Edna O’Brien alerts us to her first problem on the first page of her Acknowledgements, when she has Leslie Marchand starting his edition of Byron’s letters in 1973 and finishing it in 1974. On the second page of her Introduction she refers to “Sir Wedderburn Webster”, and tells us that Alessandro Guiccioli couldn’t read English. She alerts us to her second problem on the second page of her main text, when she tells us that “The word Byronic, to this day, connotes excess, diabolical deeds and a rebelliousness answering neither to king nor commoner”. Thus from the start we know what to expect – inaccuracy with facts, and generosity with clichés. The book is a pot-boiler, written rapidly for an ignorant and uncritical market. It has already met with the approval of no less a person than Harold Bloom, who, reviewing it, writes of Byron “He bewildered and fascinated his contemporaries with a vitality overtly erotic, compounded of narcissism, snobbery, sadomasochism, incest, heterosexual sodomy, homosexuality, what you will”.

O’Brien’s errors proliferate like rabbits in Australia. There is a shipwreck in Don Juan Canto IV. Byron read Scott’s novels while at grammar school. Elizabeth Pigot was Byron’s cousin. The Alpine Journal was written in 1814. Byron compared the bloated, pregnant bodies of both Augusta and Annabella “with the sylph-like figure of his mistress, the actress Susan Boyce”. Goethe wrote Faustus. Walter Savage Landor was one of Byron’s friends in the Pisan expatriate community. Byron’s Memoirs were “written as he said ‘in his finest, fiercest Caravaggio style’”. And these are just a selection …

Her way of actually writing about “Byron in Love” is novelistic. Here he is in Ravenna, suffering from his passion for Teresa Guiccioli:

Each day Byron is permitted two visits, Teresa and he rarely alone, relatives all too willing to take him to Dante’s tomb, to the Byzantine mosaics in San Apollinare, to the library with Dante’s manuscripts, except that his heart is too heavy for any sightseeing. Love has its martyrs and he is one of them, writing her letter after letter in the small stifling bedroom, sentiments not too different from those that the young coachman might be permitted in his stable – if he loses her what will become of him – their few moments of happiness have cost too much, he is alone, completely alone, she once so dear, so pure, seems nothing now but a menacing and perfidious shadow. Preferring death to uncertainty, he asks her to elope with him, guessing as he put it that her reply would be ‘divinely written’ but would end in a negative, and so it did. Should he, he then asked, leave Ravenna? She dissimulated, her next letter a charming discourse on his poem The Lament of Tasso, curious as to what secret suffering had produced such beautiful lines and particularly wishing to know who was the origin and inspiration for the heroine Leonora.

It’s a tissue of fabrication (derived from Origo, The Last Attachment, pp.67-8 and BLJ VI 157-9). There are no original Dante manuscripts, at Ravenna or anywhere else; Dante’s tomb is a five-minute walk away from the Palazzo Guiccioli, it’s not Teresa’s relatives but others from the local nobility who

1: O’Brien vii.
2: O’Brien xi.
8: O’Brien 36.
offer to take him sight-seeing; and Byron never refers to the Ravenna mosaics. Only the bit about *The Lament of Tasso* is accurate.

By page 134 we’re so used to this degree of wilful indifference – this RupertEverettian inconsequentiality – this postmodernist unconcern with the truth – that, when we find ourselves in Venice without having been to Diodati, we’re not surprised – though the way Geneva is pasted into the narrative on page 176, in the middle of the Pisan section, still seems unscrupulous. Was O’Brien really up against so severe a deadline that she couldn’t scroll back and put it in its correct place?