

Alicja Urbanik-Kopec

Instytut Historii Nauki PAN

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1121-4309>

**JULIAN OCHOROWICZ AND NEW TYPE OF PHENOMENA.
A STORY OF A SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE IN AN INTERNATIONAL
DEBATE ABOUT THE FRINGES OF MODERNITY**

**Julian Ochorowicz i Nowe zjawiska zmysłowe.
Historia artykułu naukowego w międzynarodowej debacie
o obrzeżach nowoczesności**

SUMMARY

The paper comments on the series of articles published in 1893 by Julian Ochorowicz in “Tygodnik Ilustrowany”. The articles serve to comment on the state of reasoning of Spiritualism supporters, who linked the “new type of phenomena” with technological advances of the era. The paper also discusses the scientific background that Spiritualist adopted to try to place their field of research in a current discourse about modernity and technological progress.

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł omawia serię felietonów opublikowanych przez Juliana Ochorowicza w 1893 roku w „tygodniku Ilustrowany”. Felietony te, jak również postać Ochorowicza, służą jako przykłady do wytłumaczenia, w jaki sposób zwolennicy spirytyzmu łączyli ten „nowy dział zjawisk” z postępem technologicznym właściwym drugiej połowie XIX wieku. Artykuł omawia również sposoby, w jakie badacze spirytyzmu próbowali umieścić swoje zainteresowania badawcze w kontekście ówczesnego dyskursu naukowego, skupiając się szczególnie na zagadnieniach nowoczesności i postępu technologicznego.

Key words: spiritism, inventions, modernity, technological progress, Julian Ochorowicz

Słowa kluczowe: spirytyzm, wynalazki, nowoczesność, postęp technologiczny, Julian Ochorowicz

The spiritual séances were a common social practice in the second part of 19th century, taking place all over Europe and in the United States. The Spiritist movement, although mostly esoteric and recreational in nature, was heavily influenced by the general idea of scientific progress that was supposed to be the defining feature of well-developed societies in 19th century. In this article, I would like to show the relation between the 19th century modernism and the rise of Spiritism, finding the similarities in discourse of spiritual researchers and the leading inventors of the time. Although, because of the historical circumstances, Polish lands were often at the periphery of the latest trends in culture and science, they were not closed to this phenomenon, and were strongly involved in the movement. I will comment on the development of Spiritism in Poland, and show that the prevalent narration about Spiritism, trying to connect it with the progressive thinking of the time and make it a new, exciting field of scientific research, was well established also on Polish lands. For this, I will mainly focus on the persuasive column by leading Polish inventor and spiritualist, Julian Ochorowicz, that he was writing for “Tygodnik Ilustrowany”. The Polish involvement in the movement shows how intensively Poles tried to be up to date with the most modern ideas of the time, even more because of the difficult political situation of the country. Spiritism and its scientific explanations offered Polish intellectuals a chance to perceive themselves as a part of international circle of visionaries, trying to advance humanity in its development in all ways possible, even when the field they chose was as unusual as Spiritism.

The wonderful century

Alfred Wallace, a scientist working alongside Charles Darwin, wrote in the end of 19th century, that “not only is our century superior to any that have gone before it, but that it may be best compared with the whole preceding historical period. It must therefore be held to constitute the begging of a new era of human progress”¹.

This quotation, taken from the preface to Wallace’s book *The Wonderful Century*, accurately summarizes the unique perspective of 19th century scientists on the era in which they lived, a perspective that surely trickled down (or so the intellectuals thought) on the less educated members of society². The widely held belief that 19th century is the age of utmost importance not only to contemporary, but also an epitome of modernity and a final achievement of human race, is the perspective that saturated Wallace’s book from its first to its last page. In *The*

¹ Alfred Wallace, *The Wonderful Century*, New York 1899, p. VII.

² Compare: Leo Marx, *The Domination of Nature and the Redefinition of Progress*, [in:] (edit.) Marx, L., Mazlish, B., *Progress: Fact or Illusion*, Michigan 1996; Thomas Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, New Jersey 1994; John Bury, *The Idea of Progress. An Inquiry Into Its Origin And Growth*, 2009; Thomas Carlyle, *The Signs of the Times*, 1829 [in:] *The Spirit of the Age: Victorian Essays*, (edit.) Gertrude Himmelfarb, London 1999.

Wonderful Century, he tries to summarize the current state of science, economy and culture to prove that “the marvellous inventions and discoveries of our own age, and especially (...) those innumerable applications of science which now form part of our daily life, (...) reminds us every hour of our immense superiority over our comparatively ignorant forefathers”³.

Wallace was only one of the great choir of historians and scientists praising 19th century as the age of all that is modern – Age of Progress, Age of Reason, Age of Machine⁴. Inventions constructed at the time were in a fact a list of devices that constitute what we call a modern standard of life. 19th century saw the invention of not only steam engine, telephone, photo camera or cinema, but also more prosaic, but not less important things like matches or raincoats. Both big and small (and maybe especially small) inventions helped to create the feeling that life was flowing faster, easier and more pleasurably, and the possibilities of human mind seemed endless. It wasn't God or Nature that allowed people to live their everyday lives, it was humanity itself that shaped the world. When we look at the 19th century from this perspective, we can easily see that Wallace's book was not a simple outburst of ill-directed boasting, but a sincere opinion – well-grounded in the state of sciences of the time – that humanity is on the verge of breaking into a new, better reality, governed not by chance and fear, but by reason and progress. In the opening of his autobiography, published originally in 1919, Nikola Tesla wrote, that “the progressive development of man is vitally dependent on invention. It is the most important product of his creative brain. Its ultimate purpose is the complete mastery of mind over the material world, the harnessing of the forces of nature to human needs. This is the difficult task of the inventor who is often misunderstood and unrewarded”⁵.

Inventions were supposed to harness nature to the will, they were supposed to break nature's laws. If we, as humanity, are able to talk on a phone with a person that is a thousand miles away, if we are able to travel by train in a speed unconceivable to the previous generations, could we also try to break free of yet another boundary and with the help of inventions cross not only barriers of time and space, but also a barrier of death? To the people of the era, the answer was – yes.

“Communication with the dead” was not only a possibility expressed by some science enthusiasts, but also the sole objective of the spiritualist movement, that started in the mid-19th century. Originating in Hydesville, New York, with young Fox sisters claiming in 1848 to be able to communicate with a ghost they called “Mr. Splitfoot”⁶ it soon became immensely popular, first in the United States, and

³ Alfred Wallace, op. cit., p. 1.

⁴ Thomas Carlyle, op. cit., p. 31.

⁵ Nikola Tesla, *My inventions*, “Electrical Experimenter”, February 1919, p. 696.

⁶ Przemysław Grzybowski, *Opowieści spirytystyczne: mała historia spirytyzmu*, Katowice 1999, p. 9–17.



Fig. 1. Julian Ochorowicz, photographed by Jan Mieczkowski, ca 1880.

then in Great Britain, developing so fast, that within fifteen years of the original American tournee of Fox sisters, there were over 10 thousand spiritual mediums working in England alone⁷. Spiritism was not a social practice present only in English-speaking countries. The rest of Europe, particularly Germany, France, Italy and Poland, was very interested not only in holding spiritual séances, but also – in producing their own spiritual mediums and spiritual medium researchers.

Research, of various credibility and use, was always an important part of Spiritism movement. It was so, because, along the purely entertaining purposes of spiritual séances, Victorian scientists immediately set on to check if Spiritism could be of any use to the scientific progress of humanity. The fascination with ghosts was shared by people of all social classes and degrees of education. Well respected scientist with established academic careers, such as Olivier Lodge (physicist and

inventor), Charles Richet (a Nobel Prize winner in the field of medicine), William Crookes (chemist, physicist and inventor) and Julian Ochorowicz (physician, pioneer psychologist and inventor) were all organizing research teams to study spiritual mediums and determine the nature of the phenomena.

As it was said before, the fever of Spiritism was not restricted only to English speaking countries. Most of the central and western Europe seemed to have at least one major medium and one major medium researcher in their home country – be it Eva Carrier and Charles Richet from France, Eusapia Palladino and Cesare Lombroso from Italy or Stanisława Tomczyk and Julian Ochorowicz from Poland.

Polish spiritualism was truly international in character – Polish mediums, such as Tomczyk, Prosper Szmurło or Franek Kluski travelled with their séances all over Europe, and world-famous mediums such as Eusapia Palladino were frequent visitors in Poland and allowed to be subjected to a series of tests by Julian Ochorowicz.

⁷ Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychological Research in England 1850–1914*, New York 1985, p. 229.

According to Przemysław Grzybowski, first Polish accounts of spiritual séances came as early as 1853, the idea migrating to Kingdom of Poland with Polish intellectuals travelling to France and in correspondence between Poles staying in the country and the political migrants living in France after the November Uprising in 1831⁸. The wider coverage of séances started to appear in Polish press in 1853, when the Cracow newspaper “Czas” (“Time”) set up a special rubric, devoted to recounting experiences of Poles taking part in such activities. These accounts were not scientific in nature and did not attempt to fit into the prevailing academic tone of diaries of scientists researching Spiritism. Instead, they mostly ridiculed the idea and accused the ones involved of gullibility, or, less kindly, of stupidity.

Warsaw newspapers are printing a short poem, very popular in the capital because of this table-mania of late:

Why are you bothering us so, lords and ladies?

We were waiting in the corners up until now

What happened? Do you have us much reason in your heads

As we have in our legs?⁹

However, the purpose of recounting the experiences with Spiritism by “Czas” wasn’t only to ridicule the idea. At one point, the newspaper argued that

such experiments repeated without scientific purpose but because of simple curiosity are redundant, as almost everyone experienced them already and are unable to say anything more about them. Let’s leave the matter to the scientist and write down their observations as signs leading us to better understand the laws of Nature¹⁰.

It seems that the newspaper aimed to ridicule only the séances that were conducted for the sake of entertainment, and even after presenting such events with greatest skepticism, it still did not completely dismiss them as fake. The call to let scientists investigate the matter is a proof of deeply scientific paradigm that was shown even in articles that were written with the purpose of entertainment.

⁸ There are not many reliable Polish critical publications recounting the Polish involvement in Spiritism – the two that are included in this paper are a historic account by Przemysław Grzybowski, *Opowieści spirytystyczne* from 1999, and a similar publication by Krzysztof Boruń and Stefan Manczarski, *Tajemnice parapsychologii* from 1977.

⁹ *Kronika miejscowa i zagraniczna*, “Czas”, 1853, nr 93, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

The duty of a scientist

One of the scientists that answered the call to investigate the phenomena in Poland was Julian Ochorowicz. He was born in 1850, so he began his academic career when the Spiritism movement was in its full bloom. He was a psychologist and inventor, as well as an assistant professor of natural philosophy and psychology at the Lvov University. He worked on the improvements in microphones, as is regarded as one of the precursors of radio and television. He invented and patented a number of devices, mainly improved types of microphones and his own telephone, that he presented on the Antwerp's World Fair in 1885. Later in life, he became a co-director of the Institute General Physiologique in Paris, France¹¹. After his come back to Poland, he established a psychological laboratory in his house in Wisła, where he also conducted experiments on a famous Italian medium, Eusapia Palladino, during her visit in Poland in the late 1893¹².

Ochorowicz is a perfect example of a scientist of the Age of Progress – relentlessly curious, with varying fields of interest and specialty, engaging both in academic studies, inventing and writing books and newspaper columns¹³. He is an author of many academic papers from the field of experimental psychology, as well as a five-volume, monumental publication on Spiritism titled *Zjawiska mediumiczne (Mediumic apparitions)* that recount his experiences with examining the spiritual mediums. He was also an author of a persuasive column published in “Tygodnik Ilustrowany”, titled *Nowy dział zjawisk*. Before 1893, his column was devoted to psychology and medical subjects, but around the time of the visit of Eusapia Palladino in Warsaw, he decided to publish articles designed to introduce the general public to the subject of Spiritism and to comment on the scientific theories created by the researchers of the phenomena. His essays were published weekly, from January 1892 to October 1893.

It is particularly interesting to analyze his article from July 1st, 1893, titled *Nowy dział zjawisk. Uwagi z powodu doświadczeń mediumicznych Eusapii Palladino. (New Type of Phenomena. Some remarks upon the spiritist experiments of Eusapia Palladino)*. In this text, serving as an introductory article before the visit of Palladino, Ochorowicz tries to persuade the readers to treat Spiritism as a branch of science. His article is a wonderful example of use of rhetoric characteristic to the Age of Progress – love of science, need of pragmatic scientific research, unshakable optimism regarding the path of human development. At the

¹¹ J. Krajewski, „Julian Leopold Ochorowicz”, *Polski słownik biograficzny*, vol. 23, Wrocław, 1978, pp. 499–505.

¹² His experiments with Palladino are described in great detail in *Zjawiska mediumiczne*. See: Julian Ochorowicz, *Zjawiska mediumiczne*, Warsaw 1913, vol. I and II.

¹³ Some additional aspects of Julian Ochorowicz's philosophy and scientific endeavors are described in Jan Tomkowski, *Mój Pozytywizm*, Warszawa 1993 and in Damian Włodzimierz Makuch, *Wokół pojęcia fantazji*, Warszawa 2018.



Fig. 2. A column by Julian Ochorowicz in „Tygodnik Ilustrowany”, illustrated with a portrait of Eusapia Palladino 1893, np. 183.

same time, it is an excellent example of a typical narrative of a progressive scientist from 19th century, trying to reconcile the inconceivable with the realistic – and fully embracing the possibility of failure. It is especially interesting to keep in mind that this is the account of an academic who, although he travelled to France and kept correspondence with western scientists – was still a member of a somehow provincial society, as Poland was then at the outskirts of 19th century modernity Ochorowicz opens with an admission of his own skepticism:

When Hughes announced his invention of microphone in 1878, I considered it a lecturer of philosophy of physics at the Lvov University and I considered it my duty to check the probability of his invention: three pieces of coke connected with a wire were supposed to send human voice on any given distance (...). A fraud – I thought to myself-how could a piece of coal be able to transmit human speech?¹⁴

Ochorowicz deliberately chooses this example at his opening paragraph. By using the example of a recent invention, he appeals to the popular 19th century

¹⁴ Julian Ochorowicz, *Nowy dzial zjawisk. Uwagi z powodu doswiadczen medycznych Eusapii Palladino*, „Tygodnik Ilustrowany”, 1893, nr 183, p. 11.

discourse of innovation and the need of modernity. Admitting his ignorance, Ochorowicz places himself in the position of an uneducated provincial, skeptical about the progress and therefore – funny. This way, he allows the public to identify with him and win their trust. In the next paragraph, he recounts the moment of his own enlightenment about the nature of inventions and the boundaries of possibility:

A few days later (...) it turned out that it could in fact transmit speech. When Edison presented his phonograph, I was more cautious and I didn't try to grab the man who was operating the handle by his throat, crying „Ventriloquist!” I became more humble¹⁵.

The ludicrous image of a scientist trying to attack the phonograph operator furthers the process of identification of the reader and prepares ground for what comes next – the parable to Spiritism. Just as Ochorowicz (and the common reader) was at first reluctant to believe in the existence of such inventions as phonograph and microphone, calling it a fraud and reacting in a ridiculous manner of a provincial, it is understandable that such reaction would be the initial one when meeting with Spiritism. It is not a coincidence that for the sake of his argument, Ochorowicz chooses two inventions connected with the transmission of the human voice without the presence of a human body.

It is particularly interesting to compare the comments accompanying the development of inventions on communication techniques, such as telegraph and later telephone, to the corresponding narrations describing the practices of communication with ghosts on spiritual séances. A connection that Ochorowicz skillfully uses in his article – by the use of a new, but established invention as an example, he prepares for his argument about a similar, but yet unconfirmed phenomena.

Together in spirit, bodies far apart

Telegraph, in its final, working form, was presented in 1844, four years before the appearance of Fox sisters. Samuel Morse sent a first message: a biblical verse from Book of Numbers. Just five years later, Americans started to coordinate their train grid with the use of telegraph, and a new company, Western Union, build a first transcontinental telegraphic line in 1861¹⁶. Telegraph, apart from inspiring enthusiasm of the sort presented in Wallace's book, was received with the air of cautious amazement – after all, it was a machine that allowed messages to travel great distances in an invisible way, without the use of paper, ink and post. In the words of Wallace: “messages can be sent to almost any part of the globe at

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ken Beauchamp, *History of Telegraphy*, London 2001, p. 69–74.

a speed which far surpasses the imaginary power of Shakespeare's sprite Ariel, who boasted he could put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes"¹⁷. On Polish lands, telegraphy started to develop in 1850s, as 1853 brought a beginning of the construction of electric telegraphic connection between Warsaw and St. Petersburg. As Gavin Weightman writes:

Tap, tap, tap of the telegraph key spelling out messages which had travelled mysteriously through ether was exciting enough in a world still mostly horse drawn and coal-fired, a world without cinema or motor car, in which the telephone was still an expensive luxury and great cities like London and New York had only recently winced at the brightness of electric lights¹⁸.

One can presume that this kind of amazement at communication inventions was inspired mostly by the fact that the information was sent without the use of visible carrier, materializing before the telegraph operator out of thin air, as an emanation of the mind of a person sending the message. This special and first in history disconnecting of body and mind seemed both wonderful and completely impossible¹⁹. As one of the commenters wrote in 1857, in an article *Telegraphic Meeting*, published in "Tiffany's Monthly":

We publish a following novel and interesting account of a meeting of the employees of the American Telegraph Company on the 3rd instant at – what place? That is the question – at no place, or at all places where the Telegraph offices, within the circuit of seven hundred miles. (...). The members together in spirit – in communication, and yet in body seven hundred miles apart!²⁰

The enthusiastic tone was characteristic to the contemporary relations about the working telegraphs. Polish journalists of the era were not far behind. H.J. Grabowski, writing for "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" in 1861 on the subject of the development of telegraph, opened his account with a praise: "Electro-magnetism, a child of 18th century (...) brought up and matured into a grown man in front of us, is one of the inventions that bring praise and pride to humanity, bring forth the

¹⁷ Alfred Wallace, op. cit., p. 21.

¹⁸ Gavin Weightman, *Signor Marconi's Magic Box*, Cambridge 2003, p. 1.

¹⁹ Weightman described the first presentation of radio telegraph in 1896, made by Gugliermo Marconi in one of the London theatres: "To any modern audience, this device looked more like a diverting toy than an invention at the very forefront of technology. (...) No message was being sent at all – just an invisible electronic signal. But in 1896 that was sensational enough. In fact, those present might easily have dismissed the demonstration as a work of magician and his assistant". Gavin Weightman, op. cit, p. 4.

²⁰ Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, Durham 2000, p. 21.

development of science and open so many new ways of progress, that it is truly inconceivable to predict what kind of benefits it will truly bring in the future”²¹. This enthusiastic paragraph was followed by a meticulous account of how many telegraph towers, how many stations and how many kilometers of cable were currently operating in the Kingdom of Poland and in Russian Empire.

Especially the fact that the people communicating were so far apart could provoke some comparisons with Spiritism, as spiritual mediums were supposed to work like telegraphs connecting living people with those in the afterlife. Before the invention of a telegraph, synchronic communication on the distance of seven hundred miles was as impossible as the communication with another dimension. The use of the phrase “together in spirit – in communication, and yet in body seven hundred miles apart” was supposed to paint a picture of people connected in the spiritual communication. This kind of comparison is valid both in the case of telegraph and spiritual séance. Whereas in a telegraph communication people are connected with the “spirit of communication”, in a spiritual séance the messages are conveyed by a very real spirit – working in connection to the spiritist medium, a ghostly telegraph, so to say. Grabowski echoes this sentiment in the latter part of his article, where he mentions that thanks to the development of telegraph, scientist are able to meet through telegraphs and exchange views and ideas. “All the telegraphic connections are open for such scientific conferences at any given time. In the face of the power of science, all political and national passions fall silent”²². It is as if humanity, faced with something bigger, more profound (such as science, communication, invisible powers of electricity) had to adapt and start to believe.

Jeffrey Sconce, the author of *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* wrote, that one of the most important fantasies connected with the invention of the telegraph was the possibility of splitting body and spirit – that the presence of one was no longer conditioned by the presence of the other. The telegraph served as an example for the spiritists to explain the mechanism of the spirit communication, and sometimes they even used the device during the séances. As Sconce writes: “the unlikely juxtaposition of telegraph and toe joint [used by Fox sisters to produce the “rapping” of the ghost they were contacting] helped articulate what would eventually become a fully developed fantasy of electronic transmutability”. “For spiritualists” – Sconce continues – “the bodiless communication of telegraphy heralded an existence of land without material substance, an always unseen origin point of transmission for disembodied souls in and electromagnetic utopia”²³.

²¹ H.J. Grabowski, *Komunikacja, przemysł i handel. Komunikacje telegraficzne w ogólności, a mianowicie w Królestwie Polskim*, „Tygodnik Ilustrowany”, 1861, nr 391, p. 165.

²² H.J. Grabowski, op. cit., p. 164.

²³ Jeffrey Sconce, op. cit., p. 57.

What Sconce omits, however, is the fact that in the light of the contemporary scientific discoveries and overall feeling of living in the “wonderful century”, those claims were, if not well grounded, then at least worth further exploration. Linda Simon comments that

Evoking the connection between mesmerism and telegraphy was not entirely facetious: sending thoughts through wires seemed, at the time, just as foolish and arcane as sending thoughts, without wires, from one human being to another. Both projects had the aura of the occult: both projects, as one magazine put it, seemed “impracticable and Utopian”²⁴.

In his article, Ochorowicz, aware of this connection that could have been easily made in the mind of the general public, skillfully uses it to prepare the reader to accept the possibility of existence of such original phenomena as Spiritism. When he recounts his reaction to the presentation of phonograph – a perfectly working, real invention, he suggests that a popular reaction to the medium speaking with the voice of a ghost is indeed a similar expression of unscientific prejudice towards the unknown. Indirectly, he also places a reader who would refuse to believe in Spiritism in the position of a backwards bumpkin, catching the phonograph operator by the throat and disgracing himself. He urges the public to be “more humble” and to suspend their disbelief for the sake of science.

What is more, Ochorowicz is able to find an explanation for the level of scepticism of the general public. It is not their fault, but the fault of the backwards school system. As he puts it: “I arrived at the conclusion that if not for my artificial blindness acquired at school, I wouldn’t have disregarded those who put their scientific credibility in jeopardy by announcing new truths to the public”²⁵. In this quote, he develops his argument further. First, he accuses the incompetent school system of inspiring narrow-mindedness. It is line with the progressive thinking of 19th century, where education was supposed to inspire new great minds to put their collective effort in advancing humanity’s progress, and narrow-mindedness was surely one of the greatest flaws of a cultured member of a modern society. However, Ochorowicz claims that what the school system was doing exactly the opposite of what it should, and its narrow teachings prevented him from believing in Spiritism, just as before, it almost prevented him from believing in the existence of real phonograph. Therefore, his belief in Spiritism is not a backwards, occult idea – it is, in fact, the ultimate proof of his modernity. In the argument presented by Ochorowicz, it is not ridiculous to believe in Spiritism. It is ridiculous not

²⁴ Linda Simon, *Dark Light: Electricity and Anxiety from the Telegraph to X Ray*, Orlando 2004, p. 34.

²⁵ Julian Ochorowicz, op. cit.

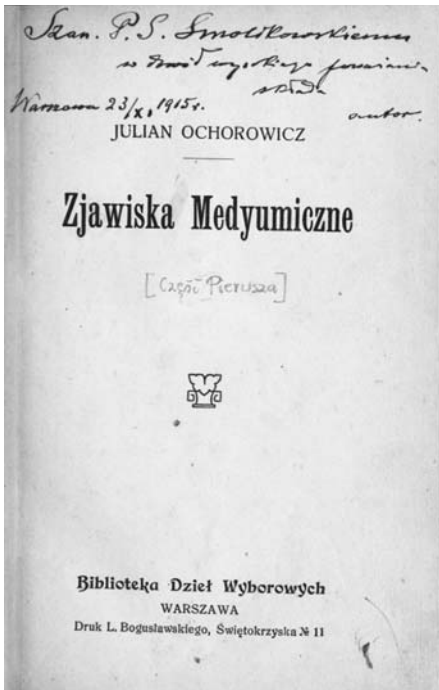


Fig. 3. A copy of the front page of Julian Ochorowicz's publication on spiritism, *Zjawiska medyumiczne*, vol. 1. With an autograph from Ochorowicz, signed in 1915.

the special type of sensitivity, extremely susceptible to any external factors. He claimed that mediums are not some unnatural creatures, but simply people with heightened perception, acting in the same way as thermometers constructed to show temperature or barometers:

The Barometer is an excellent illustration of a Spirit Medium. As the pressure of the Air causes the fall and the rise of the instrument, so the action of Spirit influence causes a fall or rise of bodily sensations of the living instrument²⁶.

Jones writes further, that such as to an external observer looking at a broken barometer could think that the pressure is not changing for a few days, when in fact it is exactly the opposite, so people working with a false or weak medium can falsely assume that the ghosts are not materializing. Mediums were perceived as people with special type of sensitivity that allowed them to contact ghosts, an

to believe, because the lack of belief in ghosts is the same as lack of belief in telephone and telegraph.

**“Who utters the word impossible,
is only a fool”**

The enthusiastic, or at least curious approach of scientific circles towards Spiritism could be explained by the overall atmosphere of curiosity towards unexplained, understandable in the age where almost every day brought a new ground-breaking discovery, previously thought impossible. Spiritism, in the form best known in central and western Europe of 19th century, was also presenting itself as a scientific movement. John Jones, a British spiritist and the author of an 1861 book *The Natural and Supernatural or Man Physical, Apparitional and Spiritual*, tries to explain the phenomena, using the language of mechanics and technology. He wrote that media are people distinguished by

²⁶ John Jones, *The Natural and Supernatural: Or Man Physical, Apparitional and Spiritual*, London, 1861 p. 270–271.

ability which usually manifested itself during the spiritual séances. Jones, very proud of his terminology, called those people “human instruments”. This term is crucial in understanding Jones’s idea, as it underlines the secondary role of the medium in experiencing the afterlife, and, above all, is a consequence of contemporary perception of Spiritism as a phenomenon from the field of science and technology, and not religion and occult.

Even describing the 19th century perception of Spiritism very concisely, as well as examining the spiritual practices, one can see that it wasn’t a completely irrational movement. While the belief that ghosts can transcend the afterlife and communicate with people on earth is definitely esoteric, the methods that were used and theories constructed to explain the process were scientific, or at least strived to be perceived as such. Most of the best known and well respected Spiritism researchers of the time were fluent in the curious pseudo-scientific language they developed themselves to find a way of describing their theories, and were devising complicated machines and conducting meticulously planned experiments in order to place Spiritism among other leading sciences of the time. This connection to the scientific method and scientific language is visible in William Crawford’s *Experiments in Physical Science* (1919), William Crookes’s *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism* (1874) and in the works by Julian Ochorowicz, mainly in *Zjawiska mediumiczne* (1913). To an extent, this type of language was used to include Spiritism in the narration about the Age of Progress, and not to inspire associations with backwardness and lack of education.

In the last part of his persuasive article, Ochorowicz states:

The only thing impossible if for 2 and 2 to equal 5; it is impossible to contradict the laws of nature. However, as we yet don’t know all of the mutually contradicting laws of nature, it is therefore safer to first examine the facts, and then to wonder if they are possible. Let’s not be naturalists more than the nature itself and remember the words of great astronomer Arago: “Who, apart from mathematics, utters the word impossible, is only a fool”²⁷.

This urgent call is the ultimate argument from Ochorowicz. By examining the spiritual séances and spiritual mediums, the researcher assumes the only possible stance for the truly great man of the Age of Reason – he first examines, and only then utters judgement. Condemning Spiritism would, once again, equal narrow mindedness. And, in the wonderful century, it was not safe to declare anything impossible, if one wanted to maintain credibility as a scientist.

Even the most pragmatic scientist of the era, faced with the marvellous projects of inventors, could have a feeling of experiencing paranormal. The invention of

²⁷ Julian Ochorowicz, op. cit.

telegraph was ground breaking not only for them, however, but also for supporters of Spiritism – although those two groups were in fact often consisting of the same of people. Thomas Watson, research assistant to Alexander Graham Bell, commented on his participation in one of the spiritual séances in a following way:

My limited experience does not justify dogmatizing on this disputed subject... I am better satisfied with the explanation that Phillips and other mediums are endowed with the power to transform some subtle, bodily radiation into a mechanical force that produces the rap, movements, and slate writings as a steam engine changes heat into mechanical motion on a telegraphic instrument transforms pulsations of electricity into the taps of the Morse code²⁸.

We can see that in this passage from Watson's personal journal recounting his meeting with a medium called Phillips, the scientist tries to explain the spiritual phenomena with the use of scientific language of the newest discoveries – therefore putting Phillips, the medium, in the same line as the telegraph or a steam engine. He is not an occult priest speaking to the dead, he is just another marvelous invention of the Age of Progress, a wonderful machine, as John Jones wanted – a spiritual barometer.

In another passage in his journal, Watson refers to electricity as a force of occult: "I was not working with that occult force, electricity, and here was some possible chance to make some discoveries. I felt sure spirits could not scare an electrician and they might be of use to him in his work"²⁹. As we can see, the metaphors from the field of science (medium Phillips as a steam engine) were also used the other way round, comparing the occult with the mundane, but also – the mundane with the occult (electricity as occult force).

The curious mixing of the metaphors from the scientific and esoteric fields was an effect of the explosive mix of ideas penetrating the 19th century approach to science. In the world where every day brought some new discoveries, where, as Simon puts it "science pushed aggressively to uncover Nature's secrets"³⁰, it was not immediately apparent which new theory will prove to be real, and which – a blind alley of progress. Scientist, such as Edison, was portrayed in the press as "a wizard: the wielder, and therefore the protector, of occult powers"³¹. Accordingly, some mediums could be presented as scientist, brave inventors trying to find new ways of communication. One could never be sure what was real, and what was a fantasy of an overemotional mind. Spiritism used the terminology of

²⁸ Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology – Schizophrenia – Electric Speech*, London 1989, p. 250.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 245.

³⁰ Linda Simon, *ibidem*, p. 22.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

science to gain credibility, and science used terminology of Spiritism to inspire awe. As John Harvey puts it:

During the period from 1850s to 1930, the reaproachment took the form of a simultaneous spiritualisation of science and „scientification” of Spiritualism. The latter was expressed in a tendency to comprehend (...) inexplicable paranormal occurrences in terms of normal and verifiable phenomena.(...) Exotic sounding terms, like „teleplasma” and „electro-biology” endowed the rhetoric of paranormal study with the aura of modernity and established discipline³².

The strive to make Spiritism more scientific was one of the main objectives of the enthusiasts of the movement. They saw themselves not as the odd experimenters on the phenomena of doubtful credibility, but as those marching hand in hand with scientists from other fields, all together trying to advance the humanity in its strive for perfection. As William Crookes wrote in a journal of his researches on the spiritual mediums:

I wish, at least for the present, to be considered in the position of an electrician at Valentia, examining by means of appropriate testing instruments, certain electrical currents and pulsations passing through the Atlantic cable; independently of their causation, and ignoring whether these phenomena are produced by imperfections of testing instruments (...) or by an intelligent operator at the other end of the line³³.

In his own mind, professor Crookes (a professor of chemistry and physics, member of the Royal Society), inhabited the same plane as Edison and Bell – his subject being “certain electrical currents and pulsations” created by an “intelligent operator” – not a ghost. It seemed that the main objective of those researchers of Spiritism was not to determine what was possible – but to see if in the wonderful century, anything at all can be impossible.

The article by Ochorowicz goes in line with another one by Thomas Edison, published seventeen years later and far away from Kingdom of Poland. When we look at an 2nd October issue of “New York Times” from 1910, we can see a sitting Edison on the first page, a figure of established, well respected inventor, giving the reader a confident smile. “»No immortality of the soul« says Thomas A. Edison” – screams the headline. Later, it clarifies that Edison “in fact doesn’t believe there is a soul” and that human beings are only “an aggregate of cells”. These are the words of “wizard of electricity”³⁴ as the headline calls him. A true

³² John Harvey, *Photography and Spirit*, London 2001, p. 70.

³³ William Crookes, *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism*, London 1874, p. 45.

³⁴ Edward Marshall „No Immortality of the Soul” Says Thomas A. Edison, „The New York Times”, October 2nd, 1910, p. 1.

man of reason, prodigal child of the Age of Progress. However, as the interview progresses, Edison shows a different side of his character – that of a curious explorer, open to all possibilities, no matter how improbable:

Careful, exact scientific discoveries will reveal new things (...) Great forces, material forces, exist under our very noses, of which we know at present absolutely nothing.

The X ray (...) and Herzian waves. (...) How many things can be occurring here of which we are quite ignorant?

The psychic forces? The supernatural? Merely word for perfectly natural which, as yet, we do not understand³⁵.

As this whole article proves, these words coming from a person of such history as Edison or Ochorowicz, should not be the least surprising. In the light of scientific discoveries and inventions of the time, of which Edison was a witness and a creator, it would be most surprising of him not to believe in supernatural, or, as he put it: “merely word for perfectly natural which, as yet, we do not understand”. His words do not imply that there are forces that are greater than man. Everything that we do not understand, we do not understand “as yet”.

Progress as the only hope

The similarity between argumentation of Ochorowicz and Edison is striking. The belief in Age of Progress and the unshakeable optimism regarding human ability to develop and improve in 19th century transgressed between societies so economically and socially different as USA and Kingdom of Poland. However, the Polish perspective on progress had a deeper meaning. Whereas in western Europe and America the unshakeable belief in progress could be founded on the actual list of inventions and scientific discoveries that reminded the contemporary of “our immense superiority over our comparatively ignorant forefathers”, as Wallace kindly puts it, on Polish lands the idea of progress was rather a theory than an actual phenomena taking place.

Bolesław Prus, who, in addition to being a writer, social activist and a columnist, was also an acquaintance of Ochorowicz, said in his speech from 1873 that “with the increase in the number of discoveries and inventions, with the improvement of the conditions of living, people become morally better. Let’s not believe the poets praising the old times. They were bad times”³⁶. The discoveries and inventions are therefore the essential part of a developing society, and 19th

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 15.

³⁶ Bolesław Prus, *O odkryciach i wynalazkach: odczyt popularny wypowiedziany dnia 23 marca 1873 r.*, Warsaw 1873, p. 8.

century is a time when they appear on the greatest scale in history. According to Prus, “we have therefore seen that in the history of humanity came a moment of a great leap forward to the better future, as if a giant current of discoveries and inventions, (...) pushed humanity to perfection”³⁷. However, according to Prus, the focus on inventions was especially important in Poland, as he saw the economic growth connected to scientific advancement as the only way of making Poland an independent country again. Constant progress was the only hope, as “societies and people who do not make inventions and do not know how to use them, lead a miserable existence and eventually perish”³⁸. This Darwinian idea of modernity as a ruthless force eliminating the weak who do not adapt to its principles could have been frightening to a nation living under a foreign rule, with no perspective of independent economic growth and a deep complex of provinciality.

Polish modernity, especially with relation to 19th century, is still a subject of a debate of Polish historians of culture. Ewa Paczoska claims that modernity is a symbolic structure of collective imagination, and that Polish, 19th century modernity is a process that does not have a clear beginning or a clear end. She also mentions the fact that romantic writers – the ones that Prus probably alludes to in his speech – in the first half on 19th century saw Poland as a nostalgic place where no progress could happen. They were “writing for a nation that was for them a value in itself, half-mythological and therefore not clearly defined spatially and temporally”³⁹. At the same time, Paczoska clearly states that positivists, such as Bolesław Prus himself, were seen as an epitome of modernity. Her diagnosis deals with cultural symbols and the problem of perception of modernity. Any factual signs of modernity in 19th century Poland had a problematic status, as they were, at least in the Kingdom of Poland, always connected with the Russian domination. Any improvements in the working of the country, like telegraphic lines, railway system or industrialization of Warsaw and Lodz districts, were connected with the intervention and funding from Russian rulers, and therefore, practices of modernity had a dual status – they were both a sign of progress, and of hostile foreignness.

The adaptation of Spiritism in Poland, apart from the usual transmission of ideas between societies, was one of the few possible ways of connecting to the international current of thought without this moral ambiguity or problems with perception. With the particular reasoning, one could, like Julian Ochorowicz, argue that belief in Spiritism is an expression of modernity, a unique path available only to those with most open minds. The similarity of his reasoning to that of

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 7.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 8.

³⁹ Ewa Paczoska, *Prawdziwy koniec XIX wieku: śladami nowoczesności*, Warsaw 2010, p. 15.

western thinkers and inventors, proves that the idea of Spiritism as an ultimate progress was in fact international. It was especially welcome in Poland, as cultural transmission of ideas was one of the few ways in which Polish intellectuals could participate in the “wonderful century”

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