Literature. Movement. Generations. Please connect the dots

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Abstract

This paper looks at a number of synchro-diachronic inter-connections between the categories of 'literature' and 'generations'. This may seem a questionable choice, for while the time-specific category of 'generation' has a clear cognitive value in regard to specific historical products of material culture (e.g. clothes, toys, films, music, comics, technological devices, etc.), literature has in fact been constructed by modernity as a cornerstone of metahistorical, essential and universal knowledge. And yet, we claim there may be deeper – although neither intuitive nor transparent – reasons for reading literature through generations, as well as for reading generations through literature. We seek to connect the dots between the two notions by proposing a heuristic model of the literature/generation nexus that is articulated on three interrelated levels, i.e., production, consumption and representation. By looking at how the diachronic axis of literary evolution moves along (and becomes in various ways intertwined with) the synchronic axis of generational taxonomies, we will see how the three levels of our model find applicability across the whole literary spectrum. We will thus deal with dynamics of generational conflict, integration and evolution, with rituals of literary consumption and with patterns of degeneration, self-generation and regeneration, as well as with the various strategies of self-representation developed by different generations of authors, from modernists to writers nowadays in their thirties, forties and fifties.

1. Introduction. In praise of moving lines

It may seem questionable to employ the notion of 'generation' to handle the intrinsic mechanisms of 'literature'. Indeed, it is a choice whose rationale is not immediate or transparent, even more so when – as in this case – such an operation takes on typological ambitions. There seems to be no legitimate way to place the categories of generation and literature side by side, to add them up, overlap or compare them, for they appear to be irreconcilable. If the concept of generation (from the Latin *generāre*, "to beget") has a clear cognitive value in regard to specific products of material culture (e.g. clothes, toys, films, music, comics, technological devices, etc.), it is because of its 'local' nature. A generation is a cohort of people who, born within the same time period, share attitudes, values, behaviours, lifestyle and cultural consumption. It is therefore an "actuality" (Mannheim 1952), i.e., a punctual, specific category, inscribed in those same historical coordinates that it in fact identifies with, and inscribes in, its most representative cultural products (Biggs 2007, PEW Research Center 2007, Strauss and Howe 1997). Even leaving aside that demographic labels can easily come in for criticism on account of oversimplifying experiences and differences, for "driv[ing] people to stereotyping and rash character judgments" (Cohen 2021) so as to "get social history all wrong" (Menand 2021), the category of generation appears rather out of tune with literature, i.e., that cornerstone of metahistorical, essential and universal knowledge that the modern age has built, in a sacred form, as a tenet of Arnoldian Culture (Arnold 1869).

And yet, to acknowledge the possible disciplinary *impertinence* of the present attempt at defining the literature/generation nexus – an attempt that, for the record, cannot but oscillate between literary criticism and sociocultural analysis – is not to disavow its heuristic potential. For the notions of literature and generation are undoubtedly interrelated, albeit in anything but an immediate and direct way. It is a slanting, transversal relationship the two concepts stand in, inasmuch as the line that connects the dots is actually an oblique, wavy one. It a *moving* line. Pursuing the intricate and intermittent path of which, as well as moving along the possible typology of its turns and variations, can actually shed light on the impact of the generation factor on literary products, and vice versa. It is only in the opinion of cabbage planters, as eminently claimed by *Tristram Shandy* (VIII.1), that the best link between points A and B is necessarily a straight line. More often than not, it is necessary to pass through point C. (Or D. Or E, F and G, for that matter.) For disconnections are a key structural ingredient of significant geometries, especially in the context of complex and interrelated symbolic systems such as the ones in question. Straight lines and correct lines are usually, in reality, crooked or biased lines, however disguised. Which means that, whether dealing with Euclidean space, or with the trajectories of desire, in pretty much Girardian fashion (1961), with the strategies of military art or with sports tactics, *movement* is something that cannot be escaped. One has to connect the dots.

2. A rationale for connecting dots

Taking a preliminary look at the sociocultural meanings carried by the word 'generation' (Aroldi, Colombo 2006; Biggs 2007; Zubareva 2020), it is not hard to find key occurrences thereof – by analogy or contiguity – in the literary sphere. Think of Bourdieu's hypothesis on the history of art and criticism as a series of movements that take on the specific form of conflicts between generations of intellectuals (1984), or of Wyatt's account (1993) of the acceleration brought to mainstream culture by protest subcultures such as the experimental avant-garde or 1980s cyberpunk. Or again, think of Corsten's notion of "we sense" (1999): belonging to a specific cohort exposes people to shared cultural and psychological experiences, therefore creating a common 'sense of sense', a typical semantics that is different from that found in those who have not lived those experiences, or did so at a different stage of their existence, as testified by such examples as the "Gruppo 63" in Italy, the "Lost generation" of American expats in 1920s Europe, or the "Generación del 27" in Spain. Or, finally, think of Elder's (1974) classic theory, whereby transitions between generations are triggered by factors of discontinuity, i.e., catastrophes in social change, so much so as to make generations the function of historical and cultural traumas, as evidenced by the English "War

Poets" (i.e., those returning from World War I), by narrators who served in Vietnam or Afghanistan, like Tim O'Brien or Harry Parker, by writers now in their forties or fifties who debuted in 9/11 fiction (e.g. Jonathan Safran Foer, Amy Waldman), or those who made their mark in COVID-19 fiction (e.g. Ali Smith, Sarah Moss, Louise Erdrich), etc.

However, investigating the literature/generation nexus does not (and cannot) amount to mechanically acknowledging the influence of either factors on the other, or to finding analogies by juxtaposition, in search of a forced convergence. There is – as we wish to put forward in this study – a much more substantial relationship to infer from connecting the dots. And there is an inevitably much more dynamic cultural geometry to grasp, once the notion of literature is stripped of the sacralised rhetoric that the late eighteenth and nineteenth century brought upon it, and is approached in its broadest nature, i.e., that of an ultra-receptive laboratory for social as well as individual imagination, and for the fashioning of commonly shared (and felt) forms of language, representation, identity and history (Edmunds, Turner 2002). In the wake of British cultural studies, if culture is a "structure of feeling" (Williams 1976), literature is to be dealt with as a formal/experimental observatory of experiences, traditions and ways of feeling, i.e., symbolic movements which indeed have much to do with the history and phenomenology of human generations.[1]

3. Method. A tripartite heuristic model

More precisely, we propose a heuristic model of the literature/generation nexus that is articulated on three interrelated and mutually impacting levels, i.e., production, consumption and representation. As an immediate example, think of the functioning of a typically generational object like J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* saga (1997-2007). In terms of production, each HP novel is a generational artefact because, in line with the rules of identity formation, recognition and projection which govern generational success, it has a precisely embedded implicit target audience (Aroldi, Colombo 2006; Konchar Farr 2015; Lauer, Basu 2019; Simpson 2018). On the level of fruition, the saga is generational in its having *de facto* been capillarily absorbed by the cultural imagination of those who,

like Harry, were between age nine and eleven when the first novel came out and grew up alongside him (a process in which several other age groups joined the fan base, through the mechanisms of global success building). On the level of representation, it is a generational work because it depicts the journey of a fictional human type through different stages of life and experience, from parentless childhood through apprenticeship to the fullness of his magic powers. The three levels are clearly and systematically intertwined, for the hero's development is in many respects parallel to that of the books (and films, and all sorts of media franchise products), and of their audience.

Examples of this kind do abound in recent production. Just to remain within the scope of Young Adult English-language fiction (cf. Beckton 2013), think of mass successes like Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series (2007-), Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008-20), John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011-13), or of the steamy-teen *Twilight* series (2005-20), whose counterpoint for thirty-somethings are E.L. James's multi-coloured *Fifty Shades* trilogies (2011-21). But precisely herein lies the problem, one might argue, as these products only seemingly showcase a link between literature and generations, in that they are not 'literary' at all: they are *mass* literature, or para-literature, i.e., popular objects of immediate and transparent consumption that do not show any of the salient characteristics (e.g., polysemous allure, universalism and elitism) of genuine Culture. Because the dynamics they illustrate are not a prerogative of 'authentic' literature, they cannot properly be seen as the founding core of the literature/generation nexus.

While bearing in mind this more than potential critique, which is in fact inherent to any culturalist and/or heuristic approach to this specific issue, in what follows we will unfold and instantiate the above-described tripartite model into an actual typology of the attested relationships between literature and generations. By taking a closer look at how the diachronic axis of literary evolution moves along (and becomes in multiple ways intertwined with) the synchronic axis of generational taxonomies, we will see how the three levels of our model find applicability across the full literary spectrum, 'true' (or high) literature included. Quite a few interesting points – noncollinear ones,

to be sure – will show up in our Cartesian plane. And anything but a single straight line will pass through these points.

4. Analysis. Waving movement along and across the literary spectrum[2]

4.1. Family trees. Production lines

This level of analysis immediately and intuitively concerns the targeting strategies of literary products. As mentioned above, these are interwoven with the requirements and expectations of different generational markets, interesting examples of which are to be found even in the strictly high-literature sphere. Think of specifically target-oriented genres, such as fairy tales or children's literature, which have been more than occasionally tackled by first-class literati such as J.W Goethe, Oscar Wilde, Leo Tolstoy, W.B. Yeats or Italo Calvino. Think of 'generational' writers, in the sense of authors whose cultural production is categorised as such based on their specific affiliation with a reading public, like the Spanish *grupo poético del 27*, the Beat Generation in the United States, or 1990s Italian "Cannibal" writers (Niccolò Ammaniti, Aldo Nove, Giuseppe Culicchia, etc.).

Given these premises, we wish nonetheless to put forward a culturally more sophisticated and challenging line of inquiry, one that concerns the role played by generations within literary evolution itself, and, more specifically, those familial (i.e., parenting and filiation), re-productive (i.e., heritage and kinship) and transmission (i.e., matrix and imprint) dynamics that the very concept of a 'literary generation' brings with it. From this standpoint, we will deal with a number of historiographic theories attempting to find a generative principle of literary tradition, i.e., a transformative structural principle that may not only align, but also embrace, integrate and contrastively account for the (variously patterned) rhythmic and cyclical succession of longstanding literary modes and newer forms of perception, ideation and representation. As we will see, these critical attempts are all based on a phylogenetic effort to redesign literary history not only as a chronological (and therefore rectilinear) paradigm, but also as a synoptic (and morphologically richer) construct, somewhat of an 'arboreal family' of literary movements, or, if it so wishes, a 'life story'

or 'evolutionary biology' of forms, texts, modes, and genres. The underlying endeavour of these theories, in other words, is to define the production – and re-production – of literature through the identification of a 'generative movement' that may systematically explain, beyond their simple succession in time, the deeper relations between and among different literary forms and models, and that may therefore engrain the very concept of generation in the creative process itself.

We will illustrate the many facets of this principle by distinguishing it into three typically recurring formulas: conflict, integration, and evolution.

4.1.1. The conflict line

The conflict formula (Ryder 1965; Grenier 2007) finds a paradigmatic consecration in Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* (1973). In this study of the psychology of aesthetic creation, poets are as much constrained as they are driven by the ambiguous – and necessarily agonistic – relationship they necessarily entertain with their predecessors. Although poetry may obviously also feed off different extra-literary kinds of influence, poets are ultimately and invincibly guided in their inspiration by the reading of other poems, for which reason they will by inertia tend to produce derivative, less incisive work than their precursors'. Given that an original vision of one's own is crucial for a poet in order to survive posterity, the shadow of 'fathers' will necessarily instil him with a spirit of anguish: the urgent need for Oedipal conflict is therefore the very origin of poetic creation. Which in turn entails that generational dialectics are key to the generative process of literature, even though the anxiety of influence is a selective condition, concerning not the poet as a human being, but the poet-as-poet, i.e., the true core of genuine authorship, an entity that belongs more to the ideal and dematerialised domain of pure textuality than to someone's actual biography. And hence it does not generically affect all poets, but only "strong" ones, i.e., an elite of artists whose radically conflictual work has caused decisive moments of discontinuity in literary history – someone like William Shakespeare, John Milton, William Blake, William Wordsworth, P.B. Shelley or W.B. Yeats.

Not coincidentally, Bloom's "strong poets" are all

romantic, Shakespeare and Milton included, whom we still tend to read from within the very critical framework that provided them with their modern form and status. Among the ideological tenets of Romanticism is indeed a necessarily conflictual, even tragic vision of intergenerational confrontation, so much so that its very production is customarily divided into warring generations. Whether one looks at John Milton (a pivotal example of generational tension, given his feud with Edmund Spenser over the creation of the rebel angel Lucifer in *Paradise Lost*) or Thomas Chatterton (the archetype of the rebellious artist driven to an early grave, and the matrix of the tragic modern popstar, from James Dean to Kurt Cobain), the germ of literary re-production is permanently identified with destructively struggling with one's fathers, i.e., against the authority of the Law and its moulding of new subjectivities and sensibilities (and masculinities). The ongoing generational clash described by Bloom is interestingly instantiated through six strategies which reflect the archetypal mechanisms of Freudian defence, while at the same time recalling the tropes of classical rhetoric: each strategy is a "revisionary ratio" allowing the poet-as-poet to actually perform an act of parricide (the father's death overlapping with the birth of the son's poetic vision). In Roland Barthes's words, the "Death of the Father would deprive literature of many of its pleasures. If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories? Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus? Isn't storytelling always a way of searching for one's origin, speaking one's conflicts with the Law, entering the dialectic of tenderness and hatred? [...] As fiction, Oedipus was at least good for something: to make good novels, to tell good stories" (Barthes 1973: 47).

4.1.2. The integration line

A competing and yet equally influential pattern emerges from T.S. Eliot's hypostasised transmutation of Modernism's love of tension into the syncretic idea of a coexisting poetic canon, or Pantheon, to be found in the archetypal and allusional intertextuality of his 1922 *Waste Land* (Cuddy 1990; Brooker 2005). The foundation of Eliot's idea (i.e., the "mythical method") is sketched out in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). Retaining poetic creativity beyond the clichés of subjective expressivity, and after the poet turns twenty-five, entails that he undergoes a process of depersonalization and dehistoricisation, giving up individual inspiration to develop a paradoxical sense of synchronic history that is nourished by the quest for archetypal ancestors to one's poetry, in the same way that the Pantheon is an architectural and symbolic syncretism of deities and confessions. A whole family tree thus simultaneously and coexists – in purely spatial terms – within the act of creation, which provides the past with indefinite permanence and history with concomitance with the present, an effect that is practically achieved through intertextually juxtaposed citations from literary fathers, primarily Dante and Baudelaire, and from the ancestor tradition of sacred texts.

Curiously enough, in this blatantly pacified, achronic and prolific feast of immortal predecessors, the artist's marital status is one of irenical celibacy. The chosen representative of anti-Romanticism deprives the classic antagonistic model of its historicity and conflictuality in the name of structural co-existence among archetypes, so as to ostensibly transcend generational and generative strife (i.e., fight for reproduction), and to coalesce in a flexible self-sufficient unity of simultaneous fragments which indeed looks like a form of parthenogenesis. While envisaging a horizontal, 'fraternal' and rhyzomatic vision of the mechanisms of literary ancestry and heritage (*mon semblable, mon frère*), which appears to be in total opposition to the vertical, dramatic and top-down dynamics impregnating Bloom's model, Eliot's integration formula paradoxically corroborates conservative Arnoldian Culture within the high tradition of modern literature. Based on the exclusive Canon that will be developed by mid-twentieth-century New Criticism, this formula will pave the way to the disciplinary foundation of English studies and the cogent curricular structure of schools and universities, eventually leading to F.R. Leavis' restoration of a *Great Tradition* (1948) until, forty years later, this line of thought will lead back to Bloom's controversial *Western Canon* (1994) (Cleto 2001).

4.1.3. The evolution line

The trajectories of conflict and integration are intertwined with a third influential pattern, for several attempts at historiography have been conducted, tak-

ing their cue from the wider framework of Darwinian evolutionism to account for the development of literary genres in the terms of the ancestry-progeny, survival-extinction and dominant-recessive dialectics. A classic example is Thibaudet's *Histoire de la littérature française de 1789 à nos jours* (1936), in which generations of writers and works follow one another, not infrequently in the diagrammatic form of overlaps, forerunners, latecomers, etc. In this scheme, the cohort of 1789, composed of authors who were around twenty when the French Revolution broke out, plays the role of household, followed by its numerous offspring, such as the 1820s Romantic generation, the 1850s Naturalistic-Parnassian generation, etc. That the evolutionary approach is quite endemic to literary studies is also testified by scientistic endeavours such as Brunetière's *Évolution des genres dans l'histoire de la literature* (1890), *Évolution de la critique* (1890) and *Évolution de la poésie lyrique en France au dix-neuvième siècle* (1892-94), positing that genres follow deterministic processes of organic development similar to those of living beings – an antagonistic model to Bloom's mythology of conflictual creation, with which this deterministic line of thought nevertheless shares a significant amount of historical schematisation. As we approach the present day, the generative-evolutionary scheme is substantiated by more evidence, although generally exempted from the positivistic logic of historical advancement underpinning Brunetière's work. Just to mention one prominent example, the interweaving of space-time coordinates in Franco Moretti's *La letteratura vista da lontano* (2005) indeed looks like another attempt to observe (not so closely, in fact) the life parable of modern genres through the application of an evolutionary matrix.

4.2. Family gatherings. Consumption rituals

This level of analysis concerns generations as key to defining the social use of literary texts, i.e., those collective practices of material consumption, assimilation and appropriation that are carried out in the reading process at various stages of one's personal and social development for a variety of communication and identity purposes. Think of children's literature and coming-of-age classics: typically provided for by educational programmes, they usually become a tool for social cohesion through the formative reading of a specific community's shared repertoire. Classics of nineteenth-century Italian literature, for example, such as Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* (1827), Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* (1883), Edmondo De Amicis' *Cuore* (1886), functioned – along with Giuseppe Verdi's opera – as the ideological cornerstones of the Risorgimento, *I promessi sposi* actually being the first textbook to be adopted nationwide in the newly established school system of the 1860s. Followed in time by more imaginative and widely popular works, such as those penned by Luigi Capuana, Guido Gozzano and Emilio Salgari, and by more formally engaged twentieth-century authors such as Gianni Rodari, Dino Buzzati, Italo Calvino and Elsa Morante, these classics have authoritatively contributed to the customary shaping of an 'official' Italian juvenile we-sense.

The phenomenology of school-age classics is nevertheless not limited to repertoires proposed by school and family environments. A large corpus of shared references is also provided by adolescent peer-induced readings. Think of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1992), the involuntary mantra of more than one generation of high-school students, or J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1890), and various other popular books by Hemingway, Gabriel García Márquez, Jack Kerouac and the Beats, abovementioned present-day Young Adult writers, etc. These are authors and works that seem to have accompanied the adolescence of different late-twentieth-century generations across a variety of national and cultural domains, as well as divergent patterns of teenage psychology. Not limited to the century of celebrity and divergent family models, however, the consumption of literature as a token of collective identification is also to be found in past times. Think of how (by acclamation, in fact) Goethe's *Werther* (1774) ignited *Sturm und Drang* in late-eighteenth-century Germany, or of the role played by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1747) in the rise of the sensibility canon, or of Charles Dickens' tremendously influential 'orphan' fiction, or of how Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) publicly desecrated romantic morality. By aggregating different generations of readers at a specific stage of their identity formation, these works have proved

iconic hallmarks of specific sociocultural eras.

Alongside school-age and Young Adult literature, a crucial role is played by more properly generational readings, i.e., those belonging to specific cohorts in specific historical periods. Think of cyberpunk for 1980-1990s teenagers: in this case, the assimilation of shared cultural resources has intertwined in an iconic way with the formation of time-specific forms of consciousness and generational imaginary, linked in turn to a particular way of feeling at a particular moment in history, which is not necessarily shared by other generations. Think also, in no particular order, of representative writers (and their respective public) such as Daniel Pennac, Stefano Benni, Hanif Kureishi, Ian McEwan, Michel Faber, Amélie Nothomb, David Forster Wallace, Mark Levy, Fred Vargas, Andrea De Carlo, Zadie Smith, and many others.[3]

4.3. Family portraits. Representation trajectories

A lush direct object for literary ideation (Edmunds, Turner 2002; Kingstone 2021), generations have always acted as a coagulant for a number of (primary or collateral) thematic declinations that can regularly be found in all-time imagination, whereby the ebb and flow of collective history, social change, individual fortunes and private affairs is made to co-exist in a wide spectrum of possible combinations, orientations, proportions and purposes. The multiplicity of these trajectories can – albeit approximately – be aggregated into three patterns, pivoting respectively on dynamics of fracture (i.e., degeneration), absence (i.e., self-generation) and bonding (e.g., regeneration, or reconciliation).

4.3.1. The fracture (or degeneration) line

This is a scheme whose foundations are, once again, broadly mythological (Finucci, Brownlee 2001; Greenslade 2010; Siegel 1985). Tragic rebellions against elders, authorities and gods abound in Greek tales of insurrection, parricide and incest, as well as in biblical and medieval narratives of *hybris*, disobedience, decay, sin, treason and atonement: think of Zeus' challengers, of Prometheus, Orpheus, Cassandra, Adam and Eve, Lilith, the Amazons, Cain, Lucifer, Faust, etc. Although its axiological pivots are numerous and complex – i.e., the sociohistorical polarity between order and revolution, permanence and transience, as well as between piety and radicalism, reconciliation and warfare, etc. – this pattern can be synthesised in an ongoing tension between the continuity of human existence, symbolised by the cyclical flow of parentage, descent and affiliation, and the dramatic cutoff, the punctual, abrupt and therefore semantically relevant (and sanctionable) interruption represented by radical self-determination and identification. It seems quite appropriate that the Latin word *gĕnus* (from which 'generation' is derived) should yield both 'genre'/'general' (i.e., a recognisable and commonly accepted order of phenomena) and 'genius'/'genial', pointing to the exceptional and not unproblematic uniqueness of individual spirit, and also, in a broader romantic sense, to someone's outstanding ability to produce art. In his study of generations in romantic literature, Wendell S. Johnson consistently claims that all writing shows some degree of tension, often externalised as a family or social strife, between the necessity of 'filial' pre-determination (resulting in the incorporation of generational bonds and constraints) and the free-willed urge for an autonomously defined self, the latter in turn translating into the search for one's own identity, usually by way of destabilising or disrupting a status quo (Johnson 1985: 85).

And indeed, a meaningful number of genres and works within the Western canon seem to fall into this paradigm, alternatively swinging to either side of the spectrum. Think of ancient comedy (Plautus, Terence, Menander), the Greek novel and the schematised struggle between young, impetuous protagonists and conservative senior antagonists (whereby marriage is often the matter in dispute). Think of Elizabethan theatre and Shakespearean anti-institutional drama; of Lord Byron's Miltonesque *Cain* (1821), re-narrating the Bible from a fratricide's point of view; of the corruption of an illusionary *locus amœnus* such as a wedding banquet in S.T. Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* moral fable (1798). Think of how pre-romantic and early nineteenth-century poetry pivots on fighting against the oppression of material Fathers as well as searching for archetypal, alternative and redemptive parental figures, from Blake's *Songs* (1794) onwards. In Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1805), Nature is the mother of poets, poetry is an exercise of filial memory, and the memory of childhood is the mind's true spiritual

power. "The child is father of the man" is a motto that, by overthrowing the educational process, celebrates all-pervasive generational memory (which unites past, present and future) as the cornerstone of identity, thus launching the modern organicism/naturalness vs. mechanicism/artificiality controversy. Think, also, of how the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel takes the symbolic killing of a father figure to its actual extremes, typically resulting in degenerative plots and the tragic disintegration of entire households (Greenslade 2010). Generational conflict is radicalised in terms that, with the inception of Freudian psychology, may fully be called Oedipal, which brings about a series of increasingly deep fractures within the generally accepted patriarchal model of authority.

As claimed by J. Hillis Miller (1963), the symptomatic "disappearance of God" is a matrix of, and a fil rouge among, the 'degenerate family' fiction of major English authors such as Matthew Arnold, Charlotte Brontë, Robert Browning, Thomas De Quincey, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. (Not to mention women's and Gothic turn-of-the-century fiction [Karschay 2015; Ledger 1995; Meaney 2000; Spangler 1989]). From a closer historical distance, think of a dominant socio-psychological motif of most Victorian and early-twentieth-century novels, i.e., feeble, more often than not broken family bonds, whereby fatherly figures overpower or desert their children, and children overreact to parental authority in search of any other sense of self. Think of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Karamazov Brothers* (1880), R.L. Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* (1880), Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901), Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) and Marcel Proust's *Recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27), that cathedral of a novel built around the love of mothers, intolerance with the authority of fathers, and the lifeblood of memory, whose epiphanies activate in relation to family members and everyday objects. In all these cases, the generational imagination is both a representative and an epistemological factor.[4]

4.3.2. The absence (or self-generation) line

Absence, including irreparable absence, i.e., death, is also a pervasive trope of Victorian literature (Cook 2021; Lutz 2015; Zigarovic 2012), which seems to particularly enjoy a deprivation of family bonds and affection, as well as the "age inversion" formula (i.e., immature adult and precocious child characters, Nelson 2012). A great many orphaned, deserted or disgraced protagonists are typically dispossessed of their origins. Born under the burden of such absence, with no authority to obey or rebel to, they have no choice, for in the lack of a formative conflict between the issues of continuity and fracture, they are forced to precociously create themselves, i.e., to self-generate, with their own strength. This is a motif that, ever since the

rise of the bourgeois novel in the eighteenth century (e.g., Daniel Defoe's *Robinson*, 1719, and Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, 1749) has been read in relation to the consolidation of the capitalist system, including the popular culture industry (Watt 1957; Smith 1967). Consequently, self-sufficient figures of this type not only symbolise complaint of an oppressive, cannibalistic sociocultural order that does not care for vulnerable generations, but also take on a markedly axiological (and metafictional) value, thus becoming allegories and celebrations of a well-established (and highly productive) cultural mainstream, to which they fully belong.

Charles Dickens is probably the most prominent figure in this respect. In *Oliver Twist* (1838), the prototype of the self-made man and Victorian moral hero manages to retain his personal decency and identity through many a misfortune, as though his human solidity, even in the absence of a biological family, were inscribed in the only possible presence of dead parents, that is to say, in his genetic heritage. A novel like *Hard Times* (1854) pivots on a more elaborate opposition between an oppressive/repressive father, Gradgrind, who is way too involved in his son's life, and the affectionate figure of an absent parent, i.e., Sissy Jupe's father, which the plot translates into the harvest metaphor – the three books bearing the titles of *Sowing*, *Reaping* and *Garnering*. The novel thus nostalgically resumes and elaborates on the romantic image of the family tree in an explicitly organicist key (Cleto 2001; Johnson 1989).

4.3.3. The bond (or regeneration-reconciliation) line

In this pattern, the fracture-bond dialectic is synthetically resolved in terms of fruitful continuity: the arboreal family is extended by new branches, whose birth and growth does not eventually lead to dramatic struggle but beneficial integration, in the frequent form of reconciliation, with previous generations. This deposits a symbolic seed of regeneration and prosecution – from ancestry to progeny – of family life and cultural history. A matrix genre in this respect is the Bildungsroman, bringing together a significant portion of the eighteenth-century novel, of the family novel in the following two centuries, and of Modernist fiction.

A world of young heroes because of epistemological necessities, as pointed out by Franco Moretti (1986), the eighteenth-century novel is typically based on either the search for one's unknown genealogy or heritage (think of illegitimacy in Fielding's *Tom Jones*), or the denial of one's origins (usually followed by reconciliation, as in Defoe's paradigmatic *Robinson*); it unravels marriage and procreation as an institutional and/or emotional matter, as testified by Samuel Richardson and Jane Austen; it finally reveals the radical aporia of human subjectivity,

experience and relationships with Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (Consonni 2012). But the privileged genre here is obviously the (nineteenth- and twentieth-century) family chronicle and saga (Berman 2020; Boyers 1974; Kilroy 2007; McCrea 2011), from Honoré de Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet* (1833) and *Père Goriot* (1835) to Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), to contemporary works such as Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001). Staging a cultural "obsession with questions of origin, evolution, progress, genealogy" (Brooks 1984: 6-7), this tradition formally and structurally merges the ideas of family and narrative so strongly "that it is hard to separate them", for both "attempt to plot a relationship between what came before and what comes after; both organize the unknowable jumble of events and people who preceded us into a coherent array of precedence, sequence, and cause" (McCrea 2011: 8).

Interestingly comprising literary magnum opuses as well as global successes, like for instance South American magical realism (e.g., Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* [1970] and *Love in the Time of Cholera* [1985], Isabel Allende's *House of the Spirits* [1982], etc.), the genre draws from Balzac's pictorial method for writing "la comédie humaine" of nineteenth-century France. Typically, these novels use the metaphor of narrative as a form of socio-historical painting, portraying complex generational plots against large-scale backdrops, whereby the novel-as-large-canvas is filled with individual details and collective frescoes. Variations on the theme include John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* (1906-21), an inner exploration of a bourgeois family centred on a tyrannical patriarch; Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907), focusing on a conflict – and its elaboration – between the opposite temperaments of a man and his son; George Meredith's *Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859), a Bildungsroman based on a Hegelian equation of regeneration, whereby a son in tension with his father (thesis) becomes in turn a father (antithesis) and evolves towards reconciliation (synthesis, or new thesis). And, as it often happens with an era's deep axiological themes, there is also a comic side to the modern anxiety over family, procreation and social order. Think of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), where family relationships are crooked and ridiculed through the use of a deus ex machina, coincidences, recognitions, etc.[5]

Finally, modernist literature seems to showcase a mythological problematisation of the conflict/degeneration-reconciliation/regeneration dialectic. As mentioned above, the historical avant-garde's initial radicalism, i.e., violent iconoclasm and breaking with tradition, as in the case of Imagism and Vorticism, is followed by reconnection and eventually by integration and a form of synthesis, or new balance. In addition to T.S. Eliot's archetypal method, think of symbiotic parent-child relationships in works such as E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908) and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), or of James Joyce's quest for mythological father- and tutelary deity figures in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* (1922). Interestingly, and coherently with the explicit cultural tradition of the USA, i.e., an avowed separation from the mother country, in terms of both political and linguistic identity, American modernists seem generally more connected to a fracture-prone than continuity-oriented conception of the generational bond. However, there is a divergence between the fatherless, 'orphan' spirit of revolutionary representatives of the new American sensibility – such as R.W. Emerson, H.D. Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane – and the 'filial' attitude of canonical authors like Edith Wharton (e.g. *The Age of Innocence*, 1920) and William Faulkner (e.g. *Absalom, Absalom!*, 1936).[6]

5. Extended families. The changing geometries of self-representation

As we approach the present, generational pictures obviously become more and more composite. And increasingly fast. Think of snapshots – selfies, too – taken, shared and consumed in rapid sequence with increasingly performative techniques, more than patiently painted portraits or carefully studied photographs. There seem to be countless dots to connect. And the points on our Cartesian plane take on bizarre configurations, even and ever harder to unravel and interpret.

And yet, a recognisable trend admittedly emerges. The generation theme – which until the early twentieth century had mainly been treated vertically, in terms of an up-down, ancestry-progeny movement that focused on the manifold meanings of family relationships (Hopwood, Flemming, Kassell 2018) – now takes on a much more horizontal or lateral identity value, i.e., that of socially-mediated self-perception, recognition and nomination. The notion tends to expand "laterally outwards" and across society (Kingstone 2021), in a fragmented, disseminated and capillary way, connecting individuals of the same cohort or age group who live, or have lived in the past, similar sociocultural experiences. As the we-sense tends to become more and more intersectional, i.e., engrained with other identity markers such as gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. (Bristow, Kingstone 2021), many writers – from modernists to authors that are nowadays in their thirties, forties or fifties – recognise themselves as part of perceptual, stylistic and epistemological 'families' or circles, whose radiuses gradually widen. This raises a deeper understanding (and pertinence) of the notion of generation in literature. On the basis of self-representation, generations are namely constructed as an ever-wider network of individuals simultaneously engaged in multi-directional lines of continuity and/or fracture with a multiplicity of other cohorts, both preceding or following. Generational movement is thus no longer limited to clear-cut parent-child dialectics, for the arboreal family now includes a much more self-determined system of interrelated branches. Between the 1960s and today, these dialectics moreover take on an accelerated rhythm: as exchanges and transits within and across literary 'families' increase in frequency, generational processes between and among circles quicken, to the extent that they come to comprise three or more cohorts in interaction (and competition) with one another.[7] Typically, present-day writers are entangled in fairly complicated extended families which also include the intermediate or "mezzanine" generations of older and younger siblings (Davidoff 2012: 82), as well as distant relatives, peers, etc.

From this standpoint, literature's function as an operative principle for cultural analysis becomes more challenging. Not only does literature prove a useful tool for outlining the relevance of generations in cultural products, but the concept of generation also appears as a key tool for rethinking literature as a cultural product. Needless to say, in suggesting this line of inquiry we do not wish to interpret literary history as yet another version of the generative/evolutionary paradigm. We propose instead a specific vertical-*and*-lateral modelisation of the self-representation poetics that characterises a relevant portion of contemporary literature, even though we are aware that counter-examples are hardly missing. Think of American writers born in the 1920-30s: Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Don DeLillo, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud never appear to coagulate around any shared generational self-definition. Or think of 1930s British authors like Henry Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Christopher Isherwood or Stephen Spender, whose only generational trait d'union is perhaps an ex-post, externally directed identity as 'minor classics'.

But to start from the beginning, and to follow a decent timeline:[8] in the 1910-20s, modernists such as Ezra Pound ("make it new"), T.S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein recognised themselves and each other in the mutual rejection of the preceding generation's view of the world (i.e., Victorian and romantic attitudes, and a hypostatised vision of social order and aesthetic harmony), only to adopt cultural matrixes farther away in time, like ancient Greek, Roman and Anglican mythology. Likewise, albeit in a minor key, in the 1950s the Beats rebelled against a pre-established social order, symbolised by neocritical hegemony in universities and polished literary techniques, beat writing – or, to borrow from Truman Capote, beat "typing" – being a form of literary protest against, and a form of defeat inflicted by, the status quo. Conversely, the fictional turn of the 1960s seems to radically question the legitimacy not only of one's connection with the world, but also of the very possibility of linear ancestry and vertical heritage. Postmodernist fiction (e.g., Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Robert Coover, William Gaddis and Donald Barthelme) distances itself from the very perception of a cogent relationship between texts and reality, placing specific emphasis on the fictionality of literature as an artefact by way of extensively practising metafiction, self-reflexivity, irony, etc. In so doing, it appears to disavow and dismember its own relationship with modernism (Cowart 2015). If textuality speaks for (and of) itself, there is no authenticity to be found behind or beyond it, no mythological "union of fragments" to be recomposed, but

an ongoing multiplicity of competing perceptions, visions and stories under the sign of artificiality, entropy, paranoia, falsification and the collapse of gravitational systems.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, on the other hand, the minimalist or retro-realistic attitude of authors such as Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Richard Ford and Tobias Wolff showcases a cultural shift back towards reality, both empirical or emotional, in its specificity, that is, as always filtered by subjective experience, whereby long novels give way to the short story. In a way, one could claim that the 1970-80s seem to recover a long-lost relationship with their modernist grandparents, much more than with their parents or older siblings. This is a concern that does not seem not to worry another movement of the 1980s, i.e., Brat-Pack narrative, the fiction of "young talents", i.e., writers who were then aged between twenty and thirty, who focused on metropolitan topics such as isolation, hedonism, narcissism, emotional frigidity and family dysfunction, including the loss, abandonment or actual murder of one's genealogical roots. Think of Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney or Tama Janowitz. Co-opted by the Hollywood industry, their works are mainly associated with the blockbuster features of Michael J. Fox, Rob Lowe, Demi Moore or Robert Downey Jr.

The 1990s are conspicuously represented by the Generation X line, composed of writers born between 1961 and 1981, and by their trademark kaleidoscopic approach to the saturated entertainment-and-consumer nature of contemporary society (Burnett 2003, Ortner 1998). Actually the first cohort to become "global" (Henseler 2013), by blending a maximalist, two-dimensional (Brat-Pack-derived) version of pop culture with postmodern literariness, through massive doses of irony, dizzying reverberations between texts and reality, and the constant deconstruction of forms, genres, and stereotypes (Grassian 2003), Gen X literature appears fully in tune with the decade's mediascape, i.e., meta-cinema (e.g. Quentin Tarantino, Baz Luhrmann), meta-TV (e.g. *The Simpsons*, *Late Show with David Letterman*), fusion-pastiche music (e.g. Moby, Beck, Bran Van 3000), etc. The status of reality is now codified as irremediably, artfully constructed. It is no accident that the self-imposed demographic label 'Gen X' comes from a Douglas Coupland novel (1991) that celebrates end-of-millennium

"accelerated culture". X is indeed a letter of intersection and instability, its 'crux decussed' illustrating a multiplication of vectors as the unstable barycentre of epistemological volatility. It is also a figuration of the unknown, Gen X being chosen over external labels such as "lost generation" or "twentynothings" used by former cohorts to indicate the new sensibility of the 1990s, also because it works as a vindication of identity for those whose we-sense appears to be inescapably post-everything (but also, in a way, *post-humous*).

Among the unifying factors of this cohort, which are also shared with Generation Y (or Millennials [Berger 2018], or Generation 'Me' [Twenge 2006]), the first to grow up online, are a massive interest in digital technologies, entertainment, social networks, and their effects on people and society at large, a growing intolerance of media-assigned stereotypes, and a marked conflict with postmodernists, whose amiable arrogance is best shown by a parody of John Barth in David Foster Wallace's *Westward the Course of the Empire Takes Its Way* (1989). Although linked by a somewhat stormy relationship, the younger generation representing itself as "hard-done-by in the competition for affordable housing, non-precarious careers and a sustainable climate" which is the legacy of the previous one (Kingstone 2021), the X and Y cohorts also share a cult of hybridity and complexification, and a love of extreme oppositions (e.g. highbrow and lowbrow, experimentation and popularisation, as well as different and conflicting identities, ethnicities, desires, etc.). The most iconic realisation of this attitude can, at least for now, be found in the works of the elder generation. To list but a few, think of D.F. Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), William T. Vollmann's *Seven Dreams* (1990-2001), Richard Powers' *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) or Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* (2002). Often monumental in size, encyclopaedic in nature and morphologically hyper-sophisticated, they all speculate on the fragmentation, fluidisation or gasification (to recall Marshall Berman's wording [1982]) of tradition.

While it is probably too early for generalisations about Gen Z (and certainly so for Gen Alpha), we can perhaps say that, despite the formal complexity and cultural erudition that can generally be found in their production, younger authors distinguish themselves

from GenX-ers in reason of a renewed urgency of confrontation with a by now more and more inescapable, and less and less sustainable, Real (with capital R), which they have been exposed to at times of watershed events. Precariousness, inequality, violence, mental illness, pandemics, drug abuse, and all kind of traumatic identity issues abound in their works, which speak the language of those cohorts whose lives have been impacted upon by not so much 9/11 (which indeed is their birthmark), but by the financial crisis of 2007-08, or by the 2020-22 health crisis. Indeed, Gen Alpha has been labelled as "Corona Generation" (Bristow, Giland 2020), its coming-of-age having taken place at times of global lockdown; likewise, Gen Z is known as 'generation of 500' in Greece, 'mileuristas' in Spain, 'génération précaire' in France, or 'generazione 1000 euro' in Italy. The we-sense of these generations is probably conveyed by the vision of such writers as Neal Stephenson, Sherman Alexie, Michael Chabon, Ocean Vuong, Diane Williams, Donna Tartt, Dave Eggers, Zadie Smith, Donald Antrim, Terese Svoboda, Colson Whitehead. Or perhaps by Sally Rooney's novels on capitalism, the environmental crisis, and social divisions (Nowak 2022). These are writers whose self-represented cultural identity is deeply linked to an expanded and non-binary perception of the 'real' function of literature in contemporary society, and to an eclectic spectrum of preferably hybrid approaches to traditional forms, new genres (e.g., graphic novels; Short 2009), communicative needs and technological affordances.

6. Conclusions. Dots and points and lines and plots

It is not by accident that we drew the first cue for designing a heuristic typology of the literature/generation nexus from our familiarity with Gen X writers. Besides being the first generation to be defined on the basis of its cultural consumption (Pasquali 2012), which it progressively elaborates on – and which, to be honest, the authors of this article also share – we feel that the 1990s are indeed the decade in whose literature we can fully and materially see and connect the dots. We think that the morphological literacy brought to us by the reading of novels as vast, subtle and erudite as Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, Da-

vid Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, Antonia Byatt's *Possession*, Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, or Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*[9] plays an invaluable role in making it possible – or, better still, desirable – to visualise and taxonomise the relevance and productivity of the literature/generation nexus. Has the enchanted pursuit of an intermittent baseball in DeLillo's *Underworld* paid dividends? There's no telling. But the textual appearances of this literary *objet trouvé* are indeed dots that, once connected, turn into points in a Cartesian plane of space and time; and then points connect into lines; and then lines configure into a plot. The plot of *our* generation.

Although the tripartite heuristic model we have proposed is far from complete, as well as biased by the disciplinary competences, methodological inclinations and personal preferences of those who compiled it, we think that it may bring new life to an investigation of the intersections between generations and cultural products. And, last but not least, we believe that a certain degree of 'familiarity' with the authors, genres and works it comprises may bring a new, decisive generational energy to the renewal of literary movements.

Notes

* Although this paper has been planned jointly, Fabio Cleto has written sections 3, 4.1 and 4.2, and Stefania Consonni has written sections 1, 2, 4.3, 5 and 6.

[1] Needless to say, by considering literature from the point of view of material culture we do not wish to belittle its symbolic status: rather, we mean to showcase its specificity as a tool of cultural analysis.

[2] We wish to preliminarily acknowledge that the lists of examples upon which our analysis is based are obviously partial and non-exhaustive, and varying in scope and focus width: admittedly, this is not a cartography of texts, but an *exemplified* heuristic model. Examples could have been different, including for instance key authors such as Günther Grass, Donna Tartt, Derek Walcott, Christa Wolf, Salman Rushdie, Michel Houellebecq, etc.

[3] Or think of a writer like Federico Moccia, probably the leading teen-age fiction author in early-2000s Italy, whose popularity has over the last two decades been gradually renegotiated with other authors who have since become equally (or more) successful among readers under twenty, like for instance Paolo Giordano, Alessandro D'Avenia, Rosella Postorino and others.

[4] To mention a few other examples, let us recall Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), a leaden parody of Malthus' demographic policy; D.H. Lawrence's unforgiving parable of maternal morbidity and filial immaturity, *Sons and Lovers* (1913); and of course Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a tale of monstrous mechanistic humanity and debased paternity which provides an incredibly iconic shape to the romanticised fascination for the undue manipulation of natural life. (A fascination whose mythology reverberates, mutatis mutandis, in modern rewritings such as Eugene O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* [1956], Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* [1949] and Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* [1955], as well as in a manifesto of British kitchen-sink rebellion like John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* [1956], in adoption drama such as Hugh Leonard's *Da* [1977], or in a parody of degenerate Yankee Calvinism like Edward Albee's *The American Dream* [1961]).

[5] The protagonist, an orphaned and abandoned child at Victoria Station, is eventually the person he pretended to be (Ernest), for he is really offspring to an important family whose name he pretended to bear – a *reductio ad absurdum* of the romantic theory (and rhetoric) of the power of imagination, and of infantile innocence.

[6] The latter to some extent inherit the Calvinist tradition of Longfellow and Nathaniel Hawthorne, in whose *House of the Seven Gables* (1851) the sins of the fathers paradigmatically befall their children, and ghosts from the past haunt the architectures of the present.

[7] The latter to some extent inherit the Calvinist tradition of Longfellow and Nathaniel Hawthorne, in whose *House of the Seven Gables* (1851) the sins of the fathers paradigmatically befall their children, and ghosts from the past haunt the architectures of the present.

[8] We are aware that we are resorting to a somewhat chronological (and descriptive) model in order to interpret the complex heterogeneity of the present-day scenario. This is not accidental. It is a consequence of the cognitive approach that we chose for dealing with the literature/generation nexus: through a network of examples and structural relationships, we empirically *guess at how we could look* at such scenario in a hopefully stimulating way. Of course, the heuristic method is not intrinsically optimal, its limitations including arbitrariness, approximation and ideological as well as systemic/relational bias. For this reason, we wish to acknowledge the fact that different hermeneutic paradigms, categories or keys could be used to read and explain these same generational pictures.

[9] This list is – once again – obviously arbitrary and incomplete.

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