

Adrian TUDURACHI, *The Genius Factory: The Birth of a Productivity Myth in the Romanian Culture (1825-1875)* [*Fabrica de geniu: Nașterea unei mitologii a productivității literare în cultura română (1825-1875)*], Institutul European, Iași, 2016, ISBN print 978-606-24-0165-8, 246 p.

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Adrian Tudurachi's most recent study, far from being a simple reconsideration of nineteenth century literature, succeeds in portraying an age of literature through innovative methods of contemporary research, perfectly aligned with current theoretical directions. Paying close attention to the manner in which genius is articulated and investigating it through analogies with the biographies of the authors, social events, and transformations in the field of classical cultural studies, the researcher has a rather quantitative-driven interest in the phenomenon. According to Tudurachi, the multiple or singular state of "giftedness", the key concept of the present volume, defines the idea of literature within the Romanian cultural context.

*The Genius Factory* attempts to prequalify how one gains visibility in literature, distancing itself from other research techniques employed up to the present. Admitting a kinship with the theories of Pascale Casanova and Judith Schlanger, the author takes as a starting point a thematic excuse, namely the literature and status of the genius, which he separates from the poetic texts proper that were previously examined as if under a magnifying glass using the close-reading technique. With a keen eye to see, above anything else, genius as a phenomenon and only afterwards in its concrete creative expression, Adrian Tudurachi recalibrates the oscillations between text and biographies, between poetry as an intrinsic product and an engaged discourse. In the four parts organised as successive steps in coagulating the idea of geniality, *Resources*, *Sacralisation*, *Monumentalisation* and *Singularisation*, the genius figures of the Romanian literary context go through an inverted process. The first chapter explores the origins of the word "genius" as found in Barbu Paris Mumuleanu's *Characters*, where the term is used for first time. Without analysing the works of this writer from an aesthetic perspective and refusing to see a minor literature as deficitary,

thus implicitly degrading, the researcher insists on the liberties that a writer belonging to this epoch enjoyed in choosing a model that presented a heritage in which to inscribe himself:

They change the manner of creating literature, the manner of manufacturing it. Being contemporary with the beginnings of a literature is an opportunity - a rare opportunity – to occupy a position outside the invisible frame of conventions and illusions that condition the literary practices. The genius evoked, if it can be considered as such, a number of deficits: that of a culture lacking a literary tradition that of an uneducated population called to create literature and that of an uninformed writing class<sup>1</sup> (11)

As a matter of fact, the idea of a genius, with its alternative of geniality, acquires meaning even in the context of a cultural difference. In this manner, this attribute overcomes the massive discrepancies between the margins and the center, geniality being detached from “quotidian practices” and contained within a sort of collective cultural unconsciousness: “Instead of requiring a process of importing through which new literature could become part of a race – doomed to lose – of reducing the discrepancies, the institution of geniality implies a sudden evaluation of the existing one”<sup>2</sup> (22). Following in the footsteps of Pascale Casanova, Tudurachi describes the functionality of literature through the processes of competition and differentiation. At the same time, the author maintains a certain skepticism towards any justification of value. Recovering through poetry several images of poverty and marginality, transforming an aesthetically lacking reality into a source of inspiration is seen as a special literary effort, even the attempt of these writers to produce literature out of basically nothing:

the work is not the figure which is distinguished on a residual basis, but it is instead composed out of the residual basis (...), as the poverty of the nineteenth century is affluent. What is

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<sup>1</sup> „Ei își schimbă felul în care fac literatură, modul de a o fabrica. A fi contemporan cu începuturile unei literaturi e o șansă – rară – de a ocupa o poziție în afara cadrului invizibil de convenții și «iluzii» care condiționează practicile literare. Geniul a conjurat, dacă se poate spune așa, mai multe deficaturi: cel al unei culturi fără tradiție literară, cel al unei populații needucate chemate să facă literatură și cel al unei clase scriitoricești neinformate”. All translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> „În loc să presupună un proces de import, prin care noua literatură ar intra într-o cursă – fără șanse de izbândă – de reducere a decalajului, instituția genialității implică o reevaluare bruscă a existentului”.

gathered from the territory, the misery and the manure, is put on display and offered through an excessive report, like a luxury commodity<sup>3</sup> (38).

It is difficult to ignore this powerful irony, through which the present text stands apart from the consecrated critical accounts, aestheticising or canonical. The preference for a methodology meant to investigate the cultural and poetic phenomenon is obviously borrowed from sociology and archeology. The second chapter problematises the visibility of literature, as well as the superficiality of statistics assuming a direct relation between the number of readers and that of sold copies. Not set entirely outside the established discourse, this investigation of “the market” situation regarding literature serves to explain the reception of the text by referring to “the social body”. So-called “contagious” literature constitutes one of the most subtle solutions to reconsider the reading audience, which can be divided into two types: the reader coming into direct contact with the text and the reader coming to know it “through association”. Although an awareness of the text’s dependency upon a barely literate reader exists, never before has it been treated with the attention it deserved, here seen as a fundamental explanation in the history of a cultural definition. Moreover, the idea of professionalizing the writer is anticipated first in the case of Heliade Rădulescu, who associates geniality with creative effort and who defines a form of authorship as an answer to collective impulses: “Conceived as equality of a superior multitude, geniality does not tolerate the supremacy of a single individual. It functions as a collective spirit, as a singularity which does not perform outside the group”<sup>4</sup> (80).

He is the same to offer a voice, within the Romanian cultural context, for a movement largely centered on geniality, *saint-simonism*, encouraging the quantitative view and moving the focal point from “defining the genius” to an “administration” of geniality: “geniuses are those initiated in the order of this world, who understand the internal order in one of its fundamental expressions: law, temper, nature, meaning”<sup>5</sup> (86). But what Tudurachi perfectly emphasizes is the opening towards new directions offered to the idea of geniality. Because of

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<sup>3</sup> „Opera nu e figura care se distinge pe un fond rezidual, ci figura compusă din fondul rezidual (...) sărăcia secolului al XIX-lea e opulentă. Ceea ce se adună din teritoriu, mizeria și gunoaietele, e pus în vitrină și oferit în vederea unui raport excesiv, ca o marfă de lux”.

<sup>4</sup> „Concepută ca egalitate a unei multitudini superioare, genialitatea nu tolerează supremația unui singur ins. Ea funcționează pe baza unui spirit de corp, ca o singularitate care nu acționează decât în grup”.

<sup>5</sup> „Geniulii sunt cei inițiați în ordinea lumii, care înțeleg ordinea internă sub una din expresiile ei fundamentale: lege, fire, natură, sens”.

the democratization of the concept by conditioning this quality to a simple intuition of future realities, even mediocre authors could be considered geniuses. Within the *Romanian Pantheon* of Iosif Vulcan, this is constructed in association with a biography authored by Heliade Rădulescu. “Embodied poetry” reverts to the previously identified mode of creating poetry: literature no longer represents an existential reality, but literature is an aesthetic act especially when the author is recognised by name, when an identity is instantly retrieved:

Poetry embodied in life encompasses the logic of imitation. An individual becomes poetic when his identity becomes reproducible (...) In order to obtain a nation of embodied poems, he has to imagine a nation of names <sup>6</sup> (94).

In the absence of any prior ostensibly critical approach, Adrian Tudurachi already announces the divide produced between the idea of geniality and its representations. Along with “embodied poetry”, one of the most potent concepts connected with this, genius comes to be associated with the biographical evolution of an individuality that “collects” experiences in order to translate them in aesthetic form. In this manner, the third chapter, dedicated to the process of monumentalisation, restores the original relationship between the work of art and its author, and, more important, it redefines the manner through which fragmented objectivity comes to be recognised through the cultural layers added to it:

The monumental no longer involves the spreading of a collection made of pretty objects but also anchoring them within the creative capacity of a territory (...) The inventory-making science actually transferred the prestige of monumentality from reception to creative possibilities<sup>7</sup> (117).

Following Walter Benjamin’s lead, the author of the study identifies as creative object or source object any selected cut-out of objective reality that is treated as a metonym. Special attention is given to what connects the personal, intimate space with the larger one:

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6.,„Poezia încarnată în viață subîntinde o logică a imitației. Un ins devine poetic în măsura în care identitatea lui devine reproductibilă (...) Ca să obțină un popor al poeziilor încarnate, va trebui să imagineze un popor de nume”.

7.,„Monumentalul nu mai presupune doar vehicularea unei colecții de obiecte frumoase, ci și ancorarea lor în capacitatea creatoare a unui teritoriu... Știința inventarului a transferat de fapt prestigiul monumentalității dinspre atitudinile de receptare înspre disponibilitățile de creație”.

What I want to highlight is that Michelet's images of souls touching each other represented for his contemporaries more than just a stylistic artifice: they were transmitting a real possibility through which a nation becomes a capable subject, a creative force in the largest possible way<sup>8</sup> (124).

A certain distance from the aesthetic school of criticism can be noted in the present text even when the first attempts at an aesthetic method in Romanian literature are described. With an analytical and descriptive perspective, assuming a critical distance from Odobescu's statements, Tudurachi structures his theoretical apparatus around an eventful moment, impacting literature indirectly and imposing archaeology as science. As a matter of fact, the new path offers literature the missing scientific premises and draws the interest of specialists in the area through the reconstructed closeness to an otherwise distant historical past. The researcher's interest also resides in Odobescu's attempt to polish the aesthetic taste of the masses and to reintegrate the destiny of a nation classified as minor into the major cultural direction. As opposed to history, always troubling itself with the great nations, archaeology investigates smaller nations, so that Odobescu introduces "archaeology in a battle of cultural recognition"<sup>9</sup> (125). The aesthetic tendencies prior to the trend established by Junimea (as the first Romanian form of social circle that theorises the problem of aesthetics) are not prevalent during the time of social events that changed the face of literature. By precisely contextualising literary failures, Tudurachi notes that the escalating nationalism around the 1848 Revolution ensures the failure of monumentalising the aesthetics defined by apparently minor writers (such as Cezar Bolliat or Alexandru Odobescu). In the case of such close proximity to a reality impacting literature, aesthetics cannot be anything but one committed to the cause.

The fourth chapter follows the process through which geniality, as an open phenomenon, narrows more and more until it is associated with one name alone. Thus, redefining geniality comes with redefining the ratio between work and desire, between foreign investment and willful assimilation of new possibilities of expression. In the Romanian

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8, „Ceea ce vreau să subliniez e faptul că imaginile lui Michelet despre sufletele care se ating erau pentru contemporani mai mult decât niște artificii stilistice: ele comunicau o posibilitate concretă prin care un popor devine subiect capabil, forță creatoare în sensul cel mai larg cu putință”.

<sup>9</sup>Arheologia într-o luptă de recunoaștere culturală”.

cultural context, the arduous literary desire is given several forms borrowed from the vocabulary of the church: “zeal is a term specialising in the production and circulation of intangible values”<sup>10</sup> (170). Furthermore, zeal is a form of emulation suggesting the authenticity of the poetic experience and the retrieval of labour so necessary in the act of creation: “to love what you cannot understand – this was the first passionate invested solution in literature, adopted by the Romanian culture (...) To allow yourself to be led by zeal is a way of entering the field of literature without understanding it”<sup>11</sup> (171). Next to “zeal” as artistic impulse, Tudurachi recognizes the “patriotic zeal”, through which the creators as “oriented existences” extend their personal projections, considered achievable on the outskirts of their own individuality.

Having accepted that a nation is permanent, the individual can aspire to a focused existence, to a life lived to serve an idea. When the individual was hopeless or powerless, the nation offers hope that gestures can have consequences, that they might influence, that they might have an impact on the existences of others<sup>12</sup> (182).

Similar to Schlanger, the researcher identifies three ways of expressing one’s vocation. The first one is “the occasion”, defined by retreating in an intimate space and by a silenced, private way of life, followed by “work”, in the form of a vocation exposed in the public space and an answer to the call of the nation, far from any individualistic desire. The last one is “art”, described as a way of entering the land of “singularity”, where the artist is isolated from the outside world and “relies on the marginality of artistic positions and on the failure of social integration of creative ethics”<sup>13</sup> (199). Changes occurring in this last stage influence geniality itself. However, as the author insists, changes arise not when the myth is created but because of social mutations: “What is changed by imposing Eminescu's typical figure (recognised as a genius by the major critics of Romanian literature) in the public space is not related to the creation of the myth but to the very relation established by the poetic universe

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<sup>10</sup> „Râvna e un termen specializat în producția și vehicularea de valori imateriale”.

<sup>11</sup> „A iubi ceea ce nu poți pricepe – aceasta a fost prima soluție de investiție pasională în literatură adoptată de cultura română (...) A te lăsa condus de râvnă e un mod de a intra în literatură și fără înțelegere”.

<sup>12</sup> „Acceptând că o națiune e permanentă, individul poate aspira la o existență focalizată, la o viață pusă sub semnul unei idei. Acolo unde individul era demobilizat sau neputincios, națiunea dă speranțe că gesturile pot avea urmări, că pot influența viitorul, că pot avea impact asupra existențelor celorlalți”.

<sup>13</sup> „Mizează pe marginalitatea posturilor artiste și pe nonintegrarea socială a conduitelor creatoare”.

with social reality”<sup>14</sup> (214). For the first time, the mimesis is inverted in the sense that reality copies the topos of fiction: “geniality is related to a self enclosed universe, a world ideally built by a demiurge-like author using the power of imagination”<sup>15</sup> (218).

Since in the nineteenth century “the genius factory” works, first and foremost, as an engine for fiction, as a narrative productivity answering the need to cover a literary deficit, the focus on the architecture and the deviation of a concept is fully justified. With an educated eye, accustomed to contemporary theoretical directions, Adrian Tudurachi describes the image of the genius and its preparation in cultural and even social games of the epoch from the stage of *sacralisation* to the final one of *singularisation*. What is more, he illustrates the way in which the initial artificiality and what may have seemed a far-fetched association with a concept manage to be fully internalised.

Accompanied by a consistent bibliography and a critical apparatus essential for the concepts discussed in the text, Adrian Tudurachi’s study is, without any doubt, among the few studies that make the literature of the nineteenth century accessible through a contemporary methodology. However, the selection of literary events and the very area of investigation place his research, at first sight, on an unfavorable horizon. How much more can we as readers get out of Bolinteanu or Odobescu’s work? Tudurachi overthrows all the predictions of readers unaccustomed to his writing. *The Genius Factory* is a perfectly articulated analysis of a different literary reality only improved by the ways in which the author questions the texts he analyses and how he deconstructs the readers’ critical predictions.

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<sup>14</sup> „Ce se schimbă prin impunerea figurii eminesciene în spațiul public nu ține de constituția mitului, ci de relația pe care universul poetic o stabilește cu realitatea socială”.

<sup>15</sup> „Genialitatea e legată de un univers închis în sine, o lumi deală constituită prin imaginație de un autor-demiurg”.