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Illness Narratives in the Esoteric Vision of the World: Agnieszka Pilchowa's Views and Concepts

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The question of the source and meaning of suffering is one of culture's key issues and also arose within esoteric movements, where the response to it constituted an important element of the concept of the world accepted in such communities. In the Polish lands, these alternative currents gained enormous popularity during the interwar period.¹ Wisła, a small town located in Silesia, became a special place on the esoteric map – a cross-over point for the influence of different nationalities and denominations.² Among the many distinctive characters associated with this place, one especially prominent figure is Agnieszka Pilchowa, known as the "Clairvoyant of Wisła" (*Jasnowidząca z Wisły*).³ In her work, the problem of illness was particularly important because it occurred not only in the

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1 Cf. Błażej Włodarz, *Prześcianki tworzyć sekty! Czyli prośba o duchowe pojednanie*, Warszawa: NULL 1933; Kazimierz Banek – Zbigniew Łagosz, "Nurty ezoteryczne na przełomie XIX i XX wieku", *Przegląd Religioznawczy* 242 (2011/4), 2011, 99-112.

2 During the interwar period there were several protestant communities in Wisła, i.e., the largest one being Lutherans and the smaller, but still very active, being evangelical churches such as Baptists, Methodist, and Pentecostals. There was also a fairly large population of Catholics and a small group of Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses (since 1929). The town and the area was inhabited by people claiming Polish, Czech, Silesian, and Jewish identity. The situation was complicated by the fact that at the beginning of the 20th century Silesian highlanders who had emigrated to the USA in the 19th century began to return to Wisła bringing with them new ways of understanding their own identity.

3 Pilchowa herself titled her memoirs as *Pamiętniki jasnowidzącej* (Memoirs of the Clairvoyant). This expression appears also in the publications about Pilchowa. Cf. for example: Józef Chobot, *Nowoczesny ruch spirytualistyczny* [online], Wisła: nakładem Książnicy Wiedzy Duchowej 1937, <<https://polona.pl/item/nowoczesny-ruch-spirytualistyczny-z-szczegolnym-uwzglednieniem-polski,Njc4NTkwNjE/4/#info:metadata>>, [27 April 2018], 160. Stanisław Hadyna (1919-1999), composer and writer, and founder of the Silesian Song and Dance Ensemble, made it popular as he published his book dedicated to Wisła and Pilchowa: Stanisław Hadyna, *Przez okna czasu: Jasnowidząca z Wisły*, Kraków: Instytut Ekologii i Zdrowia 1993. The memories of Stanisław Hadyna stand as interesting testimony. He knew Agnieszka Pilchowa in person.

context of describing particular cases, but in this author's entire and comprehensive vision of the world.

Illness, as it is usually understood within the framework of sociology or anthropology, is "... essentially part of a province of meaning, definitions and understandings. One may exaggerate the basic definitions a little, perhaps, to suggest that in many such usages illness equals 'disease plus meaning' ...".⁴ This meaning derives from a specific cultural, social and historical context⁵ – it depends on it and changes with it. For example, as Mathew George emphasizes, "fever is conceptualised as an illness that acquires meaning depending on the actors and the context involved, and whose meaning will be interpreted based on the discourse in which it is embedded".⁶ George adds that illness is usually defined as "any response in terms of a personal, interpersonal, or cultural reaction to disease or discomfort by an individual".⁷

This meaning, this particular kind of answer to suffering, is constructed and expressed in the process of creating (illness) narratives. Narratives, not only those concerning disease, but also any other, should be understood as a special form of the cognitive representation of reality, as a way of understanding reality and a process in which reality gets its meaning. Narratives also allow us to organize personal experiences by "inserting" them into culturally recognizable, legible patterns, using culturally accepted representations of disease; such narratives make these experiences not only understandable and easier to express, but also provide the individual with models of responding to them. Narratives reveal their significance in situations which are existentially difficult – in particular those that go beyond the possibilities of rational explanation and finding their sense; illness, without a doubt, should be seen as such a situation. The reason for this seems to be obvious – illness is not just a set of symptoms described and defined in medical textbooks, but an event that fundamentally and often irreversibly changes the life of the individual, and usually also the family and even the whole group. Illness, therefore, demands interpretation, an explanation that must go beyond purely etiological issues; it must also be inscribed in the wider context of the individual's life and his/her vision of

4 Mathew George, *Institutionalizing Illness Narratives: Discourses on Fever and Care from Southern India*, Singapore: Springer 2017, 4.

5 Cf. for example George Peter Murdock, *Theories of Illness: A World Survey*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 1980.

6 M. George, *Institutionalizing Illness Narratives...*, 49.

7 *Ibid.*, 5. Illness is defined in contrast to a disease that is treated as a "malfunctioning or maladaptation of biologic and psycho-physiologic processes in the individual", as a "clinical entity, as it is free of social and cultural contexts and is therefore natural", which "was given a physiological, universal, taken-for granted status" (*ibid.*, 6-7).

the world.⁸ Illness “always entails questions about its *causes* (which in our minds cannot be reduced to a germ or genetic factors), and even more so about its *meaning*: ‘why me?’, ‘why him?’, ‘why here?’, ‘why now?’. The medical information we share in, diagnoses offered by the practitioner and accepted by us are usually not enough to answer those questions”.⁹ Moreover, one should not think that illness narratives are a kind of cultural relic from distant times, when science had not yet developed methods advanced enough to discover the “real” causes of disease/illness to answer the question “what is the reason?”. In fact, the question does not touch the problem of knowledge, but meaning. “Stories can provide a means for allowing individual actors to make sense of and ‘come to terms with’ difficult or unfamiliar experiences of illness by fitting personal experience into ‘pre-existent cultural models’.”¹⁰ Illness narratives, in addition to imparting sense to the experience of disease, also have other functions. In the context of this paper it is worth mentioning one equally important function of narratives. These stories allow suffering people to “restructure their sense of self and social location ... [and] articulate and mediate disruption [produced by an illness]”. In other words, a patient while telling his story, his illness narrative which is culturally and socially understandable, finds his place in the community of healthy people – he ceases to perceive himself (also is no longer perceived) as “a stranger”. He is, in a way, accommodated within the frames of healthy, “normal” people. In this way, by means of illness narratives, the sick are able to “find the power to resist and restructure ideas of normalcy that do not fit their experience, as they reconfigure their disrupted identity”.¹¹

The purpose of this paper is to present how Agnieszka Pilchowa understood illness and how she defined its meaning. As we claim, Pilchowa in contact with her patients created stories that would allow them to find the sense of the suffering they experienced. In her narratives, this sense resulted from her vision of the world and was clearly cosmic in nature. Suffering gained an explanation by being inscribed into the cosmogonic myth. Man was to be ill because he created the “Small Cosmos”, as

8 Claudine Herzlich, “Modern Medicine and the Quest for Meaning: Illness as a Social Signifier”, in: Marc Augé – Claudine Herzlich, *The Meaning of Illness: Anthropology, History, and Sociology*, Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers 1995, 151-175: 160.

9 *Ibid.* (italics in original).

10 Cheryl Mattingly, *Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots: The Narrative Structure of Experience*, Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press 2007, 14.

11 Linda M. Hunt, “Strategic Suffering: Illness Narratives as Social Empowerment among Mexican Cancer Patients”, in: Cheryl Mattingly – Linda Garro (eds.), *Narrative and the Cultural Construction of Illness and Healing*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press 2000, 88-107: 89.

Pilchowa called it (described in more detail further in this paper), in which he lived and was subjected to attacks by the powers of darkness. Healing followed the gradual abandonment of the “Small Cosmos” and the evolution of man towards the spiritual world. The alternative medical advice which she gave to her patients harmonized with her vision of illness and the world – they were part of a story in which the ill person could find the meaning of his suffering.

We are aware that the issues identified in the article can be considered on various levels, including the interesting question of the reception of Pilchowa’s teachings and activities among her “patients”, the position of Pilchowa – as a woman – in the esoteric environment as well as the problem of her identity, shaped on the Polish-Czech border. However, due to the fact that, so far, no academic publications have been devoted solely to Agnieszka Pilchowa and her legacy, we decided to concentrate on illness narratives, as they seem to be pivotal to her teachings and activities, and hence may be seen as a starting point for future research. The presentation of Agnieszka Pilchowa constitutes an important thread in studies devoted to the esoteric environment.¹²

A brief biography of Agnieszka Pilchowa

Agnieszka Pilchowa was born to the Wysocki family in the village of Zarubek, near Ostrava, in 1888. In her family home, they spoke Czech, and she also attended a Czech school,¹³ but after getting married to a Pole and moving to Wisła in Poland in 1920 (we mention this in more detail below), she entirely abandoned her Czech heritage and developed a close affinity to Polishness. Pilchowa’s patriotic attitude clearly manifested itself in her actions and was well recognized within the milieu in which she operated. She felt that the meaning of her activity was not limited only to bringing relief to individual people, but had a broader dimension, as it would con-

12 Cf. J. Chobot, *Nowoczesny ruch spirytualistyczny...*, 160-166; Franciszek Drewniak, “Ezoterycy w Wiśle”, in: Teresa Łączyńska (ed.), *Wisła Julianowi Ochorowiczowi w 150 rocznicę urodzin*, Wisła: TMW 2001, 7-27; Zbigniew Pasek, “Spirytyzm i ruch rozwoju duchowego”, in: Renata Czyż – Zbigniew Pasek (eds.), *Kościół i wspólnoty religijne Wisły*, (Monografia Wisły 3), Wisła: Galeria “Na Gojach” 2008, 45-50; Władysława Magiera, *Cieszyński szlak kobiet*, Czeski Cieszyn: Stowarzyszenie Klub Kobiet Kreatywnych w Cieszynie – Kongres Polaków w Republice Czeskiej 2011, 25-38; ead., “Kobiety piszące: Agnieszka Pilchowa i Emilia Kolder”, in: Damian Halmern (ed.), *Ślązaczki: Kobiety niezwykle*, Zabrze: Agencja Reklamowo-Wydawnicza Illustris 2013, 47-62.

13 J. Chobot, *Nowoczesny ruch spirytualistyczny...*, 160.

tribute to improving the fate of Poland.¹⁴ It is worth mentioning that in the introduction (unsigned but most probably written by Jan Hadyna) to *Memoirs of the Clairvoyant*, the activities and works of Pilchowa were presented as complementary to the message of Polish romantic messianism,¹⁵ and at the same time a harbinger of the New Era:

And here came the dreams of our bards. Through the conflagration of the bloody world war, through the struggles of violent elements in nature, through violent fights and shocks in human souls – the dawn of the New Age rises ... All multitudes of good spirits rush to help the mankind bringing the light of truth ... Not many are those who are able to take these thoughts undisturbed, not twisted by the powers of darkness ... to such emissaries of the New Era belongs the author of this book.¹⁶

14 This attitude is clearly visible in the correspondence between Pilchowa and Wincenty Lutosławski. In the letters to him, Pilchowa presented her activities as work for, first of all, Poland, and then for the whole of humanity. The interesting thing is that by giving Lutosławski health and spiritual counselling, she emphasized her main point that Lutosławski – strongly involved in social activities – may “stay longer on earth” and continue his activities for the development of Poland (e.g., Agnieszka Pilchowa to Wincenty Lutosławski, unpublished letter of 31 January 1934). Unpublished letters of Agnieszka Pilchowa to Wincenty Lutosławski quoted in this paper are collected in the Archive of Science of Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) and Polish Academy of Art and Sciences (PAU) in Kraków under the reference number K III-155, j.a. 224. Unfortunately, only a selection of the rich correspondence between these two people has survived. We have only several letters of Agnieszka Pilchowa, dated between 1930-1938.

Wincenty Lutosławski (1863-1954), a Polish philosopher, known mainly due to his research on Plato; a university professor who taught, *inter alia*, in Krakow, Kazan, Vilnius, Lviv, London, Geneva. Lutosławski was also a social thinker and activist, and an organiser of educational circles, societies and fraternities. He also had strong inclinations towards esoteric themes, cf. Agata Świerzowska, “Esoteric Influences in Wincenty Lutosławski’s Programme of National Improvement: Prolegomena”, in: Izabela Trzcńska – Agata Świerzowska – Karolina M. Hess (eds.), “Esoteric Studies: Polish Contributions”, *Estetyka i Krytyka: The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture* 13/1, 2015 (monothematic issue), 147-173.

15 Polish messianism was born during the loss of Poland’s independence as a philosophical and literary trend. The impulse of those who preached Polish messianic ideas was to justify the sufferings of Poland by associating the mission of the Polish nation with the one of Jesus Christ. Poland, having gone through death (the loss of independence), was to be resurrected (to be reborn as a strong and independent state) to lead humanity through a spiritual revolution and establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Messianic threads were very much alive in the interwar Polish esotericism (cf. for example: Andrzej Wawrzynowicz [ed.], *Spór o mesjanizm: Rozwój idei*, Warszawa: Fundacja Augusta hrabiego Cieszkowskiego 2015; Ewa Starzyńska-Kościszko, “Polish Romantic Messianism”, *Organon* 48, 2016, 51-71; Andrzej Walicki, “Polish Romantic Messianism in Comparative Perspective”, *Slavic Studies* 22, 1978, 1-15).

16 “Od Wydawnictwa”, in: Agnieszka Pilchowa, *Pamiętniki jasnowidzącej: Z wędrówki życiowej przez wieki*, Wisła: Wydawnictwo “Hejnał” 1930, V-X: VII.

In further parts of the introduction, Hadyna emphasised that Pilchowa, although painfully feeling the need to stay in the material world, accepted these sufferings, guided by a sense of caring for Poland and all of humanity.¹⁷

As a child, she was supposed to exhibit extraordinary abilities. She would fall into trance states, where she had visions of distant lands and epochs, communicated with spirits, and dealt with the recognition and treatment of diseases.¹⁸ She married Józef Kurletto (dates unknown) quickly and under dramatic circumstances, but it was not a successful relationship. Agnieszka Pilchowa would only ever speak of these traumatic events laconically, also ensuring that there was never any mention of her first husband's name.¹⁹ After separating from him, she tried to contact the spiritist milieu in Czechoslovakia, but was not accepted there and contacts were quickly broken.²⁰ Consequently, in 1920, Pilchowa emigrated with her children to Wisła, where she met her second husband, Jan Pilch (1887-1975), who at the time was a school headmaster in Pszczyna. In this new environment, she quickly gained a reputation as an outstanding bioenergy therapist and clairvoyant.

Eventually, the couple settled in Wisła, which was crucial for Pilchowa's further activities. On the map of Poland, pre-war and contemporary, Wisła remains an exceptional place in the respect that in this small town churches and communities of various denominations were established. In this colourful mosaic of religious communities,²¹ there was also a large esoteric community, first interested in spiritism and then Theosophy, whose members eventually developed their own formula of esoteric search. This trend was initiated by the activity of Julian Ochorowicz (1850-1917), a psychologist, philosopher, lecturer at the University of Lviv, author of numerous publications, and photographer. In 1899, Ochorowicz came to Wisła, where he soon bought land, on which he built several villas to serve as

17 *Ibid.*, VI-VII.

18 Agnieszka Pilchowa, *Pamiętniki jasnowidzącej: Z wędrówki życiowej przez wieki*, Wisła: Wydawnictwo "Hejnał" 1930, 74-78.

19 *Ibid.*, 107-121; Pilchowa's husband's name was conveyed by Pilchowa's granddaughter Iwona Bartuszek (personal communication, 28 February 2018).

20 Pilchowa was connected with the circle of spiritualists operating in the village of Radvanice near Ostrava; however, this relationship was short-lived. The spiritists did not believe in the reality of Pilchowa's visions; they believed that they were only a figment of her imagination, not a real spiritist message. A particular objection was to the idea that Pilchowa, as she claimed, had a protective spirit which was to direct all her actions. Pilchowa broke off contact with the spiritists from Radvanice after one medium claimed that the real purpose of her contacts with the group was to find a well-off husband; cf. A. Pilchowa, *Pamiętniki jasnowidzącej...*, 90-96; J. Chobot, *Nowoczesny ruch spirytualistyczny...*, 160.

21 For basic information see p. 49, footnote 2.

a boarding house. He lived in one of them and conducted experiments on the phenomena of mediumship and hypnosis, which he documented in detail.²² The idea of a novel science, the focus of which also included paranormal phenomena, became popular again in the twenties and thirties. Representatives of this approach were, among others, the brothers Józef Chobot (1875-1942) and Karol Chobot (1886-1937), Andrzej Podzórski (1886-1971), and Jan Hadyna (1899-1971). From the beginning of the 1920s, Wisła also became a center for esoteric publications, among which the *Odrodzenie* (The Revival)²³ and *Hejnał* (The Bugle Call)²⁴ magazines are worth mentioning. Important topics discussed in these magazines included alternative medicine and related fitotherapy as well as astrology and spiritual advice. In addition, many books were also published in Wisła dealing with similar issues. These publications largely shaped the direction of Polish esotericism in the interwar period.²⁵

Numerous publications – articles and brochures as well as some broader texts in which Agnieszka Pilchowa presented her own concept of the creation of the cosmos, apparently revealed to her by higher spirits²⁶ – evoked great interest in the interwar period and brought her fame. At the same time, she was the author of many articles and leaflets devoted to the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, herbalism, disease prevention, alternative medicine, spirituality, primarily printed in *Odrodzenie* and *Hejnał*, the esoteric magazines of Wisła, and the national *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny* (Illustrated Daily Courier), which was popular in interwar Poland. Radio programs presented by Zofia Kossak-Szczucka on Polish

22 J. Chobot, *Nowoczesny ruch spirytualistyczny...*, 136-149.

23 *Odrodzenie: Miesięcznik poświęcony sprawom odrodzenia człowieka i badaniom zjawisk duchowych* (Revival: Monthly Dedicated to the Issues of the Revival of Human Being and Research of Spiritual Phenomena) was published in 1921-1928 by the spiritist Józef Chobot (1875-1942). The journal published articles dealing with all sorts of esoteric issues and propagated a strongly messianic vision of Polish patriotism.

24 *Hejnał: Nad morzem życia ze szczytów prawd Ducha i praw Człowieka: Miesięcznik poświęcony wiedzy duchowej* (The Bugle Call: Over the Sea of Life from the Tops of the Spirit of Truth and Human Rights: Monthly Dedicated to Spiritual Knowledge) was published in 1929-1939 by an esotericist from Wisła, Jan Hadyna (1899-1971). The journal dealt with the subjects of spiritism, astrology, parapsychology, philosophy of the East, theosophy, alternative/occult medicine etc. *Hejnał* frequently promoted an esoteric and messianic version of Polish patriotism. In 1933 Hadyna passed the *Hejnał* editorial to the Pilchs, who led the journal until the outbreak of the Second World War.

25 See Z. Pasek, "Spirytyzm i ruch rozwoju duchowego...", 40-56; F. Drewniak, "Ezoterycy w Wiśle...".

26 Agnieszka Pilchowa rarely signed her works with her full name or surname (a fairly characteristic practice in the interwar period). She usually signed as "A. Wysocka", "Agni P.", or "A.P".

Radio in which Pilchowa was mentioned also contributed to her popularity.²⁷

Agnieszka Pilchowa was said to heal people and foretell the future, but not only for ordinary people. She advised the enlightened, the educated, and even high-ranking politicians. These included the already mentioned Wincenty Lutosławski, and there were rumours of her dealings with Marshal Józef Piłsudski²⁸ and Ignacy Mościcki.²⁹ Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk was said to have offered her a transfer to Hradčany, but she declined because she was convinced that Wisła was her place on Earth.³⁰ We may assume that this is a part of the myth surrounding Agnieszka Pilchowa, created by her contemporaries to show her Polish patriotism and her attachment to Poland. Apparently, during the war, her visions of the future were also of interest to the Nazis. She was accused of helping the partisans and arrested, and ended up in the concentration camp at Ravensbruck. She was shot in early 1945, just before the liberation of the camp. According to popular belief among the inhabitants of Wisła, she had predicted her own death.³¹

It is difficult to categorise Pilchowa's oeuvre, which includes eleven books and dozens of articles dispersed throughout the Polish esoteric press. In her books and papers, claimed to be based on her own experiences, she left many autobiographical traces, but these personal messages remain buried deep within these texts, since Agnieszka Pilchowa would

27 Zofia Kossak-Szczucka (1889-1968), writer, author of many novels. Here we refer to the Kossak-Szczucka's radio program dedicated to, among others, Pilchowa. The program was broadcast on Polish Radio in Katowice on May 9 and May 18, 1932. Kossak-Szczucka presented the unusual skills of Pilchowa: "Her gaze has the properties of Roentgen. With medical accuracy she determines the presence of [her patients] diseases which bring about all sorts of defects and bodily injuries or malfunctions. Some are so small, latent, that their presence will not be suspected even by the body's owner, and only the later the x-ray will show the truth of the clairvoyant's words" (Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, "Spojrzenie w przyszłość: Odczyt wygłoszony w Polskim Radio w Katowicach w dniach 9 i 18 maja 1932 [w skrócie w/d Il. Kuriera Codziennego z dnia 6 czerwca b.r.]" [online], *Hejnat* 4/7, 1932, <<https://www.sbc.org.pl/dlibra/publication/22034/edition/19343/content?&ref=desc>>, [29 April 2018], 170-177: 175).

28 Józef Piłsudski (1867-1935), Head of the State (between 1918 and 1922), from 1920 the Marshal of Poland and the leader (between 1926-1935) of the Second Polish Republic, Minister of Military Affairs. One of the most important people in the creation of the Second Polish Republic in 1918 after Poland was taken over by Russia, Austria and Prussia and lost its independence. The alleged contact between Piłsudski and Pilchowa requires further research. S. Hadyńska, *Przez okna czasu...*, 33.

29 Ignacy Mościcki (1867-1946), the president of Poland between 1926-1939.

30 J. Chobot, *Nowoczesny ruch spirytualistyczny...*, 161.

31 S. Hadyńska, *Przez okna czasu...*, 34ff. Information about Pilchowa's imprisonment and death is confirmed by the unpublished diary of Jan Pilch located in the private archive of Iwona Bartuszek.

refer much more willingly to her meetings with spirits than with actual people. For example, in *Pamiętniki jasnowidzącej*³² she also describes her earlier incarnation. However, in her most famous novel, *Zmora* (The Nightmare),³³ she presents a fabulous version of her own experiences and encounters with dangerous creatures inhabiting the spiritual dimensions of the world. It is worth mentioning that at no point in her life did she learn to speak Polish properly, yet all her texts were published in excellent Polish. The editorial work was conducted meticulously by several individuals, including her husband, Jan Pilch; the publisher and esotericist Jan Hadyna; and the co-founder of the secondary school in Wisła, Kazimiera Chobotowa (1897-1976), who also published in the above-mentioned magazines.³⁴ None of the editors, however, ever attempted to take credit for a text written by Agnieszka Pilchowa, which confirms her exceptional status among the milieu of the Wisła esotericists.

Mental disorders

One of the first texts published in Poland by Agnieszka Pilchowa was a small pamphlet describing several cases of mental illness.³⁵ She believed that the cause of these illnesses was the impact of dangerous spirits, which she described in extremely colourful and illustrative ways as bundles of “fluids”, and projections of thoughts and emotions that were strong enough over time to transform themselves into autonomous entities referred to as “elementals”.³⁶ One particularly dangerous form they could take

32 A. Pilchowa, *Pamiętniki jasnowidzącej...* The phenomenon of precognition was also described by Pilchowa in her book *Jasnowidzenie*, Wisła: Biblioteka Wiedzy Duchowej 1935, passim.

33 Agnieszka Pilchowa, *Zmora: Powieść okultystyczna osnuta na tle prawdziwych przeżyć*, Wisła: Wydawnictwo “Hejnał” 1932.

34 Teodor Cienciąła – Teresa Łączyńska, *Zacni Wisłanie: Słownik biograficzny I*, Wisła: Towarzystwo Miłośników Wisły 2000, 13-15.

35 Agnieszka Pilchowa, *Kilka obrazków chorób umysłowych: Ich istota, przyczyny i sposób leczenia zaczerpnięte drogą jasnowidzenia z Rzeszy Ducha i własnego przeżycia* [online], Wisła: nakładem redakcji “Odrodzenia” 1922, <<https://polona.pl/item/kilka-obrazkow-chorob-umyslowych-ich-istota-przyczyny-i-sposob-leczenia-zaczerpniete.MTg4MzI3Mjg/4/#info:metadata>>, [27 April 2018].

36 The idea of the elemental is derived from the literature of Paracelsus, with its extensive description of the world of magical creatures supposed to have populated the world in the *Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus*, in: *Philosophia magna, de divinis operibus et seretis naturae* (1566). Elementals are the “astral spirits of nature and the elements”, which have a “physical body, invisible in normal circumstances” (A[?] Lipowski, “Słownik wiedzy duchowej”, *Hejnał* 6/3, 1934, 92-93: 93). In the Paracelsian spirit, this concept was widely discussed in another Wisła journal *Lotos* (Lotus), in the “Questions and Answers” section, which indicates that there was significant interest in this category. Cf. Kazimiera Chobotowa,

was that of a “mare” – i.e., a specific vampiric being, feeding on human life energy defined by her as “prana”.³⁷ She thought that these dangerous creatures could only be seen “through the eyes of the spirit”.³⁸ She also often called them “lower spirits” in opposition to the “higher” ones which, in her writings, had the status of angelic forces, supporting the pursuit of good.

According to Agnieszka Pilchowa, some groups of people are particularly susceptible to mental illness.³⁹ Children and adolescents are exceptionally vulnerable, while pregnancy and puerperium are especially dangerous for women, as strong transformations of the personal energy field may result in less protection against dangerous spirits. Many descriptions of mental illnesses in both the above-mentioned book and in other texts by Agnieszka Pilchowa may be associated with the representation of possession, especially since they contain numerous sexual subtexts. It must be stressed, however, that according to Pilchowa, the elementals remain independent of the traditionally understood powers of the infernal, as usually human impulses and actions lie at their source. Nevertheless, lower spiritual beings, as well as human spirits, are often characterised by sensuality and “infiltration” into the human world, awakening the erotic needs of their victims.

Overcoming the influence of these dangerous spiritual beings was thought to take place during the spiritual struggle characterised as the clash between the forces of light and darkness. Agnieszka Pilchowa believed that defeating these spiritual beings was extremely difficult. She suggested that they may be “dissolved” by extinguishing victims impulses and persistent thoughts since only their annihilation could lead to freedom and thereby to healing. These intuitions and experiences of Pilchowa developed further into the conception of a complex myth in which all diseases were considered to be the consequence of the fall.

“Co ezoteryzm określa pojęciem ‘elementale’?”, *Lotos* 11, 1937, 353-355. This concept was also discussed in the interwar *Glossariusz okultyzmu* (Glossary of Occultism) by Alojzy Krzysztof Gleic (1897-1950), which is a sort of compendium of basic esoteric knowledge. “Elementals” are defined here as “astral beings of the lower order, standing on the lower spiritual level of man” (Alojzy Krzysztof Gleic, *Glossariusz okultyzmu*, Kraków: nakładem miesięcznika “Lotos” 1936, 23-24).

37 A. Pilchowa, *Kilka obrazków chorób umysłowych...*, 8.

38 *Ibid.* “Prana”, like other concepts originating from Eastern thought, found a significant place within the Polish literature of the interwar period. In Pilchowa’s texts, this category is synonymous with cosmic energy, specific vibrations, manifested in the life of individual people.

39 This belief appears many times in Pilchowa’s book *Kilka obrazków chorób umysłowych*.

The myth of the creation of the world and the conquest of *karma*

The advocates of esoteric movements that developed in the second half of the 19th century devoted much of their time to presenting a new version of the cosmogonic myth that was supposed to be the result of contemporary scientific knowledge and traditional religious beliefs. Its most famous variant was the concept of evolution, popularised in the writings of Helena P. Blavatsky (1831-1891) and by the anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). The key assumption of these narratives was the idea of evolution of the Absolute which brought the dramatic fate of the world and man. The materialisation of the spiritual reality was a consequence of this process. This esoteric concept of evolution became one of the variants of the progressive myth that was so prevalent in Western civilization. Agnieszka Pilchowa also drew on the esoteric notion of evolution, but in her writings she refers primarily to the Gnostic and Christian idea of the fall and includes it in her cosmological myth.⁴⁰

In describing the process of the world's creation, Pilchowa emphasised the extraordinary demiurgical potential of man – since the myth expressed in her books began long before man adopted a material form. According to this concept, in the beginning, man was a spiritual being endowed with a powerful will capable of creating worlds. The cause of the fall was the will of those luminous creatures that contributed to the creation of the “Small Cosmos” – a degenerate world, incompatible with the original divine plan. Pilchowa described the “Small Cosmos” by referring to the metaphor of illness:

We have created a malevolent cancer, growing by the power of our will in the place where the divine worlds were supposed to flow. We have superficially created for ourselves a new paradise that transforms slowly into our hell. There we gave Darkness, Suffering and Death the right to live. Whereas in the Universe of the Heavens joyful harmony prevails, in our cosmos there is an increasing prevalence of dangerous clashes, cataclysms and conflagrations, in which many souls tremble, fearing their annihilation.⁴¹

40 Pilchowa devoted a whole book to this issue (Agnieszka Pilchowa, *Życie na ziemi i w zaświecie czyli wędrówka dusz* [online], Katowice: nakładem redakcji “Odrodzenia” 1926, <<https://polona.pl/item/zycie-na-ziemi-i-w-zaswiecie-czyli-wedrowka-dusz,Mjk2Mjc4Mzk/4/#info:metadata>>, [27 April 2018]), and repeatedly referred to this issue in numerous articles and statements, mainly published in *Hejnal*. The concept of the creation of the world that emerged here was original in the context of spiritualist beliefs, cf. Alan Kardec, *Le Livre des Esprits*, Paris: E. Dentu 1857 (published in Polish as: Alan Kardec, *Księga duchów*, trans. Józef Chobot, Wisła: nakładem Wydawnictwa “Hejnalu” 1934).

41 Agnieszka Pilchowa, “Jak powstał nasz Wszechświat?”, *Hejnal* 6/8, 1934, 232-235: 233.

The key to this interpretation can also be found in the occurrence of many illnesses that were supposed to be connected with attacks of the lower spirits.⁴² For Agnieszka Pilchowa, the right kind of evolution meant the extinguishing of the material “Small Cosmos”, which would allow the suffering beings imprisoned within it to be able to return to the world of the divine *pleroma*.

The vision of overcoming the fall, in Agnieszka Pilchowa’s narrative, includes two main themes. On the one hand, it is faith in the cosmic Christ; on the other, she uses the concepts of reincarnation and *karma*, which, however, were only distantly related to the original terms functioning in Dharmic religions. The first theme was emphasised in a text whose co-author, Mirjam, was said to be one of the spiritual carers of the Clairvoyant of Wisła.⁴³ Pilchowa describes the creation of the world, inscribing it within the scheme of the esoteric mythology developed at that time. In her narratives, man was created in an ideal spiritual form at the beginning of the cosmos. At that time he was supposed to have extraordinary demiurgic powers. However, the free will of these beings made their actions deviate from the original divine goal. This was, at least according to Pilchowa, the story of the collapse of humankind into matter, culminating in the emergence of a Small Cosmos.⁴⁴ These distant events have an extension in the lives of each human being, in his/her unsuccessful choices and in the illnesses he/she suffers.⁴⁵ Coming to the world of Christ was to reverse this situation. However, according to this narrative, people are not prepared for such a change and it is only the arrival of the New Era that can alter this situation.⁴⁶ Faith in the cosmic Christ in the narratives of Agnieszka

42 A. Pilchowa, *Życie na ziemi i w zaświecie...*, 36.

43 Agnieszka Pilchowa [Agni i Mirjam], “Bóg i szatan”, *Hejnat* 6/10, 1934, 290-295: 291.

44 A. Pilchowa, *Życie na ziemi i w zaświecie...*, 9-19.

45 This specific correlation was described in the extensive, second part of A. Pilchowa, *Życie na ziemi i w zaświecie...*

46 A. Pilchowa, *Pamiętniki jasnowidzącej...*, 52-70. Pilchowa expressed this conviction at the beginning of the 1930s. She based it – as she herself writes in the just quoted *Pamiętniki jasnowidzącej* – on her own visions. However, it may be believed that it reflected, at least to some extent, widespread expectations of a full revival of Polish statehood. In the narratives of Polish esotericists, it is often combined with the vision of the new era (cf. for example Eugeniusz Polończyk, “Synteza przyszłości”, *Hejnat* 1/2, 1929, 42-48; Józef Chobot, “Do wszystkich ludzi dobrej woli!”, *Odrodzenie* 4, 1923, 2-9). Sometimes – and this is the case of Pilchowa’s predictions, which we recall later in this paper – the visions of this advent of a new era included a worldwide cataclysm seen as a complete cleansing of the stage before the coming of this new world. This kind of apocalyptic motif may be interpreted as a reflection of the pessimistic mood resulting from the still unstable political reality. The analysis of Polish esoteric narratives of the interwar period being a reflection of the political and social situation of that time seems to be a promising idea but it goes beyond the scope of this article.

Pilchowa did not stand in contradiction to the beliefs of reincarnation and *karma*.

Pilchowa often stressed that illness is curable if it is not connected with *karma*. In her opinion, recognizing one's individual human *karma* was a very important aspect of treatment. She claimed that *karma* was "our faults, our sins",⁴⁷ whose sources should be sought in all wrongs caused from the beginning of the fall of mankind.⁴⁸ According to Pilchowa, each person carries in his subsequent incarnations such karmic traces which can cause various ailments, hence treatment cannot be limited to medical interventions but must also have a spiritual character. This was based on the assumption that *karma* is the entire series of transgressions – collected in the continuum of reincarnation – that burden people. Not all these burdens can be cleansed in one lifetime; most of them, especially if they are the result of some terrible deeds, are cleansed over the course of many lives. This cleansing is achieved through difficult experiences and, above all, illness.⁴⁹ Pilchowa spoke also about "karmic templates" that manifest themselves as illnesses, often infectious and exceptionally severe.⁵⁰ She described this in a very suggestive way:

A dirty wave of low instincts has swept through all countries under the cover of beautiful slogans: freedom, equality, brotherhood ... Do not seek the culprits among those who wrongly govern the earth's treasures and wrongly distribute them. The greatest culprit of his own misery is each individual, and the more someone is burdened by *karma*, the more he is crushed by poverty around the earth – but in this immensity of suffering he can become a spiritual giant when he humbly and competently shakes off his evil and transform into good.⁵¹

47 A. Pilchowa, *Życie na ziemi i w zaświecie...*, 51.

48 *Ibid.*, 27.

49 This concept of *karma* was characterised by various authors connected with the Wiśła community. It had already been presented in the first issue of *Hejnal*, in which J. Kulpok wrote that if the treatment for some reason fails, it can be assumed that the cause of the disease is karmic, and at that point the only means of recourse would be to find a "miraculous" doctor, able to cure in the spiritual sphere (J[?] Kulpok, "Choroby a karma: Trudności w leczeniu pewnych chorób", *Hejnal* 1/1, 1929, 12-15). Agnieszka Pilchowa added a comprehensive commentary to this article, which is at the same time a response to one of the readers about his 18-year-old brother suffering from rheumatism, arthritis and joint inflammation – a condition more common in older adults. Pilchowa explained that she had a vision of this young boy in one of his earlier lives leading a group of Jews who had just drained the blood from a 9-month-old baby. She summed up this experience as follows: "And here is his suffering, his illness ... These sufferings are necessary and justified. And again, I must again clarify that I can only bring relief to the sufferer and not a cure" (*ibid.*, Pilchowa's commentary does not have a separate title in the publication).

50 Agnieszka Pilchowa, "Szczepionki lecznicze", *Hejnal* 8/1, 1936, 35-37.

51 Agnieszka Pilchowa, "Przyczynek do 'spojrzenia w przyszłość'", *Hejnal* 6/3, 1934, 89-91: 90.

Pilchowa was convinced that in the spiritual development and reincarnation of life it is possible not only to cleanse but also to be completely free from *karma*. In her opinion, such incarnations of specific people, who are already completely independent of karmic law, are also possible.⁵²

Significantly, Pilchowa also thought that the behaviour of some dangerous spirits may be associated with karmic deposits, and their attacks are not only the expression of aggression, but a kind of purifying and necessary suffering. This is what she wrote about one of them: “Maybe he is suffering from an old burgeoning guilt, otherwise the higher powers would not have let that evil demon prowl among people in such a way.”⁵³ This situation was to indicate that disease is in fact the repayment of an old debt rather than an injustice of fate. Agnieszka Pilchowa repeatedly commented on *karma* in this spirit and, it seems, significantly enriched thinking about this issue in the Polish esoteric milieu, in which theosophical interpretations of *karma* prevailed.⁵⁴ She also claimed that the unknown causes of illnesses that are difficult to cure usually turn out to be associated with their deeply concealed karmic origins.⁵⁵

Alternative medical advice

According to Pilchowa, man, especially in his bodily form, is not completely defenceless against the consequences of the cosmic fall, hence has preventive and curative measures at his disposal. As we have already mentioned, it was important for Pilchowa to embed various ideas in practice. Such practice was for her to use everything that is best in the space of this world. One aspect of this defence is a “positive” course of action aimed at caring for one’s health and keeping in good physical condition. The *Hejnał* publication in particular contains a great deal of good advice

52 For Agnieszka Pilchowa, one such case proved to be Marshal Piłsudski, who in a previous incarnation was supposed to have been Juliusz Słowacki, a Polish romantic poet, considered to be one of the Three Prophets. Pilchowa predicted that once again he would appear at the end of the 20th century as a man free from any karmic burdens. See Agnieszka Pilchowa, “Król – Duch”, *Hejnał* 7/7, 1935, 195-204.

53 A. Pilchowa, *Kilka obrazków chorób umysłowych...*, 23.

54 Pilchowa devoted the most space to this issue in connection with the concept of reincarnation also interpreted in this context, cf. A. Pilchowa, *Życie na ziemi i w zaświacie...* In this book, Pilchowa clarified how karmic law had started working.

55 Pilchowa’s vision of the future was exceptionally pessimistic, although she saw a certain hope in the predicted unification of the Slavs as well as in the progressive spiritual struggle, cf. Agnieszka Pilchowa, *Spojrzenie w przyszłość* [online], Włsla: Wydawnictwo “Hejnał” 1933, <<https://polona.pl/item/spojrzenie-w-przyszlosc,Mjk2Mjc4MzA/6/#info:metadata>>, [27 April 2018]. The importance of burdensome *karma* in the formulation of diseases was also explained in the comments to this book, e.g., A. Pilchowa, “Przyczynek do ‘spojrzenia w przyszłość...’”, 91.

from Agnieszka Pilchowa, as well as recipes for various syrups or ointments which can be made at home. She wrote, for example, about honey as a nutritional and therapeutic agent,⁵⁶ the application of rose hip,⁵⁷ and olive oil from Nice and its remarkable health properties.⁵⁸ It seems that she was one of the first people in Poland to promote the benefits of the Mediterranean diet. At the same time, she actively demonstrated the benefits of homegrown plants (e.g., apples).⁵⁹ She also mentioned the benefits and, at the same time, the side-effects of sunbathing.⁶⁰ These tips do not differ substantially from other contemporary literature giving advice in the field of alternative medicine, which had already become very popular at that time. The ultimate goal, however, seems more profound than merely to promote the idea of a healthy lifestyle.

An illustration of Agnieszka Pilchowa's outlook on health issues, which went beyond the maintenance of bodily health *per se*, may be her dealings with Wincenty Lutosławski, traces of which can be found in the correspondence between them. This example clearly shows how, in practice, Pilchowa regarded a person who came to her with physical and spiritual problems, and how she treated the relationship between herself and her "patient". From the surviving letters we can assume that the Polish philosopher expected to receive from Pilchowa opinions and advice on life issues – in particular, the problems that he was struggling with. He also expected that, as a clairvoyant, she would unveil the mystery of the future and point him towards the proper course of action. However, what is clear from Pilchowa's letters is that she was not able to meet Lutosławski's expectations. What stood in the way was the inappropriate relationship between them, as well as Lutosławski's attitude of entitlement. After one of her meetings with the philosopher, Pilchowa wrote in a letter to him: "... because I had such a clear answer in spirit to your inquiries, yet it became so strangely entangled in my mouth more so that with anyone else I have ever spoken to ... [Y]ou demanded from me the impossible."⁶¹

In another letter, responding to Lutosławski's various allegations, and commenting on the fact that he had referred to her as a "silly fortune

56 Agnieszka Pilchowa, "Miód jako środek odżywczy i leczniczy", *Hejnat* 6/4, 1934, 122-123.

57 Agnieszka Pilchowa, "Głóg różany", *Hejnat* 6/10, 1934, 316-318.

58 Agnieszka Pilchowa, "Oliwa nicejska", *Hejnat* 6/11, 1934, 343-345.

59 Agnieszka Pilchowa, "Jabłka", *Hejnat* 6/9, 1934, 278-281.

60 Agnieszka Pilchowa, "Silna opalenizna skóry", *Hejnat* 6/7, 1934, 224.

61 Agnieszka Pilchowa to Wincenty Lutosławski, unpublished letter of 28 July 1930.

teller”,⁶² she wrote: “If Father⁶³ addresses me with such coldness, how can I clearly see everything in his life as he asks of me?”⁶⁴ If the patient manifested a negative emotional attitude, therapeutic treatment was not possible. “May Father’s anger wane, for otherwise how could I magnetise and help, as I would gladly do.”⁶⁵ These small examples clearly show that the process of repair or insight always worked in relation to the person in need. In fact, the good quality of this relationship, as well as the right attitude of the “patient” and a willingness to cooperate – a certain humility in the approach to both the clairvoyant and the messages communicated by her – were the basic conditions defining the field of cooperation between herself and the patient. There is a good illustration of this in the next letter from Pilchowa to Lutosławski, in which the clairvoyant states that “having been asked to cooperate with you, Komenjusz⁶⁶ said that he would agree to this only if you were to shake off some traces of impropriety”.⁶⁷ Once again, it is true that Agnieszka Pilchowa was the “causal factor” behind the act of healing but its effect depended on the attitude of the patient and without his efforts there would be no positive outcome. “Thank you for the nice reception,” wrote Agnieszka Pilchowa to Lutosławski after another meeting, apparently positive. “I really understood and sensed a spiritual communication.”⁶⁸

The relationship with the patient created a framework that defined the extent of Pilchowa’s capabilities. Good spirits also circulated within this framework, according to the philosophy of clairvoyant treatment, who provided the necessary knowledge with which to give help. Pilchowa wrote in a letter to Lutosławski:

62 Pilchowa mentions it in her correspondence to Lutosławski, whose letter has not been preserved. Agnieszka Pilchowa to Wincenty Lutosławski, unpublished letter of 4 April 1934.

63 Many of Lutosławski’s correspondents called him “Father”, as a way of showing respect. He himself encouraged people to write to him using this introduction as he recognised paternal love as the supreme form of love and wanted it to be expressed by every means (cf. Wincenty Lutosławski, *Jeden łatwy żywot*, Warszawa: F. Hoesick 1933, 25).

64 Agnieszka Pilchowa to Wincenty Lutosławski, unpublished letter of 4 April 1934.

65 Agnieszka Pilchowa to Wincenty Lutosławski, unpublished letter of 4 March 1938.

66 Komenjusz was one of the spirits who advised Pilchowa. The name clearly indicates Jan Amos Komenský (1592-1670), Czech philosopher and pedagogue, considered to be one of the greatest pedagogical thinkers in the history of Europe. It is no accident that he appeared in the visions of Pilchowa. Komenský put great emphasis on the need to educate every human being, to properly shape his personality, in terms of morality too. These issues were also strongly emphasised by Pilchowa. One can therefore treat Komenjusz as the embodiment of educational work.

67 Agnieszka Pilchowa to Wincenty Lutosławski, unpublished letter of 14 August 1930.

68 Agnieszka Pilchowa to Wincenty Lutosławski, unpublished letter of 22 February 1938.

Today Komenjusz told me, and a few other good spirits in the world, that I should not hesitate to establish closer contact with you, because they would like you to stay longer on earth, so I would hurry to help, especially since the time is drawing near for you to depart from your body, at which point it would be difficult for you to take control of this body. In the middle of March, the karmic template might already confine you to your bed. Therefore, in the light of such information, I take it upon myself to help you ...⁶⁹

Her therapeutic procedures included naturopathy, elements of occult medicine, and magic. All had equal weight in the Pilchowa's system and all influenced the physical and astral body. In the case of Lutosławski, the spirits recommended that "after the previous magnetising of the body" he should employ "more with naturalistic means to strengthen the physical cells and to energise the astral body's tenderness".⁷⁰

It would seem that Agnieszka Pilchowa's communiques contain many elements of magic – for example, when she describes the therapeutic effect of rainwater,⁷¹ emphasising that spring rains in particular, whose clouds act as condensers, bring cosmic energy to earth. Similar in tone are her encouragements to warm the feet with dew⁷² and her suggestions on how to find other sources of cosmic radiation. However, for Pilchowa, such conduct was equivalent to a return to nature, considered to be the space in which divine power is manifested. As a Christian, she judged magic extremely negatively. She wrote, for example: "All magic consists of the dark forces of nature and of evil spirits, and again medicine produced from nature can overwhelm the human body with the poisonous influence of black magic."⁷³ This assertion is clear testimony that the perspective of esoteric and perennialist Christianity was, for Agnieszka Pilchowa, decisive. This may seem contradictory with respect to what has just been said about the various curative strategies (as well as recommendations to use vaccines – mentioned below) proposed by Pilchowa. However, her worldview, as well as that of many other representatives of esoteric trends, is

69 Agnieszka Pilchowa to Wincenty Lutosławski, unpublished letter of 31 January 1934.

70 *Ibid.*

71 Agnieszka Pilchowa, "Lecznice działanie wody deszczowej", *Hejnał* 8/5, 1936, 214-216. Again, it is worth recalling the correspondence with Lutosławski as a testimony to the practical application of the described procedures. In one of the letters, after a meeting with the philosopher's wife, Agnieszka Pilchowa expressed concern about her condition and presented a medical procedure. She advised, among other things, "... a lot of sun and warming of the body. It would be good for both of you to make a dew: a canvas unstarched, soaked in dew, wrap yourself in it and go to bed for a few minutes" (Agnieszka Pilchowa to Wincenty Lutosławski, unpublished letter of 22 February 1938).

72 A. Pilchowa, "Lecznice działanie wody deszczowej...", 215.

73 A. Pilchowa, *Kilka obrazków chorób umysłowych...*, 22.

paradoxical by its nature.⁷⁴ Pilchowa, in her own vision of the world, seeks to rationalise and reconcile beliefs that are contradictory and present them as coherent.

The process of world healing

Agnieszka Pilchowa predicted that difficult times would come, as a result of which the *karma* of entire nations would be cleansed. She predicted that before this happened, there would be a great war between good and evil, embracing all the dimensions of being. According to one of her predictions, there would be outbreaks of dangerous infectious diseases, spreading with extreme intensity.⁷⁵ In this situation, traditional preventive measures might prove insufficient, and Pilchowa recommended taking extraordinary action, which included the use of vaccines, because she confessed that in difficult circumstances only this could save lives on a large scale.⁷⁶ She considered that the production of vaccines was linked to depriving animals of their vital force, so she feared that the cost of this suffering might be too great. However, it must be remembered that, according to Pilchowa, man in his perfect primordial form created animals, as she wrote in the spirit of her mythological cosmology:

... [A]s I have pointed out many times, God created animals – we brought them to life by improper creativity in thick matter. We imprisoned within them a grain of our spiritual light that animates the animals, gives them intelligence, and almost all our qualities. Once the animals have ceased to exist on the physical plane, their astral forms – their “souls” – begin to dissolve, turning into the original forms of energy from which they were once brought to life. The grain of our spirit enslaved in them will flow back to us, bolstering our spiritual power. The preparation of vaccines accelerates this process to a certain extent, since the animals used for this purpose, after leaving their physical bodies, cannot be reincarnated.⁷⁷

According to Pilchowa, during the preparation of vaccines, animals’ life forces are weakened through the injection of microorganisms, which in turn mobilise “the best magnetic forces, which simply burst through the astral flame”. She also advises that the people involved in these actions can eliminate the suffering of animals “through a rational suggestion that acts like a drug”.⁷⁸ According to Pilchowa, the soul of an animal, after its strength is used in vaccines, “dissolves, no longer capable of taking animal

74 Cf. Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, New York: SUNY Press 1994, 10ff.

75 S. Hadyna, *Przez okna czasu...*, 101-107.

76 A. Pilchowa, “Szczepionki lecznicze...”.

77 *Ibid.*, 35.

78 *Ibid.*, 36.

forms even in the astral body. It turns into a roaring and oscillating ethereal wave, which in turn becomes transformed into living ethereal energy that flows into our astral shell”.⁷⁹

Pilchowa’s concept of vaccines fits her vision of a return to the unity of the whole universe, made possible through the birth of Christ. A particularly interesting thread within this myth is the great significance of the Star of Bethlehem, whose action Pilchowa presented with a truly Gnostic verve.⁸⁰ The manifestation of this transcendental light opened the way for the activation of the supreme forces dormant in every human being. Thanks to this,

... the spirit grows. It grows in his suffering, grows in torment ... There will be no shadows left behind us, the abyss of sadness and the curse of blood will disappear. Everything can be transformed, for Christ has taught us miracles, and everyone has the power of miracles in him.⁸¹

According to Pilchowa, however, liberation would only happen with the upcoming New Era, which she anticipated with hope.

This cosmic perspective, according to Pilchowa’s concept, also translated into everyday life, because in individual cases of illness as well the ultimate healer is Christ, and moreover, the healing process should always begin in the soul. Agnieszka Pilchowa repeatedly underlined the role of prayer in her activities, as well as the Christian nature of the treatment. This “evangelical” aspect of healing began to dominate her writings printed in *Hejnat* after 1935. It seems that with time she developed a stronger affinity to Christian faith. From that time, her texts increasingly included medical or herbal advice, with more numerous descriptions of prayer and specific reports of meetings with spiritual carers, and above all with Christ.⁸²

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸⁰ A. Pilchowa, “Bóg i szatan...”, 292. Pilchowa repeatedly returned to the symbolism of this star, “in which the body of Jesus was formed from the most noble of magnetic vibrations, from the purest breaths of earthly life, from the sounds of flowers and from the sounds of the skies” (ead., “Gdy się Chrystus rodził”, *Hejnat* 6/1, 1934, 5-13: 8).

⁸¹ A. Pilchowa, “Bóg i szatan...”, 294.

⁸² Such an approach had been common in the esoteric community of the Protestant Wisła environment, cf. Karol Chobot, *Chrystus lekarzem, Brześć nad Bugiem*: Wydawnictwo Świat Ducha 1925.

Conclusion

The interest in alternative medicine was very lively in pre-war Poland. These ideas were especially popular in the esoteric milieu.⁸³ However, the outgoing message usually had a very narrow and essentially pragmatic character – it concentrated on recommendations, councils and propositions of a preventive nature or dealt with specific cases of illness. Concepts like the one created by Pilchowa – a full and consistent, yet completely mythologized vision of the world, which would answer questions about the source of evil, suffering, and disease – were rare. Pilchowa's narratives are unique in this respect. They are the illness narratives *par excellence*. By inserting disease (but also the healing process) into a broad cosmological context, Pilchowa gave individual suffering a universal dimension. She showed it as part of the cosmic process of healing the world. The ailment experienced by the individual gained importance and meaning through the fact that it became a part of the cosmic process. The fact that, in addition to specific therapeutic recommendations, Pilchowa offered an explanation of the causes and nature of suffering – that is, she answered the question “why?” / “why me?” – contributed to her popularity and the popularity of her ideas. The narratives created by Pilchowa, in fact, justified illness, suffering, and failure; in a way, they justified their existence, which meant that they could be perceived as a necessary element of the universal process (not an accidental and meaningless event). In Pilchowa's narratives, illness was a consequence of a cosmic fall. As such, it was a kind of “reincarnation trait” in the life of every human being, connecting him with the original sin. Therefore, all treatments, especially those concerning illnesses with a vague diagnosis, required spiritual insight. Only internal healing could guarantee release from karmic law. Pilchowa emphasized that faith in Christ is an important aspect of this process. At the same time, in her esoteric vision of the world (hence, of illness as well), this approach did not contradict mythological explanations. It also accommodated rational elements (such as naturopathy and even vaccination, as mentioned above), but the Clairvoyant of Wisła interpreted them in accordance with her own worldview, giving them esoteric meaning. In Pilchowa's conceptions one can also see elements from various esoteric currents popular in the interwar period in Poland – in particular, spiritualism, with which she remained connected for some time, as well as Theosophy and

83 Cf. for example: Egeniusz Polończyk, “Leczenie czy potęgowanie choroby?”, *Hejnat* 2/2, 1930, 49-52; id., *Lekarze i leczenie*, Lwów: dr E. Polończyk 1918; id., *Praktyczne wskazówki leczniczo-dyetyetyczne*, Lwów: nakładem autora 1922; Stanisław Breyer, *Moja metoda lecznicza*, Kraków: nakładem autora 1937; id., *Nowy lekarz domowy*, Kraków: “Higiena Życia” 1934.

Anthroposophy, which enjoyed great popularity in Poland during this time; one may also notice inspirations flowing in from the spirituality of the East, as well as from the various superstitions and prejudices of ordinary people (such as those involving nightmares, ghosts, vampires, the loss or theft of the soul, visiting the ghosts of the dead, etc.). However, all of them were interpreted in a way consistent with Pilchowa's view of the world.

It can also be assumed that the fact that Pilchowa's visions were dynamic, reflecting to a certain extent the political and social situation of Poland at that time, also enhanced their popularity. These visions functioned, it seems, in the same way as Pilchowa's illness narratives – they allowed social events to be given meaning, justifying them and showing them as an indispensable element in the cosmic process of the healing the world. However, exploring this extremely interesting issue would require separate analysis.

After the Second World War, which dispersed the Polish esoteric environment, Pilchowa and her ideas were forgotten. This was not only the Clairvoyant of Wisła case – most of the esotericists who developed their ideas in Poland's interwar period shared this fate. Poland's entry into the Eastern Bloc and the dominion of communist ideology effectively prevented the development of such ideas (or the continuation of those created before the outbreak of war), the more so that a significant proportion of them – as in the case of Pilchowa – had a clear patriotic slant. They were therefore perceived not only as a manifestation of obscurantism, but also anti-state thinking.



SUMMARY

**Illness Narratives in the Esoteric Vision of the World:
Agnieszka Pilchowa's Views and Concepts**

The article is an attempt to reconstruct and present the illness narratives formulated by Agnieszka Pilchowa (1888-1945), a clairvoyant and healer from Wiśła (Silesia). Although alternative medicine was widespread in Poland in the interwar period, especially in the esoteric milieu, concepts like the one created by Pilchowa did not appear often. Pilchowa presented a consistent, yet at the same time fully mythologized vision of the world, which would answer questions about the source of evil, suffering, and illness. The article describes the most important traits of Pilchowa's vision, focusing on those elements that create the picture of illness and show the process of its healing. The article is a pioneering one – Agnieszka Pilchowa and her ideas have not been the subjects of any research so far.

Keywords: illness narrative; esotericism; *karma*; Agnieszka Pilchowa; Wiśła; Poland.

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