

# 3.4. The Path of Progress: Utopia and Spiritualist Literature

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## **Abstract**

Described variously as the “Summerland”, the “Spirit World”, or the “Beautiful Beyond”, depictions of the afterlife in nineteenth-century Spiritualist literature reveal a conspicuous affinity with the dynamic utopian paradigm of their times, developed in line with the period’s focus on individual and collective development. While these allegedly factual representations of post-mortem locus amoenus were not written as utopias per se, they foreground the essentially utopian belief in humanity’s inherent potential for betterment, fully realized in the hereafter. In contradistinction to the traditional trope of utopian insularity, Spiritualist accounts highlight the intrinsic correspondence between the two realms of existence, which allows the spiritual sphere to influence its earthly counterpart. Hence, progress in the Great Beyond is correlated with continuous improvement on Earth and, by extension, with creating a better world in the here and now. This essay will thus focus on selected nineteenth-century Spiritualist texts with a view to exploring the idea of progress established as their thematic and structural dominant. I argue that the examined models are grounded on the tension between the depiction of a transcendent utopia and the drive towards individual perfection amongst its inhabitants, as the concept of divine will is juxtaposed with the necessity of human agency in the Spiritualist universe.

**Key words:** utopia, progress, heaven, Spiritualism, nineteenth century

The history of modern Spiritualism begins in 1848, when two young sisters, Kate and Maggie Fox, allegedly communicated with an unruly spirit that took residence in their family home in Hydesville, New York. As unlikely as it might seem today, this highly publicized case of spiritual communication changed the religious landscape of the nineteenth-century United States, made evident by the

immense popularity of spirit lectures and seances, the celebrity-like status of some of the mediums, as well as the considerable interest shown by luminaries of Victorian science and culture such as William James, Alfred Russel Wallace, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Robert Owen. As a religious but also political movement, Spiritualism became a brief though potent expression of a latent need to support the belief in life after death with scientific validation. To quote Molly McGarry (2008: 8),

Unlike other religions, in which faith was a necessary prerequisite for belief, Spiritualism asked only that one become an “investigator”, attend a séance under “test” conditions, analyze “evidence”, and weigh whether or not to believe. Spiritualists described theirs as a “religion of proof”.

In response to extensive criticism as well as encouragement from their opponents and followers, Spiritualists produced a great number of written accounts delineating a unique post-mortem cosmogony, according to which the spirits of those who passed away on Earth come to inhabit a system of celestial spheres, referred to variously as the Summerland or the Great Beyond. These often highly detailed descriptions appear as an amalgam of fiction and spiritual testimony, blending pseudo-scientific speculations and parables with presentations of religious doctrines and political treatises. Particularly striking is the connection between Spiritualist writings and the utopian literary convention, especially in the context of the evolution of the utopian genre from the static early model to its more dynamic nineteenth-century counterpart. Many of these texts echo utopia’s cultural antecedents such as the Garden of Eden, the Fortunate Isles, or Elysium as representations of a perfected reality that transcends the adversities of mundane existence. At the same time, they show the discernible influence of nineteenth-century precepts of individual and collective development as blueprints for a better future now and after death. Thus, it is my contention that, although Spiritualist works were not intended as proper literary utopias, their structural and thematic determinants link them to the utopian paradigm as well as to the utopian focus on perfectibility and progress, demonstrated by the intertwined tropes of scientific confirmation and divine agency.

The notion of progress lies at the core of Spiritualist world-building as an indispensable component of its utopianist philosophy, which effectively transferred the ethos of progress from a temporary existence on Earth into an everlasting hereafter as a dynamic process of perfectibility affecting various elements of the presented world. According to Cathy Gutierrez,

Progress was projected into heaven, which itself was subject to time and improvement. In contrast to more classical depictions of heaven such as Dante's, where the ground is so solid it bruises one's feet, or Huck Finn's, where angels on clouds play harps ..., Spiritualist heaven was a whirlwind of motion. The dead grew up, went to school, advanced through the spheres, even got married. Progress continued into the infinite future, and although there was usually peace for the dead, there was no rest. (Gutierrez, 2009: 19)

Seen from the perspective of the utopian paradigm, progress in Spiritualist texts takes up the function of the so-called "primary ideal" of classical utopias, whose "existence", according to Elisabeth Hansot, "does not *directly* depend on a particular form of social organization but hinges rather upon the existence of a supra-sensible reality" (1974: 11, original emphasis). I argue that the "primary ideal" in Spiritualist utopias can be identified as the determinant of progress to which all levels of the given presented world are synecdochically subjected. For example, Eugene Crowell declares in *The Spirit World* (1879: 37) that "[p]rogression is the grand law of the spirit-world, and although some spirits may not take the first step in the path of progression for a long time, even for ages, yet there can be no change for the worse. Retrogression is there unknown." Similarly, D. E. Bailey states in *Thoughts From The Inner Life* (1886: 157) that "[p]rogress is a law of life; it is a child of the Infinite; it knows no limit, because all of the boundless regions of heaven, earth, and space are open to its research. It is forever unfolding grander forms of beauty, nobler forms of thought."

The focus on progress is distinctly noticeable in the spatial modelling of the Spiritualist universe. Unlike the traditional utopian model, Spiritualist world-building is essentially vertical, based on the progressively diminishing contrast between the upper echelons of excellence and the inherently flawed earthly realm. The general spatial model takes the form of interlocking zones or spheres, arranged hierarchically, which are further divided into circles or divisions. For example, in *The Spirit World*, the afterlife constitutes a "system or series of heavens, or zones, which are associated with our planet, and which revolve with it, ... and which are fixed in their relations to it" (Crowell, 1879: 21). According to Andrew Jackson Davis, one of the most prominent Spiritualists of his times, there are "six spheres in the ascending flight toward Deity, who fills the Seventh Sphere" (1867: 66, original emphasis). Such a design of intertwined worlds is based on a principle of correspondence between respective zones as well as between the hereafter as a whole and the earthly realm, which contravenes both the trope of spatial insularity, typical for traditional utopias, and the temporal distance of nineteenth-century echronias.

The implementation of an up/down dichotomy as the core structural principle highlights the progressive focus of Spiritualist texts. Each sphere reflects a successive stage in the development of its inhabitants, who, in time, advance to higher zones in line with the divine “order of progression”, at the end of which spirits become “purified and exalted angels” (Crowell, 1879: 27–8). The spatial organization follows the synecdochic structure of early utopian narratives, in which, according to Artur Blaim (2013: 146), the components of the given state operate as signifiers of “the general principles underlying the utopian system”. Thus, various elements of the presented world come to represent the overall excellence (or its lack) in a given area, and each sphere constitutes a component of the overarching Spiritualist universe. For example, in the so-called “wicked heaven” in *The Spirit World*, cities are described as dens of destitution and poverty where “[t]he dwellings present a dingy, forlorn appearance, and suggest ideas of uncleanness, and discomfort” and their inhabitants “are clothed in garments which correspond to their degraded moral, and intellectual conditions, and their unhappy countenances reflect the passions, vices, and ignorance of their natures” (Crowell, 1879: 40).

The spatial design and, by extension, the “moral, and intellectual condition” of utopians change in the subsequent sphere that constitutes an improved version of its predecessor. Hence, in contrast to the aforementioned “wicked heaven,” the more advanced regions in *The Spirit World* display explicit superiority over the lower world. Likewise, Paschal Beverly Randolph (1886: 118) points out in *After Death* that the second section of the first division

is a great improvement on the first. It occupies more surface; is greatly diversified; is higher, both in reference to the scale of perfection and the equator. The fauna and flora are less coarse and rough ... The inhabitants are still quite coarse and low, but far less brutal and gross than in the former section.

The static structure of each sphere is connected with the individual progress of its inhabitants; the spiritual zones, which neither develop nor deteriorate, are arranged hierarchically, enabling the spirits to advance by moving upwards from sphere to sphere. What changes here is not the organization of the given celestial zone, but the moral progress of the individuals, whose advancement in the spiritual reality relies on their personal effort.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, many Spiritualist narratives strive to resolve the key difference between the focus of progress in traditional and modern utopias respectively. According to Hansot (1974: 13), “while classical utopias are critical

of existing society, they aim primarily at changing the individual rather than society. ... [M]odern utopias attempt to change man by remaking the society in which he will live." Spiritualist works reconcile the said approaches by placing them on two seemingly distinct ontological planes: the post-mortem reality becomes a reflection of a classical utopian state in which the individual undergoes reformation through the corrective mechanism of education and labour (the society, as such, remains static); soon enough, however, after having advanced sufficiently, spirits begin working on improving the general conditions of life on Earth as part of their path toward perfection. It is then an interlocking system in which the individual progress after death becomes correlated with facilitating improvement in the mortal world by means of spirits, who assist and inspire various social reforms with a view to creating an earthly utopia as a reflection of the celestial model. As a result, Spiritualist texts, apart from foregrounding an aesthetic and didactic ideal, attempt to provide a viable programme of socio-political critique and reform, aimed at the reality outside their boundaries.

This idea of correspondence between the two realities is one of the central tenets of Davis's concept of the "harmonial philosophy", whose purpose is "[t]o unfold the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, to apply the laws of planets to individuals — in a word, to establish in human society the same harmonious relations that are found to obtain in the cosmos" (Davis, 1923: 205–6). The spiritual world is modelled as a spatiotemporal and socio-political matrix to be emulated on earth as the core element of the mimetic relationship between both realities. More importantly, however, the connection between the two realms enables mortals to achieve greater harmony in their lives. Davis observes (1867: 165–6) that "[t]he true and noble in the Summer Land work diligently among the members of its inferior societies to bring about that state of heavenly peace and concord. When the inferior societies of the other sphere are harmonized, the earth-land will also be more harmonized". M. T. Shelhamer (1885: 422) makes a similar observation, arguing:

[the spirits'] highest blessing and privilege is in being able to impress, work upon, and guide the hidden, inner powers of souls in mortal forms until they develop the beauty and glory within them, and awaken their spirits to an understanding of beautiful life, an appreciation of the good and true, and a knowledge of the possibility of the power that is theirs.

Spirits would also exert a more direct influence upon the socio-political strata of earthly societies by establishing congresses, which would then work on impressing a specific political agenda upon respective nations. In the series narrated by the spirit of the late Samuel Bowles, a celebrated journalist, the celestial visitor reveals the following mechanism of political activism in the spiritual realm:

We have our Spiritual Congress for our nation's interest, which by developing harmony and engendering a right spirit, is enabled to throw a greater influence over your, earthly Congress. There are many impediments to our even partial control, but mighty minds are working with power, ten-fold greater than those in earth life, to help strengthen any moves in the right direction, and make them effective for the nation's good. (Twining, 1881: 32)

The spirits “not only watch most anxiously who is elected to office”, but they also “exert as strong an influence as possible to have those elected upon whom we can act” (Twining, 1881: 32). The idea of spiritual intervention was seen by many Spiritualists as a necessary part of facilitating widespread reforms on Earth, which included the pressing issues of women's rights and abolitionism, inspired by the utopians from the Great Beyond. The spirits were described as “trying to influence a world that is going astray and might cause undreamed-of suffering” in preparation for the new world developed in unison with the post-mortem realm (Rafferty, 1922: 9). Spiritualism was hence seen as a herald of the time of the New Dispensation “when heaven shall draw near to earth, and the soul of man shall be baptized with spiritual gifts; and finally, *finally*, war and hatred shall cease on earth, and peace and kindness shall be the law of life” (Rafferty, 1922: 176, original emphasis). Perhaps the most far-reaching example of Spiritualist progress is the transhumanist ideal of a new humanity that would usher the utopian ideal of the Summerland into the mortal world in the wake of the impending spiritual revolution. Davis (1923: 277) explains that

[t]he world will be cleansed and renovated, and then our race will stand forth in the brightness and beauty of its nature. One universal good, one constituting principle, one spring of thought and action, one grand and lofty aspiration — the love and quest of perfection. ... Then will the race be perfect ... and the Earth will be one garden, the true Eden of existence, with humanity as one nation standing erect therein, free from spot or blemish.

Progress was seen as an almost inevitable future of humanity in which the consolation of an eternal hereafter blended with a call to action in the here and now. In this way, Spiritualism was as much a utopian and utopianist movement, embracing the spiritual revelations from the no-place of the Great Beyond, as a radical programme for creating a good place on Earth.

## Note

1. There were, however, other aspects of progress to consider, connected with what Christine Ferguson describes as a “hard biological determinism and eugenic idealism”, which is common to many Spiritualist accounts of the afterlife (Ferguson, 2012: 203).

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