



Photo By Ron Kenner, 2004

By Ron Kenner — Work in progress*

Few have decried “materialism” with the impact of T.S. Eliot. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, perhaps the most critically acclaimed poem of the 20th Century, gave serious warning in 1922 to a new world rising, to a gadget and consumer society zooming down that “fast lane” of “progress” but perhaps going nowhere. It was as though Eliot had foreseen—before the coming of television even—watching one big groveling, orgasmic game show, first in black and white television, then in color, eventually on the giant screen. The new technology is impressive, but the game show is worse than ever.

[*brackets: updated]

Especially from Eliot's point of view we have, if anything, merely deluded ourselves with the illusion of progress while much has grown progressively worse in a shallow, spiritless, increasingly standardized mass culture. Thus the aristocratic Eliot bemoaned the low brow, the aimless, the artless, the anarchic, the dreamers and schemers, the less than civilized machinations of the "materialistic" western world.

Although perhaps more recognizable today as a stepping stone toward religious absolutes, *The Waste Land* remains credible for Eliot's erudite, well-crafted depiction and biting critique of the junkyard aspects of our material civilization, and for his early insights into the deathly promise of our neutral science. Without detracting from Eliot's diagnosis, and putting aside his religious prescription, it is long overdue, many decades later now, to regard with an equal degree of seriousness the inadequacies and perils of our *etherealistic* culture.

Pope John Paul II, voicing Catholic commitment to the poor and destitute, and alluding to the wealthy among the developed nations, declared: "We affirm our solidarity with the families that are suffering from the moral upheaval introduced into them by the cynical society of consumerism."

Admittedly, reminders may still be in order as we become inured over the years to certain evils (if the concept of evil in our lay society is still acceptable) attributable to materialism. Yet while we concentrate on the evils of 'materialism' (largely a misnomer for consumerism), the evils of etherealism, equally pervasive and just as deadly, have raised—on up to the current moment—hardly a whimper.

More so, in our long concern over material evils there has been a significant myopia in overlooking the evils of material absence, the value of material goods, and the import and value of substantial reality and substantial solutions. Not least, material solutions are almost surely as relevant—if not more-so, at least on this earth—as any spiritual ones.

It becomes all too apparent that owing to lack of emphasis on substantial material solutions a horrific number of our "material comforts" have been grossly overrated, especially since these all-too-frequently involve more puff than substance. Thus we're supposed to have a "love affair" with the automobile which millions of us actually *hate* and for good reason—not the least being that many of our "materialistic" providers for decades kept their heads in the ethereal

clouds [building gas-guzzlers] and us, too, perhaps, as we subsist on ethereal "goods" and ethereal philosophies. One might even speculate that only an ethereal distaste for the material things on earth could enable us to tolerate—even appreciate—so much of the ethereal world as we live in. How many billion McDonald hamburgers have we now consumed?

The *Ethereal Waste Land* may be taken as a euphemism for wherever there is a denial of reality, a debilitated culture, a "rip off," a deadly absence, something not truly "materialistic" but all-too-obviously less than substantial or authentic in subject, object, action, concept or word. If Eliot's *Waste Land* becomes increasingly obnoxious with supposed material "progress," the *Ethereal Waste Land* becomes more subtle and insidious as the forefront of our changing culture appears to grow ever more vacuous.

All of us, to greater or lesser degree, suffer the deprivations or illusions of the ethereal paradigm. Occasionally there is a breakthrough. Something strikes a chord in us, In a cartoon, for example, a man tells a waitress, **"Well, all right, miss, but I don't mind telling you I think \$14,000 for a piece of pie and coffee is a bit much."** **Something else deep within us responds—we still remember the commercial—as a little old lady appears on television and yells, "Where's the beef?"** For those who wish to see beyond the ethereal mirage, it becomes increasingly apparent that in innumerable ways, and with way too few exceptions, we are getting less and less material value for more and more expenditure; a condition which makes less and less sense and which may aptly be viewed as more of an *ethereal* problem than a *material* one.

The ethereal paradigm, the opposite of any *substantial* paradigm, actually far predates Eliot's *Waste Land* and continues to grow. The list is awesome, including such ethereal members as mental patients out of simple contact with reality. . . escapists or fantasists without return tickets. . . extreme idealists and relativists. . . certain anti-heroes and existentialists. . . certain Eastern-oriented mystics, Western physicists, scientists, philosophers, artists, aesthetes, miraculous mentalists, mad hatters or simply the strangely myopic who have given up on the reality of the physical world. . . .

The Ethereal Waste Land is also populated by a good many surrealists, absurdists, abstractionists or the paradox prone who have abandoned the possibility of the rational. . . . Include, also, certain

pragmatists who have sidestepped the irrational. . . certain rugged individualists, disconnected art-for-art's-sakers, romantics or others locked solely into the past or future and removed from the physical present. And don't forget a good many "spiritualists," egocentrics, narcissists or solipsists who have given up on the reality of objective reality. . . . The territory also includes neo-Platonists, ancient Greek idealists, sophists, or some of the best classic minds attributing the highest reality—and sometimes reducing all reality—entirely to forms or numbers.

The Pythagoreans , as many of us understand it, finally came to identify reality as merely numbers. And that's it. numbers. And some regard the *idea* not only as the *ideal*, superior in status to any physical reality, but as the primary or perhaps even *sole* ingredient of any reality; while for others, those no doubt chained to their perceptions, the tangible world itself is relegated to mere dancing shadows in a Platonic cave. In Platonic terms, all the worldly tangibles seemingly become poor shadowy imitations of the more authentic *ideal*—if not *beautiful*—forms. A living and breathing single spotted leopard, for example, becomes somehow less authentic and real than the ideal form—that one perfectly spotted leopard. And all of this suggests, perhaps, or so some might take it, that with Plato the only things that are *really* real are the things that are not real.

At least, however, in Plato's caveman story we are without choice as we remain chained and held fast, unable to see the light coming from the end of the tunnel. In the more modern ethereal milieu, as often as not we are there by choice. Ironically, unlike the so-called befuddled Indians who *supposedly* sold America for a string of beads (it's a good story, anyway), for the most part we moderns have knowingly and willingly and often with high anticipation and great delight allowed the new landscape to come about. At least with the Wizard of Oz we got the glorious *Emerald City*. The ethereal trick is frequently to turn whatever real greenery there is into a pale and lifeless gray.

As this new dark age of the *Ethereal Waste Land* spreads we may feel the world, and ourselves, slipping, dissolving or disappearing under some ethereal cloud: we may feel not only our strength but our lives, our personalities, our sense of self somehow seeping away.

For all the increasing "control" of our "man made" environment (seemingly unaware of the realities of

thermodynamics) we are intuitively less sure of our environment, less sure of ourselves. Not only do we alter our physiques, replace our human limbs and organs technologically, replace our muscle and mental reactions with the machine and the computer, but a growing number of us appear to be sociopathic, as though functioning without conscience, and an even greater number often seem immobilized, as though functioning without physical senses: blind or non-reactive to what we do not see, deaf to what we do not hear or wish to hear, untouched by what we do not feel, often uncivilized in our behavior and seeming lack of taste, perhaps simply untasting in our response to chemical foods, plastic flowers, to too much tasteless, insubstantial fare.

Few of us carry the impact we used to. We seem less self-sufficient, less self-assured, less sturdy. We have serious doubts about whether we carry our own weight. Strength of character, sureness of conviction, the firmness of handshake, the solidity of one's word, of integrity, pride, self-reliance, determination—all of this seems quaint now, somehow antiquated. One may suspect we are losing not only our character but our minds as well; losing our instincts from the past, our purpose for the future, our confidence for the present. If we have not exactly dissolved, it may yet seem hard to find ourselves. We appear to have lost our sense of direction, our sense of fitting in, our *raison d'être*. In this queer dissipation we now have "slice of life" for full life, a "search for identity" for a sense of identity. And that "outside" world would seem to fade, too, where egocentricity, isolation, even solipsism, create those dancing shadows in place of involvement, community, substantial reality.

In the softening process research (though not without value) too often replaces action; "service" or "information" (although also significant) replace production; inflated dollars replace sound dollars, a kind of convenient "realism" and "pragmatism" supersede morality (already an embarrassing word).

Through increasing complexity *Homo Sapiens* advanced in the evolutionary process. But in our so-called "age of complexity" we appear to be reversing the process, *losing* our complexity as we become more and more easily replaceable. Or so it would seem, at least, in the *Ethereal Waste Land*. No doubt some of these "ethereal" conditions are real and unavoidable, and not all to our taste; yet at least some of the choice is ours and we need not leap into this waste land without looking; it is all happening fast enough anyway.

Our vision of the world need not be limited to peering at shadows, Platonic or otherwise. As for Plato, a few have observed, as well, a more realistic and less ethereal side to Plato that has been generally ignored and somewhat lost over the centuries. For no doubt, viewing Plato and the early Greeks through more modern idealistic and Christian lenses is a little like getting our full understanding of Mainland China by way of Taiwan, or perhaps our local Chinatown. Plato surely has his idealistic side, yet it's worth noting that his ideal forms existed in the present and *not* in some *future* heaven as part of a system of rewards and punishment. Carried to extreme, and to exclusivity, beyond metaphor or the pleasure of philosophic speculation, such an orientation marks an excellent starting point for quick entry into that slipshod reality of the Ethereal Waste Land.

[In more recent years, with theories the likes of blaming Saddam Hussein for 9/11 or of Saddam threatening the U.S. with WMDs, and other *imagined* claims that led us into a needless war, we've moved even further and deeper into the Ethereal Waste Land.]

Of course, the first to travel in the *Ethereal Waste Land* long preceded Plato or even those early Greeks who thought Mind was all or those Pythagorean followers who saw reality as merely a numbers game. In its various guises the vacuous paradigm had continued since the earliest beginnings of civilization, and manifests itself in a seemingly endless variety of forms as curious in our day as any found in the past. Thus measured by time or space—you can hardly measure by substance—the *Ethereal Waste Land* is undoubtedly as big (if not bigger) as any waste land imagined by Eliot. If you want sheer *emptiness* here lies a truly *authentic* emptiness; more so than anything Eliot ever came up with. Yet the more authentic emptiness of the *Ethereal Waste Land* remains barely recognized; hardly protested even by the most articulate and irreverent amongst us.

As is well known, Eliot's *Waste Land* revealed a loss or rejection of subjective meaning and spiritual values while supposedly the bulk of us wallow in material comfort or sensuality. [Some etherealists are even claiming as much in our current economic downturn while hundreds of thousands, and potentially millions, are losing their houses. And where was the oversight when the *material evidence* was all too obvious, for years? Where was the oversight before Greenspan retired and wrote his book.]

On the other hand the Ethereal Waste Land, despite continuing lip service about the benefits of material comfort, reveals—in its very uncertainty about the existence of material reality—a skepticism itself so extreme that it ought to tax the credulity of even the greatest idealists, anti-materialists, or philosophical cynics. Thus in the ethereal milieu it is not as if we have risen finally, as Eliot would hope, to a higher level of spirituality; rather, we have simply lost more faith in substantial reality and in the value of the world around us.

With Eliot, the immediate problem was depicted as one of *spiritual* emptiness. In a more modern context, those able to glimpse the ethereal paradigm from the outside may look almost wistfully at such pre-nuclear spiritual concerns. No doubt many of us long ago learned to postpone spiritual problems to Sunday, if not to some far off “judgment day” in a promised “after life.”

For poetic justice, perhaps, the *material* problems are with us now, tangible and immense, immediate and unavoidable; some of them in fact so real, so blatant, so overwhelming that we have often closed our minds to these material conditions on anything but a short range immediate crisis basis. [And especially so during the George W. Bush administration for nearly two full terms.]

While in denial about many material tangibles, other, more nondiscursive conditions may be more deeply felt. The newer feeling seems primarily to be loss of solid ground, a trembling beneath, perhaps, as though our subconscious knows something we don't know. The deeper immobilizing anxieties are beyond description almost by definition; and yet, as though to reinforce faith in the ethereal paradigm, which thrives on insecurity, certain fears bubble up to the surface.

For reasons both real and illusory, we seem to be losing our footing. The physical world itself appears less solid and reliable for us in recent years. Massive earthquakes, new fault lines over once “safe” territories, unexpected volcanic eruptions of immense, near unbelievable proportions; battering hurricanes, frightening floods, deadly tornadoes, devastating “bone-chilling” winters, icebergs the size of Connecticut breaking off and melting, unpredictable and extreme “el nino” temperatures.

Thus in January 1983 we recorded the coldest winter on record; in August of the same year, the hottest summer. We've since recorded new temperature extremes. To such extremes, add man's own curious technological threats to the planet from the inadvertent creation of dust bowl or scorching desert to a shower of acid rain; from the potential melting of ice caps to the anticipated creation of ozone layers that block out the sun; from famine on earth to war in space. The list is long. In our abstractions and denials we may even make such unpleasant items disappear, and in the ethereal milieu, of course, such problems may be treated as immaterial. But the disappearing acts may prove short-lived.

A clear view beyond the real waste land, however, may well reveal that the chasm from emptiness to reality is not unsurpassable even in a modern world which all-too-often in the material macrocosm sometimes seemingly reduces itself to a single focus on threats of terrorism or the like, and in the microcosm or subatomic levels to whirling electrons, strange quanta jumps, relativity and loss of solidity, fragmented lives, indeterminacy, uncertainty, irrationality, meaninglessness, or cracked Humpty Dumpties.

Such a focused look, as well as pointing to commonly ignored perils of the *Ethereal Waste Land* may help us separate the more empty ethereal mirage from the more genuine material oasis. In our oft-despairing culture we may even gain, as well as a more purposeful, *legitimate* skepticism, a much needed new appreciation of at least the possibility of substantial and authentic material solutions; realities and values often overlooked, rejected, or simply neglected by Eliot and others in the call for, and emphasis on, spiritual salvation.

No doubt the material world has its spiritual and subjective needs. Especially as the individual becomes increasingly overwhelmed by mass society and its technologies we remain in danger of losing our own subjective selves and the kinds of subjective realities that lend meaning to our lives, whether artistically, philosophically, spiritually, or religiously.

These valid concerns have been raised, even before Eliot, by such figures as Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and later, if more despairingly so (without the hope of Eliot's religious salvation) by Sartre, Camus, and more modern existentialists, relativists, anarchists, Kafkaesque absurdists, anti-heroes or anti-materialistic mystics.

Such voices may still have something to tell us; and yet, beyond spiritual concerns, or perhaps simply that need of the individual to retain his “authentic self,” there are also more broadly based material and objective needs.

The concept of the Ethereal Waste Land is not intended to negate Eliot’s *Waste Land*. Both Eliot’s and the concerns raised here over the ethereal landscape complement each other. In certain ways they overlap. The two waste lands may appear contradictory yet more often they tend to justify each other, as depicted, say, in *Streetcar Named Desire*, as we trade the trite and shapeless *crass* realities of Tennessee Williams’ barbarian Stanley Kowalski for the anemic, over-dressed, dream-oriented *class* illusions of Blanche Dubois.

With Eliot’s waste land we are overwhelmed (something like Saul Bellow’s *Henderson The Rain King*) with the accumulated junk of presupposed material progress, only to suffer that malnutrition of the spirit. With the ethereal waste land we are underwhelmed – clouded over by a phantasmagoria of spirits and perspectives and shifting frames of references and impressive new shapes and styles and packages; and all the while the internal stuffing, the physical substance, has either stretched thin or appears to have leaked out somewhere.

Much of the world has even turned lighter, weaker somehow in that metamorphosis from iron and steel to tin and aluminum, from metal to plastic, from diamonds to zircons, from real wood to perilous formaldehyde-laced composition board, from natural foods and substances to processed foods and chemicals, from durable hand crafted goods to manufactured obsolescence, from proud worker to Kafkaesque cockroach.

There have been certain economics, advantages, comforts in the change from bulk to miniaturization, and in various high technology products; and perhaps there are few complaints of skimpy material among the slim set about low-slung near-crotchless pants, mini skirts, bikinis. Yet many a “growth” industry seems predicated on dilution and diminution, the spectrum ranging from dictionaries promising more words—but with briefer and less adequate definitions—to smaller candy bars (for the same price) to a plethora of flimsy materials on which we entrust our lives.

Supposedly an auto manufacturer spent, decades ago, a million dollars to make a car door “sound” more solid. Thus we hunger for substance, yet put our trust into ethereal intangibles. Millions are in want, but we persist in calling ours a *materialistic* culture. [Now we know about the materially vacuous aspects of the over-rated information dot.com bubble; and we’re coming to know, though even our presidential candidates rarely mention it in full context, of the increasing failure of our society to produce material goods.]

Despite the spiritless implications of today’s “materialism” which may appear to mitigate against “ethereal” conditions, the Ethereal Waste Land is peculiarly apropos as a modern phenomenon. Expanding at an ever increasing pace since the late 19th century, this Ethereal Waste Land has now reached throughout our culture into such fields of human thought and action as diverse as art, physics, philosophy, anthropology, music, psychology, architecture, ecology, economics, education, politics, history, literature. [There is an occasional call for substance] Even so, the thin atmosphere of the Ethereal Waste Land [as if there were no connection to our material depletions] has raised little alarm among modern intellectuals.

Some other adherents wander oblivious to the paradigm into which they wrap themselves; many, of course, are conscious of—if not disturbed by—the ethereal tenets; or they half consciously accept the conventional mentality. Some remain skeptical yet lack the courage of their own convictions, and fear to leave. Some hope to escape, perhaps only partly aware of the degree of their immersion. Some may be desperate. Like fish in water perhaps most throughout society are unaware of the medium in which they travel, conducting their personal lives as though in an antiquated pre-Picasso world.

Eliot’s waste land depicted that place of crass materialism for the Sammy Glucks of the world as well as for others seeking their own special brand of material progress, comfort, or finally, perhaps, self aggrandizement as compensation for an intuitive feeling of emptiness. By contrast, reminiscent in ways of David Halberstam’s *The Best and the Brightest* (the ones who gave us Vietnam) the ethereal waste land particularly takes sustenance from the artists, critics, poets, philosophers, scholars, scientists, historians, serious patriots and other cultural leaders and king-makers of our modern lay world.

As though suffering some type of degenerative arthritis, within the ethereal dimension there is seemingly that ever-continuing diminution of reality itself, from the art object to the

art concept, from the tangible to the abstract, from the purposeful to the accidental, from the credible to that more “qualified” reality; thus we have presidents who lie, industries that cheat, too many price-fixing businesses offering the least substantial product possible for the most inflated cost. Materially thin, to say *the most!*

The passive and lethargic TV-oriented consumer has grown soft, and so, too, have our concepts, goals, convictions, words. Such is the fuzziness of the modern ethereal locale. Thus chronological order or natural sequence is seen as simplistic presentation. Clear cut approaches appear too sharp and easy. Real discovery, once cause for celebration, now raises more fear than joy; the “discovery” may turn out to be merely wishful thinking, personal projection, limited perspective. Conclusions—especially answers—are frowned upon.

We may hesitate even to *think*, regarding ideas as dubious, speculations as presumptuous, involvement as perilous, enthusiasm as unprofessional, passion and purpose as dangerous, radical or “wild-eyed.” Wholes become fragments, order becomes disorder, realities become dreams, dreams become nightmares.

In the ethereal context the word is not only not the object (as some sophisticates accurately observe) but less concrete and specific. Thus *over* and *under* once specifically referred to location, or to a span, while *more* and *less* specifically referred to quantity. Now common usage often sets the standard; thus we read on the cover of more than one authoritative dictionary: “over” so many “specific” definitions.

In the ethereal milieu, the meaning of a word becomes as diffuse as gas. Hemingway once said that if you talk about something you’ll lose it. We can appreciate the observation, and yet it must also be true that if you can’t talk about something then—give or take a few fellow writers, artists, critics or academic specialists—perhaps nobody else is going to understand whatever it was you couldn’t tell them.

To Hemingway’s credit, he generally sought to describe the concrete and the specific; in his sober moments he must have believed he was capturing something in his fiction about what he saw as the real world out there. By contrast, not only is the word no longer concrete in ethereal-land but neither do we presume as much for the reality behind the word. What once served to describe or “copy” reality

now instead is supposed to “create” reality. [Creativity is in! Discovery, less so.] The idea of “representation,” itself—as if we could be so presumptuous, and as if there were indeed something out there to be depicted—is more and more regarded as a “no no” in art and literature and who knows where else.

Thus in the ethereal waste land of literature we may settle for—if not actually prefer—that ambiguity from which we can, if not wiggle out of anything, at least qualify any commitment. Partly in reaction to past oversimplifications or blunt crudities of the 3-R school—which, as has been observed, can’t even spell *writing* or *arithmetic*—we now have fewer “facts” while as compensation we have gained endless innuendoes, allusions, possibilities, ironies and God knows how many *types* of ironies.

Ideas lose strength: a gradual, seemingly painless disappearance of substance, meaning, intensity, objectivity, credibility, durability. Even the most solid ideas are overwhelmed by the volume of “new” information. Time-tested old ideas are lost. New ideas fail to take hold. Super events are short lived. Any particular incident itself becomes increasingly difficult to measure, somehow lost in the “process.” With the ethereal emphasis on “process,” rather than on beginnings, middles and ends, we are often enough not sure anymore if we are coming or going.

In such a milieu there is little sense of reaching goals, almost no sense of completion or finality; prose stories or films, for example, often circuitously return to wherever they started from. With all these curves, there are few sharper lines or demarcations. The “pigeon hole,” once popular for organizing our lives and our ideas, has become “too neat and tidy,” too isolated, for everything in the ethereal milieu appears “related” to everything else, the whole shebang seemingly one giant data base. All is softer; a kind of melding, perhaps, into the universal surround; finally, we can’t even die anymore. We “expire,” or perhaps we merely “pass on.”

We may publish or perish yet there appears to be more money in questions than in answers. “Think pieces,” which theoretically ought to justify themselves, tend to require credentials or authority. Supposedly, to ask the ethereal wastelander, there are no more absolutes and apparently there is little good reason for *anything* anymore. Things presumably happen without any particular cause, for

cause, too—dissipated, if not lost entirely—lay buried somewhere under a kind of manifest complexity.

[The madness of our the old 19th century “Manifest Complexity” seems matched only by this new, though somewhat unnamed, manifest complexity, kind of suggestive of the French intellectual Baudrillard who suggested in the 1990s that because of the cacophony of noise and opinions and confusions and perspectives that there was, in effect, no Gulf War. As with the likes of the late philosopher Richard Rorty, one might easily suspect that if there’s no consensus, no reality to be agreed upon, then there’s no reality. Yeah, sure. Like the current Iraq war is *merely* a bad dream.] Thus in seemingly endless ways the new intellectualized ethereal world is significantly less sturdy: its very foundations shaken, even collapsing.

Ironically, the ethereal condition continues partly so out of fairness, open-mindedness, humility. We have, especially the more sophisticated amongst us, come to doubt, to suspend judgment, to tolerate a plurality of contradicting realities. Firm opinion is regarded as bias, judgment as dogma, generality as platitude, permanence as wishful thinking, certitude as over-simplification, the concept of the absolute (with perhaps the exception of the speed of light) as a kind of updated, yet misguided, childlike fundamentalism. And as the chemist Anthony Standen once noted, tongue-in-cheek, the more relative everything can be made to seem the more modern we appear. The new angle becomes more important, it seems, than the essential story.

Our individual point of view is recognized as less objective and more personal and yet this still seems accompanied by an eclipse of personal judgment in which we put aside our own initial “gut instinct” reaction and our own *unique* sense and perspective.

Thus we seem none too sure of either the subjective or the objective; only too aware of Dostoyevsky’s anti-heroes, Freud’s unconscious motivations, Picasso’s Guernica or the “accidental artists”’ disjointed realities, the businessman’s promotions, the politicians’ illusions or evasions, the scholars’ hesitations, the specialists’ contradictions, and the philosopher’s humility—the highest praise going to the Socratic assertion that the only thing we know is that we know nothing.

Of course we may still suspect, or desperately hope, such as during the Vietnam “police action,” or, in Central America, [or in Iraq or Pakistan or Afghanistan], that maybe somebody knows something that we don’t know.

Thus deep in the heart of the ethereal milieu we may doubt both the *subjective* and the *objective*, and both appearances *and* what seems rational. It hardly makes sense, yet in fact the more erudite we become the more we place our hopes in probability, our faith in “the absurd” and the irrational, our scientific convictions at the mercy of specialist authorities we no longer understand, and, finally, in the lay world of physics—the very crown of science—we often attribute our highest wisdom to the “new” logic, the paradox, the irrational, the inconceivable. And if this won’t do, we can always take refuge in complexity: “Sorry, that’s not my area of competence.”

With the help of pragmatic, positivistic and ‘heuristic’ thinking, new breakthroughs may be possible—but we may also get lost. Thus certain mathematical models may no longer be visualized or even conceptualized. Finally, Einstein himself would admit that when the mathematicians got through with his theories of relativity he could no longer understand them himself. No doubt Einstein’s concern was to eliminate contradictions and paradoxes, and to make sense and reason of things. Yet in the ethereal milieu there is a tendency to enjoy, even thrill to, the paradox and contradiction, when not ignoring it altogether.

The philosopher George Santayana observed that the empiricist is “much better at seeing what he believes” than at “believing what he sees.” The philosophical “realists” have commonly been rationalists, although their past assertions of the factual world (beyond sense perception) have tended to rely on *ideal*—as distinct from material and substantial—realities.

Elsewhere those placing their faith in physical particulars tend to limit any faith in factual knowledge to sense perception. Either way, the philosophical underpinnings take on that sinking feeling; for if rationalism and realism have come into question because of modern doubts about the validity of a priori knowledge, so, too, does material reality tend to dissolve as the empiricist (with the pessimist Schopenhauer) no longer knows the sun “but an eye that sees a sun,” nor does he even know an earth but merely “a hand that feels an earth.” Et tu certitude?

And if we cannot be sure, one may ask, should we not doubt the earth's very existence? Or should we presume, since everyone has a somewhat different perspective, that there are *really* some three billion earth planets? And is there nothing more than our own individual perceptions? If *Homo sapiens* were to join the ranks of the extinct, would the physical world disappear?

One wonders how solipsistic the ethereal paradigm may become, or has already become. While the absolutist Church once placed the earth at the center of the universe—only recently absolving Copernicus and Galileo—many a chuckling modernist in the ethereal waste land now tends to place the *individual* in the center of the universe, and perhaps an empty center at that.

Form or style alone seemingly pass for *content* as man not only "makes himself"—entirely?—supposedly, but, in ways most mysterious, the world around him. There is, of course, some modicum of truth to all this. Yet subtle erudition has often been *overemphasized* and fine tuned to the point of absurdity, not least in the 20th and 21st centuries.

As Eliot's waste land of crass materialism implies an actual condition, as well as an orientation, the insubstantial ethereal paradigm is perhaps mostly suggestive of an orientation, a modernist attitude of sorts, as distinct from physical actuality; yet here, too, perspectives impact on the material world. Science began as discovery, and yet the term *discovery* may eventually fade from our vocabulary, rejected as though the *mere* discovery of something independent out there were somehow unacceptably beyond the realm of our own personal sphere of creativity.

There is that extremely satisfying idea of all this personal "creativity." This is undoubtedly reinforced by conventional themes of the importance of the individual, themes accumulating and absorbing respectability since the Renaissance. From the importance of the "lucky few" to the concept—if not the actuality of treatment—of the importance of all individuals; from the popularity of the anti-hero to the businessman's faith in capitalism, free enterprise, laissez-faire, individual opportunity. From hostility to totalitarianism to democratic faith in the individual per se, to Dostoevsky's protest of the "Crystal Palace" and his *Underground Man's* denial that two plus two equals four.

This comforting valuation of the individual stretches, in its more romanticized ethereal versions, from the popularity of the “rugged individualist” to anti-authoritarian tendencies to anarchy. From the existentialist faith in the “authentic self” to self-definitions of reality, to denial of any answers outside the self. From objectivity to subjectivity. From subjectivity to less solid definition. With all this ethereal reinforcement, and eventually a little Horatio Alger thrown in, there may seem nothing the individual can’t do. The sky is the limit, and all limits in the ethereal milieu are blurred anyway.

There is of course much that we have done, can do, and will do. But also much that we cannot do. We may kill ourselves over subjective illusions of winning the unwinnable. We cannot blow ourselves up in a nuclear war, for instance, and bring ourselves back to life. [We can’t destroy the environment, and easily bring that back; not in our lifetime or our children’s lifetime.]

While concentrating on the U.S.- Soviet ideological conflict, we [long comfortably ignored] that the majority of the world’s people in these “materialistic” times lack the satisfaction of the basic material needs for survival; including many in the “developed” world. Nor, for example, can we long ignore damages to the ecology and the environment or to the mushrooming overpopulations in a world of limited resources. Such problems may carry greater impact than our subjective determinations, for ultimately we may prove far more capable of destroying our environment than of creating it or even piecing it back together.

We may play some role in the scheme of things but it is unlikely that either all of our problems or of our glories are of our own making. Carried to its final extension, the idea of man entirely making himself and his universe approaches the very pinnacle of arrogance—despite all of the supposed scientific skepticism, lack of bias, open mindedness, and presumed humility of our modern age.

In the ethereal context, the most amazing supposed capabilities are matched only by the most amazing theoretical limitations; most all of which are surely overrated. The subjective blanket of the ethereal milieu allows each of us only “a” truth, watered down to allow for other “a” truths, while tending to deny any single truth—“the” truth – about anything, whether we can know it or not.

The objective world seemingly disappears into merely a philosophical perspective. . . and that, itself, influenced by perceptions. . . and these dependent upon one's shifting position. . . and observing – what? Merely “mental constructs”? And even if we were on the right track in our gropings through the mysteries of the universe, here nothing could be adequate for long: each view of reality, each “new” angle, soon becomes as unacceptable—despite our truly remarkable facility for dealing with space age complexities—as the latest weapons system invariably outdated before completion. As with certain mystics nothing earthly satisfies, or ever will, as we perpetually reach beyond our knowledge for the latest miracle.

The Renaissance reportedly marked a turn from the heavens to a recognition of material realities and the “good things” on earth. Despite considerable “progress,” however, it is as though the Renaissance, for all its ballyhoo, were yet to come; the tangible world with its resources and realities clearly seems not enough with us, all somehow melting down into a self-chosen anorexic thin dream, a kind of rarified legacy—in the “developed” world, especially—too often of style without substance.

You would think the ethereal paradigm would be too shaky to stand, but in actuality The Ethereal Waste land thrives on instability. Focus on the tangible is frequently pre-empted by emphasis on change itself. [There's been so much talk of 'change' in the 2008 presidential election campaign that you'd almost think that the call for change—perhaps the *oldest* political cliché in the books—was something new. You'd almost think we could change the humungous mistakes of the Iraq war and bring back the dead. Not that Clinton or Obama are talking about some of these obvious realities, but surely both have a more realistic insight into what won't be easily *unchanged*].

For all its romanticism the ethereal approach, with its insubstantial and ethereal overtones, carries a useful built-in nostalgia; a sentimental subsurface, an “ironic tension,” perhaps, while waiting for that Poesque *end point*. The promise of change and loss suggests a determination to live life to the fullest, while you can—as with so many of Hemingway's books, for example, where even love doesn't last. It changes. Such recognition of “process” may be taken as a lesson learned, painful or otherwise; a kind of “grown up” philosophical wisdom about anabolism and catabolism; a simple feeling, maybe, that the “good things” don't last.

Thus in Hemingway's *Moveable Feast* you must taste of life and enjoy Paris to the fullest, *while you can*, before the fuller moments receded into the emptiness. In Heminwayesque fashion, to recognize *change* is to be *realistic*. And since we may wish to be "realistic" we give special credence to "change," "process," "dynamics," the "non-Aristotelian," the "new," and tend to look askance at whatever seems "certain," "stuck," "static," "old," or perhaps even "solid" but boring.

One would hope that after several thousand years we might allow for various possibilities and combinations beyond either an extreme Aristotelian orientation or an extreme Platonic orientation. perhaps we might even allow for a more sophisticated politics than the more conventional locked in definitions—with the documentary music and the Greek columns in the background—of either the idealistic "free world" graceful Athenians or the less popular (and supposedly not too bright) materialistic and more disciplined Spartans who supposedly, without a peep, to avoid discovery, allowed stolen pigs to eat out their entrails.

From Aristotle we borrowed many of our ideas of content, and from Plato much of our awareness of form. Although it would seem impossible to have either content without form or form without content, the emphasis on one or the other may make the difference between a shift toward Eliot's waste land or toward the ethereal waste land. As indicated, the waste land identified by Eliot has no class, no quality, no genuine spirit, no culture, no tradition, no significant form. The ethereal waste land promises form and style but offers little significant content or meaning, small relevance, few convictions, and, often enough, no credibility.

By a process of emphasis and oversight the paradigm of the Ethereal Waste Land tends to become self-reinforcing. We're reminded of a romantic ethereal poem where one seems driven toward an ideal, spiritual, *immaterial* order as though toward a Neo-Platonic *ultra* reality atop that great "*Chain of Being*"; the impermanence (of eventual decay) and the insubstantiality of earthly things that lend credence to the paradigm in which the immaterial *Angel's Food Cake* is spotless (white) while the material (chocolate) is well known as *Devil's Food Cake*.

Similarly the *absolute*, especially in any material sense, has become a kind of fearful word, its popularity on a par with "atheistic Communism." Like Humpty Dumpty, the material

absolute—or any claim to certitude—has fallen off the wall. Thus in the modern Alice in Wonderland milieu of the Ethereal Waste Land it is not merely a matter of “how you look at things” but of whether, indeed, there *are* things, since those deeply immersed in this hazy milieu seem to have their doubts. The early Greeks recognized aspects of relativity and change, but in general they showed little doubt about the existence of objective reality itself; and anyone who did, with the possible exception of a few sophists or wise guys, probably would have been punched out or put away somewhere.

Objective reality, if allowed to exist at all, clearly has become far more tenuous. Meanwhile, indelible history itself, unchangeable even for science fiction time travelers, has challenged the absolute. Although we sometimes reminisce about a more “stable” past, probably few sophisticated individuals today object to the breakdown of the old starch-collared dictatorial absolutes. So many of the world’s once “objective realities” and understandings and values have crumbled into broken illusions under the crushing weight of experience: depression, hunger, inequality, tortuous concentration camps, the “war to end all wars,” the “indivisible” atom, the devastating bloody “peace actions” often seemingly without meaning and purpose, the failures and massacres of both Capitalism and Communism. [And finally, long after we thought the world was coming to agreement about the likes of banning torture, our nation gains disparaging notice worldwide for both the language and the reality of its “enhanced interrogation techniques.”]

In every area we have witnessed the decline in stature: God, the United Nations, countries, presidents, statesmen, union figures, lawyers, journalists, doctors, celebrities—a shrinkage taking us from giants to anti-heroes; from legends to lambastes.

Among further advances in the ethereal milieu our marriages are shorter, our residences and possessions more temporary, our jobs and the *company*, itself, less stable, our future more insecure, our goals more limited, our attention span reduced, our books shorter, our sentences briefer (but not necessarily more concrete), the world itself finally “capsulized” daily in a television set.

Historically too many so-called objective facts have turned into curious lies. Almost as a substitute for the loss of credible facts, and partly as respite, we have shifted our focus from morals and “principles” and theories and broad descriptions to bite-sized experience in our poetry and prose and communications; from

discovery and statement to experimentation and new capabilities in technique, form, media.

We have redirected our attention to that "new angle" until, ultimately, only the angle is being angled, and one suspects that in much art, literature, "communications" the *entire* content is the form (or at least all that counts), although it still may remain unclear *what*, if anything, is being counted. Often enough we may focus on form because the modern "content" seems not worth counting.

What was once "great art" by the "masters" has been exchanged in the *Ethereal Waste Land* for much questionable pop art, non art, accidental art, or conceptual art where seemingly only the art *idea* is important and where, often enough, the artist speaks only to another artist, if that. While the artist may fill some function simply by disclosure of reality however he sees it, or by tearing down to make room for the new, what began as a kind of protest, a breakdown, an expose by reflecting a pop waste land, or real or apparent irrationalities, eventually becomes merely a neutral statement of the supposed condition. Finally all of this may evolve into a philosophy of *que sera sera*, perhaps as if that were all that could be, as if there could be no more statement, no more meaning, no more great art.

There is little talk anymore about the "courage of convictions." Thus in the most sophisticated circles one finds that well-intentioned humility, one's guard up against that old fashioned "dogma," but apparently there is little comparable concern about an entirely "open mind" accepting nonsense, or about the dangers of tip-toeing through an *Ethereal Waste Land* devoid of statement, meaning, value, conviction. Or, for that matter, devoid of firm belief in anything.

Remarkably, obvious facts that lend weight to objective reality go increasingly unnoticed, such as the continuation of the *material* earth for some six billion years, more than enough permanence for a string of lifetimes. We have our whirling microcosm faster than the eye can see, our vast and complex macrocosm. There is much new to learn, too, yet we need not discard all that we have already learned and we need not attribute our confusions to the universe.

The dynamics of the universe, which may seem unstable to us, have been doing their thing with remarkable regularity for eons. The most unpleasant climactic or seismic eruptions may terrify or disrupt our lives yet they follow fixed laws of

nature. As for our everyday world, even with some awareness of the laws of entropy, empirical evidence and reflection suggest far more stability than meets the eye of the ethereal beholder.

Not everything is changing at an exponential rate. More-so, some things never change. One cannot alter history—the *real* past, whatever it is—except perhaps in the science fiction movies or in unproven theories. If you make a comment right now, if you do something right now, whether you are aware of it or not it will *forever* be an historical *fact* that you did it. What's past is past, as unalterable as spilt milk. Your action or the action of a falling tree may get lost in the flotsam and jetsam of time, noticed or unnoticed, but nonetheless it remains a permanent historical action indelibly etched into objective reality.

Natural laws may be manipulated but it is unlikely they can be changed. We may run out of water, but it remains a potential compound of two parts hydrogen to one part oxygen; when the combination is available under the right conditions, there will be water. Certain limits also seem permanent. Pseudo paradoxes may be resolved, new pseudo paradoxes created, but it is not likely there will ever be a square circle or that a quart of milk will ever be completely poured and retained, as is, in a pint container of milk. Box A cannot be completely inside Box B if box B is completely inside box A. Not even in one's imagination, if we are honest about the images. As if blessed by nature with certain clues to reality, apparently not a single one of all our minds can honestly construe such an arrangement of boxes, nor can any affirm such a condition in any credible way.

One could go on at great length listing such "absolutes." If not unequivocally absolute, owing to some strange oversight, they are still far more stable and permanent than they are ethereal and changing. As much as we suffer from "future shock" we also suffer from *past* shock; not merely from the complexities of the future but also from simple habit and from many of the consistent age old rules of the past.

The natural laws of chemistry, physics, astronomy, mathematics, biology and evolution, anabolism and catabolism, the laws of thermodynamics, and more things than we can imagine appear to have been fixed in their scheme of things for hundreds of millions—billions—of years. The earth continues to rotate on its axis and to orbit around the sun. Despite the obvious relativity of many things it is noteworthy that we engineered ourselves to the moon in good part on

Newtonian physics. Despite the obvious realities of change, quite a bit has stayed put. There has been little or no change in the geological record of the rocks, in the theory of evolution, in Mendeleev's tables, or, for ages now, in our continuing use of a twenty-six letter alphabet. There has been comparatively little change in published writings from stone engravings to the early Greeks to Shakespeare to Poe to the Declaration of Independence to some modern writers who have had millions of copies of near *identical* books published.

Contrary to existential fears about "man alone" not being able to "communicate" with another or to see from another individual's perspective, we are engulfed in standardization where often enough—at least before cable and fragmentation of the media—tens of millions simultaneously shared a similar image and sound, and perhaps even thought, as a celebrity is introduced: "And hearrrrr's Johnnnnhy!"

Many of our worst habits, which we ought to have changed after centuries of carbon copy disasters, we seem perhaps *unable* to change. Although indeed much has crumbled—and we might be grateful for much that has—many of our ideas of the past have remained essentially unaltered for centuries. Heraclitus' statement about change itself has apparently remained *unchanged* for some twenty-five hundred years and seems likely to survive the exponential change of modern times. Whirl may be king but the recognition of pattern, meaning, context, objective reality as well as subjective reality, offers the stability of firmly expecting the sun to rise tomorrow—even at the appointed hour—with or without our personal view and despite the relativity of things or the complexity and immensity of the universe.

Nothing is supposed to be certain except death and taxes. Groan! You would think most everyone reading this would, at the least, have *absolute* certainty about how many inches to a foot, how many feet to a yard, what one's name is, and, if not about one's social security number then about one's address and telephone number, or the scar on your little finger, or that missing toe, or whether Los Angeles is on the East Coast or the West Coast. Was John Kennedy assassinated, or was he not?

The earth may be whirling but some of our complexities and uncertainties and anxieties are pointless. Perhaps we cannot entirely escape from the ethereal paradigm but at least in moments it is, indeed, possible to poke one's head out and make some sense of what is happening around us. You should

know as an *absolute fact* what make of car you have been driving, where you have been working, what book you wrote, or read, or didn't write or didn't read and which arm is now in a cast and who you made love to. We can be fairly certain about whether we paid our rent or not, which pair of shoes we are wearing today and a million other things. You would think so, but under the impact of the ethereal wasteland the question arises—are you absolutely certain? Who's to say it is not a dream? Groan again!

If so, what a remarkable dream it is, especially given that regular recurrence and resemblance in nature, dream or not, of sights, sounds, colors, odors, the surprising intricacy of pattern in physical objects and life forms; a remarkable order, after all, seemingly so ingenious we ought to congratulate ourselves if, by chance, we were somehow capable of imagining all of this, as well as of finding, of course, similar imaginations and verification by so many others; unless we imagined them too. Talk about creativity! Consider imagining a single live entity, say the structure and workings of one small kitten; either an *ideal* kitten or any particular Platonic "copy cat." Unlikely! Yet even if non-dogmatic about the greater ethereal absolutes, some of us remain practically catatonic about many of the obvious facts of our existence. Given our leaders in the White House one would think we had enough legitimate anxieties.

In this enervated ethereal condition we may become the opposite of the solipsistic creator. We not only follow, but we lose ourselves. For if the material world has its temptations, so, too, does the ethereal world. Eviscerated of reason, sense, cause, logic, the very substance and *why* of things—and by extension the *why not*—we become ripe for most anything, including some of the most despicable acts that by comparison put our more materialistic, sensual deeds to shame. At least we may feel our senses. In the blurred ethereal atmosphere the worst becomes possible even with the best of intentions.

With little respect for materialism, the *known* material evidence, there is nothing to prevent us, with all our humility in tact, from falling through the trap door into this strange ethereal place. Not only do we lose our authentic selves, but we sacrifice our knowledge and insight accumulated over the years. We may also lose our potential. One may wonder whether, had they suffered such modesty and lack of certitude,

the Curies would ever have discovered radium or whether the Wright Brothers would ever have gotten off the ground.

As the historian Herbert J. Mueller observed, there are grounds for viewing our world with both pride and alarm. There may be more substantial solutions that we suspect, once we emerge from the ethereal waste land; and more substantial perils than we suspect, if we do not.

In our efforts to be "creative" we need not drown like Narcissus in sophisticated nonsense. We need not abandon subtleties for simplistic certitudes. There are alternatives to Kawalski and Blanch Dubois, to ethereal dreams and crass realities. The uncultured waste land depicted by Eliot has not yet disappeared, but perhaps, with an eye on the ethereal waste land, as well, we need not trade crude substance without style for empty style without substance.

As a modern, you may wish to allow the possibility that all is indeed subjective as "man makes himself." With that excessive humility, matched in degree only by a presumptuousness of remarkable creativity, you may hesitate to give up the ghost; not exactly *believing* in these ghosts yet fearing to be dogmatic and wishing to keep that "open mind," leaving the door open at least a tiny crack to allow for small possibilities. In some strange twist of the modern mind it appears to many to be a *certain* fact that there is surely something dangerous about any kind of certitude. And so, if you can't prove otherwise, perhaps you merely dreamed, after all, that such and such is your address or that so and so is your husband or wife. Or you can't be sure....

Maybe, indeed, you are in some grand asylum, or falling somewhere in a time warp, or somehow crashing into one of the newer dimensions. Maybe. More likely the warp is in the ethereal waste land, that strange black hole sucking up, with no good reason, whatever might make sense and meaning in our lives.

***Since response by Lewis Lapham, a few additional comments have been added here, in brackets. It's been some years since the article was submitted to Harper's, but, if anything, the *Ethereal Waste Land* persists and expands over time.**