

Carl Djerassi (1923-2015)

Alberto Lifshitz*

Editor

Carl Djerassi died at 91 years. When a depiction of the impact of scientific research is attempted, the contribution of Djerassi and those who developed it along with him (Luis Ernesto Miramontes, Jorge Rosenkranz) is one of the best examples. Besides the fact that the essential part of the project was developed in Mexico, very few scientific contributions have had the consequences reached by contraceptives: the social structure of the Western World was simply modified when women ceased to be slaves of maternity, found their own space, advanced in their position and achieved a development they were forbidden of for centuries. Thanks to birth control, the world changed into a more balanced and fair space between genders, more propitious to the development of women's talent.

But this was not the only contribution of Djerassi. I would like to highlight his role not only as educator but also as a narrator, as a creator of literature. He was an authentic writer and his works can resist the most rigorous judgements of literary critics, and he could be qualified as the creator of a genre that might be termed contemporary scientific narrative. His novels illustrate the dynamics of science and the relationships between scientists in the knowledge-production centers of the second half of the 20th Century. His first novel, "Cantor's Dilemma", recreates the fierce competence at high spheres of the scientific community to obtain recognition, including the Nobel Prize. His second novel, "The Bourbaki Gambit", also depicts the

relentless struggle of scientists for recognition, the informal organization of the "scientific community" and the "aging" of scientists that characterized their era. The plot develops around the discovery of the polymerase chain reaction (PCR).

Djerassi used to qualify his literature not as science fiction, but as "science in fiction", and several of his novels formed a tetralogy, precisely of "science in fiction". The process of creation and release of the pill, as well as his reflections as a protagonist appeared in the context of the 50th anniversary of its discovery in the book "This Man's Pill: Reflections on the 50th Birthday of the Pill". Other work worth mentioning is "Menachem's seed", set in part in the Near West, around a treatment for masculine infertility. This novel was the base for one of his plays "An Immaculate Misconception". The novel "NO" –which completes the tetralogy– describes the discovery of nitric oxide and its relationship with erectile dysfunction. "Marx, deceased", refers to the Stephen Marx character, a writer whose obsession to know what readers and critics really think about him drives him to plan his own death.

In addition to novels and plays, Djerassi wrote poetry, was an art collector (recently, he had donated his collection of Paul Klee's paintings to the Art Museum of San Francisco) and he became the sponsor of young artists and scientists which is why we could say that that who passed away by the end of January 2015, was a true renaissance spirit right in the 21st Century.

Correspondence:

*Alberto Lifshitz

Unidad de Congresos del Centro Médico Nacional Siglo XXI
Bloque B, Av. Cuauhtémoc, 330
Col. Doctores, C.P. 06725, México, D.F.
E-mail: alifshitzg@yahoo.com