

The 19th century, the era of the Industrial Revolution, the age of steam and mechanisms, is associated with the development of technology – something most tangible, material, and measurable. Conversely, in the history of ideas, the beginning of the 19th century marks the epoch of romanticism, succeeded by, on the one hand, a turn towards positivism, and simultaneously, the so-called Occult Revival. From the mid-century onwards, there was an intensifying interest in Spiritualism and Spiritism, which evolved into a fever for table-turning, rapidly engulfing Europe and both Americas. Interest in distant cultures, the religious-philosophical systems of the East, as well as Egyptomania, served as a backdrop—both ideologically and aesthetically—not only for newly emerging marginal magical groups but also for initiatory organisations of global reach. Occultism found its place in salons, and discussions about magic ceased to revolve around the context of illusion.

In numerous studies, propositions arise suggesting that this turn towards spirituality acted as a sort of counterbalance to scientific paradigms, rigid scientific principles, and facts—a striving to preserve a spiritual worldview within an increasingly pluralistic ideological reality. Undoubtedly, interests of this nature could have served such a purpose; however, considering them as antithetical to scientific advancements is not entirely accurate. Not only esoteric ideas but also scientific discourses emerged within a particular social context.

The 19th century also witnessed the harnessing of electricity—from the presentation of the first battery in its early years to the establishment of the first public utility power station in 1882. From the 1830s, experiments with various telegraphs, including electromagnetic ones, enabled the transmission of words over distances without paper. In 1887, Heinrich Hertz discovered the existence of radio waves and microwaves. The late 19th century brought another scientific achievement, a ground-breaking discovery—Marie and Pierre Curie's identification of radioactive elements in 1898. Once again, energies emitted by inanimate objects proved to have an extraordinary impact on the environment, including the human body. The 19th century was a period of exploration, harnessing, and practical application of invisible energies.

The occult can be understood in various ways. In the intellectual history and research on esotericism, distinctions are made, including the concept of occult forces—namely, invisible factors acting within objects or organisms—and the immersed in hermetic worldview occult philosophy, describing the operation of such forces in both the macrocosm, i.e., the universe, and the microcosm, represented by the human being. Phenomena like telepathy, telekinesis, or clairvoyance were considered techniques for directing energy in a manner not yet explained by science. According to some occultists, these phenomena were not only subject to investigation but were deemed necessary to explore. Many such topics intersected with, or preceded, scientific research, as seen in phenomena like animal magnetism often referred to as mesmerism, which laid the groundwork for hypnosis. Nonetheless, numerous proposed theories turned out to be dead ends in scientific exploration, and many hypotheses collapsed under experimental scrutiny. It was only with the emergence of the theory of relativity in the 20th century that the concept of the aether fell out of scientific discourse. Aether, which had aligned perfectly with both scientific and occult worldviews a decade earlier, and was believed by physicists not only to facilitate the movement of light through space but also, according to esoteric beliefs, to be a space of one of the subtle bodies, was eradicated from scientific consideration. Some researchers in the 19th century delved into the peculiar, while others ventured into more unconventional realms. There is also no doubt that many scientists had interests in occultism, and numerous occultists, through their ideas, inspired others to conduct serious research. Hence, the boundaries between scientific and occult discourses blurred significantly in some aspects.

Many well-known individuals centred these two aspects in their biographies—having a good education, sometimes pursuing scientific careers, alongside their interests in phenomena commonly regarded as supernatural. However vast this topic may be, it requires examination through a selected example that brings together diverse perspectives, areas of experimental research, branches of knowledge, and various intellectual circles. The proposed study centres on the case of a Pole, Julian Ochorowicz (1850-1917) who at the end of the 19th century was one of the most renowned figures nationally and internationally—a talented scientist and inventor, an experimental psychologist, but also a poet, advocate of positivism, and editor of journals. He earned his doctorate in Leipzig, worked in Lvov, was a recognised and respected figure in Paris, and collaborated closely with Charles Richet. While he was never a spiritualist, he conducted experimental research on phenomena surrounding mediums, which brought him numerous challenges, such as denial of habilitation.

Ochorowicz, who left behind extensive unprocessed archives, serves not only as a focal point encapsulating many intriguing aspects of the boundaries of late 19th-century science but also as a missing link in numerous studies concerning the mediumship at the turn of the 20th century. Ochorowicz's career in Poland has been forgotten for long, and his interest in phenomena labelled “occult” contributed to his disappearance from works on the history of Polish psychology, which, in turn, impacted his scant presence in any foreign language publications. The project aims to comprehensively analyse Ochorowicz's research scope and his involvement in international circles, as well as the reception of the studied topics concerning the intersections of science and occultism, approached from religious studies and academic research of esotericism.