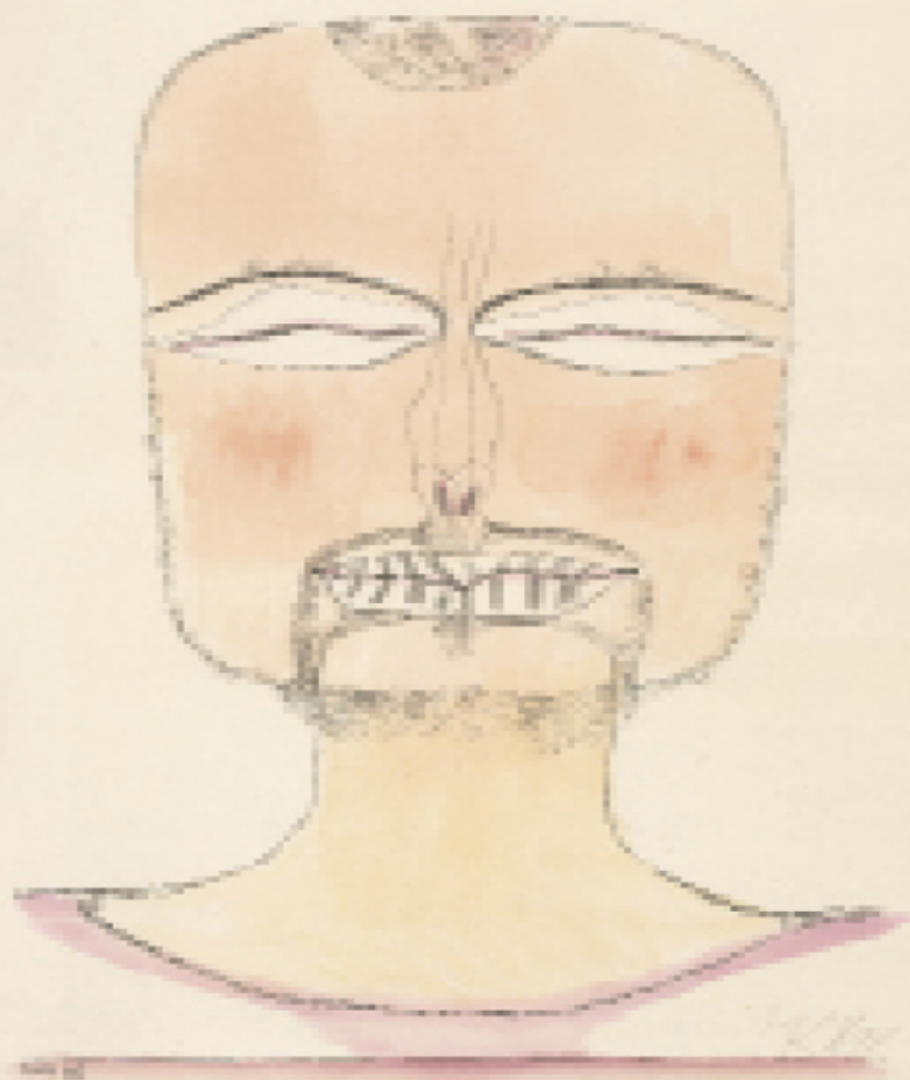


Carl Djerassi
Tagebuch des Grolls
A Diary of Pique
1983–1984



HAYMON

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Titel

Carl Djerassi

Tagebuch des Grolls

A Diary of Pique

1983-1984

*Aus dem Amerikanischen von / Translation from the
American by Sabine Hübner*

Hinweis

Cover picture | Titelbild: Paul Klee, Versunkenheit. Lithograph, hand-colored | Lithografie, handkoloriert. Albertina Wien, promised gift Carl Djerassi Art Trust II

If I were to paint an entirely true self-portrait, one would see a strange shell. And sitting inside - this would have to be made clear to all - am I, like the Kernel inside a nut. One might also call this work Allegory of Incrustation.

Wenn ich ein ganz wahres Selbstporträt malen sollte, so sähe man eine merkwürdige Schale. Und drinnen - müsste man jedem klar machen - sitze ich, wie der Kern in einer Nuss. Allegorie der Überkrustung könnte man dieses Werk auch nennen.

Paul Klee, 1905

Zitat

*Description is revelation. It is not
The thing described, nor false facsimile.*

*Beschreibung bedeutet Enthüllung. Nicht
das Beschriebene oder ein verfälschtes Faksimile.*

Wallace Stevens, Description without Place

*Pride is the recognition of one's own worth.
Vanity its pleasure.*

*Stolz ist das Bewusstsein des eigenen Wertes,
Eitelkeit ist die Freude daran.*

Fritz Mauthner, Wörterbuch der Philosophie

Preamble

In 1990, after over forty years of workaholic immersion in chemical research, I published my first autobiography, *Steroids made it possible*, as part of a series of autobiographies commissioned by the *American Chemical Society* to present through the eyes of leading chemists some of the major advances in organic chemistry during the second half of the twentieth century. These were actually “pure” autobiographies, virtually free of automythology, since they focused on only one critical readership – sophisticated chemists – and were burdened, in fact overburdened, by precise citations from the chemical literature, thus precluding most forms of fact-massaging. But two years later, aged 69, I published a “true” autobiography, true in the sense that my psychic filter, unburdened by literature citations, could and did operate in full force. And why did I, who through most of my earlier years had been hesitant to disclose many details of my personal life, suddenly start to undress in public? The instigator was my third wife¹, whom I married in 1985 and henceforth called “la ultima” in the sense that she was not only my last wife but also the great love of my life. An authentic American WASC (white Anglo-Saxon Catholic), born in Idaho, she wanted to know how a Jewish, albeit totally non-religious, refugee from Nazi Vienna had turned into a seemingly assimilated American, speaking virtually

impeccable though still accented English. Who really was her new and third husband?

Her prompting caused me to embark on a series of short memoirs, dealing in a non-chronological manner with specific events in my life, which to my delight were quickly accepted by some high-quality American literary magazines. Having composed nearly a dozen such memoirs and in the process having become infected by the benign virus of authorial pride in actually reading them in print, I realized that they represented islands in my personal sea. All that remained was to create another dozen and connect these islands by bridges to complete the only type of autobiography I was willing to offer to a general readership, since the remaining gaps would never be disclosed by me. The result was *The Pill, Pygmy Chimps, and Degas' Horse*, translated into numerous languages, though now out of print, which in German translation had the mercifully shorter title *Die Mutter der Pille*.

My inherently self-critical nature soon made me realize that psychic filters do not necessarily function only by deleting certain events. At times, they encourage deliberate embellishment or fictional adjustments that actually tell the reader more about the author's true feelings than a straight-forward account. As Sigmund Freud so aptly stated, "the unconscious speaks through the gaps in ordinary language."

This brings me to the present volume of deeply self-critical poems that record a brief traumatic interval within

the bigger story of my third and most important marriage, which lasted for 22 years until my wife, though 16 years younger than I, died in 2007. Its history is best described through Nora Ephron's words in *Heartburn* (1983):

“I insist on happy endings; I would insist on happy beginnings, too, but that's not necessary because all beginnings are intrinsically happy ... middles are a problem. Middles are perhaps the major problem of contemporary society.”

And why do I pick this particular citation? Because Ephron's novel was a piercing literary stiletto serving as the “pièce-de-revanche” against her former husband Carl Bernstein, who had abandoned her for a newer model – an experience that I also shared, though only for a year, as detailed below:

On Valentine's Day in 1977, the year following my divorce from my second wife, I met Diane Middlebrook. I fell deeply in love with Diane, who was then in the midst of working on a book entitled *Understanding Modern Poems*. Within days, I persuaded her to move in with me for a 30-day test run of cohabitation, by offering to cook for her and do her laundry – a proposition I had never made before or since to anyone – while she could focus on finishing her book. The consequences of this offer lasted for six years when on 8 May 1983, the great love of my life announced with a tender thunderbolt that she had become enamored of another man. We were through, she said unequivocally, though much more elegantly than I state here. Although

not realizing it then, what was ending was the life I had known until then, soon to be supplanted by a new, utterly unexpected turn away from scientific research into the realm of literature.

My solipsistic response at the time - charged with testosterone and adrenaline - was typically male: outraged, self-pitying, and revengeful. How could she fall in love with another man when she had me? And how come I had no inkling? My desire for revenge turned into an outpouring of poems - confessional, self-pitying, even narcissistic. It was a cathartic experience for someone who until then had never written a single line of verse - cathartic, because I wanted to revenge myself on her own turf and that of her new lover, who was not a scientist but a literatus manqué. With a few exceptions, none of these poems was published or read by anyone else. They simply had turned into the diary of an unhappy, revengeful man, who never before (or since) had kept a diary. But shortly before this volcanic poetic eruption had subsided, on my 60th birthday I wrote the following poem:

The Clock Runs Backward

At his sixtieth birthday party,
Surrounded by wife, children, and friends,
The man who has everything
Opens his gifts.

Among paperweights, cigars,
Books, silver cases,

Cut glass vases,
Appears a clock
Made by KOOL Designs
In a limited edition.
A clock running backward.
A clock called LOOK.

Amusing.
Just the gift
For the man who has everything.

How Faustian, thought the friend,
Soon to turn sixty himself.
What if it really measured time?

As the hands reached fifty,
He stopped them.
Books, hundreds of papers, dozens of honors.
Not bad, he thought: I like this clock.

But fifty was also the time
His marriage had turned sour.
He let the clock run on.

Forty-eight years, forty-five years,
Then forty-one.
Ah yes, the years of collecting:
Paintings, sculptures, and women.
Especially women.

But wasn't that the time
His loneliness had first begun?

Or was it earlier?

Why else would one collect,
Except to fill a void?

Don't hold the hands!

The thirties were best:

Burst of work. Success. Recognition.

Professor in first-rank University.

Birth of his son - now his only survivor.

What about twenty-eight?

Ah yes - he nearly forgot.

The year of THE PILL.

The pill that changed the world.

No - too pretentious, too self-important.

But he did change the life of millions,

Millions of women taking his pill, he thought.

The clock still regresses.

Twenty-seven years:

First-time father, of a daughter,

In time, his only confessor.

Now dead. Killed herself.

The beginning of his second marriage.

The first undone.

Early stigmata of success to come:

The doctorate not yet twenty-two;

The Bachelor of Arts not yet nineteen.

And the fallacy of presumed maturity:

First-time groom not yet twenty.

Backward: Europe. War.

Hitler. Vienna.

Childhood.

Stop. Stop. STOP!

The **pater familias**,

Surrounded by wife, children, friends,

The man who has everything

Is still opening presents.

More paperweights, more silver,

More books, ten pounds of Stilton cheese,

And one more clock.

Thank God it's moving forward,

Thought the friend,

The lonely one,

Who'll soon turn sixty himself.

And smiled at the woman at his side,

The one he had met yesterday. Who yesterday had said,

"Yes, I'll come with you to Oslo."

And come she did.

But not for long.

Ignoring for the moment the question of any literary quality of this poem, it is clear that it describes concisely – as only a poem can – my autobiography with few faults, foibles or warts hidden and does so without automythological improvements. How come? Because it is the summary of my poetic diary and diaries – written in the heat of emotion

and mostly only with the diarist in mind - are generally not subject to self-reflective scrutiny and refinement. *The Clock Runs Backward* is one of the few poems of that period that I published and the only one that was also translated into some foreign languages including German.

Finding poetry too constraining a vehicle for my narcissistic wrath, I proceeded to write a novel of unrequited and discarded amour, a supposedly clever "roman á clef" focusing on a terrible lapse of judgment on the part of an elegant feminist, who had dropped her eminent scientist-lover for some unknown *littérateur*. My masterpiece's title, *Middles*, I borrowed from the earlier mentioned Nora Ephron's *Heartburn*. But as my novel's "objet-de-revanche" was meant to be Diane Middlebrook, I was embarking on roman-á-cleffery at an extraordinarily transparent level by simply using my novel's title as an unsubtle reference to the first half of my departed lover's name *Middlebrook*. Yet in terms of our personal history, it proved to be prophetic, because it turned out that it was written during the middle and not the apparent end of our relationship.

My ability to complete an entire novel under less than ideal conditions - on airplanes, in hotels, and at scientific conferences - impressed me sufficiently that I actually started to look into getting it published. Fortunately, my muse intervened. Exactly one year later, on May 8, 1984, I received a note and flowers from Diane Middlebrook, whom I had not expected to ever encounter again. Her message,

essentially, was: "A year has passed. Let's talk." Of course, I accepted; though instead of flowers I presented her in return with a selection of the more brutally frank chapters of *Middles*. Although in everyday life, I possess a sense of humor, *Middles* suffered from a conspicuous lack of it. Furthermore, as Diane made brutally clear, its structure was too linear, the dialog forced. (I conceded that point, blaming it on four decades of still-too-ingrained scientific writing, with its monological and impersonal monotony). Our reconciliation took some months, but even from the early stages of our rapprochement, we realized that we would never part again. In some silly and yet fundamental way, *Middles* helped. Diane tried to persuade me that the novel was unpublishable on many grounds, discretion being only one of them. I promised never to publish that manuscript if we got married, and marry we did on June 21, 1985. The commitment between us was expressed in a moving poem that Diane wrote on that occasion, using a 1930 drawing, entitled *Geschwister*, by my favorite artist, Paul Klee for inspiration.

After Klee's *Geschwister*

By Diane Middlebrook

As in Plato's fable, they are two in one,
Their eyes focus different angles
on - it must be hoped - the same horizons,
for the delicate feet point in the same direction,
and in the little heart hanging between them

like a purse
they carry the same wishes.
The clever painter has made them nine years old
Like us: Geschwister, brother and sister,
Two lives braided into one body
Never, never to part.

This recovery from my hurt vanity – hardly an attractive feature of my own persona – had not only a sublime emotional consequence, but also led to my totally unexpected departure from the scientific world I had occupied for half a century into the new turf of literature. As my severest critic pointed out, *Middles* did show occasional flashes of insight. And most important, she observed, it demonstrated that I possessed a writer's discipline. "If you want to write fiction," she advised, "first try short stories and learn how to kill your literary darlings."

Eventually, I followed her advice. I completed a book of short stories and then turned to fiction, mostly in a genre I called "science-in-fiction" that should not be confused with science fiction and eventually moved to play-writing. For the past twenty odd years this has become my creative life and will almost certainly continue to be so until my death. And why am I so sure of this prognosis? As someone once said, many fiction writers are autobiographers wearing a mask and there is no question that I have turned into such a bearer of masks. (Indeed, one of my short stories is entitled *Maskenfreiheit*). Once I recognized the fictional

components of autobiography, I realized that the only place where I could write true, unvarnished autobiography was disguised in my fiction – a process that has turned into a form of autopschoanalysis from which I have learned much about myself.

This brings me back to my “diary” poems and associated memories, which have rested for nearly 30 years in a locked drawer to be finally re-read and revised by me three years after my wife’s death. What I found and decided to share at a time that the actuarial facts of my own life have become all too self-evident, is a tale of conceit and failure, of love and sadness, of the curative power of time elapsed, and of the insight I finally recognized in the old Latin proverb: “Revenge is but a confession of pain.”

¹ Diane Middlebrook (1938-2007), Professor of English Literature, Stanford University, and author of major biographies of poets such as Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes.

Einleitung

Nachdem ich mich über vierzig Jahre lang wie besessen ausschließlich der chemischen Forschung gewidmet hatte, veröffentlichte ich 1990 meine erste Autobiographie, *Steroids made it possible*, im Rahmen einer von der *American Chemical Society* in Auftrag gegebenen autobiographischen Reihe, die aus Sicht bedeutender Chemiker einige der wichtigsten Fortschritte der organischen Chemie in der zweiten Hälfte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts präsentieren sollte. Es handelte sich im Grunde um „reine“ Autobiographien, frei von Selbstmythologisierung, denn sie wandten sich nur an eine Gruppe kritischer Leser und Leserinnen - erfahrene Chemiker - und waren mit präzisen Zitaten aus der chemischen Fachliteratur befrachtet, ja eigentlich überfrachtet, was das Zurechtkneten von Fakten weitgehend ausschloss. Zwei Jahre später jedoch, mit neunundsechzig, veröffentlichte ich eine „echte“ Autobiographie, echt in dem Sinne, dass mein seelischer Filter unbelastet durch Zitate aus der Fachliteratur seine volle Wirkung entfalten konnte. Und warum begann ich, dem es in früheren Jahren widerstrebt hatte, allzu viele Details aus seinem Privatleben preiszugeben, mich plötzlich in aller Öffentlichkeit zu entblößen? Dazu angestiftet hat mich meine dritte Frau², die ich 1985 heiratete und fortan „la ultima“ nannte, weil sie nicht nur meine letzte Ehefrau, sondern auch die große Liebe meines

Lebens war. Als echte WASC (White Anglo-Saxon Catholic), in Idaho geboren, wollte sie wissen, wieso sich ein jüdischer, wenn auch völlig areligiöser Flüchtling aus dem Wien der Nazizeit in einen offenbar assimilierten Amerikaner verwandelt hatte und ein quasi makelloses, wenn auch immer noch akzentbehaftetes Englisch sprach. Wer war eigentlich ihr neuer, dritter Ehemann?

Ihr Drängen führte dazu, dass ich eine Reihe kurzer Erinnerungen verfasste, die in nicht-chronologischer Abfolge bestimmte Ereignisse meines Lebens behandelten und zu meiner Freude rasch von einigen anspruchsvollen amerikanischen Literaturzeitschriften angenommen wurden. Nachdem ich fast ein Dutzend solcher Erinnerungen verfasst hatte - und mich, als ich sie dann tatsächlich in gedruckter Form sah, mit dem gutartigen Virus des Autorenstolzes infizierte - wurde mir klar, dass sie Inseln in meinem persönlichen Meer darstellten. Nun galt es nur noch ein Dutzend weiterer solcher Inseln zu schaffen und sie mit Brücken zu verbinden, um so die einzige Art von Autobiographie zu vollenden, die ich einem größeren Publikum zu präsentieren bereit war, denn die verbleibenden Lücken würde ich niemals preisgeben. Das Resultat war *The Pill, Pygmy Chimps, and Degas' Horse*, in zahlreiche Sprachen übersetzt (wenn auch mittlerweile vergriffen) und auf Deutsch gnädigerweise mit dem kürzeren Titel *Die Mutter der Pille* versehen.

Da ich von Natur aus zur Selbstkritik neige, wurde mir rasch klar, dass die Funktion seelischer Filter nicht

unbedingt nur darin besteht, bestimmte Ereignisse aus dem Gedächtnis zu löschen. Zeitweise fördern sie bewusste Schönfärberei oder fiktive Anpassungen, die dem Leser bzw. der Leserin im Grunde mehr über die wahren Gefühle des Autors verraten als ein direkter Bericht. Wie Sigmund Freud so treffend sagte: „Das Unbewusste spricht durch die Lücken der Alltagssprache.“

Und so komme ich zu dem vorliegenden Band zutiefst selbstkritischer Gedichte, die ein kurzes traumatisches Intervall innerhalb der umfänglicheren Geschichte meiner dritten und wichtigsten Ehe dokumentieren, die zweiundzwanzig Jahre währte, bis meine Frau, obgleich sechzehn Jahre jünger als ich, 2007 starb. Nora Ephrons Worte in *Sodbrennen oder Quetschkartoffeln gegen Trübsinn* (1983) beschreiben die Geschichte dieser Ehe am besten:

„Ich bestehe darauf, dass Dinge ein glückliches Ende haben. Ich würde auch darauf bestehen, dass Dinge einen guten Anfang haben, aber das ist nicht nötig, weil Anfänge schon an sich glücklich sind ... der mittlere Abschnitt ist das Problem. Die mittleren Abschnitte sind vielleicht das Hauptproblem unserer heutigen Gesellschaft.“

Und warum habe ich ausgerechnet dieses Zitat ausgewählt? Weil Ephrons Roman ein spitzes literarisches Stilett in der „pièce de revanche“ gegen ihren Exgatten Carl Bernstein war, der sie gegen ein neueres Modell eingetauscht hatte - eine Erfahrung, die ich gleichfalls