Richard Lansdown, ed., *Byron's Letters and Journals. A New Selection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. 560. £30. ISBN 9780198722557.

Byron's life can be metonymically described with a single word: 'experience'. To his mother he wrote in 1808: 'It is from experience, not from Books, we ought to judge of mankind' (p. 36), showing how an empiricist principle informs his *Weltanschauung*, and how in his creative writing flights of the poetic imagination will always coexist with reality itself. Byron's own life experiences were of course of the most disparate kind – from his upbringing in Scotland by an eccentric family to his travels throughout Europe and Turkey, his failed marriage, exile to Italy and death in revolutionary Greece – and they are fully set out in Leslie A. Marchand's colossal and authoritative 12-volume edition (1973-1982) of the poet's letters and journals. In 1982 Marchand provided Byron readers with a more manageable edition of *Selected Letters and Journals*. So what are the reasons and rationale of this OUP 'New Selection' edited by Lansdown? In other words what does its 'novelty' consist of?

As a well-known Byron scholar (he authored the 2012 *Cambridge Introduction to Byron*), Lansdown explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to Marchand by stating that his 1957 biography of the poet is 'still the best that has been published; perhaps it will not be improved upon' (p. 512). By the same token, he reprints about 10% of the 3000 letters and a few extracts from Byron's five journals exactly as they appeared in Marchand's extended edition, introducing only some minor formal revisions, as clearly specified in the philologically accurate 'Notes on the text and short titles' section. However, from what he asserts in the Introduction, Lansdown succeeds in presenting still another new portrait of Lord Byron through a subjective selection of the poet's prose orchestrated according to a guiding structural principle of identifying key-experiences, -figures and -places in his life. Lansdown convincingly argues that Byron's letters and journals provide 'one of the three great informal autobiographies in English, alongside Samuel Pepys's diary and James Boswell's journal' (p. xi), while, at the same time, offering us unique (self-)critical insights into his creative processes and output, all singularly marked by the overlapping and intermeshing of life and art, fact and fiction. Hence the clearly outlined design in the *New Selection.*

The fine introduction, helpful notes on the text and 'Biographical Bibliography' (referring to fundamental source texts providing knowledge about Byron's life) are followed by 12 chapters including the selected letters and journals (arranged both chronologically and according to a specific thematic focus), and a final Afterword fascinatingly shedding new light on the aftermath of Byron's death, and particularly on how his most intimate acquaintances survived or thrived without him. The chapters, each preceded by a useful headnote, present specific focuses, which, as eloquently suggested by the titles, revolve around three main topics: the main phases and turning-point experiences in Byron's life (e.g. 6. Exile); the places mostly impacting on his life and works (e.g. 7. Venice and Rome); and particular works associated with particular women (e.g. 8. *Don Juan* and Teresa Guiccioli). Unobtrusively, Lansdown seems to suggest three precise Ariadne-like threads to guide us through the labyrinth of experiences (existential, cultural and artistic) emerging from Byron's most personal writing.

Following these three interlaced paths, readers arrive at more than a taste of 'this singularly magnetic individual' (p. xxiii) – essentially of Byron's ethnographic eye, searching for empirical as well as sensory (or sensual) engagement with foreign (especially Italian) places and people; of the constant dialogue between life and art in everything he wrote, 'for', as he said, 'truth is always strange, stranger than fiction'; of his 'antithetical mind' (p. xx), or mobility and inconsistency endorsed as existential principles, and consequently affecting his style in its idiosyncratic combination of the colloquial with the high-flown, the worldly with

the metaphysical, wit with Romanticism; and finally, of Byron's cosmopolitan spirit, his shifting personae and porous identity, selecting and absorbing aspects of the Other wherever he was.

Considering his eccentricities, not everybody will agree with Lansdown that Byron was 'an everyman', yet nobody can deny that 'his letters and journals [still] speak to us all' (p. xxi), especially to our own sense of finiteness counterbalanced by that 'desire of the moth for the star' (in P. B. Shelley's words) which seems so often to define the Romantic moment. Byron experienced first-hand the restlessness of a dialectical mind, so from Rome he wrote to Murray: 'where there is much to be grasped we are always at a loss – and yet we feel we ought to have a higher and more extended comprehension' (p. 271). Lansdown's edition of Byron's letters and journals, being a selection and not including the letters to which the poet was responding, cannot provide a full understanding of Byron's personality and genius. However, this is not a flaw. Like Byron in Rome, perhaps the reader may sometimes 'feel at a loss', because there is so 'much to be grasped' – in what Byron writes as well as in what he doesn't write, as evinced by his elliptic dashes. Thus, what apparently may seem to be a limited and limiting approach (with its three distinct foci) may have the positive effect of arousing our curiosity to explore Byron's intimate prose more thoroughly, or to direct us, as it were, towards Marchand's magisterial edition.

Gioia Angeletti
University of Parma, Italy