

Time & Telos: One Year On

Text by Gabriel Kwok

Gabriel is a London-based medical student whose writing explores questions of being, identity, place and embodiment. He hopes to marry these passions with long-standing interests in epistemology and evidence-based medicine. Gabriel studies at Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry, and he is the outgoing 28th Editor at SMSUK.



Telos (n.) – “ultimate object or aim”, from Greek *telos*: “the end, limit, goal, fulfilment, completion”¹

There is an inevitable circularity in trying to peer through time. No matter how far or profitably we journey, one must eventually return to spring and mid-autumn, bearing witness to the recurrence of life’s seasons, each end telescoping into another beginning. Delineate any given time and one inevitably finds new unknowns – both known and unknown – collected moments that we did not anticipate shaping us into who we are today. Likewise, I cannot truly know whether these experiences will have given me enough for tomorrow’s provocations, though I should expect to find many deemed sufficient by virtue of having made it through (or perhaps I succeeded *despite* the preparation?).

I am not, of course, discussing issues of causality here – and I am happy to let the historians debate the *necessary* and *sufficient* causes of events – but rather, deeply intimate questions of purpose and purposefulness as they unfold in and through time. We routinely use the past to account for what we are today, but were our actions purposefully goal-directed when we did not know the outcomes? I have packed my London flat

with curated relics of home, but did they really mean something back then, or are these mere contrivances of liminality, resonant only in hindsight?

Paths through London

Amid such impossible portents, I have often found affable companionship on solitary walks through the City’s well-trodden paths. TS Eliot also “journeyed to London / to the time-kept city”,² and I retrace his steps “along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street”,³ *The Waste Land* of a long-forgotten epoch. Standing by the crossroad of the ancient paths, the poet seems to offer his own astute observations:

“... Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end
you figured
And is altered in fulfilment. There are
other places
Which are also the world’s end, some at
the sea jaws,
Or over a dark lake, in a desert or city—
But this is the nearest, in place and time,
Now and in England.”⁴

Drawing heavily on classical *mythos*, Eliot’s semi-autobiographical remembrances can be deeply counterintuitive, recalling a parallel way of knowing based more on the construction of personal and shared narrative than the strict linear flow of cause and effect. Though certainly a sharp contrast with contemporary *scientia*, this approach can paradoxically appear more *scientific* in an older sense of the word, being far more attuned to how our psyches are built to seek out meaning, and thus allowing for a deeper, more resonant knowledge of self. This is another circular argument, of course, premised on our basic psychology being basic psychology, but there are other teleological implications too: for if we cannot escape our own psychology, then we cannot fully know what a moment

can, would or perhaps necessarily has to mean, even long after it has passed. Accessed through memory, the future can inform the past as much as the past causes the future. Perhaps we should not leave this unexamined. The poet both reveals and undertakes this pivotal endeavour as “words strain, / crack and sometimes break, under the burden”.⁴ Perhaps we too can see all writing as an act of memory, an imperfect but propitious calibration in and through time. Indeed, facing these questions so far from home, it has truly meant so much having this space for the explication and exchange of ideas.

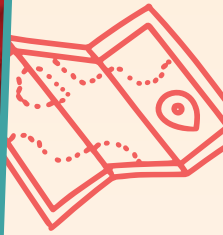
Closing the circle

Now coming to the end of the academic year, spring returns as snow turns to brilliant lilac, just as they have done before. Marked by both renewal and transition, the season is likewise suffused with an accentuated sense of circularity, as we hand the reins over at the Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom to our next executive committee. It has been our privilege journeying with you over the past year, and we hope that you have enjoyed reading our column as much as we have enjoyed curating it. I cannot wait to see where the next one will take us.

“What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.”⁴

References

1. Online Etymology Dictionary. *Teleology* (n.). Available at: <https://bit.ly/42fhtsn>. Accessed 9 May 2023.
2. TS Eliot. *Choruses from “The Rock”*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3B5fudU>. Accessed 9 May 2023.
3. TS Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3Mieb21>. Accessed 9 May 2023.
4. TS Eliot. *Four Quartets*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3LO6sXW>. Accessed 9 May 2023.



Text by Charlene Kok

Charlene is a first-year medical student at Imperial College London.



Once, in another life, my life had infinite possibilities. My relatives thought I would become a lawyer, remnants of a time when they loved to torture all the kids with the question, “What do you want to be when you grow older?”. My friends thought I would end up studying mathematics, because I used to sleep during my papers and still do pretty alright. My cousins thought I would be an artist, seeing my bedroom walls covered in all sorts of sketches and paintings when they came over. Truth is, I have always known that I wanted to do medicine, and maybe, as literary critic William Empson once said, there *is* more in a child than a man is able to keep. I now have a life, stories and a world surrounding them – I am me, not the person others thought I would become, whoever she might have turned out to be.

Lives un-lived

Truth be told, it is tempting to think about all the lives un-lived. When I finished season 3 of the television series *Better Call Saul*, I laid in bed thinking if there was anything the characters could have done to prevent the finale. As the writer Doc Luben put it, “How do we forgive ourselves for all of the things that we did not become?” Maybe the saying is true that art imitates life, because such questions do come up time and time

again, whenever I look into my past or future: who would I have become had I gone to another school? What different lives would I live if I chose to stay in the UK or go back home to Singapore?

In the *Iliad*, Achilles chooses between two clearly defined fates, ones designed by the gods and foretold in advance: either fight at Troy or live a long, ordinary life. (Spoiler alert: he chooses to fight.) As I grow older, I become more acutely aware of these forking paths in life where I have to make decisions, never quite knowing which choice is the right one, because the world we live in is not so clearly laid out for us. Each decision is an alternate fate dissolved, and I will never truly know what my life will be or could have been. Achilles never had to wonder whether he should return home or practise in the UK, and he never had the uncertainty of which choice was the fate with a long, ordinary life.

Our lives to be

What I am trying to say is that, since moving, I have been gripped with much accountability about the actions I have taken and will take. Choosing to study overseas was not a frivolous decision and choosing whether to return home or stay in the UK will be another weighty decision to make. Either way, much will be left unsaid and un-lived – our self-portraits do hold a lot of negative space. Still, there is a certain beauty in not knowing about our un-lived lives. They represent so many

possibilities of the things that could happen, and the joys and triumphs we could fill our lives with, and so much hope for the person that we could become.

To quote Virginia Woolf’s quiet lines of poetry from her book *To the Lighthouse*: “And all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be are full of trees and changing leaves.” Whichever lives we choose for ourselves, living in the space between who we were and who we will become relieves the pressure and remorse from all the lives un-lived. Everything is loveliest in the current moment. As Achilles says (in the 2004 movie *Troy*), “The Gods envy us. They envy us because we’re mortal, because any moment may be our last. Everything is more beautiful because we’re doomed. You will never be lovelier than you are now. We will never be here again.” ♦

