

Afterword

Know Time?

▼ **SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE** in *Entangled Temporalities*

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Quid tum? I begin these closing remarks with Latin borrowed from the *Eclogues* of the Roman poet Virgil.¹ I do so partly in an effort to go native with contributor Christian Flow's essay, in which an anonymous traveler mines the same work for words with which to answer the Latin salutation of Johann Matthias Gessner's granddaughter Huberia. It is important to make a good first impression, the traveler later reflected, and the same is no less true for me, entrusted with the unenviable task of conjuring a last word or two after so much has already been said, and so well. The two particular words I have chosen mean, literally, "What then?" But their force depends on context and emphasis. "Violets are dark," observes the singing shepherd in Virgil's poem, "and so are cherries." If the handsome Amyntas too has dark skin, "What then?" In other words, "So what?"

Quid tum? would become the personal motto of the great Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti. His success came despite the stigma of being the child of unwed parents, and he may at least partly have meant the motto in the same sense as Virgil's shepherd. But on medals minted in his honor, the question is accompanied by a winged eye, suggesting that "What then?" was here taken to mean above all "What's next?"² This, in other words, is the slogan of a visionary, albeit one who looked back (to classical antiquity) as much as he looked forward.

¹ Virgil, *Eclogues* 10.38.

² For a spirited and informative exchange on what Alberti meant by the phrase, see David Marsh and Ingrid Rowland, *New York Review of Books* 42.1 (January 12, 1995), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/01/12/so-what/>.

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BREPOLS

This question, predicated on a vague temporality that ranges between the present and the future, but formulated in words from the ancient past, seems a useful way to describe the work of the writer of an afterword. On the one hand, to the reader who has absorbed the insights and lessons of this issue's separate essays but who is still wondering if they add up to more than the sum of their parts, I am meant to echo the apparently anticipatory work of its editors and introducers with a retrospective answer to the question, "So what?" (I say "apparently anticipatory" because the introduction is, like most others, no less an afterword than this is, written after the contents before which it is situated.) On the other, I ideally am supposed to add to this assessment a forward looking *envoi* to the reader: with the reading of this issue done, "What next?" Both tasks offer a reminder of the way in which "the book" still structures our experience of time and of time-bound effort, even as it makes time's constructedness plain. Nor does it matter that this is a journal read online, so that its contents may be read selectively and in any order. Indeed, the editors, in their after-written introduction, outline several possible routes through the ensemble. Books have been conjuring the sense of complicated journeys at least since Homer's *Odyssey*—since, that is to say, before there were books, only songs stored in the random-access memory of the Homeric singer.

Yes, this classicist is already harping on Homer and Virgil. But he is not the only one in this volume who seems haunted by the Greco-Roman past. As Hansun Hsiung reports, the founder of the Internet Archive compares his project (somewhat alarmingly) to the great Library of Alexandria, consumed by flames. Anna-Maria Meister tells us that the first, failed containment vessel for the radioactive ruins at Chernobyl was nicknamed by some "the Sarcophagus" (from the ancient Greek for "flesh-eater"), while the architects of the new one hail their creation as Novarka, "New Arch." The arch was, of course, one of the signature architectural forms of ancient Rome. Through its triumphal arches, captive armies and nations were forced to march, signifying their "subjugation," that is to say, their passage, like oxen, "under the yoke" (*sub iugum*), the shape of which the arch was thought to mimic. Finding himself at Chernobyl, Alberti would be both perplexed and pleased! His world sought to repair the ruins of the ancient past; ours, those of a more recent cataclysm. But even this reparative work cannot quite escape the forms and metaphors of imperialist domination. More gently, Henry David Thoreau, as Erika Milam notes, had celebrated the cicada by translating an ode of the ancient Greek poet Anacreon. We might add that the cicadas that swarm through her essay also provide the soothing musical accompaniment to one of Plato's most famous dialogues, the *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates diagnoses love as an effort to remember and replicate beauty that the soul only truly knew before it was encumbered with mortal flesh, part of a cycle of life not unlike the cicada's own.

For the historian of ancient Rome, Laetitia Lenel's chronicle of efforts to capture and preserve the living presence of Holocaust survivors via magnetic wire and audio-video tape (an earlier draft of her essay also considers experiments with interactive holograms) calls vaguely to mind the wax portrait masks of ancestors displayed by Roman aristocrats and donned by actors at every family funeral. Eric Gurevitch's material lies beyond the borders of Greco-Roman antiquity (Alexander the Great famously stopped just short of a planned attempt to conquer India), but at the risk of colonizing it too for classics (one could argue that my meandering argument thus far has been nothing but such!), it seems worth noting that the information overload it maps finds a parallel in the hulking corpus of works attributed to the Greco-Roman physician Galen, which comprises an astonishing percentage of *all* surviving ancient texts in Greek. Little wonder that he too would long remain authoritative: no one had the time to replace him. Eva Hemmungs Wirtén's often hilarious tales of the patent office describe a world seemingly possible only at the intersection of industrialization and American folly; nevertheless, the "Automatic Reading System" at its center calls to mind other watersheds in the technological history of texts, such as the invention of the codex, which came in late Roman antiquity to be preferred to the scroll. This was in large part because the codex—that is to say, the book in the form in which we mostly knew it in the pre-digital age—better allowed random access to contents, such as the "synoptic" gospels of the New Testament, the parallels between which were then mapped, for the reader's convenience, with new kinds of charts, such as the Eusebian Canon Tables, which find an echo in our editors' own visual prompts to the non-sequential reading of this issue, mentioned above.

My purpose in this very academic excursus is hardly to demonstrate the timelessness of classical or Christian myths and tropes. On the contrary, similarly specious connections to the contents of this issue, including but not limited to its core theme of time, could doubtlessly be drawn from any literary, artistic, or scientific tradition of sufficient duration. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that almost any wide-ranging body of material would have mapped, across admittedly different terrain, a remarkably similar set of forces and concerns regarding chronology, temporality, memory, presence, etc. So what? Well, we might conclude with most physicists that time is all in our (human) heads; after all, they observe, the known "laws" of the universe work perfectly well without it.³ At the very least, we might follow the lead of the last century's historicists and treat time, like any of a number of seemingly natural quantities, as "constructed" and "contingent." Such, indeed, is the approach of this volume's contributors, who thereby have given us a series of histories of time that are disorientingly but thrillingly different from one another (of the ensemble, the essay that most directly and dramatically explores the

³ Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, translated by Erica Segre and Simon Carnell (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018).

constructedness of time is Dror Weil's, in which chronologies are built, maintained, and regulated through a "science of timekeeping" comprising complex physical tools—"an armillary sphere, parallactic ruler, sundials, astrolabe, and the like"—and even more complex concepts, calendars, texts, and philologies). It is in this regard, however, that we might begin to turn to the question of what to do next. Is it enough to say that time is whatever it is to this or that person or age, that there is no universal time—indeed, that the universe itself knows no time? I wonder if we shouldn't instead here offer something like the kind of intervention that Karen Barad, following Niels Bohr, makes in quantum mechanics.⁴ Rather than seeing time as a kind of productive error resulting from the human apparatus by which we experience the world—as, in other words, a human concept that helps us to know and understand the world, but not as it "really" is—might we instead make the more radical assumption that our attempts to know time are themselves part of its (genuine) ontology? Or to put this more pragmatically: do not even the most obviously constructed and even mutually contradictory temporalities reviewed by this issue's contributors add up to something that feels *real*?

I have slipped, of course, from the language of knowledge to that of affect. But here too I am hardly the first in this volume to follow an emotional turn, either in their material or regarding their own relationship to it. In the latter regard, Flow's feelings for Huberia seem energized precisely by all he *cannot* know about her routine. In the former, is knowledge the only thing Richard Alexander, as described by Milam, was seeking when he turned his ears (and parabolic reflector) to the rhythmic "melodies of insect singers"? One way or another, Milam concludes her touching survey of cicada-lovers with good news: "There is still much we do not understand about periodical cicadas." Compare and contrast Rebecca Woods's contribution, in which sound and "voice" lurk semi-silently in an etymological root of the "evocative power" she ascribes to the remains of long-extinct mammoths (Among the things they have to tell us are worrying lessons about the futures of multiple species, including our own, toward which we may need to adopt, Woods notes, "an ethics of care that Juno Salazar Pareñas calls 'hospice for a dying planet.>"). One might expect the search for knowledge to unite scholars around a shared approach to university libraries, but a century ago, feelings and antagonisms ran hot, as Hsiung reveals in an essay sure to become required reading for anyone involved in similarly fraught debates today. "When we speak of the companionship of books," wrote Herbert Putnam in 1891, "we speak of books that are our friends and intimates." He would later oppose proposals to cull "dead books" from the stacks, preferring a model of research that left time for chance encounters and unforeseeable connections.

⁴ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

Of nonconsensual experimentation in the 1950s by Indian doctors on local children, Projit Mukharji deftly opposes literary accounts to medical records in order to capture a “temporal disidentification” between doctors and patients, that is, “between the experimenters and the experimented,” with the former focused on a perceived need “to catch up with the West and exalt the nation through scientific progress,” a focus that made them (and their archives) oblivious to the latter’s “affective temporality of familial care.” Just as devastating is Lenel’s poignantly personal account of her journey through decades of accounts of the Shoah by particular survivors. At first her purpose seems aligned with that of the interviewers: to know what really happened in the ghettos and camps. But their probing questions unsettle her no less than they rankle the persons being interviewed. As stories shift and change as survivors age, accurate knowledge seems more and more elusive, a fact she rightly laments. What emerges, however, is a thickening sense of traumatic time. This or that horror may have grown hazy by the time of Jack Unikoski’s final interview in 2004, but it is the domestic detail that his wife still warns him if a televised film is “safe” to watch without the risk of nightmares that delivers the essay’s gut-punch. What he could not have *known* in 1946 is what surviving would *feel* like, sixty years on—a feeling that has no diminished claim on our collective empathy and shame.

What does it tell us that the contributors to “Entangled Temporalities,” a special issue of the *Journal for the History of Knowledge*, who largely describe themselves as “historians of science,” from the Latin *scientia*, which itself simply means “knowledge,” have brought us to places of sometimes delicate, sometimes profound *feeling*? Naturally, this effect is foremost a testament to their story-telling prowess, to their humanity, and to their embrace of the kind of ethics of care that Walter Benjamin, fleeing the catastrophe revisited by Lenel, makes central to the work of the historian. But does this same success convey a lesson about time itself? To suggest that time might be a more proper object of phenomenology than epistemology is, of course, nothing new. Nevertheless, for Heidegger and the rest, *Dasein* may be local and specific, but it is also singular and universal: this, they argue, is what being and time are like for each and every one of us. Historians, by contrast, deal in frequently messy pluralities. Weil has given us a vivid example of such in his portrait of the eighteenth-century Chinese-Muslim scholar Liu Zhi, whose work was predicated on the “conviction that Time is universal but can be grasped only through its various local and technical articulations.” Of course, historians today would embrace the second part of this formulation but not necessarily the first. They seldom make explicitly ontological claims, not only because the purported timelessness of most ontologies is at odds with current historical method, which favors granularity, but also because a significant portion of their work is about reconstructing the rise and fall of this or that purportedly timeless truth, such as the religious truth Liu Zhi sought to confirm. Nevertheless, I close this issue, as a reader, with a deeper sense of what *is*, full stop. Yes, much

of this sense comprises an expanded inventory of all the things that time can be and do. That panorama, however, also traces the outlines of what we might call a chronontology of knowledge itself—with the caveat that, here too, “itself” masks a vast plurality, one that is subject precisely to the historical work that lends this journal its title.⁵

Non novi hominem, answers Huberia to her grandfather’s question of who is at the door, “I don’t know the guy.” The verb that English translates in the present tense, “know,” is a simple past in the original, for in Latin, knowledge is almost always expressed, not as a state, but as the result of a process: Huberia does not know the man at the door because she has not, prior to that moment, come to know him. Similar tenses, one might say, underpin the metaphysical project of Plato in the *Phaedrus* and elsewhere: we recognize what we call beauty, for example, because we remember, however dimly, having seen the real thing—its Platonic “form”—when we were bodiless souls. Needless to say, one does not need to be a Latin speaker or a Greek metaphysician in order to know that knowing takes time. By what means, let us therefore ask, may we come to know time itself, in all its plurality? One might reply, sighingly, that no time would be sufficient for such a task, that we must instead content ourselves with microhistories of time in this or that time and place, such as have been gathered here. It is on this score, however, that feeling comes most gloriously to the rescue of history. To know what time feels like, which is something we surely all learn pretty quickly, is to know that it does not always feel the same. And it is that knowledge that makes each of the stories told here, even the ones that seem remotest from our own experience, ring true.

⁵ I am amused to discover that “chronontology” is already in use as the name of a website (chronontology.dainst.org) designed by German classicists who, not entirely unlike Liu Zhi, are attempting to link and cross-reference timelines and competing systems of chronological nomenclature for the ancient world.

Research Article(s)

