

# Understanding the Discourse of Aging



# Understanding the Discourse of Aging:

*A Multifaceted Perspective*

Edited by

Vicent Salvador and Agnese Sampietro

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# UNDERSTANDING THE DISCOURSE OF AGING: AN INTRODUCTION

AGNESE SAMPIETRO, VICENT SALVADOR  
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There are certain universal themes that permeate the thought and collective imagination of our societies. Eros and Thanatos, of course, are the axes around which revolve individual and social psychology, popular culture, literary creation, representations that dominate the mass media, and the flattery of publicity, etc. These topics are closely linked to our emotions, which often interfere in our analysis of them. No wonder that when Labov (1972) was searching for devices to overcome the observer's paradox in his sociolinguistic surveys, by arousing in his respondents the image of their own death, he was able to access the most spontaneous registers of speech. Love and death become poles for attracting thoughts and feelings. Thus they arouse the epistemological reflection that may rationally explain the processes involved in these spheres of human experience, as well as the passions that fluctuate between desire and prohibition, i.e. taboo, self-censorship, and the fear of all that escapes rationality. We might also say that interaction is produced between Popper's three worlds of knowledge (1968) – world 1 (physical experience), world 2 (subjective experience), and world 3, in which the mental processes of world 2 are analyzed. There are good reasons for thinking that such processes are steeped in emotional impulses and that they have been modeled historically by cultural structures. From our point of view, each society's conception of love and death largely corresponds to constructions that are articulated culturally through the various discourses produced in social semiosis. (Salvador, Kotátková, and Clemente eds. 2020)

The subject of old age, and of the aging process, implies elements of both: elements of death, for example, in the sense that the currents of the river of life, as they flow, have, in the sea as a metaphor for death, their target, their outcome, their final destination. The spectacle of the advancing fluvial waters effortlessly arouses our image of the estuary. However, aging is also related to the issue of love in a broad sense: the loss of the physical

faculties that enable us to engage in the practice of sex and the difficulty in conserving our ability to get excited, a quality considered typical of youthful ebullience. Of course in exchange, philosophical reflections on old age, which are usually the prerogative of thinkers who have settled into that biographical phase of their existence, assert other advantages, such as the serenity that comes in life from the accumulation of knowledge derived from experience itself, which in turn leads to wisdom.

Through highly diverse disciplinary channels, linked via discourse analysis, this book investigates how all of these factors function. Mainly examined are specific cases, for exemplification purposes, in order to construct a panorama that combines numerous perspectives, including the required interdisciplinarity of these approaches, the gender dimension (which underlies many of the phenomena studied), a historical itinerary of literary representations of old age, and the changes that have been introduced by today's social communication technologies.

The first section of the book, entitled *Aging: An Interdisciplinary Overview*, opens the debate on aging from a broad perspective by addressing some of the problems and discourses that are associated with this stage in life. The debate is opened by Vicent Salvador, who analyses the discursive construction of the social image of old age in Spanish and Catalan cultures in both literature and the plastic arts. His reflection emphasizes the contradictory views of old age, which is considered a period of virtue and wisdom as well as a time of illness and decay.

In the second chapter, María Desamparados Bernat offers a socio-sanitary view of this stage of life. She begins with the difficult task of defining what 'old' actually means. Even in the clinical setting, it is difficult to define a person as 'old', since age is a multidimensional construct: a person's chronological age may be different from their biological, psychological, or social age. The author also describes some of the main challenges the health sector faces in relation to the aging of the population, in response to which great efforts are generally being made to promote active aging. On a personal level, however, for many patients, the final stage in life is characterized more often as a period of vulnerability and even exclusion.

The individual sphere is also the focus of the chapter by Esperanza Morales on the image of the elderly population. Rather than analyzing how the discourse of old age is constructed from the social perspective, in this case, the author focuses on the performance (Goffman 1959) of the aging self, and examines how well-known personalities such as Karl Lagerfeld, Pepe Mújica and Vandana, among others, create their *ethos* and *authoritas* as elderly people.

The first section ends with the work of anthropologist María Cátedra, who addresses another difficult issue related to aging in western societies – the final phase, death itself. This chapter presents a detailed analysis of how illness and death affect family relationships in rural society through a study of the *vaqueiros* of Asturias (northern Spain), where old age and disease mark the transition towards death, a process involving not just the individual, but the community as a whole.

The second section of the book, as the title suggests, adopts a gender perspective on the issue of aging. Maria Àngels Francés opens this section by analyzing the image of older women in contemporary Catalan literature. Since the 1970s, renowned writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Brook Bouson have confronted prejudices against older women and their bodies by writing about old age from a gender perspective. The author adds three Catalan writers to this literary trend – Montserrat Roig, Maria Barbal and Ana Penyes– who, albeit in different ways, have challenged the invisibility of the older woman.

The next chapter, by Adolf Piquer, studies the relationship between Phaedra and Hippolytus from the perspective of age and gender by analyzing ancient and modern versions of the legend – from Seneca to Racine, and from Martorell to Rosa Montero. Phaedra breaks the established norms of age and gender in several ways, but especially because she is an aging woman with desire for a younger man. By analyzing each representation, Piquer is able to capture the specific characteristics of the various social contexts (economic, cultural and religious) in which the legend is re-told.

Returning to a contemporary perspective, Emma Domínguez studies another case in which age-and-gender-related social norms are broken, i.e. the literary representation of the elderly female detective. Focusing on the series *The Sunday Philosophy Club* by Alexander McCall Smith, whose main character is middle-aged amateur detective Isabel Dalhousie, Domínguez reflects on the prejudices that exist in relation to women and aging, and presents the protagonist as a model for the mature woman to follow.

This section on gender closes with the work by Antoni Maestre on the movie *Truman* (2015) by Cesc Gay, which deals with another social and cultural taboo – male aging. This topic is generally ignored in audiovisual discourse because aging and illness imply vulnerability, which is a threat to the traditional view of masculinity in our culture. The terminal cancer of one of the main characters in the film is the starting point from which to analyze aging, illness, masculinity, and the value of friendship.

The third section of this book, *Aging in literature across time and space*, analyses literary representations of aging from a wide range of

cultures and eras. Opening this section is a chapter by Jordi Oviedo on the image of old age in medieval Catalan literature, with special reference to Joan Roís de Corella, one of the most important authors of his time. In his work, the discourse on aging is presented through psychological and physical descriptions of the characters, who embody the values and countervalues of aging, thus generating a contradictory view of this stage of life.

In the next chapter, Vicent Montalt analyzes the image of the aged body in Shakespeare's work. The English playwright was particularly interested in issues such as aging and the passage of time. By focusing on the physical and cognitive degradation that accompanies this process, Shakespeare challenged the traditional image of wise old men.

Contemporary literary perspectives on aging are addressed in the final two chapters in this section. In the first of these, Marta Miquel unravels the ambivalent discourse on aging in one of Susan Hill's final novels, *The Mist in the Mirror*, in which the mirror, which reflects different and somehow ambivalent images of the character, becomes a metaphor for aging.

Nuria Casado analyses the discourse on aging in two recent English theatrical texts: *Escaped Alone* by Caryl Churchill and *The Children* by Lucy Kirkwood. These two plays are practically contradictory opposites (the first one is naturalistic, whereas the second one may be considered anti-naturalistic and even absurd). Also, they present complementary visions of old age through different representations of the elderly population (from elderly active to elderly depressed) which, in their contradiction, paint a portrait of the crisis of aging.

The final section of this book, entitled *Technology, mass media and popular culture*, deals with representations of the elderly in the media, popular culture and technology. The first two chapters analyze a new and little explored phenomenon – dating websites for elderly adults. Bote and Clemente offer an overview of the discourse on online dating for older people who consider the phenomenon a useful way to build and maintain affective relationships later in life. Ieva Stončikaitė, on the other hand, presents a more negative view of online dating in her analysis of the representations of this method of finding a partner in *Fear of Dying*, by famous contemporary author Erica Jong. Although cyberspace allows for greater control over the type of information that is provided or sought, the book raises an important and under-explored issue – the sexual harassment of older women.

From a different perspective, Olga García studies how resistance to old age was portrayed in films starring renowned Spanish actor Paco Martínez Soria, whose characters were reluctant, not only to accept the transformations



of modern life, but also to accept the specific challenges of aging– in clear contrast to the actor’s obvious physical changes as his professional career progressed.

Martí Domínguez and Tatiana Pina focus on another genre; graphic humor. From a large corpus of 710 vignettes which feature older people, from 36 countries, the authors analyze the stereotypes of aging and the elderly that are transmitted by these texts and images. In general, they observe that old age is portrayed as a period of personal and physical decline dominated by nostalgia, an absence of sexuality, illness, and the fear of death.

The last chapter of this book changes perspective completely and focuses not on personal experiences of aging but on teenagers’ perceptions of the elderly population. Abarrategui, Pascual and Villas-Boas interviewed a sample of students from two rural schools in Galicia about their perceptions of the elderly in general, and of their grandparents in particular. Their results demonstrate that the students’ grandparents are less stereotyped than elderly people in general. The authors also show that although elderly women are usually considered more positively than elderly men, gender roles persist even in representations of aged people.

From medicine to cinema, and from literature throughout history to graphic arts, the authors of this volume systematically analyze the phenomenon of aging and its enormous contradictions – from wisdom to solitude, from the loss of energy and vigor to sexuality in old age, and from what it means to be old to the perception of death. Although longer life expectancy is considered one of the clearest signs of a nation’s prosperity, this book suggests that an attitude of resistance still permeates how the elderly are generally perceived in society. By adopting several perspectives on the phenomenon of aging, from feminist theories and literary gerontology to studies on multimodality, this volume contributes to our understanding of the enormous complexity of the phenomenon of aging in the past, present, and future (Hamilton 2015).

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**PART I**

**AGING:**  
**AN INTERDISCIPLINARY OVERVIEW**



CHAPTER 1

THE SOCIO-DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION  
OF OLD AGE:  
GENRES, IMAGES, AND CONFLICTS<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

Within the theoretical framework of social constructionism, this article presents several aspects of the discourses that have been used throughout history in Western culture to construct the social representation of old age. To do so, we focus on the Hispanic world, and specifically on Spanish and Catalan culture. In our world, the way in which old age is valued is conflictive because of the contrast between opposing (verbal and plastic) images made up of different stereotypes and models in which apologies coexist with the contempt or concealment that leads to silence or euphemisms. We could say that two ways of looking at old age are confronted: virtue and wisdom on the one hand, and the concept of old age as a disease, or even as a stigma, on the other. We postulate that three types of discourse, each with its own textual genre, should be considered from the methodological perspective as ways in which this social representation is constructed: the regulatory (the legal framework and public administration mechanisms); and the exogenous (social discourses, literature, cinema, the arts, etc.). On the other hand, the phenomenon of voyeurism, or scopophilia, is prototypically associated with old men, though this behavior is not exclusive to members of that social group. Paintings and literature provide examples of the conflict between impotence and unextinguished desire in

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter, as well as chapters 3, 6, 8 and 16 of this book, have been developed within the framework of the research project "The discursive construction of conflict" (FFI2017-85227-R).

the elderly, a notion expressed in a particularly suggestive way in the biblical legend of Susanna and the Elders.

I find four reasons why old age appears to be unhappy: first, that it withdraws us from active pursuits; second, that it makes the body weaker; third, that it deprives us of almost all physical pleasures; and, fourth, that it is not far removed from death.

(Cicero)

There blooms the flower of patience, a noble plant, and we become calmer, more tolerant.

(Herman Hesse)

## **Old Age Stereotypes**

Obviously, the aging process and the onset of the final stage in life's trajectory are phenomena that respond to a biological reality – the deterioration of one's organs and functions – that affects all living beings. However, the social image of old age is a complex construct formulated from multiple types of verbal and non-verbal discourse that model the perception of old age existing in each era and society. Linguistic clichés invented by popular culture, legal and administrative regulations, religious, philosophical and literary texts, and, of course, the iconography of the plastic arts are all mechanisms that define the more or less stereotyped perception of this latter stage of human life that is the prelude to death. In addition to a conceptual dimension, this social representation comprises associated linguistic and plastic images, inherent emotional reactions, and sociocultural practices that become conventionalized in each historical context (Alba 1992; Thane ed. 2005). This discursive construction therefore varies depending on the era and geographical and social space, and, because of its heterogeneity, contains the seeds for numerous individual and collective conflicts.

The stereotypes established in this way constitute a perceptual economy mechanism that enables one to quickly grasp a notional category but may generate prejudices and even discriminatory behaviours. Stereotypes are certainly useful automatisms operating on the cognitive plane, whereas prejudices involve value filters that condition one's perception of reality. Discriminatory behaviours, for their part, belong to the deontological sphere and determine whether situations are just or unjust (Amossy & Herschberg Pierrot 1997). It is worth remembering these basic concepts of social psychology at the beginning of this chapter, which analyses some of the discursive procedures by which the social image of old age is constructed

in our world, and specifically in the context of Hispanic (Spanish and Catalan) culture.

The history of literature provides numerous testimonies of the awareness of deterioration due to aging. Emblematic in this context are the words pronounced by old Celestina in *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* by Fernando de Rojas (published in 1499) on the ravages of old age:

Pero ¿quién te podría contar, señora, sus daños [de la vejez], sus inconvenientes, sus fatigas, sus cuidados, sus enfermedades, su frío, su calor, su descontentamiento, su rencilla, su pesadumbre, aquel arrugar de cara, aquel mudar de cabellos su primera y fresca color, aquel poco oír, aquel debilitado ver, puestos los ojos a la sombra, aquel hundimiento de boca, aquel caer de dientes, aquel carecer de fuerza, aquel flaco andar, aquel espacioso comer?

[But who is he, lady, that can recount unto you the inconveniences of old age? The discommodities it brings with it? Its torments, its cares, its troubles, its infirmities, its colds, its heats, its discontentments, its brawls, its janglings, its griefs, which like so many weights lie heavy upon it? Those deep furrows and deep wrinkles in the face? That change and alteration in the hair? That fading of fresh and lively colour? That want of hearing? That weakness of sight? That hollowness in the eyes, seeing, as if they were shut up in a shade? That sinking and falling of the jaws? That toothlessness of the gums? That failing of force and of strength? That feebleness of legs? That slowness in feeding?]<sup>2</sup>

In another passage, however, the procurer affirms that sexual desire – mixed with memories of past experiences – does not die with the passing years. She does so with a play on words that metaphorically juxtaposes the loss of teeth and the persistence of taste in the gums. Indeed, the witch shies away from the feverish lovers and takes her leave with the following words, which illustrate the conflict between memories of the past and the present reality, thus confronting desire with impotence: “*Quedaos adiós, que voyme solo porque me hacéis dentera con vuestro besar y retozar. Que aun el sabor en las encías me quedó: no le perdí con las muela*”. [Farewell, I am leaving because I am jealous of your kissing and caressing, for their taste endures on my gums though my teeth no longer remain.]

Paremiology and folklore have abundant allusions to similar situations. On the one hand, we find repeated references to physical deterioration [in Spanish, *viejo pellejo*, literally, ‘old skin’; in Catalan, *caldera vella*, *bony o forat*, [literally, ‘old boiler, dent or hole’] while on the other hand we find a

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<sup>2</sup> Translation produced in 1631 by James Mabbe.

positive evaluation of accumulated experience (in Spanish, *del viejo, el consejo* [“ask an old man for good advice”] and *más sabe el diablo por viejo que por diablo* [literally, ‘the devil knows many things because he is old not because he is the devil’]). However, cultural tradition tends to highlight the impropriety of sexual desire in the elderly (in Spanish, *viejo verde* [‘dirty old man’] and *A la vejez, viruelas* [literally, ‘In old age, smallpox’]). Folklore has often ridiculed the image of the old man who woos or ‘buys’ a poor, young woman. This image combines the stereotype of impotence and a husband’s jealousy on the one hand, with a sort of simmering protest portraying the act as a form of abuse enabled by the power of money on the other. Literature has often depicted this tradition, for example from the figure of the *gilós* (jealous husband) in Provençal troubadour poetry to many works of contemporary literature, in which an old man refuses to accept his age and strives to remain anchored in a state of eternal youth. Mockery of this kind can also be turned into drama, as in the case of the old man who, like Faust, sells his soul to the devil out of love for Margarita, or the old professor in the film *Der blaue Engel*, who falls in love with a *femme fatale*. In his play *The love of Don Perlimplín and Belisa in the Garden*, García Lorca portrays an elderly man who enters a marriage of convenience with a young woman, causing five men, “representatives of the earth’s five races” (an example of poetic hyperbole) to enter through the newly married couple’s balcony to satisfy the young bride on her wedding night. However, Don Perlimplín refuses to accept this situation and momentarily seduces his wife by dressing up in a red cape and assuming the identity of a mysterious young man. This imaginative feat demonstrates the complex nature of eroticism beyond the merely somatic (cf. the chapters of the second section of this book, *Gender perspectives*).

## Conflict of Values

For each historical and cultural context, the social representation of old age can be analysed through numerous clichés that are associated with certain images (semantic contents, icons and emotional connotations). For example, there are frequent references to winter, snow and withered flowers, which illustrate the relationship between physical aging and the loss of heat and moisture. Experience, tranquility, and wisdom (as opposed to mere information or even knowledge, as a stage in which information has already been articulated and assimilated) are other clichés that also often accompany old age, though in this case they evaluate old age in a positive light. These conflicting appraisals are reflected in opposing behavioural attitudes: logically, negative appraisals encourage contempt and concealment (silencing



or euphemizing, as in the use of terms such as ‘third age’ and ‘elderly’), whereas positive ones encourage respect and even admiration.

In periods when tradition is valued as a collective treasure, the elderly are more greatly appreciated, whereas when the ideals of technological progress and innovation predominate, the elderly are generally underestimated or denied access to the elite jobs market by a phenomenon known as the technological divide. This polarization of the values attributed to old age also depends on more material social factors such as the size of the elderly population and whether the life system is nomadic or sedentary, since in nomadic systems the elderly are clearly an obstacle to a tribe’s essential mobility. Negative attitudes can even lead to the physical elimination of those who are no longer of practical use to the community. The film *The Ballad of Narayama* [*Narayama Bushi-ko*] is a beautiful depiction of a family drama in 18th-century Japanese rural society, where a son is obliged by tradition and the need for his community to survive to take his mother to the cold, snow-capped mountain summit to allow her die.

Burning issues in the socio-discursive construction of old age are productivity and social utility, which in the elderly are greatly reduced, or at least very different. One consequence of this kind of ‘old age shaming’ that leads to invisibility of the aged population is the frequent and high degree of isolation, whether this occurs in nursing homes that have the feeling of a ghetto or is caused by the undesired loneliness of living at home without the company of others. With a sharp and satirical pen, a Spanish theatre scholar (Tordera 2017) anonymously published a brief treatise on this subject recently, in which he examined ways of finding a use for the elderly population. It included an analysis of the so-called ‘silver economy’, which develops methods for exploiting the consumers of the elderly market through ‘the business of aging’. Tordera sarcastically explores the dilemma between revaluation and contempt and even examines the repressed desire to exterminate the elderly from today’s society.

This contradiction between evaluations highlights the terms of a conflict between concepts, as conveyed in recent theories on this issue (Bartos and Wehr 2001, Deutsch, Coleman and Marcus (eds.) 2006, Kriesberg and Dayton 2017, Morales and Floyd (eds.) 2017). On the one hand, the elderly lose strength (which limits basic aspects of their behaviour such as mobility, physical work, and social interaction) as well as some linguistic and cognitive skills on certain occasions (Wright (ed.) 2016). They experience additionally a decline in their perceptual abilities through what has sometimes been called “the sunset of senses and perceptions” (Morgado 2012, 201-205), which affects not only the most obvious senses, such as sight and hearing, but also the senses of smell (anosmia) and taste

(hypogeusia), as well as other age-associated anomalies. However, as long as this decline does not lead to a relevant reduction in their cognitive abilities, the elderly may display a level of judgment that is heightened by their experiences. There is even talk of a ‘later style’ when referring to artists who, at the final stage of their careers, are able, not only to attain a greater level of maturity, but also to revolutionize the established criteria of the literary and artistic production of their time, and even to subject their own previous works to radical and creative criticism. Edward Said dedicated an outstanding book on this subject, *On Late Style* (published posthumously in 2006), in which he exemplified this theory with works by creators such as Beethoven, Thomas Mann, Rembrandt, and Adorno, whose ideas on this issue provided the author with a certain inspiration.

With all its complexities and contradictions, the social construction of the image of old age is largely achieved via three main discursive blocks: a) regulatory discourses, i.e. the explicit or implicit provisions that create a legal and administrative framework; b) endogenous discourses, i.e. those produced by the elderly themselves (or those who feel old or wish to display the *ethos* of an elderly person), which of course include documents produced by groups who defend the rights of the elderly population; and c) exogenous social discourses, i.e. social representations generated from external sources (not necessarily by members of the elderly population) through literature, the arts, cinema and any other means of social communication. In the following sections we discuss these three types of discourse, each of which comprises multiple and varied genres.

## Regulatory Discourses

The boundaries of ‘old age’ are rather diffuse, since the peripheral zones beyond the typical nuclei reflect a high degree of variation. These boundaries differ according to history, the human geography in the various regions of the world, social class, and gender. It could be said that they also depend on the perspective of each generation living at a specific synchronous period. Indeed, they also depend on the age of the person who is reflecting upon them, as well as on whether the boundaries apply to oneself or to others. Obviously, there are more subtle individual variables than one’s numerical age, such as bodily appearance, dress sense, and attitude to life. Striving to appear younger is one of the engines of today’s economy thanks to a social process involving the *medicalization* of aging, while the pharmaceutical industry, cosmetic surgery, and even simple cosmetics move huge amounts of money. An example of this is provided by a report published several years ago by *Le Monde 2*, which discussed a

group of septuagenarians who had agreed to take part in an experiment with new hormones that involved risks that were impossible to calculate. The participants hoped that, like little Faustus, they would be rejuvenated to a certain degree. The title of the report referred to “anti-aging guinea pigs” (Salvador 2005).

Different social discourses in the legal and administrative fields help, directly or indirectly, to establish regulations for categorizing age. Many administrative systems set expiration dates for certain positions and functions. The Catholic Church, for example, establishes an age from which cardinals are excluded from the conclave for electing the future Pope. Sometimes age boundaries are found in minor but psychosocially significant documents such as *young person's cards*, or *gold cards*, which enable citizens to obtain discounts on various services depending on their age. Sometimes the boundaries are observed in icons such as those indicating seats on public transport that are reserved for the elderly (just like those for pregnant women or the disabled). These elements are all components of a regulatory discourse on the boundaries between ages.

However, the provisions that most clearly define these boundaries correspond to retirement, i.e. the life stage which Spain refers to as being of pensioners or “the passive classes”. Whether desired, feared, or taken early, as certain professional groups have done in recent years, the transition from one life stage to another marks a visible social milestone that affects the rights and responsibilities of citizens, family budgets and often self-esteem. It usually involves a loss of professional and social status that can be interpreted in terms of power: many professionals and civil servants, for example, imagine their retirement like the handing over of a sabre by a general who must permanently retire from service. In any case, exclusion from the working environment (whether voluntary or compulsory) represents a hugely important change in lifestyle. The Spanish film *Mondays in the Sun* illustrates the frustration felt by people who are forced into unemployment and who, like the elderly populations of many towns and villages, spend their hours of enforced leisure and boredom in sunny locations. The lack of employment portrayed in the film is not due to retirement (although unemployment is not totally unrelated to age) but the protagonists experience it as a kind of undesired premature retirement that highlights a social worthlessness that affects their self-esteem (Amber and Sunday 2016).

Another type of discourse, in this case a legal document that is associated with old age (albeit partially and indirectly), is the last will and testament. In the collective imagination, this document is linked to an individual's realistic planning for his or her death, and therefore to their

imminent final stage of life. The historical development of legal regulations on private property and inheritance rights are, of course, decisive factors that determine how society behaves towards the elderly. Last wills and testaments include provisions on who will inherit the testator's assets. As María Catedra analyses in another chapter of this book, when the legal rules are sufficiently flexible, in some rural communities these provisions function as a form of old age insurance policy that undertakes to compensate those who are designated to look after an elderly person.

### **Endogenous Discourses**

As retirement usually leads to a decrease in financial income (and a risk of future insecurity due to changes in the demographic pyramid), pensioner groups have often reacted, especially in recent years, by organizing collective actions such as declarations, demonstrations and marches. The term *yayoflautas* has been widely used in the media recently to describe Spanish pensioners who take part in organized protests to defend public pensions (apparently, the term derives from the noun *perroflautas*, which is used to refer to the homeless, as well as to anyone taking part in street protests against the financial establishment).

Endogenous discourse can be individual as well as collective. Examples of individual discourse are mainly found in genres such as essays and autobiographies, and other kinds of *egodocuments* (memoirs, diaries, personal letters...). In the history of written thought, there are numerous treatises and essays on this subject, including those by authors such as Cicero, Seneca, Herman Hesse, Simone de Beauvoir, Norberto Bobbio and, in the current Hispanic context, Carmen Alborch, Antonio Tordera and Teresa Pàmies. The bibliography in this area is certainly extensive. If we exclude medical treatises (where Alzheimer's disease is currently a hot topic) and self-help books, many of the volumes that explore old age would be classified as essays, a genre that usually requires its authors to be sufficiently mature in years and reflects the construction of a discursive *ethos* that indicates maturity in life (Amossy 2010). Empirical authors, on the other hand, tend to belong either in the 'old age' category or close to it. Cicero, for example, wrote *De senectute* in his sixties, shortly before his death. Simone de Beauvoir also wrote in her sixties, while Teresa Pàmies did so in her eighties. Such works undoubtedly reflect the large biographical content and generally subjective tone of reflection that are typical of essays. Most of them also project a positive vision that generates a sort of apologia for old age and have titles containing words such as 'praise', 'charm' and 'adventure'. After all, the aim of Cicero's work is to argue against the four

elements that, according to him, make old age something to be feared. However, as Fernando Lolas (2001: 186) asserts in reference to *De senectute*, like all defences, defending the virtues of old age also implies the seeds of conflict: “As an apologia for old age, the book achieved its purpose. However, like old age itself, this apologia is double-edged. [...] Old age, like life itself, will always accept multiple and contradictory visions”.

Another bibliographic field in this area is autobiography, the first-person narrative of which directly supports its confessional nature. Autobiographical works almost always involve taking a retrospective look from a perspective of old age, or, at least, of advanced maturity. Highly illustrative in this context is the title of Ernesto Sabato’s book *Antes del Fin* (*Before the End*). The search for a personal identity – and the active construction of that identity through narrative – may be based on ethnicity, nationality, gender or profession. Whichever basis of identity is prioritized, however, both the arrival point of the narrated trajectory, and the departure point of the act of narrating, are the stage of old age from which context the past experience is explored. In this sense, the author’s identity as an elderly person gains prominence, because it is from that final destination that the meaning of their whole life, which they wish to legitimize through their writing, is sought.

Taking as an example the numerous autobiographies by scientists and doctors (Darwin, Einstein, Max Plank, Bertrand Russell, Rita Levi, Santiago Ramón y Cajal, etc.), we find that their authors examine their trajectory with a desire to *give meaning* to the advancement of knowledge they have achieved through their research (scientific achievements), or by the merits of a professional practice devoted to the healing of patients (humanitarian achievements in the field of medicine) (Salvador 2015). Seen from our perspective, what each author is striving to legitimize is the (in theory, negative) circumstance of his/her own old age by citing the productivity and social utility of his/her life’s journey.

Ramón y Cajal, the Spanish doctor and researcher awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1906, illustrated this double identity in his book entitled *The World Seen at 80 Years: Impressions of an Arteriosclerotic*, which I have discussed elsewhere as follows: “Cajal explicitly outlines his identity as a doctor and an old man. In this context we might evaluate excerpts such as the following, where the ‘we’ he uses to designate the doctor or author (“similar examples that we shall omit for the sake of brevity...”) gives way to his autographical self and he speaks in the first person singular (“I included myself among the decrepit elders”) (Salvador 2015, 67). Such details illustrate the perfect symbiosis between the author’s identity as a professional who adopts an analytical tone, and the identity he

has reached as an old man, for which he adopts a more confessional tone.

## Exogenous social Discourses

We hardly need to reiterate the strong tendency of current advertising discourse to promote the values of youth in the social market or to sell ‘elixirs’ aimed at rejuvenating a person’s physical appearance, like a sort of *remedia malorum* behind which hide huge financial gains. In the end, aging is often presented as a disease for which curative, or at least palliative, treatments are available on the market.

Literature and cinema, on the other hand, present a wide range of much more varied points of view. These even include tributes to old age and its values, as well, of course, as denunciations of the self-deception shown by anyone who refuses to appear old. A simple example is provided by a gem of 19<sup>th</sup> century French narrative – *Le Masque* (*The Mask*) by Guy de Maupassant – which relates the tragicomic episode of a masked old man who dances in a street carnival until he falls down exhausted, whereupon he is revealed as a man who in his day was considered attractive but who now refuses to accept that he is growing old. In the story’s final paragraphs, the man’s wife, to whose home a doctor has taken the weary old man, reflects as follows: “*Maintenant vous voyez ce qu’il fait. C’est comme une frénésie qui le tient. Faut qu’il soit jeune, faut qu’il danse avec des femmes qui sentent l’odeur et la pommade. Pauvre vieux chéri, va!*” [Now you see what he does. This habit holds him like a frenzy. He has to be young; he has to dance with women who smell of perfume and cosmetics. You poor old darling!].<sup>3</sup>

Another reference to old age is found in the film *No Country for Old Men*, and Cormac McCarthy’s novel on which it is based. Among several other issues, the film reflects with an air of perplexity on a tragic situation in which an old man’s accumulated experience is insufficient to solve some of life’s dilemmas.

Another area in which representations of old age derive from external social sources are the plastic arts, which, along with literature, are an important agent in the configuration of the collective imaginary. Some of these factors have been studied from the perspective of ‘visual aging studies’, which begin with the assumption that age is a discursive construction. One of these studies (Kampmann 2015), which focused on 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century art in particular, adopted a gender perspective that denounced discriminatory attitudes towards women. In fact, while elderly

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Short Stories* by Guy de Maupassant, *The Mask* (*Le Masque*).