As I began thinking about this lecture for the Kings College IBS it hit home that my first such presentation was 31 years ago, way back in 1982 at Groeningen. Some of the people who were there then are now gone (I think for instance of Elma Dangerfield, so formidable a presence in so small a package, and of Andrew Nicolson, who was celebrating his contract to edit Byron’s prose). Many others who were young and promising then are now three decades less young and more accomplished. Whatever: I hope you'll bear with a certain amount of nostalgia in the ensuing talk—nostalgia and informality. The goal will be to make some comparative comments on two literary figures familiar to you all—and to consider several texts by these writers, texts that powerfully changed how I thought about things political and poetical when a much younger reader and thinker. The two writers: Eric Blair, better known to the reading public as George Orwell, and Lord Byron. The principal texts: Orwell’s essays, particularly “Politics and the English Language,” and Byron’s poetico-political masterpiece Don Juan.

Let’s start with the men, both of them iconic examples of a certain kind of liberal ruling-class Englishman, the rebel who flouts the strictures of his class, place, and time but does so in a characteristically ruling-class English way. Both men and writers display an upmarket version of the “generous anger” that Orwell attributes to Charles Dickens in a description that perfectly fits Byron and, with the change of one word, fits Orwell himself: “a nineteenth-century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls”
Byron’s and Orwell’s iconically rebellious lives and iconoclastic writing careers bookend the glory days of the British Empire. Byron, of course, was the self-identified “grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme”—poetic double to the age’s largest political figure. Byron was delighted when receiving his share of Lady Byron’s substantial inheritance enabled him to append the surname Noel so as to give him the initials NB, and he was one of the Waterloo era’s most astute appraisers both of that vanquished titan the other NB and of the imperial fortunes that rose and fell when Wellington’s forces prevailed and definitively banished the upstart Corsican. Orwell, writing from the 1920s through the 1940s, chronicled at grassroots level the decline if not fall of the British empire in powerful personal essays that complement his novels and equal them in suggestive power. Reputed to have coined the phrase “Cold War” his 1945 essay “You and the Atomic Bomb,” Orwell accurately predicted a later-20th-century world dominated by three super-powers, the USA, the USSR, and China, quasi-empires not ruling the waves like old-school Britannia but existing in uneasy stalemate by dint of possessing a weapon too powerful and horrible to use.

The two iconoclastic, freedom-affirming writers both experienced childhoods lacking paternal involvement. Byron was only 3 when his father Captain “Mad Jack,” who mainly lived apart from his wife and son, died. Richard Walmsley Blair, a functionary of the Indian Civil Service’s Opium Department, sent his family home from India in 1904 when Eric was one; and the boy grew up at Henley on Thames, essentially fatherless until 1912. As adolescents the two writers were educated, quite happily, at England’s two most famous public schools, Byron at Harrow and Blair at Eton. (Though Blair loathed his earlier schooltime at St. Cyprian’s and later Wellington, he enjoyed Eton.) As you know, Byron continued to Trinity College Cambridge, then traveled around the Mediterranean as a privileged postgraduate on what constituted an Englishman’s Grand Tour in the Napoleonic era. The Blair family couldn’t afford university tuition and no scholarships were on offer, so post-
Etonian Eric went out to Burma as a servant of empire. He became a policeman at the green age of 19 and stayed on from 1922 to 1927, thus shouldering responsibility and reluctantly wielding power at a time of life when Byron was enjoying undergraduate and travelling life. If it’s possible to say just when a practiced talent turns into a lifelong vocation, we might say that Byron and Orwell “became writers” at much the same age. When the reception of *Childe Harold* more or less guaranteed that Byron’s future would be poetry, not the parliamentary politics that he’d briefly tried before his travels, he was 24—the same age Orwell was when, recuperating from dengue fever at home in England, he decided to resign from the Imperial Police Force and take up the pen rather than continuing to wield a baton or pistol for the empire.

As men and as writers, Byron and Orwell were alike in feeling and fighting for the downtrodden. For young parliamentary Byron, that meant supporting Nottinghamshire Framebreakers and unemancipated Catholics on his occasions of speaking in the House of Lords. When in later years he put action behind conviction on the continent, his chief causes were the Italian Carbonari and the Greek Revolution. Orwell famously befriended the poor: the down and out of London and Paris, and the coal-trade workers of Wigan Pier near Manchester. He fought for the leftist republicans in the Spanish Civil War, serving first as an enlisted man and then a lieutenant in the anti-Stalinist communist militia of the POUM or Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification.

In their actions and advocacy Byron and Orwell can be seen as “friends of the people”—a Whig usage that, as Malcolm Kelsall notes, stands in sharp contrast to Southey’s epithet for the Tory Canning, “friend of his nation.” Being a “friend of the people” is of course quite different from actually becoming one of the little shirtless ones and unreservedly joining the downtrodden groups one seeks to help. Remember how Byron’s ballad “My boy Hobbie-o,” sent to Murray to forward to
Hobhouse in Newgate but also read aloud at Albemarle Street and published in altered form in the *Morning Post*, teased his imprisoned chum for getting too close, in Byron’s view, to the Westminster “mobby-o” Hobhouse represented in parliament. And though Byron boasted in a letter to his mother of being an adaptably democratic, cosmopolitan traveler lodging “in the houses of Turks, Greeks, Italians, and English, today in a palace, tomorrow in a cowhouse, this day with the Pacha, and the next with a Shepherd” (*LJ* II.9), he liked to have his lordliness recognized, as it was by Ali Pacha. On embarking in 1816 for the expatriate exile that would become life-long, Byron traveled downright imperially, in a custom-built knockoff of a Napoleonic coach.

Eric Blair, though more immersive in his mode of travelling, was like Byron a friend of the people rather than a man of the people. In Burma, which he chose as a posting partly on account of having a grandmother there, he was a non-pukka servant of empire (to my mind, rather like Cyril Fielding in Forster’s 1924 novel *Passage to India*) his inner status outwardly signified by his sporting a British mustache and Burmese tattoos. Back in England, determined to write, and advised to write what he knew, Blair decided to widen his class knowledge. Over the next five years he intermittently lived rough, experiencing Limehouse kips and spikes and Kentish hopfields, dressing in tramps’ clothes and going by the alias Burton when living with the poor. For almost two years he experienced *la pauvreté parisienne*, residing and working in the cinquième arrondissement, falling seriously ill and being hospitalized at a charitable institution, the Hopital Cochin. Blair’s personal experience of urban privation, chronicled in his first book *Down and Out in London and Paris* (where he first styled himself George Orwell) and in the 1946 essay “How the Poor Die,” gave him powerful sympathy for the poor—but the sympathy of a man with a safety net. Orwell punctuated his stints of rough life in England with periods of
residence at his parents’ comfortable house in genteel Southwold, and his aunt Nellie Limouzin provided similar support in Paris.

In 1936 Victor Gollancz, *Down and Out*’s left-wing publisher, suggested the economically depressed north of England as subject for what would become *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Heading north, Orwell traveled as the poor did, lived among them, went down mines, investigated public health, and attended public meetings—where he found reasons to criticize not just Oswald Mosley’s Blackshirts but also the British Communist Party, with which as a socialist he shared certain goals.

Later, even though fighting for the leftists in the Spanish Civil War, Orwell ran more seriously afoul of pro-Soviet Communist ideologues, who came to see members of Orwell’s POUM as Trotskyites or crypto-fascists. Orwell and his wife had to flee Spain to escape the Communists, not the right-wingers—and in “Why I Write” Orwell explains how his experience of the Spanish War crystallized his opposition to extremism at both ends of the political spectrum: “Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it.”

The individualism of that apparent throwaway phrase “as I understand it” seems important to our understanding what he means. Orwell’s anti-totalitarian stance is a good bit like the position Byron avows in the brilliant political rhetoric that makes the start of Canto IX a sort of new beginning to *Don Juan*, with “Wellington or Villainton” apostrophized and denounced as “Bob Southey” was in the Dedication, despots and sycophants trashed—and “the people” viewed skeptically from a distance rather than uncritically embraced: “I wish men to be free/ As much from mobs as kings, from you as me/ The consequence is, being of no party/ I will offend all parties…” (*DJ* IX. 25-26).
That claim of “being of no party” is partly disingenuous. Byron was a lifelong Whig who never gave the Tories the time of day—just as Orwell, though he offended ideologues of the left and the right, avowed himself a democratic socialist. But as men and as writers Byron and Orwell both displayed a decided preference for what Isaiah Berlin calls negative liberty: freedom from rather than freedom for. Due to differences in personal circumstances and in the genres in which they wrote, this seems even clearer in the case of Byron, financially independent and an expatriate when he died, than of Orwell, whose last years coincided with World War II and its aftermath (a time and circumstance for an Englishman to stand with his country) and whose personal essays, particularly the subtle, ambivalent “England Your England,” more overtly acknowledge the extent to which he was partly a creation of the society in which he was born.

To be a “friend of the people” is, like being a “friend of his nation,” abstractly partisan—but Byron and Orwell were alike in seeing concretely particular humanism as necessarily trumping the claims of party, even a party they might favor. We find instances of this empirical, individualist philanthropy evident in the deeds and words of both. Think of Byron risking the anger of his Carbonari colleagues by compassionately taking the ambushed, wounded, dying Commandant at Ravenna into his own house QUOTATION 1-and, even when he was working for the Greek revolutionary cause advocating humane treatment of Turks.

In Don Juan one finds examples of such even-handed *ad hominem* humanism in the Ismail siege, where specific instances of nobility and brutality can be seen in the Ottoman and Russian ranks alike and where one noble deed—Juan’s unselfish
rescue of the child Leila—ethically outweighs all his acts of martial prowess. But the clear-eyed narrator is too savvy to expect overmuch of individual acts, however fine. As he reminds us, a particular humane deed is no more than a pinpoint of light piercing the fog spewed forth by empires at war. “Little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love,” as Wordsworth would call them in “Tintern Abbey,” might be the best portion of a good man’s life—but they don’t incrementally counterbalance political powers run amok. See QUOTATION 2, significantly ending with its admonition to the people, not the political powers, on both sides of the English Channel: “Cockneys of London! Muscadins of Paris! Just ponder what a pious pastime war is.” It’s important for the masses to learn this moral lesson because they, not their rulers, almost always pay the human costs of war.

In his essays Orwell rises above partisanship—notably the patriotic partisanship shown by a “friend of his nation”—in various ways and various contexts. Most of you will probably recall the powerfully candid passage of self-indicting self knowledge at the end of “Shooting an Elephant” where, after distancing himself from both the empire whose instrument he’s obliged to be and the crowd of Burmese peasants whose collective expectations determine how that instrument’s wielded, he unflinchingly shows us unflattering aspects of the mob, of the imperialists, and finally of himself, a reflective but imperfect man controlled by both parties in the imperial dyad. (QUOTATION 3)

Similarly evenhanded, Orwell’s 1941 essay “England your England” begins dramatically and yet objectively: “As I write, highly civilised human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me. They do not feel any enmity against me as an individual, nor I against them.” These bringers of the Blitz, imagined by Orwell as for the most
part “kind-hearted law abiding men who would never dream of committing murder in private life” are acting outside the realm of moral judgment: each German bomber “is serving his country, which has the power to absolve him from evil.” Here Orwell is speaking descriptively of modern morality, driven by “the overwhelming strength of patriotism, national loyalty.” Elsewhere, in his essay “Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War,” Orwell, who fighting in that war was presumably absolved from evil as the German bomber was, foregrounds moments of individual humanism as crucial to his own experience as a partisan soldier. In one such example, he refrains from shooting a fascist officer who jumps out of a nearby trench and runs “along the top of the parapet in full view.” QUOTATION 4 A master of the engaging English self-deprecation that Byron’s narrator also uses to superb effect in Don Juan, Orwell here teaches a moral lesson without mounting to the pulpit. Our empathy with the pants-down officer means that Orwell need not justify his own unpulled trigger: our hearts and heads tell us that humane compassion trumps the claims of partisanship. Later in the essay, however, the case for partisanship rests on a similarly palpable sort of human epiphany. An Italian enlisted man shakes Orwell’s hand the day he joins the POUM militia, and this mundane encounter clarifies a moral issue that the abstractions and subtleties of political debate would only muddle: QUOTATION 5 “The man’s face, which I saw only for a minute or two, remains with me as a sort of visual representation of what the war was really about.”

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For the last part of this talk, let’s consider parallel texts in which Byron and Orwell understand the crucial, symbiotic connection between language and politics. Were there more time I’d so like also to include the wonderful essay “Why I Write”—Orwell’s analogue to the metapoetical digressions of the Don Juan narrator—but more on that another time. For now, just a few comments on the two texts that, among all contenders in the British age of empire extending from the
Napoleonic Wars to the aftermath of World War II, wage war most directly and to my mind most effectively on cant, an enemy common to both Byron and Orwell. The texts: Byron’s “Dedication” to *Don Juan* and Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language.”

Orwell never uses the word cant in his essay, but it prominently appears as a rhyme word in the very first stanza of *Don Juan’s* first Cant-o: “I want a hero, an uncommon want/ When every year and month sends forth a new one,/ Till after cloying the gazettes with cant/ The age discovers he is not the true one.” Wielded consciously, cant is in-group language meant to mislead outsiders. For example, think of some of Orwell’s memorable coinages in *1984*: Big Brother, thoughtcrime, doublethink, Ministry of Plenty, and so on. Cant is hypocritical, insincere, or evasive, meant to offer, as Orwell says the political discourse of his day aims to do, “a defense of the indefensible.” When cant trickles down from those few who benefit by misleading the misled masses and usage becomes unconsidered rather than intentional, it displays what Orwell calls the most marked characteristic of his time’s English, a “mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence.” Post-Waterloo Byron and post-Hiroshima Orwell are alike in seeing this insidious, misleading, vague, incompetent discourse as pervasive. It cloys the “gazettes” whose so-called “heroes” Byron rejects, and it clogs the learned and popular publications Orwell samples for the five specimens of bad writing appraised and condemned in “Politics and the English Language.” (Byron’s readers can see this same sampling and trashing done, but with comic effect, to a passage that’s inoffensive in its own right in the last stanza of *Don Juan’s* first canto.) Quotation 6

Characterizing his new *ottava rima* project *Don Juan* in a letter to Thomas Moore, Byron called the “Dedication” “good simple savage verse upon the [Laureate’s] politics, and the way he got them” (LJ VI, 68). Though Byron savagely if not simply indicts his day’s particular laureate, Bob Southey, for his present Tory
conservatism and for his opportunistic betrayal of earlier-held liberal and indeed radical principles, Orwell would probably point out that merely being a laureate makes bad writing almost inevitable: “Orthodoxy, of whatever color, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style,” says Orwell in “Politics and the English Language.” And further, “the great enemy of clear language is insincerity.” A poet on retainer to the status quo is almost obliged to praise the party line rather than voice his own convictions. Of course, as Byron goes on to show later in Don Juan through the example of the pragmatically versatile poet–singer of “The Isles of Greece,” that liar with a lyre, sincerity’s not necessary to the production of eloquent, moving political poetry. And, to be sure, Orwell’s complaints and strictures against the mental and verbal habits that make for bad modern writing—his well-known denunciation of dying metaphors, false verbal limbs and the passive voice, pretentious diction, meaningless words, and readymade phrases—have to do with the language used in modern expository prose, not literary language.

As keenly aware as Orwell was of the close and symbiotic relation between language and politics, Byron offers in his “Dedication” to Don Juan a stylized vision, what he loves and what he loathes in their purest forms. Byron denounces the poet laureate Southey, his Lake District fellow travelers Wordsworth and Coleridge, and the Liverpool government’s Foreign Secretary Robert Stewart, Lord Castlereagh—the poets for tuneless, foggy ravings and turncoat Toryism, the “slavemaker” politician for repressive Irish and Continental policies (putting down the Irish rebellion of 1798, securing the Irish Act of Union of 1800, these two back in the day when he’d been Chief Secretary for Ireland, and representing Britain at the Congress of Vienna) as well as for “set trash of phrase” in his oratory. Against these corrupt moderns Byron sets Milton, a man and poet sublime in his song and uncompromising, even when compromise would have been expedient, in his
antimonarchical politics: “He did not loathe the sire to laud the son,/ But closed the tyrant hater he begun.” ("Dedication" 10)

The vision Byron presents ignores problematically mixed cases—good poets with bad politics, bad poets with good politics, principled but tongue-tied statesmen, or corrupt yet eloquent ones. And, twisting the knife (Orwell would frown at that overused metaphor), Byron enhances political and poetical incompetence by linking them and by associating both with sexual inadequacy. Byron depicts the two “Bobs” of the Dedication through metaphors of unmanliness. Castlereagh’s an “intellectual eunuch” who warrants the pronoun “it.” Southey, somewhat more virile, is the butt of Byron’s famous “dry bob” innuendo and, along with the other Lakers, is accused of intellectual incest, a charge that becomes richer and funnier if readers know that Southey had in 1816 gossiped about Byron and Shelley’s alleged “league of incest,” that Southey and Coleridge were married to sisters, and that the Coleridges for a long time had shared the Southeys’ house at Keswick: Quotation 7

“Politics and the English Language,” for all the value of its strictures to let thoughts determine words rather than vice versa, to cherish concreteness, and to write what one believes, doesn’t offer tools for addressing the Juvenalian genius of the “Dedication” to Don Juan, a piece of rhetoric as persuasive and personal as it is potent and principled. Disavow cant and be candid in the silence of your own minds, people. How many of you find it hard, as I do, to give Castlereagh an open-minded appraisal as a statesman—or Southey as a poet—or maybe even to warm up to Wordsworth as much as he deserves, all thanks to the poetico-political brilliance of Don Juan? Here I’m reminded of a remark Stephen Minta recently made in Greece, that freedom and propaganda as Western civilization understands them were born at the same time and in the same place.
Quotation 1:

The other evening (‘twas on Friday last)—
This is a fact and no poetic fable—
Just as my greatcoat was about me cast,
My hat and gloves still lying on the table,
I heard a shot—‘twas eight o’clock scarce past—
And running out as fast as I was able,
I found the military commandant
Stretched in the street and able scarce to pant.

Poor fellow! For some reason, surely bad,
They had slain him with five slugs and left him there
To perish on the pavement; so I had
Him borne into the house and up the stair
And stripped and looked to. But why should I add
More circumstances? Vain was every care;
The man was gone; in some Italian quarrel
Killed by five bullets from an old gun barrel. Byron, Don Juan V.33-34.

Near-contemporary prose accounts of the December 8 1820 assassination of the Commandant at Ravenna, whom Byron called “a brave officer— but an unpopular man,” can be found in Byron’s letters of December 9 1820 to Thomas Moore, December 9 1820 to John Murray, and December 10 1820 to Lady Byron. (Byron, Letters and Journals V, 245-550).

Quotation 2:

If here and there some transient trait of pity
Was shown, and some more noble heart broke through
Its bloody bond and saved perhaps some pretty
Child or an aged, helpless man or two,
What’s this in one annihilated city,
Where thousand loves and ties and duties grow?
Cockneys of London! Muscadins of Paris!
Just ponder what a pious pastime war is. Byron, Don Juan VIII. 124

Quotation 3:

Afterwards, of course, there were endless discussions about the shooting of the elephant. The owner was furious, but he was only an Indian [by which Orwell means an Indian in Burma] and could do nothing. Besides, legally I had done the right thing, for a mad elephant has to be killed, like a mad dog, if its owner fails to control it. Among the Europeans opinion was divided. The older men said I was right, the younger men said it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie. And afterwards I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant. I often wondered
whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking like a fool. Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant”

**Quotation 4:**

He was half-dressed and was holding up his trousers with both hands as he ran. I refrained from shooting at him. It is true that I am a poor shot and unlikely to hit a running man at a hundred yards, and also that I was thinking chiefly about getting back to our trench while the Fascists had their attention fixed on the aeroplanes. Still, I did not shoot partly because of that detail about the trousers. I had come here to shoot at “Fascists”; but a man who is holding up his trousers isn’t a “Fascist,” he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself, and you don’t feel like shooting at him.” Orwell, “Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War”

**Quotation 5:**

When I remember—oh, how vividly!—his shabby uniform and fierce, pathetic, innocent face, the complex side-issues of the war seem to fade away and I see clearly that there was at any rate no doubt as to who was in the right. In spite of power politics and journalistic lying, the central issue of the war was the attempt of people like this to win the decent life which they knew to be their birthright.” Orwell, “Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War”

**Quotation 6:**

‘Go, little book, from this my solitude!
I cast thee on the waters, go thy ways!
And if, as I believe, thy vein be good,
The world will find thee after many days.’
When Southey’s read, and Wordsworth understood,
I can’t help putting in my claim to praise.
The first four rhymes are Southey’s every line;
For God’s sake, reader, take them not for mine. Byron, **Don Juan** I.222

**Quotation 7**

You gentlemen, by dint of long seclusion
From better company, have kept your own
At Keswick, and through still continued fusion
Of one another’s minds at last have grown
To deem, as a most logical conclusion,
That poesy has wreaths for you alone.
There is a narrowness in such a notion
That makes me wish you’d change your lakes for ocean. Byron, **Don Juan**, “Dedication” 5