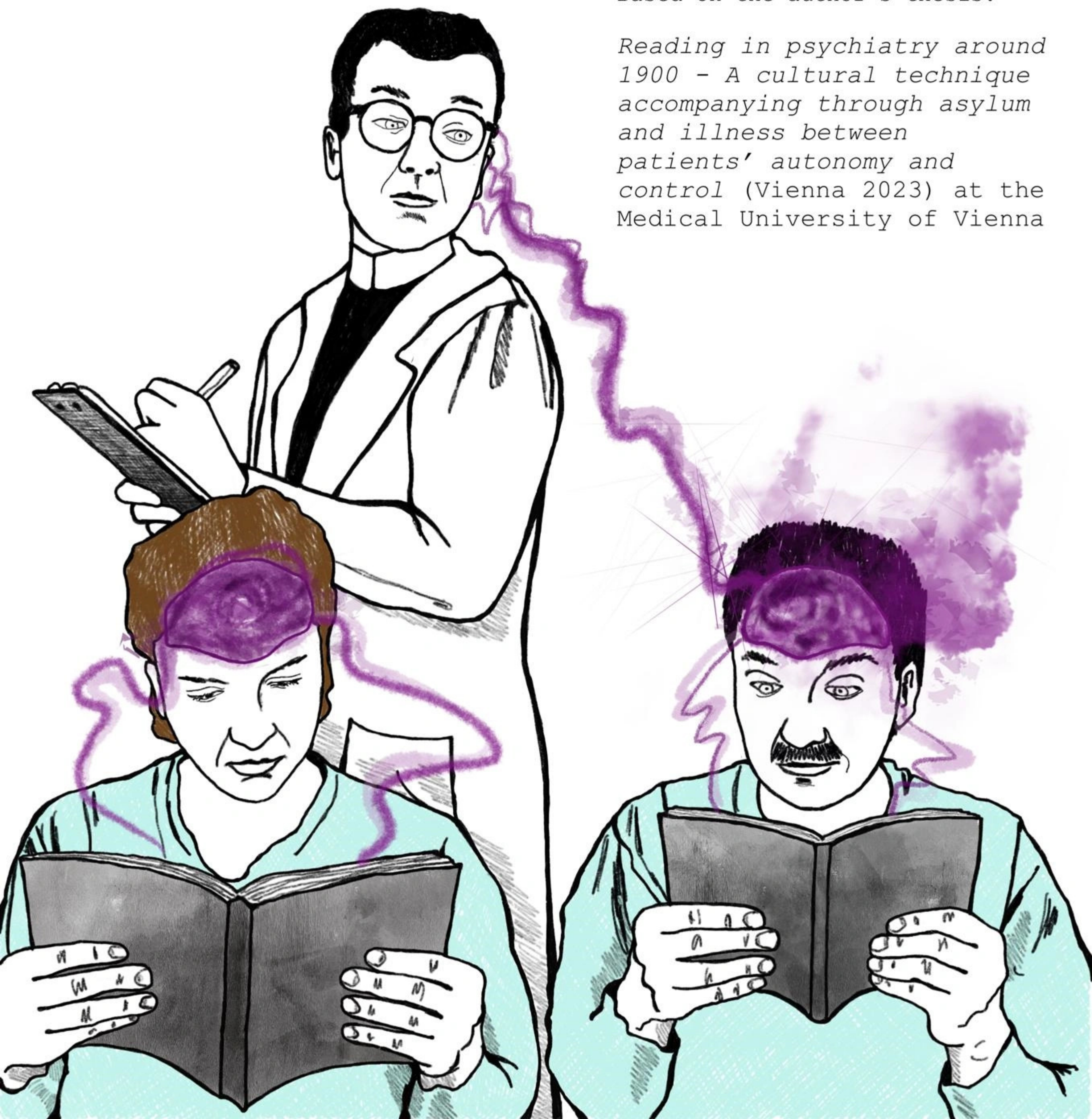


Patients' reading in psychiatry around 1900

By Anna Böhler

Based on the author's thesis:

Reading in psychiatry around 1900 - A cultural technique accompanying through asylum and illness between patients' autonomy and control (Vienna 2023) at the Medical University of Vienna



The unemployed Mr. T. is brought to the asylum by the police after he harrassed a well-known opera singer outside her home with a portrait of Minister Stürgkh, saying he wishes to marry her to him (of course he didn't know either of them in person).



A handwriting sample please. - spidery and unclear.
And now please read out loud. - stutters.



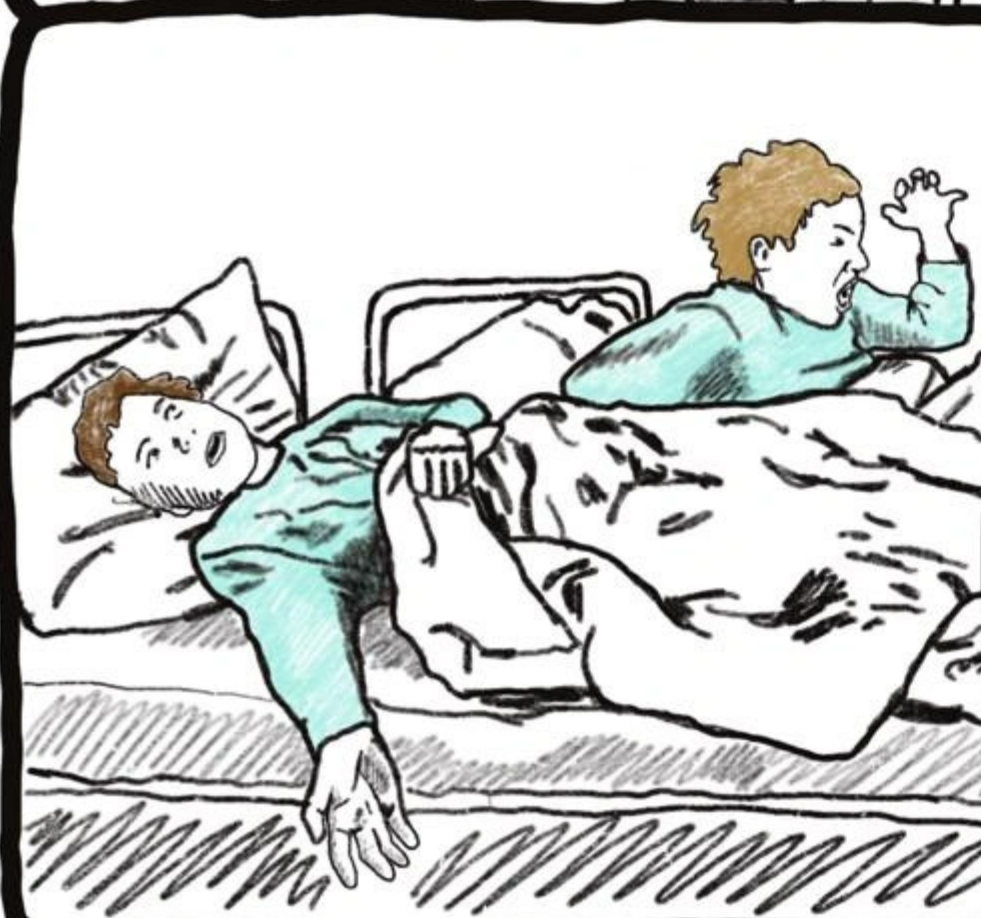
Very detailed admission forms existed at Austrian psychiatric institutions. Questions such as "Did the patient attend school and with what success?" and questions about the knowledge acquired there were used to assess the patient's level of intelligence. Emil Kraepelin, for example, mentions the three skills of "walking, speaking and reading" as examples for checking mental and physical development. Questions were also asked about conspicuous habits and tendencies that could potentially distract from therapy or be assessed as triggers for psychiatric illness. This could also include particular reading and study habits, as in the example of Mr T. Such pronounced reading habits were not automatically interpreted as a sign of education or intelligence. Depending on the social position of the patient, the habit of reading a lot was sometimes also noted in a very disparaging and patronising way.

It has been going on for months now... She doesn't eat, her frailty gets worse - and to cap it up: these seizures! I think it's the nerves...

Clear signs of Hysteria!

I... can't... move my legs...

Admission is definitively indicated!



So our patient Miss N. gets placed in a so called "Wachsaal" together with 11 other patients. Strangers with a bunch of different diagnoses. And the seizures are not getting any better...

Miss N., you have been here for over a week now... we have already tried to stay with us a little longer. will be allowed to borrow ward-library and perhaps we can soon transfer you to a quieter ward.

... a lot* but you will probably But from now you books from the



Diagnosing psychiatric illnesses was even more complicated around 1900 than it is today.

However, an important distinction was made between curable and incurable and between acute and chronic forms of illness.

A stay in a psychiatric ward was seen as particularly helpful for curable acute forms. These types of illness were also ascribed certain phase-like progressions according to which the therapy should be adapted.

In the phase of "development and height" of the illness, patients should above all be shielded from all external stimuli and removed from their normal environment.

In the second phase, that of the "turnaround" (either to improvement or chronification), the doctor should finally intervene therapeutically.

The "recovery of the former mental personality" was to take place with the help of occupational therapy in particular (which could also include reading) and discipline through the institutional rules and work therapy.

However, some patients probably also used their regained permission to read to create a personal retreat in the strictly regulated everyday life of the institution.

Cf.: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatrie, Band I (1883), p. 313, 315.



"It is quite significant how the most agitated hysteric, who arrives at the hospital in the midst of incessant attacks, changes immediately when she is placed for a few days in the "Wachsaal" (among the more restless mental patients), and the slightest favour (transfer to a quieter ward, granting manual labour, reading books, etc.) is held out in prospect..."

Cf.: Carl Diehl, Ueber zwei schwerere Fälle von Hysterie. In: Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift (1903/51), p. 553 - 558, here: p. 555.

Well, I know that she's waiting for me. You don't believe me because you're in on it...

On what?

This slander that's happening here. Don't you think I know that they're accusing me of having contracted a nervous disorder through debauchery! Me?!



Dr. Kummerich's
Hilfsanstalt für Nervenkrankheiten
Ganz ohne die Morphium- etc. Entziehung.

The Homecoming

"I did not have the
honour yet to get to
know your cousin,
my dear doctor."
Schenk said.

I told you doctor, you won't keep me here for long... and you won't drive her apart... she confirmed me her love!

Interesting- You haven't received any mail...

Who wants to list all the things that speak to me here!

In most wards, attempts were made to provide patients with reading material. In principle, reading was accepted as a therapeutic aid to supplement occupational therapy. For some clinical pictures and patient groups (especially women, adolescents), however, a negative influence of certain reading materials and habits categorised as "inappropriate" by doctors was still assumed. It was believed to trigger for example religious delusions, forms of melancholia, onanism (yes, still thought to be pathologic) and forms of paranoia. Kraepelin for example wrote in his textbook on Psychiatry from 1899 that patients with the latter diagnosis would feel "a deep longing for something great", they would withdraw from their environment and occupy themselves with "unsuitable and misunderstood reading". In newspapers and books they would find more or less blunt allusions to their fate which would reinforce these delusions.

Funny anecdote: In 1899, the *Psychiatrisch neurologische Wochenschrift* actually quoted a survey on how many asylums used old newspaper as toilet paper. Due to the bad press that psychiatry had at times around 1900, the article in question strongly recommended the use of factory-made toilet paper in the wards!

Cf.: Johannes Bresler, Mitteilungen. Psychiatrische Wochenschrift (1899/1/33), p. 303.



*Roy Porter, The patient's view. Doing medical history from below. In: Theory and Society (1985/14/2) p. 175-198



[Notes]

- **Karl Graf Stürgkh** (* 30. 10. 1859 - † 21. 10. 1916)
Was an Austrian nobleman, politician and from 1911 until his death k.k. Prime Minister. He supported the entry of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy into the war in 1914 without parliamentary consultation. Because of his autocratic policies, he was shot by the Social Democratic politician Friedrich Adler in 1916.
- ▽ **Emil Kraepelin** (* 15. 02. 1856 - † 07. 10. 1926)
Was a German psychiatrist on whose work the foundations of today's system of classifying mental disorders are based.
- **„Wachsaal“**
The German word „Wachsaal“ described a ward comparable with those in general medical hospitals. Depending on capacity utilisation and care class (usually 6 to 12 patients in the lower care classes), up to 20 patients could be accommodated there at a time. Patients were required to stay in bed in accordance with the treatment in the somatic disciplines in order to create an adequate awareness of illness in the patients (this approach was termed "Bettbehandlung"). Around 1900, this form of treatment, like occupational therapy and non-restraint, was one of the "new" forms of treatment in psychiatric wards. At the same time, it was an attempt to harmonise methods with somatic medicine, which enjoyed a higher level of trust among the population. Of course, this type of treatment also led to simpler organisational care for patients in the institutions.
- * **Treatment of hysteria**
Various interventions have been tried to treat so-called hysteria. For example, Miss N. had already been treated with bromide salts and morphine, as well as with hypnosis, hydrotherapy, electrotherapy and placebo applications. However, the stay in the institution itself was also regarded as a curative intervention, as it was assumed that the regular life, the occupational therapy and the discipline in the institution had a favourable effect on the condition of the patient.
- △ **Peter Rosegger** (* 31.07.1843 - † 26. 06.1918)
was an Austrian local poet. His works were available in various ward-libraries in Lower Austria. (The abstract here is taken from his novel *Als ich noch der Waldbauernbub war. Jugendgeschichten aus der Waldheimat.*). In general, there were a number of authors in the ward-libraries, mainly covering the genres of travel and adventure literature, homeland poetry, soldiers' stories and humorous literature. In addition, there were a number of local newspapers and magazines - many institutions had agreements with the respective editorial offices, which provided them with free copies at regular intervals. In order to promote the "education" of patients, the management of the psychiatric institutions also acquired for example German classics as well as non-fiction books from various fields. Furthermore the institutions repeatedly received donations from private donors.