In part because the term derives from the German word for novel (Roman), romantic irony has been associated almost exclusively with works of fiction, mainly the novel, the tale, and the drama. Seldom has it been related to historical narrative. This has meant that in the case of Carlyle, one of the few Victorians recognized as a romantic ironist, critics have dealt with Sartor Resartus as a work in this mode but have not seen that The French Revolution is equally an example of what Schlegel called progressive universal poetry.

Another reason why critics have not recognized The French Revolution as a work of romantic irony is owing to their attempts to fit it into one of the traditional genres. Long before Hayden White's classifications of nineteenth-century written histories according to their emplotments, commentators on The French Revolution were concerned to determine its genre. According to some it is an epic, to others a tragedy. The most recent critic of Carlyle as a historian holds that it is "closer in spirit to epic than to tragedy" in that as "heroic narrative" it "embodies the dominant impulse of the literary imagination in any age by which the panoramic and the particular, the cosmic and the local, the mythic and the historic, are held in the most fruitful tension." This generous definition of epic does subsume many aspects of Car-
lyle's history, but it does not take into account that The French Revolution is as much an antiheroic narrative as a heroic one, that it questions the ability of the narrator to relate the story accurately because of the limitations of language, deconstructs the invented historico-poetical world that it claims to offer, demands the complicity of the reader in its telling, evades closure and settled meaning, and constantly calls attention to itself not as history but as linguistic artifact.

I propose that The French Revolution is essentially neither an epic nor a tragedy but rather a work of romantic irony in which many genres are mingled. Carlyle did not cease to be a romantic ironist with the completion of Sartor Resartus, as has been claimed. For what is characteristic of Sartor (composed 1830–31) is, to a great extent, likewise characteristic of The French Revolution (written 1834–37); which is to say that Carlyle's way of perceiving the world continued to require an artistic mode correspondent to his world view, namely, a romantic ironic one.

Carlyle's world as presented in The French Revolution is ever in motion, “not fixable; not fathomable ... but for ever growing and changing.” Here “there is properly nothing else but revolution and mutation, and even nothing else conceivable” (2:211). Out of the abundant and fertile chaos of becoming, imaged usually as a roiling, ever-turbulent sea or sometimes as a flood of lava, there arise islands of cosmos: “Dim Chaos, or the sea of troubles, is struggling through all its elements; writhing and chafing towards some Creation” (4:157). The creation lasts, however, but for a while, and indeed contains within itself the elements of its dissolution: “The Beginning holds in it the End” (3:103). And then after “dissolutions, precipitations, endless turbulence of attracting and repelling ... this wild alchemy arrange[s] itself again” (4:116). Chaos becomes cosmos, which in turn becomes chaos, and so on ad infinitum.

Underlying and informing this world of becoming is the infinite, expressing itself throughout time in “Realised Ideals,” myths or symbols embodying the highest apprehension of truth at
a given time. "How such ideals do realise themselves; and grow, wondrously, from amid the incongruous ever-fluctuating chaos of the Actual"—this, says Carlyle, "is what World-History has to teach us. How they grow bloom out mature, supreme; then quickly fall into decay; sorrowfully dwindle; and crumble down, or rush down, noisily or noiselessly disappearing" (2:10).

In brief, history should show how the infinite animates the finite.

But how is it possible for the historian to represent the turbulent process of becoming in which the infinite is, in part, temporarily realized? Certainly not by conventional narrative means. For, as Carlyle had remarked in the essay "On History" (1830), "all Narrative is, by its nature, of only one dimension; only travels forward towards one, or towards successive points: Narrative is linear, Action is solid" (27:89). Lived history, on the other hand, is quite different from written history and cannot be explained in terms of linear, cause-and-effect relationships, as historians since the Enlightenment have sought to do. Each event is the offspring not of one but of all other prior or contemporaneous events and, moreover, will in its turn combine with others to give birth to new ones:

it is an ever-living, ever-working Chaos of Being, wherein shape after shape bodies itself forth from innumerable elements. And this Chaos, boundless and unfathomable is what the historian will depict by threading it with single lines of a few ells in length! For all Action is, by its nature, to be figured as extended in breadth and in depth, as well as in length. (27:88)

What, in other words, the written history must display is not mere successiveness but simultaneity; it must be like the world itself.

Yet language is linear and seems to preclude such an endeavor. The space between word and thing is enormous; mimesis is impossible. Language is phenomenal and thus cannot deal with the noumenal that underlies and informs the finite. "The first
word we utter we begin to err," Carlyle was fond of quoting from Goethe. The fact remains, however, that language, whatever its deficiency, is the major tool with which man works and realizes himself. "Words, the strangest product of our nature, are also the most potent," Carlyle wrote in his journal in 1830. "Speech is human, Silence is divine; yet also brutish and dead; therefore we must learn both arts, they are both difficult." Evidently a method would have to be found by which to represent in language the world of becoming where man stands "in the confluence of Infinities" (4:42-43).

Another difficulty in writing the kind of history at which Carlyle aimed is the partiality of witnesses and documents. "For indeed it is well said, 'in every object there is inexhaustible meaning; the eye sees in it what the eye brings means of seeing' " (2:5). Every report is circumscribed by the physical and psychological limitations of its reporter: everyone sees from his or her point of view, and no matter how objective a person wishes to be, one cannot speak of other than what one perceives from one's own angle of vision; with the best of intentions one nevertheless remains parti pris. How then can a historian achieve simultaneity and inclusiveness if, first, one must work with partial sources and, second, one writes from one's own viewpoint in reporting them? Is it possible to transcend point of view?

In the early 1830s, as Carlyle found himself more and more drawn to the writing of history, these were the chief obstacles that he foresaw to his enterprise. As for subject, he was intrigued by the French Revolution, the most dramatic event within recent times displaying the tempestuous process of becoming and of violent overthrow of "Realised Ideals." To John Stuart Mill he wrote in September 1833: "the right History (that impossible thing I mean by History) of the French Revolution were the grand Poem of our Time; the man who could write the truth of that, were worth all other writers and singers" (CL 6:446). The more he thought about undertaking a history of the Revolution, the less capable he felt of achieving what he would like. "Alas, the thing I want to do is precisely the thing I cannot do," he told his brother
in October 1833. "My mind would so fain deliver itself adequately of that 'Divine Idea of the World'; one of the subjects that engages me most is the French Revolution, which indeed for us is still the subject of subjects" (CL 7:6). It was, of course, impossible to represent perfectly the "Divine Idea" at work in history: such a project "cannot, by the highest talent and effort, be succeeded in, except in more or less feeble approximation" (CL 6:446); "only in quite inadequate approximations is such deliverance possible" (CL 7:6). Yet, he told Mill, "the attempt can be made" (CL 6:446).

As a trial effort Carlyle in 1833 composed "The Diamond Necklace," "to prove [himself] in the Narrative style" (CL 7:7). Borrowing the romantic ironic techniques employed in Sartor Resartus, he made the work an arabesque of multiple voices, clashing perspectives, interruptions of the narrative for addresses to the reader, incongruous details, varying literary genres, and interlocking narrative frames. Aiming for "a kind of True Fiction" as a means of showing "Reality Ideal" (CL 7:245, 61), he treated this episode of French history as a drama in which the viewer must allow his "aesthetic feeling first have play" before being taken backstage to satisfy his or her "insatiable scientific curiosity" (28:360). In effect "The Diamond Necklace" is akin to the commedia dell’arte, presided over by a comedian who makes sport of himself, his reader, and his work.

"The Diamond Necklace" was designed to show that if the historian were to concentrate on an object, "were it the meanest of the mean," and "paint it in its actual truth an indestructible portion of the miraculous All,—his picture of it were a Poem"; and, moreover, to show "that Romance exists" and "exists, strictly speaking, in Reality alone" (28:329). The piece was, said Carlyle, "truly a kind of curiosity" to test whether "by sticking actually to the Realities of the thing one could not in a small way make a kind of Poem of it." The result was "not quite so unsuccessful as one could have expected" (CL 7:57).

Pleased with his experiment, Carlyle was now prepared for
action, more or less along the same lines, in a larger theater. To achieve his drama he realized that he would have to enlist the aid of his reader. As early as 1828 he had theorized about the role of the reader, who must be "ever conscious of his own active coöperation" (26:149); and in "The Diamond Necklace" he had insisted on the reader's partnership with the author, the writer supplying what "true historical research would yield" and the reader bringing "a kindred openness, a kindred spirit of endeavour" (28:330). In this dynamic, dialogical relationship the meaning is generated by both the author and the reader, who share in the moral responsibility of interpreting the fluid text.

From beginning to end of *The French Revolution* the narrator invites the reader's participation: "Let the Reader endeavour to look with the mind too" (2:5); "let the Reader fancy" (3:235); "let the Reader conceive" (4:3); "let the Reader stir up his own imaginative organ" (4:207). Further, the narrator directs the reader as to how he should act and react: "dull wert thou, O Reader, if never in any hour it spoke to thee" (2:8–9); "yes, Reader, that is the Type-Frenchman of this epoch" (2:137); "now, Reader, thou shalt quit this noisy Discrepancy of a National Assembly" (2:222); "Reader, fancy not, in thy languid way, that Insurrection is easy" (3:291). Only through a brotherly relationship between author and reader is meaning to be apprehended: "therefore let us two, O Reader, dwell on [this] willingly and from its endless significance endeavour to extract what may, in present circumstances, be adapted for us" (4:2). Finally, the narrative ends with the writer's valedictory summation of how the partnership has (or should have) proceeded:

And so here, O Reader, has the time come for us two to part. Toilsome was our journeying together; not without offence; but it is done. To me thou wert as a beloved shade, the disembodied or not yet embodied spirit of a Brother. To thee I was but as a Voice. Yet was our relation a kind of sacred one; doubt not that! For whatsoever once sacred things become
hollow jargons, yet while the Voice of Man speaks with Man, hast thou not there the living fountain out of which all sacrednesses sprang, and will yet spring? Man, by the nature of him, is definable as 'an incarnated Word.' Ill stands it with me if I have spoken falsely; thine also it was to hear truly. Farewell. (4:323)

*The French Revolution* is the closest that Carlyle would ever come to Schlegel's ideal of synthetist art of symphilosophy and sympoetry, in which the author "constructs and creates his own reader; he makes that which he invented gradually take place before the reader's eyes, or he tempts him to do the inventing for himself" (L 112, KA 2:161).

What the author and reader essentially share is that each is a linguistic animal, "an incarnated Word." This is both their glory and their sad destiny. As incarnations they can utter intimations of the infinite that were otherwise impossible to reveal; yet suffering the limitations of all embodiments, they cannot speak all that they would because "human language, unused to deal with these things, being contrived for the uses of common life," can only struggle "to shadow out" what it would communicate (4:122). Like all phenomena, language is subject to decline and decay: it grows old and is no longer satisfactory as a means of communication. New occasions arise for which there are no adequate words. When, for example, addressing the final horrors of the Reign of Terror, "History would try to include under her old Forms of speech or speculation this new amazing Thing . . . [yet] in this new stage, History babbles and flounders" (4:203). It is then that a new language must be forged. This is what, in their linguistic association, the author and reader together seek. At first the most they can hope for is a near approach to the right word: "any approximation to the right Name has value." Thereafter, as their fraternal union is more fully realized, they hit upon the *mot juste*: "the Thing is then ours, and can be dealt with" (4:204). This is not, of course, to say the perfect word can ever be dis-
covered, since the identity of signifier and signified is always proximate at best.

History too has its grammar, and its parts of speech are ever subject to change. As embodied language, humans also can become archaisms unsuited for the grammar of a new or changing era. Thus Louis XV, the representative of absolute monarchy, is, in the final third of the eighteenth century, a "Solecism Incarnate" (2:21). Louis XVI is, in late 1792, "the unhappiest of Human Solecisms" (4:81). They must pass; and so too, in time, with linguistic inevitability, will the aristocrats of the ancien régime, for "to such abysmal overturns are human Solecisms all liable" (2:207).

Clearly, a new grammatical combination must arise in the syntactical sentence that is human society. The first effort is to formulate, by legislation, a new grammar. Trying to compose a constitution, the National Assembly "becomes a Sanhedrim of Pedants" debating a "Theory of Irregular Verbs" (2:215). As conditions in France worsen, "with Famine and a Constitutional theory of defective verbs going on, all other excitement is conceivable" (3:18). Instead of meaningful language there emerges only the "inarticulate dissonance" of sansculottism. All the while, however, "History, and indeed all human Speech and Reason does strive to name the new Things it sees of Nature's producing" although forced to admit "that all Names and Theorems yet known fall short" (4:204). Following the regicide, the Convention becomes "the womb of Formula, or perhaps her grave," as the people cry, "Du pain, pas tant de longs discours" (4:153, 303). At the end the linguistic outcome is left in doubt: "The new Realities are not yet come; ah no, only Phantasms, Paper models, tentative Prefigurements of such!" (4:322). The last word is given to the "Arch-quack Cagliostro," the appropriate grammarian of the frenzied era, whose "prophecy" in "The Diamond Necklace" has curiously been "fulfilled," or is perhaps "fulfilling" (4:323). In 1795—or in 1837, as the narrator is careful to point out—the new grammar has not yet fully evolved.
One of the ways in which Carlyle attempts to overcome the linearity of the language of narrative is by manipulation of point of view. The narrator usually speaks in the third person, reporting from the overview of the "Eye of History" (2:5 and 3:191, for instance). Not infrequently he interrupts his story for comment, for the length of a chapter (2:52-55), a paragraph (2:6-7), or even part of a sentence (as when he says that no one pays any attention to Besenval, "a thing the man of true worth is used to" [2:130]). Or, assuming the seer's mantle, he speaks with the voice of prophecy:

What a work, O Earth and Heavens, what a work! Battles and bloodshed, September Massacres, Bridges of Lodi, retreats of Moscow, Waterloo, Peterloos, Tenpound Franchises, Tarbarrels and Guillotines;——and from this present date, if one might prophesy, some two centuries of it still to fight! Two centuries; hardly less; before Democracy go through its due, most baleful, stages of Quackocracy; and a pestilential World be burnt up, and have begun to grow green and young again. (2:133)

In addition to addressing the reader ("Listen," "See," "Note," "Follow"), the narrator occasionally invites him to join in a synoptic view and look from his "coign of vantage with far other eyes than the rest [below] do" (2:135); or he tells the reader what he might see could he reach the tower of Notre Dame (3:291). At times the narrator becomes part of the action by joining the characters of his story:

And now behold it is vouchsafed us; States-General shall verily be! (2:115)

Thither will we: King's Procureur [et al.] shall go with us; if he kill us, we shall but die. (2:187)

Or he speaks to the historical figures in the vocative as though he (and the reader) were there:
Look to it, D’Aiguillon. (2:2)

On then, all Frenchmen, that have hearts in your bodies! (2:190)

If ye dare not, then, in Heaven’s name, go to sleep. (3:121)

Sometimes he blends points of view within a single sentence so that he is simultaneously both detached from and involved in the action:

There also observe Preceptress Genlis, or Sillery, or Sillery-Genlis,—for our husband is both Count and Marquis, and we have more than one title. (3:24)

Finally, the narrator removes himself entirely from the narrative and allows others to tell the story, as when he offers lengthy quotations from various memoirists (4:31–38).

In like manner the narrator constantly shifts tenses, mainly mingling the past with the present but occasionally switching to the future. Though the Revolution occurred over four decades earlier and thus must be largely recounted in the past, the narrator recognizes the falsifications that must necessarily result from doing so. The past tense, he admits, “is a most lying thing,” rendering that which is in the distance beautiful and sad, but “one most important element is surreptitiously withdrawn from the Past Time: the haggard element of Fear!” Fear, uncertainty, and anxiety dwell only in the present (4:81), and to suggest these or to induce them within the reader by making him feel he is there at the instant the event took place, the narrator resorts to the historical present indicative. The French Revolution, the narrator says in effect, happened in the past, but even in 1837 it is not yet finished, remaining, to no small degree, a matter of current concern. “Does not, at this hour, a new Polignac sit reflective in the Castle of Ham [and here a footnote reads: ‘A.D. 1835’]; in an astonishment he will never recover from; the most confused of existing mortals?” (2:224). The son of Philippe Egalité who fought well in Alsatia “is
the same intrepid individual who now, as Louis-Philippe struggles, under sad circumstances, to be called King of the French for a season,” and who is “frequently shot at, not yet shot” (4:58, 322). Marat’s sister, the narrator says, is still living in Paris at the very time he is writing of the murder of Marat by Charlotte Corday (4:170). Sansculottism “still lives, still works—till, in some perfected shape, it embrace the whole circuit of the world!” Its body “need not reappear, for another thousand years. That there be no second Sansculottism let Rich and Poor of us go and do otherwise.—But to our tale” (4:311–13).

In sum, Carlyle presents this curious juxtaposition of tenses and points of view in order to involve the reader in the action, to remind him that it is ongoing, and, at the same time, to caution him that this is not a presentation of the way things actually were but only a history, a tale, a linguistic representation of the way they might have been. As the narrator tells us at the beginning, the world of time is “an unfathomable Somewhat, which is Not we, that we can only “model” into a history, a construct that “reckons itself real” (2:6–7). Much will remain unknown about the French Revolution, as Carlyle recognized from the start, when he noted that his task was to deal with “the incoherent that would not cohere” and the “chaos, which I am to re-create (CL 8:103, 209). The impossibility of ever really knowing what happened is impressed upon us time and again, the narrator constantly telling us of the paucity of sources and their unreliability: “garrulous History, as is too usual, will say nothing where you most wish her to speak” (3:273); “an unlucky Editor may do his utmost; and after all require allowances” (4:3). The narrator continually comes before us to say, in effect, that this is not life but art, a tale of some events that took place almost half a century earlier.

With his many references to the theater, the narrator impresses upon us that we are witnessing an unfolding drama and will occasionally be permitted a peek backstage. Paris is “a World’s Amphitheatre” (3:55) in which the audience often “jumps on
Stage" so that what is presented is a "World Topsy-turvyed" (3:54). At the trial of the king the court ushers "become as Box-keepers at the Opera" (4:103). In this "world's drama the Mimetic become[s] the Real" (3:18), "theatricality" the actuality (3:236). Even when we are returned from the theater to the world of everyday affairs, the drama continues, which "though not played in any pasteboard Theatre, did enact itself" (3:100). The narrator becomes a stage manager or buffo of commedia dell'arte, who establishes the dramatic illusion only to destroy it and thereby so disorient us that we, like the characters within the history, confuse the world and the stage.

The actors on the stage of history are sentient of their status as dramatis personae. Mirabeau "dies as he has lived: self-conscious, conscious of a world looking on" (3:142). The professional actor Collot d'Herbois carries his talent for "the Thespian boards" over to the stage "of the world's drama" (3:18). Bouillé plays the leading role at Nancy, whereafter the stage manager allows him to "fade into dimness" (3:101). Most of the actors will not, however, merely fade away. They insist upon a grand dramatic exit, a farewell speech or gesture: Madame Roland (4:210), Charlotte Corday (4:148), Danton (4:257), Camille Desmoulins (4:257).

Many of the characters regard themselves as mere puppets. At the Feast of the Supreme Being, Robespierre plays his part as a high priest, assuming the roles of Mahomet and Pontiff; he is fully "conscious" of his acting "and knows that he is machinery" (4:267). Desmoulins feels himself engaged in "one huge Preternatural Puppet-play of Plots" with someone else "pulling the wires": "Almost I conjecture that I, Camille myself, am a Plot, and wooden with wires." Whereupon the narrator—stage manager remarks, "The force of insight could not further go" (4:156). At the end of its performance each puppet is aware that "what part it had to play in the History of Civilization is played," and the buffo—stage manager directs: "plaudite; exeat!" (2:231). This self-consciousness on the part of the dramatis personae means
they become ironic observers and, to the extent that they doubt the meaningfulness of their actions in the drama, victims of irony as well.

The question of fate and free will and the ironies it involves are continually set before us. The narrator says forthrightly, “Our whole Universe is but an infinite Complex of Forces man’s Freedom environed with Necessity of Nature” (3:102). Every man’s life is “made up ‘of Fate and of one’s own Deservings,’ of Schicksal und eigene Schuld” (3:147). At every hand the “poor human Will struggles to assert itself,” only to discover “endless Necessity environing Freewill” (4:199, 122). This is why the characters view themselves as both free agents and puppets and see the vehicles in which they act as both tragedy and comedy.

As he follows the course of the Revolution, the narrator describes the action as a mixture of literary modes and genres. “Transcendent things of all sorts,” he says, “are huddled together; the ludicrous, nay the ridiculous, with the horrible” (2:282). The life of Mirabeau “if not Epic for us, is Tragic” (3:147). The ending of the Terror is the “fifth-act, of this natural Greek Drama, with its natural unities” (4:283). The return of the royal family from Varennes is “comico-tragic,” the “miserablest flebite ludibrium of a Pickleherring Tragedy” (3:187). An incident occurring at the Fatherland’s Altar is “of the Nature of Farce-Tragedy” (3:191), while the Feast of the Supreme Being is presented as pure farce (4:267). The host of women marching to Versailles is “ludicro-terrific” (2:253), and during the Terror “the sublime, the ludicrous, the horrible succeed one another; or rather, in crowding tumult, accompany one another” (4:206–7). Events are described as “Epic transactions” (3:157), although taking place in an unheroic age (2:251). They are related by one who can only “speak, having unhappily no voice for singing” (2:212), for indeed “all Delineation, in these ages, were it never so Epic,” consists of “‘speaking itself and singing itself’ ” (4:31). Elements of the burlesque and mock epic abound, as in the flight to Varennes and the narrator’s constant use of epithets like “the
Sea-green,' referring to Robespierre, and "the People's Friend," referring to Marat.\textsuperscript{12} In effect, the allusions to literary modes and genres remind us that we are seeing the "history" of the French Revolution as a \textit{literary} event, a "True Fiction" of "a most fictile world" inhabited by "the most fingent plastic of creatures" (2:6).\textsuperscript{13}

For the reader-viewer of \textit{The French Revolution} as well as for the actors in the narrative-drama everything seems to be going on at the same time in the wildest kind of hurly-burly; what the narrator-stage manager calls "this Sahara-waltz of the French Twenty-five millions" (4:4). Frivolity and triviality are almost everywhere intermixed with seriousness. Though in great danger, the royal family cannot decide whether to flee:

Royalty has always that sure trump-card in its hand: Flight out of Paris. Which sure trump-card Royalty ... keeps ever and anon clutching at, grasping; and swashes it forth tentatively; yet never tables it, still puts it back again. Royalty will not play its trump-card till the honours, one after one, be mainly lost; and such trumping of it prove to be the sudden finish of the game! (3:136)

To many of the inhabitants of Paris the executions in the city square are splendid public theater, amusements for the bored and distractions for the hungry: "Such a game is playing in this Paris Pandemonium" (3:288). While the guillotine is taking its heaviest toll, "the nightly Theatres are Twenty-three; and the \textit{Salons de danse} are Sixty" (4:245). While "right-arms here grew heavy with slaying, right-arms there were twiddledeeing on melodious catgut" (4:38). The action is choreographed as a kind of \textit{danse macabre}.

Just as literary modes and genres are mixed to give the impression of solid inclusiveness, so the syntax of the narrative is jumbled to jolt the reader out of his customary linear way of reading. When J. S. Mill complained that "what is said in an
abrupt, exclamatory, & interjectional manner were [better] said in
the ordinary grammatical mode of nominative & verb,” Carlyle
replied that “the common English mode of writing has to do
with hearsays of things; and the great business for me, in
which alone I feel any comfort, is recording the presence, bodily
concrete coloured presence of things;—for which the Nomina­
tive-and-verb, as I find it Here and Now, refuses to stand me in
due stead” (CL 9:15). That is why we find in The French Revolu­
tion passages such as this, a typical one selected at random:

Night unexampled in the Clermontais; shortest of the year;
remarkablest of the century: Night deserving to be named of
Spurs! Cornet Remy, and those Few he dashed off with, has
missed his road; is galloping for hours towards Verdun; then,
for hours, across hedged country, through roused hamlets,
towards Varennes. Unlucky Cornet Remy; unluckier Colonel
Damas, with whom there ride desperate only some loyal Two!
More ride not of that Clermont Escort: of other Escorts, in other
Villages, not even Two may ride; but only all curvet and
prance,—impeded by storm-bell and your Village illuminating
itself. (3:177–78)

The distorted syntax in this lyrical-descriptive passage has the
effect of distracted movement in a pastoral landscape, gallant
aims translated into maladroit action. Carlyle intends not merely
to tell us what a thing is but what it feels like in its “bodily
coloured presence.” His style helps make The French Revolution
what Carlyle himself called it: “a wild savage Book,
itself a kind of French Revolution” (CL 9:116).

As Carlyle in proopria persona and the narrator say over and
again, all action is one and continuous, to be figured in depth and
breadth as well as in length. Things have no real beginnings, no
sole causes of which they are the result and effect; and in like
fashion they have no real endings: “Homer’s Epos does not
conclude, but merely ceases. Such, indeed, is the Epos of Univer-
sal History itself” (4:321). Yet in the practical world one must start and stop somewhere, even if the ascribed beginning or ending is merely arbitrary, a fictional terminus a quo and terminus ad quem: “For Arrangement is indispensable to man” (4:288). One must be “at once determinate (bestimmt) and open.” 14 Conveniently, then, Carlyle begins his story with Louis XV in 1744, when the monarchy was still to some degree a viable “Realised Ideal.” He conveniently closes it with Napoleon and the Directory, the Revolution hot ended but merely displaced, “blown into space” by Napoleon’s whiff of grapeshot (4:320). “Be there method, be there order, cry all men; were it that of the Drill-sergeant!” (4:288). Or, we might add, were it that of the buffo-narrator.

Ultimately Carlyle’s notion of being “at once determinate and open” allowed him to view the French Revolution with double vision. In the ironic world of becoming, where an entity is both itself and in the process of transformation to something else—where a is both a and not a but a becoming b—a can be prized as a momentary island of cosmos amidst the infinite sea, a type of “Realised Ideal”; but its metamorphosis into b is also to be valued when its vitality is exhausted.

Great truly is the Actual; is the Thing that has rescued itself from bottomless deeps of theory and possibility, and stands there as a definite indisputable Fact, whereby men do work and live. Wisely shall men cleave to that, while it will endure; and quit it with regret, when it gives way under them.

[When the Thing] is shattered, swallowed up; instead of a green flowery world, there is a waste wild-weltering chaos;—which has again, with tumult and struggle, to make itself into a world. (2:37–38)

We must therefore perceive this world of change, where “Innovation and Conservation wage their perpetual conflict,” with double vision: with sadness for the loss of that which was once triumphant in its claim upon man’s moral nature and with hope for
the eventual new "ideal" which dissolution of the old portends. So, says the narrator, "in this world of ours, which has both an indestructible hope in the Future, and an indestructible tendency to persevere as in the Past," we must honor the process of change, the flux of history—not only a but also a becoming b—which "lures us forward by cheerful promises [of] an Era of Hope" (2:39). This is why Carlyle is never, as many commentators believe him to be, totally condemnatory of the Revolution. From his overview of the events of 1789–95 his narrator sees that it was a necessary evil that offered promise of a future good, now "working imprisoned" but "working towards deliverance and triumph" (2:10). "To hate this poor National Convention is easy," he says of its workings in the autumn of 1792; "to praise and love it has not been found impossible." Here and throughout it is not a question of either/or but of both/and, as the narrator "stand[s] with unwavering eyes, looking'' before and after and sympathizing equally with both (4:71).

It is clear that neither epic nor tragedy, nor any one of the traditional genres, could encompass Carlyle's view of the French Revolution. Indeed, all conventional forms and genres would have been restrictions and obstructions. What Carlyle hit upon as the means of reproducing the infiniteness of life and mirroring the eternal process of becoming was the "genre" that he described as "True Fiction" and that Schlegel, in defining his special kind of irony, called universal poetry—a "genre" that "is the only one which is more than a genre, and which is, as it were, poetry itself" (A 116, KA 2:182). Carlyle had wished to make his "right History" of the Revolution "the grand Poem of our Time" (CL 6:446). According to Mill, who in his review found it "replete with every kind of interest, epic, tragic, elegiac, even comic and farcical" (p. 23), he achieved just that.