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Spaces of Memory as Visions of the Future in Spiritualist Utopias

Przestrzenie pamięci jako wizje przyszłości
w utopiach spirytystycznych

Abstract

The paper examines selected 19th-century Spiritualist texts in the context of the relationship between the past and the future as the foundational element of spatial modelling in the examined narratives. Crucial here is the trope of memory: as cultural as well as literary models, the Spiritualist presented worlds are mnemonic constructs, grounded in the process of reminiscence as the central component of their generic framework and world-building. At the same time, in line with 19th-century euchronias, the texts in question foreground the idea of progress by transferring it from the temporary mortal existence into the everlasting realm of the hereafter, based on the continuous development of its inhabitants. In this sense, Spiritualist accounts negotiate utopia's complex relationship with memory by postulating the need to coalesce the static cultural matrix of the collective with the dynamic memory of the individual. Thus, the spatial analysis of the selected narratives aims to demonstrate the semi-otic tension between the past and the future as the cornerstone of their utopian paradigm.

Keywords: 19th century, memory, progress, space, Spiritualism, utopia.

Abstrakt

Rozdział poświęcony jest analizie wybranych XIX-wiecznych tekstów spirytystycznych w kontekście relacji przeszłości z przyszłością jako głównego aspektu ukształtowania przestrzennego w omawianych narracjach. Kluczowy jest tutaj motyw pamięci: jako modele kulturowo-literackie, spirytystyczne światy stanowią strukturę mnemoniczną, zbudowaną na procesie reminiscencji będącej kluczową częścią ich struktury gatunkowej oraz budowy świata przedstawionego. Podobnie jak XIX-wieczne uchronie, analizowane teksty kładą nacisk na ideę postępu, przenosząc ją z płaszczyzny tymczasowej ludzkiej egzystencji do wiecznych zaświatów pod kątem nieustającego rozwoju ich mieszkańców. Spirytystyczne dzieła ukazują w ten sposób skomplikowaną relację utopii z kwestią pamięci, postulując potrzebę połączenia statycznego modelu wspólnotowego z dynamiczną pamięcią jednostki. Tym samym analiza przestrzenna wybranych narracji wskazuje na semiotyczne napięcie pomiędzy przeszłością i przyszłością jako fundament ich utopijnego paradygmatu.

Słowa kluczowe: XIX wiek, pamięć, postęp, przestrzeń, spirytyzm, utopia.

Memory and Utopia

The workings of memory, be it collective or individual, are intrinsically rife with contradictions and inconsistencies. Astrid Erll contends that

Memories are not objective images of past perceptions, even less of a past reality. They are subjective, highly selective reconstructions, dependent on the situation in which they are recalled. *Re-membling* is an act of assembling available data that takes place in the present. Versions of the past change with every recall, in accordance with the changed present situation. Individual and collective memories are never a mirror image of the past, but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of the person or group doing the remembering in the present.¹

Utopia is no stranger to these mnemonic perturbations. One could even argue that *all* conceived utopias are essentially utopias of memory, for they are built upon the shared reminiscences of the imperfect past that stands corrected in the improved present; Carter F. Hanson contends

1 Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Houndmills–Basingstoke–Hampshire–New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 8 (emphasis original).

that “the conscious imagining or subconscious wish-dreaming of a *better* future must also draw on memories of our pasts” (emphasis original).² In this sense, he argues, “memory is fundamental to and constitutive of utopianism, and [...] within the more specific domain of literary utopias, memory and forgetting often function as vital and complex components of a text’s utopian impulse.”³ It bears explaining that the complexity Hanson mentions is linked to memory’s inherently disruptive potential as a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse. In early literary utopias, whose worldbuilding is structured upon the tenets of collectivity, homogeneity, and repetition, memory is firmly entrenched within the event of a *ritual*. Following Halbwachs, Hanson notes that “collective memory would coalesce around the ritual behaviours that give meaning and cohesion to family and social groups.”⁴ In Thomas More’s *Utopia* the ritual denotes the praxis of sameness that roots the traditional utopian chronotope in the perpetual now, resulting in a creation of “a kind of self-referential, ahistoricized space”⁵ that “largely dispenses with history and thus with the contingencies of memory.”⁶

It also comes as no surprise that, since the very notion of the ritual points towards the collective aspect of memory, individual memory tends to receive less attention, in no small part due to its inherently malleable and, in extension, unreliable nature. On a structural level, this appears as a contrast between the frame and the main text of the utopian narrative: the frame carries the burden of individual memory and its inconsistencies, which is mitigated through various methods of verisimilitude that enhance the overall didactic aim of traditional utopian narratives;⁷ from the interpretative angle, this juxtaposition conveys the us/them opposition, between the unreliable, volatile nature of the Old World and the apparent stability and perfection of its utopian counterpart. At the beginning of More’s *Utopia*, in More’s letter to Peter Giles, the former

2 Carter F. Hanson, *Memory and Utopian Agency in Utopian/Dystopian Literature. Memory of the Future* (New York–London: Routledge, 2020), xv.

3 *Ibidem*, xvi. It needs to be clarified at this point that the definition of memory used in this analysis follows Hanson’s approach to the concept of memory not as “a singular function,” but “rather as a set of varied practices and discursive systems.” *Ibidem*, 3. As such, it constitutes one of the cornerstones of the utopian paradigm, especially in the context of its distinct temporality; as Vincent Geoghegan argues, “[m]emory is the means in the present to ground the future in the past” (qtd. in *Ibidem*, 4).

4 *Ibidem*, 16.

5 *Ibidem*, 18.

6 *Ibidem*, 19.

7 For a discussion of verisimilitude in traditional utopias, see Artur Blaim, *Gazing in Useless Wonder English Utopian Fictions, 1516-1800* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013).

excuses himself for sending a copy of *Utopia* to the latter at a much later date than anticipated, asking Giles to fill in the gaps “to the intent that if anything have escaped me you might put me in remembrance of it.”⁸ And though the implied author protests that he is “not all of the worst and dumbest memory,” he admits he cannot establish Utopia’s actual location since he forgot to ask Hythloday about it.⁹ While these fissures hint at the playful nature of More’s narrative, they also reveal the problematic nature of individual memory that goes against the “hunger for certainty” of utopian temporality.¹⁰

With the evolution of the utopian genre in the 19th century, the question of memory – individual as well as collective – further gained complexity. In utopia’s 19th-century descendant, echronia, in which *the good place* of the here and now was relocated into *the good time* of the future, the keyword is progress, an umbrella term that encapsulates the overall betterment of a society, freed from the traumas of the past.¹¹ But the answer to the question on how to approach memory in the context of progress is by no means straightforward as witnessed in two seminal echronias of the period: Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888) and William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890). As Vincent Geoghegan points out, Bellamy’s work “builds upon a distinctive theoretical rejection of the past, involving an attack on the faculty of memory,” whereas Morris’s novel, a scathing response to Bellamy’s bestseller, “contains a perspective in which both memory and history play a central and

8 Thomas More, “Utopia,” in *Three Early Modern Utopias: Thomas More Utopia, Francis Bacon Atlantis, Henry Neville The Isle of Pines*, ed. Susan Bruce (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6.

9 *Ibidem*, 6. As he explains, “[f]or neither we remembered to inquire of him, nor he to tell us, in what part of the new world Utopia is situate.” *Ibidem*, 7.

10 Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom. The Shadows of Time* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1994), 1.

11 Fátima Vieira notes that “[b]y favouring the notion of time and offering a vision of a future of happiness, echronia acquired a historical dimension. History was now envisaged as a process of infinite improvement, and utopia, in the spirit of echronia, was presented as a synchronic representation of one of the rings in the chain of progress. (...) By projecting the ideal society in the future, the utopian discourse enunciated a logic of causalities that presupposed that certain actions (namely those of a political nature) might afford the changes that were necessary in order to make the imagined society come true. In this way, utopias became dynamic, and promoted the idea that man had a role to fulfil.” See *Idem*, “The Concept of Utopia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 10.

a positive role.”¹² For Bellamy, memory is inherently dangerous in terms of impeding the triumphant march of progress.¹³ For Morris, memory and past in general are significant building blocks of London 2090 AD, with the city itself depicted as an inversion of Bellamy’s sanitized urban utopia of Boston 2000 AD. More so, future Londoners, while cognizant of the fatal flaws of the old world, cherish the past as a source of continuous wonder and inspiration.¹⁴ While Bellamy’s rejection of memory ultimately proved to be more popular than Morris’s insistence on its importance, the contrast between the two approaches points to utopia’s ambiguous stance on the value and purpose of memory in envisioning humanity’s better future.¹⁵

Spiritualism as a Religion of Memory

The often-troublesome issue of memory in utopia is conspicuously reflected in Spiritualist texts. Born in the second half of the 19th-century in the United States, the religious movement of Spiritualism became a counterpoint to the dominant religious denominations by attempting to corroborate its religious tenets with science, with both perceived as “mutually constitutive knowledges, together producing a materialist belief system to explain the immaterial world.”¹⁶ At the same time, as a movement that fervently advocated egalitarian values in the late Victorian era, Spiritualism demonstrated its inherently utopianist foundations, made evident in its core belief in the afterlife as a crucial component in the struggle to improve the contemporary reality; the future utopia on earth was to be established with the aid of helpful spirits, who would

12 Vincent Geoghegan, “The Utopian Past: Memory and History in Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* and William Morris’s *News From Nowhere*,” *Utopian Studies* 3/2 (1992): 75.

13 In his extensive analysis of Bellamy’s novel, Hanson similarly contends that Boston 2000 AD “in fact depends on freedom from memory” (*Memory*, 30) since “memory violates humanity’s nature as a progressive species.” *Ibidem*, 36.

14 Geoghegan, *The Utopian Past*, 84–85.

15 *Ibidem*, 88.

16 Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past. Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 2008), 129. According to Florence Marryat, the bestselling author of *There Is No Death*, Spiritualism “affords the *proof* – the only proof we have ever received, and our infinite natures accept – of a future existence. The majority of Christians *hope* and *trust*, and say they *believe*. It is the Spiritualist only that *knows*.” *Idem*, *There Is No Death* (New York: National Book Company, 1891), 60 (emphasis original).

impart sage advice by means of mediumistic communication. Life after death, according to Spiritualists, was a continuation of mortal existence in which each and every individual was given an opportunity of continuous improvement in the name of all-encompassing progress, the movement's central tenet and a reflection of the period's widespread socio-political and scientific upheavals.¹⁷

Genre-wise, Spiritualist works constitute a hodgepodge of conventions, embracing factual narratives, narratives of events, essays, lectures, and manifestos, amongst others.¹⁸ What binds these diverse examples are their utopian foundations, demonstrated by means of the affinity between Spiritualist narratives and the traditional utopian model, including composition, plot pattern, and the organisation of the presented worlds. Akin to classical utopias, many Spiritualist texts involve the trope of a journey; a rudimentary plot and one-dimensional characters, whose function is mainly that of co-narrators or partners in the dialogue between the visitor and the citizens of the new world; and the predominantly descriptive and didactic functions of the narrative, with the focus put upon the presentation of the post-mortem reality and its inhabitants as a lesson to be conveyed to the world beyond utopia's borders.¹⁹ The moment of death is equivalent to the departure and crossing the ontological boundary between the spiritual centre and the mortal periphery, as the protagonists venture into the new world of the hereafter. There they are usually greeted by the character of a guide, who patiently introduces the bewildered newcomers to the rules of the utopian realm; and although there is no return to the old world in a conventional sense, many spirits return during séances to support those who still struggle in their mortal life. The spatial configuration in these accounts typically adheres to the traditional synecdochic structure of utopian narratives,

17 On the significance of progress in Spiritualist beliefs, see McGarry *Ghosts of Future Past* and Cathy Gutierrez *Plato's Ghost. Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

18 According to Markus Altena Davidsen, “[f]ictional narratives [...] are narratives that create their own world, rather than referring to the actual world. Factual narratives (or referential narratives, or ‘history’), by contrast, are narratives that claim to refer to events that really happened in the actual world. News reports fall into this category, and so do religious narratives. Religious narratives, specifically, are narratives that tell of human interaction with supernatural agents and invite their audiences to participate in the interaction with these supernatural agents in their own world.” *Idem*, “The religious affordance of fiction: a semiotic approach,” *Religion* 46/4 (2016): 528.

19 For a detailed analysis of traditional utopian convention, see Blaim *Gazing* and Andrzej Zgorzelski, *Fantastyka, utopia, science fiction: ze studiów nad rozwojem gatunków* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1980).

with all aspects of the presented world operating as signifiers of the underlying symbolic domain.²⁰ Spiritualist works simultaneously display kinship with 19th-century echronias, especially in their focus on the notion of progress as the defining quality of the utopian realm, further made apparent in the vertical, hierarchical structure of the Spiritualist universe.²¹ By subverting the generic insularity of early utopias (since everyone will, sooner or later enter the Spiritualist Arcadia), Spiritualist texts remain potent vehicles of utopian sensibility, approached here as the desire for change, a prophecy for the future as well as an active element of the social transformation in the present.²² Hence, the dynamic essence of these narratives lies in the concept of progress understood predominantly as a highly individualized effort, stimulated and reflected by one's environment. In effect, they are informed by the literariness of the traditional utopian genre, which they refashion in line with their purpose as a plan of spiritual and political progress to be implemented on earth as a 19th-century blend of the archetypal "utopias of sensual gratification" with "utopias of human contrivance."²³

Spiritualist utopias are hence mnemonic models, built upon the process of reminiscence as the core aspect of their generic framework as well as the semiotic underpinning of the presented world. The very act of summoning spirits during a séance points to Spiritualism as a religion grounded in memory, in the evocation of the past as the fundamental part of a better future in which both realities are to be united. By doing so, Spiritualism suggested a link between individual recollections of its believers and the collective impetus of the movement through which the past was to change the future. As Molly McGarry aptly puts it, "[l]ike the feeling of a phantom limb, the conjuring of a ghost is a form of

20 On the synecdochic structure in utopia, see Blaim, *Gazing*. On the synecdochic organization in Spiritualist texts, see Marta Komsta, "The Path of Progress: Utopia and Spiritualist Literature," in *Utopian Possibilities: Models, Theories, Critiques*, ed. Liam Benison (Porto: U. Porto Press, 2023), 128.

21 On Spiritualist cosmology, see Gutierrez, *Plato's Ghost*; McGarry, *Ghosts of Future Past*. On the hierarchical spatial relationship between progress and utopia in Spiritualist accounts, see also Komsta, *The Path of Progress*, 127–128.

22 On isolation and boundaries in traditional utopias, see Artur Blaim and Ludmiła Gruszevska-Blaim, "Utopian semiospheres: Isolation and dialogue across borders," *Sign Systems Studies* 52/1-2 (2024): 155–184.

23 Gregory Claeys, and Lyman Tower Sargent, "Introduction," in *The Utopia Reader*, eds. Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent (New York–London: New York University Press, 1999), 2. Utopias of sensual gratification are pancultural "myths that look to the past of the human race or beyond death for a time when human life was or will be easier and more gratifying," (*ibidem*, 2) in utopias of human contrivance "every aspect of social order can be susceptible to human control" (*ibidem*, 3).

recovering the lost, of returning the dead to the living, the part to the whole. Spiritualism was a technology of memory, fundamentally collective in its gathering of bodies and souls to reconstitute and remember the past.²⁴ Accordingly, the spatiality in Spiritualist mnemonic world-building echoes Plato's relationship between Forms and copies and his theory of recollection.²⁵ The multiple spheres of the Spiritualist universe represent Platonic Forms to their earthly counterparts in accordance with the principle of correspondence as a reflection of the relationship between the two worlds but also as a means of alleviating the initial sense of estrangement upon awakening in the realm of the afterlife;²⁶ thus, in Eugene Crowell's *The Spirit World*, the inhabitants reside in "the spiritual Romes, Florences, Bolognes, Venices, Dresdens" as perfected originals of their terrestrial reflections.²⁷ Heavens are also Forms to particular countries and nations, each geographically located exactly above its earthly counterpart, as "in the part which encircles China there is a Chinese heaven or realm in spirit life, also that which is over Africa is peopled by those enjoying an African heaven."²⁸ The similitude between the worlds is often so compelling that "many who pass thence, for a time, are unable to believe that they have made the transition; they believe themselves to be dreaming."²⁹ The collective memory of the Spiritualist reality as the Form becomes then the *true* memory in the Platonic sense;³⁰ as such,

24 McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 149.

25 Cathy Gutierrez explains that "[i]n Platonic thought, Forms are the perfect metaphysical instantiation of all things and concepts. [...] Their material replications on earth are but copies, corrupt representations of the perfect concept, subject to time and decay." *Idem*, *Plato's Ghost*, 40.

26 Andrew Jackson Davis, one of the most famous figures in American Spiritualism, elucidates that "[u]pon the primordial principle of correspondence [...], there exists a general resemblance, a similarity of order and appearance, between the Winterland (earth) beneath man's feet and the Summerland (heaven) above his head." *Idem*, *Views of Our Heavenly Home* (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1877), 67. See also Komsta, *The Path of Progress*, 129.

27 Eugene Crowell, *The Spirit World: Its Inhabitants, Nature, and Philosophy* (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1879), 73.

28 Carrie E.S. Twing, *Contrasts in Spirit Life; and Recent Experiences of Samuel Bowles, Late Editor of the Springfield (Mass.) Republican, in the First Five Spheres* (Springfield, Mass.: Star Publishing Company, 1881), 43.

29 Crowell, *The Spirit World*, 24.

30 Gutierrez, *Plato's Ghost*, 44. Gutierrez evokes the Platonian allegory of the souls who "ride each night with the gods on their rounds of observing the Forms. As the souls vie for the privilege of seeing the Forms, their wings become chipped and maimed, causing them to eventually fall to earth and take on the mortal coil. Through the love of wisdom, souls may begin to recollect the perfection they had seen before they were incarnate, and thus they begin again to grow wings" (*ibidem*, 43). In a Spiritualist

it represents a transcendental rendition of cultural memory *sensu* Jan Assmann, defined as “a kind of institution” that “is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent.”³¹ These “symbolic forms” indicate the stability of true cultural memory that lies at the core of the Spiritualist spatial model.

Progress, essential to Spiritualist core belief in the nearly infinite perfectibility of humanity, plays a significant role in the context of individual memory that might run against the true cultural memory of the collective and, as such, needs to be extirpated or forgotten. “Acts on earth must be forgotten for the soul to proceed in heaven, but what replaces those memories is a truer version of memory itself, the recollection of the Forms,” Gutierrez argues;³² hence, “[f]orgetting is the purview of those with corrupt memories, whether those consist of crimes or poor personality traits.”³³ What appears here is the key paradox of Spiritualist world-building: though, much like its euchronian counterparts, it is grounded in the idea of progress and geared towards the future, it simultaneously remains rooted in the landscapes of memory.³⁴ To complicate matters, though spatial modelling in Spiritualist accounts tends to be closely related to the collective cultural memory of a given group or nation, individual memory performs an altogether different role by means of its implicitly transgressive potential as an obstacle on one’s path towards moral excellence.³⁵ In *Life Beyond the Grave* (1877), a Spiritualist account delivered by the conjoined efforts of the anonymous “writing medium” and one Mrs. Woodforde, a London-based medium and clairvoyant,

context, the spirits in the afterlife begin to recognize the perfection of heavenly Forms through a similar process of recollection; for Spiritualists, “[t]rue memory is the memory of heaven,” Gutierrez concludes (*ibidem*, 44).

31 Jan Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” in *Media and Cultural Memory*, eds. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning (Berlin–New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 110–111.

32 Gutierrez, *Plato’s Ghost*, 44.

33 *Ibidem*, 44.

34 See also Gutierrez: “The Spiritualists are almost always written about as unrelentingly progressive. Although there is great merit in that characterization, [...] their concerns about memory show a thicker and more ambiguous relationship to ideas of time” (*ibidem*, 28).

35 Gutierrez points out that “[...] the problem of ethics and the importance of continual improvement meant that some memories of being alive ran counter to advancing through heaven. By making memory the sole form of judgment in the afterlife, the Spiritualists guaranteed that the concept of memory would be a troubled one” (*ibidem*, 25).

memory is the primary tool of judgment, a canvas upon which one's failings as well as acts of virtue are displayed:

On entering the spirit world [...] the man finds the obstructions to his memory removed. [...] The reason of this, lies in the facts, that the body is beginning to loosen its connection with the spirit previous to death. When the final severance comes the whole past stands revealed like a panorama, and all that is bad is constant source of self-reproach and consequent unhappiness to the individual, whilst that which is good affords him pleasure.³⁶

If one eventually atones for their transgressions, painful memories begin to fade as a signifier of one's moral and spiritual development:

When the feelings of others towards such a man are changed, his own memory of the past becomes dimmed, because there is nothing left to remind him of it; until eventually it fades away altogether. He has difficulty in recalling it. This explains why advanced spirits are seldom able to give you much information about their past lives, where their earth life happens to have been unhappy, for the rule in question also holds good in regard to those who were unhappy – not necessarily to the evil ones only. These like to lose the recollection of the past, because it makes them happier, and so they cannot tell you much about their former history.³⁷

The erasure of traumatic past constitutes the condition of entry to the afterlife utopia, enabling spirits to pursue progress, unhindered by the burden of individual memory progressively replaced by the collective true memory of Spiritualist heavens.

Case Studies: *The Blue Island* (1922) and *A Wanderer in the Spirit Lands* (1896)

Albeit the bulk of Spiritualist accounts were written by (or communicated to, in the Spiritualist parlance) American authors, British Spiritualists did publish a considerable number of works as a reflection of the movement's immense popularity across the pond. The Victorians readily responded to the promise of the Spiritualist afterlife, delivered to them by a throng of psychics and mediums that offered solace in a Christian

36 *Life Beyond the Grave, described by a Spirit through a Writing Medium* (London: E.W. Allen, 1877), 65.

37 *Ibidem*, 65–66.

world shaken by a series of scientific discoveries, such as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.³⁸ Though arguably less known in comparison to their more famous British peers, such as the works of Emma Hardinge Britten, Daniel Dunglas Home, Florence Marryat, Robert Owen or Arthur Conan Doyle himself, the British accounts of the afterlife examined in this section blend the religious tenets of Spiritualism with a literary background, reflected in the underlying semiotic model in these narratives: *The Blue Island* echoes the traditional utopian convention, whereas *A Wanderer in the Spirit Lands* is an example of a religious allegory in a Spiritualist attire. At the same time, the texts in question are structured upon the aforementioned triad of space-memory-progress, revealing, as a result, their affinity with the progressive utopian paradigm of the 19th century by accentuating the role of memory as a springboard but also a challenge in one's pursuit of perfection.

A rather conventional literary rendition of Spiritualist tenets, *The Blue Island: Experiences of a New Arrival Beyond the Veil* is a 1922 account allegedly communicated by William T. Stead, a renowned editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette*, who perished during the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, to his daughter, Estelle Stead.³⁹ With the title evoking association with the Morean Island of Utopia, the plot of *The Blue Island* commences with William's arrival upon the eponymous island, where he is greeted by his relatives and friends and introduced to his new life by spirit guides (one of the being the narrator's father). What follows is a highly didactic narrative in which descriptions of various places, nature, weather conditions, etc. emphasise the high degree of familiarisation, and memory is a bridge between the two realities, enabling the protagonist to correctly identify the underlying signs as referents of the overall purpose of the new world.⁴⁰ In a chapter entitled "Buildings" (another trace of utopia's

38 According to Janet Oppenheim, these were "the men and women who searched for some incontrovertible reassurance of fundamental cosmic order and purpose, especially reassurance that life on earth was not the totality of human existence. While Victorians of a scholarly bent found relief disputing theologically among themselves in the periodical press, spiritualists found their comfort at the séance table" *The other world. Spiritualism and psychical research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge-New York-Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2.

39 The account, as explained by Estelle in the Preface, was created with the aid of one Purdue Woodman, a British medium, who apparently made a successful contact with the late W.T. Stead by means of automatic writing.

40 Interestingly, in the opening letter to Estelle Stead, Arthur Conan Doyle praises *The Blue Island* as a valuable aid in reducing the inevitable sense of estrangement experienced initially by those crossing to the other side: "It is of enormous importance that the human race should know these things, for it not only takes away all fears of death, but it must, as in the case of your father, be of the very greatest help when one

inherently descriptive focus), William recounts a conversation with his father during which he learns about the purpose of the so-called rest house, which was “the one most used by newly-arrived spirit people. It was nearest to earth conditions and was used because it resembled an earth place in appearance.”⁴¹ Despite his recounting of the island’s more unusual natural attributes, such as the absence of night and the underlying blue hue of the environment, the narrator repeatedly assures his readers of the overall affinity of the utopian realm with its mortal counterpart: “Therefore I must say that if you were to pay this land a visit in your earth bodies, as you are at present, you would be struck by the lack of excitement. You would think it all so like earth. That is what you would say to people on your return. ‘Oh, it’s so much like our life here, only there are such a lot of different races of mankind there.’”⁴²

Akin to the mnemonic mechanisms in More’s narrative, the collective cultural memory of the island’s inhabitants is repeatedly reinforced through the process of reification in which the spatial modelling of the island is purposefully fashioned so as to resemble one’s earthly domain with a view to easing the transition between the two realities. Unlike the reified memory of one’s cultural environment, individual recollections and habits are designated as counter-narratives against the dominant progressive discourse in Stead’s purported account, and as such need to be overcome in what is described as “the process of discarding;” according to the narrator, “[a]s we live here we gain knowledge of many kinds, and come to find so many things, hitherto thought essential, not only of no importance but something of a bore, a nuisance, and that is how we grow to a state of dropping all earth habits.”⁴³ Though the newcomers are at first free to pursue their former interests and hobbies, to live within the memory of their earthly life, as it were, they are encouraged to move beyond what is essentially seen as a limited mode of existence. More so, upon their arrival, the spirits are faced with a reckoning for their mortal misgivings, with memory taking the mantle of the ultimate judge:

is suddenly called to the other side, and finds oneself at once in known surroundings, sure of one’s future, instead of that most unpleasant period of readjustment, *during which souls have to unlearn what their teachers here have taught and adapt themselves to unfamiliar facts.*” W.T. Stead, *The Blue Island. Experiences of a New Arrival Beyond the Veil* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1922), xi (emphasis added).

41 *Ibidem*, 53.

42 *Ibidem*, 62.

43 *Ibidem*, 64.

When coming to this land, that whole record has to be dealt with. Not by a judge in wig and gown, but by our own spirit selves. In spirit life we have a full and clear remembrance of all these things and, according to the quality of these individual thoughts, so we are brought into a state of regret, happiness or unhappiness, despair or satisfaction.⁴⁴

The ultimate result is the discardment of one's identity, which is coterminous with the erasure of individual memory and the subsequent immersion in the collective identity of the spirits; upon advancement between the spheres, with each presumably becoming more perfect and thus less familiar, the spirit inhabitants "pass to another and altogether different and lighter land – and each becomes impersonal. Impersonal in the sense that they are no longer Jack Brown or Madge Black, they are now pure spirit people, and their former love, which had been a personal and individual thing, is no longer for one but equally for all. All are alike to all."⁴⁵ Individual memory is meant to be acknowledged and addressed before one progresses through the celestial ranks to other, more developed realities.

This journey between the spheres constitutes the structural backbone of *A Wanderer in the Spirit Lands*, an 1896 account purportedly conveyed by Franchezzo, a spirit of an Italian noble, to A. Farnese, a London-based transcriber.⁴⁶ Unlike the more pragmatic (or down-to-earth, one is tempted to say) depiction of the spirit life in *The Blue Island*, *Wanderer* provides a decidedly distinct moral and religious angle, as announced by Franchezzo himself in the opening section "Dedication by the Author," in which he warns the readers that

if the after consequences of a life spent in dissipation and selfishness are often terrible even during the earth-life, they are doubly so in the Spirit World, where all disguise is stripped from the soul, and it stands forth in all the naked hideousness of its sins, with the scars of the spiritual disease contracted in its earthly life stamped upon its spirit form – never to be effaced but by the healing powers of sincere repentance and the cleansing waters of its own sorrowful tears.⁴⁷

44 *Ibidem*, 96.

45 *Ibidem*, 149.

46 Although the actual identity of the medium remains unknown, the place of the first publication (London) as well as the original spelling and vocabulary might suggest that A. Farnese was presumably British or was a pseudonym of a British author.

47 Franchezzo, *A Wanderer in the Spirit Lands* (London: W. J. Sinkins, 1896), vii.

The chronotope in Franchezzo's account is that of journey through the afterlife in what becomes a Spiritualist rendition of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* or Dante's *Inferno*, as the main character traverses hellish landscapes in search of redemption for his mortal life of debauchery and vice. After awakening in the afterlife, surrounded by "the stillness – the darkness of Death" (a noticeable contrast to the serene transition in *The Blue Island*), the protagonist soon realizes that he needs to earn his redemption by helping other sinners;⁴⁸ thus, with the assistance of his guides, he returns to earth to work as a "controlling spirit," whose main task was to "impress the mortal with a sense of the terrible consequences of yielding to sin, and also [...] act as guard and watchman to protect him from the control of the wandering tempting spirits of the earth plane."⁴⁹ In the intervals between his missions, the protagonist travels through the Twilight Lands, denoting the first sphere of the Spiritualist universe, inhabited by spirits "whose lives have been too selfish and material to allow their souls to reach any higher state of development."⁵⁰ The countries in the Twilight Lands are reflections of one's cardinal depravity, made evident in their allegorical names, such as the Valley of Selfishness, the Country of Unrest, the Miser's Land, or the Gambler's Land, to name but a few. In each of these locations, the environment comes to reflect the sin associated with it and, in extension, the physical and moral appearance of its inhabitants; for instance, the Valley of Selfishness is described as

a great valley of grey stones, with dim, cold, grey hills shutting it in on every side, and this twilight sky overhead. Here again not a blade of grass, not one poor stunted shrub was to be seen, not one touch of colour or brightness anywhere, only this dull desolation of grey stones. Those who dwelt in this valley had centred their lives and their affections in themselves and had shut up their hearts against all the warmth and beauty of unselfish love.⁵¹

Similarly, the Land of Misers is inhabited by "dark crooked-looking beings with long claw-like fingers, who were scratching in the black soil like birds of prey in search of stray grains of gold that here and there rewarded their toil."⁵² In this context, memory becomes not only a sentence but also a mode of punishment, condemning the sinners to the

48 *Ibidem*, 4.

49 *Ibidem*, 39.

50 *Ibidem*, 36.

51 *Ibidem*, 43.

52 *Ibidem*, 45.

afterlife of torment, in accordance with the principle that spirits “will be made to live over in memory their past earth life” until they “expiate in the spirit the wrongs done in their earthly existences.”⁵³ Since memory also accounts for the spatial modelling of the various loci visited by the protagonist, it can be only overcome by a conscious act of repentance that triggers the moral progress of the individual and the subsequent utopisation of the post-mortem topography. As Franchezzo observes, “[i]n all respects man in the spirit world is free to work or to be idle, to do good or to do evil, to win a blessing or a curse. Such as he is, such will be his surroundings, and the sphere for which he is fitted must ever be the highest to which he can attain till his own efforts fit him to become a dweller in one higher.”⁵⁴

In line with one of central tenets of Spiritualist cosmology, Franchezzo’s account also employs the rule of affinity between the two worlds, here reformulated into a depiction of depraved originals of mortal copies; accordingly, Franchezzo’s journey culminates in the visit to the Kingdom of Hell, where he sees “the Venice of the lower spheres,” built upon “these degraded counterparts of all those beautiful places made familiar by the brush of the artist and the fame of those who have carved for themselves a niche in the Temple of History,” as well as the Imperial City, a distorted hellish form of the corrupt Rome.⁵⁵ The spiritual quest in the lower spheres is simultaneously juxtaposed with the protagonist’s intertwined moral and physiological development, with his initially decrepit body – a reflection of his sinful past – restored to its youthful appearance as a confirmation of the man’s progress. His transformation is further reflected in his advancement in the ranks of celestial beings and the subsequent change in residence: Franchezzo is relocated first to a modest room in the Land of Dawn, then to a cottage in the Morning Land, and finally to a villa in the Land of Bright Day, with each successive stage depicted in accord with an increasingly more idyllic depiction of the natural environment, an inversion of the hellish landscapes visited by the protagonist. Most importantly, however, conversely to the erasure of individual memory in Stead’s account, Farnese’s allegory does not propose such a radical solution; instead, the arcadian environment of the afterlife utopia aligns with the sublimation of the protagonist’s recollections which are now focussed on his beloved and the vision of their future life beyond death:

53 *Ibidem*, 136.

54 *Ibidem*, 78.

55 *Ibidem*, 202.

My villa was upon the top of a hill overlooking the lake which lay many hundreds of feet below, its calm waters rippled by magnetic currents and the surrounding hills mirrored in its quiet bosom, and beyond the lake there was a wide valley. As one looks down from a mountain top to the low hills and the dark valley and level plains below, so did I now look down from my new dwelling upon a panorama of the lower spheres and circles through which I had passed, to the earth plane and again to the earth itself, which lay like a star far below me. I thought as I looked at it that there dwelt still my beloved and there yet lay the field of my labours. I have sat many times since gazing out on that lone star, the pictures of my past life floating in a long wave of memory across my day-dream, and with all my thoughts was interwoven the image of her who is my guiding star.⁵⁶

Clearly imbued with a didactic purpose, Franchezzo's cautionary tale highlights the futility of one's attempt to "escape the grinding of memory's millstones" while simultaneously postulating a chance to surmount past transgressions through acts of repentance.⁵⁷ The path of progress in Spiritualist utopias is thus fundamentally a journey of memory, with the individual seeking absolution from the corruptive mortal existence by learning to recognize the true memory of the postmortem Arcadia.

Seen from the perspective of the utopian convention, the two accounts enunciate the necessity of confronting memory as impediment to one's progress as well as of acknowledging memory's significance as a cornerstone of individual as well as collective development. Space is the central component of these moral peregrinations. In *The Blue Island* the protagonist commences his journey towards perfection in a highly familiarised environment that is conducive to reawakening the true cultural memory of heavenly forms. *A Wanderer in the Spirit Lands* starts from a conspicuously dissimilar angle: the sinful protagonist, who awakens in highly defamiliarised surroundings, scours infernal lands in search of redemption for his mortal transgressions; the idea of progress is here strongly correlated with the spiritual and moral dimensions of penitence, as the eventual entry into the celestial utopia is not a goal in itself but a reward for one's striving towards improvement. In this sense, by functioning as an ideal form to flawed earthly copies as well as a dynamic reflection of one's (mis)deeds, utopian spatiality in Spiritualist works reconstrues both the traditional chronotope of static presentness and the 19th-century forward-oriented model by positing the imperfect past as the foundation of the future Paradise on this mortal plane and beyond.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 280.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 177.

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