

**Zeitschrift:** Gesnerus : Swiss Journal of the history of medicine and sciences  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Society of the History of Medicine and Sciences  
**Band:** 42 (1985)  
**Heft:** 3-4: Festschrift für Jean Starobinski  
  
**Vorwort:** Jean Starobinski medical historian  
**Autor:** Ackerknecht, Erwin H.

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 17.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Jean Starobinski medical historian

By Erwin H. Ackerknecht

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to say here a few words about our friend Jean Starobinski as a medical historian. Though his teaching and publishing lays to a larger extent in the field of literary history, he is, thanks to his incredible fertility, also a medical historian in his own right.

He was through his background and evolution predestined to become one. When he finished his medical studies in 1951 he had already been an assistant in French literature during three years. He has published in medical history since 1951. His masterful MD thesis of 1960, a «History of the treatment of *Melancholy* from the beginnings to 1900» reflects his triple origins as a student of medicine (with years of practical experience in hospitals), of literature, and philosophy. It is full of brilliant observations of therapeutic details (like the psychotherapeutic character of certain writings of Seneca) as well as considerations on general aspects of therapy (like the nature of a panacea versus a specific, or the nature of the black bile notion). Starobinski has repeatedly returned to the melancholy theme, the last time in 1982.

Though his short history of medicine of 1963 demonstrates his familiarity with the whole field, his research has centered mostly around problems of the history of psychopathology and psychotherapy. Here we owe to him several valuable short historical surveys (e. g. on psychosomatic medicine 1954; on passion 1980; on psychology between 1575 and 1625 (1980). Among his numerous studies of isolated problems are such on psychoanalysis, parapsychology, «imaginary fluids» etc. (1962, 1963, 1966). Most brilliant among these seem to me those on *Nostalgia* (1961, 1962, 1963, 1966) that strange psychosomatic disease, and on *Reaction* (1975, 1976). In the latter he follows the relatively young notion from its philosophical origins through physics, politics, biology and psychology. The semantic tendencies of our Geneva born author are here particularly visible. (He is not accidentally the editor of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Anagrams*.)

He has, of course, also discussed authors of particular medicohistorical interest like Descartes (1953, 1959). La Rochefoucauld (1955, 1959, 1962, 1966), who in his way was a «clinician», or Rousseau, one of his main study objects.

In addition to all these spiritual gifts we Swiss medical historians owe much gratitude to Jean Starobinski for his loyal and disinterested collaboration in our organisation during almost three decades. We are also grateful to him that he, in spite of being extremely popular in the US as a thinker, a person and a musician, has returned to Switzerland. We therefore wish him at his 65th birthday many happy returns!