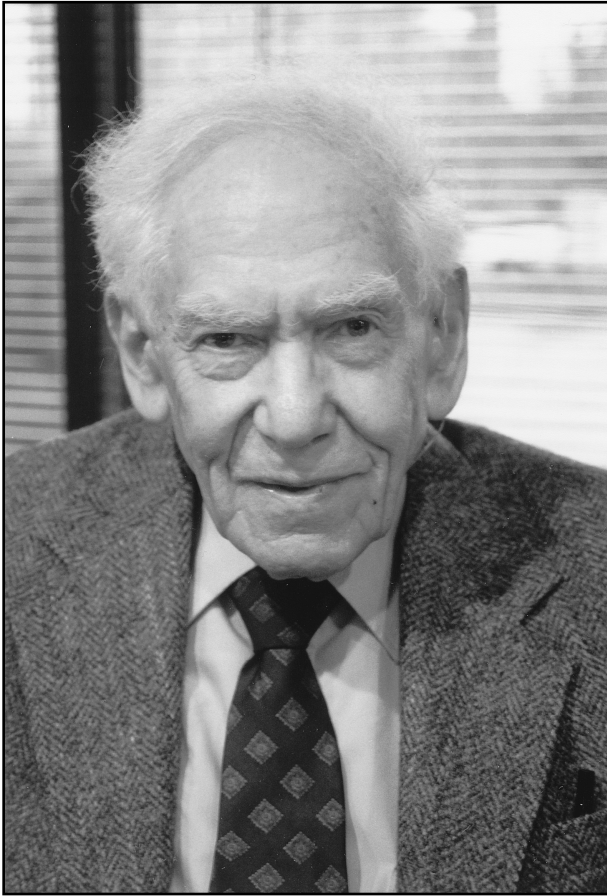


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OWSEI TEMKIN



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WITH THE DEATH of Owsei Temkin in July 2002, just a few months shy of his hundredth birthday, the world of scholarship lost one of the last survivors of a group of scholars, mostly of European origin, who helped turn the field of the history of medicine from an avocation of a few practicing physicians into a true academic discipline. Temkin's remarkable scholarship and productivity continued to the very end of his long life. Just a few weeks before his death he sent a manuscript to the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, a journal he had edited for twenty years. And in his hundredth year he published a second book of essays, of which more below, with one new essay and a new introduction. He did all this although he was pretty much confined to his room for nearly the last decade of his life.

In the first part of this commemorative essay I sketch Owsei Temkin's biography; in the second part I address the breadth and meaning of his work as a teacher and scholar.

The Temkin century began in Minsk, Russia, and continued from age three until age thirty in Leipzig, Germany, and for the last seventy years of his life in Baltimore, Maryland, where he was one of Johns Hopkins University's most distinguished faculty members. The name Owsei is the Russian equivalent of Joshua, and is pronounced "Off-say." (Throughout his life, even some of his closest Baltimore colleagues persisted in calling him "Ow-z.") The Temkin family fled Russia in 1905 to avoid the pogroms then harassing Russian Jews. They settled in Leipzig, where his father began a musical instrument store. Owsei attended elementary school and a Gymnasium in Leipzig, and in 1922 began medical studies at the University of Leipzig. As he tells us in the long autobiographical essay that introduced his 1977 book, *The Double Face of Janus*, he chose medicine because as a stateless scholar of Jewish family he knew that a career in his favored field of philosophy would not be available to him. His equally keen interest in physiology and the prospect of earning a living as a physician were the deciding factors for the study of medicine. After receiving his M.D. degree in 1927, he interned for a year and then hoped to be appointed to a position in a city hospital, but he was denied the chance because he was not a German citizen.

While still in the midst of his medical studies, Temkin heard a series of lectures by a dynamic young Swiss medical historian, Henry E. Sigerist, who had in 1925 been appointed to head the university's Institute of Medical History. Here Temkin realized that in the history of medicine he might combine his love for the humanities with his medical training. Sigerist had adopted the god Janus as the symbol for his institute because this double-faced god looked to the future with the eye of

a physician, and with his other face looked back as did the historian of medicine. These ideals were to serve Temkin throughout his long career.

From 1928 until 1932 Temkin was an *Assistent* at the Leipzig institute and from 1931 to 1933 a *Privatdozent*. In 1932, however, shortly after his marriage to C. Lilian Shelley from England, who had been working as a graduate student of German in Leipzig, the Temkins came to Baltimore, where Owsei accompanied Sigerist, the new director of the Institute of the History of Medicine at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. For the first three years in Baltimore, Temkin was an associate; from 1935 to 1957 he was an associate professor, and in the latter year was promoted to professor of the history of medicine, an unusual occurrence at Hopkins at the time because the department already had a full professor and it was rare to have two. During the Second World War he commuted to Washington to work for the National Research Council on broad literature reviews about topics such as the treatment of malaria. During these years he also served as the acting director of the Welch Medical Library at Hopkins.

In 1958 Temkin succeeded Richard H. Shryock as director of the institute and William H. Welch Professor. In 1968 he became emeritus, giving up administrative duties as well as the editorship of the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, which he had held since 1948. As we shall see below, he was hardly "retired" because in the following three and a half decades he published many papers and four books.

Temkin was widely honored for his scholarship, including the Welch Medal from the American Association for the History of Medicine in 1952, and he served as the association's president from 1958 to 1960. In the latter year he was awarded the Sarton Medal by the History of Science Society. In 1958 he was elected to the American Philosophical Society, and a decade later to the National Academy of Sciences, a rare honor for a humanist. In 1962 he was awarded a prize for distinguished scholarship in the humanities by the American Council of Learned Societies; he was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 1973 received an honorary doctorate from the Johns Hopkins University. His major books included *The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginning of Modern Neurology*, 1945; 2nd ed. revised, 1971; *Soranus' Gynecology*, translated with an introduction, with the assistance of Nicholson Eastman, Ludwig Edelstein, and Alan F. Guttmacher, 1956; *Galenism: The Rise and Decline of a Medical Philosophy*, 1973; *The Double Face of Janus and Other Essays in the History of Medicine*, 1977; *Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians*, 1991; and "On Second Thought" and *Other Essays in the History of Medicine and Science*, 2002.

Much of Owsei Temkin's future success as a scholar can be seen in

his very early work in Leipzig under the guidance of Henry Sigerist. Imagine, for a moment, a young German student, deeply interested in philosophy, who for practical reasons chose to study medicine. Just four years after finishing his internship it is 1932, and with the beginning of a promising career in the history of medicine, including some well-received papers and a *Habilitationsschrift* on the history of Hippocratism in late antiquity, he wished to get married, but had little prospect of a career in the history of medicine in Germany. But then his teacher was about to leave Leipzig to go to the United States to the newly established Institute of the History of Medicine at the Johns Hopkins University. He offered to take his young protégé with him to America, but this would mean writing and teaching in English. Imagine, too, that the young scholar can easily read English and even speak a little, but has had no experience in thinking or writing in English. But he was very fortunate because his new wife was English and promised to be very helpful in the linguistic transition he now had to make. Their close collaboration was to continue for sixty years until Lilian Temkin's death in 1992.

We must remember, too, that this was a world without Xerox, WordPerfect, and Google. If one can imagine such a scenario, then one can understand Owsei and Lilian Temkin's arrival in Baltimore in the late summer of 1932. What, then, is even more startling is that just thirty years later Temkin was awarded a prize by the American Council of Learned Societies for distinguished scholarship in the humanities. Among the other seven awardees that year were John K. Fairbank, Marjorie Hope Nicholson, Robert K. Merton, and C. Vann Woodward—a very distinguished company indeed.

Temkin's approach to historiography was a broad one. He has often been associated with intellectual history or the history of ideas. It is true that he wrote essays such as "The Idea of Health and Disease," "On the Study of Ideas in the History of Medicine," "On the History of the Concept of Infection," and "On the Physiological and the Ontological Ideas of Diseases." But simply to place his work under the banner of intellectual history is not only to have an incomplete understanding of his approach to the past; it is also to miss the richness and the nuances of his work.

The point is that implicit in much of Temkin's work there was a concern not only about what doctors thought, but also about what they did and what their patients experienced. In 1946, for instance, he said, "Medical history itself has become broader in outlook and richer in content. At the same time, by connecting the development of medicine with political history, history of religion, fine arts and science, archeology, sociology and economics, the history of medicine keeps its

students in touch with the humanities and social sciences in medicine especially in medical education.” Thus he was several decades ahead of the movement toward the social history of medicine of the 1970s, a movement he watched with pleasure and fascination. Although he was pleased to see more historians turn their attention to medical subjects, as the professionalization of the field continued apace he was concerned to the end of his life that the history of medicine not become alienated from the medical profession.

While sympathetic toward social history, he was not a part of this trend. His history might best be characterized as primarily a history of meanings. The question then is meaning for whom and for what purposes? To put the idea of meaning differently, much of Temkin’s work was concerned with reputation. This was not reputation meant only in terms of popularity and fame, but reputation as a far more searching analysis of the meaning of an idea, of a concept, or of a disease, and how these might have been interpreted at various times, including our own. Above all, he asked about the relevance of his subject for doctors, their theories, and their practices.

Reputation, it is true, is also about what people think about an idea, a book, a person, or groups of people. Yet what is encompassed in such thoughts leads ultimately to action, such as a vote, attendance at a game or a concert. So the significance of Hippocrates among pagans and Christians, of Galen’s philosophy from late antiquity to the Renaissance, as well as the meaning that patients and doctors gave to the falling sickness (epilepsy), all are concerned with reputation. But as Temkin’s books about these subjects made very clear, the reputations all occurred in a broad and often exquisitely drawn social and political context. As was true of so much of his work and thinking, Temkin was a cultural historian long before that topic’s fashionable rediscovery in recent decades.

A recurrent theme in Temkin’s historiography may be seen in the preface to the original edition of *The Falling Sickness* in 1945, where he told his readers that the book’s “aim throughout is to understand the past and thereby help us to understand the setting of present problems.” And to show that Temkin’s time in 1945 and that of a half-century and more later were similar, he continued in that preface to say that “there are few tasks more fascinating in medical history than to interpret medical ideas in the light of contemporary political, social, and cultural situations.” Whether it was as a contemporary of the Hippocratic physician or of his own time, Temkin was ever the fascinated observer. That is why his historical work generally was such a skillful blending of text and context, and why it has stood the test of time so well.

Much of Temkin's work concerned itself with moral issues of medicine and the respect for life, which was the explicit subject of one of his essays. It would not be too far-fetched to say that he was an early historian of what today we call bioethics. From his student days on, he saw in medicine a way to study the moral nature of mankind. Indeed, he asked, why turn to other fields when the history of medicine is such a rich source?

Two additional themes that ran throughout his work were the meaning of disease and the role of the works ascribed to Hippocrates and those of Galen six hundred years later, and their influence into the Renaissance. Temkin's book on Galenism was based on the Messenger Lectures he gave at Cornell in 1970. In this slim volume, a lifetime of interest in the fate of Galen's ideas in the Middle Ages and later centuries is very evident. Galen's influence lasted for so long because he marked both a beginning of the influence of Greco-Roman medicine and its end a millennium and a half later. Of this book, Professor Jean Starobinski of the University of Geneva said in a long review in the *New York Review of Books*, here "we find the simplicity and modesty of tone which is the prerogative of those who are completely in command of their subject."

In *Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians*, published in 1991, when its author was eighty-nine years old, Temkin explored the world of ancient Greek medicine from a pagan era to a world in which Christianity became dominant. Thus religion and medicine are here combined, and Temkin deftly provides us with a very wide context for the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance world. Since we are once again seemingly fascinated by natural healing, this is a rich source for some of these ideas. One reviewer called it a trail-blazing book, one that leaves many questions still unanswered, a sign of a pioneering work.

In "*On Second Thought*" and *Other Essays*, his fourth book since he "retired" from the Welch chair in 1968, published in the author's one hundredth year, Temkin included sixteen essays, two of which were written especially for this volume. The others originally appeared between 1947 and 1981, and were divided into four themes: ethics in medicine, medicine and the history of science, the history of therapy and nutrition, and miscellaneous topics in the history of medicine.

In the introductory essay, which gave the title to the volume, Temkin once again returned to a theme about which he had long been concerned and about which he had written much: the role of medical history for medicine. Here in his hundredth year he engaged a hypothetical medical school dean to make a cogent argument why, even in an already overcrowded curriculum, the history of medicine should have a place: "Its aim, and its bias, if you will, is to make students aware they need not be blindly submissive to so-called irresistible forces,

however strong such forces may be; that they can remain their own masters, even if they decide to go along with them.”

Temkin was not only an accomplished scholar, but was an outstanding teacher as well. His success as a teacher of medical students began almost as soon as he arrived in Baltimore. This success as a teacher was not merely owing to his wide learning, but owed much to his genuine respect for the students. Both he and Sigerist noted that American medical students, while usually not as well schooled in history, philosophy, and the languages as their German students had been, were, however, just as intelligent and much more eager to learn. Thus they were also more fun to teach.

Temkin also identified with the medical students. He knew, from his own experience, that medical school is a time of stress, of change, and unrest. In such times, he said, history can help us gain confidence. A course in the history of medicine, he believed, with its discussions of change, and of how we have come to know what we know and why we do what we do, can serve as an intellectual anchor for many students.

Owsei Temkin thus leaves a legacy of outstanding teaching and scholarship in the history of medicine, a field he helped to shape in its increasingly professionalized guise, and a legacy of a truly humane approach to his students and to the world in which he lived and worked. He was a man of modesty, wit, and kindness toward virtually all who knew him. Wisdom is a characteristic of a very few, but it truly belongs to any description of him. Many people have told me that when you walked in Temkin's shadow or sat at his feet you were quite aware that you were in the presence of a great man—yet he would have been the last to claim that this was true. So great, yet so modest—and he had little to be modest about.

For those of us privileged to be his students, he left a legacy that continues to enlighten and to inspire. Owsei Temkin was a striking example of what Charles William Eliot said at his inauguration as president of Harvard in 1869: Two kinds of men make good teachers— young men and men who never grow old.

Elected 1958; Committee on Publications 1971–74

GERT H. BRIEGER

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This article is based upon my previous commemoration of Owsei Temkin: “Temkin's Times and Ours: An Appreciation of Owsei Temkin,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 77 (2003): 1–11.

