

## Foreword



writers are in love with the epic,” said Ernest Hemingway, master of the simple sentence, his ghost still hovering over every writer. Trouble is, for Epi (short for Epimetheus, whose name means Afterthought), that ghost is shattered, forever summed in his obit: “Hemingway, suicide.” Epi’s bias is near-instinctive: He needs heroes to counter his father’s .22 rifle-in-the-mouth suicide.

Epi was sixteen when his dad ended it, six months before Hemingway grabbed his shotgun. A phone call yanked him from bowling as he practiced before league play: *Come home, something’s happened to your dad*. So what, Epi thought, not about to give up the game he loved because “something happened” to the dad he fled two years earlier. He resisted her repeated demand, not budging till the Sullen Belle blurted: “He killed himself.” And so Epi turned in his scoresheet, put his ball and shoes in his locker, walked by the counter with increasing speed, out the glass door, turned left, and—as memory frames it—finds himself across the street, watching a boy running, face contorted in tears, his skull screaming: “He’s in hell! He’s in hell!”

Hemingway’s laugh at the epic came to Epimetheus late, a surprise, even though he’d known for decades that many teachers dismiss the epic as dead, a tradition he hoped to revive if only because it revived him, stirring a thrill to live. With Apollo 11, a bona fide epic event, came the call to transcendence: to rise above himself, to be as gods, a supercelestial vision that introduced him more keenly to subterranean despair. Yet was he bound by the epic tradition, a willingness to endure, inspired by Hadean heroes who completed the descent and return, an adventure Hemingway himself failed to attempt when he gave himself to booze and the gun. “Papa,” as A. E. Hotchner remembers him, suffered from an illness that is better understood and mourned today (rue too for Robin Williams, whose lightning wit could not save him from the killer glooms), but in this Apolline Age of Epi’s willing *nekyia*, our turtle-paced Zero needed Orphic guides to weave the darkening deeps,



to lift him beyond self-loathing, as when in 2014 he finally read the long-summoning Montaigne, and knew his origins for the first time: “it is against nature that we despise ourselves and care nothing about ourselves. It is a malady peculiar to man, and not seen in any other creature, to hate and disdain himself.” More Montaigne:

“There is nothing so beautiful and legitimate as to play the man well and properly, no knowledge so hard to acquire as the knowledge of how to live the life well and naturally; and the most barbarous of our maladies is to despise our being.” Not to forget people who “want to get out of themselves and escape from the man. That is madness: instead of changing into angels, they change into beasts; instead of raising themselves, they lower themselves. These transcendental humors frighten me, like lofty and inaccessible places ...”

What Hemingway had in healthy mind, Epi now realizes, are the overreachers, who find themselves on the rack of comic torture: comic to others, rarely to the epicants. And so Wishy Epi persisted in his epic love—what some soul muggers dismiss as grandiosity—yet Wishy remains humbled by memories of dread Casaubon, who, in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, worked for years on his Key to All Mythologies, squirreling away notes, yet ne’er coming nearer the goal.

Epi has nurtured his epic love since academic 1963-64, when Mr. Teddy, via *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost*, introduced his Survey of English Lit class to the epic tradition. Vital too were *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, Milton’s happy man and pensive man, who heralded the pained joy of Orpheus descending to reclaim his beloved Eurydice; Orpheus, whose music “Drew iron tears down Pluto’s cheek, And made Hell grant what Love did seek.” Such tears gave Epi a thrill he scarce understood: tears of joy hard won by striving mortals; in Epi’s case needing decades and attention to thorough detail to wend the long odyssey from cowardice toward trace enlightenment.

The epic appeal was intensified by Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology*, brought vividly to life by the drawings of Steele Savage, their combined work eclipsing the orbits of most contemporary writers. And so evolving Epi paid small heed to Hemingway, partly to resist his skeletal style (oft puzzling for their omissions), partly to reject all suicidal writers: Only writers with a sustained will to live hold attraction for Epi.

In his teen years Epi read little, certainly nothing by Hemingway; nor was he a newspaper reader, almost surely missing Hemingway’s “accidental” death (as his wife claimed on first reporting the shotgun blast); and when Epi eventually heard the real news, he could only have winced, already “wedded to horror”—though his dad found courtesy



to drive to the Missouri riverside to leave the mess in his car, not in his apartment, where his corpse might not be found for weeks.

As Epi recalls, he first read Hemingway as a college senior: *The Old Man and the Sea* and *A Farewell to Arms*, quick reads not for classes, but to emulate schoolmates, whose literacy seemed daunting, years beyond his late-blooming style. He liked the new myths, but as time passed, and as rejections of all kinds intensified his genetic death-wish, he shunned Earnest the more, no Papa-guide for his shaky life-wish.

His anger obscures the journey to compassion; he rarely remembers that Hemingway's father also killed himself with a gun, and Epi never noticed that the self-destructive longing spread to Hemingway's brother and sister. When Margaux Hemingway killed herself in July 1996, near the anniversary of her grandfather's suicide, it hit Epi with dismay. He knows today that both his dad and Papa were driven by genetics and longings beyond parental, and found no way to transform their pain. He marvels at Montaigne who somehow found joy in steadiness, a quote that seems platitudinous until seen in context (I:26, "Education of Children"), readily adaptable to Epi's comic quest: "The surest sign of wisdom is constant cheerfulness; her state is like that of things above the moon, ever serene." *O Captain! my Captain!*

Yet Epi needed guidance, and could not have survived his own descent without Mr. T. as first guide, a call to courage that lifted his epic glooms to ascendant purpose: for all fatherless sons, lonely souls who want to see beyond the murderous archetypes who seem first to enlarge our minds, but whose masks conceal mites of self-destruction.

If the epic tradition taught Epi to think "in the light of eternity," he also needed a guide to find joy in life's dailyness. Enter Jack Smith of the Los Angeles Times, herein styled Jax Myth of the Laistrygone Winds, one of the world's great newspapers. Jax wrote a five-day-a-week column for decades, his deep-play consistency a marvel to anyone who tries to type a clear sentence: an epic consistency that today's once- or twice-a-week columnists dare not attempt. Epi discovered Jax Myth upon arrival in Laistrygonia in 1969, first making his home in his '68 Ford Falcon, where many glooms were offset by reading Jax for a dime a day. The most recalled affirmation dates to post-Falcon days, January 11, 1973:

Jax Myth  
A Model-Tee  
Ford Didn't Build

I have long had an idea, generally scoffed at, that man's purpose is to create a world in which he can play. It's an idea that seems well borne out by



By the mid Seventies, when Epi finally saw the movie *Hud* starring Paul Newman, one key scene brought Jax instantly to mind: Homer, Hud's father (Melvyn Douglas), saw that Lonnie (Brandon De Wilde) was far too enthralled with his older brother's wastrel ways. He gave a pained warning: "Lonnie, little by little the look of the country changes because of the men we admire."

That single quote heartened Epi to embrace the long view, e'er recalling the column that raised Jack to mythic status: the "Accomplished Name Dropper" of November 21, 1972, when Jack wrote about the annoyances inflicted on people named Smith, or on anyone with a seemingly common name. He closed with:

I am provoked, however, to make a confession that I have never made before. Many years ago ... my first editor considered my name too common for any kind of public acceptance, and he gave me another.

He called me Jax Myth, and maybe he was right.

Because Jax closed with his trademark humor, and because, to Epimethean note, he never mentioned "Myth" again, Epi was all too eager to believe the "maybe he was right" gave him license to play with the Mythic name in *Epi Bound*.

This impression endured until December 2011 when Epi found "Jax Myth" in a column dated July 28, 1986. Jack writes about personalized or vanity phone numbers, e.g., dialing "some word like HELP (for therapy)":

Why do I need a phone number that has three digits and ends in JACK? How many other Jacks are there? I might use a byline my editor gave me when I started out as a sports writer—Jax Myth. But I never liked that name; it was one reason I quit the job.

How could I have missed that column? Oh, Epi recalled, I was in Wisconsin; in the summer of '86 watching the house and cat of a former schoolmate while he and his family went to England for a fellowship summer. Having just completed the first draft of his ready-to-be-published epic, Epi thought—

*Never liked that name?*

Epi can only hope that Jack's enduring spirit and family—and extended family of readers—will see his Mythic use for its affection and respect, even if at times he feels pierced by ambivalence, as when Jax wrote somewhere that he was never afflicted by a desire to die.

Not to be overlooked is Jack's role in lightening Epi's Hemingway bias, as in the summons to Harry's Bar, this one dated April 14, 1987:



Jax Myth  
**At Harry's Bar  
 the beer was cold ...**

We drove out to Harry's Bar the other night ...  
 the 10th annual International Hemingway Contest  
 ... to enter the contest, read one book of Hemingway ... Then  
 try to be funny, in his style, on one typewritten page.  
 It's trying to be funny that ruins many

Yet, while it hurts to fragment any Mythic column, the thought recalls this snippet from July 16, 1974, the fifth anniversary of the launch of Apollo 11:

Jax Myth  
**An Opus to L.A.  
 With Pen in Hand**

... I have the space here only for a few excerpts ...  
 No writer likes to see his work fragmented; but I share his  
 feelings ... and hope he will forgive me for offering only these  
 few quotations.

The opus apologia recalls the column that hints the Mythic effect; how, on July 16, 1972, the third anniversary of the launch of Apollo 11, Epi read Jack's homage to Arthur Millier:

Jax Myth  
**Serenity in  
 the Whirlwind**

Millier was art critic for The Times for 30 years, and though he was washed by all the tides of that tumultuous era ... He found serenity in the whirlwinds.

Epi knew at once that some day the words would gladly redound on Jack, who previews Millier's work, a retrospective exhibition that evoked humility. Millier was surprised: his work was better than he remembered.

He looked round at me. "Do you think if you met yourself, say 30 years from now, you'd recognize yourself?"

I don't know. I don't expect to have the chance. But if I should, I wish I could like what I had done as much as Arthur Millier likes what he as done, and be so right.

Jack fell short of that thirty-year retrospective, dying on January 9, 1996. Yes, he wrote essays for nearly forty years, but he was too busy



living the Now to consider such a back-glancing project. And so, mingled among hundreds of Epi pages, this fragmented retrospective: dating from discovering Jack in 1969, when Wishy first moved to the Land of the Laistrygones. Epimetheus still likes what Jack has done, and oft recalls essays that buoyed him o'er his own Ocean of Storms, where, even amid swampings, he resolved to endure, if only to honor the Mythic Style, the one constant that still inspires him to embrace his own random chances for daily joy.

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Afterthought One: Because I have been honorably served by cops whose work represents the highest ideals, I must add that my angrier views do not represent a complete picture. I especially want to remember the caring courtesies of Officer John Dorff of the Burbank PD in 1979; the generous intelligence of the anonymous LA cop who let me rest in 1971; and, after my bicycle was hit by a car in early 2016, when I was in no condition to get driver information, I must mention the tremendous relief when my letter requesting assistance was acknowledged by Sgt. Richard Brunson of the LAPD, who gave me the facts I needed.

Afterthought Two: Many allusions to Jack and other writers are easily detectable, some a bit obscure. I want to be caught in this game, and hope the allusive style will not distract, but even deepen one's presence in the page. Many quotes are acknowledged in the Notes, but some are stitched in by fair use. Many bygone spellings are retained, some words invented because I like teasing pedants, and much is transformed in the spirit of epic play: lessons gleaned from *Virgil's Epic Technique* by Richard Heinze (translated by Hazel and David Harvey, and Fred Robertson). I also imagine what it was like for Homer's first audience: what was familiar now made new: still recognizable, but stitched together in a new light. The aim is to indicate inspiration from countless writers, and their participation in my Quest. *Songs replying to songs replying to songs*. It's all one extended chat. In retrospect, it's also stunning to see that guides were there all along, though I was slow in learning to read them.

My hope is that readers, and surviving contributors, will enjoy reading *Epi Bound* for its own sake, but will also enjoy playing the rhapsode's game.

Keith Fahey  
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