centers on involuntary autobiographical memories and
often involves awareness of the altered condition of one’s memory (that is, it is frequently a form of what I will call *reflective* nostalgia). Thus, the first step toward understanding the normative status of nostalgia is clearing the air around the variety of actual objects taken by episodes of it.

Since there is much more writing about nostalgia than lyrical emotions, this chapter is asymmetrical, largely taken up by the task just described. Philosophers and other theorists of emotions have mostly ignored non-past-directed poignant feelings, especially those whose actual object is the very fact of time’s passage, or the present moment seen in that light. The advantage of this is that there is no tradition of misleading definitions and diagnoses from which to extricate ourselves. The drawback is that, because they have essentially not been analyzed, they are not very well understood. Still, that does not mean that examples of them are rare. In Section 2.6, I will use a series of examples to illustrate what I mean by lyrical emotions, showing the permutations of poignant affective experience which I group under that title. This will set up the discussion of lyrical emotions’ formal object and its normative status in Chapter Five.

Before turning to these discussions of nostalgia and lyrical emotions, I will begin with a brief overview of the concept of poignancy, which I treat as a wider category of emotion experience that serves to unite these two more specific emotion types. By the end of the chapter, with several examples of nostalgia and lyrical emotions on the table, the resemblance between them will be clear.
2.1 Poignancy as a Quality of Emotion Experience

Sometimes emotions directed at time’s passage are simple: relief at the end of a bad winter, or sadness when an idyllic summer comes to a close. In other cases our emotions about time are more complex, involving a combination of happiness and sadness. A common name to describe the latter is *poignancy*, defined by psychologists as “a mixture of happiness and sadness that occurs when one faces meaningful endings…that signify the passage of time” (Ersner-Hershfield et al. 159). In this section I will summarize this view of poignancy, and explain the relationship between it and the more specific emotion types that I regard as falling under that heading.

For the most part, research on poignancy has been conducted by psychologists working on socioemotional selectivity theory (SST). SST is a theory of motivation over the adult life-span which posits that perceived time constraints influence the subjective desirability of one’s goals. According to this view, the awareness of impending endings serves to heighten the desirability of emotionally meaningful experiences in the present, and lessen the appeal of pursuing long-term goals. As perceived time constraints tighten, the former are therefore selected more often than the latter. In this way, temporal limits are important contributors to motivation (Carstensen et al. 1999; Carstensen et al. 2000).

The theory regards the preference for ‘meaningful’ emotional experiences as a preference for *positive* emotions over negative ones. SST therefore predicts that older adults will experience more positive emotions and less negative ones than younger people, which is supported by various findings (Carstensen et al. 1999). However, this is complicated by the fact that the perception of endings naturally brings thoughts of loss
and finitude to the fore. Awareness of endings enhances one’s appreciation for the present, but also reminds one of its fleetingness. In this way, such awareness has a twofold emotional effect. Although we are typically not overtaken by negative emotions, our happiness tends to be combined with sadness. It is this experience of a mixed emotion, in response to endings perceived as meaningful, that SST researchers refer to as poignancy (Carstensen et al. 2000; Ersner-Hershfield et al. 2008).

Once again in agreement with SST, experiences of poignancy have also been found to increase in frequency with age. However, the relationship between poignancy and aging is a contingent one; what matters is not chronological aging as such, but the perception of endings that typically accompanies it. Age and a sense of limited time can and do come apart, and SST predicts that when younger adults construe time as fleeting, this perception will promote the experience of poignancy in the same fashion. Studies by Carstensen et al. (1998) on younger adults with a terminal illness reflect this. Furthermore, several studies by Ersner-Hershfield et al. (2008) demonstrate that poignant feelings are not limited to scenarios which directly conjure up mortality, but rather can be produced by imagining being in a personally meaningful location for the last time, or participating in actual milestone events such as college graduation.

In what follows, I will adopt this understanding of poignancy: it is a mixture of happiness and sadness in the face of meaningful endings perceived to result from the passage of time, available to anyone who faces such an ending. This captures a good deal of the term’s everyday application. That said, it is a specialized usage which departs from the occasional description of things as ‘poignant’ which are simply sad or pitiable, such
as a child-sized coffin.\(^1\) However, I also think it is too restrictive to say, with the SST theorists, that poignant experiences are only about (1) present or future endings that (2) bear on one’s own life. First, SST researchers hold that nostalgia, though an affectively similar mixed emotion dealing with time, is purely backward-looking, and therefore fails to anticipate an ending in the way required by poignancy (Ersner-Hershfield et al. 2008). While it is true that the loss involved in nostalgia is in the past, the experience of nostalgia also figures the present (and sometimes the future) as a time in which the longed-for past is and will be forever absent. For this reason it is false that nostalgia, or any other occurrent feeling of loss, is entirely backward-directed. Second, the examples of poignancy in the SST literature deal exclusively with actual or imagined situations in which the endings confronting subjects are endings in their own lives. Yet nothing precludes experiences of poignancy as empathetic reactions to the poignant feelings of others, or, for example, as responses to fictional situations which contain all the hallmarks of a poignant situation. With these caveats, then, I will proceed to use ‘poignancy’ in the sense outlined above.

A few more remarks are in order about my choice of this term. For my purposes, poignancy can be regarded as a category, class, or quality of emotion experience characterized by two components, one phenomenological and the other intentional. Respectively, these are its mixed valence, and its construal of its objects in terms of

\(^1\) Still, it is worth pointing out that even where ‘poignancy’ is best taken to mean ‘sadness’, we may catch a glimpse of the term’s more specialized use. Although calling a child-sized coffin poignant is decidedly not meant to refer to mixed valence or the inevitable passage of time, the use of the word seems to show that the sadness is directed in part at a world where something so terrible could happen, which is distinguishable from person-specific sadness. And this switch to a wide-angle lens, in which the particular is seen in the context of an ultimate fact about life or the world, is one component of the form of poignancy I will call lyrical emotion.
endings due to time’s passage. In poignancy, one feels that something is for the last time, or sees something against a background of endings occasioned by time. The specific forms of poignancy I investigate, nostalgia and lyrical emotions, fall into this category, and are paradigmatic examples of it. But I do not wish to claim that all poignant feelings must be classified either as nostalgic or lyrical emotions. Poignancy must be considered a class that admits of manifestations other than those emotion types. However, this raises two questions about my characterizations of the latter. First, if nostalgia and lyrical emotions are ‘forms’ of poignancy, why distinguish them as emotion types at all? Why not say instead that poignancy simpliciter is the emotion type, and it can be directed at different sorts of objects (such as the past)? Second and conversely, if it is true that nostalgia and lyrical emotions ought to be distinguished as emotion types, then why involve the term ‘poignancy’ in the first place? What does it add to my account?

Nostalgia and lyrical emotions share poignancy’s characteristic phenomenology and construal of its object in terms of an ending due to the passage of time, but what distinguishes them is the particular nature of the endings involved. My suggestion is that the intentional objects of nostalgia and lyrical emotions are specifically construed in terms of ultimate endings, and this air of finality, ascribed to the past or recognized in or about the present, marks them as distinct from poignancy in general. Although all poignancy is about endings, some of those endings concern regular or repeatable events or occasions: the birthday party might be over, for example, but there will be another one next year. By contrast, objects of nostalgia are construed as belonging to a completely irretrievable past, and in lyrical emotions, the fact of life’s transience (and sometimes, therefore, the transience of the present moment) is seen as ultimate and inescapable. So
we may say that while poignancy in general is directed at endings due to the passage of time, these specific emotion types are directed at *ultimate* endings due to the passage of time.

Being directed at these sorts of ultimate endings in the past and present mark these emotion experiences as more particular emotion types than simply poignancy as such. First, it qualitatively affects the experiences, to an extent that they must be distinguished in kind from experiences whose intentional objects only represent relative or minor endings. To use an imperfect analogy, the love between a long-married couple may belong in the same broad category of emotion as a child’s puppy love, but at some point it nonetheless makes sense to think of them as different in kind. Here too, I believe the particular sense of an ending in nostalgia and lyrical emotions is strong enough to set them apart from other manifestations of poignancy. This is an intuitive conclusion to draw from a comparison between one’s mild wistfulness at summer’s end with what Philip Levine will describe, in Chapter Five, as being ‘moved in the soul’. Second, nostalgia and lyrical emotions require their own standards of correctness, different both from each other’s and from poignancy’s in general. When we evaluate episodes of them, more is demanded of them than that their actual objects are ‘an ending due to the passage of time’. This will be especially evident in nostalgia, where desire plays a crucial role; but in both cases, establishing this must be postponed until a discussion of their formal objects can be had.

The other question raised above was about the advantage gained by grouping nostalgia and lyrical emotions together under the heading of poignancy, if they are specific emotion types with their own standards of correctness. It is true that technically,
nothing essential would be lost if one refused to apply the word ‘poignancy’ to these feelings. Just as fittingness and unfittingness can be discussed without mentioning sentimentality, nostalgia and lyrical emotions could be evaluated without referring to them as forms of poignancy. However, there are good reasons for doing so. First, even though they are more particular manifestations of the experience, it should still be clear that nostalgia and lyrical emotions as I describe them meet the definition of poignancy. Whatever else they involve, they are characterized by mixed valence and they construe their objects in terms of endings due to time’s passage. Second, the term poignancy is therefore helpful for articulating the relationship between nostalgia and lyrical emotions. Their common heritage as forms of poignant experience explains the easy transformation from one such episode into the other. It also explains the otherwise cryptic tendency to invoke the name of nostalgia when describing emotions that do not involve the past. One example of such a feeling is the one that suffuses Bashō’s haiku:

Even in Kyoto—

hearing the cuckoo’s cry—

I long for Kyoto. (Hass, *Haiku* 9)

One may be tempted to call this sort of feeling “nostalgia for the present” (e.g. Jameson 1989; Voznesensky 1978).

Finally, as with the vocabulary of sentimentality, ‘poignancy’ has the benefit of being a familiar and accessible term, rather than a term of art such as ‘lyrical emotions.’ It has the additional benefit of being a term that has been refined in a plausible way by
psychologists. And as we are about to find in the case of nostalgia, a good definition of this sort of emotion experience, even if it is broader than we need, is not something to pass up lightly.

2.2 Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a polysemous term. When attempts to describe or define it do so in a narrow manner, it tends to be described or defined poorly. After arguing that the most prevalent accounts fail as definitions of nostalgia, I will conclude that only a more pluralistic account of its intentional objects is adequate to capture the emotion’s paradigmatic cases. Nonetheless, by dialectically moving through the inadequate characterizations, a general picture of some of nostalgia’s central features will emerge.

To begin with, three important general notes must be made about the scope of this discussion. First, consonant with the standard model’s treatment of emotions in general, I will treat nostalgia as an occurrent emotion with phenomenal content, rather than a disposition to experience the former, or simply a fascination with the past. I thus leave aside the sense in which a person prone to reminiscence can be said to have a nostalgic personality, and likewise the sense in which collecting old things can be regarded as a nostalgic hobby.

The second point, related to the last, is that I will be concerned primarily with nostalgia as it is brought about by the kind of memory which at least “appears to be a “reliving” of the individual’s phenomenal experience during that earlier moment” (Brewer 60). Several names for this form of memory have been proposed—Brewer
prefers “recollective” memory—but the most enduring designation is episodic, coined by Tulving (1972) and distinguished from semantic memories, which are memories for meanings and propositions. Of course, one can have semantic memories about ‘episodes’ in one’s past, such as the fact that one went camping in Oregon as a child; by contrast, in Tulving’s sense, an episodic memory of that trip would involve a sense of being in the scene and of what it was like to be there (for example, the wet smell of the air, the feeling of freedom in a near-empty campground, and so on). The notion of reliving the past cannot, of course, be treated entirely literally, on pain of equating episodic memories with hallucinatory flashbacks (cf. Matthen 2010). It should instead be treated as shorthand for the idea that, in episodic memories, some elements of a past conscious state seem to be reactivated in present consciousness (cf. Moscovitch 1995).

Finally, the distinction between episodic and semantic memory corresponds very roughly to a distinction that should be made between two types of past commonly said to be implicated in nostalgic longing. These are, respectively, the personal past, about which one can have episodic memories, and the historical past, about which one can only have semantic memories beyond a certain point. Because my focus is on episodic or recollective memories, I will ignore the sense in which the longing to experience bygone eras, such as Victorian England or the Italian Renaissance, is sometimes referred to as nostalgia. However, that is not to deny that the subject matter of episodic memories can come to be viewed, in hindsight, as deeply entwined with the wider historical conditions of the time in question. Consider, for example, Robert Hass’ description of a memory of his father: “His wink at me was a nineteen-forties wink” (Time 18). The cultural aura of that era might then contribute both to one’s memories, and to one’s longing for an
ostensibly personal past. Because such memories are still episodic, they are included among the kind of experience I am exploring here; the implications of the alteration of personal memories on the evaluation of nostalgia will be the focus of Chapter Four.

2.2.1 Content Comparison Accounts of Nostalgia

Minimally, nostalgia involves apprehending an apparent difference between the past and the present. Many accounts identify the operative difference in the respective attributes or qualities of two temporally distant states of affairs. Such accounts may be individuated according to the specific features in respect of which the past and present allegedly diverge. I will refer to such accounts as ‘content comparison’ accounts and consider two versions, naming each after the necessary condition it stipulates for episodes of nostalgia. The naïveté requirement demands that there be a particular discrepancy in knowledge between the past and the present. The poverty of the present requirement claims that nostalgia involves an evaluation that the past was preferable to the present. The phenomena to which these accounts appeal are familiar, and indeed present in some nostalgic experiences. However, I will argue that neither is necessary for nostalgia in the manner that is typically believed, even when the particular content of the nostalgic past is an important factor in the experience.
2.2.2 The Naïveté Requirement

The past-directedness of nostalgia encourages characterizations of the experience emphasizing the importance of hindsight. For example, Richard Moran claims of “[nostalgic or wistful forms of imagination]” that “it is part of their essence to capture a sharp sense of the difference between the world as represented by the naïve state of mind of one’s former self and the (then) unappreciated truth about the transience of that former world” (91). On this account, a necessary condition for nostalgic memories is that they be directed at times when one was unaware of the impermanence of one’s surroundings.

Expressions of nostalgia often describe gazing back across this particular epistemic gap. As Wallace Stegner writes in *Wolf Willow,*

The very richness of that past as I discover it now makes me irritable to have been cheated out of it then. I wish I could have known it early, that it could have come to me with the smell of life about it instead of the smell of books, for there was the stuff of an epic there…All of it was legitimately mine, I walked that earth, but none of it was known to me.

(112)

Similarly, reminiscing in “Italian Days” about his service in the Southern European Task Force, Charles Wright writes:

On alternative Sundays we’d drive to Soave and Asolo,
Padova and the Euganean Hills,

Always looking for the event,

not knowing that we were it…

No thought of that back then. (*World* 89-90)

In an essay on Wright, Mark Jarman considers these lines and answers the last one: “No, of course not, for had there been, there would have been no youth, none of the experience that rises again and again from the darkness of memory” (103). Once again, we find the assumption that scenes are eligible to be screened in nostalgia’s theatre only if they meet a certain standard of naïveté. This idea is repeated by Susan Stewart, according to whom “[t]he nostalgic dreams of a moment before knowledge and self-consciousness” (23). Likewise, Boym concludes her long study of nostalgia with the claim that “we are all nostalgic for a time when we were not nostalgic” (355), a state of mind not yet initiated into loss.²

It is true, as Moran and others suggest, that nostalgia involves a sharp sense of difference between the present and the past. Likewise, episodes of nostalgia may involve a perception of transience. But there is less reason to believe that the transience of the former world must necessarily have been *unappreciated*. In fact, we should doubt an

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² Peters echoes this theme with his view that nostalgia fixates on the “pre-ambivalent” (135); that is, on a time before the ambivalence of nostalgic desire. Lowenthal (1985) makes the same point on a larger scale, claiming that nostalgia for other historical periods edits out any nostalgia that may have existed within the target period; in effect, historical nostalgia is supposed to be possible only for periods perceived to be naïve.
account of nostalgia that demands that there be a discrepancy between past naïveté and present wisdom.

The reason comes out of the fact that we are able to consider the present as the subject of a future memory. In “The Window”, for example, Roo Borson writes:

It’s not a night for sleeping
but for remembering what it will be like
years from now, remembering this. (18)

Arguably, this thought is ambiguous between an empirical prediction that the night will be remembered, and a judgment that it should be; perhaps it contains both. But, either way, it depicts an awareness of the impermanence of one’s present surroundings. The key question is then whether it is possible to nostalgically remember experiences which featured such awareness. Such a possibility is attested to in Per Petterson’s Out Stealing Horses, in a passage which finds the narrator nostalgically remembering the following moment from childhood:

I took deep breaths through my nose and thought that no matter how life should turn out and however far I travelled I would always remember this place as it was just now, and miss it. (30)

This, then, would be nostalgia for a time during which one was conscious of the transience of one’s present world. If a nonfictional experience could meet this
description—and interviews by sociologist Fred Davis suggest that it can\(^3\)—then it is false that nostalgia depends on an epistemic advantage enjoyed by the future self over its past, in the way described by Stegner and Wright. This common view of nostalgia’s conditions fails to capture the full range of genuinely nostalgic experiences. Indeed, it would be odd if, simply by reflecting on a moment’s transience, one thereby inoculated it against future longing.

However, while it must be admitted that one can be aware of the transience of the present, one could object that such awareness is never the same as the awareness one will enjoy later. Perhaps there is, in some sense, less understanding of the present’s transience than there will be in the future. If so, then it could be claimed that nostalgia still depends on that difference in understanding. The naïveté requirement could thereby be modified into a relative naïveté requirement, which preserves the idea that nostalgia requires knowledge of a given time’s transience to an extent possible only in retrospect.

It might seem a truism that, with the passing of time, one acquires greater understanding of a time’s impermanence; a wider temporal perspective could be thought to increase such understanding in an obvious and inevitable way. If this was the case, meeting the relative naïveté requirement for nostalgia would be guaranteed. On such a view, someone who reflects on the present’s impermanence will naturally have less understanding of it than they will have later. It would always be adequate to offer the explanation “Because they’re older now” as an account of why someone is more aware of a given time’s transience later than they were before.

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\(^3\) For example: “a young woman...said she imagined herself a grandmother looking back nostalgically on the infancy of her daughters-to-be” (Davis 12). It bears mentioning that Lowenthal places this anecdote among other specimens of “nostalgia’s kitschy absurdities” (12)—charges of a kind I will address later.
But it is doubtful that one automatically acquires greater understanding of a time’s impermanence as one gets older. Even if such an increase is the normal process, we can also imagine someone losing their sense of a former world’s transience as they age, despite having possessed that sense at the time. The child Petterson describes who paused in the forest, acutely sensitive to his surroundings and anticipating that he would miss that moment in the future, might have grown into someone with a drab memory of the occasion, and little sense of that former world at all. Unless we are to judge that in all such cases the future self is nonetheless better informed (somehow), the potential for such disagreements between past and future selves establishes that wisdom about impermanence does not necessarily keep pace with age.

If we do not obviously and automatically gain greater awareness of time’s transience as it passes, then it seems that the account we began with has lost another piece of its intuitive appeal. The original claim was that a nostalgic memory is necessarily directed at a time during which one was unaware of the fleetingness of that time. Pressured by counterexamples, the claim was modified to allow for nostalgia directed at times when one was aware of such impermanence, as long as one has more awareness later. Another example showed that a future self need not necessarily have any epistemic advantage over a past self when it comes to impermanence. The whittled-down claim before us, then, is that in every case of nostalgia—though not in all memories—the future self still must have greater awareness of the relevant time’s transience. But after relinquishing the platitude that the old are simply wiser in these matters than the young, the new claim has the burden of arguing for a specific conception of ‘greater awareness’ that would explain why the past self really had less of it. It is unclear that this could be
satisfactorily explained: when the former self’s awareness of transience was undeniably acute, it seems likely that in some such cases it would merely be dogmatic to claim that one’s later awareness nonetheless must trump that of the former self. Will it always be evident that the difference one perceives between the past and the present should be identified as a difference in this particular respect? Apparently, we would be left with inconclusive phenomenological testimony to settle an empirical claim; and the whittled-down naïveté requirement might only be able to rise above that fray by appealing again to the discredited ‘automatic increase’ thesis.

There might be some for whom the claim is still sufficiently intuitive that they would hope for a way to settle such issues in its favour. My view is that former naïveté, as a necessary condition on nostalgia, reveals itself to be an overgeneralization. It can appear to be definitional when our crop of examples is limited to memories of innocence—especially those which portray early childhood (when “one was able, unconsciously, to scramble among the hills” (Colley 211)). But once we recognize that nostalgia is not so limited, the naïveté requirement seems ill-fitting.

2.2.3 The Poverty of the Present Requirement

The naïveté requirement claimed that in nostalgia the older self must know more. An even more common assumption pulls in a different direction, suggesting that nostalgia must be motivated by the felt deprivation of the older self: in some respect, nostalgia involves a judgment that the past was better. As we will see, there are a few possible versions of this view, which I call the poverty of the present requirement.
An evaluative comparison of past to present is proposed as a necessary condition by Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw, for whom nostalgia requires “some sense that the present is deficient” (3). Davis foregrounds the same idea by defining nostalgia as

a positively toned evocation of a lived past in the context of some negative feeling toward present or impending circumstance…that subjective state which harbors the relatively unexamined belief that things were better (more beautiful) (healthier) (happier) (more civilized) (more exciting) then than now. (18)

According to Davis, it is “requisite” that a comparison along these lines be made “before it can be said that a nostalgic experience has occurred” (16). More specifically, the present is “invariably felt to be, and often reasoned to be as well, more bleak, grim, wretched, ugly, deprivational, unfulfilling, frightening, and so forth” (15). This view reflects a broad consensus about the evaluations that populate the nostalgic imagination.

In a similar passage, Linda Hutcheon writes that for the nostalgist,

The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present—which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational. Nostalgic distancing sanitizes

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4 Thus, despite his allowance for what he calls second- and third-order nostalgia, which add extra layers of self-scrutiny and reflection to the experience, his account makes this evaluative comparison a necessary condition of any experience which we may call nostalgia.
as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent, safe…in other words, making it so very unlike the present. (par. 9)

The idea that nostalgia involves a negative judgment of the present and a positive judgment of the past is echoed by others; indeed, most writers on nostalgia offer some version of it, typically in list form. Thus James Phillips holds that the present must appear “stretched out, confused, conflicted, or anxious” (66), while on the flip side Roderick Peters states that nostalgia’s objects serve as symbols of “peace, beauty, harmony, warmth, freedom from want and timelessness” (136). More succinctly, Philip Johnson-Laird and Keith Oatley classify nostalgia as the feeling of being “mildly sad as a result of remembering one’s happiness in a past situation” (117). Likewise, in Gut Reactions, Jesse Prinz writes that “Reminiscing is recalling a good time while recognizing its absence. This gives us a sense of loss, which triggers a sadness response. This combination of joy and sadness is nostalgia” (165).

Many such characterizations of the nostalgic past are threatened by counterexamples, such as nostalgia for war and other hardships. These ‘negative’ objects of nostalgia run the gamut from oppressive boarding schools to totalitarian societies, as in the punningly-named “Ostalgie” for the former East Germany. As David Lowenthal remarks, “horrendous memories” (7) can also be candidates for nostalgia, and Derek Parfit writes that “Even if, in the present, some experience is either neutral, or even

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5 The same view is standard in psychoanalytic writings; for example, Nandor Fodor writes that nostalgists pine for “a far-away fairy land where all strife ceases and life rolls smoothly in a state of perfection and bliss” (qtd. in Smith 513)). Unsurprisingly, psychoanalytic interpretations of nostalgia usually assume that the nostalgic past is, at least for men, a surrogate for the preoedipal mother.
unpleasant, it can be remembered with great joy” (514). Some such cases, no doubt, involve selective remembering or full-blown confabulation. Either of those routes leads to cases of ‘nostalgia for the bad’ that are assimilable to the poverty of the present model by way of a cognitive error in the ascription of preferability. But other phenomena tell against the notion that we invariably long for times which we now regard as having been peaceful, easy, and safe. As Ann Colley observes,

Nostalgia does not always rid memory of the dangerous and the violent. It does not, as some would claim, consistently reject the negative or cast the unwanted into oblivion…[but sometimes] surfaces the excitements associated with the more difficult, fearful, and threatening episodes. (209)

Like the naïveté requirement, then, the proposal that nostalgia is always for one’s halcyon days seems designed for early childhood nostalgia; it does a poor job of accommodating other manifestations of the experience. If we allow that clear-eyed nostalgia for the bad is possible, the poverty of the present model is, at the very least, forced to evolve beyond the simple form suggested by the writers above. Furthermore, admitting that there can be nostalgia for the dangerous and frightening complicates the standard accusation that nostalgists are afraid of the present or future. Rather than conflicted or anarchic, the nostalgist’s present may just appear to them “undistinguished, unexciting, blank” (Wood 344).  

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6 Woolf makes a similar point about the present needing to seem unremarkable if nostalgia is to occur, but in her version, unremarkability seems to mean placidity more than dullness: “The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like
The quality of the nostalgic past is not always nailed down in concrete terms at all. Instead, nostalgia is sometimes held (as in Davis and Hutcheon, whose lists are disjunctive) to be a matter of seeing in the past the negation of some undesirable feature of the present. An appropriately generic template is provided by Stewart: nostalgia aims to “authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present” (139). Similarly, Robert C. Roberts’ definition attributes the painful dimension to a memory which “occasions a disadvantageous comparison that embitters the present” (Emotions 280). This view has the advantage of relative pluralism about nostalgia’s actual object, so that it proves more resilient against straightforward objections which appeal to nostalgia for the bad. Other than the constraint that the perceived past quality be judged more desirable than the present one it inverts, the pluralistic poverty of the present model allows nostalgia to be directed at times characterized by a wide range of particular features. What is necessary is just that the desirable features appear to be compromised or lacking in the present.

Typically, the foregoing account is accompanied by a further assumption that nostalgia imaginatively projects desirable features onto the past, rather than represents qualities which the past possessed. In Hutcheon’s terms, the nostalgic past is not recollected but constructed in accordance with present needs, and according to Phillips, in nostalgia “I select out certain moments, assign them more nostalgic valency. Events are fashioned into a kind of imaginary product” (66). When packaged with this view, the poverty of the present requirement yields an intuitively appealing story about nostalgia’s psychology: first, one makes a negative assessment of the present and/or future, and then, the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths” (“Sketch” 108).
aided by a selective memory, one flees to an idealized and imaginary past. From that point on, the flaws one encounters are regarded not simply as flaws, but flaws of the present, and these are taken as further evidence of the imagined decline. Jean Starobinski, in an influential history of the concept of nostalgia, regards this picture as the modern consensus: nostalgia is a “reaction” to the present that evinces a “lack of adaptation” (101). Coupled with the projectionist assumption, then, the pluralistic poverty of the present requirement is a cornerstone of the received wisdom about nostalgia.

2.3 Proustian Nostalgia

With a more plausible content comparison model of nostalgia before us, we may begin to assess its cogency. In particular, it should be asked whether there is, or could be, a type of nostalgia that does not involve regarding the past as a time preferable to the present (in any respect relevant to the experience). In this section I will suggest that the central mnemonic phenomenon described by Proust—nostalgic involuntary autobiographical memories, most famously triggered by a tea-soaked madeleine—does not fit with this model. Instead, I will argue, the Proustian phenomenon points to a different analysis. This is all the more significant because A la recherche du temps perdu

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7 This diagnosis is widely shared. Nawas and Platt endorse Starobinski’s view almost verbatim: “nostalgia [is] a reaction to an unsuccessful adaptation to the present environment” (390, qtd. in Werman). Similarly, Lasch discusses what he considers to be the standard contemporary take on nostalgic longing, which is that it “betrays a regressive psychology…some profound insecurity or incapacitating personal disappointment” (65). Also, to further anticipate the charge that nostalgia is viciously sentimental, see Dilman’s diagnosis that sentimentality “arises from a need of [the sentimentalist’s] personality and it is tailored to meet that need” (288).
is, by any reckoning, literature’s archetypal case of nostalgia. That said, my intention is not to give a reading of Proust, but to extract from him an account of an experience shared by other writers, whom I will draw on below.

At the forefront of a recent boom in involuntary memory research is the work of cognitive psychologist Dorthe Berntsen. According to Berntsen, the involuntary memories described by Proust typically have the following main characteristics:

1. They involve the spontaneous recovery of a forgotten scene.
2. The scene is usually (though not necessarily) about a remote event, such as from childhood.
3. Their retrieval is heavily cue-dependent, without the influence of any motivation to remember the scene, e.g. one’s current conditions.
4. They are typically activated by sensory cues.
5. They involve a strong sense of reliving the past; immersion in another time.
6. They are accompanied by a strong feeling of joy (“Involuntary” 26-7).

All of these can be observed in Proust’s description of Marcel’s involuntary memories in the volume *Time Regained*, at a party at the house of the Princesse de Guermantes. His

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8 In case this is not self-evident, cf. Boym, Davis, Hutcheon, Lowenthal, and Philips (of just the writers mentioned above). As Werman puts it, Proust is “the most famous grand nostalgique” (394).

9 Berntsen’s preferred term for the memories in question here is “involuntary autobiographical memories”, which distinguishes them from unbidden semantic memories. For brevity’s sake, I will simply use “involuntary memories” to refer to the autobiographical variety.
various visions of “forgotten days” \((TR\) 224) are cued by the feeling of uneven cobblestones beneath his feet, the sound of a spoon clinking against a plate, and the texture of a napkin.\(^\text{10}\) The stones return him to the baptistery of St. Mark’s in Venice, whose floor was also uneven; the sound of the spoon reminds him of the sound of his train car being repaired, stopped temporarily on the edge of a forest; and the napkin induces the memory of a towel he used at Balbec, standing in a window and looking at the promenade and the sea. Just as in the madeleine incident Marcel writes that “the whole of Combray and its surroundings…sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea” \((SW\) 64), these involuntary memories are so strong that “the moment to which I was transported seemed to me to be the present moment” \((TR\) 225):

they not only oblige our eyes to cease to see the room which is near them in order to look instead at the railway bordered with trees or the rising tide, they even force our nostrils to breathe the air of places which are in fact a great distance away. \((TR\) 234)

In other words, what returns is not just one forgotten sensation associated with the present-day cue, but “all the other sensations linked on that day to that particular sensation” \((TR\) 224). More than merely miscellaneous sensations, they yield the “whole instant of my life on whose summit they rested” \((TR\) 226)—a condensed experience of \textit{that time}. Richard Wollheim describes something similar when he remarks that in memory, “a single picnic with tomatoes and small curly leaves of basil and the crunch of

\(^{10}\) I will use the following abbreviations to refer to specific volumes of Proust: \textit{Swann’s Way} \((SW)\); \textit{Time Regained} \((TR)\).
salt can signify a complete Tuscan summer” (Thread 100). For Proust, it is the feeling of a vast context restored by a particular sensation that affords such profound, “all-powerful joy” (SW 60): “the pleasure which this contemplation had, at rare intervals, given me in my life, was the only genuine and fruitful pleasure that I had known” (TR 234).

While Berntsen’s six characteristics are evident in these anecdotes, she neglects to consider a final one, which is the immersion’s typical *ephemeral*ity. In contrast with the notion of indefinitely long reveries—lucid dream-tours of one’s past—the special quality of the memories is attributed to them only “during the second that they last” (TR 234). What this suggests is that Marcel can breathe the air of distant places only for an inhalation or two. This is significant, because it rescues his experience of nostalgic involuntary memories from idiosyncrasy. As Berntsen describes it, Proust had an “extreme” “ability” (Involuntary 139) to mentally time-travel, which was a crucial ingredient in his genius. However, figuring in the fleetingness to which Marcel attests, the Proustian experience seems to be of a piece with cases of nostalgia described by others.

A short survey of various poems and novels suffices to establish the familiarity of identifiably Proustian memory experiences. In “Nostalgia”, Jan Zwicky describes an encounter with an object from childhood in these terms:

…the sudden lurch

a kind of memory

shock, shift

to a real past tense. (50)
What comes back here is not a particular event, but the world of childhood in its specificity (“a real past tense”). In addition to the feeling of immersion, the shocking lurch clearly indicates that the memory is involuntary. In another poem called “Nostalgia”, Wright brings out the experience this way:

Always it comes when we least expect it, like a wave,
Or like the shadow of several waves,
    one after the next…

Breaks up and re-forms, breaks up, re-forms.
And all the attendant retinue of loss foams out
Brilliant and sea-white, then sinks away. (Short 36)

Here, too, the surprise (“when we least expect it”) shows that nostalgia may be prompted by involuntary memories; the metaphor of a wave breaking and foaming out suggests that the experience lasts only for a moment. Elsewhere Wright paints much the same picture: “Nostalgia arrives like a spring storm / Looming and large with a fine flash” (Scar 5).

The novelist Esther Salaman, whose personal record of involuntary memories is often referenced in the psychological literature, also testifies to the ephemerality of nostalgic involuntary memories, contrasting them with voluntary reminiscences when visiting other Russian émigrés:
Such purposeful journeys in chosen company were not at all like my unpredictable, sudden homesickness, my feelings of something precious in the past, reassuring by its mere existence, a fleeting joy, not to be held even for a moment in the mind. (14)

The fleetingness and involuntariness of nostalgia are not the only overlapping features between the experiences Proust recounts and those recounted by others. Illustrating the role of sensory cues, as well as the spillage from a present sensory modality to memories of another one, W.S. Merwin describes sitting at an old piano and beginning to play:

through the notes my mother’s hand appears
above my own and hovers over the keys
waiting to turn the pages of Czerny
whose composition has completely dissolved

from her hand a scent of almonds rises
which she had put on after whatever she had been doing
it survives with the sound into another life (Shadow 22)\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\) In fact, this entire collection of poems, The Shadow of Sirius, is memory-haunted, and often presents the past and present as two different lives. Elsewhere Merwin ends a poem by simply listing spontaneously retrieved memories: “a house long gone into air / the flutter of tires over a brick road / cool light in a vanished bedroom / the flash of the oriole / between one life and another / the river a child watched” (74).
Similarly, in Don DeLillo’s novel *Underworld*, a series of fleeting memories is cued by the smell of sunscreen:

The musky coconut balm and the adolescent savor of heat and beach and an undermemory of seawater rush, salt scour in the eyes and nose…I glimpsed something, a mental image, a sort of nerve-firing, a desert flash—the briefest puddled color of an ice-cream vendor weaving through high sand. (64)\(^{12}\)

Finally, many writers attest to the emotional impact—whether pure joy, astonishment, or the bittersweetness of poignancy—of remembering long forgotten moments, unincorporated into what Berntsen calls “the standard edition of our life story” (*Involuntary* 140). This is also reflected in the psychological findings about involuntary memories. As Rubin et al. argue,

Because involuntary memories arise associatively with no preceding search description, they allow for less emotion regulation and thus more emotional reaction and mood change than voluntary memories. The lack of a search also means that involuntary memories are less likely to involve

\(^{12}\) The idea expressed by the neologism “undermemory”, namely that certain early memories feel somehow deeper than ordinary ones, is also found in Donald Justice’s “Memory of a Porch” about the poet’s childhood in Miami. After describing the titular porch, he writes: “And in the deep silence / Below all memory / The sighing of ferns / Half asleep in their boxes” (72).
one of the most common forms of search, narrative organization…and thus are less likely to be central to the person’s life story. (605)

Similarly, Proust has Marcel insist that there must be “no connecting link” between the involuntarily remembered past and the present, and hold that the intervention of “oblivion” is a prerequisite of the memory’s effect (TR 228). In “Lonesome Pine Special”, Wright acknowledges this characteristic by interrupting a series of autobiographical fragments with the question:

What is it inside the imagination that keeps surprising us

At odd moments

when something is given back

We didn’t know we had had

In solitude, spontaneously, and with great joy? (World 69)

This sort of wonderment is a common theme in literary depictions of involuntary memory. In Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, several characters are stopped short by the peculiarity of their spontaneously retrieved memories. In one example, Lily Briscoe wonders:

Why, after all these years had that survived, ringed round, lit up, visible to the last detail, with all before it blank and all after it blank, for miles and miles? (230-1)
In the poem “With old eyes I look back”, Pär Lagerkvist gives the same refrain:

Why do I remember this? What have I to do with it?...

A stony road,

a wagon, an old car track (107-109)

And, echoing the Proustian thesis that these memories liberate one from the constraints of a hardened self-narrative, Michael Ondaatje writes:

All these fragments of memory…so we can retreat from the grand story and stumble accidentally upon a luxury, one of those underground pools where we can sit still. (148)

There are striking resemblances between the experiences adduced above and the one commonly associated with Proust. Of course, some of these experiences may contain features that others do not. With that caveat, however, the similarities are strong enough to warrant referring to such experiences collectively as Proustian nostalgia.¹³

¹³ It is also interesting to note that Berntsen’s characterization of Proustian nostalgia meets James’ definition of a “mystical experience” as one which features “Noetic quality,” “Transiency”, “Passivity”, and “Ineffability” (Varieties 414-5, my emphasis). I have not concentrated on ineffability in relation to nostalgia, but it is a common theme of nostalgic literature: Willa Cather’s My Antonia is a paean to “the incommunicable past” (273), and in A Short History of the Shadow, Wright implores “that which is dear to me come back…Now boundless, now inexpressible” (22, my emphasis). What is especially noteworthy, given our purposes later on, is James’ observation that these experiences are routinely dismissed as “vague and vast and sentimental” (414).
2.3.1 Proustian Nostalgia and the Poverty of the Present Requirement

Many theorists of nostalgia whose positions can be classified under the poverty of the present model advert to key features of Proustian nostalgia in their accounts. Indeed, it would be surprising if it were neglected. Thus, we have seen Peters refer to the timelessness and beauty of the nostalgic past, and Hutcheon to its sense of completeness. In general, the felt ‘compression’ of the nostalgic past—for example, the sudden and entire presence of Combray in a single moment—is a recurrent theme. Lowenthal writes that “the here and now lacks the felt density and completeness of what time has filtered and ordered” (3), and Philips suggests that the present feels comparatively “stretched out”.14 Both Edward Casey and Starobinski alight on the synecdochical character of Proustian involuntary memories when they remark upon the sensation in nostalgia of experiencing “the world of our childhood as an isolable entity or event” (Casey 366), and “this universe which emerges fleetingly from oblivion” (Starobinski 93, my emphasis).

The problem, I suggest, is that the poverty of the present model homogenizes nostalgia by lumping such features together with others, seen above, that are not necessarily part of Proustian nostalgia at all. For every intriguing reference to the nostalgic past’s aura of fullness and completeness, there are references to its harmoniousness, ease, and freedom from want; for every perceptive (albeit elusive) report of the nostalgist’s present appearing “stretched out”, we also find it being called ugly, anxious, and contaminated. This tendency appears to be the product of mixing

14 Compare this dialectic with Zwicky, for whom the past feels “full / somehow – but full of what?” (53), and Salaman, for whom, after an involuntary memory, “the now felt endless” (14).
description with a preferred diagnosis; namely, that the nostalgic past is devised in response to dissatisfaction with the present or future.

This is not to deny that nostalgia is sometimes best analyzed as the poverty of the present model proposes. Rousseau, for example, claims that when he is unable to sleep from “feverish agitation”,

I often distract myself from my present state by thinking about the different events of my life, and the feelings of contrition, tenderness, sweet memories, and regrets, help to make me forget my suffering for a few moments. (qtd. in Poulet, *Studies* 174)

This case exemplifies the notion of nostalgia as a reaction to an uneasy present. Furthermore, cases that cohere with the poverty of the present requirement may also have features which overlap with ostensibly Proustian ones. Unlike Rousseau’s strategic escape into memory, Tennyson’s “A Dream of Fair Women” describes involuntary recall, triggered by the smell of violets, in which the past is figured in prelapsarian terms: “Poured back into my empty soul and frame / The times when I remember to have been / Joyful and free from blame” (10). Likewise, as we saw, Salaman finds comfort and reassurance in her involuntary memories of Russia.

But despite these points of contact, now that Proustian nostalgia has been described, it appears to be a definitive counterexample to the poverty of the present requirement. I will point out several characteristics which argue against analyzing Proustian nostalgia on that model (some of which, we have seen, are mentioned by
defenders of the requirement themselves). The ill fit of the first three characteristics—unmotivatedness, fleetingness, and simple involuntariness—reveal that the poverty of the present model is more naturally suited to nostalgia conceived of as a character trait, ongoing sentiment, or pattern of judgments. When it comes to Proustian nostalgia, the model does not, to paraphrase Amélie Rorty (1980), remain close to the descriptive ground. The fourth characteristic is less about a poor match between the model and the facts, and more about an explanatory shortcoming of the poverty of the present model in the face of the particular way in which Proustian nostalgia may be directed at bad times.

The first consideration that argues against assimilating Proustian nostalgia to the poverty of the present model is that the former experience is unmotivated. Motivations are not the same as cues. As described by Berntsen, a motivation is some preexisting state of the subject—e.g. a need or desire—which plays an enabling or causal role in triggering a memory. In addition to Marcel’s views on the matter, findings from six studies summarized in Berntsen (2009) corroborate Proust on the role of chance encounters by indicating that specific environmental cues are in fact the most common triggers of involuntary memories. Since we are not in control of the majority of stimuli with which we come into contact, this result “underscores the accidental nature of involuntary autobiographical memories” (90).

On the other hand, nostalgia as it is described by proponents of the poverty of the present model is the paradigm of a motivated experience. As we have seen, a definitive feature of the view is that nostalgia is a response to some present need or desire. Such a view therefore seems badly equipped to capture this feature of Proustian nostalgia.
A defender of the poverty of the present requirement could respond that this argument presumes that cues and enabling motivations are somehow mutually exclusive. In fact, Proust himself gives ample support to a reading on which dissatisfaction with his life motivates his involuntary memories. Arriving at the afternoon party in *Time Regained*, Marcel is despondent about his literary ambitions, and then, once he apprehends the stir of involuntary memories, he claims that “all anxiety about the future, all intellectual doubts had disappeared” (223). Turning to empirical treatments of involuntary autobiographical memories, there are indications that motivations play at least an enabling role in subjects’ responsiveness to environmental cues. Berntsen (2007) speculates that motivational factors may be what account for otherwise puzzling evidence. For example, diary studies often reveal more thematic consistency among a subject’s memories, such as recurrent memories of a particular holiday, than could plausibly be explained by reference to external cues alone. Some motivation on the part of the individual to remember the holiday, such as their desire to travel again, could fill this gap. More concretely, experiments by John Mace (2005) demonstrate that the content of individuals’ involuntary autobiographical memories can be successfully primed by voluntary recollection; after purposely dwelling on a particular period of their lives, participants’ records of their subsequent involuntary memories showed an increase in memories related to that period. Given such a finding, might it not be plausible that nostalgic involuntary memories depend on a motivation after all, primed or otherwise instigated by a negative evaluation of the present?

The difficulty is that merely establishing the existence (and sometimes, the explanatory appeal) of motivations gives no particular support to the poverty of the
present model. For one thing, the model, insofar as it sets forth a necessary condition, requires a motivation in all cases, and it seems undeniable that some cases of Proustian nostalgia only have cues. Furthermore, the model requires a specific motivation, namely a negative assessment of the present, and attributing this to the Proustian nostalgist may not always be convincing (e.g. in Wright’s examples). Finally, even if Marcel’s despondency is construed as a motivation along the lines required by the model (though it could also, after all, be causally unconnected), the model would lead one to expect the resultant memories to be of idyllic times, in order to cushion Marcel against the present. Yet Proustian nostalgia, including in this scene, sometimes fixes on memories of bad times (which will be discussed further below). More typically, it fixes on memories from outside the standard edition of one’s life. This, too, is a surprising fact on the poverty of the present model; why should we expect someone dissatisfied with the present to long for forgotten glints of experience, as opposed to some period that customarily figures in one’s autobiography as ‘better days’? Finally, it is important to note that the salutary effect of memories on Marcel’s mood may be regarded as a function of them, still without endorsing the poverty of the present requirement.\footnote{For example, Wildschut and Sedikides et al. (2006) have argued that nostalgia functions to increase positive self-regard and positive affect. I have no disagreement with this, but I should note here that I have not relied on Wildschut’s and Sedikides’ ongoing experimental studies of nostalgia because their methodology consistently makes it the case that the sort of nostalgic experiences they study will be voluntary reminiscences of time periods that the subjects are already predisposed to rate as good, preferable, happy, and so on. This is in contrast with Berntsen’s more naturalistic diary methods for recording emotional involuntary memories. For example, the data in one study by Wildschut and Sedikides are narratives composed by subjects who were prompted, “Please think of a past event in your life that has personal meaning for you. This should be an event that you think about in a nostalgic way. Specifically, please try to think of an important part of your past (e.g., event or episode) that makes you feel most nostalgic. Please bring this nostalgic experience to mind and think it through. Take a few minutes to}
The fleetingness of nostalgia of the Proustian strain provides a second reason to suspect that it is not the same experience as that described by the poverty of the present model. Again, this can be seen by considering whether, on the latter, we would expect nostalgia to be an ephemeral phenomenon. If nostalgia were necessarily a matter of being dissatisfied with the present and thus escaping to the chapter of one’s autobiography brushed with the brightest gilt, it is unclear why the escape should be terminated so abruptly. On that picture, we might expect to see nostalgists languishing in their memories; but in Proustian nostalgia, the world in which they allegedly seek refuge quickly vanishes. In other words, here too the poverty of the present account of nostalgia seems at odds with the facts.

Third, the very involuntariness of Proustian nostalgia—so obvious it is easy to overlook—sits uneasily with nostalgia as depicted by the poverty of the present model. For one thing, when nostalgia is condemned, it is typically by writers who characterize it in the model’s terms (Stewart, for instance, is a particularly harsh critic). This suggests that such nostalgia is being viewed as a choice rather than a passive experience by which one is simply struck. Furthermore, the fact that the poverty of the present model treats nostalgia as having a fairly straightforward rationale (rejection of one thing and consequential embrace of another) makes it fit naturally in a voluntaristic paradigm. But

think about your nostalgic experience” (979). Because no definition of nostalgia is provided, the chances are high that subjects will assume a content comparison account of the emotion as they reflect on it. Their self-diagnoses, in other words, will be influenced by the dominant cultural understanding of the emotion. Another study makes this clear by defining nostalgia, namely as “a sentimental longing for the past” (987); subjects were to describe their nostalgic experiences in that light. Thus, subjects will likely write about familiar or stereotypical scenes of nostalgia which are not necessarily reflective of nostalgic involuntary memories. As I am arguing, however, the emotion experiences that conform to content comparison models do not exhaust what we should call nostalgia.
building assessment, comparison, ranking, and rejection into the experience sits awkwardly with Proustian nostalgia’s absence of intention. Finally, the poverty of the present requirement is typically accompanied by some version of a projectionist thesis, suggesting that nostalgia edits the past in order to make of it a rosy inversion of the present. Yet it is not clear how to square the designing of such a fantasy—involving the selecting and sanitizing which figures such as Hutcheon attribute to the nostalgist—with Proustian nostalgia’s spontaneity and surprise. It is true, of course, that Proustian recollections of experiences are qualitatively different from those experiences as they were originally lived through; but the poverty of the present model assumes that such alterations are part of a careful fantasy in a way that suggests deliberate daydreaming.

Given that Hutcheon herself holds up Proust as an example, what emerges from these considerations is the possibility of an equivocation in the literature. The poverty of the present requirement appears to trade on the assumption that ‘nostalgia’ involves a sustained attitude toward the past: a more or less stable evaluation of the present as inferior. On this view, nostalgia is something purposefully carried out. Nostalgic involuntary memories, on the other hand, are passive, associative experiences, emotional pangs or shocks that are apparently not caused by an evaluation or judgment. The poverty of the present model thus seems better suited to accommodate a particular character trait or complex imaginative undertaking than nostalgic experiences in general. In fact, given the motivations and needs attributed to the nostalgist on this model, it is left as a mystery why the nostalgist would look backward to an unrecoverable past at all, rather than forward to a utopian future that they might also construct.
These three obstacles to assimilating Proustian nostalgia to the poverty of the present model may be enough to motivate a different analysis of the former. A final feature of Proustian nostalgia presents a different kind of challenge to the model, and, by extension, to a content comparison account of nostalgia. This is Proustian nostalgia’s ability to be directed at a past which was experienced as negative or neutral at the time—in a way that is incompatible with the ‘pluralistic’ interpretation of the poverty of the present requirement developed earlier.

As Joshua Landy observes, Marcel experiences the “same species of happiness” (TR 225) when he remembers “not just the happy times but also mundane and even traumatic moments” (Landy 215). According to Berntsen, the fact that “the content of the memories is not necessarily happy” (Involuntary 138) shows that the affective quality of Marcel’s memories does not in any transparent way derive from the remembered scene itself.

It seems to be an extra emotional quality associated with the retrieval of the memory rather than a part of the remembered event per se.

(“Involuntary” 27)

This is more than a denial of the idea that the emotional content of a memory is itself a memory of emotions experienced at the time the memory was encoded.16 Rather, it denies any obvious type-isomorphism between the emotions in the original scene and the

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16 Though see Debus (2007) for the argument that all emotions directed at past events are necessarily “new” emotions, not recollections of the originals, even in cases where the emotion episodes are of the same type (e.g. shame in the moment, shame remembering the moment).
emotions undergone when remembering it. Of course, it is always possible that the original scene involved happiness that one has now forgotten about, and so the emotion type in the past is really consonant with one’s later nostalgia. However, this requires holding that in cases of nostalgia for the mundane or bad, one has ‘cognitively’ forgotten that one was happy, even though one is (1) experiencing a memory that is, ex hypothesi, rich with phenomenological detail, and yet also, in a sense that bypasses conscious recognition, (2) ‘remembering’ that past happiness insofar as one now longs for that time. While it might sometimes be true that this half-remembrance of happiness is what explains nostalgia for the bad, I think it is unlikely to be the standard case. Rather than stipulating forgotten happiness to explain this phenomenon, we should hold that the extra emotional quality contributed at the time of the memory’s retrieval need not match one’s earlier response to the same situation. In Berntsen’s terms, it can be “event-incongruent” (Involuntary 131).

The diagnosis put forward by the pluralistic poverty of the present model is that ‘nostalgia for the bad’ is a matter of the nostalgist isolating a selected feature of the remembered time (i.e. that which one now considers happier, healthier, more civilized, more exciting, or more beautiful than the present) and expunging or whitewashing the context. In Proust, however, the badness of the objects of some of his nostalgic memories is an undisguised, even salient, feature of the memories themselves. Notoriously, there is precious little that is ‘edited out’ of Proust. Instead, the representations that provoke the emotional response are described in exhaustive detail, apparently unbowdlerized. As

17 Cf. Proust’s statements that the memories are “authentic” (TR 242). Importantly, here I think Proust is describing the contents of the past times in question, rather than what we might call its mnemonic ‘mode of delivery’. As we saw earlier, and as I will say more
Landy observes, “the madeleine itself summons up nothing more than Aunt Leonie’s room on a Sunday morning, a scene laid out in all its tedious and bathetic detail over six long pages prefaced by the broad disclaimer “to live in, Combray was a trifle depressing’” (215). Yet the onset of this memory gives Marcel a “shiver” of “exquisite pleasure” (SW 60).

There is nothing necessarily incoherent about the statement, “I see how bad it was at the time, but somehow I now long for it.” On the other hand, what is required by the poverty of the present model, in cases of self-aware nostalgia for the bad, is a more specific claim: “I see how bad it was at the time, but I now regard it as a preferable time to the present.” Yet if the Proustian experience involves appreciating the truth about a past time’s quality, then there is a prima facie tension between the second statement and the content of the Proustian memory. To resolve that tension in favour of the poverty of the present requirement, one would have to hold that in every case of Proustian nostalgia for the bad, the present vantage point, from which one retrieves the memory, is judged to be even worse. That might happen sometimes, but in light of the spontaneity of the phenomenon (“Always it comes when we least expect it”), it seems too implausible to think that it always will. And whenever the present moment of retrieval does not seem worse than the past, Proustian nostalgia will stand as a counterexample to the poverty of the present requirement.

about, what can be called the ‘phenomenological tone’ of these memories (in which everything seems to rush back in a crush of sensations and context) is actually at odds with the way the present feels when one is living through it. In other words, maintaining that Marcel’s memory does not obscure mundane or bad aspects of the past is not the same as claiming that his memories of those things have not in some way (i.e. ‘structurally’ or ‘formally’) been altered.
I have argued that the dominant assumption about nostalgia—that it essentially depends on attributing qualities to a past time and comparing them with those of the present—is mistaken. To glory in the return of a moment does not entail regarding that moment as having had the property of gloriousness. What the phenomenon of Proustian nostalgia suggests instead is an experience whose distinctive characteristics owe somehow to the circumstances of the memory’s retrieval itself; Proust’s emotion derives in part from casting the line, not just the particular catch. The distinction here may thus be conceived as one between an emotion that is simply provoked by an appraisal of the content of the memory, and one that is partly provoked by the manner of remembering.\textsuperscript{18} Proustian nostalgia differs from nostalgia on the poverty of the present model on this fundamental issue: it is not necessarily a matter of comparatively evaluating past and present times. It therefore defies analysis on a content comparison model.

### 2.3.2 Proustian Nostalgia as ‘Reflective’ Nostalgia

The last characteristic of Proustian nostalgia that I considered, its ability to represent times that the rememberer regards as having been bad or mundane, marks it as a form, at least typically, of what has come to be known as “reflective” nostalgia. This term, introduced by Boym (2001), designates a nostalgic experience in which the rememberer herself suspects her nostalgia of being somehow out of step with the truth about the past. ‘Reflection’, in this sense, indicates self-questioning or self-awareness. Nostalgia that is laden with suspicions of incongruity will be the focus of my

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\textsuperscript{18} The idea of emotions directed partly at the way memories are retrieved is taken up further in Chapter Four.
investigation of the emotion’s normative situation in Chapters Three and Four. However, because the idea of reflective nostalgia also bears on our present concern with the actual objects of poignant emotions, I will say something about it here.

It is a notorious truism that we sometimes feel nostalgic for times that were less than glorious when they were present. Boring childhood days now strike one as special, or an involuntary memory of some ostensibly ordinary moment seems to bear a mysterious, lyrical significance. Proust is famous for both of these variants. For example, in “Days of Reading I”, he remarks that one would expect his memories to fix on the content of his childhood reading, but that has fallen away and been replaced by what then seemed irrelevant: getting distracted by small noises, moving to accommodate a shaft of light. And, as seen above, sometimes the past in Proustian nostalgia can have been downright unpleasant, even traumatic. Yet, as Merwin puts it, this does not stop some from wanting back a past which, “when they were living in its day / they could not wait for it to go / and were dying to get away” (Migration 419).

In cases where one is deluded about the past, such an emotion is not particularly noteworthy: it is a straightforward case of an emotion with a false object, like paranoid jealousy. But there are also cases, by no means rare, in which one ‘knows better’: one feels the longing despite readily admitting that the past was relevantly different from the appearance. This distinction corresponds to the one Boym draws between the reflective and “restorative” (49) tendencies in nostalgia. The restorative nostalgist believes their memory is accurate and seeks to restore a past state in the present. The reflective nostalgist, on the other hand, is self-conscious and possibly even ironic about their longing, aware that its object may somehow be partly fabricated. More than simply a
response to the actual past, “Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself” (xviii).

Reflective nostalgia must be distinguished from the scenario in which longing for a bad or mundane past is explained by the clarity of hindsight. In that case, the mistake is thought to belong to one’s former self: for example, one might think, “By judging it bad or mundane, they got their present wrong; but now, in longing for what I had then, I am getting it right.” In other words, one is not doubting the memory’s accuracy, but revising one’s evaluation of the time in question. By contrast, in genuine reflective nostalgia, one suspects a present emotion and the memory at which it is directed as being somehow discordant with the actual past. Here, one locates the potential ‘mistake’ in the present: while the emotion seems to be an appropriate response to the past as it now appears, one thinks that the appearance could be an illusion. For one’s emotion to qualify as ‘reflective’ nostalgia, it is necessary that one harbour some doubt about the veridicality of the memory involved.

In order to keep the discussion crisp, I will write as though the reflective nostalgist is correct in their suspicion of an incongruity between the way the past was, and the way it seems in memory. In fact, when such suspicions arise, they usually are correct. The alternative scenario—suspecting a nostalgic memory of being out of step with the truth of the past, when in fact it is perfectly in step—is obviously possible, but probably less common. There is a reason one suspects a memory of being nonveridical, which is likely that there is something nonveridical about it.

A succinct expression of reflective nostalgia can be found, once again, in Wright: “How sweet the past is, no matter how wrong, or how sad. / How sweet is yesterday’s
noise” (World 43). Here the apparent contradiction is on full display: the writer knows the way the past really was, while simultaneously regarding it as “sweet.” The poem in which these lines appear, “The Southern Cross,” is entirely devoted to what might be called a performance of this feeling. It articulates the emotion’s ambivalence and uncertainty when, despite Wright’s insistence that the various objects of his memory were “never like that” (50, my emphasis), the longing for his childhood home is still acute:

Somewhere in all that network of rivers and roads and silt hills,
A city I’ll never remember,
its walls the color of pure light,
Lies in the August heat of 1935,
In Tennessee, the bottomland slowly becoming a lake.
It lies in a landscape that keeps my imprint

Forever,
and stays unchanged, and waits to be filled back in.
Someday I’ll find it out
And enter my old outline as though for the first time,

And lie down, and tell no one. (55)
This promise of complete fulfillment, perhaps better regarded as a kind of dissolution of time than a return to the past, is in obvious tension with the claim that he will never remember it, found above and elsewhere. The past, Wright says, is “an otherness inside us / We never touch, / no matter how far down our hands reach” (48). Indeed, the whole long poem inhabits the tension between what is viscerally present to memory and an accompanying sense of the past’s irretrievability:

What’s hard to remember is how the wind moved and the reeds clicked
Behind Torcello,
little bundles of wind in the marsh grass
Chasing their own tails, and skidding across the water.
What’s hard to remember is how the electric lights
Were played back, and rose and fell on the black canal
Like swamp flowers,
shrinking and stretching,
Yellow and pale and iron-blue from the oil. (47)

Places swim up and sink back, and days do,
The edges around what really happened
we'll never remember
No matter how hard we stare back at the past (49)
The urgency of looking back (“Our prayers go out to it, our arms go out to it” (48)), along with the awareness that the past cannot be recovered, results in a state of unappeasable longing, embodied in the poem’s final passage about lying down in a space that can never be remembered. A desire Wright regards as impossible to realize, based on incomplete and possibly mistaken memory, is nonetheless stated as a determinate end.

The potential reasons to second-guess one’s nostalgia are various, and several are apparent in the excerpts from Wright. One is what could be called the original experience’s *valence*—the time was sad but now seems sweet. Another reason, less explicit above, might be called the memory’s *phenomenological tone*. Nostalgic memories present times in relief: as Woolf puts it, they are “ringed round, lit up,” jarringly specific with dark surroundings. One way of thinking that the past was “never like that” is to be aware that this quality of the memory, the phenomenological tone, has been added after the fact, and is not a faithful recreation of the original experience or its qualities. This is illustrated in the following passage from Anaïs Nin’s *Diary*:

I see my life in Paris with the added elements of fiction: lighting, focus, the gold patina which memory adds to it, and they appear to me more vividly, more separated from the quotidian details which dilute it, from the unformed, the excrescences, the dust or dullness of familiarity. They are highlighted in this case by poignant memory and a desire to relive it all, now that it is forever lost. (20)
What qualifies this nostalgia as reflective is Nin’s self-awareness that it involves a fictional “gold patina”. Yet the very features that she calls fictional seem inextricably connected to the longing she reports, for they are the primary things she describes. Among these, her sense of the past as undiluted accords with other descriptions of nostalgia we have seen: in one way or another, many writers remark on a sense of density, wholeness, or purity in nostalgic memories. This sense is front and center in descriptions of the emotion, yet to call attention to it is very often to note that it is not necessarily representative of the tone of the original experiences. Thus, in the following chapters, I will use ‘reflective nostalgia’ to refer to episodes of nostalgia that focus on a memory whose veridicality is questioned by the nostalgist for either of these reasons: perceived incongruence having to do with the quality of the past, or the phenomenological tone of the memory.

Reflective nostalgia, as we saw in the previous section, involves a prima facie self-contradiction on the poverty of the present model; however, even when that model has been cast aside, the emotion remains puzzling. How is it possible to feel longing at the very moment when the badness or dullness of a time appears with lightning clarity? John Casey suggests that it may not be possible: “If [an adult] remembers the details of what he actually did—or if he overcomes his nostalgia sufficiently to bring this out in mundane clarity—it is doubtful if the nostalgic attachment could remain” (4). In Chapter Four, I will suggest reasons to think that Casey’s doubt is unfounded—that is, reasons to think that Wright, Nin, and others are not giving us implausible descriptions of their emotions. This account will serve to dislodge the unfavourable normative assessment of reflective nostalgia that is implicit in Casey’s skepticism, and that continues to linger
around nostalgia even after the poverty of the present model is discarded. For present purposes, though, I hope I have said enough to further cement Proust’s insight that the actual object of nostalgic longing need not be a time which one regards as either happy or realistically represented in memory.

2.4 Pluralism

After examining the literature on nostalgia, I believe we are forced to conclude that a fairly loose characterization of nostalgia’s actual objects is the only one that can be given, if that characterization is not to be Procrustean. I have not denied that the emotion can occur in the manners proposed by the naïveté requirement and the poverty of the present requirement. However, where these theses stumble is in their neglect of other variations: they mistakenly make requirements out of mere forms the phenomena can take. It can be perfectly accurate to call one’s longing for the superior past ‘nostalgia’, but it is inaccurate to call nostalgia ‘longing for the superior past’.

What is typical of nostalgia’s objects is simply that they are memory representations of an unrecoverable past. Beyond that, the emotion is more distinctive for its phenomenal character than its customary intentional objects: it is a bittersweet mixture of positive and negative affect. And even this is not without exceptions, since cases in which the present is considered impoverished might be mostly sorrowful, and the emotion of Proust’s narrator is often described simply as happiness. However, because mixed valence is almost universally testified to in accounts of nostalgia (Prinz aptly calls it “a whirl of joyful sadness” (Gut 165)), and because even Proust hints at sadness
Through his ebullience (“the true paradises are the paradises we have lost” (*TR* 228)), I do not think these less-mixed cases are a threat to the classification of nostalgia as a form of poignancy.

Taking all of these examples into account, then, I believe we are forced to adopt a pluralistic stance on nostalgia’s actual intentional objects. This already has some normative implications. If the poverty of the present requirement were true, then nostalgia would be easy to accuse of escapism and, in many cases, vicious sentimentality. Because it is not true, it leaves open the possibility that not all nostalgia deserves normative condemnation. This is the issue I will pursue in the next two chapters. However, before turning to that task, let us return to the other form of poignant emotion experience we are investigating, and consider the actual intentional objects of lyrical emotions.

### 2.5 Lyrical Emotions

So far, I have said that lyrical emotions are a kind of poignancy directed at the fact of life’s transitoriness; and that this can often involve seeing something in the present in that light, such as a particular object or scene, or the entire present moment itself. In such cases, the sense of an ending that the present acquires is not just relative, in the way that one’s workday ends each afternoon, but ultimate, in a sense that is often conveyed by saying that something has become “the past”. Seeing this aspect of episodes of nostalgia posed no difficulty, because the objects of nostalgia always clearly involve the past. It is less obvious what it means to have feelings toward such endings in the present, or to see
present things in that context. So, even if my characterization generates a glimmer of recognition, it is still too short on details. What do lyrical emotions really look like? What are they about? And why call them ‘lyrical’?

The purpose of this section is to fill in the above schematization of lyrical emotions, using examples to illustrate the type of experiences I have in mind. Once more, the eventual goal will be to assess such emotion episodes using the standard model of emotion evaluation. To do that, as with nostalgia, we must first understand the actual objects of these emotion episodes. However, unlike the case of nostalgia, here we do not have to fend off a prejudicial diagnosis of the emotion in question. When it comes to lyrical emotions, there are no equivalents to misleading content comparison accounts. Instead, the task is more straightforwardly descriptive. After providing an overview of the various permutations of lyrical emotion experience, then, I will briefly explain the motivation for using the term of art ‘lyrical emotions’ to encapsulate them.

2.5.1 The Varieties of Lyrical Emotion Experience

What are the actual intentional objects of lyrical emotion episodes? The descriptions I have used—the very fact of life’s transience, or something in the present seen in that light—may look indecisive. Instead, that locution is a way of sticking close to the descriptive ground. In these feelings, confronting the existential fact of transitoriness often results in more particular things acquiring a sense of fragility or impermanence. Likewise, having such a sense about particular things in the present often leads one to ‘zoom out’, as it were, so that the poignant feeling becomes directed at the impermanence
of all things. This intentional fluidity is an obstacle to summing up lyrical emotions succinctly, and it also leads to certain ambiguities in the interpretation of literary examples. The elegiac feeling in Seamus Heaney’s “Mint”, for example, is about a particular remembered scene and, at the same time, about the fact of mortality:

The snip of scissor blades, the light of Sunday
Mornings when the mint was cut and loved:
My last things will be first things slipping from me. (396)

Furthermore, sometimes this intentional ‘ambiguity’ is only a natural product of a metaphorical relationship between a particular thing or phenomenon and the fact of transience. This is nicely captured by Bashō:

How admirable!
To see lightning and not think
life is fleeting. (Hass, Haiku 24)

As we can see in this last example, it may be tempting to characterize lyrical emotions as being about ‘life’ and other such panoramic objects; but it is not always clear whether ‘life’ refers to the general condition of evanescence, or to a set of evanescent particulars—or, if it implicates both, whether it is more about one than the other. Fortunately, we may prescind from most of these tangles. In the standard case, a lyrical emotion is focused both on a particular transitory thing, and on the general fact of
transitoriness. The relative prominence of either focal property in a given episode may be thought of as a specification of the foreground: for example, the impermanence of a cherry blossom in a haiku stands in relief against an implied background of universal impermanence. But both the particular and the general fact will typically figure in the conscious experience. To say that the present is ‘seen in light’ of that fact is simply another way of saying that the two are present in the feeling, in something like a foreground-background relationship. The depth of field may be deeper or shallower from case to case, but for our normative purposes, it will not matter exactly how this balance is struck, or which came first in the process of a given emotion episode.

Keeping in mind the intentional fluidity between the universal fact and particular things at which the emotion is directed, we may proceed to an overview of the types of scenes that are typically, though not exclusively, the sites of lyrical emotions. These fall into two general groups. The first involves thinking that the present is becoming the past, either because it is slipping away before one’s eyes, or because one imagines the present as the subject of a future memory. The second sort of scene involves imagining eternity or timelessness: either by seeing the present moment as a window onto the eternal, or by seeing the present moment as absorbed into the existence of a world indifferent to human time.

It is a familiar feeling that the present moment is, in DeLillo’s words, “falling indelibly into the past” (60). The particular scene DeLillo is describing as falling away is of a drunk man in a raincoat, shuffling around the bases after the World Series while the fans leave the stadium:
All the fragments of the afternoon collect around his airborne form.

Shouts, bat-cracks, full bladders and stray yawns, the sand-grain manyness of things that can’t be counted. (60)

Examples of recognizing the present’s transience in this way are abundant. For Larkin, the future is “No sooner present than it turns to past” (50). Donald Justice writes, “And I, who have listened for a step / All afternoon, hear it now, but already falling away, / Already in memory” (173). In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf recounts the same experience in richer phenomenological terms:

> With her foot on the threshold she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta’s arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past. (150)

Often, what is implicated in this elapse is the very noticing of the moment in question: once one wants to keep it, it is too late. As Georges Poulet describes a realization of Rousseau’s, the very desire that time suspend its flight “already indicates that the moment no longer exists, that one has passed beyond it” (*Studies* 173). (A psychological account of this kind of termination-by-attention will be considered in Chapter Five.)
In addition to such explicit accounts, less direct examples still express or describe feelings that may be plausibly supposed to involve such awareness of the moment’s retreat. In Woolf’s *The Waves*, the character Louis wishes at the end of a dinner:

Do not move, do not let the swing door cut to pieces the thing that we have made, that globes itself here, among these lights, these peelings, this litter of bread crumbs and people passing. Do not move, do not go. Hold it for ever. (109)

This quintessentially Woolfian desire may be sparked by the sensation of time’s passage—that is, of an ending descending on the present (“do not go”). As we will see below, the same longing can also be occasioned by an intimation of timelessness.

Freud described melancholy about transience as “a foretaste of mourning” (306), and this phrase, like “nostalgia for the present”, is applicable both to the feeling of the elapsing moment, and to a sort of ‘anticipatory remembrance’ that can be enacted in imagination. Earlier, we encountered this phenomenon in the form of a counterexample to the naïveté requirement on nostalgia. Borson lies in bed and imagines the memory of lying in bed; Petterson’s narrator remembers knowing that he would always miss walking through the forest at that moment. These are both cases of imaginatively switching temporal perspectives, ‘looking back on’ the present in a way that gives the present an uncanny tone. Imaginatively remembering the present limns the moment with significance. No longer entirely immersed in one’s experience, one can feel as though
one is living amidst history, be it personal or social history. Tomas Tranströmer appears to express this type of feeling in “December Evening 1972”:

Here I come, the invisible man, perhaps employed
by a Great Memory to live right now. (116)

Similarly, Lagerkvist’s observation that “Some day you will be one of those who lived long ago” (49) serves as an invitation to a lyrical emotion: a sense that the present is fleeting, that the world that surrounds one will end.

Anticipatory remembrance and the sense that the present is slipping away are therefore closely related. Both can lead easily to the other. Indeed, it may typically be a sense that the moment is slipping away that prompts one to imagine remembering it later. As such, descriptions that evince an awareness of time’s transience may be ambiguous about which precise ‘form’ the awareness takes, or what exactly evoked it. For example, in these lines by Wright, it is hard to say whether either is best read as describing the sense that the present moment is elapsing, or as remembering the present in imagination:

We stare at the backs of our own heads continually
Walking in cadence into the past (World 114)

Afternoons in the backyard, our lives like photographs
Yellowing elsewhere (Negative 37)
Nevertheless, allowing for some interpretive indeterminacy, it seems that the same type of emotion is expressed in or implied by each case. What is common to them is that they involve a sense of finality or loss coming over the present, construing it in terms of an ending due to the passage of time.

Thus far, our examples of the scenes of lyrical emotions have involved appreciating the present’s evanescence. However, sometimes a sense of time’s passage comes over one in the opposite way; that is, as an experience which seems to stand in relief against, or apart from, the ordinary flow of time. Perhaps it is natural that such experiences are often described as visions of timelessness or permanence. Despite the paradoxical sound of apprehending time’s passage in an experience of timelessness, the tension can be dissolved by distinguishing between figure and ground in attention: one focuses on an image so salient that it seems to ‘freeze time’, but this stillness can be appreciated only in the context of the ordinary flow of things, whether that flow still thrums along behind the image, or directly bookends it. Wright claims that “Everything terminal has hooks in eternity” (Negative 136), and this goes both ways: because our element is time, intimations of the eternal or the timeless are inevitably experienced as contrasts to ordinary temporal experience.

Intermittent feelings of timelessness have occupied many writers. The first example I will give comes again from To the Lighthouse. The novel’s theme is the passage of time, largely as it is perceived and contemplated by Mrs. Ramsay, the family matriarch, and Lily Briscoe, a painter staying with the Ramsays at their summer home. I will give one passage from the point of view of each, the first exemplifying and the second describing the sense that a moment is somehow permanent.
In the middle of a dinner which brings together her family and various friends, a feeling comes over Mrs. Ramsay of “profound stillness” amidst the activity (including her own as she serves the guests), although she can think of “no special reason” for it to arise. She thinks:

Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all round them.
It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity…there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby…Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain. (141-2)

A decade after that dinner, with Mrs. Ramsay dead and the house in disrepair, Lily returns to the house and attempts to paint. Her thoughts form a commentary on the kind of experience described in the previous passage:

What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with the years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the

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19 The final enigmatic conviction is echoed in The Waves: “Now let me try, said Louis, ‘before we rise, before we go to tea, to fix the moment in one effort of supreme endeavour. This shall endure” (28).
dark; here was one. This, that and the other: herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying ’Life stand still here’; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)—this was the nature of a revelation.

(218)

A desire to make of the moment something permanent, I suggest, contributes to the impulse to seek “images”, following Robert Hass’ (1984) use of the term. In his essay of that name, Hass focuses on the great haiku poets, Basho, Issa, and Buson, but he identifies the same impulse, whether or not self-consciously indebted to these original ‘imagists’, in writers as diverse as Blake, Whitman, Stevens, Williams, Pound, Chekhov, Machado, and Milosz. “In the nineteenth century,” Hass writes of images,

one would have said that what compelled us about them was a sense of the eternal. And it is something like that, some feeling in the arrest of the image that what perishes and what lasts forever have been brought into conjunction, and accompanying that sensation is a feeling of release from the self. (275) 

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20 To elaborate on Hass’ reference to the nineteenth century: in “Timelessness and Romanticism”, Poulet argues that, in addition to the writers he examines more closely (such as Shelley, Coleridge, and Blake), “the idea of Eternity possessed by man in time appears in one form or another again and again”: “Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, Carlyle, and, in America, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau” (18).
This ‘conjunction’ could, once again, be thought of as a kind of figure-ground Gestalt—even if the presence of the ground, or the “perishing” nature of ordinary time, is only implicit in writing that is more concerned with the salient, “eternal” content of the image.

In these ‘imagistic’ experiences, a feeling of timelessness results from focusing attention on one image that seems to stand outside of time. Another sense of timelessness, however, can result from a less concentrated form of attention. We might think of this as ‘quiescent experience’, to use a term coined by Milton Mayeroff (1963). Mayeroff is concerned with raising an objection to Dewey’s theory of experience, on the grounds that it is too informed by discrete, naturally-delineated, and consummated episodes which involve overcoming various types of resistance. While the case against Dewey is not relevant here, it is instructive to consider the dimension of experience that Mayeroff appeals to in his response, embodied in “such quiet and simple experiences as listening to the rain drops outside one’s window, or in the stillness watching the snow flakes come down, or looking at the sea” (148). As he describes it,

we may feel the experience had a certain timeless quality about it. It is as if there were no difference between our present experience and our other past experiences of listening to the rain. There is a feeling that nothing has really changed, that no time has intervened between, say, listening to the rain as a child and our present experience of listening to the rain. In such “quiescent” experiences there is a heightened sense of awareness not involving any direction or intervention on our part. (149)
The awareness in question, Mayeroff suggests, is “simply the awareness of great seriousness, importance, and mystery” (148). The same kind of experience, along with the specific quality of timelessness, is also described in Merwin’s poem “Still Morning”, written in old age. In it, Merwin describes this quality as it arises from a perceptual experience which seems to collapse temporal distance:

It appears now that there is only one
age and it knows
nothing of age as the flying birds know
nothing of the air they are flying through
or of the day that bears them up
through themselves
and I am a child before there are words
arms are holding me up in a shadow
voices murmur in a shadow
as I watch one patch of sunlight moving
across the green carpet
in a building gone long ago and all the voices
silent and each word they said in that time
silent now
while I go on seeing that patch of sunlight (Shadow 7)
Both in the case of listening to the rain and watching a patch of sunlight, an intimation of the world’s indifference to human time seems to be part of the feeling. And, like imagistic experiences of perishing and eternity, these quiescent experiences involve an awareness of permanence and impermanence: they exist, as it were, in a single vision. However, in this case an image is not seized and held in the foreground against the flow of time. In the quiescent experiences Mayeroff and Merwin describe, instead of being arrested, the ordinary procession of time seems to fall away and every moment is drawn together into a timeless whole (“there is only one age”). Thus, while it is sometimes possible to attend to the same object ‘imagistically’ or ‘quiescently’—say, for example, to an object such as Merwin’s patch of light—what difference there is need not be in the type of affect involved. It might rather be like the phenomenological difference between viewing a still photograph of something, and a static film of it.

Mrs. Ramsay’s vision of permanence and Mayeroff’s sense of timelessness are distinguishable styles of thinking about, and feeling toward, the relationship between the fleeting and the eternal. The first foregrounds the thought that something in the ongoing stream of transitory experiences will not be swept away by it, while the latter is more focused on the unchanging world as such. However, sometimes the same words will be used to describe both, and both can be the sites of lyrical emotions.

Furthermore, the fluid relationship between the ‘elapsing present’ and ‘anticipatory remembrance’ extends to these senses of permanence, such that the latter can lead to the former experiences. For example, ‘frozen’ moments of time can nevertheless thaw out quickly. “I am now at the zenith of an experience,” the character Bernard says in The Waves. “It will decline…The sequence returns; one thing leads to
another – the usual order” (117). Even if a scene feels timeless, that sense can be unstable, and the feeling’s own ending can be anticipated from within it.

Despite the variety of scenes that can occasion lyrical emotion episodes, then, they are closely related, both in the ways that they can transform and shade into each other, and more importantly in their common focus: ultimate endings due to the passage of time. This is experienced and expressed in a variety of ways, such as by lamenting the vanishing of the moment, or imagining the idea of the present as the subject of a future memory, or experiencing stillness among the transitory, or thinking that the world is permanent and the self is fleeting. We can make fine distinctions in our descriptions of these scenes, but each presents us with the intentional object of a poignant, lyrical emotion: the fact of life’s transience as it colours some scene, or the absolute transience of a particular thing. The examples above have been intended to give some substance to that articulation of what lyrical emotions’ blend of happiness and sadness is directed toward.

2.5.2 On the Term ‘Lyrical’ ‘Emotions’

At the beginning of this chapter, I explained why it makes sense to distinguish lyrical emotions from poignancy simpliciter, and in the Introduction I stated that the term ‘lyrical’ was chosen because of the prominence of these feelings in poetry and lyrical prose. Still, a bit more should be said about this term of art. For, first, it might seem as though no new term is needed, since there are already names available for this sort of emotion experience. Why then call them ‘lyrical’ emotions? Second, it might be objected
that the examples I have given are not all incontestable examples of emotion experiences—in which case, why point to them as examples of ‘emotions’ at all? I will consider these questions in order.

To begin with, it is true that lyrical emotions have much in common with other named emotions. In my view, the closest match is the feeling and aesthetic concept called *mono no aware* in Japanese. It is instructive to recall that Hass’ remark about glimpsing what perishes and what lasts forever was a description of haiku imagery, for *mono no aware* is a central feeling in haiku: as Giovanna Colombetti puts it, the term is generally taken to refer to “awareness of the transient nature of all things, ‘an emotional sense of the impermanence of life’” (19). The 17th century literary scholar Motoori Norinaga, who established the term’s modern usage, explains it as the feeling expressed by a certain kind of sigh, “Ah, alas!” (186), and claims that “Poetry is an action performed when one is overwhelmed by *mono no aware*” (187).21 Finally, Tomiko Yoda’s description highlights the similarity between *mono no aware* and lyrical emotions’ intentional focus on either expansive objects (such as ‘life’ and ‘all things’), or particular things seen against an expansive background:

*Mono no aware* refers to a profound feeling with which one spontaneously responds to a myriad of things and occurrences in the world. To “know

21 Norinaga argued that *mono no aware* was the dominant mood in the *Tale of Genji*, a candidate for the world’s first novel. This, in addition to the elegiac “Ubi Sunt” motif in Old and Middle English poetry such as *Beowulf* and “The Wanderer” (Bright 1893), nicely gives the lie to a tendency among modern literary critics to regard the emotional preoccupation with impermanence as a uniquely modern affliction (e.g. Boym, Stewart). Some historians yield to the same temptation, with Lowenthal echoing the theme, and Peter Fritzsche stating baldly that “nostalgia is a fundamentally modern phenomenon” (1589).
"mono no aware" refers to one’s ability to have such a feeling for certain objects on an appropriate occasion. (526, my emphases)

Considering this similarity, why not eschew the term ‘lyrical emotions’ and simply explore mono no aware? My reason is simply that, like the Portuguese emotion of saudade (an ineffable blend of melancholic longing and nostalgia), such emotions are commonly held to be culturally specific or to belong to a national character. That claim in itself is not a reason to assume it is true, but given its prevalence, an argument is required to show that it is not. Such an argument would involve tracing the history of the term in question and the scholarly debates surrounding its use. This strikes me as a distraction from the evident similarities between those emotions, and emotion experiences that are not in any strong sense associated with the cultures in question. In short, attempting to account for lyrical emotions by subsuming them under mono no aware (or saudade, or the German Sehnsucht, and other hard-to-translate emotion terms connoting longing) involves taking on more baggage than it is worth.

Other emotions shed light on lyrical emotion experience, without entirely capturing it. A treatment of wonder by R.W. Hepburn (1984) contains marked similarities to the feelings described by Woolf and Mayeroff. Hepburn asks whether the experience of wonder is necessarily limited to the circumstances that typically underlie it, namely religious commitments and ignorance about an object’s explanation. Religious wonder,

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22 Obviously, Japanese (and Chinese) poetry has had an incalculable influence on modern English-language poetry (a transmission largely credited to Ezra Pound in the standard narrative). However, I think that this is only an indication that much of what is distinctive about such feelings is not in any essential way culturally distinctive, but rather intentionally and phenomenologically distinctive.
Hepburn implies, is dogmatic, and wonder that owes to correctable ignorance should be terminated by increased understanding. Nonetheless, rather than concluding that the value we bestow on wonder is inevitably misplaced, Hepburn argues that wonder is not limited to these conditions. Instead, it can be directed at the sheer existence of the universe at all: it is a response to a sense of the universe’s “absolute contingency” (140). As such, Hepburn terms this form of wonder “‘existential wonder’” (140) and compares it to Bewunderung, the feeling famously evoked by the starry skies in Kant’s second Critique (5:161).

Hepburn illustrates his conception of wonder directed at the universe with examples from lyric poetry, such as Coleridge and Leopardi. In Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” (interestingly, also a poem about involuntary memory nostalgia), the quintessentially Romantic final image is of an icicle shining by the light of the silent moon. Leopardi aims to evoke the universe as a whole by dwelling on “the endless imagined spaces beyond the visible scene from the hillside; the wind rustling the plants in contrast with the infinite silence” (149). In both cases, Hepburn argues, Indeed, much like Norinaga’s close association between mono no aware and poetic creation, Hepburn closely links existential wonder with art, by way of Wittgenstein: “The work of art is the object seen sub specie aeternitatis” (Wittgenstein, Notebooks 83e). Among contemporary philosophers of emotion, Prinz (2007) has also proposed that aesthetic appreciation consists of the emotional experience of wonder directed at artworks. I should note that I do not wish to follow these writers in holding that such feelings, or indeed lyrical emotions, are somehow necessary requirements either for aesthetic appreciation, or for something to be considered an artwork. The second, constitutive claim flies in the face of the post-Romantic consensus that no emotion need be expressed or evoked by art as a condition on the latter, and the first claim about appreciation can be undermined by any putatively aesthetic experience which is not obviously ‘wondering’ in tone. It would, of course, be possible to deny the status of aesthetic ‘appreciation’ to those counterexamples, such as by downgrading them to mere ‘enjoyment’. But this seems to set an artificially high bar for genuine appreciation, when non-wondering aesthetic engagement could surely equip one to intelligently discuss an object’s aesthetic merits.

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the background—as the encompassing totality or its representative—is felt to be momentously present in determining our response to the limited object which we are focally contemplating: hence the wonderment. (150)

This phenomenon resembles the one we are investigating. Hepburn argues that it is by means of encounters with limited, particular things or scenes that we may experience a fraction of the wonder appropriate to the universe. This echoes Hass’ reflection that in the arrest of an image, the momentary and the infinite seem to be brought into conjunction. That dialectic has appeared in our examples: Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay reflect on a kind of eternity that seems to pervade or linger behind the ephemeral scenes in the yard and at dinner. To take another example from Woolf, in *The Waves*, Louis looks around a cafeteria:

I see the gleaming tea-urn; the glass cases full of pale-yellow sandwiches; the men in round coats perched on stools at the counter; and also behind them, eternity. (71)²⁴

The same relationship between the finite and infinite operates in the quiet and affecting attention that Mayeroff describes, although there, it may be the self that is the

²⁴ Though it does not matter for present purposes, it should perhaps be recognized that this passage (at least for me) is a bit wry: introducing the trope of eternity bluntly at the end of a sentence about these humdrum surroundings seems deliberately bathetic. Woolf is by no means humourless about the loftier feelings of her characters, both elsewhere in *The Waves* and especially in *Orlando* (2004). What we should say about the accusation that lyrical feelings are grandiose is the focus of Chapter Five.
particular finite thing which is felt to stand before the eternal. As we have seen, Mayeroff’s observation of the rain occasions the feeling, pervaded by mystery and a conviction of importance, that the past and the present have been fused. Merwin evokes a similar feeling by identifying his present awareness with his childhood perception of sunlight. In each case, the finitude of the present mingles uncannily with a sense of permanence.

Hepburn’s account of existential wonder, then, provides a useful precedent for the kind of intentional fluidity that typifies lyrical emotions, in which the fact of universal transience is, as we might say, “felt to be momentously present” in some particular transient thing. And his proposal that wonder involves apprehending the final contingency of things shades, both in his exposition and by dint of the usual association of contingency with impermanence, into the considerations of time and eternity that characterize lyrical emotions. It might also be pointed out that Hepburn’s account resembles an account of awe by Keltner and Haidt (2003), in which the central appraisal is held to be a perception of vastness or a symbolic marker thereof. Thus, Hepburn’s treatment of wonder has the benefit of not giving an idiosyncratic characterization of the type of feeling in question.

All the same, there are two reasons not to classify lyrical emotion experiences simply as episodes of Hepburn’s existential wonder. First, although they are associated with one another, the contingency and impermanence of things are nonetheless distinguishable qualities that can generate distinct emotional responses. By analogy, even if a betrayal of one’s affections always counted as a demeaning offense, it would still be a mistake to classify jealous feelings merely as episodes of anger. The emotions are
distinct. Existential wonder and lyrical emotions are distinct because the latter, concerned with ultimate *endings* due to the passage of time, have a mixed valence which involves some sense of loss or vulnerability. By contrast, wonder at the existence of the universe need not be *poignant*. The second reason not to trade ‘lyrical emotions’ for Hepburn’s wonder is that the latter is just as much a term of art as the former. Even if the definitions were exactly the same, we would not gain any easy name recognition by choosing an emotion that has been qualified as ‘existential’ to cleave off other familiar applications (such as what Hepburn calls foolish wonder, idle curiosity, and the like).

To sum up: the reason to call my cases ‘lyrical emotions’ instead of some other name is that what I mean by lyrical emotions does not seem to be captured by any other name that does not come with significant interpretive problems of its own. However, there is one more objection to consider. Many of my examples—Woolf on the elapsing moment, Tranströmer on imagining the present as a memory, Merwin’s dialectic of timelessness and impermanence—are fixed on ultimate endings due to time’s passage, without advertising that a poignant *feeling* was involved. Why, then, hold these up as examples of *emotion* experience, rather than just contemplation?

Essentially, the answer is that some interpretive license must almost always be exercised when working with actual examples of emotion experience, rather than scenarios created to fit into a philosophical account. It is rare to be able to simply read a neatly-classified emotion off the page. For one thing, as Pugmire notes, “Hovering

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25 Likewise, although it is often associated with vast temporal expanses, the experience of the *sublime* should not be conflated with lyrical emotions, since the sublime is typically characterized by fear rather than loss.
taxonomic curiosity is not normally a feature” (“Saying It” 380) of emotion experience.

And Sue Campbell argues that with emotions in general,

> It is only sometimes that we express our emotions, express “how we are feeling” by referring to a classic emotion, such as anger, jealousy, or love. Often our feelings are too nuanced, complex, or inchoate to be easily categorized. (*Interpreting* 3)

That is to say, even if our subject were anger instead of subtler feelings about the passage of time, the language used in most real examples is not typically as straightforward as, for example, “He belittled me, so I felt angry.” This point goes doubly when our case studies are drawn from literary art, which is, of course, the best source of examples of lyrical emotions, due to their peculiarly close relationship with aesthetic attention.

We might still want examples of bonafide emotion experience to contain certain indications, such as ‘I felt’, ‘a feeling of’, and so on. Sometimes, the examples I have used do contain such tip-offs. As we have seen, Hass and Mayeroff both describe timelessness as a feeling (as does Poulet, who groups together déjà vu, involuntary memory nostalgia, and timelessness under the happy name of “weird feelings” (“Timelessness” 6)). Furthermore, I think it is uncontroversial to interpret Mrs. Ramsay’s vision of coherence in the face of the fleeting as something she *feels*, as well. Yet not even ‘feeling’ explicitly describes an emotion experience, poignant or otherwise. To say that Mrs. Ramsay has experienced a lyrical emotion still requires an interpretive leap.
This is a leap I am comfortable making. For, in addition to the point above that flesh and blood emotion experience does not always come pre-packaged in obvious categories, there are some reasons to expect lyrical emotions to be expressed gnomically when they occur. Often what this means is that someone in the grip of such a feeling will attempt to express it by gesturing at something about its intentional object—for example, the fragility of the cherry blossom—rather than directly at a felt affective state.

The first reason for this is the same reason we need a term of art for these experiences at all: there is no common, widely-recognized name for them. Instead, as we have seen, they and their relatives are often among the supposedly untranslatable emotion terms of various languages. One consequence of this is that lyrical emotions may be regarded as more ineffable than other feelings. As Woolf describes Lily’s tormented attempt to articulate how she feels as she looks out over Mrs. Ramsay’s yard:

— but what could one say to her? ‘I’m in love with you’? No, that was not true. ‘I’m in love with this all’, waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children? It was absurd, it was impossible. One could not say what one meant. (28)

This is not just a reflection of Lily’s incapacity. As Mrs. Ramsay finds in the dinner passage, when she tries to state what stands out in the face of the fleeting, she can only point to “something,” “the thing”.

Second, even if one can think of a name for these experiences, one may be motivated to resist doing so out of fear of ruining them. Pugmire argues that expressing...
an emotion in words at all can sometimes seem to cheapen it. Unarticulated, it can be savoured; forced to don a public description, it acquires “the taint of common coinage” (“Saying It” 376). An example of this process can be drawn from C.S. Lewis. Despite his own unsatisfying eschatological spin on it, Lewis recognizes that the human desire for the “transtemporal” is “the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence” (90). Lewis assumes that this desire is disparaged because it is independently painful. However, the desire could just as well be disparaged because people lack a more respectable name with which to express it; and, knowing that, someone wishing to take the feeling seriously may be discouraged from laying it out plainly.

Finally, the very fact that these thoughts and feelings are described in lyrical language may provide some limited, *prima facie* evidence that they are part of emotion experiences (and poignant ones, given their objects). The idea of emotional expression is built into the traditional definitions of lyricism and lyric poetry, and without endorsing the former as a necessary condition for something to count as an artwork or a poem, I think it is typically true that lyrical writing is partly motivated by feelings, and read because of its ability to produce them. Indeed, it is difficult to describe the characteristic mood of most lyric poetry without adverting to poignancy, and with it, a sense of time like the one Hass describes. So, while I will not insist on this point, it seems plausible to read emotion into passages which concentrate on Larkin’s “long perspectives”, and are written in a tone of seriousness or reverence.

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26 This, perhaps, makes sense of a mysterious remark of Wollheim’s that the life of a poet is “a life given over to the study of the past” (*Thread* 179).
Ultimately, it is open to criticize most of these examples as being indeterminate between affect and mere attention, or between poignancy and some other feeling. For that reason, I began by stating that these examples demonstrate the *occasions* for lyrical emotions, rather than, necessarily, express the feelings themselves. That said, it is uncontroversial that (1) the emotion experience I have described exists, and that (2) these examples illustrate some of the paradigmatic scenes in which they occur. Later, the examples I will draw upon as case studies for the normative evaluation of lyrical emotions will be selected in part for their clearly affective nature.

### 2.6 Conclusion

The goal of this chapter has been to take the first step toward evaluating episodes of our two forms of poignancy—nostalgia and lyrical emotions—on the standard model of emotion evaluation. That first step has been to explore the wide range of actual, intentional objects of these emotion experiences.

After introducing the concept of poignancy, I began by investigating the actual objects of nostalgia. This involved swimming against the current of most treatments of the topic, and arguing for pluralism about the type of past that can figure in the emotion. Proustian and ‘reflective’ nostalgia show that nostalgic emotion episodes do not depend on comparative evaluations of the quality of two times.

The intentional objects of lyrical emotion episodes, I found, are also diverse. They range from a patch of sunlight to an ecstatic drunk in a raincoat; from Coleridge’s icicle to Woolf’s case of sandwiches. What they have in common is that they are represented
and felt toward as part of a conjunction, comprised of the transience of particulars and the fleetingness of all things. Thus, underneath the variety of ways in which lyrical emotions are described, they are, with nostalgia, emotions concerned with ultimate endings brought about by the passage of time. The next question is what standards of correctness ought to govern such emotions.
Chapter Three
The Formal Object of Nostalgia

To evaluate an emotion episode on the standard model, we need to know more than what emotion type it belongs to and what it is directed toward. For normativity to gain a foothold, we must also possess what, in Chapter One, I called the facts of the case. These are contained in an account of whether the particular object of emotion really instantiates that emotion’s formal object, and if so, what a proportionate emotional response to the actual object would be. The answers to these questions furnish an assessment of whether or not the emotion episode is fitting. So, to be able to assess any particular poignant emotion episode for sentimentality, we must identify the formal object of that emotion type.

The literature on formal objects (or formal properties, core relational themes, and so on) is silent on poignancy, whether in the form of nostalgia or lyrical emotions. Instead, these discussions tend to be limited to ‘basic’ or ‘standard’ emotions, such as anger, fear, disgust, happiness, and jealousy. Perhaps because such examples lend themselves to intuitive consensus about their respective formal objects, the fundamental issue of how to determine a formal object has never been addressed directly. An emotion type’s formal object is not thought of as something that must be argued for; rather, it is to be more or less read off of the phenomena.

Two facts conspire to make it a trickier business to arrive at nostalgia’s formal object. First, in nostalgia, we have seen that the phenomena are often misdescribed, so the nature of the phenomena which we might hope to read off of is contested. Second, and
relatedly, nostalgia differs from the standard examples in that it is not generally presumed to be appropriate unless rendered inappropriate by the circumstances. Instead, it approaches categorical stigmatization in everyday thought. According to Boym,

Nostalgia is something of a bad word, an affectionate insult at best…[at worst it is regarded as] an abdication of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetic failure. (xiv)

Likewise, Starobinski writes that in the modern usage of ‘nostalgia’, “its acquired poetic meaning has little by little taken on a pejorative connotation: the word implies a useless yearning” (101).\(^1\) Thus, whereas a relatively unstigmatized emotion will have a formal object which is itself a normatively neutral descriptive property, it is tempting to give nostalgia a formal object that reflects and supports this pejorative connotation.

Something like this may already be apparent in accounts of nostalgia’s actual objects we saw in the previous chapter. For example, the poverty of the present requirement might be read as suggesting that nostalgia’s formal object is a past time that is regarded as somehow preferable to the present. But in that case, having rejected the poverty of the present requirement, have we not already made some headway on the identity of the formal object? The concern could also be raised that counterexamples such as reflective nostalgia have already undermined the claim that nostalgia is necessarily directed at past happiness. It might therefore seem as though this chapter’s discussion is doomed to retread the same ground, and that we should already anticipate the conclusion:

\(^1\) Frijda, too, says of nostalgia: “it is just there, useless as it is” (“Functional” 117).
nostalgia’s formal object must respect the pluralism about nostalgia’s actual objects that I argued for earlier.

However, the present task is distinct. In Chapter Two I investigated the sorts of past times which can be represented in nostalgic experiences; now the question is what should happen in experiences of that type. When we ask about the identity of emotion’s formal object, we are only asking what, in the feeling, is at least implicitly ascribed to nostalgia’s objects—not what those objects really instantiate. The answer to the new question is not addressed by our pluralism concerning the kind of past one may long for nostalgically. To see this, consider the example of the poverty of the present requirement. This alleged constraint on the definition of nostalgia was defeated by counterexamples such as Proustian nostalgia for the bad, in which nostalgia is directed at a time which one does not believe was preferable to the present. According to the present objection, this means that ‘a past preferable to the present’ should be ruled out as a candidate for the formal object. Yet that does not follow. One could admit the existence of Proustian nostalgia for the bad, while still holding that:

(1) nostalgia’s formal object is ‘a past preferable to the present’, so
(2) what nostalgia at least implicitly ascribes to its actual object is the property of being preferable to the present; therefore
(3) Proustian nostalgia for the bad is unfitting, because its actual object, the bad time, was not really preferable to the present; it fails to instantiate the emotion’s formal object.
In other words, the argument for pluralism about nostalgia’s actual objects leaves every option for a formal object on the table. What was rejected as a necessary condition on the occurrence of nostalgia might still be maintained as nostalgia’s standard of correctness. For all that has been said so far, the property of being a preferable past could be the formal object.\(^2\)

In this chapter, I address the novel challenge of arguing for a formal object by proposing a set of requirements on, or adequacy tests for, any formal object of emotion. I then consider four possible properties that could serve as the formal object of nostalgia, assessing them according to those requirements. In my view, once we are clear on the conditions an adequate formal object must meet, several initially intuitive candidates for nostalgia’s formal object cannot be sustained. At the same time, the arguments for this reveal that the blanket statement of nostalgia’s guilt, described by Boym and Starobinski, is strictly false—as long as it is unfittingness that nostalgia is supposed to be guilty of. In fact, not all episodes of nostalgia are of an inappropriate emotion type for the situation.

My adequacy tests hinge on holding up proposed candidates to actual cases, in ways I will say more about. One of these test cases is precisely that of reflective nostalgia: the broad sort of nostalgic experience of which Proustian nostalgia is often a variety, and which involves the absence of a belief that one’s nostalgic memory is

\(^2\) To be sure, there are some limited overlapping considerations with Chapter Two. This is because what I will call a descriptively adequate formal object must clearly be ascribed to all objects of the emotion episodes in question, and so particular examples of such emotion episodes, including Proustian nostalgia, are relevant to that question. That question is, in other words, whether (2), above, is actually correct. But the purpose of such examples is still different from the role they played in Chapter Two. There, we simply asked what intentional objects nostalgia could take; here we are suggesting that the answer to that question constrains what we can say about nostalgia’s standard of correctness.
accurate to the past time. This is partly for methodological reasons I will discuss below, but also because, by the end of this chapter, we will be left with a challenge to reflective nostalgia. The challenge is that, although the blanket indictment of nostalgia turns out to be false, reflective nostalgia seems to be generally unfitting given nostalgia’s formal object (an implication that is the focus of Chapter Four). Thus, before describing the adequacy tests for formal objects and examining our candidates in their light, I will lay out a particular example of reflective nostalgia which will serve to direct some of my arguments in this chapter, and which will move into the spotlight in the next.

3.1 Reflective Nostalgia as a Test Case

In this section, I will briefly recall the identifying features of reflective nostalgia, introduce a new example of it to focus our attention, and explain why a variety of nostalgia which may seem special or idiosyncratic is nonetheless a useful tool for investigating the question of nostalgia’s formal object.

In reflective nostalgia, nostalgia is experienced in the absence of the judgment that the memory in question is veridical. This need not take the form of a settled judgment that the memory is false or distorted; it is enough for reflective nostalgia that the rememberer find the memory’s veridicality uncertain. As we saw, there are two general grounds for the suspicion of inaccuracy. First, a memory might seem to have an inaccurate ‘phenomenological tone’, as when Nin longs for a past which she remembers with “the added elements of fiction: lighting, focus, the gold patina which memory adds to it.” In Nin’s example, the past strikes her as appearing differently than it did when it
was present—due, she thinks, to a kind of alteration in memory. Alternatively, nostalgic longing might seem incongruent with the quality or ‘valence’ of the actual past, as Wright suggests: “How sweet the past is, no matter how wrong, or how sad.” Nostalgia can fix on times which, when they were present, seemed too sad or dull to be longed for later. Moreover, tone- and valence-incongruence are often combined: Wright’s sweetness will often be among Nin’s fictional elements. In other words, the phenomenological tone of the memory may be what accounts for the past time’s perceived valence.

What distinguishes reflective nostalgia is that, in it, such alterations or incongruities are evident to or suspected by the nostalgist. Nin and Wright do not uncritically endorse the goldenness and sweetness of their respective pasts. And, once more, I will assume that reflective nostalgists are correct in their suspicions of incongruity—that is, I will assume that the suspicion is accurate.

It will be beneficial to set out a more thorough and straightforward example of reflective nostalgia which showcases both the phenomenology of the memory, and the ‘reflective’ or questioning aspect of it. The following two passages from Johanna Skibsrud’s novel The Sentimentalists will therefore serve as our primary illustration of reflective nostalgia. In these excerpts, the narrator is remembering her childhood:

I don’t have many pictures of those early days…But the few I do have evoke in me a sense of moments which were perfect—self-enclosed—and which inspire me to imagine, briefly, that I’ve been like that. Uninterrupted. Completely absorbed by things. I am certain, though, that as they first occurred to me I never did feel quite as anchored in those
moments as I am now willing to suppose…I remember that in those early years, and even more so later on, we were often terrifically, nearly fantastically, bored. (37)

I experienced a homesickness so acute that I can still remember the taste of it, cottony and sour on my tongue…I had received, I suppose…such a distinct notion of what home was, or could be, that I have been unable, to this day, to give it up entirely….my longing for that home remains as strong as ever. The only difference being that the home is absent, now; that perhaps it never existed at all. Or at least not in the way I imagined. I long (I admit) for nothing but the knowing of it changes little, and—even after everything that’s happened since that first summer—there is something in me that expects that I will find it still. (61)

The first of these passages expresses doubts about the accuracy of the phenomenological tone (the curious feeling that the past was self-enclosed or perfect), and about the congruence between longing and the quality of the past (which was in fact dull). The second passage articulates the power and persistence of the emotion in spite of the narrator’s disbelief in the memory. For brevity’s sake, I will henceforth refer to this example as that of Skibsrud’s nostalgia, eliding reference to the narrator.

The choice to emphasize reflective nostalgia when attempting to choose a formal object for nostalgia in general may seem odd. But there are several reasons for doing so. First, it is, in fact, not uncommon for nostalgia to be experienced in this way; the
experience, I hope, will be familiar to most readers. In addition, as noted in Chapter Two, reflective nostalgia is a central case in Proust, literature’s undisputed exemplar of nostalgia. So it would be inaccurate to suppose that reflective nostalgia is a marginal variation on the standard form of the emotion, which need not be taken into account when narrowing in on its formal object.

For the same reason, it would also be a mistake to suppose that reflective nostalgia is best considered an entirely different emotion from the non-reflective variety, and hence that it will have a different formal object. For one thing, the intentional and phenomenal similarities resist that interpretation. Moreover, it should be remembered that there are many different ways in which other emotions, such as anger and fear, manifest (e.g. fittingly or unfittingly, with or without belief in the accuracy of their own construal of the situation), but this does not change the fact that they are episodes of anger and fear. Thus, we do not have good reason to think that the formal object of reflective nostalgia will be any different from that of nostalgia in general. Rather, the formal object ought to be the same for both varieties.

Even if it is acceptable or necessary to factor in reflective nostalgia when seeking to identify nostalgia’s formal object, that still leaves the question of why it should be foregrounded. One answer is that when one is simply deluded about the past, nostalgia’s inappropriateness is overdetermined. When one is already guilty of believing something false, one can be criticized on a purely epistemic basis. By contrast, when we consider the example of someone who has a somewhat incongruous emotion without a false belief about its object, we are confronted directly with the questions of emotional normativity that are our concern. In this way, concentrating on reflective nostalgia is no more unusual
than the convention in the literature of concentrating on self-aware phobics instead of delusional ones.

Finally, here as elsewhere, the more difficult examples of a phenomenon are often the most illuminating to consider when devising an account of that phenomenon. Thus, I proceed with reflective nostalgia in mind for the same reason that ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics dwell on thought experiments in addition to simpler observations: to put our intuitions to the test. Considered in this light, the present sort of case has the additional merit of being relatively familiar and documented, rather than fantastical (teletransporters, Twin Earth) or puzzling by careful design (trolley problems, Gettier problems). All that said, the consideration of reflective nostalgia in my discussion will not be at the expense of other, more straightforward sorts of nostalgia. The point is to find something that is common to them all.

### 3.2 Adequate Formal Objects

As stated in Chapter One, I will rely on de Sousa’s (1987; 2011) account of the formal objects of emotions. To recall, each emotion type has its own formal object, and each episode of a given emotion type involves implicitly or explicitly ascribing that formal object to the actual object, or target, of emotion. It is the formal object that is the standard of correctness for emotion episodes of that type. Thus, the formal object of nostalgia will be that property to which nostalgia is essentially a response, in the same sense that dangerousness is the property to which fear is essentially a response. For a given episode of nostalgia to be fitting, in the sense meant by D’Arms and Jacobson
The actual object of nostalgia must instantiate that property, whatever it is.

The specification of a formal object requires achieving coherence with two things: descriptive facts and normative intuitions. On the descriptive side, we must ask whether it is really the case that in nostalgia, one always ascribes (again, implicitly or explicitly) the proposed formal object $x$ to the actual object of emotion. This ascription is supposed to be made in every episode of the emotion, whether or not the actual object genuinely instantiates $x$. If we can find no good reason to think that the property is being ascribed in every episode, then it will be descriptively inadequate. In addition, on the normative side, we must ask whether making $x$’s instantiation the standard of fittingness gives us the intuitively correct answer in the evaluation of certain cases—or whether it generates counterintuitive fittingness assessments. An example of this would be a case in which the proposed formal object is not instantiated, but nostalgia is nonetheless intuitively fitting. Conversely, it would be normatively counterintuitive if the proposed formal object is instantiated, but nostalgia seems unfitting. A clear descriptive or normative failure undermines a property’s claim to be the formal object of the emotion in question. We might think of these two tests for a potential formal object as the tests for descriptive adequacy and normative adequacy.

One other condition on formal objects bears repeating. Not only must a candidate property be descriptively and normatively adequate, but it must be the sort of property that is eligible for the role, which is to say, not a response-dependent or emotion-proper property. Examples of these ineligible sorts of property are frighteningness or disgustingness, familiar from the upper half of Goldie’s diagram of emotion justification. It may well be that in every episode of fear, one ascribes frighteningness to the thing one
fears; but treating the latter as a formal object would only result in circularly-warranted emotions. In the final calculation, we might then say that a proposed formal object which is affect-laden in this way is normatively inadequate. However, since that is a rather different path to normative inadequacy than the generation of substantive normative counterexamples, it will be neater to treat this as a separate condition: for a property to be eligible to be a formal object, it cannot be a property that one ascribes only because one feels. We may think of this simply as the eligibility requirement.

Of course, to this last point, it might be objected that we can ascribe the property of frighteningness to various things in the world even when we are not afraid, and so it is misleading to label that property ascription “affect-laden”. So, the objection would run, perhaps such properties are eligible to be formal objects. However, by affect-laden (or emotion-proper, etc.), I mean only that the property ascription depends on one’s actual response, occurrent or dispositional, whether or not the response is merited. For example, a man who fears Patricia Greenspan’s (1988) harmless dog, Fido, may ascribe the property of frighteningness to Fido from the safety of his dog-proofed home. Thus, he does not have to be undergoing an episode of fear to ascribe the response-dependent property of frighteningness to the dog (since, for example, he knows all too well that walking past the dog’s yard does make him frightened). Yet that ascription still could not warrant his fear of Fido. So even though emotion-proper properties such as frighteningness may be ascribed when one is not having an emotion experience, this does not make them eligible for the role of formal object.

The property we select to be nostalgia’s formal object must therefore be descriptively adequate, normatively adequate, and eligible. As noted above, in cases of
emotions such as fear, it may at first sound odd to speak of ‘selecting’, ‘choosing’, or
‘making’ something the formal object of an emotion, rather than simply articulating what
the formal object must be. Identifying a property that is ascribed to an object in every
episode of an emotion is supposed to be trivial or nearly trivial, not contentious.\textsuperscript{3}
Similarly, the coherence with normative intuitions is supposed to fall out of the
specification of the property: for example, it is \textit{obviously} unfitting to fear something that
is harmless.\textsuperscript{4} Paradigmatically, a property that is the formal object of an emotion is
beyond reasonable reproach with respect to both its descriptive and normative functions.
Let us then examine a few candidates for nostalgia’s formal object, and consider whether
they satisfy these requirements.

### 3.2.1 An Unattainable Past

We might begin with the closest thing in the existing literature to an explicit
proposal of nostalgia’s formal object: simply an \textit{unattainable} or \textit{irrecoverable past}.
Irrevocability is mentioned in the Starobinski quote we began with, and something like
this proposal seems to be Edward Casey’s view: “The proper subject matter of
nostalgia—what we are nostalgic \textit{about}—is a world in the mode of absolute, irreversible
pastness” (377). This can be read as encompassing both functions of a formal object; the
claim would be that irreversible pastness is always ascribed to the object of nostalgia (it
is what we are nostalgic \textit{about}), and it serves as the standard of correctness for episodes

\textsuperscript{3} Cf. de Sousa (1987; 2011) and Salmela (2006).
\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Ceteris paribus}—for there are complicating cases such as fearing fictions. However, it
is noteworthy that, as far as I am aware, no solution to the paradox of fiction attempts to
solve that problem by challenging the formal objects of the emotions in question.
of nostalgia (it is the *proper* object).

The unattainability of the object of nostalgic longing is often remarked upon (e.g. Ben-Ze’ev 2004). However, when tested for normative adequacy, the property of being an irrecoverable or unattainable past comes up short. For, if nostalgia is fitting when its object belongs to the unreachable past, then nostalgia for my breakfast this morning would be fitting. Since this seems absurd, this candidate for the formal object runs into a normative counterexample. Making it the standard of correctness fails to accord with our basic normative intuitions.

Two things about this proposal’s failure should be noted. First, it is important to be clear about what seems absurd about nostalgia for today’s breakfast. It is not that a mere meal is categorically ineligible to be longed for, since we have encountered examples of nostalgia for equally mundane events. Rather, what seems unfitting about nostalgia for my breakfast this morning is simply that, as I can testify, there seems to be nothing special about it (at least, not from today’s vantage point, which is the case being considered). Something *more* than the object’s unattainability is required to make an episode of nostalgia fitting.

The other point about this proposal is that, although it is normatively inadequate and so cannot be the formal object, it is nonetheless descriptively adequate. It is hard to deny that irreversible pastness is at least implicitly ascribed to the actual object of nostalgia in every instance. Nostalgic desire feeds off of an aura of unrealizability that surrounds its object in memory; this might be what marks the modern distinction between simple homesickness and nostalgia. From now on, then, I will suppose that whatever else nostalgia’s formal object might be, nostalgia is always for a past that is unattainable, and
this should be taken to be built into references to the nostalgic past and nostalgic memories (that is, unattainability is always ascribed to, or in, these). Furthermore, the irreversible pastness of the object of nostalgia is, to a greater or lesser extent, always part of the conscious focus of the emotion. As we saw at the beginning of Chapter Two, the finality of the ending in nostalgia was enough to warrant considering it a more specific emotion type than merely ‘poignancy’. But again, this is not enough to make such finality—that is, irreversible pastness or unattainability—nostalgia’s standard of correctness.

3.2.2 A Happy Past

A simple and intuitive proposal for nostalgia’s formal object is past happiness. This accords with some of the less value-laden characterizations of nostalgia we have seen: Johnson-Laird and Oatley (1989), as well as Prinz (2004), consider nostalgia to be essentially a matter of missing the good times. And, whatever else might be said about missing a genuinely happy time (e.g. regarding proportionality, its moral or practical worth, or its tastefulness in given circumstances), a person who has this feeling does not seem to be under further obligation to explain the basic suitability of missing such a thing. In the same way that it is brutely intelligible to be afraid of imminent danger, it makes sense to miss a happy period of one’s life. The fittingness of it does not seem open to question.

But how would reflective nostalgia fare according to this formal object? The fact that Skibsrud’s past is recognized to have been fantastically boring does not provide
material for a normative counterexample to the candidacy of past happiness, for
Skibsrud’s nostalgia may simply be unfitting. That evaluation is not obviously
counterintuitive: on the contrary, longing for something that one regards as having been
boring (which we can suppose also involves remembering the desire to end that boredom)
might well be unfitting. So, at first blush, past happiness satisfies one of the criteria for a
formal object: it coheres with our normative intuitions.

What of its descriptive adequacy? Is it the case that, in every episode of nostalgia,
fitting and unfitting, the nostalgist ascribes happiness to the past time in question? It is at
this point that reflective nostalgia complicates matters. Examining the case Skibsrud
describes, it is not transparent that she is ascribing happiness to the times in question.
Rather, what precipitates her longing is the sensation of having been a seamless part of
the past: anchored or absorbed by it. As we found in Chapter Two, similar sensations turn
up frequently in descriptions of nostalgia: the past feels condensed, complete, or full, and
these phenomenological characteristics are presented as sufficient to account for the
suitability of longing for it. They are, however, not obviously related to, and certainly not
reducible to, happiness. Rather, if the photographs from her childhood depicted her as a
morose child, this would not reduce the likelihood of that child appearing to be
seamlessly absorbed in her past. Such cases of nostalgia are therefore a descriptive
counterexample to the candidacy of a happy past.

It might be argued that despite appearances, happiness is being ascribed to the
past in Skibsrud’s examples in some implicit fashion. If that could be defended, then the
descriptive counterexample would be defeated, and descriptive adequacy might be
secured. And as long as we allow that the sense in which one ascribes properties to an
object of emotion can differ from judging or believing that those properties are instantiated—as we must in order to account for recalcitrant emotions—then this reply is available to be made, in principle.

However, it is unclear how to defend this strategy in the present case. We must consider what would motivate us to override the appearance that happiness is not being ascribed to the past. After all, when we claim that the phobic who is self-aware nonetheless ascribes dangerousness to the dog, the phobic is likely to agree with that assessment: “It seems dangerous, but I disavow that appearance.” Thus, we have a good reason to maintain that dangerousness is still being ascribed. Skibsrud makes that kind of statement about other apparent characteristics of the past, but she does not say something like it about happiness. So here we cannot point to what the reflective nostalgist herself says to defend the idea that happiness is nonetheless being ascribed to the past.

The only strong enough reason to insist on the ascription, I suggest, would be if the implicit ascription of happiness to the past is necessary to explain the occurrence of nostalgia. The claim would have to be that if nostalgia is there, then happiness must be being ascribed, even if the nostalgist does not endorse the claim that the past was a happy time. This is a claim about the nature of nostalgic longing: it must be directed at what seems in some sense to be past happiness. Although this does not seem very plausible, it is worth recognizing the price of insisting on it.

The question is exactly in what sense happiness might be being ascribed. After all, we still have to accommodate the phenomenon of reflective nostalgia, in which the time in question does not seem happy in any clear, contentful way. Consequently, we are prevented from proposing that the happiness being ascribed is such that it appears to the
nostalgist as happiness—that is why the only thing left to do is to stipulate that, as a matter of definition, happiness in some minimal sense must be ascribed to the past in every episode of nostalgia. But once we are reduced to proposing this ‘minimal’ sense of happiness, I believe we are left unable to say whether the always-ascribed property of past happiness is eligible to be a formal object. If Goldie’s model is correct, more than one sort of property is implicitly ascribed to the object of an emotion: a formal object (e.g. dangerousness), and an emotion-proper property (e.g. frighteningness) which cannot serve to warrant an emotion episode. But which of these kinds of property would the stipulated one be? When we have a formal object, we have a property that we have reason to think can be instantiated by objects even if they are not the objects of feelings, whether occurrent or dispositional. That is, we can imagine such a property being instantiated when the emotion is not being felt, and conversely, we can imagine the property being absent when the emotion is being felt. But on the current interpretation of the property of past happiness, it is harder to imagine the property being absent when the emotion is being felt. This is because, to squeeze past the counterexample of reflective nostalgia, we had to insist that the property is no more than that which is always ascribed to an object in an episode of nostalgia. Thus, to override the appearances and make some version of past happiness descriptively adequate, we must make it a property that is, for all we know, incapable of doing any normative work. The argument is based on our epistemic limitations concerning the nature of properties which we have no observational or testimonial basis to claim are being ascribed.
3.2.3 A Preferable Past

Past happiness is vulnerable to a descriptive counterexample: it does not seem to be ascribed to all objects of nostalgia. But what of the property that might be behind the poverty of the present requirement: the property of being a past time that is preferable to the present? It is still in the running, and indeed, since it is discernible in so many intuitions about nostalgic episodes, it has a good claim to be the frontrunner.

Still, the idea that nostalgia’s formal object is a past that is preferable to the present immediately runs into a normative counterexample. It seems perfectly fitting to feel nostalgic toward a happy past, from the perspective of an equally happy present. One pedestrian example of this is reminiscence in the company of old friends: each person may be content with their life and avow that they would not trade the present for the past. Yet they may nonetheless feel a certain longing for the now-unattainable exploits of their younger years (for example, in childhood, high school, or college). In this case, the emotion’s fittingness does not seem to be impaired by the past’s failure to qualify as a preferable time to the present. If it is brutely intelligible that missing the good times is fitting, it seems unclear why it would suddenly be unfitting if we added present satisfaction into the equation. But, if the formal object of nostalgia was a preferable past, our evaluation of the reminiscence case would be that it is unfitting, and this contradicts our intuitive evaluation. The simple example of reminiscence thereby serves as a normative counterexample to the idea that a preferable past is nostalgia’s standard of correctness.

It might be replied that there is not really a conflict between the proposed formal
object and our intuitive assessment of the reminiscence case. One could again insist that in the reminiscence case, the time being remembered must be appearing preferable in some sense, since it is being longed for. In that case, the nostalgia of the reminiscing friends is directed at a time they implicitly regard as preferable, and this allows us to say that their nostalgia is fitting, even on the assumption that the formal object is a preferable past. Could this kind of tactic, which failed to make past happiness a viable candidate for the formal object, succeed in protecting a preferable past from the current normative counterexample?

It turns out that the answer is no, but this time for a different reason. Even if it was true that longing requires us to hold that preferability is being ascribed to the longing’s object, assessments of fittingness do not concern such ascriptions or appearances, but instead are supposed to be decided by the facts of the case. Those facts are unchanged by information about appearances. For example, in the reminiscence scenario, we are imagining (realistically enough) that the past and the present are equally happy as a matter of fact. Even if the nostalgist wrongly regards the past as a better time than the present, it remains the case that (1) nostalgia for a happy past seems perfectly fitting, and yet (2) the past in question was not, in fact, a better time than the present. If the formal object is a preferable past, we would still have to conclude that nostalgia is unfitting in these circumstances, against the intuition in (1). Therefore, the normative counterexample against this property holds up.

I have argued that a preferable past is normatively inadequate; but this verdict might be challenged on grounds of undue haste. Although this challenge will not successfully clear the way to make a preferable past the formal object, examining and
responding to it will help clear the way for the candidate that is the most promising.

The argument for the normative inadequacy of a preferable past traded on the claim that fitting nostalgia could be directed at a time period which one did not consider preferable to the present. Thus, in the reminiscence example, we pictured contented friends missing their childhoods, or their high school or college days. But entire time periods like these do not exhaust the possible objects to which we can apply the adjective preferable. It is consistent with the reminiscence scenario that, although the present and the past are equally good overall, the past seems to specifically contain more excitement, adventure, drama, freedom, or any number of other attributes. Why not then simply say that what one longs for is the specific feature whose apparent instantiation in the past is seen as preferable to its relative absence in the here-and-now? In other words, we could once again propose that nostalgia’s formal object is a preferable past—clarifying that this could mean preferable in some respect. Then the formal object could support our intuition that nostalgia in the reminiscence case is fitting.

It is correct that the formal object of nostalgia need not be ascribed to an entire time period. However, there are two reasons to resist the view that nostalgia ought to be for a past that is preferable in some respect, as this challenge urges us to do. The first reason is only terminological. The writers who inspire the proposed formal object—namely, advocates of the poverty of the present requirement, such as Hutcheon and Stewart—themselves tend to predicate preferability to an entire time period in their claims about the object of nostalgia. This is evident in their common references to the nostalgic past as utopian, prelapsarian, and the like. As a result, references to a preferable or better past carry that connotation in the literature, and may therefore may be
misleading when used differently. But, of course, this is not a problem with the idea itself.

The substantive worry concerns the implications of this strategy for descriptive rather than normative adequacy. Just as it was descriptively untenable to claim that happiness is ascribed to the past in Skibsrud’s example of nostalgia, it is awkward to hold that images of the past, in conveying a sort of anchoredness or absorption in that time, are thereby images of something preferable. It is not clear that what one feels in such an experience is preference—for example, the greater value of the past, or a desire to leave the present for it. For one thing, as I will discuss later, the reflective nostalgist may believe that to re-enter that past would be to erase the distanced perspective that seems to contribute to one’s longing for it. But moreover, it is not obvious that the Proustian experience, seizing on highly particular memory fragments, involves even an appearance of the past as preferable. It does not betray a sense that the remembered scene was better in any respect; that the past was more this, or more that. Of course, one might resurrect a now-familiar tactic and maintain that it is being thought better, because the emotion requires this ascription as a condition on its occurrence. But then, just as with the property of past happiness, we risk purchasing descriptive adequacy—dodging counterexamples like Proust’s, in other words—at the cost of throwing out any sense of betterness except that which is held to be necessarily ascribed in the feeling. As before, whatever sense of ‘better’ that could remain and evade the countervailing appearances might only be an emotion-proper property, ineligible to be a formal object. To sum up: the attempt to rescue this formal object from the normative counterexample of the reminiscence scenario may succeed on its own, but it still ends up either falling afoul of
descriptive adequacy, or rendering its eligibility hard to discern.

3.2.4 Something Desirable in a Memory

So far, three proposals for nostalgia’s formal object have been tested, and each has encountered obstacles. An unattainable past is normatively inadequate; past happiness is either descriptively inadequate or potentially ineligible; and a preferable past, after undergoing modifications to overcome a threat to its normative adequacy, suffers the same fate as past happiness. If it is not descriptively inadequate, its eligibility is still in question.

However, we may now be able to descriptively accommodate all of nostalgia’s varieties by proposing a simple but more flexible formal object: something desirable in a memory. Precisely what this means will be examined, but we should take stock of its immediate advantages. If nostalgia is categorically directed at something desirable in a memory, we are not vulnerable to counterexamples in which the past is not being seen as happy or preferable, either overall or in some particular capacity. Without contorting the terms ‘happy’ or ‘better’, we can respect the appearance that in nostalgia, one can simply want that: the ennui of Combray, or a curious seamlessness with another time. And yet we can also acknowledge that sometimes nostalgia is for the kind of perceived utopia that many writers assume, or for a particular quality of the past, such as excitement. It seems plausible that in the grip of nostalgia, desirability in some sense is always being ascribed to the intentional object of emotion.

Still, before declaring that this property is descriptively adequate, we must be
clear about the sense of desirability we have in mind. In particular, ‘something desirable in a memory’ could mean either something that was desirable to one at the past time in question, or something that is desirable now but may not have been then. Both of these options deserve consideration.

If the formal object of nostalgia is something in the past that was desirable then, then in nostalgia one always ascribes desirability-at-the-time to the object of emotion (correctly or incorrectly). I have already argued that reflective nostalgia provides a descriptive counterexample to the suggestion that happiness or betterness is always ascribed to the past; and maintaining such a claim against the appearances pushes us toward interpretations of those properties under which their eligibility to be formal objects cannot be discerned. The same argument can be made against the descriptive adequacy of the present candidate. At the time, Skibsrud found the past boring, not desirable. It is possible that, while averring that it was not desirable, she nonetheless sees it as if it had been; but once more, to the extent that this could be maintained it could just as well be an artifact of longing, rather than an emotion-independent property to which the longing is a response. In other words, it could be only a way of redescribing the fact that one feels nostalgic, not a property that could contingently fail to belong to an object of nostalgia and thereby render the feeling unfitting. That is what is required: a kind of desirability such that nostalgia’s fittingness tracks its presence, and unfittingness its absence.

Since another sense of ‘desirability’ is available, we should see if it fares better on the descriptive test. The proposed formal object is now ‘something desirable in a memory’, where ‘desirable’ is understood to mean desirable now. Thus, the object of
emotion need not have been desirable at the time. This seems to relieve us of having to strain against the appearances to descriptively accommodate reflective nostalgia: it fits nicely with the phenomenon we observe in Skibsrud, in which something is desired that was unwanted at the time. It is plausible that the object of nostalgia always appears desirable in this sense. Thus, this property seems to capture the common ascription made across the spectrum of nostalgic episodes. At the same time, it builds in the element of subjectivity that is inherent in nostalgia, and indeed any emotion: different people will long for different things, including things that others would never long for. That is, this formal object does not fix things so firmly (as ‘a happy past’ and ‘a preferable past’ did) that it fails to capture some familiar manifestations.

However, in another sense, does it introduce too much subjectivity? That is, if desirability is built into the property, might that property thus be rendered ineligible on the grounds that it is incorrigibly response-dependent, emotion-proper, affect-laden? To say that a represented scene has the property of being ‘something desirable in a memory’ may say nothing more than that one happens to feel nostalgic longing for it. And that would be no different in kind from saying that one finds the dog frightening. Without something more solid—an analogue of the dangerous—the proposed formal object of nostalgia may not actually be capable of doing any justificatory work.

It is tempting to reply to this worry by simply pointing out that the feeling of nostalgia and the ascription of this property can come apart. A past time may instantiate the property of being desirable from one’s present vantage point—for example, a stereotypical scene of nostalgia such as one’s first kiss—and yet, recognizing that the property is instantiated, one may recall the scene and feel nothing. This at least shows
that the property ascription need not be considered a mere artifact of an occurrent emotion. Yet this is not, on its own, enough to show that the property is eligible to be a formal object. For, as noted above, one can ascribe frighteningness to Fido while one is not feeling afraid, but that does not mean that frighteningness is eligible to be fear’s standard of correctness (or else it would render such fear fitting). So, the fact that the ascription of desirability can be made independently of the experience of nostalgia does not overcome this objection.

However, the objection is not insurmountable. It can be disarmed by specifying more precisely what ‘desirable’ is supposed to mean. The key is to distinguish between that which is desired, and that which merits desire (a distinction familiar from objections to Mill’s (1979) supposed conflations of the two). ‘Desirable’ and ‘desirability’, as I will use them, connote the latter. Once a condition of merit is introduced, we are pointed in the direction of reasons to support the ascription of desirability—reasons why desire is merited. This, then, removes the worry that ‘something desirable in a memory’ is affect-laden in the sense that would undermine its eligibility to be a formal object. There is a distinction between happening to be desired in the present, and being thought to merit desire from the present vantage point. The proposed formal object thus points us to justificatory reasons external to the emotion episodes in question. This shows that the property is eligible.

This refinement of the formal object might nonetheless be thought to reveal that the property we are considering is rather uninformative on its own. ‘Something desirable in a memory’ points to some justificatory reasons, but it does not pinpoint what those reasons are. And is it not the point of a formal object to be the emotion-external reason
itself, at least on a general level? Dangerousness need not ‘point to’ further reasons for fear; it is itself the reason. By contrast, the ‘something’ in the formal object we are considering seems completely open-ended. In other words, by making the property eligible, we may have reduced it to a mere stand-in for whatever reasons really do the justificatory work when we evaluate episodes of nostalgia.

In one light, describing the proposed property as a stand-in for specific reasons is accurate, but this characterization does not reveal any defect of the account. Instead, it is the price of being correct. The mistake that other proposed properties make is that they spell out what merits nostalgic desire in too-rigid terms. In doing so, they fail to be adequate in other respects, as we have seen. Exactly what merits desire cannot be built into the formal object of nostalgia itself, on pain of this inadequacy: to say more would be like saying that fear’s formal object is not just dangerousness, but the risk of physical danger. Such an account would indeed capture some central cases, but it would obviously leave others out (for example, the fear of public speaking). So, instead, we say the most general thing about fear that we can. Likewise, the most general thing we can say about nostalgia is that its actual object is (seen as) something in a memory that merits desire—but what is desirable will differ from person to person, and from case to case. ‘Something desirable in a memory’ therefore indicates that there are other reasons backing up that ascription, and these reasons justify an episode of nostalgia. To try to build any more specific reasons for desirability into the formal object would be to make the same mistake as calling the latter ‘a happy past’, ‘a preferable past’, and so on.

This point, in fact, suggests a solution to the controversy about the nature of formal objects which I mentioned in Chapter One. As I noted there, some philosophers,
such as D’Arms and Jacobson and Salmela, suggest that an emotion type’s standard of correctness or formal object must be a response-dependent property. Recognizing that merely ascribing frighteningness to an object cannot justify fear on its own, these philosophers hold that some account of what merits the ascription is then required. By contrast, de Sousa (and Goldie, at least by the implications of his model) holds that response-dependent properties should not be considered formal objects. Instead, we should say that the formal object is to be found in whatever justifies the ascription of a response-dependent property. In *Emotional Truth*, de Sousa argues:

Identifying the formal object of fear with the frightening [instead of the dangerous] would close the essential gap [between the object of emotion and my actual response]…which is essentially the requirement of correspondence…As Salmela himself points out, fear is appropriate only if what seems frightening merits fear. What merits fear, generally speaking, is the dangerous. (64-5)

Both sides of this dispute agree that a response-dependent property needs to be backed up by reasons, and so it seems fair to say it is agreed that those reasons are what justify emotion episodes. The question, then, is whether to give the title of formal object to the response-dependent property, or to the sort of reason that warrants its ascription.

The answer suggested by my analysis of nostalgia’s formal object is that, rather than having to say that formal objects must always be one or the other, we should allow that the best candidates for the formal objects of different emotion types will be
formulated at different levels of specificity. An example of a relatively specific or concrete formal object is dangerousness; an example of a comparatively general formal object is something desirable in a memory. What determines the level of specificity is just how particular we can get before the property in question ceases to be descriptively and/or normatively adequate. When it comes to the formal object of fear, we can reach a fairly specific, empirical property without violating those standards of adequacy (and so de Sousa is correct that we are better off giving this property as fear’s formal object). But as we have seen, in the case of nostalgia, we cannot get beyond spelling out the response-dependent property before the addition of further detail would tip the property into inadequacy.

That does not mean that in this case, a response-dependent property has assumed the power to justify emotion episodes. It only means that here we cannot name anything more concrete that is adequate, and so we can only gesture toward those further, idiosyncratic reasons, by leaving a variable in the formal object (‘something’). For some emotion types (humour is likely another), when we attempt to specify the emotion episode-external property that can do the work of justification, we will bottom out at a response-dependent property. In those cases, the emotion-external reasons are too variable to summarize in one property name, even though they are still what perform the justificatory work in each case. The debate about what kind of property a formal object is can be resolved by treating the names of response-dependent properties, when no more single specific reason can be adequately supplied, as partial specifications of the justifying property. These are ‘filled in’, case by case, by various items from a set of reasons that otherwise resists summarization. The attempt to give the most emotion-
external property we can, without failing an adequacy test, thus leads to a principled explanation of why some formal objects look empirical or quasi-empirical, and others look irreducibly response-dependent or affect-laden.\(^5\)

To return to nostalgia: even if all of this is accepted, I have not yet answered the charge of uninformativeness. Perhaps, with the above treatment of ‘something desirable in a memory’, I have only argued for the need not to say anything contentful about nostalgia’s formal object at all. To see why that is not the case, let us move on to consider the test for normative adequacy, and examine whether this formal object leads to intuitive fittingness assessments—or whether it is vacuous, as the present worry contends.

We have already supposed that it is intuitively fitting to miss a happy past, whether the present is better, equally good, or worse. Nothing appears to prevent the property now under consideration from delivering the same verdict: if the past exhibits desirability to the present (for example, because it was happy), nostalgia will be fitting. Next, we may test the property against a case of putatively unfitting nostalgia. To take one provisional example, we might imagine a variation on the first kiss scenario that commits the sins of selectivity and omission with which nostalgia is typically charged. This particular kiss is remembered as rapturous when in fact it was fumbling; one’s

\(^5\) Mulligan (1998) views all formal objects, including the dangerous, as axiological properties. He argues that they are not the properties that make emotions appropriate or inappropriate; instead this work is done by “natural objects and processes and…the natural properties and features of natural objects” (162). Mulligan would thus regard it as inaccurate to say that a ‘formal object’ is ever what justifies an emotion: on his view, a formal object has the status that I have given to response-dependent properties, i.e. they are to be ascribed on the basis of further reasons (Mulligan’s natural facts). But even if we should therefore regard ‘the dangerous’ as shorthand for still more facts that justify ascribing this property in a given case, this is nonetheless in accordance with the larger point: namely, the need for what I have called emotion-external criteria, and what Mulligan, like de Sousa, calls an appropriate emotion’s “correspondence” (176) with the world.
feelings are remembered as ardent but were actually ambivalent, even a little disgusted; and perhaps the whole surrounding time period is now remembered as bright and hopeful where on balance it was dreary and miserable. If nostalgia for this memory seems unfitting, can the present candidate for the formal object support that assessment? Once again, it seems that it can. If the kiss is held to merit desire because it was rapturous, then the fact that it was fumbling means that the property of meriting desire was not instantiated. The same can be said of the other reasons why one has, \textit{ex hypothesi}, ascribed desirability to the kiss: the alleged ardenity of one’s passions and the age’s golden hue. Here, the facts belie the property ascription, and render the emotion unfitting. Thus, ‘something desirable in a memory’, despite being agnostic about the particular ‘something’ in any given case, is not an empty description. It leads to fittingness evaluations that are responsive to emotion-external facts, and which will sometimes differ from the assessments that would be generated by another formal object.

If we stand by the claim that \textit{this} sort of nostalgia is unfitting, it reveals a \textit{prima facie} implication about the normative status of Skibsrud’s reflective nostalgia. It is true that opposing doxastic attitudes toward the memories mark a difference between nostalgia for the bad first kiss, and Skibsrud’s nostalgia for the boring past. In the former example, the nostalgist is deluded; in the latter, she is wise to the truth about the past. But the structure of fittingness assessments does not factor this difference into the equation. As we have seen, fittingness evaluations are decided by the facts of the case. If those facts are unchanged by information about what is \textit{ascribed} to the object (as when a phobic ascribes dangerousness to something harmless), then they should likewise not be affected by one’s doxastic attitude toward the object. Whether or not Skibsrud believes in
the perfect absorption in things that seems to characterize her childhood, the question is only whether or not she was, in fact, perfectly absorbed. Since she was not, it would appear that this emotion is just as unfitting as nostalgia for the lousy kiss.

If this is the normative outcome generated by the current candidate for the formal object, does it chafe against our intuitive evaluation of emotions like Skibsrud’s? What indeed is our intuitive evaluation of that sort of case? As stated when we considered the candidacy of past happiness, it does not seem as though ruling reflective nostalgia unfitting in such circumstances is obviously objectionable; and what a formal object must avoid is a clear normative counterexample. It is therefore safe to say that the formal object we have been considering does not result in a counterintuitive normative verdict. This means that the property of being something desirable in a memory is descriptively adequate, eligible (and informative), and normatively adequate. It appears, then, that we have hit upon the right balance of intuitiveness and non-triviality for a formal object.

3.3 Conclusion

Once we tease apart and formalize the conditions on an adequate formal object of emotion, various superficially attractive candidates are shown to be unable to serve as nostalgia’s standard of correctness. However, the property of being something desirable in a memory does pass the adequacy tests.

On the way to this claim, several straightforward examples, such as missing a happy time, were proposed as cases of intuitively fitting nostalgia. As long as our subject is fittingness and unfitness, then, nostalgia appears not to deserve the wholesale
vilification that Boym and Starobinski aptly describe. Yet reflective nostalgia does seem to earn that opprobrium. As long as we assume that reflective nostalgia represents the past as having emotion-relevant features that it did not actually have (as I have maintained is plausible), then, to repurpose Skibsrud’s words, “the knowing of it changes little”. That is, the self-awareness or irony of the reflective nostalgist is not enough to make the emotion fitting. In the next chapter, I will explore this implication and question its accuracy. In doing so, I will also explore the consequences of widening our interpretation of Boym and Starobinski, such that nostalgia’s ‘guilt’—as I will say, its sentimentality—could mean something other than the technical designation of unfittingness.
Chapter Four

Aestheticizing the Past: Reflective Nostalgia and the Charge of Sentimentality

Chapter Three argued that the formal object of nostalgia is something desirable in a memory; the discussion that yielded this result also showed that not all nostalgia is unfitting. So, if the charge of sentimentality is a charge of unfittingness, not all nostalgia is sentimental. We therefore have some reason to think that the presumption of nostalgia’s defectiveness, described by Boym and Starobinski, is false. At least on the question of whether it is capable of being an appropriate emotion type in certain circumstances, it seems that the feeling can be innocent.

But it also looked as though reflective nostalgia—such as Skibsrud’s longing for a childhood which she knows was dull—is unfitting. That which seems to merit desire, namely the past’s ‘phenomenological tone’ of self-enclosure (or Skibsrud’s sense of being ‘anchored’ in it), was not really a property of that past. So although Skibsrud feels nostalgic desire, the past time is not desirable, even from the present vantage point.

And yet, because reflective and Proustian nostalgia are familiar and often valued emotion experiences, it is worth probing this implication further. In this chapter, I argue that some cases of reflective nostalgia can be viewed as a kind of aesthetic treatment of the past, particularly on the models of fiction and (representational) visual arts. Nostalgic

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1 On the assumption, of course, that the cases in question are not always disproportionate (i.e. that one is not too nostalgic in these cases). This assumption is uncontroversial: there seems no reason to think that emotion episodes of an appropriate type will always be disproportionate.
2 Once more, to say this is the case in all reflective nostalgia is a shortcut: it would be possible for one to long for a past time, suspect that the past was not really as desirable as it now seems, and yet be mistaken about this. As before, I will suppose that the reflective nostalgist is correct in doubting that the past time was really as it seems in memory.
emotion experiences based on involuntary autobiographical memories can typically be regarded in this manner. And on this understanding, the objects of reflective nostalgia, even if the actual past was dull, are able to instantiate the formal object after all. If the past is relevantly ‘aesthetically’ in the emotion, this reverses reflective nostalgia’s unfittingness status. This account, which draws on the literature on the paradox of fiction, is the work of Sections 4.1-4.2.

The vocabulary of sentimentality is *prima facie* about fittingness, and so it may seem that by answering the fittingness question, the sentimentality question is settled too. Yet the charge of sentimentality is tenacious: even with the above argument on the table, it is still plausible to charge aestheticized reflective nostalgia with sentimentality. This is not surprising, for the association of nostalgia with sentimentality is so intimate that dictionary entries for each term often make reference to the other. This is maintained in philosophy by sentimentality’s detractors and its defenders: Kupfer states that sentimentality’s “mooring” (544) is in nostalgia, and Solomon assumes that nostalgia is “a form of sentimentality” (*Defense* 18). Even those who do not claim an intrinsic connection between the two, such as Amélie Rorty, have remarked that nostalgia counts as sentimental when the experience is “aestheticized” (“Enough” 270).

It is here that I will switch from a wholly adjudicatory stance to an explanatory one. Why is it that it still seems to make sense to charge aestheticized reflective nostalgia with sentimentality, even when it fits its actual objects? The first step is to recall that the term ‘sentimentality’ is ultimately flexible about the precise normative standard it expresses in a given instance. I therefore turn to the standard model’s other evaluative dimensions, and explore whether the sentimentality objection can be made to stick if it is
treated as a pragmatic or moral complaint against the emotion. But I will argue that objections to nostalgia along pragmatic and moral lines, although they are sound in some cases, fail to explain why nostalgic aestheticizations of the past strike us as essentially sentimental.

After rejecting those explanations, I offer a different diagnosis of the lingering normative unease we have about aestheticized reflective nostalgia in more than just outlying cases. Drawing on work in empirical psychology, I will suggest that what we find worrisome about this sort of remembering is in fact a set of characteristics typical of episodic memory and temporal representation in general. Once we appreciate that what makes us anxious about aestheticized reflective nostalgia is rooted in the natural operations of these faculties, the last promising way of formulating the sentimentality objection loses its purchase.

4.1 Aestheticizing the Past

Skibsrud’s reflective nostalgia is not obviously fitting. That was enough to clear our proposed formal object, which seemed to generate an unfittingness verdict, of normative inadequacy. In this section, however, I will argue that such episodes of nostalgia are not obviously unfitting either. This is not a reason to second-guess our newly-minted formal object—that is, to wonder if it is normatively inadequate after all. It would be unreasonable to assume that by specifying a formal object, all questions of fittingness in particular cases would immediately be clarified. Instead, it is to be expected that some cases will be harder to decide than others.
What prevents Skibsrud’s emotion from being obviously unfitting is that there is another way of thinking about reflective nostalgia: as a kind of aestheticization of the past. On this interpretation of the phenomenon, the facts about the actual past need not be regarded as decisive for the emotion’s fittingness status. This is because, as I will suggest, the attention the reflective nostalgist pays to the fictional or nonmimetic elements of the memory may track a distinction between the actual objects of nostalgia. And the actual object of an episode of reflective nostalgia need not be, at least first and foremost, the past time in question. It can instead be an imagined, aestheticized evocation thereof.

The self-awareness in the Skibsrud example is not merely a sort of annotation, flagging the memory as untrue. Instead, it dwells on the elements that are believed to have been added in memory, which are for Skibsrud a sense of anchoredness and seamlessness. Likewise, Nin’s description of nostalgia for Paris dwells on the stylistic or expressive features of the memory—lighting and focus. What if, then, the actual object of emotion in such cases is not Skibsrud’s actual childhood, or Nin’s actual time in Paris, but rather the altered memory itself? In some reflective nostalgia, the grounds for thinking that desirability is being ascribed to the past time are not as strong as the alternative construal that one is emotionally responsive to the fictional features of the memory image—things which one recognizes to be not inside the scene on the other side of the window, but instead drawn onto the glass. One precedent for this sort of view can be found in Frijda and Sundararajan’s discussion of ‘savoring’ emotions in Chinese thought, in which “the intentional object of emotion is the experience rather than the experienced object” (229). In the cases of reflective nostalgia I am describing, one is not
necessarily ‘savouring’ an emotion, but one is feeling toward a mnemonic experience, rather than just the thing in the world on which that experience draws.

This is not, of course, to claim that the object of reflective nostalgia is never a past time, and always the memory as such. It is only to claim that this may sometimes, even frequently, be the case. So, to make the refined terminology clear: by ‘reflective nostalgia’ I mean any nostalgia in which the veridicality of the memory is questioned by the nostalgist. It can be directed exclusively toward a situation in the past; but it can also be directed, at least in part, at the memory itself, which seems to involve added fictional elements. It is this second case that I refer to as ‘aestheticized reflective nostalgia’.

Chapter Two’s discussion of the actual intentional objects of nostalgia concerned the type of past that can figure in, or be represented in, episodes of nostalgia. Those points still stand. But they do not rule out the possibility that the emotion’s actual object may, instead of or in addition to being a situation in the past, also be an occurrent memory of that situation. And the latter, as we will see, need not be a mimetic duplicate of the former. The present discussion is therefore not a re-opening of the question of the actual objects of nostalgia as such, but a further specification of what we can say about that in reflective nostalgia’s case, due to pressure from the implications of nostalgia’s formal object.

So far, I have claimed that in aestheticized reflective nostalgia, the actual object of emotion is the memory itself; and I have claimed that we can have feelings directed at the fictional features of the memory. Questions may be raised about how each of these claims could be true. By answering them, we will gain a better idea of what it means to aestheticize the personal past, and how doing so impacts on reflective nostalgia’s
fittingness. Let us turn to them now.

4.1.1 The Total Mnemonic Experience: A Mixed Focus Account

The claim that the actual object of reflective nostalgia could be the memory ‘itself’ or ‘as such’ might make it seem as though the proposal is that the intentional object of emotion is the very fact that one is having a memory. This would cut against a common assumption in the literature. For example, discussing the scenario of being frightened when one imagines falling off a cliff, Noël Carroll claims that “we are not frightened by the event of our thinking of falling, but by the content of our thought of falling—perhaps the mental image of plummeting through space” (Paradoxes 80). In contrast with this sort of distinction, holding that the actual object of reflective nostalgia can be the altered memory itself sounds like the dubious claim that the emotion responds only to the event of memory retrieval, and not what the memory represents.

This account is dubious because retrieval seems like nothing intelligible to long for; after all, the retrieval is, in that moment, as possessed by the rememberer as it will ever be. To make sense of nostalgic affect on such an account, one would have to tell some alternative story about it. Perhaps it could be claimed that it is simply a brute fact that some memories, irrespective of anything about the times they represent, come upon one with the special phenomenological tone described by Nin and others. The fleeting sense of fullness with which the past is imbued might be pleasurable when it arrives and disappointing when it ebbs, and thus memories with that tone could become associated with those feelings. But this story about nostalgia simply does not have enough to do with
the content of what is remembered. In Chapter Three, I claimed that in reflective nostalgia one can simply want *that*, and it seems obvious that the desired thing in question is that which is being represented in the memory, not just the fact of remembering.

Fortunately, this is not what is meant here by saying that reflective nostalgia can be directed at the memory itself. It would indeed be mistaken to attempt a sketch of nostalgia, reflective or not, which denies that the content of the memory is part of the emotion’s focus. Such a view might be called a *pure retrieval-based account*, because it takes the event of retrieval to be the emotion’s intentional object.

Instead, I am suggesting what might be thought of as a *mixed focus account* of some episodes of reflective nostalgia. This approach rejects the stark dichotomy between maintaining that the intentional object is just the represented content (the past time), or just the fact or event of retrieval. Rather, what we have in these cases are objects of emotion with multiple focal properties, belonging to a single felt episode. In them, the object of emotion is the total mnemonic experience, encompassing both the content and its retrieval. One focal property is thus the content or past time being remembered; another is the fictive alterations to the memory that are added in retrieval; and another may indeed be the fact that a memory, perhaps long forgotten, is returning (Lagerkvist: “Why do I remember this?”). The focus of the emotion may flit between these, or simultaneously involve more than one as foreground and background, as suggested by the metaphor of seeing the past through marked-up glass. Thus, to claim that in aestheticized reflective nostalgia the actual object of emotion is the memory itself is not to throw the content out, but to let more focal properties in. Given that all of these elements may be
present and attended to in the emotion episode, the explanation that best accommodates
the phenomena is the one that accepts the phenomena’s richness at face value, allowing
that there may be multiple points of focus in a single occurrence of reflective nostalgia.

Of course, it may be argued that insofar as the fact of retrieval is still being touted
as a potential focal property, this view still faces the objection that nobody *longs for the
fact that* they are remembering. But that is only an objection to the claim that the object
of emotion is nothing other than that fact. On a mixed focus account, one can say what is
natural: that longing is directed at the remembered past (in our case, content that is
treated in certain nonveridical ways). Yet one is also able to say that there can be great
happiness occasioned by retrieving memories, as we have seen in Proust and Wright, and
perhaps sadness when the full force of the synecdochical experience wanes, regardless of
the memory’s content. These feelings could reinforce the two valences of nostalgic
longing (its mixed or bittersweet character), or could accompany the yearning for the past
time. It is hard to confidently tease apart the contributions of each focal property to some
identifiable strand of the overall affective experience; phenomenology cannot be trusted
to yield such fine distinctions.

This lack of precision is not a problem unique to aestheticized reflective nostalgia.
Consider the example of becoming embarrassed in a social situation. As you feel yourself
turning red, you are aware that your embarrassment is on display, which is all the more
embarrassing and intensifies your blush. You can tell that this further embarrassment
looks to others like an overreaction to the original faux pas, and the resulting sense that
you are making a fool of yourself turns your face even redder, triggering a recursion of
one or more steps in the sequence. All of this can happen in a matter of seconds. The
point is that although you can stand back from the intricate tortures of self-consciousness and analyze, at least to some extent, the separate reasons for embarrassment in this experience, in real time they quickly feed off of each other in a way that makes it hopeless to state which precise reason for embarrassment is in play from one moment to the next.

We might call this the blending effect. To compare, imagine listening to a crescendo in which one knows that a trumpet and a French horn are playing different notes in a chord, but when they are combined fortissimo it is practically impossible to hear which instrument is playing which note. Given the blending of reasons in a crescendo of embarrassment, it is more natural to call this a single episode of embarrassment with multiple focal properties, than to pass it off as a series of overlapping but discrete episodes of the same emotion type. The same should be said of aestheticized reflective nostalgia: a single felt episode may be directed at the total mnemonic experience, which admits of multiple focal properties.

To be clear, I draw these lessons from these examples not simply because the emotion experiences are complicated and happen quickly, but because they manifest a single emotion type whose reasons are tangled and rapidly pile up onto each other. Things are different when more than one emotion type is involved. For example, consider augmenting the embarrassment example with the detail that the original embarrassing faux pas was that you expressed Schadenfreude by making a snarky remark. Imagine that, following this, the guilty pleasure of your Schadenfreude coexists with your embarrassment at having exposed it. It would not follow from what I have argued that this is a single episode of emotion which we must call ‘embarrassed Schadenfreude’, or
some such. When there are different emotion types in the mix, it is easier and more natural to speak of second-order emotions: in this case, (second-order) embarrassment about one’s (first-order) Schadenfreude. But second-order and first-order distinctions are much less useful in cases where there is only one occurrent emotion type.

This picture of emotion episodes directed at multiple focal properties of a total mnemonic experience is what is meant by the claim that reflective nostalgia’s actual object might be the memory as such. The counterintuitive connotations of the latter phrase fall away when it is unpacked.

4.1.2 The Fictional Features of the Memory Image

What about the claim that the emotion can be, in part, directed at the fictional features of the memory image? This raises a separate worry, for it departs from a typical and intuitive way of accounting for the possibility of real emotions about imagined objects. To show this, I will briefly review the various proposed solutions to what is traditionally known as the paradox of fiction.

It is widely held that one can have real emotions about objects one knows to be imaginary, but the issue has not been without controversy. The literature on this problem constitutes the vast majority of activity at the intersection of the philosophy of emotions and philosophy of art. As Jerrold Levinson succinctly describes the puzzle, we are faced with three ostensibly inconsistent propositions which all seem to be true: (1) We often have emotions for characters and situations known to be purely fictional; (2) Emotions logically presuppose beliefs in the existence of their objects; and (3) We do not harbor
beliefs in the existence of objects known to be fictional (22-3).

Each of these propositions has been denied in various attempts to solve the problem. Some have denied the first proposition: most famously, Kendall Walton (1990) holds that our emotions in response to fictions are quasi-emotions, not the genuine article. If we do not really have emotions in response to fictions, then we do not really have a problem of fictional emotions.

The second proposition is often targeted. In addition to being rejected by all antijudgmentalist philosophers of emotion (see, for example, Stocker 1987), discussions of the paradox by Carroll (2001) and Moran (1994) specifically argue that imaginative engagements with fiction in the absence of belief or pretense are sufficient for emotions after all. However, simply denying the judgmentalist claim does not explain fictional emotions, so many who deny (2) also give a positive claim that involves tinkering with (3) as well.

While it is seldom argued that consumers of fiction do in fact believe that a given fictional situation exists, the third proposition is finessed by those who hold that the beliefs that matter for an emotion do obtain, whether or not the situation is fictional. This sort of response adds more detail than just the standard antijudgmentalist response to the puzzle. One representative of this approach is Martha Nussbaum (2001), who argues that fiction represents not just specific fictional events but also “things such as might happen” (240) in our own lives, which are of the same sort that happen in the fiction. Emotionally engaging fiction is thus cast as a depiction of trans-fictional possibilities; fictions show us things we believe might happen to us. Others who take a similar line, if less eudaimonistic and future-oriented, include Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen (1994),
Norman Kreitman (2006), and Lazarus (1991). The more general strategy, already glimpsed in Carroll’s example of the idea of falling off a cliff, is simply to liken the imagined objects to their real-life counterparts. As Lamarque and Olsen argue,

we need only invoke the similarities between fictional and real situations.

Certain kinds of situations are frightening, certain kinds of characters (real or imagined) are pitiable. (104)

Likewise, Lazarus admits that aesthetic emotions are problematic, but maintains that they are not ultimately paradoxical, since “We are not speaking of something strange or esoteric, but of the psychological representation of and involvement in life itself” (296).

The question we are interested in is how nostalgia could be knowingly directed at the fictional features of a mnemonic experience. Do any of the above resolutions of the paradox of fiction offer a plausible explanation? With the majority, I will assume against Walton that we can and do feel real emotions toward, or partly toward, objects we believe to be fictional (that is, reflective nostalgia is not quasi-nostalgia). It would therefore be appealing to deny (2) and endorse the commonsense amendment of (3) proposed by Nussbaum, Lamarque and Olsen, and Lazarus. However, if aestheticized reflective nostalgia dwells on the very aspects of the memory that are fictive, and some of those

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3 This approach is sometimes buttressed by plausible evolutionary considerations, e.g. in Currie (2003), which departs somewhat from Currie (1997). Creatures with the ability to feel real fear when imagining threats might be less prone to make plans which put them in proximity to those threats.

4 Cf. Kreitman: “the existential reality of that to which the [fictional] representation refers is irrelevant; what matters is that the attributes of the intentional object are known to us from experience and carry the same sense of reality as does our world” (615).
things are pictorial lighting and focus, or curious sensations such as seamlessness and fullness, then it is not clear that there are ‘real-life’ counterparts to these phenomena. Rather, they seem to always fall on the side of the fictional or the imaginary, at best metaphorically applicable to real-life objects of emotion. In that case, it might be difficult to avail ourselves of this account of emotions for imagined objects.

Fortunately, we do not need to produce real-life counterparts of nostalgia’s fictive elements in order to account for the emotion. Consider Moran’s critique of Walton’s view that make-believe is what accounts for affective responses to fiction. According to Walton, we experience (something like) pity for Anna Karenina because we are pretending that she is real. Moran points out that it is often the least realistic features of aesthetic objects that are most responsible for an audience’s emotional involvement with them. In painting, it can be violent brush strokes or oversaturated colours that evoke a felt response; in theatre, it can be

such things as music (including song), lighting, figurative language, pacing, and compression of time, and other effects that provide emotional punctuation and tone, but do not necessarily represent anything themselves, and indeed may be quite mimetically out of place in the scene presented…while yet being directly responsible for the emotional involvement of the audience. (82)
The relevance of this argument to aestheticized reflective nostalgia is that the altered phenomenological tone of the memories involved are akin to such expressive qualities: what Nin calls the added elements of fiction.

Of course, returning to Moran, claiming that expressive qualities are responsible for an audience’s emotions is compatible with saying that they cause them, without the audience knowing that *they* are the cause. This might be thought to blunt the force of the argument: Walton might still be correct that such fictional elements would take away from emotional or quasi-emotional engagement if they were noticed. It is true that sometimes nonmimetic features of artworks operate outside the sphere of audience attention. Studio lighting, for example, is often used to unobtrusively direct attention to the mimetic features of visual art. Film editing can subtly violate the natural rules of continuity in one corner of the screen to create an unaccountable sense of anxiety about what might appear there. In such cases, nonmimetic aspects of art contribute to our emotional responses while flying under the radar. However, as Moran’s examples indicate, expressive qualities can also be foregrounded in the audience’s attention, where they are part of the focus of emotions even as they “highlight the artificial character” (82, my emphasis) of the object.

A simple way to harmonize Moran’s point with that of Lamarque and Olsen is to say that real life includes aesthetic attention, and so in real life we can be moved by things which we know have no ‘real life’ counterparts. Given that, it is not controversial to suppose that we can be emotionally moved by imagining the past with a gold patina, or as strangely full and seamless, even when these qualities draw our attention to their own fictitiousness. There is nothing more puzzling about the claim that reflective nostalgia
can focus on the artificial treatment of the memory image, than there is about the claim that a filmgoer’s dread can be fixed on the bullet traveling in slow motion toward the protagonist. The nonmimetic qualities that contribute to our emotional response to the past can be, in Moran’s terms, part of “the manner of imagining”, rather than things which inhabit “the content of what is imagined” (93). This is the first lesson I wish to draw from Moran’s answer to the paradox of fiction: knowing that the expressive features in reflective nostalgia are fictional need not dampen their emotional resonance.

Moran’s discussion can also help us to see the variety of ways in which a memory’s expressive qualities can evoke our emotions. In his reply to Walton, Moran accepts that the expressive effects of artworks often detract from the realism of artworks. As we have just seen, his point is that such unrealistic effects nonetheless have emotional impact, and this is “not through their role, if any, in make-believe” (85, my emphasis)—that is, not by our pretending that unrealistic effects are realistic. However, we can agree with Moran that expressive qualities can be emotionally resonant without imagining that they are part of a represented scene, and still maintain that, sometimes, expressive qualities are emotionally resonant precisely because the audience is imagining them as part of the scene.

This point is not the obvious one that we can sink into a fiction and be moved by expressive features without noticing that they are mimetically out of place (e.g., “I was depressed by the story—I wasn’t thinking about the cinematographer’s stark colour palette”). Rather, the point is that we can attend to the artificial elements and be moved by the idea of a world in which such improbable or impossible-to-realize elements are realistic: that is, a world where uncanny lighting and other expressive qualities are part of
the content of what is imagined. Consider Moran’s example of Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. Moran points out that if emotional engagement is disrupted by the awareness of artifice, then we should expect the painting to be less moving for its striking brushwork. Since this is plainly wrong, he concludes that our emotional response to the painting is not the product of pretending—that is, not the product of imagining that the sky really looks that way. But *Starry Night* can also move us if we imagine that it reveals, despite its fantasticality, how the sky actually looked to Van Gogh; and from there it is a short step to imagining for ourselves the night sky brimming with incandescent whorls. Sometimes it is just this kind of departure from reality that is emotionally affecting about art, including fiction.

The same thing is possible for other expressive qualities which audiences can recognize as artificial. To take another of Moran’s examples, the compression of time in a play, film, or novel may give us the feeling that we have experienced the entire lifetime of a character. Moran’s view seems to be that this panoramic perspective can emotionally affect us in itself, as well as enhance the resonance of particular themes and events that occur in the story. In both of those capacities, the compression of time is not a fictional truth about the world, but part of our manner of imagining that world, because of the way the story is told. However, this device can also be imagined as mimetically faithful to a possible world: a truth about the pace of time in a world unlike ours, in which a lifespan can be experienced in the condensed way that a reader or viewer experiences it. Thus,

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5 The style of *The Waves* provides another sort of example. It is difficult not to imagine the novel’s characters inhabiting a world in which the rhythms of thought are exclusively incantory, and consciousness is transparent to others. To illustrate: in the section of the book about early childhood, Susan thinks, “I will take my anguish and lay it upon the roots under the beech trees” (8), and Bernard observes to himself, “Susan has spread her
while Moran is correct that expressive qualities sometimes work on us emotionally by tugging the heartstrings ‘alongside’ propositional imagining or make-believe, an additional way in which expressive qualities can generate emotional responses is by imagining them as fictional truths. Contrary to the implications of Walton’s position, however, their being inaccurate to the real world (the appearance of the actual sky, the familiar pace of time) need not detract from the emotional impact of such imagining. In other words, it is a third way of thinking about the relationship between imagining and emotions. In it, expressive qualities do not independently affect one’s emotions while one imagines that $p$ (Moran), or disrupt one’s emotional engagement with $p$ because they are unrealistic (Walton), but instead are imagined as qualities that a possible world might have. Imagining of this sort can be emotionally affecting.

Something similar may occur in episodes of reflective nostalgia. While the expressive, artificial elements might be recognized as a prism through which we see the past, they can also be emotionally salient as self-consciously entertained notions of how a past could have been, perhaps if time worked differently. For example, the reflective nostalgist knows that the brilliance of some memories is not veridical, but the idea of a time in which the light and colours really were as saturated as they are in memory can be part of what creates the feeling. The synecdochical sensory experience of a time, whether it is embodied in the taste of Proust’s madeleine or Wollheim’s tomatoes and basil, is scarcely possible to achieve in the present. Yet an imagined present that is experienced that way can be part of what we long for in nostalgia. The same goes for other effects,

anguish out” (9). For all of Woolf’s reputation as a chronicler of the stream of consciousness, this style can be seen as imagining a different sort of consciousness—lyrical and permeable—than the one we actually have.
such as the sense of absorption in a time: one may know that the past did not then feel so
preternaturally of itself, the way that Skibsrud’s photograph now makes her feel. Indeed,
one may know that that effect is a product of the distance between the present and the
past. This does not change the fact that imagining a time that is suffused with its own
flavour—an unrealizable fusion of lived experience and distance—can spark desire.
Consider, for example, the rhapsodic comments of Rousseau’s character Saint-Preux (in
_Julie, or the New Heloise_) about this way of seeing the past:

> Days of pleasure and of glory, no, you could not be days lived by a mortal;
you are too beautiful…A sweet ecstasy absorbed all your duration, and
reassembled it in a single point like the one of eternity. There was for me
neither past nor future, and I tasted simultaneously the pleasures of a
thousand centuries. Alas! You have disappeared like a flash of lightning.
That eternity of happiness filled only an instant of my life. Time has
resumed its slow course. (qtd. in Poulet, _Studies_ 170)

This passage illustrates the longing one can feel for a representation of the past which one
knows one could not have experienced (“you could not be days lived by a mortal”).
Imagining the past this way seems to be what Edward Casey has in mind when he
describes the nostalgic past as “the world of our childhood as an isolable entity or
event…a world that was never itself given in any discrete present moment” (366). I will
say more about this idea in Section 4.4. For now, the point is simply that imagining an
impossible state of experience, with its unrealizability in mind, can still prompt an emotional response.

Expressive qualities in nostalgia can therefore be responsible for the emotion in two broad ways: as part of the manner of imagining, and as part of the content of imagining. As such, the idea that in ‘aestheticized’ episodes reflective nostalgia’s actual object is the total mnemonic experience with multiple focal properties—as opposed to simply the actual past in question—does not render the feeling hard to account for. With that in mind, we may move on to consider how such emotion experiences are to be evaluated for fittingness.

4.2 Aestheticized Reflective Nostalgia and Fittingness

As we have seen, as long as the actual object of nostalgia is confined to the actual past, it is inevitable that the emotion will be unfitting when the past is undesirable. Thus it was the boredom of Skibsrud’s childhood that made it acceptable to hold that nostalgia for it is unfitting, in spite of the way she later comes to see that time. The fact that it seems desirable to her in the present would be irrelevant, for that appearance is just an illusion. However, if the object of nostalgia is actually the memory as such—that is, if the expressive qualities are part of what one longs for (or, as we might say, the seeming is part of the object of emotion)—then the facts that settle the fittingness question might not just be facts about the actual past. Instead, we must turn to facts about the total mnemonic experience.

Another gloss of ‘something desirable in a memory’ has been made available. Just
as ‘desirable’ was ambiguous between ‘desirable then’ and ‘desirable now’, ‘memory’
can be taken to mean either the past time represented by the memory, or the memory as
an imagination-inflected mental phenomenon unfolding in the present. Thus, what merits
desire in a nostalgic memory could also be the memory image *qua* image, adorned by
expressive qualities; or, as I argued at the end of the last section, the memory image as a
fantasy of an impossible past. If the actual object of emotion can plausibly be thought to
be in the imagination rather than the past, then the fact that the actual past was boring or
unremarkable no longer delivers an automatic unfittingness verdict. Instead, we must ask
whether the total mnemonic experience instantiates the formal object of nostalgia.

If our question is therefore whether Skibsrud’s memory, rather than simply the
past time it represents, has the property of being desirable, it might be wondered what is
desirable about the memory’s fictional elements. Why *desire* these? However, the
mystery dissolves if we think of such desire as a response to beauty: not necessarily to
possess the beautiful thing, but to attend to it or get closer to it. As Alexander Nehamas
describes desire in response to artistic beauty:

> Like beautiful people, beautiful works spark the urgent need to approach,
> the same pressing feeling that they have more to offer, the same burning
desire to understand what that is. (73)

As it is with art, so it is with some memories. All of our examples testify to the fact that
the past appears somehow beautiful in nostalgia, reflective or otherwise. This should not
be a surprise if Nehamas is correct in characterizing beauty itself as “the emblem of what
we lack” (76); as we have seen, many writers have noticed that nostalgic memories seem emblematic of something forever out of reach (and I have assumed that by calling the remembered past *nostalgic*, part of one’s meaning is that it is unattainable). But the central point here is that, if the memories are beautiful, and beautiful things are desirable, then the formal object of being something desirable in a memory is instantiated. And this would mean that aestheticized reflective nostalgia—longing in response to a beautiful memory as such—is fitting.

This is just what we should expect if we consider some episodes of reflective nostalgia on an aesthetic model, since the same implications for fittingness bear on our emotions toward many artworks. To use a standard sort of example, it may have been unfitting for a witness to the carnage at Guernica to find it beautiful and feel the accompanying eros for that scene. But we do not automatically transfer this evaluation to that person’s similar feelings about Picasso’s *Guernica*. It is not controversial to hold that the introduction of expressive qualities into a representation of something real impacts on the criteria of appropriate emotional responses to it.

Berys Gaut (2007) makes a similar distinction between real and imagined objects of emotion when discussing fittingness in the context of Greenspan’s Fido example. Gaut asks us to consider the difference between Fred and Frank, whom we encounter while they are cowering from the harmless dog. Both are aware that Fido poses them no threat. Fred, who is genuinely afraid of dogs, nevertheless sees the dog before him as dangerous. His situation represents the standard case of recalcitrant emotion, and his fear, Gaut says, is neurotic. We might then assume that Frank’s fear is neurotic as well. However, Frank’s fear is the result of engaging in a game of make-believe, in which Fido is a dog with a
ferocious temperament and exaggerated powers to harm him. Gaut argues that although the intentional object of Fred’s fear is “actual-Fido”, Frank’s fear is not directed at actual-Fido, but at “imagined-Fido” (222). And unlike actual-Fido, imagined-Fido instantiates the property of dangerousness, so Frank’s fear of the latter is unobjectionable. Similarly, the actual past may not instantiate the formal object of being desirable now, since the actual past was dull; but if the actual object is the imagined past, the formal object of nostalgia may be instantiated after all.

Of course, there are various concerns one might have about the idea that reflective nostalgia could be fittingly directed at an imagination-inflected mnemonic experience when the past time was undesirable. The main one is that it still does not seem unreasonable to charge such an emotion with sentimentality. I will turn to this question in the next section. However, we might also simply think that the strategy of making fittingness judgments on the basis of imagined objects opens a loophole through which one could always escape the accusation that one’s emotions are unfitting. “In my mind,” the retort would go, “this situation does warrant this emotion, and that is the object I am responding to.” According to my argument, this is not an incoherent thing to say. However, it will often be irrelevant and practically inefficacious, so the supposed loophole is unlikely to be exploited. For example, when one is accused of irrational anger in a fight with one’s partner, one seldom defends oneself by resorting to the claim that one is rationally angry at an imagined partner. This strikes us not as a deft parry, but as a way of admitting defeat against one’s real opponent. It is thus a loophole which, in most situations, promises only a Pyrrhic victory. Its existence does not seem to be a strong enough reason to retract the claim that an emotion directed at an imagined object can be
fitting, even if the same emotion, directed at that object’s non-imaginary inspiration, would not.

4.3 The Resilience of the Charge of Sentimentality

So far, I have argued that the formal object of nostalgia is something desirable in a memory, and that reflective nostalgia can instantiate it when it is directed at the total mnemonic experience, not just at the past time in question. Therefore, reflective nostalgia, in what I have called an aestheticized form, can be fitting. It might then seem as though the presumption of nostalgia’s inherent or definitional sentimentality is not only unwarranted in the simple cases of Chapter Three, such as missing the good times, but also in more problematic cases, such as Skibsrud’s longing. Both, when we understand the relationship between their formal and actual objects, seem to be fitting types of thing to feel.

Still, there is a problem. When reflective nostalgia is a kind of aestheticization of the past, it seems fair to summarize that emotion as follows:

(1) the imaginative alteration of memories; and

(2) the use of them to stimulate desirable experiences.

This account almost perfectly conforms to the dominant account of a sentimental emotion that we saw in Chapter One. It combines both of the dominant account’s intuitions, which are that sentimentality distorts an object of emotion, and that it does so as a means of
indulging in that emotion. How, then, can it be claimed that such nostalgia is not sentimental?

This objection gives voice to a concern we may have already had: namely, that the foregoing account has exonerated aestheticized reflective nostalgia of sentimentality too easily. After all, it would resolve rather too many aesthetic disputes if the mere invocation of artistic representation, or the fictional, was evidence against an emotion’s sentimentality. Instead, such a conclusion would be better regarded as a reductio of the argument that produced it.

My argument has been that aestheticized reflective nostalgia can be fitting, and that argument stands. But, since the charge of sentimentality against the emotion still has intuitive credibility, it seems that here, the charges of sentimentality and unfittingness must be considered distinct criticisms. In other words, what remains suspect about aestheticized reflective nostalgia—what makes it seem viciously sentimental—is not unfittingness. Instead, the emotion’s putative defects may fall within the purview of another sort of evaluation. If so, then even when it is technically fitting to engage in the kind of longing described by Skibsrud and others, that longing is not thereby cleared of the main charge that can be made against it. It will still be a natural reaction to respond to Skibsrud (or Nin or Wright) by saying: “The emotion may be fitting, but there is something wrong with it.”

If we express this criticism using the vocabulary of sentimentality, as seems equally natural, then this also speaks to the truth of Chapter One’s claim that ‘sentimentality’ is a polysemous term used to express more than unfittingness objections. At first glance, the charge of sentimentality does seem to challenge type-appropriateness:
that is, to challenge the very *kind* of response toward a given object of emotion. Usually this is exactly what it does. But to call a feeling sentimental can also express normative criticism along other lines. For example, it can express moral disapproval (indeed, for some philosophers, outrage), or it can deem the feeling frivolous, or make a complaint of some *sui generis* variety. As Tanner (1976-77) points out, the death of Dickens’ Little Nell is highly sentimentalized, but the death of an innocent child is not the wrong *sort* of thing to find pitiable, even to a great extent.

Of course, against the view that sentimentality must be something other than unfittingness in these cases, it might be thought that the charge of altering memories is plainly the charge of *misrepresenting* the object of emotion, and that that boils down to the accusation of unfittingness after all. It is true that such alterations are, in a sense, misrepresentative, but I do not believe that means that the sentimentality criticism must be about the instantiation of the formal object. Instead, there is another way of interpreting the charge of misrepresentation. It could be said that the very act of self-consciously having an emotion for an *imagined* object, *rather* than the actual object on which the former draws, constitutes the misrepresentation at issue. In other words, it is misrepresentative not by distorting the real object, but by opting for the unreal one. Whatever evaluative dimension best articulates it, then, I will interpret the charge of sentimentality against aestheticized reflective nostalgia as an objection to the very choice of nostalgia’s actual object, when there seem to be two options: the past as it was, and the past as one now imagines it. As Boym puts it, nostalgia is “a romance with one’s own fantasy” (xiii), and the implication of the sentimentality criticism is that we should not have feelings—at any rate, feelings of longing—toward an imagined past.
If the nostalgist’s selection of the imagined past is the problem, is there an account of sentimentality’s wrongness that successfully implicates this choice of object? What, in other words, might be wrong with longing for one’s imagined childhood, instead of the past as it was? The literature on sentimentality contains many suggestions, but here I will consider two of the most prominent. Following D’Arms and Jacobson’s (2000a) specification of the non-fittingness evaluative dimensions as the pragmatic and the moral, I will examine two broad ways of cashing out the intuition that it is wrong to have feelings for imagined versions of real objects.

One note on terminology is important: I do not challenge the observation that descriptively speaking, the dominant account of sentimentality and aestheticized reflective nostalgia seem very similar. That is, I will not argue that (1) and (2) above somehow fail to describe such nostalgia, and that the latter is therefore not sentimental. My question for now is only whether sentimentality can be defended as an epithet against aestheticized reflective nostalgia. As noted in Chapter One, at this point we must depart from the dominant account’s treatment of ‘sentimental’ as a single thick normative concept, and separate the descriptive and normative senses of the term. For the rest of this chapter, to designate the normative sense (according to which sentimentality is a defect of an emotion in some way), I will refer to vicious sentimentality. Thus, my first question is whether it is viciously sentimental to long for an aestheticized past, even when doing so is technically fitting. If this cannot be shown by interpreting sentimentality as a pragmatic or moral complaint either (as I will argue), then we will have to examine why else we might still be tempted to charge nostalgia with sentimentality.
4.3.1 The Inaction Objection

First, aestheticized reflective nostalgia might be charged with a pernicious sort of *uselessness*, and thus be considered wrong according to a pragmatic standard of assessing emotions. Chapter Three began by noting Starobinski’s characterization of nostalgia as a word which has become synonymous with useless yearning. Similarly, a major account of sentimentality’s wrongness is that a sentimental emotion “discourages activity and keeps us from dealing with the world directly” (Kupfer 543). Some claims made in this vein are undoubtedly hyperbolic—Kupfer also declares that “Unsentimental emotions lead directly to action” (556), for example. Still, many writers agree with Tanner’s basic assessment that “very deeply rooted in our view of the world” (144) is the opinion that emotions should “play their part in being good reasons for action” (132). By contrast, “an inner life which is self-generating and insufficiently related to the world of action is corrupting and dangerous” (144).  

Such positions may also receive support from philosophers who paint an action-oriented picture of emotional rationality in general. For example, Karen Jones strongly associates the rationality of emotions with practical rationality, arguing that ‘mature’ or correct emotions are those which “enable us to track the way our concerns are implicated in concrete choice situations” (25). Similarly, Bennett Helm argues that for an emotion to be rational, its object must have import for you, the criteria for which is predominantly action-based: “you must be reliably *vigilant* for circumstances affecting [the object of emotion] favorably or adversely and be *prepared to act* on its behalf” (“Evaluative” 250).

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6 Cf. Jefferson and Pugmire (2005) for further articulations of this view.
Aestheticized reflective nostalgia is at least an awkward fit with these visions of the proper emotional life.

However, there are various plausible ways to combat the uselessness complaint against nostalgia. One path is to accept the terms of the complaint, and reply by pointing out cases in which nostalgia satisfies the demand that emotions should have practical payoffs. Much in the way that Solomon (2004) disputes sentimentality’s uselessness—witness the social changes sparked by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (and indeed, other sentimental reform novels of the nineteenth century)—nostalgia has been defended precisely on the grounds that it can motivate positive social change. For example, John Su argues that nostalgia in diasporic situations can fortify “solidarity for communities struggling with displacement and cultural differences”, and function to translate “various longings and aspirations into a set of common goals...based on an image of the world as it could have been” (19, my emphasis). In a somewhat similar spirit, Kimberly Smith has argued that the label ‘nostalgia’, with its pejorative connotation, serves to delegitimize emotions that could, if listened to, be motivational. She argues that as a result of this stigmatization, “We are convinced that whatever it is we long for wasn’t actually there, that we are longing for something—community, stability, the feeling of being at home—that is unattainable anywhere (522-3). Without the stigmatization, however, the same longing could be harnessed to create such things in the present. It is easy to imagine how this description could be applied to both political and personal projects.

Thus, it is not inconceivable that nostalgic feelings could be instrumental in changing one’s life, other than by becalming it on a sea of lethargy. Furthermore, even when reflective nostalgia is in fact directed at a past that “wasn’t there”, such arguments
still point the way toward using that longing in service of present projects. In that way, 
nostalgia might overcome the inaction objection.

Yet the most direct reply to the objection is to deny the premise that emotional 
rationality ought to be measured by emotions’ potential for advancing one’s projects. 
This dictum is not just ill-suited to aestheticized reflective nostalgia, but to aesthetic 
emotions in general. The differences between practical action and aesthetic attention have 
long been noticed—and, by way of the concept of disinterestedness, they have sometimes 
been used to articulate the nature of artistic appreciation itself. As Stuart Hampshire puts 
it,

> It is important that we are capable of a type of experience, aesthetic experience, in which thought of the possibility of action is for a time partly suspended. The recognised value of aesthetic experience is partly a sense of rest from intention, of not needing to look through this particular object to its possible uses. This type of ‘pure’ experience, when it exceptionally occurs, does in fact give a sense of timelessness, just because it is contemplation which is as far as possible divorced from the possibility of action. (121)

The emotions involved in aesthetic experience therefore resist analyses that prioritize 
emotions’ capacity to help us navigate the world to advance our practical projects. Such a 
constrained account of emotional normativity does not seem to respect an important 
characteristic of aesthetic emotions. Of course, it is always possible to cast aesthetic
emotions as serving one’s practical project of ‘attending to beauty’, ‘contemplation’, and so on. However, this sounds strained. It seems more natural to say that emotions are not all normatively beholden to the standard of usefulness. And, of course, even if one insisted that contemplation is a practical project, this would only fortify the first response to the inaction objection, namely that aesthetic attention, and so aestheticized reflective nostalgia, can lead to ‘action’ after all.

Despite the broad terms which Tanner and other writers use to castigate inaction, the argument above might be thought to willfully ignore the real spirit of the charge of uselessness. Perhaps the stronger case against aestheticized reflective nostalgia does not rely on the idea that the emotion is always useless, but instead trades on examples in which the emotion interferes with other particular goals. One might become so absorbed in contemplating one’s elusive past that one’s own life goes to waste in the present. One might also shirk one’s responsibilities to others, feeling “beautiful nostalgia when watching the world decay as one’s neighbor starves on one’s doorstep” (Frijda and Sundararajan 232). However, the very strength of this objection is its weakness as a categorical rejection of the emotion we are investigating, for such examples of neglect trade on additional circumstances. It is obviously imprudent to reminisce when it would bring disaster on oneself or others; but this is no more surprising than the observation that any other emotion, including passion for one’s practical projects, can interfere with some other goal or responsibility. Therefore, explaining sentimentality’s wrongness by appealing to inaction does not seem to pose any special threat to aestheticized reflective nostalgia.
4.3.2 The Disrespectfulness Objection

The popular example of tender aesthetic emotions constituting or being symptomatic of one’s disregard for real-life suffering (as in the case of the starving neighbour above) hints at a different evaluative standard. We might attempt to situate the sentimentality critique of aestheticized reflective nostalgia within the dimension of moral appropriateness. Explaining what is viciously sentimental about such longing in ethical terms accords with Boym’s description of nostalgia as a putative ethical failure, and with similar philosophical characterizations of sentimentality as a vice. As Jefferson writes,

there is something unwholesome about sentimentality; it would certainly be a mistake to think it a virtue…Of course we know…that it is expressive of (or in itself) an ethical or aesthetic defect. (519)

Perhaps, then, the emotion can be charged with vicious sentimentality where ‘vicious’ indeed points to something immoral. Specifically, it may be that feeling nostalgic for an imagined past is disrespectful to one’s past self, or to other people with whom the actual past was shared.

First, consider the proposal that feeling nostalgia for an imaginatively-altered version of the past could be disrespectful to one’s past self. If it would be disrespectful to choose to regard another person in the present in some sort of aestheticized manner—as a character in the pageant of one’s life—then, although the analogy is not tight, perhaps this is still enough to furnish a sense that it is disrespectful to aestheticize one’s past self.
and its temporal environment. If the nostalgist came face-to-face with her past self, could she reasonably reject the latter’s disgust at having someone long for their (ex hypothesi) unimpressive present, when the future self, at least from the past self’s point of view, ought to know better?

The bald response to this would be that it is a prerogative of the first person perspective to change one’s attitude toward one’s past. Although the thought experiment of confronting one’s past self gives the question of respect some intuitive traction, its effect is to lead us away from a more salient intuition about the self: namely, that we each have the autonomy to choose how to feel about our own lives. As Larkin wryly observes in “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album”, “We know what was / Won’t call on us to justify/ Our grief” (44). In that case perhaps we are free to grieve for our image of what was.

The borders of this autonomy are gray: sometimes a person’s feelings for the past can make others queasy. The obvious test cases are lurid, such as a person who feels nostalgic for a childhood of abuse. Yet even here, if one is unaware of the abuse, this is typically regarded as repression or denial, and if one is aware, it may seem perverse—but the charge of immorality is harder to make stick.

The risk of moral offense is greater when one’s feelings about a memory are disrespectful to other people who participated in or were adversely affected by the past that figures in it. Once again, the issue lends itself to extreme examples, this time political: nostalgia for Nazi Germany, the USSR, the antebellum South, and so forth. Even if it is within one’s rights vis-à-vis one’s past self to reminisce fondly about internment in a Nazi death camp (as the young narrator of Imre Kertész’s Fatelessness
arguably does at the end of the novel), it seems flagrantly disrespectful to the other victims and survivors. Furthermore, in such cases, awareness of the actual past makes indulging in a whitewashed version even worse. Consider two tourists visiting Disneyland’s Frontierland, posing for photographs with carefree animatronic Native Americans in the Old West. Of the two of them, the one who knows about the genocide of Native Americans (to say nothing of the legacy of stereotypes) seems more morally questionable than the one who does not. Might these considerations provide the basis for an argument against the morality of aestheticized reflective nostalgia?

As with the inaction objection, these examples do provide the basis for moral arguments against longing for some imagined pasts. However, this does not distinguish aestheticized reflective nostalgia from other feelings, about the past or otherwise, which are contingently capable of evincing or embodying disrespect. And the central cases of reflective nostalgia with which we have been concerned—Skibsrud’s, Nin’s, Wright’s—do not clearly disrespect the self or others. Instead, they seem to fall within the class of cases in which one would be free to exercise the first person prerogative to change one’s mind. And if one would be free to change one’s mind about the past by reassessing it, then it seems uncontroversial when one does even less: that is, when one feels nostalgic toward the past without even disagreeing with the past self’s assessment that the time was dull.
4.4 Diagnosing Unease About Aestheticizing the Past

Even after introducing the idea of reflective nostalgia as a kind of aestheticization of the past, and thereby securing its capacity for fittingness, we found that the emotion was apt to be accused of sentimentality. But two of the major ways of accounting for the wrongness of sentimentality do not seem particularly applicable to it. Neither the inaction objection nor the disrespectfulness objection does a good job of establishing that aestheticized reflective nostalgia is, constitutionally or even typically, viciously sentimental. Apart from the difficulties of applying the particular objections to the examples of reflective nostalgia we have been concerned with, it also seems that the outcome of applying such objections to obviously problematic cases has been banal. Like other emotion experiences, aestheticized reflective nostalgia may be perniciously useless or disrespectful in some circumstances.

Is there, then, anything to the sense that such nostalgia is generally viciously sentimental, and not just in deviant cases? In this section, I will sketch a diagnosis of our temptation to think so: an explanation of our normative unease. But I will suggest that, once it is understood, the particular unease we have about such nostalgia should erode significantly.

What seems common to all episodes of nostalgia is that they involve a representation of the past that is different in kind from the way that time was experienced as the present. Earlier, when discussing the expressive features of nostalgia’s imagined past, I referred to the idea that nostalgia is directed at “a world that was never itself given in any discrete present moment.” Whether we call this a distillation, a condensation, or an
abstraction of the past, it may be that this formal qualitative feature of nostalgia’s object—which obtains irrespective of the memory’s subject matter—is what lies behind the sense that nostalgia is always viciously sentimental. There is always a basis for the suspicion that the imagined past does not match up with the actual one; and therefore that an emotion directed at the former involves a misrepresentation. It is this pervasive difference or mismatch between time as it seems in nostalgia, and time as it seemed when it was lived through, that gives rise to the presumption of nostalgia’s guilt. Yet this difference is not a product of feeling nostalgic for the past, or of disdaining the present and deciding to concoct a past that is preferable. Instead, it is a feature of memory and the mental representation of temporally distant events in general.

The first step to seeing this is to note the twentieth century’s ‘reconstructive turn’ in theories of autobiographical memory. As early as 1932, Sir Frederic Bartlett concluded that

Remembering is not the re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless and fragmentary traces. It is an imaginative reconstruction, or construction...It is thus hardly ever really exact, even in the most rudimentary cases of rote recapitulation. (213)

As Daniel Schacter explains the idea of memories as imaginative reconstructions,

the experience of remembering is shaped as much by the rememberer’s “attitude”—expectations and general knowledge regarding what should
have happened and what could have happened—as by the content of specific past events. (101)

One upshot of Bartlett’s thesis—that memories accommodate one’s later ideas about how things must or ought to have been—is that all memories are susceptible to both hindsight bias and culturally-available schemas about lifetime periods (for example, the expectation that adolescence is a time of self-discovery, and the resultant recollection of adolescence in terms of that narrative). In other words, although nostalgia is often criticized for repackaging the past in familiar or stock ways, it is not just nostalgic memories that tend to mold themselves into familiar storylines.

This is not the only way in which the reconstructive turn is relevant to our concerns. More important is a proposal about how memories are reconstructed, which will shed light on the nature of nostalgia. Martin Conway and Christopher Pleydell-Pearce (2000) have argued that “autobiographical memories are transitory dynamic mental constructions generated from an underlying knowledge base” (261). This knowledge base is comprised of information of three levels of specificity: lifetime periods (such as ‘childhood’), general events (such as ‘recess’ or ‘family vacation’), and sensory-perceptual knowledge (such as the taste of grape juice or the smell of a pond), which they call ‘event-specific’ knowledge (ESK). Information on each level is cross-indexed to information on other levels in a hierarchy. Thus, “items of ESK are part of general events that in turn are part of lifetime periods” (264).

According to Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, memories are patterns of activation that spread across the three levels of the knowledge base. However, they argue, this
activation does not always occur in a neat, constrained fashion, with ESK linked to a single general event that is nested within a single lifetime period. Especially in the case of involuntary memories (“direct retrieval”) which are triggered by cues, they argue that

The spread of activation at [all three] levels is diffuse. Knowledge held at the level of lifetime periods can access many different general events, and knowledge held in general events can access many associated general events, a lifetime period, and many records of ESK. (274)

This may account for the compressed and synecdochical quality of some memories, especially the involuntary ones that are often the subject matter of aestheticized reflective nostalgia. In these, a particular sensation can seem to contain or spread out to encompass the rest of the time period, cycling through representative episodes. Spreading activation could explain how a whole town could seem to ‘spring’ from the taste of a madeleine dipped in tea. As Campbell puts it, the reconstructive turn shows, among other things, how “certain memories become emblematic of ways of feeling, thinking, and living” (“Faithfulness” 363, my emphasis).

It is therefore a feature of autobiographical memory in general that, in it, life will often be presented differently than it was experienced at the time. But this does not yet explain why the nostalgic past seems so much more different, more compressed, than our memories of a few weeks ago. Perhaps our anxiety about the difference does not trade on the naïve assumption that ordinary memory is archival rather than reconstructive; instead,
it may trade on the sense that nostalgic memories are typically more abstract than others, to a problematic degree.

There is evidence for this, but once again, it is not evidence that concerns nostalgic memories in particular; rather, it involves a general tendency in the mental representation of temporally distant events. Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman have argued that “people construct different representations depending on whether the information pertains to the near or distant future” (405). In particular,

The greater the temporal distance from a future event, the more likely is the event to be represented abstractly in terms of a few general features that convey the perceived essence of the events rather than in terms of concrete and more incidental details of the event. (405)

By contrast, the smaller the temporal distance between the same event and the present (e.g. the event is tomorrow instead of next year), the more likely it is that the event will be represented in terms of those concrete details. This is the central proposal of what Trope and Liberman call Construal level theory (CLT): we tend to represent events in the more distant future using high-level construals (terms which are more abstract, simple, structured, and coherent), while we tend to represent events closer in time using low-level construals (terms which are more concrete, complex, and particular). Thus, even when we have the same amount of information about a given event, the closer it is to us in time, the more we will construe it in particular and contextual terms, and the farther it is, the more we will think of it in prototypical and homogenous terms. To give a sense of the
difference between low- and high-level construals, among the examples Trope and Liberman offer are “giving a dollar to a homeless person in a New York subway late at night” vs. “helping another person”; “entering the data collected this morning” vs. “advancing science”; “reading a science fiction book” vs. “broadening my horizons”; and “peeking at my neighbor’s exam to compare answers” vs. “cheating” (405-6).

While the studies supporting CLT have been primarily focused on the representation of future events, Trope and Liberman also predict that the distant past will be associated with high-level construals, and the more recent past will be associated with low-level construals. Then, if it is the case that nostalgic memories are typically for times which are in the distant past, this might naturally account for the greater abstraction of nostalgic memories than that of memories from last week. For example, CLT would predict that the more time that has passed since one’s childhood, the more the multifarious specifics of childhood will be distilled into an abstract ‘essence’.

Again, on its own, CLT might not seem to capture everything about the nature of nostalgic memories, for its abstract mental representations often sound like platitudes or clichés about the past, rather than something that could serve as the object of an urgent emotion. But, when it is complemented by Conway and Pleydell-Pearce’s account of involuntary memories, in which a finely particular sensory memory can be the emblem of a lifetime period, it is clear how experientially rich the perceived essence of the past can be.

This essence is, by nature, hard to make an object of experience in the present. In a paper exploring the neurological underpinnings of Proust’s descriptions of what is retrieved in involuntary memories, Russell Epstein has argued that in such memories, we
recover a trove of contextual information that usually operates in the background of the present stream of thought, but which can move to the foreground in memory. He writes:

   this contextual information is pretty much the same from minute to minute, from day to day, so we quickly cease to notice it. However, when this information is recovered years later, it suddenly stands out. We become aware of aspects of a period of time that we were not previously aware of, and we feel that we are experiencing it in a way that we never experienced it before. In fact, we have experienced it before, but with different emphasis: the contextual information that had fallen into the background has now been brought into the foreground. (221)

Epstein holds that this recovered world of information about a time period constitutes “the ‘essence’ of things that Proust sought in the taste of a madeleine” (237); and it is by accessing it that Marcel later feels, in Time Regained, “as if he is experiencing all of Venice at once” (218).

Of course, Proust makes much of the fineness of detail that involuntary memories deliver, which might seem at odds with my appeal to CLT and the abstraction effect of temporal distance. However, as we have seen, CLT is not incompatible with the idea that event-specific sensory memories serve as emblems or gateways to more abstractly-construed information on the level of lifetime periods. Furthermore, Marcel’s feeling of experiencing Venice ‘all at once’, and his language of a time’s essence, points to the same kind of unified, synecdochical experience of a time that I have described. Proust is
eager to distinguish the quality of involuntary memories from that of the mere autobiographical facts he can recall at will, and so it is natural for him to emphasize the lively specificity of the former: but an involuntary memory of some particular sound or smell is not incompatible with, and actually draws its sense of significance from, the way in which such details seem to contain vaster swathes of experience, themselves represented as a “coherent whole” (Epstein 218) instead of a cacophony of details. We have seen various writers gesture toward this sense in Chapter Two: the nostalgic past, Zwicky suggests, is “full / somehow – but full of what?”; others describe it as dense, complete, or like a whole universe. More examples could be added: in Stephen Owen’s study of the experience of memory in ancient Chinese poetry, he writes that these poems testify to a kind of “wholeness in the past that eludes…application to the present” (15), and uses terms such as “lost fullness” and “totality” (2) to describe the poems’ objects of longing.

What the above considerations suggest is that the felt compression and expressive qualities of nostalgia’s imagined past are not peculiar ornaments that the nostalgist uses to decorate a fantasy world, but rather are artifacts of the natural operation of long-term autobiographical memory. When we return from this to the claim that aestheticized reflective nostalgia is viciously sentimental because the imagined past does not accurately represent the feeling of the past when it was present, the grip of that charge is less firm. Why should a natural part of remembering be reviled as sentimental?

The air of disreputability that lingers around aestheticizing the past, even when it seems to run no risk of being disrespectful or (viciously) useless, may owe to a worry about the consequences of longing for memories that seem ‘fuller’ than the present. The
consequence I have in mind is that such feelings may lead one to suppose that the desirable quality of experience involved in remembering should be available in the present, or will be available in the future. In other words, reversing the escapist formula of the poverty of the present model discussed in Chapter Two, it might be that episodes of nostalgia are themselves what risk making us dissatisfied with the present. The pertinent interpretation of the sentimentality objection, then, would not be overtly moral or pragmatic, but rather eudaimonistic. The nostalgist risks making his life go worse.

It is a commonplace that nostalgic longing feeds off of distance. As a result of this longing, distance might come to seem as if it were the condition that had to be met in order for a given time to be worthy of desire. That is, one might think that the desirable phenomenological tone a time seems to have at a distance is the standard by which the desirability of the present should be measured. But if it is difficult or impossible for the present to be experienced in that way, we might be led to a sense that the present is always less desirable than distant times. As Stewart writes, in nostalgia, the “location of authenticity becomes whatever is distant to the present time and space” (139-140). I take ‘authenticity’ in this context to be another way of describing the desirable phenomenological tone of fullness and immediacy that typifies certain memory experiences. The perceived risk of nostalgia, then, is that it will lead one to think that the real or good life—or, what amounts to the same thing, the ‘full’-seeming or ‘authentic’ life—is always elsewhere, to use Milan Kundera’s (2000) phrase.

As we have seen, discussions such as Stewart’s belong to a literature which assumes that this way of thinking is attributable to psychological weakness. However, on the picture of nostalgia I have suggested, the association of distance with the desirable
structural features of nostalgic memories—whether they are a sense of order, coherence, vividness, or greater reality or ‘authenticity’—would be an understandable result of involuntary autobiographical memories. The brief revival of densely-packed information about a past time can make that time seem, in memory, more full or real than the present. In the here and now, as Hampshire claims, one is more attentive to volitional, goal-directed activity. The attentional resources it demands may make one largely ignore the contextual information which will later, in memory, stand out as special and distinctive.

So far, I have drawn on Epstein’s discussion of Proustian memories to describe the perceived risk that nostalgia might contribute to a sense that one’s real life—that is, a point when experience would attain the desirable tone or quality of such memories—is elsewhere in time. Similarly, CLT suggests that the effects of temporal distance on the representation of time may contribute to a general expectation that one’s ‘true self’ will only begin to flower on some other, distant, occasion. This is because when people reflect on their self-identity, their thoughts tend to involve the more abstract, high-level concepts (such as convictions and values) that are used to construe events at a greater temporal distance. If that is the case, then Trope and Liberman predict that

people would feel that their self-identity would be expressed in the distant future but not in the near future. Ironically, by expecting their true preferences, convictions, and values to be expressed only in the distant future, people may end up rarely, in fact, revealing their true self. (415)
This supplies a plausible psychological explanation for a familiar and oft-lamented phenomenon. As Pascal observed,

> men scarcely ever think of the present life and of the moment in which they are living, but of that in which they will live. In this manner we are always living in the future, and never in the present...Thus we never live, but we hope to live. (qtd in Poulet, Studies 86)

In the same spirit, Schopenhauer writes,

> when at the end of their lives most men look back...they will be surprised to see that the very thing they allowed to slip by unappreciated and unenjoyed was just their life, precisely that in the expectation of which they lived. (285-6)

And, long before Pascal or Schopenhauer, Seneca claims that “While we are postponing, life speeds by” (4-5). Such observations, indeed clichés, can be interpreted as practical exhortations to try harder to “think of the present life”. That interpretation is not mistaken, but if CLT is correct, then they can be read equally well as describing a predicament that arises less from neglecting the present, and more from our psychological constitution. Furthermore, if Trope and Liberman are right that CLT’s claims about temporal representation also hold for the past, this may help to explain the sense of greater reality or authenticity that the nostalgic past can contain. A distant past
may be more likely to be represented as a time when one’s experiences were infused by one’s ideals and values, while in the present or more recent past, life is construed in more quotidian terms that do not seem as essential to one’s identity.

Obviously, then, nostalgic memories would not be the only possible causes of inaccurate expectations for the present and future, since the features of nostalgic memories that risk fostering these are general features of autobiographical memory and the representation of distant times. Daniel Gilbert (2006) and Daniel Haybron (2007) have both argued that mistakes of this sort are pervasive. Gilbert, surveying the wide body of psychological evidence for this claim, notes that we seem to be largely unaware that we commit the kinds of mistakes that CLT describes: for example, when prompted in experiments, people imagine a good day tomorrow in plausible detail, and a good day next year as a “smooth purée of happy episodes” (117)—but they rank the two as equally realistic depictions of a good day. Nostalgia need not be involved for one to commit this sort of error.

All of these reasons to think that nostalgia’s alleged sins are a normal part of remembering raises another question. Why should we think that the misleading features of memory and temporal representation are what make us normatively uneasy about nostalgia in particular, if we do not ordinarily condemn memory and temporal representation themselves as sentimental? Why, in other words, might we be prone to notice the illusion in nostalgic memories, allowing us to form a negative judgment of them, when we are unaware of it in other cases?

Here the answer must be speculative, but it could be that the difference is made by the element of acute desire or longing which is inherent in nostalgia, but not present in
other cases of memory. Assume, uncontrovertially, that desiring a thing typically leads one to consider strategies, at least incipiently, for acquiring or approaching it. Thinking about strategies to approach the desired past may rapidly lead one to see that such a thing is not a realizable goal. The past, one realizes, cannot be gotten closer to, or returned to, or otherwise acquired. Depending on how reflective the nostalgist is, this might only give one a feeling of disappointment. But it may also alert one to the fact that the very desirability of what one remembers is partly a product of its pastness. The thoughts instigated by unrealizable longing may alert us to the illusory, ‘aesthetic’ or fictional elements that the imagined past contains; and this could help to generate nostalgia’s bad reputation, by way of some of the thoughts about its consequences that I have outlined above.

Another question is whether my account of our normative unease about nostalgia leaves any room to explain why some memories are nostalgic, and others are not. After all, if I am accounting for nostalgia’s ostensibly problematic, ‘aestheticized’ characteristics by numbering them among the general features of episodic memory, then it might be difficult to articulate the difference between nostalgic and non-nostalgic episodic memories. Even though that empirical task is separate from the normative question I have pursued, an explanation of normative unease about nostalgia which prevents us from distinguishing between nostalgic and non-nostalgic memories, in any non-affective terms, would still be defective.

However, my explanation does not prevent us from finding non-emotional differences between nostalgic memories and non-nostalgic ones. It is plausible to think that episodic memories, particularly involuntary ones, which *heighten* or *maximize* these
common features of episodic remembering (such as the sense of being relived, compressed, full, emblematic, and so on) will be more prone to be associated with nostalgic affect. As we have seen, authors describing such memories testify to the unusually strong presence of these features. It may then be that the difference between nostalgic and non-nostalgic memories (other than the emotion itself) is one of degree: the degree of intensity with which these natural ‘distorting’ effects are experienced.

My primary goal in this chapter has been to determine whether aestheticized reflective nostalgia is generally viciously sentimental. To answer that, we have had to explore the merits of various ways of cashing out the accusation of sentimentality. The inaction objection and the disrespectfulness objection do not seem to offer much traction to a blanket denunciation of such nostalgia. A better case for the feeling’s wrongness is eudaimonistic, concerning the risk that nostalgia will give one false hopes about the quality that present or future experience could possess. However, I have argued that this riskiness is attributable to the structural features of memory and thoughts about distant times, and is not unique to nostalgic ones, although in the latter we may be more likely to see through our illusions.

The ability to reflect on illusoriness and unrealizability is still compatible with experiencing the emotion, which is what our central cases of reflective nostalgia show. As Skibsrud says, she knows that she longs for something that never existed as it now seems in her memory, but this does not quell the longing: “there is something in me that expects that I will find it still.” Likewise, Philip Levine, discussing the poem “The House So Dear” by the early twentieth century poet Antonio Machado, observes:
Each of us harbors a dream of a place that retains some magic for us. We believe that if we could return to that place and time and begin again our lives would somehow be different, fuller, and so we return. It’s almost a quest. Machado’s portrait of it is so moving and surprising; the place is at once nothing, a wreck, a pile of junk, and yet at the same time the false vision remains as true as what’s before his eyes. We may go away totally denied and defeated, but our capacity for belief remains, even the evidence of our actual sight fails to kill it. (183-4)

At first glance, these statements appear to support the argument for vicious sentimentality: even when it is of the aestheticized, reflective variety, nostalgia seems to perpetuate the sense that life is elsewhere. After all, in Skibsrud and “The House So Dear”, the false hopes for a reunion with the past are still alive, despite the awareness of their falseness. But another reading of such passages is that, in aestheticized reflective nostalgia, such ‘expectations’ or ‘beliefs’ are tempered by an intimate acquaintance with their own frustration. As we should expect from the psychological literature, the appearance of the nostalgic past is not destroyed by the belief that such memories depict something unrealizable in present experience. Yet the reflective nostalgist’s qualification of it as a beautiful illusion may function to compartmentalize the associated hopes and desires. It seems reasonable to expect that once one knows that the past was not as it seems, one will be less prone to think the present or future could be that way, not more. We might say that what reflective nostalgia shows us is that life, or time as it is reexperienced in memory, is elsewhere; but that it is necessarily elsewhere, never at hand
or to come. A certain experience of wholeness may only be possible for times that are far away, just as a certain experience of completion is only available to us in aesthetic contexts. And just as we do not infer from art that life could attain the perfection of a fictional narrative (even though we may imagine and long for that), we can also learn not to take nostalgic memories as our guide to the future. Instead, we can confront the possibility that there is no full, whole, consummated experience of time except in such respites from everyday, goal-directed and action-dominated life.

The very reason that we can raise the alarm about nostalgia (as opposed to other, less noticeably altered representations of times) is also the reason that nostalgia is less risky than it might appear at first. The capacity and inclination for reflection on the nostalgic past shows us the difference between it and the past as it was, and reflection reduces the risk that we will take an illusion as a blueprint for the future, or derive from it a condition for happiness. Since that risk was the best reason to hold that aestheticized reflective nostalgia is viciously sentimental, that charge can now be dropped. To be sure, some such risk remains. However, it is no longer plausible to think it is inordinate, and so there is no clear reason left to condemn the reflective nostalgist who longs knowingly for the illusion of their past.

7 Along the same lines, Schopenhauer writes, “The scenes of our life are like pictures in rough mosaic which produce no effect if we stand close to them, but which must be viewed at a distance if we are to find them beautiful” (285). To say that life cannot be “beautiful” up close is too strong: my point is that the particular sort of beauty the ‘mosaic’ has when seen from a distance is naturally harder to appreciate without that distance.
4.5 Conclusion

The formal object of nostalgia seemed to render unfitting all episodes of reflective nostalgia in which the actual past was undesirable. However, I have argued that in ‘aestheticized’ reflective nostalgia, the actual object of emotion is sometimes the total mnemonic experience, including some imaginary elements, and not simply the past as it was originally experienced. That substitution saves aestheticized reflective nostalgia from categorical unfittingness, but opens it up to other versions of the charge of vicious sentimentality. I argued that on the best interpretation, the latter amounts to a eudaimonistic concern about the risks of longing to experience time in a way that may be impossible in present experience. Yet once this normative unease is diagnosed and understood in the context of the general operation of memory and the mental representation of temporally distant events, the accusation of vicious sentimentality appears uncalled for. Reflective nostalgia’s ‘mistake’ is not unique among memories, and the risk of compounding it is reduced by self-awareness. Thus, the very self-consciousness that makes nostalgia reflective is both the capacity that makes us worry about sentimentality, and what helps protect us from being condemned for it.
Chapter Five

Lyrical Emotions, the Overinstantiation Dilemma, and the Discourse of Sentimentality

The varieties of lyrical emotion experience were described in some detail in Chapter Two, but since then, we have been occupied with assessing nostalgia on the standard model, and doing the legwork required for that task. Now that it is complete, it is time to return to the other form of poignancy we are concerned with, and attempt to do the same for it. How might lyrical emotions fare on the standard model of emotion evaluation?

As with nostalgia, to answer this question, we must be equipped with both the actual and formal object of a given lyrical emotion episode. To recall, the actual intentional objects of lyrical emotions are multifarious. In general terms, lyrical emotions are directed at particular things seen in the context of the fact of life’s transitoriness, or the idea of ultimate endings due to time’s passage. As I have described them, lyrical emotions are distinguished by this ‘wide angle’ perspective, their felt profundity, and, of course, their poignant affective character. The prototypical example is the affective state embodied and evoked by haiku, in which the impermanence of a particular thing stands in relief against a vast temporal backdrop.

In this chapter, I will focus on two specific examples of lyrical emotions, taken from the poets Philip Levine and Donald Justice. These examples are not simply two more entries into the earlier survey of lyrical emotion episodes: they also serve as case studies in the self-accusation of sentimentality. In each of them, there is an indication that
the emotion experience is, or will be, negatively evaluated by the person who experienced it. When such feelings wane, the redescription of them as maudlin or kitschy may take hold. I have contended that the charge of sentimentality is, at first pass, best interpreted as expressing the charge that the emotion type is unfitting. So, as I will consider them, what Levine and Justice suggest is that their own lyrical emotion experiences are unfitting responses to their objects.

I will describe some of the causal reasons why lyrical emotions might be apt to be dismissed in this way (some of which are also applicable to the dismissal of nostalgia). However, our real concern is the normative situation. The cases of Levine and Justice dramatize the question posed in the Introduction: when one experiences a lyrical emotion episode, and then reproaches oneself for being sentimental, who is correct: the person in the first moment, convinced by the emotion, or the person in the next moment, who suspects it of unfittingness?

Since we know the actual objects of emotion (both in general terms, and in the terms given by the specific examples), the next step in adjudicating this dispute is to posit a formal object for lyrical emotions. As we found, arriving at an adequate standard of correctness for nostalgia required a surprising amount of argumentation. In the case of lyrical emotions, however, the specification of a formal object is more routine. I will claim that it is *transience*, understood in the ‘ultimate’ or ‘final’ sense that makes lyrical emotions and nostalgia distinctive forms of poignancy.

The bare selection of a formal object does not, then, render the evaluation of lyrical emotion episodes problematic. However, the particular formal object in question generates an unattractive consequence that threatens the very prospect of evaluating such
emotions for fittingness. Transience, the formal object, is a property of every potential object of a lyrical emotion episode: as I will put it, transience is overinstantiated. This, I will argue, results in a dilemma: either all lyrical emotion episodes are fitting, or—for various reasons I will explain—none are.

Whichever option we are inclined to endorse, the dilemma has the consequence of undermining the claim that some lyrical emotions are fitting while others are not. That claim is both widely assumed to be true—it underpins the sentimentality criticisms that we do in fact make—and, moreover, its truth is desirable, because of the emotions’ felt profundity. We might therefore seek to avoid the dilemma and its implications by holding that they result from some sort of mistake: for example, about the identity of the formal object, or about the necessity of evaluating these emotions on the standard model. Much of the chapter is dedicated to exploring such strategies (Sections 5.5-5.6). In the end, however, I conclude that even in the best case scenario we cannot salvage a robust critical discourse of sentimentality concerning lyrical emotions. The argument of this chapter is therefore pessimistic: we are left with a critical practice which seems sensible and desirable, but which we do not know how to defend.

5.1 Lyrical Emotions and Self-Doubt

I will begin with the examples. The first is from the autobiography of Philip Levine, from the same chapter as his discussion of Machado’s “The House So Dear” (see Chapter Four). To give some sparing background, Levine grew up working class in Detroit during the Depression and war years, and much of his writing deals with manual
labour and anarchism. The latter commitment led him to live for some time in Spain, studying the Civil War. In our passage, a Spanish friend of Levine’s has asked him to translate Machado’s poems into English. Levine does not feel equal to the task. To entice him, his friend begins reciting Machado aloud, “occasionally rising in the dusty center of his tiny campus office to declaim a passage that moved his soul with its beauty” (193). Levine, considering this, poses the question to his readers:

Have you ever been moved in the soul? I know that is a ridiculous question, but I ask it because much of my life I didn’t know such a thing was possible…As solitary observer and memorializer of the Castilian landscape, Antonio Machado is often moved in the soul. He tells us again and again without the least reserve, he tells us with such simplicity and clarity we come to believe him absolutely, and in doing so we come to understand our own deepest experiences and to believe entirely in their authenticity. (193)

What might it be, to be so moved? This passage indicates two salient features of the experience: the qualities of depth and persuasiveness. Depth is suggested not only by the description of these experiences as, precisely, our deepest, but also by the reference to the soul, which, while figurative, conveys the elemental level on which such an emotion resonates. The persuasiveness of the feeling is suggested by the language of absolute belief.
This gives us clues about the form of the feeling, but nothing about the content other than what can be extrapolated from the image of a lone “memoralizer” of the landscape. To add some detail, we might look elsewhere in Levine for an example of what being moved in this way looks like. In the following passage, Levine imagines returning home after half a century, and looking at Michigan from across the water. He writes:

I owe it to myself to return to the Ontario side of Lake Huron and stand in the damp silence embracing my mortality for all I’m worth, knowing for certain—at least for a day—that all true stories are autumnal. (136-7)

Like the feeling described in the passage about Machado, this emotion is experienced as being deep and compelling. The evocation of mortality takes us into the same territory as does the language of the soul, and “knowing for certain” is of a piece with the claim of absolute belief. What this passage adds to the picture is information about the nature of the emotion’s object and the particular affective quality. The object is sweeping and panoramic, such that the emotion seems to respond to the truth of all stories. The affective quality is conveyed by the word ‘autumnal,’ which, with its connotations of fleetingness and fragility, suggests a feeling that is bittersweet and elegiac.

The experience that emerges from these passages fits the account of lyrical emotions given in Chapter Two. The emphasis on mortality and the truth of all stories demonstrates the sense of ultimacy or finality of lyrical emotions, and lyrical emotions’ characteristic wide-angle perspective on the particular is also evident (it is not just a
feeling that life is fleeting, but a feeling that imbues a view of Michigan’s shoreline). In addition, Machado is one of the poets Hass refers to in connection with ‘the image’: that is, the felt presence of what perishes and what lasts forever in a single picture. I will therefore refer to the feeling that seems to be expressed in the above passages as Levine’s example of lyrical emotion.

My second example is from another American poet of Levine’s generation, Donald Justice. Justice concludes a longer poem with these lines:

Sadness has its own beauty, of course. Toward dusk,
Let us say, the river darkens and looks bruised,
And we stand looking out at it through rain.
It is as if life itself were somehow bruised
And tender at this hour; and a few tears commence.
Not that they are but that they feel immense. (263)

Beyond the similarly damp setting, the emotion described in this passage contains all the hallmarks of Levine’s example. The bittersweetness and fragility of the last are mirrored here by the pairing of sadness with beauty, bruising with tenderness. The gravity and panoramic scope afforded by talk of the soul, mortality, and all true stories is imparted by the shift from the river to “life itself”; and the conviction of significance that the feeling carries is evident in the felt immensity of the tears. Once again, the key components of lyrical emotions seem to be represented: a wide-angle view of some particular scene or “hour”, a sense of finality, and poignant affect.
To borrow a phrase from Pugmire, the language we are driven toward to describe such experiences “seeks momentousness and a finality of perspective” (“Secular” 78). That Pugmire is describing the emotions stirred by religious music, even in secular listeners, is no coincidence: lyrical emotions have an air of the conversion experience to them, only without an independent system of transcendental beliefs waiting to gather one up. And in one light, it is something like this absence which leaves the emotions vulnerable to self-criticism. Up until now, I have ignored the presence of self-doubt in both of my examples—whether, as in Levine’s case, it lurks on the periphery, or, as in Justice’s, it is built into the very articulation of the feeling. Let us turn to it now.

5.1.1 The Negative Evaluation: Sentimentality and Kitsch

Levine claims to be certain that all true stories are autumnal—that is, at least for a day. Despite its persuasiveness in the moment, the feeling is already projected not to last. In fact, each time Levine presents the emotion, he does so in the shadow of a negative evaluation, or deflation, of the emotion he describes. The effect of reading Machado is to

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1 One detail about the Justice example should be noted. The concern with time’s passage is not as evident there as it is in the passages from Levine, or in the cases surveyed in Chapter Two. While it is true that elsewhere Justice repeats the theme of this passage in the context of time (see “Time the Destroyer!” below), it is also true that life could seem bruised and tender simply because it is full of disappointments. However, because what Justice describes is otherwise so similar to Levine’s case, I will simply override that reading here. This is not a cheat: by now we have many examples of lyrical emotions on the table, and are not in need of more ‘positive’ illustrations of the phenomenon. Instead, the reason to focus on Justice’s example is the prominence of its self-criticism. That self-criticism can be applied to a lyrical emotion, even if one would rather say it is not in this case. For the sake of convenience, I will refer to Justice’s example as that of a “lyrical” emotion being self-criticized; any skeptical reader is free to mentally substitute different examples, such as the feelings expressed by Woolf’s characters or Merwin or Mayeroff, and interpolate the same sort of self-questioning.
convince him of the authenticity of his deepest, most moving experiences. But what this suggests is that the authenticity of those experiences is not always convincing to him. The air of ‘ridiculousness’ attached to his opening question testifies further to this fact. And, in light of the temporariness of Levine’s conviction on the shore of Lake Huron, it is hardly inconceivable that the persuasive effects of reading Machado could wear off as well. The certainty could wane and the feeling seem ridiculous in retrospect, falling into place alongside another that Levine ruefully describes elsewhere:

To the west I could see the early traffic coming in over the George Washington Bridge. Once just the thought of that sight could fill me with such rotund, romantic feelings I would have to fight back the tears. (124)

Our example from Justice goes even further, for the passage does more than gesture at the risk of inauthenticity: the emotion is explicitly dismissed at the end of the verse. The tears feel immense from the inside, but they are not. Indeed, the ironizing voice of the poem reflects this verdict throughout. From the beginning, the scene is staged—“Let us say”—which creates the impression that the dusk, the river, and the rain are cliché set-pieces for a stock emotion. This sense intensifies in the diction concerning the tears: to say that “a few” “commence” suggests an occurrence both perfunctory and predictable.

However, it is also clear that the speaker’s wryness derives from familiarity with what he skewers: ironic distance aside, the emotion is attributed to “we”. The representation of the emotion, in other words, is not simply a lampoon of some other,
more gullible sort of person. There are examples of this gentle self-criticism elsewhere in Justice’s later work:

O ineluctable blues of the middle class!

Softly we sing, and the more forgetful hum.

_Time the River, Time the Destroyer!_ Yes, ho hum. (268)

This knowingness lets us see that, like Levine’s fleeting certainty, the feeling Justice depicts can be terminated and dismissed from the inside—that is, by someone who has felt its pull.2

What kind of criticism do these cases involve? Once again, the tone and terms clearly suggest the accusation of sentimentality. The fact that the accusation comes from the person who felt the emotion is immaterial: one can disown one’s tears, and redescribe them as stock, ridiculous, or ‘rotund’. As Frijda and Tan observe, “one may attach the label “sentimental” to one’s own emotion…as well as to the emotion of someone else” (49).

Perhaps even more than in nostalgia’s case, the accusation of sentimentality against lyrical emotions has affinities with the charge of kitschiness. While most

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2 For economy’s sake, I will henceforth treat both the Levine and Justice examples as cases of lyrical emotions that are in fact self-criticized in this manner. In doing so, I freely admit that I am overinterpreting Levine (in the sense that he hints at self-doubt but does not actually announce it), and oversimplifying Justice (in the sense that there is actually a distinction in the poem, however blurred, between the speaker’s position and the first person plural). While it is therefore somewhat artificial to treat both examples as emotion experiences followed by self-criticisms, it does not violate the spirit of the passages, and it has the advantage that, when discussing the general conflict between lyrical emotion and self-criticism, we may refer back to Levine and Justice without issuing a tangle of qualifications.
commonly used to describe saccharine mass-produced art and collectibles, one of the kitsch-making features of such artifacts is their aim of evoking powerful emotions simply by representing the most typical objects of those emotions (for example, pity for the tears of an apple-cheeked child, or awe at misty mountain peaks). According to Tomas Kulka, kitsch capitalizes on “universal imagery” that is “generally considered to be beautiful or highly charged with stock emotions” (21), and deployed without irony. Its representational content is as functional as the swelling strings in a film score, informing the spectator of what to feel.

Of course, this is not sufficient for kitsch—otherwise no painting of conventionally beautiful, ‘universal’ imagery could escape it. However, this feature is enough to establish the relevance of kitsch to the dismissal of lyrical emotions. Like sentimentality, kitschiness is part of the constellation of anxieties that surrounds the experiences Levine and Justice describe. This is because of the finality, or universality, of perspective that they seek, and because the scenes seem so suspiciously apt for those soaring feelings. Our critical discourse about such emotions in large part consists in assigning these pejoratives, contrasting them with the ‘genuine’ or the ‘meaningful’. In our examples above, the self-indictment of sentimentality has won out: when they dismiss these emotions, our poets surrender them to ridicule, and resign themselves to their own bathos.

In the last chapter, I explored different ways of mapping the accusation of sentimentality onto the standard model of emotion evaluation—namely, treating sentimentality as unfittingness due to inappropriate emotion type, as strategic uselessness, and as immorality. However, in the above examples, we do not seem to be looking at
criticisms concerning prudence or morality. Instead, the most obvious interpretation is
the simplest: Levine and Justice decide, on second thought, that a lyrical feeling was not
the type of emotion that was called for by the situation. Perhaps no emotion was, but at
any rate, the lyrical ones were out of place: they responded not to the facts of the case,
but to a more picturesque simulacrum, conveniently tailored to poetic feelings and
immense-feeling tears. Thus we get the predictable poignancy they describe. On the
standard model, to ‘take back’ an emotion in this manner is thus to decide that the object
of one’s emotion failed to instantiate whatever properties are needed to merit that
emotion, and so regard it as unfitting. Those properties now strike one as akin to optical
illusions; and the previous moment’s felt response, we might say, as hallucinatory.

5.2 The Causes of Dismissal

It is rare in the literature on sentimentality to consider cases which involve self-
awareness of the sort demonstrated by Levine and Justice. Even when discussions move
beyond a caricature of ‘the sentimentalist’ and cite plausible examples of sentimentality
in life (such as Pugmire 2005), the default stance is that of explaining the defects of
someone who does not realize their feelings are defective. Yet it is common to worry

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3 Of course, this is not to suggest that this self-criticism could not lead to, or be
accompanied by, further self-criticism on strategic or even moral grounds (e.g. holding
that such experiences are useless and/or wrong). My claim is only that in these examples,
this is not the primary fault found with these emotions.

4 A different interpretation might be that Levine and Justice think these scenes merit
feeling a bit of poignancy, but not as much as they felt. I do not think this fits as well with
the examples, but at any rate, a similar argument to the one I present concerning the
assessment of unfittingness due to the emotion type could be run concerning a
disproportionality objection. I overview such an argument in Section 5.6.
about the justification of our own emotions, and this includes accusing ourselves of being sentimental.

The fact that we criticize lyrical emotions on grounds of unfittingness is enough to generate the puzzle about normativity that I explore in the next section. Before turning to it, however, a few words are in order about what, psychologically, might cause us to second-guess or dismiss our own lyrical emotions. The cause, after all, may be something other than assessing the information that bears on their fittingness. It will be helpful to distinguish these causal reasons from the normative ones that will concern us below. Two salient sorts of cause can be distinguished: ‘external’ sociocultural pressures, and the ‘internal’ instability of the emotions themselves.

By sociocultural pressures, I have in mind the risk of embarrassment that one runs when expressing a lyrical emotion, and the internalized embarrassment which can result. Earlier, I drew attention to a certain wryness detectable in one of Woolf’s descriptions of eternity (i.e. hovering behind a case of sandwiches). Here is a more explicit example, from a short story by Roberto Bolaño:

It wasn’t yet completely dark, but it was no longer day. The land all around us and the hills into which the highway was winding were a deep, intense shade of yellow that I have never seen anywhere else. As if the light (though it seemed to me not so much light as pure colour) were charged with something, I don’t know what, but it could well have been eternity. I was immediately embarrassed to have had such a thought. (157)
What exactly is embarrassing about this thought? Although Bolaño does not elaborate, it may be that talk of eternity strikes one as grandiose. Claiming to bear witness to it may therefore seem pretentious, pompous, or self-important. If it would be embarrassing to be regarded in those ways, then lyrical emotions may be apt to embarrass. Of course, a sense of eternity is not the only one associated with lyrical emotions that may seem embarrassingly pompous. In *The Waves*, the character Bernard describes a feeling that is comparable to Tranströmer’s sense of being alive inside a Great Memory, and then laments that “the feeling is so grandiose as to be absurd” (199).

Another reason for embarrassment about lyrical emotions comes from the opposite direction: rather than discomfort with grandiosity, it can stem from the fear of appearing weak. Lyrical emotions may be thought to be soft-hearted and tender-minded: Justice’s poem involves tears, and Levine speaks of being moved in the soul. Frijda and Tan argue that we experience a feeling of helplessness before the objects of such emotions, and this helplessness, “when recognized, does not conform to the ideal autonomous self that most of us prefer, and is the cause of embarrassment under normal circumstances” (55). Further, they note the cultural fact that being affected in this way “is associated with weakness and femininity in a sense hostile to women” (48), a claim that resonates with other discussions of the gendered nature of the charge of sentimentality (cf. Campbell 1997). Thus, the desire not to be considered delicate or womanish may also be a culturally inculcated motivation to dismiss lyrical emotions.

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5 Similar self-doubts afflict nostalgia, which Starobinski claims is concerned with “grandiose commonplaces” (95): what, it might be demanded, is so special about your past? The emphasis here could fall on either ‘your’ or ‘past’, to give a few different flavours of the grandiosity complaint. One illustration of this is found in Woolf’s diaries, in an entry after her reading to the ‘Memoir Club’ at Bloomsbury: “Oh but why did I read this egotistical sentimental trash!...What possessed me to lay bare my soul!” (26).
A third cultural cause can be found in the preoccupation with ensuring that our experiences and opinions be exempt from the status of cliché. At first glance, it may be unclear why lyrical emotions would be susceptible to such an accusation. After all, they are less widespread and familiar than many other emotions, such as anger; and accusing an angry person of thereby wallowing in a cliché is likely to be met with puzzlement.

Why, then, be more worried about the less common emotion? But lyrical emotions might be at increased risk of cliché because it is part of such experiences that they feel somehow special, limned in rarely-glimpsed wisdom. In anger, by contrast, one does not implicitly claim to have a feeling that is in any sense original, and thus that feeling does not render one particularly vulnerable to the accusation of unoriginality. (An illustrative exception would be the case of someone who is tempted to regard their anger as unique, such as an angst-ridden teenager; in that case, the charge of cliché can draw blood.) Thus, the desire not to seem unoriginal may counsel us to shun feelings that raise the flag of originality at all.

Finally, a popular association of lyrical emotions with Romanticism—or, in general, with melodramatic art—may contribute to the sense that they are démodé. Even if emotions themselves are not in a clear sense subject to trends, the aesthetic movements with which they are stereotypically associated certainly are. It is therefore not difficult to think that certain emotions somehow belong to an eclipsed past; and from there it would be a short step to conclude that those emotions are themselves credulous and naïve. In this way, lyrical emotions may come to be considered old-fashioned and retrograde. It was perhaps in this spirit that George Orwell, puzzling over the fin-de-siècle popularity
of the poet A.E. Housman, remarked of an especially lachrymose verse, “Hard cheese, old chap!” (23).

In addition to these potential sociocultural causes of the negative evaluation, the dismissal may also be brought about ‘internally’, by features of the emotions themselves. Lyrical emotions, as we have noted, may be pleasurable experiences. As Pugmire observes of emotions in general, “the feeling of emotions is one thing that makes them into objects of desire in their own right…we can desire to undergo or experience an emotion (or not) because of what it feels like” (*Sentiments* 15). An emotion experience, he adds, can also be desirable because having it says something about us (to ourselves or to others). Thus, there are various potential incentives for people to undergo these emotions: the desirability of the experience itself, and, perhaps, the experience’s certification of oneself as someone inspired. But the desire for such experience can backfire in familiar ways. Consider, for instance, another instructive example from *The Waves*, in which the character Neville, as a budding poet, ‘overplays’ his own lyrical emotion to the point of rabidity:

I see it all. I feel it all. I am inspired. My eyes fill with tears. Yet even as I feel this. I lash my frenzy higher and higher. It foams. It becomes artificial, insincere. (61)

The sense of artificiality is one possible consequence of leaning on the throttle of a feeling, for with that effort comes the knowledge that one is no longer responding just to the object of one’s inspiration, but also to one’s desire.
Furthermore, the attempt to maintain an emotion can be counterproductive even if the specific worry about insincerity is not on the radar. According to Daniel Wegner’s (1994) theory of ironic processes of mental control, the desire to stay in an emotional state triggers two control processes, which are both aspects of a single mechanism. On one hand, there is an operating process that tries to keep one in that state. If I am experiencing a lyrical emotion and want it to continue, the operating process refines or directs my attention to (more) things that support the emotion: say, the rain, and then the quality of the light, and then the sound of the wind in the trees; and also to thoughts, memories, and even bodily positions that are “consistent” (37) with the desired state. This process is evident in Neville’s attempt to “see it all”—his emotion lunges outward, looking for more ‘evidence’ to reinforce the feeling.

However, one is first alerted to the need to reinforce the feeling—that is, to the presence of mental states that are inconsistent with the desired one—by what Wegner calls the monitoring process. In effect, the monitoring process instructs the operating process to jettison unwanted states. In our case, this means inserting ‘lyrical emotion-apt’ states into the place of neutral or contrary perceptions, apperceptions, thoughts, or feelings. The trouble is that the monitoring process has already drawn attention to the fact that there are such neutral or contrary states—and one’s awareness of them detracts from the emotion. Worse, the fault-finding process continues to work even after the fault-fixing process gets underway: “the monitor…keeps the mind sensitive to the mental conditions that indicate that intentional mental control is failing” (35). The very effort to stay in a desired emotional state can thus make it easier to access the evidence that the state is failing. This is why, by the time we notice that we are experiencing a desirable
feeling, it can already seem to be something that has naturally expired, which is now slipping away from us. (However, it should be noted that while the ironic failures Wegner describes could terminate already-felt lyrical emotions such as Neville’s, they could also, in other cases, help to generate them. Many of the reflections on the fleetingness of the present moment, surveyed in Chapter Two, could be accounted for on this model, and as we have seen, this sense can give rise to poignancy about life’s transitoriness.)

Finally, even if we are not trying to inflate or maintain the emotion, simply noticing that we are experiencing it can have a distancing effect that hastens its termination. The general sort of difficulty here is well-known: recall James’ famous description of introspection as an attempt to catch the dark by turning on the light, or the efforts of phenomenologists to determine whether reflective consciousness inevitably distorts or snuffs out prereflective consciousness. When it comes to emotions, Lambie and Marcel have argued that second-order awareness of one’s emotional state can lead to a sense of detachment, which “diminishes the experience of first-order phenomenology and diminishes hedonics in particular” (253).

Of course, the considerations I have borrowed from Wegner and Lambie and Marcel are only explanations of how the feeling might be terminated: they do not go on to explain why that feeling might then be evaluated negatively. These accounts would therefore appear to be unlike the earlier explanations concerning our desires not to be (or be viewed as) grandiose, weak, cliché, passé, or artificial, which all serve as possible causal reasons for a negative evaluation. However, the internal instability of emotions, and perhaps these emotions in particular, can be accompanied by these desires and

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6 Cf. Zahavi (2005), Chapter 4, for an overview of Husserl, Natorp, Heidegger, and Sartre on this subject.
anxieties. Like the fluidity of intentionality in lyrical emotion experiences, many different causal ingredients can contribute to the diminishment and rejection of such feelings.

5.3 Transience as Formal Object

Psychologically speaking, the emotion’s disownment might be the end of the story more often than not. The charge of sentimentality carries considerable weight, to the point that once the suspicion is raised, it can be difficult to entirely exonerate its target. One might then always shrug off one’s loftier emotions, regarding them as momentary weaknesses.

Normatively speaking, however, the case of these feelings’ fittingness is not yet closed: just as one can in fact have unfitting emotions, one can in fact reject fitting ones. Dismissing an emotion episode often takes the form of saying it was unjustified, but that does not guarantee that it was. According to my interpretation, Levine and Justice think that their emotions lack sufficient reasons. But might they be mistaken in this? That is, in spite of their defeatism, might the emotions still be vindicated on the standard model’s terms?

As before, to assess lyrical emotions on the standard model, we would need to be able to identify a formal object for them, such that we could ask whether, for example, the scene on the shore of Lake Huron actually instantiated that property. As dangerousness is to fear, and proximity to contamination is to disgust, the task would be

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7 For further discussions of the power and tenacity of the accusation, see Campbell (1997) and Sedgwick (1990).
to find the emotion-independent property to which lyrical emotions constitutionally respond.

While it may seem difficult to pin down the formal object of such a feeling, it is not hopeless. In fact, it does not involve the kind of careful navigation of counterexamples that nostalgia required: instead, we are able to take the usual route to a formal object by reading it off of the phenomena of lyrical emotion experiences. What seems common and fundamental to them is that they respond to the ultimate transience, or impermanence, of things; or the fragility or preciousness of things due to those conditions. It is this feature of lyrical emotions—we may call it transience for short—that defines them as a form of poignancy, while distinguishing them from poignancy as such (since the latter need not be directed at ultimate or final endings). In other words, this property seems to be the most general characteristic that makes lyrical emotions a distinct emotion type. As such, it would fit nicely among the pantheon of formal objects or core relational themes that have been proposed for other emotions.

Of course, even with qualifications such as ‘universal’, ‘ultimate’, or ‘existential’, it is still rather bald and literal to call it simply transience. As with all formal objects, a certain amount of context must be assumed. Dangerousness would not be intelligible as the formal object of fear if we did not typically desire to avoid danger (and, of course, the permutations of fear we can feel depend on our personal history, the expectations instilled and managed by our culture, and so on). Likewise, transience would not be intelligible as the formal object of lyrical emotions were it not for other aspects of our predicament. That our mortality is of fundamental importance to most of us is among the reasons that the transience of things can affect us emotionally.
In Chapter Three I proposed three adequacy conditions that a formal object of emotion must satisfy. First, the property must be at least implicitly ascribed to the actual object in every emotion episode of that type (descriptive adequacy); second, it cannot yield a clear normative counterexample (normative adequacy); and third, it must be external to the emotion episode, in the sense of being able to occupy the bottom rather than the top level of Goldie’s model of emotion justification (eligibility). The question is whether transience, in this ultimate sense, passes these adequacy tests.

To take descriptive adequacy first, from what we have already said, transience seems to meet the requirement of pervasive ascription, in cases from Bashō to DeLillo. This is, of course, in part by fiat: unlike fear or nostalgia, ‘lyrical emotions’ is a term of art designed to group together episodes of emotion experience that appear to have this quality (among others). Thus, it is up to us to do as we have, and simply characterize lyrical emotions as those which are at least implicitly directed at endings due to time’s passage, or the idea of such endings. However, this does not mean that this emotion type is somehow artificial: as I argued in Chapter Two, it is a familiar, if hard to describe, experience. Transience therefore seems to be descriptively adequate.

The eligibility requirement is also satisfied, for the transience of things would be a fact even if nobody felt anything in response to it. In this way, transience falls on the more specific, concrete, empirical end of the spectrum of formal objects of emotions. Perhaps surprisingly, then, an emotion type that might be considered refined or rarified is closest in its standard of correctness to emotions such as fear. Like biological facts about

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8 As I noted, if we never had these emotional responses, we would obviously not say that such facts are the ‘formal object’ of said responses; but the current question is just whether, given that we do have them, these facts are external to our emotion experiences and hence eligible to justify them.
what is (physically) dangerous, the nexus of facts concerning the inexorability of time’s
passage obtains independently of particular or dispositional emotional responses to it.
The property of transience is not just ascribed in, or because of, lyrical emotion episodes.
For this reason, it is eligible to be the formal object of lyrical emotions.

It is more difficult to establish the normative adequacy of transience. One reason
for this is simply that we lack strong normative intuitions which we can confidently say
the formal object of lyrical emotions should support. For example, although lyrical
emotions are often dismissed as sentimental, it is not obvious that even the most overripe
cases—say, perhaps, from Thomas Wolfe or The Sorrows of Young Werther—are
actually analogous to straightforward fear of a harmless dog. That is, it is not clear that
whatever is intuitively wrong with those cases is that they are, specifically, unfitting.

Still, what we seek is a clear normative counterexample to the formal object, and
if such a thing cannot be found, that is informative too. So as not to beg the question of
the proper assessment of the Levine and Justice examples, we might return to Chapter
Two’s examples: is it, for example, clearly unfitting for Merwin to feel a lyrical emotion
about a patch of sunlight, or for Woolf’s characters to feel the poignancy of the present
moment and wish for it to be permanent? It does not seem as though these qualify as
cases of obviously unfitting emotion episodes. We do not have, in any of Chapter Two’s
examples, normative counterexamples to the candidacy of transience.

The other way to generate a normative counterexample against a proposed formal
object is to identify a case in which the formal object is instantiated, but it would
nonetheless be obviously unfitting to have an emotion episode directed at the object in
question. In fact, there is an argument for thinking that transience is normatively
inadequate in this way. However, I will claim that even though we ought to accept this argument’s premises, we still have reason to maintain that transience is the formal object. Thus, we should hold that transience is a formal object with strange normative implications, rather than conclude that it is normatively inadequate and fails to be the formal object because of them.

This will take some explaining, beginning in the next section, where those strange implications are described. For now, acknowledging that this last issue has yet to be sorted out, I will proceed on the assumption that the formal object of lyrical emotions is transience in the sense outlined above.

5.4 The Overinstantiation Dilemma

Having nominated a property for the objects of fitting lyrical emotions to instantiate, we may return to the question of whether Levine and Justice are correct to dismiss their experiences. Did the objects of their emotions instantiate the property of transience, understood in the sense described above? Was the property really there to be picked out by the feeling, as contamination was picked out by disgust? In spite of the emotions’ dismissal, the answer would appear to be yes. We have no reason to doubt that, in the moment, Levine and Justice were genuinely responding to the transience of the scenes before them.

Yet the reason this can be said confidently is the fact that, treated as a property, transience is universally predicable: every known contingent thing, for as long as it

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9 This argument and reply are found in Section 5.5.1.
exists, instantiates it. This marks a difference between transience and most other formal objects that have been proposed for emotions, whether for fear, disgust, or joy. Of course, it is true that just about anything might be thought by someone to instantiate dangerousness. However, we are comfortable appealing to various facts in order to designate such property-attributions as mistakes. In the case of transience-attributions, we cannot make any such discriminations: we cannot hold that although your emotion ascribes transience to an object, the object does not really instantiate that property. Thus, it begins to seem that the result of making transience the formal object of lyrical emotions is that Justice and Levine are wrong to decide their emotions were unfitting, because those emotions are fitting in every circumstance.\(^{10}\)

This conclusion would be very surprising. It would be peculiar enough if any emotion is entirely immune to unfittingness. It would be even more peculiar here, since this particular emotion is frequently subject to accusations of sentimentality—that is, of unfittingness. This should motivate us to seek to avoid this conclusion.

We might therefore take the position that if an emotion’s formal object is a property of everything, then it is a kind of formal object that fails to provide a basis for the normative evaluation of the relevant emotion episodes. However, that characteristic would undermine its claim to be a formal object at all: as de Sousa puts it, “to say that there is a formal object amounts to the presumption that, when disagreements occur, \textit{there is something to disagree about}” (\textit{Rationality} 158). If the only formal object that can

\(^{10}\) It should be mentioned that even if transience is not technically \textit{universally} instantiated—that is, if there did turn out to be a pocket of matter in the universe that is eternal—this would not change the present problem of overinstantiation. To put it another way, even if these emotions are ‘only’ fitting in \textit{almost} every circumstance, that is still highly counterintuitive, as I claim below.
be devised for lyrical emotions is normatively impotent, this amounts to admitting that, on the standard model’s justificatory bottom level, these emotions lack the property that makes an emotion experience fitting. Such feelings could never be fitting.

Thus, the outcome of feeding lyrical emotions into the standard model of evaluation for fittingness seems to be that they are either *always fitting* or *never fitting*. Each outcome is a result of, or response to, what I will call the formal object’s ‘overinstantiation’, in the sense that it is instantiated by too many actual objects to allow us to make fittingness distinctions between emotional responses to them. We may thus refer to the problem as the *overinstantiation dilemma*:

If the formal object of lyrical emotions is *transience*, then it is instantiated by everything (or nearly everything). From there, we can go two ways:

- The formal object of lyrical emotions is always instantiated by the emotions’ objects, so lyrical emotion episodes are *always fitting*.
- Lyrical emotions do not have a formal object that generates fittingness verdicts, so lyrical emotion episodes are *never fitting*.

Neither horn of the dilemma is attractive. If we grant, as most will, that there are indeed such things as *sentimental* lyrical emotions, then this dilemma forces us to conclude that there cannot be *unsentimental* ones. Feelings of poignancy about the ultimate transience of things would be inescapably unfitting. Disagreeable as this is, some may find it marginally more palatable than the ultra-permissive alternative that such emotions are always fitting: surely, we might think, we have to go with the option that allows us to say that sentimental lyrical emotions are possible.
But, on the other hand, it seems just as unacceptable to respond to the dilemma by banishing all lyrical emotions to the outer darkness of kitsch. Just because the examples in Levine and Justice evince doubts about fittingness does not mean there are not cases of lyrical emotions which seem utterly beyond doubt. For some, the observation that unsentimental lyrical emotions exist will be as indisputable as the observation that sentimental ones do. And even for those who are not convinced by experience that fitting lyrical emotions are possible, the independent appeal of lyrical emotion experiences makes it desirable to preserve at least the bare possibility of their fittingness. It would seem to be a *prima facie* defect of an account if it gives up on accommodating the felt significance of any such experiences. These emotions occupy an important place in art and life: to lose the ability to say that some are fitting would be to lose something considerable.

However, stepping back from the individual horns of the dilemma, the larger problem is the existence of the choice itself. It entails the abandonment of the idea that the fittingness evaluation of lyrical emotion episodes can reach different verdicts in different cases. If it is a condition of a robust normative discourse about some state that there can be differential evaluations of instances of that state, then the dilemma shows that there cannot be a robust normative discourse about lyrical emotions, when it comes to their fittingness. This appears to be true in spite of the fact that we engage in the discourse of sentimentality, which presupposes that some such emotions are unfitting while others are presumably not. That critical practice now looks to be without normative moorings.
5.5 Strategies for Resisting the Overinstantiation Dilemma

Since this conclusion is both unwelcome and, on the face of it, implausible, we might wonder whether something has gone wrong upstream. There are several strategies for resisting or avoiding the overinstantiation dilemma, and in this section I will examine four of them in detail. The first is to reject transience as the formal object of lyrical emotions, on the grounds of normative inadequacy. The second strategy is to reconceive of lyrical emotions as a different kind of affective state, namely moods, or relatedly, to claim that the appropriateness of lyrical emotions is simply a matter of individual taste. The third strategy is to propose that lyrical emotions belong to an entirely different class of emotion experience than the emotions which inspire the standard model of emotion evaluation, so the standard model is not applicable to them. The fourth strategy is to argue that treating the fact of transience as lyrical emotions’ standard of correctness neglects the essential contribution to fittingness made by a particular sort of experience of transience, over and above the fact.

I will argue that none of these strategies offers a persuasive response to the overinstantiation dilemma and the predicament in which it leaves us. The first three options keep us firmly impaled on one or another of the dilemma’s horns. The fourth does not, but its success is merely in principle: it too fails to supply us with anything useful for supporting the critical discourse of sentimentality.
5.5.1 Rejecting Transience as the Formal Object

One might argue that if identifying an overinstantiated property as the formal object has such counterintuitive implications for our ordinary critical discourse, surely that counts against its normative adequacy qua formal object. In other words, we might hope to avoid the dilemma by arguing that, since transience implies it, transience cannot be the formal object after all.

This is the unfinished business from Section 5.3, where I claimed that despite its counterintuitive normative implications, we nonetheless have reason to hold that transience is the formal object. The reason is essentially that the objection depends on assuming that we can identify a better formal object for lyrical emotions. But, I will argue, there is nothing better. Therefore, the formal object and the dilemma it generates both stand.

If the fact that it leads to the overinstantiation dilemma is a reason to discard transience, we must of course also discard impermanence, fragility, and other like properties which the phenomenology of lyrical emotions pushes us to identify as their theme. Each of these will be overinstantiated, at least when they are understood in the way that lyrical emotions would seem to respond to them. In fact, it is likely that given the intentional scope of lyrical emotions, any formal object that uniquely defines such emotions will generate this problem. As we have seen, such emotions aim for a finality of perspective and as such are ‘about’ everything (embodied, sometimes, in the particular). It will be difficult to accommodate this appearance on one hand, and come up with a unique, non-overinstantiated formal object on the other.
I argued in Chapter Two that there are no substantial benefits to subsuming lyrical emotions under another emotion type (such as *mono no aware* or wonder). Yet the threat of the present dilemma might tempt us to ‘reduce’ lyrical emotions to some other, more familiar emotion, with a formal object that is not overinstantiated. In other words, we might seek to avoid the overinstantiation dilemma by abandoning the idea that lyrical emotions are a distinct emotion type with a unique formal object. Instead, we could regard the feelings in Justice and Levine as episodes of some other feeling which is, in these cases, directed at ‘life’ or ‘the world’. Since I have already rejected poignancy *simpliciter* for this purpose (see Section 2.1), we should look elsewhere. Justice himself calls the emotion *sadness*; so let us take that as our candidate. There is no other standard emotion that has a better chance of capturing the phenomena (that is, no other emotion type that is free of special qualifications, such as wonder in Hepburn’s ‘existential’ sense).

Following Lazarus’ (1991) suggestion, the formal object of sadness may be thought of as the irrevocable loss of something important. Perhaps lyrical emotions are responses to such losses, either actual (e.g. “That moment is lost forever”) or anticipated (e.g. “This moment, like all things, will be lost forever”). And, if fitting sadness is not just for any loss but rather for the loss of *something important*, this may give us the criterion we need to distinguish fitting bouts of ‘lyrical’ sadness from unfitting ones. On this picture, if the emotion is directed at the irrevocable loss (actual or potential) of something that is genuinely important to one, then the emotion is fitting; but if the emotion is directed at the loss of something that is not genuinely important to one, it is
unfitting. Since many things are not important to one, this secures the possibility that sadness, and *ex hypothesi* the lyrical feelings that are a form of it, could be unfitting.

On one interpretation, an ‘importance condition’ points to a non-overinstantiated, emotion-external property that could establish a basis for the normative evaluation of these emotion episodes. Indeed, evaluating emotions based on an individual’s wider web of commitments—which is important to one—has some philosophical precedents. For instance, Helm (2001; 2009) makes self-consistency a requirement of a warranted emotion, and Pugmire (2005) makes it a requirement of a genuinely profound one. But self-consistency fails to provide an appropriate standard for lyrical feelings. First, the question of whether an emotion episode fits into a wider pattern of one’s evaluations seems to be always answerable in the affirmative, provided one has some talent for giving an account of oneself that casts one’s net of commitments widely enough.\(^{11}\) Second and more significantly, even if one possessed a definitive list of the things that matter to one, there is no obvious reason to think that lyrical emotion episodes should be answerable to it. On the contrary, these emotions present themselves as revelatory experiences, as reading Machado is for Levine: they seem to cut through our usual commitments and show us “the bottom of things” (Nussbaum 254). An individual’s ordinary, settled conception of what does and does not matter is beside the point.\(^{12}\) Third,

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\(^{11}\) Cf. de Sousa on aesthetic consistency: “What would be a combination of aesthetic choices that would fail of consistency?...any pair of choices could be made to seem coherent, provided we had the ingenuity to invent a story into which both would fit” (*Emotional* 76).

\(^{12}\) Pugmire (2005) responds to this type of objection by claiming that a profound emotion which seems new and revelatory—that is, which *seems* incongruent with one’s standing commitments—is in fact congruent if one looks hard enough. As far as I can determine, this is an empirical assumption that may or may not be true; but I would note that if it is, it simply illustrates my first objection. One’s web of commitments seems potentially big
the normative discourse we are seeking to ground seems to be about more than the mere self-consistency of one’s emotions and commitments. As I have noted, the philosophical literature on sentimentality is rife with references to the sentimentalist, a figure for whom sentimental emotional responses are presumably common and important. The fact that sentimental feelings are therefore consistent with his character hardly seems to absolve him of them, any more than another popular philosophical character, the amoralist, is to be forgiven her trespasses on account of their regularity.

Furthermore, changing the formal object to that of sadness might keep us closer to the overinstantiation dilemma than it seemed at first. The strategy of inserting an ‘importance condition’ into lyrical emotions’ formal object has so far assumed that the question is just whether the particular objects of the emotion episodes are things that one judges important, independently of one’s feelings of sadness. But this ignores the role of loss in the formal object: sadness is supposed to be for the irrevocable loss of an important thing. Yet what does it really mean for the objects of ‘lyrical’ sadness to have the property of being irrevocably losable, if not that they will be swallowed up by time? If that is what our sadness responds to in these cases, then it is difficult to think of episodes of ‘lyrical’ sadness in which it would be unfitting to feel sad. All things will be irrevocably lost to us in that sense; and it is to loss in that sense that our lyrical feelings seem to respond. In effect, to respect the phenomena (Levine’s emotion at Lake Huron, Justice’s at the riverside), we discover that we must steer sadness back toward transience. And there is no reason to think that the ultimate losability of things is not, or should not enough that it fails to show that most emotion episodes are incoherent with it, and it therefore fails to be useful for making normative distinctions among those emotion episodes.
be, important to us. Thus, it appears that replacing transience with the irrevocable loss of something important does not deliver us from the overinstantiation problem.

Finally, it might be objected that by nominating sadness, I have stacked the deck against the general strategy of analyzing lyrical emotions as a more familiar and easily dealt-with emotion. Lyrical feelings seem plainly to be mixed emotion experiences. Sadness, insofar as we have been considering it a feeling with one (negative) valence, may not even be a credible emotion type to reduce them to. Perhaps, then, the strategy of reducing lyrical emotions to some other, more familiar mixed emotion is still viable. But then it is simply unclear what the helpful reductive class could be. Beyond poignancy itself, there does not seem to be a mixed emotion that is a plausible substitute for lyrical emotions as I have presented them.

Changing the formal object of lyrical emotions, then, does not lead us to a descriptively adequate property that is any less overinstantiated than transience. And failing to identify a formal object for lyrical emotions—that is, declining to give one, for lack of a non-overinstantiated option—does not remove us from the dilemma’s horns. Instead, it leaves us on the second horn: without a formal object to serve as a standard of correctness for fittingness assessments, lyrical emotions could never be fitting. For these reasons, it seems that the counterintuitive normative implications of transience should not be taken to undermine that property on the grounds of normative inadequacy. In the absence of a candidate that fares any better, we should maintain that transience is the formal object.\footnote{While we are on the subject of the overinstantiation implications of other formal objects, it is worth pausing to consider a similar objection that could now be raised against the formal object I proposed for nostalgia in Chapter Three. This was the property}
5.5.2 Moods or Mere Taste

It might also be hoped that if we think of lyrical emotions as moods rather than emotions, we can skirt the question of fittingness altogether. The thought could be that if these feelings are moods, then, like all moods, they are subjective fancies that are not evaluable for fittingness. In that case, the dilemma about their evaluative status is spurious.

It might indeed be natural to think of our examples as depictions of moods. Various psychological accounts of the nature of moods resonate with the panoramic objects of Levine’s and Justice’s feelings: as Prinz notes, moods can be considered representations of “how we are doing in life overall”, or, alternatively, it might be that of being something desirable in a memory. One might ask: when would aestheticized reflective nostalgia be unfitting, if its fittingness is not beholden to facts about the actual past, but rather can be secured by the beauty of the past’s appearance in memory (as I argued in Chapter Four)? After all, I have claimed that in nostalgia, the memory always seems beautiful. Might that formal object also be overinstantiated, and therefore challenged on the grounds of normative inadequacy? The answer is no. In the case of lyrical emotions, the problem is that we have an emotion type whose episodes seem to always be fitting, and this seems as absurd as claiming that, for example, anger is always fitting. But, unlike transience, the property of being something desirable in a memory is not universally (or nearly universally) instantiated. As we saw in the example of unreflective nostalgia for the fumbling first kiss, this formal object still allows us to call some cases of nostalgia unfitting (Section 3.2.4). Furthermore, since reflective nostalgia can still be directed at the actual past (i.e. it can but need not be directed at the expressive or ‘aesthetic’ qualities of the memory), there can be episodes of it which are as unfitting as the fumbling first kiss. So neither nostalgia simpliciter nor reflective nostalgia is always rendered fitting on my account. Finally, to say that reflective nostalgia is always fitting, when it is relevantly directed at the aestheticized mnemonic experience, is not absurd. Rather, it is more like saying that a particular sort of anger is always fitting, when one is shoved by a stranger. In both cases, more specific conditions have to be met to generate the fittingness verdict than simply being an emotion of some type. As such, no overinstantiation problem arises from the formal object of nostalgia given in Chapter Three.
“moods refer to everything” (Gut 185). Either way, these accounts both capture something of the wide scope of lyrical feelings.

However, the objection posed above is a non-starter, for ordinary moods are evaluable for fittingness. This is what should be expected if they represent how an individual is doing in life. For example, if I am doing well in life but am persistently grouchy, there is nothing controversial about judging that mood unfitting.

Accepting that the bare reclassification of these feelings as moods would not remove the problem of evaluating them, it might still be thought that regarding them as moods points to a different way out of the overinstantiation dilemma. The dilemma is the result of positing a formal object that is overinstantiated. If moods “refer to everything”, this would not help, since everything is transient. But if moods are representations of how an individual is doing in life overall, then the formal objects of such states would intrinsically involve the self (that is, how the self is doing in life, in this or that respect). In that case it would not make sense to say that the formal object of a lyrical mood is simply a property of the lakeshore, the river, or the world in general. Instead, we would be able to assess a lyrical mood in the same way that we assess grouchy: by asking whether it actually accords with how one’s life is going.

Unfortunately, in the case of lyrical moods, the answer to that question still returns us to the overinstantiation problem. While moods such as grouchy or anxiety represent one’s life as being replete with particular irritations or obstacles, a lyrical mood would represent one’s life as being transient. This is, to be sure, not the same as holding that a lyrical emotion is a response to the transience of some other thing (the river, the world). Nonetheless, like the transience of other contingent things, the transience of one’s
life is a feature that one’s life always has. Irritations and obstacles can be more or less present within lives, but transience is never not a property of one’s life. As a result, involving the self’s transience in the formal object of a lyrical feeling at best relocates the overinstantiated property. Where before the problem was that any given thing is transient, now the problem is that the self is transient in any given moment. Thus, a lyrical mood runs into the same dilemma as a lyrical emotion: it is either always fitting, or, if the formal object is declared normatively impotent, always unfitting. In short, reclassifying lyrical feelings as a different kind of affective state does not solve the normative puzzle.

However, the motivation behind the original appeal to moods—namely, a sense that Levine’s and Justice’s lyrical emotions belong to a normativity-free realm—may persist. Might it be nothing more than a personal choice, or a matter of individual temperament, to regard the previous moment’s lofty feelings as fitting or unfitting? Something like this may be what Annette Baier has in mind when she writes that

We can change our minds, or, if I am right, our hearts, about how much something mattered, but that is what it will be, a change. We update our priorities, but the later ones, even when better informed, need not be any wiser than the earlier. (209)

Of course, this may only be a denial of the claim that changes of heart are necessarily due to wisdom. But in another light, it can serve to illustrate the present objection: that in some emotional matters, we have only the commitments of the present moment or personal taste to go on.
I have already argued that one’s pre-existing commitments and cares do not constitute a plausible standard of fittingness for lyrical emotion episodes. However, the present objection is not that individual temperament provides a standard of fittingness, but rather that one’s attitude toward these emotions is as personal and non-evaluable as, say, being an optimistic or a pessimistic person. Setting aside the reply that in particular circumstances optimism and pessimism may well fit or fail to fit the world, the idea is that there is no correct answer about how Levine and Justice should feel: just the facts of how they feel and their attitudes toward them, all of which are likely grounded in their respective personalities.

If we were only concerned with examples of interpersonal conflicts about emotional justification—for example, if somebody else had ruled Justice’s feeling unfitting, Justice protested that it was fitting, and we were asked to weigh in—then it would be tempting to say that the disputants can only agree to disagree. But appeals to personal taste or temperament do not help when the conflict over emotional fittingness is internal. That is the issue raised by our examples: when a person doubts their own emotion’s justification, they wonder whether it is the feeling or the doubt that is correct. To say that it is simply up to them to choose merely rephrases their problem, which would then be “How should I choose?” And when we seek to answer that question for ourselves, we are pushed to look for reasons; we come back around to the intuition that these emotions should fit the facts.

What makes it unsatisfying to respond to the overinstantiation problem by denying that lyrical emotions are normatively evaluable is that such emotions are evaluated for fittingness. Our dilemma proceeds from that fact: the discourse of
sentimentality exists and is applied to the affective states I have described. Given that, the response that lyrical emotions belong to a normativity-free sphere of affective life requires us to adopt a sort of error theory about the discourse of sentimentality applied to such feelings. On this view, insofar as a sentimentality criticism is taken at face value as the claim that a lyrical emotion fails to fit its object, sentimentality criticisms are really false or meaningless. Thus, this strategy amounts to claiming that the discourse of sentimentality is without normative moorings, which is precisely what the overinstantiation dilemma seems to show; it arrives at the same general conclusion from a different direction.

Giving up on normativity in this area by adopting an error theory about sentimentality criticisms is too implausible to accept. For one thing, to draw the line at sentimentality criticisms and their natural targets seems ad hoc. What makes other emotion types, which also purport to fit the world, exempt from the same error? It is of course possible to bite the bullet and claim that emotions all belong to this normativity-free realm; but that only covers up a smaller implausibility with a larger one. As I pointed out in Chapter One, the idea that emotions can be normatively evaluated is the philosophical and commonsense consensus, but I will make one more point about this. Far from constituting an expendable normative discourse in comparison with ethics, evaluations of emotions “have at least as secure, if not as prestigious, a place in everyday evaluative thought and discourse as do their more noble [i.e. ethical] relatives” (D’Arms and Jacobson, “Sentiment” 747). A reason for this might be because of what Goldie calls emotions’ “normative impulse” (“Imagination” 135): in the moment, we typically take our feelings to be the right things to feel. We can then ask whether that conviction is
correct. In fact, this feature of emotions shows that normativity is straightforwardly pervasive in emotional life in a way that it has been controversial to assert of ethical life. Unlike voluntary human acts, which it may seem outlandish to insist are all, in principle, subject to normative evaluation, emotions seem evaluable for correctness in every actual case, by dint of their built-in claim to be the thing to feel.

In this section I have argued that even if lyrical feelings are reclassified as moods, the normative problem remains. Involving the self (or ‘one’s life overall’) in the formal object of lyrical moods does not rescue that property from overinstantiation, and so it leaves us on the first horn of the dilemma. I have also argued against the related claim that what one should think about lyrical emotions is only a matter of taste, in a sense that removes those feelings from the realm of fittingness evaluations. This turns out to have consequences for the discourse of sentimentality that are just as devastating as the overinstantiation dilemma itself. It is still possible to insist that Levine, Justice and anybody else who wonders about the fittingness of their lyrical emotion experiences is simply mistaken. But there is more evidence that this is a tough normative question, rather than merely a mirage of one.

5.5.3 Diagnosing Away the Problem: ‘Seeing-As’

The third strategy for avoiding the overinstantiation dilemma, like the last one we considered, is ambitious. We may have the intuition that even if lyrical emotions do not reside in a normativity-free realm, there is nonetheless something crude about attempting

\[\text{Cf. Bernard Williams, who claims that if morality’s scope is all-pervasive, it leads to an “overmoralized self” (39).}\]
to evaluate them using the standard model. The present strategy hones this intuition into a diagnosis of the overinstantiation dilemma as the outcome of a fundamental ontological misconception of lyrical emotions. The proposal is that when lyrical emotions are understood correctly, it is evident that the standard model is not applicable to them. I will describe this strategy below, but argue that it, too, fails to remove us from the overinstantiation dilemma.

Philosophers tend to describe emotions in two distinct ways. The first is the one we have seen used naturally in the examples of fear and disgust, in which the emotion experiences are formulated as responses to properties (formal objects) instantiated by actual objects. We might call this the property-instantiation conceptualization. The second kind of description is equally familiar. It is most apparent when a given emotion episode is criticized for responding to one situation as if it were another, often because the present situation has some overlap with a past one: “You shouldn’t let it make you angry,” one might say to an old friend; “you’re seeing your boss’ feedback as if it was your father picking on you.” I will call this the seeing-as conceptualization of emotions.

Ordinarily, we can use the language of both conceptualizations equally well, if not equally elegantly—one sees the bear as dangerous, or one responds to the property of dangerousness in the bear. This may be what leads us to assume that the difference between the conceptualizations is merely cosmetic, and that they are interchangeable for substantive purposes. For example, Roberts (1988; 2003), who argues for applying the concept of seeing-as to emotions, has generally been grouped among perceptual theorists of the emotions—the tradition in which the property-instantiation conceptualization is most prominent (Brady 2007).
However, according to the objection I am considering, episodes of some emotion types can be properly characterized in terms of only one of these conceptualizations. The alternative construal, beyond being inelegant, strains against the phenomena. In particular, lyrical emotions are among those that cannot be accurately characterized in terms of the property-instantiation conceptualization. The reason this is important is that it was treating lyrical emotions as responses to transience that had unacceptable normative implications when transience was considered a property of an object. Those implications may fall away if we redescribe Levine’s and Justice’s experiences as a way of seeing the world as transient. On this view, the transience that matters for a lyrical emotion is akin to a hue or a cast the scene acquires, rather than something detected in the scene. The transience of things, to adapt a phrase of Stanley Cavell’s (1965), would be something seen in the feeling. Or, using Roberts’ description of emotional seeing-as, we could hold that the scenes of lyrical emotions are “imbued, flavored, colored, drenched, suffused, laden…or permeated” (“Sketch” 191) with, in, or by a sense of transience.

More specifically, this proposal is that the two different ways of describing emotions sometimes tracks an ontological difference between them. The distinction is that in these special, exclusively ‘seeing-as’ emotions, the object of emotion does not exist independently of the emotion experience itself. It is true that outside of the emotion experience, the transience of things remains a simple fact, but that fact is not what is operative in an episode of lyrical emotion. Instead, what is operative is the experience of the world suffused with a sense of impermanence, which, being affect-laden, does not outlast the emotion experience itself. This feature of exclusively seeing-as emotions makes it difficult to describe them as having an object in the traditional sense at all, for
that term already conjures up the image of a feeling directed at an independent entity. Again, the inability to tease the two apart is often a feature of the phenomenology of emotions (it is a tall order, for example, to un-see the frighteningness of a train when one is tied to the tracks). But what distinguishes seeing-as emotions is that the fusion of feeling and object is a reflection of their genuine ontological interdependence.

This might help explain the temptation, once the ‘cast’ of transience has dissipated, to think that there was something illusory about the feeling. In fact, the sense of transience disappears in the way that the ambience created by stage lighting disappears when the house lights come up. But then what explains the temptation to reject such emotion experiences, which has been our concern? Why, if a lyrical emotion is properly conceptualized in terms of seeing-as, do Levine and Justice doubt its authenticity in its wake, instead of merely bid it farewell? After all, when the house lights come up, we do not blink and decry the stage lights as fraudulent. On the diagnosis I am considering, the reason we are tempted to do so after experiencing a lyrical emotion is that, when such a powerful experience ends (and we cannot explain it as the result of, say, watching a play that was intended to move us), we are naturally prompted to wonder whether it made sense. This is, essentially, to ask the normative question.

To answer it we turn to the standard model of emotion evaluation. However, while there are two conceptualizations of what emotions are or how they work, the standard model of evaluation is structured with only the property-instantiation conceptualization in mind. That is, the standard model’s criteria are set out in the terms that the property-instantiation conceptualization uses to describe emotions.
Ordinarily, this does not present any problem. Many emotions that may be more elegantly described in terms of the seeing-as conceptualization can still be redescribed and evaluated by the standard model—for example, “You’re seeing your boss’ criticisms as if they were your father’s put-downs, but this situation lacks that one’s properties.” Yet if there are emotions which we can only capture adequately on the seeing-as conceptualization for ontological reasons, then the standard model does not accommodate all emotions. In particular, if the warrant of an emotion episode does not exist independently of the emotion experience, then the emotion should not be dismissed as unfitting from outside of the emotion experience, as in our examples. The requirement that seeing-as emotions produce emotion-independent ‘facts of the case’ would be inapplicable to them: such a demand would commit something like a normative category mistake. And, finally, emotions that are not properly adjudicated by the standard model can be expected to create havoc when the standard model attempts to process them. Something like this is, of course, what we have seen.

If this diagnosis is correct, it explains the source of the complications that arose when we attempted to assess the merits of dismissing lyrical emotions as unfitting—namely that the standard model could not support our ordinary critical discourse about these feelings. The present response is to withdraw them from the standard model. Yet in doing so, the discourse of sentimentality has been lost again, only in a different way.

If lyrical emotions are not evaluable for fittingness on the standard model, this might be thought to reveal the standard model’s inadequacy as it stands, meaning that it must be patched up, accompanied by a parallel model of evaluation for exclusively ‘seeing-as’ emotions, or replaced by a more comprehensive scheme. Any new or
improved model, however, would still have to include the standard model’s fundamental intuition that emotions are not self-justifying: there must be something else, outside of the feelings and ascriptions of response-dependent properties in question, to which they are fitting or unfitting responses. That intuition cannot be relinquished if there is to be emotional normativity at all. But it is the very thing that this strategy relinquishes when it comes to lyrical emotions. Once we make it so that lyrical emotions are categorically unable to be evaluated by the standard model, it appears inevitable that they cannot be evaluated for fittingness at all.

To put it another way, the withdrawal of seeing-as emotions from the standard model amounted to the following claim:

If the warrant of an emotion does not exist independently of the emotion experience, then the emotion should not be dismissed as unwarranted from outside of the emotion experience.

Yet it seems difficult to deny the plausibility of an opposing claim, which substitutes a rather different consequent:

If the warrant of an emotion does not exist independently of the emotion experience, then the emotion has no warrant.

Essentially, an exclusively seeing-as emotion would be impossible to distinguish from a purely projective emotion. What such emotions would lack is an emotion-independent
formal object which can serve as the standard of correctness for fittingness evaluations. And in that case, we have failed to escape the horns of the overinstantiation dilemma. For exempting lyrical emotions from the standard model leaves us unable to say they are ever fitting, which is simply the dilemma’s second horn.

5.5.4 Seeing-As as Formal Object or Further Experiential Condition

Unlike the appeals to moods or mere taste, the ‘seeing-as’ diagnosis did not deliberately set out to show that lyrical emotions are non-evaluable for fittingness. However, that is the result of removing ‘seeing-as’ emotions from the standard model. But perhaps the notion of seeing-as still offers a fruitful way of understanding lyrical emotions, while abandoning the problematic claim that they belong to an ontologically special class that the standard model cannot assess. The fourth and final strategy I will consider for avoiding the overinstantiation dilemma is in one way a reprise of the first, in that it changes the proposed formal object. However, instead of replacing transience with something else altogether (such as the formal object of sadness), it merely qualifies the sense in which transience is the emotions’ standard of correctness.

According to this line of thought, instead of holding that the formal object of lyrical emotions is the transience of particular objects, oneself, or the world, the formal object is the very seeing-as of transience. To put it in a less opaque way, the formal object could be a kind of cognitive state or activity in the self: namely, seeing things under the aspect of transience. Crucially, this need not involve feeling anything. Thus, it might provide the thing external to the emotion episodes that could serve as a
normatively robust formal object. We would be able to hold that whenever one is genuinely in this non-affective, quasi-perceptual state, a lyrical emotion would be a fitting response to it. When one is not genuinely in it, a lyrical emotion would be unfitting, sentimental, and so on. Since we are clearly not always in that state, it would seem that this allows for differential evaluations of lyrical emotion episodes.

One concern about this strategy is that, by claiming that these emotions are directed at an event in the self, it seems to invite the old complaint against James about intentionality—that is, that emotions are directed at things in the world, not at lumps in the throat. Applied to our examples, the objection would be that lyrical emotions are directed at the river or the shoreline or life itself, not one’s perception of those things. In his amalgamation of James’ theory and the appraisal tradition, Prinz (2004) responds to this objection by arguing that emotions, while they are perceptions of patterned bodily responses, thereby represent core relational themes (things other than what is going on in one’s body). This allows him to agree with the objection’s point about world-directed intentionality, while retaining the essential Jamesian picture. However, it is not clear

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15 While the details of this move are not our concern, because it is counterintuitive it is worth briefly explaining how Prinz argues for it. Prinz adopts Fred Dretske’s (1988) theory of mental representation. On Dretske’s view, a mental state counts as a mental representation if it is reliably caused by that which it is held to represent, and if it is capable of being mistakenly applied. What counts as misapplication is established according to the function of the mental state, such that if the application of the state deviates from the state’s function, it is erroneous. Prinz suggests that the feelings of bodily changes in emotions meet both of these conditions for mental representation. Human beings are both wired and taught to respond to core relational themes with various patterned bodily changes. Thus, the changes are reliably caused by core relational themes, satisfying the first Dretskean condition. Next, Prinz holds that the perception of bodily responses caused by core relational themes is designed to prepare us for behaviour appropriate to the theme in question. His example is being alerted to the presence of danger when one’s heart races in response to a large moving shadow at night. When we perceive this bodily change in ourselves, we are prepared to react appropriately, which is
that this amendment is available if our claim is that lyrical emotions are directed at a
cognitive state or activity in the self. After all, to secure normative standards for such
emotions, this strategy is to keep the formal object in the self, where it will not be
overinstantiated. We would thus have to resist following Prinz and claiming that the
emotion is really directed outward at the (overinstantiated) property of transience.
Instead, we would have to claim that the emotion is directed at the fact that one is
undergoing seeing-as. And this seems to float back into the crosshairs of the objection to
James.

However, it is possible that this objection could be countered by appealing to the
same intentional fluidity I claimed that aestheticized reflective nostalgia involves, in
Chapter Four’s mixed focus account of that emotion (Section 4.1.1). In the present case,
perhaps we are not confined to holding that a single lyrical emotion episode must either
be directed exclusively at the fact of some perceptual activity, or at the thing being
perceived. Instead, both could be focal properties of the same emotion episode. So I will
set this objection about intentionality aside.

It might also be thought that there is something odd about a formal object that is
in oneself rather than in the world—for example, one might consider this too subjective
in principle to serve as the emotions’ standard of correctness. But this in itself is not a
problem, for there are exclusively self-reflexive emotions. The formal object of shame,
for example, could be a failure to have been the kind of person one wanted to be, and this

in this sense the mental state’s function. It is “set up to be set off” (Gut 54) by the core
relational theme, danger. However, since one can have and perceive a fear-response in a
case where there is no danger, the mental state is capable of being erroneously applied,
satisfying Dretske’s second condition. For these reasons, Prinz concludes that the
perception of bodily changes caused by a core relational theme counts as a mental
representation of that theme.
builds one’s self-conception into the formal object of an emotion. And, of course, I argued earlier that the formal object of nostalgia is something desirable in a memory, which is neutral about whether the things that make the focal properties desirable are in the past time the memory represents, or in the (internal) mnemonic experience itself.

If these objections to the strategy fail, then perhaps we have at last found a way to avoid the overinstantiation dilemma. If the seeing-as of transience is the formal object, this would successfully prevent lyrical emotions from generating the dilemma. It is true that the seeing-as of transience is not overinstantiated—we are not always seeing the world in this way—and so the proposal does not leave us impaled on either of the dilemma’s horns. In this way, the present strategy is unlike the others we have considered.

However, the kind of normative foothold this solution could provide is still rather slender, with respect to the critical discourse about these feelings that we want the standard model to support. The proposal’s drawback stems from the fact that the perception of transience and the feeling one has toward it are not easily teased apart. When one responds with fear to the dangerousness of some thing, there are ways to determine that one is responding to a feature that is independent of one’s feelings. But in the case of the perception of transience, one is not in a position to introspectively determine whether one is responding emotionally to an emotion-independent reason; and there is no external corroboration available.

It might be that I am satisfied to think that a given perception of transience and a lyrical emotion experience are two different events in the self. It is certainly possible that

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the perception and the feeling really are distinct in the requisite sense. But, if I happen not to be so satisfied, it is unclear what resources are available to me to adjudicate the dispute between my emotion experience and my subsequent doubts. How could I be in a position to tell the difference between having experienced (1) a fitting lyrical emotion that responded to a non-affective perception of transience, or (2) an unfitting lyrical emotion that *projected* an affect-laden hue of transience onto the object of my perception, and so failed to respond to the requisite emotion-independent property? The borders between such conscious states are not well-marked in consciousness.

In practice, then, making a certain kind of seeing-as the formal object of lyrical emotions does not do much to preserve the discourse of sentimentality. To exploit a metaphor of Philip Fisher’s, if powerful emotions are in the business of momentarily “flooding…the entire terrain of the personality” (48), it may in this case be practically impossible to dredge out the original cognition and tell whether it was soaked by the flood, or affect-laden to begin with. To produce fittingness evaluations, this solution demands a precision in introspection that we do not have. Thus, its problem is not that it fails to secure the in-principle differential evaluability of lyrical emotions, but that it fails to provide a *useful* standard of evaluability. By evading aporia about in-principle evaluability, it invites aporetic results in practice.

We run into the same problem even if we loosen up this strategy. One might concede that transience is the formal object of lyrical emotions, not in any ‘seeing-as’ sense, but straightforwardly as a property of things in the world. However, one could maintain that the fittingness of a lyrical emotion episode requires *more* than that this
property is instantiated by the actual object of emotion. In addition, for a lyrical emotion episode to be fitting, one must also be in a certain non-affective experiential state—namely, the seeing-as of transience. This quasi-perceptual activity, in other words, might be a supplementary condition for a fitting lyrical emotion episode to satisfy. While transience qua property would still be overinstantiated, adding this ‘experience condition’ would prevent lyrical emotions from always being fitting, and so stop them from generating our dilemma. However, the same epistemic limitations that plagued the first version of this strategy still afflict the alteration. The question of how to tell whether this seeing-as is an affect-laden experience or not, when it occurs at the same time as an emotional response to the property of transience, persists. Once again, on this picture it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether one’s lyrical emotion experiences are fitting or not.

That this is a problem for the proposal at all reveals a presupposition we make about the nature of emotional fittingness, which differs from what we think about truth value. A belief’s truth value is determinate, but not something we always assume will be discernible by us. To take a common example, the proposition “The number of stars in the universe is even” is either true or false at a given moment, but we have no way of knowing which. Our intuitions do not rebel against such epistemic limitations vis-à-vis truth value. But it is less natural to think that the basic fittingness of an emotion episode could be a similarly intractable mystery. We are not accustomed to thinking that a dispute about sentimentality can only be resolved with recourse to inaccessible facts. Yet, as the proposed strategy reveals, the potential for just this sort of practical unknowability is a

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I owe this suggestion to Eric Dayton.
plausible corollary of D’Arms and Jacobson’s claim that “the fittingness of an emotion is like the truth of a belief” (“Moralistic” 72).

I will not attempt to decide here whether we should insist that emotional fittingness must be practically discoverable, or accept the conclusion that it may not be. Perhaps one thing to say in favour of the second option is that it is not unprecedented to think that the normative status of something can be determinate but practically unknowable. Famously, the moral status of an action in the Kantian scheme is determined by the motivation out of which it was performed, but the purity of that motivation, on which its normative status depends, may never be known. As we have seen, a similar result appears to be the price of securing an emotion’s fittingness by locating the emotion-independent property to which it responds in a short-lived eddy of consciousness. We would not thereby lose the right to say there may be fitting lyrical emotions, but we would lose the ability to always say which ones they are. Unfortunately, this is not just a problem for some outlying cases. Instead, it is a problem for the very cases we are interested in. The limitations of this approach will be salient whenever we are unsure about the fittingness status of such feelings—for it is that uncertainty that the present strategy leaves us helpless to address. So, when we attempt to adjudicate cases such as Levine’s or Justice’s, in which the emotion is dismissed but we are not sure if its dismissal was warranted, this strategy leaves us without the resources to decide. Even though it can avoid the overinstantiation dilemma in principle, it thereby renders the critical discourse of sentimentality about these emotions impracticable.
5.6 Proportionality and the All-Things-Considered Judgment

None of the strategies for resisting or avoiding the overinstantiation dilemma have managed to salvage the critical discourse of sentimentality about lyrical emotions. The first three failed to remove us from the horns of the dilemma, and so failed to support differential fittingness evaluations of lyrical emotions. The fourth strategy can claim to support differential fittingness evaluations in principle, but at the expense of knowing how to assess the very sorts of lyrical emotion episodes, burdened with self-doubt, that we began with.

If we cannot rescue the discourse of sentimentality by fighting the overinstantiation dilemma, perhaps it is time to simply endorse transience as the formal object of lyrical emotions, and stand by the outcome. Since everything instantiates this property, the result is that lyrical emotions are always a fitting type of thing to feel. If we were to allow this—in effect, if we thought of overinstantiation as a fact instead of a problem to avoid—what then?

The claim that lyrical emotions are always a fitting type of emotion may be counterintuitive, but the picture it paints is not entirely alien. It might be discernible in the background of a familiar thought, namely that one of the ways we get by in life is by pushing the facts of transience and mortality from our minds. These facts are nonetheless always there.18 As Sue Sinclair has put it,

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18 Cf. Nussbaum, who praises tragedy for its ability to “cut through the dullness of everyday life and show us something deep about ourselves and our actual situation” (243). The latter is a standing reality that is disclosed by tragedy, not created by it.
We perjure ourselves
when we step out the door, ignoring
the intrusive facts of death and time. (83)

Perjury or not, this avoidance is required for getting by because death and time can capsize us emotionally. Their existence justifies certain feelings, but those feelings can be too much. This reveals the relevance of the second dimension of fittingness evaluations proposed by D’Arms and Jacobson: the size or proportionality of an emotion. Perhaps lyrical emotions are an appropriate type of emotion in any given situation, but it would not always be fitting to feel them very much.

Up to this point, I have largely treated the verdict on the appropriateness of an emotion type as being what determines the verdict on an emotion’s fittingness as such. This is by design, for the charge of sentimentality is most naturally interpreted as the charge that the emotion episode in question is the wrong sort of thing to feel. However, if we are now assuming that lyrical emotions are always an appropriate type of thing to feel, then the equation of type-appropriateness with fittingness in general turns out to have been slightly hasty. So too is the pessimism about preserving a robust normative discourse about these emotions, in respect of fittingness. For, if we could show that lyrical emotions are sometimes disproportionate, then we could claim that, in spite of their default type-appropriateness, they sometimes fail to meet a necessary condition for fittingness. In this way lyrical emotions could afford differential fittingness evaluations after all. And it is worth noting that although the dominant account of sentimentality emphasizes inappropriate emotion type, there is also a tradition of associating it with
excessive emotion: as James writes, “The sentimentalist is so constructed that “gushing” is his or her normal mode of expression” (“Emotion” 198).

Rather little has been written about how to assess emotions for proportionality. When determining whether an emotion is of an appropriate type, we have a formula to work with. In contrast, the criteria of proportionality are less cut and dry. It seems only that there must be some plausible set of norms governing the range of appropriate degrees and durations of a given feeling.

In Chapter One I gave two examples of such norms: the level of one’s fear, for example, should be commensurate with the level of danger, and should subside after the danger has passed. This gives us two conditions for a proportional emotional response: a norm of commensurate intensity and a norm of commensurate duration. Still, it is important to realize that while these embody commonsense intuitions which can be discerned in clear examples, there are no firm rules about proportionality. It cannot be the case, for example, that fear becomes inappropriate the moment it persists beyond the immediate presence of danger. As Jenefer Robinson observes, once fear is initiated, “adrenaline continues to course through my blood for a while. Indeed, hormonal reactions to threat may last hours and even days” (78). Such facts and their consequences must be recognized and incorporated into the notion of an appropriate range, and even then, that range will be partly determined by contingencies such as the unique circumstances of the case, a person’s history, and so on.19

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19 It might be claimed that although it is statistically normal for certain emotions to be sustained in this manner, what this shows is that they are normally disproportionate. But this would be similar to saying that it is a mistake for a sprinter to not stop exactly at the finish line. If an event (an episode of fear, running down a track) is inevitably extended in time in a way that outlasts its original eliciting condition and/or purpose, then that
Accepting that what these norms demand will be different from case to case, let us see what they demand in cases of lyrical emotions. First, just as we would ask whether the intensity of one’s fear is commensurate with the level of the object’s dangerousness, we must ask whether the intensity of an episode of lyrical emotion is commensurate with the ‘level’ of its object’s transience. But, ignoring the crudeness of this phrase, it seems that applying the norm of commensurate intensity generates a curious result. The transience of the object of any lyrical emotion is not something that admits of degrees. Obviously, some things exist for longer than others, but given that lyrical emotions respond to the fact that their objects will *eventually* be lost in an ultimate sense, the so-called ‘level’ of transience will always be the same. The norm of commensurate intensity therefore appears to license a very powerful (or ‘large’) emotion in every instance. We might compare this to the unlimited amount of fear that is warranted by extreme danger: for example, when one is plummeting toward the ground in a crashing plane. Where there is no greater level of danger, no level of fear is too great. While in most respects it is bizarre to draw an analogy between mortal terror and being moved by the fragility of things, both cases respond to the recognition of the absolute or unsurpassable presence of the property—that is, the formal object—in question.

The second condition, the satisfaction of a norm of commensurate duration, holds that a person’s emotion should subside when its formal object no longer relates to the person in a relevant way. The vagueness of this formulation is unavoidable because of the many kinds of objects that can instantiate formal ones, such as people, physical things,

‘*aftermath*’ should, for evaluative purposes, be regarded as part of the original event, not a problematic dragging-out of it. A distinction can still be made between this kind of continuation of the event, and an excessive continuation (compare, for example, a runner who winds down after the finish line to a runner who speeds up).
situations, and propositions. For instance, when one fears an ominous stranger, one’s fear ought to subside when proximity to them is reduced; in this case, distance can be what ends the threat. Ongoing undiminished fear would be disproportionate (again, ceteris paribus). In another sort of case, such as when one is angry at a colleague’s habit of being late, the anger should subside once the colleague starts showing up on time. Here, the offense has not gone somewhere else, but rather ceased to exist. When we come to lyrical emotions, however, the thing the emotion is trained on neither physically recedes nor ceases to exist. Instead, as we have seen, it is a constant property of the emotion’s object. Whatever the object is—whether the feeling is a response to the transience of something, or everything—there will never be a case in which the feeling is present but its object is not transient. Again we confront a strange result: the norm of commensurate duration is incapable of recommending the cessation of a lyrical emotion experience.

Therefore, lyrical emotions appear to satisfy both conditions of proportionality at all times. If so, then they are always proportionate. We had hoped to be able to appeal to the standards of proportionality to show that such emotions could fail to meet a necessary condition of a fitting emotion, counteracting the fact that these emotions are always the appropriate type of feeling in response to their objects. But it seems as though the only way to achieve an ‘unfitting’ verdict on grounds of disproportionality would be to accuse a lyrical emotion episode of not being intense or extended enough.

To be sure, this means that differential evaluations are possible—some lyrical emotions could be fitting and others unfitting. But the route to this conclusion still throws the idea of negative evaluations, such as sentimentality criticisms, to the wind. If our only available complaint against lyrical emotions is that they ought to be more powerful and
prolonged, we have once again reached a conclusion that stands opposed to the way we treat them in practice. A principle of proportionate response seems to exhort us to emotions of extraordinary size in response to standing facts such as one’s mortality, the loss of the present, and the absolute unattainability of the past.

One might reply that this is only the result of applying the norms of proportionality poorly. Consider the norm of commensurate intensity. Is it really the case that the actual objects of these emotions instantiate the same ‘level’ of transience in every instance? Imagine, for example, two cases of lyrical feelings. The first is of a piece with Levine’s: you embrace the fact of mortality and are filled with a feeling that life is autumnal, which cannot, in the moment, be gainsaid. The second is more humble: you see an old friend off at the airport, and even though you know he will be back in town in a few months, there is, to your surprise, something deeply moving about the sight of him disappearing into the crowd. Now, even if we admit that confronting mortality licenses powerful feelings, is it not obvious that seeing off your friend involves less finality than death, meaning that the emotion in that case should be less strong?

The conciliatory response would be to admit that such distinctions can be made between lyrical emotions, but to insist that what we are concerned with here are cases like Levine’s, not cases like that of the departing friend. If the transience that this emotion type responds to is something that admits of degrees, it does not change the fact that the norm of commensurate intensity would be unable to call excessive any emotional response to objects at the far end of the spectrum—for example, to mortality, as opposed to the winding-down of a pleasant visit. And yet we have been attempting to identify the resources for settling normative disputes about just those emotions: the ones which seem
to bear on the truth of all stories, life itself, time as such, and so on. Therefore, even if it succeeds, this objection still does not give us a basis for calling Levine’s emotion excessive and hence unfitting, even when Levine dismisses it. That was the puzzle with which we began.

Nonetheless, I am more inclined to reject the claim that the relevant transience is one which admits of degrees. As I have defined them, lyrical emotions are directed at transience in an ultimate sense, and so they respond to it as an absolute quality: one which is not changed by the particular sort of object in whose context transience is perceived. The formal object of lyrical emotions is in this way set apart from properties such as dangerousness, which come in different ‘amounts’ from one object to the next.

This is not to deny the likely difference in intensity between confronting mortality and watching a friend walk away. But there is another plausible explanation for that difference. In both examples, a lyrical emotion responds to the transience of its object as a universal condition of things. In the mortality case, transience is appreciated in an inescapable, raw way, but in the case of the departing friend it may be mitigated by an awareness that, at another point in the future, you will see your friend again. What marks the difference between the two reactions is just that in the second, an extraneous fact serves as a consolation. Yet for all that, the transience of the moment in the airport is not any less a property of that scene than it is of the scene at Lake Huron. If it is a lyrical feeling, we are not just missing the friend; we are missing them in the context of the thought that time swallows everything. It therefore says nothing against the ‘level’ of transience involved that the principal focus of the emotion is a particular thing, instead of time or mortality as such. A lyrical feeling is partly directed at the idea of time: it views
the transience of this moment or object against a vast temporal backdrop. The fact that the emotion ‘zooms out’ in this way is what makes it lyrical.

It might also be thought that there are counterexamples to the suggestion that the norm of commensurate duration cannot recommend terminating a lyrical emotion. We might consider a scenario that is well-represented in the anti-sentimentality literature, and anticipated by Chapter Four’s inaction objection against aestheticized reflective nostalgia. Imagine a young poet sniffling at a sunset on a lake, refusing to interrupt his emotion and extend an arm to a drowning child. In this case, one might say, the feeling has surely strayed beyond the border of acceptable duration. One might adapt such examples for use against the previous claim about intensity, as well.

Yet the problem here is not one of proportionality, or intensity. Instead, it is a failure to factor in additional pressing reasons—in this case, a moral obligation to rescue the child. According to the distinction between fittingness and prudential and moral considerations, the ‘proportionate’ emotional response to an object is not necessarily how much one should actually feel, all things considered; it is instead how much feeling is proportionate in isolation from the consideration of such things as prudence and morality. In other words, the question of how much to feel is not answered just by specifying what a proportionate response to an object would be.

To illustrate this view, D’Arms and Jacobson give the example of a recently widowed parent of several young children. For her, a debilitating amount of grief would not be disproportionate to its object; but as it would interfere with her ability to care for her children, it is still not the thing to feel. Such examples abound: Pugmire (2005) and Stocker and Hegeman (1996) argue that always responding in a way that is strictly
proportional to the import of some events, such as faraway atrocities, would be
“burdensome, even grotesque” (Pugmire, *Sentiments* 32). This is in part because there are
other things which make claims on our emotional attention, such as the people who
depend on us to care about them, or to act on their behalf. Emotions are no less fitting for
being burdensome, but this is corrected for in what D’Arms and Jacobson call “the all-in
question of practical reason, whether F is what to feel, all things considered”
(“Moralistic” 71). We may call the answer to this question—distinct from the more
particular questions of appropriate emotion type, proportionality, prudence, or morality—
the all-things-considered judgment. It is in this judgment that one can, in effect, unload
the burden of fittingness and declare the grotesquerie of certain warranted emotions on
other grounds.

Returning to lyrical emotions, we might now say that although we failed to show
that they could be unfitting using the charge of disproportionality (at least, not in the right
way), we can reach a similar result in the all-things-considered judgment. This is that
lyrical emotions, fitting though they are, must be constrained by considerations of
prudence, and in some cases morality. The above puzzles about fittingness can be
allowed to stand, but any normative force that fittingness evaluations possess must be
weighed against our need to get by in the world. As such, fittingness has limited
relevance when it comes to lyrical emotions. Rather, their constant or near-constant
fittingness might be a curio that has little effect on our everyday emotional lives, like a
deep current moving beneath the surface weather.

But there are two ideas to distinguish here. The first is undeniable: knowing the
fittingness status of an emotion episode is not sufficient for answering the all-in question
of how one should feel. On the other hand, the assumption that the demands of prudence
and morality should therefore take precedence over fittingness is less plausible. The
problem is how to decide how much to count the respective evaluative dimensions which
factor into the final verdict. The all-things-considered judgment naturally takes all of
these factors into consideration, but then we are left to wonder just how much one should
consider prudence, as against fittingness. Other than unprincipled appeals to common
sense, is there a reason to privilege workaday concerns over the emotional confrontation
with time and mortality? Is there even a reason to stipulate a fair time rule between the
different perspectives one can take on one’s life?

Approaching such questions, which raise the possibility that we face multiple,
competing, but incommensurable evaluative frameworks, likely requires delving into
several vast literatures in ethics, including discussions of incommensurability (e.g. Chang
1997), the well-balanced life (e.g. Hurka 1993), and the scope or pervasiveness of
morality (e.g. Wolf 1982; Scheffler 1992)—to name only a few. For present purposes, we
must simply note that this is where the normative assessment of lyrical emotions takes us,
if we are after a solid footing for deciding when they are what to feel, all things
considered. What we have found is that considerations of fittingness are not, or almost
never, able to serve as the basis for criticizing lyrical emotions. Therefore, to justify
negative evaluations of them, some other evaluative dimensions have to be brought in.
But we seem to lack a principle even as vague and indeterminate as ‘balance’ for
deciding how much to factor in the fittingness of emotions alongside those other
concerns. It may be that we must be particularists here, and not demand a principle or
algorithm for deciding such questions: but the point is precisely that it is hard to articulate and weigh even the local reasons that a particularist could appeal to in these cases.

There are examples in which it would be obtuse to maintain that this is a real problem: cartoonish cases about poets and drowning children, for instance. On the other hand, if we return to our original negative evaluations of lyrical feelings—the realistic examples of Levine and Justice—the problem is not academic. Here the puzzle was that, in the moment, the feelings seem urgent and momentous, and yet, after the fact, they are disowned. Which reaction is correct? As we have seen, if we are ever to find fault with such feelings, we cannot (or can hardly ever) claim that they are of the wrong type, the wrong intensity, or the wrong duration. But if we wish to appeal to prudence or morality to ground their dismissal, there are further obstacles. For one thing, it is unclear what the complaints would even come down to in such circumstances. As in the case of aestheticized reflective nostalgia, uselessness and self-indulgence come quickly to mind, but considered in the context of (again, realistic) examples of lyrical emotions, what makes those things wrong is not obvious. Moreover, even if we did articulate a plausible set of criticisms from ‘outside’ of the emotion, we face a mystery about whether they should trump the fittingness of the feeling, and what kind of tribunal could ever decide that.

5.7 Conclusion

Thomas Nagel has argued that by stepping back from our subjective perspectives and observing our everyday lives from “a nebula’s-eye view” (21), the seriousness with
which we treat our lives seems absurd. It is the long perspectives, to recall Larkin’s phrase, that reveal the ludicrousness of our ordinary concerns. But this equation is reversed in the dialectic between lyrical emotions and the self-accusation of sentimentality. Lyrical emotions involve stepping back and experiencing vivid convictions about the grand scheme, but it is their very momentousness that comes to seem dubious when we are once more ensconced in quotidia. The intimations of bathos in Levine and Justice (and Woolf and Bolaño) are the flip side of Nagel’s absurdity: a finality of perspective, deflated by the everyday.

In this chapter, I have attempted to clarify the normative situation of this kind of self-criticism. Is the familiar dismissal of such emotions as sentimental backed up by the standard model of emotion evaluation? In attempting to answer this question, however, a problem emerged. I assigned a formal object to lyrical emotions, transience, which is necessary for evaluating them on the standard model. But the formal object of lyrical emotions is instantiated by too many objects to allow one to pick out any unfitting emotion episodes. And declining to give lyrical emotions an emotion-independent formal object leads to the conclusion that they are never fitting—for if there is no formal object, then the standard model, which issues fittingness verdicts, cannot be applied to this emotion type. We might still be tempted to say that this only shows the inadequacy of the standard model and its conception of fittingness. But again, the fundamental idea embodied by the standard model, and in play in these cases, is simply that feelings are not self-justifying. And that dictum is harder to shrug off, or replace.

The overinstantiation problem can be skirted using a few defensible strategies, but none of them restores the robust critical practice that we have sought to ground. Taking
the seeing-as of transience as a formal object would allow us to say that, in principle, some lyrical emotions may be unfitting. However, due to the limitations on introspection, this is not much help in practice. If we introduce proportionality considerations, we can at least criticize some lyrical emotions for not being strong *enough*—but this is at best only half of the critical footing we would like. Finally, we might hold out hope of papering over the problems to which our fittingness evaluations give rise, by claiming that fittingness can be overridden by other considerations in the all-things-considered judgment of how to feel. But in most realistic cases, it will be unclear what the practical or moral complaints against a lyrical emotion could be, and even if we had good ones, how much they should count against the feeling’s fit with its object.

Thus, whether we attempt to avoid the overinstantiation problem or accept its consequences, we are led to the conclusion that a robust discourse of sentimentiality about lyrical emotions cannot be defended. This is contrary to our ordinary practices of emotion evaluation, and it is undesirable: we do distinguish fitting lyrical emotions from unfitting ones, and these distinctions seem to us to track real distinctions between emotion episodes. But if I am correct, these views are unsupported. The discourse of sentimentiality runs aground precisely where it might seem most applicable: at poignancy about transience, and the preciousness of things.
Works Cited


Casey, John. “Emotion and Imagination.” *Philosophical Quarterly* 34.134


