

## Paliyenko on Jefferson (2015)

Jefferson, Ann. *Genius in France: An Idea and its Uses*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. xii + 273. ISBN: 978-0-6911-6065-8

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In her wide-ranging book on the idea of genius in France, Ann Jefferson delves into the ambiguity that has long surrounded the term “genius” not to define the notion, but rather to consider the significance of the “many ‘uses’ to which genius has been put” since the eighteenth century (2). The dual etymology of the term—from the Latin *genius* and *ingenium*—generates a capacious framework for Jefferson’s analysis of “the disciplinary and discursive context” in which the thinking about genius emerged (5). Jefferson traces how the French developed a modern understanding of creative and/or intellectual exceptionalism, synthesizing a remarkable number of texts to show why “there was something about genius that made it particularly ‘good to think with’” (6).

Jefferson introduces her ambitious study by analyzing three founding texts (Aristotle’s *On Melancholy*, Plato’s dialogue, *Ion*, and Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*), which anchor her view that the idea of genius has often been reinvented or reenergized in relation to “elements that appear to be antithetical or even positively inimical to it” (8). “Pathology,” “imposture,” and “the spectator of genius” (meaning “those who behold [and name] it”) are the “others” of genius that structure Jefferson’s chronological account (8). She highlights distinct moments of the discourse on genius in “aesthetics, national identity, Romanticism, psychological medicine, the realist novel, experimental psychology, and children’s literature” (15).

Part one treats the Enlightenment debate on various attributes of genius in relation to classical mimesis as well as a new philosophy of mind, drawing together thinkers such as Condillac, Vauvenargues, Helvétius, Condorcet, Dubos, Mercier, and Marmontel. Mention of women’s absence from these debates as well as thinkers’ recourse to the physiological basis of so-called male genius rooted in humoral medicine of the ancient Greeks invites further analysis. A closer look at Helvétius’s *De l’homme* (1772) and the more progressive views of Condorcet, for example, would reveal education and work as other factors that cultivate individual genius. Jefferson focuses instead on aesthetics, the power of observation, and how originality surfaced as a new attribute of genius in the latter eighteenth century, but remained tied to “the successful application of the rules of art” (21). Her discussion of Diderot’s *Neveu de Rameau* is especially illuminating as a pivotal text that problematizes the “reader-spectator’s response” by suggesting that “only genius is capable of recognizing genius” (36).

Parts two through four examine the nineteenth-century use of “genius” in different guises: critical, female, and medical. In regard to the first of these uses, Jefferson considers La Harpe’s 1798 history of literature as instrumental in protesting the misuse of the term “genius” as it shifted from *ingenium* (aptitude) to “connotations of preeminence or superior ability”; the latter allowed the public’s indiscriminate assigning of genius to individual writers (47). For Jefferson, by calling for “specialist knowledge,” La Harpe “paves the way for the career of Sainte-Beuve whose development of literary criticism for popular consumption in the press was based on broadly the same premise” (48). As “the idiom of the age,” to use Jefferson’s subtitle for part two, genius acquired a collective sense to celebrate among others the achievements of the French, their unique language, and the beauty of the Catholic faith. Prior to Chateaubriand’s 1802 *Le Génie du christianisme*, in *De la littérature* (1799), Mme de Staël had explored “the dependence of genius on its political, cultural, and historical context” (Jefferson 57–58). Staël was certainly one of the most visible women writers of the time; however, she was not alone in thinking about genius, as Jefferson suggests. Sand in turn reflected at length on the gendering of genius at different points in her career, as did other women in the arts, letters, and sciences.

Another problem that haunted genius was its mis/recognition. For Jefferson, fellow poets, the medical profession, and women represented “three major groups through which the notion of genius evolved over the remainder of the [nineteenth] century” (66). By treating only “the brotherhood of genius,” however, Jefferson unwittingly silences women in the development of French Romanticism and subsequent poetic movements. Her discussion of genius in terms of pathology (Lélut, Moreau de Tour, Séailles, Toulouse) highlights medical interest in the brain’s “optimal performance” or “malfunctioning,” without fully considering how sex factored into this equation (93). Part four reconstructs thinking about genius in the novel. Beginning with the eponymous heroine of Staël’s *Corinne* (1807), whose heightened sensitivity is the source of both poetic glory and deep suffering, Jefferson deftly shows how “genius contains the seeds of its own undoing” (133). Examples drawn from Balzac and Zola further demonstrate how “in the novel, [genius] almost always fails,” which expands the pain of genius to both sexes (127). To this point, recourse to advances in embryology would illumine the bias of the “parturient imaginary through which the failures of genius are . . . represented” (Jefferson 157).

As genius was redefined in terms of superior intellect (Binet), its medical linkage with “creative” insanity faded. Addressed in part five, twentieth-century experimental psychology drove the interest in precocity and its distrust, as discussed in relation to the “affaire Minou Drouet” (183–92). In part six, Jefferson closes her provocative study with the questions put to genius by thinkers closer to our time. That we still cannot explain genius scientifically may lend weight to it being but a construct, as Barthes and Sartre argued. More recently, Kristeva has returned to the question of gender in treating three female geniuses (Colette, Arendt, Klein), and Derrida to “the undecidable character of genius” as the ground for rethinking the concept (225). Space constraints make it impossible to do justice here to the rich discussions of this book, a thought-provoking and original contribution to modern genius studies that reinforces the fundamental idea that “genius fares best as the focus of open-ended enquiry” (226).

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