

Genre theory and family resemblance – revisited *

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In the following discussion I will examine the application of Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance to genre theory. Despite its popularity among literary theorists, there is sometimes a discrepancy between the loose concept of family resemblance, at least in its negative-radical version, and the practical assumptions made about genres. In order to overcome the inadequacies of existing applications of the concept, I will propose two ways in which Wittgenstein's concept can be fruitfully applied to genre theory. First, by using certain working hypotheses in cognitive psychology, based on the concept of family resemblance, I will argue that literary genres are perceived as structured categories, with a 'hard core' consisting of prototypical members. These prototypical members are characterized by the fact that they bear a relatively high degree of resemblance to each other. Second, by focusing on the analogy between the internal structure of literary genres and that of families one can establish a 'genealogical' line of literary genres, i.e., the series of writers who have participated in shaping, reshaping and transmitting the textual heritage established by the 'founding father' of the genre, including the dialectical relationship of 'parents' and 'children' in genre history.

The dominant trend in modern critical theory in attempting to establish a philosophical foundation for a flexible and dynamic approach to literary genres, is to introduce Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance into genre theory. According to this view:

'Representations of a genre may then be regarded as making up a family whose septs and individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having any single feature shared in common by all.' (Fowler 1982: 41)¹

This notion seems, at least *prima facie*, to be a happy medium between the Scylla of closed, rigid concepts of genre, and the Charybdis of denying any

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¹ The 'family resemblance' approach, with different stresses and degrees of sophistication, is advocated by Paul Alpers, Robert C. Elliot, Claudio Guillen, Graham Hough, Uri Margolin, John Reichert (1978), Marie Laure Ryan (1981), and Morris Weitz (1956, 1964, 1977), among others.

generalizations concerning literary genres (e.g., by Croce). Wittgenstein's appealingly loose concept began permeating genre theory during the sixties, and its popularity made Eliseo Vivas refer ironically to the new 'handy' solution to the problem of literary class (Vivas 1968: 101).

I would like to raise the question of whether Wittgenstein's concept, at least according to one of its interpretations, has not become too fashionable, too little scrutinized. Instead of being a *last methodological resort*, it has become the first and immediate refuge in the wake of disappointment with some or other rigid definition composed of a confined list of characteristics.

In the following discussion, I will, first, show that the very transfer of the concept from Wittgenstein's philosophical framework to genre theory involves some shift that may call into question the outcome of the application. More fundamentally, I will argue that there is sometimes a discrepancy between the loose concept of family resemblance and the practical assumptions made about genres, even by the very advocates of the concept. And finally, I will propose two ways in which Wittgenstein's concept can be, after all, fruitfully applied to genre theory.

Instead of presenting a homogeneous description of language, centered around its cognitive function, Wittgenstein proposes a highly pluralistic picture (Wittgenstein 1978: 11–12). In so doing he is opposing some of the logical positivists of his time (Schlick, Carnap and others), as well as the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, namely himself, in an earlier phase of his philosophical development.

In order to illuminate the radically heterogeneous character of language, Wittgenstein introduces the games analogy. This analogy is meant to illustrate the crucial statement that linguistic activities not only differ from each other in various respects, but have, as a set, nothing in common:

'Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games." I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don't say: "There *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games'" – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.' (1978: 31)

And only then, after explaining and discussing the analogy of games for a while, does Wittgenstein introduce the new analogy that interests us most, the one concerning the family:

'I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblance"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: "games" form a family.' (1978: 32)

Thus the wish to illuminate the nature of language leads Wittgenstein to use the analogy of games, and this, in turn, leads him to the analogy of family, in

order to illustrate the idea of a network of similarities.² Different kinds of language-use are compared to different kinds of games, which in turn are compared to members of a family, who resemble each other only partially. In all cases, the terms 'language', 'game', or 'family' cannot and should not be defined via finite lists of necessary and sufficient conditions, simply because the diverse kinds of phenomena they designate do not have any one feature in common (which is stipulated by the concept of a necessary condition).

An attempt to apply this fundamental statement of Wittgenstein's to the literary field will most likely result in claiming that different kinds of literature (i.e., genres) do not necessarily have anything in common.³ In other words, 'literature', like 'language', and like 'game', may be a term that cannot be defined by a finite list of conditions. Note that there is no claim here about the internal structure (and hence the possibility or the impossibility of attaining a definition) of specific language games, and consequently of genres. One may even claim that the possibility of formulating a definition as far as specific language games are concerned is implicitly assumed rather than denied. Wittgenstein's target is the all-embracing term 'language', not the specific language uses that constitute it.

According to this line of argument, a feasible way to apply Wittgenstein's concepts to the literary field would be as follows: 'language' (denoting the multiplicity of diverse language uses), which is analogous to 'game' (denoting the variety of specific games), should be seen as analogous to 'literature' (referring to a complex of different genres). This, however, is not how literary scholars have applied Wittgenstein's concepts to the literary field. Instead, they have isolated one element – the family – from his network of analogies and, ignoring its function in the entire conceptual set, used it exclusively to establish the analogy frequently found in genre theory: between a 'family' (designating some group of related individuals) and a 'genre' (designating the various texts that are considered to be its members).

While this is a possible reading of Wittgenstein's text, it is by no means the most feasible, nor the most fruitful one. My essential objection to this formulation of the analogy is that whereas rigid, Platonic or Neo-Classical, concepts of genre are justifiably rejected, the alternative presented by the radical version of the family resemblance seems to go too far in implying that genres are totally open and undelineated categories.

If all that is shared by members of a class is a partial network of similarities, how can we explain that we (as a community of speakers and readers) decide to delineate the field of phenomena in the way that we do? In

² One may mention another analogy introduced by Wittgenstein in this context, that of the thread made up of interwoven fibers 'and the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length' (p. 32).

³ Such a view is elaborated by John Reichert in his *Making Sense of Literature* (1977).

other words, why is there a relatively high consensus about the boundary lines between different kinds of language use, or different kinds of literature, if what we have 'objectively' is merely a continuum of loose networks of similarities?

If the concept of a definition consisting of a closed set of necessary and sufficient conditions is inadequate because it is too closed, the extreme alternative, based on a problematic application of Wittgenstein's concept, appears too open. The interesting point is that despite declarations concerning the adoption of Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance in its radical version, some of its advocates find themselves, in their practical criticism, relying implicitly on 'closed' concepts, more closed than they would want to admit.

Morris Weitz is perhaps the critic who has contributed in the most consistent and elaborate manner to the application of Wittgenstein's notion to genre theory.⁴ In a genre, according to Weitz, each work will share only some characteristics with another, and it is virtually impossible to give genre a definition satisfying necessary and sufficient conditions. Thus, whether a text N is a novel is not a factual question

'but a decision as to whether the work under examination is similar in certain respects to other works, already called "novels," and consequently warrants the extension of the concept to cover the new case.' (Weitz 1956: 32)

This elusive situation where every new work re-shapes and re-shuffles the entire defining system, and consequently blocks the establishment of a definition, derives from the innovative nature of art. In a later work, Weitz refers to the impossibility of defining tragedy, because 'its use must allow for the ever present possibility of new conditions. It is a simple historical fact that the concept, as we know and use it, has continuously accommodated new cases of tragedy and, more important, the new properties of these new cases' (1977: 103).

Definitions, though, Weitz believes, are not totally impossible in genre discussions. As long as we have 'closed' the domain to which we refer (one specific period in one specific literature), definitions may be attempted, and a definition of Greek tragedy, let us say, is conceivable. But a definition of 'tragedy'? According to Weitz, never. At one point, however, he states:

'they [*Hamlet's* representative critics] are unanimous on all the defining properties of a hero, his suffering and calamity; dramatic conflict involving important values; and the tragic effect. But there is little agreement on the cause of his suffering, and the particular response of the ideal spectator.' (1956: 304)

⁴ First in an article (1956) and later in two books (1964, 1977).

From these formulations one can easily infer that a suffering hero and a 'dramatic conflict involving important values' are (even according to Weitz's reluctant presentation) necessary properties of tragedy set by all the diverse theories that he surveys. Now, these conditions may sound self-evident or trivial, but this is usually the fate of necessary conditions. It is only when one tries to add more substantial conditions that a definition is found to be truly enlightening and informative.⁵

Still, trivial or not, it seems that it is possible to find some necessary conditions for defining a tragedy even according to Weitz's own presentation. And if this is the case, there is no reason to retreat to the much looser concept of family resemblance.

The point that there are some necessary conditions for tragedy may become clearer if we consider, from a different perspective, many disputes among critics about the 'true nature' of tragedy. No critic, for instance, suggests that the tragic hero is a buffoon; or that the tragic action consists of joyful and cheerful events; or that readers (or spectators) can feel no similarity between themselves and the tragic hero while experiencing the tragic effect. In other words, disputes among critics about the 'true nature' of tragedy, vehement and radical as they may be, are ultimately confined to some distinguishable area of human experience and artistic structure. And whereas there is serious debate over the exact lines of demarcation, from a bird's-eye-view these disputes are diminished. In less metaphorical language, one may argue that by raising the level of abstraction one finds that most readers and critics do share some basic assumptions about tragedy. One might remind oneself in this context of the very basis for conceptualization about genres, namely, that 'the definition of a genre works by a process of abstraction' (Rosenmeyer 1969: 3). It is possible, of course, to capitalize on existing disagreements and present them as a conglomeration of incompatible, Babel-like critical approaches, as Weitz does, but I do not think that this would be a very faithful picture of the way genres are in practice written, read, and discussed.

The novel seems to offer, at least at face value, an excellent case for the advocates of the concept of family resemblance. This move by some genre theorists seems natural because the novel, a relative newcomer to the generic repertoire, has always been characterized by its elusiveness and lack of strict conventions.

Morris Weitz, for instance, immediately after introducing Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance and its relevance to the theory of art, turns by way of illustration to the example of the tradition of the novel. When facing new, modernistic works such as Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* or Woolf's *To the*

⁵ For a discussion of the criteria that guide the formulation of definitions, see Irving M. Copi (1978), especially pp. 154–158, and Raziel Abelson (1967), especially pp. 322–323.

Lighthouse, one may ask whether the term 'novel' can be applied to them. Weitz argues that formulating the question in this form is misleading:

'what is at stake is no factual analysis concerning necessary and sufficient properties but a decision as to whether the work under examination is similar in certain respects to other works, already called "novels," and consequently warrants the extension of the concept to cover the new case. The new work is narrative, fictional, contains character delineation and dialogue but (say) it has no regular time-sequence in the plot or is interspersed with actual newspaper reports.' (Weitz 1956: 31–32)

The main problem in Weitz's argument here seems to be that instead of demonstrating the point that genuine genre definitions face problems whenever new, innovative, works are produced, it shows us only that *unrealistically restrictive and rigid definitions* may face many problems in trying to accommodate new works. After all, who would seriously stipulate a 'regular time sequence in the plot' as part of a definition of the novel? Such a postulation might automatically exclude the bulk of the genre. Weitz's claims might have gained much more credibility had he offered more realistic criteria, actually used in genuine theories of the novel.

Robert Elliot follows the basic argument presented by Weitz and applies it to satire, claiming that satire is too evasive a genre to be defined in the traditional way, and that 'there are no properties common to all the uses' (1962: 22). Yet, after pronouncing this Wittgensteinian principle in such unequivocal terms, Elliot adds one sentence that in my view undermines his whole argument:

'or, if I could find an essential property, it could be so general as to be useless for purposes of definition: "All satire attacks something," for example.' (p. 22)

This small addition, qualified and hesitant as it is, calls into question the concept of family resemblance in its truly radical interpretation. Because what is this condition that 'all satire attacks something' but a classical example of a *necessary condition* in a definition? ⁶

Note that I can heartily agree with Elliot that it is virtually impossible to supply a simple definition that will easily apply to all instances of satire. But this conviction need not dictate an exuberant embrace of the family resemblance solution. There may be some viable position in between. Elliot himself, by pointing to the invective nature of satire, indirectly indicates such an alternative.

According to such an alternative view, one could speak of a necessary condition that applies to all satire, plus an additional cluster of characteristics

⁶ For another example of the explicit pronouncement of the family resemblance approach, together with a tacit, almost unconscious, understanding that some necessary conditions (in the form of 'minimal constraints') can be formulated after all, see: Uri Margolin (1973: 141).

which is dynamic and variable. These additional traits may change (not all of them at the same time) from one literary period to another, from one literature to another, and from one writer to another – or, even more commonly, they may switch their relative status in the hierarchy that defines the genre. This one necessary condition, the one ‘fiber’ that runs throughout the whole thread (to use Wittgenstein’s analogy, but in an opposite way), may also vary in its relative standing and should not necessarily be conceived as most important or central at all times (in satire, the invective may be sharp and central in Juvenal, subtle and sometimes marginal in Horace). In addition to the example of satire discussed above, Elliot takes a cue from Weitz in citing the novel as a prime example for the application of the concept of family resemblance. But before re-formulating Weitz’s argument concerning the novel, Elliot makes a revealing remark:

‘Consider the novel for a moment (and consider the definition that E.M. Forster adopts, with comic despair, from M. Abel Chevalley: the novel is “une fiction en prose d’une certaine étendue.” Beyond this we cannot go, says Forster).’ (Elliot 1962: 22)

Again, as in his discussion of satire (and Weitz’s discussion of tragedy), Elliot is actually offering – in an implied and unconscious move – a necessary condition for the definition of the novel, despite the fact that according to the family resemblance concept there cannot be a necessary condition. The formulation that Elliot is quoting, in fact, might even be recast into three necessary conditions: (1) a novel has to be a work of fiction (as opposed, say, to history or to philosophy); (2) it should be written in prose (as opposed to verse); ⁷ (3) a novel should be of considerable length (as opposed to a short story or a novella).

Stated in this way, Forster’s definition seems less a function of ‘comic despair’ and more a cautious and flexible formulation of certain basic, necessary features of the genre. It is also possible to add to these three elements a fourth one: (4) A novel should be a narrative text (as opposed to merely a description of a landscape, or a logical argument).

These conditions cannot be dismissed as mere truisms, because they do have some informative value. To be sure, one should neither see in these four conditions necessary and sufficient conditions for defining the novel (there may be texts which fulfill the four requirements and still will not be considered novels), nor confuse these conditions with a comprehensive theory of the

⁷ There may be a few exceptions to this condition (e.g., the classical *Eugene Onegin* of Pushkin, or contemporary Seth’s *The Golden Gate*). In the face of such counterexamples I can claim that, as far as the overwhelming majority of novels is concerned, the condition still applies, and that the novel in verse is a ‘marked’ case. It is also evident that the *prototypical members* of the category of novel are written in prose. For an elaboration of this concept of prototypical members of a category see below.

novel. Any serious theory of the novel should elaborate the exact meaning of each of the terms used in the above formulation (how, for instance, to define 'fiction' or 'narrative'). Furthermore, a theory of the novel would examine the way the above four elements are related to one other and to other relevant levels of the novelistic text (e.g., point of view, expository modes). But the crucial fact is that most such theories will accept the above four characteristics as their point of departure. Thus even with the novel, apparently the most elusive and protean of literary forms, the concept of family resemblance is found to be too open.

Instead of once and for all solving the conceptual problems involved in genre theory, advocates of the family resemblance approach tend to create new problems and inconsistencies. These problems seem to stem from their radical, reductive, interpretations of Wittgenstein's concept. Instead of demonstrating the rich network of relations that *does exist* between members of a 'literary family', they have chosen to isolate the 'negative' aspect of the family resemblance, namely, the statement that there is no single trait shared by all members. This reductive-radical commitment has led them to unrealistic and unconvincing claims about specific genres as well as to certain inconsistencies in argumentation.

If we abandon this radical-negative emphasis and embrace a more 'positive' reading of Wittgenstein's concept, some fruitful implications for genre theory may arise. Weitz himself, in a comprehensive defense of the use of 'open concepts' in various areas of the human experience, points to different models of definition that are not based on a closed set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but can still show different degrees of 'openness':

'The investigation of the logical grammar of certain concepts may reveal concepts with no necessary, no sufficient, and no disjunctive set of sufficient criteria; or concepts with a necessary criterion but no necessary and sufficient set of criteria; or concepts with no definitive set as well as no undebatable necessary criteria.' (1977: 34).

I do not think one has to embrace, in the field of genre theory, the most negative-radical model according to which the concept of tragedy, for instance, is open 'in the precise sense that it has no necessary and sufficient conditions but only a disjunctive set of nonnecessary, nonsufficient conditions' and is 'perennially flexible as well as perennially debatable' (1977: 103). Even if we grant that there is no necessary condition shared by all tragedies, I think Weitz's own description suggests that the open concept of a disjunctive set of sufficient conditions may be applied to the history of tragedy, every historical phase having its special characteristics. Further, when we think of the heterogeneous field of the literary genres ranging from genres mainly characterized by formal structure (e.g., the sonnet), to more thematic-oriented genres (e.g., historical novel), there is no reason to assume that the family resemblance

approach, especially not in its negative-radical version, is appropriate for all, or for most of the literary genres. Admitting that a close, real, definition is not available does not mean that we are left with a relativistic position. Even in using loose concepts, there are some things that are not vague and loose, as Max Black has argued: 'In using a loose concept, I must know that there are instances that are indisputably "clear" and must be able to recognize such cases; and I must also be able to recognize "border line cases" ' (Black 1970: 12). There are, in short, some more fruitful and positive methodological positions, some of which are indicated in Weitz's own formulations (or his actual analyses), that also take into account the more stable aspect(s) of our 'open' and 'loose' concepts.

Such a positive model, based on the concept of family resemblance, has been developed by Eleanor Rosch in the field of cognitive psychology for studies in the internal structure of categories.⁸ Although Rosch's research is primarily concerned with common categories of natural language, I would like to suggest that some of its principles are also applicable to the more complex area of literary genres. Rosch's research project offers a powerful model, combining the concept of family resemblance with that of a prototype. Her basic hypothesis is that

'members of a category come to be viewed as prototypical of the category as a whole in proportion to the extent to which they bear a family resemblance to (have attributes which overlap those of) other members of the category. Conversely, items viewed as most prototypical of one category will be those with least family resemblance to or membership in other categories.' (Rosch 1975: 575)

The intriguing implications of these principles to genre theory seem almost inescapable. Rosch's basic hypothesis seems valid and illuminating in the field of literary genres as in the field of common natural language categories. One major implication of these principles is that literary genres are perceived neither as rigid and unified categories, nor as a conglomeration of literary texts, randomly collected, sharing merely a loose network of similarities. Rather, literary genres are perceived as structured categories, with a 'hard core' consisting of *prototypical members*.⁹ These prototypical members are characterized by the fact that they bear a relatively high degree of resemblance to each other. Marie Laure Ryan, in her highly illuminating presentation of the goals and perspectives in genre theory, also emphasizes the important role of 'typical' and 'archetypical' members of genres in constituting our notion of

⁸ See Eleanor Rosch and Carolyn B. Mervis (1975), and Eleanor Rosch (1978).

⁹ Sometimes there may be only one prototypical member 'par excellence', but that should not necessarily lead to E.D. Hirsch's claim that 'a type can be *entirely* represented in a single instance' (1967: 50). The emphasis, indicating my disagreement, is mine.

a genre within the framework of the family resemblance approach:

'there would be highly typical and less typical members of every genre This approach invites us to think of genres as clubs imposing a certain number of conditions for membership, but tolerating as quasi-members those individuals who can fulfill only some of the requirements, and who do not seem to fit into any other club.' (Ryan 1981: 118)

Thus, when we wish to describe tragedy, we should neither adopt the rigid criterial approach, nor deny the existence of a structured 'hard core' in the 'literary category', i.e., the genre, of tragedy. Instead, in order to understand the way 'tragedy' functions in the literary system, we should look for the prototypical members of the genre, i.e., for those texts considered to be the most representative tragedies. In trying to characterize 'tragedy', the most fruitful approach is to focus on works such as *Oedipus Rex*, *King Lear*, and *Phèdre*, because they are perceived as prototypical tragedies. And one of the reasons why they are deemed typical is because they share many traits with each other (e.g., a tragic hero with a *hamartia*, a structured plot that includes a relatively distinct *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*, etc.). The term 'many' is used in this context, of course, in a relative manner: *Oedipus Rex* and *King Lear* have more thematic and structural traits in common than either (or the two of them) might share with works such as Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, although it is possible to read the latter as a tragedy, as Stanislavsky did in his interpretation of the play.¹⁰

By focusing on the prototypical cases of a literary genre, we should not, of course, overlook or underestimate those texts that are not prototypical of that particular generic tradition. The 'marginality' of these texts could, sometimes, be hailed as the source of an aesthetic merit. What is perceived as a fault from a classicist point of view may be described as an advantage when judged by modernist standards. But my major concern is neither to condemn those 'marginal' cases nor to praise them. Rather, I simply wish to argue, in a purely descriptive manner, that in our perception of generic categories the prototypical cases play a major role. Furthermore, the 'prototypical-hypothesis' enables genre theory to break the conceptual deadlock implied by the approach despairing of any generalizations on literary genres that permeates modern criticism. This hypothesis opens up new *empirical projects for examining the actual ways* in which the literary community perceives and uses generic categories, or, as Marie Laure Ryan says: 'to lay out the implicit knowledge of the users of genres' (Ryan 1981: 112).¹¹ The implicit knowledge involved in

¹⁰ For an interesting analysis of the essential schema of tragedy that focuses on prototypical tragedies but at the same time pays due attention to marginal and questionable cases, see Dorothea Krook (1969).

¹¹ For some fruitful empirical research on generic categories, see the special issue of *Poetics* on 'media genres' edited by Schmidt (1987), and the essay by Schuur and Seegers (1989) on the ways of classification applied by library users in practice.

generic categories can be described also as having a coordinative epistemic and social role, especially when we are dealing with popular and media genres, as Schmidt, for instance, stresses in his research on media genres (1987). The main point, however, is that generic categories, both literary and those of the media, are part of a community's shared linguistic and cultural knowledge.

If dictionaries represent a great part of the tacit linguistic knowledge of a community, including its knowledge of concepts of literary genres, it is instructive to see that many definitions of generic terms mention prototypical examples, or the names of authors of prototypical works. When 'satire' (or 'satirical') is defined and illustrated in the *Random House College Dictionary*, Swift's name is adduced (p. 1171); Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* gives Pope (p. 513); *Petit Larousse* refers to Horace, Juvenal, and Boileau (p. 946). It is this *combination* of certain typical traits with prototypical members of the generic category that constitutes the core of our generic concept. Dictionaries of common linguistic usage are, in that respect, a good starting point for revealing the 'implicit knowledge of users of genres'. Next, we can move to dictionaries and glossaries of literary terms in which there is more room for elaboration. Here the principle of combining a set of descriptive traits with reference to prototypical works is even more central and conspicuous.¹² The list and variety of prototypical works cited will, of course, increase, but without shaking the 'hard core' of the generic concept. Moving to the area of dictionaries of literary terms brings us also closer to those who participate more actively in shaping our concepts of literary genres, namely, critics, writers, scholars, teachers, students of literature, and other active members of the literary community (e.g., publishers, bookshops, etc.). I would like to stress that the critic's basic function in such dictionaries is mainly to pronounce and make explicit the implicit knowledge of the community of users of genres. He may sometimes also perform a more fundamental role by trying to modify the 'hard core' of the generic concept, by adding to that core a work not usually considered a prototypical member of the genre. These attempts, however, are not very frequent, and not always successful. Critics may perform an important constitutive role in assigning literary status to verbal artifacts (Van Rees 1989), but within a given literary community of genre users, their role in describing generic categories is not so much constitutive as it is explicatory. If, however, critics are not describing genres, but are rather engaged in making value judgements, with or without reference to generic terms (e.g., this is a superb detective novel), their activity can be best described as regulative rather than constitutive (Van Rees 1989: 187–197).

In addition to the family-resemblance-prototype assumption, there may be another fruitful application of the concept of family resemblance with regard

¹² See, for instance, the definition of 'satire' in Abrams's *Glossary* and Shipley's *Dictionary of World Literature*.

to literary genres. Wittgenstein's concept was evoked by Paul Alpers in a very interesting discussion of the literary tradition of the pastoral. The significant point in Alpers' article is his constant emphasis on a tacit 'dialogue' between writers of pastoral throughout history. Representations of shepherds' lives, and the way they are made representative of human life in general, are constantly modified. Thus every pastoral can be regarded as 'an interpretation or development or use of the representative anecdote of shepherds' lives' (Alpers 1982: 457). In other words, we have a constant and intimate intertextual relationship between different phases of the genre. Some writers may take the previous phase as an admired model, some as a challenge, but in all cases we will have some kind of textual 'ancestry'. This brings us back to Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance. Maurice Mandelbaum, in a critical account of Wittgenstein's concept, points to the fact that in hailing the 'openness' of the concept of family, Wittgenstein ignored one crucial 'stable' element, namely that members of a family 'are related through a common ancestry' (1965: 221).

Thus the very vehicle supposed to be the emblem of extremely loose relations between its members – the family – has a far stronger 'glue' that binds its parts: common ancestry. This trait, unlike the visible physiognomic features which create only an elusive network of similarities, is shared by all members of the family.¹³ As with the *common ancestral bond* that ties families, so with games; the common feature should not necessarily be sought on the apparent, but rather on some underlying level: an enjoyable activity, governed by constitutive rules, that has no material products.¹⁴

In any event, it is possible to see the fruitful implications of the concept of 'common ancestry' for the theory of literary genres. Alpers's remark about the 'line of descent' of the pastoral may be viewed as an implicit way of pointing to a 'common ancestor' shared by all pastorals, despite the absence of any apparent literary conventions shared by all pastoral works. The intertextual relationships among diverse writers can be traced back to the 'founding father' of pastoral – Theocritus. Virgil, Theocritus' 'heir', represents the first significant bifurcation of the genre into the idyllic and the more 'realistic' version of pastoral, which then evolved and branched out further during the Renaissance

¹³ Weitz, in an attempt to defend Wittgenstein's position, proposes a counterargument according to which Mandelbaum does not succeed in showing that Wittgenstein's doctrine of family resemblance is incoherent (1970: 56–57). I think, however, that Mandelbaum's argument is intended to show that Wittgenstein's doctrine is one-sided and incomplete, not that it is necessarily incoherent.

¹⁴ For defining games as activity governed by constitutive rules, see John Searle (1969). I add the elements of enjoyment and of no material products to distinguish games from other institutional activities governed by constitutive rules, but which are not necessarily enjoyable and which have material products (e.g., economic institutions). For some important observations and distinctions on the concepts of institutional fact, constitutive and regulative rules and their applicability to the literary field, see Van Rees (1989: 190–193).

and later through Romanticism. Every writer in this line carries on the *textual heritage* of the genre, or participates in its 'genetic pool' (if one is using a biological metaphor).

Further, generic 'line of descent' often tends to be structured around the figures of either a 'founding father' or even more frequently two 'parental' figures, representing certain basic generic options and directions: Theocritus and Virgil in pastoral, Homer and Virgil in epic poetry, Aristophanes and Plautus in comedy; Horace and Juvenal in satire, Petrarch and Shakespeare in the sonnet, etc. The 'line of descent' tends then to display further bifurcation, but in most cases it is not too difficult to 'trace' later, even modern, manifestations back to the primal figures.

Thus, focusing solely on the conspicuous textual features of a literary genre may sometimes lead a theorist to despair of finding any common specific features. This despair is unjustified for two reasons. First, as we have seen, many genres, even the most elusive ones, usually share at least one fundamental trait. This trait may sometimes be general or vague, but it still may provide us with vital information about the scope and possibilities of the genre.¹⁵ Second, in addition to these fundamental characteristics, every writer who chooses to write in a generic framework (and most writers do work in some generic framework, even if reluctantly) participates in the process of textual heritage transmitted from the 'founding father', or the 'parental' figures onward. In order to understand and to evaluate the writer's work, we are expected to take into account the generic background against which he operates. It follows also that we can establish a 'genealogical' line, i.e., the series of writers who have participated in shaping, reshaping and transmitting the textual heritage established by the 'founding father' of the genre, including the dialectical relationship of 'parents' and 'children' in genre history.¹⁶

What is proposed here is a picture of the 'genre family' consisting of individual writers who have contributed to the generic tradition. And as a family tree maps for us the diverse lines of descent of a family (to use Alpers's image), so does the 'family tree' of a genre.

The determination of whether an individual is or is not part of a given family is a function of pedigree and of legal and cultural norms; similarly, the decision as to whether the works of a particular writer do or do not belong to a given genre is a function of direct influence and of the way that literary genres are perceived and divided in a specific period and literature. Demonstrating that a specific writer was influenced by a particular generic tradition is not enough. One should also show that this generic tradition is recognized as such

¹⁵ Bakhtin and Medvedev refer to such fundamental characteristics when they say that 'every genre has its own orientation in life, with reference to its events, problems, etc.' (1985: 131).

¹⁶ Some of these complex 'parent-child' relationships are explored, though from a different perspective, in Harold Bloom (1973).

by the reading public, as part of its 'horizon of expectations'. This latter aspect is concerned with the institutional nature of literature as a cultural activity. In order to determine whether a given work is perceived against a specific generic tradition by the reading public, one has to check various 'clues' such as the work's title, the author's other works and reputation. In addition, there are some very important literary-institutional factors that are involved in determining the generic 'horizon of expectation' of the literary community: the work's publisher, how it is referred to by critics, presented by salespersons, and, when it becomes part of a curriculum, the way it is grouped with other works.¹⁷

Showing an 'influence' in and of itself is not enough. On the other hand, trying to 'force' the works of a writer into a generic schema without being able to demonstrate any specific line of influence (no matter how intricate) may sometimes result in arbitrary groupings of texts.¹⁸ Being recognized as part of a genre is thus a function of a dialectical relationship between individual influence and reception by a literary community. This becomes especially striking when a new genre tries to establish itself as part of the audience's 'generic worldview'. It took some time before the novel, for example, could be recognized by readers as an autonomous literary genre rather than as Aristotle's camel, a creature that does not fit into the existing generic schemata ('a comic epic in prose').

To conclude my discussion, I want to stress that in criticizing some hasty uses of the family resemblance concept I do not want to deny that it has had a positive role in modern genre theory. It has been a vital force of liberation from certain rigid and inflexible concepts of genre. After granting this important liberating function, however, one should seek a more balanced approach to the issue of describing literary genres. Such a desired model will neither confine itself to a closed set of necessary and sufficient conditions, nor shun the attempt to formulate certain salient characteristics that can be easily found in the prototypical members of a generic category.

Moreover, as we have seen, there may be other aspects of the analogy – related to the idea of a generic heritage passing from 'parents' to 'children' –

¹⁷ The term 'horizon of expectation' is borrowed, of course, from Jauss (1982). The important institutional aspects of the literary activity, especially those performed by the critic, are discussed in Van Rees (1989).

¹⁸ The term 'influence' that I use in referring to generic transmission has been discredited in literary theory, because it may lead to indiscriminate talk of ubiquitous 'influences' and to focusing on the biography of the writer rather than on his work. For an astute criticism of the wishy-washy use of this term in literary history, see the articles of B. Ejxenbaum, J. Tynjanov and the shared articles of Tynjanov and Jakobson in Matejka and Pomorska (1978), especially pp. 59, 76, 79. I think, however, that this term conveys to us the intimate relationships that sometimes exist between the works of two writers especially within a generic tradition, and, when used carefully, should not be dismissed. For a persuasive defence of the concept of 'literary influence' see Guillen (1971: 62).

that seem highly pertinent to genre theory. To explore various implications of this dialectical relationship of 'parents' and 'children', however, goes beyond the scope of the present discussion.

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