

Retractationes on a Year at the TLL

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If I had to choose one lemma that has defined my tenure as the SCS Fellow to the TLL thus far, it would be *retractare*: to handle again. Combining the dreaded prefix re-, whose complexities have earned an entire article in *Glotta* and which has occupied much of the TLL's attention for over a decade, with the exceptionally vague verb *tractare*, the network of dozens of possible gradations in meaning encompassed by these two components opened up so many possibilities to misinterpret the author's text that this word arrived on my desk in late Autumn, and remained on it half-complete, awaiting my attention after the holidays. In that time, it recursively reflected my life at the Bayerische Akademie, its constellation of related meanings overlapping with the work process and the experience of life as a fellow.

I. With a complete sense of re-

A. Re- is iterative, signifying the act of repeating or resuming something

1. With minimal or no sense of physical action

a. While writing or speaking

α Things one has already discussed

The work of the TLL Fellow is precise and demanding in its nature. Set before you is the task of tracing out the life of a word for up to 1200 years, the space between when an unknown craftsman (might have) carved the word *rivus* in the so-called Duenos Inscription and when Isidore of Seville confidently stated that *rivi* refers specifically to rain-fed streams. The journey that the *zettel* (notecards) take you through isn't defined by research interests or disciplinary fields, but rather the organic life of the word through time and the mechanical happenstance of its preservation and transmission. And for each remarkable turn that it takes — to *rivi* of Fortune, of silver, of glass, or of blood — there are many repetitions. When Phaedrus starts a fable, „A wolf and a lamb came to the same *rivum*,“ your notes about the word will tend to blend into those that you wrote before: it is formed with water; it is natural; it is probably on the small-side. When the *zettel* directs you to the indices for compendia of Roman legal texts and you turn up seventy-six passages about *rivus*, chances are many will be in the same context. Is it natural or an aqueduct? Is it another boundary stream between properties? Is there something new, something exciting in this 57th entry? Often the reality is that it is something you have discussed. But often enough, in a work you never heard of before arriving at the library with its unparalleled variety of sources and editions, you find something new, something remarkable, streams of prophecy, of piety, or of books flowing from the pen of Augustine (and filling several cases in the TLL's library).

β Things which are being emended or reviewed for correction

Each time I sat down to revise *retractare*, I lived my research. And there were many, many revisions to be made. Titles and groupings were created, revised, and dissolved as more passages were added and what I once thought was important to highlight in the structure receded, to be replaced by a more significant observation. The authors of Late Antiquity have a particular talent for turning the structure of an article on its head. When writing *revivo/revivisco*, I had succeeded at making it all the way to the pseudonymous works attributed to Augustine before coming to an abrupt halt when there, on the page, for the first time after dozens of passages and more than one draft of the outline, sat the

first transitive use of the verb. Everything would have to slide down a level in the article hierarchy to make room for this first and, it turned out, only time where instead of „to come back to life“ the verb clearly meant „to bring another back to life.“

The editing process is not faced alone. The TLL Fellows work closely with an experienced editor who returns feedback on drafts and is available for conversations over particularly thorny passages or questions about the sequencing of sections. But the fellow must keep in mind that, for all the experience with Latin and lexicography that the editors have, they haven't lived with your word in the same way, seen the same passages, or read the same segments of the work you are wrestling with. Through the writing stage of the article, the TLL Fellows have great independence and responsibility for collecting all the relevant data that will make the twists and turns of the word's journey through time visible and clear to your editor, the external readers, and eventually the users of the Thesaurus.

b When going through a process again

No two days at the TLL are exactly alike, but the rhythms of the day take on a certain regularity. The process of writing a single lemma can take days, weeks, or even months, depending on the number of *zettel* and the complexity of the sources. At the end of the workday, there is almost always more to be done. But this work is a marathon lasting decades, not a sprint, and the scholars working on the project encourage the fellows to maintain a balance between work in the Akademie and life outside. Returning each day and booting up the computer on the American fellow's desk, or watering the Christmas cactus, or picking up your box of assigned *zettel* and carrying them into the quiet of the library is the renewal of the research, the act of resuming the journey through the word's life, passage by passage. I have found that solutions to difficult categorization questions seem to develop in the off-hours, and that fresh eyes on the previous day's work comes both with new insights and with wondering what on earth I had been thinking the day before when writing that title. The pace of work is designed for care, for the sake of both article and author. It is methodical, but allows for each worker to develop their own method of approach. It is repeated, but each repetition of the steps needed to analyze a passage is still for something new.

c When thinking over something that has been done, said, or thought of before

The collection of Latin lexica that sits in a remarkably inscrutable order along or just on top of the shelves just inside the library door are both allies and antagonists in the construction of an article. On the one hand, it can be very satisfactory, if a little bittersweet, to open the tome of Klotz-Müller and see that they, too, organized the lemma into the same groupings you have wrestled them into. On the other, you can be misled into trusting that Cicero used *rideo* + *de* to mean „to laugh about,“ which would be unique in early Latin literature, if you don't carefully check Cicero's usage of *de* as a transition-marker (section IV of the TLL article) and observe that for all his many uses of *rideo*, the one that appears in certain extant dictionaries would be unique for all pre-Christian Latin. The danger is particularly acute for words with divergent, but still related meanings, like the dreaded *retractare*, where the choice of „revise“ or „recant“ or „reread“ have dramatically different outcomes on the passage. Certain passages move through my document from day to day, highlighted yellow or marked with red text to alert me that I haven't fully decided on their final resting place as I parse out each internal context clue, each contemporary usage, each difference that choosing one group or another would make on the article's meaning.

2 With a sense of physical action

a About objects that are touched once more

Each day of work in the TLL library brings the fellow into contact with the immense history of the project. Entering up the steps into the Residenz palace, climbing the four flights of stairs surrounded by the portraits of past Akademie presidents, and entering into the library and archive rooms, you follow the path of prior fellows, editors, and independent scholars to the same volumes and index cards that have been pored over for 130 years. You will start to be familiar with the handwriting of scholars a century gone who copied out the oldest texts painstakingly by hand and annotated them with the latest in textual criticism. You may also find something useful for your apartment or reading pleasure hiding in the closets by the American fellow's desk, full of treasures that were not fated to journey across the Atlantic.

b About objects that are restored

The fellow also has the great joy of working and living in a vibrant, international city in Munich, surrounded by the history of Bavaria and its ups and downs. You might take lunch in the Hofgarten that adjoins the Akademie's wing in the palace, and see the Staatskanzlei whose Neoclassical center and modern, glass-and-steel wings remind the viewers of the connection of German identity to the Roman world, and the destruction of the 1940s that led to the building's stylistic mixture. The Residenz, too, was reconstructed, and the TLL's working space built specially into the new building, the project's history and prestige giving it a space in the heart of the city as a symbol of intellectual engagement and rigor. While the summer months in an attic office where the lights take a few seconds to respond to the switch may get swelteringly hot, the refrain of visitors remains how lucky the American fellow is to work in such a central, culturally significant and active area, with office views out over the rooftops and steeples of the old city all the way — on a clear day — to the Alps.

B Re- is locational, related to movement through space

1 In the proper sense

My return to the US has been delayed by the remarkable opportunity to remain another year working at the TLL, and so after a visit home in the summer months, I once again boarded a plane to return to Munich (see how tricky that re- can be, working both directions like that). Despite the brevity of a 12-month fellowship, that return flight to Germany still felt like its own version of coming home, to a project and colleagues that make Munich a remarkably nice place to live. I have been fortunate to arrive at the tail end of COVID restrictions, where people were able to come back out, social events started back up, and daily business was being brought back to a normal rhythm. This has meant trips to nearby cantinas for lunch with colleagues, with erudite conversation about the work on the way, and no work talk at the table. I also cannot praise highly enough the public transit options that take me back to the Akademie each morning and back home each night. Although locals like to point out the flaws, delays, and inconveniences in the network, after years in the Midwest and South the presence of any transit at all is a joy and the 49 Euro/month ticket has made travel not only to work but to the surrounding countryside and castles far more economical than a car.

2 Metaphorically, particularly with the sense of hesitating

The idea that the third time is the charm was true for my applications to the TLL. Nonetheless, when the time came to accept or decline the offer, I still had to think carefully. There are many complications to committing to a year in München, concerns about family and home life to address, and the ever present question of when one's own research will be accomplished around a full-time commitment to article work, not to mention side goals of improving one's German and actually taking advantage of being in Germany for a year. Is it worth it?

Without the benefit of hindsight, to see where my future in Classics goes, I think yes. However broad one's training in Latin before arriving at the Thesaurus, it would be almost impossible not to find something new to work with. The scope of materials, from poetry and speeches, to medical texts, land surveying manuals, legal codes, graffiti and more, makes each researcher's journey through the language unique. The additional challenge of describing everything you encounter in the right Latin phrasing to make it accessible to a reader of Latin with no background in your native language fosters new ways of thinking and communicating about the material that can be brought into research and teaching. The Thesaurus is also a hub of scholarly activity, with visiting researchers rotating through the study carrels and office spaces and generally amenable to talking about them over a dinner. For American scholars without the funds to travel to Europe independently, the fellowship opens new nearby opportunities for conference travel and networking with distant peers. And so, despite a second round of further hesitation and personal considerations when offered the chance to renew my fellowship, I was glad to be able to return in August and have the chance to deepen my understanding of the Thesaurus through another year of collaboration.

II Without a clear meaning to re-, about things that are discussed or narrated, often with only loose connection to prior discussion or to historical argumentation

I was warned early in my time at the Thesaurus Linguae Latinae that there are no easy words. Although some journies through the history of a lemma are shorter or stick to more familiar sources, somewhere along the way, there would be a passage that would cause the brows to crease, the eyes to repeat their track through the text, and the researcher to wonder what on earth they were looking at, more or less eloquently. After one year working on the project, with the outlines of about a dozen lemmata dancing in my head, this caution has proven true again and again.

There are no easy words at the TLL, but I can make the easy recommendation for scholars contemplating an application: submit it. You will find moments of delight and amusement, like Pliny's recommendation to rub a live turbot (*rhombus*) on one's skin as a remedy for spleen issues, or Firmicus Maternus's assertion that people born under a certain star sign will have the irrepressable urge to divert waterways (*rivos*). You will find moments of shock, as every possible water word, including *roro* and *rivus* becomes a gruesome metaphor in Silver Age epics. You will be challenged by philosophy and theology, when Augustine takes a word like *revivo* and decides it has a whole new, specific meaning to distinguish it from *resurgo*. And you might find that life and work imitate one another, as I did when revising *retracto*, laughing at *rideo*, and finding *ridiculus*, well, you get the idea. You can commiserate about the impossibility of understanding Ennodius or interpreting fragments of early Latin poetry with some of the most knowledgeable and personable colleagues one could hope for. And you can contribute to one of the longest running, most meticulous research works in the study of Latin to support your colleagues in the field for generations to come.