Julian North

The Domestication of Genius: Biography and the Romantic Poet

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 234 x 156mm. xii + 253pp. Hbk. £61.00)

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For the past fifteen years or so, Julian North has been working on Romantic and Victorian life-writings in the period from 1790 to 1900. Her interest has involved both autobiography and biography in the context of various literary cultures in the Romantic period, such as portraiture and spiritualism in Victorian biography, literary tourism in the 1830s and gender issues in biographical discourse in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. Her most recent book under review, The Domestication of Genius: Biography and the Romantic Poet (2009), explores the biographical writings of the Romantic poets in the context of the development of biography as a genre from 1780 to 1840. By focusing on the issue of nineteenth-century domesticity, she deepens her past research on life-writings of the Romantic poets as well as compiles it into a single work. As a compilation of the past research that she undertook over years, the book deals with six biographes—Byron, P. B. Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon. Their biographers are Thomas Moore, Mary Shelley, Thomas De Quincey and other writers. Her book begins with the outline of the biography in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. In chapter two, she cites Wordsworth and Coleridge as examples in order to introduce the Romantic hostile response to biography. The chapters that follow are devoted to detailed readings by North of the biographies of six Romantic poets.

While her examination covers a wide range of biographes and biographers, it “does not pretend to be an all-inclusive investigation of nineteenth-century biographies of the Romantic poets” (9). In fact, Keats and Blake are excluded from her examination, for the given reason that their Lives “fall
outside the period dealt with here" (9). She analyzes nineteenth-century biographies from the assumption that the biographers reconstruct the relationship between their biographees and the contemporary readers. The biographies of Blake are difficult to deal with since he was hardly recognized until the twentieth century. In fact, *Romantic Biography* (2003) edited by Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes, an anthology of essays on Romantic biography including North's essay, does not have any essays discussing the biographies of Blake. In the case of Keats, never being married, he is inevitably excluded from her consideration of the domestic sphere described in biography. Instead of Blake and Keats, she takes up the biographies of two female poets, Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans. They are not "canonical" poets and North's discussion of them occupies fewer pages than those of the other poets, but her studies will be fruitful for many scholars.

The key notion of "domestication" successfully compiles her previous wide-ranging essays about life-writings into a single book. North says, "My title, 'the domestication of genius', contains the central trope of the book and one that holds a number of meanings that will unfold in the following chapters" (4). Generally, there are two main meanings of "domesticate"; first, "make, or settle as, a member of a household" (*OED*, v., 1) or "attach to home and its duties" (*OED*, v., 2), and secondly "tame or bring under control" (*OED*, v., 3). It is clear that North pays attention to the first meaning. She focuses on how biographees' household lives were depicted by biographers because "to domesticate was [...] to insist upon the connection between the public/historical and the private/domestic worlds" (6). Yet, she also explains "to domesticate" as "to democratize" and "to question the exclusivity of cultural production that withholds itself from general consumption" (6). It suggests not only the relationship between the biographees and the reader (the reading public), but also that between the biographees and the biographers. When the biographers make the biographees approachable to the reader, the biographers could bring the biographees under control. This was the tension over authorship between the biographees and the biographers. For instance, North remarks on De Quincey's sense of rivalry with Coleridge's genius in terms of the privileged ideology of talented originality. While De Quincey showed his feeling of defeat as a biographer's "inevitable belatedness" (171), he managed to overcome it and gained authority by destroying the myth of genius in that "Coleridge is not, after all, self-created, but a plagiarist" who took and passed off a
German author’s argument on Pythagoras as his own (171). Interestingly, this is De Quincey’s “literal domestication” which brings Coleridge back “to earth” and to his “human responsibilities” (164).

Introducing the contemporary hostile response to the biographies, however, North does not always emphasize that the “domestication” of biographees threatened the Romantic poets’ self-creativity. While there was “a continuing strain of resistance to biography” in the case of Wordsworth and Coleridge, biography was also “a genre that extended educational opportunity” (51). It was, according to North, “the means of bringing the reader into the domestic space of the subject and, thereby, of bringing the subject home to the reader” (51). In a similar vein, her introduction in this book regards the domestication of genius as a merit of biographies. “For many, this is the enduring pleasure of literary biography—its capacity to make this connection—to bring genius home to the reader” (6). The expression of “bring genius home to the reader” is an idiom that means “make the reader realize the full significance of genius.” Yet, North employs the idiom very wittily. Evoking two senses of “home,” she plays on the adverbial one of “thoroughly” and the nominal meaning of “house” (i.e. domestic sphere).

Similar expressions appear five times throughout this book. In chapter three which treats the biographies of Byron, for example, North interprets biography’s influence not only as “the model of Byronic genius” but also as “a critical and competitive relationship with that model” (82). While the Lives of Byron “were explicitly opposed to the vision of the domesticated poet, [they] were engaged in a process of bringing him back home to the reader” (82). The expression “bringing him back home to the reader” heightens the meaning of “the domesticated poet”. While the Lives presented the model of Byronic genius as unapproachable aristocracy, masculinity, and autonomy, the biographers created “a domestic intimacy between Byron and the reader” (82). A similar argument about the biographies of Byron can be seen in her essay “Literary Biography and the House of the Poet”. In The Domestication of Genius, however, her discussion about “domestication” deepens in another way, as well. Quoting a sermon by the Revd Styles as evidence, North connects “Byron’s personal, domestic failure” with “the betrayal of his female readers and thereby of his nation” (81). Here, the meaning of domestic sphere is deftly extended from Byron’s own house to his native country.

Her discussion is, however, more than a good pun. By citing Carlyle’s
remark on biographies as an example of a rather welcoming response to biographies, she advances a more persuasive discussion. She points out that Carlyle said "it is the task of the Biographer to [...] bring home [the ideal outline of the poet] to our experience" (55). Her reference to the phrase "bring home [the ideal outline of the poet] to our experience" in Carlyle's own text is an excellent complement to her discussion about the nineteenth-century biographers who reveal their biographees' domestic spheres and bring them home to their readers. Her deft manner of analysis is strongly supported by her extensive reading of numerous first-hand materials.

In her essay "Literary Biography", North also surveys the association of biography and literary tourism. Within the literary tradition in which biographies were equivalent to a genre of literary tourism, biographers guide the reader into the biographees' houses: "from the reader's point of view, the writer is brought home to their experience" ("Literary Biography" 58). This embodies a significant definition of "domesticate", as "live familiarly or at home" or "take up one's abode" (OED, v., 4). Interestingly, this usage of the word is limited from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. In chapter one of The Domestication of Genius, which expatiates on Johnson and Boswell as typical models of the contemporary biographers, North emphasizes that, for both of them, the biographer had to be ideally "the housemate of his subject" (12). Their notion of the ideal biographer can be seen in Hazlitt's idea as well as the biographies of Byron. Hazlitt wanted "to penetrate the domestic interior of genius—to see, to know, to touch, and even to take the poet home with us" (53).

In addition to the extensive reading, North's analysis of each biographer and biographee at a certain distance is brilliant. Her exquisite sense of balance is also displayed in her view of feminist criticism. In the last chapter in which she examines the biographies of female poets, she criticizes the previous studies such as those by Anne K. Mellor and Susan Wolfson. In citing the twentieth-century critics' reading of Heman's verses, North remarks that they "preferred to read her poetry as a critique of the domestic sphere, and to celebrate her descriptions of the rift between private and public life, as the only possible way to politicize, and therefore to value, her work" (198). She straightforwardly asserts that the previous feminists put so much emphasis on their censure of confining women within the domestic sphere that they failed in accomplishing a new revelation of the biographies of female poets. After positing the flaws of these feminist critics, she offers
an insightful introduction to “the biographical basis of the poetess tradition” which seemed to “take agency” from the female poet “not just by insisting on the identity of the woman and her works and the unreflective nature of her creativity, but by confining her within a feminine, domestic, and depoliticized sphere of influence” (199). These conflicting aspects in the female biographies are paraphrased as “the feminist critical resurrection of Hemans and Landon” and “everything from which the female poet had to be rescued” (199–200). Refusing to adopt a simple feminist censure of the female biographies, North forms a clear view of the true character of the female biographies in terms of the issue of gender.

In many respects, North’s *The Domestication of Genius* is inspiring and suggestive. It is a worthwhile book which will bring the development of Romantic biography home to us.

*(Doshisha University, Part-time lecturer)*

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*Sally Bushell*

*Text as Process: Creative Composition in Wordsworth, Tennyson and Dickinson*


*Stephen Clark*

The primary focus of Bushell’s ambitious study is upon ‘the literary text before it becomes a completed work of art’ (1). It offers genealogies of ‘genetic’ criticism in French and German as well as Anglo-American con-