

George Hartley

THE
ARIZONA
QUARTERLY

SPRING

VOLUME 42

1986

NUMBER 1

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA—TUCSON

THE ARIZONA QUARTERLY

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The University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721.

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Second-class postage paid at Tucson, Arizona.

Manuscripts must be accompanied by return postage.

Subscription rate: \$5.00 per year; \$10.00 for three years. Single copies \$1.50.

The *Arizona Quarterly* in microfilm form may be obtained from
University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

Back issues and reprints of Volumes 1-26 are available from

Kraus Reprint Co., Route 100, Millwood, NY 10546.

This journal is a member of  the Conference of Editors of Learned Journals.

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his other books. His images are strange at first, primarily because so freshly mined from his now-luminous imagination. He works at the level of new myths. I like Wallace Fowlie's definition of a myth as a set of symbols with a narrative. The accruing effect is of a master jewel carver writing about the relationship between himself as ordinary, sensual man (eating fruit, making love to a woman) and himself as artist (coating fruit in bronze, allowing himself and everything he loves to be bronzed) exulting as does an athlete when throwing a hammer.

The bronzed man as well as the man who bronzes has implicitly the problem of Midas, who forgot he would need to touch his food to eat and touch his child to love her. The Pygmalion myth is also here, but in reverse. Instead of caressing a statue until it becomes a living woman, the poet is gilding a living woman, though there is the other, too ("brushing the marble from her stalled body," "The Barbarian," p. 33).

This book is a kind of "Inferno." There is violence in these images: jewels are also sores and blood; the pear is beheaded; the river has the torn limb of an alligator in it. Yet the "Channel Swimmer" exults: "All that really mattered was his own secret headline: I crossed./ He might be exhausted and oil-streaked but he would dance down the street" ("The Channel Swimmer," p. 84).

Few of us ever come to grips with the full implications of our choices. Eaton has not only become the master poet he set out to be, but he may well be our best living American poet, and once the whole wall of the mosaic he has been building is there to see, we will understand how well he knew what he was doing, and that even before many "saw" it, he knew he was like "a magnificent swan/ Heaped with violets, that carried its burden of fragrance/ Without spilling a petal and without a stain on its breast from the turbulent water" ("The Channel Swimmer," p. 84).

Chapel Hill, NC

JUDY HOGAN

THE MINIMAL SELF: PSYCHIC SURVIVAL IN TROUBLED TIMES.

By Christopher Lasch. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984. 317 pp. \$16.95.

"Something was making him nibble at the edge of stale ideas as if his sturdy physical egotism no longer nourished his peremptory heart." This description of Tom Buchanan from *The Great Gatsby* could easily have come from the pages of Christopher Lasch's important new book, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*. Perhaps the most valuable feature of Lasch's social criticism has always been his constant struggle to reveal the "stale ideas" at the heart of contemporary American political discussion. "Since the argument I have advanced in the foregoing pages cuts across conventional political boundaries," he tells us, "it will seem confusing to readers who rely on familiar ideological landmarks to keep their intellectual bearings" (p. 197).

Anyone who has followed the critical debates on his previous books, particularly *Haven in a Heartless World* and *The Culture of Narcissism*, knows that many readers of all political stances confuse Lasch's ideas with "a rousing defense of traditional values," a "marvelously reactionary" attempt to glorify the bourgeois patriarchal family. More intent on flogging dead horses—such as the family or individualism—most readers fail to see that Lasch's analysis offers us a truly radical approach to the problems we face under consumer capitalism.

In many ways *The Minimal Self* forms the third volume of Lasch's study of narcissism. The argument behind all three is briefly as follows: one important function of the nineteenth-century family was the socialization of the child. Through interaction with the parents the child gives up his or her pre-Oedipal fantasies of the parents as devouring monsters and internalizes the rules of society. But when the child's interaction with the parents is impeded, either through absence or through extreme permissiveness, the child's earlier fantasies remain unchecked and the monsters of the pre-Oedipal superego remain. This unresolved Oedipus complex, Lasch explains in *The Culture of Narcissism*, gives rise to the narcissist, who is characterized by the following: "dependence on the vicarious warmth provided by others combined with a fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, . . . unsatisfied oral cravings, . . . pseudo self-insight, calculating seductiveness, nervous, self-deprecatory humor." This erosion of the family and other roots creates a culture of narcissists. Modern capitalism, by taking the parents out of the home and leaving the child under the guidance of impersonal bureaucratic institutions such as the schools, the juvenile courts, and the day-care system erodes familial cohesion and so helps create the personality best suited to bureaucratic control—the group-dependent narcissist. In *Haven* Lasch develops this argument and follows the recent history of social thought concerning the family. In *The Culture of Narcissism* he shows how narcissism pervades all of American life from schooling to self-help groups to sports. In *The Minimal Self*, as the subtitle suggests, he then goes on to "make clear what *The Culture of Narcissism* seems to have left obscure or ambiguous: that the concern with the self, which seems so characteristic of our time, takes the form of a concern with its psychic survival" (p. 16).

The "minimal self" refers to the underdeveloped narcissistic ego which fails to distinguish between the self and the external world. Through the ego we mediate our voracious desires and the limits of our surroundings. It is only through our understanding of the self's limits and capabilities that we can take on such an enormous task as transforming society and hope to reach any success. Consequently, any attempt at cultural revolution (a goal Lasch seeks), no matter how well intentioned, which does not strengthen the beleaguered self, only exacerbates our problems brought on by consumer capitalism, which has replaced "a reliable

world of durable objects by a world of flickering images that make it harder and harder to distinguish reality from fantasy." It is this call for stability and a strengthened ego to which most radicals object, seeing the ego as the force behind "masculine" destructiveness and narcissism as the source of "feminine" creativity and unity. But far from merging in social harmony with all others, the narcissist, under contemporary conditions, isolates himself or herself all the more: "In a time of troubles, everyday life becomes an exercise in survival. . . . Under these conditions, selfhood becomes a kind of luxury, out of place in an age of impending austerity. Selfhood implies a personal history, friends, family, a sense of place. Under siege, the self contracts to a defensive core, armed against adversity. Emotional equilibrium demands a minimal self, not the imperial self of yesteryear" (p. 15). Conservatives, as mistaken as many radicals, often see our present problems stemming from a weakened superego, or lax moral discipline. But the narcissist's superego remains in reality too harsh and self-punishing with its fantastic monsters of authority. Liberals and radicals who, like Lasch, hope to strengthen the ego often go wrong, Lasch claims, by relying on the therapeutic ideal which, with its imposition of "experts," contributes to the fragmentation of social roots and the increase of behavioral manipulation.

Far from being reactionary nostalgia, Lasch's in-depth explanation of the minimal self, contracted all the more in its attempt to survive in an age of nuclear threat and economic crisis, his extensive application of this insight to recent developments in American society, and his continued and clarified engagement in contemporary political debate make *The Minimal Self* indispensable for those who, like Lasch, hope for political and economic justice and a rational approach to the greatest threats of our time.

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GEORGE HARTLEY

STANZA MY STONE: WALLACE STEVENS AND THE HERMETIC TRADITION. By Leonora Woodman. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1983. x, 195 pp. \$14.50.

The poetry of Wallace Stevens delights, but it doesn't always instruct. Poems about a large red man reading, about a snowman or a nude on a spring voyage may strike us with their innate esthetic rightness, while leaving us considerably in doubt about their *raison d'être*. One current view accepts Stevens's apparent lack of rational connections as a reflection of contemporary intellectual uncertainty, considers a Stevens poem as a vehicle through which the author creates his own, private reality, and lets the issue go at that. Even more highly refined approaches in this vein often end up discussing Stevens as a nominalist or as a humanist esthete, a tack which mainly holds out the help of vague labels. In the face of such prevailing criticism, Leonora Woodman claims to have found nothing less than the key to Stevens's writing. She

maintains that his work is "as consistent and systematic as any rigorous reader might wish. . ." (p. 4). Readers arching their brows at the statement may be perplexed when she further declares that Stevens is a religious poet who grounded his poetry in the related beliefs of alchemy, theosophy, Rosicrucianism, and German Pietism.

Making the pronouncement and proving it offer two different tasks, and on the latter score Woodman gets into trouble. She devotes most of her study to explicating poems in terms of the arcane knowledge on which Stevens supposedly based them. She notes, for instance, that the writer casts his well-known "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" as a recipe, "the standard form," Woodman points out, "of many alchemical texts" (p. 98). In the same poem, she calls our attention to Stevens's use of "concupiscent" and reminds us that the word echoes the "alchemical *concupiscentia* used to designate the mating of the masculine and feminine contraries" (p. 98). Further instruction comes from flowers wrapped in old newspapers. They refer directly to the *prima materia* in the mystic tradition. Later mention of a dresser missing three glass knobs signals a repudiation of the Christian Trinity.

After nearly a hundred and fifty pages of similar analyses, we may fear that the critic has led herself into shoal-laden waters. The evidence is there, but it seems at best circumstantial. Woodman makes a good deal of the fact that the poet titled his first collection *Harmonium*, again a term with alchemical associations. Yet those associations are so many and so broad that they might be misapplied to a host of works by authors manifestly ignorant of the cults in question. Similarly, Woodman strains at considerable length to make sure that we recognize Stevens's frequent references to birth and death, to water and fire, to serpents and doves as concerns peculiar to alchemy, whereas, of course, they may be found in many, if not most, religious traditions. In short, we begin to fear that Woodman has stretched Stevens's work to fit her thesis.

If we are surprised at her initial pronouncement, then let down by her lengthy defense of it, we are all but amazed by her last and briefest section. Little is known of Stevens's formative years, and as a vice-president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity insurance company, he lived apart from other poets of his day, aloof from their cliques and priding himself in the aura created by his reticence. While admitting the dearth of biographical detail, in this area Woodman makes her best case for aligning Stevens with mystical symbolism and thought. As it happens, in the latter part of the seventeenth century, groups of German Pietists, bands of celibates professing the very mysticism Woodman finds in Stevens's poems, began founding religious communities in eastern Pennsylvania. Such a tenuous set of circumstances does not in itself brand a poet from the area as one of their spiritual followers. But then Woodman establishes more than ordinary connections. In his youth, Stevens spent summer holidays near Ephrata, the site of one of