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Methodology of History of Polish Madness

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Abstract

In my book *Historia polskiego szaleństwa. T. 1. Słońce wśród czarnego nieba: Studium melancholii* [*History of Polish Madness. V. 1. The Study of Melancholy: The Sun with the Black Sky*], I am trying to present an original view on the history of melancholy in polish psychiatric thought in the 19th century. My research is based on broad hitherto unknown sources. Among the materials on which my book is based there are manuscripts, case reports and printed materials from the archives of the main mental hospitals in Eastern Europe (Kulparkow, Kobierzyn) and national libraries. An examination of so extensive source materials requires a thorough knowledge of different methodologies. I try to combine the tools provided by the intellectual history and history of ideas with that of conceptual history.

Keywords: history of psychiatry; conceptual history; history of ideas; intellectual history; melancholy; polish psychiatry

> Psychopathology and psychiatry, probably more than other fields of medicine, require the kind of theory that would cover not only the current state of matters, but also their temporal − historical − dimension.
>
> (Jerzy Strojnowski, *Psychophysiology of Jędrzej Śniadecki*)

It would be difficult to achieve the research objectives of “History of polish madness” without precisely delimiting the issues that will be taken into account when analysing the extensive material of broadly understood Polish psychiatric thought from the 19th century. Therefore, my analysis will focus on selected problems related to the appearance of the notion of mental illness in Polish lands. The main subject for reflection shall consist in the ideas included in writings on melancholy, together with psychological and medical considerations about the origins of mental illnesses, the possibility to treat them and the art of "literary madmen". However, independently of the selected specific topics, this field requires a special kind of

methodology that would permit to analyse texts of diverse form and value: from literary fiction to strictly scientific ones. It seems that the most appropriate tools to tackle these source texts are the ones that have been used in other works from the area of psychological thought or history of psychiatry (Foucault, 1969/2002; Porter, 2003), and namely, the field of history of ideas. Sometimes, it is also referred to as "intellectual history", although − as we will indicate further on − those two fields cannot be treated as synonyms without a few reservations.

Before I start to explain the methods of research on the history of psychopathology, let me notice that there are two basic approaches: the classical and non-classical approach to the history of mental illnesses. I need to highlight a terminological issue straight away. In this context, we could write about the history of science concerning mental illnesses or, in other words, the history of psychiatry or psychopathology. Nonetheless, speaking of times when these disciplines did not have a stable status yet and were just emerging from other areas of knowledge and non-discursive ways of understanding the phenomenon of mental disorders, we should rather speak of the history of mental illnesses. However, this approach might also seem dubious, because − alongside medical terms like mental condition or disorder − people used such words as: madness, lunacy or delusion[1] to refer to what current psychopathology calls a mental disorder.

The transformation of terminology from "madness" to "mental disorders" has already been considered in many analyses concerning the medicalisation of this phenomenon (see: Foucault, 1987; 2000). Nevertheless, in Polish lands, where psychiatry did not exist yet or was just a fledgling discipline, the use of these terms interchageably seems legitimate. Writing about the "history of madness" is still difficult not only from the point of view of semantics (the Polish word for "madness" − "szaleństwo" − has at least 4 different meanings according to the Polish Language Dictionary by PWN (Drabik and Sobol, 2013) and does not overlap with "mental illness" completely[2]), but also from the point of view of epistemology, as some historians of psychopathological thought claim that by using the category of "madness" we somehow form part of the critical approach to psychiatry. Therefore, we should make sure that the use of this term does not oblige us to assume a given method of historical analysis. I'm referring to the argumentation mentioned by Edward Shorter, author of one of the few works on the history of psychiatry that have been translated into Polish: "Indeed, the whole notion of mental illness appeared suspect to the activists of the 1960s, who preferred to use − always in mocking quotation marks − such bygone terms as madness or lunacy, the very ludicrousness of these phrases discrediting the proposition that mental disorder exists as a natural phenomenon. These detractors, I regret to say, now dominate the academic history of psychiatry, and the chapters that follow are intended to confront head-on their revisionism, which has become in its turn the new orthodoxy."

Revisionists are researchers who deal with such non-classical history. They base their theories on social constructionism, which − in reference to psychiatric historiography − assumes that

[1] According to Pierre Janet, these three words appear in police manuals in reference to people who potentially can be dangerous for others (Sieradzan, 2007).

[2] Other meanings of this term are: (1) behaviour that is not in line with the accepted norms and habits; (2) the mental state of a person who does not control themselves; (3) party, fun (Drabik and Sobol, 2013).

madness is not a legitimate mental illness but a social construct, a "discursive formation" (Goldberg, 1999, p. 7). The non-classical approach to the history of thinking about mental disorders is critical towards the vision of progress of knowledge in this field. It opposes the classical history (also referred to as academic) that strongly underlines the progressive character of psychiatry, assuming that science consists in an accumulation of knowledge based on gathering facts, which might also be called hyperfactualism (Szacki, 1991). This approach to the history of thinking about mental illness, as something governed by causality, similar to laws, is represented precisely by Edward Shorter. His potential opponent − a non-classical historian, seems to have more faces than Shorter expected. In reference to the history of madness, we do not have to choose between just two approaches: progressive or critical vision of psychiatric discourse. Along concepts challenged by Shorter − that can be considered anti-psychiatric, as they negate the current psychiatric knowledge and at the same time present the possibility of alternative solutions − there is also a third solution: problematisations (Dean, 1994).

The problem-oriented approach to the history of mental illness, although it is classified as non-classical, views madness differently than critical theories. This trend underlines, most of all, that categories related to psychiatry are a slippery ground that offers more questions than answers, and the only thing we can achieve is a disruption of the narrative concerning the progress of knowledge in this field (Dean, 1994). Among main representatives of this approach we can mention Michael Foucault (1969/2002) who is − often, but mistakenly − identified with the anti-psychiatry movement (Foucault, 2006; Bracken and Thomas, 2010).

Problematisations and contextualisations will be the driving forces of the hereby reflections to a larger extent than progressive or critical approach to history. Nonetheless, it would be difficult to admit that the sole fact of using terms other than "mental illness" led to the application of a non-classical historiographic approach. In fact, these assumptions are made considering that we are analysing times when psychiatry did not exist yet as a field of science, and therefore, if we omitted such category as "madness" and focused only on psychiatric terminology, ignoring the rich vocabulary used at that time in works on illnesses of the soul, it would lead to an excessive reductionism.

It is worth adding that a non-classical approach to history is, most of all, the history of losers, as opposed to the academic history of victors. A model of history of Polish psychiatry designed to reclaim what has been lost would allow us to focus on works that have been forgotten; and although there are no obvious "winners" in the history of Polish psychopathology, we do have some pioneers of whom we still remember, mostly thanks to the efforts of historians of psychological thought (for instance, the ideas of Julian Ochorowicz discussed by Stachowski (1996) in the introduction to the re-edition to his classical texts). The “History of polish madness” is based almost exclusively on texts that are viewed as secondary. It seems that we can successfully analyse such texts − not considered masterpieces − with the use of methodology created by Arthur O. Lovejoy (1936/1999), author of history of ideas, who believed that the texts of "losers" can prove very informative, as they show the most popular ideas of a given era much more accurately than masterpieces. The method proposed by him suggests that the concepts of those forgotten authors are most valuable, because they are more accurate in reflecting the ideas and norms that shaped average minds, while the minds of geniuses are often

several steps ahead of their times. Therefore, this is the first argument for adopting the methodology of the history of ideas, specified in more detail later on.

Contemporary historiography offers a wide range of tools that can be applied within the field of history of psychological and psychiatric thought. Some of those methods have already been used by other authors, but more often than not the works were written without commenting on the research methodology applied. In order to limit the methodological search to non-classical histories only, according to the assumptions specified above, we should first present three ways of approaching the historiography of psychopathology: conceptual history, history of ideas, and its sister − intellectual history. At the same time, we should explain why conceptual history will be skipped here (or at least marginalised) in favour of the two remaining approaches.

It would be hard to argue with the statement made by Władysław Tatarkiewicz (2004, p. 5), who began his book *A History of Six Ideas* by claiming that the history of science "may be treated in a two-fold manner: as the history of the men who created the field of study, or as the history of the questions that have been raised and resolved in the course of its pursuit." Having explained previously that the hereby analysis will not focus on people who particularly enriched the history of psychopathology in Poland, but rather on issues related to mental disorders, we don't have to necessarily follow the view of Tatarkiewicz (advocate of the conceptual history) that the best approach to this task would be to study the changes of what "mental illness" or "melancholy" meant throughout history. This approach, also referred to as conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), popularised in German science mostly by Reinhart Koselleck (2001), focuses on studying the conceptual history. The aim of this method is to explain the semantic variability of the analysed linguistic categories along their historical development. For example, in reference to the term "mental illness" we would study how its meaning changed from metaphorical senses to the mental reality of people affected by these conditions. The eminent researcher of the conceptual history in psychiatric notions, Berrios (1988; 2002; 2010), opts for conceptual history in his explorations of the history of psychopathology. He values it mostly due to its concreteness, as opposed to the abstract character of the history of ideas (Koselleck, 2001).

In our analysis of the terms "mental illness" and "melancholy", we shall focus on the actual use of these terms in the language, paying attention to how their meaning shifted throughout a specified time frame (from late 18th century to the year 1900), within Polish culture. Considering the high precision of conceptual history, I also use this approach in the terminological part of my "Study of Melancholy". Nonetheless, it has to be clearly stressed from the start that this method is by no means exhaustive, and in certain cases not fully adequate for the goals set for our analysis, which can be achieved only with the help of the opposite approach − the history of ideas.

The history of ideas, as a scientific discipline, was created by Arthur O. Lovejoy, the founder of the History of Ideas Club at the Johns Hopkins University, in 1923 (Czernik, 2014). He explained the basic principles of his method in his main work entitled *The Great Chain of Being*, where idea is understood as someting that exists at the roots of specific concepts. Lovejoy (1936/1999) stresses that the work of a historian of ideas consists precisely in: first,

delimiting the idea related to the given notion, as something that requires to be studied separately; and only later one can track the directions of its development wherever it is used. The main goal is to "present the process of thinking as deeply as possible" (Lovejoy, 1936/1999, p. 342). The only assumption required for this approach is that thoughts shift throughout history. However, the status of these basic ideas that can be subject to historical analysis remains unclear. Lovejoy says that these should be elementary "unit ideas", but he does not seem consistent himself when it comes to studying those unit ideas before analysing their "complexes" (Cabaj, 1989). In another place he wrote that history of ideas consists, first of all, in: "a study of sacred words and phrases of a period or movement, with a view to a clearing up of their ambiguities, a listing of their various shades of meaning, and an examination of the way in which confused associations of ideas arising from these ambiguities have influenced the development of doctrines, or accelerated the insensible transformation of one fashion of thought into another, perhaps its very opposite." (Lovejoy, 1936/1999, p. 19). What is more, in many places of Lovejoy's *opus magnum*, we can find slightly different definitions of what those unit ideas might be. Sometimes, they are referred to as original assumptions, fertile methaphors, "thoughts concerning particular aspects of common experience, implicit or explicit presuppositions, formulas and catchwords, specific philosophic theorems, or the larger hypotheses, generalizations or methodological assumptions of various sciences." (Lovejoy, 1936/1999, p. 320).

The second methodological proposition of Lovejoy concerns the analysis of the direction in which those separate ideas flow. The point is to specify their impact and changes in a precise manner. However, in many cases, it proves impossible to determine such specific track of historical transformations (Cabaj, 1898). The method of determining the direction of development of ideas was strongly criticised by Michel Foucault, who suggested that Lovejoy's proposition should be corrected: "In the sense that this slender wedge I intend to slip into the history of ideas consists not in dealing with meanings possibly lying behind this or that discourse, but with discourse as regular series and distinct events, I fear I recognize in this wedge a tiny (perhaps odious) device permitting the introduction into the very roots of thought, of notions of chance, discontinuity and materiality. (...) But they are three notions which ought to permit us to link the history of systems of thought to the practical work of historians; three directions to be followed in the work of theoretical elaboration." (1969/2002, p. 42–43).

When the history of ideas integrated the concept of a not necessarily unidirectional development of notions, the discipline started to be referred to as "intellectual history" or "history of ideas" more and more often, thus drifting away from the method created by Lovejoy. In a broader understanding, historiography of ideas will include both approaches, both history of ideas and intellectual history (Szacki, 1981). Nonetheless, it seems that even the researchers who study the history of human thought with one approach or the other fail to recognize any significant differences between the two. Only sometimes they point out that the history of ideas is a concrete research project proposed by Lovejoy, while intellectual history builds on it and is associated with Foucault. According to another definition, there is only one slight difference between those two twin-like disciplines: intellectual history, unlike history of ideas, studies a specific community of people sharing common culture. Therefore, usually it refers to the history of a given nation. In turn, the history of ideas is not limited in this manner and can study a given preconception always in a broader context (Walicki, 2000). What is more,

as Walicki points out (2000), intellectual history is especially useful for countries that did not provide a significant input into the global history in the area under consideration.

It is worth noting that the hereby text, focusing on the history of the idea of mental illness in the awareness of (specific groups of) Poles, sometimes shaped by "chance, discontinuity and materiality" (Foucault, 1969/2002, s. 43), bears more affinity to intellectual history. Hence, “History of polish madness” should be treated as a work on the intellectual history of Polish medical and philosophical circles writing about the issue of mental illness in the 19th century. However, we shouldn't forget about the warning expressed by the author of *The Great Chain of Being* himself: "the more you press in towards the heart of a narrowly bounded historical problem, the more likely you are to encounter in the problem itself a pressure which drives you outward beyond those bounds" (Lovejoy, 1936/1999, p. 318), as there will be cases when Polish texts about madness will make reference to foreign ones, thus pushing us beyond the horizon of Polish psychiatric discourse. For this reason, it will be safer to claim, as many thought historians do (Szacki, 1991), that the hereby discourse is based on the methodology of a broadly understood historiography of ideas, including both intellectual history and history of ideas.

This is why we will be speaking of historiography of ideas, even if it would be more methodologically precise to place the book “History of polish madness” within the movement of intellectual history, especially considering the fact that I took many research propositions from Lovejoy, for example the principle "to give the words of relevant texts as fully as was consistent with reasonable brevity." (Lovejoy, 1936/1999, p. 6). It is not a new approach within the history of psychological thought, where the tradition of limiting extensive quotations from source texts has been started by Ellenberger (1957) and Whyte (1960). In Polish psychological thought, Dobroczyński (2005) seems to consistently apply this “frugal lyricism of the citation” (Foucault, 1999, p 275).

The methodological approach applied in the hereby work, that has been briefly described above, undoubtedly requires further explanation, but I believe that it is more paramount to justify the reason of choosing one approach over another in reference to the problems under study.

Firstly, it has to be stressed that “one of the functions of historiography of ideas is to shed light on the products of human mind and all their diversity” (Lovejoy, 1936/1999, p. 329). If indeed historiography of ideas is able to achieve the ambitious goal of presenting the way people think about a given topic, then its goals are in line with mine. My objective is to show how Poles used to think about mental disorders and, as a result, how we can understand texts written by Polish psychiatrists in the 19th century.

Secondly, this kind of methodology helps the readers to develop their own critical opinions on the value of the presented ideas, as it is hard to assess the input of a researcher “expressing a general idea, without knowing the idea or its other manifestations” (Lovejoy, 1936/1999, p. 316).

Thirdly, the value of the historiography of ideas (and especially intellectual history) consists in the fact that it tries to understand the idea under study, taking into account the broad social, political, religious, economic and ethical context. This postulate is particularly useful when studying convictions concerning mental disorders that cannot be considered as independent

social phenomena. The opinions of alienists must be analysed on many levels, bearing in mind that the concept of madness is more of a cultural construct than the result of scientific research − especially if we are interested in the psychological aspect of delusions (as we shall see later on, often identified with the moral approach). However, the eminent expert in intellectual history, Quentin Skinner (1988), warns us that, when studying a specific idea, we should not trust orthodox solutions − either treating the interpreted text as autonomous, or succumbing to the temptation of creating a "total context" for understanding a given opinion.

Moreover, the contextualism of the historiography of ideas is limited, as "[a]n individual scholar cannot, however, hope to become a competent specialist in many fields of intellectual history." (Lovejoy, 1936/1999, s. 313). Therefore, the author of *The Great Chain of Being* proposed that a given "unit idea" should be studied by an interdisciplinary team of scientists (Lovejoy, 1936/1999), because one single researcher cannot possibly understand the issue in many different fields. I take this statement − which feels obvious for many reasons − into account when I write about eg. melancholy presented not only in texts written by Polish 19th-century experts in that field, but also in popular science books, works of fiction, or paintings; always stressing that my analysis is by no means meant to be exhaustive. According to some radical historians of ideas (see Czernik, 2014), limiting the field of analysis too strictly to phenomena appearing exclusively within the field of psychological thought, would constitute an excessive reduction, because it would annihilate part of the idea by limiting the study to one discipline only. In this case, the criticism is well founded, because it is impossible to present all the manifold facets of madness as one "unit idea" (after Foucault, 1969/2002). One may only try to go beyond the traditional understanding of history of psychiatry.

Fourthly, the aim of historiography of ideas overlaps with my intent to provide a coherent context for contemporary knowledge on mental disorders, by presenting the history of broadly understood Polish psychopathology, bearing in mind that the history of madness should not be treated as a tool for solving contemporary dilemmas. On the one hand, we may agree with the statement that the motivation of studying historiography of ideas "does not have to consist necessarily in a wish to explain present facts" (Lovejoy, 1936/1999, p. 329). Nonetheless, it is hard not to agree that "historians of ideas deal both with history and mythology: they determine facts that took place in the past, but at the same time they also perpetuate values, whose presence in the awareness of subsequent generations is crucial for the existence and identity of culture" (Szacki, 1991, p. 12). Hence, the method proposed herein contains two opposite approaches: we are trying to capture the past as such, but at the same time we forget that it is the past, and we confront it with contemporary questions, as if we could argue with it. The last point is strongly criticised by adversaries of the historiography of ideas, who blame it of commiting the error of presentism, which consists in judging past opinions or events from a contemporary point of view and treating the past only as a pre-figuration of the present (Szacki, 2002). It would not be easy to eliminate this “bias” completely and, what is more, it would probably not make much sense. Many historians of thought have already noticed that one may not completely abstain from contemporary perspective in historical research, pretending we don't know what we know and don't feel what we feel. "In our approach to history all of us are presentists to a certain extent" (Szacki, 2002, p. 10), the point is to minimise this presentism as much as possible. Actually, it seems that problems generated by us in the present are not

necessarily ultimate, considering that "studying history is always, to a certain degree, an attempt to transcend beyond the limitations and interests of present times" (Szacki, 1991, p. 330).

Another argument for assuming the perspective of historiography of ideas, in spite of its many limitations, is the fact that it does not disregard concepts that are now considered ridiculous or obsolete. This methodological approach permits to conduct historical studies of concepts that have been discontinued, and it does not force us to limit ourseves to the elements that are considered right and useful from a contemporary point of view. When it comes to assessing the rationality of knowledge in former times, historiography of ideas opposes simplistic presentism that assumes a positivist division into scientific and pre-scientific theories, overlooking the ever-chaning models of rationality characteristic for different historical periods and changing over time. In this regard, historiography of ideas allows us to study perceptions of mental disorders that never had a scientific (in the current understanding) continuation or status.

Finally, another argument in favour of the chosen method is that it gives a lot of freedom to the researcher. Historiography of ideas is, definitely, an eclectic discipline that admits the use of tools from many other fields, such as the akin studies on mentality in France (*histoire des mentalités*) (Burke, 1997), the Anglo-Saxon histories of discourse, or the German *Geistesgeschichte*. Moreover, the method in question makes it possible to use a “imaginative hypothesis” (White, 2009, p. 16), or what Edmund Husserl called "intentional history", which permits to discover the legitimate sense of historical ideas, not reducing them to what was written explicitly in archival materials (Szacki, 1991).

To end this part devoted to the search of a method that would fit the problem under research, it should be stressed that the hereby analysis is merely a humble attempt at applying historiographic tools to the history of Polish thought about psychologically characterised mental disorders. At the same time, it seems that the latter is not to be treated as a "unit idea", as proposed by Lovejoy, but rather as a complex of pre-conceptions concerning melancholy, as well as the origins, symptoms and treatment of madness. The attempt to apply the methodological assumptions of historiography of ideas characterised in this way to analyse the issue of psychopathology in Poland seems to be a novel endeavour, and as such it entails the risk of errors and omissions. In spite of many reservations concering the advantages of history of ideas and intellectual history presented above, the plan to use this method in order to analyse the collected reference materials feels like the right thing to do. Perhaps, it will contribute to creating a methodology at the intersection of historiography of ideas and psychopathology, which would facilitate, at least slightly, the work of those who decide to tackle the issue of psychiatry and psychopathology in 19th-century Polish thought.

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