The “Onanism of Poetry”: Walt Whitman, Rob Halpern, and the Deconstruction of Masturbation

But what more base, more noxious to the body
Than by the power of fancy to excite,
Such lewd ideas of an absent object,
As rouse the organs formed for noble end
To rush into th’embraces of a phantom,
And so do the deed of personal enjoyment.

William Farrer, *A short treatise on onanism* (1767)

Th’ expense of spirit in a waste of shame

William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 129”

[H]is is the Onanism of Poetry[…] Such like is the trash they praise, and such will be the end of the outstretched poesy of this miserable Self-polluter of the human mind.

Lord Byron on John Keats

A Poetics of Onanism
Lyric is onanistic: masturbation is the latent content of lyric poetry.\(^1\) Both lyric and masturbation are frequently imaginative flights devoted to absent lovers or forbidden others; both are withdrawn seductions; both are infused by the commonsensical notion that this action might better be replaced by having the loved one in hand, but might more realistically (sometimes) be a preference pretending to be a lack; both are concerned with the dynamics between imagination, representation and reality; both are arts of pleasure; both are defined against a history of queerness; both are forms of address.

Onanism can be interpreted within the spectrum of queer theory as a paradigm of non-reproductive sexual activity, or because the discursive development of homosexuality shares historical ties with that of onanism, since both raise the ire of theological, pedagogical and social opinion and their institutions; that is, both homosexuality and onanism are feared as threats to the reproduction of a productive moral and financial economy. Though onanist theory as sketched here therefore takes its bearings from queer theory and the interpretation of a history of male homosexuality, since these are the fields in which the repression of illicit desire has been studied, its practice though queer (as in non-reproductive) is not confined to any particular gendered identification of desire (though desires are of course complicit in issues of gender) but is instead best understood as the structure of a failed or suspended address: longing, fantasy, guilt as impediment or stimulus, self-pleasure, the temporality of (temporary) satiation. Onanism’s ubiquity therefore may account for the shadow of utopianism to which the following essay alludes, even if the history of futile resistance to its charms (and its being charmed) locate onanism as a crisis for the continuation of social relations, and thus a practice inspiring repression.

Some brief notes on prevalent terminology, although masturbation has been known, of course, largely euphemistically, under a thousand sobriquets. The term
masturbator appears for the first time, according to Laqueur, between 84 or 85 and 103 C.E.² It supposedly derives from manus (hand) and stuprare (to defile), though there’s little etymological certainty on this count. The word “masturbatus” occurs in the 41st epigram of Book 9 of Martial, beginning “Pontice, quod numquam futuis, sed paetice laeva / uteris et veneri servit amica manus”, a poem mocking Pontice for wasting his semen (“your left hand as mistress”).³ The prohibition on onanism includes its namesake, the story of Onan in Genesis, by whom male seed is spilt.⁴ The story of Pan, too, is worth recounting, who, despairing at his sexual frustration for the nymph Echo, was taught to masturbate by his father Hermes; Pan subsequently taught the shepherds such simple relief (therefore connecting masturbation to the solitary utopianism of the pastoral). Seed spilt on the ground needn’t be so troublingly barren in mythological terms with the pathenos born of only one seed, a “masculine dream of the Greeks – a child outside the limits of procreative activity”.⁵ Onanism has been aligned with male homosexuality because, in one argument, the real sin of both is to fail to provide for the possibility of procreation; masturbation is a waste of valuable seminal fluids. Any expulsion of this precious substance where it might not create new offspring, whether onto the ground, or inside another man, is damned. The histories of prohibitions against homosexuality and onanism are not, however, coterminous, and the cultural push against masturbation includes a frenzied period not accidentally, according to Thomas Laqueur, concurrent with the Enlightenment.⁶ The discursive repression of onanism may, in fact, have worked as a prototype for the congelation of an otherwise diffuse fear of queer-oriented sexualities into the juridical, pedagogical and medical symptomatology that was “homosexuality”. One relevant contradiction that recurs in the economy of masturbation, and to which I will return, is between masturbation as the failure of fecundity, spent energy without the returns of an investment, and a generative scattering onto the land itself, dispersing the male seed across the typically female gendered earth.
Rob Halpern’s work, culminating in the remarkable *Music for Porn*, can be seen in a tradition of gay writing; in what follows, however, I want to shift the debate from queer theory to an onanist theory that might prove revelatory of some of the contradictions of modernity. Halpern’s collection takes Baudelaire’s Paris as one of its inspirations; where Baudelaire charged his poetry with pornography etymologically understood, that is writing about prostitution, Halpern’s lyric project takes pornography in its contemporary form, after the age of its technological reproducibility.7 “Music for porn” is, I argue, a historicized transliteration of an ahistorical definition of lyric as the “music of love”: music for porn is Halpern’s definition of lyric in our age of disenchantment.

In his article “Realism and Utopia”, Halpern cites an interview by Michel Foucault:

[One] thing to distrust is the tendency to relate the question of homosexuality to the problem of “Who am I?” and “What is the secret of my desire?” Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, “What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied and modulated?8

The nostalgia for gay porn that inspires much of *Music for Porn* is used as a discourse through which to repeat Foucault’s question; we might ask, furthermore, and against its pejorative use (and its alleged solipsism), “What relations, through masturbation, can be established, invented, multiplied and modulated?” Given the incredible wealth of material in queer theory, and a burgeoning academic discipline dedicated to pornography, as well as sociologies of sex more generally, it is perhaps surprising that so little has been written about what might well be the most common sexual practice of all, though academia is beginning to catch up.9
This essay reads the most important precursor to Halpern’s onanistic poetics, Walt Whitman, whose poetry of onanistic acknowledgement Halpern deconstructs. The theoretical reverberations of these readings show how deconstruction depends upon a theory of onanism, how queer theory might incorporate a theory of onanism outside the discursive history of homosexuality, and how a utopian longing held in the practice of masturbation can be seen to develop historically with its commodification in pornography. Whitman’s utopian poetics of onanism and Halpern’s deconstructed poetics of pornography suggest a poetics of masturbation in which modes of enunciation and failed address display the contradiction of alienation between intimacy and presence.

“I dote on myself”: Whitman the Onanist

Laqueur’s ground-breaking *Solitary Sex* understands the proliferation of anti-onanism as a condition of the European Enlightenment, but my argument begins instead with masturbation’s prohibition during the adolescence of the United States of America, and the effect of this prohibition on the exuberant poetry of Whitman. Whitman’s influence can be found throughout *Music for Porn*, including directly as a source text *Walt Whitman’s Civil War*, Walter Lowenfels’ compilation of poems, letters and other ephemera related to Whitman’s work as a “poet nurse” tending to the civil war wounded, and to his “dear love of comrades”. Where Whitman’s affection for the war wounded involves contact, tending, Halpern’s care is increasingly alienated; wars are fought putatively on his behalf in Iraq and Afghanistan, and such complicity in distant harm is modelled by *Music for Porn*’s allegorical starring role, a soldier who assumes the burden of masturbatory fantasy.

Scholars have not failed to notice Whitman’s tendency toward onanism. Robert Martin’s canonical *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* prepares the ground by
describing Whitman’s poetry as “frequently autotelic”, surmising that the body of the poet himself becomes a repository of self-pleasure and passion. Such “anonymous sexuality”, against the nineteenth-century predilection to conserve energy, requires instead “a radical redistribution of that energy through the release of sperm”. Cruising is one possible description of Whitman’s hyperbolically generous poetry, but though such encounters could take place in “almost any steam bath of a modern large city” they can actually take place anywhere with a bit of privacy, since they are the combination of recollection and fantasy of masturbatory longing. The tactility of these poems is a charm in which the “unseen hand also pass’d all over their bodies” of “Song of Myself” belongs to both fantasist-poet and fantasist-reader. Tom Yingling locates the utopian imaginary as fundamental to the homosexual experience, since “homosexuality has always had to imagine the world other than as it is”. Such utopianism is an astute interpretation of Whitman’s desire and its aspirations, but if the desire that comes to be labelled homosexual provides the motivation, onanism provides the immediate practice in lieu of such a utopia, and onanism rouses the most public discourse of sexual prohibition, if not the one with the most severe of consequences. We can overturn the hierarchy: the utopia of burgeoning homosexuality as deferred consummation of desire has as its praxis the imaginative play of onanism, but might the dream of homosexual utopia not be predicated on masturbation’s inherent, and contradictory, utopianism, the crisis caused by its own tendency toward satisfaction that models fulfilment even as its energised by the palpable lack of that which it desires? George Kateb describes the affective model for Whitman to be that of “sexual cruising – momentary intensities, which are a sort of connectedness that is in the same family of sentiments as sympathy”. Is not this “democratic” cruising a masturbatory fantasy in itself? Peter Coviello’s luminous “Intimate Nationality” chimes with this cruising Whitman, asking, “Is it possible to be intimate with someone you haven’t met?” and citing Whitman’s concept of
“adhesiveness”.

Perhaps Coviello does not go quite far enough in naming the contradiction inherent in this anonymous yet intimate attachment to be the apostrophic address of masturbation, the intimacy dependent on the “mutual anonymity of author and reader”. This is the “promise of an alternative form of recognition”.

Most rigorously tied to the topic of onanism, Michael Moon’s terrific *Disseminating Whitman* attends to Whitman’s comparison of the (male) body with that of the socio-political body of the U.S. by focussing on the “constitution”, a term that “cuts across a whole range of antebellum discourses about the proper nature of political sovereignty as well as the proper nature (“health”) of the body”. The conflation belongs to Thomas Paine in his comparison of the potential of the U.S. in 1776 to that of an adolescent body: “Youth is the seedtime of good habits, as well as in nations as in individuals”, with Moon commenting: “What is merely analogical in Paine became reified in the nineteenth century into a national preoccupation with the “waste” of America’s “seed,” meaning both the country’s promise and potential and the “reproductive secretions” of its male citizens”. America’s productive constitution had to be defended from the self-abuse committed in adolescence. Moon’s argument is that Whitman’s own adolescence and the height of anti-onanist discourse in the US were historically contiguous, and therefore makes reference to the plethora of anti-onanist publications of the 1830s, including the first American edition of Tissot’s *Onania: A Discourse on Onanism* (1832).

If we follow Foucault in understanding how medical, legal, theological and pedagogical discourses create rather than simply describe the identity “homosexual” then we have to take into account the particular force of the prohibition on onanism in the time of Whitman in order to identify the pressures placed upon his expression, and to allow us to recognise the emancipatory ethos Whitman derived amidst and against such a repressive discourse. Though the terms are hardly mutually exclusive, is Whitman better
understood as “onanist” rather than “homosexual”? The dating of the two terms suggests onanist is more judicious, though the severity of responses to the reality of practicing such desires was markedly different.

How does the anti-onanist discourse pervade Whitman’s work? One of Whitman’s tropes is to make of the offering of the book to the reader a gift carrying libidinal desire, and in doing so he frequently includes masturbatory fantasies. The “I” of “Song of Myself” (self-evidently an onanistic title) offers to “worship” its own seed-spilling, confusing as it does so the relation of “I” to “you”:

If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it, Translucent mould of me it shall be you! […] You my rich blood! your milky stream pale strippings of my life! […] I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious

Or from a later passage, section 28:

I talk wildly, I have lost my wits, I and nobody else am the greatest traitor, I went myself first to the headland, my own hands carried me there.

For Whitman, hearing the voice of a soprano “convulses me like the climax of my love-grip”. Elsewhere we find a description of the “pulse pounding” through the veins of the hand, both the penis (the “young man”) in its palm, and as a book with its comparable quality of virile rhythm (music): “The young man that wakes deep at night,
the hot hand seeking to repress what would master him, [...] The pulse pounding through palms and trembling encircling fingers, the young man all color’d, red, ashamed, angry”. The penis may, however, be less potently angry; in “Bunch Poem” / “Spontaneous Me” we read: “[t]his poem drooping shy and unseen that I always carry, and that all men carry”. The fantasy of touching another body is extended through the medium of the book: “Who touches this [book] touches a man.” Aspiz interprets the masturbatory energies of “Spontaneous Me” (“Enfans d’Adam 5”), quoted below; the poem “implies that the orgasm, whether actual or imagined, is the poem and that the poem is the orgasm”, concluding that for “in Whitman’s spermatic trope, the poet, his phallus, and his song merge into one harmonious utterance.”

Beautiful dripping fragments, the negligent list of one after another as I happen to call them to me or think of them,

The real poems, (what we call poems being merely pictures,)

The poems of the privacy of the night, and of men like me,

This poem, drooping shy and unseen, that I always carry, and that all men carry,

(Know once for all, avow’d on purpose, wherever are men like me, are our lusty, lurking, masculine, poems,[...]

The greed that eats me day and night with hungry gnaw, till I saturate what shall produce boys to fill my place when I am through,

The wholesome relief, repose, content,

And this bunch pluck’d at random from myself,

It has done its work – I toss it carelessly to fall where it may.

The scattering of the poems provide post-ejaculatory “relief, repose, content”. Whitman allows these poems/ejaculate to fall to the ground in an echo of the story of Onan, and
in a scattering I later align to Petrarch’s *Rime Sparse*. In *Walt Whitman’s Civil War* we find another echo: “My little books were beginnings – they were the ground into which I dropped the seed”.[^30] The material substrate of ground, analogous to the material of the book, becomes the receptacle for the supposedly wasted seed, proving queerly fecund, sprouting poems. Whitman contests his contemporaries’ fears of a wasteful economy: “Parting tracked by arriving, perpetual payment of perpetual loan, / Rich showering rain, and recompense richer afterward.”[^31] For Andrew Lawson these “urges and convulsions have an outcome that links national identity, poetic creation, and commercial success.”[^32]

Whitman’s dream appears to be of a limitless and excessive potency, the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling overwhelming the decorum of the conventional poetic line:

> Give me exhaustless, make me a fountain,
> That I exhale love from me wherever I go like a moist perennial dew,
> For the ashes of all dead soldiers South or North.[^33]

Such excessive generosity is onanistic seed to be spilt on the territory of the civil war dead. Is this seed to be generative of new life, in defiance of Onan’s failure to procreate? Or is this seed in some way honorific, a sacrifice metonymically echoing the tragically neutered sexuality of the soldiers? For whom does Whitman’s poetry masturbate, and why?

Whitman is not a lyric love poet in its traditional sense, that is a seductive presence (even if as Petrarchan failure), but rather by understanding the “social love” available to masturbation; masturbation, without consent, requires no rhetoric of seduction, only the ambivalent generosity of enunciation and the declaration of affection. In *Music for Porn* the recognition of Whitman’s implicit deconstruction of absence in presence as the metaphysics of masturbation, meets its reification in the

[^30]: 30
[^31]: 31
[^32]: 32
[^33]: 33
commodification of masturbation in pornography. The distribution of sentimental affection, and the utopian economy of Whitman’s sexual generosity are combined in masturbatory fantasy, not so much toward the “constitution” of the United States as the constitution’s other in neo-imperial aggression, capital’s out-sourcing of labour and alienation. What political song is there to be sung for distant harm, for the wars of neo-colonialism fought in Afghanistan and Iraq?\textsuperscript{34} In Halpern’s words:

A bleeding guy in uniform, fallen guarantor of America’s future: what feelings does this body conduct, and how might they be organized differently, if only to arouse Whitman’s homoerotic affections otherwise, to pervert them from their militarized ends the police, being the future of this democracy?\textsuperscript{35}

How to “pervert” what are essentially the perverted affections of Whitman, that is perversion as affections that fail to be used for acts of procreation, but can be used to inspire the proliferation of violent sentiments? We can find evidence of Whitman’s proclivities for martial music in “To a Certain Civilian”:

The drum-corps’ rattle is ever to me sweet music, I love well the martial dirge,

With slow wail and convulsive throb leading the officer’s funeral\textsuperscript{36}

Where Whitman can “love well” this “sweet music” we might hear it as pornographic, the accompaniment of “convulsive” aesthetics to an economic transaction. The thesis of Moon is that Whitman “wishes to disseminate affectionate presence from one to the other, fervently and directly”, quoting an astonishing note of Whitman’s about the 1876 publication of \textit{Leaves of Grass}: Whitman declared his wish for the work, “to arouse and set flowing in men’s and women’s hearts, young and old, endless streams of living, pulsating
love and friendship, directly from them to myself, now and ever”. His enunciations of affections for the multitude are his offering, but his poetry seeks in reply the masturbatory energies of his readership. The aesthetics of Whitman’s desire, then, are arguably pornographic; *Leaves of Grass* seeks not merely to *represent* its affective charge but to be directly of it, to demand a correlative action from its audience.

If Whitman disseminates sentiment in a capacious generosity of what Allen Grossman labels “acknowledgement”, we need to ponder the kinds of affect, and of affections, in Halpern’s poetry, and wonder how the spontaneity of Whitman’s project meets the reification of intimacy in sexual commodification. In “Music for Porn” Halpern quotes Whitman:

> “Affections shall solve the problem of freedom yet.” To organize prosodically an experience of the war, Whitman links uncoded affects, say, a certain unsingable tenderness for a dead soldier’s body — “I bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white [sic] face in the coffin” — to over-coded attachments *love of nation, fervor for democracy* whereby our desire to be affected *this need to feel something that feels real* gets contracted to a nation whose intelligibility those same feelings have the potential to disrupt and undo.

The passage opens with a quotation from “Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice.” We can hear its ambivalence, the charge that affections are crucial to the pursuit of liberty, but also that the rousing of sentiments can motivate a fascistic withdrawal of such freedom. The “unsingable tenderness”, the love that dare not speak its name, remains, crucially, “uncoded”; its dispersal is dependent on non-identity thinking. We don’t want, here, to endorse a “homosexual” Whitman (let alone the necrophiliac Whitman), but instead to suspend such encodings, to leave such
affection outside of language, where the overdetermination of affection leads to forms of patriotism that justify acts of empire. Halpern seeks to defer the codification, to maintain “weak links” where stronger links, stronger codes, too easily become fascistic.  

Feelings become socially useful before they can be improperly felt. Fear, shame, lust, tenderness, rage, sorrow: these affects are public and historical, the raw material of social emotion before it hardens in foreclosed identities, voices and values capable of perverting the violence they otherwise arouse and lubricate. But when perceived as private, intimate, and personal, these same affects quietly serve my grotesque war economy.  

Halpern’s task is to maintain “improper” feeling, feeling not bound by the efficacy expected of social relations, and outside of the logic of ownership (of property). He seeks to keep improper feelings open, to prevent foreclosure, and so throughout Music for Porn includes an allegorical figure of the boundary, a soldier, sometimes living, sometimes wounded, sometimes dead, and this figure is consistently a figure for masturbatory fantasy: “my cock hardens in a soldier’s wound”; “I can’t fantasize about hot sex with soldiers the way I used to, and this is taking a toll on my writing”, or from “Love Song (To My Fallen Soldier)”: “This is the story of how my love goes bad in the body of a soldier”. These are improper feelings, profligate feelings using (but set against) the use value of the soldier.

The Pornographic Turn
One way to comprehend the major gesture of *Music for Porn* is as follows: sociability itself has been reified as labour. In response Halpern invokes a deeply ambivalent subject, the reification of sociability in its most heightened, arguably most capitalistic, yet also most potentially intimate form, one which Halpern argues is also ambivalently utopian: pornography. Lyric, the genre that carries its own music, and the love lyric in particular, is tied as masturbatory longing to the reification of the heightened affect of sex. Desire, the desire of the poem, can therefore be alienated from the supposed, but typically unreal, desire of the performance of desire in pornography. Where the generic love poem seeks, or claims to seek, a response of equitable love from the object of its affections, and might fail, the contemporary lyric of Halpern resides in onanistic desire, understanding the projection of desire as a commodified transaction, whilst maintaining some hope for a residual utopianism made possible by the impropriety of desire.

*Music For Porn* began its long gestation during the composition of *Rumored Place*. The penultimate, and perhaps post-ejaculatory, section of *Music for Porn* is entitled “Whither Porn?, or The Soldier as Allegory”. Written in prose, it is something of an explanation of the origins of the work we’ve just read. It describes dissatisfaction with *Rumored Place*’s “unresolved” nature. *Rumored Place* itself ends with an extended “blank” or “bar”, a “placeholder for all we can’t perceive haunting all we can”, and a piece of punctuation which likely returns in the “Legend” that opens *Weak Link*. Halpern continues: “*Music for Porn* emerged rather feebly in that blank as my writing began to seek the shape of what could not be felt there, the content of that form like the plenitude of a void”. That “feebly” is self-deprecation, but also the prioritisation of weakened (queer) affects. Halpern’s writing constantly imagines the seductions of physical presence, and the physical residue of writing; he seeks to “grasp what one has written”. The irrecoverable nature of the work reconstitutes itself in the engorged fantasy of flesh; his is an onanistic libidinal yearning, imagining physical presence until it is fulfilled in fantasy. *Music for Porn*
resolves its utopian aspirations into an obstinate figure of ambivalence, the soldier, over whom (and into whom) libidinal energies run rampant. The present for Halpern is the site of a particular kind of void: it incorporates the imaginative exploitation of a sexual fantasy, which involves the expression of the past of the masturbating subject (the reason a particular figure of lust is chosen), and the aspirant longing of the future (actually having that allegorical figure), but knows, too, that there can be no easy shift from longing through imagining to having, that masturbation is a particular kind of longing, expecting itself to be aspirant, but fundamentally estranged if ever approached in reality. The absence of the fantasy to the presence of the fantasist insists on the absence of the fantasist from the reality of the fantasy. In a sense the figure of the fantasy is a return of the repressed of modern and contemporary poetics, a reification into hardened physical form of all the fetishized values of the poetics of the open form, dedication to process and procedure, to polyvalence and trenchant ambiguity: Halpern wants to harden the open form and be fucked by it. This kind of imaginative investment is clearly fetishistic; its semiotics are felt to be tactile (even if tactility is erotically withheld) rather than merely communicative, and I’ll argue Halpern’s development of a poetics of pornography helps draw out the fetishistic poetics of Derridean deconstruction.

Whitman’s “corporeal utopian” fantasy is savaged by witnessing the intensity of human suffering of the war. Fealty to the Union, and its allegorical other, the constitution of the body, suffers. If Whitman’s sentiment, his feeling, is of a generous sympathy formed by some kind of libidinal energy, then Halpern’s feeling is an alienated version; he fetishizes the absences and the wounds of the Whitmanian soldier, making the part-objects of the otherwise useful soldier’s body the object of affection, rather than the fantasy of the whole soldier from whom the damage is drawn. This is a pornographic inversion, the replacement of a “natural” affection for intimacy (suffering) with the perverted and fetishistic desire for the damage and the
commodification of suffering in the war economy. The utopian project to sing the (homoerotic) body finds manifested not ephebian beauty but the part-objects of war; the damage of war is transformed by paraphilia, the libidinal attachment to objects inappropriate to a normative idea of the human body, or a passion for part objects in lieu of the normative idea of the coherent (constituted) body. Whitman asks whether political Union is worth the cost of the violent dispersal of so many. Halpern’s project seeks to remake the erotics of the wounded, making the “stump” or its prosthetic the fetishized dildo for acts of penetration because his question is not one of America growing up from its onanistic adolescence, but of America in its waning economic glory, its increasing impotence and fear of senescence denied by imperial rage. Halpern writes: “Being a belated effect of the war, my impotence opens like a void, filling this exquisite vacancy with nothing but itself.” Penetrating the wounds of the soldier, and being penetrated by the residues of war in turn, is as close to the “logic of presence” of Whitman that Halpern can reach; and even this attempt to feel in the present is played out in masturbatory fantasy.

Halpern explores a narcissistic teleology of homosexuality:

Each syllable strung like a bead on a rosary, inserted and teasingly tugged, one at a time, out of the hole of my ass. Tickle me here with yr tongue and watch me writhe, the pleasure is excruciating. Like any obsession with what appears self-identical, this sentence binds me in thrall to conspiring forces. Being made of iron and linen, asphalt and glass, my imagination dissembles a soldier’s fat, and I get hard just thinking about his hair, completing the circuit of my autopoiesis. Still, there’s transport in the body’s vegetable existence.
The sentence, both unit of language and period of incarceration, is bound in “thrall”, as the slave to “conspiring forces”, those forces with which we breath (conspire from “to breath together”) as well as those forces which we imagine conspire against our wishes, for example the acts of soldiers overseas on our (nation’s) behalf. Halpern plays autopoiesis, the “self-maintenance of an organized entity through its own internal processes” (OED), against onanistic fantasy (auto-affection); if lyric is “music for porn” then is it resolutely autopoetic, self-creating, a masturbatory fantasy that remains solipsistic? Not quite: this is not quite the closed “circuit” of autopoiesis as auto-affection but only what “appears self-identical”. I want to tie together the critique of a metaphysics of presence and Halpern’s metaphysics of penetration with a key philosophical account of onanism.

Deconstructing the Enlightenment Onanist

One seminal moment of post-structuralist thought has particular resonance with Halpern’s work, the account of “That Dangerous Supplement” in Derrida’s Of Grammatology. The section is nothing less than an interpretation of modern humanity as onanist. Modern man (and the gendering is deliberate) has, according to Derrida, been mistaken in his metaphysics by a deluded fidelity to presence, an ontological error to which he has been attached as though to a lover. That is, modern man has been attached to presence (including self-presence) in proportion to his shame and guilt at being a secret masturbator, a fantasist dependent on the absence of the object of affection. Presence (attachment to the loved one) and absence (the loss of the loved one) are mediated ambivalently in the figure of the masturbator, imagining presence in absence, requiring absence from presence, and, importantly, fetishizing pleasure in absence as shame, and
fetishizing shame at absence as pleasure. Modern man is libidinally charged by shame at masturbation, and philosophically inspired to revere presence as shame’s antidote: the more reprehensible self-harm, the fiercer the attachment to a metaphysics of presence. Metaphysics is shame’s other. Derrida’s critique of (self-)presence is played out on the figure of the masturbator: self-sufficient, present to themselves, immanently in and of their experience, the masturbator depends upon the powers of representation and imagination, mediating the past which their libido expresses, and the future to which their desire aspires. Halpern writes:

With the militarization financialization of daily life, lyric is caught up in these same abstractions value credit debt as overproduction penetrates the soldier’s body and weds it strangely to my own radical discontinuity of flesh and world that the poem longs to bridge.53

This poetry wants something very traditional: it “longs to bridge” the distance between poet and audience with its music. That “discontinuity” is analogous to the contradictions of credit to debt where the presence of capital would commonsensically stand, and yet money is the missing term in the dialectic. The reification of the subject and the difference of capital between credit and debt are comparable.

Derrida’s account refers back to the contradictory legacy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in whose autobiographical truth-telling can be revealed modern man’s agonism over onanism. The coinage “dangerous supplement” is Rousseau’s, standing, in Derrida’s expression, between “innocence as virginity and natural innocence as pucelage”; that is, the dangerous supplement mediates between, and exceeds the fault between, a natural and a cultural order (a transition coded as adolescent).54 The supplement is dangerous because where it promises to fill a lack it also threatens to exceed the “fullest measure of
Rousseau's anguish is evidence of the anti-onanist epidemic, rampant since the early 18th century, and described most fully by Laqueur as a “creature of the Enlightenment”. Rousseau was influenced by the most well regarded text on the subject, *L'Onanisme; ou, Dissertation physique sur les maladies produites par la masturbation*, published in 1759 in Latin, and French in 1760.

According to Derrida’s account of Rousseau, “Nature” is immanence, “self-proximity”, and since speech is the “natural expression of thought”, speech is therefore “the immediate presence of thought”. Writing as an “addition”, a supplement to speech, reproduces the structure of alienation of self from nature; this separation consists of “representation and the imagination”. Firstly we imagine the image relies on its “anterior default”, a real presence, if a past one. Then we worry the image which has substituted for that presence marks instead its absence. The image or representation always expresses the absence, the affective “emptiness”, where it seems to offer fullness; by analogy masturbation provides “no relief” where relief would be the production of presence in copulation (only the unnatural relief of masturbation’s temporary cessation of interminable desire). He who gives in to the temptations of that dangerous supplement will “carry the doleful *triste* effects of this habit, the most disastrous to which a young man can subjugate himself, to the grave”.

The imaginative pursuit of a desired future is a kind of infidelity toward the impossibility of self-presence. Pornography is belated (the recording or representation of a sex act, even if that representation coincides with its actuality), and promissory (aspirant to the sex act it defers). “We are dispossessed of the longed-for presence in the gesture of language by which we attempt to seize it”: pornography, the representation of sex, is not the “longed-for presence”, but is the longing for it. We can follow the deconstruction of presence and absence in Derrida’s treatment of “auto-affection”. On the one hand, auto-affection is satisfaction, “then and there and in the moment. If it
waits, it is not because the other makes it wait. Pleasure seems no longer to be deferred.” Auto-affection describes the particular self-presence arising on touching oneself: “What is touching is touched, auto-affection gives itself as pure autarchy”, where autarchy means a system of self-sufficiency. On the other hand, “what is no longer deferred is also absolutely deferred”. The supposed self-presence of auto-affection, and its concomitant satisfaction, reveals itself to be another expression of Derrida’s difference, never satiated, always dependent on fantasy. That “desire carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction” (as Derrida described difference) is masturbation’s modus operandi. We must not, however, take at face value the distinction between speech and its “disease” (language) that places pornography’s desire as devalued from that of coition. To believe sex to be free of its imaginative reproduction, including during sex, to imagine sex to be self-presence without fantasy, is to neuter it by a false expectation of desire meeting its attainment. The pornographic imagination is the “dangerous supplement” to coition, the fantasy life involved in all acts of presence, even the most fulfilling during coition. For Derrida the trace of alterity in masturbation, its supplementarity and failure to remain singularly self-presence, makes the masturbator the pin-up of deconstruction, the figure who performs, or rather re-performs without an original, and inescapably, the ambivalence of presence and absence.

I propose lyric is similarly a technology of modern subjectivity. The history of lyric demonstrates a keen obsession with the “summoning [of] absent beauties”; its history is one of aspirant loves, absent loves, lost loves, of the constant deferral of love as love’s infinite promise, or the deferral of seduction to attain what is desired by the pleasures of representation. Lyric’s mode of enunciation, of failed address and the representation to itself of that failure, is the revelation of the masturbatory quality of the apostrophe often understood to be contiguous with definitions of lyric. Lyric imagines and represents absent presences, and by doing so alters subjectivity. The self-
consciousness of lyric, its dynamic ambivalence between apostrophe and self-address, reaching out to others and folding into self-awareness, speaks the fundamental alienation of self-consciousness, the residue of alterity in all acts of self-abuse. For Derrida:

sexual auto-affection, that is auto-affection in general, neither begins nor ends with what one thinks can be circumscribed by the name of masturbation. The supplement has not only the power of procuring an absent presence through its image; procuring it for us through the proxy [procuration] of the sign, it holds it at a distance and masters it. For this presence is at the same time desired and feared. The supplement transgresses and at the same time respects the interdict. This is what also permits writing as the supplement of speech; but already also the spoken word as writing in general.

Masturbation is best misunderstood if it is taken to be a kind of “sexual auto-affection” divorced from alterity: one never masturbates alone; it is always a social act. The masturbator engages in an act of procuration, Derrida playing here on the etymological history of procuration that includes the obtainment of women as prostitutes. Language, therefore, is pornographic, writing prostitution, in its imaginative procuration of an “absent presence”. Rather than an ontological hygiene, discovering the “very thing” by a reduction of all mediations, Derrida proposes that the more mediations are produced, the more the “sense of the very thing they defer” is available. The “thing” is attained not by a withdrawal from signs and representation but from its manifestation by the plethora of supplements. Halpern writes: “The more mediations we are able to bring into the realm of appearance, the greater the possibility for rendering the impenetrable intelligible”. In teaching notes Halpern defines “pornotopia” “not as a critique of the mediated quality of our relations: but rather the place where the appearance of bodies becomes saturated
with as many perceptible mediations as possible”, 68 pornotopia not as reification, the “mediated quality of our relations”, but as the plenitude of excessive, pornographic imaginations: proliferative objectification, becoming flesh.

The Economics of Onanism

Laqueur concludes that the prohibition on onanism was due to three things: “it was secret in a world in which transparency was of a premium; it was prone to excess as no other kind of venery was [...] ; and it had no bounds in reality, because it was the creature of the imagination.” 69 Secretive, prone to excess, imaginative – though hardly properties of poetry alone, we can see some parallels. Crucially masturbation had “no bounds in reality”, where reality works as a delimiting function. Laqueur draws on no less an arbiter than Immanuel Kant, whose reflections on self-determination connect “Selbstschändung, “Self-abuse”” to “Selbstmord, “self-murder”. 70 Why is this unbounded imagination that runs contrary to nature such a dangerous supplement? Laqueur’s research suggests the answer is economic. Masturbation, paraphrasing Tissot:

stands outside the natural economy not because it is unnatural in the traditional Christian sense of going against the natural purpose of a sexual act but because the desire that motivates it is quite literally the opposite of natural. [...] The masturbator constitutes an economy of one, an unregulated cottage industry of desire that produces both the urge and its perverse satisfaction. 71

The imagination left to its own devices is a false economy, production and consumption, a machine of desire that finds no limits. Not only does want become excessive but masturbation becomes exemplary of profligacy: “[S]emen, money, and energy are all in
short supply and are profligately expended at the wastrel's peril”.72 Whitman’s affectionate profligacy runs counter to cautionary (or even austere) economics, and by doing so evokes a speculative, capitalist economy driven by the utopia of credit founded on the spectacularisation of debt. The “radical discontinuity of flesh and world that the poem longs to bridge” is its struggle with alienation. Halpern’s work seeks the utopian impulses otherwise “fettered” in pornography, and pornography is such a powerful choice since it includes the commodification of intimacy, of the boundaries between public and private, and of the economies of desire. Halpern writes elsewhere that pornography “offers a useful limit case where utopian energies are most exaggerated, and where stimulation and containment become literalized”.73 Pornography is the generic reification of the longing for dissemination in its representation, and the impossibility of avoiding the logic of representation even with the most explicit ambition towards total obscenity; that is, pornography seeks to exceed the bondage of representation on behalf of an exchange of performatives. Yet there is no truth of unmediated sexuality outside of language, representation, power. Pornography, for Halpern, can be deeply reactionary, the buying and selling of the body and its intimacies, and as an extreme replication of the labour market. As a genre it is conservative, too; for all its supposedly emancipatory possibilities it remains a discrete series played out with a parodic aesthetic. Hence Linda Williams aligns the genre of porn with the musical; both work with a series of numbers, sexual rather than musical in the case of pornography, and both prioritise “an effect of closeness and intimacy, rather than of spatial reality”.74 For Halpern:

It’s only when porn takes genre as its rule-bound condition of possibility and as a material limit to transgress that porn can begin to work critically against a regime of representation wherein my most intimate relations to my body and the bodies of others are mediated by the most impersonal images, ideals, concepts, words.75
Halpern’s avant-garde re-reading of pornography rethinks its contradictions, seeking the transgression possible in a genre ostensibly permissive in its elements, yet deeply conservative in its ideology. The section “Imaginary Politics” of *Music for Porn* opens with “This Pathos of Distance, Being A Thing Inside You Once I Felt”. Its opening innuendo, “Arriving by night in sleeves to drape the need,” leads into a meditation on loss and the particular kind of distance or absence of the onanistic imagination: “There’s shame in simply being here”, the suffering of “distance” transformed in the fantasy of imagining “being a thing inside you”, but remaining thing-like, an object, before the grammar loops around to the beginning of this onanistic circle, “I felt… this pathos of distance”. Amid references to Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, the autobiography of “damaged life”, the text worries at the ejaculatory “shudder with no reference”, at once the absent object of lust and the loss of the dead soldier. Halpern replays the “dawn’s early light” of the *Star Spangled Banner*:

> These words extend the body in accord with natural rhythms, and the false immediacy of that. *Exposed before the others* I write, dreaming of belief, crying faith in deadly light. So now there’s nothing, a shadow of a name having melted to my cock, their skin, my urethane veneer. The moon, the stars, a spangled heaven, all nesting deep inside the thing’s false pulse, or sunken groin.

The figure of the masturbator is “exposed” before alterity, the need for others that underpins, and contends, self-presence. Shadowy figures of fantasy turn from solid to liquid in the hand of the poet. The poem describes the “devotional kink” which will sustain the book as a whole, the fidelity to the “[p]arts all strewn” of the wounded, blazoned soldier figure who is “nothing but a likeness”, an absence in the dangerous
supplement of a representation. The voice of the poem ponders the dangers of sacrifice with the logic of alterity: “I wonder what it means not to be here, and then again to be restored”. The attempt to “restore some semblance of its lost remove”, includes the attempt to remember the dead, to find some meaning, and to work with the logic of representation (resemblance) which is always the marking of an absence, i.e., the pressure to make the representation of the lover in the imagination more fully an origin or source, an appearance rather than re-semblance, visible, real, understood, and if not then to make their absence more fully felt, to make their absence apparent. The question of utopianism in the title finds its expression towards the end of the poem:

Disinterring utopian scenes like this one, it all contracts a rather brackish taste I’ve grown to love, as if waste were the incalculable thing itself, our promised frontier. Siphoning fuel from sewage, unwinding into national moods, looting all the shit our forms so endlessly incorporate, nursing on withdrawn spectacular slaughter. Now undo this habit. This won’t take long and we’ll emerge, together, a hole blast thru the audio feed, our ears, at last prepared to hear, discovered in the mud.

Digging up a utopian past, the poem finds a hopeful pleasure in countering by parody the economy of consumption, the “brackish” taste, presumably of semen, swallowed without the possibility of procreation, without reproduction. Shit, too, in a queer economy, is the substance of an energy that helps “unwind” the nationalistic fervour usually attached to the epic figure of the soldier. The economy of waste harks back to Georges Bataille, of course, with the conjoined promotion of wasteful sexual activities (onanism, homosexuality). As we read in the opening “Envoi”: 
Faking our most sensual relations with wage-slaves around the globe, then harvesting their earnings for warmth. Jerking-off onsite, I imagine a hot day labourer using my shirt to wipe his jizz, then my hand to wipe his ass. Producing appetite thru forced withdrawal, I marvel at the thing’s capacity, a magnitude of failing grip. From somewhere deep, waste returns, my constant theme, this decay of sound, a wall of pure significance, the way capital flickers in an Afghani’s wound, hedging our implausible intimacies, materializing my love. Identity being at once realized and negated in the soldier I sing of, whatever hope remains remains mediated by the same defiled corpses. Taking note of repetitions, I find myself treading the same terrain. Here comes that stump again, this time sutured to my elbow. As for porn, the fate of bodies constructed by money and the potential disruption of this fantasy.80

An economy of increasing demand through reducing supply is played out in the hands of the poet; even the remainder becomes productive (“remains remains”). Halpern seeks, as part of a queer theoretical tradition, to make much of abjection, of waste, in order to defy the bonds of consumer capital.

What might it mean to make lyric poetry’s sodomitical inessential act: to refuse social reproduction and to register its contradictions, to abolish the limits of the moral subject and to affirm the body in the face of its disembodied apparition?

To make pornotopia a useless place committed to the reinvention of use.81

Halpern appears to argue here that lyric poetry is an unproductive “sodomitical” act, the “inessential”, or supplemental that will make apparent social antagonisms by producing (onanistic) waste, a null point from which to begin.82 It is waste that registers the
contradiction of consumption in elemental form since it is the unacknowledged residua
the cycle of production and consumption: “But behind the veneer of these earnest
comments lies my excrement and cum, gross product, this residue of debt, cruddy yield
thru which we seek transit, a justice in excess of any legible demand.” Halpern seeks to
make the body this waste, the effluvia of the contradiction of capital. Bodily abjection
behaves as consumerism’s other, the visible signs of the residues of production that are
otherwise unseen but make up the privileges of subjectivity: “all the things I’ll never see
that make me what I am”. In such circumstances the poem’s post-ejaculatory
impotence (“expense gone dead in the base of my balls”) is a moment of weakened affect
in the cycle of production and consumption. Post-ejaculatory calm is the brief dead-
point of capital, its waste. Halpern seeks not to make feelings abject, to commodify a
style of rebellion, but to abject feelings, to make socially conservative feelings useless
(weak). He critiques Whitman’s Drum-Taps for the way they redeem the damage done to
bodies by an intimacy of rhetorical strength:

Arousing intimate sensations, the poems yoke the affects they stimulate to
contrary ends, channeling the reader’s feelings while coding redeeming our relation
to carnage. It’s at this redemption that my poems rage.

His poems therefore seek the kind of abjection which is neutrality; they wish to fail to
offer the semblance of epiphanic and affective salvation for the reader associated with
the overdetermined codes of nationalism and commodification, in order to be
stimulating (pornographic) abjectly:

My poems service you as well as
Waste demands what’s deepest re
-mains a delicate pumping sensation
Feeling this can’t mean this

— difference hasn’t yet begun.

Scattered Verse

A poetics of onanism helps draw out the correspondences between economics and lyric, their forms of dissemination, generosity and incurred debt. Joel Porte describes Whitman as the “last of the big-time spenders in nineteenth-century American literature [...] scattering himself freely in the service of cultural fecundation”. For Porte the debates in nineteenth-century America were interpreted according to an “underlying psycho-physiological anxiety”. The major issues of “Jacksonian America – religious revivalism and the banking question” combined with male anxiety, and hence the aptness of Barker-Benfield’s expression, the “spermatic economy”. A contemporary theory of onanism might generate alternative models of productivity as compellingly unproductive, and not simply disregarded as paradigmatic of solipsism; its imaginative address might be fundamental to other kinds of affectionate presence and even sociability. We have moved from a 19th Century spermatic economy driven by a fear of waste into the late-modernist obsession with the need to waste and be seen to waste in the dominant imaginary of the money shot. By countering his time Whitman is of ours, but how to counter ours? that is Halpern’s task. Lawson, too, makes use of the celebrated essay of Barker-Benfield on the “spermatic economy” which “operates under the rubric of scarcity”, arguing that Whitman “extends the logic of the spermatic economy to make masturbation a
prudential action in the kind of spiritualized free market established by the poem.”

Lawson quotes, “Parting tracked by arriving,... perpetual payment of the perpetual loan, / Rich showering rain, and recompense richer afterward”, and comments “From one point of view, masturbation is fruitful and natural; from another it places the body under an eternal debt or obligation, involving it in a process of treacherous enervation and discharge, “perpetual payment of the perpetual loan.”

In economic terms the temptation is to recuperate the wasteful excess of masturbation via the general economy of Bataille, who understands man as “a result of surplus energy”: “Free energy flourishes in him and endlessly exhibits its useless splendour”. John Wilkinson briefly connects Bataille and Halpern, and Schmidt has recently reinforced the link, without reducing his own theory of a poetics of waste to an echo of that of Bataille. Pornography assumes masturbation in a restricted rather than general economy of capital, as in the “spermatic economy” of the 19th Century. Ejaculation, however often it might occur, for however many people, remains part of an economy of finitude. Though Bataille might figure ejaculation by masturbation as enunciation within a general economy, as waste, as a nonutilitarian act or sacrifice, pornography understands ejaculation as a key contradiction of its economy, the moment in the cycle both in production (the money shot) and consumption (ejaculation by the spectator) where supply and demand are (however briefly) self-cancelling. The moment of ejaculation by the male pornographic performer is the apex of value in the genre, the moment to which all else works, and which legitimates that work; the money-shot is the product in the restricted economy. The self-cancelling moment of ejaculation by the viewer is, in contradiction, arguably a paradigmatic excess; though the result of commodification of (temporary) satiation, the moment in which the masturbator conducts the intentions of the pornographic economy is also the utopian moment of its waning. The viewer’s ejaculation is a perfect illustration of the Derridean supplement,
as the very intention of the economy, and the fulfilment which exceeds that economy generating a moment outside the cycle. The restricted economy then goes about recuperating the general economy of meaningless (non-reproductive) masturbation for its own ends.

For Moon, Whitman’s desire was to “disseminate affectionate presence”. I have argued that this dispersal is best understood onanistically. We can read Whitman’s onanistic scattering, dissemination, dispersal, within and against the Petrarchan tradition, to wonder how the “dialectic between the scattered and the gathered, the integrated and the disintegrated” is transformed. The early modern poetry of the onanistic tradition of lyric can be disclosed by the original title of the poems known as the *Rime Sparse* (the scattered rhymes), the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (fragments composed in the vernacular).

Freccero writes of Petrarch’s Laura: “Her virtues and her beauties are scattered like the objects of fetish worship”. Nancy Vickers provides a reading of the term “to scatter”, *spargere*, which determines the poetic sequence, is used to describe Laura’s body, its emanations, and the feelings of the speaker. Its etymology is traced through the Latin *spargere* to cognates “sprinkle” and “sparkle” and the Greek for “I disseminate”. The dissemination of verse and the dissemination of the loved one are replayed by Whitman in forms of apostrophic address that embraces rather than abhors its own masturbatory enunciations: Whitman’s “wholesome relief, repose, content” is a description of the loafing of “Beautiful dripping fragments” of bathers, but also the post-ejaculatory calm after the scene which he has just imagined, “pluck’d at random from myself”, and which is scattered on the ground like the discarded pages of a manuscript, or discarded like a soiled sock: “I toss it carelessly to fall where it may”. Vickers understands Petrarch’s dispersal of poems and of the silenced body of Laura to be a gesture of assimilative power, a love without consent. Petrarch’s lyrics of praise and failed seduction (due to Laura’s recalcitrance, her incorruptible status as ideal, and even her “real” death) veil
their true subject, not lyric bemoaning the failure to seduce, but lyric registering the onanistic pressure to return to the scene of failure as praise, of failure as the source of its energy and the proof of its value (success as lyric demands failure to elevate its own value). Petrarch’s poems have to deny the pleasure they offer themselves as evidence of the alterity of the (objectified and absent) gender, and the act of copulation which is thereby doubly absent, and must remain so if insufficiency is to be made credible enough to power praise and desire. Not for the first time can we compare lyric to the song of the sirens, since whilst pretending to be the song of seduction, the song itself may well be absent, and the lyric only a teaser for it, gesturing toward the song (withheld) to come; such is the dynamic of deferral to seduction. 101 For Petrarch that imagination may be assimilative, if not outright rapacious, as Vickers describes, or even necrophiliac (an affection shared with Dante) where Whitman’s shameless dissemination of affectionate presence seeks to speak the love of the masses through the multiplicity of the self and its contradictions. He embraces self-love as a prolegomenon to the love of others. Whitman’s love lyrics cannot fail, or be the praise enabled by failure, as are Petrarch’s, since he recognises onanism as the ever-successful condition, the reliable constitution, the ironic presence (since it is predicated on the absence of the other) of affection where for Petrarch admitting self-love would terminate the hierarchy by which the object of praise is raised by the contrary self-deprecation of the poet, itself a passive aggressive gesture to attain the laurel by losing Laura. For Whitman self-love is the predicate of a radical affection. Halpern draws attention to the militarized borders of that inclusive empire of self-love, the zones in which an alterity that can be accumulated erotically bleeds into the wealth of labour-value that must be maintained in subservience to neoliberal capital.

How, then, to describe the economy of masturbation in Halpern’s work? Halpern draws attention to the militarized borders of that inclusive empire of self-love, the zones
in which an alterity that can be accumulated erotically bleeds into the wealth of labour-value that must be maintained in subservience to neoliberal capital. Rather than the Petrarchan lyric, dispersing the singular body of its affections across its pages, sacrificial offerings to the reader, Halpern writes love poetry for the bodies already reified and broken, strewn across the language we hold in common, and disavow, the labouring bodies of pornography and the wounded bodies of the soldier. For Halpern the supplemental logic of pornography as containment and utopian excess offers a restricted (containment) and general (excessive) economy. The ambivalence Halpern configures is that the non-productive or non-utilitarian aspects of the economy become the apogee of a restricted economy. The distinction might be understood as that between sublimation and de-sublimation. According to Barker-Benfield’s insight the financial economy can be described as a sublimation of a sexual economy. Sublimation is the term for “human activities which have no apparent connection with sexuality but which are assumed to be motivated by the force of the sexual instinct”. Sublimation is the term for “human activities which have no apparent connection with sexuality but which are assumed to be motivated by the force of the sexual instinct”. According to Freud the “forces that can be employed for cultural activities are thus to a great extent obtained through the suppression of what are known as the perverse elements of sexual excitation”.

Halpern plays with the return: the sexual economy is a sublimation of capital. Leo Bersani diagnoses a strain of anticommunitarian works “where the Western ideal of intersubjective knowledge is ruthlessly desublimated and literalized into a cold and brutal ripping open of bodies as a means of knowing the other.” Halpern longs to fuck the dispersed wounds of the bodies damaged in the West’s fantasy of perpetual domination. Music for Porn is obsessed with an epistemology of wounds as the dialectical contradiction of masturbatory desire; the poetry that understands its irrevocable absence from immanence with the object of desire makes of the wound the ultimate figure of eroticized presence, the sign that can be fucked, itself an absence in the body into which it is an interruption. The black bar of a the redaction is a similar wound, a present
absence drawing attention to and obscuring the sign it occludes. Halpern seeks “To make contact with his wounds, the seduction being that of reference itself nothing but this language at once proffered and denied.” The wound is the promise of the non-onanistic moment, the act of penetration in which semiotics and representation are replaced by phenomenology, and as such is the moment most desired, most longed for, the very dream of the distant onanist. Masturbation over the scattered wounds of the dispersed objects of fantasy and affection is a de-sublimation of Petrarchan lyric; rather than the violent dispersal of the body of the loved one obscured by its re-valuation (sublimation) into beautiful praise poetry, Halpern composes lyrics for the wounds capital has already dispersed of the bodies which populate his fantasies, and so seeks to de-sublimate their representation by making all of the aims (financial, violent, militarized) explicitly sexual.

The poem describes its fantasy, and in doing so asks us to bear witness:

To be ploughed thru the stomach, the hole, like a half dollar, big enough for me to fully insert. Grabbing a pipe, I rush to dress his words, his wounds inside my mouth. What’s it mean for my body not to be here, a memory of meat hung upon the self. Unable to distend, he hardens deep inside my calcified verse.

To address the fantasy, to “dress his words” in a way which will do them justice, discovers again onanistic distance, lyric and onanism inversions of the descriptions of what it means “for my body not to be here, a memory of meat”. Words are tended, whilst wounds are taken into the mouth. On the one hand the poem is the pornography; its music is the supplemental rhetoric of language, its effect on the body and displacement of the body from itself in the regime of signs: the poem represents love, intimacy, affection in the alien world. On the other hand the poem is the onanist; the lyric poem’s apostrophe is a fantasy since its body, its music, remains incommensurate
with the world it describes: “Were I to touch the hole in his chest, a spontaneous surge of meaning would suddenly spring to life inside my own incongruent material, the spirit and the beef.” Like doubting Thomas, the poet/masturbator wishes to reach across the metaphysical divide, into the body of truth. Lyric and onanism seek commensurability, the “surge” felt beyond the apostrophic divide. In “Remains Unwritten”, a poem about the poems that remain unwritten, and the attempt to unwrite the remains of the deceased, we read:

My own stench being what attracts me
To undressing you mean what I think I
- ‘m feeling dismembered in the touch
I still can’t touch or say the names fall out
For what’s not mine to name you softer
Targets yrs I want to sing what will have
Been my body where yr odor clings I hang
In excess of the system where we’re caught

—not sensing the thing that’s sensing us.

This lyric wants to undress in readiness to cleanse itself, to purge its complicity in harm, and such desires quickly become confused with the desire to undress others. The poem takes up the onanistic position, “dismembered” by being imagined to participate in its own fantasy. The poem as onanist wants to participate in its phantasy: “I want to sing what will have // Been my body where yr odor clings”. A couple of pages later we read
the desire of “Skin Flick” (“Being whatever yr mouth sings / Inside me still smaller pieces”), in which the desire of the poem (and poet) to be read, to be mouthed, by the object of sexual fascinations, recalls the confusions of I and you in Whitman’s play on modes of address. Such forms of address are always social, bringing into play genres of codified desire:

Now that we’ve caressed the soldier I can finally
Touch myself again begging to be called the names
He used to call himself when the nation loved
His bloodstool eating it and fucking them singing

Where Whitman’s splendour is in the generosity of affection, inaugurating forms of domination by the democracy he loved, Halpern withdraws into the implicit otherness of the lyric masturbator. This otherness intrinsic to solitude remains, still, a model of relationality: onanism is a kind of solidarity in fantasies of otherness, a pleasure in weakness, a queer performance of an ambivalent sentiment. What does it mean, therefore, to turn toward someone in onanistic fantasy?

**Onanism and Apostrophe**

Grossman’s diagnosis of Whitmanian acknowledgement relies on a notion often considered necessary to lyric, that of the voice, and in particular the way the voice offers “the bestowal of presence across time” in which the “theater of that presence is the poetic line”. Halpern’s onanistic poetics belongs to such a lyric tradition, but where Whitman’s poetics of acknowledgement promises presence, Halpern’s alienated version
of lyric is the deconstruction unveiling absence in presence. Halpern’s deconstruction of Whitmanian presence with the implicit voice of poetic song turned to its representation in written form (pornography) is helpful, therefore, in drawing out the onanistic absence necessary to Whitman’s generous acknowledgment; against Grossman, Whitman’s poetics of acknowledgement is necessarily energised by the supplement of masturbation over the “bestowal of presence”.

Onanism is the deconstruction of address. Lyric is consistently concerned with various kinds of apostrophe, the turn to or within an audience, the turn to the reader, the turn to an object or concept. Consider the following from Jonathan Culler’s seminal treatment. Firstly, apostrophe serves as an intensifier, “as images of invested passion”, quoting Fontanier’s *Figures du Discours*: “But what can give rise to apostrophe? It can only be feeling, and only the feeling stirred up within the heart until it breaks out and spreads itself about on the outside, as if acting on its own…, [as if it were] the spontaneous impulse of a powerfully moved soul”.\(^{113}\) Secondly, and more importantly, though Culler does not make apostrophe essential to a definition of lyric, he does suggest it is pervasive and ultimately that “the lyric is characteristically the triumph of the apostrophic” over the narrative.\(^{114}\) Apostrophe has also been considered embarrassing: “literary critics” are encouraged, “to turn aside from the apostrophes they encounter in poetry: to repress them or rather to transform apostrophe into description.”\(^{115}\) Culler’s point is ably made by having the audience itself “turn” from one kind of attention to another, and it is this sense of turning that defines apostrophe. Apostrophe “makes its point by troping not on the meaning of a word but on the circuit or situation of communication itself.”\(^{116}\) Apostrophe offers, therefore, a kind of communicative self-reflexivity, a self-fashioning of the poet by addressing the reader, or something in lieu of the reader, and for Culler this communication is implicitly a completed “circuit”.\(^{117}\) Apostrophe tropes on the “situation of communication itself” and masturbation is a Janus-faced form of address to
a figure of desire and to a reader that incorporates its own failure, that recognises the
incompletion of that circuit. Consider the example Culler takes from Northrop Frye’s
_The Anatomy of Criticism_, with reference to John Stuart Mill’s aphorism, the “lyric is not
heard but overheard”:

The lyric poet normally pretends to be talking to himself or to someone else: a
spirit of nature, a Muse, a personal friend, a lover, a god, a personified
abstraction, or a natural object…. The poet, so to speak, turns his back on his
listeners.118

When a love lyric attempts to seduce the subject of its affections, and by doing so
seduces its reader, its apostrophe has been turned in a way that is denied by its address;
the longed for presence of the desired other is turned to the presence of the reader,
overhearing the address intended, ostensibly, elsewhere. The act of onanism encapsulates
the failure of apostrophic address of the lyric poet, and the pleasure taken therein.
Halpern’s lyric is onanistic, a music for porn rather than the porn itself, the longing for
affection rather than the affection itself. It is a poetry which understands how its modes
of address are often transformative of the subject who speaks, and how its declarations
of affection might fall on deaf ears. If the “theater of that [lyric] presence is the poetic
line”, then the stage is empty but for the poet, his back to us, embarrassing us with the
candour of his desires. Lyric as onanistic apostrophe, a self-reflexive address (dis-
)honouring (uncalled for) its subject, the “radical discontinuity of flesh and world that the poem
longs to bridge” shares a utopian promise. The apostrophe that for Grossman is evidence
of the vocative, which itself is evidence of presence, is for Culler part of the prospective
aspiration of lyric: “[T]o apostrophize is to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into
being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire.”119 Halpern’s poetry
identifies not with such strength (“bend themselves to your desire”) but with models of weakened affect, what he conceptualises as “patiency”, an openness and vulnerability that seeks to avoid mastering animate objects by will alone:

Moving in a halo of shame, the love of a militiaman, democracy’s soul, a thing that fails to happen, suspended in this mindless blow, incalculable interval where we almost make contact with the present. Singing in the fault of our temporal divide, who will have been here to hear this. *Mon petit soldat, mon semblable* yr touch makes me other than the meat I am.120

For Whitman, “I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes. We convince by our presence”.121 For Culler the “poet makes himself a poetic presence through an image of voice”.122 Coviello argues that “virtually every strand of Whitman’s utopian thought devolves upon, and is anchored by, an unwavering belief in the capacity of strangers to recognize, desire, and be intimate with one another.”123 To be “intimate” with those “not proximate or even known” is to be “properly American, as Whitman conceives it”.124 Complicity in distant harm, in Iraq or in Afghanistan, may require even greater powers of intimacy to overcome, but for Halpern the strong voice meets a lesser music, in Derrida’s words the *differance* without which “the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space”, the “non-satisfaction” of onanistic desire which is necessary to hope.

Whitman makes of the failure of the lyric address to seduce all those his poetry wishes to love into a celebration by understanding the failure of address in lyric to be intrinsically a masturbatory economy, florid enunciation in the absence of the possibility of achieving all love. Halpern takes on this implicit masturbatory address, its failure, its wastefulness from production, to develop an alternative language of economy. Halpern’s
spermatic economy is resistant to recuperation by the dominant economy yet also emblematic of the capitalist accumulation of waste as pleasure in pornography, and so the distinction to be drawn is between pornography’s reification of the restricted economy of potency, gratification, the enunciation of the actor in maximum visibility reaching its apogee on the body of the emblazoned other, and the alternative failed address of lyric, a general economy of impotence, a weakening, a loosening of seduction to permit the fantasy to reveal its contradictions.

Coda

This essay claims lyric has been energized by the onanistic imagination. It is possible to propose an even broader argument, of which this essay has been a subset. Lyric seeks traditionally plays on seduction as a trope. Masturbatory fantasy, too, as a disposition to seduction, is withdrawn from the real circuits of communication. Masturbation, a knowingly failed seduction, imagines dialectically each and every one of its seductions to be successful; the masturbator always gets the (fantasized) object of affection. By withdrawing from the pretence of real seduction into its fiction, the masturbator takes on the power to move the object of their affections. There are two points to make about this.

Firstly, this is arguably a contention of poetry more generally. The poet, and the masturbator, frequently make the tacit assumption that the subjects in their representations not only can be dispersed by their imaginations, but also that they wish to be so dispersed. Lyric and masturbation participate in a dream of licensed exploitation, an imaginative use of other people and their bodies. Furthermore, such exploitation typically imagines those people to want to be used. In the love lyric and in masturbation,
that dream is usually sexual. Is such exploitation, the rapaciousness of the poetic imagination, demonstrable not only libidinally in the lyric, but also prevalent in poetry more generally, and in different ways according to the strictures of different genres? Recall Rousseau’s confession on his discovery of the “dangerous supplement”:

I learned that dangerous supplement that deceives nature, and saves youth of my humour of many disorders at the expense of their health, their vigor, and sometimes their life. That vice which shame and timidity find so convenient, has an even greater attraction for lively imaginations: it alloys them to dispose, so to speak, of the whole [female] sex at their will, and to make a tempting beauty serve their pleasure without the need for obtaining her consent. 126

Does poetry participate in or re-enact the exploitation of other persons in warfare (the epic), or in work (the Georgic), and perhaps dream that those persons so desire their own exploitation, or find their exploitation natural or inevitable? Is masturbation as mastery and control a symptom of the psychology prevalent in our political climate that those who suffer wish to suffer?

Whitman makes the lyric consume alternative genres; lyric behaves as colonist, incorporating the epic (the civil war poems) and Georgic (apostrophes to workers), and in doing so ramifies the seat of lyric in the multiplicitous self. Halpern’s work combines Whitman’s intimate dissemination, formally evident in the overflowing of the foreshortened poetic line into its generous tortuosity, with Baudelaire’s experimentation with prose-poetry: “While auratic lyric often appears to realize its historical transformation under modernity by amplifying rather than negating its claim to authenticity[...], lyric poetry’s survival can also be understood dialectically to inhere in the appearance of its own self-sacrifice, its becoming prose.” 127 Baudelaire took the “economic
form or ‘genre’ at one with ‘the historical substance of the age’”, specifically the commercial newspaper, and surrendered the genre of his poetry to it as a likeness because, in the words of Adorno, “artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality.” Halpern himself replicates Baudelaire’s generic surrender, equating the genre of lyric (incorporating prose-poetry) with the contemporary and commodified genre du jour, pornography. By fixating on the soldier, he populates his fantasy with an interloper from contending genres, a paid (outsourced) worker and epic hero, figure of the fantasy of efficacy in the mind of the poet, true legislator for the unacknowledged commons. What do these generic considerations mean for the poetics of onanism? If this licensed exploitation is endemic to poetry in general, then lyric energized by masturbatory address is a paradigm or practice. The self-fashioning of the poet/self in uncontested apostrophes to others is evidence that self-reflexivity is not isolated from alterity, and that the suspicion that others are ultimately for us rather than autonomous is a (bad) habit.

Secondly, we might ask why when choosing to disperse the bodies of others in the imagination, does the poet so frequently choose to fail in their seductions? In his book on the relations between anatomical dissection and the tradition of the lyric blazon, Jonathan Sawday describes the way the blazoning of the female figure becomes a pretence for the homosocial contestation between (typically) male poets. And yet, so many of the blazons describe a cruel mistress who ultimately rejects the advances of the poet/lover. The blazon acts as self-abasement, a kind of prostration before the power of beauty of the violently anatomized and dispersed female form. Why, when imagining what you want, imagine your failure, thus throwing the blazon back from the seductions of love poetry to masturbation as the recourse of self-loathing? The “animating force of the blasonneur’s hatred for the object of his ostensible veneration” is blazon (shield) against the potential loss of identity of the poet in lust: “Why is she so cruel, he asks, in a
fit of self-abnegation. The answer, of course, is because he has made her so, in a generic rather than actual sense.” Perhaps we need to attend to a split poetics of onanism, one which withdraws from the imagined successes of seduction into consolatory self-pleasure, and the other which allows its desire to overwhelm the opposition of alterity.

notes

An early version of this paper was delivered at the Research Seminar, School of English, University of Sheffield on 22nd February 2012; in belated answer to the question from my colleague Madeleine Callaghan, masturbation is obsessed with beauty; in this sense it is deeply, unreconstructedly, traditional. Further research was presented as “The Art of Masturbation,” on 13th February 2013, part of the Inspiration & Co. talks run by the University of Sheffield’s Students’ Union. I am grateful to John Wilkinson and Neil Pattison for introducing me to Halpern’s poetry, and to Dominic Johnson and Amber Regis for their reading suggestions. Sara Crangle, Robin Purves, Edward Holberton, Marcus Nevitt, Po Ruby, Michael Kindellan, Fabienne Collignon and Tom Jones have all read long versions of this paper, and each offered astute comments and suggestions, many of which will be included in future work if they have not been able to find expression here. I am also grateful to the peer-review comments from Angelaki, which, as well as helpful practical advice on structure, asked a couple of insightful questions that pushed my thesis. Finally I am very grateful to Rob Halpern and Rich Owens who have been admirably open and generous with their research and writing.

bibliography


1 Epigraphs: Farrer’s full title given Laqueur 221; Lord Byron, excerpt from a letter to John Murray, 4th November 1820, quoted in Levinson 22.

2 Laqueur 96.

3 See Henriksen 176-181 and Adams 208-11.

4 Laqueur 112.

5 Ibid. 101.

6 Laqueur 13.

7 See Terdiman 129.

8 Foucault, cited in Halpern, “Realism and Utopia” 113.

9 On pornography see Williams. On masturbation see Laqueur, Levinson, and Bennett and Rosario. The latter includes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s rightly renowned “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl” (133-53), in which Sedgwick aligns the identity of the masturbator with the rise of the novel:

> [A]s one of the very earliest embodiments of ‘sexual identity’ in the period of the progressive epistemological overloading of sexuality, the masturbator may have
been at the cynosural center of a remapping of individual identity, will, attention, and privacy along modern lines that the reign of ‘sexuality,’ and its generic concomitant in the novel, and in novelistic point of view, now lead us to take for granted. (140-1)

I contend, instead, that poetry rather than the novel, from poetry’s courtly forms of address, through to its ideologies of imagination, bears a more significant correspondence to the history of masturbation.

10 Laqueur 13.

11 See for an early example Killingsworth 47-54.

12 Martin 8.

13 Ibid. 20-1.

14 Whitman 38.

15 Yingling 137.

16 Kateb 564. See also Moon, “Solitude, Singularity, Seriality”.

17 See Bersani “Sociability and Cruising”.

18 Coviello 85.

19 Ibid. 86.

20 Ibid. 103.

21 Moon, Disseminating Whitman 16.

22 Ibid. 18.

23 Quotations from section 24 of “Song of Myself,” Whitman 33-34.

24 Ibid. 39. Quoted in Lawson, Walt Whitman and the Class Struggle 18; see also 17-22.

25 Section 27 of “Song of Myself,” quoted by Lawson, Walt Whitman, 19, from a textual variant given in Whitman 38.
26 Whitman 259.

27 Ibid. 257.

28 Aspiz 395.

29 Whitman 103-5.

30 Whitman in Lowenfels 4.

31 Whitman 40.

32 Lawson, Walt Whitman 19.

33 Quoted in Lowenfels 18. Compare to Wordsworth’s condemnation of Keats for his “outrageous stimulation” (quoted in Levinson 18).

34 On complicity in distant as a problem for lyric see Ladkin, “Problems for Lyric Poetry”.

35 Halpern, Music for Porn 55.

36 Quoted in Lowenfels 2.

37 Moon, Disseminating Whitman 3.

38 Grossman 192.

39 Halpern, Music for Porn 49.

40 See Halpern’s earlier Weak Link, Wilkinson’s “Contemporary Lyric and Epic Constraints”, and Ladkin, “Patient Poetry”.

41 Halpern, Music for Porn 53.

42 Ibid. 57; repeated in “Memoranda” 105.

43 Ibid. 109.

44 Ibid. 54. See also Halpern and Donovan.

45 Halpern writes of Walter Benjamin’s theory of allegory:

    Under the Second Empire, Benjamin argues, allegory lent expression to a crisis in
representation coextensive with the domination of social life by the commodity, which itself deploys its own allegorical form. As he notes in ‘Central Park’, ‘The introduction of allegory answers in a far more meaningful way the same crisis of art which, around 1852, the theory of l’art pour l’art was intended to counter’ (‘CP’, 34).

According to Benjamin, allegory’s exaggerated representation of universal concepts and feelings materializes meaning’s dissolution under the spell of commodity production, as opposed to l’art pour l’art, which further dematerializes and mystifies it. Allegory thus formalizes the decay of meaning that corresponds with an estrangement from the real connections and relations informing everyday life. (Halpern, “Baudelaire’s ‘Dark Zone’” 6)

The soldier enduring neo-colonial warfare, and the representation of that soldier in or as pornography, is a commodity, and a commodity that underpins the expansion of commodification into all areas of social life. Where Baudelaire incorporates the new media of commercial newspapers, Halpern incorporates pornography.

46 Halpern, Rumored Place 113; Halpern, Music for Porn 117. Halpern has used the figure of the black bar as the title of his recent selection of poems, with Placeholder as the title made legible. The black bar is a sign for what not a sign, since as a sign it only represents its purpose which is to occlude or censor other signs. It is therefore at once censorious and aporetic. To redact also means “to bring together” or “to gather”.

47 Halpern, Music for Porn 149.

48 Such suffering is summarized in Moon’s collation of wounds in Disseminating Whitman 196.

49 See Scarry’s groundbreaking account of the soldier in The Body in Pain.

50 Halpern, Music for Porn 117.
Derrida 141-52. Note should be made, too, of Derrida’s use of the term “dissemination”, and the book of that title. Derrida uses dissemination to displace binary logic and the “three” of their synthesis, and as preferential to “polysemy” (see 25), which remains dependent on the singular authority of the critic (see 26-28). There’s some parallel between dissemination and a “certain outside of castration (a fall with no return and with no restricted economy)” (26) and other kinds of seed-spilling and seed wastage (see 50 on the logos spermatikos). Since it is not insemination, we might re-read Whitman’s poetics of acknowledgement according to an onanistic generosity of dissemination, as Moon implicitly offers in Disseminating Whitman.

Derrida 150.

Ibid. 144.

Laqueur 13.

Ibid. 38.

Derrida 144.

Ibid. 144.

Laqueur quoting Rousseau 43.

Derrida 141.

Ibid. 154.

Ibid. 154.

Ibid. 143.

See Looby 178.

Derrida 154-5.
Halpern, “Pornotopias” 109-10. The term is taken from Marcus. Halpern’s understanding of pornography as a commodification of intimacy and as a generic promise of utopian happiness shares features of Agamben’s project, and indeed Agamben’s Profanations is cited in the bibliography of “Pornotopias” (114). For Agamben pornography offers a strategy for “profanation”, and “profanation of the unprofanable is the political task of the coming generation (quoted Prozorov 84); its “paradigmatic character” is described by Prozorov as an “apparatus (dispositif)”, a “structure of capturing and ordering human existence that is generalizable and transferrable to ever new domains and contexts” which therefore permits an abstraction of pornography from its history and the elucidation of pornography aligned to the “messianic politics of ‘happy life’” (Prozorov 73). Profanation conceptualises the “free or experimental use” of objects in the world as against their “possession” as property. Masturbation whilst consuming pornography is a kind of profanation without use. We imagine pornography to offer the “possibility of a radically different form of life on the basis of the very condition of late-modern nihilism that we find ourselves in” (Prozorov 81).


Laqueur 21.

Ibid. 58.

Ibid. 213.

Ibid. 194.

Halpern, “Realism and Utopia” 115.

Williams 124.

Halpern, “Pornotopias” 98.

Halpern, Music for Porn 11.

Halpern, Music for Porn 11.
78 Ibid. 12.
79 Ibid. 12-3.
80 Ibid. 7.
81 Halpern, “Pornotopias” 101, my emphasis.
82 See Schmidt 160-165.
84 Ibid. 8.
85 See Marcus 273.
87 Ibid. 89. See also Levinson’s brilliant comparison of masturbation and class identity in Keats (23).
88 Porte 258.
89 Ibid. 258-9.
90 Ibid. 258-9. See Aspiz and Barker-Benfield.
91 Compare Williams 95, and Prozorov 82.
92 Lawson, “Spending” 349.
93 Ibid. 350.
94 Quoted Connor 73. On the distinction between general and restricted economy see Plotnitsky 1-2.
95 Schmidt 20, and 160-165.
96 Quoted in Plotnitsky 1-2.
97 Vickers 272
98 Quoted in Vickers 272.
99 Vickers 274.
100 My obscure reference to the “old sock” is to Frank O’Hara’s “To Hell with It”; see

101 “The Sirens: evidently they really sang, but in a way that was not satisfying, that only implied in which direction lay the true sources of the song, the true happiness of the song. Nevertheless, through their imperfect songs, songs which were only a singing still to come, they guide the sailor toward that space where singing would really begin.” Maurice Blanchot from “The Song of the Sirens; Encountering the Imaginary”, quoted in Hillis Miller 69.

102 Laplanche 431.

103 Freud, quoted in Laplanche 432

104 Bersani, *Culture of Redemption* 34.

105 Halpern, *Music for Porn* 54

106 Ibid. 107.

107 Ibid. 5.

108 See Goode 131-2.

109 Ibid. 72.

110 Ibid. 74.

111 Ibid. 80.


113 Culler 61. See also Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion”.

114 Ibid. 66.

115 Ibid. 59.

116 Ibid. 59.

117 See Levinson 4.

118 Culler 60.

119 Ibid. 61.

121 Quoted by Culler 63.

122 Ibid. 63.

123 Coviello 85.

124 Ibid. 87.

125 I am indebted to Tom Jones for this provocation.

126 Rousseau, in Rosario 101.


128 Quoted, ibid. 2.

129 See Sawday 193.

130 Ibid. 206-7.