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HAL COASE 

Lyric, Detachment, and Collectivity

On Carl Phillips's 'Hymn'

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ABSTRACT: This essay outlines a series of parallels between queer critiques of community and the concept of lyric detachment in modern poetics. It suggests that this shared suspicion of community can provide one starting point for a reconsideration of how 'counterintimacies', as described by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, are figured in queer poetry. In order to illustrate this, it examines interactions between lyric tropes and homoerotic practices in Carl Phillips's poem 'Hymn'.

KEYWORDS: queer poetics; lyric detachment; relationality; Phillips, Carl; queer theory; communities

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Nothing, it would seem, is more difficult to conceive, to elaborate, and to put into practice than 'new relational modes'.¹

Leo Bersani, 'Sociality and Sexuality'

MODES OF DETACHMENT

Who needs community? In their 1998 essay 'Sex in Public', Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner noted that 'language for community is a problem for gay historiography'.² In the midst of the AIDS pandemic, a number of studies had approached the task of mapping the semi-public sites of queer social life, armed with the language of community, solidarity, and resistance. Berlant and Warner's response to the emergence of this communal imaginary was ambivalent. On the one hand, the 'imaginative power of the idealization of local community for queers',³ as exemplified for them by John D'Emilio's study

1 Leo Bersani, 'Sociality and Sexuality', *Critical Inquiry*, 26.4 (2000), pp. 641–56 (p. 641).

2 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, 'Sex in Public', *Critical Inquiry*, 24.2 (1998), pp. 547–66 (p. 554).

3 Ibid.

Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, could hardly be denied: the mere presence of queer hangouts on city sidewalks troubled the zoning of privacy that served as ‘the affectional nimbus that heterosexual culture protects and from which it abstracts its model of ethics.’⁴ On the other hand, the word ‘community’ — and the imaginary that nurtured it — was implicated in that model of heteronormative ethics. In 1994, the New York Department of City Planning had recommended the rezoning of downtown areas, effectively closing establishments frequented by queers, after a consultation in which ‘community district offices’ reported that ‘adult entertainment establishments negatively impact the community.’⁵ This was community as removed from vibrant underground scenes or the invigoration of AIDS organizing; ‘community’ here meant nothing other than the lockstep coordination of economic interests in defence of property, its policing, and the family it would house in perpetuity.

In a brief essay titled ‘Community’, the American poet Carl Phillips riffs on the word’s significances. As a writer, Phillips notes, the need for ‘community’ seems commonsensical: it promises us a space of generosity that can provide a ‘system of exchanged support.’⁶ Yet it can never quite be freed from a more reductive sense of propertied genteelness and exclusivity:

But in its origins the word ‘community’ itself has to do mostly with shared physical space, and a community consists of people who have in common the buildings they’ve erected, from the Latin *munio*, to build or fortify. This latter idea of fortifying does seem a likely link to thinking of community as a form of support, for a group from *within* that group.⁷

4 Ibid., p. 555.

5 Department of City Planning, ‘Adult Entertainment Study’ (New York: Department of City Planning, 1994), p. 52 <https://www.townofnewburgh.org/uppages/NYNYC_1994.PDF> [accessed 10 October 2023].

6 Carl Phillips, *My Trade Is Mystery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), p. 90.

7 Ibid., p. 84; emphasis in original. Phillips, for the benefit of his argument, chooses in his etymology to evoke the physical enclosure of a space rather than a mutual obligation. The *OED*, however, derives ‘community’ from *mūnis* (‘bound, under obligation’), and Lewis and Short give ‘root mu-, to bind’ as the derivation of *commūnis*. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘common, adjective and adverb’ <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8839776486>>; Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clar-

Phillips is chafing here against the concept's rigidity, against also the memory of how, during an itinerant childhood on various air force bases, community 'meant a sharing merely of space, and only potentially — not inevitably — of sensibility'.⁸ His suspicion that the *wrong* community would be worse than no community at all leads him to the oxymoron of 'the community of one that solitude can be'.⁹ Community, it turns out, is no more valuable than the sum of its parts, and it might even threaten those parts wherever it imposes itself too rigidly. It was with a similar guardedness, in the aftermath of the New York City Council's ruling, that Berlant and Warner wrote of their preference for 'world' and 'public' over 'community' and 'group':

By queer culture we mean a world-making project, where 'world', like 'public', differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright. The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.¹⁰

This world is apprehended as a messy display of how people might love or fuck were things otherwise. In opposition to the identitarian alignment of a community, it is the sum total of the movements that traverse and enlarge it, rather than the parts it contains. Like Phillips, Berlant and Warner are interested in a mobile and expansive sensibility — 'modes of feeling' — as opposed to the bounds of identity and the community that encloses it. This is, in a word, the world of cruising, a world that Berlant and Warner took to be at risk of an extinction wrought by the dual pressures of repressive lawmaking and sex-negative assimilationist rhetoric, both carried forward under the banner of community. They were envisioning a utopian elsewhere as already expressed in existing practices which they feared might vanish:

endon Press, 1879), s.v. 'commūnis' <<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0059:entry=communis>> [accessed 2 November 2023].

8 Phillips, *My Trade*, p. 86.

9 Ibid., p. 92.

10 Berlant and Warner, 'Sex in Public', p. 558.

not only sexual acts but also 'self-cultivation, shared knowledge, and the exchange of inwardness'; loose happenings of drag, performance, music, and dance; queer practices of what they termed 'counterintimacies' which could return to the public sphere those 'forms of affective, erotic, and personal living' that heteronormative culture would prefer to immure in the privacy of the home.¹¹

This sketch of queer theory's turn-of-the-century hopes and misgivings, as articulated by Berlant and Warner, provides a backdrop to my close reading of Phillips's 'Hymn' from his 2000 mid-career collection *Pastoral* in the second part of this essay. It is intended, firstly, as nothing more than a historical horizon, building upon what the novelist Garth Greenwell has characterized as the 'cruising devotion' without which it is difficult to parse Phillips's poetics.¹² Many of Phillips's poems are accounts of cruising for community, and their tropes of communion, lust, and loss arise out of the ambivalences inherent in that phrase. Beyond a straightforward contextualization of the poems within homoeroticism, my argument in what follows is that the restrictiveness of the term 'community' can be understood as a problem shared by queer theory and lyric poetry in the twenty-first century.¹³ I am interested in passing between these two theoretical 'meanwhiles', and locating Phillips's poetics at the dissolve between them. More than a coincidence, less than a direct equivalence, this homologous trouble with community when tracked across both fields is intended to help us think about the alternative models of intimacy which Phillips's poems present.¹⁴

11 Ibid., pp. 561–62. For the orientation of such practices towards a utopian futurity, see José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). It is worth noting that Muñoz also eschews the word 'community', appealing instead to 'queerness as collectivity' (p. 11).

12 Garth Greenwell, 'Cruising Devotion: On Carl Phillips', *Sewanee Review*, 128.1 (2020), pp. 166–86.

13 For an account of how literary criticism and queer theory at the turn of the century both pursued readings 'suspicious of the status of persons and personhood' (p. 34), see Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

14 An aetiology of this shared 'trouble with community' across both fields is beyond the scope of this essay, although it would pass through deconstructionism's distrust of the word, as when Jacques Derrida, 'Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)', trans. by John Leavey, in *On the Name* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford City Press, 1995), pp. 35–88, writes of community's 'connotation of participation, indeed, fusion, identification' and

A problem shared is not always a problem halved. For queer theory, the intractability of the questions that come after the observation that desire is intrinsically disintegrative, unmappable, and hence *countercommunal* has, since 1998, contributed to what Gila Ashtor describes as ‘the “self-critical” turn in queer studies’:

Whereas the first generation of queer critique could still locate revolutionary potential in the indefinable, open-ended, infinitely mobile horizon of anti-identitarian identity, a new generation of work demands that queerness be problematized, contextualized and deconstructed in an urgent effort to examine what underlying ideological conditions produce a queerness that is surprisingly complicit with existing politico-ethical norms.¹⁵

This second wave of continuing critique involves asking how the field might get beyond what Lee Edelman valorized as queer negativity: ‘its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social.’¹⁶ Frustrated by the limits of such negativity, Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson have called for a reassessment of queer theory’s ‘attachment to a politics of oppositionality’,¹⁷ a politics that, despite taking anti-normativity as its watchword and deconstruction as its method, has matured within a historical period marked by the forceful assimilation of certain queer subjects to political norms and the violent expulsion of others. This felt dissonance between what gets said inside the academy and what gets done outside it has contributed to the sense of impasse that Ashtor skilfully unfolds.¹⁸ One way of opening some space around this frustrated position would be to return to Berlant and Warner’s earlier

describes his desire for ‘another being-together than’ community, ‘another gathering-together of singularities’ (p. 46).

- 15 Gila Ashtor, *Homo Psyche: On Queer Theory and Erotophobia* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), p. 3. For queer studies as a ‘subjectless’ field that ‘remains open to a continuing critique of its exclusionary operations’, see David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, ‘What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?’, *Social Text*, 23.3–4 (2005), pp. 1–17 (p. 3).
- 16 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 3.
- 17 Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, ‘Introduction: Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions’, *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 26.1 (2015), pp. 1–25 (p. 11).
- 18 See esp. Ashtor, *Homo Psyche*, chap. 4.

suspicion of community and attempt to listen to it afresh. Clearly, that which positions itself *against* community rejects integration, but can such rejection provide the basis for alternative modes of relation that are, at least, collective and communicable? Is there, in other words, a shared experience of living at the limit that does not take its cues and coordinates from the centre? What comes after refusal and detachment?

'Queer detachment', writes Matthew Burroughs Price, is a 'narrative strategy — part refusal, part acquiescence, reaching toward secreted alcoves that might protect and cultivate it', a structure of feeling that 'abounds' in modernist writing.¹⁹ Burroughs Price builds a genealogy of this posture that has one origin in decadence, specifically in a Paterian subject that is 'neither public nor private, neither embedded in nor distanced from homophobic social landscapes, [...] less asocial than semiwithdrawn, experiencing aesthetic impressions yet shrinking into himself to analyze them.'²⁰ This idea brings us closer to the problem of community as posed within modern poetics. Throughout the twentieth century, the lyric self was typically understood to be withdrawn from (or bereft of or waiting for) an ideal community.²¹ This lyric alienation was given its most well-known formulation by Theodor Adorno, whose 'On Lyric Poetry and Society' begins with a description of a 'sphere of expression whose very essence lies in either not acknowledging the power of socialization or overcoming it through the pathos of detachment.'²² For Adorno, such refusal or detachment was 'the subjective expression of a social antagonism' induced by the material convulsions of capitalist modernity.²³ As Virginia Jackson's work has made clear, shades of the same argument can be traced backwards

19 Matthew Burroughs Price, 'A Genealogy of Queer Detachment', *PMLA*, 130.3 (2015), pp. 648–65 (p. 656).

20 *Ibid.*, p. 651.

21 The variety of approaches that share alienation as a defining feature of the lyric can, perhaps, be contradistinguished with reference to their distinct temporalities: when is this 'ideal community' to be recovered from? A lyric that gestures *towards* a longed-for futurity provides the basis of Muñoz's readings of Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler in *Cruising Utopia*, p. 25.

22 Theodor Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', in *Notes to Literature*, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991–92), 1 (1991), ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholson, pp. 37–54 (p. 37).

23 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

and forwards across the twentieth century.²⁴ A less well-known example can be found in a letter of 20 August 1941, written from Casarsa by a nineteen-year-old Pier Paolo Pasolini to his friend Luciano Serra in Bologna:

Pierpaolo poi è addirittura antitetico al ‘guidogozzano’ il quale ultimo si ritira dentro se stesso, si umilia, si fa anonimo, *cosa tra le cose*, laddove ‘Pier Paolo’ si distacca, è un grido, è *la certezza di essere differente dagli altri e dall’ambiente*.

(Pierpaolo is then actually antithetical to ‘guidogozzano’, the latter withdraws within himself, humbles himself, makes himself anonymous, *thing among things*, whereas ‘Pier Paolo’ is detached, is a cry, *is the certainty of being different from others and from the environment*.)²⁵

Pasolini is determined here to distinguish himself from the *crepuscolarismo* of Guido Gozzano, in which a version of the decadent aloofness described by Burroughs Price had been mellowed out with a strong dose of ennui. Pasolini’s new poetry will be antithetical to the inactivity of a submissive ‘cosa tra le cose’ — ‘thing among things’ — because the figure of the poet “‘Pier Paolo’” will be detached, like ‘a cry’, and as such he will stand for ‘the certainty of being different from others and from the environment’. Pasolini’s phrasing is helpful thanks to the economy with which it compresses the various postures of lyric alienation. There are the paradigmatic positions as later put by Adorno — the refusal of socialization (‘si ritira’) versus the pathos of detachment (‘si distacca’) — as well as an opposition between a thing-like passivity and a combative activity. A further twist is given by the strange manner in which Pasolini’s orthography differentiates the gloopy, thing-like substance of ‘Pierpaolo’ and “‘guidogozzano’” (all one word, and left uncapitalized like a common noun) from the detached figure of “‘Pier Paolo’”. The use of inverted commas further complicates any clear-cut claim to authenticity (as does the third person when applied to himself): this “‘guidogozzano’” would presumably be a persona adopted with the

24 See Virginia Jackson, ‘Lyric’, in *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th edn, ed. by Stephen Cushman and others (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 826–34.

25 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Lettere: 1940–1954*, ed. by Nico Naldini (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), p. 82; my translation, emphasis in original.

same ironic detachment as “Pier Paolo”, even if the latter is intent on extricating himself from his surroundings rather than dissolving into them.²⁶

Pasolini’s letter reminds us that alienation can cover for any number of distinct poses: disgust or disinterest, resistance or submissiveness. The detachment that engenders alienation is, after all, innately relational (the first question would be ‘detachment *from what?*’), and often denotes more a set of provisional strategies or orientations than any single quality of poetic expression. In contemporary scholarship, the trouble with defining lyric has become bound up with attempts to adequately distinguish modes of detachment. Jeremy Page has recently written of a poetics of ‘self-detachment’ as ‘the point at which the self loses its center of gravity, its embodiment and its “mineness”, yet remains.’²⁷ The self, in this reading, is not merely what Daniel C. Dennett called a ‘theorists’ fiction’: an ontologically useful sham, a sham nonetheless.²⁸ For Page, the self is what remains *after* the centre is gone, after embodiment has dissolved, and after ‘mineness’ (“Pier Paolo”) comes undone. Anahid Nersessian has examined how three American poets ‘experiment with coolness and detachment as a critical response to capital’, finding in their work ‘an ethical withdrawal from the impulse to dictate how any other person should encounter themselves.’²⁹ The poet James Longenbach suggests that the ‘impulse to be lyrical is driven by the need to be no longer constrained by oneself’, so that what he terms ‘lyric knowledge’ is the product of the repeated breaking and recomposition of formal constraints, analogous to the self as it is formed out of a perpetual process of estrangement.³⁰ What

26 The letter prefigures the polemics of the 1950s in *Officina* and beyond, in which the limits of lyric expression — and its relation to engaged civic poetry — were central. See Éanna Ó Ceallacháin, ‘Polemical Performances: Pasolini, Fortini, Sanguineti, and the Literary-Ideological Debates of the 1950s’, *Modern Language Review*, 108.2 (2013), pp. 475–503.

27 Jeremy Page, ‘The Detached Self’, *Poetics Today*, 43.4 (2022), pp. 663–95 (p. 663).

28 Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1991), p. 429.

29 Anahid Nersessian, ‘Notes on Tone’, *New Left Review*, 142 (2023), pp. 55–73 (pp. 58, 73).

30 James Longenbach, ‘Lyric Knowledge’, *Poetry*, February 2016 <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70307/lyric-knowledge>> [accessed 16 October 2023].

these accounts have in common is a claim on lyric as a privileged site in which to think through detachment as an ethical, political, or epistemological position. Tweaking Adorno's formulation, we might say that they approach lyric as a sphere of expression whose essence lies in acknowledging the pathos of socialization and overcoming it with the power of detachment.

These analyses return us to the question of what comes *after* detachment: what is it that a lyric of detachment calls towards that is beyond present imaginaries of community? And why would the pathos of socialization need to be overcome in the first place? In the lyric of Carl Phillips, we find one response to these questions as channelled through gay male eroticism. To see this more clearly, the remainder of this essay turns to 'Hymn' from *Pastoral*. The choice of text is in part intended as a corrective to readings of Phillips's career which take this collection to signal a turn away from the eroticism of his earlier writing.³¹ While the poems in *Pastoral* present sex between men in ways that are deliberately grafted onto a language of spirituality and sacrament, the 'absence of women' does not, as one early reviewer suggested, mean that the poetry is 'abstract'.³² Such a comment assumes that the poetic representation of sex between men necessitates a trade-off between the 'representation' and the 'poetic', as though the texts must translate their explicit content into indirect forms. What Phillips actually achieves is the marriage of conventional poetic tropes with the direct depiction of non-normative sexual practices.

It is therefore the presence of queer eroticism in Phillips's poetics that I associate with his use of lyric to address a future collectivity that outstrips identity *and* resists the aestheticization of non-relationality. This gesture is inseparable from the lyric tropes of *Pastoral*: nearly every poem nestles its language around an apostrophized 'you', and nearly every poem makes recourse to the lore of religious community — psalms, parables, myth, or mysticism — in order to work through

31 In a recent essay, Phillips reflects on comments from readers on his supposed move away from sexual explicitness following his first two collections: "I liked it when you were still a gay poet", an audience member said to me at a Q and A' (Phillips, *My Trade*, p. 48).

32 Daniel Garrett, review of *Pastoral*, by Carl Phillips, *World Literature Today*, 74.3 (2000), p. 600.

the self's distance from that 'you'. The cruising eye of 'Hymn', which is also its lyric-I, roams with a sense of detachment: it measures its distance from a community that dissolves the moment that this distance is closed. In place of community, at the moment of contact from which the possibility of community recedes, Phillips's poetics crafts a communion in which identity is dispersed through a syntactical extension that almost never gets to the point. That is to say that the lyric-I becomes inseparable from the object which it is posed in search of, and to name this inseparability 'communion' is to emphasize a parallel with devotional poetry that I turn to in the following section. This poetics curbs Leo Bersani's famous anti-relational rendering of sex as a 'self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance*'.³³ It lingers on the brink of that model of dispossession, obliteration, and ecstasy, and in the last instance it moves towards an imagined collectivity that extends beyond the individual (self-shattered or not) — a move that recalls Bersani's own shift in his later writings towards 'proliferating relational possibilities' as encountered in aesthetic experiences.³⁴ In doing so, 'Hymn' honours detachment as what it takes to go on wanting, as a plane of possibility where homoeroticism and the lyric are momentarily aligned.

'HYMN'

Pastoral proceeds as a constant deferral of an arrival in community. Its lyric-I, which materializes most often towards the close of the poems, begins in search of an object. The recursive elusiveness of that object — recovered then lost, covert then revealed — is the collection's leading motif. If the erotic undertow of *Pastoral* were limited to this schema, then it would be interpretable within the boilerplate terms of lyric alienation: an Adornian 'pathos of detachment' (or Pasolini's cry of difference) unfolding through the drama of fleeting sexual encounters. What is more unusual in Phillips's writing, and altogether more queer, is the power of detachment to not only constitute the self but pose the self as subject to a process of continual erasure, a process that does not

33 Leo Bersani, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. by Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 197–222 (p. 222).

34 For an account of this move within Bersani's thought away from the anti-relational and towards aesthetic encounters of 'self-extension', see Tim Dean, 'Sex and the Aesthetics of Existence', *PMLA*, 125.2 (2010), p. 387–92 (p. 391).

arrive at a synthesis in which the lyric-I is calibrated by difference and finds form through antagonism, but drifts instead towards a state of idealized anonymity of which the self is one of several collateral effects. To put it in overly schematic terms, Phillips's cruising scenes express not the longing *for* an object but longing *as* an object, longing as a state evacuated of its subject, a searchingness that can't stop circling itself. My aim is to show how this enigmatic mode of detachment is the result of precise poetic and rhetorical mechanisms, as well as suggesting that it can be historically situated among collective practices of gay men after AIDS. How do syntax and line modulate or excite this searchingness? What does cruising — with its codes of anonymized, impersonal intimacies — have to do with tensile sentences that stretch themselves towards breaking? These questions guide one illustration of what a queer poetics attentive to form can look like in practice.

Phillips's first collection, *In the Blood*, was published in 1992. In an interview from 1994, Phillips states that 'the nature of desire itself' had been his subject matter, adding that 'one's experience [of coming out in the time of AIDS] is going to be quite different from those of the gay men who did so in the 1970s and early 1980s':

I've been interested in how one reconciles the freedom of that earlier time period with the danger that can now attend sex — how to do that, without compromising the very real fact of sexual desire that most of us feel?³⁵

His first collection travels through anonymous sexual encounters with men — 'fucking in small, public spaces',³⁶ as the poem 'Mix' has it — coalescing around what an early review described as 'a voice that is alternately urbane, physically and emotionally abandoned, devotional, teacherly and streetwise'.³⁷ The erraticism and intensity of the encounters described holds that voice back from cohering into a self. It is the anonymity of the sex, and the eroticism generated by anonymity, that produces a language at once intimate and impersonal, a balance disclosed in the opening lines of *In the Blood* in the poem 'X':

35 Quoted in Charles H. Rowell, 'An Interview with Carl Phillips', *Callaloo*, 21.1 (1998), pp. 204–77 (p. 206).

36 Carl Phillips, *In the Blood* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1992), p. 8.

37 Erin Belieu, review of *In the Blood*, by Carl Phillips, and *American Prodigal*, by Liam Rector, *Agni*, 41 (1995), pp. 189–94 (p. 189).

[...] X,
 as in variable,
 anyone's body, any set
 of conditions, your
 body scaling whatever
 fence of chain-metal Xs
 desire throws up [...] ³⁸

This pursuit of the 'variable', and therefore anonymized, potential of desire — marked as 'X', 'anyone's body, any set | of conditions' — is what allows the poems to function paradigmatically as lyric: their reiterative address to a 'you', transferred and transmuted each time that 'desire throws up' another sexual encounter, is inextricable from the restless momentum of cruising which they take as their narrative grounding.

This correspondence reaches its most complete and stylized form in Phillips's fourth collection, *Pastoral*. The opening poem, 'A Kind of Meadow', loiters on a forest edge: a zone of transition between 'shadow | and what inside of it || hides, threatens, calls to' and the clearer light of a field, one that will reoccur as a site of sexual and spiritual regeneration across the collection.³⁹ The 'assembled' trees are imagined as a 'Chorus', and — not quite entering — the poem hangs about on the threshold of that collectivity:

[...] expecting perhaps
 the stag to step forward, to make
 of its twelve-pointed antlers
 this branching foreground to a backdrop
 all branches⁴⁰

This anticipation of the arrival of something singular, a singularity that would gain definition against the entanglement of the forest branches, is equated at the poem's end with the movement of desire itself:

[...] *Only until*
 there's nothing more
I want — thinking it, wrongly,

38 Phillips, *In the Blood*, p. 3.

39 Carl Phillips, *Pastoral* (Saint Paul, MN: Greywolf Press, 2000), p. 3.

40 Ibid.

a thing attainable, any real end
 to wanting, and that it is close, and that
 it is likely, how will you not

 this time catch hold of it: flashing,
 flesh at once

 lit and lightness, a way
 out, the one dappled way, back —⁴¹

Anastrophe, the reversal or tousling of standard syntax, is the most consistent feature of Phillips's poetics. 'The formula,' as Dan Chiasson puts it, 'is this: the sentence represents the mind, making sense of what the body, in the form of line and stanza breaks, forces upon it.'⁴² This could be rephrased without the dualism which Chiasson has in mind: there is the movement of syntax as an arrangement of time (anticipation, excitement, pursuit) and the stanzaic arrangement of space in which that movement occurs. A classicist by training and long-time teacher of Latin and Greek, Phillips is highly attentive to the shaping of his syntax by line and the rhetorical forms embedded in such choices: 'syntax,' he has commented, 'is about negotiating power and creating hierarchies.'⁴³ In the passage quoted, this process of hierarchization involves parsing the statement '*I want*' through a series of postpositional phrases that keep the object of desire — 'it' — front and centre, *even as* we are warned of the wrongness of thinking that it is 'a thing attainable'. The lines, that is to say, set up the pursuit of this object, before dissolving into the visual ephemera of which it is composed.

The poem 'Hymn,' from the second section of the collection, picks up where 'A Kind of Meadow' left off. In the earlier poem, the desire for 'a thing attainable' fizzles out into the flashing of dappled light. 'Hymn,' as its title's pun suggests, converts that 'it' into a person, an unattainable *him*. The scene is again that zone of transition at the forest's edge. The poem begins as a figure steps forward out of the trees and into light:

41 Ibid., p. 4; italics in original.

42 Dan Chiasson, 'End of the Line: New Poems from Carl Phillips,' *New Yorker*, 8 April 2013 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/15/end-of-the-line-6>> [accessed 14 October 2023].

43 Garth Greenwell, Richie Hofmann, and Carl Phillips, 'On Art, Sex, and Syntax,' *Yale Review*, 110.1 (2022), pp. 119–33 (p. 121).

Less the shadow
 than you a stag, sudden, through it.
 Less the stag breaking cover than

 the antlers, with which
 crowned.
 Less the antlers as trees leafless,

 to either side of the stag's head, than —
 between them — the vision that must
 mean, surely, rescue.

 Less the rescue.
 More, always, the ache
 towards it.⁴⁴

This play of subtraction, a relaxed antithesis, 'less this, than that', is once again the grasping towards a desired object that recedes into the detail which each line displaces our attention onto, a phenomenophilic give-and-take which enacts the very 'ache | towards' the figure it is describing. Garth Greenwell, reading the poem along similar lines, takes these opening stanzas as a metaphorical transfiguration of the human into the figure of the stag.⁴⁵ It is important to note that the second line — 'you a stag' — omits simile, and that the repetition of 'Less' seems to direct us not towards similitude but rather a partition of this figure's qualities, a move that passes metonymically downwards from shadow to stag, stag to antlers, antlers to 'the vision' that is rested between them. The steady anastrophic drift of details and their placement — 'sudden, through it', 'with which | crowned', 'between them' — gives the lines their trajectory of descent, as they trace a gaze that reveals itself to be less concerned with the facticity of what is in front of it — is that a shadow or a person, are those branches or antlers? — than with the hidden meaning of its composition. It is thinking, to misquote Keats, that is only capable of posing facts and reason by reaching irritably after mysteries and doubts.

44 Phillips, *Pastoral*, p. 22. Carl Phillips, 'Hymn' and excerpt from 'A Kind of Meadow' from *Pastoral*. Copyright © 2000 by Carl Phillips. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC on behalf of Graywolf Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, graywolfpress.org.

45 'Stag' itself, in gay US slang, would refer to sexually available men, and a 'stagline' to a gathering of male prostitutes; see John Rechy, *City of Night* (New York: Grove, 1963): 'Cars still go round the block to choose a paid partner from the stagline' (p. 275).

Where do these mysteries arrive from? ‘Hymn’, like much of *Pastoral*, borrows its symbolic substance from Christian hagiography. The story here is that of St Eustace, a Roman general who converted to Christianity after a vision of the Crucifixion seen between the antlers of a stag. A celebrated engraving of the scene by Albrecht Dürer (Figure 1) shows the soldier kneeling beside his horse and hunting hounds, his hands raised, his face turned in profile towards the stag that stands between two bare trees. Dürer’s depiction departed from more theatrical iconographies of the same scene in which the saint had typically been depicted falling from his horse. Its superabundant detailing is finely drawn and balanced so that, as the art historian Erwin Panofsky writes, it instils ‘a sense of quietude’, and although it is Dürer’s largest engraving, it is — ‘almost paradoxically’ — his most ‘delicate.’⁴⁶ Delicacy of detail is also a property of Phillips’s opening stanzas, and a glance at Dürer’s engraving can help us make sense of what their antithetical refrain of ‘Less ...’ amounts to. The persistent trimming of detail, the lessening of vision to the minutiae of observable phenomenon, the unremarkable manner in which the icon is reduced to an almost incidental scale and position (the crucifix itself measuring no more than 2 cm in full) — Dürer’s composition likens revelation to the mundane activity of paying attention, of *leaning in* to pinpoint, amidst its dense patterning of rhyming shapes, what is singularly different. In an analogous manner, the opening lines of ‘Hymn’ are less interested in the spectacle of an accomplished metaphor than in performing the eye’s sweep across that metaphor’s constituent parts. They caress physical detail, and test out the bounds of sight and sensation, so that the two senses of ‘vision’ — the one mundane, the other transcendent — come to seem indivisible.

The rhetorical stringency of that progressive ‘lessening’ is therefore in service to a mystical conception of the world, one that doesn’t necessitate a step up the metaphysical ladder but puts, instead, the possibility of divine communion firmly on Earth, kicking that ladder away in the process. Writing on the case of the seventeenth-century mystic Benedetta Carlini, Patricia Simons details how ‘recourse to mystical

46 Erwin Panofsky, ‘Dürer’s “St. Eustace”’, *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University*, 9.1 (1950), pp. 2–10 (p. 2).



Figure 1. Albrecht Dürer, *St Eustace*, c.1501, engraving, 35 × 25.9 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

fantasy endowed her passion with a structure and a rhetoric. Rather than sublimation through piety, Benedetta's case history indicates an intensifying of acts spiritual *and* sexual.⁴⁷ In 'Hymn', iconographic borrowings from Eustace should likewise be read not as rerouting desire towards an abstraction of divine love but as allowing for its gaze to be guided by a grammar of longing that remains embedded in the observation of worldly phenomenon and baited by sexual anticipation. That this heightened reading of the visual can traffic between the language of mysticism *and* the mechanics of cruising is one achievement of Phillips's poetics.

Cruising, writes Jack Parlett in *The Poetics of Cruising*, is 'a perceptual arena where acts of looking are intensified and eroticized':⁴⁸ the sexually assertive gaze is bent on fixing the telling detail, hoping that its gaze will in turn be taken as a sign. The metonymic exactingness with which 'Hymn' translates this practised intensity into its syntax results in the subtraction of the self from the equation: you stare too intensely, you forget altogether that you are staring.⁴⁹ It is here that a second noteworthy feature of the syntax of the opening stanzas is important: their elision of a subject. The only complete clause comes in the third stanza: 'the vision that must | mean, surely, rescue', where 'the vision' is, fittingly, itself the phrase's grammatical subject and the presence of an onlooking subjectivity can only be inferred from the suggestive intrusion of 'surely'. The self is nowhere to be seen, absorbed as it is in the strain of seeing. This would support reading the poem within the long tradition of devotional lyricism, in which self-sacrifice, or self-annihilation, is one outcome of the mystical sensibility that Phillips here makes his own. Merrill Cole, in *The Other Orpheus*, describes how to 'figure interpersonal relations in the language of Christian devotion, and thereby to make sacrifice the proof and substance of human love,

47 Patricia Simons, "'Bodily Things" and Brides of Christ: The Case of the Early Seventeenth-Century "Lesbian Nun" Benedetta Carlini', in *Sex, Gender and Sexuality in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by Jacqueline Murray and Nicholas Terpstra (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 97-124 (p. 104; emphasis in original).

48 Jack Parlett, *The Poetics of Cruising: Queer Visual Culture from Walt Whitman to Grindr* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), p. 2.

49 For a discussion of the gaze and its significances in cruising, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), p. 188.

is the inaugural strategy of Western love poetry.⁵⁰ The self, in this tradition, is given up, abased, or sacrificed, as testimony to its own insignificance when faced with the incomprehensible magnitude of divine love, the idea being that such incomprehensibility can only be negatively marked by the self's vanishing. Cole was interested in the relation between this strategy and 'the sacrificial economy' of male homoeroticism in modernist poetry, as well as the possibility of discovering alternative erotic modes that would not be limited to the language of acquisition and loss, selfhood and sacrifice.⁵¹ The next stanzas of 'Hymn' appear to turn precisely on this question, taking place as they do within a further blurring of distinction between the divine and the mundane, between erotic and sacred:

When I think of death, the gleam of
the world darkening, dark, gathering me
now in, it is lately

as one more of many other nights
figured with the inevitably
black car, again the stranger's

strange room entered not for prayer
but for striking
prayer's attitude, the body

kneeling, bending, until it finds
the muscled patterns that
predictably, given strain and

release, flesh assumes.

When I think of desire,
it is in the same way that I do

God: as parable, any steep
and blue water, things that are always
there, they only wait

to be sounded.⁵²

Without recourse to the trope of devotional self-sacrifice, it is hard to make sense of the fifth stanza's switch from a desirous 'ache towards'

50 Merrill Cole, *The Other Orpheus: A Poetics of Modern Homosexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 6.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 143.

52 Phillips, *Pastoral*, pp. 22–23.

an ungraspable object to the contemplation of death. The stanzas then extend this association of devotional imagery and sex, and that association hinges directly on the suggested likeness of death to desire, most vividly illustrated by the ‘black car’ — both a hearse and a pickup — or the kneeling body — both a sexualized pose and ‘prayer’s attitude’.

Like Cole, it was on a resemblance between Catholic mysticism’s ‘pure love’ (in which self-annihilation is a necessary condition for divine communion) and the practice of barebacking amongst gay men (in which the receiver risks HIV infection) that Bersani made the case for an ‘impersonal intimacy’ in which subjectivity is annihilated as it is ‘penetrated, even replaced, by an unknowable otherness’:

Of course, both barebacker and the proponent of pure love continue to exist, for other people, as identifiable individuals; but at the ideal limit of their ascetes, both their individualities are overwhelmed by the massive anonymous presence to which they have surrendered themselves.⁵³

The comparison is also made explicit by Garth Greenwell in his own reading of ‘Hymn’: ‘the limit-experience of sex [...] is similar to the mystic’s limit-experience of God in the way that it confounds discursive rationality and courts the bewilderment and even the extinction of the self.’⁵⁴ What I note, however, is that the *courting* of bewilderment and extinction marks the expressive limit of this semblance in ‘Hymn’. When death is overtly evoked, it is as part of the *reinsertion* of a subjectivity into the poem’s syntax: the ‘I’ that is held in contemplation of death organizes the following five stanzas around one complete sentence. If these stanzas are set against the parataxical fragmentation of vision as traced through the poem’s first four stanzas, this subjectivity performs a drawing away from the kind of eroticized self-

53 Leo Bersani, ‘Shame on You’, in Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 31–57 (p. 54).

54 Greenwell, ‘Cruising Devotion’, p. 173. Carl Phillips, *The Art of Daring: Risk, Restlessness, Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014), has also reflected on this connection between self-annihilation and gay sexual practices: ‘The more I observed men get multiply, randomly, routinely barebacked by total strangers, the more I began to equate promiscuity with virtual suicide. Or with the despair, the nothing-left-to-lose, that I’d associated with suicide. And, as with suicide (commitment as a form of power that counterbalances a sense of powerlessness), I think promiscuity has a great deal to do with power — the feeling of conquest and/or of being conquered’ (p. 108).

shattering which Bersani's parallelism leads towards. This is to say that while the move from desire to death (and back again) has something of the Bersaniesque about it, and is inflected with what Cole calls the 'sacrificial' logic of devotional love, what Phillips's lines pursue is the self's *contemplation* of that limit itself, rather than the dissolution of that limit as enacted upon the self.

Remaining at this limit, the poem's subsequent stanzas perform another turn, or a return, back towards desire and the language of devotion. The emphasis falls again on the sensation of anticipation that attends desire: the contemplation of desire, like the contemplation of God, is a state of being present and waiting 'to be sounded'. This amounts to an amplification of the comparison between an affected stance of lyric detachment (the self composed here as a contemplation of itself) and the eroticism (mystical *and* queer) of submitting oneself to a desirous state of expectation. The poem's final stanzas equate this expectation with the passivity, and durability, of a stone:

And I a stone that, a little bit, perhaps
 should ask pardon.
 My fears — when I have fears —
 are of how long I shall be, falling,
 and in my at last resting how
 indistinguishable, inasmuch as they
 are countless, sire,
 all the unglittering other dropped stones.⁵⁵

This final image of the 'dropped stones', and of falling as one stone among many, is more than the theological pose of a pacified receptivity to God; it is the last image with which Phillips refigures intimacy as *neither* nihilistic self-dissolution *nor* solipsistic self-contemplation, but an anonymity that rests within a collectivity. Phillips recalled in an interview a practice common on the gay beaches along Cape Cod in the 1990s:

I saw here and there several men who would be lying alone,
 except for a small pile of stones — a cairn of sorts — beside them;
 I later learned that these signified the lover, now dead, with whom
 each man had been used to coming to this beach in the past.⁵⁶

55 Phillips, *Pastoral*, p. 23.

56 Quoted in Rowell, 'Interview', pp. 213–14.

This practice, Phillips goes on to emphasize, was occurring alongside continued cruising for sex: two counterpointed sentiments, one of desire's continuance, and one of mournful recollection, that ground the opening and closing lines of 'Hymn'.

The conceit of the 'I' as a stone is the bridge between these two poles, connecting as it does the passivity of the self in the hyper-receptive gazing of the opening stanzas to the practice of mourning represented by the collection of 'other dropped stones'. Each gesture involves the lyric-I in a relational exchange: the cruising gaze expects 'the rescue' that will resolve 'the ache' of desire; the stone waits for its collection among 'other dropped stones'; both figure a 'wait | to be sounded', a sentiment which, as the work of Cole and Bersani makes plain, can be readily lifted from Christian mysticism and transferred to modern homoeroticism. Phillips's innovative manipulation of this transference lies in pairing its erotic drive with the second practice of collecting stones in memory of those lost to AIDS. In doing so, the anonymity implicit within each exchange — as marked firstly by the absence of a subject in the opening lines and then by the image of the stone resting 'indistinguishable' among 'countless' others — is the product not of detachment but rather the subject's surrender to, or entering into, alterity. That process of surrender does not involve the reification of an already existing community. Rather, Phillips's erotics of waiting orients itself towards a future in which the subject will be collected, gathered up, or 'rescued' by the arrival of the other.

The connections between theories of lyric detachment and queer interrogations of relationality should run both ways. Phillips's 'Hymn' arrives at its resting place of collectivity — one stone, gathered lovingly among others — by excavating the likenesses of the lyric-I and the cruising subject. Through that likeness, the poem shapes, in the language of Berlant and Warner, a counterintimacy: the anonymity of cruising leads onto the anonymity of death, not as a place of self-annihilation or non-relation, but as an expectant state of *belonging to*, or being gathered within, a collectivity. To return in closing to where this chapter began: Berlant and Warner hazard their own image of an intimate exchange, in the final pages of their essay, that exceeds and disrupts received modes of relation. They do so by pausing over a moment in a New York leather bar, where they watch a performance

of 'erotic vomiting'. A boy — 'twentyish, very skateboard' — sits and tilts his head up for another man to pour milk down his throat:

A dynamic is established between them in which they carefully keep at the threshold of gagging. The bottom struggles to keep taking in more than he really can. The top is careful to give him just enough to stretch his capacities. From time to time a baby bottle is offered as a respite, but soon the rhythm intensifies. The boy's stomach is beginning to rise and pulse, almost convulsively.⁵⁷

Bracketing, for a moment, the poetics of the performance itself, what is striking is the account's careful recombination of anonymity, roleplay, and fluid exchange, a vignette that Berlant and Warner compose in order to contest the idea that queer sexualities need confine themselves to the assertion of an impervious and fixed identity. The participants are here, as in Phillips's poems, engaged in a daring choreography of passivity and activity, performed in public view, in a manner that surpasses any normative rendering of sexuality as private sex between two people. In recounting the performance, Berlant and Warner are keenly attentive to the arrangement of its rhythms and beats, as well as the lulls and climactic screams among the crowd watching.⁵⁸ In their closing paragraph, they briefly refer to the performance as a *lyric* moment:

We are used to thinking about sexuality as a form of intimacy and subjectivity, and we have just demonstrated how limited that representation is. But the heteronormativity of U.S. culture is not something that can be easily rezoned or disavowed by individual acts of will, by a subversiveness imagined only as personal rather than as the basis of public formation, nor even by the lyric moments that interrupt the hostile cultural narrative that we have been staging here.⁵⁹

Phillips's lyric provides another example of how a queer poetics might travel beyond the interruption of present norms. It does so without recourse to the language of community, preferring instead to explore the

57 Berlant and Warner, 'Sex in Public', p. 565.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., p. 566.

erotics of waiting for a future collectivity. This is, as I have been arguing, the poetics of cruising itself: as ‘anticipated remembrance’,⁶⁰ a series of gestures that recite a shared memory of what might come. These gestures find their correspondences in the common elements of Phillips’s poetics. The restlessness of syntax, the tracking of the gaze, the vanishment and resurfacing of its subject, and the anonymity which it is reduced to when faced with its desire: such strategies contribute to a lyric moment that is defined by its anticipation of a being together that is not here yet.

60 Parlett, *Poetics of Cruising*, p. 56.

Hal Coase, 'Lyric, Detachment, and Collectivity: On Carl Phillips's 'Hymn'', in *Rethinking Lyric Communities*, ed. by Irene Fantappiè, Francesco Giusti, and Laura Scuriatti, Cultural Inquiry, 30 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2024), pp. 235–57 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-30_10>

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