NÚRIA CASADO-GUAL, EMMA DOMÍNGUEZ-RUÉ, MARICEL ORÓ-PIQUERAS (EDS.)

RE-DISCOVERING AGE(ING)

NARRATIVES OF MENTORSHIP

[transcript] Aging Studies Volume XVI
Since Mentor, Telemachus’ advisor in Homer’s Odyssey, gave name to the figure of the ›wise teacher‹, fictional representations of mentoring have permeated classic and contemporary cultural texts of different literary genres such as fiction, poetry, and life writing. The contributions of this volume explore wisdom in old age through a series of narratives of mentorship which, either from a critical or a personal perspective, undermine ageist views of later life.

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A TRIBUTE TO BRIAN WORSFOLD AND MARIA VIDAL
Content

Introduction

Of Wisdom, Growth, and Gratitude:
Revisiting the Mentor Figure within the Framework of Ageing Studies
Núria Casado-Gual, Emma Domínguez-Rué, Maricel Oró-Piqueras | 9

Rediscovering Ageing through Narratives of Mentorship

Getting Old, Dreaming Youth: Notes about Fanny Burney
Maria Socorro Suárez-Lafuente | 21

I may be retired—however, I am still a very busy man
Recollecting and Reimagining through Ageing and Mentorship in Mitch Cullin’s A Slight Trick of the Mind
Marta Miquel-Baldellou | 29

Rumi, Sufi Spirituality and the Teacher-Disciple Relationship in Elif Shafak’s The Forty Rules of Love
Billy Gray | 47

Saviors and Survivors
Narratives of Mentorship as Rescue
Margaret Moganroth Gullette | 69

Literary Mentors for Life
Joan Margarit’s Lessons on Poetry and Ageing in New Letters to a Young Poet
Núria Casado-Gual | 87

The Many Functions of Furniture
Re-Discovering Mentors through Narratives of Material and Immaterial Convoys
Roberta Maierhofer | 105

Experience as Mentor in Helping to Deal with Old Age
Susan Ballyn | 119
“One must take it as it comes”
A Virtue-Ethical Approach to the Exemplary Life Practices of Centenarians
_Aagje Swinnen and Hanne Laceulle_ | 125

**Toledo**

_Jeffrey Skoblow_ | 147

**Lessons Learnt: CollAge for Maria and Brian**
Of Trees and Fire
_Antoni Cuadrado-Fernández_ | 155
Embodied Legacies of Mentoring and Role Models
_Josephine Dolan_ | 157
Mentorship as a Lifelong Experience
_Ander Errasti and Cristina Astier_ | 158
Reflections on Academic Generations and the Possibilities of Mentorship
_Sarah Falcus_ | 160
All that Remains
_Carme Farré Vidal_ | 161
On Listening to the ‘Music for two Pianos’
_John Kinsella_ | 162
Maria And Brian—Our Parental Figures in the World of Academia
_Núria Mina and Ieva Stončikaitė_ | 165
Connecting People through Brian and Maria—No Limits
_Elena Urdaneta_ | 166
To Feel Part of a Dream
_Núria Casado-Gual_ | 167
Let’s have tea in “La Torre”: Mentoring through Affection
_Maricel Oró-Piqueras_ | 169
Your Child of Sorts—A Tribute to Maria & Brian
_Emma Domínguez-Rué_ | 171

**Notes**

Notes on Editors | 173
Notes on Contributors | 174
Introduction

Of Wisdom, Growth, and Gratitude: Revisiting the Mentor Figure within the Framework of Ageing Studies

Núria Casado-Gual, Emma Domínguez-Rué, Maricel Oró-Piqueras

The Oxford English Dictionary defines mentor as “an experienced and trusted adviser” and is often applied to a senior colleague who acts as counsellor in companies or educational institutions. However, as Vigen Guroian argues, “genuine mentorship is scarce in our day” (2008: 77): in his view, the pseudo-equalitarian relationships of modern society and the institutionalisation of mentorship programmes in virtually every field of education and professional life have trivialised such relationship, often transforming a mentor into a synonym for ‘friend’. In contrast, the Greek original word inspired by the venerable old friend of Ulysses and adviser of Telemachus in Homer’s Odyssey (actually the goddess Athena in disguise) “means mind or spirit and connotes a strong sense of purposefulness and agency” (Guroian 2008: 76).

The classic figure of the mentor as a judicious old person is inextricably related to the Ancient Greek concept of wisdom and thus central to the issues examined in this volume. In our culture, wisdom has traditionally been concomitant with old age, elders being thus venerated as recipients and transmitters of that wisdom. However, as Jan Baars contends, in ancient times wisdom was not a consequence but rather a necessary condition to age: in other words, having lived a certain number of years did not guarantee its attainment, so a lifelong commitment to knowledge and philosophical thinking were perceived as necessary conditions to achieve wisdom in old age (2012: 90). As he explains, “there is a conditional not a direct relationship between old age and wisdom: in Plato’s “Republic” the leaders were not considered wise because they were old, as in some traditionally oriented societies, but because they had studied rigorously
and thought deeply all their lives” (Baars 2012: 95). As narrated by Plato, the philosopher is not so much a recipient of wisdom but his efforts revolve around the wish to achieve it: thus, he “is neither wise or unwise, but aspires to attain wisdom and to determine what this might be” (Phaedrus 278d4; Symposium 204a; cited in Baars 2012: 93; *emphasis in original*). Thus, wisdom cannot be understood as the mere gathering of knowledge or experience, but rather as the effort and the ability to put them into practice and share them for the common good.

These aspirations and capacities also characterize the mentor figure, and they encompass the consideration of ethical values and common sense, as well as a sense of commitment to self and others, and the development of emotional intelligence. In this respect, the exercise of the mentoring practice could well be related to the practical exercise of wisdom across the life course, which some age scholars and gerontologists have defined as “an art of living” (Baars 2012; Edmonson 2005). Through their teachings, mentors do not only provide their protégé(e)s with certain abilities, but also convey a sense of ethics and a considerable degree of affection, both of which become “ultimately crucial to the continuance of a practice, special art form, or way of life” (Guroian 2008: 77). Studies like Baars’ (2012) and Edmonson’s (2005) offer good examples of the relevance of mentorship in the field of ageing studies, and reveal the ways in which an examination of the mentor figure can provide interesting perspectives about cultural and literary narratives of ageing.

Within literature, the archetype of the wise old man has typically represented the ageing mentor. In her study on the late poetry of Modernist authors, Kathleen Woodward (1980) describes the wise old man as a hero, a figure that is often characterized as a teacher and which offers the “embodiment of tradition and continuity” that is sought after by younger generations. Drawing from Carl Jung’s definition of the same archetype, Woodward notices to what extent this literary figure personifies meaning and the human need for personal growth (1980: 19). At the same time, she also draws attention to the importance that mentors have had or through the career of writers, to the extent of having become “doppelgängers, secret selves” throughout their careers and lives (Woodward 1980: 13). The consideration of literary representations of mentorship, either through archetypes or other characters, or through the careers of writers, throws light on the significant interaction between ageing, personal development and the dialogue across generations. At the same time, as Vigen Guroian
contends, “true mentorship is vital to culture and the growth and flourishing of education and the arts” (2008: 77). This statement proves especially true in our present youth-oriented, technology-dominated society, in which the kind of wisdom that is personified by the (ageing) mentor needs to be re-valued, and the capacity of older people to sustain and enrich the common construction of knowledge needs to be recognized.

Faithful to these convictions, this volume examines the concept of mentorship through a cultural and, predominantly literary, lens within the framework of current theories of ageing. The symbolic potential of all the studies and creative pieces of the collection enhances the cultural and social values implicit in the narratives of mentoring they explore. At the same time, this book offers a tribute to Brian Worsfold and Maria Vidal-Grau, founders of the research group Grup Dedal-Lit of the University of Lleida and pioneering scholars in the field of ageing studies in Catalonia. Besides celebrating Maria and Brian’s long and fruitful careers as extraordinary academics, the authors of this collection would like to acknowledge their lifelong commitment to the common good, mainly expressed through their perseverant dissemination of humanistic values, and the ongoing support to the younger generation of scholars they have contributed to training. In the light of the aforementioned considerations of wisdom and mentorship, Brian and Maria have been true mentors, in academia and in life. Their practice of mentorship has undoubtedly conveyed an “art of living” in the holistic sense, and even more so because both of them have transmitted their knowledge and experience through true affection. This extremely important human component may seem minor in the world of academia, but its effects contribute to building stronger links among generations and ultimately help consolidate the communal creation of knowledge. Now that Maria, Brian, and the rest of first-generation scholars in ageing studies exemplify the rich possibilities for growth of later life, the intellectual and creative exploration of ageing they have promoted may be enriched further through their own life experience. At the same time, their continuous intellectual and collegial exchange with members of subsequent generations of scholars enables their mentoring practice to continue, and new considerations of ageing to emerge through it.

The nine chapters that constitute this volume revolve around mentorship from various perspectives and even interpret the notion of mentor in different and mutually complementary ways. However, all of
them coincide in enhancing the essential value that mentors have had for those who receive their wisdom. Through either close readings of literary texts, or cultural readings of ageing, or as pieces of life-writing or of literature in their own right, all the chapters prove that the figure of the mentor not only guides future generations, but also provides them with tools to face the adversities of a long life and to enjoy, at the same time, their achievements and blessings. In “Getting Old, Dreaming Youth: Notes about Fanny Burney,” M. Socorro Suárez Lafuente re-discovers the figure of Frances Fanny Burney, or Fanny Burney, by examining both her biography and late works, while at the same time taking into account the older men that acted as Burney’s mentors and who had an important influence on the author’s growth and literary development. As Suárez points out, although Burney did not always concur with her mentors’ views, she felt grateful for their care and found “protection and peace of mind” in their friendship. Suárez Lafuente’s piece also looks at Burney’s later years, when she survived her mentors and developed new works. Besides enhancing the importance of older mentors in the life and career of the distinguished English writer, Suárez’s article draws attention to the ageist and sexist bias that diminished Burney’s later works during her lifetime and beyond.

Marta Miquel-Baldellou’s article focuses on mentoring in Mitch Cullin’s A Slight Trick of the Mind. By creating a fictional Sherlock Holmes in his retirement age and describing his growing friendship with the young son of his housekeeper, Cullin’s novel reveals a new facet of the otherwise cold and distant detective and, at the same time, uncovers the potential for change inherent in the mentorial relationship for both the older and the younger man. As Miquel-Baldellou argues, “it is in his old age that Holmes becomes significantly attracted to the domain of art and of imagination, after nearly a lifetime of having mostly resorted to logic and reason.” Holmes’ mentoring of the young man in the novel not only contributes to the latter’s intellectual and psychological development, but also operates significant changes to the old detective’s personality and approach to life, thus deconstructing the view that elderly people “disengage” (Cumming/Henry 1961) and instead concurring in the notion proposed by cultural gerontologists that age indeed provides new possibilities for further identity formation and the ability to make relevant choices (Wyatt-Brown and Rossen, 1993; Cohen-Shalev, 2002; Casado-Gual/Domínguez-Rué/Worsfold, 2016).
The essay “Rumi, Sufi Spirituality and the Teacher-Disciple Relationship in Elif Shafak’s *The Forty Rules of Love*” by Billy Gray continues to explore the dynamics of the teacher-disciple relationship through a close reading of the best-selling novel that is part of the so-called “Rumi phenomenon.” As Gray explains, the teacher-disciple component is at the core of the two narrative strands that Safak’s interweaves in her fascinating book, both of which highlight the profoundly transformative power that mentoring relationships have for the disciple within the context of Sufism; the component of moral risk that is taken by both Master and disciple in order to attain the desired inner growth of the latter in this spiritual context; and the fundamental role that love, understood in a real, abstract and mystic way, plays in such a process of discipleship. In his analysis, in which he contextualizes in detail the influence that Rumi has exerted both on Sufism and Western culture throughout history, Gray also pays attention to the connection that Safak’s novel establishes between the process of (midlife) ageing and the spiritual metamorphosis of its main characters. Whereas the contemporary narrative strand in *The Forty Rules of Love* suggests the ageless nature of the process of learning, the plot that fictionalizes Rumi’s biography underscores the richness of later life in knowledge and experience.

Aligning with Suárez-Lafuente, Miquel-Baldellou and Billy Gray’s analysis of emblematic characters as well as canonic authors in the history of literature, Margaret Moganroth Gullette rethinks the concept of mentorship “along a wider literary spectrum” by focusing on three older fictional figures from three best-selling novels who literally save or rescue the younger characters from their respective abyss. The authors who created these benevolent ageing figures are Alexandre Dumas, Jesús Carrasco and Muriel Barbery, and the novels discussed are *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Out in the Open*, and *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*. Through her analysis, Gullette not only enhances the moral qualities of these older characters, but also reflects upon her own process of ageing by recognizing that, with age, it is the older figures that now call her attention, in contrast to the fascination she had felt towards Dumas’ hero as a younger reader. At the same time, her analysis undermines stereotypical representations of youth and of old age, as it invites us to re-read these classical texts from the prism of the destabilizing paradigm that the development of age and ageing studies have represented in the last decades. As she contends towards the end of her essay, “[o]lder people too may need to be saved.
What rule says that only the young live in distressing lack?” Her close reading of the three novels certainly makes us aware of this and other “anti-ageist innovations.”

In the chapter “Literary Mentors for Life: Joan Margarit’s Lessons on Poetry, Ageing and Time in New Letters to a Young Poet,” Núria Casado-Gual continues to expand the notion of mentorship by analyzing the late essay by the Catalan poet as a meta-literary text that renders Margarit himself a literary mentor, and in which Margarit simultaneously recognizes the poet Rainer Maria Rilke as his own doppelgänger. By examining the two levels of discourse that conform Margarit’s ars poetica—that is, a literary discourse on the art of writing, and a moral discourse on the art of living—Casado-Gual looks at the literary, cultural and philosophical foundations of the poet’s late-life views, and contextualizes their value in the creation of an emancipatory model of ageing that also includes the potential of late-life creativity. In particular, she pays attention to the themes of love and loss in Margarit’s consideration of his own poetry, as well as in the lessons he transmits to younger writers. At the same time, she also takes into account the symbolic implications of Margarit’s formal legacy, through which the experienced author not only passes on his formal conception of poetry but also “conveys his moral vision of life to his readers” as an older man.

In an article that merges a personal and a scholarly gaze, Roberta Maierhofer acknowledges the fact that a scholar’s achievement is very often the result of immaterial contributions, many times facilitated by mentors such as the ones honored in this volume. In contrast with more formal or academic guidance, Maierhofer argues, some forms of mentoring that set the basis of significant research are often overlooked, if not totally ignored, when making a record of one’s academic results. Along this premise, Maierhofer offers a retrospective analysis of Rose Tremain’s The Cupboard as representative of another kind of ‘silent’ mentor, namely, a literary text that actually facilitates a real maturing of the person, both personally and professionally, and which, in her case, paved her way to her work in the field of ageing studies. In a similar way to Gullette’s revision of her classics, Maierhofer’s analysis creates an interesting palimpsest of readings in which the mature scholar re-evaluates her assumptions as a younger academic and reader.

In another very personal contribution, Susan Ballyn presents an honest account of her first contact with older people when she was a secondary school student. It is then that she realized the extent to which experience,
acquired through ageing, is the most valued resource one can have when needed. Her experience with old people, both as a teenager and working at a hospital as a young adult, provided her with tools to help her own parents and family members when they needed care, and also helped her when facing her own ageing. Through this piece of life-writing, Ballyn continues to extend the meaning of the notion of “mentor” to consider experience, in this case, as the mentoring agent per se. At the same time, Ballyn emphasizes the lessons learnt on ageing through direct contact with representatives of the so-called ‘fourth age’, who remain on the margins of both society and, all too often, of ageing studies themselves.

In a study that also encompasses symbolic and social meanings of mentorship understood in a broad sense, and which is also focused on “the older old,” Aagje Swinnen and Hanne Laceulle analyze the fascination our contemporary society still has for centenarians, which brought the authors to start a project entitled “The Cultural Fascination with Centenarians.” In their essay, Laceulle and Swinnen contrast the concept of virtuousness from a theoretical standpoint with the views of centenarians in relation to the meanings they attribute to the “success” implicit in their long lives. By identifying several factors shared by the centenarians interviewed, Laceulle and Swinnen’s study shows that centenarians are indeed exemplary figures and thus symbolic mentors for the younger generations in the ways they face and understand life choices, both in terms of the opportunities it offers and the adversaries one must face.

The last chapter, “Toledo,” is in fact a short story by Jeffrey Skoblow that was written while staying in an apartment Maria Vidal and Brian Worsfold offered him during his first visit at the University of Lleida in 2002, and which was first published in a personal collection of stories. “Toledo” presents a mentor of an unusual kind, also in the context of this volume: middle-aged, so not “technically old” (even though this can be easily discussed if properly contextualized), and an accidental private teacher to a very young couple, to somehow classify his relationship with the younger figures. What connects “Toledo” and its literary mentor with the rest of the volume, though, is the intimate connection the story establishes between teaching, living, and defending a specific philosophy of life (and an art of ageing that is derived from it) in which work, love and creativity are totally entangled. Due to its special nature, this collection concludes with a section entitled “Lessons Learnt: CollAge for Maria and
Brian,” in which colleagues and friends of these two scholars express the importance they both have had for their research and above all life itself.

As Gullette puts it in her essay for this volume: “‘Mentor’ is an honorable title, betokening unselfish benevolence toward the young. Because raising the young well is so important to any functioning society, mentors become a necessity.” As mentioned in some of the essays as well as the contributions of the last section, mentoring is related to the transmission of knowledge, but also, especially within the field of ageing studies, to the richness and depth that establishing solid relationships between generations may bring with it. This actually has a very close relation with the definition of wisdom provided by Ricca Edmondson in a recent publication (2015), in which she argues that wisdom can only be accounted through “wise action,” rather than “wise people,” and that such “wise action” (204) is achieved through the sharing of one’s experiences across generations. In this sense, Brian and Maria have been firm believers and practitioners of “wise action” and, thus, have spread wisdom not only by building networks across generations, mainly within academia and, in the last twenty years, very prominently, in the field of literary gerontology, but also within their closest family, friends, neighbourhood and city. These are, at the end of the day, the foundational domains that compose the little but very significant stories that one can find in literature, no matter the period or background in which a text is set. And these are, ultimately, the places where new forms of mentoring, real or imagined, will continue to be built.

*The Editors*

**Works Cited**


Oxford English Dictionary: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mentor

