

On Reading *Frederick the Great*

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Such is the drama of life . . . ; a thing of multifarious tragic and epic meanings, then as now. A many-voiced tragedy and epos, yet with broad-based comic and grotesque accompaniment.

Carlyle, “Baillie the Covenanter”

Facts are a kind of divine thing to Friedrich; much more so than to common men: this is essentially what Religion I have found in Friedrich.

Carlyle, *Frederick the Great*

I go nowhere else, but to Chelsea, which is my theatre of History—& Humanity.

Ruskin to Carlyle, ca. 25 September 1870

THE HISTORY OF FRIEDRICH II. OF PRUSSIA, CALLED *Frederick the Great* (1858–65), is Carlyle’s longest, most ambitious work—4500 pages in original editions—and, just possibly, his greatest. Shorter than Balzac’s *Comédie humaine*, longer than Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, about the same length as Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*, *Frederick* comes in about three times as long as his other epic history, *The French Revolution* (1837). So immense a narrative demanded of Carlyle that he develop an even greater variety of styles and voices than before. The white-hot intensity of *The French Revolution* would have cooled over the colossal length of *Frederick*. In our age of minuscule attention spans, few have read—or desire to read—an *histoire fleuve* like *Frederick*. Readers would do well to read *Frederick* as they read Proust or Balzac, immersed in their respective Parisian milieus and given up to the characters, their thoughts, and their doings. Only through similarly close attention can *Frederick*’s world reveal itself within the

twists and turns of Carlyle's narrative, his uncanny command of language, his sense of play, his unsurpassable humor. His cast of characters is hardly less numerous or less vividly created than Proust's or Balzac's, and even those with only cameo roles can be unforgettable. As with Balzac or Proust, reading *Frederick* can be, as Morse Peckham remarked, "a hugely enjoyable experience" (214). Difficult as it may be to make a case for a book that even Victorian literary specialists ignore, reading *Frederick* challenges many critical misconceptions about Carlyle's achievement. As both a stylistic *tour de force* and as a prescient analysis of the historical figures and events that underlie seismic changes in the political destinies of Europe, *Frederick* cannot be ignored.¹

In the past Carlyle's *Frederick* enjoyed periods of popularity and admiration. Jane Addams, founder of Hull House in Chicago, ill while working in London's East End, turned to *Frederick*, whose first volume she opened "with a lively sense of gratitude" (65).² In Reading Gaol Oscar Wilde requested a copy of *Frederick* along with *Sartor Resartus*.³ Theodore Roosevelt, on safari in East Africa, looked forward with pleasure to a half-hour each evening with *Frederick*: "His object—relaxation, entertainment, instruction" (qtd. in Nevins 13).⁴ Although planned before the Great

¹ This essay was written before the celebrations of the 300th anniversary of Frederick's birth (24 January 1712) and of his achievements in Germany. These occurred particularly at Potsdam, outside of Berlin, where he erected the palace complex of Sanssouci. This anniversary also resulted in a shower of books, a play, a novel, TV films and documentaries. See *The New York Times* (25 Jan. 2012): A4, 11, and (30 Jan. 2012): A4. This essay has been much reduced from a larger study. I happily acknowledge Joan Blythe's generous help in the preparation of the current version.

² Addams admired Carlyle's writings so much that she determined to donate twenty-five copies of *Heroes and Hero-Worship* each year to deserving young people; see 36.

³ See Richard Ellmann, 218 and Rupert Hart-Davis, *Wilde*, 405n.

⁴ Not everyone had greeted Carlyle's *Frederick* with enthusiasm when it first appeared. After he had delved into Carlyle's new history, a skeptical John Stuart Mill exclaimed in 1854 that Carlyle had "written himself out, and become a mere commentator on himself" (645). More than a century later, *Frederick* aroused A. L. Le Quesne to a high level of dudgeon. Carlyle, he said, made implausible claims for his hero and in contrast with his earlier books, *Frederick's* prose is "one-dimensional." For Le Quesne, such flaws, "rule out any serious claim to include it among his major achievements" (90).

War, Thomas Mann only completed his long, thoughtful, and admiring essay on *Frederick* in December 1914, some months after World War I had begun.⁵ Hitler, another kind of admiring reader, was no less charmed. Enconced in his Berlin bunker, the *Führer* had Goebbels read to him from *Frederick*, his “favourite book” (qtd. in Trevor-Roper 97) as bombs exploded overhead.⁶ Hitler’s response is best understood in the context of the rise and fall of German adulation of Frederick. His seven-years war against the three greatest military powers of the eighteenth century earned him, according to Golo Mann, “the admiration of even those Germans—they were in the majority—for whom the centre of the nation was still Vienna and not Berlin” (15). Soon after Frederick’s death in 1786 his greatness took on legendary status. His achievement in Prussia, largest of the German states and his home—as well Copernicus’s and Kant’s—gave rise to a revived national confidence that stimulated the German renaissance in literature, art, music, philosophy, and history. Nor, without his example and the tradition of successful absolutism he left behind, would Germany’s gradual unification under Prussia’s aegis during the nineteenth century have been so easily effected. After Bismarck founded the German empire in 1871, paintings

⁵First published in English as “Frederick the Great and the Grand Coalition” (1929), Mann puzzled over Frederick’s character, his capacity for dissimulation, and his extreme misogyny. It is worth noting that Aschenbach, the world-weary protagonist of *Death in Venice* (1912), was “the author of a limpid and powerful prose epic dealing with the life of Frederick the Great” (ch. 2).

⁶On 11 March 1945, six weeks before the end of the war, Joseph Goebbels gave Hitler an abridged translation of Carlyle’s history, possibly one based on the German version prepared by Carlyle’s German-Jewish amanuensis, Joseph Neuberg. In his Berlin bunker Hitler would spend hours reading rousing passages from it. He interpreted the dire situation in which he found himself—the Americans had crossed the Rhine, the Russians were advancing steadily on the Eastern front—in light of the moment in 1761 during the Seven-Years’ War when Frederick found himself surrounded on all sides by enemies. Only the opportune death of Czar Peter, whose successor sued for peace, saved the Prussian king. Learning of the death of Franklin Roosevelt on 12 April, Hitler believed salvation was near. His interest in Carlyle long predated his bunker readings, going back to the early 1920s in Munich when he came upon *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. See Timothy W. Ryback, 201, 203. Ryback deems Hitler a “lifelong student of Carlyle” (208). See also John Gross’s illuminating review essay of Ryback’s study.

of Frederick as well as historical accounts of his life and exploits gained in popularity. It required the disasters of two World Wars to dim this vision of Frederick for the Germans.

In the decades since World War II Frederick has gradually disappeared off the historical map—both in Germany and in English-speaking lands—almost as completely as Prussia did in 1947. The modern association of *Frederick* with the violent course of twentieth-century German history has inevitably tarnished the image of both Carlyle's hero and the hero's biographer. But Frederick was closer to Carlyle's time than Carlyle is to ours: only nine years separate Frederick's death from Carlyle's birth. No more than on Carlyle's history can twentieth-century horrors be laid at Frederick's door. Few recent historians of the Prussian king and his era have taken Carlyle's *Frederick* seriously. They may list his history in their bibliography, but in their narratives they rarely cite, or take issue with, Carlyle's views.⁷ The chief exceptions to the current neglect of *Frederick* among professional historians are those who focus on military history, particularly Napoleonists. Napoleon revered Frederick, read his extensive writings on strategy and tactics carefully, and learned from them. Jay Luvaas deems that Carlyle "had a sure grasp of the military factors involved" in Frederick's campaigns, a grasp that nineteenth-century military historians have also recognized (10).

Similar to the fate of its subject, *Frederick* has now all but disappeared from the literary map. Even among professed Carlyleans, it is possibly the least read or studied of Carlyle's books. Yet some light remains.⁸ In his recent collection of essays Simon Schama urges a reevaluation of both Ruskin and Carlyle for their graphic portraits of past figures and events. "On

⁷ See, for example, Robert B. Asprey's *Frederick the Great. The Magnificent Enigma* (1986). See also Giles Macdonogh's *Frederick the Great: A Life in Deed and Letters* (1999) and David Fraser's *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia* (2000). The best modern short biography of the Prussian king remains Gerhart Ritter's *Frederick the Great. A Historical Profile* (1936; rev. 1954), trans. with an introduction by Peter Paret (1970). For a more recent study that takes up Frederick within a larger canvas see Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Fall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (2006).

⁸ For example, A. J. P. Taylor referred to Carlyle as "the greatest of all historical novelists" (144).

almost every page,” writes Schama, one discovers “close readings that would reveal a richness of utterance and complexity of poetic strategy that make comparisons with his idols, Milton and Dante, not entirely ridiculous.” Carlyle he considers “the impassioned oracular poet-bard, . . . a persona unembarrassed to become part of the action himself, a protean companion in written speech” (350–51).⁹ Whereas Schama takes his examples from *The French Revolution*, the assessment serves equally well for *Frederick*, which is possibly the greater work, not only for its sweeping prophetic vision, its pyrotechnic poetic language, and its unforgettable characters, but also for the impact it exerts on those able to respond to it without preconceptions. Notions of history were in flux when Carlyle began *Frederick*, in which he wished to rethink history. In this heroic task he surely succeeded.

The Background of *Frederick*

To remain vibrant, a nation, Carlyle believed, needs to undergo periodic explosions. England had its Civil War, France a full-scale Revolution, which, “if not greater than anything in human experience, [was] at least more grandiose” (*Works* 12: 6). This Revolution, which erupted barely three years after Frederick’s death, is *Frederick*’s implied *Götterdämmerung*. For decades Carlyle had execrated the godless eighteenth century. The Enlightenment was for him an era of gradual disbelief. It had “nothing grand in it, except that grand universal Suicide, named French Revolution, by which it terminated its otherwise worthless existence with at least one worthy act;—setting fire to its old home and self” (*Works* 12: 8–9). Yet the century in which he was born never ceased to intrigue Carlyle. He was, after all, its child, and no child ever more vehemently rejected—or examined more carefully—his imperfect parent.

Embarking on his history, Carlyle realized that Frederick had been “a kind of intermittent pursuit with me all my life” (To Varnhagen von Ense, 6 June 1852; *CL* 27: 136). “The first Book I ever read in German,” he informed Varnhagen von Ense, was

⁹ Schama goes on to compare Carlyle with Thoreau in fostering a “challenging, not to say confrontational, relationship with the reader.” Thoreau himself appreciated in Carlyle the “ability to liberate language from its gentility” (354).

Archenholtz's *Geschichte des siebenjährige Krieges in Deutschland* (13 November 1845; *CL* 20: 55). Archenholtz made Carlyle aware of Frederick's brilliance as a military tactician and prompted him to think about one day writing a history of the king's life and times. After reading the *Geschichte*, Carlyle began intensive study of Schiller and Goethe. Both spoke unequivocally of Frederick's greatness. Inspired by Homer, Schiller wanted to write an epic. What better model, he thought, than the *Iliad*. He contemplated for his hero first Gustavus Adolphus, then Frederick. But the project languished, and Schiller returned, wisely in Carlyle's view, to the drama and began *Wallenstein* (*Schiller, Works* 25: 118–19). Yet Schiller's excitement over writing a modern epic based upon Homer anticipated and possibly stimulated Carlyle's own burgeoning excitement about Homeric epic a decade later, as did Friedrich August Wolf's pathbreaking *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795). The *Iliad*, in Voss's powerful German translation, looms large behind *The French Revolution* and also has a sinewy relationship to *Frederick*.¹⁰

Reading Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811–33) in the early 1820s heightened Carlyle's awareness of Frederick, who both exalted and distressed Goethe. Although Frankfurt lay well outside Prussian territory, the young Goethe thrilled to Frederick's exploits during the Seven-Years' War: "Thus I also was then a Prussian in my views, or to speak more correctly, a Fritzian; since what cared we for Prussia? It was the personal character of the great king that worked upon all hearts." Frederick's history deserved epic treatment. "Every nation, if it would be worth any thing at all," Goethe wrote, with Frederick in mind, in his autobiography, "must possess an epopee, to which the precise form of the epic poem is not necessary" (*Autobiography* 1: 39, 232). The later books of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* reveal no abatement in Goethe's admiration: "If . . . we looked towards the north, we were shone upon by Frederick, the polar-star, who seemed to turn about himself Germany, Europe,—nay, the whole world" (2: 79). Frederick's heroic struggles during the Seven-Years War, according to Goethe, "had saved the honor of one part of the Germans against a united world" (2: 124). In

¹⁰ On the importance for Carlyle of Wolf's interpretation of Homer and Voss's German translation, see my "Carlyle as Epic Historian," 132–36.

addition to Archenholtz, Schiller, and Goethe, Carlyle in the late 1820s also encountered Frederick through his reading of Voltaire and Heyne.¹¹ In 1830 he even proposed to an Edinburgh publisher a single-volume biography of “brave Fritz” (To G. R. Gleig, 21 May 1830; *CL* 5: 102). Nothing came of this proposal, but in *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34; 1838), which he began soon after, Teufelsdröckh’s stepfather Andreas Futteral fought for “Fritz the Only” at Rossbach (1757), Hochkirk (1758), and Kunersdorf (1759). “*Das nenn’ ich mir einen König,*” he declared (*Sartor* 64).

By the early 1840s the Prussian king had supplanted Carlyle’s earlier literary heroes, Schiller, Goethe, and Jean Paul, but the time to write about him had not yet come. Correspondence with Varnhagen von Ense indexes Carlyle’s evolving thoughts. “Did any one ever write an adequate Life of your Frederick the Great,” he asked his German friend in 1840 (7 November; *CL* 12: 316). Two books on *Frederick* by Johann D. E. Preuss, which Varnhagen had sent him, awoke in Carlyle “the liveliest curiosity . . . to know more and ever more about that King. Certainly if there is a Hero for an Epic in these Ages,—and why should there not in these ages as well as others?—then this is he!” (22 October 1845; *CL* 20: 35). *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1840) and *Past and Present* (1843) had longingly surveyed the great men of the past. After completing *Cromwell* in 1845 Carlyle searched anxiously for a new task. “I have still no fixed work,” he lamented to Varnhagen; “nothing in the dark chaos that it could seem *beautiful* to conquer and *do*;—no work to write at” (16 December 1846; *CL* 21: 111). In 1847, thanking Varnhagen for further volumes of his *Denkwürdigkeiten* (*Memoirs*), he admitted that “withal I get a view as if into the very heart of Prussia thro’ them; which also is highly valuable to me” (3 March; *CL* 21: 173). Later that year he confessed, that “if I were a Prussian, or even German, I would decidedly try *Friedrich*” (5 November; *CL* 22: 147).

From 1848 to 1850 Carlyle set down at fever pitch his passionately-held thoughts about Ireland, the condition of England, and the Continental revolutions of 1848. Substantial fragments of a never-completed book on Ireland survive, as do published and unpublished essays on the 1848 uprisings on the

¹¹ See, for example, “The Life of Heyne” (1828), *Works* 26: 334.

Continent. In one of his *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850) he spoke of “Fritz of Prussia” as “(almost the only sovereign *King* I have known since Cromwell’s time)” (*Works* 20: 146). He did not give up on his plan to write about Frederick. In 1851 he remarked to Varnhagen von Ense, “If I were a born Prussian, I believe I should forthwith attempt some Picture of Friedrich the Great, the *last* real *king* that we have had in Europe” (29 October 1851; *CL* 26: 221). The European revolutions first exhilarated, then depressed Carlyle. “I myself cannot be amused at the things I see,” he commented to his brother John in 1852. Nonetheless, “I still keep reading abt Frederick the Great [which has] . . . the advantage of keeping me *silent*, and busy in *that* with many problems and inquiries—” (23 February 1852; *CL* 27: 51–53). “I took to reading, near a year ago, about Frederick,” Carlyle wrote Emerson in June of the same year, “as I had twice in my life done before [1819 and ca. 1829–1830]. . . . The man looks brilliant and noble to me; but how *love* him, or the sad wreck he lived and worked in? I do not even yet *see* him clearly” (25 June; *CL* 27: 153). That summer, wishing to follow in the “footsteps of a most brilliant, valiant and invincible human soul,” Carlyle went, for the first time, to Germany (*CL* 27: 139; 6 June 1852). During the months that followed he often expressed grumpy frustration with the project, but by December 19, more positive, he wrote his mother, “I am busy indeed!” (*CL* 27: 368). “Frederick the Great” had now become a consuming passion. The man whom Carlyle had earlier complained he “could not love” he now affectionately referred to as “poor *Fritz* (Freddy)” (*CL* 27: 373).

In taking on *Frederick* in 1852 at the age of 57, Carlyle thought himself, like the Homeric gods, time-rich. He would be nearly seventy before finally completing his task in 1865. Studying the dynamics of a society in crisis sustained his engagement no less than it had earlier. Whereas *The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (1845) chronicles the fortunes of Puritanism through the energies of its greatest active hero, *Frederick* depicts how two men, Frederick Wilhelm and his son Frederick the Great, together forged the modern state of Prussia. Only five years after Carlyle published his last volume, Prussia realized itself politically and geographically as Germany. With all the long years and undoubted difficulties that writing the six hefty volumes

entailed, Carlyle knew at the end that he had in hand the book for which he had spent a lifetime preparing himself.

Epic Historian, Epic Stylist

Frederick the Great is the culmination of Carlyle's career as a literary historian. The narrative opens *in medias res* with the hero's father and mother, then plunges twelve centuries into the past. All ancestors who contributed to Brandenburg's and by implication Frederick's development enter, have their moment in the sun, and depart. Frederick's father, a true old Teuton in whom, like all Hohenzollerns, burned "a strong flame of choler" (*Works* 12: 264) gave young Fritz an unusually severe upbringing, presumably, thought Carlyle, to toughen him for the burdens of rule. Strict and willfully cruel, Frederick Wilhelm regularly caned his son, beat both him and his sister senseless, and once imprisoned Frederick for several months under the sentence of death. Carlyle had little more tolerance than had the father for Frederick's early foppish tendencies and infatuation with French culture. Himself a kind of rough father to Frederick, Carlyle sets himself the task of licking the recalcitrant cub into shape, into a Carlylean hero.

At the core of Frederick's heroism is what Carlyle perceived to be the King's superb sense of reality. "In his way he is a Reality," Carlyle claimed, "the last Crowned Reality there was" (*Works* 12: 14, 16). Reality for Frederick was work and how to go about *his* work. Echoing Goethe, Carlyle describes Frederick in old age as "like the stars, always steady at his work" (*Works* 19: 249).¹² Much of this work involved strategic honing of the Prussian military machine and leading the Prussian armies into stunning victories that greatly extended the territory and reputation of Prussia. Another major arena of Frederick's work was to bequeath to Prussia a vast legacy of civic improvements—canals dug, roads built, bogs drained. In this way, he imposed order upon disorder, cosmos upon chaos. For Carlyle this triumph of work validates Frederick, who believed in work, as did his chronicler, and Carlyle describes Frederick's achievement in an "Epic of Reality" (*Works* 18: 235), an epic based on awareness of "Fact."

¹²The language echoes two of Frederick's favorite sayings, "*Ad astra per aspera*" and "*Ohne Hast, aber ohne Rast*."

Frederick is also the culmination of Carlyle's lifelong fascination with epic. He shapes his enormously complex narrative not only through an understanding of tragic and comic epic tradition, but also through a number of other literary modes, especially Shakespearean tragedy. In his essay "Baillie the Covenanter" (1842) he referred to "the drama of life . . . a thing of multifarious tragic and epic meanings, then as now." He spoke of this drama as "a many-voiced tragedy and epos, yet with broad-based comic and grotesque accompaniment" (*Historical Essays* 268). In *Frederick the Great* Carlyle used all these means in order to guide his readers through the morass and confusion inherent in Prussia's emergence as a power to reckon with in eighteenth-century Europe. Wolf, a scholar much admired by Carlyle, had proposed in *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795) that the Homeric epics were not the creation of one individual but a composite of ballads sung by different bards. Over time various "editors" had written down, joined together, and revised the disparate ballads into the epic poems attributed to the singular identity known as Homer. Carlyle happily adopted Wolf's theory. Editors and the idea of editors were always important to him. In early essays he invariably spoke of himself as an editor, and *Sartor* features considerable interplay between editor and protagonist.

Although Carlyle serves as *Frederick's* master of ceremonies, two *personae*, his fellow conspirators—the imaginatively conceived German pedants Sauerteig and Smelfungus—share editorial duties with him. Each member of this Odd Threesome has a different function. Sauerteig, whose name means "yeast" or "leaven," deals with "Ideal History, of the identification of history with imprisoned epic" (Peckham 208); Smelfungus, a sniffer-out of ancient documents, is a kind of dusty researcher, perhaps modeled upon Carlyle's amanuensis Joseph Neuberger whom he both valued and professed to scorn.¹³ Complementing Carlyle's authorial position, Sauerteig and Smelfungus create antiphonal effects as sardonic counter-voices. One sings the siren song of airy idealism, the other croaks the results of soundings in the treacherous shoals of Teutonic scholarship.

¹³ The name "Sauerteig" appears to be a traditional one in German for a comic pedant. Johann Gottfried Seume uses it in this way in the introduction to his *Spaziergang nach Syrakus im Jahre 1802*; see viii. On both figures, see Peckham's valuable discussion, 206–07, 212.

Creating such irascible, blunt-speaking personae allows Carlyle to navigate his way in-between (and dissociate himself from) their extreme perspectives. Sauerteig, for example, thinks “magnanimity and depth of insight will never come” to the young Frederick; he doubts his “heroic purity of heart and of eye,” and wonders whether this man destined to be king will constitute an “ideal” worth remembering (*Works* 13: 120). Carlyle no doubt wondered too, but could feign not to know. Likewise, he distanced himself amusingly from his “abstruse friend” Smelfungus. “Here,” he admits smilingly, “saved from my poor friend Smelfungus (nobody knows how much of him I suppress), is a brief jotting, in the form of rough *memoranda*, if it be permissible” (*Works* 14: 309; 19: 181).

If Sauerteig and Smelfungus serve as Carlyle’s editorial assistants, yet another character represents the chaotic “wagonloads of Books and Printed Records” (*Works* 12: 10) that supplied the details of Frederick’s life. For the authors of the hundreds of sources Carlyle waded through he adopted the collective name “*Gelehrte Dummkopf*,” “learned dumbbells,” or English “Dryasdust” (*Works* 12: 18). Though grateful for this necessary but tedious work, Carlyle often laments that “the Prussian Dryasdust” totally lacks synthesizing skills. Before him sits a “multitude of Anecdotes, still circulating among them in print and *vivâ voce*,” but Dryasdust can neither shape them nor give them life (*Works* 17: 305). Early on Carlyle explodes with indignation over the meandering ways of the multitude of Dryasdusts: “It will not do for me at any rate, this infinite Doghouse; not for me, ye Dryadusts, and omnipotent Dog-monsters and Mud-gods, whoever you are. One honourable thing I can do: take leave of you and your Dog-establishment. Enough!” (*Works* 12: 172) But Carlyle will not take leave of them. To impose order upon chaos, to give factual substance to his “Epic of Reality” he will need the facts that only Dryasdust has the patience to dig up.

Carlyle-as-narrator, in contrast to the pedants Dryasdust, Smelfungus, and Sauerteig, often presents himself as an affectionate, mischievous, and demanding companion and leader. Like Frederick himself, Carlyle plots arduous campaigns, upon which he marches his readers. In the first chapter of Book 11, he exclaims: “Yes, readers; a Journey indeed!” Carlyle goes on to warn them that large tracts and long distances must be covered

and that the journey will “go now too slow and again too fast” (*Works* 14: 38). Even the pedantic Smelfungus rises to the challenge. “Courage, reader,” he exhorts the reading troops, “on the above terms, let us march according to promise” (*Works* 14: 309). During the difficult year 1759, it is Carlyle who commands, “Forward again, brave reader, under such conditions as there are!” (*Works* 18: 5). Before a battle Carlyle puts himself in the place of those on whose land it will take place. He urges peasants and mothers “to run and hide” (*Works* 15: 343) and to conceal their horses, food, and belongings. Although he professes to be on the side of readers, Carlyle-as-narrator can also treat them cavalierly: “But can English readers consent to halt in this hot pinch of the Friedrich crisis; and read the briefest thing which is foreign to it? Alas, I fear they can;—and will insert the Note here” (*Works* 18: 49). The “briefest thing,” it turns out, is ten pages of small-print type describing the battle of Minden! In the *Iliad* Homer delayed the narrative more than seven books before recounting the great struggle on the plains of Troy, but Minden is not Troy and Carlyle knows it. Once clear of Minden, he slyly shifts the scene to Quebec before returning to the crisis at hand, all the while driving his readers onwards to the goal of understanding the epic reality of Frederick.

Throughout *Frederick* Carlyle draws upon western epic tradition. Homer serves as a main inspiration, as he did for *The French Revolution*, but *Frederick* also leans heavily upon Milton and Virgil—the latter, historic Frederick’s own preference.¹⁴ *Frederick* is like the *Iliad* in celebrating heroic valor, military discipline, and the melodic “sacred Poet” (*Works* 17: 304). It is also like the *Aeneid* in recounting how a great nation came about, in stressing the importance of husbandry—particularly in agriculture and commerce, and in the maintaining of an industrious peace force. As Homer and Virgil invoked the Muse, so Carlyle relies upon divine inspiration; like them, he summons up Rumor and Mercury. Frederick’s writings as well as Carlyle’s are filled with Homeric echoes. For example, the battle of Fontenoy was, in Frederick’s words, an “important victory on the Scamander” (*Works* 16: 116). Carlyle lets his

¹⁴In *Frederick* Carlyle recounts the king’s debate with Gellert regarding the merits of Homer and Virgil (7: 341). On Carlyle and the *Aeneid*, see *Two Reminiscences* 111.

characters reveal themselves through speech and deed; yet, like Virgil and Milton, he does not hesitate to obtrude himself into the narrative. His frequent mention of the “sacred Poet” refers both to Classical example and to Old Testament prophets. With regard to the latter, Carlyle keeps *Paradise Lost* ever before his readers. *Frederick*, like Milton’s epic, pits the universal True against the everlasting False and utilizes prophetic zeal to vindicate that truth and lead people toward a life “happier far” (*PL* 12: 587). Frederick, a genius, larger than life, Carlyle’s “original man,” however unlikeable he finds him to be, is the Homeric hero of war, of radical Achillean individualism as well as of crafty Ulyssean guile. He is also a self-sacrificing Virgilian hero, conscious like Aeneas of the future national good, aware of Teutonic national aspirations (as Carlyle was), aspirations beginning in the early 1850s and realized in and after 1870 with Bismarck’s unification of Germany. Frederick’s conduct also recalls Milton’s exhortation: “by small / Accomplishing great things, by things deem’d weak / Subverting worldly strong . . . ; suffering for Truth’s sake / Is fortitude to highest victory” (*PL* 12.566–70). Also like Milton, Carlyle lightens up such high moral seriousness with epic humor.

Comic Historian and Humorist

In *Frederick* Carlyle created an epic larded with epic-size humor. Inherent in Carlyle’s role as historian and critic is his humor. Recalling the comic extravagance of *Sartor*, the mock-epic passages of *The French Revolution*, and the sardonic wit of *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, the omnipresent humor in *Frederick* draws upon Carlyle’s literary history of laughter. Whether caused by his frustration before sober Prussian Dryasdusts or, more often, by his own highly developed sense of the comic, the wild flashes of humor in *Frederick* explode through the earth-rind of fact. Possibly the most entertaining of Carlyle’s major works, *Frederick* can best be seen as a huge comic epic in prose, akin in its extravagance of thought and language to Rabelais’s *Gargantua* (1534) and *Pantagruel* (1532).¹⁵ Endless, irresistible

¹⁵ Emerson recognized a similarity between Carlyle and Rabelais. He compared the humor of the *Latter-Day Pamphlets* to “writing Rabelais in 1850” (11 March 1854; Slater 497).

explosions of wit and humor, as zany and politically incorrect as Rabelais's and no less embracing of humanity, continually burst through, even undercut, Carlyle's moral earnestness. Emerson, impressed by volumes 1 and 2, termed *Frederick* "infinitely the wittiest book that was ever written" (Perry 282).¹⁶

Carlyle's varieties of humor in *Frederick* include "the Homeric style," a kind of "rough banter, which he calls 'chaffing'" (*Works* 16: 45). Neither French *politesse* nor "chivalrous epigram," such humor is direct, curt, blunt, sometimes cruel, often (Carlyle's own word) "vacant," implying by that word choice "stupid" or "inane." In *Frederick* Carlyle has two members of Frederick Wilhelm's "Tobacco-Parliament" and "Synod of Houyhymns [*sic*]," Fassmann and Gundling, insult each other. Friends greet their dispute "with hilarious, rather vacant, huge horse-laughter" (*Works* 13: 91). Carlyle wonders: "Was there ever seen such horseplay? Roaring laughter, huge, rude and somewhat vacant, as that of the Norse gods over their ale at Yule time;—as if the face of the Sphynx were to wrinkle itself in laughter; or the fabulous Houyhnmns [*sic*] themselves were there to mock in their peculiar fashion" (*Works* 13: 92). Near the end of the *Iliad*'s first book the assembled gods on Olympus, seeing Hephaestos limp along, laugh at him coldly and cruelly. Such a response can still make readers wince. The rough humor of *Frederick* echoes such epic revelry, whether Homer's or that of the Norse gods in the Icelandic epics. Others find in *Frederick* what Carlyle himself called "a Smollettian robustness—and at times, coarseness" (qtd. in Brooks xviii), or the influence of Sterne, which led Ruth apRoberts to declare the history "his most Shandean work" (16). In his blend of the comic and the grotesque, there is even a trace of Swift.

Everywhere the author's passionate wildness of humorous imagination vitalizes the narrative. After Frederick's stunning victory at Rossbach, the king set down "a short metrical Piece" that, "called by Editors the most profane, most indecent, most &c," celebrates "with irrepressible honest exultation" and "a royal ecstatic felicity" the enemy's arse. A modern cultural critic might interpret the choice of subject differently, but for Carlyle, Frederick's "immense suppressed insuppressible

¹⁶ An expanded version of the quotation (May[?] 1859) appears in Emerson's *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* 14: 273.

Haha," his tribute to "the rearward part of certain men," has "a kind of epic completeness and fulness of sincerity; and, at bottom"—Carlyle's pun, not mine—"the thing is nothing like so wicked as careless commentators have given out!" (*Works* 17: 281). The earlier Carlyle had shown himself sensitive to indelicacy. *Frederick's* ribald humor indicates that he may have overcome such qualms. In fact, Carlyle seems positively obsessed with posteriors. Elsewhere, he describes the "laggard Dutch, . . . a People apt to be heavy in the sternworks." In 1741 the Dutch were reluctant to ally themselves with the British, yet diplomatic maneuvering appears to succeed in bringing the two states together: "Pull long, pull strong, pull all together,—see, the heavy Dutch do stir; some four inches of daylight fairly visible below them: bear a hand, oh bear a hand!" But the effort, even with the reader's participation or urging, fails: "Pooh, the Dutch flap down again, as low as ever" (*Works* 15: 202–03). As he says elsewhere, "Thus time rolls on in its many-coloured manner, edacious and feracious" (*Works* 12: 194).

Chapter titles provide important evidence of Carlyle's comic intent. Mixing epic, tragedy, satire, and comedy, even farce, they are designed to draw attention and laughter. A brief sample demonstrates the range of his humor: "His Majesty slaughters 3,602 Head of Wild Swine" (*Works* 13: 139); "Baby Carlos gets his Apanage" (*Works* 13: 369); "At Versailles, the Most Christian Majesty changes his Shirt, and Belleisle is seen with Papers" (*Works* 15: 60); "Prince Karl, cut in two, tumbles home again double-quick" (*Works* 16: 172); and "Ex-Lover Poniatowski becomes King of Poland (7th September 1764) and is crowned without Loss of his Hair" (*Works* 19: 65). Carlyle also revels in setting off an individual's present inadequacy against mythic greatness: the ineffectual Louis XV, thinking himself a god who can sway the universe, is for Carlyle "nothing of a Cloud-Compeller" (*Works* 18: 7); likewise, the current Dauphiness is hardly a "chivalrous Bellona" (*Works* 17: 200). Such instances of human misjudgment, multiplied almost infinitely, give *Frederick* a grotesque, phantasmagorical character. Carlyle reinforces this impression with his endless name-play. Some names are historical, some his own coinage, and some are both, such as "Ludwig *Beardy*, Ludwig *Superbus*, Ludwig *Gibbosus* or Hunchback" (1: 181) and "Sigismund *Super-grammaticam*" (*Works* 12: 156). August

of Poland, nicknamed by contemporaries “the Strong,” is “the Physically Strong.” For Carlyle he is an irresistible target: “History must admit that he attains the maximum in several things. Maximum of physical strength. . . . Maximum of sumptuousness; really a polite creature; no man of his means so regardless of expense. Maximum of Bastards, Three-hundred and fifty-four of them; probably no mortal ever exceeded that quantity.” One day the merry monarch, ill of an infection, becomes “August the Dilapidated-Strong” (*Works* 14: 77). Informing his readers of this “[u]nhappy soul[’s]” death soon after, Carlyle asks, “who shall judge him?” (*Works* 14: 91).¹⁷

The Tragic Historian

In addition to the Homeric and humorous perspectives, Carlyle also ponders Frederick’s heroism from the vantage points of Aeschylean and Shakespearian tragedy. The King’s destiny was no less tragic than his life had been epic. Similar to the world-view of his creator, Frederick, engaging in battles much of his adult life, maintained a resigned pessimism. Words fail to render his melancholy, for he keeps his grim thoughts to himself. “A fixed darkness, as of Erebus, is grown habitual to him; but is strictly shut up, little of it shown to others, or even, in a sense, to himself” (*Works* 18: 88). Like Prometheus “chained on the Ocean-cliffs,” Frederick exists amidst an indifferent universe. “Prometheus and other Titans, now and then, have touched the soul of some Aeschylus, and drawn tones of melodious sympathy, far heard among mankind. But,” comments Carlyle, “with this new Titan it is not so” (*Works* 18: 215). To evoke the tragedy of the King’s family strife, he likewise draws upon Aeschylus. Frederick Wilhelm, angry with his wayward son, had ordered the execution of Frederick’s best friend, Lieutenant Katte. The story, Carlyle tells us, “has never yet been humanly set forth . . . and could never yet be responded to in austere *vox humana*, deep as a *De Profundis*, terrible as a Chorus of Aeschylus” (*Works* 13: 345). After only a “tragical Six Months of Czarship” Czar Peter of Russia, favorable to Frederick’s schemes, fell victim in 1761 to an assassin. “Had there been an Aeschylus, had there been a Shakespeare!” laments Carlyle, aware that only a dramatic genius of that august level could have rendered the

¹⁷ See also “The Prinzenraub” (1855), *Essays* 7: 159.

intense family *agon* that led to Peter's demise (*Works* 18: 425). Drawing upon Aeschylus and Shakespeare, Carlyle assumes the mantle of tragedian.

Of Frederick, Carlyle declares early in his history: "He is a King every inch of him, though without the trappings of a King" (*Works* 12: 1). He quotes from *King Lear*, the most epic and apocalyptic of Shakespeare's plays. The allusion crystallizes his epic, tragic purpose. In Act IV, scene 6, when the blinded Duke of Gloucester meets the mad unclothed king out on the heath, he ruminates, "The trick of that voice I do well remember," then asks, "Is't not the king?" Lear replies: "Ay, every inch a King. / When I do stare, see how the subject quakes." Lear, after uttering the most searing lines on social justice in the Shakespearean canon, tells Gloucester, "I will preach to thee." Edgar, Gloucester's son, has shrewdly characterized Lear's vitriolic words as "matter and impertinency mixed; reason in madness." Lear, known when king for dragon-like wrath in war and human relationships, now rages against hypocrisy. Shakespeare's scene combines epic and tragedy, comedy and satire. So too do many scenes in Carlyle's *Frederick*. The two Fredericks embody decidedly Lear-like qualities. Near the beginning of the third volume, Carlyle again invokes the scene on the heath. Regarding Frederick ascendancy, he notes, "old friends are somewhat astonished to find this friend of theirs a King every inch!" (*Works* 14: 299). These repeated allusions to *King Lear* serve as a talisman of what is to come. Like Shakespeare's beleaguered monarch, Frederick kept to the end his fiery, irascible temperament. No defeat for him was final: "Astonishing how he blazed out again, quite into his old pride and effulgence" (*Works* 19: 138).

Teutonic Destiny

Carlyle's *Frederick the Great*, among its many purposes, documents the fate of those who challenge inevitable Teutonic supremacy. Like other great nineteenth-century figures—Beethoven, Chateaubriand, Madame de Staël, Byron, and Hugo—Carlyle was both riveted and repelled by Napoleon. Although Carlyle in *Heroes* termed Napoleon "still our last Great Man!" (208), when he came to *Frederick* he viewed both the first and third Napoleon (Napoleon's nephew, Louis

Napoleon) as forces in opposition to the Prussia that Frederick had formed and later to the creation of a gradually unifying Germany. Carlyle takes up Napoleon in the Proem and from time to time brings him in throughout Frederick as a kind of doppelgänger to the Prussian king. During the years Carlyle worked on Frederick the Napoleonic legend glorifying his being, rule, and battles held potent sway over many in Europe, America, and even once-hostile Britain. But set against the reality of Frederick's achievement, the legend for Carlyle is but gaseous matter mounting aloft. Thus compared to Frederick's victories at Rossbach or Leuthen, Napoleon's at Austerlitz and Wagram mean little. Whereas Napoleon to win a battle needed huge armies and massive munitions, Frederick "by husbanding and wisely expending his men and gunpowder, defended little Prussia against all Europe" (*Works* 12: 7). According to Carlyle, that Frederick achieved so much with so little made Napoleon feel "astonishment and shame"; so bedeviled was he by Frederick's fame that after the French victory at Jena he "tore down the first Monument of Rossbach . . . and sent it off in carts for Paris" (*Works* 17: 281).

After 1848 Carlyle had another Napoleon on his mind. The composition of the first pages of *Frederick* coincides almost exactly with Louis Napoleon's vertiginous rise to power. On 3 December 1851, the miniscule Gaul assumed the presidency for a constitutional ten years. But in November 1852, he abruptly declared himself emperor. The news seems to have stimulated Carlyle to new vigor vis-à-vis "poor Fritz" (*CL* 27: 374, 23 Dec. 1852). Frederick, "the new Phoebus Apollo risen in his wrath," stood as a "warning [to] all Pythons [of] what they get by meddling with the Sungod!" (*Works* 17: 148). In the reign of Louis XV, the sumptuously attired French marshal Belleisle pompously "intends to make a new French thing of Germany" and cut up this "Province of France" into four parts (*Works* 15: 66, 165). Similarly, Napoleon III viewed French domination of Europe as natural. During the nearly thirteen years Carlyle worked on *Frederick*, Napoleon III tried to reassert the hegemony that France had exerted upon Europe first in Belleisle's time and later in the reign of Napoleon I. Yet Belleisle's scheme for a divided Germany failed because it was "contrary to the Laws of Fact" (4: 165). Carlyle believed that the plans for French domination

devised by the “Copper Captain” (Froude, *Life in London* 2: 340) would be thwarted for the same reason. Throughout the successive volumes of *Frederick*, detestation of France remains Carlyle’s ruling passion. For example, the War of the Austrian Succession came about because of the “baseless vanities of the French Court and Nation” (*Works* 15: 145). Five years after *Frederick*’s completion in 1865, Napoleon III’s Second Empire abruptly collapsed in defeat against German forces at Sedan. Subsequently, much of France was occupied. Carlyle wrote to Emerson, “Did you ever hear of such a thing as this suicidal Finis of the French ‘Copper Captaincy’; gratuitous attack on Germany, and *do* Blowing-up of Paris by its own hand! An event [the Commune] with meanings unspeakable—deep as the *Abyss*.— —” (4 June 1871; Slater 581).

The elevation of Germany in Carlyle’s worldview was not a recent development. In *The French Revolution* Carlyle had distinguished between “ready Gaelic fire” and “Teutonic anthracite.” Individuals composed of “Teutonic anthracite” included “Luthers, Leibnitzes, Shakespeares.” Though difficult to ignite and slower burning, they produced a more intense fire. Carlyle here responded positively to both French and German character. “How happy is our Europe that has both kinds!” he concluded (*FR*, *Works* 4: 297–98). But Louis Napoleon chilled and then extinguished Carlyle’s recognition of French achievement. By the time of *Frederick*, Carlyle viewed France in opposition to Anglo-German unity. The English and German character embodied a “requisite unconscious substructure of taciturn inexpugnability, with depths of potential rage almost unquenchable” (*Works* 4: 429). Such a “solid placid people” (*Works* 3: 378) instinctively wish to do the right thing. Carlyle never ceased to believe in a pan-Germanic group of peoples—with the English a major component—working together for Europe’s and mankind’s good. During the crucial decades between 1830 and 1870, Hans Kohn contends, Western Europe “grew more liberal and the belief in the final triumph of liberalism all over Europe became widespread” (126). But no more than in Carlyle’s mind did liberal ideas take hold in a Germany increasingly dominated by Prussia. In fact, Prussian leaders, Bismarck most notably, vehemently rejected them. Instead, thanks in part to Carlyle’s *Frederick*, the English came to admit the equivalence of German and Prussian destiny, or as Kohn phrases it, came to regard

“the Prussian dynasty of the Hohenzollern” as “the legitimate successor of the Hohenstaufen” (128).

Frederick reflects Carlyle’s life-long missionary advocacy of German culture, philosophy, literature, and history. Fascinated by Germany’s rise, Carlyle saw Frederick as a key figure—perhaps *the* key figure—in shaping modern European history. In the company of Schiller, Goethe, and now Bismarck, Frederick—father of his country, *praeceptor Germaniae*—loomed largest in Carlyle’s Teutonic Valhalla. Frederick gave Germans a sense of their history, of their essential unity; his deeds stimulated the newly-reborn German literature of late Enlightenment and early Romantic Germany. Carlyle in his “Early German Literature” (1831) had referred to Germany as “our old Saxon Fatherland,” one “still curiously like our own” (*Works* 27: 329). and so Germany became for him, a country of the mind, one purged of diurnal imperfections. In his 1838 *Lectures on the History of Literature* he had spoken of the Germans of old as “a race of men designed for great things” and wondered if “perhaps even the highest of their destiny is not as yet attained” (*Lectures* 125). Idealized by Carlyle, the Germans were a people ready to fulfill their destiny, a people to watch. Sufficiently stirred, they might attain further greatness. The German people were also intimately related to the English. Germany’s concerns were England’s. Writing *Frederick* had a educative purpose. A classical education taught the English of his day of Philippi and Arbela “but of Dettingen and Fontenoy,” asks Carlyle, “where is the living Englishman that has the least notion, or seeks for any?” (*Works* 15: 143). In fact, many Britons still regarded Frederick as a “Robber and villain” (*Works* 12: 12).

In *Frederick the Great* Carlyle sought to change “the staple English” (*Works* 16: 339) idea of his subject by making his compatriots aware of the Prussia out of which the great king had emerged. His history marks the nearly final stage in Carlyle’s lifelong missionary purpose as advocate for German literature and culture. Carlyle saw, and taught others to see, Prussia as the legitimate heir of and creator of a united “Germany.” Under Bismarck’s leadership, the German nation now stood deservedly ready to take a prominent place in the world. In a November 1870 letter to *The Times*, Carlyle urged England to sympathize not with France but with Prussia. Germany’s triumph in 1870,

a triumph Carlyle viewed as right and necessary, sanctified its future as Europe's leader. Because of the French Revolution, "the *first* half of the battle" had been won, "but the farther stage of it . . . must be under better presidency than that of France." In Carlyle's view, "the German race, not the Gaelic, are now to be protagonist in that immense world-drama; and from them I expect better issues" (*Works* 30: 56–57). The unification of Germany—brought about by Bismarck with a "slow calmness," *ohne Hast aber ohne Rast*—delighted the author of *Frederick* (*Works* 30: 58). The prospect pleased other English historians as well, including Freeman and Stubbs, who shared Carlyle's pan-Germanic perspective and his view of England's role as a Teutonic nation.

In the end as in the beginning, for Carlyle, Germany represented cosmos, France chaos. He reproached Ruskin in July 1874 for not believing as he did: "I think and have long thought that you are dreadfully in error as to the German people and the genius of Germany; which (including England & its Shakespeares, wh. are radically German), I place far above the genius and characteristics of any other people ancient or modern" (Cate 204). By writing *Frederick* Carlyle believed that he had enlightened his countrymen about German history. The English must now jettison their misguided, ignorant perception of Germans and accept Germany as a model and a desirable future partner. His life nearing its close, Frederick has the "one sure consolation . . . of standing steadfast to his work, whatever the mood and posture be" (*Works* 19: 176). Such language about consolation as steadfast hard work could come straight out of Carlyle's letters of the 1860s. Carlyle's creativity in *Frederick*, personally life-assessing, is the no-holds barred creativity of the unillusioned old. Like Frederick, Carlyle thought himself an "old snuffy lion on the watch" (*Works* 12: 2). As the historian approached Frederick in old age, the gap between author and subject narrowed and Carlyle became more sympathetic towards Frederick. His own life seemingly nearing its end, Carlyle recalled to Emerson the "12 years in a continuous wrestle with the nightmares and the subterranean hydras" that his epic history had cost him (27 January 1867; Slater 551). Writing *Frederick* had been a Herculean combat, one that had wearied Carlyle, yet one in which he had revelled.

This sense of constant struggle, as well as Jane Welsh Carlyle's increasing ill-health in the 1860s, had saddened and perhaps deepened Carlyle. His achievement remains an extraordinary one. Moved by the example of the Prussian king's endurance, Carlyle had extended his sympathy to a fellow striver who like himself had wrestled, lonely and unaided, to impose his vision on the world.

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