

THE EMERGENCE OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN *THE WASTE LAND**

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I have tried to construe the emergence of Cubism as a symptom of the post-classical age. The Cubist experiment cannot be completely understood until it is placed in its proper historical perspective, as an attempt to re-orient thinking within an altered sense of the real. Thinking itself must come to terms with a demanding time, in which the classical distinctions between subject and object, man and nature, or self and the world are being re-formulated. The Cartesian split that separated man from matter had already been threatened by art before it was broached by the philosophy of the modern physicists.

Twentieth century painting could not be content to imitate the visible world, for that act of imitation was based on the old orientation which isolated man from his environment. Art had known, since the dissolution of the Impressionist dilemma, that the self is an integral part of the world it inhabits. The problem for the serious artist, ever since, has been to cope with this realization. For, as simple as it sounds, this new orientation requires nothing less than a complete redefinition of man, and the world.

When the boundaries between subject and object are transgressed and the self becomes exteriorized, then the act of thinking is delivered, once more, to the realm of the metaphysical. One still can say, «I think». But the old, persistent question arises again: What does it mean to say «I»? And if the «I» opens out into its surroundings, to what extent does its thinking influence or determine the environment? What, finally, is the «nature» of this new reality, and where can it be located? Such questions as these are, consciously or unconsciously, the motive force behind all truly modern art.

* (This is one of a series of interrelated essays dealing with many of the important creative phenomena of the twentieth century. There are, as a consequence, numerous references here to the preceding work, «Kafka/Cubism-Einstein/Indeterminacy», as yet unpublished, which contains a more detailed account of the significance of Cubist style and its curious historical relationship with the work of Franz Kafka).

The post-Impressionists had recognized that a work of art must be more than the imitation of a set of external data. They knew that those data are affected by perception, and that perception can be ordered by the imagination. As the self moved outward into the environment, pervading the world with sense, the locus of reality moved inward, toward the «region» of creative thought. With Cubism, that movement reached a climax. Any Cubist artifact represents the post-classical relationship between creative thought and the environment because it is, in essence, an example of their interaction. This is the direct line of heritage from Cézanne to Braque and Picasso. The difference is that the Cubists tipped the scales in favor of thought. In the final flowering of Cubism, every artwork establishes its own, autonomous reality. This is the case because the Cubists understood that the interaction between thinking and the environment composes what is real. If Cubism depicts anything, it is the active participation of thought in the structuring and interpretation of the physical world.

That this new artistic orientation corresponds with and to a certain degree prepares for the implications of the new physics cannot be considered a matter of historical coincidence. Art and science are intimately related. Their common roots lie in the matrix of intelligence. Each is an expression, in a different form, of thinking as it emerges through history.

And here, we have come to an important point. It would seem to be one of the defining characteristics of the post-classical age that thinking itself, as a depersonalized, historical phenomenon, becomes an issue for thought. For if man, the vehicle of thought, and the world constitute an amalgamation, then the real can only discover itself in that thinking which brings them together, which allows them to interact as what they are.

An understanding of the new orientation, then, would require a displacement of thought. Thinking must transcend its immediate conditions to consider itself, impersonally, from beyond itself. But this is precisely what the Cubist aesthetic has done. If the Cubist artwork is an example of how thinking suffuses the environment, then to contemplate that artwork is to contemplate thinking from beyond itself, to contemplate the functioning of thought.

This interpretation appears to lend credence to Morse Peckham's proposition that art fulfills a biological role, that it functions as a «rehearsal for the orientation which makes innovation possible»¹. Cubism induces us to make that displacement which allows for a re-evaluation of the process of thought. And such a re-evaluation was an essential step in the development of quantum physics, in learning to understand how reality propagates at its source, on the sub-atomic scale.

But before we go any further, it maybe a good idea to stop and consider our present position. If this explanation of the new orientation, and the role of art in establishing it, is correct, then we need not limit our attention to the case of Cubism. Other important, and roughly contemporaneous works of art should also address the problem of the post-classical age, should function to induce us

¹ Morse Peckham, *Man's Rage for Chaos* (New York: Schocken Paperback, 1973), p. 314.

out of the old context and to prepare us for that necessary re-evaluation of the phenomenon of thinking. One of those works which most profoundly answers this historical need is T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

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The medium of vision is space. The medium of language is time. Until the twentieth century, both had been considered, in the Newtonian explanation of reality, as absolute. It was assumed that a consistent three-dimensional space and a consistently consecutive time were the perimeters of the material world, that they «contained» all that is. Their uniform characteristics, supposedly independent of the existence of man, determined the nature of the physical universe in which we lived. But painting uncovered the need to reorganize the concept of space through the intervention of thought. One of the effects of Cubism is to bring into question the belief that space is absolute, that it *is*, independently of the mind that perceives it.

If there is evidence of the new orientation in literature, it should reveal itself as a reorganization of the traditional concept of time. On this level of interpretation there are considerable similarities between the implications of *The Waste Land* and those of the Cubist aesthetic. But it must be stressed that this is not a matter of the influence of painterly technique on the poem. It constitutes, much rather, the expression of a shared historical need: the need to redefine the framework of reality.

As the acceptance of serious interdisciplinary studies increases, critics are gradually coming to recognize these similarities². Jacob Korg was one of the earliest to publish a detailed stylistic comparison between *The Waste Land* and modern painting in general. He elucidates the fundamental «Cubist» aspect of the poem when he writes that «In the Cubist painting, the laws of space are suppressed, so that all parts of the model, even those that are normally out of sight, can be brought actively into the design; similarly, in *The Waste Land*, the laws of time are suppressed so that all of history and literature can be made available to the poem. In short, *The Waste Land* reconstitutes time in much the same way as the Cubist painting reconstitutes space³».

Ironically, it was Eliot's theory of tradition, published in 1919, just before the composition of *The Waste Land*, which laid the groundwork for his poetic transformation of time. In «Tradition and the Individual Talent» he argues, in effect, that there are two kinds of time, the chronological and the historical, which, while separate, are mutually interdependent. The individual, in Eliot's case the poet, constitutes the link between the two.

² Two of the significant interdisciplinary studies in which *The Waste Land* receives considerable attention are Wylie Sypher, *Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature* (New York: Random House, 1960), and Mario Praz, *Mnemosyne: The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

³ Jacob Korg, «Modern Art Techniques in The Waste Land», *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XVII (1960), p. 458.

Personal experience emerges through chronological time. Things «come to pass»; we live our lives. Memories are created. But the body of tradition, or history, exists somewhere, perpetually, beyond the awesome rhythm of chronology. This «somewhere», however, does not denote any physical location. The past makes up an ideal structure which can only take its place in the mind. Yet this cannot be the mind of the individual, which is formed by personal experience; it can only be a larger mind that contains the memory of a culture. The ideal structure of the past, then, composes itself within a consciousness that transcends the individual, one that is, essentially, historical.

It is the responsibility of the poet to acquire this «consciousness of the past» because the present, and the meaning of the present, are an extenuation of the past, and the meaning of the past. To be a significant voice of his own time, the poet must speak with the «historical sense», which

involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order⁴.

This is to say that the poet despersonalizes his own experience in order to acquire that of his culture, his tradition. But in doing so, of course, he unifies them both. The tradition becomes a part of his experience, and he, in turn, assumes the historical consciousness. Thenceforth, he operates, through the medium of his art, in the realm of historical time.

Every new work that he creates modifies that «ideal order» of monuments which composes the structure of the past, modifies the historical consciousness itself. But of course, every new work of art is, at the same time, an organic result of the tradition which fostered it. The meaningful present can only be an extenuation of the past. As Eliot puts it: «Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past»⁵. As this point he seems to be implying that this «consciousness of the past» may be an independent, self-organizing force which expresses itself through the individual artist, or, to use the terminology of this essay, of thinking itself as a de-personalized phenomenon within its historical context. So we come once again to that displacement of thinking which is implicit in the Cubist aesthetic. Yet here it arises from a concern with the nature of time. As Frank Kermode has so perceptively said of Eliot's theory of tradition: «In a sense, it is Cubist historiography, unlearning the trick of perspective and ordering history as a system of perpetually varying spatial alignments»⁶.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, «Tradition and the Individual Talent», in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1960), p. 4.

⁵ Eliot, «Tradition and the Individual Talent»... p. 5.

⁶ Frank Kermode, «A Babylonish Dialect», in *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. Allen Tate (New York: Delacorte Press, 1966), pp. 236-7.

Only from this standpoint can we fully appreciate why Eliot deemed it so needful to escape from the personality. The assumption of the historical consciousness is, in itself, a transcendence of the immediate conditions of thinking, of the personal identity of the man. When the poet devotes his life to the development of the consciousness of the past, «What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality»⁷. Eliot's call for escape from the personality is an experimental step toward a re-definition of man within the larger context of history. It reveals itself as another symptom of the post-classical age.

As I have previously pointed out, this kind of experimentation with the self is one of the necessary risks of modernity that Franz Kafka was unable, or unwilling, to take. And yet, he is a pivotal figure because he recognized so acutely the need to take them. The conflict of Kafka's literature centers around the sense of incapacity which arises, ultimately, from his own refusal to transcend the empirical boundaries of the self. Although he saw the necessity of abandoning the classical orientation based on the definite separation of man and nature, he clearly believed that to do so was an enterprise fraught with danger. It would, as the wall-investigator comes to realize, pull the very ground out from under our feet.

Kafka's great heroes are tormented by the need to escape from their own painfully limited identities. Figures like K, Josef K, and Gregor Samsa finally come to represent the tender flame of consciousness itself. But in them we are given an individual consciousness that is circumscribed, isolated, and eventually doomed by the limitations imposed in the old orientation. And of course, since Kafka's narrative technique is based on a close identification with the sensory awareness of the central character, the narration itself is doomed from the outset to failure or fragmentation.

If Kafka's characters represent himself, then their metaphysical quest reflects his own. The «narrative consciousness» of his writing is a metaphor of the mind of the artist in its confrontation with reality. At a time when the classical orientation was approaching exhaustion, Kafka, like Eliot, recognized the need for thinking to escape from its empirical bounds, which, for both of them, took the form of the identity. But Kafka never created a successful metaphor for that escape. He could not separate his art from his personal life. They were both conditioned by a belief in the ultimate distinction between the self, as an isolated consciousness, and the infinite external world. There could be no fusion between the two. Kafka clearly understood the prison cell of identity, but he chose to lock himself inside. He chose, at the same time, to lock himself into his own failure.

Kafka's only escape from the empirical self could be found in a work like *Die Verwandlung*, in which the central character, the narrative awareness of the story, dies, but the narration itself continues, transcending the awareness of

⁷ Eliot, «Tradition and the Individual Talent»... pp. 6-7.

Gregor Samsa into the plane of the omniscient. As close as it comes to answering the call of the new orientation, this metamorphosis of narrative consciousness finally only points the way. *Die Verwandlung* presents a symbolic death of the self, not an opening out of the self into the environment. For Kafka, who chose to adhere to the limitations of time and space imposed by the classical orientation, death provided the only imaginable mode of transcendence, the only vehicle of escape from the prison of identity.

The full value of *The Waste Land*, and its structural coherence, come forth when the poem is considered within this somewhat novel context. It can, and should, be read as an example of narrative consciousness. But the important difference is that Eliot had taught himself in «Tradition and the Individual Talent» to transcend the limitations of the self without destroying the self. The narrative consciousness of *The Waste Land* opens out into historical time, beyond the chronological in which the personality of the poet is engaged.

In order to bring off this technical coup, Eliot needed some character whose awareness went beyond the empirical, who could transcend and unify the lives and the thought of an unlimited number of individuals from various points in time. This character, of course, is Tiresias. His omniscience constitutes the unifying principle of the poem. Unlike the Kafkan hero, Tiresias is not locked into the Cartesian prison of identity. By making Tiresias' consciousness the milieu of the poem, Eliot himself gains access to all of chronological time. The individual personality of the poet merges into the historical consciousness. Eliot provides a straight-forward explanation of Tiresias' role in the well-known note to the poem:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character', is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias⁸.

To understand the structure of *The Waste Land* we must realize that it occurs in the mind of Tiresias. His mind is the historical consciousness, outside of chronological time, which performs the «Cubist historiography» that composes the poem. In a method similar to that of the Cubist painter, Tiresias chooses various historical moments and then places them into a new juxtaposition. As if to let us know that his thinking provides the structure of the poem, Eliot allows him to emerge at the exact center of his constellation of fragmentary voices and personalities, like the nucleus of some enormous, suspended atom.

In its treatment of history the poem operates in the same way as a Cubist still-life or landscape of the analytical period. It does not re-present an objectified version of the past, it evokes the past by quoting fragments out of the context of time. The original apposition of these fragments creates an autonomous field which establishes its own, intrinsic meaning. Or, to express it in terms more consonant with Eliotic thought, the poet redeems meaning from an exhausted time.

⁸ Note to line 218 of *The Waste Land*.

In the same way, the reader must create his own meaning from this constellation of historical fragments. In the Cubist composition the fragments act as signs, which direct each viewer to establish a subjective version of the original context. By the same token, *The Waste Land* can be understood as a system of signals for the subjective reorganization of history, or time. This is participatory art at its finest, inducing thinking itself into an unprecedented relationship with time. Thus, the poem demands a different orientation of the reader; it demands an individual exercise in the creation of meaning. Little wonder that *The Waste Land* has inspired so many critics to elaborate so many ingenious interpretations. Such is the ultimate purpose of the poem: to induce a fusion between thinking and the world, to practice that orientation by which thinking might contemplate its own complicity in reality, in determining and understanding the nature of what-is.

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But of course, an overall theme pervades *The Waste Land*. It provided not only the motive for writing the poem but also the organizing principle of its structure. That theme might best be described as the dilemma of a life lived in the absence of value. Certainly, at the time the poem was written, Eliot was suffering a personal crisis of value. And the complex of personal experiences behind that crisis was, just as certainly, the medium from which *The Waste Land* arose⁹. We would, however, be doing an injustice to Eliot's own avowed intentions if we chose to restrict any consideration of the poem to the author's biographical experience.

The Waste Land was, indeed, «the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life»¹⁰; but that grouse attained its significance in the manner in which it was relieved: by translation onto a universal plane. What had been an «insignificant» personal grouse becomes, through conversion into poetry, a very significant cultural one. In this sense the theme of absent value is both motive and organizing principle. It is true that the assumption of the historical consciousness allows Eliot to transcend the perimeters of his own experience. That experience, however, remains an important part of the poem. Tiresias, although omniscient, is still controlled, or directed, by Eliot's point of view. The poet's personal grouse against life is thus imposed onto the structure of history. Each element of that selective panorama of history and literature that Tiresias observes has some relevance to the dilemma of value. The poem's Cubist juxtaposition of isolated fragments of time in a new context is an attempt to discover, or to create, some sense of value by reorganizing a body of history from which value—or meaning—has somehow escaped.

⁹ A fascinating, though necessarily conjectural interpretation of the poem as a kind of exorcism of the grief contingent on a set of intensely private experiences is given in James E. Miller, Jr., *T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977).

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile Transcript of the Original Drafts*, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, Inc., 1971), p. 1.

The original historical juxtaposition of *The Waste Land* creates gaps in continuity which must be fleshed out, or filled in, by imaginative thought. Meanings, logical connections, are elicited out of the silence of thinking to inhabit the structural void the poem contains. The significance of these structural voids is reinforced and intensified by Eliot's use of the literary allusion.

This aspect of technique more closely approximates the synthetic phase of Cubist painting. Whereas the Cubists took ordinary objects from their own environment —calling cards, newspaper clippings, cigarette wrappers, etc.— and gave them a new identity within the «field» or «created context» of the artwork, Eliot does practically the same with the numerous quotations that criss cross *The Waste Land*. They do not function as does the traditional literary allusion, sending us back to find their meaning at their source. For the number of sources is overwhelming; they suggest the total expanse of our cultural memory. It is helpful to know the original context of the allusions, but not absolutely necessary. For they attain an independent status in the structure of the poem as elements that work as signs toward evocation. Jacob Korg has previously noted that «These quotations communicate, not by carefully controlled meaning, as the other words in the poem do, but by their associations, which are at once more immediate and less exact than the meaning of the words»¹¹. This is a kind of stream of historical consciousness. Leopold Bloom, on his Dublin day, is, like us all, the host of a swirl of remembrances. Snatches of recurring song, phrases from the recent past, and images of hope and fear all circle, ceaseless, through the mind. The same is true of *The Waste Land*. Its quotations and allusions are the fleeting, fragmentary memories which well up freely in the historical mind which is the poem. It is left to the reader to search for, or to create, feasible patterns of association among these fragments. To do so is to elaborate the content of the historical consciousness, to subjectify history.

Just as the Cubist vision violates classical, or Newtonian space by fracturing the continuity of classical perspective, this technique violates chronological time by fracturing grammatical syntax. For the presence of these literary fragments creates, in syntax, breaches of expectation which force thinking, symbolically, beyond the ordered progression of linear time. If language, the structure of language, does somehow determine the way in which we «see» or understand the world, then the necessity to redefine the world in the post-classical age must engender, to some degree, the de-structuring, or destruction, of our traditional linguistic system. This is, of course, on one level, exactly what *The Waste Land* does; by opening gaps, or voids, in its own syntactical structure, it opens up spaces, or silences, in which thinking can encounter reality direct, outside of the scaffolding of language. No wonder that the poem's first readers found it so difficult to apprehend. The old linguistic expectations which they brought to it were exactly what the poem intended to destroy. The intimate relationship between language and reality has been eloquently described by George Steiner:

¹¹ Korg... p. 459.

The classic and the Christian sense of the world strive to order reality within the governance of language. Literature, philosophy, theology, law, the arts of history, are endeavors to enclose within the bounds of rational discourse the sum of human experience, its recorded past, its present condition and future expectations... They bear solemn witness to the belief that all truth and realness—with the exception of a small, queer margin at the very top— can be housed inside the walls of language. This belief is no longer universal¹².

«Truth and realness» have become undefined concepts in the twentieth century. The classical orientation is no longer sufficient to contain them.

Kafka's wall-investigator finally realized that neither the wall nor his own language could adequately encompass the totality of what-is—that his investigation, or his language itself, had to end in failure. Eliot, though, has declined to rely on the old tools. In *The Waste Land* he has created a structure of consciousness which encompasses the gaps of knowledge inherent in the old, empirical orientation. The violation of syntactical expectation jolts the mind outside of linear time. It forces thinking to practice the creation of meaning from beyond the security of the traditional context. The collapse of the old world-view is not a cue for the abdication of responsibility, but rather for the assumption of responsibility for a new definition of reality. Like some archaeological discovery, *The Waste Land* is an arrangement of historical remnants which invite reconstruction, interpretation. Thinking itself must provide the context, the milieu, for these remnants. The reader, the participator in the poem, becomes his own Tiresias, elaborating his own historical consciousness which redeems the void by structuring it with a framework of meaning, a sense of value that autonomously arises out of the necessary union of thinking and its environment.

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We have seen how the narrative technique of *The Waste Land* bears, in its implications for thinking, an uncanny resemblance to Cubist style. Each one, in its respective medium, converts thinking into a structural element of the environment. They cannot be properly understood, nor appreciated, from the outlook determined by absolute space and absolute time. They necessitate a new orientation, one which unifies man and his environment through the process of thought. Therefore, any comprehension of this new sense of reality requires that act of intellectual displacement by which thinking itself becomes an issue for thought.

The orientational shift implied by these new artworks involves two major reformulations. The first would be that the world is unavoidably subjectivized by the processes of perception and thought. It therefore follows that reality, which is only that which we are capable of knowing, arises from the interaction of man and nature through thought. Thus, secondly, to understand, to comprehend reality necessarily means to contemplate thinking as the context in which reality

¹² George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York, Atheneum, 1967), pp. 13-14.

occurs. What this orientative shift seems to be saying is that what is real ineluctably arises out of the fusion of those opposite poles of the classical framework, «subject» and «object». In its essence, at its genesis, reality is a synergy of contrasting categories which we can no longer afford to think of as mutually exclusive.

This view-point, at least for the present, is substantiated by our knowledge of sub-atomic physics, which tells us that the building blocks of the universe, such as photons, electrons, and other elementary particles, exhibit the characteristics of both energy and matter at one and the same time. The difficulties of trying to objectively identify and describe such entities and the processes they engender, led Niels Bohr to the expedient of his Principle of Complementarity. Any description of quantum phenomena, he realized, must encompass all of the contradictory results, which varying experimental approaches produce. Sub-atomic structures and processes cannot be definitely described in the old sense of «definition» as a limiting of possibilities. Much rather, they can only be described as the totality of *all* that we can know about them— even though the characteristics gleaned from experiment are maddeningly contradictory. The message of complementarity is that the reality of these basic building blocks *is* contradictory; that light, for example, is both particle and wave, matter and energy. In other words, one of the defining qualities of reality itself would appear to be contradiction.

Bohr's idea of complementarity actually brings into question the basis on which our thinking about reality, and ultimately our language, have relied. It suggests that the logic which was one of the cornerstones of the classical world-view is not inherent in the physical world. Although he found applications for complementarity in other fields of human endeavor¹³, Bohr always maintained a careful distinction between the subject, as observer, and the content of the observations he makes. His entire faith in the validity of science, however, depended on such a distinction. Even so, he did allow that the knowledge of the new physics necessitated an adjustment in our thinking about the separation of man and nature. He writes, for example, that «While, in the mechanical concept of nature, the subject-object distinction was fixed, room is provided [in the new framework of quantum mechanics] for a wider description through the recognition that the consequent use of our concepts requires different placings of such a separation»¹⁴.

Without ever attempting to define these different placings of the subject-object distinction, Bohr implies that the problem resolves into one of language¹⁵. We have reached the point at which the language the scientist uses to describe nature, be it mathematical or verbal, must take into account the concepts, or assump-

¹³ A broader application of complementarity is one of the major purposes of the essays collected in Niels Bohr, *Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1958).

¹⁴ Bohr... pp. 91-2.

¹⁵ He says in the same essay, «Atoms and Human Knowledge», page 91: «Of course, in every field of experience we must retain a sharp distinction between the observer and the content of the observations, but we must realize that the discovery of the quantum of action has thrown new light on the very foundation of the description of nature and revealed hitherto unnoticed presuppositions to the rational use of the concepts on which the communication of experience rests».

tions, on which the description itself is based. As Bohr puts it, «... we must, so-to-speak, distinguish between subject and object in such a way that each single case secures the unambiguous application of the elementary physical concepts used in the description»¹⁶. The language, the mode of description, cannot be completely separated from what it describes. What we know is to some degree dependent on *how* we know it. Does this auto-awareness in some way, perhaps, betoken the path which the linguistic reorganization of the post-classical age must follow? Certainly, there are many indications, in both literature and philosophy, that such will be the case.

And therefore, I should like to end this chain of speculations with one final suggestion: that the emergence of the historical consciousness in Eliot's poetry converges, as well, with one of the central tenets of Martin Heidegger's thought, the concept of *Dasein*. It would go beyond the scope of the present essay to draw a detailed comparison of two such profound and complex thinkers as Heidegger and Eliot. However, I do want to point out that their ideas are, in many ways, congruent, and offer an interesting ground for analysis.

Heidegger also found it necessary to effect a displacement of thinking from its immediate conditions in the personal identity. Such a displacement was already inherent in the problem which he set himself in *Being and Time*: «to work out the question of the meaning of Being and to do so concretely»¹⁷. Since all Being includes the special case of human being, then conscious thinking, the major distinguishing characteristic of human being, must be displaced in order to consider itself as one aspect of Being in general, as one element of the totality of what-is. Heidegger, however, understands this displacement not as a new acquisition of thought, but rather as one of the essential, if ignored, qualities of human being, which he refers to as *Dasein*, or «being there». The special case of human being is distinguished from all the rest of what-is, from all other kinds of being, by its capacity to think, to displace itself from itself. This displacement for the purpose of self-contemplation is, Heidegger asserts, a constitutional function of thinking: «Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather, it is ontically¹⁸ distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it... It is peculiar to this entity that with and through its Being, this Being is disclosed to it. *Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein's Being*»¹⁹.

As is obvious, Heidegger's fundamental premise requires a depersonalization of man, as the entity which thinks, in order to understand man within the larger matrix of Being in general. This redefinition of the concept of human being

¹⁶ Bohr... p. 91.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 19.

¹⁸ «Ontical» (*ontisch*) is a Heideggerian term which is used as a contrast to the «ontological». Translators Macquarrie and Robinson gloss both terms as follows (note 3, p. 31): «Ontological inquiry is concerned primarily with *Being*; ontical inquiry is concerned primarily with *entities* and the facts about them».

¹⁹ Heidegger... p. 32.

corresponds with the kind of orientative shift which I have described as a symptom of the post-classical age. Indeed, the very emergence of Heidegger's question (that of the meaning of Being) indicates the same need to recast the framework within which we elaborate our sense of the real. As William Barrett so provocatively writes:

Whether or not Heidegger is an equivalent in the domain of thought of a Joyce, Picasso, or early Stravinsky in their fields, is perhaps a futile, though teasing question; but it is quite clear that like these artists he is seeking to break out of the mold of a tradition, and so seems to belong to our century in a way that few other philosophers do... He is seeking to recast the context itself in which Western thinking has taken place since Descartes in the seventeenth century—and indeed... since the beginning of Western thought among the Greeks. So bold a venture of thought would imply that the thinker himself already stands outside this context²⁰.

The painter places himself beyond the context of visual perception. The poet places himself beyond the context of personal awareness. The physicist places himself beyond the context of objective observation. The philosopher places himself beyond the context of traditional Western thought. If we can meaningfully characterize the twentieth century as the beginning of the post-classical age, then one of its aspects must be this displacement of thinking.

In the new orientation, thinking itself is recognized as a dynamic structural element of the world, one of the complementary components of reality. The problem which faces art, at this moment, is to stabilize the new orientation, to provide man a place within a context which he helps create. Therefore, before we question the response of art to this historical directive, we should try, if possible, to identify the new reality which gives it birth. Only then can we judge contemporary art on its own terms; only then can we assess the validity of any individual work as an expression of humanity's essential need to define itself.



²⁰ William Barrett, *What Is Existentialism?* (New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1964), p. 117.