

*The Queer Art of Ardent Reading:
Poems and Partiality*

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IT IS A TRUTH, if not universally acknowledged then at least widely experienced, that even the most devoted readers of verse tend to remember parts of poems rather than the whole thing. Lines, fragments, couplets, rhythms: these are all liable to be turned round in our memories like the melody from a music box. Familiar as this idea may seem, such a truth might in fact help us understand how “ardent reading . . . function[s] in relation to queer experience,” as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick put it. One of Sedgwick’s enduring aims as a critic was to explore things that everyone feels, but that everybody feels differently, and remembering parts of rather than whole poems is one such thing. Reading instances where this happens in both fiction and poetry, alongside Sedgwick’s writing, helps us better understand what it’s like to feel ardently attached to a poem, an object, an idea, a person; what it’s like, I’m tempted to say, to love.

Poetry, according to the contemporary poet Don Paterson, “has always been an ‘aspirant’ form, one which seeks to transcend the limitations of human memory.” It has a “unique and near-magical property,” in that it is “the one art form where its memory and its acquisition are one and the same thing.” Unlike a story, symphony, painting, or film, where only the structure remains intact in memory, “if you can remember a poem, you possess it wholly. To recall a poem *is* the poem; the poem has become, quite literally, part of your being.” Because of this fact, he asserts, “a good poem has a compositional integrity which cannot be addressed piecemeal.” These somewhat vatic pronouncements strike me as more properly stating the poet’s desire than a reader’s experience—an ideal account rather than a realistic one. The “if” is important in Paterson’s penultimate sentence:

“if you can remember a poem.” But what if you can’t remember it in its entirety? What part or how much—if any—of the poem do you then “possess”? Paterson is right here to stress memorability as a distinguishing feature of poetry, but there are also reasons why we might want to interrogate the quasireligious, quasimarital metaphor he employs in thinking of the poem as “becom[ing], quite literally, part of your being.” The poem for Paterson becomes part communion wafer and part marriage vow, in which two individuals are “united with one another, in heart, body, and mind.” What if, we might ask, I don’t want to give myself to, or be given, the totality of a poem? What if instead I wanted to acknowledge the uneven and partial connections, attachments, misalliances (and more) that I might make with that poem—or indeed with other people?

Some examples of this differentiated memorability are evidently a product of “badness.” A number of Wordsworth’s lines, for instance, provoked special and sometimes justifiable ire during the nineteenth century: “I’ve measured it from side to side: / ’Tis three feet long, and two feet wide.” Such lines are memorably unmemorable, in this case inadvertently highlighting the fault line between simplicity and banality; it’s easy to see why they might have lodged in the memory of readers for this very reason. But there are, for many of us, myriad instances of lines, phrases, or passages of unexceptional and unexceptionable verse that stick with us—poetic offcuts that lodge in the mind without even the mnemonic justification of the bathetic. “The average mind is the repository of innumerable patches of patterned language,” the literary scholar Catherine Robson suggests, and poetry—more often than not the most densely patterned kind of language we encounter—is peculiarly apt to insinuate itself into our minds, hooked into memory by long-playing rhythms and melodies. To pay serious attention, though, to the “patches of patterned language” in readers’ minds should mean that we also take seriously their patchiness. Memorizing a poem is a conscious act, but lines and phrases of poems will frequently take up residence in our memory whether we will it or not. Such snippets of verse—recalled to memory seemingly

without, as it were, rhyme or reason—are a recurring feature of our reading lives, and one that poets and novelists have often been more willing, or perhaps better equipped, to address than their critics. Developing a fuller understanding of this phenomenon leads, among other things, to a sense of the analogous nature of our attachments to poetry and the type and quality of our attachments to other people.

To begin with an example: in chapter seventeen of the British comic novelist Barbara Pym's *Less Than Angels* (1955), the long-suffering protagonist Catherine Oliphant finds herself on a bus, with her thoughts seeming to resolve themselves in "three layers."

On the top layer she was saying over to herself like a chant two lines of verse which often, though for no apparent reason, came into her mind at moments of stress or emotional upheaval:

*What was he doing, the great god Pan,
Down in the reeds by the river. . .*

It was a jingle, perhaps with some long-forgotten comic significance, but it persisted, over and over again like a bluebottle buzzing in a close room.

The "jingle" is only a partially accurate description of the lines, which are in fact the first two of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem "A Musical Instrument" (1862). On one level, identifying this quotation reveals a "comic significance" in relation to Catherine's plight. Looked at one way, the poem is a late-Romantic allegory about the making of a poet, whose identity as poet is, the poem suggests, contingent both on suffering and on a measure of isolation from their fellow humans. What the "great god Pan" is in fact doing by the river is removing one particular reed in order to turn it into a pipe—a process that involves "hacking and hewing," "spreading ruin," and drawing out the "pith" of the reed "like the heart of man." Read as a self- and sub-conscious commentary on her plight at this moment in the narrative, the lines that "buzz" in Catherine's head prompt us to see her as a bathetic modern counterpart to the Romantic poet, buffeted by forces and obligations beyond her control—though without the compensation

of an heroic poetic vocation. Catherine is, after all, a writer of mediocre short stories for women's magazines. But the passage itself might forestall this allegorical reading as much as it invites it. The narrator is clear that these lines occur to Catherine "for no apparent reason. . . at moments of stress or emotional upheaval"—though the word "apparent" ironically suggests that Catherine is likely more in the dark than Pym's readers. Stripped of the dignity of poetic allusion, the lines feel to her like a "jingle," as aimless as the motion of a "bluebottle buzzing in a close room." Part of the "comic significance" lies in Catherine's nervous reassurance that the lines are recalled entirely at random, rather than constituting an unconscious commentary on her present situation. But Pym's point here, I think, is also to depict a kind of partial and insistent remembrance of a poem in spite of its apparent irrelevance, and not only to invoke the lines from "A Musical Instrument" for the special relevance they bear to Catherine's situation. "What was he doing, the great god Pan, / Down in the reeds by the river" is as much of a compulsive mantra for Pym's character as it is a telling allusion. This is a tic that many of her characters share—see, for example, the marvelous scene at the end of *Excellent Women* (1952) with a misremembered line from Dante scratched onto a windowpane—and it is valuable as a reminder that poems, in terms of the roles they play in our lives, are objects of use. Poems—and very often portions of poems—are part of the furniture of our lives, and we might learn about this by exploring the kinds of attachment we form to them, as well as by discerning what they mean. Catherine's internal recitation of Barrett Browning's lines constitutes a clear example of the kind of use in which I am interested here: a seemingly objectless reiteration of a line or phrase, in which the significance of the quotation inheres in the fact and the act of remembering, perhaps more than in its meaning. In such instances, the allure of the lines isn't only the result of the logic of allusion. Indeed, I hope it will become clear that such moments reveal an intensity of attachment that is predicated on the partial nature of the remembered object; as though the ardor with which such lines and phrases are recalled is dependent on their being part, and only part, of a larger whole.

Although she has been remembered mainly as a critic of fiction, Sedgwick was particularly sensitive to such moments of partial poetic recollection, and her body of critical and creative writing sheds light on the significance of these quotidian occurrences. The neglect of Sedgwick's work on poetry in favor of her work on fiction is unsurprising given the significant bias toward prose in queer studies. Yet Sedgwick's helpfulness in thinking through these questions should also be no surprise, given the voraciousness of her reading of poetry. The scholar Jason Edwards has recently reminded us that "In spite of her fame as a novel gazer, Sedgwick wrote repeatedly about the English, European, American, and East Asian poetic canons, penning eleven essays on poetry across her career." And what is more, in an appropriately Sedgwickian catalogue—generously outsized and taxonomically eclectic—Edwards has put together an extraordinary list of the poets, singers, and genres referred to by Sedgwick in her writing:

haiku, lyric, and narrative poetry; soliloquies and dramatic monologues; prayers, hymns, and lullabies; grave, votary inscriptions and pseudo-inscriptions; pop and country songs as well as the blues; Bible and bedtime stories as well as bathroom songs; the fictional and factional, autobiographical, and literary critical; as well as the epistolary, novelistic, and pornographic. . . . Virgil, Dante, and Chaucer; Wyatt, Shakespeare, Traherne, and Spenser; Gryphius and Milton, Marvell and Lovelace, Pope and Cowper; with Bashō, Ryōhō, and Saikoku; Chōka, Fusen, and Saiba; Rōshū and Kyōtara; with Shelley and Keats; Wordsworth and the Lake Poets; von Scheffel, Blake, and Byron; with Rossetti and Brontë; the Brownings and Hopkins; Baudelaire, Swinburne, and Tennyson; with Longfellow, Whitman, and Dickinson; with Kipling, Wilde, T. E. Lawrence, and Cavafy; with Yeats and Pound, Stevens and Eliot; Cummings, Auden, Frost, and Stein; with Cornford, Plath, Bishop, and Sexton; Rich, Glück, and Lorde; Jarrell and Winters; Merrill, Lynch, Gunn, and Fisher; as well as Dr. Seuss and Untermyer, and the lyrics of Folliott S. Pierpoint and Isaac Watts; Lorenz Hart, Yip Harburg, and George Gershwin; June Carter Cash and Loretta Lynn; Bessie Smith, Hank Williams, Woody Guthrie, and Conway Twitty;

with Dionne Warwick, Nina Simone, Carly Simon, and Sheena Easton.

This list constitutes not only a catalogue of topics and points of reference, but also one of poetic influences, for Sedgwick was an accomplished and published poet. As she herself outlined, for a substantial part of her writing career, Sedgwick thought of herself as at least as much a poet as a critic. It may be, then, that something of this double life as both a reader and writer of poetry precipitated an acute awareness of the power of poetic earworms—an awareness of their persistence, but also, perhaps, an aspiration for her own lines to exhibit a similar durability. In her long, unfinished, neo-Victorian verse novel, “The Warm Decembers,” published in the volume *Fat Art, Thin Art*, Sedgwick explores this refractory poetic remembrance (to which Edwards’s list bears witness) by describing both the deformations and the insistence of memory:

Waking in the morning, I remember first
 I’m grown up. I have some money and a car
 and anything I want, to cook and eat,
 and (in the horrid, doggerel blank verse
 in which I—no, not “think”—but breathe, and represent
 continually to my own ear the place
 of my unthinkingness) repeats, repeats
 some vapid version of a Shakespeare phrase,
 “Yet Edmund was beloved.”
 Waking alone, yet E— is beloved.
 Also: “an important writer of fiction and poetry,—”
of criticism
 and poetry, of course it’s meant to say,
 but “fiction,” in this empty register,
 scans, so “fiction” in my head it always *is*.

As it was in Pym’s novel, this act of remembering is described as both persistent (“repeats, repeats”) and, in some sense, unavailable for conscious or rational thought (“no, not ‘think’”). The “vapid. . . Shakespeare phrase” referred to by the speaker (“Yet Edmund was

beloved”) is drawn from the fifth act of *King Lear*, just after Goneril’s and Regan’s dead bodies have been brought out onto the stage. Read as allusion, this fragment might rightly point a reader toward the ambivalent feelings regarding sisterly relations manifest in the poem, an aspect explored in special depth in the chapter “The Girl with Buttons.” Yet, as the passage in Sedgwick’s poem suggests, we might be mistaken in translating this “vapid” repetition too readily into an interpretive response to the text.

The poem itself guides readers away from that interpretive reading in two ways. First, Sedgwick’s attempt to find another verb or verb phrase to describe the act of repetition signals that the word “think,” and all the connotations that attend it, isn’t a happy one for the mental process she describes. The ungainliness of the alternative on which she settles is a further symptom of its resistance to our usual habits of sense making, mixing as it does the visual and the aural, and employing the rarely used term “unthinkingness”: “no, not ‘think’—but breathe, and represent / continually to my own ear the place / of my unthinkingness.” To “represent continually to my own ear” is either a tortured, poetical way of saying “hearing myself,” or, more likely, an attempt to distinguish what is being described from the more recognizable experience of straightforward listening. For the use of “represent” introduces an implication of semiotic arbitrariness—the phrase cannot be understood as an utterance with intrinsic meaning, but rather as a sign of something else. But it also hints at a kind of structural integrity, as though the phrase functions less like speech—sequentially and temporally—than like a thing complete in and of itself, to be represented in the manner one might a car or a plate of food.

The second fact that preempts a more conventional parsing of this passage lies in the way that the subject of the poetic fragment (“Edmund”) is replaced by the speaker of the lines (“E—”): “Yet Edmund was beloved,” “Yet E— is beloved.” As the phrase is echoed in the speaker’s mind, “Edmund” becomes “Eve.” The creeping of the personal into this line indicates at once a projection of the speaker, and a transformation of the line itself. It is not only pincered out of its

original context by Sedgwick's quotation marks, but also changed by the incorporation of the speaker's name—or, at least, the speaker's initial. In this light, the quotation might be understandable as something less like the process of allusion, and as a thing more like one of D. W. Winnicott's "transitional objects"; the line becomes significant to the speaker only insofar as it is a partially external object that is animated by the inspiriting projection of her own presence. As Winnicott notes, a wide range of things might constitute such transitional objects or phenomena: "perhaps a bundle of wool or the corner of a blanket or eiderdown, or a word or tune, or a mannerism," or even "a repertory of songs and tunes." Each instance of animation will be at once partly internal and partly external. Sedgwick's line occupies a similar position: it emerges like the memory of a dream on "Waking in the morning," and it is described not as thought but rather as "represent[ing] / continually to my own ear the place / of my unthinkingness." In the words of James Merrill, to whose work Sedgwick regularly returned, the line becomes a kind of "acoustical chamber," a space where the notes of her own voice and another's are blended, and which is capable of "endow[ing] even the weariest platitudes with resonance and depth."

I'll return to Sedgwick's engagement with these ideas, but before doing so I want to consider two more examples of writers who were especially sensitive to these "acoustical chambers": Edward Lear and Virginia Woolf. In December 1851, Lear wrote to Emily Tennyson, the recently crowned poet laureate's wife, that "[t]here have been but few weeks or days within the last 8 years, that I have not been more or less in the habit of remembering or reading Tennyson's poetry, & the amount of pleasure derived by me from them [*sic*] has been quite beyond reckoning." His enthusiasm for Tennyson's verse did not abate during the remaining thirty-seven years of his life, and as a result of this deep and lasting attachment, Lear conceived a plan to publish a book containing illustrations of particular lines from Tennyson's poems. Each illustration would take, as inspiration, a phrase or short passage and pair it with a landscape scene drawn from Lear's own travels. Some illustrations offered what Lear called "positive" depictions of a

scene described in the lines, where Tennyson had described a specific vista (for example, “a huge crag platform”); others were categorized as “suggestions,” in which the images were prompted by a mood (“vast images in the glittering dawn”). The project was never finished, and, as the scholar Jasmine Jagger recently noted, the fate of this Learical labor of love is “almost impossible to trace,” for not only is the number of individual scenes planned by Lear unknown, but many exist in different sizes and formats. (Gradually working them up from small sketches he termed “eggs,” some progressed to “chrysalises” or larger watercolors, while a few made the final leap to become “butterflies”—large-scale oil landscapes.)

Nonetheless, the collection of snippets, phrases, and passages of Tennyson’s verse, in which Lear felt an intuitive combination of “musical charm, vivid imagination, terse and descriptive power,” is a poignant biography of a reading life—a portrait, or better yet a collage, of what an intimate familiarity with a body of writing might look like. Taken as a whole, Lear’s “Poetical Topographical Tennysoniania” bears witness to the fitful yet lingering quality of our recollection of poems. The “dewy dawn of memory” (a line that provided an occasion for one of the “eggs”) revealed for Lear not poems in their entirety, but rather cast its light unevenly on details and outcrops of a verse landscape. For the painter, what he termed Tennyson’s “genius for the perception of the beautiful in landscape” made itself felt through snatched glimpses and fragmentary recollections. As for Sedgwick in “The Warm Decembers,” these parts, disarticulated from a larger whole, invited a kind of transformational projection. In the former, “Edmund” became “E—,” and then, implicitly, “Eve”; in the latter, Tennyson’s lines are mapped onto panoramas that Lear himself had observed on his travels. The nonsense poet and painter was also drawn to inhabit and alter the much-loved Tennysonian lines through parody. One of the oil “butterflies,” for instance, on which Lear was at work in 1871 took for its inspiration the lines, “To watch the crisping ripples on the beach / And tender curving lines of creamy spray.” By the time Lear wrote to Chichester Fortescue in 1873, however, these lines had been mischievously transformed into something that might

have been lifted from one of Lear's own poems: "To watch the tipsy cripples on the beach / With topsy turvy signs of screamy play." There can be no doubting the "wonderful amount of interest and gratification" Lear derived from this project, stretching, as it did, for forty or so years; this is not mere poking fun. Rather, this kind of play—which can only be the result of profound familiarity and affection, as is the case with much parody—seems to be permitted, even encouraged, by the fact that Lear was dealing with parts of, rather than whole, poems. It is easier, after all, to twist the words of others when they are taken out of context. Terry Eagleton describes the polysemous nature of poems as follows, but while he means "poem" we could readily substitute "line" or "phrase": "Freed from a loveless marriage to a single meaning, [a poem] can play the field, wax promiscuous, gambol outrageously."

It was Tennyson's "power of calling up images. . . distinct and correct" that so captivated Lear, and these images were able to retain their hold on him by virtue of their liberation from the frameworks of narrative and song in which they were originally set. "Tennyson's lines were embedded in Lear's emotional memory," as Jagger notes, but before they became so they first had to slip the leash of their respective poems. It is possible that few of Tennyson's readers in the nineteenth century were as emotionally invested in his work as Lear was, and yet it is not difficult, anecdotally speaking, to adduce similar examples of particularly musical lines detaching themselves from their original settings and lodging in the memories of his readers. Like the "vagrant melodies" borne by the wind in Tennyson's "The Palace of Art," the lines illustrated by Lear floated free of their moorings and, in doing so, made themselves more readily available for recollection and repetition. Lear's relationship with Tennyson, unlike with Franklin Lushington, was not a case of unrequited love. The poet laureate irritated him as a person as much as his poetry thrilled him as a reader; after one visit to the Tennysons' home on the Isle of Wight, Lear peevishly recorded in his diary how "high souls & philosophic writings combined with slovenliness, selfishness, & morbid folly," and doubted whether any woman other than his wife Emily "could

live with [Tennyson] for a month.” Nonetheless, Lear’s Tennysonian project should be seen as a version writ large (and on canvas) of ardent readerly attachment—an attachment, moreover, that was predicated on, and oriented toward, pieces of poems rather than their totality.

Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) makes a strange but compelling bedfellow for Lear’s Tennyson project, featuring centrally as it does a painter as well as a character who, like Lear, cannot stop quoting the Victorian laureate. Mr. Ramsay, we learn, likes to stride around the house loudly quoting passages of English verse. Among his favorites is Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” and at the beginning of chapter six in the first section, his quotation is so extended and insistent that a line from that same poem has become lodged in Mrs. Ramsay’s head:

But what had happened?

Someone had blundered.

Starting from her musing she gave meaning to words which she had held meaningless in her mind for a long stretch of time. “Someone had blundered”—Fixing her short-sighted eyes upon her husband, who was now bearing down upon her, she gazed steadily until his closeness revealed to her (the jingle mated itself in her head) that something had happened, someone had blundered.

Once again, that word “jingle” appears, and once again there is an assertion of a kind of ruminative vapidness: “words which she had held meaningless in her mind for a long stretch of time.” Unlike in the passage from *Less Than Angels*, though, Woolf’s emphasis here lies in a moment at which the previously meaningless line takes on a situational clarity and relevance. This moment thus forms part of the novel’s wider exploration of how apparently quotidian events become retrospectively meaningful or luminous through the alchemizing process of memory. In her meditation on Tennysonian echoes in Woolf’s work, Angela Leighton shows beautifully how these half-lines that catch in the ear or the memory are one of the catalysts of this process—what

she terms “the lyrical undersongs of the literary,” “where the rhythms of another language superimpose voicings from outside.” Nor is this instance an isolated occurrence, for the remembrance of lines of poetry is one of the novel’s minor but recurring motifs; it is as though Woolf is suggesting that such fragments are not merely shored against our lives—washed up on the beach of consciousness like flotsam—but rather constitute the grains of sand themselves, an inextricable part of their texture. It was perhaps the absence of this fine-grained psychic bed that James Joyce lamented when he wrote to Harriet Shaw Weaver in June 1921 that “I have not read a work of literature for several years. My head is full of pebbles and rubbish and broken matches and bits of glass picked up ’most everywhere.”

Consider Mrs. Ramsay’s rumination after the famous dinner scene:

And she waited a little, knitting, wondering, and slowly those words they had said at dinner, “the China rose is all abloom and buzzing with the honey bee,” began washing from side to side of her mind rhythmically, and as they washed, words, like little shaded lights, one red, one blue, one yellow, lit up in the dark of her mind, and seemed leaving their perches up there to fly across and across, or to cry out and to be echoed; so she turned and felt on the table beside her for a book.

*And all the lives we ever lived
And all the lives to be,
Are full of trees and changing leaves,*

she murmured, sticking her needles into the stocking. And she opened the book and began reading here and there at random, and as she did so she felt that she was climbing backwards, upwards, shoving her way up under petals that curved over her, so that she only knew this is white, or this is red. She did not know what the words meant at all.

Steer, hither steer your winged pines, all beaten Mariners

she read and turned the page, swinging herself, zigzagging this way and that, from one line to another as from one branch to

another, from one red and white flower to another, until a little sound roused her—her husband slapping his thighs.

While “her mind was still going up and down, up and down with the poetry,” Mr. Ramsay reads one of Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* novels, leaving him “feeling very vigorous, very forthright.” This vigor contrasts so much with his wife’s readerly disposition that it even causes him to wonder “if she understood what she was reading.” The scene, contrasting as it does femininity and masculinity, poetry and prose, calls our attention to the differences between those terms and the ideas they represent. But to read the scene only in terms of its gender dynamics would be to miss half the point, for this passage also describes something about the nature of reading poetry more generally. The rhythmic wash of words and the swinging “from one line to another as from one branch to another” represent a very different readerly experience from the vigorous thigh slapping induced by Scott’s *The Antiquary*. Although her husband wonders scornfully “if she understood what she was reading,” it is already clear by this point both that she does not “know what the words meant at all,” and that the kind of comprehension imagined by Mr. Ramsay is, in many ways, irrelevant to the experience of his wife’s reading. Mrs. Ramsay turns aside and feels for “a book,” not *the* or *her* book—from which indefinite article we should surmise that what she wants at that moment is any kind of companion to the lines heard at dinner from Charles Isaac Elton’s “Luriana Lurilee.” The beguiling melody of Elton’s poem, also known as “A Garden Song,” prompts her not to search out or recite the poem entire, but rather to turn absentmindedly for a kind of response to the call of those lines. The poem that provides the echo is, appropriately enough, “The Sirens’ Song” by the seventeenth-century poet William Browne.

In “How Should One Read a Book?” Woolf celebrates a similar kind of experience, in which a book or a poem returns to us unbidden after a prolonged absence:

Wait for the dust of reading to settle; for the conflict and the questioning to die down; walk, talk, pull the dead petals from a rose,

or fall asleep. Then suddenly without our willing it, for it is thus that Nature undertakes these transitions, the book will return, but differently. It will float to the top of the mind as a whole. And the book as a whole is different from the book received currently in separate phrases. Details now fit themselves into their places. We see the shape from start to finish; it is a barn, a pigsty, or a cathedral.

It is not a whole poem or book that floats to the top of Mrs. Ramsay's mind, however, but rather unmoored lines and phrases; in contrast to the instinctive synthesis of parts described in "How Should One Read a Book?," both Sedgwick and Mrs. Ramsay discover in these moments what Winnicott would have called an experience of creative, unintegrated being. Woolf may well be admitting as much. While the critic and author of *The Common Reader* envisions recollection as a kind of tessellating coherence of parts, at least one of her fictional readers instead finds that poems resolve into separate, constituent pieces.

In such moments of reverie have many readers found themselves, abstractedly turning round a rhythmic line or two, but such moments are by and large inimical to the kind of attention critics of literature are supposed to bring to a text. Sedgwick, I think, helps us see not only that there might be space for the former kind of reading in the latter, but also that recognizing this fact might help us come to a better understanding of poetry's interest for queer readers. As I have said before, one of Sedgwick's enduring aims as a critic was to explore things that everyone feels, but that everybody feels differently: sexual desire; shame; the attraction of the first-person singular. Motivated by the "astonishing" paucity of our conceptual tools for dealing with people's differences from one other, one of the most important aspects of this work centered on the experience of reading; "one characteristic of the readings" in *Epistemology of the Closet*, she explains, "is to attend to performative aspects of texts, and to what are often blandly called their 'reader relations,' as sites of definitional creation, violence, and rupture in relation to particular readers, particular institutional circumstances."

This idea is developed further at the beginning of *Tendencies*. For all that volume's evident engagement with the contemporary politics of the AIDS crisis—it features autobiographical reflections on Sedgwick's participation in the various forms of activism mobilized in response to it, as well as eulogies for Michael Lynch and Craig Owens—the book is primarily about what she termed “perverse reading,” transformative readerly attachments to particular works. More specifically, it is about the relation of this attachment to the political landscape where queer readers find themselves:

I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love.

This intense attachment, for Sedgwick, most often took the form of “a visceral near-identification with the writing I cared for, at the level of sentence structure, metrical pattern, rhyme”—“a kind of formalism,” in her words. We will return later to the fact that this passage posits as synonymous the ideas of “near-identification” and (in a later sentence) “appropriation”; for now, we should note the idea that queer readers might be particularly invested in “sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other.” Such moments might be apparent, for example, in instances of textual ambiguity, or in the depiction of exorbitant or unusual desires (though readers of Sedgwick will be familiar with the much wider range of possibilities proposed in her various essays). It is, she suggests, for herself and others, a kind of survival tactic to “invest those sites with fascination and love.” In other words, for readers who are unlikely to find a compelling or full representation of their own social and emotional experience in the literature to which they may nonetheless find themselves deeply attached, investing in moments of confusion, rupture, or misalignment in those texts might constitute a necessary kind of reading. (Lauren Berlant has described

this strategy as “misrecognition.”) This queer or, in Sedgwick’s terms, “ardent” reading involves two things germane to this essay: first, a willingness to let particular passages, lines, or phrases in a given work fail to “line up” with that work’s broader meanings; and secondly, a willingness to take seriously forms of intense, or indeed excessive, attachment to those sites of dissident meaning. These ideas parse admirably the examples of “ardent reading” given so far in this essay: Catherine’s mantric repetition; Lear’s Tennysonianism; Mrs. Ramsay’s siren song. In each of these examples, there is both a free-floating quality to the meaningfulness of the recalled lines, and evidence of an intense affective aspect to that recollection. The remembered passages are at once a response to the world and a transformative instrument within it—they are suggested by particular circumstances but also shape the rememberer’s perception of that situation.

We might say that Sedgwick’s very definition of *queer* places “partiality” at its heart: not only in the sense of desiring, but also in an adjacent sense of partialness, as well as in the antithesis of impartial. We can trace this fascination with parts and partiality across the three decades of her career: how, for instance, particular aspects of an individual might become peculiarly charged by the experience of shame or in camp attachments to “fragmentary, marginal, waste, lost, or left-over cultural products.” Indeed, the intensity of those attachments, those partialities and tendencies, are something like intellectual compass points for Sedgwick’s astonishingly wide-ranging set of interests; wherever someone or something seems peculiarly “over”-invested, her critical ears prick up. The “richest junctures” of personal experience, Sedgwick proposes, might be those points where “meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other,” where not “*everything means the same thing*”; where the “strange paths” of “auto-” and “allo-identification” are driven by idiomatic engines of intensely personal desire. The following list, from the posthumously published *The Weather in Proust*, is a suggestive though not exhaustive catalogue of what might constitute such moments: “startling outcrops of overinvested erudition; the prodigal production of alternative histories; . . . the richness of affective variety; and the irrepressible, cathartic

fascination with ventriloquist forms of relation.” There is good reason to see the kind of reading considered above as cognate to these forms of attachment.

Such moments are also related to Sedgwick’s description of readerly engagement in the way that the lines of verse in the texts by Pym, Lear, and Woolf become *detached* from the body of the poem from which they are drawn. In those moments and in ones like them, the fragments of a poem become temporarily self-sufficient, an object or a thing in their own right. In this respect, we can draw a further link between these fragments and Sedgwick’s queer reading, for her works demonstrate an enduring interest in the magical properties of the “objects” of object-relations psychoanalysis—or what we would perhaps more simply call “things.” This interest is evident in her influential essay on James, shame, and queer performativity. In her wide-ranging discussion of shame as a switchboard between public and private affect, Sedgwick describes the feeling itself as “a kind of free radical,” an affect that “attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of—of almost anything: a zone of the body, a sensory system, a prohibited or indeed a permitted behavior, another affect such as anger or arousal, a named identity, a script for interpreting other people’s behavior toward oneself.” For Sedgwick, the “things” to which feelings of shame might glue themselves are not simply physical objects, but rather are drawn into the psychic orbit of the individual from different ontological spheres. The lines of verse discussed so far in this essay—like those of Tennyson that rang persistently in Lear’s ears—seem themselves to have detached from their original poems to hum or loop in our consciousnesses, and they bear an analogous relation to the totems or favors of shame described by Sedgwick above (although, of course, with different attendant affects). Parts of poems serve as little lightning rods for thought and feeling by virtue of their detachment from their respective totalities.

This preoccupation is evident also in her essay on the Greek poet C. P. Cavafy, which explores the “queer little gods” of his (and Proust’s) domestic spaces. The argument dwells on the “promiscuous . . . sense of divinity” shared by these two writers and considers the

significance of the panoply of minor deities and other “ontologically exceptional” beings in their work. Originally given as a keynote lecture, the opening paragraphs of the essay recount the circumstances of its genesis. Her “sense of these odd beings in Proust, both the initial sense of their qualities but also the peculiar feelings of tenderness and intimacy with which I had always seemed to regard them,” she suggests, “flowed directly from a wellspring of stored-up and half-remembered encounters with the lyrics of Cavafy.” “Stored-up” and “half-remembered” well describe the encounters with poems discussed already in this essay, and these remembrances, in a way, form both the occasion and the substance of Sedgwick’s essay. She goes on to describe herself “grappling to remember a particular, indicative poem” (“The Footsteps”), which she quotes in full, before asking: “What kind of poem was this to find lodged in one’s mind under such circumstances?” This is a good question, but of course, as Sedgwick herself subsequently admits, it was not a poem that was lodged in her mind, but rather lines from one, or an impression of it—the poem itself had to be “dislodged and decondensed from memory” as part of the writing of the essay.

The “queer little gods” of the title form, for Proust, “a network of versions of nonomnipotent power,” figures that allow him to imagine the “middle ranges of agency” between, on the one hand, omnipotence and, on the other, annihilation. But they are also allegorical of the various kinds of presiding genii of our imaginative—and more especially our reading—lives. Though Sedgwick never specifically says so, Cavafy’s dreamy lyrics become themselves something of a tutelary spirit in her reading of Proust, a dimly understood but omnipresent reminder of her own preoccupations and attachments. Edward Lear professed to have felt an uncanny prescience in Tennyson’s descriptions of landscapes the poet had never seen: “his descriptions of certain spots are as positively true as if drawn from the places themselves, and. . . his words have the power of calling up images as distinct and correct as if they were written from those images, instead of giving rise to them.” In a similar way, Sedgwick’s recollections of Cavafy’s lyrics illuminate not the poems themselves but rather the situations

in which they were recalled to memory. In part due to this similarity, her description of the ontological character of the “queer little gods” might serve equally well for the poetic fragments explored by this essay: they are “somewhat like that of the internal object in Melanie Klein: in the description of one Kleinian, ‘a part of the world lodged within, which both becomes identity and yet differs from what the individual feels to be himself.’” Or, put another way, “We both contain and also *are* these soul-genies—they rattle around inside us but also constitute us.” This rattling has more than an echo of the “buzzing” of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s lines in the passage from *Less Than Angels* quoted above; in both cases, the Kleinian object is felt to be at once alien and incorporate to the reader’s body. This, perhaps, is one of the things meant by Sedgwick when she describes ardent reading as involving simultaneously “a visceral near-identification” with a text and an “appropriation” of it.

To my mind, this is one of the fundamental teachings of Sedgwick’s exploration of the term *queer* (and I use the word “teachings” advisedly, given her fascination with the vagaries and variety of pedagogical relationships). All it might take to identify as queer, she mused provocatively in *Tendencies*, is the impulse to identify experimentally, promiscuously:

“Queer” seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation. A hypothesis worth making explicit: there are important senses in which “queer” can signify *only when attached to the first person*. One possible corollary: that what it takes—all it takes—to make the description “queer” a true one is the impulsion *to* use it in the first person.

A condition of this freedom, I think, is a sort of generosity, both to oneself and to others: a license to engage in exploratory kinds of identification and desire not necessarily sanctioned by custom or convention, and a willingness to see others do the same. Sedgwick’s generosity, we might note, was (and is) a quality for which she is often praised. But an understanding of the queerness of her generosity lies not in

an homogeneous giving to all and sundry, nor in a neoliberal ideal of tolerance, but rather in a recognition of the unevenness of one's relationships—in the fact that what we can want, expect, or request of one person, or what we can offer, withhold, or entertain, will vary from relationship to relationship. This kind of generosity, contrary perhaps to the ideals of liberal philanthropy, is not disinterested but rather necessarily and joyously partial. In shifting attention, then, to the differential nature of our poetic memories, we capture something of this peculiar kind of generosity in our own reading experience. Acknowledging that some lines stick with us more than others—and for apparently indiscernible reasons—recognizes the differential nature of memory and desire. Most important, it bids those lines welcome in such a way as to acknowledge their often unreasoned and unreasonable appeal, without specifying in advance the nature, quality, or intensity of the attachment.

Melanie Klein, as might already be apparent, was influential in shaping Sedgwick's sense of how our attachments to literary texts influence our relations with other people. Klein's works tells us that, from infancy, our feelings toward objects are fluid and transferable to and from the people around us. This process "by which we displace love from the first people we cherish to other people is extended from earliest childhood onward to things," and these early forms of "phantasy-building" or "imaginative thinking" form the basis of our capacity to relate to, and identify with, other people. The nature of our attachments to people is shaped by our attachments to things. What Sedgwick elsewhere refers to as the "un-anxious mobility of desire" exhibited by the infant in Klein's account is, in a sense, what the kind of reading discussed in this essay represents. To these verse fragments—half-remembered poems and remembered half-poems—we can attach feelings, identifications, and desires that might not be sustained by the poem in its entirety. Mrs. Ramsay's rhythmic wash of words, for instance, is predicated on a sense of perpetual motion; this is unrealizable in a full poem, which eventually, of course, must end. The characteristics of verse that allow it simultaneously to be memorable ("aspirant," as Paterson puts it) and dis-articulable enable a kind

of splitting—of poems and of readers’ responses to them—such that the poems become repositories of strong and often inchoate affective attachments. The act of recollecting and reciting fragments of poems can sustain a weight of feeling disproportionate to the significance of the line in its original context, and as such we could say that these processes allow poems to add up to more than the sum of their parts.

I’m grateful to a colleague for their observation that Nietzsche described something very similar to this process in *The Gay Science*, and, just as I intimated at this essay’s outset, Nietzsche too saw this phenomenon as indicative not merely of our habits of reading or the nature of memory, but also of the way we learn to love.

One must learn to love.—This is what happens to us in music: first one has to learn to hear a figure and melody at all, to detect and distinguish it, to isolate it and delimit it as a separate life. Then it requires some exertion and good will to tolerate it in spite of its strangeness, to be patient with its appearance and expression, and kind-hearted about its oddity. Finally there comes a moment when we are used to it, when we sense that we should miss it if it were missing; and now it continues to compel and enchant us relentlessly until we have become its humble and enraptured lovers who desire nothing better from the world than it and only it.

The “life” of these figures and melodies is contingent on their “separateness” as well as on their “oddity,” and the ways we are compelled and enchanted by them hinge, as Nietzsche discerned, on their temporary estrangement from a larger whole. We bid them welcome, become attached to them with both humility and—sometimes—surprise. The “unanxious mobility” described above might be thought of as a willingness to embrace both partialness and partiality—and, what is more, might in part be learnable from the practices of ardent reading. Sedgwick’s critical and poetic oeuvre provides us with a language—both a grammar and a vocabulary—for expressing these aspects of our reading lives, but it seems appropriate to end with one of my own earworms that suddenly seems relevant.

Beloved of John, I get it all wrong
I read you for some kind of poem
Covered in lines, the fossils I find
Have they no life of their own?

Though, like verse, we all have ragged edges, mistaking a person for a poem presupposes a completeness and coherence that we are unlikely to find in that individual. It is, rather, “lines” that might constitute the more fitting analogy, particularly those that are “fossilized”: buried, piecemeal, transformed but recognizably themselves.