

III.—What are *teretis plagas*? (Horace, *Odes* 1.1.28)

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It might be supposed that there is nothing left to be said about the interpretation of an author such as Horace, whose works have been subjected to the scrutiny of able scholars through centuries; yet the fact remains, surprising as it may seem, that there are not a few places where a student who will adopt the attitude of the child in Hans Christian Andersen's story of the fraudulent weavers of the royal robe, cannot remain satisfied with the traditional exegesis. The fact that it may have been concurred in by editor after editor proves, one fears, very little; one of the chief curses of classical studies has been, and is, traditionalism, and one of the worst traditions is that of repeating a note from former commentators in the casual way that suggests that repetition is by many identified with explanation. The word *teretis* in the phrase *teretis plagas*, Horace, *Odes* 1.1.28, has suffered this treatment.

The statement in the Pseudo-Acronian scholia¹ is: "non plagas teretes, sed de tereti ait fune factas: ideo enim ita posuit, quia illis debemus substantiam unde sumimus," i.e., "because we owe a substance to those things from which we derive it," and hence, presumably, the epithet may be transferred. The language of the quotation suggests however that there were readers of Horace a long time ago who felt that *teretis* has a direct application to *plagas*, since the scholiast takes pains to deny this and provides a solution through the indirect. But the scholia $\lambda\phi\psi$ ² take an entirely different point of view: "plagae sunt retia: dicuntur autem teretes plagae propter nodos rotundos." This appears to mean that when the cordage forming the nets is knotted at each intersection, the knot thus tied forms a smooth, round ball. An examination of almost any net, a tennis-net, for instance, will show that there is some truth in this, but one may well doubt whether a transfer of epithet from such small *nodi* to the *plagae* is reasonable. Note however that the scholion in this case seems to testify to the notion

¹ *Pseudacronis Scholia in Horatium vetustiora*, rec. Otto Keller (Leipzig, 1902), 18.

² *Scholia in Horatium* $\lambda\phi\psi$, ed. H. T. Botschuyver (Amsterdam, 1935), 6.

of roundness, curvature, which is apparently inherent in the word *teres*. Festus provides this definition:³ "*teres est in longitudine rotundatum, quales asseres natura ministrat*"; but this is obviously not easy to apply to nets, and because of that some editors⁴ have been led to believe that what is being thought of here in *teretis* is the poles on which the nets are strung, though the transfer of the epithet in this case seems incredible on any rational grounds. And so difficult of general application is Festus' statement that Robinson Ellis is driven to say that "a gradually diminishing roundness is sufficiently in accordance with Festus' definition."⁵ One is left wondering about that, seeing that the three instances of *teres* he discusses in Catullus 64 refer to (1) a brassière fitting snugly over the swelling breasts of a woman (64.65), (2) semi-globular shaped cymbals (64.262), (3) barrows raised over the tombs of the Homeric heroes (64.363)! The truth is that Festus' definition is quite insufficiently inclusive; a study of the article *teres* even in Harpers' Latin Dictionary will prove that. We do not therefore emerge from the contemplation of ancient sources of explanation with any sense of security about the meaning of the word in the Horatian phrase under discussion.

It seems advisable in the next place to see to what extent Horace can be made to furnish the explanation himself. The word *teres* occurs in his works elsewhere: in *Odes* 2.4.21 *teretis suras*, in *Epodes* 11.28 *teretis pueri*, and in *Satires* 2.7.86 *teres atque rotundus*. It seems to me incontestable that the idea conveyed by the adjective in the first two of these passages is not so much smoothness as well-roundedness, shapeliness arising from soft curves. The beauty of the calf of a woman's leg is, for most observers, shapeliness; its smoothness will be appreciated by a more limited circle. The boy of whom the pederast is amorous tends always to approximate the female form in its most conspicuous feature, the beauty of its curving lines; note that the Lyciscus of *Epodes* 11.24 boasts *quamlibet mulierculam vincere mollitie*, and the *teres puer* of 11.28 who may conceivably displace Lyciscus in Horace's affections, must be of the same kind essentially as his rival, as the *longam renodantis*

³ *Festus de Verborum Significatu*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Leipzig, 1913), p. 498, 15.

⁴ Referred to by H. Schütz, *Horaz, Oden und Epoden* (Berlin, 1889), 29.

⁵ R. Ellis, *A Commentary on Catullus* (Cambridge, 1893), 338. The rather tall and slender cone which Ellis thus evokes does not fit very well, as pointed out in my text.

comam shows.⁶ In the *Satires* passage, while the sense of smoothness undoubtedly emerges, it is closely associated with the perfect curvature of the sphere. It thus appears that in the three passages other than *Odes* 1.1.28 where *teres* is used, the idea of curves and curvature is strongly indicated by it; the suggestion thus arises that in the only other place where Horace employs *teres*, this sense of the word, which seems predominant with him, might occur once more. Reference has already been made to three occurrences of *teres* in Catullus 64, namely, vss. 65, 262, 363; in regard to the latter two of these, Robinson Ellis, no mean judge of the meaning of a word in the Catullan vocabulary, definitely accepts the idea of curved swelling as suggested by *teres*, and though in the note to vs. 65 he decides on "smooth" as his rendering of the word, every item in his note, and some very forcibly so, makes for the sense "bulging, swelling outwards." Catullus' *bracchiolum teres puellulae* in 61.181-182, is very like the *teretis suras* of Horace, *Odes* 2.4.21. Thus there can be no doubt about this value of the word in Latin, to pursue it no further, and it is a commonplace of experience that any adjective of several meanings has, in relation to any individual who employs it, one sense of the word which for him is likely to be more prominent than any other.

It scarcely seems worth while recapitulating here, except in the most summary fashion, the treatment accorded *teretis* in the phrase *teretis plagas* by the commentators and translators. Some ignore it, like the great Bentley and the no less distinguished Lambinus; others accord it merely an undocumented and undiscussed translation; others yet again put forward an explanation, either ancient or modern, which is plainly unsatisfying on one account or another. The most informative notes or renderings are the following:

(1) that of Macleane:⁷ "This word Festus describes to mean 'long and round as a pole,' which definition will not always help us to the meaning. It has always more or less closely the meaning of roundness or smoothness, or both as here." His emphasis on smoothness and roundness is correct.

⁶ The absurd and truth-obscuring prudery of Anglo-Saxon editors refuses to acknowledge the general pederasty of the Mediterranean area in both ancient and modern times, and is horrified beyond expression by anyone who uses his common sense enough to see and to say that Horace did not rise above the physical mores of his habitat, and indeed never claimed to do so, nor ever thought that there was any distinction to be gained in making good such a claim.

⁷ A. J. Macleane, *Horace, Opera Omnia*, third ed. rev. by G. Long (London, 1874), 6.

(2) that of Schütz,⁸ where the difficulty of *teretis* is frankly recognized, and certain standard renderings and explanations, both ancient and modern, are challenged;

(3) those of several editors, e.g., Shorey and Laing,⁹ where reference is made to *Epodes* 2.32: *obstantis plagas*, thus raising the question as to what shape a "resisting net" will present at the place where a crazed animal rushes madly into it;

(4) that of Naylor:¹⁰ "The adjective *teretis* goes closely with *rupit* and may mean either 'because slender' or 'though strong,'" exhibiting a delightful vagueness which one may suspect did not affect Horace at all similarly;

(5) that of Ussani:¹¹ "secondo quanto dicemmo in *Epod.* XI 28 'ben fatte,' e quindi per via di traslato 'forte,' onde nasce un contrasto col *rupit*," with which in its general lines agrees Giusanni's note on *tereti cervice*, *Lucretius* 1.35;

(6) the translation of Sir Theodore Martin:¹²

"If his stanch hounds have tracked the deer,
Or by the meshes rent is seen
Where late a Marsian boar hath been,"

where particular attention is invited to the rendering "rent" for *teretis*; this must be what Ernout and Meillet have in mind when they write: "il y a peut-être une trace du sens étymologique dans le *teretis plagas* d'Horace," regarding *teretis* as meaning "rubbed," "scraped," and so "weakened" (from *tero*);¹³

(7) the note of DorigHELLI:¹⁴ "*rupit*, i. irrupit, se coniecit in plagas, vel involutus eas rupit," where, very obviously, this commentator has in mind as one possible explanation the idea of the animal getting entangled in the net, bulging it out, and so breaking it, just what Sir Theodore Martin appears to have sought after with his translation "rent" for *teretis*.

Enough has been said to demonstrate the extreme uncertainty on the one hand and the dogmatic repetitiousness on the other of the usual interpretations of *teretis* in this passage, while an examination of the value of this adjective in its other occurrences in Horace

⁸ See note 4, *supra*.

⁹ P. Shorey and G. Laing, *Horace, Odes and Epodes* (Boston, 1910), 143.

¹⁰ C. D. Naylor, *Horace, Odes and Epodes, a Study in Poetic Word-Order* (Cambridge, 1923) *ad loc.* He reflects the views of Wickham (Oxford, 1904), who cannot settle down to a definite meaning.

¹¹ V. Ussani, *Le Liriche di Orazio* (Torino, 1927), 1.60. See also C. Giussani's *Lucrezio* (Torino, 1896), 2.16, note to line 35.

¹² Sir T. Martin, *Works of Horace* (transl.) (Edinburgh, 1881), 1.4.

¹³ A. Ernout and A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la langue latine* (Paris, 1939), 1031, *s.v. leres*.

¹⁴ F. DorigHELLI, *Quintus Horatius Flaccus* (Padua, 1780), 3, note to line 28.

and in some striking passages in Catullus appears to indicate how strongly the idea of curvature or, in the extreme case, bulge, is associated with *teres*. This suggests the possible conclusion that for *Odes* 1.1.28 the adjective means "bulging," that is, pushed out from the natural perpendicular fall of a net set up on poles into a roughly curved form such as the net would assume from the impact upon it of an animal driving against it from within. The translation for this line may therefore very well be, and it is here maintained that it is, "or Marsian boar has burst the bulging snares." As Wickham points out: "27, 28 must mean 'if the moment is sufficiently exciting.' If no deer had been sighted, if the boar was still safe in the netted enclosure, the huntsman might go home for the night."¹⁵ Everything would be ordinary enough up to and even including the bulging of the nets as the trapped animal feels his way about and tests the nets here and there; the supreme experience which no genuine hunter would forego, no matter what the counter-attractions of a *tenera coniunx* waiting expectantly for him at home, is the particular occasion when the net once again bulges and this time, after bulging, gives way.

It should be added that it is no sufficient criticism on this view to say that *teretis* is a more or less routine epithet added to *plagas* precisely as *fidelibus* is a stock description attached to *canibus*. In the situation conceived by the poet *fidelibus* is anything but a stock epithet; he says: "If a hind has been caught sight of by the hounds which can be depended on." They have got a view of the deer, and, fortified by a good scent too, no doubt, they follow up forthwith, baying as they go, and their master recognizes to such a degree how absolutely dependable they are that he drops all idea of returning home for the night in order that he may keep in touch with them. The moment is, as Wickham puts it, "sufficiently exciting." The fact is that in the circumstances *fidelibus*, far from being a mere stock epithet, is so significant that *teretis* needs to have some rather specialized and locally important value attached to it, merely to keep it, if possible, on the same language level with *fidelibus*.

¹⁵ E. C. Wickham, *Horace* (Oxford, 1904), 1.5, notes.