Theories and Theorists of the Literary Generation Concept.
Contemporary Semantic Re-evaluations and their Socio-cultural Impact

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Abstract

Nowadays, the concept of literary generation becomes functional within the specialized literary discourses as its semantic evolution enhances, on the one hand, the dynamics of the cultural paradigms and idea movements projected on the literary creations, and, on the other, the inter-relation of individual authorial ideologies to the larger family of synonymous creative spirits. Our study analyses the main contemporary theories mirroring this concept in the Romanian culture by pointing out both the overt effect of (relative) ideological submission in the dynamic field of creation, as well as the creative deviation (in) validating the abstract pattern – the basis of the theoretic construct the literary generation concept is rooted in.

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Introduction

The theme and functions of the concept of literary generation are nowadays roots for mainly theoretical debates gaining momentum in the Romanian cultural space, another symptom for its state of perpetual transition, and as a corollary to the permanent necessity of synchronizing with the ages and forms of western culture. The necessity of systematisation may seem anachronic for a postmodern spirit; nonetheless, the destabilising forces acting for so long upon the creative act and the cultural products, in general, one of the effects of the totalitarian ideology, justify to some extent the critics’ and theorists’ choice for sequencing the literary facts, of which the concept upon scrutiny in this paper is granted special attention. Part of an ample applied study, the present paper

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represents a necessary theoretical preamble and a starting point for a potential debate that may elucidate – at least partially- and make functional the concept of literary generation, in all its contextual variants [1].

**A potential French pattern**

In a volume of studies published in Romanian in 1966 [2], Albert Thibaudet brings to the fore both a complex definition – although still timid in what the just coverage of the appropriate semantic field is concerned – and the critic’s apprehensions in respect to the real possibilities of defining the concept by freeing it from the terminological servitudes to biology, historicism and the Bergsonian impact over the socio-humanitarian disciplines. Rightfully reducing the term to a relation between a theoretical concept, present in the critical metadiscourse, and its actual functionality, Thibaudet cautiously assumes some reservations: “A generation does not begin or end in a precise point. It belongs to continuity. Thinking continuity means portioning it in segments that exist within us, for our own convenience, not in it. The literary generations result from abstractions of criticism, whose duty is to construct ideal realities that can be imagined and circulated” - our translation [3]. Next, elaborating upon the nature of his profound anxiety: “I could see how unskillfully my segments applied to a continuity, to what extent the multiform life of a generation eluded the aspects one was inclined to frame it in and the formulae one had to assign it to, one way or the other” - our translation [4]. Nevertheless, apart from the critic’s hesitations, the organization of literary histories in a pattern of periodization in generations has worked, for a good part of his critical posterity, and is still working in the case of the Romanian literature.

**The first waves of theorists**

In an essay organising seven senses of the term ‘generation’ [5], Mircea Vulcănescu considers his duty to explain the expansion and semantic intricacy of the term, given its multiple implications and perseverant usage in the journalistic works at the beginning of the twentieth century. If biologically the term denotes the common origin – the total amount of immediate descendants of a common father – our translation, sociologically it would circumscribe to a social group of persons of the same age. Historically, the participation in an event would give the group individuality, while statistically, the generation would mark “the period of natural renewal of the members of a social group” – our translation. From a psychological angle, the impact of the participation in the same events and conventions of the same environment of spiritual development leads to a ‘psychological community’, and culturally and politically, the generation is construed as “a group of people whose social manifestations are convergent or resemble one another, that is, they feel, believe, know and want similar things and have identical attitudes towards similar issues” – our translation. Lastly, in an economic sense, it is “a group of people of the same age whose spiritual unity or cultural and political manifestation can be explained by the identical situation and economic function of those making it up and especially by their belonging to the current social hierarchy” – our translation.

Without discussing the categorization of the meanings proposed by Vulcănescu, as much as the obvious interaction between the seven partial definitions of the term ‘generation’, its natural association with a rapid and dense course of events that have decisively marked the Romanian socio-political and cultural evolution in the twentieth century is noteworthy. Two successive world wars and the coming into power of the communist dictatorship led to the formation/deformation/immolation of several generations of intellectuals to whom the theoretical-methodological foundations of the term in question could represent at some point a vouching of grand history and a superior justification for small, individual histories.

Returning to the last sense of the term, we ought to note that, in fact, the sociologist focuses the socio-ideological dimension he needs to distinguish, both theoretically and functionally, from extratemporal theoretical doctrines such as idealism, theism, realism, materialism or communism. Framed in the category of ‘spiritual equilibrium’ formulae, these cannot be taken for ‘unity of mentalities’ even though they can preside, as models, over the spiritual formation of a generation. What is more, in every epoch, there exists a dominant mentality correlated to a spiritual structure, also dominant, which leads, in the case of culture and artistic creation, to the convergence of the major creative forces in a current, a literary trend, a (relatively) distinct cultural movement or,
as the critic Nicolae Manolescu put it, a cultural paradigm [6] which, at some point, leaves way for another paradigm having functioned underground or at the margins of the mainstream cultural phenomena.

At the end of his demonstration, the sociologist constructs a definition-synthesis which, for the present-day thinking, is a clear example of strong modernist concept: “A generation is a social bio-psycho-historical group predominantly made up of persons of the same age who act simultaneously, spontaneously, with their age-solidarity awareness. The manifestations of this group are determined by the fact that its members took part in a certain historic event whose influence they suffered during their intellectual formation – which makes similar concerns prevail, as well as a resemblance in material and masters” [7].

Finding necessary to concentrate and semantically specialise the term ‘generation’, the Romanian aesthetician Tudor Vianu advances in his 1936 study, *Generație și creație/ Generation and creation* [8], the ‘literary generation’ formula. Concerned with the compulsory theoretical foundation of the term, the aesthetician begins by establishing the proximal genre provided by the first sense of the term (the chronological one) – and, inside this, by some necessary segmentations, by virtue of whom the biological generation must not be mistaken for the cultural one, and specific difference. In Vianu’s words, “under the discrepancy of chronological and biological generations, literary generations can be recreated, that is to say, solidarities among people who, living at the same time, irrespective of their age, harbour similar hopes and contribute to the same work” – our translation [9]. More precisely, the members of a literary generation share the same beliefs and literary orientation, they choose (relatively) similar creation techniques and text rendition strategies, and believe in the same purpose of the artistic act. Simply put, they share a poetics and admit to be on the same side in what the movement of literary forms is concerned. Studying the motives behind the convergence of creative attitudes determining the formation of a literary generation, Vianu connects the cultural background and the selected cultural and literary patterns with the socio-economic and political peculiarities of each age. Re-acquiring a sociological component, the term ‘generation’ partially summarizes – an important aspect for literary studies – it maintains the creative component in the foreground and, inherently, the aesthetic stake of the formula. This is why Vianu does not omit to note the necessary foundation function fulfilled by a literary generation in its entirety, against the creative spirits that excel among their congeners and may, at times, collide with the literary convention of their time:

“much of the ardour of a culture-creator is crushed by the narrow boundaries of his/her generation. Few are those who succeed and go beyond; most of them remaining their prisoners. Our appreciation goes to the former” – our translation [10].

**The young generations. New theoretical perspectives**

Assertive and scholarly, the study dedicated to the literary generation concept by the very young literary critic and theorist Luigi Bambulea [11] starts from what the author considers to be a shortcoming, retained for years, of the terminological field of all the critical endeavours operating with the literary generation formula or its contextual synonyms. The multiple functions of the term (“the generation is a concept for literary theory, a concept and a criterion for literary criticism, a criterion for the history of literature and a structure for the criticism and history of culture” – our translation [12]) ground, in the author’s opinion, the undertaking to produce “both a *dynamic expression* of the generation – that is its concept – and an *expression of the dynamics* of that generation – that is its structure” – our translation [13]. Attempting at forging a flexible concept, yet sufficiently dense in point of semantics to be applicable at any time, Luigi Bambulea draws three coordinates of the term and, at the same time, three possibilities of adjustment of the relation that the generation has with the extrinsic factors that may determine it and with its own structural dynamics. Against the background of the occurrence of a fundamental invariant – the aesthetic criterion – and its centripetal function of “generation sequencer”, which “denotes a relatively uniform conscience of the literary act and of the status of the creative being in itself” – our translation [14], the relationship between the generation and temporality seems of utmost importance for the theorist. Older notions (already presented) concerning the time frame in which a generation manifests creatively (30 years) are recaptured here, as well as the implicit biological reference to the socio-cultural particularities of the historical time considered. To put it otherwise, “the chronological game must be
subsumed to an historical background, the historical background must be subsumed to a cultural context, the cultural context must be subsumed to a literary criterion, and the literary criterion must be subsumed to an aesthetic perspective” – our translation [15].

Secondly, the relationship between a generation and memory brings forth the dynamics of the (sometimes conflictive) relation between ancient and modern, that is the way in which a group of creators relates to tradition, for most part assimilated and arranged, even in a polemic-revanchist mode, which, like it or not, they constantly re-write, and to the new contingents of creators that are to form a new generation. The usual placement in opposition with tradition, and an attitude of possible tolerance towards those who have just started to gather determine a certain tension inside a literary generation, in whose actual manifestation forms the group identity takes shape.

Thirdly, the theorist considers the composition of a literary generation, rightfully dissociating the writers’ affiliation to a biological generation from their assignment to a different cultural-creative age of the epoch they belong to.

More involved than all the theorists and practitioners of the generation concept in the contemporariness of the literary phenomenon, the critic Ion Bogdan Lefter takes the risks of a radical inversion of the relations between the creator of literature – reference point for all the undertakings presented so far – and the product of the creative act. The apology for ranking the literary text higher than its producer springs naturally from post(post)modernism which represents the fundamental theoretical concernment for Lefter, but also from a methodological motivation – “the urgency to catch completely the concept inside the specific space of literature, otherwise, its status being inappropriate to or invalid in a literary discussion” – our translation [16].

Starting from the idea that only literary works are able to validate or invalidate the creative principles, the choices of poetics and poietics of a generation, as well as the actual effect of some cultural models or spiritual masters, Lefter opts decisively for the primacy of texts, in whose interstices both the creative personality who brought them to life and the socio-cultural data accompanying/determining their production are sublimed. To put it otherwise, “the true generation community cannot exist in literature before the homogeneity of the creation proper. Therefore, I feel the urge to re-place the definition of the concept of literary generation in the textual area. A literary generation is made up of writers whose works emphasise a common formula (…) – whose works reveal significant similitudes and can be regarded as embeddings of a single structural pattern. Therefore, I consider the literary generation firstly a generation of texts, then a generation of writers” – our translation [17].

Finally, a recent point of view is worth noting here, as it is unequivocally contrary to the entire debate carried out for some time about the creative/literary/creation generation. In a study on Romanian postmodernism [18], Iulian Boldea assigns the term discussed here to a weak concept which has maintained artificially its force of significance and preserved a signified which is practically unidentifiable: “We ask ourselves, then, how efficient, and methodologically appropriate is the concept of literary generation today, in an age of decentration, fracture and deconstruction of the cultural paradigms? I believe that nowadays more than ever, the concept of literary generation has a completely relative sense, a significance that can be no longer generalised, despite the actual existence of some writers committing to the same conceptual spirit, to the same programmatic norms, with a similar way of experiencing and understanding the world and literature” [19].

Touched by the new mal du siècle, deconstruction, the concept in focus, seems nothing else than a discursive cultural construct surviving in spaces which, after long periods of totalitarianism, are still in search for a cultural identity that they are able to (re)construct only with the endorsement of some strong concepts.

**Conclusions**

Assimilated nowadays in the Romanian culture either to a strong or a weak concept, the literary generation remains, from the theoretical and functional perspective of the cultural discourse, an instrument associated with structural and motivational functions of great significance in what modernist history of literary facts is concerned, as well as for the alternative.
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