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Redefining *Remate* : Hemingway's Professed Approach to Writing *A Moveable Feast*

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· NOTES ·

REDEFINING *REMA TE*:
HEMINGWAY'S PROFESSED APPROACH
TO WRITING *A MOVEABLE FEAST*

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FOR NEARLY FIFTY YEARS, Hemingway scholars have used the term *remate* to describe Hemingway's unique approach to autobiography and memoir. Their use of this term is traceable to a 10 May 1964 article by Mary Hemingway in *The New York Times Book Review*, where she discusses the "conception" and "construction" of her husband's posthumously published memoir, *A Moveable Feast*. Mary recounts a conversation with Ernest about the genre of *Feast*, prompted by her complaint as she was preparing the typescript that: "It's not much about you. . . . I thought it was going to be autobiography." She recalls Hemingway's response: "It's biography by *remate*" and goes on to gloss his meaning, "*Remate* idiomatically is used to mean a two-wall shot in jai alai. By reflection." This exchange is noteworthy for two reasons: first, according to Mary, Ernest changed her designation of *Feast*'s genre from "autobiography" to "biography" in his response to her, and second, her translation of *remate* as a jai alai term that means "by reflection" is not accurate or complete.

It is impossible to know what exactly Hemingway said, although clearly "biography by *remate*" would mean something different from "autobiography by *remate*." In *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (1972), Carlos Baker identified this subtle shift in genre in Mary's statement but chalks it up as a mistake and tries to settle the issue when he writes in a footnote: "[Hemingway] was doing autobiography rather than biography [in *Feast*]" (375). Since that time, most critics have followed Baker's lead and referred to *Feast*

almost exclusively as “autobiography” and Hemingway’s method of writing as “autobiography by *remate*.”¹ Although there is probably more to say on this topic, the focus of my discussion will be Mary’s use of the term *remate*.

Since Mary made this claim, the notion that Hemingway was working “by *remate*” in *Feast* has informed numerous critical efforts, but it appears that either Mary’s memory, her Spanish, or her knowledge of jai alai was not quite accurate. In this note, I want to track a potential misunderstanding of Hemingway’s notion of (auto)biography and memoir (and of *A Moveable Feast* in particular) that has extended from Mary’s statement that *remate* means “by reflection.”

Remate is a rich and unusual word. It comes from the Spanish verb, *rematar*, which literally means “to re-kill,” with the suggestion of “to kill” coming from *matar*. *Remate* is frequently translated into English as “to finish” or “to complete.” Mary is right to identify the word as a jai alai term, but traditionally *remate* is used to refer to any type of “kill shot,” a shot so forceful or perfectly placed that it cannot be returned.² Although a *remate* shot can be a “two-wall shot” as Mary defined it in her 1964 *New York Times* article, it need not be; the purpose in identifying a shot as a *remate* in jai alai is to make the point that it is un-returnable. In addition, given Hemingway’s lifelong love of bullfighting, it is also worth noting that *remate* has roots in that art as well. According to Barnaby Conrad’s *Encyclopedia of Bullfighting*, *remate* means “[l]iterally conclusion. A finishing pass, such as the *rebolera*, [a flourish to the passes in which the cape is swirled around the bullfighter’s waist like a dancer’s dress]” (Conrad 205). The same encyclopedia defines *rematar* as “to complete. To finish a series of passes” (205). James A. Michener also lists *remate* among the bullfighting definitions in his introduction to *The Dangerous Summer*. His definition is “end, conclusion,” a “master pass” that leaves the bull “motionless” (27). Mary’s interpretation of the word thus appears suspect, because it misses the essence of the word, which is “to finish” conclusively and “to end” absolutely.

Before continuing this exploration of *remate*’s genealogy in Hemingway scholarship, I want to be clear that this note is in no way meant to diminish the excellent work done by Hemingway scholars and critics who took Mary Hemingway at her word and used *remate* to mean “by reflection.” There are three reasons why this note should not be used to question their efforts. First, regardless of the term used as the entry point, the study of Hemingway’s writing as “reflective” has been illuminating; it has signifi-

cantly deepened readers' appreciation of his writing technique as well as his themes. In this regard, the confusion around the translation of *remate* has been a happy accident for Hemingway scholars. Second, although the emphasis in jai alai is on its status as a "kill shot," *remate* can be a *two-wall* shot, and therefore is in a sense "reflective." Third, Mary's gloss of *remate* is only one term that has encouraged scholars to look for rebounding and reflective properties in Hemingway's work. If one requires *his* permission to read his writing in this way, there are still several other metaphors available. For instance, in a 1950 interview with Harvey Breit, Hemingway compared aspects of his writing to "calculus" and to the "three-cushion shot" in billiards. This note is simply an effort to trace an apparent misunderstanding or misinterpretation of something Ernest Hemingway may have said to Mary Hemingway about his method in *A Moveable Feast*.

Mary's definition of *remate* as meaning "by reflection" was first picked up by Philip Young in his *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration* (1966). In the afterword, Young rehearses the exchange between Mary and Ernest as presented in her 1964 article and offers the first, brief demonstration of how *remate* might serve as a basis for reading and interpreting *A Moveable Feast*. The concept of reflection, Young maintains, allows the reader to see how "even when the focus, as so often, is on someone else there is an unflagging sense of presence, of himself [Hemingway]" (284). In 1969, Carlos Baker repeated Mary Hemingway's story in *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* and offered a somewhat more technical definition of *remate* as "the jai-alai term for a double-wall rebound" (540). Apparently inspired by Mary's observations that *remate* refers to a two-wall shot "by reflection," Baker's definition is technically incorrect.

In his 1972 book, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*, Baker did raise a muffled warning about the way *remate* had been translated and used in Hemingway scholarship. In a footnote embedded on page 375 (the same footnote where he insists that Hemingway must have meant autobiography and not biography in the original exchange with Mary), Baker expresses a reservation about Mary's interpretation of *remate* and makes an effort to correct his 1969 misunderstanding of the word. At first he attempts to salvage the emphasis on "reflection," which had already proved a valuable way of reading *A Moveable Feast*, by suggesting that Mary might have misremembered the word. He suggests that Hemingway might have said *rebote* instead. *Rebote*, which is Spanish for "ricochet or rebound," is a back wall, rebound shot in jai alai,

allowing Baker to preserve the idea that Hemingway “was writing autobiography by showing himself rebounding from the personalities of others” (375). But Baker also admits that perhaps Hemingway did say *remate*, in which case *A Moveable Feast* might be read as a way of “treating some of his former enemies to kill shots” (375). Although he does not take a definitive position on *rebote* versus *remate* in *Feast*, Baker does point out that Hemingway at least knew the proper meaning of *rematar* because in *Islands in the Stream* he correctly used a variation of the word, *rematado*, to mean “finished,” “complete” or “dead.” In the passage Baker has in mind, *rematado* refers to a lethal shot striking a German “at the base of the spine and in the back of the neck” (IITS 328). Yet despite Baker’s footnoted observation about the confusion around Mary’s translation of *remate* as “by reflection,” this meaning of *remate* has persisted in Hemingway scholarship since 1972 with few qualifications.³

In recent years, as scholars and critics have begun to explore the full scope of Hemingway’s posthumously published work, the word *remate* is again being invoked with some degree of frequency. Rose Marie Burwell first resurrected the term in her ground-breaking *Hemingway: The Postwar Years and The Posthumous Novels* (1996). She draws on Baker’s incorrect 1969 definition of *remate* as “a jai alai term for a double-wall rebound” (Burwell 159; 203), but does not take into account his reservations about this translation in the later 1972 footnote. Burwell expands upon Mary’s gloss of *remate* as “reflection” when she ties the concept of *remate* as a writing technique to Hemingway’s use of “twinning” characters: “Hemingway began to work by what he would eventually call *remate*, a technique that certainly facilitated—and may have suggested—the significant twinning, cloning and splitting of painters and writers in *Islands* and *Eden*” (54). Jacqueline Brogan, Jeffrey Meyers, and Hilary Justice are among many recent scholars giving attention to Hemingway’s work in the genres of autobiography and memoir who have used *remate* in a similar way. Although I do not think any Hemingway reader can seriously question that value of “reflection” when considering his work (think of all those mirrors and twinned characters), I do think it is valuable to sift through the confusion around *remate* engendered by Mary Hemingway and consider the repercussions.

Something appears to be wrong with Mary Hemingway’s story regarding her exchange with Ernest about *A Moveable Feast*—either Hemingway said *rebote* and she misremembered the word, or he said *remate* and she

got the translation wrong, not unlikely given that her Spanish was never as strong as Hemingway's (Reynolds 130). A less likely scenario is that she was thinking very specifically of the fact that *remate* can *sometimes* refer to a two-wall shot and chose not to mention that it is *always* a "kill shot."

Two things, however, are clear at this point. First, *remate* does mean a "kill shot" in jai alai, or a finishing pass in bullfighting; it does not mean simply "reflection" or "rebound," although clearly there is an element of "doubling" in the "re-" prefix. Second, there is ample evidence that Hemingway knew the proper meaning of *remate*. He uses the word appropriately in several places in his work. In addition to the use of *rematado* Baker identifies in *Islands in the Stream*, Hemingway includes a definition of *rematar* in the glossary of *Death in the Afternoon*: "to finish; to make the last pass of any series of passes with the cape; to perform some act that will provide an emotional or artistic climax" (443).

The idea of *A Moveable Feast* as a kind of "kill shot" makes intuitive sense. Without using the word *remate*, Michael Reynolds suggests as much in *Hemingway: The Final Years* when he notes that after reading Gertrude Stein's "belittling portrait of Hemingway in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Ernest promised himself that when he had nothing else to write, he would produce his memoirs to even up the score" (291). This idea of writing to "get even" suggests that working by *remate* means by "kill shot" or by performing some finishing act "that will provide an emotional or artistic climax" (*DIA* 443). It is perhaps worth contemplating how reconsidering *remate* would change the way we study, teach, and write critically about *A Moveable Feast*.

NOTES

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1. The shift from "autobiography" to "biography" in Mary's version of her exchange with Hemingway is curious. In *Hemingway: A Life* (1969), Carlos Baker glosses over Hemingway's replacement of "autobiography" with "biography" by using paraphrase at the crucial moment. Baker quotes Mary as saying "I thought it was going to be autobiography," but then moves into paraphrase, writing: "He was working by *remate*, said Ernest, borrowing the jai-alai term for a double-wall rebound." (540) By inserting the word *working* into the paraphrase, Baker avoids the problematic shift in genre in Mary's original account. In *Hemingway: The Writer As Artist* (1972), Baker attempts to clarify the issue by simply dismissing the change to biography

in Hemingway's response as a mistake. Rose Marie Burwell also glosses over this shift in genre in Mary's version of the exchange. Burwell uses the phrase "working by *remate*" (159) in the main section of *Hemingway: The Postwar Years and the Posthumous Novels*, but in her end-notes, she slips directly into the phrase "autobiography by *remate*" and cites Baker's *Life* as her source. Most subsequent critics have used the phrase "autobiography by *remate*." Of course, if Hemingway did say "biography," it would further dismantle readings of *Feast* that suggest the focus is meant to be Hemingway—by "reflection" or in any other way.

2. To clarify the nature of the *remate* shot, I contacted Miami Jai Alai. I was put in touch with a member of their Public Relations department, BIG Dave Lemmon, who shared this information about the *remate* shot: "at one time [*remate*] was a general term for all kill shots in jai-alai, but over the last two or three decades, it has been refined to identify a particular backhand carom shot. The player throws a reverse (backhand) shot—usually from shoulder height or higher—that hits the side wall, then the front wall just above the cushion, and finally hits the floor before heading off the court into the screen. It is particularly effective because of the counter-clockwise spin imparted by the cesta [the curved basket that serves as the "racket" in jai alai] which causes the pelota [the ball] to curve away from the oncoming opponent before he can run up the wood to catch it."

For more information on the sport of jai alai and the different "shots," visit the <http://www.jaialaiextra.com/Jai-Alai-Shots.html> or <http://www.fl-gaming.com/shots.htm> (this site has diagrams).

Incidentally, I also learned from Phil Skipp at Miami Jai Alai that Leicester Hemingway was a friend of the owner and wrote a column for their program.

3. Lisa Tyler mentions Baker's reservations about *remate* in a footnote in her *Student Companion to Ernest Hemingway*.

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