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OWSEI TEMKIN
1902–2002

A Biographical Memoir by

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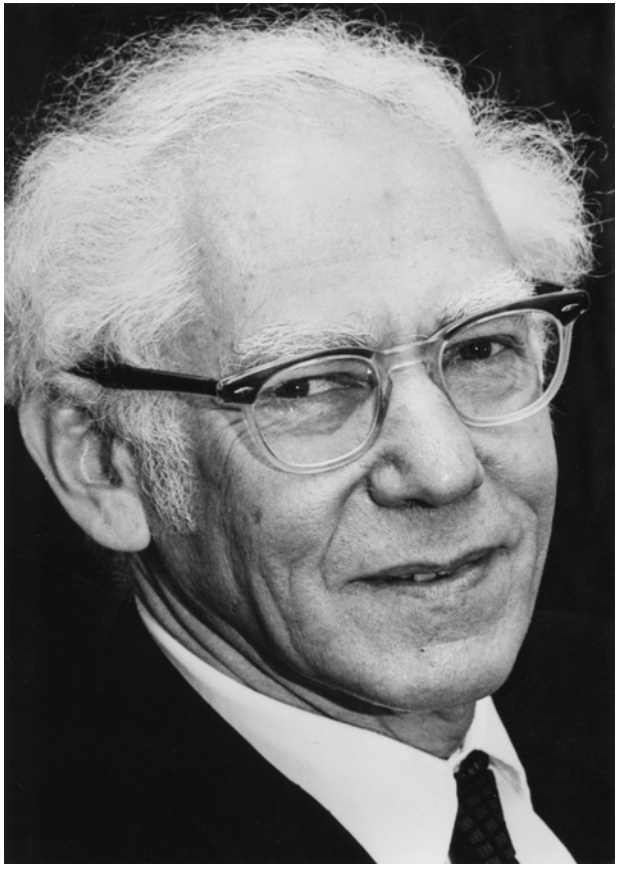
Biographical Memoir



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Oscar Temkin

OWSEI TEMKIN

October 6, 1902–July 18, 2002

BY SAMUEL H. GREENBLATT

OWSEI TEMKIN WAS NOT A scientist in the ordinary sense of one who works at the benchtop, in the field, or with theoretical models. Rather, as a physician-historian he spent a long and productive lifetime studying how medicine and science develop and interact with the cultures that harbor them. His election to the National Academy of Sciences in 1978, 10 years after his formal retirement, was indicative of the recognition that he had achieved for this effort. It also signified the immense respect that he commanded in the scholarly world by virtue of his extraordinary knowledge of languages and historical cultures, the depth of his analyses, and his gentle but firm modesty. Indeed, gentleness and modesty were his personal hallmarks, but his modesty was not false in any way. He understood his own intellectual powers and the place they gave him in society, but he abhorred self-promotion, mainly because it was inconsistent with dispassionate scholarship.

The timing of Temkin's election to the National Academy of Sciences was paradigmatic of the way he achieved recognition for his work—late but in nearly full measure. Since he worked prodigiously but quietly, the size and quality of his contribution became apparent rather slowly to the

world outside of his immediate circle. In the end, however, the work spoke for itself and for its author.

Temkin was born in Minsk, Belarus (then part of Russia), on October 6, 1902, the son of Samuel and Anna (Raskin) Temkin. In 1905 his Jewish family moved to Leipzig, Germany, to avoid pogroms. There he had his elementary schooling and attended the *Real-Gymnasium*. After the Russian revolution of 1917, his family lost its Russian citizenship. The young scholar felt the sting of being an alien in German society, but he also benefited from the residual rigor of the German educational system, which still remained partially intact after the disaster of World War I. In 1922 he enrolled at the University of Leipzig:

> I was asked to state my field of study. "Medicine and philosophy," I said. My reply was not acceptable; only one school (*Facultät*) could be chosen, and so I declared for medicine. It would satisfy my interest in science, particularly human biology, while eventually enabling me to make a living in a useful manner. . . As an alien, I could not count on becoming a teacher at a Gymnasium or university, and there was no other possibility of supporting myself in philosophy or history, which had also attracted me since boyhood. (1977, p. 3)

Although its shape evolved, Temkin's interest in philosophy endured. This interest informed his approach to history for the rest of his life.

Fortunately, Leipzig had the preeminent Institute for the History of Medicine. In the fall of 1925 Temkin attended the survey course offered by the newly arrived director, Henry E. Sigerist (1891-1957). When Sigerist talked about the Hippocratic concept of disease, Temkin's philosophical predilections were aroused. He became Sigerist's pupil and wrote his thesis for the M.D. (an advanced research degree) on the subject. After he received his M.D.

in 1927, Temkin spent a year as an intern at St. Jacob Hospital in Leipzig. He then returned to the institute as an *Assistent* from 1928 to 1932. By returning he took his place in a historiographic tradition that continues to this day, albeit in Baltimore rather than Leipzig. The tradition began with the founding of the Leipzig institute in 1905, when Karl Sudhoff became its first director. After Sudhoff's retirement, "the first four years of [Sigerist's] directorship . . . coincided with the few good years of the Weimar republic" (1977, p. 6). Temkin thus rejoined a small but lively group of like-minded scholars in a place where the new director engendered a heady milieu that was even tinged with a little philosophic romanticism.

Speaking of romanticism, the timing of Temkin's return to the institute was also most fortunate in the personal sense. At a costume ball that Sigerist organized "for the very staid association of the professors of the Leipzig University" (1977, p. 8), Temkin met a gracious young English woman, Clarice Lilian Shelley (1906-1992), who was working on her M.A. thesis in German at the University of Wales. They were married on July 15, 1932. Their daughters, Ann and Judith, were born in the United States. Mrs. Temkin was her husband's adviser, editor, and scholarly colleague until her incapacitation from Parkinson's disease. She died in 1992.

In 1931 Temkin became *Privatdozent* for the history of medicine at Leipzig. In 1932 he followed Sigerist to the recently founded Institute of the History of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University. Both young men—Sigerist and Temkin—were recruited by the legendary William H. Welch, who in his retirement was the first director of the Johns Hopkins institute. Welch had been the acknowledged founder of the Johns Hopkins Medical School, so Temkin in his old age was the last living link to the founder.[1] At Johns Hopkins,

Temkin was originally appointed associate to the institute. From 1935 to 1957 he was associate professor. He was appointed professor of the history of medicine in 1957, and in 1958 he became William H. Welch Professor and director of the Institute of the History of Medicine, following the retirement of Richard Shryock. (Shryock had been appointed in 1949, two years after Sigerist's retirement.) In 1964 Temkin also became professor of the history of medicine in the Johns Hopkins Department of the History of Science. He took emeritus status in 1968.

Returning to Temkin's earlier chronology, the newlywed Temkins made their first real home in Baltimore. With his usual insight and good humor, Temkin later recalled Mrs. Temkin's critical role in his acculturation:

> As a professional linguist, my wife . . . soon told me that to write acceptable English I had to think in English . . . The lack of strict definitions of words and the ease with which new definitions of words can be formed make German an ideal philosophical language. These qualities, however, easily protect vagueness and lack of clarity hiding behind an array of words that give a false impression of depth. My assimilation to English became concomitantly a critical review of much German writing, including some of my own. (1977, p. 23)

In 1934, following the rise of the Nazis, Temkin lost his German citizenship. He became a naturalized American citizen in 1938. By 1943 he had finished the manuscripts of three monographs, including his magisterial history of epilepsy, *The Falling Sickness*, which was published in 1945. In 1943-1944 Temkin served as a civilian with the Division of Medical Sciences of the National Research Council. His assignment (with colleague Elizabeth Ramsey) was "the preparation of reports on current research concerning the therapy of certain diseases important in the war effort," especially malaria (1977, p. 27; Stevenson and Multhauf, 1968, p. 303).

The two and a half decades from the end of World War II until just after his formal retirement in 1968 were the period of Temkin's most intense productivity and the foundation of his increasing reputation. During this time one of his most important colleagues was the peripatetic classicist-historian Ludwig Edelstein (1902-1965). Edelstein worked at the Johns Hopkins institute from 1934 to 1947 and again from 1952 to 1960. In addition to being director of the institute from 1958 to1968, Temkin was the editor of the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* from 1948 to 1968. Mrs. Temkin was assistant editor from 1957 to 1971. The bulletin was—and remains—the most important journal in its field. In 1958-1960 Temkin served as president of the American Association for the History of Medicine.

One of the most taxing and rewarding obligations of many academics is the molding of advanced students into full-fledged scholars. Temkin directed the doctoral studies of his two immediate successors at the institute, Lloyd G. Stevenson (director 1968-1983) and Gert H. Brieger (director 1984-2001). A partial list of other prominent historians of medicine who took their Ph.D.s with Temkin includes Donald G. Bates, Chester R. Burns, and Toby Gelfand. In addition, several established scholars spent long periods at the institute during Temkin's tenure, including Henry Guerlac, Edwin Clarke, Jerry Stannard, and Charles Rosenberg. Temkin also had several M.A. students who have contributed much to scholarship and teaching in the history of medicine (Stevenson, 1982, pp. 223-225). His lectures for medical students in the required courses on medical history were models of organization and clarity. I have known some Hopkins medical graduates of that era who later regretted that they had not listened more carefully.

For many years after his retirement Temkin remained a valued presence at the institute and in the university. This

was also the time when honors began to flow in. Some had come earlier: the Welch Medal of the American Association for the History of Medicine (1952), the Sarton Medal of the History of Science Society (1960), and the Prize for Distinguished Scholarship in the Humanities of the American Council of Learned Societies (1962). In 1969 Temkin delivered the Hideyo Noguchi Lectures at Johns Hopkins, and in 1970 he gave the Messenger Lectures at Cornell University. In 1973 Johns Hopkins conferred an honorary LL.D., and in 1975 he received an honorary Sc.D. at the Medical College of Ohio in Toledo. He was a member of many prestigious academic societies in the United States and abroad, including the American Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Temkin's election to the National Academy of Sciences was the last of the major honors that came to him, and he was very pleased by it. After his election, Temkin was asked to select a section for his membership. There was no historical section, but there was a section on social and political sciences. Temkin chose the neurobiology section, because, as he explained in a letter to Kac,[2] it was "closest to my scientific interests and because quite a few of its members are known to me personally."[3] His daughter Judith Temkin Irvine recalls that he made his choice because of his identification with *The Falling Sickness*. At that time he was continuing to keep abreast of the scientific literature on epilepsy.[4] In 1981 Temkin supported an effort to establish a permanent section of history and philosophy of science in the Academy,[5] but the effort came to naught and apparently was never revived. In 1982 Temkin requested and received emeritus status in the Academy, because of his "age and advanced deafness."[6] The progressive hearing loss had started in middle age. In his later decades his mobility was increasingly restricted by severe arthritis.

Owsei Temkin remained clearheaded and sharp-witted to the end, which came with appropriate quietude when he was three months short of his one-hundredth birthday. His last book, *On Second Thought,* was published, with the help of his daughter Judith, before Temkin died in 2002. Judith was also his coauthor on his last historical paper, which appeared posthumously in the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* in 2003.

THE FALLING SICKNESS

Temkin's first historical book was *The Falling Sickness,* which appeared in 1945. He had originally decided to undertake the work in 1931, partly in the hope that "historical clarification might be of some help to neurologists" (1977, p. 20). Its approach became the paradigm for his later monographs, and it set the standard for scholarship in the history of medicine for several decades. The book's contents are well defined by its subtitle, *A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology* (i.e., from Hippocrates to John Hughlings Jackson and Jean Martin Charcot). An underlying theme is Temkin's lifelong interest in the concept and meaning of disease, including its scientific and cultural aspects. Given epilepsy's long association with religion, evil, magic, and scientific theorizing, it could be the perfect vehicle for such an investigation; as usual, the scholarly devil is in the myriad detail.

For each historical period (antiquity, Middle Ages, Renaissance, the Enlightenment, nineteenth century), Temkin guides the reader through the complexity of theories, beliefs, and practices that constituted the totality of epilepsy. He was able to do this effectively because of his thorough knowledge of the relevant languages and cultures and his command of how epilepsy was understood in his own time. In essence, until the nineteenth century, scientific and

extrascientific concepts of epilepsy coexisted or even cohabited, usually with reasonable compatibility. By the decade of the 1870s, the modern scientific study and understanding of the disease (really, diseases) had begun in earnest, and that is where Temkin leaves off.

When the first edition went out of print and became scarce, Temkin decided against reprinting it, because he felt that it was out of date in two ways. First, there had been significant historical work that needed to be incorporated into a new edition. Second, in the period after World War II, scientific and clinical concepts of epilepsy had changed dramatically. Electroencephalography had become central to the diagnosis and understanding of seizures, and the concepts of psychomotor/temporal lobe epilepsy had emerged. The revised second edition appeared in 1971. In both editions Temkin explicitly acknowledged that he had limited himself to "a history of epilepsy in Western civilization" (1971, p. vii, x), including classic Arabic cultures, because he did not want to be "confusing history and anthropology" (1945, p. viii). That is, the relationship of epilepsy to prehistoric trepanning was (and remains) speculative, and he felt that folk practices in East and South Asian civilizations had little effect in the West.

In his preface to the second edition Temkin wrestled with a familiar historical conundrum: whether "to let the past speak for itself and [or] to bring it near to the understanding of the modern reader" (1971, p. vii). He concluded that the past must speak for itself as much as possible, but in the end the reader can see the past only through his own eyes. Most of the substantive changes in the revised edition of *The Falling Sickness* deal with the more recent history of epilepsy. Temkin extended his historical cutoff date by a decade to approximately 1890, "except in the case of Hughlings Jackson, where it seemed advisable to avoid any

arbitrary boundary" (1971, p. vii). Jackson's work on (what was later called) psychomotor/temporal lobe epilepsy extended into the twentieth century.

GALENISM

This small volume is the published version of the Messenger Lectures on the Evolution of Civilization, which Temkin delivered at Cornell in October 1970. It appeared in 1973. Again, the subtitle defines the nature and scope of the work: *Rise and Decline of a Medical Philosophy*. This book belies more of Temkin's philosophical interests than his concern with the meaning of disease. Galen of Pergamun (ca. 130-200) codified and greatly expanded the entire corpus of Greek/Western medical knowledge up to and including his own time. His authoritative legacy was carried into the Renaissance, and parts of it persisted into the nineteenth century.

Temkin analyzed the philosophical underpinnings of this legacy, starting with the Platonic background of Galen's medical and scientific ideals. Galenic medicine—and some of the philosophy that went with it—was authoritative through the Christian Middle Ages. Temkin was particularly interested in the challenges that Galenism encountered during the Renaissance. Even in the seventeenth century "the mechanistic orientation . . . was not strong enough to replace Galenism as a unifying medical philosophy" (1973, p. 178). On the other hand, "By 1870 medicine was firmly launched on its new scientific course, which gave it the intellectual unity it had lost after the downfall of Galenism as a medical philosophy" (1973, p. 191).

THE DOUBLE FACE OF JANUS

Janus was the Roman god of beginnings, with two bearded faces on one head, looking in opposite directions.

Temkin agreed with Sigerist that this pagan deity is an appropriate "allegory" for the history of medicine, which looks simultaneously toward medicine as it advances and toward its history (1977, p. 9). The idea for the book was "planted" by Shryock and doggedly pursued by Jack Goellner, director of the Johns Hopkins University Press, until it was published in 1977. The first essay ("The Double Face of Janus") in this large volume is an intellectual autobiography, followed by reprintings of 36 of Temkin's previously published papers. A few are translated from their original German. Much of the factual substance in my present memoir about Temkin is based on this title essay. His good-humored but penetrating sense of irony is displayed on the first page when he says, "A publication of collected essays by their author is intrinsically an immodest undertaking." (1977, p. ix).

Fortunately, Temkin's scruples were overcome by the opportunity to comment on the republished essays. Indeed, the title essay is much more than a commentary on his previous work. It is also a participant's account of how the entire historiography of medicine evolved from the 1920s to the 1970s—a treasure for later historiographers. One of Temkin's lifelong concerns was the place and usefulness of medical history within medicine as a whole, because he always felt a strong obligation to the whole. Writing about his sense of commitment ca. 1930, he said, "As a historian I felt committed to scholarship rather than to a profession. My professional commitment was to medicine, for which I had been trained, and the feeling of obligation to medicine never left me throughout my career as an active member of a medical faculty" (1977, p. 20). In retirement 45 years later he had thought about moving outside medical history to do a study of the great historians of antiquity, but his mind's inclination stayed closer to home:

Health and disease have been subjects of religious and philosophical meditation, and as metaphors they are to be found in politics, science, and literature. . . Man has speculated over the meaning of his disease for himself and for his community. Medicine is not only a science and an art; it is also a mode of looking at man with compassionate objectivity. Why turn elsewhere to contemplate man's moral nature? (1977, p. 37)

HIPPOCRATES IN A WORLD OF PAGANS AND CHRISTIANS

True to the above conclusion, Temkin's last historical monograph, published in 1991, went back to his original interest in Hippocrates. It also followed the methodological example of *The Falling Sickness,* because it took a complex subject and traced it through many centuries of encounter between the subject and its environment. To a significant degree, this was a different way of looking at Hippocrates (i.e., a different way of asking questions about the Hippocratic corpus and its legacy). Again, the breadth and depth of intellectual sweep is astonishing and essential.

The first sentence of Temkin's preface poses the question, "How did the fame of the Greek physician Hippocrates fare during the first six centuries of our era, during which a pagan culture was transformed into a Christian one?" (1991, p. ix). In the first third of the book he explored the place of Hippocrates in Greek and Roman medical practice and culture, including its relationship to pagan religion. Christianity eventually absorbed much of Hippocratic practice and philosophy, especially through the mediation of Galen. However, there was always some tension in the relationship, mainly because ancient medicine and philosophy contained an element of scientific materialism that was inimical to Christian monotheism. Throughout the work Temkin deliberately avoided theological problems, but he took moral issues to be a legitimate part of his historical investigation.

"ON SECOND THOUGHT" AND OTHER ESSAYS IN THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE AND SCIENCE

In some respects this book is a followup volume to *The Double Face of Janus*, 25 years later. Fourteen of its 16 chapters are reprints of Temkin's earlier papers, none of which had been included in *Janus*. What had been left out but was now deemed worthy of reprinting is interesting in itself. "Gall and the Phrenological Movement" (1947; 2002, pp. 87-130) is a strikingly clear exposition of the cultural and philosophical milieu in which Gall and Spurzheim developed their ideas. In commenting on his reprinting of the essay in 2002, Temkin says only that it is "an early, mid-nineteenth century example of the conflict between the objective and the subjective sides of human beings"[7] (2002, p. 9). It is also interesting to note that serious historical interest in phrenology developed widely only in the late twentieth century.

The most remarkable aspect of "On Second Thought" is not the fact of its appearance from the pen of a centenarian. Rather, it is the fact that this centenarian was still rethinking and reworking his previous positions on scholarly issues. The most important example of this reconsideration is Temkin's changed opinion about Edelstein's analysis of the Hippocratic oath (Edelstein, 1943). Edelstein concluded that the oath is largely of Pythagorean origin, and this idea was widely accepted. The second essay in "On Second Thought" is not a reprint. It is an original essay that takes issue with Edelstein's position by asking, "What Does the Hippocratic Oath Say?" and then offering "Translation and Interpretation" (2002, pp. 21-28). Temkin pointed out that the evidence for the existence of a group of Pythagorean practitioners is very weak and not supported by the oath itself, which remains "a puzzling document" (2002, p. 27).

Perhaps because Edelstein was no longer present to defend himself, Temkin seems to have had some pangs of remorse about the matter, so he offered a *mea culpa*: "To atone for my heresy, I have included in this volume the obituary of my friend Edelstein, a statement written before I developed second thoughts about his approach to ancient medicine" (2002, p. 4).

EPILOGUE

Even in a life as long and productive as Temkin's, there are projects left unfinished. Early in his career Temkin took an interest in the history of the biological concept of irritability (1936). By the late 1940s he had resolved to write an extensive analysis of the subject. The Noguchi Lectures of 1969 at Johns Hopkins were titled "On the History of Anger, Irritation, and Irritability." According to his account in *Janus*, they remained unpublished at that time because he still hoped "to expand them in a much more comprehensive book" (1977, p. 31). It was not to be, and we can only contemplate the whole from the fragments. Perhaps this is also true of the man.

The manuscript was critiqued by Gert Brieger, Judith Temkin Irvine, and Nancy McCall, whose assistance was much appreciated. I am also indebted to the assistance provided by Andrew Harrison at the Chesney Archives at Johns Hopkins (see note 2 below).

NOTES

1.Owsei Temkin: The man who knew Welch. *Hopkins Med. News*, spring/summer, 2001.
2.Typescript letter from M. Kac to Temkin, May 10, 1978, in Temkin papers at the Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions (henceforth, Temkin/JHMI Archives).
3.MS draft of letter from Temkin to Mark Kac, May 22, 1978, in Temkin/JHMI Archives.
4.Personal communications: emails from Judith Temkin Irvine to Samuel Greenblatt, January 31 and February 3, 2006.
5.Copies of typescript letters from Joseph S. Fruton to members of the National Academy of Sciences and to Bryce Crawford Jr., Home Secretary of the NAS, both dated September 28, 1981; MS of Temkin's reply of October 10, 1981; in Temkin/JHMI Archives.
6.Copy of typescript letter from Temkin to Crawford, May 4, 1982, and letter from Crawford to Temkin, May 17, 1982; in Temkin/JHMI Archives.
7.He had previously stated that the essay on Gall was omitted from that volume because of its excessive length (Temkin, 1977, p. 31, footnote 67).

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