

Nostalgia

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Nostalgia has become a popular topic of study across various disciplines. It is usually taken for granted in these discussions that we know what we are talking about. In this article, I argue against two dominant accounts of the nature of nostalgia put forward by philosophers and other writers in the humanities and social sciences. These views assume that nostalgia depends, in some way, on comparing a present situation with a past one. However, neither does justice to the full range of recognizably nostalgic experiences available to us – in particular, ‘Proustian’ nostalgia directed at involuntary autobiographical memories. While the immediate purpose of this article is to clarify the intentionality of a paradigmatic but neglected emotion type, certain episodes of Proustian nostalgia also raise questions about how to evaluate emotions that are self-consciously directed at non-veridical memories. I will conclude by briefly considering this issue.

1. ‘Time comparison’ accounts of nostalgia

To begin with, three general notes must be made about the scope and assumptions of this discussion. None is controversial. First, I will treat nostalgia as an occurrent emotion or affective experience, rather than simply a fascination with the past. Second, I will be concerned 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 1996: 60). Several names for this form of memory have been proposed, but the most enduring designation is *episodic*, coined by Endel Tulving (1972). Because my focus is on episodic (and so personal) memories, I will ignore the sense in which the longing to experience bygone eras is sometimes referred to as nostalgia. Third, I take nostalgia to be among those emotions which necessarily have cognitive content: roughly, the implicit or explicit thought that the object of one’s episodic memory is both unrecoverable and desirable. Thus, the content of nostalgic emotion episodes is an amalgam of the particular object of the memory, and the attitude of desire towards it.¹

Any adequate view of nostalgia will acknowledge that it involves a felt difference between past and present: the very *irretrievability* of the past is salient in the experience. However, many accounts claim that there must be a more specific difference between the past and the present. These accounts

1 This basic characterization is compatible with the views on nostalgia’s necessary conditions that I dispute in this article.

identify the operative difference in the respective attributes or qualities of two temporally distant states of affairs. I will call such accounts ‘time 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, neither is necessary for nostalgia in the manner that is typically believed, even when the particular nature of the nostalgic past is an important factor in the experience.

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 ‘[n]ostalgic 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 naive state of mind of one’s former self and the (then) unappreciated truth about the transience of that former world. (1994: 91)

On this view, a necessary condition for nostalgic memories is that they be directed at times when one was unaware of the impermanence of one’s surroundings. This theme is echoed by Susan Stewart, according to whom the nostalgic person ‘dreams of a moment before knowledge and self-consciousness’ (1993: 23). Likewise, Svetlana Boym concludes her long study of nostalgia with the claim that we are ‘nostalgic for a time when we were not nostalgic’ (2001: 355), a state of mind not yet initiated into loss. I will call this the *naïveté requirement*.

It is true that expressions of nostalgia often describe gazing back across this particular epistemic gap. Likewise, episodes of nostalgia typically involve a perception of transience. But there is less reason to believe that the transience of the former world must necessarily have gone *unappreciated*. In fact, we should doubt an 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 can imagine the present as the subject of a future memory: one can be aware of the impermanence of one’s present surroundings. The question is then just whether it is possible to *nostalgically* remember experiences which featured such awareness. There is no reason to think this is impossible: indeed, it would be odd if, simply by reflecting on a moment’s transience, one thereby inoculated it against future longing. But then it is implausible that nostalgia depends on the future self’s superior awareness of

the past's impermanence. This common view of nostalgia's conditions fails to capture the full range of genuinely nostalgic experiences. The naiveté requirement can appear to be definitional when our crop of examples is limited to memories of innocence – especially those which portray early childhood. But once we recognize that nostalgia is not so limited, the requirement seems ill-fitting.

3. *The poverty of the present requirement*

A more plausible time comparison account holds that nostalgia must be motivated by the felt *deprivation* of the older self: in some respect, nostalgia involves a judgement that the past was better. I will call this the *poverty of the present requirement*. On this view, the intentional object of nostalgia is necessarily a past regarded as preferable to the present.

The idea that nostalgia essentially involves a negative evaluation of the present and a more positive evaluation of the past enjoys broad interdisciplinary consensus. For example, Robert C. Roberts claims that in nostalgia there is 'a disadvantageous comparison that embitters the present' (2003: 280). Historians Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw claim that nostalgia requires 'some sense that the present is deficient' (1989: 3). The sociologist Fred Davis holds that nostalgia depends on the belief that 'things were better... *then* than *now*' (1979: 18). And literary theorist 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 as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent, safe... in other words, making it so very unlike the present. (2000: 195)

On all of these views, what is necessary for nostalgia is that the desirable features of the past 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. 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 then, aided by a selective memory, one flees to an idealized and imaginary past. Coupled with the projectionist assumption, then, the poverty of the present requirement is a cornerstone of the received wisdom about nostalgia.

4. Proustian nostalgia

With another model of nostalgia before us, we may begin to assess its cogency. In particular, it should be asked whether there are, or could be, episodes of nostalgia that do *not* involve regarding the past as a time preferable to the present, in any respect relevant to the experience. I will argue that the central mnemonic phenomenon described by Proust – nostalgic involuntary autobiographical memories, most famously triggered by a tea-soaked madeline – does not fit with this model. Instead, the Proustian phenomenon points away from such an analysis.²

At the forefront of a recent boom in involuntary memory research is the work of cognitive psychologist Dorth 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, such as one's current conditions.
- (4) They are typically activated by sensory cues.
- (5) They involve a strong sense of reliving the past.
- (6) They are accompanied by a strong feeling of joy. (2007: 26–27)

What returns in these involuntary memories is not just one forgotten sensation associated with the present-day cue, but, as Proust's narrator Marcel describes it, the 'whole instant of my life on whose summit they rested' (1970: 226).³ It is the feeling of a vast context restored by a particular sensation that affords Marcel such profound happiness, even when it is bittersweet: 'the true paradises are the paradises we have lost' (1970: 228).⁴

Berntsen's list overlooks one last characteristic of this experience, which is its typical ephemerality. In contrast with the notion of indefinitely long reveries – lucid dream-tours of one's past – Proust notes that the memories have their special quality only 'during the second that they last' (1970: 234). This is significant, because it rescues his experience of nostalgic involuntary memories from idiosyncrasy. Figuring in its fleetingness, the Proustian experience

2 To be clear, what I am calling 'Proustian' nostalgia is not intended as a literary or historical reading of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. As I explain below, Proust describes a widespread psychological phenomenon, which is helpfully illustrated by his well-known example.

3 Richard Wollheim offers a nice example of this synecdochical effect: he writes that the memory of 'a single picnic with tomatoes and small curly leaves of basil and the crunch of salt can signify a complete Tuscan summer' (1984: 100).

4 See Epstein 2004 for an account of the neurological underpinnings of these mnemonic experiences.

is of a piece with cases of nostalgia described by others. For example, in a poem called 'Nostalgia', Jan Zwicky refers to the emotion as a 'sudden lurch / a kind of memory/shock' (2004: 50). And in another poem called 'Nostalgia', Charles Wright describes both the phenomenon's spontaneity and its transience: 'Always it comes when we least expect it, like a wave . . . / Brilliant and sea-white, then sinks away' (2002: 36). Proustian nostalgia, then, is not confined to Proust, and while it is aptly described by novelists and poets, I do not take it to be a rarified phenomenon. What I call Proustian nostalgia is a familiar emotional experience with the above characteristics.

5. Proustian nostalgia as a counterexample to the poverty of the present requirement

Proustian nostalgia is unmotivated, fleeting, involuntary, and, as I will describe below, capable of being self-consciously directed at bad memories. Nostalgia with these characteristics serves as a counterexample to the poverty of the present requirement. In other words, the psychological conditions and processes involved in these episodes of nostalgia tell against the intentional object that the poverty of the present model supposes the emotion type must take.

The first characteristic of Proustian nostalgia that clashes with the poverty of the present model is that it is *unmotivated*. Importantly, motivations are not the same as cues. As described by Berntsen, a motivation is some pre-existing state of the subject – such as a need or desire – which plays an enabling or causal role in triggering a memory. 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' (2009: 90).

On the other hand, nostalgia as it is described by proponents of the poverty of the present requirement is the paradigm of a motivated experience. A definitive feature of the view is that nostalgia is a response to a felt deprivation in the present. Such a view, therefore, seems badly equipped to capture the unmotivated nature of Proustian nostalgia, which relies on accidental memories. And even when Marcel's nostalgia has the apparent *function* of ameliorating his gloom, the emotion is still brought about by chance rather than design.

The *fleetingness* of Proustian nostalgia provides a second reason to suspect that the poverty of the present requirement is spurious. This can be seen by considering whether, on the poverty of the present model, we would expect nostalgia to be ephemeral. 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 seems at odds with this phenomenon.

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. The fact that the 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 building assessment, comparison, ranking and rejection into the experience sits awkwardly with Proustian nostalgia's absence of intention. Furthermore, 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 with Proustian nostalgia's spontaneity and surprise.

It is true 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 differences are part of a deliberate fantasy. The model thus seems better suited to accommodate complex imaginative undertakings than nostalgic experiences in general. In fact, given the motivations and needs attributed to the nostalgist on this model, it is mysterious why the nostalgist would look *backward* to an unrecoverable past at all, rather than forward to a utopian future that they might also construct.

A final feature of Proustian nostalgia presents a different kind of challenge to the poverty of the present model. This is Proustian nostalgia's ability to be directed at a past which was experienced as negative at the time. As Joshua Landy observes, Marcel experiences the same emotion when he remembers 'not just the happy times but also mundane and even traumatic moments' (2004: 215). According to Berntsen, the fact that the memories are not necessarily happy shows that their affective quality 'does not in any transparent way derive from the remembered scene itself' (2007: 27).

The diagnosis implied by the 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, and expunging or whitewashing the context. In Proust, however, the badness of the objects of some 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. Landy notes that even the famous madeleine

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’. (2004: 215)

And yet the onset of this memory gives Marcel a shiver of pleasure.

There is nothing necessarily incoherent about the statement, ‘I see how bad it was at the time, but I now long for it.’ However, what is required by the poverty of the present model, in cases of self-aware nostalgia for the bad, is for the nostalgist to hold something more specific: ‘I see how bad it was at the time, but I now regard it as a preferable time to the present.’ For the poverty of the present requirement to make good its claim, it would have to be true that in every case of Proustian nostalgia for bad times, the present vantage point, from which one retrieves the memory, is judged to be even worse. That might happen sometimes, but, in the light of the spontaneity of the phenomenon, it seems too implausible to think that it always will. And whenever the moment of retrieval does *not* seem worse than the remembered past, Proustian nostalgia will be a counterexample to the poverty of the present requirement.

6. *Conclusion and evaluative implications*

I have argued against two prevalent assumptions about nostalgia: first, that it always targets past innocence or naiveté, and second, that it always targets a past regarded as preferable to the present. Where these theses stumble is in their neglect of variety: they mistakenly make requirements out of mere forms the phenomena can take. Thus, 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’. Instead, I believe that a fairly loose characterization of nostalgia’s intentional objects is the only one that can be given. What is targeted in episodes of nostalgia are memory representations of an unrecoverable past, seen, at least in the moment, as meriting desire. Beyond that, the emotion is more distinctive for its bittersweet affective character than for the sort of past it is directed towards, or the relationship that obtains between that time and now.

The phenomenon of self-aware Proustian nostalgia for the bad raises further puzzles of its own; I will close by mentioning one that concerns its evaluative implications. Nostalgia is among a relatively small class of emotion types that tend to be considered categorically inappropriate, in one sense or another.⁵ While the aim of my argument has not been to vindicate nostalgia, my conclusion does reveal the spuriousness of one common reason for

5 ‘Inappropriate’ is, of course, ambiguous between several grounds for censuring an emotion type (see D’Arms and Jacobson 2000); I take it that the general bad reputation of nostalgia is ambiguous in this way. See Howard 2012 for a more detailed treatment of these issues as they pertain to a related emotion type.

denigrating it. Whatever else may be objectionable about nostalgia, it is not essentially a form of deliberate escapism.

Even this modest defence of nostalgia may seem revisionary. I am inclined to see it as unsurprising: like other emotion types, it could be that nostalgia admits of appropriate and inappropriate episodes, depending on the circumstances. However, the evaluative status of self-aware Proustian nostalgia for the bad might be significantly more counterintuitive.

In self-aware Proustian nostalgia for the bad, something about the memory strikes the nostalgist as non-veridical. The nostalgist knows the past in question was unpleasant at the time, but in memory it is altered by certain effects: for example, the memory has acquired a gold patina, or it seems to be an uncanny distillation of a whole time period. Neither effect strikes the self-aware nostalgist as true to the quality of one's experiences at the time when those memories were encoded. Yet they are part of what is targeted by nostalgia. The emotion seems to be directed precisely at 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 drawn onto the glass.

In this way, self-aware Proustian nostalgia for the bad gives rise to the much-discussed paradox of fiction, only outside of the usual context of art spectatorship. The canonical problem asks how audiences can feel things for people or situations in artworks that they know to be fictional: Anna Karenina, for example, or some menacing slime. Here, the same puzzle arises between the rememberer and the memories she regards as non-veridical. When the self-aware Proustian nostalgist longs for bad times, she suspects that those times are being presented in some aestheticized fashion by her memory, and longs for them anyway. Thus, just as we may ask how audiences can have feelings in response to events they believe are fictional, we may ask how the nostalgist can feel desire in response to a memory they believe to be relevantly altered.

However we might resolve the paradox of fiction in this context – that is, whichever way we explain *how* such nostalgia comes about – there is at least intuitive support for the judgement that these emotional episodes are *unfitting*. Nostalgia strikes us as inappropriate when it is directed at an image of the past that diverges substantially from the real one. The fact that the nostalgist suspects this discrepancy only seems to make things worse. It seems plausible to think that self-aware Proustian nostalgia for the bad is the model of an inappropriate emotion.

Yet this evaluation might be premature. As we have seen, in self-aware Proustian nostalgia for the bad, the fictional or aestheticized features of the memory are part of the intentional object of the emotion. But the more that the remembered past diverges from reality, the *less* the emotion's standards of fittingness might be beholden to the actual past. Such nostalgia, we have seen, is analogous to emotions directed at artworks. And an emotion directed at an artwork can be fitting even when the same emotion, directed at what that

artwork *represents*, would be unfitting (compare the feelings that are fittingly directed at paintings of massacres with those directed at the massacres themselves). So, if the analogy with emotions about fictions is as strong as it seems, nostalgia could be protected from unfittingness just where it looks the most guilty – that is, when it is knowingly directed at an aesthetized past.

This potential vindication of self-aware Proustian nostalgia for the bad is just one surprising result of taking nostalgia more seriously than it has been. The philosophy of emotions has so far neglected emotions directed at autobiographical memories.⁶ What the various permutations of nostalgia suggest is that an adequate account of past-directed emotions will have to confront difficult issues raised by dominant reconstructive theories of autobiographical memory – and in particular, by emotions directed at memories midway between veridicality and confabulation.⁷

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6 See Debus 2007. A notable exception to this trend is Goldie 2012.

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Seeing-in and seeming to see

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1. What is it to see some thing or scene, O, in a picture, P?
Gombrichians offer the following answer:

- (a) Our experience of ordinary pictures comprises both (i) visual experience of P and (ii) visual experience as of O. (Lopes 2005: 39–40; Kulvicki 2009: 387–88; Newall 2011: 40)
- (b) In such cases, (i) and (ii) occur simultaneously. (Lopes 2005: 31; Kulvicki 2009: §4; Newall 2011: 25)
- (c) Our experience of some pictures, *trompe l'oeils*, comprises (ii) in the absence of (i). (Lopes 2005: 39–40; Newall 2011: 26–27)
- (d) When pictorial experience comprises both (i) and (ii), we are not tempted to believe that O is before us. We are tempted to believe only that P is. (Lopes 2005: 30; Newall 2011: 24–25)

Thus at the heart of seeing-in lies (ii), seeming to see the depicted object. In the case of ordinary pictures, this is the difference between seeing the marks