Six Afterlives

Scott Hales

These poems belong to a series called "Famous White Men in Mormon Afterlives." They are thought experiments about eternal life and progression. I wrote them (and several others) in May 2018 after reading Mary V. Dearborn's *Ernest Hemingway: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2017). Reading about Hemingway's life reminded me of a presentation I attended several years ago on the many times proxy ordinances had been performed for Hemingway and his four wives in Latter-day Saint temples. Latter-day Saints perform these ordinances because we believe that life continues after death, and that the experience of life after death is virtually the same as what we experience in mortality—except that it is "coupled with eternal glory" (D&C 130:2). Hemingway's life, then, did not end by suicide in 1961. It continues to this day in the spirit world. Hemingway still inhabits space and adapts to his new surroundings, much the same way we do when we move houses or change jobs.

With eternal life in mind, I began imagining what life might be like for Hemingway and other famous people. How would they adapt to spirit prison or paradise? What would they do differently? I was particularly interested in the "dead white men" who have long been overrepresented as key players in our historical narratives. What would existence be like for them without the privilege they enjoyed in mortality? How would they respond to a world where everyone was truly equal in the eyes of God? Would they find redemption, or would they cling to their old ways?

Hemingway in Paradise

At first he was
sincere. He gave
up drinking, watched

his language,
attended elders
quorum with Scott

and Archie. Maybe
he liked that fishing
was better in Paradise

than in Prison, and the
big game hunting was more
exciting than expected—

even if knowing
the lions and rhinoceroses
were immortal

took some of the
fun out of it. And
the same was true

for the bullfights,
although St. Peter
promised they would

improve once someone
finished the temple work
of the great Belmonte.

But then a few
weeks passed, and
he saw that Paradise

was no Havana
in the summer. It
wasn't even Key

West. It was too
clean, too well-lighted,
too much like Oak Park.

And the hills were
more like gray hippos
than white elephants.

Sure, he was
perpetually thirty,
but he wanted to be

eighteen and wounded,
laid up in an Italian
villa with a nurse

and a bottle of
vermouth, instead
of where he was,

forever sealed to
four women who
didn't really like him,

and each afternoon
was filled not with death,
but life eternal.

Yes, what he really
wanted were the lakes
of Michigan, the green

hills of Africa, the
rivers of Spain. But
mostly what he wanted

was a place where
nothing was as truly true
as his one true sentence.

Self-Help

Progress, not stasis,
was the object and design
of existence in heaven.

When Dale learned this,
he had dreams of building
another empire,

bigger and nobler
than the one he could
not take with him

when he died.
Everyone he saw
needed help, and

if the same
sociality existed here
as it did there, then

the hosts of the
dead, both great and
small, would still

need his expertise
in winning friends
and influencing

people. He started
a public speaking tour.
He wrote two new books,

*How to Stop Worrying
and Start Living
Eternally* and *The Quick
and Easy Way to
Effective Exaltation.* But
the market for self-

help was unexpectedly
poor in Paradise.
Jesus had beat

him to the punch,
and, frankly, had a
better program.

Dale was devastated.
Surrounded by boxes
of unsold books, he

criticized, condemned,
complained. He did
not act enthusiastic.

How could he? In
two weeks' time, he
was back to

selling motor-
trucks for a living,
keeping company with

cockroaches and
neckties in a cheaply-
furnished flat. He

was lonely, disappointed,
bitter, and rebellious.
He couldn't smile.

A Narrative of A. Gordon Pym

Edgar Allan Poe did not
die that day in Baltimore.
The drunk, disheveled man
they fished out of the gutter

was his less impressive
double. The real Poe had lit
out for the West on a stagecoach
two weeks earlier, finding

his way first to Kanesville,
then to Salt Lake City. There
he changed his name to Arthur
Gordon Pym, accepted baptism,

married three wives, fathered
twenty-six children, and never
wrote another word of fiction
or poetry for the rest of his

long life. He died in full
fellowship with the church, a
lighthouse keeper on the Great
Salt Lake, a father of sorts

to the whales that called
the lake their home. In Paradise,
he maintained his low profile,
avoiding creditors and every bad

writer he had reviewed with
wit as sharp as an Ourang-
Outang's razor. He served quietly
as a ward membership clerk, a

guardian angel to alcoholics
and drug addicts, and a muse

to various teenagers with literary
aspirations. He found, in short,

his El Dorado. It was there—
across the lunar mountains, down
the shadowy valley. He had
ridden boldly, and it was there.

Jonathan Edwards, Champion

Disappointed that hell was not as real
as he'd imagined, Jonathan Edwards
cheered himself up at the rec center
Ping-Pong table. He bought his own
paddles and a carton of white plastic
balls. He studied *A Congregationalist's
Guide to Table Tennis* and, more furtively,
A Complete Idiot's Guide to Ping-Pong.
When his mind grasped the basic theory
of the game, he recruited an opponent
from the foosball table and sent his
first ball flying.

He was not, to his surprise, a naturally
gifted player. His early efforts seemed
uninspired—embarrassing even. Hand-
eye coordination was not a skill he had
learned at Yale as a pimply eighteenth-
century teen. He flinched when the ball
came at him, afraid it would smite
him in the face. Sometimes he
swatted and missed or connected too
hard with the ball, hurling it across
the room like a damned soul into
a pit of fire and brimstone. Ping-Pong
was a game of skill; it had a learning
curve. No grace, irresistible or other-
wise, had a role in selecting who won

and who lost. It was the player with
the paddle, not God, who determined
where the ball would land. Winning
was a matter of will, not unconditional
election. Yes, one became a champion
because he persevered—but he per-
severed because he willed himself
to do it.

It took him six months, and some soul
searching, but Jonathan Edwards became
the Ping-Pong champion he longed
to be. At the rec center, they called him
"The Spider." He gave into his depraved
nature, and easily won every game he
played. He cast away his Puritan garb
and started wearing designer sunglasses,
high-end workout clothes, and gold chains.
If a garment screamed reformed theology, he
sent it to Goodwill or Deseret Industries.
He became a new man. Rather than
look to the sky or the dust beneath his
feet, he cast his eyes across the net,
unafraid of the moment.

A Man among the Gentiles

The admiral did not understand
why his ships still sailed the icy
fires of hell. In 1492, God had

wrought upon him to sail the
ocean blue. If he had stayed home,
others seeking liberty would've never

found their new world. White
and delightsome Europe needed
a release valve. He gave it to

them and spread Christianity in his
wake. So why was he still tormented,
racked with the pains of a damned

soul, when all he had done was
follow the Spirit? What he had done,
he had done quickly and in God's

name. If that was a crime, clap
him in irons; he had been in prison
before. Time would vindicate

his method. For what were rape,
slavery, conquest, and genocide when
one had a role in God's immutable

plan, when life in this round world was
cheaper than accountability? No one
he knew would have done anything

different. Yes, God and His Spirit
had wrought upon him—and him alone.
He would stay the course, see his

voyage to the end, come Hell or
Hell's high waters. His ships were fleet,
and they could weather the storm.

Breakfast

Every Friday morning, Harry
Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan
Doyle meet for breakfast at
a café downtown. In life, they
used to puzzle for hours over
the question of life after death.
Harry's skepticism had kept
the conversations lively; Doyle's

long-suffering had kept them
friends. So it was in the Spirit
World: neither man could
help returning to the topic,
even though the Big Questions
had all been answered. It
was now the finer points,
the hows and whys of eternal
existence, that brought them
together like sunshine to
a mountain peak or frost
to a window pane. Keeping
in character, Harry was a
how-man, Doyle a why. One
pondered walls, boundaries,
padlocks on pearly gates. The
other sought the elementary:
the clue, the solution, the lost
in a found world. Since coffee
and certain teas were unavailable,
they settled for Postum and
juice. Doyle liked ham and
eggs and an English muffin.
Harry usually ordered pancakes
and fruit cocktail. On Fridays
when it rained, they sat indoors,
at a table by the window. If
neither friend had much to say,
they would eat contented, each
enjoying the moment, as puddles
formed on the chairs outside.

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