The year that *Latter-Day Pamphlets* appeared, 1850, marked the end of thirteen years of economic and political disturbance and the beginning of a period of economic prosperity and political calm that endured until new appeals for reform, culminating in the Reform Bill of 1867, again disturbed the nation. Apart from a few months in 1851, during which he wrote *The Life of John Sterling*, Carlyle was occupied during most of this period with the writing of *Frederick the Great*. Neither work directly addressed the political issues of the day as *Chartism, Past and Present*, and *Latter-Day Pamphlets* had done, but they continued to explore the problem of authority by returning to the relationship between father and son that had preoccupied him in his early career. In *The Life of John Sterling*, Carlyle plays the role of father attempting to conceive a literary son; in *Frederick the Great*, he envisions a son seeking to obtain the authority of the father.

### Fathering the Literary Son: *The Life of John Sterling*

In writing *The Life of John Sterling*, Carlyle was authoring the myth of Sterling’s literary career just as in life he had attempted to father Sterling as a literary son. *John Sterling* rewrites the career paradigm that Carlyle had created in the 1820s. Like *Sartor Resartus*, the biography is in three parts and traces the hero’s discovery of his literary vocation. Both Teufelsdröckh and Sterling are political radicals who reject a religious career in favor of a literary one. But, while *Sartor Resartus* ends just as Teufelsdröckh is about to author a “new mythus,” *The Life of John Sterling* shows what happens when the author actually tries to create the new mythus: he fails.
Carlyle uses the life of Sterling to explore his own dilemma, arguing both that the literary career is the only one open to men of talent and that it does not satisfy the need for action. He seems to be choosing between making a final attempt to assume an active role in the political arena and withdrawing from it altogether, as literature could not be effective. Writing to his influential friend Harriet Baring of his "disgust with [the] trade," he wondered if he should "squeeze into Parlt. itself, and there speak Pamphlets, hot, and hot, right from the heart" (Wilson, 5:7). "Throughout the 1840s," Kaplan concludes, "the prospect of becoming a man of action, a public actor rather than a private thinker, had attracted him strongly. . . . Given his friendship with Bingham Baring and his relationship with Peel, the possibility of a new career in public service was more than wishful thinking" (361). Although Carlyle hoped that the Northcote-Trevelyan Report (1854) would lead to the appointment of civil servants by merit, he also continued to complain that, like Burns and Sterling, he was excluded from government by his class origins, that "Fate . . . allowed [him] no other" profession (Wilson, 5:121-22). As in Latter-Day Pamphlets, he argues that because the major professions are not open to earnest young men like Sterling—who is best suited for a public life as a member of Parliament—they are forced to make a living in literature (LJS, 39-42). In The Life of John Sterling, he writes an apologia for the nineteenth-century man of letters.

In Sartor Resartus, Carlyle had projected an image of himself as the rebellious son who rejects his father's faith but then attempts to recuperate the transcendental through literature. In place of his religious father, James Carlyle, he had adopted a literary godfather, Goethe. With the "Reminiscence of James Carlyle," Carlyle turned from fiction to history, rejecting the transcendentalism of Goethe and the Germans in favor of his father's preference for the "real." On Heroes and Hero-Worship had further deemphasized the importance of literature by excluding Goethe and replacing him with men of letters who could not create a new mythus. The Life of John Sterling consolidates this process by replacing the earlier triad of Thomas Carlyle/son, James Carlyle/father, Goethe/godfather with the triad of Sterling/son, Thomas Carlyle/father, Coleridge/godfather. Carlyle's satiric portrait of Coleridge and "transcendental moonshine" is a displaced repudiation of the German transcendentalism of Goethe, who had influenced the
young Carlyle just as Coleridge had influenced Sterling. The Carlyle of *The Life of John Sterling*, moreover, is no longer a rebellious son, but the father who leads Sterling back to reality, reenacting the moment when he had submitted to the law of the father after writing the "Reminiscence of James Carlyle."

The first half of *The Life of John Sterling* closely parallels the narrative pattern of *Sartor Resartus* and Carlyle's career paradigm. Carlyle, like the Editor of *Sartor*, had known the subject of his biography personally and uses his letters and writings to compose the narrative of his life. Like Teufelsdröckh, Sterling "renounce[s]" the law and finds himself unable to discover a suitable profession (*LJS*, 40; see 38). Teufelsdröckh believes that he has recovered paradise in the heavenly love of Blumine, whom he compares to the "moon," but then learns that his discovery is a mere "calenture" (*SR*, 139, 147); Sterling falls for Coleridge's "transcendental moonshine" only to discover that Coleridge's teachings are "fatal delusion[s]" and "fatamorganas" (*LJS*, 60; emphasis added). Teufelsdröckh is a radical *sansculotte* who travels to Paris at the time of the 1830 revolt; in the same year, Sterling allies himself with the philosophic radicals and becomes involved in an abortive Spanish rebellion. Like Teufelsdröckh, he wanders endlessly in search of health and, after the Spanish debacle, which ended in the execution of the rebels, reaches the conclusion that his radicalism is a "Philosophy of Denial," an Everlasting No (*LJS*, 90). In response to this crisis, Sterling, like Teufelsdröckh, who mounts the "higher sunlit slopes" of the "Everlasting Yea" and becomes an author, discovers that "his true sacred hill" is literature (*SR*, 184; *LJS*, 266).

The second half of *The Life of John Sterling* represents what might be regarded as a continuation of *Sartor Resartus*, in which Teufelsdröckh fails to become a paternal authority and to author a new mythus. Instead of producing a *Palingenesia*, Sterling produces only a meager quantity of essays, poems, and tales, which are almost entirely ignored by the public. This is in keeping with Carlyle's abandonment of the transcendental aspirations of *Sartor* after the death of his father. Yet although Carlyle had abandoned these transcendental aspirations, he had continued to hope that he might become a literary father. Even though Sterling fails to become a father, he becomes a model for literary sons, those who might recognize Carlyle's authority and enable him to become a father himself.

Carlyle depicts his relationship with Sterling as the relationship of
father and son, of hero and hero-worshipper. Sterling plays the role of audience for Carlyle's writings, their relationship beginning with an exchange of letters on *Sartor Resartus*. Although, in their first exchanges, Sterling shows his inclination to adopt an independent critical position, Carlyle soon is able to regard him as his ideal reader, a son who finds in him the kind of father that he wants to be. By 1840, Sterling is Carlyle's most approving reader, telling him that he considers the *Miscellaneous Essays* "the book of the last 25 years in England" and publishing the "first generous human recognition" of his work (Tuell, 309; *LJS*, 191; see *CL*, 11:191–92). *The Life of John Sterling* both describes how Carlyle attempted to father Sterling's career by persuading him to give up religion, or at least the Church of England, in favor of literature, and shapes the narrative of Sterling's career itself so as to make it fulfill this desire.

Carlyle wrote his narrative to correct Julius Hare's biography, which, Carlyle claims, misleadingly represents Sterling "as a clergyman merely" (3). Because Hare views Sterling from the point of view of Christian orthodoxy, he inevitably represents Sterling's career as a "defeat of faith," whereas Carlyle wishes to argue that his abandonment of conventional Christianity enabled him to become in the end a "victorious believer" (5, 6). Carlyle begins his narrative by insisting that Sterling's interest in organized religion and theological issues ended when he resigned his curacy in 1835, shortly before they first met, that "during eight months and no more had he any special relation to the Church" (3). However, recent studies have established that, although health prevented Sterling from retaining his curacy, he still considered himself a clergyman and a follower of Coleridge when he met Carlyle in 1835 and that he sustained his connection with the church until at least 1839. Only in 1840, when he published defenses of Strauss and Carlyle, did he part with his more orthodox friends, and, even so, he continued to interest himself in theological issues.

Carlyle shaped the biography by pushing back to 1835–37 the date of Sterling's conversion to literature and by suppressing evidence of his continuing interest in theology. As Carlyle prepared to write by rereading Sterling's *Essays and Tales*, he was already looking for signs of heterodoxy, insisting in a comment written in the margin of the book that "This man must soon leave the Church" (Tuell, 344). Even before Sterling takes up religion, Carlyle is insisting that his only "solid fruit lie[s] in Literature" (74). As early as 1837, just two years
after Sterling had given up his curacy, Carlyle claims, “he began to look on Literature as his real employment,” he “felt more and more as if authentically consecrated to the same,” and he learned to look at “Literature as his work in the world” (144, 152, 157). Nonetheless, the evidence of Sterling’s continuing interest in religion and his indecision about his vocation force Carlyle to push back the date of Sterling’s conversion, and, in discussing 1841, he finds it necessary to assert that “Literature was still his constant pursuit” and that “we now hear nothing more” of Strauss and church matters (221, 222). In order to compensate for these difficulties, he gives prominence to those letters and episodes that emphasize his influence on Sterling and Sterling’s literary interests. He reprints only those portions of Sterling’s critique of *Sartor Resartus* that bear on its artistry, suppressing “several pages on ‘Personal God’” and quotes Sterling’s assurance that his “thoughts have . . . been running more on History and Poetry than on Theology and Philosophy” (116, 139; see 138).

At this point, Carlyle’s shaping of Sterling’s career in the biography nearly merges with his attempt to shape Sterling’s career in life. Finding Sterling intelligent and earnest, Carlyle was respectful of his orthodoxy but encouraged every sign that he was abandoning theology for literature: “One of the announcements you made me was as welcome as any other: that you were rather quitting Philosophy and Theology. I predict that you will quit them more and more” (CL, 9:117–18). Carlyle makes it clear that he had actively striven to shape Sterling’s beliefs, countering Sterling’s concern about his “pantheism” with “flippant heterodoxy” and discouraging religious discussion by resolving to “suppress” all conversations “on the Origin of Evil” as “wholly fruitless and worthless” (*LJS*, 124, 130–31). He even went so far as to encourage Sterling to stop using the title “Reverend” on the title pages of his books (*CL*, 12:6, 322). Most importantly, he persuaded Sterling of the importance of Goethe. At first, Sterling had regarded Goethe as too pagan, but Carlyle convinced him of Goethe’s higher spirituality by describing how his mentor had “save[d]” him from “destruction” and provided him with a higher kind of faith (*CL*, 9:380, n. 12, 381; *LJS*, 147). Even though by 1840 Carlyle had himself lost some of his enthusiasm for Goethe, his letters to Sterling made belief in this literary father an article of faith (*CL*, 11:216–17, 13:321–22, 14:24, 73). Sterling relented, and he was soon following in Carlyle’s footsteps as a translator and critic of German literature.
Carlyle tries to counteract the tendency toward transcendentalism implicit in his insistence on the value of Goethe and literature by attempting to persuade Sterling, at the same time, that prose is superior to poetry. Carlyle makes the same objections to poetry and aestheticism that he had made to Coleridgean moonshine, criticizing Sterling's letters on Italian art as "nebulous" and suppressing his aesthetic appreciations as capitulations to the century's "windy gospels" of "Art" (175, 174; see 164). Carlyle's caricature of Coleridge, like that in his letters of 1824, condemns him because his poetic speculations draw his followers into an endless circuit of desire for the transcendent and prevent them from achieving closure in action? Carlyle argues, accordingly, that in an era of "revolutionary overturnings" prose alone achieves closure by producing something outside of itself, by doing battle: only the "Intelligible word of command, not musical psalmody and fiddling [i.e., poetry], is possible in this fell storm of battle" (196).

Yet, although Carlyle converts Sterling from religion to literature in the first half of the biography, he cannot, in the second half, convert him from poetry to prose. When, at the beginning of 1837, Carlyle encouraged Sterling to switch from theology to "poetry and history," his emphasis was on the latter, for by the end of the year he was discouraging him from writing verses (CL, 9:379). While Carlyle advised all poets of his acquaintance, except possibly Tennyson, to adopt prose, he seems to have hoped that he might really succeed with Sterling, and he persisted in his advice for at least five years. Yet, although The Life of John Sterling represents Sterling as asking the question "Write in Poetry; write in Prose?" the question is really Carlyle's (195). At first, Sterling tries to satisfy his new friend, reporting in 1837, for example, that his new writings for Blackwood are "prose, nay extremely prose" (147). But, in spite of Carlyle's harsh criticisms and advice to the contrary, he persists in writing verse (CL, 12:320–22, 14:21–25; LJS, 250). Finally, acknowledging that Sterling is becoming "set more and more toward Poetry" and that "With or without encouragement, he [is] resolute to persevere," Carlyle concedes that "if a man write in metre, this sure enough was the way to try doing it" and in retrospect decides that he ought to have been more definite in affirming Sterling's poetic vocation (204, 250, 216–17; see CL, 13:132).

The question turns out to be not "prose or poetry" but whether Sterling was a "true son" who accepted Carlyle's authority or a "mutinous rebel" who denied it (264). Sterling lives in an era of revolution
when sons do not respect the authority of their fathers. Instead of being a disciple who conforms to authority as he might have in an era of faith, Sterling is a rebellious son—a “Radical,” and an “emblem” of the era of revolution—who cannot make himself submit to his literary father (36, 5-6, 267). He criticizes *Sartor Resartus*, persists in his Coleridgean transcendentalism and in writing verse, even doubts the heroism of Cromwell. Like Teufelsdröckh, the young colt who breaks his constraining neck-halter, Sterling is an escaped “Arab courser . . . Roaming at full gallop over the heaths” (40). The emphasis on wasted energy, however, suggests that Sterling is more like Farmer Hodge's emancipated horse in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* than the coltish Teufelsdröckh of *Sartor Resartus*. Indeed, Carlyle would have Sterling, like the emancipated slave, brought under the law of the father, “trained to saddle and harness” (40). Whereas in *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle focuses on the son's need to rebel and turn to literature as a means of recapturing the transcendental idyll from which he has been sundered by the father, in *The Life of John Sterling* the rebellious son becomes a past self for whom his present self lays down the paternal law. Yet, just as Carlyle’s literary persuasion was unable to lay down the law for blacks and Celts, so it cannot constrain Sterling to submit to his authority and give up poetry.

Born of the era of revolution, Sterling remains an eternal wanderer. He cannot achieve closure by writing a myth that enables action; he is, like Childe Roland, fit only to “fail” with his fellow questers. Whereas Teufelsdröckh's wanderings presumably end when he becomes an author, Sterling's continue, even increase, after he is converted to literature; his five major “peregrinities” are emblems of his restless, “nomadic” character: “He could take no rest, he had never learned that art; he was, as we often reproached him, fatally incapable of sitting still” (155, 26; see 30, 40, 91, 92, 96, 102, 104, 121, 133, 134, 184, 266; *CL*, 8:50). The relationship between ill-health and wandering in *The Life of Schiller*, as well as that between ill-health and self-consciousness in “Characteristics,” now manifest themselves in the life of Sterling, whose “bodily disease was the expression, under physical conditions, of the too vehement life which . . . incessantly struggled within him” (155).

Yet Carlyle ultimately concludes that Sterling is not a “mutinous rebel,” that he is both “filial” and “submissive,” because in this “Talking Era . . . the anarchic, nomadic, entirely aerial” career of “Literature” is the “only one completely suited” to him (264, 43). His decision to
write poetry is not an evasion of the call to battle, but the only possible form of action for a man of his sensibility: he is finally a “victorious doer” because life’s “battle shaped itself for” him “chiefly in the poetic form” (6, 222). Sterling must wander endlessly because, even though he can stop being a rebellious son, he cannot become an authoritative father. Like Carlyle, he discovers that literature is no more capable of escaping the endless circuit of desire than is Coleridgean religion. In his final effort to conform to the law of his literary father, Sterling attempts in his last work, *Cœur-de-Lion*, to write a Homeric epic, but this work is left incomplete at his death, literally without closure (255).

Instead of blaming himself for directing Sterling into the fruitless pursuit of literature, Carlyle condemns Coleridge for leading him into the “deserts” of theology and failing to bring him to “new firm lands of Faith beyond” (60). Yet, as Clough was to charge (perhaps with this passage in mind), Carlyle was equally guilty of leading a younger generation “into the desert and . . . [leaving] them there,” no longer sons but not yet fathers (Hale, 46). If Carlyle could still claim to recall his preexistence in paradise, the doubly belated literary son could only recall the wanderings of exile. If Carlyle could in a limited way engender progeny like Sterling, Sterling could not accomplish even that; his writings all fall “dead-born” (250). Yet the Sterling of this biography is an avatar of Carlyle, not the Carlyle who believed he could become a procreative father, but the Carlyle who so often felt his works were born dead.

*The Life of John Sterling* also expresses the irony that, whereas Carlyle had sought to father a king, to shape Peel in the image of Cromwell, he had only succeeded in fathering a man of letters, shaping Sterling in his own image. A heroic soul born in the nineteenth century, it suggests, will not possess the vigor of the Puritan general, but will instead suffer the debility of the man of letters too enfeebled by consumption to perform the duties of a parish curate. Whereas Carlyle had once hoped that heroism could be recovered by replacing the hero as man of letters with the hero as king, he now seems to conclude that only the diminished heroism of the man of letters is any longer possible. In the end, *The Life of John Sterling* is not just an apologia for the man of letters but an elegy for heroism.

The rhetoric of *The Life of John Sterling* signals Carlyle’s withdrawal from public controversy. Instead of the angry prophet addressing a fallen nation, here he is a melancholy memoirist recalling and defend-
ing a beloved friend. Whereas in his previous works he had debated with his audience, *The Life of John Sterling* excludes its readers: all of the conversation is between Carlyle and Sterling (106, 124, 252). Undoubtedly because it was a much “gentler business” than “The Negro Question” and *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, because he did not have an antagonistic relation with the man he wrote of, Carlyle found the book easier to write than those more controversial works (Sadler, 286; see Kaplan, 372, *Rem.*, 127). The reviewers immediately noticed the change in tone and praised its calm, its tenderness, its freedom from “rant, eccentricity, and extravagance” (Dixon, 1088; see 1090).10

Although Carlyle isolated himself from his audience by avoiding a direct engagement with them, he also continued to isolate himself by attacking their most cherished beliefs. The religious reviews, recognizing that in spite of its milder tone *The Life of John Sterling* took up the attack on the Church of England and orthodox Christianity where “Jesuitism” had left off, were “in a terrible humour” with him (*LL*, 2:97). In *The Life of John Sterling*, they claimed, Carlyle had finally revealed himself as a demon—a “Mephistopheles,” a “Satan,” a “Herod”—who delighted in leading an innocent young clergyman into the paths of heterodoxy (*North British Quarterly*, 245; *Christian Observer and Advocate*, in Seigel, *Critical Heritage*, 403, 405).11 Carlyle concluded that the “review newspaper and world [were] all dead against” him, that “though no one hates” him “nearly everybody of late takes [him] on the wrong side, and proves unconsciously unjust to” him (*LL*, 2:139—40). Indeed, his “Heterodoxy” probably cost him a government pension and election as rector of the University of Glasgow.12

Although he frequently took up his pen in the early 1850s to address the religious and political questions of the day, his writings all led to the same issue as the manuscript known as “Spiritual Optics.”13 This manuscript does not mention *The Life of John Sterling* or the controversy it aroused, but it clearly refers to it when Carlyle asks “Why . . . men shriek so over creeds?” But he makes little headway toward producing an effective reply; instead of producing an effective response to his critics, he gets locked up in the contradiction between his beliefs that cultural values are relative and that they are transcendental. Finding himself at a dead end, he abruptly concludes, “alas, not a word of this is coming rightly from my heart; nor is it tending (naturally) toward any good or even perceptible goal whatever!” In another manuscript, he again finds himself drawn to contemporary subjects, even though he was writing history—“modern Dundases with their appointments
to India . . . the Pig-Iron interests . . . the reduced whiskey interests”—he concludes that it is “much better . . . that we say nothing. Altum Silentium” (Tarr, “The Guises,” 19). Instead of trying to make himself heard over what he thought of as the Babelian din of London, he sought isolation from it by having a soundproof room constructed at the top of his house and withdrawing into the world of Frederick the Great.

*Frederick the Great* was not admired by all, but it created still less controversy than *The Life of John Sterling*. Indeed, during the thirteen years that he worked on *Frederick*, Carlyle managed to avoid almost all public controversy. As a prodigy of scholarship and a heroic act of writing, it helped to restore Carlyle’s reputation as a historian and man of letters. Those who had parted with Carlyle could not be won back by it, but those who wished to think well of the hallowed man of letters could do so. If in 1854 he was found too heterodox to be elected rector of the University of Glasgow, by 1866, after the appearance of *Frederick*, he was elected, by a huge margin, rector of the University of Edinburgh.

**The Son as Father: Frederick’s Art of War**

Frederick the Great, like Carlyle, finds himself divided between compliance with the law ordained by his natural father, Friedrich Wilhelm, and the desire to pursue the interest in art and literature validated by his spiritual father, Voltaire. So the triad of son, father, and godfather—Carlyle, James Carlyle, and Goethe—this time becomes Frederick, Friedrich Wilhelm, and Voltaire. Like all sons, Carlyle and Frederick seek to become paternal authorities themselves. Carlyle, debarred from assuming the authority of James Carlyle, had attempted to obtain the literary authority of Goethe. But, since his allegiance to literature was also a rebellion against the authority of his father, it constantly undermined itself. The impossibility of achieving his father’s authority through writing, manifested in his insistence in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* and *The Life of John Sterling* that the man of letters is excluded from political action, led him to project himself into the figure of Frederick, whose father forces him to abandon his desire to write in order to lead a life of military action.

Carlyle ascribes the same characteristics to Friedrich Wilhelm that he had ascribed to his father in the “Reminiscence of James Car-
lyle," his father's "inflexible authority" becoming the "unquestioned authority" of Frederick Wilhelm (FG, 1:348). Friedrich Wilhelm possesses the same combination of qualities—"simplicity," preference for silence, disdain for art and speculation—that made James Carlyle an unselfconscious believer. Friedrich Wilhelm's rustic simplicity manifests itself in his love for the "Spartan Hyperborean" hunting lodge at Wusterhausen that he prefers to his palaces at Potsdam and Berlin. Disdaining talk, he holds "Tabagies"—"Tobacco-Parliaments," not speech-making parliaments—that consist mainly of silent smoking. Finally, he distrusts literature and speculation, turning Jakob Gundling, his only literary courtier, into a "Court-Fool" and banishing the philosopher Christian Wolff from his domains (2:80–93). Finally, he is, like James Carlyle, a man of action, a builder or "Aedile."16

Like Carlyle, Frederick is born into a world that contains not only the rustic idyll of Wusterhausen but the French culture that his father had attempted to banish from Brandenburg when he assumed the throne (1:334ff.). Consequently, the narrative of Frederick the Great develops in terms of a dialectic between German culture, identified with Friedrich Wilhelm, and French culture, identified with Voltaire and the philosophes: between masculinity (the "centre" of German culture is "Papa") and femininity (Frederick's mother and sister are franco-philics), between Lutheran orthodoxy and freethinking heterodoxy, the Spartan and the Athenian, the "solid" and the "unsolid" (1:319–34, 385). The "proud spirit" of young Frederick inevitably comes into conflict with the "iron laws" of his father, and although Friedrich Wilhelm thinks "[t]his Fritz ought to fashion himself according to his Father's pattern . . . it cannot be. It is the new generation come. . . . A perennial controversy in human life; coeval with the genealogies of men" (1:427). Like Teufelsdröckh and John Sterling, the "fiery young Arab" colt Frederick "break[s] harness" and, rebelling against his father's "imprison[ing]" military discipline, combs out his hair "like a cockatoo, the foolish French fop, instead of conforming to the Army-regulation" and takes to "verses, story-books, flute-playing" (3:11, 2:189, 1:422). Like Carlyle, he becomes unorthodox and develops dyspepsia, the physical correlative of the modern condition of doubt (see also Adrian). When Friedrich Wilhelm discovers his son "unlawfully" playing music and wearing French costumes, he ferrets out "contraband" Latin texts, banishes "illicit French Books," and "ruthlessly" shears his son's cockatoo locks (2:188, 1:422). Unable to
bear any longer the beatings his father metes out when he discovers these “effeminate” practices, Frederick tries to flee Prussia (1:393). Friedrich Wilhelm discovers the plot, executes Frederick’s close friend Hans Hermann von Katte for treason, and only absolves his son from the same fate when he promises to “quit his French literatures and pernicious practices, one and all” (2:352). Frederick’s attempt to flee Prussia is his “Everlasting No”; just as Sterling’s remorse at the death of Boyle in the Spanish rebellion leads to a religious conversion, so Frederick achieves an Everlasting Yea of sorts after witnessing the execution of Katte. He now learns to “love this rugged Father,” and before long he is performing his duties like “Papa’s second self” (3:29, 150).

Yet Friedrich Wilhelm’s repression only makes Frederick’s “French” or literary self emerge all the more powerfully. Frederick obtains a private residence at Reinsberg where he is free to pursue his artistic pursuits, and it is at this period of his life that he first corresponds with his new “Intellectual Father,” Voltaire (5:271). As Carlyle had regarded Goethe and the Germans as the new priesthood and the authors of the new liturgy, so Frederick regards Voltaire as “Preacher, Prophet, and Priest,” the bearer of the “new ‘Gospel’” (3:193, 192). Although Frederick outwardly obeys his father, he has not really accepted his beliefs, and in his relations with Friedrich Wilhelm he becomes “calculat[ing], reticent . . . half-sincere” (2:373). He pretends, for example, to dislike the woman Friedrich Wilhelm has chosen for him to marry so that he will appear all the more submissive when he accepts her. Because Frederick submits to the superior power but not to the superior belief of Friedrich Wilhelm, the conclusion of the first half of the history does not so much resolve the conflict of father and son as polarize the conflicting French and German “elements” in the hunting-lodge at Wusterhausen and the art projects of Reinsberg.17

When Frederick takes the throne in the second half of the history, his contemporaries justifiably wonder whether he will indeed be a second Friedrich Wilhelm or whether he will reign as an enlightened philosopher-king.18 Once his father dies, and physical compulsion disappears, it would seem that he is free to follow his own desires. Indeed, although he surprises his contemporaries by expanding his army, he does initially dedicate himself to the arts in homage to the “Muses.” But the second half of the history will demonstrate that Friedrich Wilhelm’s authority was more than simple strength or power, that he remains “the supreme ultimate Interpreter, and grand living codex,
of the Laws,” and that his laws have the authority of the “Laws of this Universe” (2:72, 119; see 1:340, 434, 2:72, 326). Frederick cannot obtain authority through rebellion but only through submitting to the law as laid down by his father. By the end of the first year of his reign, he is at war and begins to discover that “Bellona [will be] his companion for long years henceforth, instead of Minerva and the Muses, as he had been anticipating” (3:413). Indeed, Frederick, who wages three major wars, outdoes his father, who fought only one, becoming in the process more like Friedrich Wilhelm than Friedrich Wilhelm himself.

But, while Frederick’s first war teaches him the value of his father’s virtues—he wins, not through his own efforts, but because he has inherited a well-prepared army from his father—he has not yet learned the limitations of the arts and still clings to his literary father, Voltaire. In order to depict the final triumph of war over art, Carlyle presents Voltaire’s visit to Berlin in 1750–52 as a mock tragedy. During the ten years’ peace following the Silesian wars, Frederick attempts to revive his artistic projects, in part by convincing Voltaire to take up residence in Berlin, but, although Frederick imagines that he can still dedicate himself to the Muses, his experience of war has made that project impossible. Frederick eventually perceives that while he has been “battling for his existence,” Voltaire has been growing “great by ‘Farces of the Fair,’” and he quickly grows impatient when his literary father gets embroiled in a series of ridiculous adventures culminating in the controversy of the “Infinitely Little” (5:267, 348). The latter episode, which soon comes to represent the pettiness of the intellectuals involved (one cannot help but recall the Lilliputian debate between the Big-endians and the Little-endians), generates the mock-tragic denouement of Voltaire’s visit. Voltaire might win the intellectual debate, but, as the real issue is power, he is destined to lose, for he has made the mistake of attacking Maupertius, the president of Frederick’s royal academy. The farce ends when the king, who cannot accept being embarrassed in this manner, has Voltaire arrested and forces him to depart from Berlin in disgrace. Just as Friedrich Wilhelm had banished French courtiers when he assumed the throne, Frederick, now truly become his father’s “second self,” banishes Voltaire’s French frivolity from his court (1:334–35). “Voltaire at Potsdam is a failure,” Carlyle reports, and, “happily,” the “Life to the Muses” is “extremely disappointing” (5:380, 205).

In Frederick the Great, the literary man has become the opposite of
what he had been in Carlyle's writings of the 1830s. Whereas Carlyle's literary father, Goethe, had recaptured the transcendental, Sterling's literary father, Coleridge, produces only transcendental moonshine, and Frederick's literary father, Voltaire, is a skeptic, belonging to the "Anarchic Republic... of Letters," who makes the transcendental inaccessible (4:396; see 1:11, 270, 8:217–18). In his depiction of Voltaire, Carlyle inverts his earlier representations of authorial creativity. Whereas Teufelsdröckh was to become a Goethe-like author whose *Palingenesia* would bring about the phoenix rebirth of society, Voltaire is a "Phoenix doused"; instead of realizing ideals, he produces the anarchy of revolution, "Realised Voltairism" (5:294, 3:177). Where Carlyle depicted the Germans as conveyors of a new religious spirit, he depicts Voltaire's "spiritual[ity]" as mere wit (*esprit*), and his writings as "Gundlingiana," the antics of a court jester (3:177, 8:218).

When Frederick banishes Voltaire, he finally recognizes that his own "swift-handed, valiant, steel-bright kind of soul...[is] very likely for a King's... not likely for a Poet's" (3:238). Except as historical documents, his writings have lost all interest; he emerges as a hero precisely because he is the one man of action in a "Writing Era" (1:11). It is not by imitating Voltaire, the author of farces, that Frederick becomes "Vater Fritz," but by imitating Friedrich Wilhelm, one of "the Authors of Prussia" (4:366).

In the figure of Frederick the Great, Carlyle completes his vision of the author as creator of a new paradise in the image of the God of Genesis. Carlyle's first project that dealt with Frederick—a translation of a text describing Frederick's interest in draining swamps and the profits to be obtained thereby—was an extension of his growing obsession with land reclamation (see NL, 2:141). In *Frederick the Great*, where Carlyle proceeded to represent Frederick as the author of Prussia, Frederick inherits the authority to create Prussia from the "fathers" who, from the year 928 to the accession of Friedrich Wilhelm in 1713, began the process of separating land and water "into two firmaments" through the territorial expansion of Brandenburg by war, purchase, colonization, and land reclamation (2:51; see 1:78, 96, 131, 176, 250, 293, 309, 341, 3:313, 4:47, 5:308, 8:254, 305, 306).

Battle, both literal and figurative, is Carlyle's principal metaphor for the work of creating the Prussian nation. Whereas the wars of the eighteenth century are otherwise indicative of its "anarchic" tendencies, Frederick's battles, like those of his ancestors, are "pitched
fight[s] . . . against anarchy” which, like his land reclamation projects, turn land to human use (1:72). His wars not only aim to suppress the “inveterate ineffective war[s]” of the era but to produce order by acquiring the lands that constitute the new Prussian state. This at least partially accounts for the lavish attention Carlyle devotes to the geographical details of Frederick’s battles. He made a journey to Germany exclusively to examine the twelve major battle sites, and in the history he provides detailed narratives and maps of the armies’ positions and maneuvers, indicating the specific relationship of the battles to the physical geography of the land (see Brooks). The creation of a culture is no longer for Carlyle a matter of “spirituality,” for the ideal has become associated with Voltaire and Gundlingiana; instead it is a matter of physical force, of military drill, forced labor, and agricultural production.

Yet, while Frederick authors an epic nation, Carlyle fails, as he acknowledges from the start, to “disimprison” the “imprisoned Epic” of Frederick the Great so that it can transform his own anarchic era as Frederick, at least temporarily, transformed Germany in the eighteenth century (1:17). Carlyle, aged sixty when he got under way with the history, recognized that Frederick the Great was the “last of [its] kind,” a last desperate search for epic closure (Marrs, 719; see Kaplan, 397). This search stretched out the process of writing the history far beyond his expectations but never brought him to the termination he desired.

While in The French Revolution Carlyle had written an epic history of a people who could not author an epic myth, in Frederick the Great he authored a non-epic history of the creation of an epic nation. The following passages, each representing the spread of rumor, illustrate the differences between the two histories:

Not so, however, does neighbouring Saint-Antoine look on [the repair of the castle of Vincennes]: Saint-Antoine to whom these peaked turrets and grim donjons, all-too near her own dark dwelling, are of themselves an offence. Was not Vincennes a kind of minor Bastille? Great Diderot and Philosophes have lain in durance here; great Mirabeau, in disastrous eclipse, for forty-two months. And now when the old Bastille has become a dancing-ground (had any one the mirth to dance), and its stones are getting built into the Pont Louis-Seize, does this minor, comparative insignificance of a Bastille
flank itself with fresh-hewn mullions, spread out tyrannous wings; menacing Patriotism? New space for prisoners: and what prisoners? A d’Orleans, with the chief Patriots on the tip of the Left? It is said, there runs “a subterranean passage” all the way from the Tuileries hither. Who knows? Paris, mined with quarries and catacombs, does hang wondrous over the abyss; Paris was once to be blown up,—though the powder, when we went to look, had got withdrawn. A Tuileries, sold to Austria and Coblentz, should have no subterranean passage. Out of which might not Coblentz or Austria issue, some morning; and, with cannon of long range, “foudroyer,” bethunder a patriotic Saint-Antoine into smoulder and ruin! (FR, 2:128–29; first instance of emphasis added)

In Berlin, from Tuesday 31st May 1740, day of the late King’s [Frederick Wilhelm’s] death, till the Thursday following, the post was stopped and the gates closed. . . .

Vaguely everywhere there has a notion gone abroad that this young King will prove considerable. Here at last has a Lover of Philosophy got upon the throne, and great philanthropies and magnanimities are to be expected, think rash editors and idle mankind. Rash editors in England and elsewhere, we observe, are ready to believe that Friedrich has not only disbanded the Potsdam Giants; but means to “reduce the Prussian Army one half” or so, for ease, (temporary ease, which we hope will be lasting) of parties concerned; and to go much upon emancipation, political rose-water, and friendship to humanity, as we now call it. (FG, 3:278–79)

Because epic represents what people believe, The French Revolution merges past and present, reader and history. Already in Oliver Cromwell’s Letters and Speeches, past and present diverge into the past of Cromwell’s large-type letters and speeches and the present of Carlyle’s small-type narrative. In Frederick the Great, the reader and narrator are radically separated from the narrated past. Both of the passages above employ the present tense, but the passage from The French Revolution begins immediately in the present—narrator, readers, and historical actors are contemporaneous—whereas the passage from Frederick (typical of the latter work) begins in the past tense, a practice that contextualizes the event as a portion of the past that has no contact with the present.

Frederick the Great also follows Oliver Cromwell’s Letters and Speeches in abandoning the use of dramatized speech that unites the narrator and the historical actors in the first-person plural “we.” The passage from
The French Revolution, like those discussed in chapter 3, represents polyphonic speech, capturing the paranoia, hyperbole, and fantasy of rumor in St. Antoine. The passage from Frederick the Great, by contrast, does not dramatize conflicting opinions and it keeps the narrator and historical audience distinct; there are two “we’s,” “we” who spread rumors in the past and “we” who “now call” ideas by different names. The latter groups the narrator and reader in an era separate from that of Frederick and his contemporaries, and the narrator further distances himself through irony by designating the speakers’ ideas as “rash” and “idle” “political rose-water.”

Finally, Frederick the Great fails to be epic because, like Oliver Cromwell’s Letters and Speeches, it does not yield symbolic meaning. Although the thematic conflict between father and son, art and war, provides a symbolic structure for the history, this structure remains in the background, obscured by a forest of detail. As in Cromwell, the structure of the history is reduced to mere chronology, and the chapter titles—“Phenomena of the Accession,” “At Reinsberg, 1736–1740,” “Crown Prince Goes to the Rhine Campaign,” “Battle of Kunersdorf”—refer to dates and events rather than symbolic actions. The kind of mythic episode and anecdote that revealed the meaning of the French Revolution most often turns out in Frederick the Great to be without meaning or, as in the case of the Jenny Geddes story in Cromwell’s Letters and Speeches, without historical foundation. Whereas an anecdote like the story of “Margaret with the Pouch-mouth” might in The French Revolution have yielded some insight into events, Carlyle here relates it merely “for sake of the Bride’s name,” and while the folk myths that have arisen around the figure of Frederick might be “the Epic they could not write of him,” more often than not Carlyle debunks these anecdotes rather than discovering their epic potential (1:135, 6:305). The pattern may be found most clearly in his two narratives of the “world-famous ‘Moriamur pro Rege nostro Mariã Theresiã.’” He first narrates the “poetic,” and partly “mythical,” version, a “very beautiful heroic scene” in which the Hungarian nobility answer Maria Theresa’s pleas for aid with a chivalric oath to die for the queen. He then debunks the first version with a “prose” version in which the barons haggle for confirmation of their constitutional rights before they will swear fealty to the queen (4:259–62). By including both versions, Carlyle tries to have it both ways, but he clearly privileges the final debunking version, prose fact displacing poetic myth and symbol. Whereas he had
once used the word “mythus” synonymously with “epic” to signify a culture’s genuine beliefs, “mythic” now comes to mean simply a story that is untrue (e.g., 4:261, 7:324, 373, 8:7).22

Because Carlyle conceives epic as a closed and totalizing myth, especially at this point in his career, the impossibility of achieving authentic closure also means the impossibility of epic. Frederick the Great seeks totalizing closure by replacing the multiple voices of history—a plurality of dissenting factions that make closure impossible—with a multiplicity of narrators and narratives. Carlyle splinters himself into personae that represent different aspects of the historian—Scott’s Dryasdust, Smollett’s Smelfungus, Mr. Rigmarole, the aesthetician Sauerteig (and his aesthetic manifesto, the Springwurzeln), and Diogenes Teufelsdrockh—as well as the different stages of historical composition—a “predecessor” of the principal narrator, a “tourist” who has seen the sites of Frederick’s battles, a satirical friend of the narrator, a writer whose notebooks the narrator has received, the narrator of an excerpt from an imbroglio of manuscripts, and the editor of the history. By including a representative of each stage of historical interpretation and composition Carlyle would seem to be creating a totality, a history that comprehends every aspect of the past. Yet the different stages of the process of writing history, especially the different historical perspectives, do not seem to add up to a whole so much as they produce a sense of fragmentation.

Carlyle’s desire to achieve totality makes it almost impossible for him to decide how to use his historical sources, what to include or exclude. In The French Revolution, he revealed the meaning latent in historical documents by transforming them into dialogues and debates. In Frederick the Great, he does not perform this kind of transformation of historical documents; instead he simply quotes them at length as if he is unable to discover their latent meaning. Moreover, because he cannot decide which episodes are meaningful and which are not, he seems to feel compelled to include them all. The latter tendency is especially apparent in the practice of setting long passages in small type and the use of multiple parallel narratives that represent simultaneous historical actions. Passages in small type, which include direct quotations of documents like those just discussed, as well as narratives tangential to the main narrative and renarrations in greater detail of material already narrated, account for about one-fifth of the text (Peckham, 205–6). Tangential narratives, like the stories of Mar-
garet with the Pouch-mouth or Laurence Sterne’s father at the siege of Gibraltar, do not tell us much about Frederick or his era, but Carlyle includes them because he has no way of deciding what is relevant and what is merely interesting. Particularly indicative of Carlyle’s uncertainty about whether he has successfully transformed his material into meaningful history are those passages that simply repeat and amplify the preceding narrative, as if he were trying to discover the second time around what he has missed the first. Instead of reassuring the reader that the narrative is now complete, such amplifications, by demonstrating the inadequacy of the preceding narrative, suggest the possibility of a still more complete narrative that would in turn displace the latter one, the whole process becoming an infinite regress in which one narrative displaces another in a necessarily failed attempt to achieve totality.

Carlyle’s desire for totalizing closure was at odds with his desire for closure as the achievement of rest. The latter led him to predict almost as soon as he began writing that he would complete the work quickly, while the former led him to expand the book to twice the length he originally intended—over four thousand pages in six volumes—and to miss deadline after self-imposed deadline from 1856, just a year after he began writing, to 1864, when he was still a year away from finishing. As if desperately trying to control the impulse to digress and repeat, he repeatedly asserts that he is omitting and abridging material, giving the reader the impression that the book might be much longer than it already is (e.g., 1:112, 132, 395, 2:223, 4:27, 28, 38, 50, 55, 103, 7:279, 8:181). Yet all of this work was not enough to “keep [his] heart at rest”; still restless after a long day’s writing, he felt the need to take relief in horseback riding (LL, 1:182). The four-thousand-odd pages of Frederick the Great are the correlative of the thirty thousand miles he rode while writing it (Rem., 133).

Carlyle’s desire to finish writing Frederick and the impulse toward expansion that kept him from succeeding raised his anxieties to such a pitch that he “began to have an apprehension that [he] should never get [his] sad book on Friedrich finished, that it would finish [him] instead” (LM, 2:i5g). If writing Frederick the Great was killing him, the impulse that extended the process to such a great length has to be regarded as suicidal. When Frederick, surrounded by a “world of enemies,” suicidally throws himself into battle, Carlyle argues that it is not a matter of “puking up one’s existence, in the weak sick way of fejo
de se; but, far different, that of dying, if he needs must, as seems too likely, in uttermost spasm of battle” (6:223, 253; see 249, 7:298). In writing Frederick the Great, Carlyle, who sometimes spoke approvingly of suicide, similarly threw himself into a labor that would allow him to lose consciousness of himself in the course of performing something like a public duty (Kaplan, 505).

Yet for all the effort he put into it, he was never even certain that Frederick was worth writing about (NL, 2:142, 149; LL, 2:139–40; RWE, 501, 505–6). Was Frederick a reincarnation of Friedrich Wilhelm or the incarnation of an era that “has nothing grand in it, except that grand universal Suicide, named French Revolution?”; was he, like Odin, a great originator, the “Creator of the Prussian Monarchy,” or, like the man of letters, a belated hero, the “Last of the Kings?” (1:8, 3, 6). Because Friedrich Wilhelm is always prepared for war and never doubts the value of his martial ethos, he only needs to go to war once in his lifetime. Precisely because Frederick never fully embraces his father's values, he cannot complete the battle of life and must struggle incessantly against his anarchic enemies. Even in the long era of peace following the Seven Years' War, he cannot rest contentedly at Sans Souci, but drives his industrial regiments to death working on land reclamation projects:

‘When, in the Marshland of the Netze, he counted more the strokes of the 10,000 spades, than the sufferings of the workers, sick with the marsh-fever in the hospitals which he had built for them; when, restless, his demands outran the quickest performance.—there united itself to the deepest reverence and devotedness, in his People, a feeling of awe, as for one whose limbs are not moved by earthly life. . . . And when Goethe, himself become an old man, finished his last Drama’ (Second Part of Faust), ‘the figure of the old King again rose on him, and stept into his Poem; and his Faust got transformed into an unresting, creating, pitilessly exacting Master, forcing-on his salutiferous drains and fruitful canals through the morasses of the Weichsel.’ (8:126–27)

Like Faust, Frederick wants to reclaim land so that he can found an ideal society on it, but the process of reclaiming the land destroys the very people who would inhabit his utopia.

Carlyle proclaims from the start of Frederick the Great that he has “renounce[d] ideals” and will “take-up with the mournfullest barren
realities,” that he has not produced a “Fabulous Epic” in which Frederick is invulnerable, but an “Epic of Reality” (1:17, 7:234–35). When he wrote *The French Revolution*, he had been interested in “what has realized itself,” in “How Ideals do and ought to adjust themselves with the Actual” (CL, 7:24). Now the movement is in the opposite direction, the ideal emerging from the real, poetic myths displaced by prosaic facts. Carlyle wants to argue that art must proceed, not from the ideal, but from the real, the battle of existence. Instead of visionary art quelling the anarchy of war, military drill, he would argue in “Shooting Niagara,” can become an art, progressing from “correct marching in line, to rhythmic dancing in cotillon or minuet” (CME, 5:42). Appropriately, the only work of all Frederick’s writings that Carlyle regards as having any merit is his *Art of War* (FG, 5:241).

The process of creating the Prussian state does not involve the attempt to realize an ideal as Samson had done in his monastery or Cromwell in the commonwealth. “Vater Fritz” is an impotent creator who has no children of his own; he has the power to create an orderly state, but his writings are incapable of creating cultural belief. Whereas Carlyle’s belief in art, or the ideal, had once led him to imagine it as a force that could enable a society to rise above the battle of existence, art had now become for him merely the refinement of war.