

1982

The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire

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Dillon-Smith, David, The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Department of History, University of Wollongong, 1982.
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THE HISTORIAN AS MORALIST: A STUDY OF EDWARD GIBBON
AND *THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE*

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

DAVID DILLON-SMITH, M.A., Dip. Ed.

Department of History

1982

V O L U M E

O N E

This thesis is my own work.

David Dillon-Smith.....

David Dillon-Smith

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my thanks to all who have helped me in this thesis: to Associate-Professor Kiernan who chose the topic and was my supervisor till late in 1979 and who made numerous corrections to my drafts; to Professor Duncan who enabled me to continue after Professor Kiernan's departure, and to Associate-Professor Hagan for his help since Professor Duncan's long illness. Dr. Piggin read an early draft of certain chapters and gave me needed encouragement and Dr. Marengo helped with some work in Italian. Others outside this university are Dr. Peter Spartalis, who read through a draft of the thesis and gave his comments, and Mr. Gordon Young, who helped me with his penetrating criticisms and positive suggestions.

I acknowledge the assistance of the University of Wollongong, especially for allowing me repeated visits to libraries and rare book collections in Sydney and Canberra and for granting me study leave, so that I was able, between work in linguistics and E.S.L., to make use of historical material in the British Museum, including the Gibbon Papers in the Manuscript Room.

I owe sincere thanks to those who have typed and made countless corrections to my work: Mrs. Margaret Massey, Mrs. Myrtle Treloar, Miss Angela Chan and Mrs. Lynn Hutton, whose careful labours are greatly appreciated. As the burden of proof-reading fell on me, I have only myself to thank and blame and must therefore apologize for any errors which remain. I need not apologize, however, for adhering to Gibbon's sometimes odd spellings, especially in French and his rare sprinkling of accents, faithfully transcribed by his editors and rivalled by those of Suzanne Curchod. As he chose to stick with 'the famous though improper' spelling 'Mahomet', I have followed his usage in this and in names like 'Liutprand' which appears in my bibliography, however, as 'Liudprand'.

ABBREVIATIONS

The thesis contains very few abbreviations, at least in the form of initials, and those few are fairly generally accepted:

BM	The British Museum, now The British Library
<u>DF</u>	<u>The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.</u>
<u>JA</u>	<u>Gibbon's Journal to January 28th, 1763 ; My Journal, I, II, & III and Ephemerides, ed. D.M.Low. London, 1929.</u>
<u>JB</u>	<u>Le Journal de Gibbon à Lausanne, 17 Août 1763 - 19 Avril 1764, ed. G.A.Bonnard. Lausanne, 1945.</u>
<u>JC</u>	<u>Gibbon's Journal from Geneva to Rome : His Journal from 20 April to 2 October 1764, ed. G.A.Bonnard. London, 1961.</u>
<u>MW</u>	<u>The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq. Published by Lord Sheffield, 2nd ed. London, 1814.</u>
OED	<u>The Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford, Clarendon, 1933, 1961.</u>

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a significant aspect of Gibbon's thought and outlook and its effect on his major work. Part I traces the development of moral attitudes in the man and their expression in his early and exploratory writings. The first and second chapters trace this development through his reaction to Oxford, his apprenticeship in Lausanne and his return to England, as the moral foundations were laid and tested till the aspiring historian was ready to turn his mind to the choice of a satisfying subject. Chapter three pauses to survey the principles he explored and tentatively set down in his first publication and notes their significance for the emerging historian. Chapter four considers his quest for a worthy subject and suggests that the first topics were rejected as unsatisfactory, primarily on moral grounds. The experience in Rome and its importance are re-examined and attention is drawn to the emphasis on moral values in certain writings undertaken as he approached his chosen subject.

Part II looks first, in chapter five, at the moral categories underlying The Decline and Fall and, in the following chapter, at their application in Gibbon's approach to character and the historian's responsibility to truth, to his public and to posterity for the faithfulness of his portraits of the figures of history. Some of these persons are seen as uniquely appropriate to Gibbon's purpose and the moral values he wished his History to exemplify. Chapter seven explores the moral emphases seen in his discussion of the causes of decline and in particular proposes that the twin factors of barbarism and religion are presented in The Decline and Fall as primarily moral rather than racial or religious

categories. The question as to how far the philosophic historian and moralist does justice to religion and to his avowed ideal of strict impartiality is finally considered. Chapter eight examines a major theme of the work as it looks at Gibbon the humanist moralising on the strange and melancholy 'vicissitudes of fortune', the transitoriness of the life of man, his works and his empires, and on the value of history as the means of transcending this impermanence, this inevitable change and decay. Chapter nine focuses on the historian's use of language as an appropriate vehicle for his moral reading of history, and moves from the broader aspects of style, through the units of composition, to the choice of words, in order to show how Gibbon forged a suitable instrument for his purpose. The final chapter discusses the ambiguity of the historian's reputation in former times and particularly his standing as a moralist in view of the 'indecencies' and 'improprieties' found in his work by his contemporaries and later critics. The question of how far this affects his moral stature is considered and the relative insignificance of this element and the lasting appreciation of The Decline and Fall, not only on literary and historical grounds, but also for its positive moral value, is reaffirmed. The individual chapter outlines indicate more clearly and in greater detail the thread of the presentation and the argument throughout the thesis.

INTRODUCTION

Historians of the stature of Gibbon continue to attract critical attention and numerous aspects of their work become the subject of separate studies. So many facets of the man and his History have been examined that there might seem little left to say. But strangely for a writer whose moral comments and outlook have been so frequently referred to, this particular aspect at least seems to have escaped closer and more detailed examination. Yet when we approach his work from this point of view we find a rich vein to be explored. The references to the moral view of history amongst eighteenth-century writers, and of Gibbon in particular, though by now a commonplace, usually consist of no more than a few passing remarks or a short section of a chapter.

If this is so then the present study is warranted for Gibbon is one of those writers who seem to mark a watershed in the practice of history. Hence we have a set of studies of his problem after two hundred years presented by Lynn White and his collaborators or more recently, in a symposium on The Age of Spirituality¹ Arnaldo Momigliano's contribution entitled quite simply, 'After Gibbon's Decline and Fall', almost as if a sort of B.C.-A.D. division dates from that work. For us, then, who live in the 'after Gibbon' period, it seems that The Decline and Fall like other peaks, both in historical writing and in the real world, challenge us to explore them simply because they are there.

1. ed. Kurt Weitzmann. Princeton U.P., 1980.

My own fields of study, apart from an early piece of research on Pacific history, have been the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century, both the English language in those periods and various historical questions. My research for the present thesis began by bringing these two together in an investigation of eighteenth-century attitudes to the Middle Ages, particularly on the part of historians: 'History and the Gothic past in eighteenth-century England and France'; then it turned in another direction to consider the use made of history by some of the notable religious writers and apologists of the day, like Prideaux, Lardner, Jortin, MacKnight and others with whom Gibbon was familiar and whose works he acknowledged in his notes.¹ Eventually my research returned to the central and dominant figure, acknowledged by Trevor-Roper as still 'greatest of historians', for I found there was one important aspect of the man and his masterpiece largely unexplored: Gibbon as moralist and the moral categories and emphases of The Decline and Fall, which has more than once been considered as a historical Paradise Lost.

1. Also Archibald Maclaine whose standard English translation of Gibbon's important source, Mosheim's Ecclesiastical History is in the Bentick Street catalogue of his library.

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Dillon-Smith, David, The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Department of History, University of Wollongong, 1982. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/1426>

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CHAPTER TWO

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND MORAL GROWTH

Personal relationships began to play an important part in Gibbon's life during his first period in Lausanne. Two instances are introduced into the Memoirs with the avowed intention of showing that not only his intellect but also his feelings had been stirred at that time. More important still, the objects of these attachments were most worthy of a young man's enthusiasm. 'I should be ashamed if the warm season of youth had passed away without any sense of friendship or love: and in the choice of their objects, I may applaud the discernment of my head or heart.'¹ One of these persons was Georges Deyverdun, his closest companion, whom he called 'a Gentleman of high honour'; the other, Suzanne Curchod, his only love, a young lady 'adorned with science and virtue.' Both friendships were for life; in the one case till Deyverdun's death, in the other till Gibbon's.

The model of friendship based on these two examples suggests that superficiality is to be avoided in favour of depth and real sympathy of understanding. Eventually a concept of friendship replaced that of marriage in Gibbon's personal outlook, but it was an enriching and liberating experience as he enjoyed a world of both male and female friends. Friendship he saw to be founded on emotional attachments as well as on common interests and intellectual compatability. An examination of the two examples presented by Gibbon in his Memoirs, is important for an appreciation of the deepening of his spiritual

1. Memoirs, 'C' version, Bonnard, App. I, p. 208. This part of the account is not incorporated into the text as published by Sheffield or Bonnard, though written probably a little later than the 'B' sketch used by them.

nature and his consequent growth in moral stature. Through it all can be seen a growing devotion to the idea of personal freedom, a theme which would grip the conscience of the historian of Rome. Gibbon was well aware that in these years of exile he might have drawn towards some of the frivolous and empty young Englishmen travelling in Switzerland or the sizeable colony of people of fashion in Lausanne.¹ He was saved both by the constraints of his situation and later by his growing moral discernment. He wanted the reader to see that his closest associations were formed with those who would uplift rather than degrade, and the recollection of this fact, though introduced into the Memoirs for this purpose, nevertheless filled him with honest pride.

Deyverdun, a member of one of the best families in Lausanne, was described by Gibbon as 'of an amiable temper and excellent understanding' and possessing 'an elegant taste.'² He became not only Gibbon's most intimate companion over many years, but also his literary collaborator and the translator of essential sources for his Swiss History. This literary companionship proved valuable to young Gibbon as he pursued his formidable plan of study which covered a wide field of 'historical and critical erudition'. Like himself, Deyverdun also made extracts of every book and often developed these into essays. Gibbon would immediately share with his friend all his own ideas and compositions, so that, as he says, 'I enjoyed the benefits of a free conversation on the topics of our common studies.'³

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1. See, e.g. above, p. 29 and n. 1.
 2. Combining the accounts of 'B' and 'C' sketches (Memoirs, pp. 76 and 208).
 3. ibid., p. 76.

Back in England at the end of the fruitful period in Lausanne, Gibbon missed this valued association. On receiving a letter from his friend, he confided to his Journal, 'D'Eyverdun from his character and way of thinking is the only friend I ever had who deserved that name.'¹ He was indeed Gibbon's alter ego. 'Every idea, every sentiment was poured into each other's bosom: and our schemes of ambition or retirement always terminated in the prospect of our final and inseparable union.'² So Gibbon wrote after this happy prospect had been shattered by his friend's untimely death in 1789.³ But it reflects exactly his feelings at twenty-six as he finished an eight-page letter to Deyverdun: 'it is a kind of pleasure I have not had a great while, that of pouring out my whole soul to a real friend.'⁴ On Deyverdun's death, his large house, 'La Grotte', passed to Gibbon for his own use. There, in the garden so tastefully laid out by his late friend, and commanding a boundless view across the meadows and lake to the breathtaking mountains of Savoy, Gibbon faced the painful prospect that in his declining years he would feel himself 'alone in Paradise.'⁵ It was under the guidance of Deyverdun, a keen gardener, that Gibbon, 'whose considerable eye for landscape had nevertheless seldom seen the trees for the woods,' began, as he confessed, to 'dwell with pleasure on the shape and colour of the leaves, the various hues of the blossoms, and the successive progress of vegetation.'⁶ This

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1. JA, entry for 10 June, 1762.
 2. Memoirs, 'C' sketch, App. I, p. 208.
 3. This 'C' sketch was probably written in 1790. (See Bonnard's Introduction, xvi.)
 4. JA, 9 July, 1762.
 5. Memoirs, p. 184.
 6. D.M. Low., Edward Gibbon, p. 303; cf. Memoirs, p. 177, point 3. One tends to think of Wordsworth's debt to his sister Dorothy, 'She gave me eyes, she gave me ears...' ('The Sparrow's Nest'.)

deep relationship, which began and ended in Lausanne, contributed greatly to the enrichment of the historian's life and literary career.¹ It gives a valuable insight into the man behind the book, one who has often been accused of lacking warmth and deep feeling, of being all head and no heart.

Almost as if in answer to such a suggestion, Gibbon confessed to Suzanne Curchod about a year after their first meeting, 'L'amour de l'Etude faisoit ma seule passion jusqu'au tems où vous m'avez fait sentir que le Coeur avoit ses besoins aussi bien que l'Esprit.'² While admitting, as he presented his apologia to the public, some fear of ridicule from the introduction of this 'delicate subject', he still retained a certain pride that he was 'once capable of feeling such a pure and exalted sentiment.'³ Yet the affair had remained a somewhat ambiguous episode as far as the character and behaviour of the man are concerned. His biographers arrive at very different judgements because the existing materials allow different and even contradictory interpretations. Michael Joyce, for instance, speaks of Gibbon as 'an admirable friend' to either a woman or a man, though 'as a lover he was inglorious and even shabby.'⁴ R.N. Parkinson's more generous

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1. Low says, 'Deyverdun is a shadowy although constant figure in Gibbon's life. Only in the letter (at the end of Gibbon's political career) is his voice heard with any clearness...the voice of an eager yet prudent friend full of understanding and solicitude.' (*op.cit.*, p. 295). It was at that time he made available to Gibbon an ample part of the large house he had inherited.
 2. *Letters*, ed. Norton, No. 20, 9/2/58, I, 91.
 3. *Memoirs*, p. 84.
 4. *Edward Gibbon*. London, 1953, pp. 32-3; 53-4.

estimate still admits that with Gibbon 'duty to a parent counted for more than passion.'¹ Both contrast with the very sympathetic and understanding views of earlier biographers like D.M. Low² or Cotter Morrison.³

Faced with this conflict of interpretations, we are obliged to reopen the question. The friendship with Deyverdun presents us with no real problems; the affaire Curchod demands a much closer analysis in our study of Gibbon's moral development. The questions we must ask are these: did Gibbon sincerely love her? did she return his love? why did he give her up? and how did the affair affect his view of women and his relations with them?

There is no reason to doubt genuine affection for Suzanne. 'I saw and loved' in the Memoirs⁴ echoes the brief Journal entry for June 1757, 'I saw Mademoiselle Curchod, omnia vincit amor et nos cedamus amori,⁵ which in turn agrees both with his letters and with the stories that arose in Lausanne about his infatuation.⁶ 'He fell in love seriously, completely, and honourably', says Low,⁷ and he began to picture his future life with Suzanne. Nor need we

1. Edward Gibbon. N.Y., 1973, p. 14.
2. op.cit., chapt. 6, especially pp. 80-82; 90-91.
3. Gibbon, pp. 30; 53. Similarly J.M. Robertson's Gibbon. London, 1925, chap. II, 'An Episode' (pp. 19ff.)
4. p. 85 ('The report of such a prodigy awakened my curiosity; I saw and loved. I found her learned with pedantry, lively in conversation, pure in sentiment, and elegant in manners.')
5. JA, p. 6.
6. See, e.g. Low, op.cit., pp. 76-7 and Letters, No. 15, 19/10/57 I, 68-71.
7. JA, Introd. lxiv.

doubt her tender feelings for him, if we accept her letters as the expression of her heart: 'Vous etes le seul homme pour qui j'aye versé les larmes, le seul dont la perte m'ait arraché des sanglots...'.¹ It is only when we ask the third question, 'Why then did Gibbon give her up?', that the answers differ and hence the verdict on his behaviour.

The third person in the story is Gibbon's father. His expectations for his son did not include either continued absence from his native land or his marriage to a foreigner, however accomplished and attractive. His prejudice, as the son saw it, is shown in his ultimatum, 'Epousez votre Etrangere, (vous) etes independent, mais souvenez vous avant de le faire que voue etes fils et Citoyen.'² This 'independence' meant in fact something like a mere 300 pounds a year, with all the consequences for a young gentleman's way of life. But Gibbon detected also a note of 'prudence' in his father's suggestion that life in England in the circle to which he was accustomed would probably not suit Mlle. Curchod and that youthful infatuation has to face up to the hard realities of life.³

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1. Letters, No. 27a, 7/9/58, I, 107; cf. her appeal to him on his return to Lausanne (45a, 30/5/63, I, 145): 'je vous demande a genoux de dissuader un coeur insensé; signez l'aveu complet de votre indifférence, et mon âme s'arrangera à son état.'
 2. No. 27, 24/8/58, I, 106, where Gibbon conveys to Suzanne his father's reply. (The singularity of Gibbon's spelling and accentuation is noted by editors of his French writing. Suzanne's is perhaps just as erratic.)
 3. No. 34, 25/2/58, I, 121. 'Mademoiselle Curchod trouveroit peu de douceurs en Angleterre", and, he adds, 'Elle se serviroit de son ascendant pour vous engager à vous expatrier.'

We have the correspondence which gives the views of the three principal parties in the affair;¹ and we have the final ironic touch of Gibbon's comment written long after the feelings of youth had cooled, that in response to 'the prejudice or prudence of a parent, I sighed as a lover; I obeyed as a son.'²

The more we study the case, however, the more likely it seems that any intended irony there may be in this statement, lies rather in the first part than in the second. 'The prejudice or prudence of a parent'; it is one of those ironic alternatives which the historian continually offers his reader in The Decline and Fall.³ And is the 'prudence' comparable to that of his much admired Fielding, in whose language of irony such a term, though superficially complimentary, is gradually emptied of all esteem?⁴ Long before, in a P.S. to one of his letters to Suzanne, Gibbon had questioned the 'prudence' of continuing their correspondence. 'Prudence', replied Suzanne, seizing on the word, 'ah! quelle étrange prudence;' then repeating it in a tone of reproach a little further on, 'ma fierté, votre prudence...'.⁵

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1. See Miss Norton's Appendix II, vol. I, 391-401 for an acute examination of the letters and the sentiments expressed or implied. She lists 23 letters in a table of correspondence, of which 18 appear in her edition, and also gives probable dates for some of Suzanne's letters undated in Low's collection of 12 as App. I to Gibbon's Journal.
 2. Memoirs, 'C' sketch, Bonnard, 85, n. 7 (printed in Sheffield's text, MW, I, 107.)
 3. See below chapter IX, pp.
 4. See, e.g. R. Alter, Fielding and the Nature of the Novel (Harvard, 1968), especially chap. V, 'The Uses of Style'. Alter draws attention to Fielding's development of 'strategies to call the received usage into question', the most sustained instance being the concept of 'prudence' in Tom Jones. The 'prudent' people in the novel, as Gibbon would have known, are the least desirable. See also G.W. Hatfield, Henry Fielding and the Language of Irony University of Chicago Press, 1968, chap. V, 'The Serpent and the Dove: Prudence in Tom Jones'.
 5. Nos. 34, 23/2/59 and 34a (c. end April 1759?), I, 122-3.

'I sighed as a lover: I obeyed as a son'. It is, like so many of Gibbon's carefully considered phrases, very quotable and every biographer has quoted it. But what does it tell us of the man? Our answer depends on how we read it in the context of the affairs. Michael Joyce sees 'the well turned frigidity' of this famous sentence anticipated in 'the careful phrases' of Gibbon's final, decisive letter to Suzanne, in which it is just as 'hard to detect the least warmth or feeling.'¹ Low, with more penetration, points out that while the whole correspondence may strike a modern lover with its apparent 'lack of intimacy on both sides', this does not indicate the absence of deep feeling underneath.² Per Fuglum, in his study of the historian's thought, does not accept the celebrated remark at its face value and says we must look elsewhere for the truth. 'Gibbon', he suggests, 'gave up Suzanne Curchod because he loved his independence, his free, quite way of life and above all his books.'³ Put like this, it is hard to deny. It agrees so well with the manner of life into which he eventually settled when his father's death gave him the elegant sufficiency he needed to enjoy his independence. It agrees also with his comment in later years: 'A matrimonial alliance has ever been the object of my terror rather than my wishes.' Nor could single life have any sense of emptiness 'for a man whose hours were insufficient for the inexhaustible pleasures of study.'⁴ We may therefore think that after a brief and disturbing interlude of the heart, Gibbon returned with relief to the calmer, more predictable pleasures of study and of the mind.

1. op.cit., p. 32.

2. op.cit., p. 90. ('The feeling is undoubted, but the approach sometimes makes one imagine that the letters were exchanged by sympathetic attorneys to the Court of Love rather than by the principals.')

3. Edward Gibbon. His View of Life and Conception of History. Oslo & Oxford, 1953, p. 48.

4. Memoirs, p. 140. Gibbon is referring to the year 1770 and his literary work in England at that time.

All this is true enough; it is in fact obvious after the event. But it refers us to the consequence rather than to the reason for Gibbon's action in the circumstances. It is not the whole truth or even the most important part of it. It leaves no room for the other side of Gibbon's character, that of the moralist who was aware of the voice of duty in this unhappy situation. To simply maintain as Jordan does,¹ that Gibbon hated his father will not do. It is much more accurate to say with Low, a very perceptive biographer, that 'in spite of divergence of tastes, Gibbon got on well with his father.'² He may have resented the paternal management of his life, whether it involved a love affair, taking a commission in the Hampshire Militia, or a government post. He was keenly aware of his father's domineering and incompetence.³ Yet he was still bound to him by ties not only of financial dependence, but also of what he saw as 'filial piety'. His letters are evidence of this. They show a concern to please, a solicitude for his father's health, even a delight at the prospect of being with him again at Buriton, and in one letter, written admittedly when some misgivings might have prompted a soft answer, he four times addressed him as 'mon très Cher Pere', concluding, 'et faites moi la justice de moi croire avec une tendresse et un respect sans bornes.'⁴ Gibbon was not given to dissimulation.

1. Bowerstock, op.cit., pp. 8, 10.

2. op.cit., p. 92.

3. See e.g. Gibbon's agitated letters regarding his father's mismanagement of the property and the burden which fell on him after his father's death, Nos. 51, 52, 62, 87-9; and an unbroken series of appeals in Nos. 92-105. In the Militia too, his father was 'neither conscientious nor competent', see Low's Introduction to JA, p. xvi.

4. No. 16, 26/10/57, I, 74. See also No. 32, 30/12/58, I, 116: 'Your illness really alarmed me...If you had not assured me that you was so much better, I would have set out immediately for Beriton.' (cf. No. 23, 29/3/58; I, 102.)

More than once he stated that what he did not feel he would not feign. He said as much in a letter to his father where he was unable to conceal from him the whole scheme he had in mind: 'I abhor the least appearance of art.'¹ In the same letter he also wrote, 'If my letter displeases you, impute it Dear Sir only to yourself. You have not treated me like a son but like a friend. Can you be surprised that I should communicate to a friend all my thoughts and all my desires.' If this is not the language of art, then it expresses attachment and deference. When he foresaw that his proposal to settle in Switzerland with Suzanne would not be well received by his father, the excuse was that 'il choquera également la tendresse et l'ambition', tenderness and ambition that is for the son.² His father's letter is 'si tendre si affectionnée'. Even in reporting his father's unyielding opposition to their ~~mar~~riage, he wrote of him reproachfully but still with respect, asserting that he had his son's happiness in mind. Certainly the father played on his son's attachment and submission. After his ultimatum, 'Marry your foreigner...', he added a self-pitying appeal, 'Il s'endit ensuite sur la cruauté de l'abandonner et se mettre avant son tems dans le tombeau, sur la lâcheté qu'il y auroit de fouler aux pieds ce que je devois à ma patrie'.³

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1. No. 34, Summer 1760, I, 126; cf. No. 20 to Suzanne, 9/2/58, I, 90: 'Je n'y ai point mis d'art...il n'est pas de mon Caractere.' Cf. also the celebrated sentence (Memoirs, p. 34), 'My temper is not very susceptible of enthusiasm, and the enthusiasm which I do not feel I have ever scorned to affect.'
 2. No. 20, 9/2/58, I, 91.
 3. Letters, No. 27, 24/8/58, I, 106.

It was with this appeal ringing in his ears that the young man went to his room, weighed up the issues for two hours, and returned, as he said, to tell his father that he was ready to sacrifice to him all his life's happiness. True, even after his father's last word on the matter six months later, 'Prenez votre parti et tachez d'en perdre le souvenir, car rien ne pourra me faire consentir à cette alliance',¹ young Gibbon still had his doubts. Writing in this turmoil, 'agité, déchiré tour à tour par des mouvemens contraires', he admitted to Suzanne, 'Il est des momens, Mademoiselle, où ce refus me fait croire que je ne lui dois plus, et que libre de tout devoir je puis tacher chercher mon bonheur quoiqu'il en coûte ou à lui ou à moi'. But, he added, 'ces momens sont peu nombreux et peu longs.'² Could they not, she had suggested, marry but with Gibbon remaining in England and visiting her for three months each year? Such an arrangement need last only as long as her father lived and would thus not mean giving up all hope.³ 'Mais quelle espérance?' was Gibbon's reply. 'Celle de la mort d'un Père.'⁴

As we read the brief reference in the Memoirs and the more detailed documentation of the affair in the letters, it strikes us that Gibbon's approach is self-consciously paradigmatic; morality must come first. And for the moralist, faced with a clash between passion and duty,

1. ibid., No. 34, 23/2/59, I, 119, 121.

2. ibid., I, 121.

3. See letter 20a, Feb. 1758, I, 92-3, for reference to her 'project'; and in particular, 93, n.2.

4. ibid., I, 121.

duty must carry the day. Gibbon does not present himself as a hero, yet perhaps he felt something of the old Roman virtue in his stoical acceptance of his duty to his father and his fatherland. 'I yielded to my fate', he afterwards wrote, as he recalled this submission.¹

Where Gibbon's mistake lay, it has been suggested, was that having made his decision on the basis of duty, he seemed to have still left Suzanne some grounds for hope that their love would continue. 'Son erreur...était de laisser à Mlle Curchod qu'il l'aimait toujours et qu'il ne faissait que sacrifier son amour à son devoir.'² However this may be, a careful reading of the lovers' correspondence in the context of the letters Gibbon was then writing to his father, leads to the conclusion that the memorable sentence in the Memoirs summing up the situation, describes the situation as it really was. Both the lover's sighs and the son's obedience or resignation are in those letters if we are willing to accept them as evidence. The final irony of the much quoted dictum is that after all it expresses the simple truth.

If this analysis of the affair presents a fair statement of the facts, why is it not included in the Memoirs, where the only reason Gibbon gave for yielding to his fate is, 'I soon discovered that my father would not hear of this strange alliance, and that without his consent I was myself destitute and helpless.'³ If we ask why he left

1. Memoirs, p. 85. It is worth comparing this with his sense of duty in regard to taking his seat in the House of Commons. (See Letters, No. 35, Summer 1760, I, 124) and below, pp. 71-2 of this chapter.
2. Correspondence complète de Rousseau, ed. R.A. Leigh. Oxford, 1972, tom XVI, p. 272, note d. (Notes explicatives)
3. p. 85. Even on this line of defence there is something to be said; see Low, Edward Gibbon, pp. 90-1.

it at that, it is helpful to make a comparison with the account of his conversion at Oxford. His real reason for including that event, though ostensibly to show the progress of his mind, was, as we have seen, to justify his step by showing how reasonable it was in the circumstances. His love affair, on the other hand, treated much more briefly, is introduced with some apprehension merely as a youthful episode in his life at Lausanne.¹ Or, if we take the slightly later version,² it is bracketed with his friendship for Deyverdun to show he had not been without feelings of love or friendship during the 'warm season of youth', and that the persons concerned were such as to make him applaud his judgement. In the case of his early love, he was making a brief and rather diffident reference to what might not otherwise have been known about 'the historian of the Roman Empire', namely that he had once experienced the joys and pains of a sincere love. In the case of his conversion, he was obliged to deal at some length with what was only too well known, especially at Oxford where his opponents were still to be found. One of the calumnies they could heap on the sceptical historian was that he had once turned papist. Hence the pressing need for adequate defence. No such need existed as far as his love affair was concerned. The lady herself, as Mme Necker, had long been one of his closest friends; and who would remember or now be interested in the rights and wrongs of an amorous interlude thirty years in the past? Here a plain statement of the outcome would

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1. Memoirs, p. 84. 'I hesitate from the apprehension of ridicule, when I approach the delicate subject of my early love'. And he hastens to explain at some length the dignity of what he means by 'love'.
 2. 'C; sketch, Bonnard, App. I, p. 208.

suffice. The love affair had receded into history while Gibbon's religious opinions had not.¹

Yet there was one who had ventured to pass judgement and that without sufficient knowledge of the facts. The letter in which this implication was made appeared during Gibbon's lifetime, though only over the initials J.J.R.. But that was sufficient clue, and as an addendum to the celebrated dictum, Gibbon referred his readers, in a very explicit footnote, to Rousseau's works, giving edition, volume and page.² The two eminent men had almost been drawn together over Suzanne Curchod. Her friend and protector after the death of her parents was a young Swiss pastor, Paul-Claude Moulton, a close friend and ardent disciple of Rousseau. Moulton had urged him to intervene on Suzanne's behalf, if as seemed likely, Gibbon came to visit the philosopher.³ Gibbon did not come, and Rousseau was saved the unpleasantness of such an interview; but he explained to Moulton why he could not fall in with this little scheme to which Suzanne herself was party.⁴ He would be unable to conceal his antipathy to

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1. See above, chap. I, p. 20 and note 3. In the same conversation here referred to Johnson mentioned the rumour that the author of The Decline and Fall had also once been a Mohammedan; this possibly arose from Gibbon's desire to study Arabic at Oxford. (See Boswell's Life of Johnson, ed. Hill-Powell, London, 1934, II, 447.)
 2. In Sheffield's edition, I, 107n. (As in World's Classics, ed. Bury, p. 84.)
 3. Rousseau, Correspondence, ed. Leigh, No. 2735, XVI, 270-1.
 4. See Moulton's letter to Suzanne Curchod, ibid., No. 2736, XVI, 273.

Gibbon and so would spoil the plan. 'Le refroidissement de M. Gibbon me fait mal penser de lui; j'ai revû son livre, il y court après l'esprit, il s'y guinde. M. Gibbon n'est point mon homme; je ne puis croire qu'il soit celui de Madlle Curchod. Qui ne sent pas son prix n'est pas digne d'elle, mais qui l'a pu sentir et s'en détache est un homme à mépriser.'¹ Gibbon's comment in the Memoirs was, like that on the love affair itself, very brief. It was also mild and tolerant, but he apparently felt it quite necessary since his own moral conduct was at stake. 'As an author I shall not appeal from the judgement, or taste, or caprice of Jean Jacques: but that extraordinary man, whom I admire and pity, should have been less precipitate in condemning the moral character of a stranger.'²

The final question we ask is: what effect did the affair have on Gibbon? His own answer at the time was that it disabused him; it opened his eyes. Suzanne, as Gibbon was well aware, was a much sought after young lady. There were other suitors, even persistent ones, during the time of their correspondence. Indeed, after his renunciation, he mentioned his concern that he might have spoiled her chances.³ Later on, however, he learned that even while she was writing to him, distraught at the thought of losing him, 'arraché des sanglots', 'coeur ulcéré', and pleading 'la foiblesse de ma santé',⁴ she was

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1. Rousseau au ministre Paul-Claude Moulton, ibid., No. 2742, XVI, 280-1.
 2. See above n. 2.
 3. Suzanne referred to this in her letter of 5/11/58 (Letters, No. 28a, I, 111): 'après tant d'aveux vous comprenez Monsieur que votre délicatesse sur la crainte de ruiner ma fortune...'
 4. We hear earlier of two such groups she founded in the young society of Lausanne, La Société du Printemps and L'Académie de la Poudrière. See Low, JA, Intr. lxvi.

apparently enjoying the social life of Lausanne, 'goutant tous les plaisirs, fondant les Académies, distribuant les prix, composant elle meme des ouvrages d'Esprit, et se jouant de l'amour si elle ne s'en occupoit pas.' So he wrote in his Journal¹ on receiving from Suzanne what he called a most unexpected letter, five years after the break had been made.²

His reaction to her long, accusing letter was unequivocal. 'Fille dangereuse et artificielle...Elle s'amusoit à Lausanne sans s'y attacher. Je le veux. Mais ces amusemens la convainquent toujours a la dissimulation la plus odieuse et si l'infidelité est quelquefois une foiblesse, la duplicité est toujours un vice.'³ Her words could not be reconciled with her behaviour. A few months later there is another revealing comment⁴ on Suzanne's highly emotional reaction to a performance of Zaire. Despite her loud sobs which drew all eyes towards her, her face appeared fresh and happy when she took away her handkerchief: 'Chacun a remarque une affectation aussi grossiere. Que cette fille joue la sensibilité'. In both these situations the contrast between appearance and reality was enough to enlighten the moralist in Gibbon. 'Je dis eclairer. Il n'est question que d'idées et nullement de sentimens.' In fine, 'Cette affaires singuliere dans toutes ses parties m'a été très utile; Elle m'a ouvert les yeux sur la caractère des femmes -, et elle me servira longtemps de preservatif contre les seductions de l'amour.'⁵

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1. JB, 22me September 1763 (pp. 51-2). In her third letter to Gibbon, Suzanne had rather playfully admitted to 'quelques grains de coquetterie.' (No. 18a, 10/1/58, I, 81.).
 2. No. 51a, 21/9/63, I, 159-162.
 3. JB, Septembre, 1763.
 4. JB, 5me Mars, 1764 (p. 234.)
 5. JB, 22me September, 1763.

This was part of Gibbon's own 'enlightenment' at Lausanne. Though he continued to delight in women's company, he kept himself free from further entanglements. There were those references which Sheffield carefully deleted from the published Memoirs, like the account of Gibbon's ambiguous relationship with the vivacious Mme. Bontemps. 'I have reserved for the last the most pleasing connection which I formed at Paris, the acquisition of a female friend by whom I am sure of being received every evening with a smile of confidence and joy...' ¹ Thinking of this little flutter and of what he calls Gibbon's 'cool opportunism' towards Mme. Seigneux, 'la petite femme', Michael Joyce says that with 'his one true passion...behind him', Gibbon showed 'something of the male flirt'; ² and that he was even 'becoming increasingly cynical in his attitude towards sex.' ³ This attitude, which apparently had its origin in his enlightenment 'sur les caractères des femmes', seems to lie behind the general view of women, as distinct from admiration for a number of exceptional women, in The Decline and Fall. Indeed, there is little doubt that it would earn him the epithet 'chauvinist' from many women readers today. They could point to his low opinion of women's mental firmness and judgement, as evidenced by his description of Julia Domna, to his slur on 'female fortitude' and to such phrases as 'the infirm minds of children and females' or 'the vanity of a female author'. ⁴

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1. Bonnard's edition of the Memoirs, 127-8. Sheffield omitted twenty-two lines beginning with these words. Cf. Letters, Nos. 42, 44; I, 135; 143. Low remarks, 'It does not seem to matter very much whether he was Mme. Bontemps' lover or not. He had learned one lesson clearly enough...', Edward Gibbon, p. 136.
 2. See also Low's description of 'the incorrigible old flirt', op.cit., p. 336.
 3. op.cit., pp. 49-50, 53.
 4. See DF, vi, I, 139; xi, I, 332; xxxvii, IV, 68; xlviii, V, 241.

Nor would references like that to 'the wiser and stronger of the sexes' be likely to win them over. Suzanne, in an acute appraisal of the first volume, remarked: 'Monsieur, dans le nombre de vos lecteurs, vous compterez autant de femmes que d'hommes; j'ai dit malgré vous, car vous les avez maltraitées; à vous entendre toutes leurs vertus sont factices.'¹ And Porson's celebrated comment, in the midst of his enthusiastic defence of the historian, struck deeper: 'Nor does his humanity ever slumber, unless when women are ravished or the Christians persecuted.'² Gibbon's early experiences of love and religion seem to have left their mark on The Decline and Fall.

It was, however, with a note of pride that, in reviewing those early years for his Memoirs, he introduced the account of his love for Suzanne Curchod, as a 'pure and exalted sentiment'. He was at pains to point out that this was no mere gallantry, let alone the grosser appetite common to animals and man alike, but real love of the most elevated kind.³ There were, it was true, times of dissipation in Lausanne and a riotous evening in the company of wild companions.⁴ These were certainly no cause for pride. Though we can read of them in the Journal, they have no place in the Memoirs where they would mar the picture of the intellectual and moral development of the historian which Gibbon is there intent on presenting. They were indeed a passing phase in his growth to maturity; and as maturity involves self-knowledge,

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1. Letter to Gibbon, 30/9/76, MW, II, 177. Cf. his light-hearted reply to her charges, Letter, No. 361, 26/11/76, II, 127.
 2. Richard Porson, 'Letters to Mr. Archdeacon Travis, &c'. Works, London, 1790, I, Preface, xxviii.
 3. Memoirs, p. 84. In their letters, both Gibbon and Suzanne refer to the purity of their love, e.g. No. 20; I, 91, ('une passion aussi pure...'); No. 27a; I, 107 (L'inclination...si pure.)
 4. JB, 23me Août and Septembre 15, 1763; also 29me Février, 1764 which ends, 'Quel train de vie. A Paris j'étois un sage.'

so Gibbon was maturing in this respect. As he remarked to his father about two years after his decision regarding Suzanne, 'Whatever else I may be ignorant of, I think I know myself.'¹ And in his post-mortem on a love affair which he had pronounced as dead, he could see with the eye of the moralist² that the lady's behaviour and outlook were incompatible with his own principles: 'Duplicity', he confided to his journal, 'is always a vice'. Even Rousseau with all his sympathies on the opposite side, had written of Suzanne Curchod: 'Elle ne sait ce qu'elle veut; cet homme (Gibbon) la sert mieux que son propre coeur.'³

Once cured of his old love, Gibbon seems to have come to recognise the way of life for which he was suited. The course of events confirmed his judgement and things turned out for the best both for the man and especially for the historian. He moved slowly but resolutely towards his life's work; and an unhappy love affair made way for a most cordial and lasting friendship when Suzanne became Mme. Necker.⁴ She also became a most acute critic of his History,⁵ as well as perhaps the model

1. Letters, No. 35, (Summer) 1760, I, 124.
2. See entry in JB for 22me Sep. and especially that extract cited above, p. 52, ('dissimulation', 'infidelite', 'duplicite est toujours un vice' &c.)
3. Correspondence, ed. Leigh, No. 2742, XVI, 281. Certain remarks in Suzanne's letters to Gibbon illustrate Rousseau's opinion. She says her ideas are 'bien romanesque' (20a, I, 93); 'mon esprit tout romanesque qu'il est' (45a I, 145; cf. also 27a, I, 107); her image of Gibbon, she admits was a chimera 'qui n'exista jamais que dans une tête romanesque fêlée' (47a, I, 148).
4. See Memoirs, p. 86. With perfect propriety Mme. Necker could write to him even in his last years as 'son premier et son dernier ami'. (See Low, op.cit., p. 336.)
5. See, e.g. her letters to Gibbon, 29/7/76 and 30/9/76, MW, II, 172, 176-7; also, G.M. Young, Gibbon. Edinburgh, 1932, p. 133. She anticipated Carlyle's description of DF as 'a kind of bridge that connects the antique with the modern ages.'

for his portrait of the empress Athenais Eudocia.¹ But one clear lesson Gibbon had learnt from his experience of love, 'that his need for feminine companionship which was constant throughout his life, was best satisfied in the temperate zone of friendship'.²

Gibbon's continual reference to books, to his plan of reading and to 'the inexhaustible pleasures of study' might easily make us forget how sociable he was, how much he enjoyed his friends and how much they enjoyed him. Life in Lausanne was not all hard grind; it was divided between books and friends. And, as he said, 'the most genuine proof of my attachment' was that, after an absence of five years from Lausanne, 'my old friends of both sexes hailed my voluntary return.'³ He also demonstrated his capacity for friendship by adding to this original circle both during his second period of residence and again on his final retirement. Indeed this capacity is something none of Gibbon's biographers can miss. His loyal friendship and deepening affection for Lord and Lady Sheffield over the years is a fine example, but his letters show how numerous were those whom Gibbon counted as true friends.

It was this very quality revealed in the letters that Sheffield stressed in giving them to the public. And the unlikely beginning of the friendship between these two men, in many ways so different, the

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1. DF, xxxii, III, 409ff. Remarking on the resemblance in a letter to Suzanne, Gibbon referred to 'l'Athenais de nos jours' and to that rare mixture of beauty, virtues and talents which can raise a woman from obscurity to eminence.
 2. op.cit., Low, p. 136.
 3. Memoirs, p. 128.

historian's staunch attachment to the family and his unselfish decision to uproot himself from Lausanne and hasten to the side of his friend in his hour of bereavement, make a delightful story, not without its own moral value. In his Advertisement to the Miscellaneous Works, Sheffield commended the letters in the following terms: 'They will prove how pleasant, friendly, and amiable Mr. Gibbon was in private life; and if, in publishing Letters so flattering to myself, I incur the imputation of vanity, I shall meet the charge with a frank confession, that I am indeed highly vain of having enjoyed, for so many years, the esteem, the confidence, and the affection of a man whose social qualities endeared him to that most accomplished society and whose talents, great as they were, must be acknowledged to have been fully equalled by the sincerity of his friendship.'¹

No instance of a new and lasting friendship is more pleasing than that of Dorothea Gibbon who became young Edward's stepmother in 1755. Despite the rather disturbing shock of this news which his father did not confirm for some months, Gibbon at first determined to lay prejudice aside and be diplomatic; then, however, diplomacy gave way to genuine affection. He discovered a woman of 'warm and exquisite sensibility.' His initial reaction on hearing of his father's remarriage was to see in the new wife a rival and a usurper.² The proverbial epithets of the Latin poets describing stepmothers were ringing in his mind till his return to England. In his letters to his father he sent the new Mrs. Gibbon his 'respects' or 'all the sentiments Esteem and

1. MW, I, xiv. See also P. Quennel, 'Edward Gibbon', Four Portraits. London, 1965, p. 133.

2. ibid., pp. 92-3.

duty can inspire.'¹ Then came yet another of young Gibbon's lessons in escaping from prejudice.² He had to admit his mistake. Even at first meeting, he realised 'the injustice was in my own fancy; and the imaginary monster was an amiable and deserving women...After some reserve on my side our minds associated in confidence and friendship, and as Mrs. Gibbon had neither children nor the hopes of children, we more easily adopted the tender names and genuine characters of mother and of son.'³ The delightful little account in the Memoirs tallies exactly with words entered in his Journal for only himself to see: 'I can't express the pleasure I had at seeing her, I love her as a companion, a friend and a mother'.⁴ Their affectionate correspondence over the years was based on a happy arrangement expressed in the opening words of one of Gibbon's letters to her, 'You remember our agreement; short and frequent letters.'⁵ His affection and respect for Dorothea remained to the end of his life.

During the years of apprenticeship in Lausanne, there were others with whom Gibbon was on friendly relations and whose assistance he acknowledged when writing his Memoirs. One such was Francois-Louis Allamand, pastor at Bex. They kept up a friendly correspondence and met whenever Allamand came to Lausanne. The two letters of Allamand which found their way into Sheffield's edition⁶ are both concerned with Locke and the question of innate ideas, which as we are told

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1. Letters, Nos. 28, 24/10/58 and 23, 29/5/58, I, 109; 102.
 2. See above, chapter, I, p. 31 and notes 1 and 2.
 3. Memoirs, p. 92.
 4. JA, 16th May, 1762 (p. 72).
 5. Letters, No. 41, Paris, 12 Feb., 1763, I, 132.
 6. MW, I, 436-455, 14 September & 12 October, 1756.

in the Memoirs, he attacked and Gibbon defended.¹ Gibbon described Allamand as 'un des beaux Genies que je connois',² and as one who exhibited a mastery of both language and science but who shone above all else in dispute. He tells us with suitable irony that 'his acute and flexible logic could support with equal address and perhaps with equal indifference the adverse sides of every possible question.' It is little wonder, as Gibbon claimed, that with such a skilful debating partner, 'I gained some dexterity in the use of my philosophic weapons.' Yet in this genius who 'might have enlightened, or deluded the World',³ he seemed to detect a secret scepticism.⁴ The character Gibbon has given us of Allamand leaves the impression of an intellect severed from morality in contrast to his own which was becoming subordinated to it.

Beyond the circle of those he could call 'friends' were several eminent scholars with whom Gibbon's increasingly active mind urged him to correspond on classical, historical and textual questions. He exchanged letters with three professors, Johann Breitingen of Zurich, whom he also visited on his tour with Pavillard, Jean Crevier of Paris and Matthew Gesner of Gottingen. This correspondence seems to show

1. Memoirs, p. 82.

2. JB, 1^r Janvier, 1764, p. 197.

3. This phrase in the Memoirs (p. 82) corresponds to that in the Journal (JB, loc.cit., 'Cet homme qui auroit pu éclairer ou troubler une nation.'

4. Bonnard claims that 'had Gibbon ever seen Allamand's major work, L'Anti-Bernier (1770)...; he would hardly have suspected him of scepticism.' (Notes, p. 278). However, Allamand must have given Gibbon this impression.

him making up for lost time at Oxford,¹ and it is a testimony to his intellectual attainments that such men as these accepted 'the invitation of an unknown youth' to correspond on learned subjects.² The plan of disciplined study begun in the middle of 1753 was already showing signs of maturing scholarship.³

There is also during this period a revealing instance of Gibbon's self-awareness warning him that he could not betray his own better judgement even in deference to his father's wishes. This was his abortive attempt to study mathematics. His father was anxious for him to pursue this subject, and we are given the picture of the dutiful son unwilling to deny 'so reasonable a wish.'⁴ But what prompted his father's desire, he tells us, was merely 'a blind idea of the usefulness of such abstract science.' Young Gibbon passively complied with this mistaken desire for two winter sessions of lectures, but having grasped the principles, abandoned for ever the study of mathematics. In this one matter he quietly let his father's wish be forgotten. Nor did he have any regrets. Instead, says the moralist in retrospect, it was just as well 'that I desisted before my mind was hardened by the habit of rigid demonstration so destructive of

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1. In the Memoirs, (p. 77) Gibbon wrote, 'It was now that I regretted the early years which had been wasted in sickness, or idleness, or mere idle reading.' (For Sheffield's 'mere', Bonnard has 'more'.)
 2. Memoirs, p. 81. The discovery of his Latin correspondence with Breitinger, published in Norton (I, Nos. 7, 9, 11, 12, 14) gives weight to Gibbon's claim in the Memoirs. Miss Norton writes, 'the letters indeed abundantly confirm the breadth and thoroughness of his reading.' (Letters, I, App. I, p. 388.)
 3. It is reflected later in the Journals and 'Extraits raisonnés de mes lectures'.
 4. See Memoirs, p. 78 and cf. the dutiful son of the letters cited above, pp. 45-47.

the finer feelings of moral evidence which must however determine the actions and opinions of our lives.'¹

In Gibbon's account of his entrance into the life of London at the end of this period abroad,² we are given an impression of the effectiveness of the application to study and of his moral growth and self-awareness developed in Lausanne. He preferred to forget what seemed to him the tasteless pleasures of London society for the solid improvement of reading. When he got into debt it was usually to the bookseller.³ Though his annuity was insufficient to support 'the style of a young Englishman of fashion in the most wealthy metropolis of Europe', he still regarded himself as rich in his indifference or aversion to 'the active and costly pleasures' of his age and country. When his money had gone, he said, he had the courage to retire to his father's house in Hampshire to enjoy 'an inexhaustible source of amusement' in his studies.⁴ With reference to his wasted days at Oxford he admitted that he was then 'too young and bashful to enjoy like a manly Oxonian in town the taverns and the bagnios of Covent Garden.'⁵ His more mature moral outlook at this later stage is reflected in the observation that, 'The pleasures of a town life, the daily round from the tavern to the play, from the play to the coffee-house, from the coffee-house to the (Bagnio) are within the reach of every man who is regardless of his health,

1. Memoirs, p. 78.

2. ibid., p. 93f.

3. Cf. a later reference (ibid., p. 155) 'To a lover of books the shops and sales of London present irresistible temptations'.

4. Memoirs, p. 90.

5. Sheffield altered the last phrase to 'the pleasures of London.'

his money and his company.'¹ And though, he confessed, he was sometimes seduced by the example of others, yet the 'better habits' formed at Lausanne led him to look for 'a more elegant and rational society.' In the retrospect of twenty-five years he frankly attributed any failures to follow this better way, to the disadvantages of his own 'situation and character.'²

Gibbon had returned home to England a dutiful son, half happy to see his father and more particularly his aunt Porten,³ half regretful at leaving his new intellectual home in Switzerland. His father's aim in sending him to Lausanne had been to turn him into a protestant; it had also turned him into a foreigner and an intellectual alienated from English culture. The father was only too well aware of his son's penchant for foreign ways and loss of familiarity with his native tongue.⁴ Nor did those around him fail to notice this. 'One mischief however and in the eyes of my countrymen a serious and irreparable mischief was derived from the success of my Swiss education; I had ceased to be an Englishman'.⁵ According to his Memoirs, his 'opinion, habits and sentiments were cast in a foreign mould' and his own language had grown less familiar to him than French.⁶ His Essai sur l'etude de la litterature was written in

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1. Memoirs, p. 93. The 'C' sketch has 'to the Bagnio', the others omit the word.
 2. Memoirs, loc.cit.
 3. See Memoirs, pp. 90-91.
 4. Gibbon's account to Suzanne Curchod of his father's displeasure, quoted him as saying, 'Vous n'avez deja que de penchant pour les moeurs Etrangères. La Langue de votre pays ne vous est plus connue'. (Letters, No. 34, 23/2/59; I, 121).
 5. Memoirs, p. 86.
 6. Memoirs, loc.cit.

this, the language of his conversation and studies, in which he said he found it easier to compose than in his mother tongue.¹ He had left Lausanne with real regret and as he later put it, 'I should have cheerfully accepted the offer of a moderate and independent fortune on the terms of perpetual exile.'² Hence, when attending Lady Hervey's select dinners in London, he was not 'displeased at her preference and even affectation of the manners, the language and the litterature of France.'³ By a half-hearted effort he gradually came to terms with the English world,⁴ and by reading his favourite English authors, those of the period since the Revolution, who 'breathed the spirit of reason and liberty', he was able to restore his command of his native tongue.⁵ He read not only Swift and Addison, to whom his friend Mallet directed him, but also the historians whose works he felt had at last removed the reproach of British neglect in this field. Hume and Robertson thus became his inspiration and his models when he came to consider his chances of following their steps.⁶

Gibbon certainly did not find everything to his liking in his new situation, but he submitted himself to the life expected of him. Yet even his present circumstances proved to be a blessing. The wisest of men had said, 'Give me neither poverty nor riches',⁷ and with the mature wisdom of experience Gibbon recognised the benefits of the middle

1. ibid., p. 105.

2. ibid., p. 86.

3. ibid., p. 94.

4. His efforts, he said, were 'languid and slow'. (loc.cit.)

5. Memoirs, p. 98.

6. Memoirs, p. 98-9. We can see this also in his Journal, e.g. Buriton, JA, 26 July, 1762.

7. Proverbs, chap. 30, v. 8.

state of life. 'I am persuaded that had I been more indigent or more wealthy, I should not have possessed the leisure or the perseverance to prepare and execute my voluminous history.'¹

It was during these years following his return to England that he resolved and began to keep an exact journal of his actions and studies. This was, as he wrote at the time,² 'both to assist my memory, and to accustom me to set a due value upon my time.' This journal he assiduously kept with few and infrequent breaks. On such occasions he reproached himself with idleness and neglect and felt obliged to spend some days bringing his account 'au courant'.³ We see in this journal Gibbon's habit, at the close of each year, of balancing his account, 'not of money but of time'.⁴ Indeed, as Low has suggested, 'he has an almost religious sense of the value of time.'⁵ In the personal observations of the Journal, we may thus discern something of the growth of the moralist; for, unlike the carefully edited reflections of the Memoirs, these are spontaneous records of day-to-day events and reactions not meant for other eyes to see.

1. Memoirs, p. 89. Gibbon may have recalled the unique compliment he had heard in the Commons when Sheridan had linked the style of Tacitus with 'the luminous pages of Gibbon', a description he had afterwards whimsically corrected to 'the voluminous pages'. (Sheridan's famous speech of 13th June 1788 in the Hastings trial. See Walter Sichel, Sheridan, 2 vols. London, 1909, ii, 149, 150.
2. 24 August, 1761, (JA, p.3).
3. JA, 13 Oct., 1762; cf. 27 Sept., 1762, 'I have not almost this fortnight, set down anything in the literary way. Indeed, I was very idle'. Having brought the journal up to date and begun 'a second time from the 25th of March 1762', he had asked himself, 'Shall I be more constant than the first?'
4. JA, 30 Dec., 1762.
5. Edward Gibbon, p. 124.

On reaching his twenty-fifth birthday, Gibbon took the chance to look at himself and weigh up impartially his good and bad qualities.¹ What did he find? With a naivete or honesty unhindered by self-consciousness or false modesty, he saw his character as 'virtuous, incapable of a base action, and formed for generous ones; but...proud, violent, and disagreeable in society.' In this analysis with its suggestion of Rousseau, there is no place for original sin: 'virtuous', and formed for generous actions was Gibbon's view of himself. Then what is the source of the bad qualities? Human interaction in a corrupt society, it would seem. But Gibbon realised that it was his own responsibility to cultivate the good tendencies and 'extirpate or restrain' the bad. And he went on to show that the lessons of resilience and fruitful response to changing circumstances, first learnt in Lausanne, were now well established. 'As to my situation in life, tho' I may sometimes repine at it, it perhaps is the best adapted to my character. I can command all the conveniences of life, and I can command too that independence (that first earthly blessing,) which is hardly to be met with in a higher or lower fortune.'²

This self assessment is significant for two reasons. It shows Gibbon's concern with that moral aspect of character which was to be the basis of the pen portraits in The Decline and Fall; and it underlines the pre-eminence he gave to personal and intellectual freedom, without which the good life and the public good were impossible. It was the theme of freedom which was to appeal to him in certain subjects whose worthiness for a history he pondered in the middle of this same year.³

1. JA, 8 April, 1762.

2. JA, loc.cit.

3. JA, 26 July, 1762.

Gibbon's self-portrait gains an added significance by its contrast with his sketch of John Wilkes, at that time Colonel of the Buckinghamshire militia, who dined with both Gibbon's and his own fellow officers a few months later.¹ Once again, however, as in the portraits in the History, he began with the good qualities. 'I scarcely ever met with a better Companion; he has inexhaustible spirits, infinite wit,² and humour, and a great deal of knowledge'. Then comes the damning moral judgement, somewhat akin to those Gibbon would pass on some of the monstrous emperors of Rome: 'but a thorough profligate in principle as in practice; his character is infamous, his life stained with every vice, and his conversation full of blasphemy and bawdy. These morals he glories in - for shame is a weakness he has long since surmounted'. Man, as Gibbon could see, may be born good, formed for generous actions, but he can choose whether he will follow or forsake the path of virtue. Wilkes chose depravity; he appeared a success in a tainted society, but was a failure in his own moral character where he refused to 'extirpate or restrain' the vicious impulses. Years later Gibbon wrote of another highly successful public figure and entertaining companion, 'Will Fox never learn the importance of character'.³

Gibbon was no prude. His flirtations and occasional revellings testify to this. But there is a striking contrast again in his reaction to his own conduct. It was nothing to glory in. For him, unlike Wilkes, shame was a spur to virtue. The very occasion of

1. JA, 23 Sept., 1762.

2. In his self-portrait, Gibbon had written, 'Wit I have none...'

3. Letter to Sheffield, 4/10/88, Letters, III, 132-3. Fox, travelling with Mrs. Armistead, visited Gibbon in Lausanne in September 1788. cf. Memoirs, p. 190.

Wilkes' visit, not surprisingly 'proved a very debauched day.'

It was one of a number of such days. They are all recorded in the Journal,¹ which had become to the awakening moralist a sort of secular confessional. Gibbon never lost his sense of shame over these occasions. Along with that roistering night in Lausanne which involved him in a court appearance,² a feeling of disgrace removed them from the more dignified record of the Memoirs. In the case of the 'debauches' during the militia days, which were generally associated with the visits of their Colonel, Sir Thomas Worsley, it was chiefly the sense of time misspent, of days lost, which he deplored: 'I felt the usual consequences of Sir Thomas's company and lost a morning because I had lost the night before.' And again, 'I felt the usual consequences of debauch and was unfit for any application all day.'³ But when it involved a groundless and dangerous quarrel with a good friend in the regiment, it was also regrettably 'a most disagreeable proof of the pernicious consequences' of over-indulgence.⁴ The moralist learned his lesson well from these instances of 'debauch', but especially from this last occasion when a drunken quarrel almost led to drawn swords. Was this night in the historian's mind when he wrote in The Decline and Fall and placed particular emphasis on the pronoun: 'Drunkenness, the most illiberal, but not the most danger, of our vices, was sometimes capable, in a less civilised state of mankind, of occasioning a battle, a war, or a revolution.'⁵

1. See e.g. JA, 28 and 29 August, 29 September and 27 October, 1762 (pp. 130; 151; 163).

2. This was during his second residence in Lausanne; see JB, 23me Aout, 1763, and see App. I, pp. 278-280.

3. JA, 23, 24 and 29 August; 10 October, 1762 (pp. 127-8; 130; 163).

4. JA, 29 September, 1762.

5. DF, ix, I, 240.

Militia life at first aroused some enthusiasm in young Gibbon, though it was eventually abandoned with considerable relief.¹ But, just as he balanced his accounts of his use of time, so he also weighed the pros and cons of military life. There was certainly an unpleasant side, but a moralist should look beyond this: 'In every state there exists, however, a balance of good and evil. The habits of a sedentary life were usefully broken by the duties of an active profession.' Once again, on this occasion in the experience of soldiering, Gibbon did not forget to place the credits alongside the debits. He was aware, as his Journal shows, that his good qualities of diligence and conscientiousness were developed by this experience. He was zealous in the discharge of his duties, above all in making sure his men were well turned out on parade. As Captain, he shouldered the responsibilities of the battalion, which were taken too lightly by his father, the Major, and by Sir Thomas Worsley, the Colonel.² His lists and field reports bear witness to his care in such matters, which one might well have expected a scholar addicted to the pleasures of his study to have found too tedious to both with.³ In fact he showed 'incredible powers of application' and 'though he might quite easily have rid himself, as others did of his military obligation, he devoted himself unreservedly, and in circumstances wholly uncongenial to himself, to the efficiency of his corps and his duties as an Officer. His personal pride may have been priggish

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1. 'I am glad the militia has been, and glad that it is no more'. (JA, 23 Dec., 1762); see also 1 Sept., 1762, and cf. Memoirs, pp. 115-7.
 2. '...in fact I commanded the batallion', he wrote (JA, 23 Dec., 1762). There are several references also to Worsley's intemperance, laziness and general incompetence. 'The Major' too, is shown to be averse to exertion and responsibility.
 3. See JA, 1 Sept.; 6 and 23 Oct., 1762.

and pragmatical, but he had a pride of regiment as well.'¹

It was during his military service that his reading also branched out in a new direction. He diligently read² and commented on a book which was to be of great service to him as he prepared his History. This book, Guichardt's Memoires militaires sur les Grecs et les Romains, even drew him away for a time from his beloved Homer.³ Gibbon's attention to military matters, both practical and historical, emphasises his active acceptance of all vicissitudes,⁴ the chosen and the unchosen, as contributing to the formation of mind and character. In keeping with this attitude, the militia days are given quite considerable space in the Memoirs, which are primarily concerned with the making of the historian.⁵ He then pointed out what he saw as the chief benefit of his term of service. 'My principal obligation to the militia was the making me an Englishman and soldier.'⁶ His own History gained immeasurably from its author's first hand experience of tactics, manoeuvres and of the camp; and the making of the soldier is clear enough, but what of 'the Englishman'? The answer seems to be that when Gibbon was recalled from Lausanne, he was so alienated from English life and society that he might easily have renounced them forever. He was

1. C.P. Hawkes, Authors at Arms. The Soldiering of Six Great Writers. London, 1934, p. 83. Hawkes is quite critical of some of Gibbon's petty faults but also brings out his moral strengths. His three sections on Gibbon are on pp. 49-83.
2. 'Diligently' is Gibbon's word in the Memoirs (p. 117).
3. See JA, 14 May, 1762, when he began this book. He continued to comment on his reading which he completed on the 23rd of that month. He also read de Savornin's Les Sentimens d'un homme de Guerre (26/5/62).
4. 'Vicissitudes' is quite a favourite term and concept of Gibbon's running through The Decline and Fall. See chapter VIII below.
5. In Bonnard's edition, pp. 107 to 117; in Gibbon's MS, 47vto 51.
6. Memoirs, p. 117.

at first, as he admitted, tempted to do so as soon as the opportunity offered for him to return to Switzerland. Instead he was gradually able to re-enter the life of his native land. In this process of re-education, the militia played its part. 'After my foreign education, with my reserved temper, I should long have continued a stranger in my native country had I not been shaken in this various scene of new faces and new friends: had not experience forced me to feel the characters of our leading men, the state of parties, the forms of office and the operation of our civil and military system',¹ England was again brought into Gibbon's orbit and the importance of this must not be forgotten. If, in a famous sentence, he noted that 'the Captain of the Hampshire grenadiers...has not been useless to the historian of the Roman Empire',² we may safely add, 'nor has the Englishman', since The Decline and Fall is about more than just the empire of Rome; the historian seemed at times to be writing with one eye on England.³

On the debit side, however, Gibbon was struck by many of the baser aspects of army life: the coarseness and brutality, the idleness, the 'excessive drinking' which affected him morally and physically,⁴ and the uncouth officers, 'who were alike deficient in the knowledge of scholars, and the manners of gentlemen.'⁵ Gibbon who liked to think of himself as both scholar and gentleman, found his temper 'insensibly soured' by this sort of company. He was also disgusted by the inhuman

1. ibid., loc.cit.

2. ibid., loc.cit.

3. See below, chap. IV, pp.

4. We have noticed his comments on the moral effects of the 'debauches'; he also traced his old enemy the gout to this same source.

5. Memoirs, p. 116.

and degrading aspect of their mock campaigns against 'enemies' who were sometimes 'naked unarmed prisoners' the objects of pity rather than terror. In his description of his changing reaction to military life, we hear the moral reflections of the historian on the young man 'dazzled even by the play of arms', who in his initial 'enthusiasm' wants to become a professional soldier. 'This military fever', he commented, 'was cooled by the enjoyment of our mimic Bellona, who gradually unveiled her naked deformity.'¹ It is essentially a description of 'the triumph of barbarism', but it is also the triumph of the moralist over the realist. It is about war and the pity of war.

In a public utterance during this period, his speech to the electors of Petersfield in 1761, Gibbon voiced the moralist's duty in the service of his country.² He recognised the place not only of armed defence,³ but also of the 'Senate' as a worthy sphere of service. 'Had I succeeded', he told the electors, 'I should have used my utmost endeavours to have acted up to the great Trust resposed in me. I should have considered a seat in Parliament neither as a Title of Honor, nor as an Instrument of Profit; but a laborious and important Duty, to which the greatest parts joined to the severest application are scarcely equal. I should have endeavoured to follow the path of Moderation and Impartiality; Loyal to my King without servility, Zealous for my Country without Faction, attached to the general welfare of Great Britain, but not

1. ibid., p. 115.

2. JA, App. II, pp. 242-4; also in Craddock, The English Essays of Edward Gibbon, pp. 25-6.

3. See the opening of this section on the militia in the Memoirs (p. 107f).

inattentive to the particular Interests of the Borough I had the Honor to represent.'¹ Making due allowance for the rhetoric of political speeches and for the fact that Gibbon was relieved not to have to take his seat at this time,² the sentiments here match those of a letter to his father the previous year³ about the prospect of entering the House of Commons. There he wrote of the offer as flattering his vanity, but flattering also 'a nobler passion', that 'I might be one day, the instrument of some good to my country'. With reference to this 'nobler' ambition, Swain perceptively remarked that 'the hope of being "the instrument of some good to my country" is not, according to Namier, one of the reasons for which 'men went into parliament in the eighteenth century.'⁴

In his letter to his father Gibbon gave another assessment of his character. It is like that on his twenty-fifth birthday, a character sketch uninhibited by 'false modesty', but rather illuminated by self-knowledge.⁵ Its purpose was to show his father that he lacked the

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1. JA, App. II, p. 243.
 2. Shown not only by his letter to his father, but also in the Journal, 'One Barnard of Alresford, made me lose the Election or rather gave me an opportunity of giving it up with honor.' (JA, 22 March, 1761).
 3. Summer, 1760, Letters, No. 35; I, 123-6. Gibbon wrote this as a letter to his father though living with him at Buriton, because he found it easier to set his reply down on paper. Was this a comment on his lack of ease in thinking on his feet?
 4. Swain, Edward Gibbon the Historian, Notes to chap. V, No. 9, p. 154. The reference to Lewis Namier is from his The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III. London, 1929, vol. I, section I, 'Why Men Went Into Parliament', pp. 1-75.
 5. 'Whatever else I may be ignorant of, I think that I know myself and shall always endeavour to mention my good qualities without vanity and my defects without repugnance.' (Letters, I, 124).

necessary talents to make a worthwhile contribution in the House of Commons, in particular what seemed to him the essential gift of eloquence. Gibbon had a very clear notion of what membership of the Commons should involve and he believed that he did not possess this requisite qualification. When he eventually took his seat in 1774, he maintained a discreet silence throughout his seven years of regular attendance. He voted, as he said, with his feet, but his lucid comments and criticisms of parliamentary business went into his letters.

A sense of his inadequacy in the essential art of public speaking almost prevented him from entering parliament and kept him silent when he did at last take his seat. He always retained this conviction of the power and importance of oratory in both its use and abuse. He saw its value in 'a popular state' where 'freedom of inquiry' and 'the force of persuasion' were respected; he saw too that this power of the orator could find expression also through the pen of the historian, as indeed his own experience went to prove. So he wrote in The Decline and Fall: 'In the republics of Greece and Rome, the art of speaking was the powerful engine of patriotism and ambition; and the schools of rhetoric poured forth a colony of statesmen and legislators. When the liberty of public debate was suppressed, the orator, in the honourable profession of an advocate, might please the cause of innocence and justice; he might abuse his talents in the more profitable trade of panegyric; and the same precepts continued to dictate the fanciful declamations of the sophist, and the chaster beauties of historical composition'.¹

1. DF, x1, IV, 280.

It was the power of the orator to move the heart to virtuous actions that struck Gibbon most forcibly, as he noted in his Journal. After a visit to the French church in London,¹ he reflected on the sermon: 'Except in some particular cases where we are blinded by popular prejudices, we are in general so well acquainted with our duty that it is almost superfluous to convince us of it. It is the heart, and not the head, that holds out: and it is certainly possible, by a moving eloquence, to rouse the sleeping sentiments of the heart, and incite it to acts of virtue. Unluckily it is not so much acts as habits of virtue, we should have in view...'² Gibbon could equally have found this though in Hume's first premiss on the subject³ that reason being 'perfectly inert' can never of itself move us to action; that morality is 'supposed to influence our passions and actions, and to go beyond the calm and indolent judgements of the understanding.'⁴

In his letter to his father, in his speech to the Petersfield electors, and in his comments on this sermon can be seen several characteristics of the maturer Gibbon's nature and outlook. There are the sense of moral obligation and duty, the 'severest application' to the task in hand, and a desire to shine in public, which became the desire for 'fame' when he was considering topics for historical writing. If he could not shine as an orator in parliament, he hoped to do so on the page of history. But to what purpose? Surely to speak with the voice

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1. St. Julian's made available in 1567 by Queen Elizabeth to Walloon refugees.
 2. JA, 22 August, 1762.
 3. See Hume's Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge. Oxford, 1888, Bk. II, Pt. II, Sect. III, pp. 413-7; cf. also Jonathan Harrison, Hume's Moral Epistemology. Oxford, 1976, pp. 5ff.
 4. Hume, Treatise, III, I, 1, pp. 457-8.

of freedom and truth and, like his admired Tacitus, to present 'a just and perfect delineation' of the vices and virtues of the illustrious characters of the past.'¹ Other characteristics too, all moral qualities, are apparent in these three early compositions: the Gibbonian ideals of moderation, impartiality and freedom from prejudice. There is also his esteem for a life of active virtue to which the heart and emotions need to be stirred. It was this practical, useful goodness rather than contemplative goodness or mere moral precepts which won his approval for great figures in history like Marcus Aurelius Antonius² and Boethius.³ He would follow the maxim of his most esteemed Latin author, Cicero, that 'to be drawn away from active life is contrary to moral duty.'⁴

Gibbon, like Hume, believed that moral ideals should move, since they could not be produced by, our reason. He affirmed the place of the heart and emotions not only in the full life of man but also in the achievement of moral goals. For himself, he would have been ashamed 'if the warm season of youth' had passed without any experience of real love and friendship.⁵ He likewise admitted the appeal of the parliamentary or pulpit orator to the heart and the emotions. His only fear was that in an eloquent appeal to 'the necessity of a virtuous life', the emotional response might soon be dispelled

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1. See above, chapter I, p. 1, and notes 1-3 on that page.
 2. e.g. DF, iii, I, 84-5; xv, II, 72-3.
 3. 'From these abstruse speculations, Boethius stooped or to speak more truly, he rose to the social duties of public and private life.' (DF, xxxix, IV, 213.)
 4. De Officiis, I, vi, 19, tr Walter Miller (Loeb Classical Library, 1913).
 5. Memoirs, App. I, p. 208.

by other factors such as 'the coldness of our northern constitutions' or the lack of immediate opportunity to put our good resolutions into practice.¹

A few months later, after reading 'a French moral and political romance', borrowed from the same preacher whose sermon had prompted these reflections,² Gibbon wrote that its description of the manners of the court of Memphis was worthy of Tacitus and the whole book breathed 'a spirit of virtue and humanity'. But the catastrophe of the story was 'very cold and unnatural' and the author's style though pure and elegant, was seldom 'elevated and never animated'. The reason for this seemed to be that the writer 'had too mathematical a head to excell in the language of description and too Stoic a heart to shine in that of the passions'.

'Too mathematical a head'; there was always a danger in that. We recall Gibbon's remark in his Essai³ about the tyranny of the physical sciences and his decision in Lausanne to desist from further study of mathematics before its habit of rigid demonstration hardened his mind or destroyed 'the finer feelings of moral evidence' by which we must direct our lives.⁴ Yet, having once renounced what he saw as dehumanising and destructive of our moral sensitivity, he was again tempted by the thought of modern mathematics, which had become a fashion

1. JA, 22 August, 1762.

2. JA, 12 December, 1762. ('I have borrowed of Mr. Barnouin, a French moral and political Romance of the Abbé Terasson called Sethos'.)

3. Essai sur l'étude de la littérature. London, 1761, chap. III, p. 16 and chap. XLV, p. 58. He saw Geometry and the physical sciences as then on the throne. See below chap. III, pp. 91.

4. Memoirs, p. 78.

and almost a necessary study in the intellectual world of the day. Toying with this idea, he requested and received an outline from Mr. Scott, a learned mathematician and disciple of de Moivre. At the time, however, this project had to compete in Gibbon's schedule with the more absorbing and more human study of classical literature which he was trying to fit into the exigencies of army life. 'I can hardly put any of his directions into practice before next winter',¹ he wrote in May 1762 regarding Mr. Scott's plan. He was then busy reading and reviewing the Iliad in his Journal and we can see from the current entries his preoccupation with this and similar studies. We hear no more of Mr. Scott and his outline and in the Memoirs we find Gibbon's admission that 'his map of a country which I have never explored may perhaps be more serviceable to others'.² This was not Gibbon's country. When a slightly more settled life than that of an army tent had suggested to him the opportunity of drawing up a new programme of reading, he had hesitated between mathematics and Greek, but finally decided in favour of the latter. 'The example of Scaliger and my own reason determined me on the choice of Homer, the father of poetry and the bible of the ancients...a poet who has since become the most intimate of my friends'.³

1. JA, 10 May, 1762.

2. Memoirs, p. 118. The letter containing Scott's plan, is No. XIV in Sheffield's collection, MW, II, pp. 41-51. He recommended a number of French mathematicians, 'because you are a thorough master of that language' and also because their style and clarity was best suited to beginners. Then followed some English authors leading up to Newton, Cotes, the Bernouillis and de Moivre and concluding with a number of works by Newton.

3. Memoirs, p. 118.

There was for Gibbon more humanity, more moral instruction and enrichment of mind in the ancient poet than in the modern mathematician; there was also a more appropriate preparation for the historical writing to which he aspired. His first published work, the Essai, which he had seen through the press the previous year, was basically a defence of ancient literature against its current disdain by the moderns. In it had had spoken of mathematics as an imperious queen ready to prescribe other studies and mistaken by some for the true spirit of philosophy.¹ Gibbon's decision about the direction his own studies were to take from his twenty-sixth year, set the seal on what he had already affirmed and defended in his Essai.

1. Essai, chap. XLV, p. 58.

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Dillon-Smith, David, The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Department of History, University of Wollongong, 1982. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/1426>

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PART I: THE HISTORIAN

CHAPTER ONE

THE BEGINNING OF SELF-AWARENESS AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Would it have surprised 'the historian of the Roman empire' to have found himself among the moralists? He neither proposed a philosophy of history nor even stated, except in passing, his own views on morality. But in so far as he followed his model Tacitus,¹ it is important to note the close correspondence between the statements of intention of the two historians. Tacitus said that he was guided in his selection and presentation of material by his 'conception of the first duty of history - to ensure that merit shall not lack its reward and to hold before the vicious word and deed the terrors of posterity and infamy.'² In the same spirit Gibbon defended his practice in the first volume of The Decline and Fall. Writing of the historian's duty he declared: 'Whatever subject he has chosen, whatever persons he introduced, he owes to himself, to the present generation, and to posterity, a just and perfect delineation of all that may be praised, of all that may be excused, and of all that must be censured. If he fails in the discharge of his important office, he partially violates the sacred obligations of truth and disappoints his readers of the instruction which they might have derived from a fair parallel of the vices and virtues of the most illustrious characters.'³ The principle of historical writing here

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1. On Tacitus as Gibbon's 'model and mentor' see e.g. David Jordan, Gibbon and his Roman Empire. Illinois, 1971, pp. 172 ff. Readers of The Decline and Fall or the Essai sur l'etude de la littérature, however, need look no further for examples of Gibbon's homage and debt to the Roman historian.
 2. Annals, III, lxv. Loeb, tr. John Jackson, 1969. Tacitus' statement is: 'quod praecipuum munus annalium reor ne virtutes sileantur utque pravis dictis factisque ex posteritate et infamia metus est.'
 3. 'A Vindication of some passages in the XVth and XVIth chapters of the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', 1779, MW, IV, 631-2.

stated is that of Tacitus in contrast to that of Ranke¹ or of most present-day historians. As a 'philosophic historian' in the Tacitean tradition, Gibbon did not fail to draw his 'philosophic reader's attention to praiseworthy or ignoble actions, to the rightness or wrongness of motives, and to virtuous or vicious rulers, all of which could serve to impart 'instruction'. Indeed we should expect to find a strong moral awareness in an author who shows a deep conviction of 'the judgement of posterity'² by which monarchs and the 'illustrious characters' of history are acquitted or condemned.

When we turn from the ancient to the contemporary writer whom Gibbon emulated and whom he later joined in 'the triumvirate of British historians',³ we find that 'the philosophic Hume'⁴ made a broad distinction between 'moral subjects' on the one hand and physical on the other. Under 'moral causes' he included 'all circumstances which are fitted to work on the mind as motives or reasons and which render a particular set of manners habitual to us.'⁵ As examples he mentioned some of those matters with which

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1. Summed up in his famous dictum, 'Ich will bloss sagen wie es eigentlich gewesen ist.'
 2. See e.g. DF, xviii, II, 242 for such an appeal by Gibbon. Cf. also v, I, 137; xxii, II, 440, xxx, III, 396.
 3. Regarding the praise of Robertson and Hume he claimed he had 'never presumed to accept a place in the triumvirate of British historians'. Memoirs, p. 158, but later frankly admitted his great satisfaction and pride at being ranked in this select trio; see Letters, 26/3/1788, III, 100, and Bury's Introduction to Gibbon's Autobiography, p. viii. The Memoirs reference is dated 1776.
 4. Memoirs, p. 2. Gibbon also wrote of 'the impartial philosophy of Hume', as a historian, *ibid.*, p. 120, and in DF referred to him as 'our philosophic historian.' (lxix, VII, 225).
 5. Essay XXI, 'Of National Characters', David Hume, The Philosophical Works, ed. T.H. Green and T.H. Hodge. London, 1886, 4 vols. (reprint by Scientia Verlag, Aalen, 1964), Vol. III, p. 244.

Gibbon was very much concerned in The Decline and Fall, 'the nature of government, the revolutions of public affairs, the plenty or penury in which people live, the situation of the nation with regard to its neighbours.'¹ And the question of 'motives' to which Hume referred in his definition is central to Gibbon's analysis of character.

In an early essay, 'On the Study of History',² which we may assume Gibbon to have read with great interest,³ Hume pointed out that this study is not only entertaining and improving to the mind but also morally enlightening. 'An advantage in that experience which is acquired by history, above what is learned by the practice of the world' is 'that it brings us acquainted with human affairs, without diminishing in the least from the most delicate sentiments of virtue.' 'Poets', Hume wrote, 'can paint virtue in the most charming colours, but as they address themselves entirely to the passions, they often become advocates for vice. Even philosophers are apt to bewilder themselves in the subtilty of their speculations; and we have seen some go as far as to deny the reality of all moral distinctions. But I think it a remark worthy the attention of the speculative, that the historians have been, almost without exception, the true

1. Gibbon's History deals with 'a series of memorable revolutions' all related to that great 'revolution which will ever be remembered...' (DF, i, I, 1). See e.g. DF, xxxviii, IV, 175-76; ii, I, 47; xxxvi, III, 121, 1, V, 332.
2. Essay VI, Works, vol. 4, pp. 388ff. It appeared in editions between 1741 and 1760.
3. Though the two editions of Hume's Essays and Treatises in Gibbon's library are later than 1760, the assumption is reasonable since Gibbon looked up to Hume as his English model and often quoted his essays in DF. Frank Manuel reminds us of 'Gibbon's combing Hume's essays for information as well as spiritual guidance.' ('Edward Gibbon: Historien-Philosophe' in G.W. Bowersock, et.al, Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Harvard & London, 1977, p. 173.)

friends of virtue, and have always represented it in its proper colours, however they may have erred in their judgements of particular persons.'¹

At the beginning of some 'Hints' jotted down between his return from Rome and the beginning of work on The Decline and Fall, Gibbon restated Hume's conclusion in the form of a question and answer expressing his own complete agreement: 'Historians friends to virtue? yes - with exceptions.'² And when he came to write his own History he brought out with great clarity the 'moral distinctions' of which Hume had written and also applauded what he himself saw as examples of genuine 'wisdom and virtue'.³ Thus, as Frank Manuel points out, 'neither Hume nor Gibbon had any doubt that it was the responsibility of the historian to act as a moral judge.'⁴

In the last period of his life, as the celebrated 'historian of the Roman empire', Gibbon turned 'with peculiar solicitude and attention'⁵ to the writing of another history, that of the historian himself. Both histories are to be seen as 'personal readings of the past',⁶ and the latter is vital to the interpretation of the former,

1. The Philosophical Works, vol. 4, pp. 388-9.

2. P.B. Craddock, The English Essays of Edward Gibbon. Oxford, 1972, p. 88. Gibbon suggested that 'they incline more to personal than social virtues.'

3. Lewis P. Curtis has claimed that the whole DF 'revolves around a formula' expressed in the three words: 'virtue, wisdom, and power'. ('Gibbon's Paradise Lost', in F.W. Hilles (ed.) The Age of Johnson. New Haven, 1949, p. 79). See for this characteristic expression, DF, xxxi, III, 376; liii, VI, 94, where it is paired with its characteristic antithesis 'vice and folly'.

4. 'Edward Gibbon: Historien - Philosophe', in Bowersock, op.cit., p. 173.

5. Sheffield, Advertisement to the First Edition of MW, London, 1796, I, iv.

6. See Roger J. Porter, 'Gibbon's Autobiography, Filling up the Silent Vacancy', Eighteenth-Century Studies, 8/Nr. 1, 1974, p. 6.; cf. Jordan, op.cit., p. 5.

since it traces the historical pilgrimage of the man behind the book. History after all, as Bury reminded readers of the Memoirs, 'is in the last resort somebody's image of the past, and the image is conditioned by the mind and experience of the person who forms it.'¹ It was, as Gibbon said, 'to illustrate...the history of my own mind' that he related the details of one crucial experience,² and his phrase applies in large measure to the Memoirs as a whole. Their value is enhanced by the fact that though they were put together after the author's 'conversion to the City and Empire',³ of Rome and the completion of his great work, they draw upon the journals which the young man conscientiously kept from the time he began turning over historical projects in his mind. 'I propose from this day, August 24, 1761, to keep an exact journal of my actions and studies'.⁴ Based on and incorporating much of the Journals,⁵ the Memoirs thus combine contemporary record and mature reflection on his growth and experience.

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1. Autobiography of Edward Gibbon, intr. by J.B. Bury. OUP 1907, (repr. 1935), xiv.
 2. Memoirs, p. 58.
 3. See Christopher Dawson's introduction to Everyman Edition of DF, London, 1957-60, xi ('His conversion to the Church may have been transitory and superficial, but his conversion to the City and Empire was profound and governed his whole life and work.')
 4. Cited in Sheffield's Advertisement, MW, 1796, I, vii.
 5. The various parts are edited as: Gibbon's Journal to January 28th, 1763. My Journal, I, II, III and EPHEMERIDES, D.M. Low, London, 1929 (here cited as JA); Le Journal de Gibbon à Lausanne, 17 Août, 1763-19 Avril 1764, Georges Bonnard, Lausanne, 1945 (JB); Gibbon's Journal from Geneva to Rome (20 Ap. to 2 Oct., 1764), Bonnard, London, 1961 (JC). Cf. also Miscellanea Gibboniana, which includes his 'Paris Journal' (JP), pp. 93-101, ed. G.R. de Beer, G.A. Bonnard and L. Junod, Lausanne, 1952.

At the beginning of a section which introduces a new stage in his life,¹ Gibbon wrote, 'The review of my moral and literary character is the most interesting to myself and to the public; and I may expatiate without reproach on my private studies since they have produced the public writings which alone can entitle me to the esteem and friendship of my readers.' With certain critical safeguards to be noted, the Memoirs may thus be read as a moral paradigmatic account of the historian's personal and literary development.

It was in his fifteenth year, we are told, that his 'free desultory reading' and 'indiscriminate appetite' settled into 'the historic line'.² This statement complements one made later in the Memoirs, and recorded in his Journal,³ 'I know by experience that from my early youth I aspired to the character of an historian.' The assertion looks like a conventional one, but the force of the emphatic 'know' is a personal refutation of a view then current which would disallow Gibbon's claim to a special vocation for history.⁴ In the Memoirs we are shown the ripening of this aspiration in his mind and experience and especially so when extracts from the journal reveal his consideration of worthy subjects for a history.

1. Memoirs, p. 89; chapter V in Bonnard's edition, marking his return from Lausanne to England in May 1758.
2. ibid., p. 41.
3. ibid., p. 119; JA, 14 April, 1781.
4. The context is: 'After his oracle Dr. Johnson, my friend Sir Joshua Reynolds denies all original genius, any natural propensity of the mind to one art or science rather than another. Without engaging in a metaphysical or rather verbal dispute, I know by experience...' 'The true genius,' said Johnson in the 'Life of Cowley', 'is a mind of large general powers accidentally determined to some particular direction.' (Lives of the Poets, World's Classics. OUP, 1906, vol. 1, p. 2.)

Gibbon thus perceived in what he later saw as 'this first period of my life',¹ an initial channeling of diffuse interests into a destined course; or, to use his own recurring metaphor, which as we can see places no stress on purely rational elements, a discrimination of his literary 'appetite'.² This redirection of interests to the study of history, he attributed, with a mixture of irony and plain truth, to a huge serialised compilation in which he became immersed: 'Since Philosophy has exploded all innate ideas and natural propensities, I must ascribe this choice to the assiduous perusal of the Universal history as the octavo volumes successively appeared.'³ This statement links up with that of his knowing by experience his special vocation for history. What Gibbon is saying is that if a new philosophic view will not allow him this vocation, then he must put it down to a voluminous and rather patchy set of books.⁴ However, while the reading of such histories might supply facts for the more conventional historian or chronicler of events, this material has later to be recreated in terms of moral experience for one who is to

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1. The period before he went up to Oxford; see Memoirs, p. 43 and cf. p. 46, the beginning of a new chapter.
 2. The metaphor continues with 'unripe taste', 'greedily devoured', 'devoured like so many novels', 'swallowed with the same voracious appetite', 'intellectual feast', 'undigested chaos' (ibid., pp. 41-3).
 3. An Universal History from the earliest accounts of time to the present appeared first in folio, then in 21 volumes octavo between 1747 and 1754. It was a joint enterprise both on the part of the authors and of the publishers. The edition I have used is dated London, 1779 (vol. I). The subtitle reads, 'Compiled from Original Sources'. Gibbon here refers to the 'Ancient Part'.
 4. Gibbon referred to it as 'an unequal work' (DF, xxv, III, 58, n. 142). His references to the 'Modern Part' in DF are often uncomplimentary and harsh, cf. vol. V, pp. 196, n. 433, 339, n. 24, 423, n. 204.

emerge as a 'philosophic historian'. It was clearly to the latter class that Gibbon, the ardent admirer of Tacitus and Hume, aspired. 'The part of an historian', he wrote when pondering his first serious topic, 'is as honourable as that of a mere chronologist or compiler of gazettes is contemptible.'¹

With the Universal History Gibbon bracketed the Ductor historicus as another of a small group of books which seemed to have turned his feet into a preordained path.² This was a treatise by Thomas Hearne, the extraordinary Oxford antiquary. Eccentric, malicious and unsociable, Hearne was a meticulous and indefatigable editor of English medieval historians, the scarcity of whose works Gibbon later deplored when recommending the Scottish historian John Pinkerton for this very task.³ While Hearne's book was intended as a beginner's guide to historical studies, its second volume gave an account of the writings of the historians of Greece and Rome, together with comments by critics.⁴ The significance of these two books is that at an early age they not only confirmed Gibbon's vocation for history, but also launched him on the study of those Greek and Roman historians whose works were available in English translation.⁵ These were Herodotus, through whom he was

1. 'Hints of some subjects for History', MW, V, 487.
2. Memoirs, pp. 41-2. Cf. also Jordan, 'Edward Gibbon: The Historian of the Roman Empire', in Bowersock, op.cit., p. 7.
3. 'Address recommending Mr. John Pinkerton', &c., MW, II, 707 ff. Here he wrote that Hearne's 'editions will always be recommended by their accuracy and use.' (For Hearne see D.C. Douglas, Oxford Scholars 1670-1730, 2nd ed. London, 1951, chap. IX).
4. The work came out in 1701, a 2nd edition (2 vols.) in 1704-5 and others followed. The first book, subtitled, A Short System of Universal History and an Introduction to the study of it might have stimulated Gibbon's early interest in chronology. The second book is An Introduction...wherein an Account is given of the Writings of the Ancient Historians, Greek and Roman, with the Judgement of the best Criticks upon them.
5. See Memoirs, pp. 41-2.

enabled to begin his serious study of history at the beginning, Xenophon, a historian he greatly admired,¹ Tacitus who became his model, and Procopius, on whom he realised so heavily in the middle chapters of The Decline and Fall.²

Before the end of his fifteenth year he reached the second milestone on what he later saw as the road to Rome. It is interesting that each significant stage in the historian's intellectual and moral development is firmly associated with a particular place: Putney, Oxford, Lausanne, Rome. This well-known incident is that of a summer visit to the Wiltshire home of a Tory squire, Mr. Hoare, where the boy found less delight in the beautiful countryside than in his discovery of 'a common book', the Continuation of Echard's Roman History.³ It proved to be, he said, 'my first introduction to the historic scenes which have since engaged so many years of my life.'⁵ This is made clear by the title of the Continuation: from Constantine to...the Taking of Constantinople by the Turks. 'To me', he wrote, 'the reigns of the successors of Constantine were absolutely new. I was immersed in the passage of the Goths

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1. 'The sage and heroic Xenophon', he calls him in quoting the Anabasis (DF, xxiv, II, 520, and see note 49: 'This pleasing work is original and authentic.')
 2. Mainly chaps. xxxix-xliiii. See Gibbon's account of Procopius and acknowledgement of his materials (DF, xl, IV, 224-6). He also wrote, "For the troubles of Africa, I neither have not desire another guide than Procopius, whose eye contemplated the image, and whose ear collected the reports, of the memorable events of his own times.' (xliiii, IV, 415, n.1).
 3. Lawrence Echard's Roman History came out in 5 volumes in the last years of the 17th and the early years of the 18th centuries. Its many reprints attest its popularity so that it could be said to be 'a common book'. Echard wrote the first 2 volumes but only revised the Continuation.
 4. Memoirs, p. 42

over the Danube when the summons of the dinner-bell reluctantly dragged me from my intellectual feast.'¹ In retrospect, the importance of this 'discovery' in the making of 'the historian of the Roman empire' became plain to him and he determined his readers should not miss its significance either. No dinner bell would dispel the irresistible appeal of those 'historic scenes', and the lad purchased without delay whatever books he could find on the Byzantine period. He then embarked on a quest for 'genuine sources' and 'ranged round the whole circle of Oriental history', reading all that was available in English on the Arabs, Persians, Tartars and Turks.²

Here in this first period of his life, we find, according to Gibbon's own recollection, all the elements of The Decline and Fall. Indeed this fact has been taken by one of his best-known biographers³ to show 'how deep was the sympathy that Gibbon had for his subject, and that there was a sort of pre-established harmony between his mind and the historical period he afterwards illustrated.' We see him not only absorbed in 'the historic scenes' and in the peoples which come alive in his History, but also launched on that tireless search for sources which made it an enduring monument to scholarship. 'I have always endeavoured to draw from the foundtain head', he could boast in the preface;⁴ 'my curiosity as well as my sense of duty has always

1. Memoirs, p. 42.

2. ibid., p. 43. See pp. 42-3 for names of some of these books and of maps and chronological works which brought some 'order of time and place' to an otherwise chaotic mass of information.

3. Cotter Morrison, Gibbon. London, 1878, p. 5. Recent interpretations, like Jordan's tend to be more sceptical. The Memoirs 'present a contrived, and sometimes misleading account of Gibbon's life'. (Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 7; cf. his chapter in Bowersock, op.cit, p. 7).

4. Preface of 1788, also in Bury, DF, 1909, Pref. xlv-xlvi. Gibbon had once intended a separate collection of the numerous authors from whom he had drawn his materials, but contented himself with repeating this earlier assurance in the 4th volume of the quarto edition.

urged me to study the originals.'¹ What then, beyond a certain maturity of mind and scholarship, could he need? The answer we discover from his letters, journals and Memoirs was a central unifying inspiration, later to be found in his vision of Rome.

Throughout Gibbon's writings we are often aware of argument by antithesis; a kind of internal dialogue or dialectic which appears on the surface in terms of sharpness of contrast. It sometimes related to persons or places in his own experience. Nowhere does this stand out more clearly than in his treatment of the next period of his life, with the strong contrast between barrenness and frustration at Oxford and fruitful growth and development at Lausanne. This element in Gibbon's account merits further analysis, for the light it can throw on the historian as moralist.

The beginning of a new chapter in Gibbon's life² brought neither the necessary maturity nor inspiration. His brief stay at Oxford remained to the end of his life a negative experience, 'the most idle and unprofitable time of my whole life'³ and the next step forward did not come till his removal to Lausanne. Why was this? It is perhaps best answered by his own statement, that even though adequate works were now available in all branches of learning, 'there still remains a material difference between a book and a professor.'⁴

1. His Vindication (1779) was largely a defence of this claim, 'that I had carefully examined all the original materials that could illustrate the subject.' (MW, IV, 591; and cf. 595).
2. It is in fact a new chapter (III) in version F of the Memoirs. 'My own introduction to the University of Oxford forms a new area in my life.' See Memoirs (ed. Bonnard), p. 46 and facing page.
3. ibid., p. 48.
4. ibid., p. 51.

Books there had been at his grandfather's house in Putney; but his reading had been wild and undisciplined, 'une debauché de lectures',¹ as he snatched from the shelf whatever title attracted his eye, while an indulgent aunt encouraged rather than checked 'a curiosity above the strength of a boy.'² This curiosity, still keen when he entered Oxford, had by then turned to history and specifically that of the period which he was to make peculiarly his own. What he now looked for from the university he made quite clear: discipline, a plan of study, personal direction, intellectual and moral guidance.³ All these Oxford failed to give. It did worse: it chilled the love of reading in this most bookish of men.⁴

Gibbon had entered Magdalen College, as he realised, not without 'capacity or application', and 'in the discipline of a well-constituted academy, under the guidance of skilful and vigilant professors', he would have advanced to the next stage of scholarship. Even 'folly as well as vice', he felt 'should have awakened the attention of my superiors, and my tender years would have justified a more than ordinary degree of restraint and discipline.' Instead, the unpardonable sin against this 'most precious season of Youth' was that he was allowed to waste his time with impunity.⁵ It is therefore not surprising that his account of his university days is the occasion for an extended indictment of this ancient seat of learning. He even contemplated a

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1. Michel Baridon, Edward Gibbon et le Mythe de Rome. Paris 1977, p. 30.
 2. Memoirs, p. 37.
 3. See Memoirs, ch. III, especially pp. 48-57. This was clear enough in retrospect, even allowing for Gibbon's special arrangement of his life for the Memoirs.
 4. 'Chilled' in his own word when referring to his renewed love of reading in Lausanne; see Memoirs, p. 71.
 5. See Memoirs, pp. 48, 57 and 54.

further criticism of the English universities,¹ not merely to justify his own hostile reaction, but also to express moral indignation at the abuse of learning.

Oxford cheated him of his expectations. It seemed to him to be characterised by professors who failed to lecture and tutors who neglected their students. It represented to Gibbon a dead end; and the antithesis with Lausanne can best be brought out by the juxtaposition of two comments. 'To the University of Oxford I acknowledge no obligation.' 'Such as I am in genius or learning or in manners, I owe my creation to Lausanne: It was in that school that the statue was discovered in the block of marble.'² One might almost translate it in terms of 'the two cities' so prominent in medieval historical thought:³ the city of God and the corrupt earthly city; Jerusalem and Babylon; or in Gibbon's later antithesis, Rome and Constantinople. In this early instance, Lausanne typified everything Oxford should have been. Lausanne stood for a moral approach: for toleration, illumination, progress through diligent study and above all, the guidance of a warm and perceptive tutor; Oxford for corruption and hypocritical Christian values: prejudice, ignorance, stagnation, idleness and negligent teachers.⁴ Jesus' indictment of the lawyers of his day could be read as Gibbon's condemnation of the dons of

1. *ibid.*, p. 48. He supported his remarks about the indolence of Oxford professors by a reference to Adam Smith's comment (*Wealth of Nations*, Bk V, ch. 1, Part iii, art. ii).
2. *ibid.*, pp. 48 and 86.
3. Notably in the title of Otto of Freising, a historian cited several times in *DF*: *The History of the Two Cities* ('*Chronica sive Historia de duabis Civitatibus*') tr. C.C. Mierow, N.Y. 1928.
4. For his reference to Oxford, see *Memoirs*, ch. III; for Lausanne, pp. 70, 74 and App. I, p. 209. Of Dr. Winchester, his second tutor, he wrote (p. 56) 'whose literary and moral character did not command the respect of the college.'

Oxford: 'Ye have taken away the key of knowledge; ye entered not in yourselves and them that were entering in ye hindered.'¹ To Gibbon, the free use of his grandfather's house had already, 'unlocked the door to a tolerable library.'² Once again, on entering Oxford, he admitted, 'a key was delivered into my hands which gave me the free use of a numerous and learned library.'³ But it did not prove a key to fruitful learning, since books were found to be no substitute for able teachers. Two modes of education are being contrasted: mechanical book learning lacking encouragement and personal direction, and hence without moral value; and guided study which was human, stimulating and challenging.

Two things, however, came out of Gibbon's abortive experience at Oxford. Ironically, it was the long vacation that gave the opportunity for a temporary revival of his taste for reading, anticipating that permanent revival when he finally quitted the 'English cloister'⁴ for the free atmosphere of Lausanne. Yet, to remind his reader that the university had done nothing to mature his mind, he added, 'but it was still the same blind and boyish taste for the pursuit of exotic history.'⁵ Frivolous and without moral discernment, his early pursuit of this sort of history had simply resulted in 'vague and multifarious reading' instead of teaching him 'to think,

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1. Lk. xi. 52. On Oxford in the first half of the 18th century, see e.g. V.H.H. Green, A History of Oxford University. London, 1974, especially chap. VI, 'The University in Decline', pp. 85-109.
 2. Memoirs, p. 37.
 3. ibid., p. 47.
 4. In Sketch C of the Memoirs, he wrote that had he remained at Oxford, his 'knowledge of the World would have been confined to an English Cloyster'. (Memoirs, App. I, 209). Cf. his reference (loc.cit.) to 'the monks of Oxford', to the clerical government of the university (p. 49) and its being 'an Ecclesiastical school (p. 57), all signifying narrowness and prejudice; 'Cambridge', he admitted, 'appears to have been less deeply infected with the vices of the Cloyster.' (p. 67).
 5. ibid., p. 55.

to write, or to act.'¹ The only illuminating principle he could discern in it was 'an early and rational application to the order of time and place' which he had found in tables of chronology and maps of ancient geography. This introduces an important organisational concept to be faced when he came to write his History and his eventual solution was to favour place and peoples rather than time. Recalling this solution in his Memoirs he wrote: 'It was not till after many designs and many trials, that I preferred, as I still prefer, the method of grouping my picture by nations; and the seeming neglect of Chronological order is surely compensated by the superior merits of interest and perspicuity.'² But at this early stage, the boy, overreaching himself in his effort to weigh various rival systems, lay awake trying to reconcile the Septuagint and the Hebrew computations.³

With the return of his desire for reading during his university vacation, he was again seduced by a teasing question of Oriental chronology which prompted a premature attempt at historical writing. His title, 'The Age of Sesostris' was, he thought, suggested by Voltaire's Age of Louis XIV which, as he ironically added, 'was new and popular.'⁴ Gibbon's description of himself as 'unprovided with original learning, unformed in the habits of thinking,' and his taste in books as 'still blind and boyish' is no doubt by way of explanation as to why he was misled by this 'new and popular' history. And thinking of his wish to meet the author in Lausanne, he wrote, 'whom I then rated above his real magnitude.'⁵ It was not in the manner of Voltaire that Gibbon would write his own work.

1. ibid., p. 43.

2. ibid., p. 179.

3. ibid., p. 43.

4. ibid., p. 55. The Siècle de Louis XIV appeared in 1751, an English translation the following year.

5. ibid., p. 83.

Like his Oxford experience as a whole, this chronological essay was a false start. Symbolically and finally it found its way to the fire in a general clearance twenty years later. Though questions of chronology continued to interest him¹ and were taken up in some of his early works,² the subject eventually fell into perspective as a sort of scaffolding for his own great reconstruction of a millenium of history. The earlier pre-occupation seen in Sesostris, was mechanical, unproductive, negative. Yet even in a negative way it taught him something in his historical development: both his own unreadiness for writing history and also the danger of trying to link the distant and doubtful chronologies of various ancient nations. 'At a riper age', he wrote, 'I no longer presume to connect the Greek, the Jewish, and the Egyptian antiquities which are lost in a distant cloud.' Then, with a significant comment on his attainment of historical maturity, he added, 'nor is this the only instance in which the belief and knowledge of the child are superseded by the more rational ignorance of the man.'³ It had become clear to him that moral categories were more enlightening than the temporal ones, which had proved inadequate.

A much more important event, or chain of events, arose out of his reading and reflection at this time. His perusal of Conyers

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1. As the acquisitions to his library testify. See Geoffrey Keynes, The Library of Edward Gibbon. A Catalogue of his Books. London, 1940.
 2. e.g. 'Les Principales Epoques de l'Histoire de la Grèce et de l'Egypte', (1758), a comparative table of Newton's Marsham's and Usher's chronologies, which prefaced 'Remarques Critiques sur le nouveau Système de Chronologie du Chevalier Newton'; 'Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Mèdes' (dated by Sheffield between 1758 and 1763). See MW, III, 150-169; 56-149.
 3. Memoirs, p. 56. Yet he considered his solution in Sesostris not 'devoid of ingenuity' for a lad of fifteen, and he looked back with some satisfaction on his treatment in the Essai of 'the early history of Rome and Newton's chronology.' (ibid., pp. 56, 104).

Middleton's Free Inquiry¹ into the historical evidence for early Christian miracles, and this author's exposure of saints and fathers, seemed to the young student to border on infidelity. At Oxford, though an infidel or heretic was regarded as a monster, the university took no care to guide its youthful members in the path of faith. It neglected the spiritual as much as the intellectual education of its undergraduates. 'Our venerable Mother had contrived to unite the opposite extremes of bigotry and indifference.'² Unarmed against such an assault, Gibbon was left to his own devices. While on the one hand Middleton could not destroy his 'implicit belief' in the continuance of miracles during the early Christian centuries, still on the other, the lad was 'unable to resist the weight of historical evidence' presented by the notorious Oxford controversialist. The tension between these antithetical forces he afterwards expressed by applying to his own dilemma a couplet of Vergil to the effect that Aeneas would find salvation from an unexpected source, a city of the enemy Greeks.³ This prediction, he said, he would now apply to himself, if he had 'persevered in the communion of Rome.' Thus Middleton, the heretic, was cast in the role of these hostile Greeks, indirectly rescuing Gibbon from what he then saw as the heresy of Protestantism.

In giving his account of the history of his mind throughout this experience, Gibbon felt morally bound to defend himself on two fronts: the one, his espousal of the Catholic faith for which he must offer a

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1. A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers which are supposed to have subsisted in the Christian Church from the Earliest Ages through successive Centuries. London, 1749. (The edition I have used is that in Miscellaneous Works. London, 1752, vol. I).
 2. Memoirs, p. 57.
 3. '...Vix prima salutis.
Quod minimum reris, Graia pandetur ab Urbe.' (Aeneid, vi, 96-7).
Memoirs, p. 58.

plausible explanation; the other, the appearance of inconsistency in view of his later abandonment of it. The former could be explained by his own inexperience and the negligence of his alma mater. Given his early fondness for 'religious disputation', as shown by the objections he had raised against those 'mysteries' in which his aunt believed, it was not surprising that the Oxford controversy over Middleton during Gibbon's residence at the university, should have attracted his attention. But it was surprising, he felt, that Oxford, basically 'an ecclesiastical school', should have failed to inculcate in her students 'the orthodox principles of religion'.¹ This almost 'incredible neglect'² left young Gibbon defenceless when confronted with historical evidence 'that we have no sufficient reason to believe upon the authority of the Fathers that any such (miraculous) powers were continued to the Church, after the days of the Apostles.'³

Gibbon's problem was the perennial one of finding an infallible guide as the custodian of absolute truth; one whose claims could be verified. Here Protestant rationality failed him. Neither the reasoning of Middleton nor that of his less convincing opponents⁴ provided a satisfying solution. For Gibbon the central question was

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1. ibid., p. 57. Gibbon thought of Oxford as 'an ecclesiastical school' both because of its clerical foundation and its continuing government by the clergy (see p. 49); and also because of the religious test and obligations required of its students (57). Thus he referred (p. 52) to 'the fellows or monks of my time'. See also above note 1 p. 10.
 2. Even to the point of refusing offers to remedy the situation. A note added by Gibbon explains: 'Ignorance, religious of undergraduates, who are soon ordained - complaint of Dr. Prideaux - Dr. Busby offered to endow two catechists - rejected by both Univers.' (The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon, ed. J. Murray. London, 1897, p. 83, note 22).
 3. Part of the lengthy title of Middleton's Inquiry.
 4. Gibbon referred to 'the two dullest' champions of primitive miracles being 'crowned with academic honours by the University of Oxford'. These were William Dodwell and Thomas Church, both awarded the D.D. for their answers to Middleton's Inquiry. See Memoirs, p. 58.

that of miracles. These seemed to be the test of truth, and the institution attested by miracles must surely have the truth. It was along these lines that he sought to vindicate his conclusion against the charge of absurdity. The evidence for subapostolic miracles was that of the saints and fathers. For this reason Middleton had given particular attention to exposing the character of these witnesses.¹ Young Gibbon, for his part, retained a reverence for what he thought to be the character, but what he later recognised as merely the names of these venerable persons. The only weapons he could oppose to Middleton's elegant style and free use of argument were prejudice and 'implicit belief'. But he was forced to concede, on Middleton's evidence, that the first four or five centuries, the period of these disputed miracles, saw the adoption of the main Catholic doctrines and practices. Since he accepted the miracles, he felt compelled to embrace the faith and practices that accompanied them: celibacy, monastic life, holy oil, invocation of saints and worship of relics, those very things which were later to provoke his moral indignation and which he exposed with such scorn in The Decline and Fall as superstitions and frauds.

In his present crisis of thought, however, the answer came in a very different form. He was offered by a fellow student translations of two of Bossuet's works, An Exposition of the Doctrine of the Catholic Church and The History of the Variations of the Protestant Churches. Bossuet was convincing to Gibbon at this stage, just as Bayle was a little later. The bishop applied a reductio ad absurdum to contradictory

1. Part III is outlined as follows in the plan of the Inquiry: 'To illustrate the particular characters and opinions of the Fathers, who attest these miracles.'

Protestant opinions just as Bayle's 'universal pyrrhonism' did to all religious opinions.¹ More than half a convert already, Gibbon was fully persuaded by Bossuet and, as he afterwards admitted, 'I surely fell by a noble hand.'² This is indeed high praise from the author of The Decline and Fall, but it is also a shrewd defence of his own fall.

When the fame of this work had, as he said, made his own name as notorious as that of Middleton, Gibbon felt that an additional justification of his youthful lapse was appropriate. After all it was a matter of moral consistency that was involved. Nowhere was this more so than at Oxford, the home of his most trenchant critics. Sensitive to the fact that his 'character stood exposed to the reproach of inconstancy,' he feared merciless treatment from these opponents who could add to his hated infidelity the rumour 'that the historian had formerly "turned Papist".'³

What was his second line of defence? It was simply to introduce at this point in his Memoirs, short sketches of two fellow travellers, Chillingworth and Bayle, who like himself, 'afterwards emerged from superstition to scepticism.'⁴ By tracing the development of these

1. Memoirs, p. 65.

2. ibid., p. 59.

3. ibid., p. 61. G.B. Hill suggested in his edition of the Memoirs (London, 1900), p. 73, n.4, that the reference may be to Boswell's record of a conversation with Johnson, 20 March, 1776 (Hill-Powell ed. of Life of Johnson, London, 1934, 6 vols., ii, 447-8) where the phrase 'turned Papist' is used of Gibbon. However, Gibbon may have heard from friends that his case was still much talked of at Oxford.

4. Memoirs, p. 62; see also pp. 62-5 for the account of Chillingworth and Bayle.

two eminent free thinkers, he could claim to be in good company. If his own earlier conversion could be shown to have been understandable and excusable, his ultimate solution of the two antithetical positions, could like theirs, also be seen to be a reasonable synthesis. Furthermore, there was even a touch of pride in the thought that his conversion to Catholicism had meant 'an honest sacrifice of interest to conscience.' And though in after years it seemed to him incredible that he should ever have believed in transubstantiation, yet this was no cause for shame, since the same sophistry which had deceived him in his callow youth, had also ensnared the mature minds of Chillingworth and Bayle.¹

In describing the process of his religious conversion, Gibbon stressed books and rational argument rather than any sense of spiritual or moral inadequacy, though, as he admitted, his life was marked by 'folly as well as vice.'² The conversion involved merely a 'sincere change of speculative opinions' without any 'lively sense of devotion or enthusiasm.'³ On the one occasion that he spoke of the matter to his close friend Lord Sheffield, he attributed this change to the writings of the Elizabethan Jesuit Robert Parsons, 'who, he said had urged all the best arguments in favour of the Roman Catholic religion.'⁴ We may well ask why Gibbon named Parsons in conversation with Sheffield but Bossuet in the Memoirs. Were both responsible in different ways?

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1. ibid., pp. 61-2. Also Sheffield's note in the Memoirs: 'He described the letter to his father, announcing his conversion, as written with all the pomp, the dignity, and self-satisfaction of a martyr.' (MW, I, 63).
 2. Memoirs, p. 57. Cf. the frequent phrase 'vice and folly' and its variants in DF and see chap. V., pp. 12ff, below.
 3. ibid., p. 68. Gibbon emphasised (pp.60-1) that there was no proselytism or even any conversation with a priest 'till my resolution from books, was absolutely fixed.'
 4. Sheffield's note to this effect follows the words 'fell by a noble hand', MW, I, 62n.

If so, why omit Parsons from his account and give all the credit to Bossuet? Perhaps the best explanation is along these lines. Parsons, like Chillingworth and Bayle, also a convert from Protestantism, would again seem to parallel Gibbon's own case up to this point. An Oxford man of brilliant, logical mind, who left his College position for conscience sake, Parsons was not only a prolific author but above all a daring adventurer and a potential martyr. Such a personality behind the polemical writer would surely appeal to the young seeker after truth, ready to risk fortune and even safety, which Gibbon sketches for us at this stage. There is a similar sense of alienation from his milieu common to both men. Even Gibbon's letter to his father seems 'to reflect the influence of Parsons rather than of Bossuet.'¹ Parsons, unlike Gibbon and his two intellectual prototypes, had 'persevered in the communion of Rome.'² This would not help when the story of the reconversion at Lausanne was to be explained. Whatever the relative importance of the various influences at Oxford, the outcome was decisive.

With his 'reason subdued', Gibbon decided immediately to enter the Church of Rome. It is very much a historian's conversion, the protagonists being Middleton and Bossuet, with Bayle retrospectively added for moral support.³ Church history was the field on which his own mental struggle was fought out. Since the episode in the Memoirs was introduced as illustrating the history of his own mind,⁴ we might expect the emphasis on intellectual and rational elements. In the same way he ascribed his reconversion to his maturer reading and

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1. E.G. Swain, Edward Gibbon the Historian. N.Y., 1966, p. 56.
 2. See Memoirs, p. 58 and page 17 above.
 3. Memoirs, pp. 63-5, where a condensed account of Bayle's career follows that of Chillingworth's.
 4. ibid., p. 58.

reasoning. This is what the author of the Memoirs wished to bring out, in his account of the making of the historian. His primary aim here, however, was apologetic. As a raw youth, untaught in religious matters, he sought answers to honest doubts; he found Bossuet at the critical moment and 'fell by a noble hand.' Nothing to be ashamed of in that. If later he could refer to the episode as his 'religious folly',¹ it was still a step on that same road to enlightenment taken by other men of intellectual eminence and moral courage. But he also described it as 'my childish revolt against the religion of my country.'² What, asks Jordan, was he actually revolting against? 'Gibbon was not a pious man, nor had he ever had a strong Protestant faith to lose. It was, I think, a revolt against his father, against Oxford, even, perhaps against English society'.³ It was, in fact, a mark of alienation.

Lausanne brought Gibbon into touch with the philosophes and it is their precursor Bayle whose career is read back into his account of his Oxford conversion. Thus the goal of Bayle's development is summed up for Gibbon in a saying he quoted at this point, 'I am most truly a protestant; for I protest indifferently against all systems, and all sects.'⁴ Here is a hint of the sort of 'protestantism' Gibbon was to arrive at soon afterwards in Lausanne.⁵ Thus, in his

1. ibid., p. 86.

2. ibid., App. I, p. 209.

3. 'Edward Gibbon: The Historian of the Roman Empire', in Bowersock, op.cit., p. 8.

4. Memoirs, p. 65.

5. ibid., pp. 73-4; cf. his reference to Bayle, p. 78 and Bonnard's notes, pp. 266-7. Concerning Gibbon's statement that Bayle 'balances all the false Religions in his sceptical scales', Bonnard comments, 'for Gibbon all religions were equally false, but by using this adjective he may have calculated that his readers would instinctively think he made an exception for the Christian religion and spare him their criticism.'

apologia, the Memoirs, he felt obliged to play down the Catholic conversion experience at Oxford and stress the new and antithetical experience at Lausanne, preparing his reader for that ultimate and all important synthesis in Rome. But the Oxford conversion contained an element of continuing significance. It had led him to a study of church history and this survived his progress through 'superstition to scepticism.'¹ Readers of The Decline and Fall can be thankful. Fascinated by his descriptions of heresies and Church Councils, they can appreciate Newman's assertion that Gibbon was 'the chief, perhaps the only English writer who has any claim to be considered an ecclesiastical historian.'² Nor did Newman merely assert this; his own use of frequent and lengthy quotations from Gibbon shows how fully he believed this critical judgement.³

Gibbon's mature education began with his banishment to Lausanne, which he gradually came to see as a liberating and germinal experience. It marked his deliverance from the 'port and prejudice' of 'the monks of Oxford' and from 'a knowledge of the world confined to an English cloister.' 'The path of learning' was now 'enlightened by a ray of philosophic freedom',⁴ as he entered a new world of lumières, philosophic historians, moralists, and genuine scholars dedicated to teaching and research. He would later claim that the useful and

1. ibid., p. 62 and see above, p. 20.

2. J.H. Newman, An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, 3rd ed., 1845, ed. for Penguin Books by J.M. Cameron, London, 1974, p. 72. Newman expressed much the same opinion in his chapter on 'Milman's View of Christianity' (Essays, Critical and Historical, London, 1872, II, 186.

3. See his Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine.

4. In the 'C' text of the Memoirs, Bonnard, App. I, 209.

systematic studies of his first eighteen or twenty months stood out in after years as the foundation of all his future improvements.¹ His love of reading returned, he knuckled down to the unwelcome stringencies which were even turned to good effect, and he had already gone a long way towards mastering the French language. Making allowance for a possible overemphasis in the Memoirs on the importance of Lausanne, this claim is attested by the solid reading recorded in the Journal and by the habits of independent study which were soundly established well before he began his Essai early in 1758. Apart from the purposeful plan of self-education into which his kindly tutor led him, he was aware of a broadening of outlook and a correction of prejudice. 'I insensibly lost the prejudices of an Englishman', he later wrote. There are signs that he even then began to recognise some of the advantages of his 'seclusion from English society', as he became aware of his progress in French and also of the removal of temptations to idleness which would have come from socialising with his fellow countrymen.²

It was, in fact, an extended extract he made of a book with the significant title, Histoire de l'église et de l'empire, that seemed to him to mark the watershed between his childish and his adult studies.³ The book is significant because the author, le Sueur, saw the importance of 'joining the history of the empire with that of the church' for the early centuries, a practice Gibbon was later to adopt. It was even more significant in our consideration of the historian as moralist because of its emphasis on decadence and corruption in church and

1. Memoirs, p. 74.

2. The references are to Memoirs, App. I, p. 210 ('C' text) and p. 71 ('B' text).

3. Gibbon originally wrote, 'rational studies' but altered it to 'manly studies'; see Memoirs, p. 71 & n. 4.

empire alike, and the stress it laid on moral decline.¹ But there is a significance also in the way Gibbon described his attitude to the exercise. It was 'a copious voluntary extract', and in a writer as word-conscious as Gibbon and in a work as carefully revised as the Memoirs, that it surely intended to draw our attention to the importance of this new stage in his moral growth. He was not unwillingly driven by his tutor into this lengthy assignment. It was his own choice to embark on this type of disciplined study of which his Extraits provide copious evidence.² And the fact struck him as a first sign of maturity.

His father's first concern in entrusting his erring son to the care of the Swiss pastor, Pavillard, was to remove him from the scene of his dangerous lapse³ and reclaim him 'from the errors of Popery'.⁴ The letters the pastor wrote to Mr. Gibbon reported on this matter as well as on the boy's academic progress and general well being. But

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1. Jean le Sueur's long annalistic history, 6 vols., Geneva, 1672-9, was re-edited with a continuation to A.D.1100 in the Amsterdam edition of 1730 which was in Gibbon's library. (See Keynes, op.cit.) See also S. Mazzarino, The End of the Ancient World (Eng. tr. London, 1966), pp. 110-2.
 2. 'Extraits raisonnés de mes lectures, recueil de mes observations et pièces détachées &c.' eventually ran to 335 pages of the 1814 edition of MW (V, 209-544).
 3. It was dangerous, because, as Gibbon pointed out from Blackstone (Memoirs, p. 61), it amounted to high treason.'
 4. Memoirs, p. 73. Daniel Pavillard, which Gibbon nearly always spelt 'Pavilliard', taught Latin and ancient history at the 'college' and history at the 'Académie' (now the University of Lausanne).

Pavillard never tried to force the issue and it was for his moderation as also for his friendship and guidance that Gibbon remembered him with affection in after life. He was also marked by a warm humanity, clear headedness, and a real skill in teaching, born of long experience. 'His innate benevolence', Gibbon felt, 'had assuaged the spirit of the church; he was rational because he was moderate.'¹ He also had a sound, if superficial knowledge of most branches of literature. With Pavillard's help, Gibbon was enabled to work out a programme of fruitful study so that, in sharp contrast to Oxford, he felt himself at each step, 'invigorated by the habits of application and method.'² So revolutionary was this change in attitude, that he even found early rising 'a salutary habit' by which to extend his time for study. At the end of a year and a half the result was evident. Though his learning deepened considerably during the remainder of his stay in Lausanne, yet the latter half of this initial period always stood out in his mind as 'the period of the most extraordinary diligence and rapid progress.'³

The signs of intellectual and moral growth can be observed in another set of contrasts. On the physical plane, the move to Lausanne at first appeared like an expulsion from Eden: leaving the ease and elegance of his Oxford apartment for a small, poorly furnished room,

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1. ibid., p. 72. Gibbon described Pavillard as 'a Calvinist Minister' (p. 69), but 'Calvinist' as Bonnard points out, here means no more than 'protestant', since 'Calvinism had long ceased to be the doctrine of the Canton of Berne,' (Notes, p. 270).
 2. 'C' text as printed by Sheffield adds, 'His prudence repressed and dissembled some youthful sallies; and as soon as I was confirmed in the habits of industry and temperance, he gave the reins into my own hands.' (see note pp. 72-3 in Bonnard's edition.)
 3. Memoirs, pp. 70, 74. He refers to 'the last eight months of the year 1755.'

unattractive and cold; the 'stately pile' of Magdalen College for 'an old inconvenient house' in 'an unhandsome town'. A touch of the dramatic clung to his first impression of the Oxford walks, which had suggested to him the shaded Attic banks frequented by Plato's disciplines. Over against this background was the romantically depressing picture of the 'narrow street' in Lausanne which was to be the scene of his exile.¹ Yet in later life this city, not Oxford, became his Athens for which he had developed 'that tender regard which seldom fails to arise in a liberal mind from the recollection of the place where it has discovered and exercised its growing powers.'²

That sentiment, however, had still to develop as the young man's mind discovered 'its growing powers'. At the start, the contrasts with Oxford life could only be felt as a reduction to straitened circumstances. Most humiliating for him was the fact that whereas his entry to Oxford had raised him 'from a boy to a man', Lausanne meant that, 'from a man I was again degraded to the dependence of a school-boy.'³ The mark of this dependence was the meagre pocket money, now handed to him by his tutor. At Oxford, he had enjoyed a very liberal allowance and an indefinite amount of credit among local shopkeepers; but this liberality, he came to see, had also proved a 'dangerous latitude'.⁴ In retrospect he was able to

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1. ibid., pp. 70 and 47.
 2. The reference is to the Emperor Julian who 'preserved for Athens that tender regard...'&c (DF xix, II, 270). 'Gibbon', says Low, 'clearly reveals his own long-cherished aspiration in these words, and now that he had come back to his own Athens, he only discovered new causes of gratitude.' (Edward Gibbon. London, 1937, p. 299).
 3. The references here are to pp. 46 and 70 of the Memoirs. In the latter instance Gibbon had first written 'reduced' but later changed it to 'degraded'.
 4. ibid., p. 47.

appreciate that had he been sent to Europe with a similar lavish provision, appropriate to his father's fortune, he might, as he later ironically put it, 'have returned with the same stock of language and science as our countrymen usually import from the Continent.'¹ He could be grateful for the indigence and constraints which forced him into a proper and profitable use of his time, as he served his apprenticeship under Pavillard. In this way he learnt to balance the mental and moral gains against the physical and material losses. In the new scale of values Lausanne began to establish itself as the scene of his greatest improvements.

What were the real credits which outweighed the apparent debits? Perhaps of first importance was to find an experienced supervisor who understood his pupil and won his affection; above all, one who knew just how far to lead him and when to let him find his own way. This was an inestimable benefit for which Gibbon was always grateful. In this situation so conducive to learning, he began to find his feet on the path of education. His private study of logic, here according to the system of de Crousaz, seems to have made him aware of yet another contrast with Oxford. There he had lamented the difference between a book and a professor, which had left him largely untaught. Here, at Lausanne, he found that, 'the book as well as the man... contributed the most effectually to my education.'² We can take this contrast a step further. Oxford had been marked by a lack of modern and relevant learning and by the presence of professors who failed to teach. In the Lausanne academy Gibbon found 'a professor of some learning and reputation' lecturing on a subject of great

1. ibid., pp. 70-71.

2. ibid., p. 73.

importance to him, namely, logic. Yet he discovered that he now preferred, as he said, to study 'in my closet, the lessons of his masters and my own reason.'¹ He was thus beginning to look beyond the professor to the primary sources, in this case Grotius and Puffendorf, and he was testing them against his own reason and experience.

In his Lausanne apprenticeship Gibbon had thus entered upon an entirely new system of education. In fact, he later saw it as consisting of two educations, one coming from teachers, the other more personal and more valuable, the product of his own efforts. This twofold education into which Lausanne initiated him, he held to be the experience of every man who rises above the common level. And, he added, borrowing the language of religious experience as a metaphor of intellectual enlightenment: 'He will not, like the fanatics of the last age, define the moment of grace; but he cannot forget the area of his life, in which his mind has expanded to its proper form and dimensions.'² 'The moment of grace' Gibbon did later venture to define when he told how the future 'historian of the Roman empire' discovered his great theme in 'the eternal city'; but that moment of illumination was not yet.

The expansion of his mind meant an escape from the narrowness and traditional nature of his former education within an orthodox Christian mould, and an initiation into more deistic morality and

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1. The professor was Beat-Philippe Vicat, professor of law, who had written and lectured on 'le droit naturel'. His 'masters', Grotius and Puffendorf Gibbon mentions with a critical comment (p. 78).
 2. Memoirs, p. 74, n. 4. ('C' Text).

tolerant humanism. Moderation and rationality he found in Pavillard; de Crousaz, he saw, 'had the rare merit of diffusing a more liberal spirit among the clergy and people of the Pays de Vaud.' Not only had he turned out several generations of students able both to think and to write, but his teaching had rescued the academy of Lausanne from Calvinistic prejudice.¹ Gibbon leaves us in no doubt that his own rescue from prejudice was a major part of his progress at Lausanne. He recognised the benefits of his removal from the prejudices of Oxford and of English society,² but he still had a long way to go. Even after philosophic duels with his friend Allamand, whom he described as a most skilful master, he still found himself 'the slave of education and prejudice.'³ Yet the process of liberation had begun. His close study of de Crousaz's logic introduced him to the art of reasoning and thus gave him 'the free command of an universal instrument.'⁴ This instrument he soon felt ready to apply to his 'Catholic opinions'.

The next stage in Gibbon's mental and religious development, he later maintained, stemmed largely from the application of these logical

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1. ibid., p. 73. Apart from his philosophic work, Crousaz was known in England for his Commentary upon the Pope's Four Epistles, printed in translation by Currl, London, 1738 (Garland reprints, 1975).
 2. See above chap. I, pp. 16, 17.
 3. Memoirs, p. 82. This philosophic 'fencing' partner, Francois-Louis Allamand, was the minister at Bex.
 4. In the Journal entry for 17 December 1775 (JA), Gibbon wrote: 'But what I esteem most of all from the perusal of De Crousaz's logic, I not only understood the principles of that science but formed my mind to a habit of thinking and reasoning I had no idea of before.'

principles he had imbibed and was thus, like his Oxford conversion, essentially an intellectual process. In his Memoirs, he was to use the earlier experience to illustrate the history of his mind; so in this case he wrote from Lausanne, though primarily to reassure a favourite aunt, 'I have in all my letters taken notice of the different movements of my mind, entirely Catholic when I came to Lausanne...and at last fixed for the Protestant'.¹ The change came about, he claimed, mainly through his 'private reflections', and in particular through his 'discovery of a philosophical argument against the doctrine of transubstantiation.' The Catholic creed, he said, 'disappeared like a dream' and he came to rest in a sort of minimal protestantism. It was 'protestant' in being not 'Romish',² but was in fact, the next step towards a broad and tolerant deism.³ But for the present, according to his own account, 'I suspended my religious inquiries,⁴ acquiescing with implicit belief in the tenets and mysteries which are adopted by the general consent of Catholics and Protestants.'⁵

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1. Letters, No. 3, Feb. 1755, I, 5.
 2. As proof of this, and as he told his aunt Porten in the letter referred to, he received the sacrament in the Church of Lausanne on Christmas Day 1754.
 3. It is impossible from the brief indications in the Memoirs to be precise about the degree and type of deism Gibbon may have reached at this point in his career. He had certainly moved in the direction of Bayle's position as already defined. See above, p. 23, n. 4 & 5 and notes 4 & 5.
 4. In an additional paragraph in the 'C' text, Gibbon wrote that his acquiescence in the common creed of protestantism continued till the latter part of 1759, when a reading of Grotius' De Veritate Religionis Christianae 'first engaged me in a regular tryal of the evidence of Christianity.' In this way he arrived at a position very much that of the historian of The Decline and Fall. For this paragraph, see Memoirs, App. I, p. 211.
 5. ibid., p. 74. He first wrote, 'which were adopted by the general consent of the Christian World.' (see notes 2 & 3 on that page).

This tolerant acquiescence was, however, disturbed by a visit to the famous pilgrimage attraction of Einsiedeln during a tour of Switzerland with Pavillard in the autumn of the following year.⁶ The Abbey was romantically set as if by magic in the middle of a wild and mountainous region. Gibbon's comment in the Memoirs is that it was indeed erected by magic, 'the potent magic of religion.' This comment stems from his impression recorded at the time in what he referred to as 'a French journal, which I dispatched to my father as a proof that my time and his money had not been misspent.'² The almost unparalleled riches and superstition of Einsiedeln made the greatest and most lasting impression on the young traveller. The place abounded in stories of miracles and even the historical guide book from which he drew much of his account for his father, seemed 'en un mot...le comble de Superstition.'³ The prodigious pilgrimage trade on which the fame and fortunes of the Abbey rested, enriched both it and its banker in Zurich. There was so much to record that Gibbon asked his father's pardon for his lengthy despatch, but, as he said by way of excuse, 'on ne trouve pas a chaque pas des lieux qui sont a la fois le comble de la Superstition, le Chef d'Oeuvre de la Politique Ecclesiastique et la honte de l'humanité.'⁴

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1. 1755. See Memoirs, pp. 80-81.
 2. ibid., p. 80. 'Journal de mon Voyage dans quelques endroits de la Suisse' is included in Miscellanea Gibboniana ed G.R. de Beer, et.al, Lausanne, 1952. See. pp. 28-33 on Einsiedeln. (Gibbon spells the name 'Einsidle' in the Swiss Journal and 'Einsidlen' in his Swiss History and the Memoirs.)
 3. 'Swiss Journal', in (Misc. Gibboniana), p. 28.
 4. ibid., p. 33.

In the account of this visit one discovers many of those religious antipathies so characteristic of 'the historian of the Roman Empire': pilgrimages, miracles, monks, martyrs,¹ adoration of the Virgin, ecclesiastical government, and the commercialisation of religion resulting in a lavish display of treasures, with an apparent indifference to surrounding poverty. It has been plausibly suggested that Pavillard, who seems to have been careful never to force protestant views on his young pupil, may have included this visit in their itinerary 'for reasons of propaganda.'² If so, the result was highly successful and enduring. Twelve years later this Einsiedeln experience supplied 'material for one of the liverlier notes' in Gibbon's Swiss History.³ The core of this note is: 'Le contraste de ses bâtimens magnifiques avec le pays affreux qui les entoure fait naître l'idée des palais enchantées qui paroisoient tout à coup au milieu des deserts. Le magie d'Einsidlen est celle de la superstition...'

The reaction at Einsiedeln thus forms an instructive supplement to the account of Gibbon's 'religious inquiries' at Lausanne. When he came to record it in his Memoirs, he recalled his 'astonishment at the profuse ostentation of riches in the poorest part of Europe', while 'the magic of superstition' then became that of religion itself. His final thrust was: 'The title and worship of the Mother of God

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1. 'Martyrs', around the time of the 9th century, Gibbon explains, included all ecclesiastics who met a violent death. (*ibid.*, p. 28).
 2. H.S. Offler, 'Edward Gibbon and the Making of his "Swiss History"', Durham University Journal, XLI, 1949, p. 71. Gibbon's break with the Catholic Church had, of course, been made the previous year; see above, p. 32 note 1. He attributed it to his own 'private reflexions (Memoirs, p. 73), but Pavillard's role, though quiet and unobtrusive, does seem significant.
 3. Offler, *op.cit.*, p. 71n. Gibbon's note is in his 'Introduction à l'histoire générale de la République des Suisses', MW, III, 273. See also text pp. 273-4.

provoked my indignation; and the lively naked image of superstition suggested to me, as in the same place it had done to Zuinglius, the most pressing argument for the reformation of the Church.'¹ How far these sentiments corresponded with those felt at the time of the original visit we cannot say, but in The Decline and Fall the 'indignation' is transferred to Nestorius when Gibbon examines the fifth-century controversy associated with that patriarch: 'The Blessed Virgin he revered as the mother of Christ, but his ears were offended with the rash and recent title of mother of God...a word, unknown to the apostles, unauthorised by the church, and which could only tend to alarm the timorous, to mislead the simple, to amuse the profane, and to justify, by a seeming resemblance, the old genealogy of Olympus.'² Finally, both these accretions, miraculous relics with other trappings of the ecclesiastical system, and the concept of 'the Mother of God', come up again in a chapter concerned with the Paulicians, who in their simplicity of worship and belief rejected them. Using once more the very phrase that had first recorded his reaction to Einsiedeln, Gibbon wrote: 'The objects, which had been transformed by the magic of superstition, appeared to the eyes of the Paulicians in their genuine and naked colours.'³

The Einsiedeln experience was thus impressed on Gibbon's mind and his writings from the earliest journal through his History to the closing autobiography. It encapsulates a permanent aspect of the moralist's stance: indignation at the abuse of religious power and

1. Memoirs, p. 80. There is also a thrust at Einsiedeln in his 'Antiquities of the House of Brunswick', MW, III, 508.

2. DF, xlvii, V, 119-120.

3. DF, liv, V, 119.

the exploitation of popular superstition.¹ The moralist's education had begun. This fact might have been only partly perceived by the youth of twenty, but his willing and active co-operation in the process, which at first seemed humiliating and distasteful, clearly shows that he was not by any means unaware of it. Even if we discount much of the carefully arranged picture presented in the Memoirs, regarding it as a tendency to read back into these early scenes what was in fact the wisdom of the mature man, there is still the contemporary evidence: Pavillard's letters reporting on his pupil's progress, his own letters to his family, and the journal entries. Above all there is the evidence of young Gibbon himself on his arrival home in May 1758. His development in the awareness of himself, of moral values and of the quality of human relationships, testifies to a steady progress during the years in Lausanne. Before he could qualify as a moralist, he needed to deepen his human understanding and to develop as a humanist. His sojourn in Switzerland during his formative years played a vital part in this process. Despite one or two minor revolts and partial failures, he could see at least the beginning of enlightenment.

1. He had already (Memoirs p. 79) in his reading of Giannone's Civil History of Naples, encountered as Low puts it, 'the seamy side of ecclesiastical history.' (Gibbon's Journal, Introduction, lxiii).

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Dillon-Smith, David, The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Department of History, University of Wollongong, 1982. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/1426>

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CHAPTER THREE

THE STATUE IN THE MARBLE

Gibbon's Essai sur l'étude de la littérature was a trial of strength, a first attempt, an initial survey of the ground. The author stresses this in his foreword. 'C'est un véritable essai que je produis au grand jour', were the opening words and in his third paragraph, 'C'est un essai, je le répète encore; ce n'est point un traité complet qu'on va lire'.¹ It was perhaps above all a writer's attempt at self-knowledge, which had developed steadily during his 'exile'. 'Je souhaiterois me connoître'. But there were other aims also, chief among them being, as we have seen, to defend his favourite study, the classics, against the contempt of the moderns.² And with his sharpened self-awareness, he could see and admit to a measure of honest pride behind the project. Defence of one's favourite study, is after all he confessed, 'L'amour-propre un peu déguisé'.³ Nor would Gibbon tolerate the banal excuse of authors that, in spite of themselves, they were forced by their friends to publish'.⁴ In his case, however, it was his father's persuasion to which he ultimately yielded. At first, he confessed, 'ma jeunesse, et un fonds d'orgueil qui me rend beaucoup plus sensible aux critiques qu'aux éloges, m'empêchèrent de goûter son project'.⁵ Eventually his reluctance gave way, and after Mallet's introduction to a London bookseller, the Essai was given to the public.

1. 'Avis Au Lecteur', MW, IV, pp. 5-6.
2. ibid., p. 5.
3. ibid., loc.cit.
4. Essai; introductory remarks 'in Mr. Gibbon's handwriting, on the back of the title-page of an interleaved copy of this Essay', printed by Sheffield, MW, IV, 1.
5. MW, loc.cit.

The carefully balanced sentence in the Memoirs which still admits the mixture of obedience and self-interest, is reminiscent of that which summed up his decision about Suzanne Curchod, but on this occasion with more obvious irony: 'I yielded to the authority of a parent, and complied like a pious son with the wish of my own heart'.¹ The filial piety expressed in the case of the love affair is here shown in the light of his own ambitions, which in the Spring of 1761 when the Essai was published, were 'influenced by the state of Europe'. Gibbon had hopes of attending the proposed Congress of Augsburg in the capacity of 'a Gentleman or a secretary'. His father believed that a proof of his son's literary talents, seconded, no doubt, by his command of French demonstrated in the Essai, would bring him to the notice of those who could secure him some official position. Hence it would seem that in this instance, the wishes of both father and son happily coincided.

Although the Essai was a beginning, a first and somewhat diffident attempt, it was in another sense, also a conclusion to what Gibbon saw as a most fruitful period of development in his life. It was a tangible result of the Lausanne period, the distillation of all his new programme of reading and research.² It was also a measure of his intellectual and moral maturity at this stage. The author of the Essai might seem far removed from the author of The Decline and Fall, which is certainly

1. Memoirs, p. 101.

2. The Essai, begun in Lausanne in March 1758 and completed in England early the following year, was published in 1761. (See JA, 8 March, 11 July, 1758; 11 February 1759, and for its revision, 23 April, 1761.) An English translation, often inaccurate, appeared in 1764. A facsimile of this, An Essay on the Study of Literature is published by Garland. N.Y., 1970.

not the work of a young man of twenty-two. But already the essential viewpoint is forming, the moral outlook is apparent and the basic authors are making their impression. When recalling the programme of deep and extensive reading undertaken at Lausanne, Gibbon saw certain elements which were guiding him towards his destined theme. Thus in seeking with his reader clues to his historical development, he selected three book which 'may have remotely contributed to form the historian of the Roman Empire'.¹

From the first of these he learnt how to handle a most important stylistic weapon, one which may be felt to be his most characteristic tone. Pascal's Lettres provinciales, which he tells us he read almost every year, taught him 'to manage the weapon to grave and temperate irony even on subjects of ecclesiastical solemnity'. The reader sensing an ironic overtone in the claim itself, might be tempted to amend 'even' to 'especially'. But in any case, all would probably agree that this weapon of irony was to be highly significant in the historian's language of moral comment.

The Abbé de la Bleterie's Life of Julian introduced Gibbon to one of his heroes, to whom he devoted three chapters of The Decline and Fall.² It has been felt that some of Julian's sentiments correspond

1. Memoirs, p. 79.

2. DF, chaps. xxii-xxiv. In February 1758 Gibbon also made an extract with critical comments of three of Bleterie's Memoirs on the succession of the Roman Empire and the prename of Augustus, (MW, III, 169-178).

so closely with Gibbon's that his words concerning that emperor may on occasions have an autobiographical ring.³ In the Life, he discovered something of the man and his times; and he was also led to a maturer consideration of miracles than that at the time of his Oxford conversion. This reconsideration prompted him to set down his thoughts on this subject. Having in mind a celebrated case of alleged divine intervention in the story of Julian, he later wrote, 'I should be glad to recover my first essay on the truth of the miracle which stopped the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem'.² Gibbon's account of this miracle in The Decline and Fall involves a careful assessment of the value of historical testimony.³ His weapon of irony on ecclesiastical subjects is seen in a remark in his Journal on Bleterie's moderate treatment of the pagan emperor. 'Quelle litterature, quel gout, et quelle elegance! J'ajoute et quelle moderation! Julien etoit payen et L'Abbé ne hait que les Jesuites.'⁴

The third formative book to which Gibbon pointed was Giannone's Civil History of Naples.⁵ This later became a leading source for his early attempt at historical writing, 'Critical Researches Concerning the Title of Charles VIII to the Crown of Naples'.⁶ What struck him in this first reading of Giannone was 'the progress and abuse of

1. e.g. Low's reference to the regard of both men for their 'Athens' (op.cit., p. 299) and Gibbon's remark (DF, xix, II, 305) 'If Julian could now revisit the capital of France &c.' which seems to correspond with Gibbon's own feeling. Cf. also several laudatory comments on Julian's character as an active philosopher, in chaps. xxii and xxiii of DF.
2. Memoirs, p. 79.
3. DF, xxiii, II, 457-460.
4. JB, 25^{me} Febrier, 1764.
5. Istoria civile del Regno di Napoli, 1723. Gibbon read it in a French translation published at la Haye in 1742.
6. MW, III, 206ff; see especially note to p. 217. See also JA 14 April, 1761.

sacerdotal power, and the revolutions of Italy in the darker ages.' The abuse of sacerdotal and papal power forms one of the prominent moral strains in The Decline and Fall, which is also built around a series of 'revolutions' of many types.² But regarding the former of these matters, Gibbon surely reflected sympathetically on the author who had been pursued by ecclesiastical hatred and vindictiveness. Writing later in his Lausanne Journal that 'la candeur, la penetration et la liberté de cet Excellent Jurisconsulte feront toujours estimer son ouvrage par tous les sage', he added, 'Les Ecclesiastiques ne sont pas de ce nombre'.³ Again, the tone of 'temperate irony', the admiration of qualities Gibbon himself espoused, candour, penetration and liberty, and a developing sense of moral outrage at ecclesiastical tyranny are seen.

Other books too made a direct contribution to the formation of the historian and the moralist. In the works of Grotius and Puffendorf he discovered 'the duties of a man, the rights of a citizen, the theory of justice...and the laws of peace and war'.⁴ Apart from his programme of reading in the Latin classics which included the historians, poets, orators and philosophers 'from the days of Plautus and Salust to the decline of the language and empire of Rome',⁵ Gibbon began the study of modern philosophical writings. After completing de Crousaz's Logic,

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1. Memoirs, p. 79. Gibbon altered his earlier 'Rome and Italy' to 'Italy'. Cf. the reference to the 'revolutions of Rome in the middle age' in the conclusion to DF (VII, 338) as one of those 'events most interesting in human annals', connected with the causes and effects of the fall of Rome.
 2. Such were revolutions in governments and rulers, in society, in religion and in the art of war.
 3. JB, 11^{me} Novembre, 1763. The History of Naples had, as Low remarks, 'introduced him to the seamy side of ecclesiastical history'. (JA, Intr. lxiii).
 4. Memoirs, p. 78. Of the theory of justice, he exclaimed, 'it is alas! a theory'.
 5. ibid., p. 76.

he tackled Locke and Bayle, a 'bridle' and a 'spur', he said 'to the curiosity of the young philosopher.'¹ The Treatise of Government introduced him to Whig principles, based as he came to see, rather on 'reason than experience'.² He found himself from time to time consulting the most interesting articles in Bayle's Dictionnaire historique et critique, which he called 'a vast repository of facts and opinions'.³ Nor did he fail to acknowledge his indebtedness to Bayle when writing his own History.⁴ But the greatest single influence at this stage in the making of the historian was without doubt that of Montesquieu, to whom he discharged his debt, first in the Essai, later in The Decline and Fall. In the former it was rather to L'Esprit des Lois, but in the latter he drew also upon the Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence. He recorded his delight while at Lausanne in the frequent perusal of this author, 'whose energy of style and boldness of hypothesis were powerful to awaken and stimulate the Genius of the Age.'⁵ Gibbon became, in fact, the first historian to take up Montesquieu's theories in his work.⁶

1. ibid., p. 78.

2. ibid., loc.cit.

3. ibid., p. 64.

4. There are about twenty-five references to Bayle in DF, nearly all to the Dictionnaire. See e.g. DF, cii, I, 195, n. 36; xii, I, 344, n. 10; xxix, III, 242, n. 34; xlv, V, 34, n. 71; lxix, VII, 229, n. 30.

5. Memoirs, p. 78.

6. See, e.g. Bonnard's note (JB, 224, n.3): 'Gibbon fut le premier historien a tirer parti de théories de Montesquieu et subit même son influence dans son style...' H.R.Trevor-Roper writes of Gibbon's discovery of Montesquieu at Lausanne: 'It was the greatest single inspiration of his years of study.' ('The Idea of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', in W.H.Barber et al., The Age of the Enlightenment. London, 1967, p. 420. This article appeared, with very minor but interesting alterations, in The Listener, 22 & 29 Oct., 1964, pp. 617-9; 657-9.)

The Essai, which is the fruit of all this study and reflection, was certainly the exploratory work of a young aspiring historian eager to test his skills and ideas and to find himself. Yet it is entitled to greater recognition than it has commonly received. It has suffered from its eclipse by the History. Even its author, who offered some of the soundest criticism, was unduly harsh in his judgement. Looking back from under the shadow of The Decline and Fall with its consummate texture of narrative and style, he was perhaps too conscious of the weaknesses of his first published work.

The initial reception, in Europe at least, was more than encouraging. 'I was delighted', wrote Gibbon, 'by the copious extracts, the warm commendations, and the flattering predictions of the Journals of France and Holland: and the next year (1762), a new Edition (I believe at Geneva) extended the fame or at least the circulation of the work.'¹ This made up somewhat for the 'cold indifference' and relative neglect in England. Gibbon felt this reaction natural enough in view of the foreign language, style and sentiments of the Essai. The Monthly Review which gave it little more than a page notice,² certainly took offence at its being written in French, somewhat unfortunate no doubt during hostilities with France, but still hoped to see the work translated as 'there is much merit and a variety of erudition' in it. The Critical Review in a much more lengthy and harsher criticism,³ which found fault with its sententiousness, its dogmatism and the validity of many of its views, nevertheless praised the author's 'erudition and

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1. Memoirs, p. 102 ('B' version; 'C' substituted 'warm applause and fair predictions of the Journals of Holland and Paris'. See The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon, ed. John Murray. London, 1896, p. 225).
 2. Vol. XXV, July-December, 1761, pp. 224-5.
 3. Vol. XII, 1762, Art. XI, pp. 57-65.

and ingenuity', 'taste and accuracy' of scholarship and his 'judicious observations' on the philosophic spirit. And the writer concluded by noting 'the promise derived from the merit of this essay, in which, if there is anything to blame, there is certainly much more to commend.'

The acclaim of the French journals, however, was not only flattering but most useful to the young author. Their 'copious extracts' from 'un des meilleurs ouvrages de littérature que l'Angleterre ait produits',¹ made Gibbon at once well known in France in the circle in which he most wanted to be known. It gave him entrée into the salons and literary society of Paris. When he visited the French capital after the conclusion of the war, he found that he 'carried a personal recommendation',² more valuable than the letters of recommendation given him by friends. In an interesting fragment of his Journal, entitled 'Idée generale de mon sejour 'à Paris',³ Gibbon explains this. 'Mon livre me fut très utile. J'eus même le plaisir de voir que c'etoit ma meilleur[e] recommandation & de sentir que je ne la devoir qu'à moi-même. Il y auroit de la vanité de rapporter même dans cet acrit, tous les eloges et toutes les politesses qu'il m'attira. Il decida de mon Etat; J'etois homme de Lettres reconnû, et ce n'est qu'à Paris que cette qualité forme un Etat'. The entry continues with an attempt at a just and impartial estimate which might be put alongside those in Gibbon's English Journal.⁴ 'Je n'ai point assez de vanité, pour

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1. Journal Etranger, Paris, Août, 1761, Art. VIII (Quoted in Bonnard, 'Gibbon's "Essai sur l'Etude de la Littérature" as judged by contemporary reviewers and by Gibbon himself', English Studies, XXXII. London, 1951, p. 145-153.)
 2. Memoirs, p. 102.
 3. Published as one of 'Trois Morceaux' of 'Le Séjour de Gibbon à Paris, du 28 Janvier au 9 Mai 1763', in Miscellanea Gibboniana, Lausanne, 1932, pp. 101-7. (See also above chap. I, p. 4 and n. 3.)
 4. JA, 8 April, 1762; cf. Letters, No. 35: I, 123-6. See above pp. 40-41; 45.

m'en croire exempt. J'avoue naturellement, qu'en retranchant les complimens et les hyperboles, je me flatte qu'ils (ces Eloges) etoient fondees sur quelque verité. La facon avantageuse dont la plupart des Journalistes en ont parle(.)¹ me persuade, qu'il fait honneur à un jeune auteur, et qu'il peut lui inspirer quelque confiance pour l'avenir.'²

Apart from its obviously derivative quality and its echoes of writers under whose inspiration it was written - 'Alas how fatal has been the imitation of Montesquieu', exclaimed its author³ - the main criticism of the Essai seems to have been its lack of sequence and connection. In his own later review in the Memoirs Gibbon did not deny what contemporary reviewers had long since perceived. 'Morceaux... faits séparément sans aucune relations réciproque', said the Journal Encyclopédique; and even the enthusiastic critic in the Journal Etranger had to attempt to present the author's main points, as he said, 'sans ordre et sans liaison comme dans le livre'.⁴ Gibbon admitted in his Memoirs that most of the chapters might be reversed or transposed without much loss of effect; that the Essai consisted of 'a number of

1. Here Gibbon noted the journals which had reviewed his Essai: 'The Monthly Review, The Critical Review, Journal des Savans, Journal Encyclopédique, Journal Etranger, Bibliothèque des Sciences et des Beaux Arts.'
2. Miscellanea Gibboniana, p. 105. Gibbon almost quotes his last sentence in his comment in the Memoirs that 'the Essay does credit to a young writer...'
3. Memoirs, p. 103. He is speaking particularly of the style but it can apply also to the content and ideas.
4. Cited in M. Baridon, Edward Gibbon et le Mythe de Rome. Paris, 1977 p. 268; and see note 5 on that page.

remarks without method or connection', and that its 'most serious defect...is a kind of obscurity abruptness'.¹ C.V. Wedgwood using Gibbon's criticism to damn his work out of his own mouth, goes even further in saying that, 'it is indeed difficult to make out exactly what thesis Gibbon was trying to prove.'²

Yet the thesis, if one may call it that, is plainly announced in Gibbon's Avis au Lecteur: 'Je voulois affranchir une science estimable, du mépris où elle languit aujourd'hui. Il est vrai qu'on lit encore les anciens, mais on ne les étudie plus.'³ And this attempted vindication of the classics takes up the greater part of the Essai, either in the form of arguments for their value in developing the mind and ordering the life, or of application and example. The work presents a plea for 'cette connaissance philosophique de l'antiquité',⁴ and despite some disjointedness and uncertainty of emphasis, this theme seems to dominate. There is certainly not the consummate texture and inevitable progression of The Decline and Fall and 'the historian of the Roman Empire' was very much aware of this as he looked back

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1. Memoirs, p. 103. Perhaps this 'obscurity' seemed half intentional and may have been what Rousseau had in mind when he said of Gibbon's manner in the Essai 'il s'y guinde'. (See above chap. II, p. 51 and note 1.)
 2. Edward Gibbon. London, 1955, p. 11.
 3. MW, IV, 5; and see above p. 1, note 2.
 4. This phrase occurs in chap. XLVII, p. 61.

over nearly thirty years to his apprentice effort. But in criticising its lack of plan and method, Gibbon was, Bonnard suggests, 'far from fair to his own early work. The chief fault of the Essai is not lack of method or connection, but lack of proportion. The sequence of ideas is, I submit, clear throughout.'¹ The careful reader must surely agree with Bonnard that any difficulty he may encounter in following this sequence 'is essentially due to some of the examples and illustrations being treated at such length that they are liable to draw the reader's attention away from the main trend of reasoning, but not to any lack of logical coherence in that trend itself.'² Indeed, despite his own severe criticism, Gibbon discovered in the retrospective view which he took in his Memoirs, a number of admirable points for which he could feel the same modest pride experienced by the young man in the Paris Journal.³ Probably his greatest satisfaction in his mature review of the Essai was that, 'Some dawning of a philosophic spirit enlightens the general remarks on the study of history and of man.'⁴

'L'esprit philosophique' is a key motif of the work, for it is in this spirit, the author maintained, that the whole study of literature should be undertaken. The term 'literature' is not formally defined in the Essai, but it could at that time be almost taken for granted amongst the type of public for whom Gibbon wrote. There is no indication

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1. 'Gibbon's "Essai sur l'Etude de la Littérature"', English Studies, XXXII, 1951, p. 151.
 2. ibid., p. 152.
 3. See above, p. 86.
 4. Memoirs, p. 104.

that it caused any ambiguity to readers or reviewers. It is quite clear that 'literature' throughout the work meant essentially that of ancient Greece and Rome, which 'a philosophic age', especially in France, had come to undervalue as somewhat irrelevant. The young scholar was registering his protest against this contemptuous neglect of the classical heritage; and its lasting value for the modern student is the main thesis he was trying to establish. 'I was ambitious of proving by my own example as well as by my precepts that all the faculties of the mind may be exercised and displayed by the study of ancient literature.'¹ Hence his examples are drawn mainly from Greece and Rome, though in all honesty he pointed out with reference to de Caylus's admiration of the young author's extensive reading, that his 'genuine and personal acquaintance was confined to the Latin classics.'² On the one hand there were the classical scholars, like those with whom Gibbon had been corresponding in Lausanne, heirs of the humanist tradition; on the other, some of the new scientists, here represented by d'Alembert's Discours préliminaire à l'Encyclopédie, who looked down on such men as mere 'Erudits'. The Academy of Inscriptions, guardian of classical learning, and an institution revered by Gibbon,³ had thus been degraded he said, 'to the lowest rank among the three royal societies of Paris.'⁴

1. Memoirs, p. 99.

2. ibid., p. 103.

3. For his admiration of the Academy, see Memoirs, p. 97. He never forgot the joy with which he exchanged 20 pounds for the first 20 volumes of the Academy's Memoirs. 'At a time when I assiduously frequented this school of ancient literature I thus expressed my opinion of a learned and various collection...'

4. Memoirs, p. 99.

In his Essai Gibbon thus appears as the champion of erudition as opposed to an indiscriminate adulation of the modern exact Newtonian sciences. Each age and country, he said, is attached to a particular science or discipline; in the France of his own day he saw natural science and mathematics on the throne, holding other intellectual pursuits in abject subjection.¹ In a later chapter of the Essai he reiterated this pretentious claim of the sciences as he approached a definition of 'l'esprit philosophique' by way of a warning as to what it is not. Some want to identify it with geometry, 'cette reine imperieuse, qui non contente de regner, proscriit ses soeurs et declare tout raisonnement peu digne de ce nom, s'il ne roule pas sur des lignes et sur des nombres.'² But for Gibbon, a study worthy of an able man would be to trace that revolution in religions, governments and manners which have successively bewildered, devastated and corrupted mankind.³ This emphasises moral categories, in the Humean sense, as against physical and mechanistic ones. The moral and ethical approach to history also asserts itself at several points in the Essai just as it did a little later when Gibbon was weighing certain attractive historical subjects which seemed to display nobility and corruption, and which in this way presented useful lessons.⁴ In the Essai, the young author who had already rejected the habit of rigid mathematical demonstration as fatal to those 'finer feelings of moral evidence'

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1. See Essai, chap. II, p. 16 and quotation from Fréret in Gibbon's note.
 2. Chap. XLV, p. 58.
 3. ibid., chap. II, p. 17.
 4. The Swiss and the Florentine subjects, he wrote in his Journal, contained 'great lessons' and 'both subjects are perhaps equally instructive'. (Memoirs, p. 122 records the Journal entry for 26 July, 1762, where, however, 'useful' replaces 'instructive'.

by which our lives must be governed,¹ explicitly proclaimed his alienation from the ruling intellectual culture of his day.

In the earlier chapters of the Essai Gibbon presented his view of 'the two cultures'.² The pursuit of the 'Belles-Lettres' had been revived and cultivated by the Renaissance humanists; in more recent times these studies had been in decline and had received their mortal blow in the dispute of the ancients and the moderns. At present, said Gibbon, it is the fashion to ignore and despise classical learning,³ though not all great scientists have been opposed to humane studies.⁴ However, he felt, living as we do in another age and under other skies from the ancients, we necessarily miss their beauties unless we can first recapture their point of view. Only a circumstantial knowledge, 'connaissance détaillée', of their times can achieve this. Horace and Pliny are almost unintelligible to any reader who has not learnt to live and think like the Romans. Here we see the historian as he was later to appear in his toga.⁵ In the battle of the ancients and moderns, it is easy to see where Gibbon stood.

In arriving at an understanding of these ancient writers we are dependent on the help of the critic. If Aristotle, 'the father of criticism', brought light into the shadows of nature and art, critics

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1. Memoirs, p. 78.
 2. C.P. Snow would probably have seen it as foreshadowing the current split in the world of learning.
 3. Essai, VI, 19 and III, 17.
 4. Gibbon cited the examples of Newton, Gassendi and Leibnitz (VII, 21-2).
 5. Essai, XVI. Other critics have remarked and all thoughtful readers have noticed what Bury pointed out about Gibbon 'as the stylist, who never lays aside his toga when he takes up his pen.' (DF, 1909 ed. Introd. I, vii). But, of course it is not in his style alone that Gibbon presents a Roman appearance.

have perfected their art during the intervening years. Yet they still disagree as to their real object. To Gibbon it is 'l'art de juger des écrits et des écrivains, ce qu'ils ont dit s'ils l'ont bien dit, s'ils ont dit vrai'.¹ There are three areas of criticism. The first, the province of 'critiques grammairiens', includes grammar, the knowledge of languages and manuscripts, recognition of genuine works and the restoration of true readings. The second, the province of 'critiques rhéteurs' covers poetry and eloquence. The third, which is very extensive and deals with the examination and criticism of facts, is the concern of 'critiques historiens'.² The exclusive pretensions of the first class of critic Gibbon considered to have been prejudicial not only to their own work but also to criticism in general. He himself had already shown acute perception in this field with his suggested readings in his Latin correspondence with Breitinger,³ and was later to do so as a mature historian, notably in the emendation which secured Porson's support against his clerical adversary, Travis.⁴ But he showed in the Essai that he knew the limits of this branch of criticism and did not mistake a subsidiary part for the whole. Criticism, then, is concerned not only with what writers have actually said, nor how well they may have said it, but also with the truth of their statements. In an interesting note on the critic's task in this matter, Gibbon added that it was confined to questions of historic truth, to the

1. Essai, XXIII, p. 38.

2. Chap. XXIII, p. 37-8.

3. 'I proposed my interpretations and amendments', he said of his correspondence with Breitinger, while his substitution of otio for odio, in a letter to Crevier, has since been verified by manuscript evidence. See Memoirs, p. 80 and Letters, I, App. I, p. 390.

2. See Memoirs, p. 174; DF, V, III, n. 17; also S.T. McCloy, Gibbon's Antagonism to Christianity. North Carolina, 1933, pp. 133-142. Travis's Letters to Edward Gibbon, Esq. is republished as Gibboniana XIII (Garland Publishing, 1974.)

truth of their evidence, not that of their opinions, which is rather the concern of logic.¹

Yet criticism has its own logic. Once again Gibbon referred to that trend of thought which praises the logic of geometry. It is, he held, 'plus glorieux aux sciences de développer ou de perfectionner l'homme, que de reculer les bornes de l'univers'.² But cannot criticism share the logical claim of mathematics? Indeed it has more to offer. Geometry is concerned only with demonstrations peculiar to itself; criticism, on the other hand, weighs the different degree of probability. And, he concluded, in a statement reminiscent of that about 'moral evidence' determining 'the actions and opinions of our lives', 'c'est en les comparant que nous réglons tous les jours nos actions, que nous décidons souvent de notre sort'.³

'Balayons les vraisemblances critiques', Gibbon added as he proceeded to give an example of the superiority of classical studies over mathematical demonstration in the training of the mind.⁴ By way of caution against the current 'Pirrhonisme historique', at the same time useful but also dangerous, he introduced his example of the historical controversy concerning a disputed treaty between Rome and Carthage about which the report of an exact and enlightened ancient historian⁵

1. *Essai*, XXII and note p. 38.

2. *ibid.*, XXVI, p.39-40.

3. *ibid.*, XXVI, p. 40.

4. *ibid.*, chaps. XXVI-XXXIII, pp. 40-45.

5. Polybius, 'historien exact et éclairé'. Gibbon may have been influenced by de Crousaz's classic refutation of Huet's pyrrhonism.

had encountered modern scepticism. Gibbon offered his own explanation in an attempt to reconcile the ancient account with the view of historians like M. Beaufort, a scholar with whom he discussed the early centuries of Rome in his journey home to England. But his main concern in this lengthy example in defence of 'a useful and interesting history' was as he said, to show the delicacy of such critical investigations, in which the object is not to produce demonstrations, 'Mais de comparer le poids des vraisemblances opposées'.¹ The exercise of the critical faculty, weighing probabilities in such a case, is of the greatest value in training, not only the mind for thinking, but also the person himself for living - 'développer ou perfectionner l'homme'.

In the business of criticism, as in other concerns of the Essai we cannot miss an emphasis on what Hume designated 'moral' as distinct from 'physical' subjects.² The materials of criticism, according to Gibbon are, 'Tout ce qu'ont été les hommes, tout ce que le génie a créé, tout ce que la raison a pesé, tout ce que le travail a recueilli.'³ As we follow the 'littérateur' into his study, says Gibbon, we see him surrounded in a well stocked library by the works of every age; his mind is enlightened but not overburdened. His diligent research may lead to the critics' hypotheses being either confirmed or overthrown. At this point, 'le travail de l'érudit est achevé. Le philosophe de nos jours s'y arrête et loue la mémoire du compilateur. Celui-ci en est

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1. Essai, XXXIV, p. 45. DF abounds in references to the probability or improbability of events, the 'internal probability' of the core of an embellished story, etc..
 2. See above chap. I, p. 2, n. 5.
 3. Essai, XXIV, p. 38.

quelquefois la dupe, et prend les matériaux pour l'edifice.'¹ As was clear to the author of The Decline and Fall, which he more than once likened to a great edifice,² one must not mistake the scholar's collection of materials for the building itself. No, 'le vrai critique sent que sa tâche ne fait que commencer. Il pese, il combine, il doute, il décide. Exact et impartial, il ne se rend qu'à la raison, ou à l'autorité qui est la raison des faits. C'est-à-dire, l'autorité combinée avec l'expérience.'³ Here is an interesting preview of 'the historian of the Roman Empire' at work on his own edifice.

Since it falls to the critic to judge writers as to whether 'ils ont dit vrai', what is the measure of an author's responsibility to truth? 'Can the poet deviate from historical truth?', Gibbon asked.⁴ The lawgiver of criticism, Horace, we are reminded,⁵ pronounced that the poet ought to present his heroes just as history has made them known to us. But, Gibbon asked, 'Shall we then reduce the poet to the role of a cold annalist?' The mere annalist, like the chronicler of events did not rank high in Gibbon's opinion. He tended to be a dull fellow not worthy of the esteem due to the 'philosophic historian'. Hence the use of such expressions as 'barren annals' in The Decline and Fall.⁶ The aim of poetry is to charm, to move and to elevate

1. ibid., XXIV, p. 39.

2. e.g. in a letter to Lord Sheffield, No. 642, 20/1/87; III, 59.

3. Essai, XXV and note p. 39.

4. ibid., XXXVI.

5. Gibbon quotes from Ars Poetica, V, 119 et seq.

6. e.g. xxxviii, IV, 152, lxii, VI, 475. Cf. also the remark in 'Hints' (MW, V, 487) that 'the part of an historian is as honourable as that of a mere chronicler or compiler of gazettes is contemptible.' This corresponds with the superficial admiration of 'le philosophe de nos jours' for the 'compilateur' (see above p. 95-6 and note 1.)

the mind. Laws must be seen only as aids to these purposes not as restricting them. We have seen philosophy bristling with demonstrations, hardly daring to admit accepted opinions. Yet poetry to be pleasing must rely on them.¹ Poets are not as bound by chronology as the historian, though glaring anachronisms may offend us.² Poets in writing their history may be pardoned for presenting it as it ought to have been rather than as it really was. An interesting reflection this as far as the moralist is concerned. But even the poet, who may take liberties with historical truth, must not tamper with moral truth. Inconsistencies of character are inadmissible. We cannot accept, even from the greatest poets, a cowardly Caesar or a virtuous Cataline.³

The Essai contains many interesting ideas on the nature and methods of the historian, ideas which reflect the author's wide and thoughtful reading. Basic to the whole discussion is the nature of 'the philosophic spirit' which must illuminate the historian and the man of letters. There is, said Gibbon, nothing more talked of, yet nothing rarer or less well known than 'l'esprit philosophique'. Yet it is more important than discernment. Writers assume that it breathes through their work and that it is the characteristic feature of our own age. What is this spirit? First of all, Gibbon pointed out, it is not to be found in intellectual novelty, in attacking every prevailing

1. Essai, XXXVII.

2. ibid., p. 47. 'Les anachronismes d'Ovide nous déplaisent. La vérité y est corrompue sans être embellie.'

3. ibid., XXXVIII.

opinion; nor, as some held, is it to be equated with mathematics, which sees all science in terms of lines and numbers. Not for one moment, Gibbon insisted, must we forget our great debt to mathematics; even its errors have sometimes pointed the way to truth. But this 'esprit philosophique' is wider and more universal in its operation. It consists in getting back to the simplest ideas and in combining first principles.¹ It enables the possessor, as if from a more elevated vantage point, to take not only an exact, but also a more extensive view. One is reminded of Gibbon's words regarding the rapid and short-lived series of Byzantine emperors. 'A being of the nature of man, endowed with the same faculties, but with a longer measure of existence, would cast down a smile of pity and contempt on the crimes and follies of human ambition...It is thus that the experience of history exalts and enlarges the horizon of our intellectual view.'² This faculty, displayed by a few geniuses like Cicero, Tacitus, Bacon, Leibnitz, Bayle, Fontenelle and Montesquieu, is not formed by study: it is a gift of heaven. Yet the true study of literature, this habit of becoming in turn a Greek, a Roman, a disciple of Zeno or of Epicurus, is most appropriate for developing and exercising it.³

Here we arrive at a major theme of the Essai. The study of literature, the ability to get inside the skin of different people in different periods, is the means whereby the truly philosophic spirit

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1. Chaps. XLIV-XLVI. ('à saisir et à combiner les premiers principes.' p. 58). For the 'idées simples' and 'premiers principes' as a reflection of Malbranche see Baridon, op.cit., p. 279. See also p. 100 below.
 2. DF, xlviii, V, 258-9.
 3. See Essai, chap. XLVII, headed 'Le secours qu'il peut tirer de la littérature.'

can discover those essential qualities which make persons and nations what they are. Such a spirit can perceive, throughout the infinite variety of minds, a general conformity amongst those whose century, country and religion have inspired an almost identical way of contemplating the same objects. Even those minds most free from prejudice do not know how to rid themselves of it completely. And in his own case, Gibbon was able to observe a gradual freedom from prejudice as a measure of his moral development.¹

What a spectacle, he exclaimed, opens up before a truly philosophic genius: the most absurd opinions held by the most enlightened nations, and barbarians arriving at the most sublime truths;² the sources of morals everywhere the same yet the views of contentious metaphysics everywhere different.³ In this way, said Gibbon, we may learn not to be astonished at what appears to us most absurd, and often to challenge what seems the best established fact.⁴ Without such a philosophic knowledge of antiquity we would do mankind too much honour: we should be too little aware of the rule of custom, and continually confuse the incredible with the absurd. The Romans were enlightened; yet these same Romans were not scandalised at seeing Caesar unite in his person, a god, a priest and an atheist.⁵

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1. See above, chap. I, p. 31 (cf. Memoirs, pp. 73, 82); and chap. II, p. 57-8 which shows Gibbon's triumph over an unfounded prejudice against his stepmother.
 2. In DF we see Gibbon's opposition not to the 'barbarian' nations as such, but to the spirit of barbarism wherever found.
 3. Essai, XLVI-XLVII.
 4. ibid., XLVII, p. 61 ('Nous y apprendrions non seulement à avouer, mais à sentir la force des préjuges, à ne nous étonner jamais de ce qui nous paroît le plus absurde, et à nous défier souvent de ce qui nous semble le mieux établi'.)
 5. ibid., loc.cit., 'Les Romains étoient éclairés; cependant ces mêmes Romains ne furent pas choqués de voir réunir dans la personne de César un Dieu, un prêtre et un Athée.' (See also Gibbon's note on 'athée', p. 61.)

Gibbon was scandalised at such behaviour, as can be seen. His comments, in the Essai,¹ on the Roman people with their superstition, their double standards of morality, their ferocity and cruelty, are significant in view of similar remarks in The Decline and Fall.²

The 'esprit philosophique' is a key to the writing of history as Gibbon saw it. His definition, with its 'idées simples' and 'premiers principes', is as Baridon points out, an echo of Malebranche, whose disciple and correspondent, de Crousaz, he suggests may have passed it on to Gibbon through his Logique.³ Whatever the immediate source, the concept became a vital principle for the young historian: 'Il s'agit pour l'historien Philosophe de "commencer par les choses les plus simples et les plus faciles" comme le voulait Malebranche: confronté à la foule des éléments qui lui fournissent ses sources, il doit remonter vers les idées simples, "les principes" qui pourront y introduire un ordre intelligible'.⁴ The philosophic historian is thus enabled to impose on a multitude of facts and events a rational order which is not intrinsic to them.

The Essai is primarily a defence of erudition, but erudition under the guiding light of 'l'esprit philosophique'. The two positions stood opposed in the 'modern' thought of eighteenth-century France. The

1. Chaps. LI, pp. 65-6 and L, p. 64.

2. See e.g. DF, lx, IV, 234-5; lxix, VII, 221, 228-9; lxx, VII, 307; lxxi, VII, 326-9.

3. Baridon, op.cit., p. 279. ('"Les idées simples", "les premiers principes", autant de concepts clefs de cartesianisme sur lesquels Malebranche revient sans cesse dans le Livre VI de la Reserche de la Vérité, et que Crousaz...avait mis en bonne place dans son traite de logique.')

4. ibid., pp. 279-280.

Encyclopédie article 'Philosophie', which Gibbon must surely have used, as we know he used that on 'Erudition',¹ sets the one against the other.² Gibbon found, or at least was seeking, a resolution, a synthesis. This comes out especially in his treatment of the historian's use of facts and of ancient learning.

What then is history for the philosophic historian? In the chapter headed 'L'histoire est la science des causes et des effets', Gibbon declared, 'L'histoire est pour un esprit philosophique, ce qu'étoit le jeu pour le Marquis de Dangeau. Il voyoit un systeme, des rapports, une suite, là, où les autres ne discernoient que les caprices de la fortune. Cette science est pour lui celle des causes et des effets'.³ Yet while this search for causes is a mark of the philosophic historian, his concern is not with particular, but rather with general and determinate causes.⁴ The historian is confronted with facts. But there are facts and facts; and the philosophic historian must know how to select and handle them.⁵ Among the multitude of facts, the majority prove nothing more than that they are facts. There are others which may be used in drawing a partial conclusion; from them can be judged the motives of an action or traits of character: they throw light on a link in the chain. The really significant facts which dominate the general system

1. Essai, p. 21. n. 1 refers the reader to this article by d'Alembert. Part of the note reads, 'Mais je voudrais, qu'après avoir reconnu qu'un érudit peut avoir de goût, des vues, de la finesse dans l'esprit, (1) ils ne se servissent pas de ce terms pour désigner un servile admirateur des anciens, d'autant plus aveugle qu'il y a tout vu, hors leurs graces et leurs beautés.'
2. See art. 'PHILOSOPHIE' e.g. 'Le plus grand philosophe est celui qui rend compte du plus grand nombre de choses: l'érudition par ce moyen n'est plus confondue avec la philosophie.'
3. Essai, XLVIII, p. 63.
4. ibid., LV, Causes générales mais déterminées; and see below, chap. III, pp. 105-7.
5. Essai, XLIX, 'Règles pour choisir les faits'.

and give rise to springs of action are rare and it is even rarer to find a person who can distinguish between these kinds of facts.¹

We must beware, however, of systems and of fitting facts into pre-conceived hypotheses. 'Déférez plutôt aux faits qui viennent d'eux mêmes vous former un système, qu'à ceux que vous découvrez après avoir conçu ce système.'² 'There would be fewer dead histories', says Low, 'if this simple advice had been more often remembered.'³

Even trivial facts can be of real consequence, more revealing than brilliant actions.⁴ Gibbon claims this to be true of centuries, of nations and of individuals: of Alexander in the tent of Darius in contrast to Alexander on the field of battle. It is also true of those mundane circumstances which display the ferocity of the Roman disposition, such as their condemnation of an unfortunate victim to suffer in the amphitheatre, just as much as the strangling of a royal captive at the foot of the Capitol. These were the barbarities of an enlightened people which were to come up for moral censure in The Decline and Fall. In trivial acts, Gibbon points out, there is no occasion for disguise; hence their value for the philosophic historian. To ascertain whether virtue was triumphant in a particular people in a particular period, he would look at their actions rather than their speeches.⁵ In such observations we can study the growth of the historian

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1. ibid., loc.cit. Encyclopédie, art. 'PHILOSOPHIE', points out: 'La connaissance des faits est sans contredit utile, elle est même un préalable indispensable à leur explication; mais être philosophe ce n'est pas simplement avoir beaucoup vu et beaucoup lu...c'est avoir des principes solides et surtout une bonne méthode pour rendre raison de ces faits et en tirer de légitimes conséquences...'
 2. Essai, I, p. 64.
 3. Edward Gibbon, p. 104.
 4. 'Préférez souvent les petits traits aux faits brillants.' (loc.cit.)
 5. 'J'observe plutôt ses actions que ses discours.' (loc.cit.)

as moralist. It comes out in the Essai through precept, through historical example and especially through the description of a people's manners. Indeed, in bringing out a moral comparison, Gibbon very deliberately chose the court of Tiberius because at that time, he said, vice was at its height.¹ In that age of the emperors, he noted a few chapters further on, a servile world bestowed the title of gods on monsters unworthy of the title of men, and called these monsters benefactors of mankind.²

Since apparently insignificant matters can be so revealing, the historian needs great perception in selecting his facts. Without this sense of proportion and deeper significance, he is likely to miss a unique trait simply in order to daze us with the sound of a battle. It is once again a question of the philosophic spirit: 'Si les philosophes ne sont pas toujours historiens, il seroit du moins à souhaiter que les historiens fussent philosophes.'³ The only writer Gibbon knew who came up to his idea of the philosophic historian was Tacitus. In this regard Livy, interesting as he is, cannot be compared with him. The essential difference is between writing history 'en rhéteur' and writing it 'en philosophe'. Not that Tacitus was ignorant of the language of the passions or Livy ignorant of that of reason. It is all a question of the purpose which the appeal of eloquence to the heart is made to serve. With Livy, according to Gibbon, the aim was

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1. Essai, LI, 65.
 2. ibid., LXV, 77.
 3. ibid., LII, 66.

to please rather than to instruct; with Tacitus it was to bring out the connection between events and to fill the soul with the wisest lessons.¹ The contrast between the two can be seen also as that between 'physical' and 'moral' causes,² between mere external situation and philosophical penetration: 'Je gravis sur les Alpes avec Annibal; mais j'assiste au conseil de Tibère'.³ Livy can describe, in a very affecting manner, the abuse of power, the desire for vengeance, the love of liberty and the overthrow of tyranny, but completely forgets to reveal the nature of the laws in question, the character of the officials concerned, their failings, and their conformity with the spirit of the Roman people, with their own order and with their ambitious designs. These things belong to the sort of social and moral analysis Gibbon expected to find in Tacitus and which he would look for in his own analysis of the Roman Empire. And even at this early stage he was thinking in terms of explanations of decline and fall in the state, 'comment les loix faites pour une république bornée, pauvre, à demi-sauvage, la bouleversèrent, lorsque la force de son institution l'eut portée au faite de la grandeur'.⁴

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1. Gibbon frequently referred to such lessons in the Essai, DF and other works. This must be borne in mind when critics write of his rejection of the history with a purpose thesis, as represented by Bossuet or Bolingbroke. See, e.g. Louis Althusser, Montesquieu, la Politique et l'Histoire. Paris, 1969, also cited in Baridon, op.cit., p. 281.
 2. That is in Hume's terms, with which Gibbon was familiar and from his laudatory remarks on Hume's work, surely in agreement.
 3. Essai, LII, 67.
 4. Essai, LII, 67. Gibbon's reverence for the Roman republic is clear and is well expressed in his famous chapter XLIV on Roman jurisprudence, 'although I have devoted myself to write the annals of a declining monarchy, I shall embrace the occasion to breathe the pure and invigorating air of the republic'. (DF, IV, 471). Cf. Gibbon's comments on 'the crafty tyrant' Augustus abolishing 'popular assemblies' (DF, iii, I, 67 and xliv, IV, 477.)

Here Gibbon has outlined his ideal of the historian and the shape of his own aspirations. His delineation is very significant for our study of the historian as moralist. In his analysis he distinguished three levels of writers. At the bottom, and not worthy of the name of historian, are the 'frigid annalist', the 'mere chronicler' of events and the whole tribe of 'compilateurs grossiers'.¹ Far above these blind recorders of facts are writers like Livy and Tacitus who have a true historical genius.² Here, however, we encounter a second crucial distinction. The one has eloquence, vivid description and power to move the emotions; but that is all. To reach the highest level, as represented by Tacitus, the historian must possess that 'esprit philosophique' which will enable him to display connections and causes,³ to explore character and the manners of a nation, and to discern motives and the moral springs of action. Gibbon invited the reader to try to follow 'l'enchaînement, non des faits, mais des idées,' in an endeavour to sound the human heart.⁴ This is beyond the power of the uninspired historian, but it is here that a Tacitus or a Montesquieu can demonstrate his powers of philosophic analysis.

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1. 'Froid annaliste' used in the context of the poet (XXXVI, 46) but applicable to the historian; cf. 'chronicler' in 'Hints', MW, IV, 487 and in DF, III, 472, n. 2: 'the dull annalist' of the Alexandrian Chronicle; also Essai, LII, 66: 'compilateurs'.
 2. 'L'un et l'autre ont bien su s'élever au-dessus de ces compilateurs grossiers que ne voyent dans les faits que des faits.' (LII, 66).
 3. Gibbon speaks of 'la chaîne des événements' (LII, 67); 'un chaînon' (XLIX, 63); 'rapports' (LIII, 68); l'enchaînement (LXVI, 78); and deals with moral causes more especially in later chapters, LV; LXXIX ff.
 4. LXVI, 78 ('sonder le coeur humain'.)

Probably nowhere again in his writings did Gibbon bring out more clearly this moral discrimination of facts as a distinguishing mark of the truly philosophical historian.¹ D'Alembert had suggested² that at the end of each century all the facts should be collected, a choice made of a certain number, and the rest committed to the flames. Gibbon did not agree. On the contrary, he claimed, all the facts should be carefully preserved because only the philosophic historian is able to distinguish between them. A Montesquieu will unravel amongst the most trivial, connections unperceived by the ordinary person:³ 'Montesquieu partait les faits - et non plus "des essences"...pour remonter aux principes et rendre l'histoire intelligible. L'audace de cette demarche avait conquis le jeune Gibbon.'⁴

Thus emboldened, Gibbon approached the question of historical causation, but it was the 'moral' causation of Hume not the mechanical causation of Newton. Even so he prefaced his treatment by a caution against the readiness to sacrifice freedom to a love of hypotheses, a disposition which, he said, is productive of systems. There are those who, having perceived design in the actions of some great man, have wanted to make all men just as systematic in theory as in practice. They have found design (l'art) or policy even in man's passions or involuntary actions: 'en un mot, à force de vouloir faire honneur à l'esprit humain, ils en ont souvent fait bien peu au coeur.'⁵

1. See chaps. XLIX, L, LII, LIII.

2. Mélanges de philosophie et de littérature, III, 1,

3. Essai, LIII, p. 68.

4. Baridon, op.cit., p. 281. See also Essai, LV, p. 69.

5. Essai, LIV, p. 68.

At the opposite extreme are those who have banished design altogether from the moral world¹ to replace it by chance, so that weak mortals are seen acting only from caprice. The rise and fall of empires is attributed to the rage of a madcap or the weakness of a woman.² The study of determinate but general causes should satisfy both schools of thought: those who are glad to see man 'humilié, les motifs de ses actions inconnus à lui-même le jouet des causes étrangères' and those who find in general causes the connections they love and the speculations on which their mind feeds.³

In the realm of moral choice Gibbon resisted any theory of absolute determinism just as he did the opposite extreme. He did not see man reduced to insignificance, unaware of his own motives, the plaything of extraneous forces, or following the predetermined laws of a deity of whom he is merely the instrument.⁴ These are not the sort of laws he accepted either in the physical or the moral world. It is with the 'lois générales' of Montesquieu that his view of general determinate causes corresponded. But the very prospect of what this theory of general causes might open up excited the aspiring historian to exclaim, 'Qu'une vaste carrière s'ouvre à mes réflexions: La théorie de ces causes générales seroit entre les mains d'un Montesquieu, une histoire philosophique de l'homme. Il nous les feroit voir réglant la grandeur et la chute des empires, empruntant successivement les traits de la fortune, de la prudence, du courage, et de la foiblesse, agissant sans

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1. 'Ils ont banni l'art du monde moral'. (loc.cit.)
 2. ibid., LIV, pp. 68-9. 'La fureur d'un écervelé établit un empire: la foiblesse d'une femme le détruit.'
 3. ibid., LV, p. 69.
 4. See Essai, chap. LXXIII, Systèmes de la liberté et de la nécessité.

le concours des causes particulières, et quelquefois même troimphant d'elles.'¹ Thus the young author 'called for a new Montesquieu to carry out this project, and who was this Montesquieu but Gibbon himself?'²

Here, at twenty-two³ is the future historian of the Roman Empire, who has sometimes been accused of failing to produce a list of causes in his work. 'A philosophical history of man', 'the rise and fall of empires': such were the themes that were stirring his mind. Little wonder that when his encampment with the Militia gave him time for reflection, we find him searching for a noble and worthy subject in which they could be realised. He had already caught the vision; he had taken up the philosopher's mantle: he was determined to rise above the mere record of facts on the one hand and, on the other, that love of systems, 'derniere passion du sage'.⁴ The historian-philosopher would however, trace in 'general events' the slow working of those forces which bring about a change in all things based on opinion, like religion and manners.⁵ He would find ample scope for this in The Decline and Fall. Near the beginning of that work,⁶ Gibbon suggested that a history of human manners would be more agreeable than even a history of the arts; and repeatedly he either traces or referred to changes in both manners and religion.⁷

1. ibid., LV, p. 69.

2. Frank E. Manuel, 'Edward Gibbon: Historien-Philosophe', in Bowersock op.cit., p. 169.

3. See JA, 11 July, 1758, 'I took in hand again my essay and in about six weeks finished it from C. 23-55...besides a number of chapters from C. 55 to the end which are now struck out'. (Gibbon was born in April O.S. or May, N.S., 1737.)

4. Essai, LV, p. 69. As J.M. Robertson pointed out (Gibbon. London, 1925, p. 39), Gibbon does not show any great love of theorising. The inconsequence of the ideas 'is already significant of lack of lasting zeal for theoretical construction.'

5. Essai, loc.cit., ('tout ce qui est soumis au joug de l'opinion.')

6. DF, ii, I, 47.

7. e.g. DF, i, I, 12, n. 38; xxvi, III, 120; cf. also the rise of and changes in the development of Christianity or of Islam.

'The key word in Gibbon's philosophico-historical reflections in the Essai, 'according to Frank Manuel, 'is ressort, one of the widely current, baffling terms of eighteenth-century Anglo-French thought that are so difficult to understand precisely.'¹ Such 'springs of action',² motivating causes, as we might call them find ample illustration in Gibbon's great History, but as Manuel points out, it is to the Essai we must turn for his 'sweeping theoretical imperatives' on the subject. There one senses implicit in all the treatment of causation, and of systems of liberty and necessity, another ideal so dear to Gibbon's heart, that of individual freedom. Since man has this power of moral choice, his manners and morals are especially worthy studying. If he were only 'a toy of external forces', 'an instrument of the Deity', what is left for the philosophic historian to discover, since the providential element is an unknown quantity?

In his discussion of the 'philosophical historian', in his treatment of history as 'the science of causes and effect',³ Gibbon was proposing nothing less than a science of human nature, analogous to, but free from and different from the rigidity of the physical sciences. History is the instrument whereby we can discover those principles common to all mankind. There can be no doubt that in this Gibbon was following Hume, the philosopher-historian he so greatly admired. Hume had

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1. Bowersock, op.cit., p. 169, where Manuel gives a brief account of the background of the term.
 2. 'Springs of action', which is the equivalent used in the English translation of the Essai, (London, 1764, p. 100), is that used by Manuel, op.cit., p. 167. Cf. Hume's use of it in the quotation of page 110 below.
 3. Essai, chapter heading, XLVIII.

suggested that the chief use of history for the philosopher 'is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour. These records of wars, intrigues, factions and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or the natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects, by the experiments which he forms concerning them'.¹

In the later chapters of the Essai Gibbon applied his methodology to a systematic exploration of the origins of pagan religion, of its gods and heroes. Before plunging in, he issued a warning. 'Les ennemis d'une religion ne la connoissent jamais, parce qu'ils la haïssent, et souvent la haïssent parce qu'ils ne la connoissent pas.'² A very sound piece of advice, this, and one which Gibbon had thrown back at him by a zealous opponent when the storm broke over the offending chapters of The Decline and Fall.³ In his treatment of paganism he followed in the steps of the philosophes and of Hume;⁴ he reasoned acutely, avoiding

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1. Hume, 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding', Sect. VIII, Pt. I, 'Of Liberty and Necessity', Philosophical Works, vol. 4, p. 68.
 2. Essai, LVII, p. 70.
 3. James Chelsum, Remarks on the Two Last Chapters of Mr. Gibbon's History and A Reply to Mr. Gibbon's Vindication, (2nd ed., 1785, Preface). Quoted by McCloy, op.cit., p. 56. Chelsum's book is reprinted by Garland, 1974.
 4. Some of these authors, like Fontenelle and Banier, appear in Gibbon's notes; others can be supplied from his account of his reading over these years. He was very much indebted to Hume's Natural History of Religion.

the rigidity of systems in favour of a much more flexible approach to historical examination. Indeed, he was still turning this question over in his mind when he wrote his Memoirs. But even at that stage of maturity this early treatment gave him satisfaction.¹ It also impressed some contemporary critics as perhaps the most acute and original part of the Essai.²

Other aspects of causation dealt with in the Essai are more by way of a qualification of Gibbon's general thesis as seen above. We should not, he said, try to account for everything in history in terms of general causes. In more particular events there is usually a mixture of causes. Philosophers tend to look for a cause, not only universal but unique, yet it is seldom so in the ordinary course of events. Let us therefore avoid this pitfall: admit general causes but do not exclude either design or change. To conclude his discussion he pointed out that an ordinary degree of penetration can discover when a certain action is at the same time thus both cause and effect. In the moral world there are many such; or rather, there are very few things that do not owe something to the one and to the other.³ However, and here is an important caveat, it takes an unusual degree of judgement when two things always exist together and appear intimately connected, to discern that the one does not derive from the other.⁴

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1. Memoirs, p. 104. ('I am not displeased with the enquiry into the origin and nature of the gods of polytheism. In a riper season of judgement and knowledge I am tempted to review the curious question whether these fabulous deities were mortal men or allegorical beings...')
 2. 'Morceaux très-sage et très-ingénieux' said the reviewer in the Journal Etranger and transcribed the section in full; 'l'esprit et le savoir abondent', (Bibliothèque des sciences et des beaux Arts); 'this curious and most original part of the essay' (Critical Review). See above pp. 85-7, and Bonnard's article there cited.
 3. See chaps. LXXIX & LXXX ('Mélange de causes dans les événements particuliers') 'il y en a très peu qui ne tiennent plus ou moins de la nature de l'une de l'autre'. (p.92)
 4. Essai, loc.cit.

The Essai, begun and partly written in Switzerland, completed and published in England, marks both an end and a new beginning in Gibbon's career: an end of his apprenticeship in Lausanne and a beginning of a more independent development in his native land, as he gave serious consideration to realising his historical ideals. He had written this first major work in French, partly because as he said, at that time he thought in French, but also as he later admitted, because of the honour due to a young Englishman writing with ease in that language of European culture.¹ His success can be judged by the acclaim accorded him in the French journals, one of which hailed this phenomenon of 'un Gentilhomme Anglois...qui ose écrire en François, imprimer son ouvrage à Londres, & continuer à manger du Roast Beef avec ses compatriotes.'² Even his style was highly praised by these reviewers. The only qualification was that it was perhaps a little too oratorical and given to overfrequent antitheses.³ Similarly The Critical Review, though generally favourable to his literary effort, objected to his love of maxims and apothegms, adding that 'Almost every line constitutes a dogma; every sentence includes a decision.'⁴ Gibbon himself, its shrewdest and fairest critic, later remarked on its 'sententiouness and oracular brevity.'⁵ This sententiouness may strike one as the mark of a young man, or even as a mark of Gibbon as a stylist; but sententiousness is certainly the mark

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1. Memoirs, p. 105, 'but my true motive was doubtless the ambition of new and singular fame, an Englishman claiming a place among the writers of France.'
 2. Bibliothèque des sciences et des beaux arts, loc.cit., (Bonnard, op.cit., p. 148).
 3. 'Séduisant, mais trop oratoire, un peu affecté...& chargé d'antithèses, justes à la vérité, mais trop fréquentes', said the Journal encyclopédique, 15 Nov., 1761. Gibbon himself admitted some affectation (Memoirs, p. 103).
 4. Vol. XII, 1762, Art. xi, p. 65.
 5. Memoirs, p. 103.

or a moralist. The moralistic writer, the didactic author, like the preacher, casts his thoughts into this mould. It is very obvious in many parts of the Essai as we might expect from its opening declamation: 'L'histoire des empire est celle de la misère des hommes. L'histoire des sciences est celle de leur grandeur et de leur bonheur.'¹

When he returned to England, Gibbon also formed his English style. He perfected it as he turned over the rolling periods of The Decline and Fall, casting them in his mind before he wrote. He still had a feeling for French but after his abortive Histoire...des Suisses in 1767, he took Hume's advice and stuck to English.² His sententiousness and rhetoric still sounded through but harmonised with his command of 'the middle tone'³ in his native tongue. But his Essai, while it may suffer both in style and construction by comparison with The Decline and Fall, remains a vital statement of so much that was to characterise the philosophic historian of Rome. He was indebted to Montesquieu for his method and ideas, but more so to Hume for laying 'the basis for a systematic philosophy of human nature. Now, in his essay...Gibbon had asserted that the historian should be, in the best sense of the word, a philosopher, because the first qualification for his task is the power of perceiving

1. Essai, I, p. 15.
2. Hume's letter to Gibbon on reading the manuscript of his Swiss history, dated 24 Oct., 1767, is printed in Sheffield's edition of the Memoirs, MW, I, 204-5n. Dr. Maty, in his foreword 'A L'Auteur' in the first edition of the Essai, also chided Gibbon: 'Vous etes Anglois, et vous choisissez la langue de vos enemis.' (p. 9).
3. 'Many experiments were made before I could hit the middle tone between a dull Chronicle and a Rhetorical declamation'. (Memoirs, p. 155)

the relative importance of facts. And, thereby, he perhaps forecast his own future as the Tacitus of the modern world.'¹ Thus, even during his Swiss exile, he had a clear view of what the writing of history should mean and who his model would be. Lausanne, he said, was the 'school' in which 'the statue was discovered in the block of marble.'² Looking at the Essai, the product of that school, we can see that the statue, though still unfinished, is unmistakably Roman.³

The Essai's final example is itself prophetic of Gibbon's Roman Empire waiting to be written. To illustrate a circumstance which is 'a la fois cause et effect',⁴ he returned to his mentor Montesquieu and to the question of causation in the moral world. Having in mind Considérations sur la grandeur et sur la décadence des Romains*, he stated that the corruption of all orders of Romans arose from the extent of their empire and was itself productive of the greatness of the republic.⁵ In The Decline and Fall, on one of those occasions when Gibbon explicitly suggested a cause for the decline of Rome, he said it was 'the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness.'⁶ Again, in other places it is implicitly or explicitly connected with the spread of luxury.⁷ The Essai begins by linking empires with 'la

1. C.N. Cochrane, 'The Mind of Edward Gibbon' (I), University of Toronto Quarterly, XII, No. 1, Oct. 1942, p. 17.
2. Memoirs, p. 86.
3. Gibbon himself pointed to the Roman examples throughout the Essai.
4. Essai, LXXXII, p. 91.
5. ibid., LXXXII, p. 92. Gibbon's footnote refers to Montesquieu's work,* but omits causes from the short title; cf.n.2, p. 216 below.
6. DF, IV, 'General Observations &c.', p. 173.
7. e.g. DF, xxxi, III, 310, n. 30; 311; xlii, IV, 377; xlv, V, 81, 97; xlix, V, 281; and cf. examples of luxury in the decline of other peoples in DF.

misère des hommes' and the sciences with 'leur grandeur et...bonheur'; it ends with the observation, 'à mesure que le luxe corrompt les mœurs, les sciences les adoucissent'.¹

Empires, their rise and fall, corruption of manners, science and learning, the misery and the happiness of mankind: these are themes worthy of a philosophic historian awaiting his great subject and his moment of inspiration.

1. Essai, I, 15; LXXXIII, p. 92.

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Dillon-Smith, David, The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Department of History, University of Wollongong, 1982. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/1426>

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CHAPTER IV

A SUBJECT FIT FOR HISTORY

In his Essai Gibbon had set down some theoretical principles which should guide the philosophical historian in his selection and use of facts, his discernment of moral causes and effects, and his study of human nature. He now needed a subject which would give him ample scope to put these principles into practice. During his military service he was writing and revising parts of the Essai and preparing it for the press.¹ Its ideas were therefore in his mind, when about the time of his twenty-fourth birthday, he began a careful consideration of topics on which he might write.²

What does he tell us? First, that he is still committed to history as his special field. With some years of critical reading behind him, he reaffirmed his youthful aspiration: 'My own inclination as well as the taste of the present age, have made me decide in favour of history. Convinced of its merit, my reason cannot blush at the choice.'³ But had he the abilities, he wondered. If not he might turn out to be no more than 'a mere chronicler or compiler of gazettes', a role in his eyes as contemptible as that of historian was worthy of honour. How could he discover his potentialities and try his strength?

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1. See JA, 23 April & 10 June, 1761, pp. 24-5; p. 100.
 2. Shortly before his birthday, he wrote of 'having thought of several subjects for an Historical composition' (JA, 14 April, 1751 p. 24). Beginning the story of his life in the Memoirs Gibbon gives his birthday as 'the 27th of April, O.S.' but in his Journal for 1762 he refers to the 8th of May as 'my birthday', i.e. N.S. (Memoirs, p. 24; JA, p. 69.)
 3. 'Hints of some Subjects fit for History', dated 'Camp near Winchester, 26 July, 1761' (MW, V, 487).

This was the question which prompted his 'Hints of some Subjects fit for History', certain further deliberation recorded in his Journal, and an early work which emerged from the exercise that same year, namely 'Critical Researches concerning the Title of Charles VII to the Crown of Naples'.¹ Methodical as ever, he decided to list certain topics he considered promising, weigh their relative merits, and then research them for a trial period. Their very importance would at least, he felt, ensure the value of the study and compensate for any failure in the performance.

To Gibbon at this stage, it was his vocation rather than the topic that was crucial. He would test his claim to be considered a historian and not 'a mere chronicler' by actually writing history: the topic was the means to this end. For us, however, the chief interest lies in his process of selection and rejection because of the light it throws not only upon his historical interests and assessment of sources but also upon his moral judgement.

Before turning to the particular topics there is one question which seems to arise from them all. While they represent a reaffirmation of Gibbon's early feeling of vocation for history, they also show his first definite attempt to find historical inspiration in directions other than the ancient past. Why, we may ask, at the very time when he confirmed his choice of history as a discipline, was he diverted from his great subject to others, both medieval and modern, and mostly English rather than Roman? It may be suggested that having recently attained intellectual

1. MW, III, pp. 206-222.

maturity in a climate of lumières and 'modern' historians, he was more prepared to illustrate his ideas, such as those on causation, from whatever period of history offered the best materials. Perhaps less distant times with a wealth of relatively accessible materials might offer the greatest scope to a young historian. The fact that Gibbon rejected his first two topics partly on account of their being too 'remote' from his own time may seem to add plausibility to this notion. But though he entertained thoughts of more recent topics at this point, there is no indication that he shared the current view of writers like Voltaire that all worthwhile history is essentially modern history.¹ And throughout this whole period of historical searching, his reading as reflected in his Journal continued to be predominantly in the ancient classics and their critics.²

There seems to be a simple and reasonable explanation why Gibbon looked away from the ancient past for a fresh topic. His intention was primarily, as he pointed out, to test his powers as a historian. Why try to do so by working over the well-ploughed fields of Greece and Rome in competition with so many eminent scholars, when he could better assess his own achievement in comparatively virgin soil? This was at least a determining factor in relinquishing his most promising English

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1. See Voltaire's article HISTOIRE in the Encyclopedie (Paris, 1755 tome 8, p. 223, col. 1). His view was confirmed by his own concentration on modern subjects. Bolingbroke also would concentrate on modern history which seemed 'more entire as well as more authentic' than a good deal of ancient history ('Letters on the Study and Use of History', Collected Works, London, 1844), vol. II, p. 223; cf. also vol. II, pp. 186 and 211-2).
 2. Apart from the reading of Greek and Roman authors and works about them, Gibbon composed a considerable critical piece of 30 folio pages on Hurd's Horace; see JA, 8 Feb.; 18 March, 1762, pp. 45, 49; and MW, IV, 113-152.

subject, Raleigh, which at first sight seemed to have 'such a quantity of materials as I desired and which had not yet been properly made use of'.¹ However, after looking into it more deeply, and especially after reading Oldys' Life, he came to the conclusion: 'Excepting some anecdotes lately revealed in the Sidney and Bacon Papers I know not what I should be able to add'. Even when he thought of dealing with the times rather than the man himself, he still saw little chance to prove himself in breaking new ground, because these were 'the periods of English history which have been the most variously illustrated' by eminent writers. Asking himself, 'what new lights could I reflect on a subject' so adequately covered by many accomplished men, he decided to look elsewhere.²

Yet, though this may have been, in the negative sense, a convincing reason for young Gibbon to avoid Roman themes even while his reading kept them before his eyes, there is a more positive factor, the crucial factor of experience. Though the thread of Rome ran right through his early thinking and research, it still took the physical experience of the forum and a sight of the hub of empire for him to appreciate his special calling. This is yet another, though the supreme instance, of the importance of 'place' in Gibbon's career.³ Just as he had come to see that moral choices could only be made on the basis of experience, so for Gibbon 'it was the view of Italy and Rome which determined the choice of the subject.'⁴ This visit was doubly valuable for one so

1. JA, 4 August, 1761, p. 30.

2. Memoirs, p. 121 (a revised version of his Journal entry for 26 July, 1762).

3. See above Chap. I, p. 6.

4. The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon, ed. John Murray, p. 270 (Memoir C.)

graphic in his physical descriptions of terrain, of battles and of places, and for whom geography and topography formed so important a preparatory study to his tour. Rome became to him a living reality in those days of October 1764. Here his thoughts echoed those of the humanist Poggio Bracciolini, whom he followed at a distance of three centuries to the same vantage point of the Capitoline hill. That it was the living heart of empire he perceived, may be inferred from his reference to 'the ruins of the Capitol', which at that date he could only have seen with the eyes of his historical imagination.¹

Gibbon began his search for a historical topic directly after the revision and publication of his Essai. Its treatment of moral causation and moral values must therefore have been still in the front of his mind, and we would expect such moral criteria to have influenced his choice of a worthy subject and his rejection of those which fell short of his ideal. In the cases where he has elaborated on these subjects that is precisely what we find.

After considering several topics, his first choice was 'the expedition of Charles VIII of France into Italy.'² About six years earlier he had read Giannone's Civil History of Naples and later

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1. The version of his famous sentence in fragments 'C' and 'E' mention the 'ruins', while that in 'D' has simply 'musing on the Capitol'. In 1764, as Bonnard points out, 'the Capitol was already what it now is'. (Notes to Memoirs, p. 305.) See Piranesi's etchings of Gibbon's Rome; also J.J. Saunders, 'Gibbon in Rome 1764'. History Today, XIV, 9 Sept. 1964, pp. 608ff.
 2. JA, Buriton, 14 April, 1761 (also in Memoirs, p. 119).

singled it out as one of three books which 'may have remotely contributed to form the historian of the Roman Empire'.¹ This reference in the Memoirs seems to indicate an indelible impression on the young man, and Giannone's direct influence in inspiring this first subject can be accepted.²

This expedition of Charles VIII at first appeared to Gibbon to be a great event in history and the king a notable figure. It is interesting to observe that at this stage he had his eye on prominent persons or 'heroes' rather than on movements or periods and that so much of The Decline and Fall also clusters round such heroes or anti-heroes as Constantine, Julian, Belisarius, Mahomet and Athanasius. There, as H.L. Bond points out, 'individual actors occupy the forefront of the stage to play their heroic, their comic, or their tragic roles... and they retire leaving to others the continuation of the ever-changing drama'.²

As he scrutinised Charles and his expedition more closely Gibbon came to feel that this subject was not only 'too remote from us' but also that it lacked the intrinsic greatness it first seemed to possess, being 'rather an introduction to great events than great and important in itself'.⁴ However, in accordance with his plan for assessing his

1. JA, December 1755 (Memoirs, p. 79); see above, chap. III, pp. 52 and n. 4. Giannone, the leading Italian historian of the 18th century, had escaped for a time the wrath of the church, by taking refuge in the tolerant security of Switzerland.
2. It is pointed out by Trevor-Roper, 'The Idea of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' in Barber, et.al., The Age of the Enlightenment, p. 425, n. 13: 'Giannone's direct influence has been shown by Signor Giarizzo (Edward Gibbon e la cultura europa del settecento, Naples, 1954), pp. 136, 209'.
3. The Literary Art of Edward Gibbon. London, 1960, p. 89. See chap. V, 'Characters' and especially pp. 91-2.
4. JA, 4 August, 1761, p. 30.

topics, he read widely on the subject, then wrote a preliminary dissertation of ten folio pages on Charles' title to the throne of Naples.¹

In this short piece we find, besides a specific examination of the king's claims, certain more fundamental moral obligations. Gibbon commented for example, on the need for punishment to protect the public welfare, this being the real purpose of the laws 'which reason has dictated to all nations'.² Yet he admitted the cruelty of the punishment which condemns 'to perpetual ignominy the unhappy bastard'. The guilt is that of the princes, not the sons, for 'in those ages, as wicked as they were ignorant, princes disgraced themselves by a life of profligacy'.³ Then, after setting out the titles of each contender to the crown, Gibbon explicitly stated what he was later frequently to assume in The Decline and Fall, that he must leave the final judgement to the decision of his reader. 'It belongs to the reader to pronounce sentence...I pretend not to decide'.⁴ However, his summing up of the crucial points for the guidance of his jury, again laid stress on some basic moral considerations: 'The right of conquest, an odious right, fit only to make illustrious criminals... The consent of the subject, the fairest of all titles'. And his

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1. 'Critical Researches concerning the title of Charles VIII to the Crown of Naples', MW, III, 206-222. In a footnote (p.206) Gibbon adds: 'I meditate a history of the expedition of Charles VIII into Italy; an event which changed the face of Europe. Should I ever undertake such a work, these researches will find their place in it, but written with more care and precision'.
 2. Cf. DF, xliv, IV, 487, and Cicero's observation that 'reason prescribes the law of nature and nations'.
 3. MW, III, 211.
 4. ibid., III, 221; and see below.

final comment is: 'The right of conquest is only made for wild beasts. The laws of succession, though well contrived in themselves, are destitute of fixed principles. The only title not liable to objection, is the consenting voice of a free people'.¹ Thus, in the light of this preliminary examination of the French king, this 'hero' must have appeared to Gibbon as morally flawed, pursuing his 'odious right' of conquest in violation of popular consent. He must have appeared immoral as a destroyer of Renaissance civilization.

With this note of disgust, Gibbon turned from Charles to a series of English 'heroes'. They probably reflect his attempt to make himself an Englishman once more after his sojourn abroad.³ His first work, written in French, had been received with enthusiasm across the Channel, but had met with a cold reception at home.⁴ 'I should have escaped some anti-Gallican clamour', he admitted, 'had I been content with the more natural character of an English author'.⁵ Strangely, it was during his Swiss exile that he had been introduced to English authors like Locke and also found in certain French writers an admiration for things English. 'C'est peut-être le paradoxe le plus amusant de la vie de Gibbon', writes Baridon, 'qu'il ait découvert

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1. ibid., III, pp. 221-2. We recall Gibbon's comment on his reading of Cicero in Lausanne and his recommendation of this author to any liberal scholar, 'I breathed the spirit of freedom, and I imbibed from his precepts and examples the public and private sense of a man'. (Memoirs, 'C', p. 75 and n. 7.)
 2. See above, chap. II, pp. 39, 43. Not that he ever really did become an Englishman; he remained more European, and somewhat outside of English society.
 3. 'In England it was received with cold indifference, little read and speedily forgotten'. (Memoirs, p. 102). Gibbon even refused his printer's request for a new edition when the fame of The Decline and Fall had created a ready market for the Essai.
 4. Memoirs, p. 105.

l'Angleterre en Suisse et grâce à la France. Sa biographie montre qu'il a lu Locke à Lausanne dont Voltaire disait en 1754: "On y parle français, on y pense à l'anglaise"; il y lut aussi ce même Voltaire, Fréret et Montesquieu...tous devaient tant à l'anglomanie de l'époque qu'ils lui ont fait retrouver à l'étranger le problèmes auxquels il voulait se dérober quant il était dans son pays'.¹ Despite a continuing regard for Montesquieu, Gibbon's historical models were not French, but English; not Voltaire or Vertot² but Robertson and Hume, and it was to Hume's History of England that he kept turning.³

While, till recently, Gibbon lamented, Britain had been sadly lacking in real historians,⁴ this reproach, he rejoiced to say, had at least been removed by the worthy pair of northern historians, whom he eventually realised he had joined to form 'the triumvirate'. When, therefore, he referred to The Reign of Henry VII, 'just published', as 'ingenious but superficial',⁵ this apparent faint praise suggests that

1. Edward Gibbon et le mythe de Rome. Paris, 1977, p. 403.
2. Apart from a couple of references in DF (xxxviii, IV, 161, 168) and JB (1^r Novembre, 1764, pp. 122, 126) to this author, Gibbon showed an early admiration for the Abbé by using his Histoire des revolutions de la republique romaine (1719) as a model 'most approved for purity and elegance of style' in his exercises in retranslation (Memoirs, p. 75). He also enthusiastically described one of his most promising subjects as 'a chain of revolutions worthy the pen of Vertot'. (JA, 26 July, 1762, p. 104).
3. See e.g. JA, 4 and 13 August, 1761, pp. 30, 32.
4. 'There is not post of honour in the English Parnassus more vacant than that of history', said Hume in 1753 (letter to John Clephane, 5/1/53, in J.Y.T. Greig (ed.) The Letters of David Hume. Oxford, 1932, Vol. I., p. 170). And Horace Walpole wrote to Robertson, awaiting publication of his History of Scotland (Jan. 18, 1759): 'Good Historians are the most scarce of all writers...' Correspondence, ed. W.S. Lewis. Yale, 1951, Vol. 15, p. 40.
5. JA, 2 November, 1761, p. 42. This must be read bearing in mind Gibbon's usual high praise for Hume, e.g. the original philosophical genius' with reference to the 2nd volume of Hume's History (cf. JA, 4 August, 1761 and 26 July, 1762). In the Memoirs, this phrase became 'the impartial philosophy of Hume' (p. 121).

his admired author's last volumes swept over a great span of English history too summarily to look beneath the surface and thus lacked the moral penetration expected of the philosopher. Perhaps Gibbon felt that he himself would like to probe more deeply some of those historical figures whose characters and motives Hume seemed to have treated too superficially. At all events, he obviously believed that as an Englishman, he could find in the history of his own country, notable persons still not adequately treated, and that these would allow him to try his powers of historical writing. Thus of his next seven subjects for consideration, six were English and one Scottish. The English 'heroes' included Richard I, the Black Prince and Henry V from earlier times and from a more recent period, Sidney and Raleigh.¹ The biographical emphasis is significant not only as a preview of The Decline and Fall² but also in terms of Gibbon's historical apprenticeship. There was, of course, as Jordan reminds us, the example of Plutarch and the various 'Lives' so popular amongst Augustan readers in England.³ But the aspiring historian must also have sensed the advantage of having a human unifying centre for his writing. Gibbon was acquainted with Bolingbroke's belief that 'Man is the subject of every history...History therefore of all kinds... that descends to a sufficient detail of human actions and characters, is useful to bring us acquainted with our species, nay with ourselves'.⁴

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1. The other topics were, 'the barons wars against John and Henry III' and Montrose. Henry V was considered in a comparison with Titus (JA, 4 Aug. 1761, p. 30).
 2. See above, chap. VI on Gibbon's treatment of character.
 3. Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 99. One might add the 'histories' of one whom Gibbon considered 'a great master', Henry Fielding: The History of...Joseph Andrews, The History of...Johnathan Wild, and The History of Tom Jones, the last 'which may be considered as the history of human nature' (DF, xxxii, III, 384, n.13).
 4. 'Letters on the Study and Use of History' (Works, II, 229).

Avoiding what seemed in Hume a superficial treatment, the philosophical historian would achieve not only a 'moral' and humanistic piece of writing but one whose human centre gave it coherence. 'Gibbon first looked to biography as providing that principle of organisation which he hoped would give coherence to the past. He had rejected all the deductive schemes of his day, and he believed a biographical approach to the past would fill the gap. In the first place he had a profound humanistic conviction that man is the object of history, and what could be more obvious than writing the history of one man. All of the technical problems Gibbon had noticed in the work of others - Voltaire's habit of separating out the various aspects of history into separate chapters, Montesquieu's disregard for the role of individuals in history - might be solved by a biographical approach.'¹

It is instructive to note the reasons Gibbon gave for the choice of his first English topic, Richard I and his crusade. They were not primarily rational though justified on rational grounds. This subject made its first appeal to the imagination: 'alluring by the marvellous. A king of England at the head of an allied army of English and French under the walls of Ascalon!'² But as a test case, a subject on which to try his abilities as an historian, what did it have to offer? Here rationality entered and pointed out the 'good materials for executing such an undertaking'. They were 'good' because they were contemporary and accurate and, 'what is of great importance to the lover of truth', because the leading primary sources were to be found on each of the opposing sides and thus afforded every chance of impartiality, a

1. Jordan, op.cit., pp. 98-99.

2. 'Hints', MW., IV, 488.

quality Gibbon held to be essential for the historian.¹

However alluring the subject and however adequate the sources, Richard did not satisfy Gibbon for long. Like the rest of the British set, with the exception of Raleigh, he was soon rejected, not to be heard of again. A deeper look convinced Gibbon that this English hero's moral stature fell far short of his common fame let alone the high standards of the historian. 'This Richard was a fit hero only for monks. With the ferocity of a gladiator, he united the cruelty of a tyrant; and both were unsuccessfully employed in a cause where superstition silenced religion, justice, and policy; and against one of the most accomplished princes in history. How little are we interested in the exploits of Richard'.² In his search for subjects 'fit for history', the philosophic historian had discovered one fit only for 'the monkish historians' who were prepared to glorify superstition and cruelty in the cause of religion. Gibbon was surely coming to agree with Fielding's estimate of the popular concept of 'greatness' wherein many of the 'great' men both past and present turn out to be the bad ones; they were in fact merely great rogues.³

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1. e.g. in DF praise for 'the impartial historian', and for the quality of impartiality, xxii, II, 443, n.52; xxvi, III, 116, n. 93; xlv, V, 69; xlvii, V, 144, n. 90.
 2. 'Hints', MW, V, 488. Readers of DF feel the scorn and the contempt Gibbon put into the word 'monks' and his revulsion at gladiatorial shows and the participants. 'A monkish historian', he wrote (lix, Vi, 374) 'would have been content to applaud the most despicable part of his character. (St. Louis and his crusade are being discussed.)
 3. Particularly in Johnathan Wild.

Both in 'Outlines of the History of the World', probably written about 1771,¹ and in The Decline and Fall begun about two years later, this early judgement on Richard and his crusade is endorsed. In the former, Gibbon wrote, 'Richard the First...possessed only the personal courage of a soldier...The crusade and captivity of Richard exhausted England and impoverished the crown'.² The whole work contains only this and one other brief mention of the English 'hero'. In The Decline and Fall Gibbon's comment is, 'If heroism be confined to brutal and ferocious valour, Richard Plantagenet will stand high among the heroes of the age'.³ This nicely sums up the original judgement recorded in his 'Hints' and exposes the vulgar notion of 'heroism', not confined to the common people alone, but unfortunately shared by the general run of historians. Nor could the whole crusading movement inspire any more respect. The 'ferocious valour' of the hero was but part of the general 'epidemical disease'; 'the principle of the crusades was a savage fanaticism'.⁴ Behind 'the folly and glory'⁵ Gibbon saw a strange mixture of motives. There was a confusion of religious, though superstitious ideals, a desire for personal glory and an outlet for the national passions of warlike peoples.⁶ Above all, the Crusades

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1. Sheffield (Contents in MW, vol. III) dates it between 1758 and 1763, but Bury (DF, III, 268, n. 8), J.W. Swain (op.cit., pp. 122-3) and P.B. Craddock, all suggest 1771. On this question, see Craddock, op.cit., p. 57.
 2. MW, III, 16-17.
 3. DF, lix, VI, 365. Thomas Warton, whose Dissertations prefacing his History of English Poetry Gibbon valued highly (see DF, xxxviii, IV, 163, n. 148), called Richard 'a curious Gothic figure' (op.cit., 1774, ed. I, iv, 116).
 4. DF, lviii, VI, 284; lxi, VI, 464.
 5. 'Outlines', MW, III, 13.
 6. See DF, lviii, VI, pp. 278-284. cf. also p. 329, 'The World was scandalised by the pride, avarice and corruption of these Christian soldiers'.

appeared to him as immoral since they involved the imposition of religion by force, and often, as in the case of Richard, by unworthy agents.¹ Even so noble a character as Sir Phillip Sidney, who was included in Gibbon's original list of attractive prospects, might also have appeared less perfect on closer scrutiny. At least, in a later reference to the use of 'corruption' to achieve a desirable end, Gibbon mentioned the fact that Sidney was 'said to...have received a bribe in the cause of liberty.'² In thus scrutinising subjects for his history, Gibbon subjected popular, but often hypocritical opinions, to rigorous re-examination as he brought national heroes and their exploits before the bar of moral values.

Richard gave way to the Black Prince who also failed to satisfy Gibbon's moral judgement. His Journal does not give any real indication as to why he dropped this famous warrior prince, but there is a comment in the Outlines which throws light on his attitude. Once again he felt a certain hollowness of the fame of this 'hero' and the patriotic perversion of values seemed to the philosophic historian grievously out of perspective. 'The English dwell with rapture on the trophies of Edward III and his gallant son the Black Prince; on the fields of Crecy and Poitiers; and on the Kings of France and Scotland, at the same time prisoners in London. To a thinking mind, Edward's encouragement of the woollen manufacture is of greater value than all these barren laurels.'³ We may surmise, since we have no direct statement on Henry V, the last of these earlier English heroes, that he, too, must have been

1. See also below chap. VII, pp. 366-7.

2. DF, xxi, II, 390, n. 117.

3. MW, III, p. 35.

weighed in the same scale of values and found wanting. To Gibbon, the victories of peace were more worthy of the historian's acclaim than those of war. This standard of values is amply illustrated in The Decline and Fall and is sometimes emphasised by an overt moral judgement. There he wrote of 'ages of prosperity sacrificed to moments of glory', and near the beginning of chapter I he deplored the fact that 'as long as mankind shall continue to bestow more liberal applause on their destroyers than on their benefactors, the thirst of military glory will ever be the vice of the most exalted characters.'¹ He saw with a philosophic eye that the world still tended to extol the deeds of those who beggared their countries in useless and bloody battles, but often forgot the useful if less exciting benefits which flowed from the policies of peace.

Sir Walter Raleigh provided Gibbon with his most promising English subject, one which he researched and pondered for about a year. In this case again, there was a strong appeal to the imagination as well as the assurance of adequate sources. 'I at last fixed upon Sir Walter Raleigh for my hero, and found in his life a subject important, interesting and various, with such a quantity of materials and even found that the subject gained by closer investigation. Yet by the following July he had come to a quite different conclusion: 'I believe I must give it up'.³ Why then did such a likely subject not produce the 'intended historical essay'⁴ which Gibbon had hoped to write?

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1. DF, xi, I, 330; i, I, 6, and see below, chap. V.
 2. JA, 4 August, 1761, p. 30.
 3. JA, 4, 13 August, 1761, January, 26 July, 1762, pp. 30, 32, 44, 102. The Memoirs version (p. 121) runs, 'I am afraid of being reduced to drop my hero'.
 4. JA, 4 August, 1761, p. 30.

We have already noticed his doubts about being able to add anything new to what had already been written on Raleigh and his times.¹ There was also the fear that recent history inevitably tends to become party history.² To discover more than this we must read between the lines of the Journal. We find that Gibbon proceeded by way of Birch's account of Raleigh's life and Hume's history of the period to a close study of Oldys' 'elaborate Life, prefixed to the eleventh edition of Raleigh's History of the World.³ He found Oldys' work disappointing; 'a very poor performance', he later called it.⁴ Even though the author had diligently collected and arranged almost all the available materials on Raleigh, the results was 'an apology, tediously full of insignificant circumstances and wrote in a most heavy affected style'. It was even 'very barren of materials' in certain parts, and these the most characteristic parts of the life, 'so essential to a biographical writer'.⁵ It was thus in no sense a philosophic history, merely 'a servile panegyric'.⁶ That from the historian's point of view was unphilosophic in itself. But was the subject worthy of such undiluted praise? The patriotic fervour of

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1. See above, p.119 and note 2. Finding the first volume of Voltaire's Louis XIV much less interesting than the second, Gibbon commented that 'so many writers had exhausted the battles and sieges of Lewis XIV's reign, that it was impossible to add any thing new'. (JA, 28 August, 1762, p. 129).
 2. JA, 26 July, 72, p. 103. ('I should hardly choose to write on this part of our history, where every character is a problem, and every reader a friend or an enemy; where a writer is supposed to hang out a badge of party, and is devoted to destruction by the opposite faction'.)
 3. Raleigh's History of the World, the 11th ed. To which is prefixed the Life of the Author, by Mr. Oldys. London, 1736. See JA, 4, 13 August, 1761 and Memoirs version of January 1762 (pp. 120-1).
 4. Memoirs, p. 121. (JA, 26-7-72 has 'a very indifferent work'.)
 5. JA, 26 July, 1762, p. 102.
 6. Memoirs, p. 121 (JA, 'it is throughout a panegyric'.)

Englishmen might persuade them to agree, but what of Gibbon's wider public, his European readers who had acclaimed his Essai? How would Raleigh be received by them?

These were the questions Gibbon asked himself in trying to reach a decision about this topic. He had to face the fact that while Raleigh's story was certainly interesting, 'his actions are of so subaltern a nature and his writings so confined to the language they were composed in that his fame can hardly ever pass the limits of our island.'¹ Was Raleigh indeed a 'subject fit for history', as Gibbon intended to write it? With the moral criteria revealed both in the Essai and in Gibbon's rejection of his previous topics to guide us, we may better interpret his judgement that Raleigh's 'character is ambiguous', or as he originally put it, 'so doubtfully handed down to us'.² As we can see from a comparison of the Essai, the 'Hints' and the Journal, Gibbon looked for the 'fame' which should be accorded to a philosophic history;³ but to achieve this, he also needed a subject able to inspire and to support such a history. It became plain to him that his European public would be likely to treat the English adventurer with contempt, and for Gibbon 'indifference' abroad seemed to be 'far more bitter than censure, or reproach' at home.⁴ Raleigh clearly would not do. His character was not sufficiently clear, and he was too limited in appeal which depended largely on the patriotic prejudices of his

1. JA, 26 July, 1762, p. 103.

2. Memoirs, p. 122 and JA, 26 July, 1762, p. 103.

3. In the 'Hints' (MW, V, 487) he confessed, 'I would despise an author regardless of the benefit of his readers: I would admire him who, solely attentive to this benefit, should be totally indifferent to his own fame. I stand in neither of these predicaments'.

4. Memoirs, p. 122 and JA, p. 103.

fellow countrymen. Therefore, Gibbon concluded, 'I must look out for some other subject'.¹

This conclusion, when incorporated in the Memoirs, is there reinterpreted as the need for 'a safer and more extensive theme.'² This seems to represent, like a number of rephrased Journal entries, other than mere stylistic improvements, a gloss on the original in which Gibbon attempted to recapture more clearly for the reader, his thoughts at the time. In this case he was bringing out his conviction that whatever subject he finally decided on, it must be safe: it must avoid both inherent dangers to which insular or partisan topics were liable, and also the moral ambiguities which were often concealed behind blind patriotism and false hero worship. In any case, the satisfying topic should be 'extensive', transcending the narrow boundaries of purely national fame to which figures like Raleigh were confined. And with that Gibbon looked beyond the limits of biography.

He turned finally to two subjects which seemed 'fit for history' in fulfilling the necessary requirements. They were normally inspiring and they were 'more extensive' in several ways. No longer biographical, they exemplified such extensive themes as courage and liberty; they were 'European' rather than narrowly English, and they were subjects which have been seen as 'elements in the great problem which exercised the historians of the eighteenth century.'³ That problem, Roman decline

1. JA, loc.cit.

2. Memoirs, p. 122.

3. See H. Trevor-Roper, 'The Idea of the Decline and Fall', in Barber, et.al., op.cit., p. 426.

and the lost millennium which followed, he was not yet ready to tackle. But for the present he found an absorbing subject in the country of his adoption, 'The History of the Liberty of the Swiss, which that brave people recovered from the house of Austria, defended against the Dauphin... and at last sealed with the blood of Charles'.¹ This was the one he would 'prefer to all others'. Here indeed was a 'glorious theme' which should cause 'the meanest writer to catch fire'.² But the other, 'The History of the Republic of Florence, under the House of the Medicis', was also a 'splendid subject' on which he thought he would ultimately settle, partly because the sources of the former were inaccessible to him, being 'fast locked up in the obscurity of a barbarous old German language', which he was not prepared to study just for this task. The Florentine Republic was certainly suggested to Gibbon from his reading of Machiavelli's History, a work he greatly admired and to which he was introduced in his first serious study of history at the age of fourteen.³

Both these topics concerned human freedom, a growth in the one case, a decline in the other; and 'both lessons', Gibbon felt, 'are equally instructive'.⁴ It is significant that both topics remained with him and still exercised his mind in the year after he had decided on Rome.⁵ But it is more significant to our present purpose to note

1. JA, 26 July, 1762, p. 103.

2. Memoirs, p. 141; JA, loc.cit., cf. Memoirs, p. 122: 'From such a theme the dullest stranger would catch fire'.

3. Memoirs, p. 42, where he speaks of swallowing 'many crude lumps' of these modern historians. By the 18th century, Machiavelli's Istorie fiorentine was available in two English translations; Gibbon mentions reading it in Italian during his study of the language in the winter of 1759. (JA, p. 10).

4. Memoirs, p. 122, based on JA, 'Both lessons equally useful'.

5. Memoirs, pp. 140-1.

the grounds for their choice which were not coldly rational, but emotional and moral. Gibbon thought in terms of 'glory and liberty', being 'influenced with the zeal of patriotism', 'the dullest' catching fire, as well as useful or instructive lessons, 'public spirit', 'great lessons of government', 'examples of virtue'.¹

It is not surprising then to find that when he took up his Swiss subject five years later and wrote an introduction to the history of that republic,² he could, even after his Roman experience, still describe it as a 'glorious theme' which 'satisfied' 'my judgment as well as my enthusiasm'.³ This is all the more striking in view of his well-known remark concerning his emotional reactions: 'My temper is not very susceptible of enthusiasm, and the enthusiasm which I do not feel I have ever scorned to affect'.⁴ And the rare show of enthusiasm to which that remark referred was the climactic and unique experience, his first sight of Rome. Thus both Rome and Swiss liberty stirred Gibbon to an enthusiastic response which is almost without parallel in his career.

The two 'noble' themes that Gibbon finally arrived at in the middle of 1762 both answered to the aspirations of the historian. 'What might not I hope for', he wrote of the former, 'who to some talents perhaps add an affection for the nation which would make me labour the composition con amore'.⁵ The other also enjoyed a particular advantage in 'two

1. Cf. JA, pp. 103-4 with Memoirs, p. 122.

2. 'Introduction à l'Histoire générale de la République des Suisses' (MW, III, 239-330).

3. Memoirs, p. 141.

4. ibid., p. 134.

5. JA, p. 103.

fine morceaux for a Philosophic historian, and which are essential parts of it, the Restoration of Learning in Europe by Lorenzo de Medicis and the character of Savonarola'.¹ No wonder Gibbon's problem in this instance was not the inadequacy of a 'hero', but which of two equally stirring themes he should choose. Both were left suspended at this stage.² Nor could he ultimately choose between them without the opinion of his friend Deyverdun, whose collaboration as translator also finally removed the obstacle of the German sources. Meanwhile, however, with the French war at an end and freed from militia service, Gibbon eagerly seized the opportunity to return to Europe at the beginning of 1763. Paris, with its polished society and its facilities for research, and Lausanne, with its 'tranquil simplicity' and renewed friendships, were merely preliminaries to the keenly anticipated Italian tour.

It is obvious to the reader of the Journals and the Memoirs that Gibbon's preparatory reading for this Italian tour, as well as his travelling library, was not that of a historian of early modern Italy let alone of the Swiss Republic, but of ancient and medieval Rome.³ When he was able to return to Paris in January 1763, he was thinking in terms of some historical subject of commanding interest, neither politically contentious nor partisan, but 'extensive' and having ample

1. JA, p. 104.

2. As Gibbon wrote in this Journal entry: 'This design I believe I shall fix upon; but when, or how shall I execute it? That is a thing I can say little to at present'. (JA, pp. 104-5).

3. See the record in the Lausanne Journal of his detailed study of ancient Rome, especially in Nardini, which Pavillard procured for him from the Geneva library (17 September to 2 October, 1763) and of ancient Italy in Cluvier 'une enterprise considerable', from 13 October to 3 December. (JA, pp. 42-87; 90-163). Other books included a dissertation on the buildings of ancient Rome (ibid., 6 October, p. 82).

and accessible materials. His programme involved visits to the Academy of Medals and to libraries, and in particular a study of Mabillon's great work on diplomatics and Montfaucon's Palaographia.¹ Neither of these works had a direct bearing on any modern theme; both were tools for an earlier period of History. In addition, his plan of reading included the ancient historians and later works on old Rome, topographical and geographical studies of the empire from which he drew up his own 'Recueil géographique de l'Italie', and finally, 'the science of medals'. In a neat little mahogany box was his 'travelling library', consisting of twenty-four volumes of Brindley's ancient classical editions, amongst which were Sallust, Caesar, Nepos and four volumes of his beloved Tacitus.² 'And thus', wrote Gibbon, 'was I armed for my Italian journey'.³

As we watch him set out on this long-awaited tour, the earlier attractive topics seem to be forgotten and we may well ask with Trevor-Roper, 'was this...the prospective chronicler of the Medici, or of the liberty of the Swiss, and not rather, even now, even before his Roman experience, the historian of the Roman Empire?'⁴ Even the historian himself, at least as he arranged his life in retrospect for the Memoirs, seems to leave on the table several significant titles to point the reader to the destined outcome of this memorable journey.

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1. The references to these authors in the footnotes of DF testify to Gibbon's continued use of them. He also records how he earlier used a large part of his first allowance in Lausanne to purchase volumes from the Academy of Inscriptions, a school of ancient literature he 'most assiduously frequented'. (Memoirs, p. 97).
 2. See Geoffrey Keynes, The Library of Edward Gibbon, Intr. p. 18 and App., p. 128. The box of books is now in Christ Church Library, Oxford.
 3. Memoirs, p. 132.
 4. 'The Idea of the Decline and Fall', op.cit., p. 425.

There are the Roman Antiquities, the Italia Antiqua, descriptions of Italy by Strabo, Pliny and other ancient writers, the topography of the city and Bergier's Histoire des grands Chemins de l'Empire Romain.¹ And he leaves us in no doubt as to the goal. 'ROME is the great object of our pilgrimage'.²

So much is clear, but Trevor-Roper proceeds to ask a second question about this tour: 'What historian could face all at once, so huge a subject? Giannone had contented himself with a geographical fragment of it... Hume had shown what could be done in one brilliant essay...Robertson had swept over the whole period from Antiquity to the Renaissance in two long, masterly sketches...How much simpler it must have seemed to Gibbon to follow the example of these revered masters: to detach another manageable portion than tackle the whole gigantic problem!'³ This 'great problem' which 'haunted the new "philosophical historians"'⁴ of the eighteenth century was the apparent discontinuity of historical development in view of the long dark gap between the high civilisation of Rome and their own. It was one to which their own age, unlike the previous century, was ready to address itself and of which, according to Trevor-Roper, 'all the subjects which in turn occupied Gibbon's mind can be seen as elements.'⁵

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1. See Memoirs, pp. 131-2, and Gibbon's account of his reading over this period in JB; cf. note 3, p. 136 above.
 2. Memoirs, p. 143.
 3. op.cit., p. 425. The work of Hume referred to is his essay 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations' (to which Gibbon referred more than once: DF, xxxi, III, 323, n. ; and MW, V, 178, 549, for minor comments; and also JB, p. 163, n. 1). Robertson's works are his Charles V and America (both also cited in DF).
 4. Trevor-Roper, op.cit., p. 423.
 5. ibid., p. 426. See also pp. 422-5 for his definition and discussion of the 'problem', as considered by Giannone, Bolingbroke, Montesquieu and Dugald Stewart.

Yet there seems no evidence in Gibbon's writings to suggest a conscious analysis of this 'huge subject' into its constituent elements nor any preoccupation with it at the time of his tour of Italy. His journal of the tour is silent¹ and we must look to the late reconstruction of the Memoirs for the clue connecting his experience of the city with his destined subject. The truth is not so much that Gibbon was unable 'to face all at once so huge a subject', but rather that he only began to be aware of its extent when, eight years after his experience in Rome, he got down to the business of writing his first volume. The 'limits and extent' of the subject were still not clear, as he explored his way 'through the darkness of the middle ages'. 'At the outset all was dark and doubtful: even the title of the work, the true area of the decline and fall of the Empire...'² These had still to be decided and defined. His 'original plan was circumscribed to the decay of the City', which had provided the initial inspiration, 'rather than of the Empire',³ which was a later outgrowth of this inspiration.

But what of the earlier topics? Were they conceived deliberately or even dimly in the light of this 'great problem' of the eighteenth century? Was Gibbon, in effect, tackling it piecemeal? Such a view tends to undervalue their appeal for the aspiring historian, especially considering the enthusiasm aroused by what struck him as in themselves 'glorious' or 'splendid' themes. And it finds little support in the Englishness and hero-centred nature of the series that preceded them. Nor could Richard, and even his crusade, be seen as major issues in the

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1. His last journal ended in December 1764 at Rome with descriptions of ancient objects of art. See JC, pp. 236ff.
 2. See Memoirs, pp. 146-7, 155.
 3. ibid., p. 136.

great medieval question; nor could Henry V,¹ let alone Raleigh, Montrose or Sidney. Surely Gibbon saw them as historical figures in their own right, or 'heroes' as he called Richard and Raleigh.² However he may have viewed Charles VIII, his Neapolitan expedition of 1498 lies outside the limits of even the later extended scope of The Decline and Fall. The Florentine subject, which was to deal with the period between 1420 and 1569, was again largely beyond this scope. The Swiss Liberty, though mainly within it,³ was but remotely connected with the transformation of the Roman world and the medieval problem of discontinuity.

What is certain is that the common factor in these last two subjects is not Roman decline and medieval darkness, but the very characteristic Gibbonian theme of liberty, which gripped him not only in ancient Rome but also in modern England, France or America. '"Liberty" had always been one of Gibbon's watchwords', says Swain, 'and he believed that all culture and civilisation itself were dependent upon it'.⁴ It was

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1. Trevor-Roper (p. 425) says, 'the English subjects were suggested by Hume'. They are mentioned in the Journal for 4 August, 1761 and the first reference to the relevant volume of Hume's History 'just published' is on 2 November, where it is described as 'ingenious but superficial'. He consulted Hume's earlier volume for background on Raleigh, apparently after he had already settled on this subject (cf. 4 & 13 August, 1761.)
 2. It was only when he felt this 'hero' had been fully treated already that he thought of extending his topic to 'the general history of the age, so far as connected with the life of Raleigh'. (JA, 26 July, 1762, p. 102).
 3. JA, p. 103 and Memoirs, p. 141 ('I embraced a period of two hundred years from the association of the three peasants of the Alps to the plenitude and prosperity of the Helvetic body in the sixteenth century.')
 4. Edward Gibbon the Historian, p. 142.

the only climate in which moral choices could be made.¹ Liberty and the loss of liberty form one of the dominant themes of The Decline and Fall.² In the case of his last two topics, Gibbon saw them merely as contrasting illustrations of this one great theme: Switzerland 'emerges into glory and liberty', while Florence suffers 'the loss of her liberty'.³

Even more basic than the questions we might ask about the nature of the subjects Gibbon was considering at this time, is the question as to the nature of the history he must write. We have seen some of the underlying principles as he explored them somewhat tentatively in the Essai. Does he give us any further 'hints' as he now faces up to the problem of finding a compelling topic? One comment he made after reading Voltaire's Louis XIV is revealing. While admitting it was 'told in an easy, clear, and lively style', he noted the absence of 'any thing of the majesty of the great historians',⁴ those whom he himself dared or hoped to follow. It is probably this 'majesty' more than anything else which has made Gibbon's own History 'a truly classic work', still holding its place long after its contemporaries have been forgotten.⁵

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1. Cf. Bury's comment (Memoirs, Intr. xvi), 'Liberty was in fact his ultimate standard; perhaps there was no deeper feeling in his breast than jealousy of personal freedom, and independence which he describes as the first of earthly blessings'.
 2. It is a fruitful study to follow related terms like 'liberty', 'freedom', 'independence', 'despotism', 'tyranny' though the whole of that work. Swain gives some instances on pp. 142-3.
 3. 'I have another in view, which is the direct contrast of the former', he wrote. See JA, p. 104 and Memoirs, p. 122.
 4. JA, 28 August, 1762, p. 129.
 5. 'Lo, there is just appeared a truly classic work', wrote Horace Walpole to William Mason, 18 Feb. 1776, Correspondence, ed. W.S. Lewis, vol. 28, p. 243.

It was also clear that there would be no room for trivialities in the work Gibbon would write. One of the merits he found in Voltaire's Louis XIV was his 'throwing aside all trivial circumstances, and chusing no events, but such as are either usefull or entertaining'.¹ In fact, Gibbon had dropped his projected work on the Neapolitan expedition of Charles VIII not only because it was morally unsatisfactory but also because on closer investigation, he concluded that this event was not great in itself.² Furthermore, apart from the events themselves, one must avoid superficiality of treatment which he detected even in the work of Hume.³ In his reading at this time, he was aware of this defect in other eminent writers like Voltaire⁴ and Fontenelle, whose Histoire des Oracles, he wrote, 'tho' excellent, is somewhat superficial'.⁵ Gibbon's history would certainly be accurate and impartial since two of 'the most important parts' of history he considered to be accuracy and impartiality.⁶ But, as one would expect from the Essai and his comments on the Swiss and Florentine subjects, it would also be instructive and useful. This was in fact, fundamental to his view of history. Even Voltaire, though no moralist, had concentrated, as Gibbon said, on what was 'either usefull or entertaining'. He welcomed this quality of usefulness in a book of Erasmus, which was 'a perfect contrast to most fashionable French ones, since it is usefull without being brilliant'.⁷

1. JA, 28 August, 1762, p. 129.

2. JA, 4 August, 1761, p. 30; and see above p. 121 of this chapter.

3. JA, 2 November, 1761, p. 42; and see p. 124 of this chapter.

4. 'He follows some compilation, varnishes it over with the magick of his style, and produces a most agreeable, superficial, inaccurate performance'. (28 Aug. 1761, JA, p. 129).

5. JA, 31 May, 1761, p. 79. He wrote of the author of some Dissertations, 'Godeyn is polite and curious, but somewhat pert and superficial'. (*ibid.*, 6 Aug., 1762, p. 108); cf. his criticism of Pouilly, 'esprit brillant et superficiel' (Essai, XXVII).

6. *ibid.*, 26 October, 1762, p. 174.

7. de Burigny's Life of Erasmus (JA, 29 September, 1762, p. 147).

And of another book he enjoyed reading that same year, he wrote, 'Leti is a most agreeable Historian, a little more regard to truth and exactness would have made him an instructive one.'¹ Instruction was to be found in discerning truth, and in those 'useful lessons' to be drawn by perceiving moral causes and effects.

The theory of this he had begun to explore in his Essai. But where, he had suggested in that work, could it find better illustration than in the greatness and the fall of empires.² Writing, in his early work on feudal government,³ of the peoples who overturned the Roman Empire, he noted that, 'De tous les empires, celui des Romains s'est élevé le plus lentement et s'est soutenu le plus longtemps. Voilà á la fois la cause et l'effet'. That of Charlemagne also 'porta dans son sein ces principes de destruction.'⁴ Here was the principle of destruction from within rather than from without which Gibbon was later to apply. Even at this time, we may note, he was reading one of his most indispensable sources for The Decline and Fall, Tillemont's History of the Emperors.⁵ Moreover, in tracing the decadence of empires, the loss of liberty in republics, and the tyranny of rules, there would be occasion for Gibbon's moral outrage to show itself in the more instructive parts of the story. Righteous indignation,

1. Historia Genevrina by Gregorio Leti (JA, 24 June, 1762, p. 87).
2. Essai, chap. LV, p. 69; see also chap. III, p. 114-5 above.
3. 'Du gouvernement féodal, surtout en France', MW, III, pp. 183-202. This was written, according to Sheffield, between 1758 and 1763.
4. op.cit., pp. 194, 197. See also pp. 199-200 on causes and effects.
5. JA, 16 October, 1762, p. 163. Cf. Gibbon's oft-quoted remarks about this author in DF: 'The patient and sure-footed mule of the Alps may be trusted in the most slippery paths;' (xxv, III, 50-1, n.26) and his regret in chapter xlvii, 'And here I must take leave forever of that incomparable guide'. (V, 141, n. 81).

though often tempered with irony, would burn through some of the pages of his history when the occasion arose. So after reading the eighteenth book of the Iliad, Gibbon wrote in his Journal that Homer's very excess of rage, 'tho' terrible, pleases us, because it is only directed against the murderer of his friend.'¹ And in 'the crimes and follies' of mankind² which it fell to the lot of the historian to trace, there would be ample scope for such rage. In another set of 'Hints', written after he had found his great subject, but some time before he began to unfold it, Gibbon asked himself, 'Historians friends to Virtue?' and answered, 'yes - with exceptions.'³

To many of Gibbon's contemporaries, the most 'instructive lessons'⁴ were to be found in modern history, and they felt it was to this period that 'philosophic historian' should direct his attention.⁵ To Voltaire this was the only really verifiable part of history. Only at the end of the fifteenth century, he held, with printing and the revival of the sciences, 'font qu'enfin on a des histoires assez fidèles, au lieu des chroniques renfermées dans les cloîtres depuis Grégoire de Tours... Pour pénétrer dans le labyrinthe ténébreux du moyen âge, il faut le secours des archives, & on n'en a presque point...'⁶ Not only was modern history more authentic, but also more relevant in its application

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1. JA, 1 July, 1762, p. 89.
 2. See below, chapter V, 11.
 3. 'Hints', in P.B. Craddock, The English Essays of Edward Gibbon, pp. 88ff. They are dated between 1765 and 1768. The quotation is from No. 1, p. 88.
 4. Cf. Gibbon's use of this phrase concerning his last two topics (Memoirs, p. 122) with the various remarks in DF about the 'useful lessons' or 'instructive lessons' of history (e.g. xlii, IV, 387; xliv, IV, 471).
 5. See Dorothy Koch, English Theories Concerning the Nature and Uses of History, 1735-1791, unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Yale, 1946, chap. I, 'Bolingbroke and the "New History"', in which she examines the antecedents and the significance of the maxim 'History is philosophy teaching by examples'.
 6. Article HISTOIRE in Encyclopédie. Paris, 1751-65, vol. 8. p. 223, col. 1.

to one's own day. 'Enfin la grand utilité de l'histoire moderne, & l'avantage qu'elle a sur l'ancienne, est d'apprendre a tous les potentats, que depuis le xv siècle, on s'est toujours reuni contre trop prépondérante...' ¹ Hence Voltaire's own histories were concerned with the modern period. Nor did Bolingbroke see the value of spending much time on history before the end of the fifteenth century, particularly as far as the education of the governing class was concerned. 'Down to this area let us read history; from this area down to our own times, let us study it.' ² All the knowledge needed for ecclesiastical or civil policy was to be found within this period of history, which also seemed to him 'more entire as well as more authentic' than a good deal of ancient history. ³ Hume, too, who 'wrote his History backwards', starting from the most recent times, ⁴ set out 'to teach lessons directly relevant to contemporary politics'. While he sought both to entertain and to bring out what he saw as the vices and virtues of the persons in his story, the contemporary motive took precedence. His History of England 'was primarily a tract for the times'; written mainly 'to exorcise irrational hostility between the Whigs and the Tories'. ⁵ Even Gibbon himself seemed to favour recency and relevance when he described the first topic he rejected as being 'too remote from us'. ⁶ Why then did he not settle on some modern topic?

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1. ibid., p. 223, col. 2 (De l'utilite de l'Histoire).
 2. 'Letters on History', Works, II, 230 (Letter VI).
 3. ibid., II, 223; cf. also II, 211-2.
 4. His first volume on the Stuarts appeared in 1754, his second in 1756, his last 'From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Reign of Henry VII', in 1762.
 5. J.B. Stewart, The Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume. Westport, Conn. 1973, repr. 1977, p. 298. See also Hugh Trevor-Roper's B.B.C. talk, David Hume as a Historian', The Listener, Dec. 28, 1961, p. 1103, col. 1.
 6. JA, 4 August, 1761, p. 30 and p. 121 of this chapter.

To ask such a question reminds us in the first place that in his reading for pleasure as well as in his systematic programmes of study, Gibbon had always turned very largely to the ancient classics or to books about them. This predilection with the ancient world applied also to his critical writings, most of which were on ancient, a few on medieval and none on modern subjects.¹ It would therefore be more appropriate to ask a rather different question namely: why should he turn away from a field very much his own in order to choose a modern theme, unless it was only there that he could find scope for the investigation of moral causes and effects, the analysis of human nature and those 'useful lessons' which were the concern of the philosophic historian? However, it was mainly to refute such a suggestion that Gibbon had written his Essai. There he aimed to prove 'that all the faculties of the mind may be exercised and displayed by the study of ancient literature',² and this was shown to apply to the study and writing of history as much as to other branches of literature. All the examples and arguments were thus drawn from the ancient world.

Nor was Gibbon's use of the materials of ancient history undermined by the scepticism which characterised Voltaire's view of their validity. Gibbon strongly rejected the extreme Pyrrhonism of some of his contemporaries as highly dangerous and went to some lengths in the Essai to vindicate the reliability of Roman history.³ This history had suffered a great deal,

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1. About three-quarters of those written before the conclusion of DF are on ancient subjects. See MW, vols. III-V.
 2. Memoirs, p. 99.
 3. See Essai, chaps. XXVII to XXXIV.

he said, from the attacks of writers like M. de Beaufort 'qui savoit douter et qui savoir décider'. He had revived the controversy associated with M. de Pouilly, 'esprit brillant et superficiel',¹ qui citoit plus qu'il ne lisoit' and who cast doubt on the 'historical certainty' of the first five centuries of Rome: 'Mais son imagination peu faite pour ces recherches, céda facilement à l'érudition et à la critique de M. Freret et de l'Abbé Sallier'.² There was no need then for this 'Pirrhonisme historique' to which, said Gibbon, his own century had given birth. In his choice of a subject he was not inhibited by the feeling Voltaire and Bolingbroke expressed about the lack of authenticity of earlier history.

The only modern subject on which Gibbon had done any extended research was Raleigh and his times. In abandoning it he had recorded his aversion to becoming involved in a period of English history which tended to be polarised into warring factions. The historian was 'supposed to hoist a badge of party', and his work inevitably made 'every reader a friend or an enemy'.³ Gibbon could surely not have lost sight of the fact that Hume, who persistently asserted and was sure he had achieved impartiality in his History,⁴ was attacked by both parties.⁵ He might also have remembered the passage in Hume's Treatise dealing with our emotional reactions in time of war. We detest our enemies 'under

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1. Cf. the remark on Hume's final volume as 'ingenious but superficial' and other references to Gibbon's criticism of superficiality, on p. 142 above.
 2. Essai, XXVII, p. 40.
 3. JA, 26 July, 1762, p. 103.
 4. 'I may be liable to the reproach of ignorance, but I am certain of escaping that of partiality'. See H. Trevor-Roper, 'David Hume as a Historian', The Listener. December 18, 1961, p. 1103, col. 1.
 5. 'While Tories call me Whig, and Whigs Tory'. See E.C. Mossner, 'Was Hume a Tory Historian?', Journal of the History of Ideas, ii, 1941, pp. 225-236 and 'An Apology for David Hume, Historian', PMLA, lvi, 1941, pp. 657-690.

the character of cruel, perfidious, unjust and violent'. If the enemy general is successful, he is bloodthirsty and merciless; if we are successful, our commander 'has all the opposite good qualities;... every one of his faults we either endeavour to extenuate, or dignify it with the name of that virtue which approaches it.'¹

In this light Gibbon's fear of running into a period of party warfare has a deeper moral significance for the writer of the history of such times. Impartiality, one of his key tenets, would be as impossible to achieve as it was for Hume; at least it would not be recognised as impartiality. Not only that, but party prejudice would surely blind his readers to the great lessons of human nature, of vice and virtue, since their passions were already committed to their particular side. So, to use Gibbon's term in connection with this very topic, would not his own period of ancient history afford a 'safer' ground on which to illustrate 'the constant and universal principles of human nature.'² But it was not only 'safer', it was also richer, for he must surely have felt what he later affirmed in The Decline and Fall, that 'the annals of the emperors' revealing to us 'the utmost lines of vice and virtue' 'exhibit a strong and various picture of human nature, which we should vainly seek among the mixed and doubtful characters of modern history'.³

Thus in avoiding recency, Gibbon was not abandoning relevance or

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1. A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. Selby-Bigge, II, ii, 3, p. 348.
 2. Again Hume's own phrase, but applicable with qualifications to Gibbon, who saw these basic motives and reactions of human nature continuing beneath the outward appearance of changing manners and the 'vicissitude' of events.
 3. DF, iii, I, p. 86.

the possibility of current application. Trevor-Roper has pointed out how great historians, in responding to the demands of their age, have either been inspired by 'a present crisis' or have 'turned to a carefully chosen chapter of past history in order to better interpret their own age.' In the second category are the eighteenth-century 'philosophic historians' including Gibbon, interpreting the new Enlightenment by a look back over the past centuries, seeing 'the history of humanity in a long perspective' and asking questions above all about the declining Roman Empire and the dark and middle ages'.¹

The 'myth of Rome's fall' had, before Gibbon wrote, and has since his day, continued to fascinate historians by suggesting parallels and applications for the diagnosis of the West in modern times.²

The Decline and Fall itself contains many historical parallels, lessons and philosophic analyses. Some of these occur at the end of the first part of the work³ in Gibbon's 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West' which include some reflections on the prospects of European civilization in the old world and in America. 'Like many of his contemporaries', says Swain, 'Gibbon saw a close parallel between the Roman Empire of antiquity and the British Empire of his own day, and in his History he ascribed to ancient Rome not only the glories of the British Empire, but also its weaknesses'.⁴

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1. 'The Idea of the Decline and Fall' in Barber et.al., op.cit., pp. 422-3.
 2. Spengler and Arnold Toynbee come to mind and more recently, Michael Grant's The Fall of the Roman Empire - a Reappraisal. Radnor, USA, 1976; see in particular his introduction, p. 17. See also R.M. Haywood, The Myth of Rome's Fall. London, 1960; A.H.M. Jones, The Decline of the Ancient World. London, 1966; Santo Mazzarino, La Fine del Mondo Antico. 1959, tr. as The End of the Ancient World. London, 1966; and F.W. Walbank, The Awful Revolution. The Decline of the Roman Empire in the West. Liverpool, 1969.
 3. Following chap. xxxviii, IV, pp. 172-181.
 4. op.cit., pp. 141-2. See also pp. 130-1 and 138 &c. where Swain points out some oblique references to contemporary persons and situations.

Gibbon's use of this 'myth of Rome' has been developed more recently by Michel Baridon,¹ who traces the image of Rome in the minds of the Augustans and shows, like Swain, the current political overtones in Gibbon's Roman Empire.

'ROME is the great object of our pilgrimage'; this parting explanation set the tone for the whole Italian tour. In a journey of just over a year, eighteen weeks, or almost exactly a third, was spent in Rome. The lengthy notes in his Journal record the intense interest with which the traveller studied the statues and busts of the emperors in the Florence Galerie.² But the excitement with which he approached 'the eternal city' remained an unforgettable experience even as he penned his Memoirs a quarter of a century later.³ Not enthusiastic by nature, as he knew himself to be, he made no secret on this occasion of his enthusiasm for the climax of his pilgrimage. A sleepless night preceded 'days of intoxication' during which the great figures of ancient Rome seemed to come alive among the ruins of the forum. As he wrote to his father a week before the decisive day: 'I have already found such a fund of entertainment for a mind somewhat prepared for it by an acquaintance with the Romans, that I am really almost in a dream. Whatever ideas books may have given us of the greatness of that people. Their accounts of the most flourishing state of Rome fall infinitely short of the picture of its ruins'.⁴

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1. Edward Gibbon et le Mythe de Rome. Paris, 1977. See especially, pp. 376ff.
 2. JC, 16me, 17me Juillet, 1764, pp. 166-171. He also inspected the imperial medals in the Cabinet des Medailles (see pp. 194-201). See also the imperial inscriptions he copied down (p. 149). From Florence he wrote to his step-mother, 'Dear Madam this tour is one of the very few undertakings that exceed the most sanguine and flattering hopes...' (Letters, 20/6/64, I, 180ff.)
 3. Memoirs, p. 134.
 4. Letters, No. 61, 9/10/64, I, pp. 183-5.

After several days of excitement, he was ready to 'descend to a cool and minute investigation' of the actual sites which turned into personal experience all his preparation from books. In this climactic experience he was convinced that he had finally found the theme he sought: 'It was at Rome, on the 15th of October 1764, as I sat musing admist the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind.'¹

Here is the statement as Sheffield printed it in his edition of the Memoirs. It represents Gibbon's third version and a good deal of attention has been given to it by critics particularly in view of the slight difference in details between the versions. 'To what extent', Bonnard asks, 'is the famous statement fact, to what extent imagination?' since, as he reminds us, 'The "ruins of the Capitol", he had only seen in his imagination, for, in 1764, the Capitol was already what it now is.'² Gibbon saw it, no doubt, with the same vision with which, as he had walked the forum in those exciting days, he could say, 'each memorable spot where Romulus stood, or Tully spoke, or Caesar fell was at once present to my eye'.³ But this same vision of the Capitol, common to both the first and last versions of the famous sentence in the Memoirs was exactly that with which he had also closed his History. After surveying with his reader the ruins of the city as they were in

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1. Memoirs, MW, I, p. 198; cf. 'C;' version (Bonnard's edition, p. 136).
 2. ibid., Editor's Notes, pp. 304-5 where Bonnard discusses the rephrasing of this sentence. See also the versions as printed in John Murray's The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon.
 3. Memoirs, p. 134.

his own day, he soberly recorded as he finished the book: 'It was among the ruins of the capitol that I first conceived the idea of a work which has amused and exercised nearly twenty years of my life'.¹

As Gibbon looked back, with his great work behind him, he read a particular order and progression into the life of 'the historian of the Roman Empire'. 'If Gibbon writes history and memoirs from the same desire, we must read the life with as much suspension of judgement about "the truth" as we read The Decline and Fall. Both are necessarily personal readings of the past'.² This is important to remember; but in trying to make the delicate division between 'truth' and 'imagination', we must not lose the essential truth of the statement, that something happened in Rome; Gibbon was converted to Roman greatness, as indeed he suggested to his father, and to an awful awareness of its fall. Making due allowance for the reworkings of the celebrated Memoirs statement, and for the author's apparent patterning of his life in retrospect, we must accept the significance of the time and the place in the making of the historian. This emerges from whatever version of the event we take, and the revisions through which it passed, all really elaborations of the basic statement in the History, may be said to confirm its pivotal importance for Gibbon himself.

Something else strikes one too about the famous sentence. It is often felt that Gibbon tried to make it 'as dramatic and significant as he could'.³ This seems to suggest a striving after dramatic effect.

1. DF, 'Conclusion of the whole work', VII, p. 338.
2. Roger J. Porter, 'Gibbon's Autobiography, Filling up the Silent Vacancy', Eighteenth-Century Studies 8/Nr. 1, Fall, 1974, p. 6. Cf. Swain, op.cit., p. 4: 'he could show how he had arranged his whole life with a view to producing his great History; nothing else, he would show, had really mattered'.
3. Bonnard, Notes to Memoirs, p. 305.

Yet if so, it is rather that of understatement, of quiet restraint. The drama is to be seen in the preceding days and Gibbon's account echoes this. Then follows a 'cool and minute' inspection of the ruins. The celebrated entry occurs in a sort of postscript to the narrative of the tour, a discussion of the value of foreign travel. And in about four pages devoted to the Italian tour, the Roman experience is given only about as many lines. In each of the versions it seems to be deliberately played down in the context of the whole story of the Memoirs. The tone is restrained. It is announced by no trumpets and it is immediately taken up into a further qualification about the actual scope of Gibbon's subject. All this seems reasonable enough when we consider that in the account of his life, this experience did not bear fruit at once; it did not herald the beginning of The Decline and Fall which had some time yet to wait. But I suggest a more significant reason for this obvious restraint. It is that the essential truth of the statement needs no great elaboration or embellishment to make its point. It can be said simply and briefly; it had already been said even more briefly, but conclusively at the end of the History. No overemphasis was needed. That great work was in itself adequate testimony to the experience at Rome. It was not unlike Wren's memorial inscription in St. Paul's: 'If you seek his monument, look around you'.¹

There is surely no need, then, to doubt the reality of Gibbon's conversion to Rome through his experience of the city. 'It was the view of Italy and Rome which determined the choice of the subject', he wrote.² He had needed to see what was still to be seen of ancient

1. 'Si monumentum requiris, circumspice'.

2. Memoirs, p. 136 ('C' sketch).

Rome, its venerable ruins. But he also needed to see more, and he did. He saw the ruins of the Capitol and 'the eternal city', not Christian but pagan, with the eyes of moral vision. The two Romes merged and separated in his mind's eye. The Church of the Zoccolanti became the Temple of Jupiter once again. The experience, of course, represented no sudden conversion; it was long prepared for, over almost a lifetime. But it represented a commitment to Rome that was both permanent and complete. Even though he temporarily returned to other themes, he never lost his vision of Rome. In the first summer after his return from Italy, 'the decline and fall of Rome' was 'still contemplated' though 'at an awful distance',² but meanwhile he turned to something more moderate and more manageable.

This was a reconsideration of his earlier favourites, the twin topics of liberty in Switzerland and in Florence. After discussion with Deyverdun, the choice fell, not surprisingly, on the former, especially as his companion was now available to translate the German sources which had hitherto been the main obstacle. But the preliminaries involving the collection and translation of sources proved a longer job than had been supposed. Meanwhile Gibbon undertook a short piece of investigation which is highly relevant to our view of the historian seeking to come to grips with his chosen theme. It is significant because it is Roman, but even more so because it reveals the moralist focusing

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1. The fact that the scene of Gibbon's musing, St. Maria in Aracoeli, was actually the site of the temple of Juno Moneta, is of little consequence to the fact of the experience. See, however, Bury's note on the site, DF, VII, pp.235-6, n. 47; also Lynn White, Jr. (ed), The Transformation of the Roman World. University of California Press, 1966, p. 291.
 2. Memoirs, p. 140.

on motives and intentions, just as he was to do with his characters in The Decline and Fall. In this 'Digression on the Character of Brutus'¹ we see Gibbon, completely overturning the commonly accepted estimate of the 'hero' and patriot because he saw it to be based on a moral confusion. Not only, says Gibbon, was this man praised by all the great writers of the following age, but even two centuries after the establishment of the empire, 'the character of Brutus was studied as the Perfect Ideal of Roman Virtue'. Furthermore, in modern England, France and Italy 'his name has always been mentioned with Respect by the Adherents of Monarchy; and pronounced with Enthusiasm by the Friends of Freedom'.² That is the long-entrenched estimate which continued to be held almost without exception by those of opposite political opinions. It is the also bound up with the theme of liberty for Brutus owes this universal esteem, to his traditional role as the enemy of tyranny and the defender of freedom.

Gibbon found himself having to dissent from 'the Sentence of Ages'. Not only did he see the assassination of Caesar as a 'feeble and unfortunate' act, but he also saw the character of Brutus as tainted by compromise and, most heinous of all, by 'unrelenting avarice'.³ Hence he sought 'to enquire, in what consisted THE DIVINE VIRTUE OF BRUTUS?' He was concerned, as ever, with the motive, the intention behind the act. The ancients, he said, generally applauded tyrannicide, just as the nations of modern Europe generally condemned it. But all that could be said in favour of the 'GODLIKE STROKE' of Brutus was 'that by acting up to the established standard of Roman virtue, he is

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1. MW, IV, p. 95ff. Sheffield marked it 'date uncertain'; Craddock in The English Essays of Edward Gibbon dates it 1765-6.
 2. MW, IV, p. 95.
 3. ibid., pp. 96, 103.

entitled to our indulgence, and in some measure to our esteem. Yet in these nice cases, where the esteem is bestowed on the INTENTION, rather than on the ACTION, we ought to be well assured that the intention was pure from any interested or passionate motive; that it was not the hasty suggestion of resentment or vanity, but the calm result of consistent and well grounded virtue, impatient of slavery and tender of the rights of mankind.'¹

Here is Gibbon's criterion and it is interesting to find him laying down this standard of virtue as he approached The Decline and Fall, with its numerous character sketches of notable persons, where the motive, the intention, became the determining factor. In this early work, however, he stressed that the praises of the ancient writers, even the nobility of Brutus's own letters, had to be weighed against the private and public conduct of the 'hero'. We may easily be predisposed towards him by this literary evidence, 'but it is the uniform tenor of his life, private as well as public, which must in a great degree acquit or condemn the conspirator.'²

In Gibbon's examination, Brutus stood condemned on several counts: his 'unrelenting avarice', which perhaps even surpassed that of the notorious Verres;³ his equivocation,⁴ his obsequiousness,⁵ his compromise of his republican principles, and his perjury.⁶ To Gibbon, the ardent champion of freedom, a key question in the cross-examination of contemporary witnesses was this: 'Could Brutus accept, could he solicit

1. MW, IV, p. 100.

2. ibid., pp. 100-1.

3. ibid., p. 103.

4. ibid., p. 106.

5. When governor of Cisalpine Gaul; see p. 107.

6. ibid., p. 109-110.

the honours of the state from a master who had abolished the forms of elections?'¹ There was an obvious inconsistency in an avowed republican, patriot and defender of liberty accepting such honours from the destroyer of liberty and the republic. 'True patriotism would have instructed him not to cancel but to refuse obligations of such a nature from the declared enemy of Cato and the liberty of Rome'.² Might there not be here an implied lesson for some British patriots in Gibbon's day? In ancient Rome, and perhaps in eighteenth-century England, one might expect the ordinary people to confuse the name of democracy or liberty with its actual abuse in practice; but no philosopher should be guilty of such a confusion.³

The 'philosophic historian' and lover of liberty, after his re-examination of the facts concerning the character and motives of the Roman 'patriot', concluded with a declaration of the moralist's reverence for truth. 'Such are the reflections, which an accurate examination of the character of Brutus has suggested to an enemy of tyranny, under every shape: who will neither be awed by the frown of power, nor silenced by the hoarse voice of popular applause. The monarch and the patriot are alike amenable to the severe but candid inquisition of truth.'⁴ The core of the 'Dissertation on Brutus' and its relevance to the making of the moralist historian is that it is an examination not of legal issues but of ideals and of consistency to avowed ideals, and that it becomes the occasion for the enunciation of general moral principles.

1. ibid., p. 108.

2. ibid., p. 109.

3. ibid., p. 111 ('but to a philosopher of an enlarged mind it was surely of little moment under what appellation public liberty was oppressed.')

4. ibid., loc.cit.. On these sentiments see also Gibbon's Lettre sur le gouvernement de Berne, discussed below.

However, before Rome finally claimed Gibbon's undivided attention, there was an abortive return to the Swiss theme. He had once before touched on the question of liberty in Switzerland,¹ very likely several months prior to setting out on his tour of Italy.² His Lettre sur le gouvernement de Berne,³ written under the guise of a Sweedish traveller to his Swiss friend, had drawn attention to what young Gibbon saw as defects of the administration and the oppression of the Vaud. After appearing in an edition of the Miscellaneous Works published at Bale in 1796-7, it was used by J.B.Say in 1802 and by the historians of the Vaud revolution.⁴ Its immediate interest to our discussion lies in the fact that it concerns the liberty and equality of the citizen, that it uses an example from ancient Rome with a contemporary application, and proclaims some general principles. The historical reference concerns freedom, Roman tyranny and the case of Brutus: 'Arretez, Monsieur; Je vous ai parlé en homme libre et vous me repondez dans langage de la Servitude. Arretez. En convenant pour un moment de votre bonheur, de qui le tenez vous? de la Constitution? Vous n'osez pas le dire. C'est donc du prince? Les Romains en devoient un plus grand à Titus. Ils etoient cependant de vils esclaves. Brutus vous auroit appris que dans un Etat Despotique le prince peut quelquefois vouloir, le bien: Mais

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1. His Lettre sur le gouvernement de Berne, BM, Add.MS 34882, folios 4-10, appeared untitled among the letters in MW II, No.IX, pp. 1-32, and was published by L.Junod as 'La Lettre de Gibbon sur le gouvernement de Berne' in Miscellanea Gibboniana, ed. G.R.de Beer, G.A.Bonnard & L.Junod. Lausanne, 1952, pp. 123ff.
 2. Sheffield, taking it to be in Gibbon's early handwriting, placed it 'probably about the time of his first leaving Lausanne', i.e. 1758 (MW, II, 1). Junod showed better reasons for placing it in his second Lausanne period, connecting it with an entry in JB (1r Nov., 1763, pp. 126ff.). See Junod's Preface, pp. 118-120.
 3. See notes 1 and 2 above.
 4. 'Ces indications sommaires montrent l'emploi abondant qui a été fait de la lettre de Gibbon par les historiens de la Révolution vaudoise,' Junod, Préface, p. 115.

que dans les Etats Libres Il ne peut que le vouloir.'¹ Junod was struck irresistibly by a connection between some of the sentiments in the Lettre and the reflections in Gibbon's Journal at this time.² His reading of Cluvier and Vertot led him to write of the domination of the peoples of Italy by the Romans: 'Ils ne voyoient point des Gouverneurs dont l'insolence egaloit l'avarice, toutes leurs affaires evoquées à la Capitale, et un mur d'airain qui separoit à jamais le Citoyen et le sujet. On refusoit la bourgeoisie Romaine aux Cités, mais des qu'un particulier faisoit paroître une ambition justifiée par les talens. La Republique connoissoit trop bien ses interets pour ne pas la lui accorder.' Then the current application: 'J'ecris dans le pays de Vaud. Ses habitans doivent etre contents de leur etat. Qu'on le compare cependant à celui de ces peuples d'Italie,' and Gibbon went on to mention exclusion from advantages and even rights.³ Thus both the Journal and the Lettre draw an analogy⁴ between the condition of the Vaudois and conditions in Roman times.

In the Lettre, amongst particular references to the situation of the Vaudois, Gibbon enunciated certain general principles, sometimes rather oratorically. 'Que vois manque til la liberté: et privés d'elle, tout vous manque.' And regarding liberty and law, he wrote: 'Cependant si la Liberté consiste a n'etre soumis qu'à des loix dont l'objet est le bien commun de la Société, vous n'etes point libres.' These and similar Gibbonian principles lend the document an importance for our study of the development of the moralist and the historian, amongst

1. Lettre, p. 130.

2. See his préface to the Lettre, pp. 118-9.

3. JB, 1r Nov., 1763, cited by Junod in his préface, p. 119.

4. Cf. also another analogy, Lettre, p. 129: 'Une preuve moins sensible pour le peuple mais aussi decicise pour des gens de Lettres: C'est l'analogie. Les Barbares du Cinquieme Siecle...'

them being the emphasis on toleration in the face of minute theological differences which was to become so marked a feature of The Decline and Fall: 'En soutenant les droits de l'humanité, je n'outre point les maximes de la Tolerance'.¹

Eventually the groundwork for the history of Swiss liberty was prepared and about four years after his return from Italy, Gibbon began to write. The subject still appealed to him, even after his conversion to Rome, as being a 'glorious theme' in its own right and fully satisfying to the historian. Having written the introduction he submitted it to the judgement of Hume, whose only adverse comment was that it should have been written in English instead of French.² This criticism, Trevor-Roper suggests, may have convinced Gibbon to write his Decline and Fall in English.³ This may be so, but our more immediate question is, what persuaded him to relinquish this last survivor of his earlier topics, one which still satisfied both his 'judgement' and his 'enthusiasm'?⁴ On Gibbon's own admission this was the only literary preoccupation standing between him and his destined work.⁵ Its abandonment could not have been due to Hume's comments which were complimentary and encouraging. His objection to the language chosen was merely that it was the wrong choice for a work he thought 'written with spirit and judgment'. 'And', he added, 'I exhort you very earnestly to continue it'. Surely no criticism would have been more valued than Hume's.

1. Lettre, pp. 124, 125, 134.
2. Hume's letter of 24 October, 1767 is printed in Sheffield's edition as a footnote to the Memoirs (MW, I, pp. 204-5).
3. 'The Idea of the Decline and Fall', op.cit., p. 427.
4. Memoirs, p. 141, writing of the year 1767 and the resumption of the Swiss history.
5. 'As soon as I was released from the fruitless task of the Swiss revolutions, I gradually advanced from the wish to the hope, from the hope to the design, from the design to the execution, of my historical work'. ('D' version, MW, I, p.213).

What then removed this last obstacle to the writing of The Decline and Fall? In the absence of a journal, which came to an end at Rome, we have only the comments of the Memoirs to guide us.¹ The suggestion there is very much like that in the case of Raleigh, that the work would be uncertain of gaining fame abroad. Perhaps once again it was not 'safe' or 'extensive' enough. At any rate Gibbon tried a specimen of the Swiss history on 'a literary society of foreigners in London', but by means of anonymity, he made sure that his audience could freely speak their mind. Their judgement was unfavourable and, he said, his own 'cooler thought' later ratified 'their condemnation', though 'the momentary sensation was painful'.²

Was Gibbon in agreement with his foreign audience about the style and treatment only, or had he begun to have reservations about the subject itself? There is no reason to doubt that he had considered the theme as glorious and the country worthy of a historian. It was his adopted country, the one which had in a sense made him, and to which some years later he eagerly returned to live. Rousseau and other notable men had made it famous and its stirring struggle for independence appealed to Gibbon as a suitable moral issue. However, his closer study of the sources, with Deyverdun's help, may have revealed a good deal of petty and unpleasant in-fighting among the cantons which would appear as a blemish on the pure fight for liberty. It may have made it difficult for him to present Switzerland unambiguously as the citadel of freedom and moral virtue. Nor would the picture of a narrow, closed Calvinistic culture in many areas have suited his ideal. This would have disgusted him and offended his ideas of freedom and toleration.

1. See Memoirs, pp. 140-2.

2. ibid., pp. 141-2.

The most Gibbon admitted in his Memoirs was that his work must inevitably have been 'slight and superficial' since he was after all a foreigner who had spent but a few years in Switzerland, and was 'uninformed by the scholars and statesmen and remote from the libraries and archives of the Swiss Republics'. No doubt with this last thought in mind, he also referred to the two years preparatory labour as having yielded only 'slender materials' from which he would have to write.¹ Having abandoned this 'essay', he was able to express his dissatisfaction with both its scholarship and its style,² and as he turned to The Decline and Fall, the whole task which had entered its third year seemed to have been 'fruitless'.³ Yet one has to ask, if Gibbon was swayed by the negative reaction of a group of foreign gentlemen in preference to the positive encouragement of the great 'philosophic historian' himself, how much persuasion did he really need to exchange the lesser subject for the greater? The tone of the retrospective comments in the Memoirs also supports this view: 'released from the fruitless task' and 'I cannot regret the loss of a slight and superficial Essay'.⁴

1. Memoirs, pp. 141-2.

2. 'My ancient habits, and the presence of Deyverdun encouraged me to write in French, for the Continent of Europe: but I was conscious myself, that my style, above prose and below poetry, degenerated into a verbose and turgid declamation. Perhaps I may impute the failure to the injudicious choice of a foreign language'. (ibid., p. 142.)

3. ibid., p. 146.

4. ibid., pp. 146, 142.

With this last diversion out of the way, Gibbon was able to come to grips with his great work and began to prepare his materials. Out of this preparation it seems came the 'Outlines of the History of the World',¹ in some ways a sort of rough draft for the time schedule of The Decline and Fall as originally announced in Gibbon's first preface.² Though the 'Outlines' are a mere chronological sketch, neatly divided into centuries and countries and even lacking much balance or perspective, the work is punctuated with moral judgements and assessments which are essentially those of The Decline and Fall. The references to Richard and the crusades have already been cited,³ but one could take a number of such comments which any reader of Gibbon might identify as coming from The Decline and Fall. Thus he wrote that, 'The Christians of the western and eastern empires had scarcely any common resemblance, except that of religious superstition'. Or again, 'Edgar is celebrated by the monks for his profuse devotion to their order; and by rational men, for the attention he gave to the natural strength of his kingdom'. In like vein is the typically Gibbonian comment on 'Henry II, surnamed the Saint because he chose to be the last of his family'.⁴ There are also remarks on 'the active genius of the Arabs' and the awakening

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1. MW, III, pp. 1-55. Also in Craddock, op.cit., pp. 163-198.
 2. DF, I, xxxix-xl, where the three periods of the history must correspond to the building of 'three stories' which he mentioned in his letter to Sheffield (No. 642, 20/1/87; III, 59). The note in DF, chap. xxx (III, 283, n. 88) is thought to refer to all or part of the 'Outlines': 'As early as 1771, I find the same idea expressed in a rough draft of the present History'. See also Swain, op.cit., pp. 122-3 and Craddock, op.cit., p. 57.
 3. See chap. IV, p. 128, nn, 1,2 above.
 4. MW, III, pp. 4, 7, 9.

genius of Europe being tarnished by ignorance and error¹ where again the tone is unmistakably that of The Decline and Fall. A short section, under the fourteenth century devoted to the achievement of Swiss liberty, begins with the words: 'The Swiss owe their reputation to their freedom, and their freedom to their valour'.² Apart from parallel sections between the two works³ there are sometimes strong verbal similarities. Thus the judgement on Innocent III in the 'Outlines', 'By establishing the doctrine of Transubstantiation and the tribunal of the Inquisition he obtained the two most memorable victories over the common sense and common rights of mankind', became: 'Innocent may boast of the two most signal triumphs over sense and humanity, the establishment of transubstantiation and the origin of the inquisition'.⁴ Even through the sketchy and abrupt treatment of the 'Outlines', we see the essential viewpoint, the 'temperate irony' and the language of moral comment ready for the later work. Patricia Craddock notes that while there are obvious differences between the 'Outlines' and the last two volumes of The Decline and Fall in 'Gibbon's knowledge and priorities', yet 'his values and value judgements...show relatively little change in the same period (1771-88)'.⁵

The Decline and Fall was now coming into sharper focus for Gibbon. The implementation of his plan, however, was made possible not only by his release from competing literary interests, but also by his achievement at last of the necessary independence.⁶ This had not

1. ibid., III, pp. 6, 19.

2. ibid., III, p. 32.

3. A list of parallel passages is given in Craddock, op.cit., Editor's Notes, pp. 565-6.

4. MW, III, p. 21 and DF, lix, VI, pp. 369-370.

5. op.cit., p. 564.

6. 'the first of earthly blessings', as he called it. See Memoirs, pp. 150-5.

come about till he had attended to the most pressing demands of his late father's mortgaged estate, provided for his step-mother and settled himself in his own house in London. There, surrounded by his library and 'absolute master' of his time and activities, he could tackle the history which not long before he had merely 'contemplated at an awful distance'.¹ The subject itself was 'awful' in more ways than one: it was awe inspiring, 'perhaps the most awful scene in the history of mankind'; it was also formidable, even forbidding, because so huge and overwhelming. How huge Gibbon had not yet discovered and had hardly dared to investigate till he had enjoyed his new independence. This gave him at last the freedom to explore the site and make more detailed drawings. One preliminary sketch is probably seen in the 'Outlines'. Then, as he sought to define the title and the time span of the work,² he found 'the decline and fall of the city' growing into that of the empire, eventually both the east and the west. With the help of Muratori's work and other great scholarly volumes from his shelves, he 'explored' his way 'through the darkness of the middle ages', till at last he 'almost grasped the ruins of Rome in the fourteenth century'.³ He was back at those ruins which had originally determined his commitment to the decline and fall of Rome. At the end of his great work he was able to reaffirm the rightness of his subject, when after a final survey of the noble ruins, he wrote that the attention of every modern 'pilgrim' to the imperial city, indeed of every reader, 'will be excited by an history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire; the greatest, and perhaps the most awful scene, in the history of mankind'.⁴

1. Memoirs, p. 146.

2. 'At the outset all was dark and doubtful: even the title of the work, the true area of the decline and fall of the Empire...' (Memoirs, p. 155); and still in 1781-2, 'So flexible is the title of my history that the final area might be fixed at my own choice...' and he goes on to consider whether the eastern empire should be included. (ibid, p. 164).

3. Memoirs, p. 147.

4. DF, lxxi, VII, p. 338.

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Dillon-Smith, David, The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Department of History, University of Wollongong, 1982. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/1426>

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PART II: THE HISTORY

CHAPTER V

MORAL CATEGORIES OF THE DECLINE AND FALL

In his Essai Gibbon had set down some moral principles for the writer and for the student of literature. In his consideration of subjects fit for history, his concern was to find one which would allow him to do justice to those principles and enable him to fulfil what he saw as the role of the historian. After his experience in Rome he seemed never to have had any doubt that he had found the subject he sought, and though at first he could only contemplate it 'from an awful distance', he gradually began to assume the character of 'the historian of the Roman Empire'. Eventually he went on not only to create his own Roman Empire, but also to indicate the moral forces which he saw operating in its leaders and in its social, political and military life to bring about its ultimate collapse.

We need not expect to find in Gibbon a systematic moral philosopher; not even a philosopher in the strict use of the word.¹ Though he referred to himself thus² and habitually took what he considered to be a philosophic view of things, yet he used these terms in the widest and most general sense. He was distrustful, even scornful of metaphysics,³ and was always concerned with the practical rather than with the abstract.

1. See, e.g. J.B. Black, The Art of History. London, 1926, p. 158.

2. DF, lxxi, VII, 294, n. 74: 'Yet as a mere philosopher, I cannot agree with the Greeks', and his recurring use of 'a philosopher' to introduce a point of view which is often shown to be his. Cf. also Memroirs, p. 186.

3. DF, xiii, I, 423 (on the neoplatonists); lxvi, VII, p. 132; 'the fleeting shadows of metaphysics'; and cf. MW, III, p. 361.

While accepting 'the sceptical tradition running from Bayle to Hume', he was, 'like many of his contemporaries...more interested in a philosophy of common sense and concentrated on things rather than words'.¹ When, as a young man, he ventured to define 'l'esprit philosophique',² he did so in terms of getting through to simple ideas, of grasping and combining first principles and of gaining a clearer and more extensive overview than that of the casual observer.

More instructive, however, than this early definition is a study of the uses and contexts in The Decline and Fall. Here we see that 'philosophic' stands in antithesis to such qualities as superficiality, prejudice, an unthinking obsession with mere facts, and hence the failure to perceive underlying realities and moral causes; in short, an inability to penetrate the surface and discover 'the first principles'. Gibbon's use of these terms and his appeals to philosophy and morality are essentially pragmatic. He did not indulge in abstract systems or speculations. Instead, he assumed a consensus of enlightened and right-thinking men as to what constituted 'wisdom and virtue'. Jordan compares his use of the word 'philosophy' to the present-day rather imprecise use of 'science'. 'He was not troubled the imprecision of the concept. "Philosophy" was a general word adequately describing all those things Gibbon most admired, and since neither he nor his contemporaries found any difficulty in understanding what the word or concept meant, there was no need to be more precise'.³

1. Jordan, Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 76.

2. Essai, chap. XLVI, p. 98.

3. Jordan, loc.cit. As he points out, Gibbon's philosophy was closer to Renaissance humanism than to that of the French intellectuals. 'Philosophy is Gibbon's term for all of the values of his humanistic faith'. (ibid., p. 77).

Gibbon's philosophic ancestry, like that of his contemporaries, was to be found in ancient Greece and Rome: amongst those philosophers who, he said, 'deduced their morals from the nature of man rather than from that of God'.¹ He regarded the long line of Greek philosophers as constituting 'the wisest and most virtuous' of their time.² After naming also Seneca, Pliny, Tacitus, Plutarch, Galen, Epictetus and Marcus Antoninus, he wrote: 'Philosophy had purified their minds from the prejudices of popular superstition; and their days were spent in the pursuit of truth and the practice of virtue'.³ He saw philosophy as not only inculcating practical wisdom and moderation, and thus dispelling credulity, superstition,⁴ fanaticism⁵ and persecution,⁶ but also 'purifying the mind from the basest passions', even if there were some incorrigible persons who seemed proof against its salutary influence.⁷ Commending Simplicius, one of the last Greek philosophers, Gibbon noted that while both his physical and metaphysical commentaries had disappeared, 'his moral interpretation of Epictetus' remained a classic book 'most excellently adapted to direct the will, to purify the heart, and to confirm the understanding'.⁸

1. DF, ii, I, 33.

2. DF, xl, IV, 285.

3. DF, xv, II, 73.

4. DF, xvi, II, 127 ('Philosophy, the most dangerous enemy of superstition'.)

5. DF, xxv, III, 25 ('Philosophy alone can boast...that her gentle hand is able to eradicate the latent and deadly principle of fanaticism'.)

6. DF, xxv, III, 4 ('the principles of philosophic toleration'.)

7. Like Theodatus, DF, xli, IV, 327.

8. DF, xl, IV, 285.

'The pursuit of truth' and the confirmation of the understanding were to be accompanied by a direction of the will, a purification of the heart, in short, by 'the practice of virtue'. Voltaire, in his Dictionnaire philosophique, had stressed this dual function of the philosopher: 'there is none in antiquity who has not given men examples of virtue and lessons in moral truth'.¹ History, for Gibbon, would also do both. And it was primarily to the practical Romans rather than to the speculative Greeks that he turned. In Cicero, above all, he had found as a young man and never ceased to find, not only a model of style and sentiment, but also 'admirable lessons which may be applied almost to every situation of public and private life'.² This admiration for the philosophic statesman of Rome he shared with the philosophers of his day,³ as well as with those English statesmen whose political roots were in the Roman republic.⁴ It was his revered 'philosophic historian', David Hume, who confessed: 'I desire to take my Catalogue of Virtues from Cicero's Offices'.⁵ In this same school 'the historian of the Roman Empire' was formed. And to Cicero, with his practical Roman outlook, 'the goal of philosophy was not primarily to know but to do'.⁶

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1. op.cit., Editions Garnier Frères. Paris, 1967, art. PHILOSOPHE. ('Tous les philosophes ont eu ce double caractère; il n'en est aucun dans l'antiquité qui n'ait donné des exemples de vertu aux hommes, et des leçons de vérités morales'.) The translation is that of Theodore Besterman, Voltaire's Philosophic Dictionary. Harmondsworth, 1971.
 2. Memoirs, pp. 75-6.
 3. e.g. Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu; see Michael Grant, Cicero: On the Good Life. Harmondsworth, 1971, Introd., p. 42.
 4. On the long unchallenged republican view of Roman history amongst English writers, Middleton's idealisation of Cicero, and the reaction against this view, see Addison Ward, 'The Tory View of Roman History', Studies in English Literature, IV, No. 3, 1964, pp. 413-456.
 5. Cited by Grant, loc.cit.
 6. Walter Miller, introd. to Loeb ed. of Cicero's De Officiis, 1968, xiv.

Thus, while Gibbon's references to 'philosophy' cover a wide range of applications both intellectual and moral, there is a strong emphasis on the practical, the useful and the virtuous. He condemned the neoplatonists for 'mistaking the true object of philosophy', by neglecting 'the knowledge that is suited to our situation and powers, the whole compass of moral, natural and mathematical science,...whilst they exhausted their strength in the verbal disputes of metaphysics'.¹ For him it was in the service of the public and of mankind that philosophy proved its worth. 'The duties of a judge', he declared, 'require all the faculties of a philosophic mind'.² And his ideal of philosophic service is seen in a 'philosophic monarch' like Marcus Antoninus or Julian,³ 'the philosophic sultan' Amurath,⁴ or even a 'philosophic bishop' like Synesius who, without fear or flattery, addressed his representations to a weak emperor in a time of national disgrace.⁵ The philosopher, Boethius, whose great work Gibbon felt to be not unworthy of Plato or Cicero, 'stooped, or, to speak more truly, he rose' from his abstruse speculations 'to the social duties of public life'.⁶ To Gibbon, 'the union of the prince and the sage, of the active and the speculative virtues, would constitute the perfection of human nature'.⁷ The emperor John the Handsome came close to this ideal, and it is interesting that Gibbon's commendation pointed to

1. DF, xii, I, 423. Cf. also lxvi, VII, 132.

2. DF, xxxviii, IV, 136.

3. DF, xlvi, V, 244; xxiii, II, 456.

4. DF, lxvii, VII, 153.

5. DF, xxvi, III, 136 and n. 138.

6. DF, xxxix, III, 213, 215.

7. DF, xlvi, IV, 220. This ideal is seldom found; the so-called 'Imperial philosopher', Leo VI, here referred to, was something of a fraud.

the natural rather than the academic source of this ruler's exemplary virtue: 'The philosophic Marcus would not have disdained the artless virtues of his successor, derived from his heart, and not borrowed from the schools'.¹

The 'philosopher', the 'impartial spectator', of Gibbon's History will, like the historian himself, never be cold, detached or indifferent,² but always involved in mankind. He should react and feel in response to men's virtues and vices and be the champion of liberty, toleration and 'the dignity of human nature'.³ Gibbon thus writes that 'a philosopher' will 'deplore the loss of the Byzantine libraries';⁴ he will condemn 'the vanity' of the 'universal desire to obtain and hold the sceptre of domination';⁵ he will be 'scandalised by the temporal kingdom of the clergy';⁶ he will justly censure an example of 'base flattery';⁷ and when he considers the destructive force of war against the slow 'advances of reason, science, and the arts of peace, a philosopher, according to his temper, will laugh or weep at the folly of mankind'.⁸ Indeed, in seeking to enter into the experience of guilt and penance which found expression in the Crusades, Gibbon admitted that 'the cold philosophy of modern times is incapable of feeling the impression

1. DF, xlviii, V, 244.

2. See e.g. DF, x, I, 299: 'were it possible for a philosopher to remain indifferent among the general calamities of human kind'. Cf. Gibbon's remark on Orosius for apparently condoning the execution of a captive heathen king: 'The bloody actor is less detestable than the cool, unfeeling historian'. (DF, xxx, III, 282, n.84).

3. DF, liv, VI, 134, n. 46; iii, I, 88.

4. DF, lxviii, VII, 206.

5. DF, xlviii, V, 259.

6. DF, lxx, VII, 309.

7. DF, xlvi, V, 68, n.61.

8. DF, lxv, VII, 86.

that was made on a sinful and fanatic world'.¹ Such are the moral reactions which characterise 'the philosopher' in The Decline and Fall.

This theme of the decline and fall of Rome, which satisfied the aspirations of the philosophic historian, at the same time, by its very nature, made extraordinary demands upon him. While still working on his first volume, Gibbon wrote that he was 'engaged on a great Historical Work;...the subject is curious and never yet treated as it deserves'.² At least twice he referred to 'the happy choice of the subject',³ which had raised great expectations from his public. He was sure of his subject; his only concern was that its greatness would 'leave no excuse for the feebleness of execution'. Writing in these terms to John Whitaker, the historian of Manchester, he admitted that his diffidence did not proceed 'from any false modesty, but from a real consciousness that I am below my own ideas of historical merit'.⁴ What does he tell us of his ideas of historical merit and how do they relate to the moral categories on which a great history, such as that he was undertaking, must be based?

We have seen that in his Essai, Gibbon had ranked historians on a threefold scale. Far above that of the mere chronicler or recorder of facts, and in a completely different class, were the true historians. But the great majority of these were still either superficial or

1. DF, lviii, VI, 280.

2. Letter to Dorothea Gibbon, Letters, No. 309, 7/6/65, II, 75.

3. See Letters, Nos. 325 and 328, 16/10/75, II, 90 and 3/1/76, II, 93.

4. ibid., II, 90.

undistinguished, lacking high standards and philosophical insight. It was not to this class that he aspired. It was rather to that elite, best represented by the two northern historians who had but recently removed 'the old reproach' of British neglect¹ and shown how history should be written. Yet to find this ideal of the truly philosophic historian, he still had to turn to ancient Rome.²

Little wonder then, that having attempted so great a subject, he feared that he might fail to come up to this standard. We find perhaps the most concise statement of his ideas on the matter in his Vindication of the final chapters of his first volume. There he claimed that the historian, 'owes to himself, to the present age, and to posterity a just and perfect delineation of all that may be praised, of all that may be excused, and of all that must be censured. If he fails in this discharge of his important office, he partially violates the sacred obligations of truth, and disappoints his readers of the instruction they might have derived from a fair parallel of the vices and virtues of the most illustrious characters'.³

In this very Tacitean statement, Gibbon reaffirmed his consciousness of the historian's high responsibility and of his obligation both to his own integrity and to his public. In accordance with the instructive function of history, that obligation requires an exact and complete presentation in order to reveal what merits either praise or blame. This can be achieved by the method used in The Decline and Fall, namely to present such a 'fair parallel of the vices and virtues' of the characters. But above all, the statement in the Vindication stresses the historian's sacred obligation to truth.

1. Memoirs, p. 99.

2. 'Je ne connois que Tacite qui ait rempli mon idée de cet historien philosophe', Essai, LII, 66.

3. MW, IV, 631-2.

Here we have the most basic of the moral categories or assumptions underlying The Decline and Fall, namely a respect for 'the truth of history'. It is, in a sense, the foundation of all the rest. Closely associated with it, since it also has to do with getting at the truth about character and sometimes with questions of probability and interpretation of evidence, is what Gibbon called 'the knowledge of human nature'. Thirdly, he was most keenly aware of 'the judgement of posterity' to which the historian saw persons, and particularly those in positions of authority, being answerable. Fourthly, adherence to historic truth and to a moral viewpoint, led to a reading of history largely in terms of human 'vices and follies' though sometimes relieved by examples of 'wisdom and virtue'. Fifthly, he recognised an obligation to trace moral causes and effects, especially in the rise and fall of individuals and empires. Finally, an assumption belonging to the tradition in which he wrote, though he transcended many of its limitations, was a conviction of the instructive value of history.

The primary and fundamental category, the historian's responsibility to 'the truth of history' is what Gibbon had in view throughout the whole. Thus, for example, he tells the reader that he is sure that a certain eloquent description contains 'some facts incompatible with the truth of history'.¹ In a note reminiscent of the statement in his Vindication, we have his admission: 'I owe it to myself and to historic truth to declare that some of the circumstances in the paragraph are founded on conjecture and analogy.'² This concern for the truth of history is sometimes stated but more often implied.

1. DF, xxxvi, IV, 60, n.148.

2. DF, xxxi, III, 373, n. 184.

There are two aspects of historic truth: accuracy with regard to facts and events, and the wider responsibility of presenting a true and faithful picture of a man or his times. The two are really complementary: the latter depends on the former, though it can also be used as a check upon it. The former demands of the historian minute care in his research and use of authorities, and his fidelity to this aspect of historic truth remained a matter of great satisfaction to Gibbon. Some of the sweetest praise was the testimony to his scrupulous use of original sources,¹ while the aspersions cast on his work in this regard were the one criticism which stirred him to reply. His Vindication was primarily a defence of his faithful observance of truth in the handling of facts and materials.

It is well to remind ourselves of the store Gibbon set by such 'accurate industry',² in the historian. It was the 'inimitable accuracy' of Tillemont, his 'incomparable guide' throughout a great part of The Decline and Fall that won his high praise,³ and he paid similar compliments to the erudition of other authorities on whom he leaned heavily for his material.⁴ The reverse side of the coin appears in his attitude to Voltaire as a historian. While he respected the philosophical manner of the great man, he censured him for inaccuracies and errors of fact⁵: he 'confounds the emperors of the East and West'⁶; his Louis XIV is 'an

1. Memoirs, p. 193.

2. Used of Thomas Birch's General Dictionary, Historical and Critical, in Memoirs, p. 121.

3. DF, xlviii, V, 141, n.81. In xxv, III, 50, n. 126 Gibbon said of Tillemont, 'The patient and sure-footed mule of the Alps may be trusted in the most slippery paths'. Ironically, in this same place Bury had to point out that it is not Orosius who is in error, but Gibbon's misreading of him.

4. See, e.g. Memoirs, p. 147.

5. His work is usually characterised by 'much general sense and truth' yet with 'some particular errors', DF, lxiv, VII, 9, n. 26.

6. DF, lxviii, VII, 188, n. 53.

inaccurate performance'¹; and, carried away by his imagination, he even fell into anachronistic blunders. Thus the Austrian Duke Leopold was made a contemporary of Richard Coeur de Lion. 'Dois-je m'arrêter', asked Gibbon, 'à prouver qu'un duc d'Autriche qui regnoit en 1193 ne fut point battu à Montgarden en 1313, cent-vingt-deux ans après?'² Strange errors and fancies like these are more culpable than the almost unavoidable slips which any writer might make. While Sir William Temple, said Gibbon had the excuse of being deceived by an 'imposter', Voltaire's mistakes sometimes proceeded 'from want of knowledge or reflection'.³ Such ignorance or lack of reflection seemed to Gibbon inexcusable⁴ because they violated the historian's moral obligation to truth. Introducing the notes to the first quarto edition of The Decline and Fall⁵ he declared: 'Diligence and accuracy are the only merits which an historical writer may ascribe to himself; if any merit indeed can be assumed from the performance of an indispensable duty'.

A study of Gibbon's 'Index Expurgatorius',⁶ and some of his scholarly investigations might give the impression that the discovery of errors, even in his most admired historians and sources, had become something of a pastime with him. More fundamentally, it was part of his wider

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1. 'Extraits raisonnés de mes lectures', MW, V, 247-8.
 2. 'Introduction à l'Histoire générale de la République des Suisses', MW, III, 272n. Gibbon began the note with the observation: 'M. de Voltaire nous a tracé d'un pinceau léger le tableau de l'histoire générale de l'Europe. Le coloris en est toujours brillant, mais le dessein est souvent très incorrect'.
 3. DF, lii, VI, 23, n. 50. Such errors in dating were also especially damaging to Voltaire's work, since his realist epistemology depended more on an accurate chronology than did Gibbon's history.
 4. 'Voltaire might wonder...but he should not have owned his ignorance of the country, religion, &c...' (DF, liii, VI, 93, n. 72.)
 5. Advertisement to the Notes, in DF, I, xliii.
 6. MW, V, 548-579. It is dated both by Sheffield and by Craddock, 1768 and/or 1769.

concern for historic truth. Let us take examples from three authors for whom Gibbon expressed almost unqualified respect. In Hume he noted an error regarding the Sybarites, a slip in his estimate of the population of ancient Gaul, and a mistaken notion about Constantine and imports. In reference to the emperor Severus, he pointed out that Hume had not handled the campaign 'with his usual accuracy'.¹ After praising Giannone very highly and mentioning the esteem in which his History of Naples was held, Gibbon noted two instances of obvious mistakes in this work.² And despite his great and consistent praise for Muratori, we find the comments: 'M. Muratori is grossly mistaken in the interpretation', and 'Muratori's erroneous reckoning'.³ The same sort of correction is applied also to lesser writers.⁴ 'Diligence and accuracy', as Gibbon said, are not merits but 'an indispensable duty' for the historian. When they were called in question, his reply was: 'I adhered to the wise resolution of trusting myself and my writings to the candour of the public, till Mr. Davies of Oxford presumed to attack, not the faith, but the good faith of the historian'.⁵ This question of 'fidelity' or 'good faith' involved in Davies' view, said Gibbon, 'the ruin of my moral and literary character'.⁶ Hence

1. MW, III, 178; MW, V, 549 and 148; DF, v, I, 122, n. 32.

2. MW, V, 413, 505, 512-3.

3. MW, III, 356-7; V, 553-4.

4. 'Monsieur l'Abbé Lenglot de Fresnoy se trompe lorsqu'il nous dit que Maximilien I reçut de sa femme Marie les provinces de Groningue'. (MW, V, 515); or 'M. Rapin de Thorras se trompe...' (ibid., V, 514).

5. Memoirs, p. 160. 'E' fragment; Sheffield's version has 'fidelity' for 'good faith'.

6. 'Vindication', MW, IV, 520.

the historian felt it incumbent on him to vindicate his 'innocence and accuracy'. In direct contrast to this, he confessed: 'I am less flattered by Mr. Porson's high encomium on the style and spirit of my history than I am satisfied with his honourable testimony to my attention, diligence and accuracy'.¹ These were the 'humble virtues' which Gibbon held to be indispensable and whose loss would involve moral culpability in the historian.

The second and broader aspect of historical truth with which Gibbon was concerned, a faithful presentation of persons, periods and principles, transcended diligence and accuracy, but was a complementary obligation. Accuracy and correctness of facts are not ends in themselves but merely essentials in building up the total presentation and in enabling the historian to reach general statements of principle. Without such embracing 'moral' observations, which give depth and coherence to The Decline and Fall, historical writing can degenerate into an uninspired catalogue of facts. To the philosophic mind, said Gibbon, mere facts constitute the least interesting part of history; its real value lies in the knowledge of man, morality, and politics to be found within it. These ideas should be pursued by the historian who sees in particular facts only the proof of general principles.² This was Gibbon's view expressed even before he had found his great subject, and as he later followed the depressing annals of the Eastern emperors, he was on his guard against falling into 'a minute accumulation of circumstances which destroy the light and effect

1. *Memoirs*, p. 193.

2. 'Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Mèdes', *MW*, III, 126. Sheffield dated it in the period 1758-63.

of those general pictures which compose the use and ornament of a remote history'.¹ But what if the historian is careless in discovering, interpreting and relating his facts? Then the general principles will be false and the whole picture distorted. Take the case of Voltaire's Mohammed, who after the conquest of Mecca, imagined and perpetrated the most horrid crimes. 'The poet confesses that he is not supported by the truth of history, and can only allege, 'que celui qui fait la guerre à sa patrie au nom de Dieu est capable de tout'.² Gibbon was always wary of such pseudo-philosophical treatment of persons and events. It was not enough to philosophise in a historical narrative and, where the facts proved awkward or obscure, to say in the words of the professor replying to a student's objection that the facts were otherwise, 'so much the worse for the facts'. The larger 'truth of history' depended on a reliable foundation; the research must be thorough and the facts carefully ascertained. Without this underlying accuracy the 'philosophical historian' would, like Voltaire, become superficial, or even worse, misleading.

Reciprocally, this broader 'truth of history' could assist the truly philosophic historian equipped with a sound knowledge of men and manners, to interpret and even to correct the 'facts'. Gibbon therefore felt able to judge certain facts used by an author to be 'incompatible with the truth of history'.³ In giving a faithful

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1. DF, xlvihi, V, 180. Gibbon, however, also wrote: 'I am always apt to suspect historians and travellers of improving extraordinary facts into general laws'. (ibid., xxv, III, 38, n.100). He himself was careful never to do this.
 2. DF, I, V, 391, n. 150.
 3. See p. 174, n.1 of this chapter.

presentation of a character and his behaviour, particular details found in the sources must be tested against the general weight of evidence as a whole. In the case of the funeral oration on the emperor Valens by the celebrated rhetorician Libanius, Gibbon asserted: 'The truth of history may disclaim some parts of this panegyric, which cannot strictly be reconciled with the character of Valens or the circumstances of the battle.'¹ Thus a canon of interpretation used by Gibbon was that the well attested total impression should be used to check the consistency of individual points alleged by historical sources. In the case of irreconcilable authorities, the best that the historian could do was to suggest a possible compromise and avoid dogmatic assertion. In such a situation it could only be said that, 'the truth of history might perhaps be found in a just medium between these extreme and contradictory assertions'.² In weighing up the advantages offered by one of the earliest topics he considered for history, Gibbon welcomed the availability of 'two contemporary and accurate historians'; but, better still, 'what is of great importance to a lover of truth, the one a Christian, and the other a Mahomedan'.³ The philosophic historian and lover of truth could thus compare accounts from opposing sides in order to build up a complete picture in accord with the truth of history.

Where the speculative philosopher sought abstract truth, Gibbon's aim was the practical attainment, as far as humanly possible, of historic truth. It was something of a preoccupation with him and he proclaimed

1. DF, xxvi, III, 119.

2. DF, xxvi, III, 135.

3. 'Hints of some Subjects fit for History', MW, V, 488. The context is given in chap. IV, p. 126-7.

it with great insistence. Indeed, he applied the principle to both his histories, namely that of Rome and that of the historian himself. In the second of these he wrote: 'Truth, naked unblushing truth, the first virtue of more serious history, must be the sole recommendation of this personal narrative'.¹ As his esteemed fellow historian, William Robertson, expressed it, in a letter very gratifying to Gibbon for its high praise of his second and third volumes: 'It was always my idea that an historian should feel himself a witness giving evidence on oath. I am glad to perceive by your minute scrupulosity, that your notions are the same'.²

A second moral category to be found in The Decline and Fall is what Gibbon called 'the knowledge of human nature'. The historian's respect for 'the truth of history' will inform all his work and will be the touchstone of his treatment of events, causes and character. In the light of his 'sacred obligations' he will pursue his study of mankind and particular instances will both illustrate and find their general expression in the broad principles of human nature. In his Essai, Gibbon had called on the reader to join with the author in seeking to investigate, 'to fathom', the human heart,³ and his History gave him ample scope for doing just this. We could safely say that his fundamental concern is with man, his manners and morals and with the motives which alone determine both the goodness or badness of the action and the true character of the individual. In the statement already quoted, he gave clear expression to the view that the philosophic

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1. Memoirs, p. 1.
 2. Letter No. CXLIV, 12/5/81, in MW, II, 256.
 3. 'Sonder le coeur human', op.cit., chap. LXVI, p. 78 and see above, chap. III, p. 105, n.4.

mind is not content with a collection of the superficial facts of history, but looks beneath them for the underlying truths of human nature: 'C'est la connoissance de l'homme, la morale, et la politique qu'il y trouve qui la relèvent dans son esprit. Tâchons de suivre cette idée, et de voir jusqu'à quel point elle conduiroit un écrivain, qui ne voit dans les faits particuliers que la preuve de ses principes généraux'.¹

Both in poetry and philosophy the tenet that 'the proper study of mankind is man', had gained wide acceptance before Gibbon began to write. Pope's Essay and Hume's Treatise stand out as but two expressions of the doctrine. Bolingbroke, in words certainly familiar to Gibbon, wrote: 'Man is the subject of every history; And to know him well, we must see him and consider him, as history alone can present him to us, in every age, in every country, in every state, in life and in death'.² This, as Bond reminds us,³ was a commonplace of eighteenth-century thought and accords with Hume's view that it was the business of history to attempt 'to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature'.⁴ Yet it is also true, as Dorothy Koch pointed out, that 'like Voltaire and Hume in his own century and James Harvey Robinson in the twentieth, Bolingbroke envisions a "new history" which will stress more sides of life than the political'.⁵ Gibbon's view of history and his writing of it exhibit a similarly expansive and unrestricted approach: man in all

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1. 'Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Mèdes', MW, III, 126.
 2. 'Letters on the Study and Use of History', Works, II, 229. (Letter V).
 3. The Literary Art of Edward Gibbon. Oxford, 1960, p. 89.
 4. 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding', 'Philosophical Works, vol. 4, p. 68, Sect. VIII, Pt. 1 'Of Liberty and Necessity'.
 5. English Theories Concerning the Nature and Uses of History, 1735-1791. Unpublished Dissertation. Yale, 1946, p. 18.

aspects, his manners, his laws, his society, his religion, his family life, as well as his government and conquests. Robertson had provided such a broadly-based historical 'view' in his survey of the 'Progress of Society in Europe', with which he introduced his History of Charles V¹ and Gibbon several times referred his reader to 'that masterly sketch' and to 'the judicious remarks' to be found in Robertson's introduction.² Writing of the use of metals and of barter, in his chapter on the manners of the Germanic tribes, Gibbon claimed that 'to a mind capable of reflection such leading facts convey more instruction than a tedious detail of subordinate circumstances'.³

It was the life of man under its varying external appearances which was of primary importance to the historian. Such a focus of attention would provide that most essential insight, 'the knowledge of human nature' which was so enlightening to both author and reader. This knowledge enabled the writer to give an authentic and morally consistent presentation of men, their conduct, character, and motives. Fielding, said Gibbon, excelled in this knowledge and he himself was almost tempted to quote from a novel of this 'great master, which may be considered as the history of human nature'.⁴ By contrast, Voltaire's Mahomet, in attributing to the prophet 'the most horrible crimes' all unsupported by 'the truth of history', was 'neither charitable nor philosophic'.⁵

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1. 'A View of the Progress of Society in Europe from the subversion of the Roman Empire to the beginning of the sixteenth century', in 3 sections preceding Book I of his History of Charles V. London, 1769.
 2. DF, xliv, V, 327-8, n.158; lviii, VI, 333, n. 149; cf. also ix, I, 241, n. 42; 248, n. 68; xlix, V, 303, n. 100; lxi, VI, 465 and n. 89.
 3. DF, ix, I, 238. See also the final paragraph of that chapter regarding the different concerns of history in different societies. (ix, 255).
 4. DF, xxxii, III, 384, n. 13. The reference is to Tom Jones.
 5. DF, l, V, 391, n. 150.

The truly philosophic historian, armed with an authentic knowledge of human nature and its ways, will not fall into such moral inconsistencies. Moreover, by this means, he will be able to expose hidden motives beneath the actions of his characters and even to reconstruct a human situation. Thus, in referring to the disunity among the Germans which was formented by Roman intrigue, Gibbon added that not only were 'many traces of this policy' to be found in the historians, but also 'many more may be inferred from the principles of human nature'.¹ Indeed, 'the knowledge of human nature and of the sure operation of its fierce and unrestrained passions on some occasions, supply the want of historical materials'.² Particularly in the case of less complicated and less sophisticated peoples, this knowledge provides the historian with a reliable guide to their reactions. In dealing with a revolt of the Gothic peasantry, Gibbon wrote: 'So strong and uniform is the current of popular passions that we might almost venture, from very scanty materials, to relate the particulars of this war'.³ This moral insight into human nature sometimes influenced the historian's handling of his sources: 'I have transferred the reproach of avarice', Gibbon wrote regarding one of his authorities, 'from Valens to his servants'. On what grounds, the reader may ask. The justification, with its ironic overtones, is that 'avarice more properly belongs to ministers than to kinds; in whom that passion is commonly extinguished by absolute possession'.⁴

1. DF, ix, I, 253, n. 83.

2. DF, x, I, 256. Cf. Hume's remark in an appendix on 'The Anglo-Saxon Government and Manners': 'Though we are not informed of any of these circumstances by historians, they are so much founded on the nature of things, that we may admit them as a necessary and infallible consequence of the situation of the kingdom during those ages'. (History of England, 1841 ed., Vol. I, App. I, p. 179).

3. DF, xiii, I, 384.

4. DF, xxvi, III, 20, n. 58.

Tacitus, as the philosophic historian par excellence, declared Gibbon, exemplified this knowledge of human nature to a remarkable degree, and, he claimed, the third-century emperor of that name derived from the study of 'his immortal ancestor', 'the philosophic historian whose writings will instruct the last generations of mankind', both 'the knowledge of the Roman constitution and of human nature'.¹ This same knowledge of human nature, he maintained, saved 'our philosophic historian', Hume, from the sort of misjudgements of which Voltaire was sometimes guilty.² While an unreflective observer might find it surprising that the Persian magi should engage in persecution, Hume, said Gibbon, acutely remarked 'that the most refined and philosophic sects are certainly the most intolerant'.³ It was this moral philosopher's profound understanding of human nature and manners, which, according to Gibbon, convinced him of the operation of such a spirit beneath the appearance of learning and philosophy.

Gibbon himself had evidence of this amongst the most enlightened men of Paris and had reacted strongly against bigotry and intolerance in such an unlikely quarter. He could not 'approve the intolerant zeal of the philosophers and Encyclopaedists the friends of d'Olbach and Helvetius: they laughed at the scepticism of Hume, preached the tenets of Atheism with the bigotry of dogmatists, and damned all believers with ridicule and contempt'.⁴ This experience provided the aspiring historian with a salutary lesson in 'the knowledge of human nature' to confirm that derived from his study of history.

1. DF, xii, I, 344.

2. See e.g. DF, lxix, VII, 224-5 and n. 15.

3. DF, viii, I, 219, n. 29.

4. Memoirs, p. 127; cf. also Gibbon's 'Journal à Paris', 21me & 23me Février, 1763, Miscellanea Gibboniana, pp. 96, 98.

Even philosophes, he discovered, could exhibit 'intolerant zeal', even the enlightened Romans barbarism, cruelty and superstition, and even barbarians honour, loyalty and courage. It required a true knowledge of men, exercised with due regard to the truth of history, to guard even the most philosophic against moral prejudice and hence against faulty judgements.

The historian of human manners is sometimes confronted by a 'union of the fiercest and most tender passions', Gibbon noted. Such conflicting reactions, found side by side in the Crusaders, have 'been variously considered by two philosophers: by the one (Hume) as easy and natural; by the other (Voltaire) as absurd and incredible'.¹ These contrary judgements emphasise the need for caution in such cases. We must avoid the danger, said Gibbon, of attributing these very different passions to the same persons at the same moment. Once again in connection with the Crusades, 'some deep reasoners' had suspected the contrivance and policy of the papacy in the whole enterprise from first to last. But such a view, Gibbon protested, was unsupported by 'nature' or by fact. It was truer to say that the popes had 'followed, rather than guided, the impulse of manners and prejudice'. Here, he suggested, was the obvious explanation; and in contrast to the 'deep reasoners', he noted that 'this simple idea is agreeable to the good sense of Mosheim and the fine philosophy of Hume'.² It was Hume who, in discussing the corruption of primitive Christian theology and its relapse into a popular polytheistic mythology, 'observes like a philosopher, the natural flux and reflux of poly-

1. DF, lviii, VI, 324 and nn. 119, 120.

2. DF, lix, VI, 371, n. 96.

theism and theism'.¹ Thus the philosophic mind, informed by a knowledge of human nature, is seldom caught by surprise, nor does it need to seek 'deep' explanations when a simple human explanation is available. In accordance with this principle, Gibbon followed Hume by pointing to the very simple and obvious reason of 'proximity' and familiarity to account for the low esteem in which the Romans held their Pope, whose 'name and authority' called forth such reverence from the remoter parts of Europe.²

In one of his most masterly characterisations, Gibbon stated a general principle to which he aspired in his writing: 'As Athanasius was continually engaged with the prejudices and passions of every order of men from the monk to the emperor, the knowledge of human nature was his first and most important science. He preserved a distinct and unbroken view of a scene which was incessantly shifting; and never failed to improve those decisive moments which are irrevocably past before they are perceived by a common eye'.³ As we watch Gibbon dealing with the facts of history, which as he said, were often little more than a record of man's crimes, follies and vices, the moral order and coherence he was able to impose on this raw material was directed by this same 'knowledge of human nature' which Athanasius so forcibly exhibited and which Gibbon also learned from first hand experience as well as from the ancient writers, from Montesquieu and from Hume.⁴ The study of man and his manners and of the development

1. DF, xxviii, III, 225, n. 92.

2. DF, lxix, VII, 224-5, where Gibbon followed his own remarks with a quotation to this effect from Hume's History of England.

3. DF, xxi, II, 384.

4. See, e.g. C.N. Cochrane, 'The Mind of Edward Gibbon', University of Toronto Quarterly, XII, No. 1, Oct. 1942, pp. 1-17; D. Jordan, Gibbon and his Roman Empire, pp. 70ff, 84ff.; Frank E. Manuel, 'Edward Gibbon: Historien Philosophe', in G.W. Bowersock, Edward Gibbon and The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, especially pp. 169ff.

of human society had, he claimed, with the exception of Montesquieu's work, received too little attention. But with such studies as Robertson's 'Progress of Society' and Hume's Essays Moral, Political and Literary, there had come a welcome change: 'On this interesting subject, the progress of society in Europe, a strong ray of philosophic light has broke from Scotland in our own times; and it is with private as well as public regard that I repeat the names of Hume, Robertson and Adam Smith'.¹

Yet Gibbon was concerned with more than a view of society and of manners: it was the man beneath the manners that interested him. Manners and customs of a particular age or nation as he knew may obscure the real nature of the individual. Historians can be misled by the externals and this he sought to avoid. The late sixth-century historian, Agathias, he wrote, 'praised the private and public virtues of the Franks,...their politeness and urbanity, their regular government and orthodox religion', and compared them favourably with the subjects of Rome. But he was deceived: 'Perhaps the Franks already displayed the social disposition and lively graces, which in every age have disguised their vices, and sometimes concealed their intrinsic merit'.² Or, if one took a superficial view of Britain after the Roman occupation, it would seem 'that the native rudeness of the country and its inhabitants was covered by a thin varnish of Italian manners'.³ Again, one may find the opposite effect. 'The vices of the Lombards were the effect of passion, of ignorance, of intoxication; their

1. DF, lxi, VI, 465 and n. 89.

2. DF, xxxviii, IV, 129.

3. DF, xxxviii, IV, 165.

virtues are the more laudable, as they were not affected by the hypocrisy of social manners, nor imposed by the rigid constraint of laws and education'.¹ And those horrid scenes of 'domestic cruelty' towards animals, which Gibbon thought may imperceptibly weaken our feeling of compassion and which are a common sight among the Tartar shepherds, 'are disguised by the arts of European refinement'.² In such cases a knowledge of human nature was essential to save the historian from misjudgements and enable him to penetrate the disguises of manners and refinement.³ And it was on this knowledge that Gibbon relied for his great array of character sketches in The Decline and Fall.

In the third place, Gibbon, like Tacitus, saw men and women, especially those in positions of eminence and power, as answerable to the judgement of history or posterity. They would either enjoy lasting praise and renown or suffer 'everlasting infamy' from future generations; but it was the historian's duty to see that posterity received a faithful record so that it might rightly apportion its praise or blame. The 'great' figures of the past thus stand vindicated or condemned before the 'judgement of posterity'. In the case of Constantius, on whose imperial honour, says Gibbon, this judgement imprints a deep stain, it is invoked in the context of 'the sincerity of history',⁴ which should present a true testimony before this tribunal of future ages. The sincerity or truth of history is antithetically opposed to the false witness of the 'venal orators' or 'servile'

1. DF, xlv, V, 29.

2. DF, xxvi, III, 76.

3. A suspicious temper, like that of Theodosius, 'might naturally arise from a dark and imperfect view of the corruption of mankind.' (DF, lxii, VI, 478).

4. DF, xviii, II, 242.

historians who obsequiously praise their unworthy patrons.¹ Whenever this has happened and partisan interests have corrupted impartiality, 'the voice of history' has become 'little more than the organ of hatred or flattery'.²

Posterity, like 'the voice of history', can be likened to an orator either in the courtroom or delivering a funeral oration, an analogy which Gibbon employed.³ But we have in his work a literal instance in the funeral of the Emperor Julian, when the ancient custom was revived by which 'the voice of praise should be corrected by that of satire and ridicule' and even 'the faults and follies of the deceased emperor' displayed.⁴ So too, in considering the virtues of Theodosius, Gibbon wrote: 'The orator who may be silent without danger, may praise without difficulty and without reluctance; and posterity will confess that the character of Theodosius might furnish the subject of a sincere and ample panegyric'.⁵

The essential moral rule of evidence is that the orator must avoid venality, and the historian, flattery: the panegyric must be sincere, nor must the faults and follies be forgotten in the oration. Hence it is the duty of the historian, who, like his characters is ultimately accountable to the tribunal of posterity, to give a faithful

1. DF, loc.cit., and cf. xxvi, III, 128.

2. DF, x, I, 293.

3. Carl Becker, in fact, described The Decline and Fall as 'a memorial oration' (The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers, p. 118), and Bond called it 'a commemorative address on the fate of the Roman Empire'. (The Literary Art of Edward Gibbon, pp. 56-7).

4. DF, xxiv, II, 557-8.

5. DF, xxvii, III, 175.

and impartial presentation; he must search out the hidden springs of action, expose crimes and display virtue for the instruction of his readers both of his own and of future generations.

'The judgement of posterity', with the impartial historian as its spokesmen, is one of the great moral categories of The Decline and Fall. There may be no place in that work for the type of censure or acquittal characteristic of ecclesiastical courts and councils nor for a great 'last judgement' of mankind; but the verdict of posterity is given on the basis of human morality¹ and in accordance with what Gibbon called 'the profane virtues'.² This is the criterion to which Gibbon referred the actions of his characters.³ When Hadrian resolved to adopt the two Antonines, we are told that he 'resolved to deserve the thanks of posterity by placing the most exalted merit on the Roman throne'.⁴ And of the younger of these emperors, Gibbon recorded that 'his memory was revered by a grateful posterity'.⁵ By contrast, the line of emperors from Tiberius to Domitian is 'condemned to everlasting infamy'.⁶ The contemporaries of Severus enjoyed the peace and glory of his reign and therefore forgave its cruelties, but 'posterity, who experienced the fatal effect of his maxims and example, justly considered him as the principal cause of the decline of the Roman

1. Gibbon, like the Greek philosophers, deduced his 'morals from the nature of man rather than from that of God', DF, ii, I, 33.
2. In contrast to the 'venal orators' and ecclesiastical writers in the heat of controversy, we have 'the profane virtues of sincerity and moderation'.
3. 'As with Voltaire or Hume', wrote J.H. Plumb, 'Gibbon interpreted history in purely human terms. Of course he made moral judgments and he stressed the effects of chance. But his moral judgments were those of men not God and his chance was purely human, not a great external force...' ('Gibbon and History', History Today, XIX, Nov., 1969, p. 738.
4. DF, iii, I, 83.
5. DF, iii, I, 85.
6. DF, iii, I, 87.

Empire'.¹ And in the light of this disclosure of moral 'cause' and 'effect', it is the force of posterity's judgement which must prevail.

Gibbon's continual awareness of his own obligation to posterity is exemplified both in his strict impartiality and in his careful consideration of each case on its merits. Though he felt a special admiration for 'that extraordinary man',² the emperor Julian, he nevertheless set out to give, and believed that he had achieved, 'an impartial balance' of his virtues and vices.³ In one instance where the restorer of paganism had spared the life of a stubbornly resistant bishop, Julian's action might at first sight appear as yet another example of his characteristic moderation. But in this particular case the historian felt compelled to withhold his verdict, for 'if the bishop of Arethusa had saved the infancy of Julian, posterity will condemn the ingratitude instead of praising the clemency of the emperor'.⁴ At the opposite extreme to Julian was Ambrose, representative of a class for whom Gibbon could feel little respect. He was not only an archbishop but also a saint, and even worse, one of those ecclesiastics who challenged the authority of the civil ruler in the perennial struggle between church and state. Though we should expect to find Gibbon's sympathies all on the other side, yet since 'posterity has applauded the virtuous firmness of the archbishop',⁵ the historian not only concurred with its judgement but also brought out this admirable side of Ambrose's character. We are shown Theodosius'

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1. DF, v, I, 137.
 2. DF, xxiv, II, 558.
 3. Memoirs, p. 162.
 4. DF, xxiii, II, 491.
 5. DF, xxvii, III, 185-6.

recognition of the virtue and disinterested nature of this firmness, when the emperor, though publicly rebuked and humbled by the archbishop, continued to offer him increasing affection and respect. And Theodosius for his part, said Gibbon has rightly won lasting admiration, since his generous conduct after a memorable military success, 'has extorted the applause of his most inveterate enemies'.¹

In many such instances Gibbon appears almost as the mouthpiece or as the advocate of posterity, briefed to marshal the evidence and present the case. So sensitive was he to the voice of posterity that on one page he could record its clear decision concerning the archbishop, and on the next could suggest that it was committed to an identical response in the case of the emperor: 'Posterity has applauded' Ambrose; that verdict is already confirmed; and since 'posterity...admires the pure and singular glory' of Theodosius' elevation, in like manner 'it must applaud his unrivaled generosity in the use of victory'.² With the same sensitivity and feeling of responsibility Gibbon was able to declare that 'personal merit can alone deserve the notice of posterity'. He therefore felt himself bound to follow this principle and thus to dismiss Constantius, the worthless son of Constantine, 'from the world with the remark that he inherited the defects without the abilities of his father'.³

At times the historian might be obliged to indicate relative culpability or degrees of guilt. His extended view and 'the experience of history' enable him to make comparisons and to assess each case in

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1. DF, xxvii, III, 186.
 2. DF, xxvii, II, 185, 186-7.
 3. DF, xxiii, II, 440.

terms of the measure of enlightenment of the period in question. When considering the persecution of Christians by the emperors and magistrates of ancient Rome, Gibbon observed that they were unacquainted with the inner faith and the motives which compelled their victims to refuse submission to the laws and institutions of a pagan state. It was quite otherwise with Charles V or Louis XIV who, 'from their reflections or even from their own feelings, might have acquired a just knowledge of the rights of conscience and of the obligation of faith and of the innocence of error'.¹ On that account these modern persecutors must be pronounced 'more criminal' than their ancient counterparts.

In another historical comparison Gibbon implied that a ruler, like a historian, can display the relevant facts of his case and make his appeal to posterity. Constantine is accused by Gibbon and by earlier historians of killing his son, Crispus, and of keeping the matter dark. In sharp contrast, Peter the Great, when he found it necessary 'to subscribe the condemnation of a degenerate son', took the proper course by submitting his compelling reasons 'to the judgment of Russia, of Europe, and of posterity'.² But since 'censure...arraigns the public and private motives of princes',³ it is sometimes left to the impartial historian to correct a lingering misjudgement which an irresponsible censure has perpetuated. This Gibbon did in the case of Hadrian by suggesting that it was prudence and moderation rather than envy which prompted some of the policies of that very changeable emperor.⁴

1. DF, xvi, II, 389.

2. DF, xviii, II, 222.

3. DF, i, I, 8.

4. DF, loc.cit.; cf. Gibbon's re-examination of Constantine's conversion: 'The real or imaginary cause of so important an event deserves and demands the attention of posterity'. (DF, xx, II, 317).

The propriety of making moral judgements in history is a contentious question and opposite viewpoints have been expressed. Butterfield recoiled from the idea of a historian usurping the function of the deity and saw a real danger 'if moral judgments are incorporated into the structure of the story', particularly as in many instances 'moral judgments are apt to be political ones'. But he admitted also that 'a natural scientist is pledged to work in the way Gibbon purported to do; that is to say, he confines his explanations to causes that are "under God" for he would be committing sabotage if he brought God into his scientific argument'.¹ And in the famous controversy between Acton and Creighton, he came down on the side of the latter and of withholding judgement against Alexander Borgia. Alexander, as W.R. Inge pointed out in an address to the Historical Association, was, in fact, one on whom Ranke, 'the most judicial of historians, passes one of his rare moral verdicts'.² Yet H.A.L. Fisher, in a pronouncement very similar to Gibbon's famous understatement on John XXIII,³ but without its irony, wrote: 'The indulgent eye of modern criticism has withdrawn the gravest charges which were levelled against this Pontiff by his contemporaries. It is content to leave only as established sensuality and simony, worldliness, perfidy and secret poisoning'.⁴ As Inge commented, very much in the tone and spirit of Gibbon: 'I am curious to know what faults the Warden of New College would consider grave blemishes in the character of a vicar of Christ'.

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1. H. Butterfield, History and Human Relations. London, 1951, pp. 104, 102.
 2. 'Historicism and Religion', inaugural address, History, No. 80, March, 1936, pp. 289-302. The reference here is to p. 301.
 3. DF, lxx, VII, 300.
 4. A History of Europe. London, 1936, pp. 488-9.

Inge's main point is this: 'History deals with human nature... A description of the behaviour of human beings from which all moral judgments are excluded is not a true picture'. Both Acton and Creighton saw history in terms not unlike Gibbon's record of 'the crimes and follies of mankind', relieved by some good men and actions here and there. But one clamoured for moral judgements, the other refrained. 'It is possible', Inge admitted, 'to take either side in this controversy; but Creighton's last words remind us that it is possible to condemn crime without usurping the prerogative of God in judging the criminal. To pass no moral judgments is virtually to ignore the difference between right and wrong. It does not satisfy the reader, but shocks him'.¹

Convinced of this, Gibbon did not refrain from passing judgement, or confirming what he felt to be the judgement of history, declaring guilty those who committed offences against humanity and on occasions absolving from blame or praising the benefactors of mankind. In this way he felt it 'proper to punish and dismiss' an 'unworthy' ruler before proceeding to an account of the following reign.² Of Theodosius, on the other hand, he wrote that 'he honourably deserves' the epithet 'great'.³ He characterised others as 'imperial monsters' because of their 'inhuman and absurd cruelty' and his revulsion at monks and hermits was largely for this same reason since the torments they inflicted on themselves and others indicated that 'cruel and unfeeling temper' usually associated with a tyrant.⁴ Gibbon held that history could neither justify nor ignore the tyrants and persecutors and their evil deeds.⁵ As a moral censor he condemned the conduct of the Romans,

1. Inge, *op.cit.*, p. 301.

2. *DF*, xii, I, 375.

3. *DF*, xxvi, III, 129.

4. *DF*, xxxi, III, 302; xxxvii, IV, 80.

5. *DF*, xvi, II, 87.

particularly their administration, as 'weak and wicked' violating not only the laws of nature and of nations, but also justice and all feelings of humanity.¹ Similarly, the slave trade, which 'reduces the human species to the level of cattle', Gibbon declared to his contemporaries, 'accuses the guilt of Europe'.²

Given the view of posterity and its relation to 'the voice of history' as presented in The Decline and Fall, the historian's moral obligation becomes quite clear. Sometimes he is called upon to praise, sometimes to condemn, and on occasions to consign a worthless character to oblivion; but always to see that justice is done to the figures of the past. These persons must often look to posterity alone for a just verdict on their behalf. After the dust of controversy, prejudice or false flattery has settled, 'the voice of history' can speak with impartiality to applaud their motives or their true worth, to accuse their villainy, or it may be, to declare them the guiltless victims of slander and tyranny. Since, according to Gibbon, the history of nations can be described as 'the paths of blood',³ it is not surprising that the blood of these victims often cries out for vengeance and that justice requires the historian to vindicate their innocence to future generations. In the fifth century the friends of the fallen Stilicho suffered under the cruel persecution instigated by his enemy Olympius. Like their patron, 'they died in silence', but 'the despotic power which could take his life without a trial, and stigmatise his memory without a proof, has no jurisdiction over the impartial

1. DF, xxv, III, 60; xxix, III.

2. DF, xlii, IV, 400; xxv, III, 55; and cf. Gibbon's letter to Sheffield, No. 759, 15/5/90, III, 192-3, referring to his support of the slave trade as being likely to result in a 'triumph...over justice and humanity'.

3. DF, lvii, VI, 236. Cf. also iv, I, 93: 'From such motives ("love of power, contention, pride of victory, revenge") 'almost every page of history has been stained with blood'.

suffrage of posterity'.¹

We are thus brought back to the idea of impartiality, so essential to Gibbon's view of the role of the historian and are reminded that with him it did not mean a cold detachment. It meant, as we have seen, scrupulous fairness within the limitations of his sources, and often a correction of those sources, where the tone 'of hatred or flattery' was evident.² It meant involvement in the history he was writing, and the measure of his involvement is often apparent in his sense of outrage which provoked him to use the strongest language.³ Like the faithful orator discharging his responsibility to this audience, the impartial historian confirms the moral judgement of posterity, transmits it and clarifies it for his readers, and in so doing appeals to their own response of censure, praise or indignation. In this he sees himself serving that noble use of history as an instructive force. Referring to one of his important sources, the historian Procopius, he reminded his reader that he was a rhetorician who, in the course of a long public career, was influenced by 'the vicissitudes of courage, of servitude, of favour, or disgrace', to compose successively, 'the history, the panegyric, and the satire of his own times'. At best, however, he 'appears to disdain the prejudices of the people and the flattery of courts when he is 'excited by the generous ambition of pleasing and instructing posterity'.⁴

1. DF, xxx, III, 296.

2. The accusations against Stilicho are 'vaguely stated in the language of flattery and hatred' (DF, xxx, III, 296); and cf. the remarks on history being often equated with these qualities, DF, x, I, 293.

3. See below, chap. IX, 'The Language of the Moralist'.

4. DF, xl, IV, 224.

Gibbon's celebrated remark that history 'is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind',¹ introduces a fourth moral category in The Decline and Fall. In its immediate context it might appear as a cynical aside appended to the statement that the reign of the virtuous Antoninus had 'the rare advantage of furnishing very few materials for history'.² It is, in fact, amply illustrated by much of the history of the Empire which he recorded. The reader is struck by the frequency of the terms, 'crimes', 'follies', and 'vices' in his account of the steady decline to which they are mostly applied.

Gibbon's mentor, Tacitus, likewise saw the period he was to record as one characterised by crimes and horrors: 'The history on which I am entering is that of a period rich in disasters, terrible with battles,

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1. DF, iii, I, 84. It recurs in many forms throughout DF. Here it is, as C.N. Cochrane notes, a literal translation of Voltaire's 'un ramas de crimes, de folies et de malheurs'. ('The Mind of Edward Gibbon', op.cit., p. 9). In similar vein is his statement: 'L'histoire de grands événements de ce monde n'est guère que l'histoire des crimes'. ('Essai sur les Moeurs', Works. Paris, 1963, Vol. I, p. 371).
 2. Jordan (op.cit., p. 80) refers to the saying in a discussion of Gibbon's 'philosophy of history' which includes his 'faith in man's ability to make sense of his experiences and to order... his life'. Unlike the few who exemplify this, the 'heroes', spiritually outside their age, 'most men are fatalistically trapped by history and live lives determined by events which they cannot understand, let alone control. This, he says, 'is the meaning of his remark that history is but a catalog of the crimes and follies of mankind'. Neither the connection nor the 'meaning' is made very clear. Byron's comment on Coleridge comes to mind: 'I wish he would explain his explanation'. (Don Juan, I, 2).

torn by civil struggles, horrible even in peace...In Rome there was more awful cruelty. High birth, wealth, the refusal or acceptance of office - all gave ground for accusations, and virtues caused the surest ruin...Slaves were corrupted against their masters, freed men against their patrons; and those that had no enemy were crushed by their friends'.¹ So he wrote at the beginning of the Histories; and when he came to his Annals, he gave his reader a similar warning of the monotonous frequency of unpleasant themes, 'a series of savage mandates, of perpetual accusations, of traitorous friendships, of ruined innocents...everywhere monotony of subject and satiety'.² In the long catalogue of corruption and the anatomy of cruel tyranny, Gibbon, like those from whom he learned much, the historian Tacitus and the satirist, Juvenal,³ also found a spate of material. The pages of The Decline and Fall show how this side of human nature runs throughout the work.

'We are fatigued', Gibbon wrote early in his story, 'with the disgustful relation to Nero's crimes and follies'.⁴ A little later he suggested: 'The vices and follies of Elagabalus might appear to have been adorned by fancy and blackened by prejudice. Yet confining ourselves to public scenes displayed before the Roman people and attested by grave and contemporary historians, their inexpressible infamy surpasses that of any other age or country'.⁵ Referring to the ostentation of a section of the Roman nobility in the fourth century, Gibbon cited Ammianus' charge that they 'assume an unbounded licence

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1. Histories, I, 2, tr. C.H. Moore, Loeb ed. 1925. Tacitus went on, however, to admit examples of virtue also.
 2. Annals, IV, 33, tr. J. Jackson, Loeb ed. 1937.
 3. After a thorough study of the Satires, he wrote: 'J'ai fini Juvenal que je regrette beaucoup de n'avoir pas plutôt connu, et qui sera désormais un de mes auteurs favoris'. (JB, 17me, Sept. 1763).
 4. DF, iii, I, 82.
 5. DF, vi, I, 160.

of vice and folly'.¹ A few pages further on he noted that the same historian 'exposes with equal indignation the vices and follies of the common people'. He then went on to refer to Juvenal's equally strong expressions about the crowds and their obsession with chariot racing, and maintained that both the historian and the satirist 'painted from life'.² 'The crime and folly of the court of Ravenna' epitomised for Gibbon Roman degradation in the face of Alaric's advance on Italy.³ And, after surveying the depressing story of the Byzantine emperors, he tried to rise above the sordid scene and take a broad moral view from a more elevated position: 'A being of the nature of man, endowed with the same faculties, but with a longer measure of existence, would cast a smile of pity and contempt on the crimes and follies of human ambition so eager in a narrow span to grasp at a precarious and short lived enjoyment'.⁴

By the time we reach, in the forty-eighth chapter, this echo of the original remark found in the third, we are convinced that Gibbon has substantiated his claim. The catalogue of vices, follies and crimes, either referred to generically or described specifically, has continued throughout the story of the Western Empire and becomes even more oppressive in his survey of Byzantine affairs. So conscious is the author himself of this effect that, confronted with two royal assassinations in a single year, he experienced something of Tacitus' reaction to the 'monotony' and 'satiety' of such shocking events. 'I am at a loss, he admitted, 'how to vary the narrative of similar crimes'.⁵ Actions of this kind make up

1. DF, xxxi, III, 312.

2. DF, xxxi, III, 322nn. 61, 62.

3. DF, xxi, III, 339.

4. DF, xlviii, V, 258.

5. DF, xxv, III, 66.

such a large part of Gibbon's account that we find him again and again obliged to use one of these pairs of terms, 'vices and follies' or 'crimes and follies', as he viewed the sorry line of characters passing before him.

It is significant that in almost every instance he applied the terms to despotic rulers or to the paristic court clustered round them. There was a similar association in the mind of Tacitus as he recorded the history of the early empire. 'These moral diseases, in Tacitus' view, are all consequent on the loss of freedom'.¹ For Gibbon also, irresponsible autocracy seemed to be the basic evil for a nation or society, since only within an atmosphere of liberty could human nature realise its true dignity and exercise its moral choice. Often, especially in the Eastern Empire, the sycophantic nobility had surrendered their honour to purchase the favour of the ruler. It was so when Michael III, a true successor to Nero or Elagabalus, sat on the Byzantine throne. Here was a ruler who presented a unique 'imitation of their vices' and 'who considered pleasure as the object of life and virtue as the enemy of pleasure'.² In this situation the real power lay in the hands of his mother, the empress of Theodora. 'With Theodora, all gravity and wisdom retired from the court; their place was supplied by the alternative dominion of vice and folly'.³

The struggle between the two antithetical forces, 'wisdom and virtue', 'vice and folly', can be seen played out on the stage of

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1. B. Walker, The Annals of Tacitus. A Study in the Writing of History. Manchester, 1952, p. 78. See this short chapter V, 'Tacitus' View of the Period'.
 2. DF, xlviii, V, 212-3. Alexander, uncle and governor of the young emperor, Constantine VII, 'emulated the reputation of Michael', 'in a rapid career of vice and folly'. (V, 222).
 3. DF, xlviii, V, 213.

Gibbon's History. Herein lay a salutary lesson for the rulers of every age. When he reflected on the arbitrary rule of the Byzantine emperors, themselves slaves of their own ceremonies and prisoners of the palace, the philosophic historian observed an inexorable law which operated to remove these rulers one after another. Here, in essence, is the story of the Eastern Empire as told by Gibbon. It is best summed up in the memorable sentence near the end of that long chapter covering six hundred years and sixty emperors: 'The grave is ever beside the throne; the success of a criminal is almost instantly followed by the loss of his prize; and our immortal reason disdains the sixty phantoms of kings who have passed before our eyes and faintly dwell in our remembrance'.¹ The fact, long recognised, that Gibbon did scant justice to the culture and civilisation of Constantinople, is not the question here. Our immediate concern is his moral view of the unscrupulous ambition of despots and its inevitable result: 'The exercise of boundless despotism is happily checked by the laws of nature and necessity. In proportion to his wisdom and virtue the master of an empire is confined to the path of his sacred and laborious duty. In proportion to his vice and folly, he drops the sceptre too weighty for his hands', as some minister or favourite imperceptibly takes over from him 'the task of the public oppression'.²

In such a situation the people are at the mercy of the tyrant's whims and excesses. The reign of the Fatamite caliph Hakem, who was 'delivered by his impiety and despotism from the fear of either God

1. DF, xlviii, V, 259.

2. DF, liii, VI, 94-5.

or man', thus became 'a wild mixture of vice and folly'.¹ On the other hand, while the Empress Theodora exercised a somewhat similar influence over the court during the reign of her young son, the weak and vicious Michael III, his uncle, the Caesar Bardas, was able in some measure to restrain the general depravity. As a generous patron of literature, he was instrumental in opening a palace school for which 'a part of the treasures of his nephew was sometimes diverted from the indulgence of vice and folly' for the pursuit of nobler things.²

It is not surprising that the historian, like his reader, tended to become weary of the uniform tale of vicious, criminal and foolish actions as he wrote 'the annals of a declining monarchy' and 'exposed... the vices of a declining empire'.³ No wonder that, like Tacitus, he lamented his thankless and unrewarding task.⁴ In tracing the development of Roman jurisprudence, he welcomed the opportunity of leaving these depressing annals 'to breathe the pure and invigorating air of the republic'.⁵ There was once more a sense of relief when he reached the period of Mahmud the Gaznevide whose rule brought his subjects 'the blessings of prosperity and peace': 'From the paths of blood, and such is the history of nations, I cannot refuse to turn aside to gather some flowers of science or virtue'.⁶ The monotonous succession of evil rulers and the consequent lack of relief is felt more heavily in the second part of The Decline and Fall where the focus has moved

1. DF, lviii, VI, 264.

2. DF, liii, VI, 109.

3. DF, xliv, IV, 471 and xxxiv, III, 454. The second reference is to 'the freedman of Onegesius' giving his frank view of Roman ways to the historian Priscus, but this view is in fact a summary of Gibbon's own account of the decline of manners.

4. e.g. Annals, IV, xxxii, 'nobis in arto et inglorius labor'. See also p. 200 of the present chapter.

5. DF, xliv, IV, 471.

6. DF, lvii, VI, 236.

to Constantinople. In introducing his rapid survey of emperors from Heraclius in the seventh century to the 'Latin conquest' in the twelfth, Gibbon gave his frank opinion that 'the subjects of the Byzantine empire, who assume and dishonour the names both of Greeks and Romans present a dead uniformity of abject vices, which are neither softened by the weakness of humanity nor animated by the vigour of memorable crimes'.¹

The history Gibbon related, thus amply illustrates his famous statement in the third chapter; and in most of his chapters there seem to be few pages which do not either refer to vices, crimes and follies, or exemplify them in particular instances. Yet, while the general character of the later empire is one of degeneracy almost inseparable from the growth of despotism, there is no outright or unqualified condemnation; there are 'some flowers of science and virtue' to be discovered even amongst ignorance and corruption.² Gibbon also conceded that though both reason and rhetoric had frequently associated the extensive and powerful empire of Rome with manifold evils, it had at the same time been the source of benefits and social improvements for mankind.³ There had, for example, been a lessening of the unequal distribution between the east with its 'immemorial possession of arts and luxury' and the harder, more barbarous way of life in the west.⁴ And even though Gibbon sometimes moralised in a traditional manner on the exchange of rugged and honest simplicity for soft oriental luxury,⁵ he showed a commonsense approach to this characteristic aspect of civilized life. His attitude was not that of a rigid puritanical protester

1. DF, xlviii, V, 181.

2. So too, Tacitus, Histories, I, 2, admitted, 'Yet this age was not so barren of virtue that it did not display noble examples'.

3. DF, ii, I, 56.

4. DF, ii, I, 56.

5. e.g. DF, i, I, 10; ix, I, 250; xxvii, III, 195, 196; xxxi, III, 329, 353.

but of the student of society who was not misled by false utopianism. It was true that the hard working labourer supported the ease, elegance, pride and even sensuality of the rich, those 'favourites of fortune': 'Such refinements, under the odious name of luxury, have been severely arraigned by the moralists of every age; and it might perhaps be more conducive to the virtue, as well as happiness, of mankind, if all possessed the necessities, and none the superfluities, of life'. Ideally, and history bore witness to this fact, virtue and happiness are more securely based upon the simple satisfaction of real needs than on the gratification of ever increasing desires for ease and elegance. 'But', Gibbon admitted, 'in the present imperfect condition of society, luxury, though it may proceed from vice or folly, seems to be the only means that can correct the unequal distribution of property'.¹ To be realistic and accommodate our absolute standards of personal excellence to the greatest good of society, it seemed preferable to achieve a more equable distribution of goods at the expense of some loss of wisdom and virtue.²

The solution seemed to lie in the golden mean between wretched poverty and excessive luxury. Moderation was praised by Gibbon in his characters and he saw the avoidance of extremes as the safest path to virtue. The problem with luxury was that it was seldom moderate; it was generally 'profuse', 'extravagant' or 'intemperate'.³

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1. DF, ii, I, 58-9.
 2. Gibbon recognised society as still imperfect but saw progress as a cause of satisfaction. And particularly in his study of the Germanic peoples, he made it clear that a simple, hardy life free from luxury did not constitute virtue nor even a desirable existence. So-called 'virtuous simplicity' was often no more than 'ignorance and poverty'. See DF, ix, I, 235-6.
 3. DF, xxxi, III, 311, 318, 359 and cf. the same thought in ii, I, 45.

The inhabitants of 'opulent' cities 'enjoyed and abused'¹ its benefits and were in turn 'enervated'² and 'corrupted' by it. Thus luxury, however it might alleviate the brutish life of uncivilized peoples, seemed in the course of history, notably that of declining empires, to suffer from abuse. Such abuse was almost inseparable from civilization. Both the Greeks of the second century and the Persians of the third, are, unlike the barbarians, described as having been 'long since civilized and corrupted'; and in each instance the process is associated with the spread of luxury.³ The 'pompous courts' of the Greek cities of Asia 'united the elegance of Athens with the luxury of the East...' The Persian 'monarch and his nobles transported into the camp the pride and luxury of the seraglio', and these nobles were 'in the bosom of luxury and despotism'.

It is instructive to observe the linguistic companions with which the word 'luxury' is associated in the pages of Gibbon. Only once is it 'innocent';⁴ in other cases it is 'selfish', 'effeminate', 'pompous or sensual', 'extravagant', 'intemperate'⁵ and is linked with 'pride', 'ease', 'riot' and with such vices as 'idleness', 'lust' and 'avarice'.⁶ Into this word 'luxury' Gibbon often seemed to inject all his contempt for eastern 'effeminacy' or 'corruption' with which he tended to associate it. Its 'progress' amongst the Romans of the late

1. e.g. DF, i, I, 1; xxxi, III, 347.

2. Gibbon uses this verb very frequently in connection with luxury; e.g. vi, I, 140; ix, I, 251; xiv, I, 449; xvii, II, 188.

3. DF, ii, I, 42; vii, I, 229.

4. DF, vi, I, 166.

5. DF, ii, I, 51; xxvii, II, 196; xxxi, III, 311, cf. 318, 321, 359.

6. DF, xxxi, III, 322, n. 61, 348; 327; x, I, 283; v, I, 115; cf. xxvii, III, 197 ('indolence'); vi, I, 160; xxxi, III, 310, n. 30. In his Journal for 25 Oct. 1762 (JA), Gibbon had written that both Longinus and Seneca attributed 'the decay of taste to luxury and its attendant vices'.

fourth century he could only explain in terms of 'that indolent despair' which grasps at nothing but the enjoyment of the present moment. He saw this as akin to 'the mad prodigality which prevails in the confusion of a shipwreck, or a siege' as it did then 'amidst the misfortunes and terrors of a sinking nation'.¹ It was this 'effeminate luxury which infected the manners of courts and cities', and which, by instilling 'a secret and destructive poison into the camps and the legions', proved fatal to 'the genuine and ancient principles of Roman discipline'. And this in turn 'may be considered as the immediate cause of the downfall of the empire'.²

Here we are in the realm of moral causes: vices, follies, luxury, and a mad and desperate escape to suicidal indulgence instead of a resolute recovery of the ancient virtues and discipline which had made Rome great. It seemed an almost inevitable process of history as one compared the hardy simplicity of the northern nations, or the vigorous civil and military exertions of the Roman republic with the luxury and indolence³ which characterised an overripe and decadent empire as portrayed by Gibbon.

This causation, or the inevitability of certain results, given certain conditions, constitutes another of the essential categories of The Decline and Fall. In seeking the lessons of history, the philosophic historian looked into his material more deeply than the unenlightened writer in order to arrive at an understanding of the

1. DF, xxvii, III, 196.

2. DF, xxvii, III, 196-7.

3. DF, xxvii, III, 197: 'the pusillanimous indolence' of 'the enervated soldiers (who) abandoned their own and the public defence'.

underlying causes of events and an appreciation of their significant effects. In a well-known but revealing comparison, the young Gibbon had likened history for the philosophic mind to what the Marquis of Dangeau could perceive in gaming: a system, connections, sequence, where others discerned only the caprices of fortune. Thus he declared, the understanding of history is to the philosophic mind that of 'causes' and 'effects'.¹ But as he clearly showed in the course of his Essai, these were not the usual physical or mechanical ones, but psychological and moral:² the broad working out of human passions like ambition, or those inevitable results which history recorded again and again in the rise and fall of nations and empires. What Gibbon did was to transfer the notion of 'cause' and 'effect' into the moral and human sphere. Deeply indebted to Montesquieu's Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence, he had exclaimed in his Essai, 'What a wide field opens itself up to my reflection! The theory of general causes would, in the hands of a Montesquieu, become a philosophical history of man. He would display these causes operating in the rise and fall of empires.'³ Gibbon took up the challenge, working within the moral categories afforded by The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.

It has sometimes been pointed out that Gibbon does not systematically present us with a series of 'causes' of the decline and fall of the empire. Swain, for instance, says that readers 'will be disappointed if they expect to find ... a closely reasoned philosophical or sociological treatise

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1. Essai, chap. XLVIII ('Cette science est pour lui celle des causes et des effets.'), p.63.
 2. See chap. III above, e.g. pp. 106 & 111.
 3. Essai, chap. LV, (English translation of 1764).

on the causes of Rome's collapse. Nowhere in his six volumes does he make a full and explicit statement of what, in his opinion, were the great determining causes of that catastrophe'.¹ While this is true, it is not the whole truth. There are observations and suggestions scattered throughout The Decline and Fall. Gibbon's method is not to divorce 'causes' from his narrative of events in order to present them in 'a full and explicit', but isolated statement. It is rather the method of Fielding, who called his novels 'histories', and who took the reader into his confidence in order to guide him in the discovery of reasons, motives and the true character beneath deceptive appearances. But though pointing rather than telling, Gibbon never failed to indicate the significant relationships and consequences which we might possibly overlook.

In his second chapter he drew attention to 'the latent causes of decay and corruption'.² They are 'latent' because not apparent to contemporaries in a period of public happiness, but they are revealed to the reader of The Decline and Fall. And they are essentially moral causes which can be likened to 'a slow and secret poison' affecting 'the vitals of the empire'. Only two chapters further on, 'the first symptom and cause of the decline of the Roman Empire' is discovered in 'the licentious fury' of the Praetorian bands.³ It must be noted that only in the psychological and moral realms can something be seen as being at the same time both cause and symptom or cause and effect. A mental or moral

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1. Edward Gibbon the Historian, p. 141. cf. also L.P. Curtis, 'Gibbon's Paradise Lost', in F.W. Hilles (ed.) The Age of Johnson. New Haven, 1949, p. 77 and David Jordan, Gibbon and his Roman Empire, pp. 214 etc.; though Jordan does say on p. 226, 'The specific causes for Rome's fall march across the pages of the Decline and Fall'.
 2. DF, I, 61-2.
 3. DF, v, I, 114.

attitude produces a chain of self perpetuating consequences. 'Licentious fury', begins if it proves successful once, to reproduce its kind.

Similarly Gibbon could refer to 'the spirit of chivalry' as both 'the parent and offspring of the crusades', and of the crusades as 'at once an effect, and a cause, of this memorable institution'.¹ He had pointed out in his Essai² that in the moral world there are many actions which are both cause and effect; or rather there are few, he continued, which do not partake more or less of the nature of both the one and the other.³

At the end of the third volume of The Decline and Fall, he appended his 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West' to bring out both causes and useful lessons. Here he particularly pointed to Rome's 'immoderate greatness' of which her decline was 'the natural and inevitable effect'.⁴ The value of moderation and the dangers of excess are familiar themes in Gibbon's work. Prosperity, which is there so often associated with luxury, 'ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest'. Given such moral conditions, which include also the acquisition of foreign vices by the legions, their revolt against imperial authority and the corruption of discipline, in an over-extended empire, the explanation of decline becomes 'simple and obvious'. These are obviously the 'general and determinate causes' of the Essai; military defeats and certain apparently accidental misfortunes being the particular causes which only hastened the inevitable collapse. 'Time or accident' simply 'removed the artificial supports' allowing the colossus to fall under its own weight.⁵ In one

1. DF, lviii, VI, 329; 295. One might think of Augustine's 'poena ~~peccati~~ peccatum' as illustrative of a similar process.

2. chap. LXXXII, pp. 91-2.

3. Gibbon is proposing an organic, 'biological' alternative to the conventional 'Newtonian' view of cause and effect.

4. DF, IV, 173.

5. DF, IV, 173.

sense, therefore, it is almost superfluous to produce a set of reasons 'why the Roman Empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long'.¹

Swain, who makes reference to the 'General Observations', says that Gibbon's 'sketchy remarks on that occasion should not be taken as expressing the historian's mature views on the matter'. He continues, 'Unfortunately, however, modern commentators sometimes forget this fact and, on the basis of a few sentences in this excursus, they ascribe to Gibbon ideas which he held only momentarily if at all'.² This sort of statement makes criticism difficult. The 'Observations' appeared when Gibbon was forty-four; he had studied systematically for over twenty-five years, travelled on the Continent and met many of the most eminent and most intelligent people of the day, had written several works, sat in Parliament for about seven years and been engaged on writing and revising The Decline and Fall for a similar period of time. Even if, as may be the case, all or part of the 'Observations' was originally written before the first part of The Decline and Fall,³ we cannot suppose Gibbon's last word to what he then felt might be his last volume, would have appeared without deliberate thought and careful revision. In the case of his early Essai about which he later had some reservations, he refused to let it be reprinted. He did not withdraw the 'Observations' but merely altered a single phrase to avoid unnecessary offence. No writer as careful and fastidious as Gibbon would append to his completed work a peroration containing ideas

1. DF, IV, 174.

2. op.cit., p. 141.

3. It all depends on Gibbon's reference to 'the house of Bourbon', see below p. 228 and note 4, which he claimed in his Memoirs had been written before Louis XVI's accession to the throne, that is before 1774. He began The Decline and Fall in February 1773. See Memoirs, 174, n.48 and Bonnard's comment (p.328) beginning, 'If the concluding observations...were really written before Louis XVI ascended the throne...'

he considered as immature or no longer accurately expressing his views. Nor is it clear why we should accept some statements of a mature historian in the body of his history at their face value but dismiss certain critical observations on that history as unworthy of serious consideration. It is more reasonable to conclude that if Gibbon saw the value of adding such observations to his completed story of the Western empire, he would be sure that they adequately expressed his reflections on the history he had written. C.N. Cochrane, in his study of the mind of Edward Gibbon, regards the 'Observations' as the locus classicus of his treatment of causation,¹ while François Furet called them 'the only genuine analytical commentary on the problem that gave The Decline and Fall its title'.² And their emphasis is all on the moral factors.

In various parts of the work, we can see Gibbon assigning causes and indicating effects, as he surveyed the course of events. Some of these have to do directly with the Roman Empire, others concern the many interrelated movements, like Christianity, Islam, the Crusades, themselves seen as contributory causes of decline. In the famous chapters xv and xvi Gibbon dealt with what he discreetly called the 'secondary causes' of the rise and establishment of Christianity. These were for Gibbon essentially the primary or 'natural' causes, the supernatural causes being necessarily excluded by his philosophic view. In chapters l and li it is with the human reasons for the rise of Islam that he is concerned and in the following chapter there is a definite suggestion as to the 'causes' of 'the decline and fall of the

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1. See Cochrane's discussion of Gibbon's views on 'the problem of causation in history' ('The Mind of Edward Gibbon', op.cit., pp. 154ff.)
 2. 'Civilization and Barbarism in Gibbon's History', in Bowersock, op.cit., p. 162.

empire of the caliphs'.¹ These 'causes' make an interesting comparison with those of the decline of Rome. Here once more we find the corruption of freedom and courage through foreign contacts; the loss of 'freedom and martial virtues' as 'the active power of enthusiasm had decayed'; the rise of faction and fanaticism, both mixed with avarice; the rule of cruel and jealous tyrants; the relaxation of discipline;² and just like Rome's 'immoderate greatness', 'the most obvious cause was the weight and magnitude of the empire itself'. These moral causes of decay are so reminiscent of the decline of the Western empire, that Gibbon felt constrained to comment: 'So uniform are the mischiefs of military despotism that I seem to repeat the story of the praetorians of Rome'.³

There is also a quite explicit concern with the 'causes' and 'effects' of the Crusades and of the chivalry with which they are so closely related.⁴ Gibbon's plan did not include a full history of the Crusades, and having dealt with the earlier expeditions, he added ironically: 'A regular story of the crusades would exhibit the perpetual return of the same causes and effects'.⁵ He was not avoiding a discussion of 'causes' but only the dullness of mere repetition.⁶ He therefore directed his reader to Fleury's 'accurate and rational view of the causes and effects of the crusades'.⁷ As with other notable movements, secular

1. DF, lii, VI, 53.

2. DF, lii, VI, 49; 51-3.

3. DF, VI, 51.

4. DF, lviii, VI, 269ff.; 329.

5. DF, lix, VI, 338.

6. As he says in the same place (p. 338), 'a brief parallel may save the repetition of a tedious narrative'

7. DF, lviii, VI, 278, n.22.

or religious, his concern was with the human and natural causes and no more. This is in marked contrast to Cardinal Baronius, one of his ecclesiastical sources, who, as he noted in an earlier volume, was 'more inclined to seek the cause of great events in heaven than on earth'.¹ But Gibbon, in dealing with the crusaders' capture of Antioch, a subject long associated with visions and supernatural aid, made it clear that his interest, unlike that of the contemporary chroniclers, was only in 'the human causes of victory'.² When it was a matter of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and similar physical phenomena, the philosophic historian regarded such happenings as lying outside his domain of 'cause' and 'effect': 'Without assigning the cause, history will distinguish the periods in which these calamitous events have been rare or frequent'.³ There was more instruction to be found in the pursuit of moral explanations and moral results.

Throughout The Decline and Fall the most significant and influential movements of the centuries are examined to find their reasons and trace their consequences; and this philosophic quest has led the historian far in both time and space. 'Our curiosity has been tempted to visit the most remote countries of Europe and Asia to explore the causes and the authors of the long decay of the Byzantine monarchy', Gibbon wrote.⁴ Here again emerges the essential difference between the historian and the 'dull annalist' or chronicler, these latter being exemplified by the sources on which Gibbon had to rely for this part of his story.

1. DF, xxxiii, III, 428, n. 25.

2. DF lviii, VI, 313.

3. DF, xliii, IV, 464. 'Their times and effects appear to lie beyond the reach of human curiosity, and the philosopher will discreetly abstain from the prediction of earthquakes...'. Perhaps the 1754 earthquake at Lisbon came to Gibbon's mind as he wrote these sentences.

4. DF, lxix, VII, 218.

He stressed the distinction. Facts and events these writers have in abundance, but the distinguishing marks of the true historian, a concern with manners, character, motives and underlying causes, are absent. 'A succession of priests or courtiers tread in each other's footsteps in the same path of servitude and superstition: their views are narrow, their judgment is feeble or corrupt; and we close the volume of copious barrenness, still ignorant of the causes of events, the characters of the actors, and the manners of the times, which they celebrate or deplore'.¹

There is no doubt that as he approached the end of his history, Gibbon expected the reader to have a clear idea of these matters. This had been a definite part of his design; and if he had been successful, he felt that the causes of Rome's decline must have emerged from his narrative. He even censured the 'philosophic' Montesquieu for his apparent ignorance that the Goths after Valens' defeat never abandoned Roman territory. And why did Gibbon say that this 'error is inexcusable'? Simply because 'it disguises the principal and immediate cause of the fall of the Western Empire of Rome'.²

In view of all this, to point to the lack of 'a full and explicit statement' of the main causes of Rome's fall reflects a somewhat superficial view of The Decline and Fall. It also tends to ignore the method and obscure the function of the philosophic historian, which is

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1. DF, xlvi, V, 182. The particular reference is to the Byzantine historians belonging to the Comnenian family.
 2. DF, xxvi, III, 139, n. 143. Gibbon also made reference to Montesquieu's Considérations and to the alleged omission of a cause of Rome's decline in chapter xxi, II, 414. It is interesting that Gibbon expected the word Causes in Montesquieu's title ('Considérations sur les Causes de la Grandeur' &c.) to be exploited to the full.

not to foist a ready-made list of 'causes' on a receptive reader, but rather to discover with him underlying reasons and motives as they emerge through events and characters. In this process the philosophic historian assumes a philosophic reader.¹ Together they survey the scene of human affairs which the historian presents. Gibbon wrote for the 'critical reader', 'the prudent reader', 'the thinking mind'.² As he wrote by way of introduction to a long extract from the historian Ammianus Marcellinus: 'The judicious reader...will perhaps detect the latent prejudices...of Ammianus; but he will surely observe with philosophic curiosity, the interesting and original picture of the manners of Rome'.³ If the historian has done his part, there is no need for him to do for 'the judicious reader' what that reader can do for himself. 'Causes' should not always be abstracted and listed in isolation from the events they produced; rather they should become apparent as these events are unfolded. But from time to time the historian will comment; and, as a new turn of events reveals a further 'cause' or 'effect', he will draw the reader's attention to its significance. On the first page of his work Gibbon opened his plan to the reader. It was to describe the condition of the Roman Empire and then 'to deduce the most important circumstances of its decline and fall'; and he suggested that the effects of these events were 'still felt by the nations of th earth'.⁴ On his last page he reminded the reader who had followed this decline and fall to its conclusion, that its 'various causes and progressive effects are connected with many of the events most interesting in human annals';⁵ and these events covered

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1. Gibbon's many words to the reader and the terms in which he addresses him are instructive. See notes 2 and 3 below and also DF, xxiii, II, 465, n. 24; xxv, III, 40-41; xli, IV, 307; lvi, VI, 174, n. 1; lix, VI, 346, n. 34.
 2. DF, liii, VI, 98, n. 82; xxviii, III, 207; xxxiii, III, 429.
 3. DF, xxi, III, 311.
 4. DF, i, I, 1.
 5. DF, lxxi, VII, 338, Gibbon's 'Final Conclusion'.

the history of the intervening centuries.

Even before his experience in Rome, Gibbon had pondered this rise and decline of nations. Reading Cluveri's Italia Antiqua in preparation for his Italian tour, he expressed his astonishment at the luxury and wealth of the Etruscans but saw in that ancient people also, the softening and enervating effect of luxury. Their colony between the Alps and the Appenines was, about the year 600 B.C., also 'riche, puisannte et amolie par les delices. Sa Metropole l'etoit encore davantage. Elle panchoit deja vers sa ruine. Combien de siecles ne leur a-t-il pas fallû pour cette progression lente mais sure qui conduit une nation de la barbarie, à l'industrie, aux arts, au luxe et à la molesse? N'en doutons point'.¹

Since such a moral pattern is to be found in the development of nations through civilization to corruption and decay, there are lessons here for the philosophic mind. This is one of Gibbon's tenets in The Decline and Fall. Having completed the story of the fall of the Western empire and thus, as he said, having abundantly discharged his engagements with the public,² he dared to look forward with the hopeful suggestion that 'the history of the Greek emperors may still afford a long series of instructive lessons'.³ A few pages further on, in his philosophical postscript, 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West', he wrote that 'this awful revolution may be usefully applied to the instruction of the present age'.⁴ Thus in sending these volumes to Suzanne Necker he could confidently promise her that she would find in them an interesting and instructive picture

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1. JB, 26me. Octobre, 1763. Gibbon refers to him as 'Cluvier', occasionally 'Cluver'. For the various forms of his name see Bonnard's note in JB, p. 89, n. 3.
 2. See the Author's Preface, P.S. March 1, 1781, DF, I, xli.
 3. DF, xxxviii, IV, 171.
 4. DF, IV, 175-6.

of the times.¹ His most general and best known statement of the instructive value and use of history comes in his account of the policy of the Western emperors towards the Christians and the parallel he drew between these rulers and the monarchs of modern Europe whom he found 'more criminal' in their persecutions than their ancient counterparts. 'History', Gibbon declared, 'which undertakes to record the transactions of the past, for the instruction of future ages, would ill deserve that honourable office, if she condescended to plead the cause of tyrants, or to justify the maxims of persecution'.²

There could scarcely be a more direct or forceful statement both of the task and 'office' of history and of the historian's moral duty in this regard. At the outset of his quest for a subject Gibbon had contrasted the contemptible role of the mere chronicler with the 'honourable' calling of the historian. Here, as he looked back over his first volume, he declared that 'honourable office' to be inseparable from the historian's obligation to record for future instruction and to expose tyranny and the destruction of the rights of conscience for all to see.³ If this record seemed often to contain little more than examples of vice and folly, then the obvious lesson for the present and for future ages was the inevitable consequence of abandoning freedom, virtue and wisdom.⁴ The English governing class, L.P. Curtis suggested, 'agreed upon fundamentals;' they 'believed in the supremacy of the moral will. Nor laws nor institutions (and so thought Gibbon) might avail to build the good society unless those laws and institutions

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1. Letters, No. 498, 26/2/81, II, 262, referring to the present of volumes II and III made to her at that time.
 2. DF, xvi, II, 87.
 3. So also, having completed his initial plan with the fall of the Western Empire, Gibbon saw fit to recommend his finished work to the instruction of his contemporaries ('General Observations', IV, 175-6 and cf. Memoirs, p. 164.)
 4. 'Gibbon's Paradise Lost', in F.W. Hilles, op.cit., p. 79.

were informed with the principles of freedom, virtue, and wisdom'.¹ It was on 'the firm basis' of wisdom and virtue that the Roman republic had rested;² their loss undermined the foundations of the empire. During that happy period before the decline set in almost uninterrupted, 'the two Antonines...governed the Roman world forty-two years with the same invariable spirit of wisdom and virtue'.³

The chief lesson is clearly shown: true civilization and happiness flow from wisdom and virtue; barbarism and misery from folly and vice, those passions which have all too frequently taken possession of humanity and especially of its leaders, and which thus make up so much of recorded history. This has been largely the story of ambition, war and conquest,⁴ and it will ever be so, 'as long as mankind shall continue to bestow more liberal applause on their destroyers than on their benefactors'.⁵

The didactic or exemplary view of history is, in terms of its best known expression, 'philosophy teaching by examples'.⁶ This view, very familiar to the eighteenth century,⁷ is often associated with

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1. 'Gibbon's Paradise Lost', in F.W. Hilles, op.cit., p. 79.
 2. DF, xlix, V, 280-1.
 3. DF, iii, I, 84.
 4. DF, ix, I, 255; cf. also iv, I, 93.
 5. DF, i, I, 6.
 6. See G.H. Nadel, 'The Philosophy of History before Historicism', History and Theory, III, 1963, pp. 291ff for a discussion of 'the exemplar theory of history'.
 7. See Dorothy Koch, English Theories Concerning the Nature and Uses of History, 1735-1791, chap. 1. In her Introduction, p. xv, she refers to Edmund Bolton's Hypercritica; or a Rule of Judgment, for Writing or Reading our History's, 1722 where he cites Isaac Casaubon who "'tells us, as from out of the Ancient Authors, that history is nothing but a kind of Philosophy using examples.'"

Bolingbroke's statement and his exposition of it.¹ Yet, as Goldsmith pointed out, Bolingbroke did not, like some of his predecessors, try to 'make history the great fountain of all knowledge; he very wisely confines its benefits, and supposes them to consist rather in deducing general maxims from particular facts, than in illustrating maxims by the application of historical passages'.² Gibbon likewise turned frequently from a narrative or a description or an analysis of manners, to speak directly to his readers, sometimes in the first person, but mainly in those general statement of comment and principle, which he abstracted from special details of his account and which rise above the particularities of time and place. In this way he not only asserted the instructive value of history but also demonstrated it throughout his work.

This is very far, however, from the old providential view which Gibbon had found in Bossuet. While rejecting a meaning, purpose or divine direction in the events and 'revolutions' he recorded, Gibbon brought out from time to time certain instructive lessons to be shared with his 'philosophic' reader. These included both that increased 'knowledge of human nature' which the perceptive study of history could furnish, and many others such as the wide consequences of our actions. On the one hand, were to be seen the certainty of retribution for the vicious tyrant, the strong probability that those who take the sword will perish by the sword, the futility and frustration of selfish ambition, and perhaps most evident of all, the assurance of the censure

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1. Bolingbroke, 'Letters on the Study and use of History', Works, II, 177, introduced the maxim thus: 'I will answer you by quoting what I have read somewhere or other, in Dionysius Halicarn...' He enlarged upon it, on pp. 179, 191, etc.
 2. 'Life of Bolingbroke', Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith, ed. A. Friedman. Oxford, 1966, Vol. III, p. 469.

of posterity; on the other hand, there were instances of the love and esteem of the people for the just and merciful ruler, the blessing of an age of peace and prosperity, and the praise of succeeding generations for those who had contributed to the happiness of mankind.

Gibbon espoused, but without any forcing or distortion, the moral-utilitarian view expressed by Tacitus. 'The chronicling of these details', said the Roman historian, 'may yet serve a useful end: for few men distinguish right from wrong, by native intelligence: the majority are schooled by the experience of others'.¹ The young Gibbon had experienced, and for that reason acclaimed, the use of eloquence 'to rouse the sleeping sentiments of the heart and incite it to acts of virtue' since 'it is the heart and not the head' which needs to be moved.² And his own eloquence was employed not in the pulpit, in public assemblies or in parliament, but in writing 'the annals of a declining monarchy'.³ If this faithful record, presented according to 'the truth of history' yielded often unpleasant and apparently unedifying results, then these must still be told. In the context of history as a catalogue of crimes and follies, the melancholy 'aspect of Gibbon's historical thought', Jordan maintained that 'he is saved from utter despair only by his taste for irony. There is nothing to be learned from a study of history precisely because the only lesson is despair'.⁴ Needless to say Jordan does not document this from The Decline and Fall. The fact is that while the vices, crimes and follies of mankind do not make pleasurable reading and, as Gibbon admitted, often satiate or disgust both the historian

1. Annals, IV, xxxiii, tr. Jackson, pp. 56-7.

2. See JA, 22 August, 1762 and above chap. II, p. 73.

3. Cf. DE, xliv, IV, 470.

4. Gibbon and his Roman Empire, pp. 80-1.

and his readers, history nevertheless 'undertakes to record the transactions of the past', whatever they may be, 'for the instruction of future ages'.¹

In the context of this his most famous statement of the purpose and use of history, Gibbon applied the lesson in two ways very characteristic of his approach: a parallel between ancient and modern times; and a moral judgement on two rulers whom he brought before the bar of posterity. In this account of the conduct of the Western emperors towards the Christians, he drew a parallel and a contrast between these emperors and two kings of modern Europe whom he found more criminal in their persecutions than their ancient predecessors.²

The obligation to instruct as well as entertain can be seen in its influence on his selection and treatment of material.³ Though 'wars and the administration of public affairs are the principal subjects of history', he wrote, 'the number of persons interested in these busy scenes is very different, according to the different condition of mankind'.⁴ To Gibbon, manners were 'more instructive' and enlightening than mere facts or political and military events. Consequently he interrupted his narrative at this point with a chapter on the life and manners of the Germanic peoples.⁵ In the course of that chapter, after referring to their use of both money and barter, and of the value they set on their own crude artifacts, he suggested that, 'to a mind capable of reflection such leading facts convey more instruction than a tedious detail of subordinate circumstances'.⁶

1. DF, xvi, II, 87. Cited in full, in p. 219 above.

2. See above, 'The judgement of posterity' in this chapter.

3. See above, chap. III, p. 103 concerning the selection of details.

4. Df. DF, ix, I, 255.

5. Chap. ix.

6. DF, ix, I, 238.

From this point of view he could write of 'the agreeable history of the arts', but of 'the more agreeable history of human manners';¹ and he also pointed out that there was 'room for a very interesting work' devoted to the connexion between the languages and manners of nations'.² Again and again he mentioned 'national manners',³ or gave a sketch of the manners of a particular people,⁴ or of 'the manners of the times'.⁵

Though it might appear to those who looked for a more conventional history in terms of wars and public affairs that Gibbon was turning aside from the true course of his narrative, he was ready to defend his continuing concern not only with morals as characteristic of peoples and periods, but also with the corruption or reform of morals and with significant changes in them, either under coercion or due to altered conditions of life.⁶ And he justified this in terms of 'instruction'. These minor 'revolutions', like that great revolution suggested by this title,⁷ he considered full of instruction to 'the philosophic mind'. The picture of 'human manners' such as may be displayed in the simple account of a town or a family is both 'interesting and instructive',⁸ and for this reason Gibbon indulged in such 'digressions'

1. DF, ii, I, 47.

2. DF, i, I, 12, n. 38.

3. e.g. xxxv, III, 489; xlii, IV, 368, n. 10; xliv, IV, 529, n. 179; lvi, VI, 178.

4. The Germans in chap. ix (cf. also reference to 'the laws and manners of the Germans', lxi, VI, 466); the 'Digression on the Family of Courtenay', VI, 466-474; the Moors, xxxiii, III, 426, and n. 18; the Arabs, chap. 1; the long excursus on the 'manners of the pastoral nations' in chap. xxvi and Gibbon's reference back to it at the beginning of chap. lxiv, VII, 1, n.1.

5. e.g. xxxii, III, 378; IV, 178; xl, IV, 235-240 and 237, n. 50; xlii, IV, 371, n. 16; xlviii, V, 182; liii, VI, 103 & 100 n. 90; lvi, VI, 211.

6. See DF, ii, I, 44; iii, I, 86; xxxviii, IV, 129, n. 66; lvi, VI, 181, 183; lviii, VI, 278.

7. DF, IV, 175-6.

8. DF, xxvi, III, 121.

as that on the Courtenay family.¹ The famous chapter on Roman jurisprudence² is the most notable example of his turning aside from his narrative to treat the manners and laws of a people. Its insertion was strongly criticised by the historian, John Whitaker.³ While finding in the chapter 'much learning, much good sense, and more parade of both', Whitaker listed it amongst Gibbon's many irrelevancies: 'What has such a disquisition on all the laws of all the Romans, to do with a history of the decline and fall of the empire?'⁴ There was, of course, the obvious reply that an exhaustive account of the origin and development of the system of laws which the Roman people had bequeathed to the world, was essential both to an understanding of 'that great people' even in their decline, and to an informed judgement on the legal achievement and administration of the codifier. As Carl Becker put it, expressing a commonplace of modern historical thinking: 'We cannot properly know things as they are unless we know "how they came to be what they are."' ⁵

But Gibbon had already justified the inclusion of this chapter in its opening paragraph, that is, in terms of the moral categories we have been considering. An investigation of Roman jurisprudence and its codifier he saw as necessary in the interests of historic truth and for the informed judgement of posterity. Being no mere chronicler, he felt it his responsibility to arrive at a fair estimate of the work of Justinian, whose character had long suffered from either flattery or invective. And how could justice be done without a thorough

1. DE, VI, 466-474.

2. chap. xliv.

3. Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire Reviewed. London, 1791. See also Whitaker's letters to Gibbon, MW, II, especially Nos. LXX and LXXI, 21/4/76, 11/5/76, pp. 146-152.

4. ibid., p. 52.

5. The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers. New Haven, 1932, p. 19.

survey of that emperor's contribution to the European heritage of Roman law?

Invoking 'the truth of history' at the beginning of the chapter, Gibbon declared: 'Attached to no party, interested only for the truth and candour of history...I shall trace the Roman jurisprudence from Romulus to Justinian, appreciate the labours of that emperor, and pause to contemplate the principles of a science so important to the peace and happiness of society'.¹ But the statement also pays tribute to the intrinsic value of the subject as enlightening and instructive -- 'The laws of a nation form the most instructive portion of its history'.² Its omission would therefore greatly diminish the usefulness and instruction of Gibbon's work; and we can be certain that its instructive value alone would have secured its inclusion in The Decline and Fall, since no philosophic historian could forgo the contemplation 'of a science so important to the peace and happiness of society'.

The passage not only gives a very clear statement of what Gibbon considered the nature and function of history, but also shows how this concept could determine his choice of material. While he saw the historian fundamentally committed to 'the truth of history', he still enjoyed some latitude in the selection of his subject matter and in the emphases he placed on certain aspects of it. And here the instructive value of the material itself was a major determinant.

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1. DF, xlv, IV, 471. Its relevance to the titular theme of the work is also made clear. The reader is left in no doubt that the codification did nothing to arrest the decline of the empire and that the government of Justinian, which united 'the evils of liberty and servitude' with legal oppression, actually contributed to it.
 2. DF, xlv, IV, 471.

There was often also a measure of unsought-for freedom when dealing with conflicting sources or an inconsistent account in the same source. In such cases probability and 'the knowledge of human nature' would guide the historian, but once again, he would be influenced by the opportunity for allowing some moral lesson to come through. Gibbon had written in an early work: 'Lorsqu'il s'agit d'une histoire, dont les variations permettent quelque liberté a la critique, et meme a la conjecture, l'historien choisira parmi les faits contestés ceux qui s'accordent les mieux avec ses principes, et ses vues...Lorsque la chronologie proscrivoit un trait de morale, Plutarch méprisoit la chronologie'.¹ Gibbon had not forgotten this maxim of the moralist, Plutarch. When he came to write his own History, chronology became less important than place, and both these dimensions were seen to be ultimately less important than moral values. After the completion of that work, he wrote in the margin of his Herodotus: 'Rousseau has most wisely observed that the most incredible narratives of Herodotus may be esteemed as moral lessons'.² How much more interesting and instructive, we may be sure, must Gibbon have considered that most credible narrative of The Decline and Fall, verified as it was by 'the truth of history' and 'the knowledge of human nature'.

Throughout the course of his narrative, Gibbon was often aware of striking parallels and likenesses. It was not so much that history repeats itself, as that, given the more or less constant passions of human nature, similar situations may be expected to recur. Whether or not he subscribed to Hume's idea of 'the chief use of history' being

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1. 'Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Mèdes', MW, III, 128. Sheffield dated it between 1758 and 1763.
 2. 'Marginalia in Herodotus', so entitled by Miss Craddock, The English Essays of Edward Gibbon, p. 367.

'to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature', he did suggest that 'the different characters that mark the civilised nations of the globe may be ascribed to the use, and the abuse of reason'.¹ These fairly constant operations of human passions allowed the philosophic historian, as we have seen, to make some generalisations. Hence we find him remarking that the same causes have produced the same effects or that the narrative he is writing sounds almost identical with what he had written earlier or even apologising for repetition of similar material. Thus the great sweep of his span of history suggested to him many parallels, not only ancient and medieval, but also from modern times.² These seemed to add relevance and presented him with a ready means by which the lessons of the past could be brought to the attention of 'the present age'. He may, for various reasons, have abandoned his early projects of writing modern history, but to him history could never be remote. The 'awful revolution' of Rome's fall could itself be 'usefully applied to the instruction of the present age'.³ Just a little later in these 'General Observations', he followed up this statement with the remark that an 'Arcadius or Honorius may again slumber on the thrones of the house of Bourbon',⁴ a parallel which was resented by Louis XVI. In reply, Gibbon neither disclaimed the allusion nor examined the likeness, but pointed out that it had been written before the accession of that king of France.⁵

1. DF, xxvi, III, 74.

2. e.g. between Caracalla's actions and those of Charles XII (vi, I, 150-2); between the Phoenicians in the ancient world and the Spanish empire in the new (vi, I, 174); concerning Diocletian, 'the parallel of Charles the Fifth, however, will naturally offer itself to our mind'. (xiii, I, 415); and there is the parallel between Constantine and Peter the Great (xviii, II, 222).

3. DF, IV, 175-6.

4. It appeared in the first edition, but was later altered to 'thrones of the South'. See DF, IV, 178 and Bury's Appendix 5 to that volume, p. 562.

5. Memoirs, p. 163 and p. 175, n. 48.

The 'myth of Rome' and its lessons exercised a powerful influence over the men of Gibbon's day. Michel Baridon has traced this image in the outlook of the Augustans and it continued to hold its place throughout the eighteenth century,¹ and indeed into our own day. To take but two instances from the period when young Gibbon was turning his thoughts to the writing of history. We find in 1759 Edward Wortley Montagu's Reflections on the rise and fall of the ancient republics adapted to the present state of affairs in Great Britain. Drawing a clear comparison with these republics, he came to a melancholy conclusion: 'As the British state and the ancient free republics were founded upon the same principles...it is impossible not to perceive an equal resemblance between theirs and our manners, in proportion as they and we alike deviated from those first principles.'² And like Pitt addressing the House of Commons, Montagu saw the British constitution seized by corruption and decay. He wrote of England in the same terms as Gibbon wrote of Rome. Luxury, he said, had been imported by Charles II at the Restoration. 'The contagious influence of that bane to public virtue and liberty corrupted our manners, enervated our bodies, and debased our minds, whilst our military spirit subsided in proportion as the love of pleasure increased;...to this universal luxury and this only, we must impute the amazing progress of corruption which seized the very vitals of our constitution'.³ A few years later, The North Briton stressed the instructive value of history in a parallel between Rome and Britain. 'There is no study more entertaining or instructive than history: nor is there any history so applicable to our government

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1. Edward Gibbon et le Mythe de Rome, Livre III, especially pp. 376ff., 'Le Mythe de Rome et la Pensee Anglaise'; also pp. 49ff, 'L'Attaque contre Walpole et le theme du declin'.
 2. Reflections & c. London, 1759, p. 7 (cited by Baridon, op.cit., p. 496).
 3. Montagu, op.cit., 2nd enlarged ed., London, 1760, pp. 381, 377.

as that of ancient Rome. We clearly see in it the fatal rocks and shelves upon which a great and flourishing empire was wrecked'.¹

The Decline and Fall certainly reflected this attitude which was so much a part of the political climate of Gibbon's England. But its grand and almost universal sweep of history made it far more than a mere 'tract for the times', and its lessons were more often implicit than explicit. Still, there is no doubt that Gibbon worked with two empires in mind, and could not fail to sense the parallels as he wrote. At the time when the Lord Chancellor's request for a vindication of British policy addressed to the courts of Europe² interrupted his work on the decline of the Western empire, he wrote to his friend Deyverdun: 'L'homme de lettres et l'homme d'Etat, qu'il vous suffise de savoir que la decadence de Deux Empires, le Romain et le Britannique s'avancent à pas egaux'. And he added, recalling his unbroken silence in parliament, 'J'ai contribué cependant bien plus efficacement au premier'.³ Again, while working on his fourth volume, and happily retired from political life so that, as he told Deyverdun, he could once more become 'homme philosophe et historien', he drew the parallel between declining

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1. North Briton, XXXVIII, 12 Feb., 1763, cited by Baridon, op.cit., p. 499. For the Roman-British analogy in the Augustan period and beyond, see J.W. Johnson, The Formation of English Neo-Classical Thought. Connecticut, 1978, pp. 62ff, 93ff. The blame on luxury recurs constantly, e.g. in Bolingbroke's political tract, On Luxury, The Freeholder's Political Catechism and numerous authors, poetical, historical, satirical and political.
 2. Gibbon sent the draft of this Mémoire Justificatif pour servir de réponse à l'Exposé de la Cour de France to Lord Chancellor Weymouth in May 1779 with a covering letter which is dated 10/8/79 (Letters, II, 224); he apparently continued to work on it in July and it was published in October. See also MW, V, pp.1ff.
 3. Letters, No. 452, 4/6/79, II, 218.

empires: 'Dans cette histoire moderne il seroit toujours un peu question de la decadence des Empires, et autant que j'en puis juger... vous aimez aussi peu la puissance de l'Angleterre que celle des Romains. Notre chute cependant a ete' plus douce, après une guerre sans succès et un paix assez peu glorieuse'.¹

Corruption and decay had been fatal to states and empires in the past, and Gibbon saw this as a moral law which continued to operate in his own day. Here was a lesson which he could be sure would strike a response from his contemporaries in England. Corruption and decay among the ruling classes in the Roman Empire was a theme which he stressed over and over again. 'Whether or not Gibbon intended his History to be a moral directed at the ruling classes of his own day - which was at least part of Tacitus' motive - cannot be easily proved...The loss of virtue, wisdom, and power by the Roman aristocracy caused Rome's fall - and let the British ruling classes beware'.²

Parallels suggested themselves between Rome and Britain, particularly in the matter of constitutional liberty and colonial policy; and there seem to be references in The Decline and Fall to George III and the American revolutionaries. Gibbon's letters make clear his feelings on these issues, and it has been suggested that in discussing the Roman rebels who had presumed 'to sully the majesty of the purple', 'some may have lived in the sixth century,...but one of them was named George Washington'.³ Even if once deterred from writing modern history by fear of party politics, Gibbon allowed himself the right

1. ibid., No. 571, 20/5/83, II, 326.

2. Jordan, Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 226.

3. See J.W. Swain, Edward Gibbon the Historian, pp. 130-1, 138.

to draw lessons expected of a philosophic historian; and there were passages in chapter xxv of The Decline and Fall which were seized on by his former friends, the 'patriots', who wished 'to damn the work and the Author'.¹ Indeed, the events of the day, both at home and in America, must have seemed like a modern commentary on Roman despotism and imperial faction, especially as Gibbon sat in the House of Commons during the writing of his second and third volumes. 'Parliamentary opposition to George III and Lord North was then reaching its height, while the American Revolution was tearing the British Empire to pieces, and Gibbon could not remain untouched by the prevailing excitement. What he had heard from Burke in Parliament during the afternoon, and from Fox at the coffee-houses in the evening was still vivid in his mind as he wrote about Rome the next morning. So many Whig ideas found their way into his narrative that these two volumes may be called a Whig version of the decline and fall of Rome'.²

One of the most obvious, yet generally unheeded lessons of history, to which Gibbon and many of his contemporaries drew attention in imperial Rome, was the need for protection of public liberty against despotic rulers.³ It was apparent even in an age of 'general happiness' like that of the Antonines, with its 'honest pride of virtue'. The melancholy and disturbing fact was 'the instability of a happiness which depended on the character of a single man'.⁴ This was inherent in 'the obvious definition of a monarchy' with which Gibbon shrewdly began his chapter on the 'golden age' of the Antonines:⁵ 'a state

1. Letters, No. 500, to Dorothea Gibbon, 13/4/81, II, 266.

2. Swain, op.cit., p. 134. See also p. 135.

3. DF, iii, I, 65ff.

4. DF, iii, I, 86.

5. 'Golden' that is in relation to the 'age of iron' which preceded it. (DF, iii, I, 86).

in which a single person, by whatever name he may be distinguished, is entrusted with the execution of the laws, the management of the revenue, and the command of the army'. Such a situation, as history shows, is precarious, and 'unless the public liberty is protected by intrepid and vigilant guardians, the authority of so formidable a magistrate will soon degenerate into despotism'.¹ This is part of Gibbon's thesis, exemplified in the story of Rome, in the Byzantine Empire, in Persia and amongst the Turks; and it is applicable also to eighteenth-century monarchies or twentieth-century dictatorships. The question of the royal prerogative was relevant to Hanoverian England just as it is to present-day Australia. Some of these lessons of The Decline and Fall are perennial.

'The character of a single man' is too precarious a foundation to support the continued happiness and well being of nations. It is a recurring thought in Gibbon. When the extensive empire of Rome 'fell into the hands of a single person', no one was safe and there was nowhere to escape.² Even the happiest period of that empire turned out to be merely a short relief between the 'monsters' who preceded it and 'the monstrous vices' of Commodus who followed.³ And some of the best and most active minds in England, were fearful that 'the "Augustan Age" of the Georges would lead to a succession of absolute, tyrannical Tiberiuses and Caligulas', while 'to American colonials of the late eighteenth century, George III was a tyrant as odious as Tiberius'.⁴

1. DF, iii, I, 65.

2. DF, iii, I, 89-90 'the world became a safe and dreary prison for his enemies'.

3. 'These monsters' were Tiberius, Caligula, Nero and Domitian, DF, iii, I, 87. For Commodus, see iv, I, 92.

4. See J.W. Johnson, op.cit., p. 62. He refers to Goldsmith, Boswell, Burke, the Pitts, Swift and others on this and following pages.

Indeed, in the year that the final volumes of The Decline and Fall were published, Gibbon, expressing once again the sentiment found in that work, exclaimed at the thought the king's insanity: 'that three Kingdoms should depend on the brain of one man!' And taking a text from Cicero, he added, in this situation, 'the Salus populi must be the first law'.¹

Yet there is a reciprocal relationship here. The preservation and welfare of the people depended on their own spirit and their jealous care of their liberty. The lesson is reiterated in The Decline and Fall. In one of his instructive parallels, Gibbon contrasted the feeble acquiescence of Roman forces in an ignominious treaty made by the emperor Jovian, with the very different conduct of the freedom-loving citizens of ancient Greece in a similar situation: the Greeks 'were inspired by the generous enthusiasm of a popular assembly' whereas the degenerate Romans were 'tamely resigning themselves to the secret deliberations and private views of a single person'.² In a monarchy, where liberty is always at risk, there must be sufficient restraints and safeguards. Even good and well-intentioned rulers seemed to show that 'absolutely power corrupts absolutely' and Gibbon presented examples of this deterioration of character in Constantine and Theodosius the Great. Of the latter he wrote: 'in a station where none could resist and few would dissuade the fatal consequences of his resentment, the humane monarch was justly alarmed by the consciousness of his infirmity, and of his power'.³ But a people whose spirit is sapped by degeneracy,

1. Letter to Sheffield, 29/11/88, Letters, No. 715, III, 133. For the reference to Cicero's Leges, see n.2 on that page.

2. DF, xxiv, II, 551.

3. DF, xxvii, III, 177.

obsequiousness, effeminate luxury and corruption, easily become the willing slaves of such tyranny. And this is a complementary lesson to be found in Gibbon's History.¹

In view of Gibbon's fear of an unchecked monarchy so forcibly expressed at the beginning of his third chapter and elsewhere in The Decline and Fall, we might not have been surprised had one of his topical and characteristic footnotes read: 'that the power of the Crown has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished'.² In fact he voted against Dunning's motion, though he moved for an address to the king requesting that parliament be not dissolved till a way had been found to halt the growing influence of the Crown and to remedy other abuses.³ Four years later, freed from the storms of parliament and working quietly on his fourth volume in the retirement of Lausanne, he had second thoughts: 'I am not surprised that you grow sulky', he wrote to Lord Sheffield; 'your free and liberal spirit must disdain a set of Men whose aim is their restoration to power, and whose means may affect the principles of the Constitution'. And he compared the

1. A docile people as the condition of one-man tyranny finds classical expression in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar (I, iii, 103-5; ii, 151, 157).

'And why should Caesar be a tyrant then?
 Poor man! I know he would not be a wolf
 But that he sees the Romans are but sheep;
 Rome, thou hast lost the breed of noble bloods!

 When there is in it but one only man.

2. Dunning's motion was passed on 6 April, 1780 and Gibbon's 2nd and 3rd volumes, which end with the 'General Observations' were then being prepared for the press. See Letters, No. 470, 27/3/80, II, 240 and Memoirs, p. 161.

3. Letters, No. 613, 2, 14/2/84, II, 398, n.2.

mildness of Dunning's motion with the much stronger democratic resolutions then before parliament, 'for which you have probably voted as I should probably have done, such is the contagion of party'.¹

Gibbon's adherence to the instructive value of history, however, is much more than just a warning to the rulers of the nation. It involved the laying bare of the motives which reveal the true nature of men's actions and a display of the consequences of virtue or vice, of justice or selfish and immoderate ambition, in whatever nation and at whatever period they were to be found. Given this conviction of the instruction which a philosophic mind can gain from a full and 'candid' presentation of history, it is little wonder that Gibbon, like Bacon² and Bolingbroke,³ did not favour historical abridgements. Such works tended to squeeze out the essential philosophy and instruction which alone gave life to history. If mere facts were for the philosopher the least interesting part of history,⁴ they were also the least instructive part. 'In the barren times of Diocletian', he pointed out, 'history was reduced to dry and confused abridgements, alike destitute of amusement and instruction'.⁵ To Bolingbroke, those who are capable of providing a

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1. Letters, No. 613, 2, 14/2/84. II, 398. The current resolutions involved the necessity of a ministry having the confidence of the House of Commons, and certain unconstitutional practices arising from the abuse of this principle.
 2. 'As for epitomes', wrote Bacon, '(which are certainly the corruptions and moths of histories) I would have them banished'. Works, ed. Spedding, Ellis and Heath, Boston, 1861 (repub. 1976), Vol VIII, p. 424.
 3. See Bolingbroke, 'Letters on the Study and Use of History', Works, II, 223-4. Others who expressed this view in the eighteenth century included Bishop Warburton. See Dorothy Koch, op.cit., pp. 43-4.
 4. 'Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Mèdes', MW, III, 126.
 5. DF, xiii, I, 422-3. Cf. his reference to the first thirteen books of Ammianus as 'a superficial epitome' (DF, xxvi, III, 128, n. 116).

detailed account of the actions and characters of men in every age and country, seemed to exercise a dual function: 'Whilst they narrate as historians, they hint often as philosophers',¹ who enable the reader to discover the truth which the example illustrates. Gibbon sought to discharge this double function and, without any forcing of the message, to lead his critical and perceptive reader to a recognition of the moral lesson beneath the surface of events.

A recent commentator has written: 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire was in part a moral tale; virtue was made to reside largely offstage in an age occasionally alluded to, but antecedent to the one that excited and preoccupied Gibbon'.² While this may apply to 'virtue' in a rather narrow sense of the term, it does not apply to particular virtues, which frequently appear on the stage of Gibbon's History and which are there to be applauded. Nevertheless, it is true that there is in the background a somewhat idealised notion of the republic as 'a free, a virtuous, and a victorious commonwealth'.³ After this 'ancient virtue' and liberty had largely disappeared, there was the brief interlude when the Antonines governed the Roman world 'with the same invariable spirit of wisdom and virtue',⁴ the basis on which the republic had rested.⁵ Instead, 'a feeble senate and enervated people cheerfully acquiesced in the pleasing illusion' that 'they still enjoyed their ancient freedom', thought both senate and people had, in fact, already submitted to the slavery 'artfully' imposed by Augustus and his successors.⁷ Had the

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1. 'Letters on...History', Works, II, 229.
 2. Stephen R. Graubard, 'Edward Gibbon: Contraria Sunt Complementa', in Bowersock, op.cit., pp. 124-5.
 3. DF, iii, I, 88.
 4. DF, iii, I, 84; cf. x, I, 278 where 'ancient virtue' is used of the senate.
 5. DF, xlix, V, 280-1.
 6. DF, iii, I, 86.
 7. DF, iii, I, 78.

Antonines restored the freedom of the senate or introduced a representative assembly 'which gave the people an interest in their own government...the seeds of public wisdom and virtue might have been cherished and propagated in the empire of Rome'. And one could even dare to imagine that 'under the mild and generous influence of liberty, the Roman Empire might have remained invincible and immortal'.¹

These are the necessary qualifications which must be made to the most quoted and often casually applied passage about the 'happy' age of the Antonines as being Gibbon's ideal of perfection. It was, in fact, to use one of his favourite terms, a somewhat 'specious' age of gold. To outward appearances it seemed the most happy and prosperous period for the human race. But it was without foundation or stability, its happiness being dependent 'on the character of a single man'.² One-man rule with a virtuous emperor on the throne might preserve the semblance, but could not bring back the reality of 'ancient freedom'. So Gibbon wrote: 'if a man were called on to fix the period' of greatest happiness and prosperity, he would certainly point to the Antonine age. A philosopher, however, or a philosophic historian, would not be deceived by false appearances. He would see that without 'rational freedom' there was no future and no hope. It was an age of lost opportunity, of a republic which might have been. And yet the pathetic fact remained that this short interlude was 'possibly the only period of history in which the happiness of a great people was the sole object of government'.³

1. DF, xxxi, III, 376-7.

2. DF, iii, I, 86.

3. DF, iii, I, 84.

It is in terms of this loss of 'ancient freedom', this golden age of the past, this haunting vision of a bygone happiness, this fall from 'wisdom and virtue', that The Decline and Fall may be read as 'Gibbon's Paradise Lost'.¹ 'For the story of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire', said Professor Spencer, 'had also been another story of the Fall of Man...No one can read steadily through Gibbon's masterpiece without being aware that the theme is, once again, Paradise Lost'.² The work is epic both in theme and proportions. Gibbon had written an essay on the epic and particularly on Milton's choice of a theme at the very time that he himself was searching for a worthy subject;³ and when he finally laid down his pen over twenty years later, he knew he had produced a history of 'the greatest, perhaps, and the most awful scene in the history of mankind'.⁴ It is of course, a secular epic for an enlightened age. Its hero according to Curtis, is 'the potential character of man',⁵ its great theme, as Bond expressed it, 'the potential dignity of man, from which stems the assertion of his right to intellectual and political freedom'.⁶

More especially the tragedy is that of the corruption of Roman character and the decay of Roman society. As to the particular element whose loss was most responsible for the decline of that character and society, opinions have varied: valour, the heroic spirit, ancient

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1. See Lewis P. Curtis, 'Gibbon's Paradise Lost', in F.W. Hilles, op.cit., pp. 74ff, and H.L. Bond, The Literary Art of Edward Gibbon, pp. 11ff., 23ff.
 2. T.J.B. Spencer, From Gibbon to Darwin, Inaugural Lecture. University of Birmingham, 1 Dec., 1958, pp. 15-16.
 3. Gibbon's essay on Hurd's Commentary on Horace was written in February, 1762 (MW, IV, 113ff.) and his considerations of topics are dated 14 April and 4 August, 1761 and January & 26 July, 1762. The passage on Milton's search for an epic theme is on p. 150 of MW, IV.
 4. DF, lxxi, VII, 338.
 5. Lewis P. Curtis, 'Gibbon's Paradise Lost', in Hilles, op.cit., p. 88. 'About this character', says Curtis, 'Gibbon wrote the mightiest epic of the century'.
 6. op.cit., p. 40.

virtue, the love of liberty.¹ They are all found in Gibbon and the emphases change with the changing situation and the issue under discussion. But they can all be subsumed under what Gibbon and his contemporaries understood by 'civilization', which could flourish only in an atmosphere of liberty of mind, as an expression of the creative and heroic spirit of man, and whose stability rested on a firm foundation of wisdom and virtue. Only within such a society could man achieve his true destiny, and the greatness of a civilization could be measured by the extent to which it enabled man to realise his potential character and dignity. The tragedy of Rome was the failure and collapse of civilization.

From this point of view, Gibbon's 'Paradise Lost' can be seen also in terms of the triumph of barbarism which had overspread the ruin of the greatest civilization like the thorns, brambles and vines which had reclaimed the site of the site of Capitol in the imperial city.²

'The fierce and unrestrained passions' which Gibbon recognised in human nature,³ belonged not only to the life of the barbarian nations but also to that of the later Roman Empire and were destructive of its civilization. When these passions were 'indulged without control', as in the sack of a great city, 'an historian' could only record the virtual disappearance of the distinction between 'civilized and savage man'.⁴ And here again we are confronted with a basic moral category of The Decline and Fall. 'For Gibbon the life of civilization is the life of virtue; its antithesis (superstition or barbarism) is vice'.⁵

1. See e.g. Curtis, Bond, Cochrane and Fuglum in the works cited.

2. DF, lxxi, VII, 314. And see below, chap. VIII.

3. DF, x, I, 256.

4. DF, lxviii, VII, 205.

5. Cochrane, op.cit., p. 151. 'To see virtue with Gibbon as the life of civilisation, is to see also what he means by vice and degeneracy'.

If we read The Decline and Fall as a great prose epic, its subject, according to Bond, would be 'the fall of man from a state of intellectual, spiritual, and political freedom into the darkness of barbarism and servitude of every sort, until, at the beginning of the Reformation, man begins to emerge into the enlightenment, which, Gibbon felt, characterised his own age'.¹ Since this embraces, within the two great periods into which the work is divided, 'a story of fall and redemption',² there is, though Bond does not go on to make the suggestion, at least a potential 'Paradise Regained' envisaged within the 'Paradise Lost'. Rays of hope can be perceived in the latter part of the book. Thus, having traced the decline of Rome through four volumes and five centuries from Trajan to Heraclius, Gibbon faced the 'ungrateful and melancholy task' of continuing the story of what he saw as a contemptible line of Eastern emperors who 'dishonour the names of Greeks and Romans'.³ Opening up his plan of the final volumes, he confessed: 'I should have abandoned, without regret, the Greek slaves and their servile historians, had I not reflected that the fate of the Byzantine monarchy is passively connected with the most splendid and important revolutions which have changed the state of the world'.⁴ We are reminded of the 'splendid subject' of the Florentine Republic on which Gibbon once thought he would finally settle, and which was 'essentially connected' with 'the revival of arts and letters in Italy'.⁵ In his final volume he gave a glimpse of these first gleams of revival in Italy before brining down the curtain on the Eastern Empire.⁶

1. Bond, op.cit., p. 39.

2. ibid., p. 40.

3. DF, xlviii, V, 180-1.

4. DF, xlviii, V, 182.

5. JA, 26 July, 1762.

6. DF, chap. lxvi, VII, 123-137. Gibbon's final (sixth volume) contained chapters lviii to lxxi.

As an inheritor of the new humanism, Gibbon was aware of his own age as one of science and enlightenment. There was little likelihood, he felt, of it succumbing to 'any future irruption of Barbarians'; and even so, there was the new world of America where 'Europe would revive and flourish'.¹ Such were his observations 'to be usefully applied to the instruction of the present age', which he drew from the story of the fall of the Western Empire.²

It is its overarching effect, proceeding from its wide study of man, its tragic dimension and its didactic force which, above all else, proves a unifying feature of The Decline and Fall. That work has sometimes been said to lack structural unity. The true answer is to be found less in its narrative continuity than in an essential moral coherence. This concern with moral categories, with men and motives, with moral causes and effects, with virtue and vice, with growth and decay, with greatness and decline, supplied the real life force of the immense history. No matter where Gibbon had decided to end his narrative, the work would still have possessed this organic 'moral' completeness.

1. DF, xxxviii, IV, 178, 9.

2. DF, IV, 181. Jordan describes the second part of the 'General Observations as 'didactic and superficial', 'unconvincing' and lacking in sincerity; it 'reads like a philosophe pamphlet'. (op.cit., pp. 71, 73, 74). Yet he admits that Gibbon's 'thesis is an expression of the rational optimism of the Enlightenment'. (p.230). The 'Observations' should be read alongside Gibbon's comments on current affairs in his letters.

Whether the story is one of tragic decline or of hopeful renewal, the object of attention is civilization with its essential basis of liberty, wisdom and virtue, and in either case it is cast in the heroic mould. When he wrote his essay on Horace, Gibbon drew an analogy between the rules of history and those of heroic poetry and saw the purpose of a chorus in the epic as being 'a perpetual moral commentary upon the drama, enforcing every virtuous sentiment, rectifying every vicious one; and pointing out the important lessons which may be drawn from the catastrophe'.¹ Considering his History as a 'Paradise Lost' against this background, Curtis asks: 'What else are the reflections moral and philosophical, with which Gibbon embellished The Decline and Fall? What else are the philosophic hints?'² Only, we might truly reply, they are not embellishments in Gibbon's eyes; they are the stuff of which history is made.

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1. 'On Mr. Hurd's Commentary on Horace', MW, IV, 127. On the rules of poetry and history, see pp. 125-6 and the note on p. 126 to the effect that both Bacon and Hurd 'agree that poetry is an imitation of history'.
 2. op.cit., p. 88.

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The historian as moralist: a study of
Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall
of the Roman Empire

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Dillon-Smith, David, The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Department of History, University of Wollongong, 1982. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/1426>

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CHAPTER VI

THE TRUE COUNSEL AND CHARACTERS OF MEN

The moralist's concern is with character rather than reputation, with the essential person beneath the superficial appearance. Gibbon's criticism of the Byzantine historian John Cantacuzene's memorials of his own time brings this out. 'This eloquent work', he considered, failed to penetrate the surface of things or to get down to 'the hidden springs of action', which were presented as always pure, reasonable and virtuous. His history became an 'apology', a panegyric of the author and of his associates. 'Instead of unfolding the true counsels and characters of men, he displays the smooth and specious surface of events, highly varnished with his own praises and those of his friends. Their motives are always pure; their ends are always legitimate; they conspire and rebel without any views of interest; and the violence which they inflict or suffer is celebrated as a spontaneous effect of reason and virtue'.¹ 'Specious', one of Gibbon's key words, gives the clue to this misreading of history and misjudgement of character. He was always on the alert, warning his reader against the specious reason or the specious appearance. The historian's business is to discover the real motives which prompt the actions of his people: these he must test against 'the truth of history' and his own 'knowledge of human nature'.²

Gibbon saw each individual as having a true or essential character. It may, as in the case of Augustus or Constantine, be concealed as

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1. DF, lxiii, VI, 511. Compare Gibbon's earlier criticism of a volume of Hume's History of England as 'ingenious but superficial', JA, 2 Nov, 1761.
 2. See above chapter V, pp. 174ff.

long as a man finds it to his advantage to do so, but will reveal itself when there is no longer any need for pretence.¹ It was this true, essential character that Gibbon sought to display. In relating the history of Constantius, he referred his reader back to the course of events in which this emperor was the central figure. 'His genuine character, composed of pride and weakness, of superstition and cruelty has been fully displayed in the preceding narrative'.² The historian was only saying quite explicitly here what he frequently implied: 'Don't miss the moral point of the narrative; be careful to look beneath the surface and see this fellow as he really was'.

Thus Gibbon, though 'remarkably subtle and sensitive in his analysis of character' accepted 'the assumption of his age, indeed of European humanism, that man had an identifiable essence'. Any change in character therefore 'is only apparent, not real. The passage of time or the changing circumstances of life might reveal a man's true character, and this true character might be different from that usually attributed to him, but this is not fundamental change'.³ From this arises a most important moral concern of the historian: through his narrative, or more explicitly by means of a specific analysis, to 'display' the real and essential character of the individual. This character, this complex of elements, was basically something constant, given him by nature, -'nature had formed' it- though it could be seen that different elements might at different times predominate and that in exercising a moral choice men could affirm the baser or nobler side of their natures. Hence the importance of 'freedom of mind' for man to fulfil his essential humanity.

1. 'raised...above the necessity of dissimulation' is the phrase used of Constantine, DF, xviii, II, 216.

2. DF, xxii, II, 439-440.

3. D. Jordan, Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 198.

Jordan's main emphasis in the paragraph from which the above quotation is taken, is on Gibbon as a child of his time, accepting the current assumption 'that a man's character could not change' and seeing 'human nature as unchanged by history'. Though of less importance for our study of the historian as moralist than his incidental admission that a man's true character might differ from the common view of that character, it is still worthy of notice. In effect it only means that Gibbon and many of his contemporaries subscribed to one view of character and human personality, while Jordan and many of his contemporaries have a different viewpoint. Yet in a deeper sense, the survival of literature from an earlier age, including Gibbon's own great work, depends very largely on the fact of human nature remaining basically 'unchanged by history', whatever precise meaning we may give to that phrase. The spirit of man finding its expression in great books written by men superficially very different from ourselves, still speaks to us and moves us by virtue of this fact. 'The same passions, identified by the ancients and clearly understood by the Renaissance and the Grand Siecle and the Enlightenment, had always and would always motivate human behaviour'.¹ Gibbon could surely affirm the truth of this from his reading of his beloved Homer whose study he once decided had more moral instruction than that of mathematics.² So it was also with Xenophon, with Tacitus, and with Juvenal in whose work he found the same deep human passions moving men to action. And it is certain that if human nature were to change radically, if men were no longer motivated by these same passions we all understand, the great literature of earlier times would cease to move us on the human level and would finally become outdated.

1. Jordan, loc.cit.

2. Memoirs, p. 118.

The point is worth a further comment since it is of prime importance to the study of literature and to the reading and writing of both history and biography. In discussing the question, C.S. Lewis admitted that he had for many years held this theory of the unchanging human heart but abandoned it because he had come to doubt whether stripping off the externals was the best way to study the poetry of the past. We are likely to discard the things we see as unimportant and what is left may no longer be the work the author wrote. It is like studying Hamlet after the revenge code has been removed or, in Denis Saurat's terms, disentangling 'what there is of lasting originality in Milton's thought...the permanent and human interest' from the 'theological rubbish'. 'Milton's thought, when purged of its theology', replied Lewis, 'does not exist'. There is a better way, he maintained: 'Instead of stripping the knight of his armour you can try to put his armour on yourself...I had much rather know what I should feel like if I adopted the beliefs of Lucretius than how Lucretius would have felt if he had never entertained them...You must, so far as in you lies, become an Achaean chief while reading Homer, a medieval knight while reading Malory, and an Eighteenth-Century Londoner while reading Johnson'.¹

Now this, in fact, is very much the sort of thing Gibbon recommended in his Essai: to feel like the Romans, to put ourselves in the place of the people we are studying. And yet, the basic link between other times and our own, the constant element, is after all

1. A Preface to Paradise Lost. Oxford, 1942, chap. IX, pp. 61-4. The reference to Denis Saurat is from p. 111 of his Milton, cited by Lewis, op.cit., p. 64.

our essential humanity - the human heart which, to a great extent, transcends not only time and race but even age and sex. Anger, ambition, avarice, joy and revenge are common to men and women, old and young though their motives and expressions may vary. In his work on Milton criticism, Professor A.J.A. Waldock put it like this: 'Mr. Lewis has a mocking chapter entitled "The Doctrines of the Unchanging Human Heart"; yet it is upon the basis of this very doctrine that literature rests and has its being. The Odyssey is now dated in almost every conceivable way - in every conceivable way (to be precise) but one: the primary human feelings are our own. If ever the human heart does perceptibly change, then the Odyssey - with the rest of literature from its day to ours - will take a last slide into oblivion, for the sufficient reason that no reader will then exist who will have the slightest idea what it is about'.¹ It is as true of Gibbon's 'epic' as of Milton's and it is a major reason why it is still read and enjoyed. Hume's statement about 'the constant and universal principles of human nature',² seems to reflect the judgement of thinking men of Gibbon's day and it only expresses more categorically a central truth to which most of us would subscribe. In adapting the rise and fall of the ancient republics to the current state of affairs in Britain, Montagu reiterated the same maxim: 'If we recollect that human nature is at all times and in all places the same...' ³ He was not unaware of physical, social and cultural differences between eighteenth-century Englishmen and ancient Greeks or Romans,

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1. 'Mr. C.S. Lewis and Paradise Lost', Southerly, Vol. IV, No. 2, Sept., 1943, pp. 7-13. The quotation is from p. 8.
 2. 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding', Philosophical Works, Vol. 4, p. 68; already cited in context, chap. V, p. 182.
 3. Reflection on the Rise and Fall of the Ancient Republics, &c. p. 24.

but the point of his application, like the interest and instructive value of Gibbon's History, was seen to depend ultimately upon this continuity and essential sameness beneath the skin.

Gibbon saw plenty of difference between civilized and barbarous peoples, between the society of 'the pastoral nations'¹ and that of a soft and luxurious metropolis. But he saw these as surface differences, and held that men were motivated by the same basic passions which make human nature what it is.² Ambition and avarice were essentially the same in the capital of the East as in the German forests or the deserts of Arabia, though the expression of these qualities might take different forms, some crude, some more refined. He also knew that the operation of these passions, by means of which the philosophic historian could often reconstruct a course of events,³ were simpler and more easily read amongst simple and savage races. Amongst civilized nations, he believed that 'the different characters that mark' particular peoples 'may be ascribed to the use and to the abuse of reason, which so variously shapes, and so artificially composes the manners and opinions of an European or a Chinese'.⁴ And even 'more sure and simple' in its operation than reason is instinct, so that the more instinctive and less rational a people, the more predictable are their reactions. However, 'character' as Gibbon used the word in this particular context has more to do with the superficial aspect of human life, namely 'manners and opinions', that is to say the area where most variety is to be found. By contrast 'the hidden springs of action', which are an index of the inner and 'genuine character', were, for him, relatively constant in time and universal in context.

1. DF, chap. xxvi, 'Manners of the Pastoral Nations'.

2. 'As the human heart is still the same', he wrote he could legitimately match Tertullian's observation on 'enthusiasm' with Hume's, DF, xv, II, 45, n. 116.

3. See DF, ix, I, 253, n. 83; x, I, 256 and above chapter V, p. 184.

4. DF, xxvi, III, 74.

Nevertheless in our study of the historian as moralist, it is less important that we share his assumptions, than that we recognise their significance for his interpretation of history. They are significant in two ways at least. 'These assumptions', as Bond points out, 'make possible a variety of generalisations about man, and they underlie Gibbon's belief in the usefulness of history as a liberating study'.¹ It is 'liberating' and useful because it is an 'instructive' study, for, as Bond points out regarding Gibbon's presentation of character, 'the ultimate value of history rests on moral grounds'.²

In the course of The Decline and Fall Gibbon referred to several standards by which human nature and character may be judged: we can distinguish at least five.³ There is his own notion of what would constitute an ideal character; there is what he saw as 'the popular idea' of perfection; there is the eighteenth-century concept of 'the noble savage'; there is the traditional Christian idea of human perfection; and there is a relative view which sees a man against the background of his country and times.

With regard to the first of these standards, it has been suggested that Gibbon set up, as a criterion, 'a kind of perfect man, an ideal type by means of which he can judge historical personalities...He is nothing but a supposedly ideal combination of qualities, a combination useful enough for purposes of testing, but inconceivable in "our present imperfect condition"'.⁴ In two main places Gibbon made explicit

1. The Literary Art of Edward Gibbon, p. 90.

2. Bond, loc.cit.

3. Bond and Fuglum between them, suggest all of these standards.

4. Fuglum, op.cit., p. 52.

reference to such an ideal, though at other times he thought in terms of a particular character who embodied this combination of admirable qualities. The essence of his ideal is a harmonious union of the speculative and the active, of self fulfilment and service to mankind, of the private and the public virtues. Above all such a character was marked by balance and moderation. The early Christians, according to Gibbon, took their virtue to excess, and this was the source of their faults or errors.¹ Even Julian, though at the other extreme, suffered from a similar excess which to some extent marred his splendid character. This character, not that of the real Julian, but an ideal combination of those complementary qualities exemplified by Julian at his best, the calm thinker and the man of action, came as near to perfection as perhaps any in The Decline and Fall. Yet, in practice, he 'seldom recollected the fundamental maxim of Aristotle, that true virtue is placed at an equal distance between the opposite vices'.²

It is in dealing with what he saw as the lack of balance in the character of the primitive Christians that Gibbon suggested his idea of perfection: 'In the most virtuous and liberal dispositions two very natural propensities' can be distinguished, namely 'the love of pleasure and the love of action'. When the former was 'refined by art and learning, improved by the charms of social intercourse, and corrected by a just regard to economy', it was the source of the greatest happiness to the individual. So too, love of action, when it is free from anger, ambition and revenge, and 'when it is guided by the sense of propriety and benevolence...becomes the parent of every virtue'. 'To the love

1. DF, xv, II, 36.

2. DF, xxii, II, 446.

of pleasure', Gibbon continued, 'we therefore ascribe most of the agreeable, to the love of action we may attribute most of the useful and respectable, qualifications. The character in which both the one and the other should be united and harmonised, would seem to constitute the most perfect idea of human nature'.¹

This is an essentially secular or pagan standard based on the principles of the thinkers of Greece and Rome in contrast to that based on the Fathers of the Church, for whose other worldly teaching, Gibbon referred his reader to the work of the Swiss professor of law, Jean Barbeyrac, Sur la Morale des Pères.² The Gibbonean, the classical model of human perfection was very much of this world, its two aspects being self-realisation and social service. The key notions in Gibbon's presentation of it are found in the terms 'natural', 'liberal', 'active', and 'harmony'; and unlike the Christian idea, it is characterised by balance and moderation. Thus Gibbon spoke of 'very natural propensities' to be found 'in the most virtuous and liberal dispositions'; of 'worldly philosophers who, in the conduct of this transitory life, consult only the feelings of nature and the interest of society'; of those activities which, though rejected by the Fathers, occupy 'the leisure of a liberal mind', namely 'the acquisition of knowledge, the exercise of our reason or fancy, and the cheerful flow of unguarded conversation'. He frequently stressed the active virtues and the active lives of some of the respected figures in The Decline and Fall.³ but it was when the personal and the public, the individual and the social, the speculative and the active qualities were 'united and harmonised' that 'the most

1. DF, xv, II, 37.

2. DF, xv, II, 36, n. 89. When in Lausanne, Gibbon had studied Barbeyrac's comments on Grotius and Puffendorf. See Memoirs, p. 78 and n. 26, p. 276.

3. e.g. Trajan, 'that virtuous and active prince', i, I, 5.

perfect idea of human nature' was to be found.¹ One emperor who seemed to him to approach this ideal was Antoninus Pius. Gibbon referred to Julian's 'philosophical fable', the Caesars, in which the preference was given to that emperor's 'useful and benevolent virtues'.² It appeared to Gibbon that Antoninus 'enjoyed with moderation the conveniences of fortune, and the innocent pleasures of society: and the benevolence of his soul displayed itself in a cheerful serenity of temper'.³ This 'innocent enjoyment' of moderate luxury and of 'the pleasures of society' were what Gibbon found absent from the early Christians who consequently lacked 'moderation'. Antonius, however, displayed not only this quality, but also active virtue by diffusing 'order and tranquility over the greatest part of the earth'.⁴

Gibbon again gave explicit expression to his standard of human perfection in order to show how far another 'Imperial philosopher', Leo VI, fell short of 'this ideal excellence': 'The union of the prince and the sage, of the active and speculative virtues, would indeed constitute the perfection of human nature'.⁵ What were the weaknesses which vitiated the realisation of the ideal in Leo's case? Apart from his inconsistent approach to the subject of matrimony, he lived in vain pomp and ease; his apparent clemency and peace were the outcome of 'softness and indolence' and 'his mind was tinged with the most puerile superstition'. It is all

1. DF, xv, II, 36-7.

2. DF, xxiv, II, 505-6.

3. DF, iii, I, 84.

4. DF, loc.cit.

5. DF, xlviii, V, 220.

summed up in the rhetorical questions Gibbon posed concerning this emperor: 'Did he reduce his passions and appetites under the dominion of reason?...Did he subdue his prejudices, and those of his subjects?'¹ Because he did not, his character was stained with superstition, prejudice and indulgence. Here, too, was an unbalanced and immoderate character. His mind was not controlled by rational principles; reason was not allowed its proper role.

Gibbon was certainly aware of the limitations of reason: this can be seen in many of his comments.² He had learned, perhaps under the influence of Hume, to distrust unaided reason in the conduct of life. But when it was guided by experience and informed by such resources as our 'knowledge of human nature', reason was a necessary governor of the 'fierce and unrestrained passions',³ which can otherwise take control. Maurice, an emperor very unlike Leo VI, ruled not only 'over the East' but also 'over himself', and he did so by 'expelling from his mind the wild democracy of passions, and establishing...a perfect aristocracy of reason and virtue'.⁴ 'The freedom of mind' was necessary for man's full development: political freedom was essential for his fulfilment in society. But democracy could run wild, as in France, and an enlightened and rational elite were perhaps the best safeguard of those cherished qualities, 'reason and virtue'. This is a point of view very characteristic of Gibbon, especially in his later years.⁵ As in the

1. DF, loc.cit.

2. e.g. DF, xvi, II, 147; xxx, III, 285.

3. DF, x, I, 256.

4. DF, xlv, V, 21.

5. cf. 'all the inconveniences of a wild democracy' (DF, iii, I, 73) and the use of 'wild' in relation to democracy in a letter to Lord Sheffield, 27/10/1792, Letters, III, 283. Gibbon was for moderation in politics as in life, as a safeguard 'against the opposite mischiefs of despotism and democracy (ibid., III, 307)).

macrocosm so in the microcosm: as in the state, so too in the man, but especially in a man charged with the responsibility to rule. Of a very mixed character, whose 'government exhibited a singular contrast of vice and virtue', Gibbon wrote: 'When he listened to his passions he was the scourge, when he consulted his reason, the father of his people'.¹

Gibbon's portrait of the ideal man is of one with a liberal mind, purged of prejudice and superstition, his passions and appetites under the direction of 'right reason', his virtues displayed in a balanced character none being taken to excess; a just proportion maintained by that cardinal virtue of moderation. A grateful recollection of his tutor Pavillard during that most fruitful period of his own development, was that 'he was rational because he was moderate'.² Above all such a balanced character would combine the best of both the scholar and the man of action. It was thus in the great days of ancient civilization, Gibbon's model of the society in which citizens develop their human potential to the fullest degree. This Greco-Roman ideal contrasted sharply with those barbarians, 'hardy veterans' whom Constantine raised to the consulship for their merit and services. In these newcomers to public office, who lacked a 'humane' and 'liberal' education, 'the powers of the human mind were contracted by the irreconcilable separation of talents as well as of professions'. Herein could be seen the divorce from the ancient classical ideal of versatility: 'The accomplished citizens of the Greek and Roman republics, whose characters could adapt themselves to the bar, the senate, the camp,

1. DF, xlviii, V, 255.

2. Memoirs, p. 72. Pavillard, according to Gibbon, combined 'a clear head and a warm heart'.

or the schools, had learned to write, to speak, and to act, with the same spirit, and with equal abilities'.¹

Diametrically opposed to this essentially pagan or humanist ideal is the Christian concept of perfection, an antithesis which Gibbon brought out in his study of the growth of the early church.² As these men and women of the primitive church 'emerged from sin and superstition', they devoted themselves 'to a life, not only of virtue, but of penitence. The desire of perfection became the ruling passion of their soul'.³ Wherein did their idea of perfection contrast with that of the 'worldly philosophers' who represented the best of Greece and Rome? Gibbon indicated several major differences. In contrast to the pagan ideal, the early Christians were other-worldly, they practised self-denial rather than self-fulfilment, they were anti-social and unpatriotic, they took their virtues to excess, and both the motives and the expression of their virtue were personal and private rather than public. The fact that we are really dealing with two irreconcilable views of the nature and destiny of man comes out more in Gibbon's later treatment of the development of Christian doctrine.⁴

After suggesting what seemed to be 'the most perfect idea of human nature' in terms of a union of love of pleasure and love of action, Gibbon reversed the picture to reveal a character which was the negation of this ideal: 'The insensible and inactive disposition, which should be supposed alike destitute of both, would be rejected, by the common consent of mankind, as utterly incapable of procuring any happiness to the individual, or any public benefit to

1. DF, xvii, II, 193.

2. DF, xvi, II, 34-7.

3. DF, xv, II, 35.

4. As in chaps. xvii, III, 162ff; xxxiii, III, 430-1; xxxviii & xlvii.

the world'. Here is a hypothetical statement of the Christian ideal which Gibbon proceeded to expose. 'But it was not in this world', he continued, 'that the primitive Christians were desirous of making themselves either agreeable or useful'.¹ We might, by contrast, note his summing up of an actual character of the opposing school. Marcus Aurelius, while 'he was severe to himself', not unlike these early Christians, was nevertheless, 'indulgent to the imperfection of others, just and beneficent to all mankind'.²

Not only, in Gibbon's view, were the early Christians indifferent to the world and to 'the charms of social intercourse', but in their desire for mortification, they were immoderate, and confused the use and abuse of innocent pleasure. 'The unfeeling candidate for Heaven' was taught not only to resist grosser delights but also elegance and luxury in dress and houses, in fact 'the most finished productions of human art'.³ Gibbon proposed that in view of the close interconnection between soul and body, it was best 'to taste with innocence and moderation', those enjoyments of which the body was susceptible. 'Very different', he said, 'was the reasoning of our devout predecessors; vainly aspiring to imitate the perfection of angels, they disdained every earthly and corporeal delight'. In their attempt 'to exalt the perfection of the gospel above the wisdom of philosophy', the zealous church fathers forsook moderation and carried self-denial to an unwise and indeed impossible extreme.⁴ Here again it was a case of imbalance between right reason and the human passions and feelings.

1. DF, xv, II, 37.

2. DF, ii, I, 85. 'His life was the noblest commentary on the precepts of Zeno'.

3. DF, xv, II, 37-8.

4. DF, xv, II, 36.

In their flight from their former way of life, they forgot the golden mean and a reasonable approach to the idea of perfection. Their own ideal of perfection became their 'ruling passion'; 'and it is well known, that while reason embraces a cold mediocrity, our passions hurry us, with rapid violence, over the space which lies between the most opposite extremes'.¹

It is against the character and ideal of the 'saint' in Christianity that we see Gibbon pouring out his greatest scorn and using his keenest irony. If the designation 'saint' was to be taken as the peculiar mark of Christian perfection, then the lives of the saints might be assumed to be a living expression of this ideal.² On the contrary, they seemed to Gibbon to represent, in most instances, a denial of all that is best in human nature; 'the character of a saint' appeared to be synonymous with such a denial. Hence he wrote that Louis IX possessed 'as much reason and humanity as may be reconciled with the character of a saint'.³

An examination of the title of 'saint' as used in The Decline and Fall is instructive. Gibbon's viewpoint soon becomes clear. There is not one complimentary use of the term to be found. Sometimes the tone is neutral, sometimes mildly derogatory, but mostly contemptuous; and it is the contempt of moral disgust. At the very least, sainthood represented to Gibbon a stunting of the full development of character

1. DF, xv, II, 35.
2. The recorded lives of saints were often a 'dark fund of superstition...fabulous and florid legends'. (DF, liii, VI, 67, & n. 7) 'The sixty-six lives of St. Patrick...must have contained as many thousand lies'. (ibid., xxx, III, 286, n. 96).
3. DF, lix, VI, 346.

according to his humanisitic ideal; at the worst it meant savagery, sedition, 'religious madness',¹ superstition, hypocrisy, and a false set of moral values.²

There were some called saints, like Athansius, Gregory Nazianzen and Louis IX, whose character Gibbon found admirable in many respects. But their natural goodness or usefulness was seen not in, but in spite of, their sainthood. Gregory had been granted 'the title of saint... but the tenderness of his heart and the elegance of his genius reflect a more pleasing lustre' on his memory.³ Louis 'was canonised in Rome; and sixty-five miracles were readily found and solemnly attested, to justify the claim of the royal saint. The voice of history renders a more honourable testimony, that he united the virtues of a king, an hero, and a man'.⁴ That is to say, this 'best of kings' possessed naturally the requisites of the Gibbonian moral ideal, a good heart and understanding combined with an active spirit. It was the saintly side of his nature, his superstition, his religious zeal, those qualities to be applauded by 'a monkish historian', which formed 'the most despicable part of his character'.⁵ What Gibbon, for his part, applauded were the inconsistencies of a saint, the lapses, we might say, into natural human feelings of pity, kindness and tolerance. Both Martin of Tours

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1. 'Savage saints' (DF, xxxvii, III, 78), 'seditious saints' (III, 88). Maron, a saint or savage, displayed his religious madness.' (xlvii, V, 166).
 2. e.g. DF, liii, VI, 268, where the productiveness of the husbandman is contrasted with all 'the merits and miracles' in the calendar.
 3. DF, xxvii, III, 159.
 4. DF, lix, VI, 374.
 5. DF, loc.cit.

and Ambrose 'pronounced without hesitation the eternal damnation of heretics; but they were surprised, and shocked, by the bloody image of their temporal death, and the honest feelings of nature resisted the artificial prejudices of theology'.¹

It was the basic tenets of this theological system, original sin, eternal damnation, and many of its ethical principles which tended to produce an ideal abhorrent to Gibbon. The framers and prisoners of this 'rigid system of Christianity'² appeared to him very unattractive in character. This is the usual picture of the monk and the saint in The Decline and Fall: 'indeed, there is in almost all of Gibbon's references to saints a sharply drawn antithesis between the merit of sainthood and humanity'.³ In so far as sainthood represented the traditional Christian ideal of perfection, the same antithesis applies to that Christian ideal as a whole.

Gibbon did not present the ideal of 'the noble savage' as such, but did allude to 'a pleasing vision' which was entertained by some about the life of pastoral peoples.⁴ Though he praised certain pleasing characteristics of the Germanic races, their loyalty, their domestic life and their simplicity in contrast to the laziness and luxury of degenerate civilizations, he was under no illusion about the idealised picture drawn by some writers of the manners and behaviour of the hardy tribes of shepherds and nomads. He saw such a picture as a literary or philosophic construct and he devoted the bulk of a chapter

1. DF, xxvii, III, 163.

2. DF, xxxiii, III, 493.

3. Bond, Edward Gibbon the Historian, p. 108.

4. See chap. xxvi.

to demolishing it. 'The sober historian', he wrote, sees the falsity of this 'pleasing vision', 'and is compelled, with some reluctance, to confess that the pastoral manners which have been adorned with the fairest attributes of peace and innocence, are much better adapted to the fierce and cruel habits of military life'.¹ So, he continued, in order 'to illustrate this character, I shall now proceed to consider a nation of shepherds and warriors;' and a similar picture, he pointed out, was presented by both ancient and modern sources.²

When he returned to the story of the Huns several chapters later, in order to trace the career of Atilla,³ he referred to the atrocities committed by the Thuringians fighting in his army. Their inhuman cruelties served as an example of those 'fierce and unrestrained passions' of human nature to which he had already referred; and he dismissed the 'pleasing vision' with the conclusion: 'Such were those savage ancestors, whose imaginary virtues have sometimes excited the praise and envy of civilised ages'.⁴ So much for the noble savage and his relations.

There is one other ideal to which Gibbon referred, namely the brutal but romantic figure of popular fame. Such was Richard Coeur-de-Lion, whom he once considered a promising subject for history, but whom after reflection, he dismissed as morally inadequate. Richard was a popular national hero, a type; and as Gibbon admitted, 'if heroism be confined to brutal and ferocious valour, Richard Plantaganet

1. DF, xxvi, III, 75.

2. DF, loc.cit.

3. Chap. xxxv.

4. DF, xxxv, III, 493.

will stand high among the heroes of the age'.¹ But the character of the hero and the standards of the age were weighed in the balances and found wanting. 'With the ferocity of a gladiator, he united the cruelty of a tyrant';² and these qualities he used in the service of superstition. He was 'a fit hero only for monks', a judgement which is almost equivalent to endowing him with 'the character of a saint'. He lacked that necessary union of speculative and active traits; he was not even a successful leader. He 'possessed only the personal courage of a soldier';³ and in Gibbon's scale of virtues the animal courage of the soldier hardly won recognition.⁴

Yet, Gibbon well knew, that 'as long as mankind shall continue to bestow more liberal applause on their destroyers than on their benefactors', those 'ambitious of fame' and obsessed with 'the thirst of military glory', would be exalted as heroes and win the praise not only of poets but also of historians.⁵ To some, these conquering heroes typified the greatest of which human nature was capable. Such was the eleventh-century Turkish Sultan, Alp Arslan, who swept across the Euphrates, capturing Caesarea and subduing Armenia and Georgia. 'The name of Alp Arslan, the valiant lion, is expressive of the popular idea of the perfection of man'; this leader 'displayed the fierceness and generosity of the royal animal'.⁶ Thus both the English and the Turkish 'lions' were examples of a popular but unworthy ideal.

1. DF, lix, VI, 365.

2. Hints &c. MW, V, 488.

3. 'Outlines of the History of the World', MW, V, 414.

4. 'The courage of a soldier is found to be the cheapest, and most common quality of human nature'. DF, xxvi, III, 129.

5. DF, i, I, 6.

6. DF, lvii, VI, 245.

From all these ideal notions of human nature, either unattainable, illusory or unworthy, Gibbon turned for his historical judgements to an actual standard by which a man's character and attainments were measured against the age and society in which he lived. Here was a relative standard which he saw as more realistic and more in accord with the ordinary point of view of the thinking man. Moreover, this standard was applicable to both aspects of the Gibbonian ideal, the speculative and the active: 'Our estimate of personal merit is relative to the common faculties of mankind. The aspiring efforts of genius or virtue, either in active or speculative life, are measured not so much by their real elevation, as by the height to which they ascend above the level of their age and country; and the same stature, which in a people of giants would pass unnoticed, must appear conspicuous in a race of pigmies'.¹ It was in this way that Belisarius stood out from his times and impressed Gibbon so much. But it is interesting also to recall his borrowing of his metaphor of stature from Longinus, and his application of it to the Roman world of the second century with its degeneracy of literary and artistic standards and its debased sentiments. Against this littleness of attainment even the moderately endowed looked imposing, as did the hardy northern barbarians: 'This diminutive stature of mankind...was daily sinking below the old standard, and the Roman world was indeed peopled by a race of pigmies, when the fierce giants of the north broke in and mended the puny breed'.²

Against this 'diminutive stature' 'the sublime Longinus' himself stood out from 'the corruption of taste' and, among the 'degeneracy of his contemporaries', 'preserved the spirit of ancient Athens'.³

1. DF, xlii, IV, 364.

2. DF, ii, I, 63-4.

3. DF, ii, I, 63.

Likewise, over a century later, there was the poet Claudian who, though not deserving 'the epithet of sublime', nevertheless 'soared above the heads of his feeble contemporaries, and placed himself, after an interval of three hundred years, among the poets of ancient Rome'.¹ So, too, Boethius, 'the last of the Romans' in the tradition of Cato or Cicero, shone out more brightly against the darkness of a barbarous age.² In dark and degenerate times this relative method of assessing character allowed a more just estimate by taking into account the extenuating circumstance of the surrounding corruption. In the case of Belisarius, Gibbon was able to say: 'His imperfections flowed from the contagion of the times; his virtues were his own, the free gift of nature or reflection'.³ Without this flexible, and consequently much fairer standard of judgement, Gibbon, in writing 'the annals of a declining monarchy', would have found few persons or few deeds to praise. But, as he admitted with some relief, when taking up the story of Mahmud: 'From the paths of blood, and such is the history of nations, I cannot refuse to turn aside to gather some flowers of science or virtue'.⁴ He did not simply apply eighteenth-century standards in judging his characters; he generally viewed them in historical perspective against the background of their own times. By doing so he was able to do justice to those, who, thought far from perfect in an absolute sense, nevertheless stood out from their contemporaries. 'In this view', he said, 'the character of Belisarius may be deservedly placed above the heroes of antiquity'.⁵

1. DF, xxx, III, 299-300.

2. DF, xxxix, IV, 211.

3. DF, xlii, IV, 365.

4. DF, lvii, VI, 237.

5. DF, xlii, IV, 365. Cf. the superiority of Stilicho to the Roman generals 'in an age less attentive to the laws of honour or of pride'. (xxix, III, 238).

In sifting 'genuine character' from mere reputation Gibbon continually showed the moralist's concern for the underlying motive. In some instances it was more necessary for his general design than in others. In the case of Constantine it was crucial for Gibbon's presentation of his view of that emperor and of the establishment of Christianity. 'The motives of his conversion', together with the patronage of Christianity by Constantine and his sons, he therefore wrote, 'will form a very interesting and important chapter'.¹ So too with Julian, 'his motives, his counsels and his actions as far as they were connected with the history of religion, will be the subject of the present chapter'.² And, in the case of the early Christians, he suggested 'two motives which might naturally render' their lives much purer and more austere than those of their pagan contemporaries or their degenerate successors: repentance for their sins and the desire to uphold the good name of their society.³ But it is by no means only in such crucial cases, on which an essential part of his intentions rested, that Gibbon laid stress upon the motive.

So consistent was his concern with motives and with 'the true counsels' of men that he often turned the motive into the real actor in a given situation. Rather than saying that Julian wished to restrain the design of his troops, he preferred to write: 'Prudence as well as loyalty inculcated the propriety of resisting their treasonable designs'; not, the Turkish prince aspired to reign, but 'The secret zeal and ambition of the Turkish prince aspired to reign'.⁴ Casting

1. DF, xvi, II, 138; in the words of Gibbon's synopsis: 'The Motives, Progress and Effect of the Conversion of Constantine'.

2. DF, xxiii, II, 457.

3. DF, xv, II, 34. Cf. also 'the characters and motives of the first Caesars' (xv, II, 21-22).

4. DF, xxii, II, 425; lix, VI, 351. Cf. 'their private ambition was insensitive of the public danger'. (lviii, VI, 319).

his statements in this form, he tended to personify motives or virtues and vices, as if to place on them the real responsibility for the action. 'The tottering houses are pillaged by intrepid avarice'; 'the office...had been usurped by the ambition of the admiral'; or, 'a motive of avarice or fear still opened the holy sepulchre to some devout and defenceless pilgrims'.¹

Where the motive is uncertain or ambivalent, Gibbon usually suggested alternatives, dual motives, or even a possible or likely motive in the circumstances. Thus we find, 'ambition and piety', 'prejudice as well as loyalty', Jovius 'from a selfish or perhaps a criminal motive'; Pulcheria 'from a motive either of prudence or religion', and Theodora, 'from a motive of shame or contempt'.² Sometimes it is implied that the character himself was hardly aware of the source of his action, but Gibbon still looked beneath the surface as if to remind the reader of the importance of the underlying motive. 'Julian', he wrote, 'continued to maintain the freedom of religious worship without distinguishing whether this universal toleration proceeded from his justice or his clemency'. And when the emperor did, in fact, allege certain 'motives...to justify' a 'partial and oppressive measure', these motives might be only fit to 'command during his lifetime the silence of slaves and the applause of flatterers';³ they would not satisfy a philosophic historian or his readers in an enlightened age.

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1. DF, xliii, VI, 465; lxvii, VII, 165; lix, VI, 380. Cf. 'The captive generals were either released by his avarice or tortured by his fanaticism'. (liv, VI, 124).
 2. DF, xxi, III, 333; xxii, III, 406; xl, IV, 230. Cf. 'the motives whether of pride or policy which induced Diocletian to withdraw (xvii, II, 149). See below chap. IX on the language of the moralist.
 3. DF, xxiii, II, 486, 487.

In such cases, Gibbon seems to be saying, we must read between the lines. So, in a meeting between Pope Martin V and the Eastern Emperor Manuel, their expressions were merely those of diplomacy, as 'ambition on the one side and distress on the other dictated the same decent language of charity and peace'. But beware, for we are dealing with an 'artful Greek' and a 'Roman, not less artful', and with a 'court and church' both 'hollow and insincere'.¹ Here it is the known characters of the participants, both 'artful', the nature of diplomacy, and the prevailing 'hollow insincerity' which must guide both the historian and the perceptive reader.²

On occasions 'a variety of motives might dispose' a person to a course of action, but one 'of these motives' will appear 'the most forcible'.³ In these situations 'the knowledge of human nature' proves indispensable to the historian. We might otherwise, said Gibbon, be inclined to exercise our curiosity and to wonder how the person could rationally follow such an obviously short-sighted course, as for example, the ruthless amassing of great wealth 'which he could not spend without folly, nor possess without danger'. We might indeed wonder, if, without a knowledge of human nature, we failed to remember that avarice is 'the blindest of human passions'.⁴

This knowledge also saves us from misjudgements, either too severe or too charitable. Thus charity might dispose us to 'believe that the original motives of Mahomet were those of pure and genuine

1. DF, lxvi, VII, 101.

2. Gibbon's opinion of civilized diplomacy was that it was characterised by insincerity and dissimulation; see, e.g. DF, xli, IV, 290; xlv, V, 59-9.

3. DF, xvi, II, 115.

4. DF, xxix, III, 233.

benevolence'; but we should be aware that 'a human missionary is incapable of cherishing the obstinate unbelievers who reject his claims, despise his arguments, and persecute his life'.¹ In the moral world there are prejudices, or natural human reactions, like the desire for vindication or revenge, and strongest of all, the motive of personal advantage and greed for power or gain. These must be borne in mind particularly when we are looking at those in, or aspiring to, positions of authority.

Though Gibbon may not have explicitly stated that 'power corrupts', his treatment of character certainly illustrates the maxim, especially in the case of the unchecked ruler invested with 'absolute power'. His definition of a monarchy² and his references to the dangers of one-man rule bring this out forcibly. In fact he saw kings and courts as almost a special world of their own, often apparently freed from the moral restraints of ordinary men and women.³ 'The counsels of princes', he believed, 'are more frequently influenced by views of temporal advantage than by considerations of abstract and speculative truth'.⁴ And, thinking of the long line of rulers in the palace of Constantinople, he asserted that 'the unfortunate prince who is born in the purple must remain a stranger to the voice of truth'.⁵ Even when writing of his admired Julian, he admitted that his position as emperor, or rather his achievement of absolute power, rendered his motives

1. DF, i, V, 401.

2. See opening of chap. iii, I, 65.

3. On courts and kings, see e.g. DF, I, V, 382 ('the cold servility of courts'); lii, VI, 57 ('educated in the vices of kings'); cf. li, V, 502, lx, VII, 385; xxvi, III, 39; xiii, I, 319.

4. DF, xx, II, 311.

5. DF, xxxii, III, 408.

suspect. His grief, Gibbon wrote, in a dispassionate examination of the man, 'could proceed only from his innocence; but,' he added, 'his innocence must appear extremely doubtful in the eyes of those who have learned to suspect the motives of princes'.¹ In this way he was prepared to speak of Julian being 'overwhelmed with real or affected grief'.

That Gibbon himself was one of those who had 'learned to suspect the motives of princes' is clear enough from his portraits of them, though he endeavoured to curb a possible prejudice in this direction even in the case of rulers he found distasteful. As a rule, he believed, self-interest seemed to determine the policy of persons in high places, even if the absolute monarch found that his own interest tended to coincide with that of his nation, so that, 'were he totally without virtue, prudence might supply its place and dictate the same rule of conduct'.² Though the people might applaud some of these policies since they also benefited from them, the motive still remained self-interest and no more, and the moral value of the action must be ignored. An absolute monarch like Septimius Severus sometimes bent his policy 'in favour of the poor and oppressed'. Is he then to be praised for his compassionate and benevolent behaviour? Gibbon's answer as far as Severus was concerned was that he followed this apparently virtuous course of action, 'not so much indeed from any sense of humanity, as from the natural propensity of a despot to humble the pride of greatness and to sink all his subjects to the same common level of absolute dependence'.³

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1. DF, xxii, II, 426. 'It may seem ungenerous', he said, 'to distrust the honour of a hero, and the truth of a philosopher'; but Julian was in fact, he continued, the victim of superstition.
 2. DF, v, I, 132.
 3. DF, v, I, 132-3.

It is only as a rare exception that Gibbon failed to indicate, or at least to suggest, a possible motive; yet not even in such instances did he merely gloss over the omission, but rather drew attention to it, pleading inadequate sources or remoteness of time and place. On one such occasion he excused himself on the ground that 'at the distance of fourteen centuries, we may be satisfied with relating the military exploits of the conquerors of Rome, without presuming to investigate the motives of their political conduct'.¹ So also in a case of the supernatural, he would not presume 'to investigate the nature or motives', but contented himself with the 'more humble task' of an actual description of the city.² Where it is beyond the power of the historian to discover the motive, 'we may suspect' it, he felt, from a consideration of the most plausible arguments, aided by our knowledge of the constant principles of human nature and the ways of monarchs.³ This we are tempted to do and we find the historian offering his own suggestion based on his understanding of the characters and the particular circumstances of the occasion. 'We are too imperfectly acquainted with the court of Constantinople', he frankly confessed, 'to form any judgement of the real motives which influenced the leaders of the conspiracy; unless we should suppose that they were actuated by a spirit of jealousy and revenge'.⁴

The supreme importance of Gibbon's concern with 'the real motives' is in determining the moral value of a character and an act. Readers are aware and critics have noted that he habitually summed up his characters in sets of virtues and vices, merits and defects, but we

1. DF, xxxi, III, 330.

2. DF, xvii, II, 158.

3. DF, xvi, II, 129.

4. DF, xviii, II, 234.

should remember that these are never rigid or predetermined. The basic question, stated or implied, is always, 'What prompted the action?' With this in mind we must ask: 'Is liberality a virtue? The answer is: 'We must look at the motive'. The liberality we see might be the free expression of a generous nature; it might be merely the prodigal open-handedness of an irresponsible prince towards his boon companions; or, worst of all, it might be the use of 'donatives' to purchase the support of followers, a method used by aspiring or ambitious emperors with the praetorian guards. Of an apparently liberal edict of Caracalla, Gibbon wrote that, 'His unbounded liberality flowed not, however, from the sentiments of a generous mind; it was the sordid result of avarice'.¹ Again, while the valiant Belisarius was fighting Justinian's battles, the emperor himself, 'invited by his patience and liberality, the repetition of injuries'.² Here neither the patience nor the liberality is meritorious.

The same overt act must be interpreted differently according to what inspired it. Consider the assumption of the consulate by two emperors: the 'artful' Augustus acted from expediency and 'prudence', Julian from his own 'choice or inclination'.³ The retirement of Diocletian from the imperial throne was, as Gibbon saw it, a philosophic decision more characteristic of the emperor Marcus Antoninus; 'Reason had dictated, and content seems to have accompanied his retreat'.⁴ By contrast, he saw the same decision on the part of Charles V as occasioned, or hastened by, the failure of his schemes and by disappointed ambition. Diocletian, on the

1. DF, vi, I, 171.

2. DF, xlii, IV, 364.

3. DF, xxii, II, 451.

4. DF, xiii, I, 415, 418.

other hand, had accomplished all his designs and resigned the empire at 'the full tide of uninterrupted success'.¹ His motive was therefore more worthy and the lesson in the 'vanity of human greatness' more instructive.² In reaffirming his decision when offered the opportunity to resume the throne, he wisely refused 'to relinquish the enjoyment of happiness for the pursuit of power'.³

Near the end of The Decline and Fall we are shown the double abdication of Amurath II, as 'the most striking feature in the life and character' of this Turkish sultan. Surely here was a case of a ruler thoughtfully weighing up the true priorities and philosophically obeying the voice of true wisdom. But again one must look beneath the surface to the real reason: 'Were not his motives debased by an alloy of superstition, we must praise the royal philosopher, who at the age of forty could discern the vanity of human greatness'.⁴ Even a historian can be deceived in such a case; and Voltaire, according to Gibbon, was in fact deceived by the sultan's action. Casting, as Gibbon wrote of him elsewhere, 'a keen and lively glance over the surface of history',⁵ he expressed his admiration for 'le Philosophe Turc'. But it was not only superficiality, said Gibbon, that affected the consistency of Voltaire's moral judgements; it was also bigotry:

1. DF, xiii, I, 416. Gibbon did, however, refer to his illness.
2. 'Diocletian acquired the glory of giving to the world the first example of a resignation which has not been very frequently imitated by succeeding monarchs'. DF, I, 415.
3. DF, xiii, 418 and n. 119. Gibbon was quoting the younger Victor.
4. DF, lxvii, VII, 146.
5. DF, li, V, 446, n. 65.

'Would he have bestowed the same praise on a Christian prince for retiring to a monastery? In his way Voltaire was a bigot, an intolerant bigot'.¹

The primacy of motives in connection with moral judgement runs throughout Gibbon's work. Those which influenced the early Christians in their way of life, or which urged Constantine to adopt the new religion, are perhaps the most prominent, but there are numerous less sustained instances at every stage of the narrative. A man is condemned for base motives or exonerated by good ones. As he rose to supreme power, Severus, like Constantine, 'concealed his daring ambition'. During his campaign in Italy he hardly ate or slept, he marched on foot and in armour like his troops, whose hardships he shared, while he encouraged them in the field. A very admirable picture of a worthy and disciplined character. But his motive gave the lie to this. It was only 'whilst he kept in view the infinite superiority of his reward' that he acted thus. And later, having achieved this reward, 'his conscience, obsequious to his interest, always released him from an inconvenient obligation', even on those rare occasions when he bound himself by an oath or a treaty.² On the other hand, though Martin of Tours deviated from his 'generous resolution' of toleration,

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1. DF, lxvii, VII, 146, n.15. Gibbon answered his own rhetorical question in a note (lxviii, VII, 211, n. 114): 'Voltaire, as usual, prefers the Turks to the Christians'. For 'le Philosophe Turc', he referred his reader to Voltaire's 'Essai sur l'Histoire Générale', c.89, p. 283. In chap. 89 of his 'Essai sur les Moeurs', Voltaire deals with Amurath, but in his 'Annales de l'Empire', under Frédéric d'Autriche, he wrote of Amurath: 'Ce Turc, qu'on peut compter parmi les philosophes, était compté parmi les héros'. Oeuvres Complètes, ed. Louis Moland. Paris, 1877-85, vol. XIII, p. 449.
 2. DF, v, I, 123, 127.

yet he was, in Gibbon's eyes, redeemed from this lapse, since 'his motives were laudable and his repentance was exemplary'.¹ When we turn to Chrysostom, we find that though 'the profane imputed to an ambitious motive' the archbishop's extension of his pastoral jurisdiction, yet he himself might have been 'conscious of the purity of his intentions' in terms of 'a sacred and indispensable duty'.² A more striking instance of motive reflecting on Chrysostom's character is seen in his protection of the fallen minister Eutropius. His character might well be misread by those who merely glanced at the surface of history and it is a testimony to Gibbon's impartiality and attention to 'the truth of history', that he cleared Chrysostom of all blame. While the condemned Eutropius was grovelling before the archbishop in his cathedral, Chrysostom effectually sought to turn the anger and vengeance of his opponents into mere contempt in order to save the trembling wretch from destruction: 'the orator, who was afterwards accused of insulting the misfortunes of Eutropius, laboured to excite the contempt, that he might assuage the fury of the people'. And this actually resulted in a victory for 'the powers of humanity' over insane hatred.³

Motives and character are seen in reciprocal relation in Gibbon's presentation of his historical figures. Worthy or unworthy motives provide criteria for determining whether a character is good or bad; but more commonly, since most characters are a mixture of both good and bad, they enable us to decide the moral value of any particular action.⁴ They also allow us to recognise various degrees of

1. DF, xxvii, III, 163.

2. DF, xxxii, 398.

3. DF, xxxii, III, 390.

4. Such a mixture is pre-eminently seen in the portrait of Julian, where Gibbon's praise and obvious admiration did not prevent his censure.

culpability.¹ Conversely, however, we find Gibbon sometimes determining doubtful motives on the basis of known character. Once the general picture of the man has been built up, his motives may be interpreted in terms of his established character. Augustus became for Gibbon a type of the 'artful' tyrant, whether in Rome, Constantinople, or even in the Moslem world. In his treatment of Augustus he built up a character marked by 'art' or dissimulation, on the basis of which this emperor's motives could be explained. 'The tender respect of Augustus for a free constitution which he had destroyed can only be explained by an attentive consideration of the character of that subtle tyrant. A cool head, an unfeeling heart, and a cowardly disposition prompted him at the age of nineteen to assume the mask of hypocrisy which he never afterwards laid aside'.² Having established an underlying and 'true character' for Augustus, Gibbon could then interpret his policies and actions in terms of his 'artful system'. In the light of this, 'his moderation', that almost indispensable virtue exhibited by all Gibbon's most admired figures, could be seen not as the expression of a moderate and benevolent nature, but simply as 'inspired by his fears'.³

This approach can be observed in a number of minor characters and in what are often little more than passing comments on such characters. The vices of a profligate bishop, said Gibbon, 'were admitted as a proof that his zeal was inspired by the sordid motive of interest'.⁴ Similarly the character of Rufinus seemed to justify

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1. See e.g. DF, xiv, I, 460: 'The death of Severianus will admit of less excuse, as it was dictated neither by revenge nor by policy'; or the extenuated condemnation of the earlier tyrannical emperors in contrast to that of the cruelty of Maximin (vii, I, 186, 184).
 2. DF, iii, I, 78.
 3. DF, loc.cit., though note his praise for this moderate policy as such, e.g. i, I, 2.
 4. DF, xxvii, III, 163 and n. 60. The reference is to the cruelty of the persecuting bishop, Ithacius.

the accusations'; or 'the character and language of the Archbishop of Milan may justify the suspicion' that his conduct would be moved by opposition to an imperial law.¹ 'The virtues of that prince', Gibbon wrote of Decius, 'will scarcely allow us to suspect that he was actuated by a mean resentment against the favourites of his predecessor'.² Character, once established, especially in terms of a 'ruling passion', becomes marked by such epithets as 'artful', 'subtle', 'moderate', or 'unworthy', and hidden motives, and even probable actions, where these are historically obscure, are suggested by Gibbon on the basis of consistency with that character. The pre-eminent example of this is the portrait of Constantine, which is worth considering in some detail both because it illustrates Gibbon's approach so well and also because of the importance he placed on the presentation of this character in the theme of decline and fall.³

In what is the most carefully written and most thoroughly revised section of The Decline and Fall, Gibbon devoted a chapter to the deeds of Constantine, his foundation of a new capital and his system of administration, and in the following chapter⁴ he proceeded to delineate the real character of 'that extraordinary man' in sharp contrast to his historical reputation.⁵ This carefully executed portrait has a dual significance in the work. Firstly, Gibbon felt obliged to present the true Constantine, a very different character from either the 'saint' and hero of Christian story, or the 'most abhorred' of tyrants who

1. DF, xxix, III, 236; xxvii, III, 168.

2. DF, xvi, II, 120-1.

3. DF, xiv, I, 476. See also Memoirs, p. 159 for the peculiar trouble he took with this part of his History.

4. DF, chaps. xvii, and xviii.

5. See opening of chap. xviii, II, 214. Julian is also referred to by Gibbon as 'that extraordinary man' (xxiv, II, 558).

dishonoured the empire by his 'vice and weakness'. In place of this confusion, he hoped to present a more authentic figure, 'which the truth and candour of history should adopt without a blush'.¹ His revaluation of the first Christian emperor was thus to be in the interest of the truth of character and of history. But, in the second place, Gibbon saw such a presentation of Constantine's character as being vitally connected, not merely with the establishment of Christianity, but also with the decline of the Roman Empire.²

The true character of Constantine was thus seen by Gibbon as inextricably linked to his great theme of imperial decline, and central to the character were 'the motives of his conversion as they may variously be deduced from benevolence, from policy, from conviction, or from remorse'.³ The centrality of the leading motive, 'the ruling passion of his soul',⁴ is kept before us as Gibbon reaffirmed it in the portrait of the aspiring general, of the co-emperor and finally of the sole ruler of the empire.

What we are given is a two-fold picture, a sort of diptych hinged chronologically about the accession of the emperor, the dark colours of the latter part being suggested in the former, though at first glance the contrast seems so complete as to be almost contradictory. It was only the veil of dissimulation that for some years obscured the real Constantine. In his early life and military career he outshone his rivals, but the achievement of absolute power revealed

1. DF, xviii, II, 214.

2. DF, xiv, I, 476.

3. DF, xvi, II, 138.

4. DF, xviii, II, 215.

the cruel and degenerate ruler for whom pretence was no longer necessary. This later and undisguised Constantine was, in Gibbon's view, 'corrupted by his fortune, or raised by conquest above necessity of dissimulation'.¹

When we are first introduced to the tall and majestic general, we are told that 'his mind was engrossed by ambition', though his 'active spirit' had been tempered in his youth by 'habitual prudence'.² His prudence is seen in his later alliance with Maxentius against their common enemy Maximian where he revealed himself as an 'artful prince'.³ Even a single act of apparent generosity is shown as ambiguous, or at best, as 'partial'. Gibbon could still, however, refer somewhat leniently to this period as his 'most innocent and even virtuous', though it is a relative standard since Constantine's virtues 'were rendered more illustrious by the vices of Maxentius'.⁴

In the next scene of Constantine's rise to undisputed power, we see an aspirant, 'whose ambition had been hitherto restrained by considerations of prudence rather than by principles of justice'.⁵ Constantine and Licinius divide the empire between them but neither can renounce, as might seem the wisest policy, 'any further designs of ambition', and in the next move, Constantine, though probably not in this instance the aggressor, is marked out by his 'aspiring temper'.⁶

1. DF, xviii, II, 216.

2. DF, xiv, I, 429.

3. DF, xiv, I, 436, 441.

4. DF, xiv, I, 444-5.

5. DF, xiv, L, 447.

6. DF, xiv, I, 463. Gibbon, however, using character as a guide to conduct, suggested Licinius as the probable aggressor, largely because of his 'perfidious character'.

The portrait of Constantine thus shows ambition as his motive from first to last, though disguised by prudence or dissimulation till the time was ripe. Then, as sole ruler, 'the master of the Roman world' is shown as 'not insensible to the ambition of founding a city which might perpetuate the glory of his own name'.¹

In the final summing up of Constantine's character, Gibbon stated explicitly, on the basis of what had been shown of his career: 'He loved glory, as the reward, perhaps as the motive of his labours. The boundless ambition...from the moment of his accepting the purple at York, appears as the ruling passion of his soul'.² This 'boundless ambition' which made Gibbon's Constantine, 'both as a father and as a king,...impatient of an equal', led him into both political tyranny and domestic crime. It brought about the murder of a worthy son, Crispus, already invested as Caesar and sharing the administration, but threatening to outshine his father, the emperor. And even this dark design was covered with 'the veil of ceremony and dissimulation'.³

The presentation of Constantine's character in terms of its ruling motive has been examined in some detail both because of its vital importance in The Decline and Fall and also because it offers the most careful and extended case-study in Gibbon's method which we

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1. DF, xvii, II, 150. Gibbon emphasised the idea by repeating it a few pages later (p. 160): 'The master of the Roman world, who aspired to erect an eternal monument to the glories of his reign'.
 2. DF, xviii, II, 215. This may be justified, Gibbon added, by a number of circumstances including 'the consciousness of superior merit'.
 3. DF, xviii, II, 221.

have been considering. As Jordan in his study of 'The Age of Constantine' points out, 'It is important for Gibbon's notions that Constantine's duplicity be firmly established. His interpretation of Constantine's motives (especially his motives for converting to Christianity) rests on his ability to satisfy his "boundless ambition". It is equally important for Gibbon's philosophy that Constantine be a hypocrite when he converts to Christianity'.¹

In Gibbon's delineation of the 'artful' Constantine, however, we sense also a comparison with that other predominantly 'artful' character, Augustus, the cunning founder of autocracy, whom the historian can use as a touchstone for later emperors. There are many 'artful' characters in The Decline and Fall, or at least characters who are described as displaying this side of their nature. They range from monks, courtiers, prelates and popes, the prophet Mahomet and his wife Ayesha to absolute rulers who above all seemed to exemplify this quality.² But it was the emperor Augustus who, for Gibbon, appeared to embody it and who devised an 'artful system'.³ which became almost the archetype for his successors in both the West and the East. Though August does not properly belong to the period of decline and fall as seen by Gibbon, yet with his 'artfulness' and 'prudence' he is used as an implicit, and sometimes explicit, standard of comparison

1. Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 199.

2. For monks, see DF, xxv, II, 30; for a courtier, like Cleander, iv, I, 99; a prelate, xlvii, V, 157; a pope, Gregory VII, lvi, VI, 214; Mohamed, I, V, 357, 358; Ayesha, I, V, 407; and emperors, apart from Diocletian and Constantine, see Manuel, lxvi, VII, 101.

3. DF, iii, I, 80.

for later rulers. Augustus, Diocletian and Constantine,¹ however, form a sort of triumvirate characterised by their crafty policies and their 'prudence', a quality which, with Gibbon as with Fielding, is often very close to pretence: the character prudently restrains or disguises his real nature so long as it is expedient to do so.

Augustus, as the original 'subtle' or 'crafty tyrant',² becomes a paradigm of later autocrats in The Decline and Fall, both in terms of his dominant trait and of the system of political deception he initiated. His artfulness and prudence are seen as the essentials of aspiring despots anxious to disguise their real nature and intentions and preserve their reputation.³ His system, based on deceiving the people, was essentially that employed by other emperors in their particular circumstances; they were inspired by the same motivation. 'That artful prince', Diocletian 'framed a new system of Imperial government...and as the image of the old constitution was religiously preserved in the senate, he resolved to deprive that order of its small remains of power and consideration'.⁴ Even Julian saw the advantage of 'the artful system by which' he 'proposed to obtain the effects, without incurring the guilt, or the reproach, of persecution'.⁵ Augustus is

1. Jordan says, 'only Augustus and Constantine are consistently referred to as "artful" in The Decline and Fall', *op.cit.*, p. 200, though he should also include Diocletian. See DF, xiii, I, 379 ('motives of prudence' of 'the artful Dalmatian'), 380 ('that artful prince'), 409 ('the most artful policy' of 'that artful prince', his 'prudent measures'), xiv, I, 426 ('the arts of Diocletian'.)
2. DF, iii, I, 78, Augustus as 'subtle tyrant'; he is also referred to as 'crafty'. In xxvii, III, 171, 'crafty tyrant' is applied to Maximus with his 'perfidious arts', who 'now displayed his genuine character'.
3. Gibbon also recognised the moderation and wisdom of Augustus, especially in recommending to his successors a policy of peace, rather than military expansion, i, I, 2,3,9.
4. DF, xiii, I, 409.
5. DF, xxiii, II, 502.

also shown artfully restoring the dignity while destroying the independence of the senate, so that 'the principles of a free constitution are irrecoverably lost'.¹ His 'crafty' policy is seen pre-eminently in the mock humility with which he bowed to the senate's will and accepted with a show of reluctance, the powers of proconsul and imperator which it bestowed on him. In this act Gibbon saw him expressing his true character but worse still, bequeathing such political deception to his successors and to the empire. 'The memory of this comedy, repeated several times during the life of Augustus, was preserved to the last ages of the empire, by the peculiar pomp with which the perpetual monarchs of Rome always solemnised the tenth year of their reign'.²

In Gibbon's chapter on the constitution of the empire in the Antonine age, Augustus, with his artful character expressed in the system he devised, hovers in the background. His principles are those which will pervert later rulers and undermine the empire. Even if he was moderate, it was for an unworthy motive. 'When he framed the artful system of the Imperial authority, his moderation was inspired by his fears. He wished to deceive the people by an image of civil liberty, and the armies by an image of civil government'.³ The character and system of Augustus continue to throw their shadow over later emperors and are felt as an implied standard of reference especially for Diocletian and Constantine. He is introduced again

1. DF, iii, I, 66.

2. DF, iii, I, 67-8.

3. DF, iii, I, 78.

in the famous chapter on Roman jurisprudence as having levelled the Romans 'by the equality of servitude' and of setting his successors an example in dealing with 'the mischief of popular assemblies'.¹ Finally he is used in a contrast with an emperor of a later age, Charles IV, but again the common feature of both is dissimulation and the disguise of their true character. 'If we annihilate the interval of time and space between Augustus and Charles, strong and striking will be the contrast between the two Caesars; the Bohemian, who concealed his weakness under the mask of ostentation, and the Roman, who disguised his strength under the semblance of modesty'.² Augustus, though not actually on the stage of history presented in The Decline and Fall, is an indispensable source of comment on others and is, with his counterpart Constantine, perhaps the best illustration of Gibbon's development of character in terms of dominant qualities and motives.

In analysing character, Gibbon also warned against the danger of our being deceived by what he called 'specious' or 'apparent virtues'. It is possible for a person, particularly a prince, to mislead by concealing his vices; it is also possible for the observer to be misled by concentrating his 'specious virtues'. Does a character appear to change considerably over a period? This may be due, as Gibbon's Constantine shows, to his dropping a false appearance imposed by prudence to disguise a ruling and selfish passion. But it may also be due to a too casual reading of what seem at first sight to

1. DF, xliv, IV, 477.

2. DF, xlix, V, 330.

be the characteristics of a virtuous nature, but are in fact merely superficial, not the outgrowth of the inner man. In comparing the abdications of Diocletian and Charles V, Gibbon suggested that despite deep differences, the characters of both emperors were marked by 'specious virtues' which 'were much less the effect of nature than of art'.¹

A certain degree of 'artfulness' was to be expected in most rulers, not just in blatant cases like Augustus and Constantine. A good example of the discovery of these 'specious virtues' is to be seen in Gibbon's reference to 'the remarkable alteration of...character or conduct' in the emperor Gratian. He suggested to his reader that this was not to be put down, as one might readily suppose, 'to the arts of flattery', with which he had been surrounded from his infancy. The judicious reader with moral discernment, the sort of reader Gibbon always had in mind, would want to look deeper: 'A more attentive view of the life of Gratian may perhaps suggest the true cause of the disappointment of the public hopes. His apparent virtues, instead of being the hardy productions of experience and adversity, were the premature and artificial fruits of a royal education'.² Without the proper soil, essential to moral growth, these courtly 'virtues' soon withered and disappeared. But in all fairness even to an artful

1. DF, xiii, I, 416.

2. DF, xxvii, III, 140. The 'apparent virtues' of Gratian were 'his gentle and amiable disposition', 'the graceful affability of his manners' and his 'liberality', while literary men, soldiers and clergy praised his 'taste and eloquence', 'his valour and dexterity in arms' and his 'humble piety'.

character like Constantine, Gibbon pointed out the difficulty of deciding between the specious and the real, admitting that the former may on occasions develop into the latter. 'As real virtue is sometimes excited by undeserved applause, the specious piety of Constantine, if at first it was only specious, might gradually, by the influence of praise, of habit, and of example, be matured into serious faith and fervent devotion'.¹

Gibbon's consistent practice in The Decline and Fall shows his feeling of moral obligation to arrive at a fair assessment of character in order to present, as he said of Constantine, 'a just portrait', in which the real motives are discovered, in which the historian achieves impartiality, and which is agreeable to the truth of history. Writing of another historian's failure to always satisfy this moral obligation, he warned his reader, 'a lover of truth will peruse with a critical eye the instructive anecdotes of Procopius. The secret historian represents only the vices of Justinian, and those vices are darkened by his malevolent pencil'.² Though no great admirer of Justinian, Gibbon sought to do him justice, judging his actions on their individual merits and motives and, as with his other characters, giving him the benefit of the doubt where the record of history was not clear cut. Thus he obviously had in mind his own very different standards when he wrote of those shown by Procopius: 'Ambiguous actions are imputed to the worst motives; error is confounded with guilt, accident with design, and laws with abuses; the partial injustice of a moment is dexterously applied as the general maxim of a reign of thirty-two years'.³

1. DF, xx, II, 325.

2. DF, xl, IV, 252.

3. DF, loc.cit.

Just as Gibbon regarded moderation as a cardinal, almost an essential virtue in others, so too it is the key to his own presentation of character. 'The same kind of balanced judgement is found in all the portraits of Gibbon. One of their most typical features is the delineation of virtues and vices with which each study concludes'.¹ He even anticipated the reader's expectation when, in his fifth volume, he wrote: 'At the conclusion of the life of Mahomet, it may perhaps be expected, that I should balance his faults and virtues'; but he confessed the difficulty of doing justice to the prophet's character darkly glimpsed across twelve centuries.² Even if, at times there seems a somewhat monotonous regularity about this final weighing up of the good and bad points of character, it at least emphasises the certainty of this balanced judgement as part of a 'just delineation', 'a faithful picture' of the person concerned. 'While we applaud the justice, we should not overlook the policy of Aurelian',³ Gibbon wrote very typically, thus illustrating his invariable approach to characterisation.

If a historian is too much involved in the events he is narrating, or too decidedly partisan in his affiliation, he may fail to overcome personal antipathies when presenting a character and may thus betray 'the truth of history'. Zozimus stood in this relationship to the emperor Theodosius and his portrait therefore suffers from distortion: 'An historian, perpetually adverse to the fame of Theodosius, has exaggerated his vices and their pernicious effects'.⁴ This is one

1. H.L. Bond, The Literary Art of Edward Gibbon, pp. 90-91.

2. DF, I, V, 400.

3. DF, xvi, II, 124.

4. DF, xxvii, III, 196.

of those criticisms of his sources, in the form of a caution to the reader,¹ which serves once more as a foil to Gibbon's own balanced and impartial characterisation. However, he made the contrast quite obvious by explicitly stating his own approach: 'In the faithful picture of the virtues of Theodosius, his imperfections have not been dissembled; the act of cruelty, and the habits of indolence, which tarnished the glory of one of the greatest of the Roman princes'.²

The emperor Alexander Severus, with 'modest firmness' and outstanding courage, subdued a tumult of the legions at Antioch and his decisive call for order averted an ugly situation. Having related, from the Historia Augusta, this incident so indicative of the emperor's nature, Gibbon proceeded to his usual balanced assessment. Rather surprisingly, in this very section, entitled 'Defects of his Reign and Character', he inserted a very illuminating and sympathetic comment on the notable incident at Antioch, showing that he was not tied to a rigid and invariable apportioning of virtues and vices according to any formal or prearranged scheme. And again his eye was still on the motive: 'Perhaps, if the singular transaction had been investigated by the penetration of a philosopher, we should discover the secret causes which on that occasion authorised the boldness of the prince, and commanded the obedience of the troops; and perhaps, if it had been related by a judicious historian, we should find this action worthy of Caesar himself, reduced nearer to the level of probability and the common standard of the character of Alexander Severus'.³

1. See above, p. 285 and notes 2 and 3.

2. DF, xxvii, III, 195-6.

3. DF, vi, I, 170.

Not only must one beware of biased and vindictive historians whose values are distorted and whose balance is inclined to one particular side, but there is a special case of partiality which one must expect from ecclesiastical and 'monkish' historians, who see Constantine's character in terms of the Christian hero, or Louis IX's as that of the 'saint'. Against the 'fierce and partial writers' who have allotted all virtue to their side and all vice to that of their opponents and who have thus 'painted the battle of angels and demons', the philosophic and impartial historian must warn his readers: 'Our calmer reason will reject such pure and perfect monsters of vice or sanctity, and will impute an equal, or at least an indiscriminate measure of good and evil to the hostile sectaries, who assumed and bestowed the appellations of orthodox and heretics'.¹ It is the historian's call for a balanced judgement, even if, in the absence of sufficient historical evidence, this must sometimes be artificially attempted by a sort of even-handed justice on the part of the historian himself.

Partial and sectarian writers tended to deprive moral judgements of all meaning and to create monsters with black or white labels, rather than actual moral beings whose motives and choices were sometimes good, sometimes bad. They ended up with characters as mere personifications of virtue or vices. Worse still, when monkish historians tried to present a character like Louis IX, the result was an inversion of moral values as Gibbon saw them: they concentrated on the 'monkish' or saintly virtues, which to Gibbon were vices, negations of those very qualities which the fully developed human personality should exhibit; they overlooked the real virtues altogether. Here again, the result was a figure less than human, bearing little resemblance to 'nature'.

1. DF, xxii, II, 412-3.

It was, in the case of Louis IX, 'the most despicable part of his character' that these historians were 'content to applaud', while one like 'the noble and gallant Joinville', who knew him as a man and a soldier, sharing his friendship and his captivity, 'has traced with the pencil of nature the free portrait of his virtues, as well as of his failings'.¹

If, on rare occasions, Gibbon tended to use a rule of thumb by which to reach a balanced verdict on a much disputed character, it was that which he laid down for his revaluation of Constantine: 'By the impartial union of those defects which are confessed by his warmest admirers, and those virtues which are acknowledged by his most implacable enemies, we might hope to delineate a just portrait of that extraordinary man', quite agreeable to 'the truth and candour of history'.² It was, as Jordan points out, 'a technique familiar to the religious controversialists of the seventeenth century and perfected by Bayle. He took Constantine's virtues from his enemies and his vices from his friends'.³

This technique should certainly produce a balance, but will it produce a human being? Gibbon was well aware of this problem, and his caution forms a satisfactory answer to those critics who see a rather mechanical distribution of vices and virtues at the end of each account of the life of the significant persons in his History.

1. DF, lix, VI, 374.

2. DF, xviii, II, 214.

3. Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 197. In a footnote, DF, xviii, II, 216, n. 2, Gibbon gave his main sources for Constantine's virtues. For Gibbon's view of Bayle's balancing 'opposite qualities' 'in his sceptical scales', see Memoirs, pp. 64-5.

'It would soon appear', he admitted, that the vain attempt to blend such discordant colours, and to reconcile such inconsistent qualities, must produce a figure monstrous rather than human, unless it is viewed in its proper and distinct lights, by a careful separation of the different periods of the reign of Constantine'.¹ His solution, reached after the most intense concentration and revision, found expression, as we have seen, not only in 'a careful separation' of the splendid general from the later degenerate ruler, but also in the repeated resolution of these opposing aspects in terms of a single constant and ruling passion, namely 'boundless ambition'.

Gibbon saw his 'impartial' approach to the prominent figures of history as involving the correction of a traditional but unbalanced judgement, which often led him to propose a new view somewhere between the partisan extremes which had been perpetuated down to his own day. With character, as with facts, he saw that 'the truth of history might perhaps be found in a just medium between these extreme and contradictory assertions'.² This was especially necessary when confronted with the protagonists of two opposing parties, who had set 'the first Christian emperor' over against 'the Apostate'. It was, indeed, in his treatment of the latter that Gibbon felt he had achieved a quite 'impartial balance' which even strong critics of The Decline and Fall accepted.³ It was significantly in the context of presenting this emperor's character, that he referred to the ancient Roman custom at funerals and triumphs, a custom practised at Julian's own funeral,

1. DF, xviii, II, 214.

2. DF, xxvi, III, 135.

3. See Memoirs, p. 162. 'My impartial balance of the virtues and vices of Julian was generally praised'.

by which 'the voice of praise should be corrected by that of satire and ridicule'; and while displaying 'the glory of the living or of the dead, their imperfections should not be concealed from the eyes of the world'.¹

Radical revaluations of traditional and accepted views of historical events and characters usually need some word of justification to pave the way for a fair reception. At the beginning of his central chapter on Julian, Gibbon presented the rationale for his reappraisal. 'The character of Apostate has injured the reputation of Julian; and the enthusiasm which clouded his virtues, has exaggerated the real and apparent magnitude of his faults. Our partial ignorance may represent him as a philosophic monarch, who studied to protect with an equal hand, the religious factions of the empire, and to allay the theological fever which had inflamed the minds of the people from the edicts of Diocletian to the exile of Athanasius. A more accurate view of the character and conduct of Julian will remove this favourable prepossession for a prince who did not escape the general contagion of the times'.² If traditional prejudices, labels like 'apostate', and popular misconceptions involved in the cliché, 'philosophic monarch', can be peeled off, the way is open for 'a more accurate view' of the man.³

How did Gibbon hope to achieve this correction of perspective? By the same technique as he applied to his characterisation of Constantine. 'We enjoy the singular advantage of comparing the pictures

1. DF, xxiv, II, 557.

2. DF, xxii, II, 456.

3. See e.g. Robert Browning, The Emperor Julian. London, 1975, especially, p. 231.

which have been delineated by his fondest admirers, and his implacable enemies', he wrote of Julian; and amongst these balanced sources, is the first hand account of his actions 'faithfully related by a judicious and candid historian, the impartial spectator of his life and death'.¹

So also in the case of Charlemagne, Gibbon accepted 'the confessions of an enemy...as the safest evidence of his virtues'.² Authorities from both sides and a faithful record from a historian who could be described as 'candid' and 'impartial': here we have criteria to satisfy the moral categories underlying The Decline and Fall.³

A noble and more credible Julian emerges, a man characterised by tolerance, moderation, gentleness and learning, yet also infected by ambition, superstition, and occasionally by prejudice. An index of Gibbon's commitment to this 'more accurate view' of a 'hero' whom he personally found very attractive, can be seen in his disclosure of a motive which does not flatter Julian in the least. His ban on Christians teaching grammar and rhetoric was excused by friends and supporters as well as by the emperor himself. Indeed, 'the motives alleged by the emperor to justify this partial and oppressive measure might command, during his lifetime, the silence of slaves and the applause of flatterers'. By the judgement of posterity, however, a judgement which Gibbon endorsed, 'a just and severe censure has been inflicted on the law' which discriminated so harshly against one section of the population.⁴ So too, in other instances, according to Gibbon, Julian was restrained from violating even his own 'laws of justice and toleration' only by 'the care of his reputation, which was exposed to the eyes of the universe'.⁵

1. DF, xiii, II, 456.

2. DF, xliii, V, 459.

3. See above chaps. IV, pp. 126-7; V, pp. 189-91.

4. DF, xxiii, II, 487.

5. DF, xxiii, II, 489.

In his characterisation we can see the historian revealing himself very clearly as moralist not only in the impartiality of a portrait with which he felt great satisfaction, but also in the scrupulous honesty which refused, unlike many of his contemporaries, to set up Julian 'the philosophic monarch' as a model for their own 'philosophic age'. As a modern biographer of this emperor has put it: 'The men of the eighteenth century tended to see Julian in their own image, as the incarnation of dispassionate reason and the foe of obsolete superstition. Gibbon was honest enough and learned enough to perceive the difficulties of this interpretation...Thus Diderot made of Julian "l'honneur de l'eclectisme" and Voltaire, who was constantly using him as an example, was embarrassed by his evident religiosity, which he tried to explain away or to ignore as unimportant'.¹ Gibbon's obligation to 'the candour of history' allowed him to do neither; and he exposed Voltaire's admiration for Amurath, 'le philosophe Turc', as due not to honesty but to bigotry.²

It has already been shown how Gibbon's view of people in history was very much influenced by considerations of the nature of the period in which they lived.³ Underlying his assessment of character, we find this relative standard in conjunction with those other criteria of impartiality and balance which we have been considering. There are, he felt, ages of giants and ages of pigmies;⁴ and the character of a man must be seen against the stature of his contemporaries. In this

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1. Robert Browning, The Emperor Julian, p. 231. Voltaire, in his Dictionnaire philosophique, referred to him as everywhere the equal of Marcus Aurelius, and even as 'peut-être le premier des hommes, ou du moins le second'.
 2. DF, lxvii, VII, 146, n. 15.
 3. See above, pp. 263-264 of the present chapter.
 4. See DF, ii, I, 62-4 and in particular the statement that 'the Roman world was indeed peopled by a race of pygmies'. (p. 64).

view, Stilicho towered above his age and Boethius shone out with added lustre in a dark and degenerate period of history.¹ Constantine's virtues 'were rendered more illustrious by the vices of Maxentius',² while, on the other hand, 'the vices of Chosroes' 'were frankly admitted to be simply 'those of Oriental despotism'.³ Julian's character, said Gibbon, 'did not escape the contagion of the times'.⁴ This phrase, which recurs in The Decline and Fall, is a further illustration of Gibbon's commitment to a judgement which is moderate, impartial and even generous, because it is essentially relative. Thus the emperor Claudius for all his admirable qualities, had 'not entirely escaped the 'contagion of the times'.⁵ If there is impartiality, there is also moderation in the recognition that, considering the times, the man deserves some praise for remaining relatively free from surrounding vices. And even more generous is the statement concerning Belisarius, that 'his virtues were his own', while 'his imperfections flowed from the contagion of the times'.⁶

Another sort of relative judgement is invoked where it is felt that allowance must be made for circumstances which have been either too harsh or too kind to a particular character. Since a partial or or imperfect view might result, it is the duty of the truthful historian to draw attention to this fact so that the reader may adjust his judgement.

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1. DF, xxix, III, 237ff., especially p. 238 ('the Roman generals might yield the pre-eminence of rank to the ascendant of superior genius' in Stilicho); and for Boethius, see xxxix, IV, 211.
 2. DF, xiv, I, 445.
 3. DF, xlii, IV, 386.
 4. DF, xxiii, II, 48.
 5. DF, xi, I, 308.
 6. DF, xlii, IV, 365.

Gibbon therefore took care to do so by pointing out that 'the precarious and dependent situation of Julian', in his role of general and governor of Gaul, actually displayed his virtues and concealed his vices'.¹

In The Decline and Fall, the great figures of history are judged in terms of their 'true character' and their contribution to the welfare and happiness of mankind. Hence the question arises: How far is their title to greatness justified when judged according to such moral criteria? Constantine, Julian and Justinian from an earlier period, and Charlemagne from a new era,² are recalled to the bar of history to allow Gibbon to present the case for a more impartial verdict. The evidence is re-examined, the standards of the age are taken into account, and the impartiality of the witnesses is scrutinised. Thus, as we have seen in the case of Justinian, Gibbon wished to set aside the biased testimony of 'the secret historian', Procopius, who continually attributed base motives to the emperor and blamed him for the wrongs of others and even the calamities of the age.³ In his detailed assessment of the character and achievements of this emperor, whose life and work stretch across no less than five chapters of The Decline and Fall,⁴ Gibbon was really testing Justinian's claim to true greatness.⁵

1. DF, xix, II, 303. Julian had recently been appointed Caesar at Milan in AD 365.
2. The second of the three periods into which Gibbon divided his History in the original preface of 1776, opened with Justinian and ended with Charlemagne (see Preface of the Author, p. iv; in Bury's edition, I, xxxix-xl). However, as Gibbon said of Charlemagne, 'Europe dates a new area from his restoration of the Western Empire'. (xlix, V, 306).
3. DF, xl, IV, 251-2, cf. 224-6.
4. Chaps. xl to xliv.
5. DF, xliii, IV, 459ff. Gibbon also used the method employed for Constantine and Julian: 'the confessions of an enemy may be received as the safest evidence of his virtues'. (xliii, IV, 459).

The clearest instance of such a re-examination is to be found in the account of Charlemagne, where Gibbon opened his case with the statement: 'The appellation of great has been often bestowed and sometimes deserved'.¹ In the first hearing, where Charlemagne's performance in family life, in administration and on the battlefield are considered, he fares badly. In the domestic sphere, it is found that 'of his moral virtues, chastity is not the most conspicuous', though it is admitted that this need not necessarily render him a bad ruler. However, in the government of his empire, it is alleged that his laws, though perhaps well-intentioned, 'were not less sanguinary than his arms'; and in the use of arms, he abused the rights of conquest, sometimes acting with callous lack of both humanity and justice.² After this initial examination, it is nevertheless admitted that there are many counts on which the emperor is entitled to praise, above all his 'encouragement of learning', which, said Gibbon, 'reflects the purest and most pleasing lustre on the character of Charlemagne'.³ Yet in Gibbon's account this is faint praise, since he took good care to qualify the appellation 'great'. Here was yet another of those characters who, like Constantine and Justinian, had long been accepted as both great and good. Charlemagne, however, enjoyed the unique distinction of having the title 'great' 'indissolubly blended with the name'. The title of 'saint' was also added to his name in the Roman calendar, and most surprising of all to Gibbon, 'the saint, by a rare felicity, is crowned with the praises of the historians and

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1. DF, xlix, V, 302-3. Not unlike Constantine, Charlemagne is, as Gibbon noted, also accepted as a saint.
 2. DF, xlix, V, 303-4.
 3. DF, xlix, V, 306.
 4. DF, xlix, V, 306.

philosophers of an enlightened age'.¹ Hence it is all the more incumbent on Gibbon to check the credentials of this ruler whose sainthood, under closer scrutiny, appears somewhat tarnished and whose title to greatness rather doubtful. In the interests of justice and impartiality, he appealed to his relative standard of judgement: 'His real merit is doubtless enhanced by the barbarism of the nation and the times from which he emerged; but the apparent magnitude of an object is likewise enlarged by an unequal comparison; and the ruins of Palmyra derive a casual splendour from the nakedness of the surrounding desert'. The conclusion, so damning by its ironic understatement, and especially in view of what Gibbon went on to show of Charlemagne's true character, is this: 'Without injustice to his fame, I may discern some blemishes in the sanctity and greatness of the restorer of the Western Empire'.²

Gibbon had declared in his Essai that small traits are often more revealing than brilliant deeds and that Alexander displayed his character more clearly in the tent of Darius than on the battlefield of Guagmila.³ So to in The Decline and Fall, he sought for the unpremeditated as being the most reliable actions for revealing the true character of his figures. This is well illustrated by a scene in the life of the emperor Claudius. Gibbon had previously shown that emperor exercising clemency towards the supporters of the defeated Aureolus, but reserving 'for himself the pleasure and merit of obtaining by his intercession a general act of indemnity'.⁴ But the historian

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1. DF, xlix, V, 303. Gibbon cited Mably, Voltaire, Robertson and Montesquieu (n.100).
 2. DF, xlix, V, 303. 'In the discussion of his motives', Gibbon concluded 'whatever is subtracted from bigotry must be imputed to temper'. (p. 304).
 3. Essai, L, p. 64.
 4. DF, xi, I, 308.

recognised the danger in the use of such evidence of character, for Claudius like Julian, obviously had an eye on 'the care of his reputation' in public actions of this kind. They are unlikely to reveal pure and unmixed motives. 'Such ostentation discovers less of the real character of Claudius than a trifling circumstance in which he seems to have consulted only the dictates of his heart'.¹ Then follows the scene in which an old woman complained of the arbitrary appropriation of her property by a general of the late emperor. Claudius recognised himself in the general, 'blushed at the reproach', and, we are told, 'deserved the confidence which she had reposed in his equity'. He confessed his fault and made 'immediate and ample restitution'.² Such an anecdote, which a historian concerned only with politics, battles, and great events might have discarded, Gibbon saw as vital to the discovery of true character. In the light of this little scene, the arbitrary action of the general was found to be not indicative of a ruthless and merciless nature, but merely an isolated blemish due to the prevailing 'contagion of the times' upon an essentially upright man.

The emperor Valens is one, said Gibbon, whose memory has been injured because of the triumph of the orthodox Christian party. Accordingly, he sought with 'candour' to arrive at a juster view of this emperor whose public acts are stained with the marks of persecution and cruelty. With such a character, so variable and so maligned, it is hard to reach a satisfactory verdict from reports of the striking

1. DF, xi, I, 308.

2. DF, xi, I, 308.

events of his reign; the real man is more likely to be found in private encounters: 'Whatever credit may be allowed to vague and distant reports, the character, or at least the behaviour, of Valens may be most distinctly seen in his personal transactions with the eloquent Basil archbishop of Caesarea'.¹

In seeking admissible evidence of real character and motives, the historian is sometimes limited by the available material. If he is dealing with kings, he must beware, as Gibbon himself frequently warned, of accepting their expressed motives at face value; and, if he is forced to use public and official pronouncements of emperors, documents which are directly concerned with enhancing their own reputation, then there must be safeguards. Recognising this in his treatment of Galerius' edict of toleration, he admitted: 'It is not usually in the language of edicts and manifestos that we should search for the real character or secret motives of princes; but, as these were the words of a dying emperor, his situation perhaps might be admitted as a pledge of his security'.² This is an interesting comment on Gibbon's use of his sources. It is yet another example, not only of his treatment of each case on its own merits by admitting any relevant or extenuating evidence, but also of his duty as moralist to each individual character, from the standpoint of posterity.

1. DF, xxv, III, 28.

2. DF, xvi, II, 142.

Gibbon's deep concern with character throughout The Decline and Fall is declared even in marginal headings and chapter outlines.

Apart from those referring to virtues and vices, to various human traits or to particular instances of these, we find over seventy which explicitly promise a treatment of character.¹ In one sense the whole work is largely concerned with the actions and characters of the persons who move across its ample stage. Though we need not attribute to Gibbon a 'great-man theory' of history, his monarchs and generals, administrators and powerful religious leaders do seem for a time to hold in their hands the fortunes of nations, empires or adherents of the faith: on the nature of their character the misery or well-being of peoples appears to depend. On several occasions Gibbon stressed the pivotal importance of an individual. Having sketched his famous picture of human happiness in the Antonine age, he immediately pointed to 'the instability of a happiness which depended on the character of a single man'.² At a later stage he noted that 'a state or empire may be indebted for their safety and prosperity to the undaunted courage of a single man'.³ When the Goths had crossed the Danube, Theodosius hesitated whether he should involve 'his exhausted people' in further warfare. 'In this moment of anxious doubt', Gibbon declared, 'the fate of the Roman world depended on the resolution of a single man'.⁴ In Charles

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1. I refer to the numerous subheadings like, 'Character and Policy of Augustus', 'Character of Commodus', 'Their Characters', 'His Character'.
 2. DF, iii, I, 86. This was, as Gibbon suggested, inevitable under the Augustan constitution. Cf. DF, xxxviii, IV, 177: 'The happiness of an hundred millions depended on the personal merit of one or two men'.
 3. DF, xv, II, 37.
 4. DF, xxvii, III, 172. Cf. also xxix, III, 240: 'The various multitudes of Europe and Asia...were overawed by the authority of a single man; and the rigid discipline of Stilicho protected the lands of citizen from the rapine of the licentious soldier'.

Martel he saw 'Christendom delivered by the genius and fortune of one man';¹ while, in Charlemagne's day, 'the union and stability of his empire depended on the life of a single man'.² In the establishment of the Ottoman empire, Gibbon assigned the most important place 'to the personal qualities of the sultans'; for, he wrote, stating what he regarded as a general principle: 'in human life, the most important scenes will depend on the character of a single actor'.³

Gibbon found this principle just as applicable to his own times as to those he dealt with in The Decline and Fall. Surveying the contemporary scene at the end of 1789, he saw France in a state of anarchy, deprived of her former strength and vigour. In this situation he looked in vain for a man of strong character like Richelieu or Cromwell to restore the nation's former greatness. 'How many years must elapse', he asked, 'before France can recover any vigour, or resume her station among the powers of Europe? As yet there is no symptom of a great man, a Richelieu or a Cromwell arising either to restore the Monarchy or to lead the Commonwealth'.⁴

1. DF, lii, VI, 16.

2. DF, xlix, V, 305.

3. DF, lxv, VII, 81. Referring to Bajazet's victorious march through Hungary and Germany to Rome being checked by a painful fit of gout, Gibbon noted how such an ailment 'falling on a single fibre of one man may prevent or suspend the misery of nations'. (DF, lxiv, VII, 37).

4. Written to Lord Sheffield, 15/12/ 89, Letters, lll, 184.

Given the importance of 'the character of a single actor' in the shaping of events, we would expect certain consequences in the historian's work. And these we can observe in The Decline and Fall. In the first place, this view is reflected in Gibbon's presentation of his material; secondly, the instructive side of history finds its main illustration in the lives and characters of these actors; and thirdly, arising out of this is the moral obligation to arrive at the authentic character of the person concerned.

Firstly, then, as we study the development of Gibbon's plan and presentation, we can perceive a moral coherence worked out very largely through the interplay of character and external forces. In the earlier part of the work, this plan 'is in essence simple: it is to demonstrate the sources and the progress of Roman weakness, and, in so doing, to demonstrate those weaknesses of universal human nature which are, in the end, self-destructive'.¹ This is seen in the lives of emperors and leaders grappling with great problems in a period of continuing decline; and the struggle or failure to struggle with these internal and external problems reveals the character of the man. It shows the opposite possibilities of men, either to sink in abject indulgence and surrender, or to control and master the forces arrayed against them.

In the second part of his work, as Jordan points out, Gibbon's emphasis moves still more away 'from institutions, classes, and impersonal forces to individuals...He concentrates on those characters in the past who were not overcome by circumstances...The relationship

1. Parkinson, Edward Gibbon, p. 76. Parkinson has taken as an example of this aim, a study of volume II, on the basis of which his remarks are made.

between the individual and impersonal forces becomes the dominant theme. And the exceptional individual, able to understand his circumstances, able to order his life despite historical forces working against him, becomes the hero of The Decline and Fall'.¹ The type of hero Gibbon had in mind is clearly stated in his own revision of that work, which he began towards the end of 1790 but which he never carried through. There he wrote that 'the first place in the hall of fame is due and is assigned to the successful heroes who had struggled in adversity; who after signalling their valour in the deliverance of their country, have displayed their wisdom and virtue in the foundation or government of a flourishing state. Such men were Moses, Cyrus, Alfred, Gustavus Vasa, Henry IV of France, etc. and, in Rome, perhaps above all others, Trajan'.²

Of the men here singled out as examples, one religious leader and five kings, none belongs to The Decline and Fall, so that we do not have Gibbon's direct comments on how they especially satisfied his standard. They must all at least have had, in his eyes, ideals of wisdom and virtue as well as the active attributes of valour and service to their nation. He referred to Alfred as 'the most glorious of the English kings';³ the virtues of Henry IV he saw as the antithesis of the 'savage character' of Clovis and his 'personal prowess' as comparable to that of Belisarius, Pyrrhus and Alexander.⁴ In his early work on the monarchy of the Medes, Gibbon wrote at length of Cyrus as one who

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1. Gibbon and His Roman Empire, pp. 228-9.
 2. Marginal Notes from Gibbon's 2nd edition of The Decline and Fall, in Bury's 1900 ed., Introd. xxxvi. See also Craddock, The English Essays of Edward Gibbon, p. 587 for the dating of these notes.
 3. DF, xxxix, IV, 216.
 4. DF, xxxviii, 118, where Henry and Clovis 'suggest the most opposite ideas of human nature'; xli, IV, 335, where Henry is grouped with these generals.

had left in Asia a name which survived the ruin of his empire.¹ There he aimed to do with Cyrus what he later did in the great portraits of Constantine and Julian, namely to set aside an extreme and unbalanced view and arrive at an appreciation of the true character of this philosophic ruler and man of action.² Still, in contrast to Henry I, 'Cyrus n'avait point l'âme de Henry IV dont on n'a jamais lu l'histoire sans attendrissement; de ce prince qui pleuroit le triste sort de ses sujets rebelles, et qui aimait son peuple, comme les autres rois ont aimé la gloire'.³ And Trajan, hero 'perhaps above all others' in Rome, though he too suffered from this ambition for fame, 'the vice of the most exalted characters',⁴ was nevertheless included with the Antonines in that 'golden age' which preceded the long decline.⁵

The 'heroes' who had attracted the young Gibbon as he searched for a subject 'fit for history', had been set aside as morally inadequate or lacking universal appeal for a really great work.⁶ The mature historian, reflecting on that work now completed, expressed in a sentence in his revision, the criteria for a true hero. Even valour in a worthy cause was not enough; there must be also those moral requisites, 'wisdom and virtue' and public service. Here was the standard of excellence both in the state, whether republic or empire, and in the

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1. 'Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Mèdes', MW, III, 122; see also following pages.
 2. ibid., p. 146. 'Il a fallu se livrer à une discussion un peu longue, pour apprécier le vrai caractère de Cyrus'.
 3. ibid., MW, III, 132.
 4. DF, i, I, 6. In his notes for revision, Gibbon altered 'characters' to 'minds'.
 5. DF, iii, I, 86.
 6. See above, chap. IV, pp. 127ff.

ruler, whose chief concern should be the happiness and prosperity of his people.¹ In this note on his finished work Gibbon underlined those qualities to which he had already given such prominence,² and recalled the standard he had in mind as he portrayed and assessed his characters in The Decline and Fall.

But if history is to be not only interesting but instructive, and if it is concerned so largely with the actions and characters of its 'actors', then these will provide the main source of instruction. So a second consequence is that the philosophic historian will discern useful lessons by which the morally enlightened can profit. Gibbon, however, did not suggest that one could model one's life on these historical characters, nor that they were exempla in the sense that Bolingbroke proposed. His presentation is at once more subtle and complex, reflecting the complexity he saw in human nature. But he did see living instances of ambition, avarice, superstition, generosity, contentment, of vice and folly or of wisdom and virtue in the men and women who people his work. As we observe him tracing the life of Julian, we are shown where and how that emperor erred, his deception or his confusion of motives, and the pitfalls a truly 'philosophic monarch' would have avoided. We are given a severe moral lesson in the chapters on Constantine, from the glowing picture of the youth with his promise of moral greatness, through the aspiring general whose 'ruling passion'

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1. See marginal note, DF, 1900 ed. Introd. xxxvi; and above, chap. V, pp. 219-220, 238.
 2. See the conclusion of L.P. Curtis' article already quoted, to the effect that Gibbon's 'entire history revolves around a formula, around three words...virtue, wisdom and power'. ('Gibbon's Paradise Lost', op.cit., p. 79).

gradually took over, to the final degeneration when this 'boundless ambition' dominated the unchecked autocrat. A similar sad and moral story is brought to us in the final scene presented by Gibbon in the life of another great figure, who becomes an example of 'the jurisdiction of conscience and the remorse of kings...After a life of virtue and glory, Theodoric was now descending with shame and guilt into the grave'.¹

This instructive approach is the pattern of characterisation applied to one ruler after another. As Gibbon turned his mind to the story of declining Rome, he was sure that nowhere in modern history could he discover characters who presented such 'a strong and various picture of human nature' as in the annals of the Roman emperors. 'In the conduct of these monarchs', he wrote, 'we may trace the utmost lines of vice and virtues; the most exalted perfection and the meanest degeneracy of our own species'.² Nor did he fail to exploit this rich mine of human character. Indeed, as we noticed in the case of motives, which he often personified,³ so too, these vices and virtues, whether those of the emperors or of other men and women, frequently become the real actors, or at least the masks of the actors in his drama. It has been suggested that his real villains 'are not so much particular Roman emperors, or particular tribes of barbarians, or groups of believers, Christian or pagan: the villains are ease, sloth, and luxury; enthusiasm, zeal, and fanaticism; arrogance, pride and vanity. They are seen, as they must be, as embodied in particular persons, classes and races, philosophies and religions; but the real culprit is the uneducated, irrational, and (if we may use such an expression when writing of Gibbon's work) unregenerate human nature'.⁴

1. DF, xxix, IV, 217.

2. DF, iii, I, 86.

3. See the present chapter, p. 265.

4. Parkinson, op.cit., pp. 76-77.

Yet even if such an impression is created by the recurrence of these abstract nouns on page after page of The Decline and Fall, its historical figures are never mere personifications of these qualities, but real men and women. They are neither wholly good or bad, they have their moral successes and failures and because of this they have a lesson for ordinary human beings living in the same imperfect world. Those who succeed usually do so by triumphing over adverse circumstances which have tested and developed their character. 'Sweet are the uses of adversity' might be written over many of his 'heroes'; and his sensitive portrait of Athenais displays not only pleasing qualities of mind and body, but also 'a virtue tried by distress'.¹ But there were also those on whom the lessons of life were wasted. How did Gallus, for one, use his trials? 'A temper naturally morose and violent, instead of being corrected, was sowered by solitude and adversity; the remembrance of what he had endured disposed him to retaliation rather than sympathy'.² Or consider the younger Andronicus, 'who gathered the fruits of ambition; but the taste was transient and bitter; in the supreme station he lost the remains of his early popularity; and the defects of his character became still more conspicuous to the world'.³ The plain message of Gibbon's statements is that man can rise above his misfortunes and difficulties, though he may and, in fact, frequently does succumb to them.

There are even princes who, like Gibbon himself, were able to find instruction in the varied characters of Roman history. He celebrated the good sense of Theodosius I who not only learned but applied these

1. DF, xxxii, III, 410.

2. DF, xix, II, 263-4.

3. DF, lxiii, VI, 516.

moral lessons: 'The annals of Rome in a long period of eleven hundred years presented him with a various and splendid picture of human life; and it has been observed that whenever he perused the cruel acts of Cinna, of Marius, or of Sylla, he warmly expressed his generous detestation of those enemies of humanity and freedom. His disinterested opinion of past events was usefully applied as the rule of his own actions'.¹ Gibbon's own great History is also a testimony to the fact that the exemplary value of the unparalleled vices and virtues of the emperors, as well as 'the splendid theatre on which they were acted, have saved them from oblivion'.²

Since the 'single actor' often plays a most important role in history, and since his character can afford such instruction to future ages, the duty of the historian is clear: he must present an impartial and authentic account of that character. But in seeking to do this, as Gibbon was well aware, he is immediately confronted by the problem of his sources. They may reflect a partisan bias which has sometimes become well established in a traditional distortion, such as the opposing presentations of Constantine.

It is often the case that prominent persons have been misjudged; that justice has never been done to their real nature. The man in an exalted position is peculiarly liable to such misjudgement because of the tendency 'to suspect the motives of princes',³ and of those who have risen to places of eminence over their fellow citizens. Even their virtues may be misconstrued or maliciously represented in a bad light.

1. DF, xxvii, III, 176.

2. DF, iii, I, 87.

3. See DF, i, I, 8 and cf. above p. 268-9 of the present chapter.

'It is easy for faction and calumny to shed their poison on the administration of the best princes and even to accuse their virtues by artificially confounding them with those vices to which they bear the nearest affinity'.¹ Or it may be not the voice of calumny but of flattery. Thus Valentinian's favourites sometimes deceived his judgement: 'They praised his inflexible love of justice, and, in pursuit of justice, the emperor was easily tempted to consider clemency as a weakness and passion as a virtue'.² It is when the word of flatterers and favourites is accepted by a partial or an uncritical historian that this moral distortion is perpetuated. By such a confusion of moral values, by a deliberate reversal of vices and virtues, by exaggeration or false emphases, a distortion of the true character is handed down to posterity. With a keen suspicion of the likelihood of such bias or distortion, Gibbon was always on the alert when using ecclesiastical or court historians.

He was also aware of that other danger, to which he felt church historians were especially prone, namely the application of a harsh and over rigid standard of judgement which likewise robbed a man of his 'true character'. Against such harsh and ungenerous censures the reader is warned. If Gibbon presented the Empress Theodora as 'the royal prostitute', as perhaps Justinian's most obvious weakness and the symbol of his poor judgement, he was determined not to let the narrow or self-righteous critics have the last word. His own very flexible and compassionate moral outlook enabled him to write:

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1. DF, vii, I, 184.
 2. DF, xxv, III, 20-21.

'Those who believe that the female mind is totally depraved by the loss of chastity, will eagerly listen to all the invectives of private envy or popular resentment, which have dissembled the virtues of Theodora, exaggerated her vices, and condemned with rigour the venal or voluntary sins of the youthful harlot'.¹ In somewhat similar vein he expressed what he felt to be a true and humane estimate of Theodosius: 'The unfeeling critics, who consider every amorous weakness as an indelible stain on the memory of a great and orthodox emperor, are inclined, on this occasion to dispute the evidence of the historian Zosimus. For my own part, I shall frankly confess, that I am willing to find, or even to seek, in the revolutions of the world, some traces of the mild and tender sentiments of domestic life; and amidst the crowd of fierce and ambitious conquerors, I can distinguish, with peculiar complacency, a gentle hero, who may be supposed to receive his armour from the hands of love'.²

There is no doubt that Gibbon was more interested in people than politics. Neither its systems nor its philosophies presented the living instruction he found in the great characters of history. Though he acknowledged a debt to Montesquieu, he followed a different course in his own work. Roman history was for him far more than a "'case study" for a general typology of political regimes'.³ And he saw 'second-century Rome as representing a privileged moment in human history', instructive primarily for its unequalled characters rather than its political philosophy. 'Gibbon was, in fact, indifferent to the

1. DF, xl, V, 230.

2. DF, xxvii, II, 172.

3. François Furet, 'Civilisation and Barbarism in Gibbon's History', in Bowersock, op.cit., p. 161.

political philosophy that so excited many of his contemporaries. He wrote, as did his masters in antiquity - Thucydides, Cicero, and Tacitus - moral history. For a period to be great, it was necessary, but also sufficient, for it to have produced a certain kind of man. The emperors of the second century were his exempla; they were at once a culture and a moral'.¹

1. Furet, loc.cit.

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Dillon-Smith, David, The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Department of History, University of Wollongong, 1982. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/1426>

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V O L U M E

T W O

CHAPTER SEVEN

BARBARISM AND RELIGION

If Gibbon's work gave classical expression to the notion of Rome's decline and fall, it did not close the great debate on the end of the ancient world. To some admiring contemporaries he seemed to have said the last word and he long remained without significant challenge. But eventually new questions and fresh evidence led to a diversity of answers and emphases. Perhaps only the assumption contained in his title still seems reasonably certain, though even the appropriateness of 'fall' in relation to the Western Empire has raised doubts.¹ In discussing an aspect of the perennial question two centuries after Gibbon had gazed on the ruined greatness of the imperial city, Arnaldo Momigliano expressed satisfaction that he could at least begin with that 'piece of good news': 'it can still be considered an historical truth that the Roman Empire declined and fell'.²

There, however, agreement seemed to end and even when attention is confined to Gibbon's own contribution to the debate, there is divergence of opinion as to what constitutes the theme and crux of his version of Rome's decline and fall. Like Paradise Lost, it has stimulated the ingenuity of critics in suggesting what the work is really about.

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1. Hence The Transformation of the Roman World, as an alternative suggested by Lynn White and his collaborators in the reappraisal of that title. Uni. of California Press, 1966; and see especially his 'Conclusion', p. 301. Bury, for one, had of course raised objections many years earlier in his History of the Later Roman Empire. London, 1889. He wrote of 'what is loosely called the Fall of the Western Empire', op.cit., I, 34.
 2. 'Christianity and the Decline of the Roman Empire', in A. Momigliano (ed.), The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century. Oxford, 1963.

Hence we have the so-called 'Braudy-Jordan hypothesis', and articles raising the question of 'The subject of Gibbon's History'¹ or pointing out what his actual explanation was.²

Let us consider Jordan's comments on the question. He finds, in part one of The Decline and Fall, not too few but perhaps too many suggested 'causes' -- 'at least two dozen' -- and the result, he claims, is confusion: 'To argue that Gibbon's explanation is confusing is merely to describe his History'. We may agree; but the confusion is not in Gibbon alone, for Jordan goes on to state that he has, in fact, 'no explanation for why Rome fell'.³ Thus whether the 'causes' are intended as 'explanations' or whether any explanation at all is offered is not clear; it depends which page of Jordan's chapter one turns to. Nor is it clear whether he finds any thesis. The work, he tells us, is not held together 'by a consistent closely argued thesis'; then more decisively: 'Gibbon had no thesis or rather...abandoned his thesis about halfway through The Decline and Fall,⁴ though 'his first answer to the question "why did Rome fall"', namely through 'moral corruption', 'is usually assumed to be the thesis of his History'. 'Yet even this thesis', which is also referred to as 'his theme', 'is ambiguously stated'.⁵ 'At any rate', as we are informed a little

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1. Ian White, Cambridge Quarterly, Vol. III, No. 4, 1968, pp. 299-309.
 2. See e.g., Gerald J. Gruman, '"Balance" and "Excess" as Gibbon's Explanation of the Decline and Fall', History and Theory, Vol. I, 8 1960, pp. 75-85. See also another suggestion of Gibbon's 'real theme' in Charles T. Wood's review of The Transformation of the Roman World, History and Theory, VIII, No. 1, 1968, p. 150.
 3. Gibbon and his Roman Empire, pp. 213, 214. (*Italics mine*).
 4. ibid., p. 214, 'But if Gibbon had no thesis, or rather if he abandoned his thesis...he worked within the traditions of Renaissance historiography'.
 5. ibid., loc.cit. It is called 'his theme' on p. 226.

a little further on , 'his thesis is moral decay, not the triumph of Christianity and barbarism', although such a 'thesis...scarcely adequate to account for' the history of Rome, 'could explain nothing about' that of Constantinople.¹ Nevertheless, Christianity and barbarism we are twice reminded, is indeed Gibbon's 'original thesis', despite the fact that it is precisely at the point where he is said to have added Christianity 'to the causes of Rome's fall' that he is also said to have abandoned this 'original thesis'.² Jordan's comment is therefore not surprising: 'It is clear that he is already confused',³ and the commentator does not help to dispel the confusion.

What then is clear in all this? First, that Gibbon does concern himself with 'causes', even if somewhat casually, and secondly, that in his treatment the moral element predominates. With regard to the former, as Jordan reminds us twice over, Gibbon's suggested causes 'march across the pages of The Decline and Fall,'⁴ although 'seemingly without pattern, and seemingly unrelated to each other'.

This absence of consistent exposition of causes has long been recognised by various writers.⁵ Indeed, as a modern biographer has suggested, even 'some of Gibbon's most faithful admirers would not care to be faced with an examination question: "State in your own

1. ibid., pp. 226.

2. ibid., pp. 221, 3. The reference is to the treatment of Diocletian, DF, xiii, I, 385.

3. ibid., p. 221.

4. op.cit., pp. 213 and 226 where the identical phrase is repeated.

5. e.g. Cotter Morrison, who felt that Gibbon failed to bring his account of causation into a single focus (Gibbon. London, 1878, p. 133); D.M. Low refers to his 'perfunctory analysis of causes' (Edward Gibbon. London, 1932, p. 326); see also J.B. Black, The Art of History. London, 1926, p. 126; Per Fuglum, Edward Gibbon. Oslo and Oxford, 1953, pp. 32-40; Lewis P. Curtis, 'Gibbon's Paradise Lost', in F.W. Hilles (ed.) The Age of Johnson, pp. 73-90.

words why the Roman Empire declined and fell.'" ¹ And, like Jordan, he too claims that this is due to the plurality rather than to the lack of explanations. Yet, the repeated emphasis of the word 'seemingly' in Jordan's reference to the apparent absence of pattern and interrelation is suggestive. The absence is not quite as real as it may appear and the impression is no doubt due in part to the fact that Gibbon refrained in most cases from parcelling up his causes or indicating their relative importance, preferring to throw out suggestions at various places in the context of his unfolding narrative. Thus, with certain exceptions, the modern student, as Low pointed out, tends to find his analysis of causes in the first part of the work, disappointing, while the final volumes may 'propound and answer no questions explicitly, but their power of suggestion is inexhaustible.'²

Suggesting rather than giving final and categorical answers, Gibbon relied on the co-operation of his philosophical reader and only occasionally did he make those provocative epigrammatic statements like the celebrated reference to 'barbarism and religion', which have often been too loosely regarded as definitive causal explanations. Cautious, because scholarly and 'philosophical', he would surely have endorsed the conclusion of a modern scholar working in the same field and with two hundred years of further research behind him. A.H.M. Jones, having outlined what he considered 'the principal causes of the empire's decline,' still felt it necessary to add the caution: 'It would be difficult, and probably pointless to weigh their relative importance, for they

1. Michael Joyce, Edward Gibbon. London, 1953, p. 131.

2. D.M. Low, Edward Gibbon, p. 326. The main exceptions are chapters xv and xvi.

interacted upon one another so as to form a single complex...The decline and fall of the Roman empire was the result of a complex of interacting causes which the historian disentangles at his own peril.'¹

Such a caution makes it easier to appreciate Gibbon's reluctance to offer lists of definitive causes and also the disagreement among his commentators regarding those he did put forward. What can, however, be affirmed is that, in accounting for the decline of Rome, he emphasised what may be broadly called 'moral' factors and that even 'barbarism' and 'religion' appear in his History not so much as racial and spiritual but rather as moral categories. In our consideration of these moral categories of his work, the fact of his concern with causes and effects, their primary application to the moral realm and the validity and relevance of his 'General Observations' as a comment on the action, have already been seen. But before turning to the two specific and most celebrated factors, namely 'immoderate greatness' and 'barbarism and religion', it will be well to look further into the overall tone and effect of Gibbon's explanations.

To complement the negative impression of confusion and uncertainty in the references so far taken from Jordan's analysis, we may let him summarise this positive moral stance in The Decline and Fall. 'His thesis is moral decay,' he states unequivocally,² or 'internal moral corruption', especially that of the Roman ruling classes.³ And, if Gibbon's explanation is seen as 'confusing' or unsatisfactory, he certainly 'has a moral, almost tragic, view of the stupendous history of Rome.' In his statement of Rome's decline as the 'effect of immoderate

1. 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', History, XI, Oct.1955, p. 226.

2. op. cit., p. 226, though on p. 214 he only says 'it is usually assumed to be.'

3. ibid., pp. 214, 226.

greatness', of 'the immense fabric' collapsing under its own weight, 'such vague notions as "the artificial supports" or "the principle of decay"....are not very satisfying.' They are acceptable only 'as a moral literary view of Rome's fall.'¹ Jordan notes 'Gibbon's insistence on seeing Roman history in moral terms', and though he 'dutifully discusses' specific causes of decline, such as 'excessive taxation, military licence, economic crisis, civil war, assassination,' he returns, always, to a moral explanation. Human happiness, vice, luxury, misery, civic virtue, these are the terms in which he views the tragedy of Roman history.'² The point is clear and a study of Gibbon's text confirms it. It is in such terms and from such a standpoint that he discussed the decline of the Western empire; and, despite a difference in plan and method in the second part of the work, the same essential vocabulary of decline³ is applied to the 'degenerate' rulers and their 'servile' subjects in the East. In short, as Jordan affirms, 'Gibbon did not alter his moral scheme when his History became universal.'⁴

This 'moral scheme' saw Roman greatness not primarily in extent of territory and dominion,⁵ but in 'wisdom and virtue', in the benefits of civilization extended to its subjects, in just laws, moderate government, noble buildings and in practical improvements like the creation of the much needed port of Ostia - 'an useful ornament of Roman greatness'.⁶ The health and happiness of the empire was connected with 'virtue', liberty and moderation, its decay with vice, tyranny and excess. In this

1. ibid., pp. 214, 5.

2. ibid., p.223. Cf. p.224: 'He returns, time and again, to the moral concerns of Enlightenment humanism.'

3. See below, chap. IX.

4. op.cit., p.228.

5. See the opening of chap.ii of DF.

6. DF, ii, I, 56.

sense, then, it was perhaps superfluous to earmark particular 'causes', though they are definitely indicated from time to time. For if the exposure of vices and the emphasis on degeneracy are not to be interpreted as suggested 'causes' of decline, what are they?

It is well to remind ourselves of Gibbon's approach to the various 'causes' of decline and of the 'moral scheme' within which they are seen. There are certainly military factors. Yet the problem is not primarily a matter of weaponry, techniques, money, even man-power, but rather the loss of valour, 'military virtue', and that patriotism 'which had rendered the legions almost invincible.' Improvements and innovations, the product of nine centuries of military experience, were nullified by the 'licentiousness' of the troops.¹ Sloth and indulgence were seen by Gibbon as the real enemies, for, 'in the luxurious idleness of their quarters,' the soldiers shared their grievances and plotted revolution at the very time when a reformation was afoot which 'would have restored health and vigour to the Roman army.'² So also in a later age, despite a plentiful supply of arms, superiority in the art of construction of the engines of war and ingenuity in tactics, the real problem was that 'the solitude or degeneracy of the provinces could no longer supply a race of men to handle those weapons and to reduce the theory of war into bold and successful practice.'³

Again, there is a recognition of agriculture as a crucial factor in the preservation of the state. Yet 'under the Roman empire, the labour of an industrious people was variously, but incessantly employed,

1. DF, i, I, 10-11, 13.

2. DF, vi, I, 154. The particular reference is to Macrinus' attempted reformation of the army in the early third century. See the continued allusions to the 'insolence', 'licentiousness' and 'fury' of the Praetorians and the legions, e.g. DF, vi, I, 169.

3. DF, xlv, V, 63.

in the service of the rich.' And, while Gibbon admitted the place of luxury in the economy of an imperfect society, not only was it associated in his mind with 'vice and folly', but in actual practice, it led, as he saw, to the most remote parts of the earth being 'ransacked to supply the pomp and delicacy of Rome.'¹

Gibbon paid comparatively little attention to the economic causes of decline and, amongst these, it was rather the rift between rich and poor and the enervating effects of affluence that concerned him - the social and moral aspects of a wider economic malaise. And, writing of the soundness and defence of the empire at the beginning of the third century, he saw fit to draw a somewhat romantic contrast between the rugged and honest Caledonians, 'glowing with the warm virtues of nature, and the degenerate Romans, polluted with the mean vices of wealth and slavery.' The parallel, he noted, 'would be little to the advantage of the more civilized people.'² Indeed, instead of citing the loss of economic prosperity as a cause of general decline, Gibbon reversed the order. The prosperity to be expected of a country which 'united the various excellencies of nature and art', and actually attained in the Antonine period, had, in his view, 'gradually declined with the decline of the empire.'³ In other words, the essential decline, of which this failing prosperity was merely a symptom, lay outside the economic sphere. It was a decline associated with softness and luxury, with domestic tyranny and with the degeneracy of rulers, senators and soldiers. Thus, at length, when Alaric occupied Rome, the invaders 'were incapable of tasting the more elegant refinements of luxury, which had been prepared

1. DF, ii, I, 58, 59.

2. DF, vi, I, 142.

3. DF, xxxi, III, 350.

for the use of the soft and polished Italians.'¹

Whatever explanations and causes Gibbon suggested in the realms of administration and politics, military matters, commerce or society, we are never allowed to forget that we are dealing with a declining empire, and the re-iteration of decay in terms of 'corruption', 'degeneracy', 'selfish ambition', lazy indulgence and the loss of the old Roman virtues, traces a continuous moral line right through his History.

The tradition in which Gibbon worked has been outlined by various writers² and can be traced at least from the use of 'decline' as applied to the state, inclinatio res publica, in the days of the Roman Republic. Cicero's regret at the deterioration in Roman manners³ and the lack of great men, and the observations on 'moral decay' by historians like Livy and Sallust were part of this tradition. And Sallust's connection of decadence with the disappearance of virtus, Gibbon found again in Machiavelli. Humanist historiography reinforced for him the moral reading of historical events, though in Poggio particularly, it was strongly linked with the role of fortune. From France in his own century, his debt to Montesquieu's works on Roman greatness and decline and his l'Esprit des lois, has been repeatedly emphasised and annotated by Gibbon himself.⁴ And there is an interesting correspondence between Gibbon's moral analysis and the comments of another eighteenth-century

1. DF, loc. cit.

2. See, e.g. S. Mazzarino, The End of the Ancient World, tr. G. Holmes. London, 1966, especially chaps. 1,2,5 (though not on Gibbon); J.W. Johnstone, The Formation of English Neo-Classical Thought. Princeton U.P., 1967, chap.9; Donald Earl, The Moral and Political Tradition of Rome, London, 1967, especially chaps. IV and V.

3. De Re Publica, V, 1, 2.

4. In his Essai, his Memoirs, and in the footnotes and text of DF.

French writer, whom he transcribed during his apprenticeship in Lausanne and all of whose volumes he acquired for his library.¹

The Abbé de Vertot began his Révolutions arrivées dans le gouvernement de la République Romaine by pointing to the love of liberty as the first object of the establishment of the republic and went on to refer to the place of voluntary poverty and hard work in producing men of strength and valour and of preserving this liberty. But, after the destruction of their great rival, Carthage, 'les Romains, invincibles au-dehors, succombèrent sous le poids de leur propre grandeur.'² We are reminded of Gibbon's 'General Observations' and the collapse of the great fabric under its own weight, once 'prosperity had ripened the principle of decay.'³ So too, in Vertot: 'L'amour des riches et le luxe entrèrent dans Rome avec les trésors des provinces conquises, et cette pauvreté et cette tempérance, qui avoient formé tant de grands capitaines, tombèrent dans le mépris.' In short, it seemed that another nation had appeared on the scene, once this former 'moderation' was abandoned. Then with another phrase suggestive of the classical tradition and of Gibbon, we are told: 'Une corruption générale répandit bientôt dans tous les ordres de l'état.' Justice, votes, and office were publicly sold and not only luxury but even effeminacy was to be found in the military camp.⁴ The emphases are those of The Decline and Fall and, not surprisingly, Tacitus, Juvenal and Seneca are prominent among the sources cited by Vertot in this part of his work.

As we document Gibbon's History, we find him drawing heavily on

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1. His library contained two copies of all Vertot's Révolutions, those of the Roman Republic, Sweden and Portugal, as well as his history of the hospitaliers and of the Bretons in Gaul. See Keynes, Gibbon's Library.
 2. Vertot, op. cit., tom. I, 'Discours Préliminaire', pp. 1, 6.
 3. DF, IV, 173.
 4. Révolutions &c., I, 7, 9, 14-15.

these moral elements in the long tradition stretching from ancient Rome, through Renaissance Italy, to eighteenth-century France, but at the same time playing down the role of fortune. In the one place where he paused to comment at length on causes and effects, his 'General Observations', he gave prominence again to these moral factors. There, he began by emphasising the place of merit and discounting that of fortune in the rise of Rome. Honour and virtue are cited as the principles of the republic and the decline of Rome is associated with 'immoderate greatness' and the ill effects of increased prosperity. The key phrases underline the moralistic approach: the legions 'acquired the vices' of foreigners and mercenaries; they 'oppressed the freedom of the republic and afterwards violated the majesty of the purple'; the emperors were responsible for 'corrupting the discipline' of the forces; there was a relaxation of 'vigour' in the government; the division of the empire 'fomented the vices' inherent in the system; 'the instruments of an oppressive and arbitrary system were multiplied'; and 'a vain emulation of luxury not of merit' became the norm under the 'degenerate successors of Theodosius'. Finally, extreme distress, which unites the virtues of a free people, embitters the factions of a declining monarchy' and the empire was 'betrayed' to its enemies as the 'long period of decay' witnessed the suicidal enmity between East and West.¹

So also, in the religious factors listed in these 'Observations', we find a similar predominance of moral elements: 'the abuse of Christianity', discouragement of 'the active virtues', the 'specious demands of charity and devotion', misapplication of funds, 'earthly passions of malice and ambition' fomenting 'theological discord', the Roman world 'oppressed by a new species of tyranny', the sacred

1. DF, IV, 173-4.

'indolence of the monks embraced by a servile and effeminate age', 'the same vices' tempting 'the unworthy Romans to desert' the service of the state from 'baser motives', while over against these damaging and negative qualities are set a few morally positive ones such as 'the pure and genuine influence of Christianity' to be traced in its beneficial effects on the barbarian converts and its softening of the ferocious conquerors of the empire.¹

In this statement we have an index of what Gibbon saw as the moral disadvantages of 'the triumph of religion', already set out systematically in his fifteenth and sixteenth chapters and later portrayed in the synods, persecutions, crusades and papal rule of the second part of his work. It is also in these 'Observations' that we find that other remark which has frequently been abstracted as one of Gibbon's two primary attempts at accounting for the decline and fall of Rome: it was 'the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness.' In the light of this, 'the story of its ruin' is declared to be 'simple and obvious', whereas critics have felt that it is neither and that Gibbon himself did not find it a simple matter to account for. He is thus thought to have shuffled off the responsibility for a satisfactory answer.

That is a common reading of this part of Gibbon's text. Yet another, equally valid, is to consider the epigrammatic summary in its particular context, namely the postscript and review of a completed history of the Western empire and to remember that throughout the preceding volumes, the emphasis has been on internal decay, corruption, luxurious indolence, loss of military virtue, and for the most part degenerate rulers. There

1. DF, IV, 175.

has been no indication of a permanent remission or of a new lease of life since the Antonine period and, as Gibbon was to write in his final chapter, 'all that is human must retrograde if it do not advance.'¹

It is perhaps at first sight surprising that Toynbee, who took such an opposite view to Gibbon in many respects, almost endorsed his famous statement here, though he proposed a decline which antedated the empire altogether. But, he declared: its 'rapid downfall after the Antonine Age is seen to be not at all surprising. On the contrary it would have been surprising if the Empire had endured.'² For, like Gibbon, he saw the seeds of decay within the apparently firm structure of that empire. Given this, and the fact of an overextended empire, lacking the honour and virtue of the republic and pushing its borders and straining its resources beyond the bounds of moderation, then, in Gibbon's terms at least, its decline might well seem 'natural', even 'inevitable' - as inevitable as the financial ruin which must follow continual and unchecked overspending in private affairs.

'Moderation in all things' might well be claimed as Gibbon's rule of life. 'A moderate voluptuary' some may say, with a taste for madeira and good living, but for all that one who practised moderation himself and admired it in others. Of his tutor, Pavillard, he wrote with gratitude, 'he was rational because he was moderate,'³ while he regretted Julian's lack of moderation: he 'seldom recollected the fundamental maxim of Aristotle that true virtue is placed at an equal distance between the opposite vices.'⁴ And moderation is a key

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1. DF, lxxi, VII, 316. Cf. Voltaire's even more deterministic statement that the Roman Empire 'fell because it existed for it is after all a fact that everything must fall.' (Dictionnaire Philosophique, cited in B. Lyon, The Origin of the Middle Ages. N.Y., 1972, p.23.)
 2. A Study of History, IV, p. 61.
 3. Memoirs, p. 72.
 4. DF, xxii, II, 446.

concept in Gibbon's interpretation of the greatness and decline of Rome.

This note is sounded right at the beginning of the work and the opening chapter shows the happy and prosperous times to be founded on 'moderation'. After the rapid victories of the republic, 'it was reserved for Augustus to relinquish the ambitious design of subduing the whole earth, and to introduce a spirit of moderation into the public councils.'¹ There are not many things for which Augustus earns Gibbon's commendation, but he receives unqualified praise for this virtue at least. And 'happily for the repose of mankind, the moderate system recommended by the wisdom of Augustus,' was continued by his immediate successors.² What reversed this safe and admirable policy is said to have been the 'avarice' of the Romans, as further conquest was 'undertaken by the most stupid, maintained by the most dissolute, and terminated by the most timid of all the emperors' at a time 'when the throne was disgraced by the weakest or the most vicious of mankind.'³ The moral associations of moderation and of the destructive forces which overthrew it to the eventual ruin of the empire, are made clear: avarice, dissolution, disgraceful conduct and vice. 'The ambitious design of subduing the whole earth' was an attempt to achieve 'immoderate greatness' which would almost inevitably lead to tyranny over the Romans and their conquered subjects, as the first of many evils.⁴

1. DF, i, I, 2.

2. DF, i, I, 3.

3. DF, i, I, 4.

4. The 'present greatness' of Rome is coupled with 'the corruption and the licence of the soldiers' in pressing upon the senate the need for a monarchy into which Augustus, by now 'the crafty tyrant', stepped. The way to autocracy was thus opened and 'the principles of a free constitution' were lost. (DF, ii, I, 67).

The importance, or the necessity, of moderation is reiterated throughout the first chapter,¹ the only threat being seen as the 'ambitious spirit' of Trajan which placed him among Gibbon's 'destroyers' of mankind.² But, despite this interruption, the wise policy of the other emperors had its expected result, as we are informed in the following chapter: 'Domestic peace and union were the natural consequence of the moderate and comprehensive policy embraced by the Romans.'³ If peace and union are the natural consequence of moderation, then conversely, we would predict strife and disunity as the natural consequence of an immoderate policy and an attempt to advance beyond the limits of moderate greatness. And this is what Gibbon affirmed when he came to his 'General Observations'. Nor did the moderate policy of the early empire apply only to military and secular affairs. It is one of Gibbon's major tenets that it extended to religion and other spheres as well. Rome's religious toleration, 'the mild spirit of antiquity', avoided the 'theological rancour' of later times,⁴ and promoted harmony. Moderation characterised the life style of the people and 'the modest simplicity of private houses....announced the equal condition of freedom,'⁵ before enervating luxury destroyed this admirable way of living.

With a classical moralist's appreciation of the golden mean and avoidance of excess, Gibbon discerned a basic cause of decline in 'the

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1. e.g. 'with these moderate views' (I, 19), 'the spirit which moderated...the power of Hadrian and the Antonines' (I,20), 'the real or affected moderation of the emperors' (I,29).
 2. DF, i, I, 6, 8. Trajan's 'martial spirit...formed a very singular contrast with the moderation of his successor.' (I,8).
 3. DF, ii, I, 47.
 4. DF, ii, I, 32, 34-5.
 5. DF, ii, I, 51.

excessive magnitude' of the empire.¹ Here, his debt to his classical sources is clear; so too is his acknowledged debt to Montesquieu as well as to others in the tradition. But are his words on 'the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness,' simply, as Jordan suggests, 'an echo of Montesquieu' and an expression of his own 'fatalistic view';² or can we see beyond this? Is there not a moral inevitability about throwing moderation to the winds and ignoring the consequences - in this case, imperial decline and ultimate fall? And did not Gibbon at various points indicate that he saw in the ambitious and unrestrained extension of the empire, a root of every kind of evil? He did, in fact, make clear the moral results of this policy. Some of these we have noted; others have been referred to by Gerald Gruman who saw "'balance" and "excess" as Gibbon's explanation of the decline and fall.'³

Gruman has pointed out that moderation in extending citizenship to worthy members of conquered peoples met with Gibbon's approval as a desirable measure; but this policy of assimilation was carried to extremes so that eventually the conquerors began to be submerged by the conquered and the true Roman character was lost.⁴ This extreme policy also led to an undesirable 'uniformity' - a 'uniform government' and 'a uniform artificial foreign education' imposed on diverse provinces.⁵ Then too, as Gibbon claimed, 'the public freedom was

1. DF, xxxi, III, 377.

2. op.cit., p. 215.

3. Gruman's article with this title appeared in History and Theory, Vol.I, 1960, pp.75-85.

4. See DF, ii,I, 36-7.

5. DF, ii, I, 63.

lost in extent of conquest',¹ and the Roman world degenerated into 'a dreary prison' for the enemies of its autocratic ruler.² Furthermore, he believed that this 'universal dominion...and the resultant Pax Romana caused a deterioration of political virtues,' that 'slow and secret poison' working in 'the vitals of the empire.'³ Even war itself was 'improved into an art and degraded into a trade,' while patriotism, that ancient 'public virtue' made little impression 'on the mercenary subjects of a despotic prince,' and the mercenaries of the army, like the ordinary Roman soldier, 'were drawn from the meanest, and very frequently from the most profligate of mankind.'⁴

These were some of the evils, without taking into account those of religious origin, which to Gibbon's mind stemmed from the abandonment of moderation. It was, however, he admitted scarcely possible that in a long period of peace and apparent prosperity, contemporaries should 'discover the latent causes of decay and corruption.'⁵ They were perceptible only to the penetrating observer with moral discernment. To Gibbon, as he drew attention to the significance of these symptoms, they seemed clear enough in retrospect; and he would probably have been surprised that some twentieth-century readers and critics should feel he had not made a serious attempt to display them, in view of his later reference to them as 'simple' and 'inevitable'. Of course, more recent study of the later empire, particularly in the Byzantine period, has led to the suggestion of more substantial and varied causes of decline or survival. But the main reason why Gibbon's 'causes' have

1. DF, i, I, 10.

2. DF, iii, I, 89-90.

3. Gruman, op. cit., p.78; and see DF, ii, I, 62.

4. DF, i, I, 10, 11.

5. DF, ii, I, 61-2.

been deemed unsatisfactory and inadequate seems to be the fact that they are essentially moral and immaterial: lack of moderation with its consequent evils, and those qualities like greed, selfish ambition, laziness, indulgence, loss of ideals of service, which he often loosely included under the general notions of 'corruption' and 'decay'.

While drawing deeply on Ammianus for a moral indictment of the Romans for such qualities, Gibbon declared that he had made extensive use of the Theodosian Code, but 'as a work of history rather than jurisprudence.'¹ Here he found a basic source for documenting Rome's economic and social malaise as an obvious symptom of its decline. From his research into these symptoms there must have seemed to him a certain inevitability about the outcome. Facing one of the problems which had confronted Gibbon, namely, 'why the invasions of the fifth century succeeded while the earlier failed,' Sir Samuel Dill also appealed to the Theodosian Code and did so in terms which might well be mistaken for Gibbon's, with the same ring of 'melancholy' and the 'slow and inevitable decay': 'In the voluminous enactments issued from Constantine to Majorian, the student has before him a melancholy diagnosis of the maladies which by a slow and inevitable process of decay, were exhausting the strength of Roman society.'²

Turning from 'immoderate greatness' and the inevitability of decline, what are we to make of the more famous pair of 'causes', that is, 'barbarism and religion'? Are they put forward as causes at all and what is their moral significance? These factors, coupled for all time

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1. See his footnotes in DF and his statement here quoted from Memoirs, p. 147.
 2. Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Empire. London, 1898, revised ed., 1921, p.227.

in the famous statement in his final chapter,¹ were, without doubt, closely associated in Gibbon's mind. They have, however, been cited frequently, and sometimes rather casually, as his primary explanation or cause of Rome's fall. Even Bury, whose care and scholarship rivalled that of Gibbon,² gave this impression when he referred to the famous epigram as 'the guiding idea or "moral" of his history,' with Christianity being 'mainly to blame for the retrogression in human societies since the second century A.D.'³ E.H. Carr wrote more bluntly: 'Gibbon attributed the decline and fall of the Roman empire to the triumph of barbarism and religion,'⁴ while Jordan saw this as his 'original thesis'.⁵ Some writers, in their certainty about it, have not even been careful in quoting this alleged cause. Thus R.M. Haywood began his book by suggesting that 'Gibbon offers two reasons for Rome's fall. He speaks of the triumph of Christianity and the barbarians, and in another place asserts that the vast fabric sank under its own weight.'⁶ J.B. Morrall likewise wrote: 'The fall of the Western Empire may have been, as Gibbon maintained, due to the triumph of barbarism and Christianity'.⁷ Yet there are others who are aware that whatever we might assume Gibbon to have meant, he did not actually state that these two factors brought about the fall. Michael Joyce, for instance, has commented: 'Although at first glance Gibbon's statement seems so definite, a closer examin-

1. DF, lxxi, VII, 321.

2. See A.T. Clarke, 'The Genius of Gibbon', The Nineteenth Century, LXVIII, 1910, p.673 and his reference there to a writer in the Edinburgh Review who saw Bury 'as being in learning second to Gibbon, in scholarship superior.'

3. DF, Introd. to 1909 ed., p.vii.

4. What is History? London, 1961, Pelican repr. 1964, p.90.

5. op. cit., p. 221.

6. The Myth of Rome's Fall. N.Y., 1962, p.3.

7. The Medieval Imprint. Harmondsworth, 1967, pp.37-8. So too, R.W. Harris, Reason and Nature in Eighteenth Century Thought. London, 1968, p.360, misquotes, 'the triumph of barbarism and Christianity'.

ation may leave us in doubt whether he is seriously maintaining, as Bury would have us believe, that the connexion between the decline of Rome and the triumph of The Christian Church was of a causal nature.'¹

It is easy, however, to see why the epigram may be taken as Gibbon's 'explanation' and also why the second element should have largely dominated critical discussion, especially in view of Gibbon's best known chapters and his reaffirmation in the Memoirs of the connection between 'the triumph of the Church' and 'the decline of the Roman monarchy'.² Yet it is important to keep both factors in conjunction, for in The Decline and Fall, we find now one, now the other, uppermost in his moral consciousness, as he presented what he saw as their 'connexion with the ruin of ancient Rome.'

Gibbon saw both factors as contributing to the weakened resistance of an already declining empire, though in the actual terms of the epigram, they might just as easily be read as effects; that is, these triumphs which Gibbon has described in his preceding volumes were made possible only because of a basic and continuing weakness in the empire itself, which antedates either of these forces. In fact, he admitted that he should have taken the beginning of decline back to an even earlier period than he actually did.³ But even in his History as it stands, a decline begins to be evident with the assumption of supreme

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1. Edward Gibbon, pp. 131-2. 'But we must remember, he writes, 'that when two series of events are taking place over the same period, it cannot be assumed that one of these series is determined by the other.' We must handle Gibbon's text carefully to discover how far he saw them as determining factors. Parkinson (Edward Gibbon, p.45) referred to the implication or inference of 'a causal relationship' as seen by Gibbon's contemporaries.
 2. Memoirs, p. 147.
 3. See his revision of chapter i, in DF, I, Appendix 1, p.508. 'Should I not have deduced the decline of the Empire....even from the tyranny which succeeded the reign of Augustus? Alas! I should.'

power by 'the crafty tyrant', Augustus, and indubitably from the reign of Commodus,¹ that is to say, a considerable time before 'the triumph of Christianity'. There are also strong suggestions in The Decline and Fall that Gibbon shared the view of Roman writers and many of his contemporaries in seeing decline and moral deterioration in the late republic, in other words before 'barbarism' became a destructive force, and he certainly saw the change from a republic marked by 'freedom', 'honour' and 'virtue' to the imperial system as in itself a decline. It was thus not the barbarians who caused, 'but who,' in Gibbon's words, eventually 'discovered the decline of the Roman empire' to their own advantage.² And towards the end of his third volume, he reaffirmed his conviction that, 'if all the Barbarian conquerors had been annihilated in the same hour, their total destruction would not have restored the empire in the West.'³ It has thus been affirmed: 'Barbarism and Christianity triumphed over Rome, but only by outlasting her; they did not cause her collapse.'⁴

Though not initiating the decline, barbarism and religion are seen by Gibbon as alien forces, inimical to those qualities which made Rome great and which in the end usurped its dominion. But whether they are regarded as causal or not, they appear in The Decline and Fall primarily as moral issues and we shall consider them each in turn to see how this applies.

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1. See DF, ii, I, 86. 'The happy and prosperous' period of the empire finishes with the accession of Commodus, though Severus, a decade later is seen as 'the principal author of the decline and fall of the Roman empire.' (v, I, 137).
 2. DF, vii, I, 210.
 3. DF, xxxv, III, 506-7.
 4. D.M. Oliver, 'Gibbon's Use of Architecture as Symbol', Texas Studies in Literature and Language, Vol. XIV, No.1, Spring 1972, p.88.

When we ask what 'barbarism' meant to Gibbon, we find that it is one of those terms, like 'philosophy' or 'civilization' which he assumed rather than stopped to define, if indeed he can be said to have defined any of his key terms in any formal way. Such concepts are clarified to a great extent by his application and contexts, though with the proviso that we avoid reading our present connotations into eighteenth-century usage. 'Barbarism', in Johnson's Dictionary, included 'ignorance of the arts' and 'want of learning' as well as those rougher qualities of 'incivility', 'cruelty' and 'brutality'; and for the first sense of 'barbarous', he offered the synonym, 'uncivilized'.¹ In fact, in looking for the marks of 'barbarism' as Gibbon saw them, we may perhaps discover these most clearly in the contrast with its virtual opposite, 'civilization'.

The most dramatic antithesis in The Decline and Fall is that played out between the opposing forces of the great civilization of pre-Christian Rome on the one side, and on the other, the barbarian world and the new religion which finally conquered both.² At the very beginning we are introduced to what Gibbon regarded as an almost ideal age when the Roman Empire embraced and supported 'the most civilized portion of mankind.' The collapse of this unparalleled civilization, the awful revolution 'still felt by the nations of the earth,'³ forms the central theme of the work, while its final scene shows a stream of modern pilgrims from the once barbarous nations of the north, paying their

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1. Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language. London, 1755, entries BARBARISM, 2,3,4; BARBAROUS. Sheridan and Walker, in their dictionaries, virtually repeat the senses given by Johnson.
 2. 'The real victor, as the history of both the Eastern and Western Middle Ages shows, was Christianity,' wrote François Furet, 'Civilization and Barbarism in Gibbon's History', in Bowersock, op. cit., p. 166.
 3. DF, i, I, 1; or, in Gibbon's revision: 'the decline and fall of Rome, of whose language, religion and laws the impression will long be preserved in our own and the neighbouring countries of Europe.' (see Bury's Appendix, Vol.I, p. 508).

respects to its monuments and ruins, now in the midst of ecclesiastical Rome.¹

It is not that we are presented with a rigid dichotomy, a black and white contrast between civilized and barbarian. Instead, we are sometimes shown supposedly civilized peoples with barbaric traits, of which even the nomadic nations might be ashamed: and we are shown so-called barbarians acquitting themselves more honourably than their civilized counterparts and successors, and even displaying more respect for the capital of the empire than a Holy Roman Emperor in a later age. We must also note at the outset that Gibbon, having made his statement about 'barbarism and religion', immediately added a warning against the fanciful notion of fierce barbarians from the north coming down upon the empire to avenge, and to destroy classical books and buildings. 'In simple truth,' he declared, 'the northern conquerors were neither sufficiently savage nor sufficiently refined to entertain such aspiring ideas of destruction and revenge.'² He showed himself far more hostile to the spirit of barbarism which was not confined to particular peoples, but could dominate individuals and even highly 'civilized' nations like the ancient Romans, the medieval Greeks or the modern French and Italians.

The antithesis, civilization and barbarism, represents the positive and negative, or the progressive and retrograde aspects of much of the great span of history which Gibbon related. Directly after his account of the very civilized age of the Antonines, we are confronted with the case of a truly barbarous emperor, Commodus, characterised not only by

1. DF, lxxi, VII, 337-8.

2. DF, lxxi, VII, 321.

cruelty, brutality, savagery of manners and avarice, but also by 'his ignorance and low sports', of which his appearance as a gladiator was the most shameful illustration.¹ 'To see virtue with Gibbon as the life of civilization, is to see also what he meant by vice and degeneracy,' wrote Cochrane, who cited Commodus as a 'conspicuous example', 'the very embodiment of classical vice.'² This sort of public vice, unlike the personal and more excusable failings of certain rulers, was destructive of society and civilization, as was this emperor's 'savageness of manners' and his disdain for 'the majesty of Rome'.

It was this reign that Gibbon saw as the real beginning of decline.³ He thus clearly indicated that the impending fall was due primarily to moral collapse from within rendering the empire unable to withstand the pressure which soon came from without.⁴ Consequently, four chapters later, 'the Barbarians of the East and of the North' are introduced into the story,⁵ the following chapter is devoted to 'the state of Germany till the invasion of the Barbarians' and the next brings us to the study of the Goths, about to burst in upon the Roman scene. It is only when the civilizing virtues have been lost and manners barbarised by such conduct as that of Commodus, that these outsiders are able to press in upon the empire with any success. This at least is the order of events as seen by Gibbon. There follow a survey of relations between Romans and barbarians, and an account of the lands inhabited by these peoples -

1. See DF, iv, I, 93-4, 101-4.

2. 'The Mind of Edward Gibbon', University of Toronto Quarterly, XII, No.2, 1943, p.152.

3. See DF, i, I, 1, end of paragraph 1.

4. Historians like Bury and A.H.M. Jones have denied the primary significance of this inwardness of decline. See, e.g. Jones, 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', op.cit., p.221: 'These facts indicate that Rome did...not collapse from internal causes.' Yet note Jones' stress on 'psychological factors', ibid, p.215.

5. DF, chap. vii.

Germany, Britain, Africa and the Danube region - with a chapter on 'the pastoral nations' to conclude the second volume.¹ Then, after 'the final division of the Roman Empire', we are shown the hegemony passing in turn to Goths, Huns and Vandals, while the final chapters of the first part present the barbarians still fierce and merciless, though now under a veneer of Christianity.² 'If we take a wider and more imaginative view of history,' beyond looking merely at the stability of Roman defence of the frontiers, then 'the grounds for Gibbon's conclusion become apparent. Long before the barbarians burst the barriers on the Rhine and the Danube, the civilization which those barriers shielded was sinking into decay.'³

In applying the collapse 'to the instruction' of his own age, Gibbon looked beyond nationalism to the concept of 'Europe as one great republic' held together by a common civilization, a civilization and culture offering the only safeguard against a return of barbarism, or at least against a new inroad of barbarous peoples.⁴ In this same place, his 'General Observations', he presented the antithesis in sharpest focus. From his Europocentric viewpoint, we are shown the nations of that continent enjoying 'almost the same level of politeness and cultivation,' while 'the savage nations of the globe are the common enemies of civilized society.'⁵

As commentator on current affairs, writing from the vantage point of

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1. See chaps. xxv (sections I, II, III, V) and xxvi.
 2. DF, chap. xxxvii, sect.II, Vol.V, pp.81ff & chap. xxxviii, which moves on to the reign and conversion of Clovis.
 3. W.G. de Burgh, The Legacy of the Ancient World. London, 1923, Penguin Books, 1953, p. 389.
 4. DF, IV, 175-6.
 5. DF, IV, 176.

his completed work, and like a prophet addressing a complacent age, Gibbon felt that the question which the reader should ask with 'anxious curiosity' was whether Europe was threatened by a calamity similar to that which overwhelmed Rome: 'Perhaps the same reflections will illustrate the fall of that mighty empire, and explain the probable causes of our actual security.'¹ On balance, he thought there seemed less need to fear a repetition of the external events which had played their part in the final collapse of Rome at the end of its long period of decline: 'The reign of independent Barbarism is now contracted to a narrow span; and the remnant of Calmucks or Uzbecks, whose forces may be almost numbered, cannot seriously excite the apprehensions of the great republic of Europe.' At the very worst, faced by a new barbarian onslaught, 'the remains of civilized society' could be transplanted across the Atlantic 'and Europe would revive and flourish in the American world.'² The basic threat, therefore, seemed to be less a military than a moral one; in fact, within a decade, the mob, whose barbarity and violence had already appalled Gibbon in his homeland³, was to become once again the 'barbarians' whom he saw shaking to its foundations the centre of the great European republic.⁴

Yet as he laid down his pen at this stage of his work, he found a more philosophic source of hope for civilization in the recollection of the slow and painful struggle through which it had been achieved by the once savage peoples of that continent. From this story of man's progress the moral seemed clear enough to warrant a qualified optimism:

1. DF, loc. cit.

2. DF, IV, 179, 178.

3. See Letters, No. 477, 27/6/80, II, 245, written just after the Gordon riots.

4. 'Barbarians' was the word he used in his letters for the French revolutionaries.

'The experience of four thousand years should enlarge our hopes and diminish our apprehensions; we cannot determine to what height the human species may aspire in their advances towards perfection; but it may safely be presumed that no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism.'¹

What are, in Gibbon's view, the essential features of civilization, and so by implication, those of its ancient rival, barbarism? Some are referred to in the 'General Observations': laws, arts and sciences, ideas, the cultivation of language, the benefits of trade and manufactures and the superior powers of reason and fancy, exemplified at their highest in the philosopher and the poet.² Encompassing all these, and more fundamental than any of them, were the moral bonds which unite individual citizens in their membership of a commonwealth: 'the fidelity of the citizens to each other and to the state;' 'the firm and equal balance of the constitution, which united the freedom of popular assemblies with the authority and wisdom of a senate and the executive powers of a magistrate.' And permeating all are those principles of 'honour and virtue', so clearly seen in the Roman republic,³ and illuminating for a brief span that happiest period of the empire.⁴ That period, too, was marked by moderation,⁵ the name of Rome was revered by distant nations and 'the fiercest barbarians frequently submitted their differences to the arbitration of the emperor.'⁶ As Rome conquered she civilized, and the minds of the barbarians were thus 'opened to... new impressions of knowledge and politeness.'

1. DF, IV, 179, 180.

2. DF, IV, 179, 180.

3. DF, IV, 172.

4. 'The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom.' Marcus Antoninus was 'just and beneficent to all mankind.' (DF, iii, I, 86, 85).

5. DF, i, 1, 20.

Civilization, whether in 'the great republic' of eighteenth-century Europe or in the great days of ancient Rome, was thus seen by Gibbon as transcending narrow nationalism and giving scope to the powers of mind and imagination of men of varied racial origins thus allowing them to share in the common culture which flourished in an atmosphere of peace and prosperity.¹ A further most important aspect of civilization, exemplified both in an enlightened Europe and in a wise and benevolent Rome, can be described as the preservation of a great intellectual tradition which encourages the free exercise of man's powers and the realisation of his dignity as a moral being. Thriving in an atmosphere of mental and moral freedom, civilization alone provided a fertile soil for this development of man's potential, his creativity and reason, which bore their fruit in the arts and sciences. 'In a civilized state,' wrote Gibbon, 'every faculty of man is expanded and exercised.'² Hence Roman greatness was to be estimated not just by rapid and extensive conquest, but rather by the fact that 'the firm edifice of Roman power was raised and preserved by the wisdom of ages.'³ The provinces were united not so much by arms as by laws and were adorned by the art and architecture of Rome. The empire stood for tolerance, unspoiled by destructive 'theological rancour'. Its mentors, the teachers of philosophy, while not unresponsive to law and custom, 'asserted the independent dignity of reason.' In such a climate 'the spirit of enquiry' flourished primarily because it was 'supported by freedom.'⁴

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1. See e.g. DF, iii, I, 82, 85 concerning 'peace and prosperity' and Marcus' abhorrence of war 'as the disgrace and calamity of human nature.'
 2. DF, ix, I, 238.
 3. DF, ii, I, 31. The idea of the importance of the classical tradition in developing the best powers of the mind is strongly expressed in Gibbon's Essai. See above, chap. III, p.88 and cf. DF, vi, I, 165; lxvi, VII, 136.
 4. See DF, ii, I, 31-2, 34, 33.

From such passages we can form a clear picture of what Gibbon understood by 'civilization', a word which came into use in his century both in England and France,¹ as he and other 'enlightened' men looked for a term to describe a culture which they saw as the antithesis of the darkness of the middle ages and of the barbarity of most of the world beyond the continent of Europe.² It was a concept which Gibbon did much, both positively and negatively, to encourage by his own work.

Barbarism, by contrast, was the denial of all this and was therefore barren and unproductive. It was doubtless with approval, since it is consistent with his views elsewhere in The Decline and Fall, that in writing of the birth of learning among the Arabs, Gibbon quoted a maxim to the effect that: 'The teachers of wisdom are the true luminaries and legislators of a world which, without them would sink in ignorance and barbarism.'³ In a reciprocal relationship, such men, 'the select few', are seen as the makers of civilization, while they themselves,⁴ in each generation, are nourished and sustained by it. Appreciating his own advantages as a member of this elite,⁵ and also the dependence of an enlightened society on its 'teachers of wisdom', Gibbon was seduced neither by notions of 'the noble savage' nor by those of a 'wild' egalitarian democracy, in which he felt civilization would be reduced to the lowest common denominator of education and culture. But he also made it clear that political and social morality, 'founded on rational

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1. See OED, entry CIVILIZATION; also Furet's essay in Bowersock, op.cit., p. 159. The word did not, however, find its way into the dictionaries. If recorded at all, it is found, as in Bailey (1730) and Johnson (1755), as a law term for rendering a criminal process civil.
 2. See, e.g. W.P. Ker, The Dark Ages, Mentor Books, N.Y., 1958, pp. 11-12, with the quotations from Moyle, Goldsmith and Cotter Morrison.
 3. DF, lii, VI, 29. Abulpharagius, primate of the East was commenting on the enlightened Abbassid caliph, Almamon.
 4. See DF, ix, I, 238 and cf. Memoirs, p. 186.
 5. Memoirs, pp. 186, 154.

freedom, formed the true basis of a healthy civilization for once these were destroyed, decay would set in as it had in ancient Greece or Rome.

History and experience taught him the frailty and vulnerability of civilization. At various points in his narrative he recorded a relapse into barbarism as a civilization went down under its enemies, once liberty, vigour and virtue had gone and when vigilance was forgotten. Betrayed from within by its own degeneracy, it became a prey to violence from without. This was true of Rome in the fifth century and of Africa in the sixth: 'That country was rapidly sinking into the state of barbarism from whence it had been raised by the Phoenician colonies and Roman laws; and every step of intestine discord was marked by some deplorable victory of savage man over civilized society.'¹ A similar relapse was to be seen when the tide of a restored civilization in the age of Charlemagne was turned back by 'new swarms of invaders, the Normans, Saracens and Hungarians, who replunged the western countries into their former state of anarchy and barbarism.'²

If not everywhere extinct in Gibbon's day, barbarism seemed to belong mainly to another world, beyond, or at least on the fringe of 'the great republic of Europe'; for it remained a sad fact that 'the barbarian lords of Ionia and Lydia still trample on the monuments of Christian and classical antiquity,' and that 'the provinces of the East present the contrast of Roman magnificence with Turkish barbarism.'³ But it was not so much Turks or Calmucks who posed the threat to eighteenth-century civilization as Gibbon saw it. Among the enemies

1. DF, xliii, IV, 419.

2. DF, lxi, VI, 464.

3. DF, lxiv, VII, 28; lvii, VI, 268. 'A spirit of native barbarism,' he wrote, 'prompted the Turkmen to insult the clergy of every sect,' after describing the Turkish conquest of Jerusalem.

of civilization which could open the door for a return to barbarism were superstition, fanaticism, and above all the destruction of liberty, which maintained its precarious balance between the opposite evils of autocracy and anarchy.

Autocratic rule on the one hand and mob rule on the other - 'the despotism of the prince or people',¹ - endangered man's freedom to enjoy the good life and to develop the best society. Fanaticism, political or religious, likewise threatened the bases of civilization with its emphasis on intellectual excellence, moderation, tolerance, and wise government. As he read not only ancient history but also 'the signs of the times', Gibbon was very much aware of such dangers. He had watched with apprehension what seemed to him to be the growing power of the crown and the abuse of office in England, he had followed each step of an alarming revolt in America, and he was soon to be aghast at what he regarded as a return to barbarism in France. In the middle of his great work he found himself in his own metropolis surrounded by religious frenzy which no doubt coloured his scenes of Arian witch hunts in Constantinople and other cities of the empire.² 'Our danger is at an end,' he wrote to his step-mother at the time of these Gordon riots, 'but our disgrace will be lasting, and the month of June 1780 will ever be marked by a dark and diabolical fanaticism, which I had supposed to be extinct.'³

It is apparent that in his famous epigram and in his expression of

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1. DF, lxvii, VII, 191; here with reference to the Bulgarian, Baltha Ogli.
 2. See Memoirs, p. 186.
 3. Letters, No. 477, 27/6/80, II, 245.

'anxious curiosity' about the immediate future of European civilization, Gibbon was more concerned about barbarism than about barbarians as such, who were, after all no longer a serious threat. There is, of course, the etymological connection between the words, but the connotations and use of the derivatives showed a clear distinction. In eighteenth-century usage, 'barbarism', 'barbarity' and 'barbarous' had largely lost a direct reference to these peoples and the dictionaries define them mainly in terms of linguistic crudity, ignorance, especially in arts and learning, incivility, and such clearly moral traits as 'brutality', 'inhumanity', 'cruelty', 'hardness of heart' and lack of pity.¹ Even 'barbarian' itself had seen a shift from its primary racial sense, a fact shown in Johnson's entry on this word. After noting the original etymology, he listed 'foreigner' merely as the second of three uses then current. And in Gibbon, we notice first a scrupulous avoidance of what we would call a 'racist' use of the term 'barbarian' and secondly an awareness that 'barbarism' was not essentially or solely the property of these nations. Let us consider more closely this first point.

Reflecting on an account of the buildings of ancient Rome², Gibbon noted in his Journal the common prejudice by which we consider the barbarians of the North as enemies of the arts and attribute the destruction of the monuments of Rome to Alaric, Genseric and Totila. The author he was reading demonstrated the falsity of this view since most of these buildings were still standing in the time of Theodoric, who showed greater care in preserving them than had the last Western emperors.

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1. See the dictionaries of Bailey (1730, 1734 &c.), Johnson (1755), Sheridan (1780) and Walker (1791).
 2. 'Petri Angelii Bargaiei De Privatorum Publicorumque Edificiorum Urbis Romae Eversoribus Epistola', which he read in the Thesaurus of Graevius.

Moreover, the account continued, we wrongly regard the fifth-century invaders as savages issuing from the depths of the forests to break through the barriers of the Roman defences. While this might apply to some peoples, the Goths, the Vandals and the Franks had lost much of their former barbarism before their invasion of Roman territory. Large numbers of them had already served in the Roman armies, learned the Latin language, adopted Roman manners and accepted, or at least respected, the Christian religion. If they were inclined to despise the vanquished, they showed no hatred. The soldier was sometimes cruel, but the general rarely barbarous and the legislator never.¹

In The Decline and Fall, Gibbon emphasised this, pointing out that 'the Gothic kings, so injuriously accused of the ruin of antiquity, were anxious to preserve the monuments of the nation whom they had subdued.'² But he went even further to correct the prejudice to which he here referred. In a chapter dealing with the Gothic and Vandal invasions, he suggested that 'the legionaries of Augustus appear to have surpassed, in violence and injustice, the Barbarians who invaded Gaul, under the reign of Honorius;'³ and that the conquered peoples came to prefer barbarian rule to 'the tyranny of the Imperial officers.'⁴ With regard to the sack of Rome in 410, he pointed out that 'some rare and extraordinary examples of Barbarian virtue had been deservedly applauded,'⁵ while Alaric, 'the wise Barbarian, justified his regard for the faith of treaties, by the just severity with which he chastised a party of licentious Goths.'⁶

1. JB, 6 me Octobre, 1763, p. 83. 'Le Soldat etoit quelquefois cruel, mais le General etoit rarement barbare et le legislateur ne l'etoit jamais.'

2. DF, xxxix, IV, 204. Gibbon referred his reader to Cassiodorus 'for the Gothic care of buildings and statues.' (see IV, 204, n.76)

3. DF, xxxi, III, 370.

4. DF, xxxi, III, 368.

5. DF, xxxi, III, 330.

6. DF, xxxi, III, 330.

The relative nature of 'barbarian' and the abuse to which it was liable can be seen in many parts of The Decline and Fall. Gibbon referred to the origin of the term in the prejudiced view of Greeks and Romans who applied it to those born in a world outside their own and hence unable to speak their great languages. But a similar prejudice persisted into the eleventh century. The French and German emperors enjoyed supreme dominion as imperial successors of Caesar, Augustus, Constantine, Justinian, Charlemagne and Otho; their jurisdiction was accepted over the imperial city and the papal coins bore their title and image. 'But every Roman prejudice was awakened by the name, the language, and the manners of a barbarian lord.'¹ A similar attitude clouded relations between French and Greeks at the time of the Crusades. When the French forces under Godfrey de Bouillon and his peers encamped in the plains of Thrace, the Byzantine emperor Alexius Comnenus tried to appease and accommodate them. But the old mutual jealousies continued between the two peoples who 'despised each other as slaves and barbarians.'² The Emperor Charles IV, grandson of the German Emperor Henry VII, was born in Bohemia amongst a people whom the Germans regarded as 'strange and barbarous'. Yet, as Gibbon noted, 'personally Charles must not be considered as a Barbarian.' He was educated in Paris, spoke and wrote not only his native tongue but also French, Latin, Italian and German, and was always represented by Petrarch as 'a polite and learned prince.'³ Even Petrarch, however, 'promiscuously bestows' the term 'barbarous' on 'the countries beyond the Alps.' But, as Gibbon made clear, while a son of Florence might justly regard Italy as 'superior to France both in art and science, in wealth and politeness,' the difference hardly

1. DF, lxix, VII, 220-1.

2. DF, lvii, VII, 299.

3. DF, xlix, V, 328 and n.159.

supported his use of the epithet 'barbarous' in so exclusive and patronising a way.¹

It is all so relative and so much a matter of prejudice as Gibbon showed. And in this context he also showed how little such names come to mean. Though he continued to use the Graeco-Roman designation 'barbarian' for nations beyond the frontiers of 'civilization', yet as an 'impartial historian' with a 'knowledge of human nature', he did not confuse a somewhat contemptuous title with the real character of these peoples. He was prepared to give honour where honour was due and it was due in many instances to these foreigners rather than to the 'degenerate Romans' who had so much to learn from them. The Romans in the West, and more particularly those in the East, he claimed, had become unworthy of that name. Of the latter he wrote that 'the subjects of the Byzantine empire, who assume and dishonour the names both of Greeks and Romans, present a dead level of abject vice.'² The names had been emptied of their content when the spirit which had made those civilizations great had departed. In his opening survey, he referred to the Greeks as 'long since civilized and corrupted...still preserving the prejudices after they had lost the virtues of their ancestors.' They 'affected to despise the unpolished manners of the Roman conquerors,' even though they had to acknowledge their 'superior wisdom and power.'³ The Romans, in their turn, after losing their freedom 'in the extent of conquest,' and being prepared to survive the loss of liberty, faced in the North 'a hardy race of Barbarians who despised life when it was separated from freedom.'⁴

1. DF, lxx, VII, 291.

2. DF, xlviii, V, 181.

3. DF, ii, I, 42.

4. DF, i,I, 10; i, I, 2.

Rome's decline is thus seen essentially as the surrender of its Romanness, of the civilization built on that 'wisdom and virtue' which had made possible and justified its civilizing mission. This gradual loss of its distinguishing virtues represents the central tragedy of Gibbon's History, no matter what larger or epic significance we may see in it. A 'prodigal commons' slowly 'sunk under the reign of the Caesars into a vile and wretched populace which must, in a few generations, have been totally extinguished, if it had not been continually recruited by the manumission of slaves, and the influx of strangers.'¹ Even by Hadrian's time, citizens complained of the capital having 'attracted the vices of the universe; the manners of the most opposite nations.' The mixed multitude of the city, bringing together the worst features of these foreign peoples, had the affrontery, 'under the proud and false denomination of Romans,' to despise both their fellow subjects and their sovereigns.² It is as a rare exception to this general departure from its ancient character that we find the occasional example of 'Roman courage' or 'the magnanimity of a genuine Roman.'³

The northern barbarians, in contrast, had much to recommend them. They showed up the decline of the Roman spirit by their own simplicity of life, honour, courage, adherence to 'the faith of treaties' and their social virtues. It is certainly traditional enough, a convention to which Tacitus conformed in his Germania⁴, to find the ancient Roman mores amongst these foreigners. But it is significant that Gibbon, who

1. DF, xxxi, III, 319.

2. DF, xxxi, III, 319. This view of the capital as a sink or cesspool became something of a commonplace among Latin writers from late republican times. See e.g. Donald Earl, The Moral and Political Tradition of Rome. London, 1967, pp. 96-7.

3. DF, xxxi, III, 359, 361. The references here are to the generals Gerontius and Constantius.

4. Germania, 6, 27. e.g. 'no one laughs at vice there; no one calls seduction the spirit of the age' (Loeb ed., tr. M. Hutton, 1970, p.161.

was prepared to take an independent line in some cases, here chose to emphasise the moral interpretation of barbarian life. Thus, in the end, he showed the Roman virtues as having deserted to the peoples of the North, who proved not only strong enough but also worthy to conquer a degenerate Rome.¹ The Goths, in fact, came to consider themselves 'as the friends of peace, of justice and of Rome.' One of their leaders, Fravitta, is described by Gibbon as 'a valiant and honourable youth, distinguished above the rest of his countrymen, by the politeness of his manners, the liberality of his sentiments, and the mild virtues of social life.'² And these, apart from the higher intellectual and aesthetic attainments, are the basic human qualities seen by both the eighteenth-century lexicographers and by Gibbon, as those of civilized man as opposed to barbarism.³

Who then is the barbarian? It was not essentially a question of birth for to be born among these peoples was no determinant of character nor did it prevent a man from exhibiting what would once have been recognised as the old Roman virtues. The Emperor Romanus, in a pretentious and ridiculous statement of his terms for peace, insolently addressed the Sultan Alp Arslan as 'the barbarian'. 'But,' said Gibbon, 'this barbarian by his personal merit and the extent of his empire was the greatest prince of his age.'⁴ In a provincial like Trajan, Gibbon saw one whom the Scipios would have accepted as a fellow Roman and whose virtue the Senate applauded over two-and-a-half centuries after his death.⁵ And it was Theodoric, the Ostrogoth, whom, on his visit to Rome, the

1. DF, xlviii, V, 182.

2. DF, xxvi, II, 138.

3. The dictionaries from Bailey to Walker tend to repeat the same definitions with emphasis on 'savageness of manners' for the one, and softness and politeness of behaviour for the other.

4. DF, lvii, VI, 254.

5. DF, ii, I, 41-2; iii, I, 82.

Senate advanced in solemn procession to salute as 'a second Trajan'.¹ And even the very formula repeatedly used by Gibbon to indicate the essence of Roman greatness is applied to an eastern vizir: He thus saw 'the light and splendour of Asia' reflected in the 'wisdom and virtue' of the vizir Nizam, in 'a period when Europe was plunged in the deepest barbarism.'²

Writing of Atilla, Gibbon claimed: 'We must applaud the Barbarian who respected the laws of hospitality and generously entertained and dismissed the minister who had conspired against his life.'³ And in his account of Alaric's capture of Rome, he deliberately introduced the well-known contrast with the sack of the city by Charles V and drew the conclusion that 'the ravages of the Barbarians... were less destructive than the hostilities of Charles the Fifth, a Catholic prince, who styled himself Emperor of the Romans.'⁴ In his description of those nine months, hourly stained by 'some atrocious act of cruelty, lust and rapine,' Gibbon showed what real barbarism meant: 'sanguinary crimes... polished vices, rapacious avarice, and unrelenting cruelty;' in short, 'a remarkable scene of the depravity of mankind.'⁵ This appeared all the more shocking by contrast with the moderation shown by a 'barbarian' eleven centuries earlier. And in Gibbon's pages we find many Romans whose conduct was more barbarous and uncivilized than that of the foreigners they might despise. Returning, in his final chapter for a description of 'the eternal city' in the time of Petrarch, he headed his description: 'Ignorance and barbarism of the Romans'.⁶

1. DF, xxxix, IV, 203.

2. DF, lvii, VI, 256. The vizir held office from 1063 to 1092.

3. DF, xxxiv, III, 464. Cf. Gibbon's remark about 'a peculiar strain of delicacy' shown by 'the gentle Barbarian', Amir (lxiv, VII, 29).

4. DF, xxx, III, 347.

5. DF, loc. cit.

6. DF, lxxi, VII, 334.

Barbarism was thus a state into which even the most civilized might relapse when the true values of that civilization were discarded, just as liberty always tended to drift into licence when it was divorced from order and from moral principles. This is one of the 'lessons' Gibbon suggests throughout The Decline and Fall and he strongly connected the two qualities of civilization and liberty in a number of places. And though he did not espouse an 'original sin' type of morality, he felt free to use some of its terms within his humanistic framework and to write not only of corruption and degeneracy, but even of human 'depravity'. Even in a polished society, that is, as he saw it, a society with a polished minority, 'the nature of the tiger was the same' as when he had once blatantly shown 'his teeth and fangs' in more savage times.¹ And, lurking below the surface, barbarism, which had revealed itself in gladiatorial shows, inhuman treatment of captives and popular outbursts in ancient Rome, was always ready to break through and reassert itself even more dangerously. When Gibbon described 'the triumph of barbarism' he was concerned above all with those psychological and moral qualities which were in effect the negation of those which are the essentials of a great civilization.

Religion, the second element of the famous pair, has received the major share of attention from Gibbon's biographers and critics. On this score he has been attacked and defended from his day to ours. He was fascinated by religion, and Christianity in particular, as a cultural phenomenon, and he traced its development from imperial to papal Rome. He saw it as an alien and disintegrating force within the empire, as alien indeed as the barbarians and 'it is a Rome

1. DF, liv, VI, 133. The immediate reference is the apparent, though not real softening, of religious animosity between the times of Calvin and Cranmer.

weakened by "the spirit of Christianity"...that is finally conquered by the barbarian invasions'.¹

Gibbon admitted that he disliked Christianity as an innovation undermining the old order,² and thus, by implication, connected with the decline of Rome.³ Yet, in a frank assessment of this old pagan religion at the time of Julian's attempted restoration, he admitted that it was moribund, being 'destitute of theological principles, or moral precepts, and of ecclesiastical discipline' and, as it 'rapidly hastened to decay and dissolution', it was therefore 'not susceptible of any solid or consistent reformation'.⁴ In like manner, Gibbon's estimate of the new religion is also that of the moralist, though the moralist appears as an 'impartial historian' who first assembles and examines the evidence and then proceeds to judge the church as far as possible on its own claims.⁵ Thus he found its first adherents conspicuous for their moral purity, simplicity of life, and consistency. But he ironically excused himself from 'the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity'.⁶ That task he would leave to the theologian. The historian would content himself with a secular account of what he regarded as a human institution,

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1. François Furet, 'Civilization and Barbarism in Gibbon's History', in Bowersock, op.cit., p. 165. Bury referred to both Christianity and Teutonism as 'solvents of the ancient world', History of the Later Roman Empire. London, 1893, Vol. I, p. 17.
 2. 'I was attached to the old Pagan establishment', he explained. Letters, No. 771, 5/2/91, III, 216. Cf. his remarks on his objection to such innovations with his almost identical comment on Burke's reaction to the French Revolution, Memoirs, p. 195.
 3. Memoirs, p. 147. ('As I believed, and as I still believe...')
 4. DF, xxiii, II, 472.
 5. Memoirs, p. 147: 'I weighed the causes and effects of that Revolution'.
 6. DF, xv, II, 2.

which, like all human institutions, inevitably began to show signs of human 'error and corruption'.¹

His low esteem for the moral teaching of the Church Fathers probably dated from his first period in Lausanne. As he took up the study of Grotius and Puffendorf at that time, he welcomed the aid of their commentator, Jean Barbeyrac,² who, in his preface to Puffendorf, 'proves that the morality of the Fathers is much inferior to that of modern philosophers'.³ When he came to write his chapters on the rise of Christianity, Gibbon again turned to Barbeyrac, in this case, to his 'very judicious treatise...sur la Morale des Pères'.⁴ From this tribute and from his treatment of the subject, it can be seen that Gibbon's respect for this author agreed with that of Voltaire, who wrote that Barbeyrac 'goes back...to the sources of morality; and has the bold candour to show that the Fathers of the Church did not always understand this pure morality, which they disfigured by strange allegories...and he draws attention to the contradictions which he observes' in their morality.⁵ This same view of an early decline from a 'pure morality'

1. DF, loc.cit.

2. Memoirs, p. 78: 'My fatigues were alleviated by the good sense of their commentator, Barbeyrac'.

3. Voltaire wrote thus in his catalogue of writers, Siècle de Louis XIV: 'il y preuve que la morale des Pères est fort inférieure a celle des philosophes modernes'. See Oeuvres Complètes, ed. Louis Moland, Paris, 1877-85, Vol. XIV, p. 36.

4. DF, xv, II, 36, n. 89; also 40, n. 102. But according to Davis' An Examination of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of Mr. Gibbon's History. London, 1778, pp. 185ff., he was indebted to Barbeyrac for no less than twenty-one passages in his text.

5. Voltaire, 'Mélanges, Annales de l'Empire', Oeuvres Complètes, Vol. XXVI, p. 505. ('Il remonte...aux sources de la morale; et il a la candeur hardie de faire voir que les Pères de l'Eglise n'ont pas toujours connu cette morale pure, qu'ils l'ont défigurée par d'étranges allégories...Il relève les contradictions qu'il remarque dans la morale des Pères'.

is fundamental to Gibbon's approach to the subject of Christianity, not only in the two chapters of his first volume but throughout his work. And despite his plea for recognition of the 'spiritual heroes' of the middle ages,¹ he found it difficult - some would say impossible - to understand their religious experience and ideals or to empathise with (the) 'saints'. 'By their fruits ye shall know them', was to him the only safe and effective criterion. Hence he would judge religion on what could be seen, its moral and social record.

The basic question for the historian, then, was: did the new religion, unlike a morally bankrupt paganism, achieve any great moral reformation and improvement of society? Gibbon's simple answer was that though 'the primitive Christian demonstrated his faith by his virtues', corruption soon and inevitably set in.² The story of the church thus paralleled that of the empire in its steady degeneration and decline. This story was epitomised in the career of the first Christian emperor, who, 'as he gradually advanced in the knowledge of truth...proportionately declined in the practice of virtue'.³ By the time of that emperor, and even earlier, it was clear that the church had imitated the ambition, greed and power politics of the declining state in which it had developed. It had surrendered its spiritual independence as it gained political acceptance.

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1. DF, lix, VI, 346. 'A philosophic age has abolished with too liberal and indiscriminate disdain, the honours of these spiritual heroes'.
 2. DF, xv, II, 34. Gibbon proposed 'the pure and austere morals of the Christians' as a cause of the rapid growth of the church (xv, II, 3). For the 'uncandid' nature of his claim, see Milman's note in his 1846 edition of DF, vol. I, p. 486 and his more general comment in his Preface I, ix-xiii.
 3. DF, xx, II, 329 and cf. also 340.

Documenting this decline by a reference to a Christian apologist, Gibbon maintained that 'the corruption of manners and principles so forcibly lamented by Eusebius', was a consequence as well as a proof of the political freedom these later Christians 'enjoyed and abused... Prosperity had relaxed the nerves of discipline'.¹ The widening rift observable in Constantine and Christians of his day, is brought out in a statement made by Gibbon about the Syrians of Antioch in the reign of Julian: 'The majority of the people supported the glory of the Christian name, which had been first invented by their ancestors; they contented themselves with disobeying the moral precepts, but they were scrupulously attached to the speculative doctrines of their religion'.² In the same century Arians and orthodox bitterly divided the church over a small but significant theological issue; yet, said Gibbon, 'the moral character and conduct of the hostile sects appear to have been governed by the same common principles of nature and religion'.³ And while, as he suggested, in a later age, 'a speculative reasoner' might assume the restraining influence of the Christian faith upon the conduct of the Crusaders, this was not the case, for 'seldom does the history of profane war disclose such scenes of intemperance', prostitution and other vices.⁴ By the fifteenth century, the divorce between religious observance and moral conduct seemed almost complete. Concluding his 'Outlines of the History of the World' with a reference to the daily invention of new legends and superstitious practices and to the expiation of every sin by penances or mere fine, Gibbon declared that 'this Religion had scarcely any connection with Morality'.⁵

1. DF, xvi, II, 125.

2. DF, xxiv, II, 509. Referring to the conversion of the Russians, Gibbon commented: 'an imperfect conversion, if they still consulted the wizards of Curland'. (DF, lv, VI, 158, n. 68).

3. DF, xv, II, 34. Cf. the distinction he made in the case of Alexius, between 'his moral and religious virtues'.

4. DF, lviii, VI, 314.

5. MW, III, 55.

This divorce between religion and morality is at the bottom of most of Gibbon's objections and serves as a convenient heading under which they may be systematically discussed. He set down, in his comments on Zoroastrianism, two basic requirements for any religion if it were 'to make a deep and lasting impression on the human mind': it 'must exercise our obedience, by enjoining practices of devotion; and must acquire our esteem by inculcating moral duties analogous to the dictates of our own hearts'.¹ There is no doubt from his treatment of religion in The Decline and Fall that it is on the effectiveness of the second requirement that he felt religion should be judged. And it is in keeping with this view of religion as practical morality that he pointed out that the ancient philosophers, living under the mild religious spirit of antiquity, 'deduced their morals from the nature of man, rather than from that of God'.² Here, as elsewhere, he was stressing the marked contrast between a human, socially based morality and that of the Judaeo-Christian type, which he saw as being arbitrarily imposed from above on purely religious grounds. Regulations and requirements should not be external to man in society, but instead should be deduced from his own nature and practised for his benefit. 'The social virtues' were thus given a high priority in Gibbon's scale of religious values as he emphasised in examining the character of Timour, where he claimed that 'the rules of morality are founded on the public interest'.³ This moral emphasis determined Gibbon's assessment of Christianity, which, in Falco's words, he reduced 'to two doctrines and a moral system'.⁴

1. DF, viii, I, 216-7.

2. DF, ii, I, 33.

3. DF, lxxv, VII, 72-3.

4. Giorgio Falco, La Polemica sul Medioevo. Torino, 1933, reprint of 1977, p. 202. ('mutilato e ridotto il Cristianesimo a due dogmi e un sistema morale'.)

In the development of Christianity, he observed, morality was soon esteemed less than orthodoxy and submission to ecclesiastical authority. Such a change could be seen in the Fathers of the Church. 'From the imperious declamations of Cyprian, we should naturally concluded that the doctrines of excommunication and penance formed the most essential part of religion; and that it was less dangerous for the disciples of Christ to neglect the observance of moral duties than to despise the censures and authority of the bishops'.¹ Gibbon was therefore agreeably surprised to find, as for instance in some of the 'rational divines' of Lausanne, occasional exceptions to this trend which he felt, continued to characterise both Catholic and Protestant theologians. And in the work of a British preacher, James Foster, he found a statement reflecting his own emphasis: 'The true manner of preaching the Gospel', Foster maintained, 'is to inculcate the great duties of morality...That is and must be, the end of all revelation worthy of God'. After reading the sermon, Gibbon remarked with astonishment: 'Quel miracle! Un Theologien qui prefère la raison à la foi, et qui est plus effrayé du vice que de l'heresie'.²

We may distinguish four main aspects of this divorce between religion and morality as brought out in The Decline and Fall. In the first place, not only did Christianity, in Gibbon's estimation, fail to maintain the standard of conduct expected of it, but its very principles seemed to represent an inverted scale of moral values, exalting the trivial and the irrelevant at the expense of the useful and the essential. The sort of emphasis he looked for, was found in Zoroaster's requirement

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1. DF, xv, II, 56-7. But see also Milman's comment on this passage in his note, vol. I, p. 508.
 2. JB, 1r, Sept., 1763. In a note (p. 20, n.3) Bonnard cites from the volume the words translated above. Gibbon found the sermons in a volume of the Bibliothèque raisonnée. Foster's Sermons were published in London in 1733. Cf. reference in DF, lvi, VI, 230, to a priest who preferred 'his country to his religion'.

of such 'moral duties' as justice, mercy and liberality, and his exact connection between the degree of eternal happiness and that of present 'virtue and piety'.¹ So too, the Magian saint, unlike the Christian, was expected to beget children, plant useful trees, bring water to the dry land and make himself of service to society. In contrast to the essentially Christian order of good works as the fruit, rather than the ground of acceptance with God, Gibbon gave a characteristic twist to the Pauline injunction to work out one's own salvation, by transferring it to this alien context: the Magian saint for his part, was required 'to work out his salvation' by such valuable labours as irrigation and acts of social usefulness.²

Usefulness to society and promotion of human happiness ranked high in Gibbon's scale of values, but low, it seemed to him, in that of most religions, especially Christianity. He regarded the construction of canals as a better use of 'cost and labour' than the construction of cathedrals.³ Referring to a new edition of the lives of the saints which a tenth-century chancellor of the Eastern Empire had been directed to prepare, he added: 'The merits and miracles of the whole calendar are of less account in the eyes of a sage than the toil of a single husbandman, who multiplies the gifts of the Creator and supplies the food of his brethren'.⁴ A similar but more scathing comment concerning the qualifications of a successful candidate for the papacy, brings out very clearly Gibbon's view of the ecclesiastical scale of values: The likely

1. DF, viii, I, 217.

2. Phil. 2; 12. Cf. Augustine's comment on the verse: 'Nos ergo volumus, sed Deus in nobis operatur et velle; nos ergo operamur, sed Deus in nobis operatur et operari'. ('De Dono Perseverantiae', Migne, PL, XLV, cap. xiii, cols. 1012-3).

3. DF, xlix, V, 309.

4. DF, liii, VI, 67-8.

candidate will have learnt amongst other irrelevancies and absurdities, not only 'to revere all that is contemptible, and to despise whatever might deserve the esteem of a rational being', but even 'to consider the missal or the crucifix as more useful instruments than the plough or the loom'.¹

To Gibbon, the plough and the loom represented 'the most prolific, the most useful, and in that sense the most respectable part of the community', those who, in producing the necessary food and clothing, support life in the great cities by 'the dexterity or labour of their hands'.² Yet the farmer, the weaver, the craftsmen and other useful members of society were not respected in this way by the church. The extreme instance of this false valuation and reverence for the 'contemptible', was to be found in those who withdrew themselves completely from society to spend their life in devotion or idleness. Christian preachers, whilst they might recommend 'the practice of social duties', had from early times 'exalted the perfection of monastic virtue, which is painful to the individual, and useless to mankind'.³ This yardstick of utility Gibbon consistently applied to religion. As he watched the Eastern Empire sink in its calamities during the tenth century, he pointed out that though its subjects were more dexterous and diligent than those of most nations, religious superstition, particularly in the form of monasticism and holy days, vitiated much of this talent and energy. 'The Greek superstition relaxed the mind by prayer and emaciated the body by fasting; and the multitude of convents

1. DF, lxx, VII, 310.

2. DF, xxxi, III, 318.

3. DF, xx, II, 346.

and festivals diverted many hands and many days from the temporal service of mankind'.¹ Religious life is thus represented as physically and economically unproductive and as intellectually stagnant.²

This points us to a second aspect of the divorce, which may perhaps be seen as a specific and extreme example of this more general inversion of values. Religious superstition seemed to Gibbon not only to have confused the order of moral priorities, but to have replaced real virtues with a set of 'specious virtues'. In the ecclesiastical scale pre-eminence was given mainly to what he regarded as 'painful', useless and anti-social. A pope could be expected 'to reward mortification and celibacy as the first of virtues',³ whereas to an enlightened and 'philosophic' mind, these practices were devoid of any virtue. Though the term 'specious virtues' is applied to the emperors Diocletian and Charles V, as those derived less from nature than from art,⁴ Gibbon reserved this description almost exclusively for religious contexts. Such 'virtues' were 'fictitious' and reflected only the mistaken view of men suffering from a degree of moral blindness.

'Specious virtues' were for Gibbon characteristically 'monastic virtues', virtues falsely so called, but extolled by ecclesiastical writers who were at the same time 'apt to despise the profane virtues

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1. DF, liii, VI, 72. Cf. also VI, 71, n.13, regarding the number of monks on the Greek islands.
 2. DF, lxvi, VII, 121, where Gibbon refers to the great amount 'of time and talents that were lost in the devotion, the laziness, and discord of the cloister'.
 3. DF, lxx, VII, 310.
 4. DF, xiii, I, 416.

of sincerity and moderation'.¹ Even noble minds could be seduced by these apparent virtues. Such was Louis IX whom 'a monkish historian' would applaud for 'the most despicable part of his character', that part corrupted by 'the baleful influence' of superstition.² So too, Godfrey of Bouillon, with blind yet sincere piety, practised in the camp, 'the real and fictitious virtues of a convent'.³ It is these 'fictitious virtues' which are shown to be dangerous, more dangerous in fact than the vices of the clergy,⁴ since they are morally deceptive. Gibbon's Constantine thus exhibited not 'real virtue' but only a 'specious piety' which won the acclaim of churchmen and ecclesiastical historians.⁵ And the 'virtues...supposed to deserve the peculiar favour of the Deity', included not only mortification, fanaticism, withdrawal from society and from useful service to mankind, but also liberal gifts to sacred institutions and the rigid suppression of all those whose creed was contrary to that of the ruling majority.⁶

More damaging still to the good life and to ordinary codes of morality, was a third aspect of the divorce, by which religion and its priestly caste claimed to set themselves above these codes and to override commonly accepted notions of right and wrong. This involved the substitution of rites and observances for moral requirements. Gibbon was offended by the suggestion that a life of continued disregard for

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1. DF, xxvi, III, 128.
 2. DF, lix, VI, 374. Cf. 'His devotion stooped to admire and imitate the begging friars of Francis and Dominic...' (loc.cit.)
 3. DF, lviii, VI, 289.
 4. DF, xlix, V, 318-9 and see below, pp. 387-9.
 5. DF, xx, II, 325. Eusebius' Life of Constantine is here cited by Gibbon, p. 326, n. 56.
 6. DF, xxxii, III, 407.

truth and goodness could be put right by a single ceremonial act like baptism, a rite purely external and incapable of making restitution for all the previous wrong inflicted on others...Such a view of religion seemed to threaten the whole moral order, just as to Hume, Gibbon and others of their day, miracles seemed to threaten the physical order. And it was the first Christian emperor, who, by such a violation of moral law, set the tone for future abuse: 'The example and reputation of Constantine seemed to countenance the delay of baptism. Future tyrants were encouraged to believe, that the innocent blood which they might shed in a long reign would be washed away in the waters of regeneration; and the abuse of religion dangerously undermined the foundations of moral virtue'.¹

What was true of baptism applied equally to other rites of the church. Under the reign of superstition which allowed the wrong doer absolution through penance, and the fulfilment of his penance by means of a fine, Gibbon saw religion further parting company with morality.² Pilgrimage likewise attained not only merit but popularity, becoming one of 'the fashionable superstitions' of the age, and being much favoured by the Normans, who successfully combined 'the habits of pilgrimage and piracy'.³ It thus provided an alternative to morality as well as to those other sacred expedients so advantageous to military-minded rulers. Of Henry the Lion, who, in a holy war, had brought to his neighbours the choice of baptism or death, Gibbon wrote: 'The baptism or the blood, of so many thousand pagans might have expiated the sins of the Catholic

1. DF, xx, II, 330.

2. See 'Outlines of the History of the World', MW, III, 55. A similar sentiment recurs in DF.

3. DF, lvi, VI, 181; lv, VI, 156. See also xlvi, V, 232, regarding Michael, husband of Zoe; also lvii, VI, 266-71; lviii, VI, 305.

hero: but his conscience was still unsatisfied, his salvation was still doubtful, and it was in the fairest season of victory and peace... that he accomplished the fashionable devotion of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land'.¹

Perhaps the most blatant triumph of religion over morality to Gibbon's mind was the use of rich gifts to the church to compensate for private or public wrongs. He never lost his sense of disgust, first stirred by his youthful visit to the Abbey of Einsiedeln, so richly endowed and perpetually nourished by the gifts of pilgrims. The experience is recorded in four of his writings both before and after The Decline and Fall,² and the same theme recurs throughout that work also. There our attention is drawn to the case of those who 'atoned for the injuries of war by the rich foundation of monasteries and churches'.³ In his chapter on the conversion and conquests of Clovis, Gibbon told of the action of Sigismund, king of the Burgundians, to salve his conscience: 'The Catholic Sigismund has acquired the honours of a saint and martyr; but the hands of the royal saint were stained with the blood of his innocent son, whom he inhumanly sacrificed to the pride and resentment of a stepmother...The reproaches of a guilty conscience were alleviated, however, by his liberal donations to the monastery of Agaunum, ...which he himself had founded in honour of the imaginary martyrs of the Thebaean legion'.⁴ Wallace-Hadrill summed up the activities of a noble and powerful French family which included the founder of Cluny, as 'cutting throats but endowing churches'.⁵

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1. 'Antiquities of the House of Brunswick', MW, III, 547.
 2. See above, chap. I, pp. 33-5 and footnotes.
 3. DF, xlv, V, 31. The reference is to Autharis, king of the Lombards.
 4. DF, xxxviii, IV, 121-2.
 5. J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, The Barbarian West. 2nd, revd. ed. London, 1962, p. 125. The reference is to the family of St. Guilhem.

Religion is thus shown as anti-moral in its effects when bishops, priests and monks devised substitutes for the ordinary rules of morality and when kings and emperors eagerly adopted these substitutes. Sometimes royal patrons took the lead in making and controlling prelates. Glycerius, the assassin of the exiled emperor Nepos, was, we are told, 'translated, perhaps as a reward of his crime, to the Archbishopric of Milan'.¹ Especially in the East, 'the episcopal conscience' was often, 'after the Greek fashion, in the hands of the prince'.² The emperor might hover over church councils, which were careful not to issue decrees contrary to his declared will. These decrees, which were binding on the consciences and actions of the people, concerned morals less frequently than orthodoxy and acts of devotion. This was true of the second council of Nicaea, which pronounced on the question of images. The Empress Irene was dedicated to the overthrow of the iconoclasts and she promoted to the patriarchal throne, Tarasius, who presided over the council.³ From its acts, which Gibbon described as 'a curious monument of superstition and ignorance, of falsehood and folly', he restricted himself to one example, designed to show 'the judgment of the bishops on the comparative merit of image-worship and morality. A monk had concluded a truce with the daemon of fornication, on condition of interrupting his daily prayers to a picture that hung in his cell. His scruples prompted him to consult the abbot. "Rather than abstain from adoring Christ and his Mother in their holy images, it would be better for you", replied the casuist, "to enter every brothel in the city".'⁴

1. DF, xxxvi, IV, 51.

2. Here in fact the princess, as the immediate reference is to Irene's control of the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Eastern Church, DF, xlix, V, 296.

3. The council met from 24 Sept. to 23 Oct., 787.

4. DF, xlix, V, 296.

A fourth aspect of the divorce is seen when religion, again assuming precedence over morality and truth, stooped to unworthy means to achieve a desired end. In the history of the church, Gibbon saw Christian emperors, without the excuses of their pagan predecessors like Decius and Diocletian, cruelly persecuting their opponents in the name of religion and thus violating 'the precepts of humanity and of the gospel'. 'Such', he wrote, 'was the persecuting spirit of the laws of Theodosius, which were repeatedly enforced by his sons and grandsons, with the loud and unanimous applause of the Christian world'.¹ So also, the popes, thrust into a position of temporal power in calamitous times, 'as the ministers of charity and peace', had, in fact, 'deluged Europe and Asia with blood'.²

Such abuse of power and the tendency of religious leaders to see themselves above common morality and thus to justify vicious methods for holy ends, appeared to Gibbon characteristic of religion in general, especially when it was dominated by enthusiasm and fanaticism. Mahomet seemed to consider 'that he alone was absolved by the Deity from the obligation of positive and moral laws'.³ Gibbon ironically added that this might appear to be an evidence of his sincerity as a divine messenger, in view of the cruel and unworthy methods he used to accomplish his designs. Since he allowed himself 'to employ even the vices of mankind as the instruments of their salvation', he saw 'the use of fraud and perfidy, of cruelty and injustice', as 'often subservient to the propagation of the faith'. Yet, 'he would have started at the foulness of the means had he not been satisfied of the importance and justice of the end'.⁴

1. DF, xxviii, III, 215.

2. DF, xlv, V, 39.

3. DF, 1, V, 402.

4. DF, 1, v, 401-2.

The Catholic Church also 'satisfied of the importance and justice of the end', had produced a specific instrument of persecution or conversion in the Inquisition. Gibbon, champion of freedom of the mind and conscience, of toleration and 'the mild spirit of antiquity', was appalled by this and all other forms of coercion, as 'the Catholic Inquisitors of Europe...defended nonsense by cruelty'.¹ He saw it as one of 'the two most memorable victories' of the papacy, a victory in this case over 'the common rights of mankind'.² It was, he claimed, 'an office more adapted to confirm, than to refute, the belief of an evil principle'.³ And the triumph of religion had made possible this offence against the dignity and moral integrity of human beings.

Holy wars, another shocking instance of justifying immoral methods to achieve what was considered a desirable result appeared to Gibbon a blot on the record of Jews, Christians and Moslems alike. Such wars, which disgraced the history of the expansion of the church, involved the forced conversion of its enemies to Christianity or to orthodoxy, whether by Clovis in the sixth century, Charlemagne in the eighth, or Henry the Lion in the twelfth.⁴ These two latter conquerors offered their pagan enemies the alternatives of death or baptism; and Charlemagne, by 'an abuse of the right of conquest', pronounced the ultimate penalty against the defeated Saxons for 'the following crimes': the refusal or false pretence of baptism, relapse into idolatry, murder of priest or bishop, human sacrifices, and even eating meat in Lent; a strangely mixed list which is yet another testimony to the confusion of moral values which then prevailed.⁵

1. DF, lxiv, VII, 4.

2. 'Outlines of the History of the World', MW, III, 21, where Gibbon referred specifically to Innocent III. The other victory was that of transubstantiation.

3. DF, liv, V, 130.

4. See DF, xxxviii, IV, 122ff; xlix, V, 303-4, 308-9; 'House of Brunswick', MW, III, 542.

5. DF, xlix, V, 303 and n. 103.

Of all holy wars, the Crusades were the most remarkable both in their consumption of human resources and in their dire effects. Gibbon was familiar with Hume's description of them as 'the most signal and most durable monument of human folly that has yet appeared in any age or nation'.¹ Yet as he pointed out, 'Christians, both of the East and West, were persuaded of their lawfulness and merit'. For it was felt, as in other holy wars, 'that a difference of religion is a worthy cause of hostility; that obstinate unbelievers may be slain or subdued by the champions of the cross; and that grace is the sole fountain of dominion as well as of mercy'. Enlistment absolved the feudal ties of peasants, the vows of the monk, and the creditor's claim on the debtor, while 'outlaws and malefactors of every cast might continue to brave the laws and elude the punishment of their crimes'.² What was more morally shocking to Gibbon was that the Christian nations, having asserted 'their peculiar title to the Holy Land', set out on a brutal and sanguinary conquest which they justified as the service of God: 'War and exercise were the reigning passions of the Franks or Latins; they were enjoined, as a penance to gratify those passions'.³

The conduct of the Crusaders was as mixed as their motives: valour and idealism of some noble leaders, unpredictable and inconsistent enthusiasm of hermits and monks, brutality and licence of the rabble who engaged in looting, prostitution and drunkenness. And, if discipline broke down and behaviour was loose, penance was readily available, so that 'with the multiplication of sins, the remedies were multiplied'.⁴ But over and above all this incidental contempt for

1. History of England, Vol. V, p. 250.

2. DF, lviii, VI, 276-7, 282-3.

3. DF, lviii, VI, 277, 281.

4. DF, lviii, VI, 278.

morality, was the irreparable damage done to the principles of justice and mercy under the sanction of religion: 'Vainly would it be alleged...that the recovery of Bethlehem or Calvary...will atone for the violation of the moral precepts of the gospel'.¹

This paradoxical notion of a 'holy' way with its idea of sanctified slaughter, raises the matter of what was, in Gibbon's view, one major source of the divorce between religion and morality, namely a false and repugnant concept of an avenging God, which was held by the Jews and passed on to the Christians. Moral objections to the Jewish religion had already been expressed by the Gnostics, and such objections, according to Gibbon, 'too readily present themselves to the sceptical mind'.² A fundamental problem was 'how to reconcile with the common notions of humanity and justice', the conquest of Canaan which, at God's command, involved 'the extirpation of the unsuspecting natives'.³ Furthermore, 'the sanguinary list of murders, of executions, and of massacres, which stain almost every page of the Jewish annals', showed that the chosen people had exercised no more compassion than the barbarous peoples whom they had slaughtered. As to the law, it was surely 'impossible that a religion which consisted only of bloody sacrifices and trifling ceremonies, and whose rewards as well as punishments were all of a carnal and temporal nature, could inspire the love of virtue, or restrain the impetuosity of passion'.⁴ In short, as Gibbon expressed it in discussing the God of Islam: 'The moral attributes

1. DF, loc. cit.

2. DF, xv, II, 12-3. That Gibbon was expressing many of his own sentiments here is clear from the context, from footnote comments, e.g. pp. 12, 13, nn. 27, 28, and from other passages in the work.

3. DF, xv, II, 13. 'The same bloody precepts' seemed to characterise both the Koran and the Old Testament. 'The Lord of hosts marched in person before the Jews' in these wars of extermination (DF, I, V, 383).

4. DF, xv, II, 13.

of Jehovah may not easily be reconciled with the standard of human virtue'.¹ And the Christians, he felt, in their religious wars, crusades, forced conversions and Inquisition, had perpetrated similar offences against morality in the name of religion.

Nor had the Reformation radically altered the situation. If Augustine and his successors were notorious for their 'ardent zeal against heretics of every denomination', Calvin must carry the blame for the killing of Servetus, and the principles used to justify the conduct remained substantially the same. 'Stupendous doctrines' like original sin and predestination were carried over from the old faith to the new and, in Gibbon's view, 'the rigid system of Christianity' framed by Augustine so nearly resembled that of Calvin in its essentials, that 'the real difference between them is invisible even to a theological microscope'.² Despite the reformers' modification or rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation, 'the weight of supernatural belief inclines against the Protestants', and 'many a sober Christian would rather admit that a wafer is God, than that God is a cruel and capricious tyrant'.³

Thus Gibbon saw the moral deficiencies of the Judaeo-Christian Deity reflected in those of his followers. It was more than mere inconsistency of life or failing to maintain a high ideal. Behind the cruelties and persecutions of Jew, Catholic and Protestant, lay a morally distorted view of God and man. God was represented as merciless and tyrannical, and his demands on his creatures as stultifying

1. DF, 1, V, 360.

2. DF, xxxiii, III, 430-1 and n. 33.

3. DF, liv, VI, 131-2.

and unreasonable, not designed for the greatest happiness of mankind. Man was burdened with original sin and denied his physical and intellectual fulfilment in a free and culturally satisfying society. Theological systems did not inspire much confidence in the goodness of either God or his creatures. Boethius, 'the last of the Romans', who edified the church by 'his profound defence of the orthodox creed', still had to attempt 'to reconcile the perfect attributes of the Deity with the apparent disorders of his moral and physical government'.¹ Hence the conduct of his Christian subjects was often determined by a perverse system of moral values. Not charity, mercy and justice, but liberality to churches and monasteries and the rigid suppression of heresy were deemed most worthy of merit for 'such virtues were supposed to deserve the peculiar favour of the Deity'.²

So perverse and rigid were the values of this system that not only were all deviations from the ruling orthodoxy suppressed in this world, but even the best men of ancient times were condemned to everlasting punishment in the next. This mark of Christian exclusiveness seemed to Gibbon not only inhuman but also a denial of moral values. It ignored and nullified the effect of ordinary virtues outside the limits of the Christian faith. So offensive was it to his sense of right that he repeated his charge several times in the course of The Decline and Fall. In the fifteenth chapter, on 'The Progress of the Christian Religion', he summed up the situation thus: 'The condemnation of the wisest and most virtuous of the Pagans on account of their ignorance or disbelief of the divine truth, seems to offend the reason and the

1. DF, xxxix, IV, 211, 212, 215-6.

2. DF, xxxii, III, 407.

humanity of the present age. But the primitive church, whose faith was of a much firmer consistence, delivered over, without hesitation, to eternal torture, the far greater part of the species'.¹ The 'moral attributes' of such a God, Gibbon held, fell short of those expected of men and women of virtue and good will. These 'rigid sentiments' were alien to the easy toleration and spirit of harmony of the ancient world. After quoting from 'the stern Tertullian', exulting at the spectacle of so many proud kings, deluded philosophers, persecuting magistrates and many learned and literary men of antiquity suffering in everlasting flames, Gibbon appealed to 'the humanity of the reader' to let him draw a veil over the rest of this vindictive description.² It was also to humanity and decency that he appealed in the following chapter, when he referred to the pagans being incensed at this 'recent and obscure sect' presuming 'to devote their ancestors to eternal misery',³ especially as these ancestors included some of the 'wisest and most virtuous' in ancient Greece and Rome.

To the moralist, virtue is virtue no matter what the soil that produces it. Gibbon saw religious bigotry denying this fact or at least rendering the virtues of outsiders to the faith worthless as far as acceptance and salvation were concerned. He found this rigid and exclusive doctrine not only in the writings of the Fathers, but

1. DF, xv, II, 28.

2. DF, xv, II, 29. *CF.* xl, IV, 282, where the reference is to the 'new religion, whose masters...condemned the infidel to eternal flames'.

3. DF, xvi, II, 126. The sentiments of early Christians like Ignatius, desirous of martyrdom, are also 'most repugnant to the ordinary feelings of human nature'. (DF, xvi, II, 111).

also enforced by the reformers in their acceptance of the Athanasian Creed, whereby 'they pronounced the eternal damnation of all who did not believe the Catholic faith.'¹ The incorporation of this creed into the Book of Common Prayer meant that the offensive article of faith was repeated in public worship even by a modern and enlightened age. Gibbon's revulsion at such a doctrine remained with him to the end. It is the note on which he concluded his Memoirs. His final gloss to the text explained that the 'celestial hope is confined to a small number of the Elect,' from which we must deduct 'all the mere philosophers,' all the 'earthly Christians' and 'all the gloomy fanatics who are more strongly affected by the fear of Hell, than by the hopes of Heaven. "Strait is the way, and narrow is the gate, and few there be, who find it!"'²

No was such exclusiveness and false emphasis confined to Christianity. While Gibbon applauded its absence from the old Roman religion, he saw it as a concomitant of fanaticism wherever it arose. Thus even Islam, which he considered as in many ways admirable, did not escape his censure in this regard. On his interpretation,³ 'every man who believes in God, and accomplishes good works, may expect in the last day a favourable sentence.' But, 'the good works are those which he [Mahomet] has enjoined' and 'the spiritual blindness' of those outside the faith, 'though excused by ignorance and crowned with virtue, will be scourged with everlasting torments.'⁴ Bigotry, especially when it substituted religious observance for the service of man or nullified the real

1. DF, liv, VI, 131. See also 'Vindication', MW, IV, 606.

2. Memoirs, p. 196. The note refers to the text on p.189, 'the faith of enthusiasts who sing Hallelujahs above the clouds.'

3. But see Bernard Lewis, 'Gibbon on Muhammad', in Bowersock, op.cit., especially pp. 69, 71-2.

4. DF, I, V, 362, 372-3.

virtues of others, was morally offensive to Gibbon wherever he encountered it.

Christianity, in his view, combined not only the moral defects of religion in general with those inherited from Judaism in particular, but also others taken over from the defeated Roman empire and from ordinary unregenerate human nature. If the Christian religion could be credited with an original purity in its primitive or semi-mythical state, it was certainly 'corrupted' by the time of its triumph and that triumph resulted in what might be called the paganisation of the church. Gibbon shows us the first imperial convert, influenced less by his heart than by his head and by the consideration of political gain, opening the gates of Christendom to adherents of the old religion on the basis of temporal inducements such as royal patronage and material rewards. He shows the even balance of the two religions tipped in favour of the emperor's choice by an appeal to unworthy and even immoral motives: 'the piercing eye of ambition and avarice soon discovered that the profession of Christianity might contribute to the interest of the present as well as of a future life.'¹ And where 'the venal and obsequious crowds' of courtiers, moved by 'hopes of wealth and honours' led the way, the common people followed in imitation and with similar hopes, their conversion being 'purchased at an easy rate.'²

Moreover, with the 'separation of men' into clergy and laity, Constantine's favour seemed to confirm 'the inalienable rights' and

1. DF, xx, II, 330.

2. DF, xx, II, 330-1.

privileges of the ecclesiastical order, from which stemmed many later abuses.¹ It helped to implant a worldly outlook in the seats of ecclesiastical authority, for bishoprics, as Gibbon observed, especially those in important and wealthy cities, were frequently sought for temporal rather than spiritual reasons, and with scandalous results. 'The interested views, the selfish and angry passions, the acts of perfidy and dissimulation, the secret corruption, the open and even bloody violence, which had formerly disgraced the freedom of elections in the commonwealths of Greece and Rome, too often influenced the choice of the successors of the apostles.'²

The unmistakable divorce between religion and morality was thus officially confirmed in the edict and policy of Constantine and his successors. A triumphant Christian establishment took over the moral inadequacies of the imperial system, its power structure and its methods, and allowed into positions of authority worldly men governed by human motives and passions. So, while 'the religion of Constantine' quickly achieved 'the final conquest of the Roman empire,' the result was that 'the victors were insensibly conquered by the arts of their vanquished rivals.'³ In this pyrrhic victory involving the paganisation of the triumphant church, Gibbon pointed to 'the same methods of deceiving the credulity, and of affecting the senses of mankind.' In this spirit, he claimed, 'the ministers of the Catholic church imitated the profane model which they were impatient to destroy.'⁴

1. DF, xx, II, 334.

2. DF, xx, II, 336. See also pp. 337-8 and the dangers of 'the faculty of spiritual generation.'

3. DF, xxviii, III, 227.

4. DF, xxviii, III, 226-7 and see nn. 96, 97. Cf. xvi, II, 92: 'The gardens and circus of Nero on the Vatican, which were polluted with the blood of the first Christians, have been rendered still more famous by the triumph and by the abuse of the persecuted religion.'

Gibbon's desire for impartiality saved him from unqualified condemnation of the clergy, especially the humbler and poorer of them. He even acknowledged certain admirable qualities in saints like Athanasius and Bernard and he held in high regard some of the more rational and moderate Swiss pastors. His scorn was reserved for those corrupted by ease and luxury and for those he regarded as responsible for the abuse of power.

In the first place, he saw churchmen being corrupted by much the same vices as other citizens of the declining empire: softness, ambition, luxury, avarice and grosser sins. He thought of his English clerical contemporaries as enjoying 'the fat slumbers of the Church',¹ quite unlike the lower clergy and even the bishops in fifth-century Britain, whose poverty compelled them 'to deserve the public esteem by a decent and exemplary behaviour.'² Such, however, was the decline in clerical behaviour over the years, that fifteenth-century Europe presented this striking contrast with earlier times: 'The Popes, bishops, and rich abbots, careless of the public esteem, were soldiers, statesmen, and men of pleasure; yet even such dignified ecclesiastics blushed at the grosser vices of the inferior clergy.'³

For certain popes and for monks in general Gibbon had nothing good to say. The latter, 'in every age and country' were distinguished by 'a cruel and unfeeling temper', 'religious hatred' and 'merciless zeal'.⁴ They insinuated themselves into noble and wealthy families to secure

1. Memoirs, p. 140.

2. DF, xxxi, III, 375.

3. 'Outlines', MW, III, 55.

4. DF, xxxvii, IV, 80. 'Their minds were inaccessible to reason or mercy.' (DF, xlvii, V, 130).

proselytes for their unnatural way of life and riches for themselves, all by means of 'the specious arts of flattery and seduction.'¹

Prosperity inevitably corrupted their discipline and ideals, with the result that 'every age of the church has accused the licentiousness of the degenerate monks; who no longer remembered the object of their institution, embraced the vain and sensual pleasures which they had renounced and scandalously abused the riches which had been acquired by the austere virtues of their founders. Their natural descent from such painful and dangerous virtue to the common vices of humanity will not excite much grief or indignation in the mind of the philosopher.'²

Yet, in the mind of the moralist, there was indignation and disgust which comes out in Gibbon's description of this betrayal of ideals and this drift into a scandalous way of life under the guise of religion.³ 'The numerous vermin' of monks, friars and hermits of the cell or the desert, who spread across the Middle Ages, struck him as not merely useless, but offensive. They 'disgraced religion, learning and common sense.'⁴

Bad popes too, there certainly were, for 'the sanctity of the office might be degraded by the personal vices of the man.'⁵ These vices Gibbon stigmatised on numerous occasions: ambition⁶ avarice,⁷ treachery and falsehood,⁸ and even bloodthirsty behaviour;⁹ he recorded the vileness of John XII and he left it to church councils to condemn 'the

1. DF, xxxvii, IV, 68. 'Abject plebeians,' said Gibbon, 'who gained more in the cloister than they had sacrificed in the world' (IV, 69).

2. DF, xxxvii, IV, 75-6.

3. DF, xxxvii, IV, 72, where he used the words 'horrid and disgusting', adding, they seemed to think 'every sensation that is offensive to man...acceptable to God.'

4. 'Outlines', MW, III, 29.

5. DF, lxix, VII, 222.

6. See DF, xlix, V, 282, 300, n.94, 311, 319; lvi, VI, 212; lix, VI, 369; lxx, VII, 308.

7. See DF, xlix, V, 291; lix, VI, 369 (by implication); lxvi, VII, 104; lxi, VI, 454.

8. DF, xlix, V, 291.

9. DF, liv, VI, 130: 'Innocent III surpassed the sanguinary fame of Theodora.'

incorrigible vices' of Eugenius and of John XXIII.¹ Yet he was willing to concede that 'of the Christian hierarchy, the bishops of Rome were commonly the most prudent and least fanatic,' one of their number even being responsible for 'the meritorious act of saving the majestic structure of the Pantheon.'²

It was not so much the vices of particular popes as the development of papal pre-eminence and the immense possibilities for the abuse of temporal power which disturbed Gibbon and his narrative recorded many actual instances of this abuse. Opposed to one-man rule in the state, he found ecclesiastical autocracy equally dangerous and obnoxious. He was certainly in agreement with Hobbes' description of the new 'ecclesiastical dominion' as being simply the ghost of the old empire seated on its grave,³ for he saw 'the Christian Pontiffs' making 'their claim of universal dominion' after having 'succeeded to the throne of the Caesars.'⁴ His rather empirical approach in certain places where he listed the failings of individual popes is thus subservient to his general philosophical stance and his main objective. He regarded as immoral the ecclesiastical system which had developed by the twelfth century and he summed up his charge against the Roman church in no uncertain terms: 'Her avarice was oppressive, her despotism odious... her innovations more rapid and scandalous' than those of her Eastern counterpart; 'the lives of the Latin clergy were more corrupt, and the Eastern bishops might pass for the successors of the apostles, if they

1. DF, lxvi, VII, 117; lxx, VII, 299-300.

2. DF, lxxi, VII, 322.

3. 'The Ghost of the deceased Romane Empire sitting crowned upon the grave thereof.', 'Leviathon', chap. 47, The English Works, London, 1839, Vol. III, pp. 697-8.

4. DF, xvi, II, 92. For references to the 'tyranny' and 'despotism' of the popes, see e.g. xlvii, V, 138, lx, VI, 416; lxvi, VII, 104, 107; lxx, VII, 296, 306.

were compared with the lordly prelates, who wielded by turns the crosier, the sceptre, and the sword.'¹

Finally, apart from these aspects of barbarism and religion and the particular criticisms of the latter, there is also a sense in which Gibbon presents religion as barbarism in The Decline and Fall. He saw religious wars as often more barbaric than those waged for other motives. The Jewish invasion of Canaan, the Moslem expansion of the faith, Christian holy wars, and especially the Crusades, had a large element of barbarism in them. He regarded the conquest of the Promised Land as a war of extermination in which 'the common notions of humanity and justice' were forgotten, while 'the barbarians of Palestine' exercised 'as much compassion towards their idolatrous enemies as they had ever shown to their friends or countrymen.'² For examples of the fanatical and furious spirit of the Moslems, one can turn to a number of places in The Decline and Fall. 'In the first year of the first caliph, his lieutenant Caled, the sword of God and the scourge of the infidels, advanced to the banks of the Euphrates, and reduced the cities of Anbar and Hira.' The victors were elated by the slaughter of '"an immense multitude of infidels"' and the acquisition of innumerable quantities of spoil, while the rifling of the great Persian palace during the sack of Ctesiphon, is itself a barbaric tale: 'The naked robbers of the desert were suddenly enriched beyond the measure of their hope or knowledge,' shouting 'with religious transport, "This... is the promise of the apostle of God."' ³

1. DF, liv, VI, 129.

2. DF, xv, II, 13; here put as a Gnostic viewpoint, but forming an essential step in Gibbon's whole argument.

3. DF, li, V, 429-430, 433.

No less barbarism had been displayed by the Christians throughout history. Seven centuries after these Moslem barbarities, Ladislaus, king of Naples, named by the pope as 'general of the church', intervened in the Great Schism. 'Besieging Rome by land and water, he thrice entered the gates as a barbarian conqueror; profaned the altars, violated the virgins, pillaged the merchants, performed his devotions at St. Peter's and left a garrison in the castle of St. Angelo.'¹ The association of barbarism with religion is clearly made here and in other places, such as the comparison of the sack of Rome by Charles V with that by the Goths,² a comparison decidedly to the advantage of the latter. When reminding his reader in the final volume of this contrast, Gibbon wrote: 'In the history of the Gothic siege, I have compared the barbarians with the subjects of Charles V.'³ And, as Stephen Graubard has noted: 'Such comparisons, however accurate, are intended principally to communicate moral outrage about Christian behaviour.'⁴

The barbarity of holy wars and forced conversions has already been noticed. But a reference to the theme of 'barbarism and religion' is brought out in Gibbon's examination of the 'Justice of the Crusades'. Writing of the specious claims made by the crusaders to justify the slaughter or subjugation of unbelievers, he went on to add: 'Above four hundred years before the first crusade, the eastern and western provinces of the Roman empire had been acquired about the same time, and in the same manner, by the barbarians of Germany and Arabia.'⁵ The implication is clear: the new or Christian barbarians acted no better than their heathen predecessors.

1. DF, lxx, VII, 297.

2. DF, xxxi, III, 347.

3. DF, lxx, VII, 308, n.102.

4. 'Edward Gibbon: Contraria Sunt Complementa', in Bowersock, op.cit., p. 132.

5. DF, lviii, VI, 287.

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Within the Christian world, warring sects are shown displaying a singular degree of barbarism. Africa was the scene of some of the bitterest conflicts between Catholics and Arians, when the fanatic and ruthless Vandal king, Genseric, having as a youth 'renounced the orthodox communion,' became the scourge of his Catholic subjects. He is portrayed by Gibbon as a barbarian in name and nature, 'furious and formidable' in his language, fierce and ambitious as a conqueror, and possessing 'a ferocious mind...incapable of compassion.'¹ But both sides in this religious struggle were barbarous, inflicting, when they had the upper hand, inhuman cruelties on the minds and bodies of their opponents. So too, in the Eastern Empire, barbarity characterised the prolonged conflict between these two religious factions, which ended in the overthrow of Arianism and placed Gregory Nazianzen triumphantly on the archiepiscopal throne. And amid 'the tumultuous voice of rage, grief, astonishment, and despair,' Gregory declared that 'on the memorable day of his installation, the capital of the East wore the appearance of a city taken by storm, and in the hands of a Barbarian conqueror.' Yet it was simply celebrating the triumph of orthodoxy with the support of a Christian emperor.²

The Christians are also cast in the role of barbarians for their destruction of monuments and works of pagan antiquity. Gibbon saw this as another product of fanaticism, a sort of gratuitous barbarism, which, having triumphed over paganism in the religious sphere, signalised the triumph by destroying some of the treasures of the old culture. Islam, except for a few extremists, he thought free from

1. DF, xxxvii, IV, 89; see also the following pages of that chapter.
 2. Theodosius had been baptized into the orthodox faith early that year, A.D. 380. See DF, xxvii, III, 148, 155.

this vindictiveness;¹ but, in acquitting the Moslems of such 'destructive zeal', he was reminded of the fate of the Alexandrian library and 'the mischievous bigotry of the Christians who studied to destroy the monuments of idolatry.'² He lamented the empty shelves of the great library which had been 'pillaged or destroyed' and threw the blame on Theophilus, archbishop of Alexandria in the late fourth century, 'a bold, bad man, whose hands were alternately polluted with gold and with blood,' and who brought about the destruction of the temple of Serapis. 'Surely,' Gibbon felt, 'the compositions of ancient genius,' might 'have been excepted from the wreck of idolatry,' accomplished by 'either the zeal or the avarice of the archbishop.'³

And what of the capital of the world, to which Gibbon returned to bring his narrative to a close? He had earlier shown himself unwilling to believe the common view of Pope Gregory's mutilation of the temples and statues of ancient Rome, and of his burning of the Palatine library. Yet, while admitting that the evidence of 'the barbarian' pope's 'destructive rage is doubtful and recent,' there was the fact that Gregory's writings 'reveal his implacable aversion to the monuments of classical genius; and he points his severest censure against the profane learning of a bishop who taught the art of grammar, studied the Latin poets, and pronounced with the same voice, the praises of Jupiter and those of Christ.'⁴ In the eyes of Gibbon, the eighteenth-century gentleman scholar, who breathed the air of classical Rome, this pope

1. See DF, li, V, 482-3.

2. DF, li, V, 483 and n. 140.

3. DF, xxviii, III, 211-2.

4. DF, xlv, V, 33-4. 'Gregory may not have burned the Palatine library, as John of Salisbury relates,' said Rand, 'but really he did not need to burn it. His programme, if universally accepted, would automatically close the doors of the collectors of ancient books and leave their treasures to moulder on their shelves.' Founders of the Middle Ages. N.Y., 1929, p. 249.

was potentially, and indeed intellectually, if not in actual practice, a 'barbarian'.

In a comparison between Rome and Constantinople, Gibbon borrowed from the lament of 'an eloquent Greek, Emanuel Chrysoloras, over the capital of the East at the beginning of the fifteenth century: 'The works of ancient sculpture had been defaced by Christian zeal or barbaric violence; the fairest structures were demolished; and the marbles of Paros or Numidia were burnt for lime or applied to the meanest uses.'¹ In similar vein, Gibbon lamented with Poggio the ruins of ancient Rome. The city and its buildings had, in the main, been spared by Alaric and Genseric, 'and the momentary resentment of Totila was disarmed by his own temper and the advice of his friends and enemies.' Where did the chief responsibility for the destruction lie? 'From these innocent barbarians,' Gibbon concluded, 'the reproach may be transferred to the Catholics of Rome. The statues, altars, and houses of the daemons were an abomination in their eyes; and in the absolute command of the city they might labour with zeal and perseverance to erase the idolatry of their ancestors.'² Yet their culpability did not seem to extend beyond 'the moments of heathen superstition.' However, in writing of the decay of the Coliseum, Gibbon alleged that 'whatever was precious, or portable, or profane, the statues of gods and heroes, and the costly ornaments of sculpture...became the first prey of the barbarians or the Christians;³ while, 'of the present ruin the nephews of Paul the Third are the guilty

1. DF, lxvii, VII, 140, and see p.138, n.1.

2. DF, lxx, VII, 321-2.

3. DF, lxxi, VII, 329.

agents; and every traveller who views the Farnese palace may curse the sacrilege of these upstart princes.'¹ It is clear from such passages that Gibbon not only linked 'barbarism' and 'religion' in his reflections on the ruin of Rome but that, in certain circumstances, he expected much the same conduct from both.

Most of Gibbon's reactions to the triumph of religion which we have examined have fallen on the debit side of his moral balance sheet. Yet to make good his claim as an impartial historian, he was determined to render a factual and objective account of the growth and corruption of the church and his endeavour or his achievement have been acknowledged by such diverse writers as J.M. Robertson and John Henry Newman.² If there were defects in the impartiality of his presentation, he did at least suggest some points to the credit of both Christianity and other religions.

He expressed an admiration for certain features of Zoroastrianism, listing examples of its practical and social morality which he considered worthy of praise.³ He stressed also some of the advantages brought by Islam, such as its civilizing effect on the tribes of Arabia. The prophet, he claimed, had 'breathed among the faithful a spirit of charity and friendship, recommended the practice of the social virtues, and checked, by his laws and precepts, the thirst of revenge and oppression of widows and orphans.'⁴ He mentioned also the good

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1. DF, lxxi, VII, 333; though Gibbon admitted the evidence for their plundering of the Coliseum to furnish materials for their palace was slight. See p.333, n. 73.
 2. See Robertson's Gibbon, pp. 58-9 and his Gibbon on Christianity, London, 1930, Introd. xxi; and Newman's frequent references, quotations and comments in his Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, 3rd ed. 1845, re-edited for Penguin Books by J.M. Cameron, 1974, e.g. pp.126-8, 231, 286-290, 199ff., 311ff., 330ff.
 3. DF, viii, I, 217-8.
 4. DF, I, V, 421.

government and resulting prosperity of certain countries under their Moslem conquerors.¹ There is, doubtless, often an element of polemic in Gibbon's commendation. In his day Islam tended to fill the vacancy for an Oriental myth which a disillusionment with the Chinese 'as a model of moral virtue...and of secular tolerance,' had created and which the Enlightenment sought as one of its ideal prototypes. Its historians, as Bernard Lewis, has pointed out, were attempting 'to correct the negative stereotypes of the Middle Ages and to recognize the contributions of Islamic civilization to mankind.' Furthermore, Islam and its founder, lacking the social and legal protection afforded in Europe to Christianity, 'thus served as an admirable vehicle for anti-religious and anti-Christian polemic. Gibbon occasionally accomplished this purpose by attacking Islam while meaning Christianity, more frequently by praising Islam as an oblique criticism of Christian usage, belief, and practice.'² Even making allowance for this ploy, it is significant that most of his evaluative summaries of the legacy of Mahomet and his successors are examples of impartiality and preserve a strictly judicial balance of praise and blame.

Some further entries on the credit side of religion are to be found in Gibbon's treatment of Christianity. They may be few, often a little grudging, especially in comparison with his numerous adverse criticisms, but they are there nonetheless. They include the tributes to some of the 'saints', notably Augustine, Athanasius and Bernard for qualities like incorruptibility, 'undaunted courage', and even mental energy and

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1. e.g. *DF*,; i, V, 441; and particularly the prosperity and religious toleration enjoyed in Spain, *li*, V, 514-7.
 2. 'Gibbon on Muhammad', in Bowersock, *op.cit.*, p. 70.

eloquence. 'A philosophic age,' he admitted, 'has abolished, with too liberal and indiscriminate disdain, the honours of these spiritual heroes.'¹ Ulphilas, 'the bishop and apostle of the Goths', he acclaimed for his 'blameless life and indefatigable zeal', which won his people's 'love and reverence.'² So too, in contrast to the forced conversions and religious wars, he acknowledged 'a purer spirit of religion' in the relief and the freeing of captives, for in this a ruler like Heraclius showed 'the charitable spirit of a Christian hero.'³

Beyond giving honour to the individual, Gibbon recognised the moral and civilizing effects of Christianity itself, and nowhere more than among these Goths. 'Christianity, which opened the gates of Heaven to the Barbarians, introduced an important change in their moral and political condition.' Not only did they receive 'the use of letters', but 'their minds were insensibly enlarged by the distant view of history, of nature, of the arts, and of society.' And even 'in the most corrupt state of Christianity,' they 'might learn justice from the law, and mercy from the gospel;' and, however far practice fell short of precept, they were, at least, 'sometimes restrained by conscience, and frequently punished by remorse.'⁴

As in Gibbon's censures, so in his praise of Christianity, we are left in no doubt that it is the moralist who is passing judgement. He is concerned primarily with the cultural and moral effects of religion on these barbarians, a pragmatic attitude characteristic of

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1. DF, lix, VI, 346. He is here writing particularly of Bernard of Clairvaux.
 2. DF, xxxvii, IV, 82.
 3. DF, xlv, V, 89; and see xlv, V, 19, where the 'Christian hero', Tiberius Constantine, is said to have imitated 'the purer virtues of the Antonines.'
 4. DF, xxxvii, IV, 85-6.

his approach to religion as an aspect of manners.¹ The contrast between this primary, and what he saw as the incidental or 'superstitious' side of religion, emerges in his discussion of the various motives and influences behind barbarian conversions. 'The moral precepts of the Gospel,' he wrote, 'were protected by the extravagant virtues of the monks; and a spiritual theology was supported by the visible power of relics and the pomp of religious worship.'² By contrast, it was the moral rather than the spiritual side of Christianity which he acclaimed, and its morality was of the social kind, not that associated with cloistered or 'monkish virtues'.

The conversion of the barbarians also brought benefits which transcended their own society, since it made them members of a wider, European community. This 'Christian republic', whose union was cemented by 'the perpetual correspondence of the Latin clergy, the frequent pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem, and the growing authority of the Popes,' had for Gibbon, a positive value as a step towards a common culture, and ideal which he cherished in 'the great republic of Europe' in his own day. It is a testimony to his desire to achieve impartiality that, however much he deprecated pilgrimages and papal power in themselves, he recognised their contribution to this ideal, since they 'gradually produced the similar manners, and common jurisprudence, which have distinguished, from the rest of mankind, the independent, and even hostile, nations of modern Europe.'³ In his 'General Observations', where he optimistically pictured this 'great

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1. As he wrote in 1764: 'A valuable work might be written giving a philosophical picture of religions, their genius, reasonings and influence on the manners, government, philosophy, and poetry of their respective votaries.' ('An Examination of Mallet's Introduction to the History of Denmark', MW, III, 231.
 2. DF, xxxvii, IV, 84 (Section headed, 'Motives of their faith').
 3. DF, xxxvii, IV, 86-7.

republic' raised above the threat of future barbarian invasions, he wrote once again of the softening influence of Christianity on these once ferocious peoples. At the bottom of this list, and as an expression of faint praise, he gave Christianity some credit for breaking the violence of the fall of the empire whose decline it had hastened.¹ Furthermore, Christianity, over the last few centuries, seemed to him to have shed some of its former prejudice and repression. He was aware of 'a secret reformation...silently working in the bosom of the reformed churches; many weeds of prejudice were eradicated; and the disciples of Erasmus diffused a spirit of freedom and moderation. The liberty of conscience has been claimed as a common benefit, an inalienable right.'²

In the chapter following that from which this statement is taken, Gibbon examined the expansion of Christianity over Western and Northern Europe in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, and took the opportunity to weigh the pros and cons of this important event.³ After acknowledging that the monks were initially prompted by pure motives and active courage to visit the tents and huts of the barbarians, he recounted the now familiar story of rapid degeneration into superstition and forced conversions. The whole Baltic coast was 'invaded under the standard of the cross,' and this made way for 'the reign of idolatry.' If the spiritual effect was negative, 'truth and candour' had to admit that 'many temporal benefits' came to these Christians of the North. And even if the precepts of the gospel could not subdue 'the rage for

1. DF, xxxviii, IV, 175.

2. DF, liv, VI, 133-4.

3. DF, lv, VI, 168ff.

war, inherent in the human species,' and bring about peace, at least, 'the admission of the barbarians into the pale of civil and ecclesiastical society delivered Europe from the depredations, by sea and land, of the Normans, the Hungarians, and the Russians, who learned to spare their brethren and cultivate their possessions. The establishment of law and order was promoted by the influence of the clergy; and the rudiments of art and science were introduced into the savage countries of the globe.'¹ Here we find once more 'the impartial historian' searching, even in the triumph of religion, for what he can acknowledge as positive gains.

It is in the context of a plea for impartiality that we find his famous remark that, 'to a philosophic eye the vices of the clergy are far less dangerous than their virtues.'² The epigram is often quoted but seldom expounded. Its immediate setting, as Owen Chadwick reminds us, is often forgotten by those who use it.³ It is that of the papal disorders of the tenth century, where, after ridiculing the legend of Pope Joan, Gibbon referred to the actual influence of the 'sister prostitutes, Marozia and Theodora', in making popes out of 'the most strenuous of their lovers.' The 'rare genealogy' of the papacy in this century, according to Gibbon, included three descendants of Marozia who all occupied the throne of St. Peter.⁴ 'In its context,' Chadwick noted, 'the celebrated mot was Gibbon's way of rebuking the Protestant historians for their cruder anti-papal prejudice and of subtly distinguishing his claim to detachment.'⁵ The passage is one

1. DF, lv, VI, 171-2.

2. DF, xlix, V, 318-9.

3. 'Gibbon and the Church Historians', in Bowersock, op.cit., p.224.

4. The third, her great-grandson, however, was never pope. See Bury's note, DF, V, 318, n.140a.

5. Chadwick, loc.cit. Cf. Newman's reference to the mot, Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, p. 126.

of a number in which he deprecated the partisan exploitation of papal misdemeanours,¹ clearly dissociating himself from such a use of history.

But there is more to 'the celebrated mot' than this. We have noticed Gibbon's exposure of the vices of the clergy, above all of the monks and popes. We have examined his rejection of what he considered a false scale of moral values associated with traditional and institutional Christianity. Here, in an aphoristic statement, he linked these two aspects to express what he saw as an important truth. The mot does not stand alone. It is merely a neat, succinct expression of a moral indictment which runs through The Decline and Fall.

In the first place, the Catholic Church has admitted the failings of popes and 'has accused' in 'every age...the vices of the cloister.'² At the same time, it has exalted and emulated their seeming virtues. In this, 'to the philosophic eye,' lies the danger: 'specious virtue' would be substituted for the genuine. From the standpoint 'of a philosopher' also, Gibbon viewed the 'natural descent' of the monks from their 'painful and dangerous virtue to the common vices of humanity.'³ The vices are merely 'common' and human, the virtue 'dangerous' as it placed an unnatural strain on ordinary mortals. And in writing of the conversion of the barbarians, Gibbon juxtaposed 'the moral precepts of the Gospel' and 'the extravagant virtues of the monks,'⁴ while he linked 'monk' and 'sophist' in a reference to the education of an

1. Chadwick gives some instances, op.cit., pp. 222ff; see also DF, xlix, V, 318, n.140 and lxx, VII, 310, n.106.

2. See DF, xxxvii, IV, 75 and Memoirs, p. 67.

3. DF, xxxvii, IV, 75-6.

4. DF, xxxvii, IV, 84; already quoted in the sentence above, p.385.

Eastern emperor, whose 'character was degraded, rather than ennobled by the virtues of a monk and the learning of a sophist.'¹ In a similar way, 'fictitious virtues', those 'of a convent', though devoid of moral value, deceived such noble souls as Godfrey of Bouillon.²

Gibbon's contention amounts to this. While rabid protestants exclaim with holy horror but also with 'malicious pleasure', over the scandals of the papacy, and use even such a 'poor engine of controversy',³ to attack their opponents, the dispassionate and 'philosophic eye' sees these things in their true perspective. Certainly there were bad popes and bad monks. History does not deny it. And no one is deceived by it. Vice is ugly and stands openly condemned. What is more dangerous, because it is more deceptive and because it is sanctified by sacred authority, is 'fictitious virtue', or evil masquerading as good. Only the discerning, the enlightened, the moral philosopher, can detect these 'specious virtues'. So, towards the end of The Decline and Fall, in a passage which echoes 'the celebrated mot', with its reference to the outrageous conduct of the popes, Gibbon admitted that 'the sanctity of the office might be degraded by the personal vices of the man,' but once again added a moral rider that 'the scandals of the tenth century were obliterated by the austere and more dangerous virtues of Gregory the Seventh and his successors.'⁴ Nothing could make clearer the stance of the moralist towards what he saw as a set of false values which the triumph of religion' had imposed on the Christian world.

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1. DF, xlviii, V, 238.
 2. DF, lviii, VI, 289.
 3. DF, xlv, V, 318 and n. 140.
 4. DF, lxix, VII, 222.

From this standpoint, Gibbon's History, it has been suggested 'sounds like a moral treatise differing only from the work of some Christian apologist in that he has reversed the traditional values.'¹ How far does this reversal of values, which reflected the general perspective of his own century, satisfy us as doing justice to Christianity and the so-called age of faith which followed its official acceptance? How far do his moral judgements in this area now appear to be just?

While Gibbon's achievement as an historian, perhaps the greatest of historians,² is almost universally acknowledged, certain of his assumptions and conclusions have been widely challenged from his day to ours. The challenge has come from learned editors of such divergent ideologies as Milman and Bury,³ from most of those writers who, in the first half of the present century, have probed specific questions concerning the later Roman Empire and the middle ages,⁴ and more recently from Lynn White and the group of historians who set out to re-examine 'Gibbon's problem after two centuries'.⁵ Such a re-examination was felt necessary not so much because of advances in scholarship and methodology over the past two hundred years, as because of altered standards of judgement 'Essentially,' they concluded, 'it is neither new facts nor more careful appraisal of facts known to the late eighteenth-century which compels

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1. R.W. Harris, Reason and Nature in the Eighteenth Century, London, 1966, p.360. Referring to the 'improprieties', Low remarked: 'Gibbon's fun is only the morality of the Fathers turned inside out', Edward Gibbon, p. 267.
 2. See e.g. Trevor-Roper's article, 'Gibbon greatest of historians', Journal of Historical Studies, I, Winter 1967-8, pp.109-116.
 3. The areas of challenge can be seen broadly in the introductions to their editions and more specifically in particular notes to the text, e.g. Bury's claim that 'Gibbon's account of the internal history of the Empire after Heraclius is not only superficial; it gives an entirely false impression of the facts,' though he found some excuse for this. (DF, Intr. I, xvi).
 4. Such writers as Baynes, Oman, Rostovtzeff, Bark and others concerned in the Pirenne debate.
 5. Subtitle of The Transformation of the Roman World, ed. Lynn White Jr., Univ. of California Press, 1966.

us to disagree with Gibbon's perspective and judgments: it is our different mode of vision.'¹

The now rejected mode of vision was seen to rest on 'absolutist' or 'exclusive sets of values' belonging to men steeped in the humanist tradition. By contrast, 'the pluralism that increasingly has come to dominate the minds of Western men since Gibbon's day...insists on the spiritual necessity of judging one's own relationship to everything', whether 'a work of art, a political system, or a religious belief,' and on 'an obligation of understanding from the inside even, or especially, the things we do not like.'² The present approach was seen also to reject the temptation to measure the height of a civilization in terms of the old absolutist values, and to avoid a rigid 'periodization' of the past and similar interpretative fallacies.³ Yet, according to Charles T. Wood even historians impelled to undertake such a revaluation by their awareness of these revolutionary changes in attitude, still suffer 'from the limitations imposed by Gibbon and his contemporaries in their interpretation of what happened to Western civilization after the happy, though silver age of the Antonines.'⁴

Thus, in the broadest sense, the altered 'mode of vision' concerns the question of the middle ages as a whole. The historical problem for Gibbon and his contemporaries was that 'cultural trough'⁵ between

1. Lynn White, 'Conclusion', op. cit., p. 292.

2. Ibid., pp. 310, 194.

3. Charles T. Wood, review of The Transformation of the Roman World, History and Theory, VIII, No.1, 1968, pp. 146-9.

4. Ibid., p. 145.

5. Toynbee's phrase, A Study of History. London, 1934-54, VII, 383. Andrew Losky in his Introduction to The Transformation of the Roman World, also uses the term 'trough'.

those two peaks, their own Augustan age and that of the legendary Antonines.¹ With very rare exceptions, notably Edmund Burke's little Abridgment of English History² they found it hardly possible to write of medieval institutions with...intelligence and appreciation.'³ While epigrams do not tell the whole truth, they are a useful index to the fairly general consensus of an age and the 'barbarism and religion' sentiment, echoed in numerous writings, is neatly summed up in Pope's familiar couplet:

A second Deluge Learning thus o'er-run,

And the Monks finished what the Goths begun.⁴

And, if Gibbon in drawing his History to a close, conceded that 'the darkness of the middle ages exhibits some scenes not unworthy of our notice,'⁵ the vast extent of this dark period was a solemn reminder to his readers that it had taken civilization a millenium and a half to recover its true basis and values. In this sense Gibbon is seen by Lynn White as one of those makers of masterpieces who have 'cannibalized the past.'⁶ It is a natural corollary of his undisputed position as historical spokesman⁷ for his century and his pre-eminence as a writer,

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1. Without much contemporary evidence for such a view, this age had, long before Gibbon, been idealised into something of a myth. To Toynbee (op.cit., IV, 60) and Walbank (The Awful Revolution, Liverpool, 1969, p.19) it was at best an 'indian summer'.
 2. 'An Essay towards an Abridgment of English History', Works, London, 1842, 2 vols. II, 503-596.
 3. Lord Acton, Essays on Church and State, ed. D. Woodruff, London, 1952, p.455. See, however, T.P. Peardom, The Transition in English Historical Writing, 1760-1830. Columbia U.P., 1933, especially chaps. IV, V; also H. Weisinger, 'The Middle Ages and the Late Eighteenth-Century Historians', Philological Quarterly, Vol. XXVII, Jan. 1948. pp. 63-79.
 4. An Essay on Criticism, lines 687-8.
 5. DF, lxix, VII, 219.
 6. Op.cit., p. 293. Writing of the 'one-sided prejudice, bred of an inevitable reaction against the mediaeval view of life' which 'still obscures the thought of many outside the ranks of historical students,' de Burgh claimed that 'Gibbon did more than anyone to fix this prejudice in the mind of the public. W.G. de Burgh, The Legacy of the Ancient World, new ed. London, 1953, p. 438, n.1.
 7. As far as 'the public' is concerned Gibbon is the sole survivor of the triumvirate of historians and the only one widely read.

that his authority gave a lasting influence to his pronouncements. Thus, as Bury pointed out, his 'designation of the story of the later Empire as "a uniform tale of weakness and misery" is one of the most untrue, and most effective, judgments ever uttered by a thoughtful historian.'¹ The effectiveness and influence of his judgements is thus not necessarily dependent on their truth.

There is no doubt, however, that Gibbon's fine historical sense enabled him for the most part to transcend the bias and limitations of his age which are nevertheless enshrined in some of his categorisations of the middle ages and in some of his most quotable and therefore most quoted remarks. It enabled him to produce an unrivalled and largely impartial account of what to him was a period of civilization in decline. But our admiration for the masterpiece need not make us unaware of its limitations. We can, I feel, at times detect in the historian a tension between an impulse to censure or ridicule what struck him as contemptible or irrational and a strong desire for strict impartiality. This tension, only half resolved, is felt when his philosophic scrutiny is directed to certain features of medieval life and thought or when his distinctly Western telescope is trained on the capital of the East. But it is never more apparent than when he is dealing with religion wherever it is found. And nowhere does the irony, the contempt, or the pose of the candid inquirer break through more consistently than in these parts of his work.

It is here, therefore, particularly that we sense a need for revaluation in attitudes and judgements and this is all the more apparent

1. DF, Introd., I, xvi.

since religion is a major element in The Decline and Fall. In fact, some writers have seen the religious problem as fundamental to the whole work.¹ At all events the subject occupies eleven whole chapters and significant sections of others, apart from the numerous references to religious matters which arise in the course of the narrative. But once again, it is not so much facts as our viewpoint which has changed. The altered viewpoint was already making itself felt before the beginning of this century. The 'candid and rational inquiry' into early Christianity which had appeared 'uncandid' and 'disingenuous' to Milman appeared to Bury in much the same light: 'Our point of view has altered, and if Gibbon were writing now, the tone of his "candid and rational inquiry" would certainly be different. His manner would not be that of sometimes open, sometimes transparently veiled dislike.' The approach Bury saw as appropriate to the changed historical and critical climate included greater detachment and tolerance and a more 'unobtrusive scepticism... which seems to render offensive warfare superfluous.'²

While we may accept the general truth of Bury's verdict, based on the most scholarly investigation of one historian's work by another, it is also true that the point of view has again shifted since Bury's Cambridge inaugural lecture and his conception of history as a science.³ We might now qualify his notion of 'detachment' and, as White and his fellow historians have suggested, think rather in terms of looking at one's personal relation to the objects of inquiry and of an obligation

1. See e.g. Giorgio Falco, La polemica sul medioevo, Torino, 1933, reissue of 1977, p.197. ('il problema religioso è uno dei tratti fondamentali.')

2. Bury's Introd. to 1896 ed. of DF, I, xxxix. 'Though the moral of Gibbon's work has not lost its meaning,' he concluded, 'yet it is quite otherwise with the particular treatment of Christian theology and Christian institutions.'

3. The Science of History, Cambridge, 1903.

to understand from the inside. And while we may agree with Bury that 'neither the historian nor the man of letters will any longer subscribe, without a thousand reserves, to the theological chapters of The Decline and Fall' we may also wish to qualify the other part of his assertion, that 'no discreet inquirer would go there for his ecclesiastical history.'¹ If he is discreet, we might reply, he may safely go there for the facts, since Gibbon vindicated his scrupulous use of the original authorities to everyone's satisfaction,² but he will use a thousand reserves in dealing with Gibbon's interpretation and conclusions.

Nevertheless we are still inclined to ask, how could he with his obvious antipathies produce a satisfactory history of the church? But then, the greatness and penetration of The Decline and Fall itself have surprised generations of men from Horace Walpole onward.³ And Lytton Strachey, in many ways a writer after Gibbon's own heart, considered it a paradox that such a masterpiece should come from the pen of that rather vain and pompous little eighteenth-century gentleman: 'the point of his achievement lay in the extreme improbability of it.'⁴ The paradox becomes even more striking when we consider the ecclesiastical sections of his work.

A modern ecclesiastical historian has put the question in this form:

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1. DF, 1896 ed., Introd., I, xxxix.
 2. As witness the finality of his Vindication, the discomfiture of most of his critics and the weight of historical opinion from his time to the present.
 3. Walpole could only identify the author of this 'truly classic work' as 'the son of a foolish alderman' and a 'whimsical' member of parliament. Walpole to Rev. Wm. Mason, 18/2/1776. Correspondence, ed. W.S. Lewis, New Haven, 1955, Vol. 18, p. 243.
 4. 'Gibbon', Portraits in Miniature, London, 1931, p. 159. 'The utter incongruity of those combining elements,' he continued, 'produced the masterpiece.'

'Could Gibbon with his profound Enlightenment presuppositions - a lack sympathy for any kind of superstition or excess in religion to the point of disparaging even such an institution as monasticism, and with his emphasis on the rational to the exclusion of an understanding of the specifically religious values in Christianity's development - could Gibbon, given these assumptions, write satisfactory church history?'¹

Professor Geanakoplos, after an examination of Gibbon's treatment of the East-West schism, answered his own question with a qualified affirmative. He found that Gibbon displayed his customary diligence in seeking out primary sources, a discerning use of them, an objectivity beyond that of his Catholic or Protestant predecessors and, in certain instances, a surprising anticipation of the findings of recent scholarship. He even seemed to accept the sincerity of the monks whose delusions he ridiculed and he brilliantly conveyed the issues of theological debate, accurately setting down 'the subtle differences between essence and energies in the Godhead.'²

What then were his limitations? It was not just a matter of the 'many basic flaws' and 'great gaps' in the Byzantine sections of the work. The deficiency was not so much historical and technical as dispositional: a lack of understanding in certain cases of what he found ridiculous and a failure to give credit to certain things for which he had no sympathy.³ Milman, as a scholarly editor, made a comment much to this effect in a note near the beginning of Gibbon's

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1. Deno J. Geanakoplos, 'Edward Gibbon and Byzantine Ecclesiastical History', Church History, XXXV, No.2, June 1966, pp. 171-2.
 2. Geanakoplos, op. cit., pp. 172-3, 176.
 3. Ibid., p. 180.

fifteenth chapter: 'Divest this whole passage of the latent sarcasm betrayed by the subsequent tone of the whole disquisition, and it might commence a Christian history, written in the most Christian spirit of candour.'¹ But is latent sarcasm compatible either with candour and sympathetic understanding or with that ability recommended by Gibbon in his Essai of getting inside one's historical characters?'²

It is this failure which is one of the most conspicuous weaknesses in Gibbon's treatment of religion. Despite his interest in the subject and its prominence in The Decline and Fall, it is essentially the outward and visible side that we are shown. Did he ever penetrate or even seem fully aware of another side, of the deep springs of religious experience? Religion appears as an aspect of manners, a political issue, the subject of controversies and verbal duels, or as a matter of biographical interest in the lives of religious leaders. Any material giving insight into the inner and spiritual life of the early Christians, the deeper motivation behind the missions to the barbarians, the dynamic experience shared by St. Bernard, St. Francis and even Luther, remains to the historian and thus to his reader a closed book. The result is that the more sympathetic reaction sometimes shown towards such notable figures is largely for qualities not in themselves religious: statesmanlike abilities in some of the popes, fearlessness in Athanasius, courageous patriotism in Leo, bishop of Rome, tenacity and opposition to autocratic control in Ambrose, or praise for the learning of the Maurists and the accuracy of Tillemont.

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1. DF, ed. H.H. Milman, 2nd ed. revd., London, 1846, 6 vols., II, 152, note 'a'. See also A.G. Widgery, 'Gibbon's Treatment of Christianity', Interpretations of History, Confucius to Toynbee, London, 1961, pp. 170-1.
 2. Essai, chap. XLVII and see above chap. III, pp. 98-99.

This concentration on the externals of religion is not hard to account for. In the first place, it is the manifestations of religion in the spheres of manners and morals, of politics and war, which are seen as the real business of the historian, who attends synods merely to observe 'the principle of discord' at work and then to relate it to imperial decline;¹ who considered the influence of popes, pilgrimages and crusades from the same motive, the evangelisation of the barbarians in terms of its social and cultural effects, and a leader like Athanasius as a rare study in psychology.² After all, it was only such observable facts as these which were readily accessible to the objective historian.

In the second place, there was the virtual impossibility of empathising with the spiritual side of men and movements. The intellectual climate of the age, its blend of deism, unenthusiastic Anglicanism and overenthusiastic Methodism, together with Gibbon's personal religious history, all militated against such an understanding. In a sense, this deficiency is no more culpable than colourblindness or one's unfamiliarity with conditions at the South Pole, but it is for all that a limitation. A.H.M. Jones, in his re-examination of a subject which forms a pivotal part of Gibbon's work, namely Constantine and the Conversion of Europe, both recommended The Decline and Fall to his readers and at the same time found it necessary to forewarn them 'against Gibbon's greatest weakness, which is not so much anti-Christian bias as a temperamental incapacity to understand religion.'³

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1. See DF, xlvii, V, 103-4; liv, VI, 318: 'the spiritual wars' disturbing 'the peace and unity of the church' had such a bearing on the decline and fall of the empire, 'that the historian has too often been compelled to attend the synods, to explore the creeds, &c.'
 2. See DF, xxi, II, 383.
 3. Jones, op.cit., London, 1972 reprint, p. 242.

This incapacity is apparent in a number of places. We have already considered the pragmatic scale of values which Gibbon applied to Christian people and institutions. But did he look below the surface of things? What, beneath the rites and observances in an apparently topsy-turvy system of priorities, inspired the Christian to strive after the highest, even if he often fell short of the ideal? And this is of vital concern to the moralist. Thus it has been suggested that, though Gibbon rightly 'links the Christian reform of morality to repentance,' he underestimates the depth and extent of that spiritual change of heart; that he 'does not sufficiently analyse, because he does not sufficiently understand Christian ethics, which is an ethic of spiritual perfection modelled' on a perfect 'mediator between God and man.'¹ Whatever the truth of this explanation, there is an obvious failure 'to understand from the inside' this as well as other aspects of religion.

The same failure also led to some dubious conclusions which appeared to indicate a moral blind spot in the historian. Gibbon could understand and applaud tenacious resistance and even suffering in the cause of liberty; he seemed unable to appreciate the same qualities in the adherence to one's faith. Looking at a stubborn and intractable group within the Roman Empire, he referred to 'the inflexibility and intolerance of Christian zeal.' Bishop Watson, the most moderate and balanced of his early critics, whose reply he warmly received, saw it rather as unshakable conviction and attachment to truth. Watson agreed with Gibbon's statement of the facts but differed completely in his

1. Gerhardt B. Ladner, 'The Impact of Christianity', in Lynn White (ed.) The Transformation of the Roman World, p. 76.

interpretation: 'You deduce it from the Jewish religion; I would refer it to a more obvious source, a full persuasion of the truth of Christianity.'¹

The outstanding instance of Gibbon's concern with externals at the expense of deeper understanding and sympathy is his reassessment of the scope of the early Christian persecutions. His account is careful and scholarly as he sought to present the matter in what he saw as its true perspective by rejecting the traditional exaggeration of the extent and numbers. Leaning heavily on Dodwell's work, 'On the small number of martyrs', he presented its findings in a persuasive form.² It has been suggested that Dodwell wrote in the spirit of a special pleader, with a tendency to minimize rather than exaggerate,³ while Gibbon has been seen in the role of devil's advocate in his treatment of these persecutions.⁴

Whatever the true facts and figures may be, many readers have found a lack of feeling in Gibbon's account. He tends to reduce suffering to a mere statistic and that statistic to a polemic in which a comparison with later Catholic persecutions serves to reduce the relative culpabil-

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1. Richard Watson, An Apology for Christianity, Cantab., 1776, p.8. The whole context of Watson's reply to this first of Gibbon's 'five causes' needs to be studied to see how he read no derogatory sense into terms like 'inflexible'.
 2. Gibbon acknowledged his debt to Dodwell's Paucitate Martyrum (DF, xvi, II, 95, n.43). Davis confronted Gibbon with 'Instances of Plagiarism from Dodwell' in his Examination of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of Mr. Gibbon's History, &c., London, 1778, pp.229-230 (incorrect pagination), while Chelsum pointed to an example of Dodwell's use of evidence as 'more accurate' than Gibbon's (Remarks on the Two Last Chapters of Mr. Gibbon's History, &c. Oxon, 1778, p.206, n.8.)
 3. See W.E.H. Lecky, History of European Morals, 3rd ed., London, 1911, I, 465.
 4. See Falco, La Polemica sul medioevo, p. 268 ('Nello....le cause, l'estensione, la durata delle persecuzioni, il Gibbon fa la parte dell'avvocato del diavolo.').

ity of pagan Rome. It is, of course, hard to generalise about the reactions of readers and critics to this chapter, but Lecky, who cannot be accused of religious bias, was moved to write of it in terms beyond his usual moderation: 'Notwithstanding the great knowledge and critical acumen displayed in this chapter, few persons, I imagine, can rise from its perusal without a feeling both of repulsion and dissatisfaction. The complete absence of all sympathy with the heroic courage manifested by the martyrs, and the frigid and, in truth, most unphilosophic severity with which the historian has weighed the words and actions of men engaged in the agonies of a deadly struggle, must repel every generous nature, while the persistence with which he estimates persecutions by the number of deaths rather than by the amount of suffering, diverts the mind from the really distinctive atrocities of the Pagan persecutions.'¹

The reader of The Decline and Fall, and specifically of chapters xv and xvi, can hardly doubt that the author found it harder to show the strengths of Christianity than its weaknesses, and he must also suspect that the intention behind his impartiality in presenting the other, or neglected side of Christianity, was to emphasise these weaknesses. The impression is confirmed though not created by Gibbon's confessed adherence to the old 'Pagan establishment' of Rome.² Nor is the underlying reason always to be sought in the tension between antipathy and impartiality, or in a valiant but unsuccessful attempt to discover some item for the credit side of his moral balance sheet on Christianity.

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1. Lecky, op. cit., I, 465. See also an interesting article by G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, 'Why were the early Christians persecuted?', 'An Amendment' by A.N. Sherwin-White, and de Ste Croix's 'Rejoinder', Past and Present, Nos. 26, 27, Nov. 1963, pp.10ff; Ap.1964, pp. 23-7, 28-33.
 2. Letters, No. 771, 5/2/91, III, 216.

At times there seems to be a manipulation, though never any falsification, of the facts to produce the desired effect. At least it is certain that other church historians surveying the same primary sources can produce a rather different story. The process is perhaps most readily apparent to Gibbon's editors, admirers of the great historian, who have scrutinised his text and weighed his authorities page by page and note by note. Milman, himself a writer of church history, and an editor always scrupulous, guarded, and determined to be as impartial as the historian on whom he was commenting, sometimes felt obliged to point to certain misleading, even inaccurate, impressions produced by Gibbon's presentation.

In the case of his treatment of early Christian expansion, this amounts to almost a sleight of hand or a device typical of a clever politician. 'The art of Gibbon, or at least the unfair impression created by these two memorable chapters, consists in confounding together in one undistinguishable mass,' what are, in fact, two quite distinct matters: 'the origin and apostolic propagation of the Christian religion with its later progress.' Gibbon's plan was to begin in medias res, that is to say, in the post-apostolic period, so that 'the main question, the divine origin of the religion is dexterously eluded or speciously conceded,' while his very dark presentation of 'the failings and follies of succeeding ages' serves to cast their shadow 'back on the primitive period of Christianity.'¹

So too, the darker aspects of Christianity can be made to appear

1. DF, ed. Milman, II, 165, note 'a'.

typical by selecting the words or actions of extreme or unattractive persons as representative. There is the familiar use of 'the stern Tertullian' as spokesman for the church as a whole, and this is but one instance of a wider tendency: 'Gibbon has too often allowed himself to consider the peculiar notions of certain Fathers of the Church as inherent in Christianity.' And this, as Milman pointed out, 'is not accurate.'¹ Similarly, E.K. Rand, in his lectures on Founders of the Middle Ages, commended to his audience Gibbon's treatment of monasticism as 'a brilliant account of the weaker side' of that movement. And he went on to note that this is one of the few places where Gibbon can be charged 'with a suppressio veri; his material is drawn mainly from Cassian and the worst parts of Jerome. In a word, he does what a good satirist ought to do, but not a good historian.'²

Monasticism is a very significant example of an institution in which historian after historian has discovered positive values which Gibbon either could not or would not see. Lecky, writing just a hundred years after Gibbon, castigated the church, the ascetic and monastic life, in no less outspoken terms. Yet he went on to indicate a nobler side to be seen in both the moral example of self-denial at a much needed time, and also the practical channels into which the monastic spirit in the West was directed.³ For Gibbon, however, monasticism was doubly damned by its withdrawal from public life and by its set of 'fictitious virtues', not to say also its instances of actual vice. These facts obscured for him its contribution in areas of life which he could appreciate, such as the

1. Ibid, II, 167, note 'a'.

2. Lectures delivered in Boston, 1928, Dover Publications, N.Y., 1957, pp. 237-8.

3. History of European Morals, II, 154ff, 178.

multiplication of books, promotion of agriculture and social solidarity amidst disintegration and disorder. He refers to such things but grudgingly and with qualification. He 'insinuates that the copying of the classics was a kind of transgression into which the monks were tempted now and then. On the contrary it was a regular part of their task; for the study of the Pagan authors was ingrained in the scheme of monastic discipline as established by Cassiodorus.'¹ Indeed, Benedict of Nursia, founder of Western monasticism, not only exhibited the ancient Roman virtues, but as Trevor-Roper reminds us, also 'created for an atomized rural society, the basic social and economic cell of its survival.'² Furthermore, if Gibbon was sincere in acknowledging the purity of life and simplicity of the primitive Christians, which he saw lamentably corrupted with time, should he not have given some recognition to monasticism as 'the first attempt in the history of Christianity... to peel off the accretions and to return to the primitive faith?' Nor, as Rand also noted, should we 'call monasticism altogether selfish or unsocial;' for in fleeing the world and making his 'protest against the iniquities and frivolities of a Pagan and a Paganized Christian society,' the monk wished 'to give an example to society of a life of simplicity and godly living.'³ And Gibbon's view of the ascetic ideal of the Eastern Empire as 'a barren withdrawal from the world,' has been shown by modern Byzantine scholarship to be at best a half truth; for 'one of the outstanding features of early Byzantine asceticism is its

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1. E.K. Rand, Founders of the Middle Ages, pp.247-8.
 2. The Rise of Christian Europe, London, 1965, p.68. See also his reference to Knowles, to the effect that Benedict was 'the embodiment of all the oldest Roman virtues.'
 3. Rand, op.cit., p. 238. Cf. Lecky, European Morals, II, 155.

passion for social justice and its championship of the poor and oppressed.¹

To the end of his life, Gibbon continued to connect the decline of the Roman Empire with 'the propagation of the gospel and the triumph of the Church.'² Though he did not define the connection specifically, he gave ample suggestions for exploring its effect. It was at all events a negative influence, which combined with other factors to weaken an already ailing empire. Perhaps the notion of a 'cancer' imperceptibly sapping the vitality of Roman society comes as close as any to Gibbon's idea of Christianity 'insensibly' weakening the state. Falco gave expression to this view of the 'insidious cancer', the incompatible principle, which, 'while respecting the established order, undermines its foundations.' It did this, he maintained, by putting its faith in transcendental Truth, by its demands on the consciences of men and by its transfer of the real meaning of life to another world, while its official adoption and the consequent persecution of the pagans, involved a denial of the empire's ancient nature and traditions.³

The metaphor of the parasitic, alien growth, draining the life of the body politic was made explicit in a passage in Frazer's Golden Bough, which reads like a gloss on Gibbon, on the historian as moralist, but again with the traditional Christian values reversed.⁴ Frazer saw a prime cause of Rome's decline in the Christian contempt for the earthly

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1. E. Dawes and N.H. Baynes, Three Byzantine Saints. Oxford, 1948, pp.198, 197. Gibbon, in fact makes two complimentary references to John the Almsgiver, one of the three saints included in these biographies. See DF, xlvi, V, 76; xlvii, V, 172 and Dawes and Baynes, op.cit., pp. 195ff.
 2. Memoirs, p. 147.
 3. The Holy Roman Republic, p.20.
 4. J.G. Frazer, The Golden Bough, 3rd ed., London & Basingstoke, 1914. Pt.IV, Vol.I, pp. 299ff.

city in favour of the 'City of God', a shift of the centre of gravity from this world at the expense of the empire. And, like Gibbon, he saw it primarily in terms of moral dereliction, the failure of citizens to fulfil the unselfish Graeco-Roman ideal of subordinating individual interests to those of the state. Oriental religions, and Christianity in particular, with an emphasis on individual salvation and communion with God, taught the individual to concentrate on himself, thus endangering the very existence of the state: 'The inevitable result of this selfish and immoral doctrine was to withdraw the devotee more and more from the public service.'¹

Toynbee, who quoted this passage in his discussion of 'The Church as a Cancer', included Frazer with Gibbon amongst the 'Western neo-pagans' who 'first emerged in the Italy of the Quattrocento,' who captured European thought in the late seventeenth century and whose voice continued to be heard into the twentieth.² In their eyes the Christians injured ancient society in a number of ways, but perhaps above all by their non-cooperation. Michael Grant, in his reappraisal of Gibbon's problem, put them amongst 'the groups that opted out', with the nuns and monks in particular being similar to our modern 'drop-outs' from society.³ The same 'selfish, immoral doctrine is stated in Gibbon's well-known gibe: 'it was not in this world that the primitive Christians were desirous of making themselves either agreeable or useful.'⁴

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1. J.G. Frazer, op. cit., Pt.IV, Vol.I, p.300., though it is Oriental religions in general, without specific reference to Christianity on this particular page.
 2. A Study of History, London, 1954, Vol. VII, p.385.
 3. The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Radnor, 1976, Pt.V., 232ff.
 4. DF, xv, II, 37.

Granted a measure of truth in this judgment, the degree of emphasis has varied among historians as to how far this contributed to the decline and fall of Rome. Bury, while referring to the separateness of the church and the loss to the state when 'the best refuse to have children,'¹ gave less prominence to this factor than Jones, who nonetheless admitted that 'the Roman Empire seems never to have evoked any active patriotism from the vast majority of its citizens.'² Nor could Rostovtzeff see the new religion as responsible for the collapse of the empire. He considered this a very narrow view since the effect of Christianity was at most but one side of the gradual change in the mentality of the ancient world.³ The whole Roman world, the Roman spirit itself, as Bury showed, was undergoing a profound change; 'but yet, as far as Christianity itself was concerned, there seems no reason why the Roman Empire should not have continued to exist in the West just as it continued to exist in the East.' Remembering this continuance in the East, 'we must conclude that Christianity did not contribute to produce what is loosely called the Fall of the Western Empire.'⁴

Reconsidering Gibbon's problem after two centuries, and no longer from the standpoint of a neo-classical age, we are better able to appreciate not only what died but also what emerged. And in the emergence of a new type of civilization, to discover also the positive contribution made by Christianity; or, in Toynbee's terms to see the

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1. History of the Later Roman Empire, London, 1889, I, chap.III, 'Elements of Disintegration within the Empire.'
 2. The Later Roman Empire, London, 1964, II, 1062. See chaps. xxii, xxiii, and xxv of this work, and also his article, 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', History, XL, 1955, 213-5.
 3. M.I. Rostovtzeff, The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire, 2nd ed. Oxford, 1957, I, 540. See also R.M. Haywood, The Myth of Rome's Fall, pp. 51, 139-140.
 4. Op. cit., I, 34.

church rather as a chrysalis than as a cancer. Even those historians who reject his general approach, and that would seem to be most,¹ may still find some truth in his proposition that Christianity preserved and transmitted something essential to the life of a civilization in the dangerous period between the dissolution of the old and the genesis of the new.² No longer are we shut up to the Gibbonian view, bluntly expressed by Falco as: 'Christianity saved souls but ruined the empire.'³ Instead, it has been seen as quite possible to assert a connection between the triumph of Christianity and the decline of the empire and still be aware of the positive contributions made by the new faith.

Momigliano, who asserted the connection, thus hastened to add: 'but, of course, it will not be a simple return to Gibbon.'⁴ He was therefore able to come to some very different assessments of medieval institutions and of the role of Christianity. 'Judged from the traditional point of view of the pagan society,' he admitted, 'the monks were a subversive force;' but in the altered situation, 'they provided an alternative to pagan city life.' In this way, monasticism ultimately 'became a constructive force in society,' uniting men 'in a new form of communal life' with 'a considerable amount of economic independence and political self-government.' And this was but one of the ways in which Christianity 'built something of its own,' which, while undermining the current military and political structure, also brought much needed leadership, protection and guidance.⁵ With its superior dynamism,

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1. See e.g. A.H. Plumb, 'Gibbon and History', History Today. Vol.19, Nov. 1969, p.141; also P. Geyel, Debates with Historians, London, 1945, pp. 97, 118, and Can we know the pattern of the past? Bossum Holland, 1948.
 2. A. Toynbee, op.cit., VII, 'Churches as Cancers'; 'Churches as Chrysalises', esp. pp. 393-4.
 3. La polemica sul medioevo, p.202 (II Christianesimo salva le anime, ma rovina l'impero.)
 4. 'Christianity and the Decline of the Roman Empire', in The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century, p.6.
 5. Momigliano, op.cit., pp. 12, 15.

efficiency and adaptability to the new social and political conditions, Christianity, 'discovered a bridge between barbarism and civilization: the process of romanizing the barbarians by christianizing them is an essential feature of the history of the Roman empire between Constantine and Justinian. If it did not save the empire, at least in the West, it saved many features of Roman civilization.'¹ This view of the church as chrysalis goes far beyond what we find in Gibbon. It is, however, in line with the morally positive contribution which Milman, in his History of Christianity had claimed for the church, that, 'if treacherous to the interests of the Roman Empire, it was true to those of mankind.'²

In the present century the challenge to the old viewpoint espoused by the 'neo-pagans' has even taken the extreme form of disputing the whole premise that the fall of the empire was perhaps the most awful scene in human history. The question became in W.C. Bark's rephrasing: 'For whom was the Roman failure bad?'³ And, in the new, more creative synthesis which followed, he saw Christianity playing a vital part. So too, Pirenne agreed that, 'for all its decadence, the church of the earlier middle ages was a great civilizing influence against barbarism.'⁴ And Trevor-Roper, second to none in his admiration for Gibbon and the eighteenth-century historians, reflected very clearly this altered point of view when he wrote: 'The Empire adopted Christianity in the fourth century, but did it not perhaps thereby, arrest -- however

1. Op.cit., pp. 14-15.

2. History of Christianity under the Empire, London, 1840, III, 48.

3. Origins of the Medieval World, N.Y., 1960, p.105. See 'Epilogue on the Past and the Present'.

4. H. Pirenne, A History of Europe from the Invasions to the XVI Century, Eng. tr. E. Miall, London, 1939, pp.56-7.

temporarily - a decline which had already begun in the military anarchy of the third century: a decline which, at that time, cannot be ascribed to Christianity or even connected with it?' And when, in the gloom of the eighth century, 'a historical philosopher...might reasonably have concluded that it was all over with Europe,' whose civilization seemed to have gone out, what gave it the power of recover? 'How was it that Christendom not only recovered but was able, at the end of the eleventh century, to launch a counter-attack? This counter-attack, the Crusades, is surely another of the turning points of history.'¹

At that point in his third volume where Gibbon recorded the twin triumphs of the barbarians and the church over the Roman Empire, he placed first, and it seems with a greater degree of resentment, that of the church. Persecuting emperors were replaced by Christian rulers bent on extirpating 'the fabulous gods of antiquity' and 'the public devotion of the age was impatient to exalt the saints and martyrs of the Catholic church on the altars of Diana and Hercules.'² The passage foreshadows that final scene in the History with its more epigrammatic summary of 'the triumph of barbarism and religion' and is consistent with Gibbon's view of the official adoption of Christianity as involving simply the exchange of one superstition for another. But, we may ask, however one interprets the nature of the change, was the triumph of the church unaccompanied by no moral victories?

There was one which Gibbon, in common with later historians, stressed,

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1. The Rise of Christian Europe, London, 1965, pp. 27-8.
 2. DF, xxxiii, III, 439. The link with imperial decline is then suggested: 'The union of the Roman empire was dissolved; its genius was humbled in the dust;' and the barbarian armies from the North 'had established their victorious reign over the fairest provinces of Europe and Africa.'

namely the abolition of gladiatorial shows.¹ In doing so he was far ahead of his Roman mentors, like Cicero and Seneca, who saw nothing wrong with this custom.² But we have to go to Gibbon's successors to find a recognition of the moral advance of which this victory was but one manifestation. 'One of the most far-reaching changes introduced by Christianity into the conduct of life,' Bury wrote, 'was the idea that human life as such was sacred; an idea distinctly opposed to the actual practice of the pagans, if not quite novel to them.' And he pointed out that this conviction not only discredited and ultimately spelt the end of gladiatorial combat, but also changed the public attitude towards suicide and infanticide. In his survey of the 'influence of Christianity on society,' he also noted that the idea 'that all men are brothers' both softened 'to some extent the relation between the Roman world and the barbarians' and also had far-reaching effects for good on the accepted institution of slavery.³

Much has been made in this chapter of the divorce between religion and morality as seen by Gibbon. More recently, A.H.M. Jones found it strange that with the official adoption of Christianity, 'the general standards of conduct should have remained in general static and in some respects have sunk' - this despite vigorous preaching of the Christian code backed by the fear of punishment in this world and the next.⁴ Other historians, however, have noted, that even amid superstition and fanaticism, the church's teaching and enforcement of a pure morality, had a wide and important effect..⁵ And the surprisingly new thing about

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1. DF, xxx, III, 273-4, where he praised the Christian poet, Prudentius and the monk, Telemachus, for their part in this reform.
 2. See e.g. Lecky, op.cit., I, 271 and notes.
 3. A History of the Later Roman Empire, London, 1889, I, 21-2.
 4. The Later Roman Empire, II, 979.
 5. Thus Lecky, op.cit., II, 154; also e.g. Pirenne, Oman, Butterfield, Haywood and Ladner.

the Christian religion was, in fact, its indissoluble link and deep concern with morals, even though the emphases may have been very different from those of the ancient philosophers or the 'Western neo-pagans'. And it must also be remembered that the bulk of our evidence for moral failure in the early Christian centuries, such as that cited by modern historians, comes from the Christians themselves, whether the denunciations of the stern Salvian, Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, or other authorities on whom Gibbon relied.

The connection between 'the religious and the moral sphere' has indeed been seen as uniquely close in Christianity: 'That a man must strive for moral goodness in order to worship God effectively is not a commonplace in the history of religions.' And Christian morality 'was all the more novel in the late ancient milieu as it included sexual purity' and fidelity in marriage.¹ This essential connection and the 'moral importance of Christianity', Lecky claimed, was missed by the pagan writers simply because, in the religion with which they were familiar, no such connection existed.² And, despite his view that the church had largely failed to raise the general level of conduct in the later empire, Jones attributed this in part to those moral standards being too high and too rigid rather than the reverse.³ In fact, he acknowledged the influence of the church not only in abolishing gladiat-

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1. G.B. Ladner, 'The Impact of Christianity', in Lynn White, op.cit., p. 75.
 2. Op.cit., I, 336-8.
 3. The Later Roman Empire, II, 979. Cf. his Decline of the Ancient World, chap. xxiv, 'Religion and Morals', pp.330-332.

orial shows, but also in rescuing prostitutes and in legislation to prevent the practice itself.¹ Others have gone even further, pointing to the suppression of the large schools of prostitution operating under the aegis of the temple of Venus and to the virtual disappearance of the grossest scenes such as graced the walls and portals of the houses in Pompeii. So that even in what Gibbon regarded as a dark and 'degenerate age', 'in some respects...Christianity had already effected a great improvement.'²

The mixture we have seen in Gibbon of strict impartiality, a horror of Voltaire's anti-Christian bigotry, on the one side, and on the other, an equal horror of 'enthusiasm' and 'fanaticism', which at times bordered on bias³, shows an ambivalence towards religion and the process of history which is sometimes reflected in the judgements of the moralist. This aspect has been brought out to some extent in an examination by J.G.A. Pocock of The Decline and Fall as 'a product of the last years of the Enlightenment, the uneasy years between the American and French revolutions.'⁴ Both his reading of history and his reaction to the changed climate of these years contributed to this ambivalence in Gibbon.

He had more respect than contempt for some of those Church Fathers, whom superficially and consistent with his general approach, he might have

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1. Jones, The Later Roman Empire, II, 976. His section entitled, 'The Church's Failure' is the conclusion to this chap. xxiii, II, 979ff.
 2. Lecky, op.cit., II, 153-4. Cf. Lecky, op.cit. II, 213: 'It had been at first one of the broad distinctions between Paganism and Christianity, that, while the rites of the former were for the most part unconnected with moral dispositions, Christianity made purity of heart an essential element of all its worship.'
 3. As Professor Hancock has reminded us, Gibbon 'was no enemy to bias.' Professing History. Sydney, 1976, p.10
 4. 'Gibbon's Decline and Fall and the World View of the Late Enlightenment', Eighteenth-Century Studies, Vol. X, No.3, Spring 1977, pp. 287-303.

been expected to scorn. Against the background of 'the failure of ancient skepticism', 'the apostacy of the philosophers' and notably 'the failure of Julian to restore philosophic magistracy and virtue,' that emperor is seen as 'the inferior of Athanasius in statesmanship and public morality.'¹ The reason given by Pocock for Gibbon's respect for these men of religion - Athanasius, Ambrose, Gregory the Great and John Chrysostom - is that they 'were leaders, effective and not without statesmanship,' and that 'the Christian republic...was being led by Christian virtue.'² And this, in spite of the fact that such virtue was fanatical, that the leaders and their people were alike under the sway of prophecy and metaphysics, and that their virtue was 'anticivic and otherworldly', in no way serving the defence of the empire. Gibbon, Pocock argues, 'was beginning to make use of Hume's distinction between enthusiasm, which was fanatical and intolerant but drove men to assert their liberties against their rulers, and superstition, which was passive and law-abiding but disposed men to accept their rulers even when these were priests.' Christian enthusiasm, having triumphed in the destruction of the pagan temples, was transformed into a new superstition as neo-paganism emerged.

'About all this,' Pocock points out, 'Gibbon had ambivalent feelings and saw history as an ambivalent process. Religion as superstition had originally been an aspect of barbarism, and it would be possible to see its revival as a return to barbarism.'³ And in his own day he

1. Pocock, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

2. *op. cit.*, pp. 299-300.

3. *op. cit.*, p.300. Pocock notes that 'the relation of barbarism to religion can be explored when we realize that the Enlightenment's sociology of barbarism, which Gibbon knew very well, was also a sociology of superstition and rather less of fanaticism.' (p. 298).

reacted with horror, not only to the American and French revolutions and the Gordon riots, but also to the views of Joseph Priestley, as a 'union of philosophy with fanaticism', seeing in this man 'a second Arius, who would have been at home in the streets of fourth-century Alexandria.'¹ Yet, ironically enough, having as a dutiful 'civic humanist' drawn the attention of the civil magistrate to the dangerous opinions of Priestley, Gibbon would have been appalled when the Birmingham mob, set on by the magistrates, destroyed the philosopher's property and tried to burn his house. This was the very sort of 'barbarism' that shocked him in France.

The historian of the Roman Empire, scathing as he was of 'religion as enthusiasm' just as he was of that more primitive religious superstition connected with barbarism, was reminded by Hume 'that liberty and virtue might rest - as in the Reformation and the Puritan Revolution they had rested - on a foundation of fanaticism... There was something to be said for superstition, if it was compatible with the rule of enlightened and tolerant magistrates.'² And it is part of Gibbon's ambivalence, or perhaps sheer practicality, that, as moralist and lover of civic virtue, he could even excuse Burke's 'reverence for Church establishments' and should think of writing of 'the danger of exposing an old superstition to the contempt of the blind and fanatic multitude.'³

1. op. cit., p.302. For Gibbon's references to Priestley, see DF, liv, VI, 134, n.49; Letters, Nos. 563,4,5, 28/1/83, 6/2/83, 22/2/83, II, 320-3; Memoirs, 171-2.

2. op. cit., p. 301.

3. Memoirs, p. 195, referring to a dialogue on the subject between Lucian, Erasmus and Voltaire.

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The historian as moralist: a study of
Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall
of the Roman Empire

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Dillon-Smith, David, The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Department of History, University of Wollongong, 1982. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/1426>

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PROSPECT FROM THE CAPITOL: THE VICISSITUDES OF FORTUNE

It was the prospect from the Capitoline Hill which gave 'the learned Poggius' in the fifteenth century and young Edward Gibbon in the eighteenth, 'ample scope for moralising on the vicissitudes of fortune, which spares neither man nor the proudest of his works, which buries empires and cities in a common grave.'¹ This sentiment runs right through The Decline and Fall and is integral to the spirit of the whole work. It was the physical impact of this scene, Gibbon claimed, which gave him the inspiration to write the history, first of the city, then of the empire. Thus, with a sure artistic touch and an acute sense of history, he returned in his closing chapters to the city in order to survey with his Renaissance predecessor the greatness that was Rome.

As one sits on the same hill, so changed even since Gibbon's time,² trying to recapture the scene, and using as he did the eye of imagination to assist the outward vision, it is not hard to feel that revolution of the wheel of fortune which overturned so great a civilization whose centre is represented by a number of solid foundations, two substantial arches, a massive cavernous basilica and a series of lonely columns. The prospect which opened up to Gibbon was not merely of the ruins before him, but back across the centuries to the very origins of the city. Nor can 'the modern traveller' of the twentieth century easily escape similar

1. DF, lxxi, VII, 313.

2. Gibbon has left us some account of the Capitol though more particularly of its museum and statues, in his Journal at Rome. In his manuscript journal, he devoted the left page to painting, the facing page to architecture, antiquities etc. BM. Gibbon Papers, vol.VI, Add. MSS. 34879, pp. 76ff.

feelings of the change which time has wrought. The reaction is no doubt commonplace, as it had become in Gibbon's day, but it is none the less real. Yet his response went much deeper than this. The archaeologist studies and reconstructs the remains, the poet and the romantic enjoy a pleasing melancholy induced by them, but the moralist ponders the 'vicissitudes' of human history, the nature of greatness, the causes and inevitability of decay in empires past and present, and from it all draws instructive lessons for his own and future generations. This was Gibbon's viewpoint. 'This awful revolution,' he observed, 'may be usefully applied to the instruction of the present age;' for history as he understood it, 'undertakes to record the transactions of the past for the instruction of future ages.'¹

Modern commentators have expressed some doubt as to where Gibbon actually sat and whether it was in this particular environment at all that he actually received his inspiration to write The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Bonnard, both in his notes to the Memoirs and in an earlier paper,² questioned the factual basis of the famous statement as finally recorded.³

One of the main reasons for this scepticism is the absence of any similar statement of this experience of October 1764 in the Journal, which breaks off, or may be more aptly said to peter out at Rome.⁴

1. DF, IV, 175-6; xvi, II, 87.

2. Memoirs, pp. 304-5 and 'L'importance du deuxième séjour de Gibbon à Lausanne dans la formation de l'historien' in Mélanges d'histoire et de la littérature offerts à M. Charles Gilliard. Lausanne 1944, pp. 400ff.

3. See the discussion of this question above, chap. IV, pp. 151ff.

4. This is the impression one gets from the final pages in Gibbon's own handwriting: half pages, blank pages and on the last a mere three-and-a-half lines. (BM. Gibbon Papers, vol.VI, Add.MSS 34, 879, pp. 76ff.)

There is also the long interval between the experience in Rome and the writing of The Decline and Fall, an interval during which Gibbon thought of other subjects and in fact began to write his Swiss history. The real point of departure, as we have seen,¹ and as Bonnard was at pains to point out, was the period of preparation at Lausanne prior to the Italian journey. There Gibbon studied the ancient writers and later works on the buildings of the city and the geography and highways of the empire. His travelling library was an extension of this preparatory study. In imagination he had already traversed the great roads of the empire and walked among the buildings of the ancient capital even before he set out on his tour.²

All this is certain and it is essential to the climax in Rome. But most conversions, even sudden conversions like that of St. Paul, are only the culmination of a process and fuse together elements already prepared. The fact is, as Trevor-Roper has reaffirmed in an appreciatory essay on Gibbon³, that though we can believe what the historian has told us of his great moment in 1764, we must not forget all that lay behind it. But what are we to make of the reactions of the Memoirs? In these careful reworkings of the famous statement of the Roman experience Bonnard saw the poet striving after the most satisfying effect rather than the historian recording a plain fact: 'Cette phrase est un vrai poème... Elle est d'un art si sûr, si maître de ses effets qu'on se demande si Gibbon ici n'a pas fait oeuvre d'artiste plus que d'historien, s'il n'a pas sacrifié peut-être la vérité des faits à la reserche de la

1. See above chap. IV, pp. 136-8.

2. His reading included Nardini's Roma Vetus, Cluverius' Italia Antiqua, Bargaesus' De Privatorum Publicorumque AEdificiorum Urbis Romanae and his work on the Obelisks of the city and Bergier's Histoire des grands Chemins de l'Empire Romain. (see JB, entries over this period).

3. DF edited and abridged by H. Trevor Roper, Heron Books, N.Y., 1970, p.662

beauté.'¹ Yet it is only when the scene or the vision is very real and compelling that it demands of an author the most careful polishing and repolishing in order to convey the effect which it has exercised on him. And in the epilogue to the great work which Gibbon claimed owed its inspiration to this view or vision of ancient Rome, the voice is surely that of the historian rather than the poet when he declares in simple, unvarnished prose: 'It was among the ruins of the capitol that I first conceived the idea of a work which has amused and exercised nearly twenty years of my life.'² In fact, when we combine the statement in the History with that in the Memoirs we are given two actual and quite definite places, the Capitoline Hill for its conception and the summer-house in Lausanne for its completion.³

There is, however, no occasion for controversy on this point, especially as our concern is with the historian as moralist. The famous statement of 'the moment of conception' may be given due weight. What 'the historian of the Roman Empire' considered and wished his readers to accept as central to the inspiration of his work is of prime significance, and this has to do with ruins and an impression of vanished greatness. We must recognise not only historical truth, but also poetic and moral truth.⁴ On one level we find The Decline and Fall a monument of painstaking scholarly research and accuracy; on another we find sentiments and truths about decline and fall which arise from the recorded facts of history. The alleged inspiration on the Capital is

1. 'L'importance du deuxième séjour de Gibbon' &c., Mélanges, p. 401.

2. DF, lxxi, VII, 338.

3. DF, loc. cit. and Memoirs, p. 180.

4. Cf. also Essai, chaps. XXVIII, XXXVI-XXXVIII and XXIV, note, p. 38.

reaffirmed and consummated in the final chapter of the History where the historian stops to reflect on greatness and decay.¹ It forms a consummation of these themes, though not without a ray of hope, simply because the whole work has been concerned with them. It has been built around 'revolutions' in states and empires, and it constantly presents the reader with 'ruins' both material and metaphorical, with the process of decay both in buildings and in the life of peoples. In his first published work Gibbon had declared it to be a task 'worthy of an accomplished man to trace that revolution in the religions, governments and manners, which have successively misled, devastated and corrupted mankind'.² In view of this his own description of The Decline and Fall in terms of 'revolutions' has not received the emphasis it deserves.³ But many of these were slow processes, not necessarily initiated by violence, and more akin in the traditional terminology to the 'Industrial' than to the 'French Revolution', while the greatest was that all inclusive 'long revolution' from the ancient to the modern world in which the wheel had made a complete turn.⁴ In Poggio's celebrated dialogue which he pondered among the ruins of Rome, Gibbon found not only a catalogue of its ancient buildings, which he incorporated into his final chapter, but also the 'eloquent' expression of the reactions they inspired in the beholder.⁵

The hill and the Tarpeian rock, changed, as Virgil had sung, from

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1. See also DF, xxxviii, VII, 258-9.
 2. Essai, chap. III, p.17. The words are 'égaré, désolé et corrompu'.
 3. Trevor-Roper, however, has at least stated it boldly in passing: 'Gibbon's subject is the revolutions of society between Antiquity and Modernity; but its centre is the city of Rome.' 'Appreciation', DF, ed. Trevor-Roper, p.665.
 4. DF, lxxi, VII, w13, 4, 'the wheel of fortune has accomplished her revolution' translating Poggio's words.
 5. 'De Varietate Fortunae', Vol. I of Opera Omnia. Poggius Bracciolini Scripta in editione Basilensi anno MDXXXVIII collata, Bottega D'Erasmus, Torino. 1964.

horrid thorn to glittering gold, had reverted to their primitive state, reconquered by the thorns and briars.¹ With this seminal reflection Poggio opened his dialogue. 'Nothing,' he continued, 'that history can relate offers any comparison to the calamitous turn of fortune which has overthrown the queen of nations, once the most beautiful and most magnificent of all. There could be no examples of greater change either in the past or in what was yet to be.'² To Gibbon it was 'the greatest perhaps and most awful scene in the history of mankind.'³ And he quoted Poggio's regret that the public and private buildings which had been designed to last for ever lie broken and in ruins.⁴

But if Gibbon pictured himself musing, like his predecessor, among the wreck of vanished grandeur, it was not ruined buildings and material decay which appalled him most. It was the loss of liberty and true greatness in a people, their moral decay evidenced in the spread of luxury and licence. The aspect of this calamity which provoked Poggio's companion, Antonio Lusco, to exclaim over the cruel injustice of fortune towards Rome, was that this was the city which had produced 'so many illustrious men, commanders and generals, the nourisher of so many of the most excellent leaders, the parent of such outstanding virtue, the mother of so many worthy arts - military discipline, the sanctity of morals the sanctions of the laws, examples of every virtue, the rule of right living'.⁵ It was the ruin of men and morals, the disappearance of

1. Poggio, 'De Varietate Fortunae', Lib. I, pp.6-7, Opera Omnia, vol. I; DF, lxxi, VII, 313.

2. ibid, p. 6.

3. DF, lxxi, VII, 338.

4. 'De Varietate Fortunae', Lib. I, p. 7.

5. Opera Omnia, I, Lib. 1, pp.6-7 ('Quo magis dictu...deflendum quippe est hanc urbem...bene vivendi ratio defluxerunt.')

excellence, of arts and virtues, which was the severest blow. The few surviving columns and temples merely emphasised and symbolised this greater loss.

After gazing on the awful scene for a few minutes, Antonio told his companion how there came to his mind the case of Caius Marius, once a pillar of the Roman republic, but afterwards banished and finding himself an exile in North Africa. There above the ruins of Carthage, he sat wondering whether his own fall or the fate of Rome's ancient rival presented a more signal spectacle of the turn of fortune.¹ Such physical and human examples of ruin are brought out in The Decline and Fall with its numerous instances of the destruction of cities and of the instability of human greatness.

In his Introduction, addressed to the humanist Pope, Nicholas V, Poggio pointed out the usefulness of history from which, over a long period of time, he had collected and arranged his own examples. These historical examples, he declared, would give his dialogue a moral value, since their evidence of the instability of fortune's favour and of the mutability of human affairs, should check empty ambition and the insane desire to dominate.² He noted the similarity of theme to that of his earlier work On the Unhappiness of Princes and reminded Nicholas that, even if his ecclesiastical majesty seemed beyond the reach of misfortune, yet as temporal ruler of Rome, he was just as liable to suffer a reversal as any other prince. Poggio went even further, and before offering his patron this new work, added a word of warning to the effect

1. ibid., p. 6.

2. 'De Varietate Fortunae', Prooemium, ad Nicolaum Papam V, pp. 1-2, (Opera, I).

that, by carefully heeding the example of the fall of his predecessors, the Pope would learn the salutary lesson of caution.¹

The 'philosophic historian' of the Roman empire, himself both humanist and moralist, found much to his taste in the moral reflections of the Renaissance humanist, as also in the Poggiana of Jean Lenfant, whose history of the councils he used in the final volume of The Decline and Fall.² What he found congenial and instructive in Poggio's other discourses we can surmise. There was that on the nature of nobility, wherein the author considered how it was acquired and went on to reject the opinion of those who made it consist in anything other than virtue;³ there were those On the Misery of the Human Condition and On the Unhappiness of Princes.⁴ On this latter subject we recall Gibbon's own comment: 'I shall not descant on the vulgar topics of the misery of kings; but I may surely observe, that their condition, of all others, is the most pregnant with fear, and the least susceptible of hope.'⁵ Poggio also wrote a discourse On Avarice which discusses the place of ambition.⁶ These twin vices or follies, avarice and ambition are to be found at every turn in The Decline and Fall and Gibbon's work endorses Cincio's remark in this last dialogue that, though we are all naturally avaricious, this quality reigned principally in ecclesiastical circles; that, while Judas sold the Saviour for money, the contagion had gained ground in the church to such a degree that in his day there was nothing

1. ibid., p. 3. ('Hanc vero historiam ...')
2. POGGIANA: ou la vie, le caractère, les sentences et les bons mots de Pogge Florentin &c. 2 vols. Amsterdam, 1720. The book was not in Gibbon's library (see Keynes); but he refers to Lenfant's work on the church councils in two places, DF, lxvi, VII, 105, note 40 and lxx, VII, 301, note. 87, and six of his volumes were on Gibbon's shelf.
3. 'De Nobilitate', Opera Omnia, I, pp. 64ff.; cf. Poggiana, I, p. 53
4. 'De Miseria Conditionis Humanae', 'De Infelicitate Principum', Opera Omnia, I, pp. 88ff; 392ff.
5. DF, xlviii, V, 259.
6. 'De Avaritia', Opera Omnia, II, pp. 2-34.

rarer than a priest who was free from avarice.¹ In a later work, Against Hypocrisy, Poggio was still more outspoken and, with a freedom like Gibbon's, castigated the vices and follies of the clergy, their pretended piety but secret debauchery, their scramble for preferment and, above all, their pride which they sought to conceal under a cloak of humility and sanctity. Their conduct produced in Poggio the same sort of moral indignation and scorn which hypocritical ecclesiastics aroused in Gibbon.²

Thus, in more senses than one we may say that Gibbon sat where the earlier humanist had sat and moralised. And though he could not have failed to endorse the moral observations of Poggio's other discourses, it was pre-eminently that inspired by the ruins of Rome and the fall of princes which influenced his own History. There he not only gave it honourable mention on two occasions but also used it as both a documentary and an inspirational source.³ Furthermore, he found in this dialogue two examples which he introduced towards the end of his narrative. Poggio, after referring to some ancient instances of the mutability of fortune, related the amazing success of Tamerlane and the calamities of Bajazet and these same moral illustrations appear in chapter lxxv of The Decline and Fall.⁴ All this and much more by way of the lessons of

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1. See especially the section 'Vnde Clericorum avaritia', p.22; cf. Poggiana. pp. 124ff.
 2. 'Contra Hypocritas', Opera Omnia, 2nd work in vol.II (no continuous pagination). Once holding avarice the chief vice, Poggio now considered hypocrisy to be much worse. ('...tanquam monstrum perniciosissimum Hypocritism videlicet multo scelesius vitium...')
 3. DF, lxxv, VII, 65, notes 58, 59 and lxxi, VII, 313ff. and notes. This chapter not only grows out of Poggio's 'prospect' of Rome and his dialogue but uses his description of the buildings of the city.
 4. 'De Varietate Fortunae', Lib.I, Opera Omnia, I, pp.36-8; DF, chap. lxxv. Gibbon, however, acknowledged the lack of historicity in the story of Bajazet's iron cage, 'so often repeated as a moral lesson'. (VII, 63).

history Gibbon found in Poggio's most celebrated work, to which he paid tribute as an 'elegant moral lecture'. Both in the ruin of empire and in the downfall of notable persons, he too found 'ample scope for moralising on the vicissitudes of fortune.'

The opening paragraph of Gibbon's first chapter introduces us to the 'revolution which will ever be remembered, and is still felt by the nations of the earth', while the final paragraph of the work brings down the curtain on this 'greatest, perhaps and most awful scene in the history of mankind'.¹ Near the beginning of chapter i we are told that the resilience of the Germanic peoples and their bid for independence 'reminded Augustus of the vicissitudes of fortune',² and this same theme drawn from Poggio's title becomes the text for Gibbon's closing oration as he takes his leave of the reader.³

Had Gibbon been content simply to relate the course of events in tracing the story of the declining empire, he would have recorded that a particular person, monarch, empress, minister or general, assumed control or rose to a position of authority, enjoyed a season of power, did certain things, then either died at the height of success, or, as was more often the case, declined to an ignoble end or was overthrown. But his conception of history went beyond this. Instead, he paused over and over again to reflect on the shape of the life and career he had unfolded, as yet another instance of a general principle in human affairs from which a philosophic mind might draw a useful lesson, even if mankind as a whole seldom proved any the wiser. This approach has been shown in

1. DF, lxxi, VII, 338.

2. DF, i, I, 3.

3. DF, lxxi, VII, 313 and n.1.

examining his treatment of character.¹ It is also poignantly brought out in the recurring theme of 'vicissitude', transitoriness and the revolutions of history. Let us notice some instances of this theme.

The empress Julia, consort of Severus, was raised from a humble station to greatness, 'only to taste the superior bitterness of an exalted rank'; from this eminence she sank to 'the condition of a subject' and finally escaped degradation only by 'a voluntary death'. Thus she had during her life, 'experienced all the vicissitudes of fortune'.² A later empress, Eudocia, rose from nothing to become the wife of the Western Emperor, Theodosius. Her story, as Gibbon admitted, was indeed 'an incredible romance'. But after her spectacular elevation to power, fame, honours and an ostentatious style of living, she overplayed her hand by aspiring to govern the empire and ended in exile and disgrace. She too is described as having gone through 'a full experience of the vicissitudes of human life'.³

A very different case is that of the great general of Justinian. 'The name of Belisarius can never die,' Gibbon declared as he related 'the simple and genuine narrative of his fall' from the heights of fame and success to rejection and poverty. But the story of his having to beg in the streets for food, is 'a later fiction which gained credit, or rather favour, as a strange example of the vicissitudes of fortune.'⁴ Yet the 'genuine' account of his career as told by Gibbon is sufficient

1. See above chap. VI in general and pp. 305-6 in particular.

2. DF, vi, I, 154.

3. DF, xxxii, III, 412.

4. DF, xliii, IV, 458-9.

illustration of such vicissitudes.

Valerian, kept by the victorious Sapor in chains, but still in his imperial purple and exposed to the insults of the crowd, is displayed by Gibbon as 'a constant spectacle of fallen greatness'; and the proud conqueror was said to always mount his horse after placing a foot on the emperor's neck, heedless of 'all the remonstrances of his allies who repeatedly advised him to remember the vicissitudes of fortune.'¹ It was a timely warning. In a later chapter we are told how the Romans recovered their spirit after the defeat of Dura: 'the transient presumption of Sapor had vanished' when he observed the uncertainties of war; and, having learnt from bitter experience, he at last, 'feared to provoke the resistance of despair, the vicissitudes of fortune, and the exhausted powers of the Roman empire which might soon advance to relieve or to revenge the successor of Julian.'²

Olympius, the weak, foolish, self-seeking and obstinate minister of Honorius, 'might have continued to insult the just resentment of a people', but for a palace intrigue which brought about his downfall. 'The escape or exile of the guilty Olympius,' as Gibbon stated, 'reserved him for more vicissitudes of fortune' which included a period of wandering, a restoration to power and a final fall from favour to end in disgrace.³

In The Decline and Fall, such vicissitudes habitually attend the

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1. DF, x, I, 293-4. By contrast Alp Arslan who had already learnt to respect 'the vicissitudes of fortune', treated his royal captive, Romanus, with the utmost respect. DF, lvii, VI, 250-1.
 2. DF, xxiv, II, 549.
 3. DF, xxxi, III, 332.

career of ministers, they are acutely felt by 'the royal vassals in a disputed succession to the throne'¹ and they are continually exemplified in the uncertain outcome of battles, where the decision sometimes seems to hang in the balance, only to turn unexpectedly against the superior force. We read of nine battles in the Third Crusade, fought in the vicinity of Mt. Carmel, 'with such vicissitude of fortune' that on one occasion the Sultan pushed into the city while on another the Christians entered the royal tent; so that 'the vicissitude of success' might have taught the opposing monarchs 'to suspect that Heaven was neutral in their quarrel.'²

It is in such a context of the fluctuating fortunes of battle, when its vicissitudes inclined the fierce spirit of Clovis to acquiesce in an advantageous treaty of peace', that Gibbon came closest to giving an indication of what he meant by 'fortune', even though he may have only defined it negatively.³ In attempting a definition of 'fortune' Poggio and his companion took different sides, Antonio adopting an Aristotelian position and calling it an accidental cause, whereby circumstances happen to a man contrary to his own intention and design. When challenged by Poggio he shifted his ground somewhat to admit an overruling providence behind circumstances commonly considered fortuitous.⁴ Gibbon, familiar with the problem as presented in this dialogue, and having in mind the campaigns of Clovis in Poitou and Aquitaine which resulted in the futility of a so-called victory won at the expense of

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1. Such was the situation with the four sons of Malek Shah, who 'in the vicissitudes of their fortunes' confused the allegiance of the royal vassals, *DF*, lviii, VI, 318-9.
 2. *DF*, lix, VI, 363, 367.
 3. *DF*, xxxviii, IV, 126-7. So, too, the abdication of Charles V 'appears to have been hastened by the vicissitude of fortune.' (*DF*, xiii, I, 416).
 4. 'De Varietate Fortunae', Lib. I, *Opera Omnia*, I, 25-27.

ten thousand lives, exclaimed: 'Such is the empire of Fortune (if we may disguise our ignorance under the popular name) that it is almost equally difficult to foresee the events of war, or to explain their various consequences.'¹

This description of 'fortune' is negative because Gibbon admitted it to be a synonym for an unknown quantity, though both here and elsewhere he clarified its use by its context. The recurrence of the term in The Decline and Fall is partly a concession to traditional and popular usage, partly a matter of convenience. It is a sort of complex variable in two senses of the word, sometimes substituting for an imaginary quantity which cannot be ascertained, and sometimes being a symbol for variability or inconstancy. Such is the dual function of this indispensable word.

Gibbon allowed a place for fortune in peoples' lives, including his own, as well as in public and military affairs. To take three instances from two consecutive pages, we are told that the general Fabius was not compelled to share any great proportion of his 'solid and independent fame...either with fortune or with his troops'; that an emperor's prudence 'was seconded by fortune' as he always seized and improved 'every favourable circumstance'; and that the Goths made the best 'of the advantages of their fortune'.² So too, when emperors were raised to the throne by the support of their soldiers, an obsequious senate 'was always prepared to ratify the decision of fortune'.³ Or again, we read

1. DF, xxxviii, IV, 127.

2. DF, xxvi, III, 130-131.

3. DF, xxxii, III, 392.

that 'the elevation' of Gainas, the Gothic leader, whose career presents another example of strange vicissitudes, 'had been the work of valour and fortune'.¹ Even in reviewing the life of 'the historian of the Roman Empire' himself, wherein to a great extent Gibbon liked to see everything in his earlier years as preparatory, and contributing to his destined vocation, he made room for fortune and what we popularly call 'the luck of the game'. 'When I contemplate the common lot of humanity,' he wrote, 'I must acknowledge that I have drawn a high prize in the lottery of life. The far greater part of the globe is overspread with barbarism or slavery; in the civilized world the most numerous class is condemned to ignorance and poverty; and the double fortune of my birth in a free and enlightened country in an honourable and wealthy family is the lucky chance of an unit against millions.'²

Without pursuing any further the place of the fortuitous in Gibbon's own view of the world, we can safely say that he did not try to avoid a convenient term, hallowed by ancient, medieval and Renaissance usage,³ a term which still conveyed to his contemporaries that enigmatic area of life about which philosophic minds might speculate, but the reality of which every man knew from happy or from bitter experience. The original pagan term of classical Greece and Rome seemed the obvious one to choose - what other word could one find? Yet it was emptied of old superstitions and unenlightened connotations: the goddess was demythologised. Even so, the notion was never allowed to replace or

1. DF, xxxii, III, 392.

2. Memoirs, p. 186.

3. The recurring symbol of the wheel of fortune in medieval literature, which was carried over into humanistic use, is also a convenient one for Gibbon in his 'revolution' figure.

obstruct rational explanation nor absolve the philosophic historian from the pursuit of discoverable causes. Thus Gibbon opened his 'General Observations' with the statement that the declining Greeks had attributed the triumph of the Roman Republic not to its merit, but to its Fortune: 'the inconstant goddess' had simply redistributed her favours. But, he continued, 'a wiser Greek', Polybius, 'who has composed with a philosophic spirit the memorable history of his own times, deprived his countrymen of this vain and delusive comfort by opening to their view the deep foundations of the greatness of Rome.'¹ These Gibbon went on to affirm, were moral, not fortuitous.

With these safeguards against the abuse of the word 'fortune', it matters little that Gibbon chose to employ the term in a popular sense, without any great precision or philosophical clarification.² It served the moralist well when his emphasis was particularly on instability, change and decay, a context which he found both in Poggio and in Boethius, who philosophically took solace in his calamity from a recognition of 'the inconstancy of fortune'.³ Throughout The Decline and Fall such a recognition conveys its message even to some of the proudest and most ruthless conquerors, like Sapor or Clovis, who learned from their experience of fortune's vicissitudes, the necessity for moderation and restraint.

It is the cogency of this argument from bitter experience, no doubt, which makes the sentiment of the fickleness of fortune a favourite with

1. DF, IV, 172.

2. It is one of a number of favourite terms, including 'philosophy' which Gibbon did not set out to define.

3. DF, xxxix, IV, 215.

ambassadors, especially when presenting their case from a position of weakness rather than strength. The Alemanni, reduced by Aurelian to distress, sued for peace. Surrounded by the imposing army of Rome and facing the emperor, majestically seated on his throne, their ambassadors, when given permission to rise and speak, 'extenuated their perfidy, magnified their exploits, expatiated on the vicissitudes of fortune and the advantages of peace.'¹ In somewhat similar circumstances, Apharban, ambassador of 'the Great King', Narses of Persia, a nation whose spirit had been broken by defeat, was allowed to submit his cause to the decision of the emperors. He based his appeal for clemency on the same grounds, 'convinced as he was that in the midst of prosperity, they would not be unmindful of the vicissitudes of fortune.' Galerius, exasperated at the hollowness of this diplomatic cliché from the mouth of an envoy of the proud and mercilous eastern potenate, replied: 'It well becomes the Persians to expatiate on the vicissitudes of fortune and calmly to read us lectures on the virtues of moderation.'² So, too, at a later period the Roman ambassadors reminded Barbarossa that, 'like all sublunary things Rome has felt the vicissitudes of time and fortune.'³

The same theme is enunciated by a number of Moslem rulers who philosophically bear witness to the fact of transitoriness, either in the very words we have been considering or in others having the same force. The emperor Romanus, following his defeat and capture by Alp Arslan, was forced 'to kiss the ground before the lord of Asia'. Whether, in accordance with national custom, the Sultan actually placed

1. DF, xi, I, 319.

2. DF, xiii, I, 402.

3. DF, lxix, VII, 244.

his foot on the emperor's neck seems doubtful. But certainly, in contrast to the arrogant Sapor, Arslan showed himself mindful both of his prisoner's rank and of the uncertainties of warfare. 'He instantly raised the royal captive from the ground; and thrice clasping his hand with tender sympathy, assured him that his life and dignity should be inviolate in the hands of a prince who had learned to respect the majesty of his equals and the vicissitudes of fortune.'¹ The moral of the incident was not overlooked by Gibbon, who added that such conduct 'may afford a lesson to the most civilised ages.' The same sultan's tomb also bore what he called 'this useful inscription: "O YE WHO HAVE SEEN THE GLORY OF ALP ARSLAN EXALTED TO THE HEAVENS, REPAIR TO MARU, AND YOU WILL BEHOLD IT **BURIED** IN THE DUST!"' Gibbon's final comment was, 'The annihilation of the inscription, and the tomb itself, more forcibly proclaims the instability of human greatness.'²

As the story of the Roman Empire is brought to an end with the victorious Mahomet II entering the palace of Constantine and his successors, now 'stripped of the pomp of royalty', we are told that, 'a melancholy reflection on the vicissitudes of human greatness forced itself on his mind; and he repeated an elegant distich of Persian poetry: "The spider has wove his web in the imperial palace; and the owl hath sung her watch-song on the towers of Afrasiab."' ³

Here we have yet another instance of Gibbon's use of his historical characters to convey a moral reflection or generalisation which is one of

1. DF, lvii, VI, 250-1.

2. DF, lvii, VI, 253.

3. DF, lxviii, VII, 208. Gibbon made a comparison with Scipio who, at the sack of Carthage, repeated Homer's famous prophecy. (n.104).

the motifs of the whole work.¹ And the particular sentiment in question seems to come from none more easily and appropriately than from these eastern rulers, these followers of the religion of the crescent. So characteristic is it that Braudy has gone as far as to assert: 'Almost every major Arab figure who appears in The Decline and Fall has a highly developed and poetic sense of what Gibbon usually calls "the vicissitudes of fortune". The Arab's awareness of the vanity of human wishes is in fact a reflection of the historian's view of the rapid passage of time.'² The main emphasis, however, as we have seen, is not on rapidity but rather on the completeness of the change that time has brought about within the life of an individual, of a reign, or of an empire. The individual person experiences a full turn of the wheel - from obscurity to eminence and back to obscurity or even worse - though on occasions a second turn may bring another taste of power. The empire of Rome suffered a complete revolution, symbolised by its ruins and by the return of 'the sacred ground' to its pristine state 'disfigured with thorns and brambles'.³ But whether rapid and violent, like the capture of Constantinople, or the work of centuries, like the decay of Rome, the melancholy fact of change remains and is continually and explicitly stated in The Decline and Fall as part of the moral: 'Sic transit gloria mundi'.

The expression of the 'vicissitudes' sentiment recurs in a number of phrases, but all are variations on a single theme. Besides 'the vicissitudes of fortune', we find 'the vicissitudes of human life',

1. See reference to this aspect in chapter IX below, pp. 503-4.

2. Narrative Form in History and Fiction, p. 256.

3. DF, lxxi, VII, 313-4.

illustrated in a career such as that of the empress Eudocia.¹ There is 'the vicissitude of human affairs', a reflection which, Gibbon felt, would suggest itself to 'a philosophic spectator' of the decline of Rome, were he to imagine Tacitus once again appearing in a Senate which had 'degenerated from the virtues' of its founders², or were he to contemplate the recurrence of the same scenes of disaster which had afflicted Rome at an earlier period of her history.³ There is 'the vicissitude of human and divine things' evidenced by 'the splendid relics of two temples, or rather of two religions' remaining after the Vandal sack of Rome.⁴ We also find opposing monarchs each enjoying in turn 'the vicissitude of success' in their battles⁵; or the Emperor Cantacuzene, seeking to re-establish himself, but dismissed by his ally and protector 'to a new vicissitude of hopes and perils'.⁶ Procopius was prompted by 'the vicissitudes of courage or servitude, of favour or disgrace', to compose successive histories of his times, on the one hand as panegyric, on the other as satire.⁷ The artful but vacillating Emperor Manuel, in his negotiations with an equally artful Pope, 'advanced or retreated; alternately instructed and disavowed his ministers', 'according to the vicissitudes of danger and repose'.⁸ And Gibbon, as he reflected on the

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1. DF, xxxii, III, 412 and see above p. 426. I find altogether about 17 combinations, in addition to phases of similar force, like 'the alternative of favour and disgrace', 'the incessant change of human affairs', 'the transitory series of human life' and the word 'mutability'.
 2. DF, xx, II, 348.
 3. DF, xlvi, V, 46. ('By the fatal vicissitude of human affairs, the same scenes were renewed at Ctesiphon, which had been exhibited in Rome after the death of Marcus Antonius.')
 4. DF, xxxvi, IV, 6.
 5. DF, lix, VI, 367; and see above, p.428.
 6. DF, lxiii, VI, 522.
 7. DF, xl, IV, 224.
 8. DF, lxvi, VII, 101.

fall of the Empire in the West, and contemplated man's slow progress from savagery, a long ascent followed by 'a moment of rapid downfall', was led to the observation that 'the several climates of the globe have felt the vicissitudes of light and darkness.'¹

The central truth common to all these variants is that of instability, transitoriness and the unpredictable factor in human life and in the rise and fall of empires. It is a very significant aspect of Gibbon's concept of history. Its embodiment in The Decline and Fall is associated with an actual and an imaginative view of the remains of ancient Rome; but the exponents of this theme are very diverse: the ruins of countless cities, of palaces and temples, of religions, of institutions, and of men and women of many races and ranks, whose eminence was followed by wanderings, misery and death, as well as of ecclesiastics who found themselves no less the victim of fortune or fate, or whatever name be used to personify and disguise the unforeseen element in human affairs. Against such a background, it is little wonder that the philosophic historian found occasion to moralise on vicissitudes of men and nations, or that he considered it 'a just but melancholy reflection' that the unity of a great empire, the happiness of many peoples and the stability of the Roman world depended on something as precarious as 'the character of a single man'², the succession to the throne, or even the outcome of a battle. Indeed, it is in large part, the recurrence of such fateful situations often followed by disastrous results, which makes 'melancholy' one of the characteristic words in The Decline and Fall.

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1. DF, IV, 180 'General Observations &c.'. Cf. 'the vicissitudes of light and obscurity' which marked the course of 'the ascending meteor', Rienzi (DF, lxx, VII, 278); his 'strange vicissitudes and magnanimous spirit' we are told, excited 'the pity and esteem' of Pope Clement VI. One might list other vicissitudes such as those 'of famine and plenty'. (DF, xxvi, III, 77).
 2. see DF, ii, I, 86 where the phrase is used of the Antonine Age and xlix, V, 305 where it refers to Charlemagne's empire.

The classic statement of the 'sic transit' motif is found in a passage previously cited, where, having swept through the long line of 'phantom' emperors displaying 'the crimes and follies of human ambition, so eager in a narrow span to grasp at a precarious and short-lived enjoyment' of power, Gibbon claimed that the historian's extended view allows him to survey such an insubstantial pageant in truer perspective. Yet he felt obliged to state the melancholy truth that 'the duration of a life or reign is contracted to a fleeting moment; the grave is ever beside the throne; the success of a criminal is almost instantly followed by the loss of his prize.'¹ The sentiment is expressed more pithily and with greater generality in a comment on the succession to the crown of Sicily: 'Of human life, the most glorious or humble prospects are alike and soon bounded by the sepulchre.'²

The thought of life being 'contracted to a fleeting moment'³ is not only attested by persons in The Decline and Fall, it is also, as we have seen, part of Gibbon's concept of history and of his sense of the passage of time. That it continued also to characterise his attitude to his own life is borne out by the conclusion to his last published work, the Memoirs. In taking his leave of the reader, he declared: 'The present is a fleeting moment: the past is no more; and our prospect of futurity is dark and doubtful. This day may possibly be my last: but the laws of probability, so true in general, so fallacious in particular, still allow me about fifteen years.'⁴ Ironically, Gibbon's experience of the

1. DF, xlvi, V, 258-9.

2. DF, lvi, VI, 217.

3. It recurs in DF, lxxi, VIII, 317; 'the narrow span' of man's existence, his life and labours 'a fleeting moment'.

4. Memoirs, p. 188 and see p.196 for additional sentences included by Sheffield.

uncertainty of these laws proved justified for he enjoyed barely three years of 'this autumnal felicity'.

This personal awareness of impermanence and the brevity of life, merging with the moral reflection on vicissitude as handed down from Poggio and the humanist tradition, thus found very varied expression on the wide canvas of history presented by The Decline and Fall. It is illustrated in numerous lives and its spokesmen include the philosophic Boethius, ambassadors of various nations and Muslim rulers. It is brought out by Gibbon, not only in empires and dynasties, but even in the history of a notable family whose English branch was still one of distinction in that country. His 'Digression the Family of Courtenay',¹ with its account of their changing fortunes, may have had the effect of bringing the notion of vicissitude much nearer home. After noting their loss of splendour in an earlier age, as 'they descended from princes to barons', then to 'simple gentry' and finally to soldiers or mere peasants, Gibbon pictured the present generation, who, 'while they sigh for past greatness, ... are doubtless sensible of present blessings.' 'Yet the Courtenays,' he stated, 'still retain the plaintive motto', Ubi lapsus! Quid feci?. which asserts the innocence, and deplores the fall of their ancient house.'²

But the vicissitude motif, so frequently associated in Gibbon's History, with the fall of kings, as in its classic expression quoted above, assumed a startling and current relevance for Gibbon five years after completing his work. Writing from Lausanne to Lord Sheffield,

1. DF, lxi, VI, 466-474.

2. DF, lxi, 470, 474.

he urged: 'Do not suffer yourselves to be lulled into a false security. Remember the proud fabric of the French monarchy. Not four years ago it stood founded as it might seem on the rock of time, force and opinion, supported by the triple Aristocracy, of the Church, the Nobility and the Parliaments. They are crumbled into dust, they are vanished from the earth.'¹

Vicissitude, impermanence, a revolution of the wheel of fortune: central to all these is the historian's concept of time and of our experience of time. This, like his wider notion of revolutions as the raw material of his History, has received very little attention. In providing some suggestive comments on the matter, Ian White has written: 'Studies of Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire have, it seems to me, generally failed to bring out the most persistent and characteristic moral impression of the work ... It may briefly be called the theme of time.'² And he noted that such writers as Tillyard and Bond appear to have missed the unique significance of Gibbon's chosen subject in this regard. Tillyard denied any 'exclusive connexion' between this subject and 'the general truths' Gibbon had to convey, which were, in fact, 'nothing but the common stuff' of his particular century and social class.³ Against such a suggestion White maintained that 'an historian's moral purpose is expressed in his choice of topic,' and that Gibbon's subject 'illustrates his theme better than would a

1. Letters, No. 803, 30/5/92, III, 258.

2. 'The Subject of Gibbon's History', Cambridge Quarterly, Vol. III, No. 4, Autumn 1968, p. 299.

3. E.W.M. Tillyard, The English Epic and its Background. London, 1954, p. 514. 'The common stuff' is White's rendering of Tillyard, whose actual term is 'staple'. See White, op. cit., pp. 299-300.

general history of the world. The continuity of the Empire makes us the more conscious of its changes, in the same way as a series of ancestors does, or the revolutions of a comet, or the identity, over many years, of the self ... It is still important to the point of his history that the man killed defending Constantinople in 1453 should be the successor of Augustus. The ruins of Rome, to which he returns in the last three chapters of the History, enforce the same moral. As continuity makes us conscious of change, so what remains makes us conscious of what has been lost.'¹

Over and above the incidental philosophic comment, there are the particular illustrations of the theme of time here referred to. The continuity of the family and the idea of lineal descent are brought out both in the History and in the Memoirs. In the former we have, for example, the excursus on 'the long series of Courtenay annals',² illustrative not only of vicissitude but also of continuity beyond the short life span of the individual. In the latter, Gibbon began by tracing his own ancestry, but prefaced his account by referring to 'the posterity of Confucius' with its 'perpetual succession' over more than two thousand years. This is associated with the philosophic reflection on the individual person who seeks to 'stretch forwards' in hope beyond death, and backwards by associating himself with his forebears: 'We seem to have lived in the person of our ancestors,' thus extending our span of existence vicariously into the remote past.³ And the work closes with the reflection that 'in old age' we find 'a consolation of hope' in the new life of our children.⁴

1. op. cit., pp. 299, 306.

2. DF, lxi, VI, 466-474.

3. Memoirs, pp. 7ff, 3, 4.

4. ibid., p. 189.

Another illustration of the theme of time is found in the remarks on comets, volcanoes and earthquakes, with which Gibbon concluded his forty-third chapter. His point of observation for the comet is the year 531 A.D., during the reign of Justinian. Its seven recorded 'revolutions' embrace the whole 'narrow space' of human 'history and fable'. Its last appearance was to the 'enlightened age' of Bayle and its next takes us forward to the year 2255, when the calculations of that age 'may perhaps be verified by the astronomers of some future capital in the Siberian or American wilderness.'¹ An analogous but irregular measurement of time is observed in the recurrence of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and the visitations of the plague.²

Apart from these illustrations, the extension of the individual life span is, of course, seen in the frequent mention of eras and ages, usually characterised by some distinguishing mark or epithet. At the end of chapter xl, reference is made to the record of eras dated from creation: 3000 years of 'ignorance and darkness', another 2000 years 'fabulous or doubtful'; then the dawn of the historic eras, 1000 years of ancient history, a further 1000 years from the fall of the Western Empire to the discovery of America, and a balance of almost 300 years up to the historian's own day.³ We find, indeed, a quite frequent bracketing of years, often in round figures: the thousand years' separation of the Mar Thoma Church of Malabar from the Western world; the recollection of a thousand years 'since Egypt had ceased to be a kingdom', and the eleven centuries' leap to 'the present misery of

1. DF, xliii, IV, 463.

2. DF, xliii, IV, 464-9.

3. DF, xl, IV, 287, n.160; cf. also n.161.

the Jacobites' of that land.¹ The Ethiopians, we are reminded, 'slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten;' while the preservation of the same features and complexion by a people 'afford a proof that two thousand years are not sufficient to change the colour of the human race.'² The temporal dominion of the popes 'is confirmed by the reverence of a thousand years', a similar period marks the era during which Constantinople resisted its several assaults, and looking back to the earliest times, Gibbon recalled that 'a hundred generations' had fallen into the grave since the building of the pyramids.³

In this way, perhaps so obvious and commonplace, the historian repeatedly reminds his reader of these great leaps of time, sometimes conveying him back over a span of history -- 'we shall imagine ourselves transported five hundred years backwards' -- or carrying him forward -- 'I shall step over the interval of eleven centuries to observe the present.'⁴ The minute and rigid concern with a 'doubtful chronology' which had engrossed the young Gibbon has given way to a feeling for the grand sweep of history and the sense of eras and millenia.

The corollary of this focus on the passage of time and ages is the hypothetical elimination of the interval between two periods or events. The sense of shock is imagined if they were presented to the observer in their stark and unbelievable contrast as a testimony to those changes which time had wrought. There are two interesting

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1. DF, xlvii, V, 162, 173, 174.
 2. DF, xlvii, V, 176, 175, n.155.
 3. DF, xlix, V, 282,; lxiv, VII, 33; lxx, VII, 318.
 4. DF, xlviii, V, 187-8; xlvii, V, 174.

examples of this use of the time machine which seemed to fascinate Gibbon. The first is that of a tale which was 'engraved' on his memory so early that he could not say when, as he recalled the experience in his Memoirs. It was the story of 'The Cavern of the Winds', wherein Prince Adolph, 'after three months or three centuries ... is overtaken by Time,' which had continuously pursued him.¹ The unexpressed idea seems to be that, though time eventually catches up with us, we may become oblivious of it, as when engrossed in some pleasing experience including perhaps that extended view of the past afforded us by history.

The other example is the story of 'The Seven Sleepers', recorded in The Decline and Fall. This is a rare instance, for Gibbon was not given to recounting religious legends, but chose to include this one largely for the 'moral' it contained. Here again the interim is obliterated and this annihilation of time gave the historian the opportunity to comment: 'We imperceptibly advance from youth to age without observing the gradual, but incessant, change in human affairs, and even in our larger experience of history, the imagination is accustomed by a perpetual series of causes and effects to unite the most distant revolutions. But if the interval between two memorable aeras could be instantly annihilated,' the surprise and the reflections of the spectator 'would furnish the pleasing subject of a philosophical romance.'² This startling juxtaposition of the old world and the new seems basic to Gibbon's own reflections on history -- the sharp contrast between the reign of Decius and that of Theodosius the Younger,

1. Memoirs, p. 36. The episode is cited from an English translation of la Mothe's Histoire d'Hipolite, Comte de Douglas, and given in Bonnard's Notes, p. 247.

2. DF, xxxiii, III, 439.

and above all else, that revolution represented by Roman magnificence turned to ruins, the Capitoline hill and the Tarpeian rock reconquered by thorns and briars.¹

What is the essence of this theme of time in The Decline and Fall? It is this. Man's mind is immortal but his life is brief and momentary in the boundless annals of time. Even his material works and memorials, though apparently so permanent, are but temporary and eventually either disappear or fall into decay. His only means of transcending time and its ravages is his 'larger experience of history', which extends his view and lifts him above the temporal limitations of his own existence or those of mighty empires and their civilizations. This recurring thought is expressed in terms of breaking through the confines of his 'narrow span' by means of this enlarged experience. It should 'enlarge our hopes',² and raise us above the pitiful and futile 'crimes and follies of human ambition' by which successive rulers grasp at short-lived power and satisfaction. 'It is thus that the experience of history exalts and enlarges the horizon of our intellectual view,' enabling us to look down on this mortal scene with 'a smile of pity and contempt' for both its pettiness and its impermanence.³

But there is also a complementary 'moral' associated with this theme of time. It is the relative value of reigns and eras. 'Ages of ignorance' or 'superstition' are not to be equated with 'enlightened

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1. The surprising contrast between the reigns of Decius and Theodosius is brought out by the illustration of 'The Seven Sleepers' See DF, xxxiii, III, 439.
 2. DF, xxxviii, IV, 180.
 3. DF, xlviii, V, 258-9. This is quite different to Swift's misanthropic contempt.

ages' no matter what their actual length may be.¹ Significance is not to be measured in years. Annals and chronicles become 'barren' as all facts tend to be given roughly the same space irrespective of their intrinsic value and relative importance. By contrast, Gibbon tended to hurry over what he considered barren periods, lacking in instruction, and to dwell instead on those periods and activities which merited attention. In this way he was asserting moral value and instruction over merely temporal duration or even the mistaken acclaim formerly given to a 'hero', a conqueror, or a 'great man', which the verdict of history should now reverse.

The major example of this recognition of moral perspective and proportion is to be seen in the construction of The Decline and Fall itself. The obvious disparity between the parts, between the attention and detail in the former and those in the latter, has been repeatedly pointed out in criticisms of the work. Gibbon himself was, however, the first to point it out and his familiar reference to the six hundred years of Byzantine rulers being condensed into the task of a few days' writing and a few hours' reading, emphasises this reduction of the record of kings to what the historian saw as their true worth. He made clear his opinion of both the period and its sources whose inferiority is reflected in his summary treatment. He faced an 'ungrateful and melancholy task' which he would have 'abandoned without regret' but for its passive connection with 'the most splendid and important revolutions' which ushered in the rise of modern Europe.²

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1. Cf. DF, xli, IV, 286-7, n.160; xliv, IV, 498, n. 90; lxii, VI, 505, n. 69; xxv, III, 30; xxxviii, IV, 124; lxi, VI, 447 with iii, I, 77; xxv, III, 17 and n. 46.
 2. DF, xlviii, V, 180, 182.

The phrases used of the Western and Eastern empires respectively, show how his estimate was based on his sense of moral proportion. The Western emperors 'exhibit a strong and various picture of human nature, ... the utmost lines of vice and virtue.' In contrast to this variety and wide spectrum, those of the East presented 'a dead uniformity of abject vices'. The Western rulers were marked by 'the most exalted perfection and the meanest degeneracy' of our species; the Eastern were 'neither softened by the weakness of humanity nor animated by the vigour of memorable vices.'¹ Thus, in continuing his narrative beyond the reign of Heraclius, Gibbon explained: 'Should I persevere in the same course, should I observe the same measure, a prolix and slender thread would be spun through many a volume, ... without adequate reward of instruction or amusement... These annals must continue to repeat a tedious and uniform tale of weakness.'² In fact, it is in this extensive chapter that Gibbon comes nearest to the style of the 'annalist' even though his philosophic and moral observations still reveal an immeasurable gap between such compilers and himself. Nevertheless the structure and emphases of The Decline and Fall testify to the author's scale of moral significance.

We have approached the sic transit theme as Gibbon himself did, namely by way of the prospect from the Capitol, the view of 'the spectator, who casts a mournful eye over the ruins of ancient Rome.'³ These familiar ruins, and many others less famous, constitute an image

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1. For the contrast see DF, iii I, 86-7 and xlvi, V, 181.
 2. DF, xlvi, V, 180. The monotonous uniformity is emphasised also by the expression: 'the same path of servitude and corruption'(V,182)
 3. DF, xxxvi, IV, 21. This is the way Gibbon approached it in his own experience, though in his History, the full statement is reserved for the final chapter.

in The Decline and Fall, and because of the significance of this image, require a closer study. The thought and vocabulary of the work repeat the idea of ruin, decline, decay, degeneration and collapse. The reader becomes accustomed to the word 'ruin' in both its literal and metaphorical senses ringing out from page after page to remind him of the persistence of this motif, while from time to time the melancholy prospect of such ruins moves the historian to pause and moralise on change and decay.

Ruins begin to be prominent as early as the second chapter, where attention is focused on the unity and happiness of the empire under the Antonines. Yet the age is shown to carry in itself the seeds of decay, the inevitable cause of its own ruin. Having given a general account of the situation in Rome and the provinces, Gibbon directed the reader's thoughts to the surviving monuments of Roman greatness: 'Among the innumerable monuments of architecture constructed by the Romans, how many have escaped the notice of history, how few have resisted the ravages of time and barbarism! And yet even the majestic ruins that are still scattered over Italy and the provinces would be sufficient to prove that those countries were once the seat of a polite and powerful empire.'¹ A little later we are reminded of 'some considerable ruins' which still 'preserve the fame' of the young Herod's 'taste and munificence', and informed that 'modern travellers have measured the remains of the stadium he built in Athens.'² It is left to such ruins

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1. DF, ii, I, 47. Such ruins, according to Gibbon, not only reveal greatness and a sense of beauty, but also illustrate 'the more useful history of human manners', since the buildings were in many cases erected at private expense, though almost all for public benefit.
 2. DF, ii, I, 50.

to maintain something of the reputation of a once great people or powerful ruler and their survival gives at least an imperfect impression of this greatness. Then, for the third time, Gibbon casts his eye in the latter part of this chapter over some memorable ruins. This time it is in the eastern provinces of the empire where they 'present the contrast of Roman magnificence with Turkish barbarism.' These 'ruins of antiquity scattered over uncultivated fields' now 'scarcely afford a shelter to the oppressed peasant or wandering Arab.'¹ But the former greatness of these Asian cities, long extinguished, can be gauged from the remains of Laodicea, 'whose splendour is still displayed in its ruins.'²

The silent message conveyed by all these ruins to which Gibbon directs our attention is one of vanished greatness, of magnificence overwhelmed by barbarism, and of a scene of desolation. Sometimes the notion of barbarism and destruction is uppermost, as in the appearance of the countryside after the German invasion of Gaul: 'The scene of peace and plenty was suddenly changed into a desert; and the prospect of the smoking ruins could alone distinguish the solitude of nature from the desolation of man.'³ The moral indictment of humanity, or at least of its barbaric conquerors, if only implied, is still unmistakable.

From the multitude of ruins, material, political, human, and moral, with which we may say the pages of The Decline and Fall are strewn, it is worth while noticing the main categories and the wide application of

1. DF, ii, I, 54.

2. DF, loc. cit.

3. DF, xxx, III, 284-5.

this word which Gibbon found so indispensable. We find the ruins of numerous cities and towns, from Cologne to Caesaria, from Jerusalem to Bagdad.¹ There are references to the ruin of the countryside, such as that of Assyria, Thrace and Dacia, of 'the opulent provinces of Gaul' and of 'a populous district which had once been adorned with the flourishing cities of Bologna. Modena, Regium and Placentia.'² There are ruins of temples such as those of Daphne or Serapis, and those over which monasteries had been built, while in Rome 'the solitary temples were abandoned to ruin and contempt', the most interesting, that of Jupiter on the Capitol, having 'crumbled into dust.'³ It was this last that Gibbon, in describing the prospect from the hill, confused or artfully merged with the church of the Zoccolanti, whose chanting friars seemed to mock 'the ruin of paganism' and to symbolise the triumph of

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1. These include Laodicea (ii, I, 54), Cyzicus (x, I, 285-6), Tarsus (x, I, 292), Spolatro (xiii, I, 422), Jerusalem (xv, II, 10; xvi, II, 89, 95), Amida (xix, II, 287, 9), Cologne (xix, II, 293), Cyrene (xx, II, 344), Babylon (xxiv, II, 523), Perisabor (xxiv, II, 524), Maogamalcha (xxiv, II, 529), Modain or Ctesiphon (xxiv, II, 529), Seleucis (xxiv, II, 530), Leptis and Sabrata (xxv, III, 49, n.124), Caesaria (xxv, III, 51), Argentaria (xxvi, III, 112, n.88), Italica (xxvi, III, 125, n.109), Corinth (xxx, III, 258), Carthage (xxxiii, III, 434, 6; li, V, 499; lix, VI, 377), Naissus (xxxiv, III, 455), Sardica (xxxiv, III, 459, 460; xl, IV, 219), Tongres (xxxv, III, 484), Aquileia (xxxv, III, 494), Anderida (xxxviii, IV, 164, n.51), Milan (xli, IV, 351), Genoa (xli, IV, 352), Antioch (xlii, IV, 393; lxv, VII, 51, n.24), Phasis (xlii, IV, 408), Sirmium (xlvi, V, 60), Thebarma or Ormia (xlvi, V, 89), Nineveh (xlvi, V, 95), Axume, xlvii, V, 177), Palmyra (xlix, V, 303), Cufa (l, V, 413, n.193), Baalbec (li, V, 458), Erbe or Lambesa (li, V, 494), Heraclea (lii, VI, 38), Selinus (lii, VI, 41), Septizonium (lvi, VI, 213), Agrigentum (lvi, VI, 217, n.117), Philippopolis (lxi, VI, 446), Bagdad (lxv, VII, 60), Palestrina or Praeneste (lxix, VII, 262).
 2. *DF*, xxiv, II, 523; xxx, III, 255 (cf. xxxii, III, 394); xxxi, III, 370; xxxvi, IV, 60.
 3. *DF*, xxiii, II, 494; xxviii, III, 212; xxviii, III, 205; lxix, VII, 236 ('the solid walls and long shelving porticoes were decayed or ruined by the lapse of time.')

religion over the fallen empire.¹ There are the ruins of buildings like the Coliseum, the palace of Salust, 'the eastern hemisphere of St. Sophia' and, in an all embracing phrase, 'the ruin of the fairest structures of antiquity'.²

Apart from the ruin of material things, Gibbon wrote of 'the ruin of the Empire',³ as well as that of 'the Roman name',⁴ and of 'the Roman world',⁵; of various kingdoms⁶, of a dynasty⁷, of one's country⁸, of church and state⁹, of 'the civil and common law',¹⁰ and, in both Athens and Rome, of that of civil liberty, on whose ruins, he claimed, 'the Latin clergy had erected their tribunal'.¹¹ We read also of the ruin of a religion, like that of the Egyptian Serapis¹², 'of the Christian Church',¹³, 'of the seven churches of Asia',¹⁴, of an ecclesiastical party like the Arians or the iconoclasts¹⁵, and perhaps most significantly, on several occasions of 'the ruin of paganism'.¹⁶

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1. For Gibbon's identification of this church with the temple of Jupiter, compare his reworkings of the famous sentence about his experience in Rome; see also Bonnard's note, Memoirs, 304,5 and G.M. Young, Gibbon, pp. 59-60 regarding the confusion of sites.
 2. DF, xii, I, 371, cf. lxxi, VII, 329-330; xxxi, III, 344, lxvii, VII, 140; xxviii, III, 209.
 3. DF, xxxi, III, 333; liii, VI, 87, cf. also iii, I, 80; vi, I, 153; xxvii, III, 188; xxxvii, IV, 87 and xxxviii, IV, 106-7 ('the ruins of that mighty fabric').
 4. DF, vi, I, 169; xxix, III, 243.
 5. DF, xxxvi, IV, 18.
 6. DF, xxxviii, IV, 121 (Burgundy); xlix, V, 284 (Gothic); lxiv, VII, 29 (Greek).
 7. DF, ii, I, 42 (the Ptolomies); xxvi, III, 93 ('the dynasty of the South'); lvii, VI, 234, n.2 (the Samanides).
 8. DF, ii, I, 36; xlv, V, 9; lxv, VII, 80; lxvii, VII, 160.
 9. DF, lxv, VII, 79.
 10. DF, xxiii, II, 342.
 11. DF, xx, II, 346, 342.
 12. DF, xxviii, III, 212.
 13. DF, xx, II, 486.
 14. DF, lxiv, VI, 28.
 15. DF, xxvii, III, 153 (subheading).
 16. DF, xxii, II, 417; xxviii, III, 198; and xlix, V, 261; cf. 'the ruin of the pagan religion', xxviii, III, 219; and 'the ruins of pagan superstition', xxiii, II, 489.

Among the human examples of 'ruin' are 'the noblest provincials of Spain'¹, imperial ministers like Plautinus, the minister of Severus, and Rufinus, the minister of Theodosius²; 'an innocent youth'³, the great general Stilicho⁴, an archbishop⁵, and emperors such as Valens and Julian⁶. The ruin of some is attributed directly to temperamental or moral causes. Mousa, son of Bajazet and King of Anatolia, was 'ruined by his timorous disposition and unseasonable clemency'; Geta, the weaker of Severus' sons, would, as his father could see, 'be ruined by his own vices'; while Nero, one of the imperial 'monsters', 'involved the whole empire in his ruin'⁷. Gibbon considered that the enormous losses even in a single battle like that of Châlons, seemed 'to justify the historian's remark that whole generations may be swept away, by the madness of kings, in the space of a single hour'⁸. He made it quite clear that most of the ruin of cities, provinces, temples, public buildings and human beings was solely or largely the work of man⁹, though in some instances the ravages of time had played their part; in the case of the destruction of non-material things, a religion, law and liberty, or the collapse of a state or empire, human agents were either deliberately or unwittingly responsible. Bad or ineffective rulers, he saw as sometimes the cause, sometimes merely the helpless and apparently careless 'spectators of the public ruin'.¹⁰

1. DF, v, I, 132.

2. DF, v, I, 135; xxxii, III, 380 and see xxix, III, 235.

3. DF, xxvii, III, 170 (Valentinian).

4. DF, xxx, III, 295 (and as 'patron' of Claudian, xxx, III, 294, 8).

5. DF, xxxii, III, 398, 400 (Chrysostom).

6. DF, xxvi, III, 115; iv, I, 123.

7. DF, lxv, VII, 77; v, I, 140; iii, I, 80.

8. DF, xxxv, III, 490 and see n.45.

9. The notorious and corrupt John of Cappadocia reared his 'aspiring fortune on the death of thousands, the poverty of millions and the ruins of cities (xl, IV, 256).

10. DF, lxiv, VII, 40 (of John Palaeologus); almost identical phrases are used of Honorius (xxix, III, 252) and Vistiges, King of Italy (xli, IV, 331), while Paschal II is called 'the cause and the witness of the public ruin' (lxix, VII, 226).

Such extended surveys of word usage almost inevitably tend towards the tediousness of a shopping list, yet only in this way can we visualise the broad spectrum covered in The Decline and Fall by the noun and verb 'ruin'. Nor are we merely looking at a word which dropped almost too readily from Gibbon's pen, but at an essential part of his view of history, a concept woven inextricably into the texture of his work. In that immense work, ostensibly conceived among the ruins and returning to them for its conclusion, the reader is never far from this image in either its physical or figurative application.

By the time Gibbon wrote his History the ruins of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East had gripped the imagination of scholars and tourists. They were on the itinerary of 'curious travellers' and well illustrated articles on celebrated ruins like those of Palmyra were to be found in journals like the Gentleman's Magazine.¹ Gibbon was greatly indebted to the accounts of these 'modern travellers' to whom he referred in his notes.² He even made such general statements about the fame of a particular site as that in a note on the former Greek colonies in Sicily: 'The ruins of Agrigentum are the theme of every traveller.'³ And though Gibbon the traveller may not have been able to visit many of these sites, Gibbon the historian visited them with his reader, not merely out of antiquarian interest but because he found in them a far deeper

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1. Gentleman's Magazine, Vol. XXIV, Feb., March, June, Dec. 1754; see also Vols. XXV, 454; XXXVIII, 417.
 2. See e.g. ii, I, 54, n.3 'I have taken some pains in consulting and comparing modern travellers, with regard to the fate of those eleven cities of Asia'; also n.1 and in fact most of those referring to the ruins of cities listed on p. 449 above. Works like Chandler's Travels are constantly appearing in these notes.
 3. DF, lvi, VI, 217, n.117.

significance.¹ Whether or not we see him 'as a true precursor of the romantic cult of ruins', we may still agree with the other part of Fuglum's assertion: 'When in the eighteenth century men's thoughts and longings were directed towards the future, and an optimistic belief in progress made its triumphant entry, ... Gibbon, alone in his age, dovotes the best part of his life to the problem of decadence.' He 'focusses his attention on the manifestations of decay.' Among historians of the decline of the Roman Empire, 'his vast work shows a coherence, a consistency of treatment at which one can only stand amazed.'² This treatment finds its natural centre in the ruin image whose ubiquity contributes in large measure to that coherence and consistency.

There are several levels on which the idea of ruin and decay makes its impact in The Decline and Fall as the historian reacts to their silent but powerful message. The simplest and most obvious is a sense of awe and an acute awareness of fallen greatness. Then there is the feeling of transience in the life of men and empires. A contemplation of ruins also leads to the question of the causes of destruction and the measure of guilt of those responsible. At an even deeper moral level ruins are eloquent reminders of the human suffering inflicted by the destroyers, and at this level there can be no real distinction between the most imposing and the most humble ruins, between the remains of the Capital and those of a cottage. Finally, at the very heart of the work,

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1. After stating that the ruins of Baalbec, now once again visible, excite the curiosity and wonder of the European traveller,' Gibbon added this enthusiastic note: 'every preceding account is eclipsed by the magnificent description and drawings of M.M. Dawkins and Wood, who have transported into England the ruins of Palmyra and Baalbec.' DF, li, V, 458, n.85.
 2. Edward Gibbon, pp. 153, 148.

is the theme of the inner decay of the empire in its ideals, its institutions and its rulers.

Gibbon, the historian who produced a prose epic, may not have possessed the poet's fancy nor the romantic's vision, but he was deeply susceptible to the effect of ruins. He found them not only 'stately',¹ but 'majestic' and the majesty of the ruins of Rome stirred his spirit as it had that of Petrarch, confirming his 'lively impressions' of the city and empire in its noblest days.² A traveller himself, who drew widely on the literature of travel in documenting his History, he looked from time to time once again with the traveller's eyes. The transcendent and unfading view was that which recreated for young Gibbon in October 1764 the living heart of the empire. Recapturing this vision he would write: 'the traveller, who has contemplated the ruins of ancient Rome, may conceive some imperfect ideas of the sentiments which they must have inspired when they reared their heads in the splendour of their unsullied beauty.'³ But ruins also appeared 'awful' in their expression of departed glory. The temple of Daphne was 'left a naked and awful monument of ruin';⁴ while 'the awful remains' of the Coliseum, in its day so 'expressive of Roman greatness', could still, though 'reduced to its naked majesty', be 'contemplated with awe and admiration by the pilgrims of the North'.⁵ The theme of greatness and decline was also conveyed a sight like 'the awful ruins of Spalatro' which 'are not less expressive of the decline of the arts than of the greatness of the Roman empire in the time of Diocletian'.⁶

1. DF, xxxi, III, 344 (Salust's palace, 'a stately monument').

2. DF, ii, I, 47; lxx, VII, 268.

3. DF, xxix, II, 277.

4. DF, xxiii, II, 494 (strictly 'the walls of the edifice').

5. DF, xii, I, 371; lxxi, VII, 331. Of these pilgrims Gibbon became one in a later age.

6. DF, xiii, I, 422.

By way of the 'Roman monuments' and 'the majestic ruins that are still scattered over Italy and the provinces',¹ Gibbon conducted his reader to the happiest age of empire, when men had enjoyed the benefits of peace and good government as well as of the good life as they walked amongst buildings aesthetically satisfying and majestic. This age, which, with its failure to achieve personal liberty and self-fulfilment, carried within it the seeds of ruin, was too soon over and all but forgotten. Yet even in a later period of artistic decline, the emperor Constantius was able to visit Rome and admire 'the awful majesty of the Capitol',² and to modern pilgrims like Gibbon and his fellow travellers from the North, something of this former majesty and awe remained and inspired the historic imagination to recreate the splendour of the eternal city.

In his recreation of the past, Gibbon could also turn to the reflections of two 'eloquent' humanists: one who celebrated the capital of the Western empire, the other that of the East. If, like Poggio, he actually climbed the Capitoline Hill to see for himself, he was not able to compare the description of Chrysoloras with the actual view of Constantinople; he could visualise its splendour only through books. This he did with the help of ancient authors and modern travellers³ so that he was able to assert: 'With the decline and fall of the empire, the cities of the West had decayed and fallen; nor could the ruins of Rome, or the mud walls, wooden hovels, and narrow precincts of Paris and London, prepare the Latin stranger to contemplate the situation and

1. DF, ii, I, 47 and see chaps. ii and iii.

2. DF, xix, II, 276. This was in A.D. 357.

3. See the opening of chap. xviii and the relevant footnotes.

extent of Constantinople, her stately palaces and churches, and the arts and luxury of an innumerable people.'¹ Yet Emanuel Chrysoloras, 'father of the Italian schools', found that the ancient capital of the West surpassed his highest expectations to such an extent that he could not blame 'an old sophist' for regarding Rome as 'the habitation, not of men, but of gods'. 'Those gods and those men,' wrote Gibbon, 'had long since vanished; but to the eye of liberal enthusiasm, the majesty of ruin restored the image of her ancient prosperity.'² One cannot forget that rare 'enthusiasm' which Gibbon felt as he approached the ruins of Rome and which enabled him to imagine its former glory.³ When, however, he compared the present with the past there was that inevitable strain of 'melancholy'. This he found also in Chrysoloras' 'flattering picture' of Constantinople, wherein 'the past and the present, the time of prosperity and decay, are artfully confounded; but a sigh and a confession escape from the orator, that his wretched country was the shadow and sepulchre of its former self. The works of ancient sculpture had been defaced by Christian zeal, or barbaric violence; the fairest structures were demolished.'⁴

If such a 'melancholy reflection' was inspired by the sad contrast between the present and the past, there was also that more poignant reflection which sprang from the thought of transience and impermanence. We have noticed the sentiment of life's 'narrow span' and 'fleeting moment', expressed in the Memoirs and in the famous passage reflecting on the swift passage of sixty emperors across six hundred years of history,

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1. DF, liii, VI, 71.
 2. DF, lxvii, VII, 138.
 3. Memoirs, p. 134.
 4. DF, lxvii, VII, 140.

which occupies the historian for a mere space of 'some days' and the reader for only a matter of 'some hours'.¹ In Gibbon's final chapter, this transience is associated with ancient buildings and ruins. In the earlier chapter it was 'the experience of history' which helps to transcend the brevity of life: in the latter it is the relative permanence of some enduring structures that have continued from antiquity. But most of these structures, like the empires which raised them, come at last to ruin. 'The art of man is able to construct monuments far more permanent than the narrow span of his own existence: yet these monuments, like himself, are perishable and frail; and, in the boundless annals of time, his life and his labours must equally be measured as a fleeting moment.' Only a few 'simple and solid' structures, like the pyramids, survive, while 'an hundred generations, the leaves of autumn, have dropped into the grave.'²

It is in the context of the disappearance and ruin of monuments by which the Romans sought to establish something more lasting than man, that Gibbon discussed the causes of this loss. In the two hundred years before Poggio's 'melancholy picture was drawn', many public buildings apparently disappeared.³ Apart from the slow operation of 'time and nature', this destruction seemed to Gibbon to be due less to 'barbarism and religion' than to the 'folly' of the unworthy Romans, pillaging their own priceless heritage for building materials, and above all, to their insane 'domestic hostilities'. One structure alone shows what

1. See this chapter, p. 437 and relevant footnotes.

2. DF, lxxi, VII, 317-8. Gibbon there refers to 'the leaves of autumn' figure as a 'natural but melancholy image', p. 318. n.19.

3. See DF, lxxi, VII, 316-7.

might have been done for the rest of the city had reverence for the noblest work of antiquity consistently transcended fanaticism, violence and destructive intolerance: a pope was commended for 'the meritorious act of saving and converting the majestic structure of the Pantheon'.¹

Because of its unique conversion to the new religion and its special preservation, the Pantheon, like the pyramids of Egypt, could look down on the passing generations of men. But when, in his concluding survey of the city, the historian's gaze finally focused on the Coliseum, he did not hesitate to accuse its destroyers. The costly statues clothed in precious metals 'became the first prey of conquest and fanaticism, of the avarice of the barbarians or the Christians'. Yet in 'its naked majesty' it still excited the 'awe and admiration' of the northern pilgrims. Eventually it was pillaged continuously by the populace for building materials, till in the fourteenth century, by what Gibbon censured as 'a scandalous act of concord', both Roman factions turned it into a quarry, and in their stupidity, burnt its stones for lime. In condemning the Pope's nephews for their wanton destruction, Gibbon asserted that 'every traveller who views the Farnese palace may curse the sacrilege and luxury of these upstart princes.'² Here the moral indignation of the historian reaches a climax of an almost religious intensity, marked by a 'curse' at such 'sacrilege'.

The new Rome, built around and sometimes out of the ruin of the old, seemed to mock its ancient greatness. After condemning the 'ignorance and barbarism of the Romans' up to the fifteenth century when 'the clouds

1. DF, lxxi, VII, 322.

2. DF, lxxi, VII, 333 already referred to in chap. VII, pp.381-2.

of barbarism were gradually dispelled', Gibbon drew a very uncomplimentary picture of the modern city. In population it fell far below the great capitals of Europe, the major part of the seven hills was 'overspread with vineyards and ruins' and most of the Campagna was 'reduced to a dreary and desolate wilderness'.¹ The neglect of the forum, the centre of the ancient greatness, must have disturbed Gibbon greatly. But 'the triumph of religion' incensed him most. The 'bare-footed friars' chanting their vespers where the temple of Jupiter should have stood, symbolised this triumph in a city, which, to use one of his own words, was 'infested' with their kind. 'The beauty and splendour of the modern city' which he readily admitted, may, he wrote, be ascribed to the abuses of government and to the influence of superstition'.² And the final words of the chapter made the clear distinction that it was 'the relics, not of superstition, but of empire' which were 'devoutly visited by a new race of pilgrims' from the North.³ These pilgrims, filled with 'enthusiasm' for the ancient imperial city, deplored its annexation by the clerical hierarchy. Each new Pope, Gibbon continued, enriched his relatives 'at the expense of the church and country'; his nephews filled their palaces and gardens with the ancient treasures of their nation: 'the perfect arts of architecture, painting and sculpture have been prostituted in their service', as they adorned their private dwellings with 'the most precious works of antiquity'.⁴

This 'ruin of the works of antiquity', hastened by 'every successive age', in what Gibbon called 'the progress of decay', was almost beyond

1. DF, lxxi, 334 (sub-heading); 336.

2. DF, lxx, VII, 336.

3. DF, lxxi, VII, 337-8. His final words that is apart from his 'final conclusion'.

4. DF, lxxi, VII, 336-7.

the powers of the historian to trace and the task seemed a fruitless one.¹ Yet he did not merely deplore the fact. If he did not try to ascertain the share of each particular age, he was concerned to shift the blame from those on whom it had been wrongly placed and to suggest where it rightly belonged. It was transferred from the 'innocent barbarians' to the Romans themselves - their churchmen, princes, ruling families and irresponsible populace. Theirs was the true vandalism: the Gothic kings were preserves rather than destroyers.² Theodoric is shown to have been the protector of the citizens as well as of the works of art, and Totila appears in a similar light.³ By contrast, at the close of the sixth century, when the fortunes of Rome were at the lowest ebb, and its edifices 'were exposed to ... ruin and decay ... the monks who had occupied the most advantageous stations, exulted in their base triumph over the ruins of antiquity.'⁴ If more Romans had followed the example of the Gothic kings or that of a pope who had saved the Pantheon, more of classical antiquity would have been preserved for posterity.

Two years after Gibbon's return from his Italian tour, a young French artist, Hubert Robert also returned from Rome to make his official début in Paris at the Salon of 1767. Diderot, who was greatly impressed by Robert's many representations of real and imaginary classical buildings, gave a full discussion of them in his Salon of that year.⁵ Although Diderot and Gibbon were basically in different camps and it is not even

1. DF, lxxi, VII, 316.

2. DF, xxxix, IV, 204.

3. DF, lxxi, VII, 321 and xliii, IV, 424-5.

4. DF, xlv, V, 34.

5. Oeuvres complètes, ed. J. Assézat and Maurice Tourneux, Paris, 1875-77, Vol. XIII, 'Salons' III, 246. For this paragraph see Betty Weinshenker, 'Diderot's Use of the Ruin Image' in Diderot Studies, ed. Otis Fellows & Diana Guoiragossian, XVI, 1973, pp. 309-329.

certain that they met during Gibbon's second visit to Paris,¹ their reaction to classical ruins shows an interesting similarity. Both had, indeed, clarified their response to the sublime and the beautiful by reference to Burke's treatise,² and for both 'the image of the ruin held great symbolic significance'.³ There is even an interesting verbal correspondence between Gibbon's oft-repeated 'vicissitudes' and a remark of Diderot on a picture entitled, Autres Ruines: 'Une autre chose qui ajoutait encore à l'effet des ruines, c'est une forte image de la vicissitude.'⁴ But Diderot's appreciation of the melancholy of inevitable decay was mixed with a more optimistic response, as he saw a positive value in the destruction of ruins symbolic of autocracy. A scene depicting the remains of a palace, the temple of Jupiter and the dwelling of Augustus used as a stable, struck him as a hopeful omen of the ultimate victory of social justice. There was a sense of irony also in the inscription above what had become a simple shop: DIVO AUGUSTO, DIVO NERO, its poetic justice appearing to mock the monsters of imperial Rome.⁵ It has been suggested that with Diderot, ancient ruins, after long continuing as symbols of frustration and melancholy, had become 'illustrations of a lesson in political morality'.⁶

There was no doubt in Gibbon's mind about the lessons to be drawn

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1. Gibbon's words are, 'Among the men of letters whom I saw, d'Alembert and Diderot held the foremost rank in merit, or at least in fame.' (Memoirs, p.126). But Bonnard in a note commented, 'Whether G met either of them is not clear from his ambiguous sentence.' (p.301)
 2. It had appeared in a French edition in 1765. Gibbon had a copy of the 1759 London edition (see Keynes). See also Weinshenker: 'Diderot and Burke: a Study in Aesthetic Affinity', PMLA, LXXV, Dec. 1960, p. 527-539.
 3. Weinshenker, 'Diderot's Use of the Ruin Image', p. 309.
 4. Salons, III, p. 246, cited Weinshenker, op. cit., p. 314.
 5. Weinshenker, op. cit., p.323. Diderot refers to 'un lâche proscripateur, un tigre couronné', 'Salons', III, 243.
 6. Weinshenker, op. cit., p. 329.

from ruins and from the fate of empires.¹ He shared Diderot's sense of the irony of ruined splendour and pretension, his passion for social justice and his concern for political morality. This is clear from his early works, his Memoirs and from The Decline and Fall. And in that work, each man-made ruin seems to accuse the violence and inhumanity of man. In this way, 'the history of nations' meant 'the paths of blood', from which he gladly turned aside to something more edifying when the opportunity offered.² If the destruction of the city of Amida proved to be 'the safety of the Roman provinces', the emperor Constantius was still constrained to weep over its 'smoking ruins'.³ Nevertheless the fate of this city was later 'revenged by the total ruin of Perisabor'. Of this exploit Gibbon wrote with real humanity and anger: 'After the full gratification of every military appetite, Perisabor was reduced to ashes; and the engines which assaulted the citadel were planted on the ruins of the smoking houses.'⁴ The reader can sense the historian's feeling of pity, disgust and indignation as he recorded such scenes on a number of occasions⁵ with their 'prospect of smoking ruins', of 'the desolation of man' and above all of 'the smoking houses' of those unparticipating victims of war.

It is perhaps easy and even commonplace to be affected by the 'majestic' or 'awful ruins' of noble structures and imposing monuments, but for the sensitive mind and the conscience of the moralist, it is not

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1. We might recall his phrase about Ctesias' system 'sur l'origine, la durée, et la ruine des empires des Mèdes et des Assyriens' ('Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Mèdes'; MW, III, 59) and the opening words of his Essai, 'L'Histoire des empires est celle de la misère des hommes.'
 2. DF, lvii, VI, 236.
 3. DF, xix, II, 287, 289.
 4. DF, xxiv, II, 525, 524.
 5. e.g. DF, xxvi, III, 120; xxvii, III, 196; xxviii, III, 209; xxx, III, 285.

the splendour or fame that counts, for 'the ruin of a single town,...the misfortunes of a single family'¹ have their human story to tell. Nor is the moralist's sense of social justice and human value dependent on the size and magnificence of the object of destruction: 'If we are more deeply affected by the ruin of a palace than by the conflagration of a cottage, our humanity must have formed a very erroneous estimate of the miseries of human life.'² Here is Gibbon's own verdict, but the student of The Decline and Fall can confidently affirm that he would also have endorsed the sentiments of Diderot on a ruin painting by Robert which 'indicate that the palace is associated with tyranny, idleness and evil, the cottage with utility and justice. Only the ruin of the palace will enable it to acquire the virtues of the cottage.'³

At the most basic level there is the inner decay and collapse of which the ruin image speaks throughout The Decline and Fall. In this, the metaphor of 'ruin' has its counterpart in that of 'fabric', a term which is also used to evoke the idea of instability and decay. The best known instance is that in the centre of the work where the historian is reflecting on the collapse of the Western Empire. With the removal of its artificial supports by time or accident, 'the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight. The story of its ruin is simple and obvious.'⁴ The twin metaphors are again linked in a reference to the elaborate code of titles and social rank perfected in the Byzantine system: 'this baseless fabric, the monument of pride and servitude, was for ever buried in the ruins of the empire.'⁵ In the

1. DF, xxvi, III, 121.

2. DF, xxiv, II, 526.

3. Weinshenker, op. cit., p.335.

4. DF, IV, 173-4.

5. DF, liii, VI, 88.

late third century, 'the expiring senate' with high hopes proclaimed its restoration to 'its ancient dignity'. It was no more than a facade which could not withstand the power of the armies and the provincials who realised the hollowness of the senators' boast. 'On the slightest touch, the unsupported fabric of their pride and power fell to the ground.'¹ So too, 'the ruin of paganism', already cited, can be matched with Constantine's decision 'to undermine the irregular and decayed fabric of polytheism,' which he then literally carried out with 'the demolition of several temples in Phoenicia.'² And in the 'final destruction of paganism', Gibbon pictured Gratian completing the demolition of the immaterial structure, propped up as it was, by age-old custom: he 'dissolved the ancient fabric of Roman superstition, which was supported by the opinions and habits of eleven hundred years.'³ In this way the 'fabric' of the empire or of the old religion suggests its 'decay', an insubstantial structure already undermined and ready to topple in ruins.

If Gibbon started out from an impression of the ruins of Rome, his intention was to reveal something far more fundamental: 'the problem of decadence', the manifestations and the causes of decay.⁴ His work is not about the decline and fall of cities and buildings, but of an empire and its former greatness; it is about the decay of the ancient Roman spirit, of patriotism in the best sense,⁵ embracing civic responsibilities, public service and a sense of honour; the decay of freedom and social justice, the degeneration of senate and people. The senate, that great republican survival, becomes a sort of index of the soundness of Rome.

1. DF, xii, I, 347.

2. DF, xxi, II, 415.

3. DF, xxviii, III, 200-1.

4. Fuglum, op. cit., p. 148; see also the present chapter, p. 453, n.2.

5. See, e.g., DF, i, I, 10-12.

Like the Coliseum, it underwent a period of neglect, followed by a brief era of care and concern, finally to be ruined by its abusers and saboteurs.¹ Indeed, we are told: 'The fate of the Senate suggests an awful lesson of the vicissitude of human affairs.'² Gibbon's History records not only 'the triumph of barbarism and religion' as destructive forces, but also that of luxury, effeminacy, crimes and follies unchecked and unpunished, and of emperors, generals and politicians who rode roughshod over the ordinary people. He made it clear that these things constitute the sort of ruin and decay which lie behind the death of a great civilization. And these are all moral values.

In his earlier, or projected works,³ Gibbon had considered the themes of political expediency, the loss or recovery of freedom, and the rights and responsibilities of rulers, governments and peoples. He had considered the nature of vice and virtue in the life of individuals and nations. None of these themes was abandoned. The subject was altered and extended when he came to write his great work, but within its far grander sweep of history, these same essential moral questions ultimately found a still more ample scope.

It has been the aim of the preceding chapters to show that Gibbon brought to history the outlook and convictions of a moralist, and that his work thus presupposes and also exemplifies certain moral values and lessons. The decline is essentially and in the deepest sense a moral

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1. During Valentinian's reign, 'a republican spirit was insensibly revived in the Senate' (xxxv, III, 504), and we can trace its ups and downs till its final extinction. (see xliii, IV, 445-6).
 2. DF, xliii, IV, 445.
 3. Like his work on Charles VIII, his *Swiss Liberty* and his projected work on the Florentine Republic.

decline reflected in what he regarded as 'degenerate Romans' and 'degenerate Greeks'. If he failed to do justice to the Eastern Empire and Byzantine civilization,¹ largely because of the inadequacy of current historical data and methodology, his judgements, however harsh, were still those of a moralist. He condemned what he saw as degeneracy, effeminacy and imitation of oriental despotism. And the facts, at least as he related them, give substance to most of these judgements. Behind the would-be 'impartial historian' we are sometimes aware of the over earnest moralist, castigating the vices and follies of rulers, churchmen and citizens, the self-destruction of dynasties, and the weak or wicked emperors who slowly but surely brought about the ruin of their country, and who, by their refusal to co-operate with the West, opened the gates to the ultimate destroyer in the person of Mahomet II.

Behind 'the vicissitudes of fortune', the transience, the destruction of cities, works of art and human habitations, lies the decay of those values and ideals which had once made the Roman world great. Their loss becomes the ruin of the empire. The ruin image throughout The Decline and Fall is suggestive of a spiritual and moral ruin of which that of cities and the countryside is but the visible expression. In a section of the 'Contrast of vice and virtue', Gibbon considered how the virtues of leaders like Belisarius had been replaced 'by the various or uniform vices' of corrupt officials. In this situation of betrayal and debasement, Totila, the barbarian, is introduced as chaste, temperate

1. See, e.g. Bury's Introduction to DF, especially, pp. xviff.; A. Hamilton Thompson's 'Gibbon' (Historical Association, Gen. Ser. 1946, which is concerned to a great extent with Gibbon's inadequate view of the Eastern Empire (see, especially pp.7-9); also Speros Vryonis Jr., 'Hellas Resurgent' in Lynn White Jr. The Transformation of the Roman World. Univ. of California, 1966, pp. 92ff.

and trustworthy, a restorer of peaceful pursuits and the protector of the ordinary people. From the mouth of this defender of civilization, whose virtues Gibbon found so 'laudable', he borrowed the 'theme that national vice and ruin are inseparably connected; that victory is the fruit of moral as well as military virtue; and that the prince, and even the people are responsible for the crimes which they neglect to punish.'¹

One could perhaps find no better motto for The Decline and Fall. It was the failure to remember this that lay behind the ruin of the world's greatest empire. Despite his reverence for Rome and her civilization, Gibbon made no attempt to hide her weaknesses and cruelty nor his own disgust at her contempt for the rights of other peoples. These feelings and his own deep humanity penetrate even his lament over 'the most awful scene' of her collapse and the greatness still inherent in her ruins. As the young traveller wrote to his father on the eve of his experience 'among the ruins of the Capitol': 'Whatever ideas books may have given us of the greatness of that people, Their accounts of the most flourishing state of Rome fall infinitely short of the picture of its ruins.' Then he added, and it is the voice of the moralist anticipating by some years that of 'the historian of the Roman Empire': 'I am convinced there never, never existed such a nation, and I hope for the happiness of mankind there never will again'.²

1. DF, xlii, IV, 426.

2. Letters, No.61, 9/10/64, I, 183.

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Dillon-Smith, David, The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Department of History, University of Wollongong, 1982. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/1426>

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CHAPTER IX

THE LANGUAGE OF THE MORALIST

Even without Gibbon's explicit statement in his Memoirs,¹ the attentive reader soon perceives the great importance he placed on the right use of language and the care he took to achieve his effects. The impression is confirmed by a study of the revisions made to the first volume of The Decline and Fall six years after its initial publication. Collating the first fourteen chapters in the two editions, Bury found that 'in most cases the changes were made not for the sake of correcting misstatements of fact, but of improving the turn of a sentence, re-arranging the dactyls and cretics, or securing greater accuracy of expression'.² So keen was the historian's feeling for language that both sound and sense were once more carefully weighed in an effort to improve the style of a work which had already won almost universal acclaim.

The subject of language is one that turns up very frequently in The Decline and Fall. It may be the language of symbols, 'naval grammar', the dialects of Greece, the speech of the early Britons, the language of Russia, the arduous task for schoolboys in mastering the classical tongues, a question of etymology or a comment on the abuse of certain words by propagandists in church or state.³ But the remarks about the style historicans are illuminating and give an indication of what Gibbon felt as appropriate or inappropriate in historical writing.

1. Memoirs, p. 155

2. Introduction to his 1900 edition of DF, p. xxxii.

3. See, e.g. DF, liii, VI, 97, 106; lxvi, VII, 100; lv, VI, 157.

In the first place, he looked for a certain degree of 'gravity' in such a composition. He not only referred approvingly to grave historians,¹ but, allowing such a requirement to govern his own practice, he opened a chapter on the crusades with the admission: "In a style less grave than that of history, I should perhaps compare Alexius to a jackal."² A similar animal comparison by the poet Claudian, he felt to be a violation of 'the dignity rather than the truth of history'.³ It was again something of the Latin notion of gravitas that Gibbon had in mind, a dignity and high seriousness appropriate to the moral importance of a subject.

While Gibbon looked also for eloquence⁴ in the best historical writing, he was repelled by what he considered affectation or a pompous rhetoric which he found in the writing of Anna Comnena. What he found objectionable about this 'affected style' was the inflated language with its exaggerated comparisons and flattery.⁵ So too, he referred to 'the pompous style of the age' in which the

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1. His references to 'the gravest historians', xxxviii, IV, 156, 168, are no reflection on their gravity, but merely an expression of surprise that even such grave writers could be mislead. Cf. 'the sober historian' forcibly awakened by hard facts from 'a pleasing vision' of the manners of pastoral peoples, xxvi, III, 75.
 2. DF, lix, VI, 335.
 3. DF, xxxii, III, 389.
 4. He harshly criticised the lack of eloquence in Gregory of Tours, and referred to Falcandus as 'an eloquent historian' (xxxviii, IV, 148, n. 17; lvi, VI, 227 and n. 46).
 5. DF, lvi, VI, 205.

president of the royal college of Constantinople 'was named the Sun of Science', his twelve associates, the professors in the different arts and faculties, were the twelve signs of the zodiac'.¹ Gibbon rejected not only the fanciful exaggeration of size and numbers such as one found in 'the stupendous account' of a Byzantine historian,² but also its reflection in a grandiose style. From his criticisms of the bombast of such writers the inference could be drawn that his own style would be free from hyperbole and highly fanciful metaphors. In revising his first volume he noted: 'Mr. Hume told me that in correcting his history, he always laboured to reduce superlatives, and soften positives.'³ Gibbon, who was marked by moderation in all things, showed a similar restraint in his writing and avoided the self-defeating 'amplification, which, by saying too much, says nothing.'⁴ Extended and highly poetic metaphors are rare in Gibbon, since they seemed to stand in the way of both clarity and plain truth.⁵ Ammianus, a very useful source for The Decline and Fall, was nevertheless felt to be guilty of such bad taste in his history 'that it is not easy to distinguish his facts from his metaphors.'⁶ 'Vague and doubtful metaphors' may be left to the poet, the historian will gain both our interest and our confidence by presenting his account of 'memorable events' 'with the simplicity of truth.'⁷

1. DF, liii, VI, 108.

2. DF, lvi, VI, 223.

3. Marginal note from Gibbon's revision, final sentence of paragraph 1, chapt. i, Bury, Introd. DF, 1900 edition, xxxv.

4. DF, liii, VI, 97, n. 81. Gibbon associated such 'vain exaggeration' with the Byzantine historians.

5. There are some interesting and appropriate metaphors to be found in chapter. xlvii; Parkinson has drawn attention to some of these, Edward Gibbon, pp. 132f.

6. DF, xxvi, III, 72, n. 1.

7. DF, xxvi, III, 483.

Gravity and seriousness did not mean dryness, a fault which Gibbon found with some historians and more especially chroniclers, who became tedious in their detail which was not illuminated by philosophic perception. A wealth of specific facts was basic to a historical narrative, but there was a place for the generalisation and the moral truth to be drawn from the details of events or of character, and this is a marked feature of Gibbon's style.

While he had no patience with tedious enumeration of detail in historical writing, he was equally determined to avoid superficiality. We have seen that the aspiring historian found Hume's History 'superficial',¹ and he later brought the same charge against Voltaire who, with all his brilliance, merely cast 'a keen and lively glance over the surface of history.'² The truly philosophical historian will, like Tacitus, be concerned with the real motives of men, the causes of actions and the springs of character. It could never be said of Gibbon, as he wrote of Cantacuzene, that 'instead of unfolding the true counsels and characters of men, he displays the smooth and specious surface of events.'³ And his style, being the image of a mind keen to probe and reveal in this way, could be expected, with all its eloquence, to preserve a directness and a penetrating simplicity.

1. JA, 2 November, 1761, p. 32; and see above chap. IV, pp. 6-7.

2. DF, li, VI, 446, n. 65; one of a number of similar criticisms of Voltaire.

3. DF, lxiii, VI, 411; yet his history is still an 'eloquent work'.

One might not perhaps think of describing Gibbon's style as 'simple', yet he repeatedly stressed the importance of simplicity and associated this quality with 'the truth of history.' It was 'an old chronical' of all things that gave him pleasure on account of its 'natural simplicity.'¹ It contrasted with the affected style and artificial rhetoric which so disgusted him in the Byzantine writers. This he described as 'the language of falsehood and declamation', to be avoided by the true historian who will present his work 'with the simplicity of truth.'²

Simplicity and eloquence: there was no essential incompatibility, and they were to be found together in the best historians. What made a writer like Gregory of Tours so distasteful to Gibbon was that his style was deficient in both.³ The problem of style which Gibbon had to face in embarking on his History was that of steering a course midway between the dullness of a chronicler and the florid, declamatory style of the later Greeks. As he took up his pen, these seemed to be the Scylla and Charybdis of historical composition and by the time he had reached the second part of his work, he confessed in various notes that he had suffered both from the tediousness, prolixity and uninspired minuteness of some of his sources, and from the pompous bombast of others. He came to endorse du Guignes' dichotomy of the Arab historians as consisting of either 'the dry annalist' or 'the tumid and flower orator.'⁴ In rising to

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1. In Sheffield's translation of the Journal, MW, V, 412 (= JB, 7me, Nov., 1763, p. 142.
 2. DF, xlvi, V, 42-3; xxv, III, 483. Cf. XI, 275, 'a sentiment whose simplicity persuades us of its truth.'
 3. An unfavourable judgement which Gibbon claimed he had 'tediously acquired' the right to pronounce 'by a painful perusal' of Gregory's work. See DF, xxxviii, IV, 148, n. 117.
 4. DF, li, V, 429, n. 14.

the greatness of the subject he had undertaken, it would be easy for eloquence to become pompous and artificial at the expense of both simplicity and truth. Earlier writers, particularly in the majestic days of empire, might perhaps be excused for a measure of grandiloquence in their accounts of the Roman world, but 'the temper as well as the knowledge of a modern historian', according to Gibbon, 'requires a more sober and accurate language.'¹ Even if overshadowed by the grandeur and awe of his theme, the modern 'historian of the Roman empire' must never sacrifice accuracy or restraint in his expression. Instead of an 'elaborate affectation of rhetoric and science' which only betrays on every page the author's vanity, there must be that 'simplicity of style and narrative which wins our belief.'²

Style, as Gibbon recognised, is not an end in itself. It serves a wider purpose, and this he kept in mind in his 'many tryals' to get it just right. For him it had to match his view of the historian's task and fit the great subject he had undertaken. Not only had the language to be an adequate vehicle for narrative and description, it had also to be appropriate for instruction and moral comment. Tillyard, after a close study of Gibbon's work, made this assertion: 'Voracious though Gibbon's appetite was for the facts of history, it yet remains true that the first principle of The Decline and Fall was that it should express certain great moral truths.'³

1. DF, i, I, 29.

2. DF, xlviii, V, 241.

3. E.M.W. Tillyard, The English Epic and its Background. London, 1954, p. 514.

If that is so, and preceding chapters have attempted to demonstrate its truth, then the historian's medium of expression was shaped with this end in view. It is therefore important to examine certain aspects of Gibbon's use of language in order to see how he sought to convey these moral truths more effectively.

At the most general level, we have been thinking in terms of style, a broad and composite term often applied rather loosely and without further qualification to the total impression of a piece of writing. Various terms have been used to describe Gibbon's style according to the reaction of the critic¹ and his degree of objectivity. Yet as 'the image of his mind' and as a reflection of his lofty theme, it could be basically defined as both precise and dignified. These two features remain constant despite the minor differences one may perceive between certain chapters, paragraphs and even sentences. The precision is the natural outcome of such a mind as Gibbon's but it is also the result of extraordinary care and revision. Gibbon was a precise man and was accustomed to frame his sentences and choose his words most carefully both in conversation and in his private correspondence. But he was also a very diligent man and the degree of exactness and clarity he achieved in his prose testifies to the work of shaping and refinement which continued till he was satisfied with what he had written. Where the occasional vagueness or ambiguity is found, it is nearly always intentional: it may be designed to avoid dogmatic assertion where

1. From the revulsion of Coleridge at the one extreme to admirers like J.B. Robertson at the other. In between there are those who have appreciated a little of Gibbon at a time. Gilbert Highet, writing of 'Baroque Prose' said that, 'the character of Gibbon's style, however, is partly a matter of taste.' (The Classical Tradition, Oxford, 1964, p. 348).

the sources are inconclusive or to reflect a confusion amongst these authors or in the thought of theologians.¹

But dignity is perhaps an even more striking characteristic of Gibbon's style. Like Robertson who insisted on 'the dignity of history',² Gibbon echoed the same sentiment and in the same words.³ But he was also conscious of the dignity of his own great theme. 'The historian of the Roman empire' had therefore to achieve a style worthy not only of his chosen discipline but also of what he had come to see as his destined subject.⁴ 'The greatest, perhaps and most awful scene' in human history surely demanded an appropriate dignity of style. Yet Gibbon's dignity is rarely, if ever pompous⁵ on the one hand, nor on the other, is it incompatible with his irony, with certain lighter touches of humour, or even with the occasional suggestions of ribaldry. It is never destroyed by a descent to abuse or by an incongruity of expression. The effect of Gibbon's delightful little incongruities, exposing some foible of character or conduct, are those of well-mannered, polished social discourse. Their intention is sometimes that of adminis-

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1. However, G.M. Young does cite an unintentional ambiguity, Edward Gibbon, p. 90-1.
 2. See Dugald Stewart's 'Life of Robertson', in The History of Scotland, 1821 edition, vol. 1, p. 100.
 3. See, e.g., DF, xxxii, III, 389.
 4. The Final Conclusion to DF endorses his experience in Rome and his sense of satisfaction in his task: 'The historian may applaud the importance and variety of his subject', 'the greatest, perhaps the most awful scene, in the history of mankind.' (VII, 338).
 5. Though some might think of Gibbon's style as 'pompous', probably few would mean by this epithet 'bombastic'. See C.S. Lewis's remarks on the good sense of the word and 'the proper occasion for pomp', e.g. the epic. (A Preface to Paradise Lost, Oxford, 1942, p. 16.)

tering a gentle rebuke to affectation or hypocrisy. But the essential dignity which is not thereby impaired, remains a most fitting, perhaps a necessary feature, of the moralist historian.

Under the general heading of 'style' we may refer next to 'tone', the term Gibbon himself used for the mode of expression he required and which he knew he had finally achieved. 'Many experiments were made before I could hit the middle tone between a dull chronical and a rhetorical declamation.'¹ These are the extremes which, as we have seen, Gibbon saw in so many other historical works and which he was determined to avoid in his own. His contempt for the 'dull chronicler' was expressed in his earliest search for a subject² but he found the opposite extreme equally distasteful. A lover of the golden mean in all things, he achieved in his style, and without loss of dignity, a tone pitched midway between the flat and the inflated: one that never descends to the 'low' tone of Fielding's 'low' characters, or even the comic bathos of that author, nor does it have the ring of Johnsonese,³ let alone of pulpit declamation.

This quality of 'tone' was probably in the mind of G.M. Young when he wrote that 'Gibbon's style, though Johnsonian in its general movement, is Johnson transmitted through Robertson;' and Robertson, he continued is in his manner of writing, 'much more modern than Johnson', in places even anticipating Macaulay.⁴ As a young writer

1. Memoirs, p. 155.

2. 'Hints', MW, V, 487.

3. In the sense which Boswell's Johnson at least tended to translate plain and simple ideas into rotund and dignified language and often made even his 'little fishes talk like whales'.

4. Gibbon, pp. 82,83.

setting out, Gibbon had looked admiringly at 'the careless beauties' of Hume's History and had entertained 'the ambitious hope' of emulating 'the perfect composition, the nervous language, the well-turned periods of Dr. Robertson.'¹ What he finally achieved was a style and tone perculiarly his own, 'the image of his mind', which became 'so natural to him that he could both write and speak it as easily as the unpretending English of his letters to Holroyd.'²

Burke, according to Dugald Stewart, objected to a style which, he wrote, 'daily gains ground amongst us' tending 'to establish two very different idioms...and to introduce a marked distinction between the English that is written and the English that is spoken... From this feigned manner of false...no one modern historian, Robertson only excepted, is perfectly free. It is assumed, I know, to give dignity and variety to the style. But whatever success the attempt may sometimes have, it is always obtained at the expense of purity, and of the graces that are natural and appropriate to our language.'³ Gibbon was equally averse to this false dignity and declamatory style in historical writing, though in Burke's view he does not appear to have escaped the danger. It was probably of this style in general that Bishop Hurd was thinking when, in 1800, he looked back over the past century: 'The pompous, or what may be called the

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1. Memoirs, p. 99; cf. ibid., p. 121 with its reference to 'the vigorous sense' of Robertson. It is probable that 'nervous' in the earlier passage is used with the meaning of 'vigorous' as applied there to the actual expression.
 2. G.M. Young, Gibbon, p. 84.
 3. Robertson, Works, I, 179.

swaggering manner, was introduced by Bolingbroke; continued or rather heightened by Junius and Johnson: till now it has become the only style that pleases the mob of readers.'¹ He did not mention Gibbon as contributing to this effect, but if, as Stewart believed, Burke's criticism was directed by implication towards Gibbon, then that critic at least must have had his doubts about the historian's having 'hit the middle tone' in The Decline and Fall. Yet Stewart felt that Burke, and worse still his numerous and uninspired imitators, had tended to fall into the other extreme by 'too close an adherence to what he recommends as the model of good writing, the ease and familiarity of colloquial discourse'. 'For my own part', he concluded, 'I can much more easily reconcile myself, in a grave and dignified argument, to the dulcia vitia of Tacitus and of Gibbon, than to that affectation of cant words and allusions which so often debases Mr. Burke's eloquence, and which was so long ago stigmatised by Swift as "the most ruinous of all the corruptions of language"'.²

It was from the study of Swift, Addison and the English writers after the Revolution, Gibbon tells us, that he managed to restore the purity of his own language, and he continued to admire their simplicity, vigour and elegance.³ He would therefore be unlikely to tolerate

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1. Richard Hurd, Works, quoted by Young, op.cit., p. 85.
 2. Robertson, Works, I, 179.
 3. Memoirs, p. 99. 'Wit and simplicity are their common attributes', he wrote of Swift and Addison, finding also 'manly vigour' in the former and 'the female graces of elegance and mildness' in the latter.

any of the corruptions censured by Swift. But while he achieved elegance and refinement he was not guilty of false dignity or declamation. There is no artificial raising of the style. And probably most modern readers of The Decline and Fall who are familiar with the range of eighteenth-century prose would agree that his individual 'tone' is somewhere between the highly latinised and formal at one end of the scale and the language of polite conversation at the other. To borrow Gibbon's own idiom, one might describe it as dignified without affectation and unadorned without banality. As we open his first chapter, over which he took so much trouble to achieve this appropriate 'tone', we notice a considerable proportion of quite short, uncomplicated sentences and a vocabulary which is plain and unpretentious. Looking at the opening sentences of each paragraph in this chapter, we find that about one quarter are of the simple, one-clause type whose length gets down as low as ten words, while one third consist of just two clauses, either co-ordinate or relative. The same sort of thing can be seen in later chapters in both the first and second parts of the work.¹

Gibbon did not sacrifice the 'simplicity' he valued, either in the structure or in the vocabulary of most of his sentences, which are sometimes not far removed in these respects from those of refined

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1. The average length of opening sentences in chap. i is 27.6 words and even some of the longer sentences are divided into two parts by a semi-colon. The proportion of single-clause opening sentences to the number of paragraphs in the 'General Observations' which conclude Part I is one half, in the first chapter of Part II (xxxix) it is one fifth and in the final chapter of the work, it is about one quarter. Again, there is a good proportion of simply constructed co-ordinate or descriptive clauses amongst the rest. The proportion of one- and two-clause opening sentences in the paragraphs of these four sections is 26/39, 7/10, 15/22 and 8/14 respectively.

speech. The difference - the dignity or stateliness - is to be found rather in the patterning or movement of the sentence, with its balance, antithesis, climax or threefold arrangement. This tripartite or tri-colon pattern handed down from the Greek rhetoricians by way of Roman writers and orators, Cicero above all, was cultivated and fully developed by French and English writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and is very characteristic of Johnson and Robertson amongst Gibbon's contemporaries. But it is the simple forcefulness of which this threefold pattern is capable that is relevant here since it makes it so compatible with the 'middle tone' of the writer or orator.

'It is particularly useful', says Highet, 'because it both seems natural and is memorable.' And, by way of illustration, he cites the famous speeches of two great American presidents - from the one: 'We cannot dedicate - we cannot consecrate - we cannot hallow - this ground', and 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'; and from the other during the grim days of the great depression: 'one-third of a nation, ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished'.¹

No one could deny that many of Gibbon's statements are 'memorable'; few would deny that his prose has a certain majestic or imposing movement like the march of history itself; but it is easy for us to forget the essentially simple and straightforward means by which he achieved this effect.² A 'natural' and 'unpretending English', as Young put it, which owes much to Cicero, to Swift, Addison, Hume and Robertson, but which is ultimately the product of his own sensitive ear and precise judgement able to recognise this appropriate tone once he had attained it.

1. G. Highet, *op.cit.*, pp. 112-3.

2. Gibbon's prose style has been seen as more symmetrical than Johnson's but less complex - that is in terms of transformations per sentence. See Curtis W. Hayes, 'A Transformational-Generative Approach to Style: Samuel Johnson and Edward Gibbon', *Language and Style*, Vol. I, Pt. 1, 1968, pp. 47-8.

It is this 'middle tone' with its ability to gain the reader's confidence which is most suited to the gentle moral persuasion and undogmatic comment of Gibbon's History. An elevated tone would sound patronising and might smack of a tedious clerical moraliser; a casual and familiar tone would prove inadequate to carry the great moral truths and generalisations, which would then sound strangely out of key. The 'middle tone' places the author on a level with his reader, but still allows him, by drawing on his knowledge of human nature with its vices and follies, to offer his moral comments without awkwardness and without pompousness.

Under 'tone' are subsumed the various effects of what can be termed 'intonation'. Just as the linguist thinks of intonation as a 'suprasegmental feature' over and above the individual phonetic segments, so in studying Gibbon's prose, it can be seen as producing a range of inflections over and above the grouping of sounds, words and sentences which contribute to the total effect of his writing.

Turning from these larger stylistic and tonal effects to the structures which carry them, one can move down the structural hierarchy from the overall theme, to the chapter, a fairly natural stretch of literary discourse and an almost universal subdivision of theme, to the paragraph, Gibbon's chosen unit of composition, and ultimately to the sentence and its parts. The chapter forms a convenient division based either on chronology and narrative sequence, or, as with Gibbon who chose to give preference where appropriate to an arrangement in terms of subject matter,¹ on the need for exposition and description. By such

1. cf. Memoirs, p. 179: 'I preferred, as I still prefer, the method of grouping my picture by nations; and the seeming neglect of Chronological order is surely compensated by the superior merits of interest and perspicuity.'

arrangement he felt free to suspend the temporal progress of his narrative to provide information on religious issues or the manners of the pastoral peoples. Certain chapters, like that on Roman jurisprudence, thus become entities, famous in their own right.

Sometimes a group of two or three chapters forms a unit. Thematically those on the development of the early church exhibit this unity of design, so much so that J.M. Robertson felt free to publish them under the title Gibbon on Christianity.¹ Gibbon, who always regarded the rise of the new religion as inextricably bound with the story of imperial decline,² gave special attention to researching, writing and pruning this section of his work³ and was prepared to defend it as an entity in his Vindication. The chapters on Julian are basically a revaluation of what Gibbon regarded as a much maligned but essentially noble character, presenting him as 'the apostle of paganism.'³ They thus gain a thematic unity in two ways: by their concentration on a single character; and by their presentation of the ruin of the old pagan religion. In this latter respect they complement chapters xv and xvi showing the rise and establishment of Christianity from the other side. The chapters on Constantine form another unit in as far as they continue the treatment of imperial decline and church establishment, culminating in the chapter which investigates this 'public establishment' as 'one of the most important and domestic revolutions.' This revaluation, Gibbon claimed, is not only entertaining because it can 'excite the most lively curiosity', but is also of moral worth

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1. London, 1930. The 'propagandist' use of DF in this way has been unacceptable to some; see e.g. A Hamilton Thompson, Gibbon (Historical Association, General Series, G. 3, 1946), p. 9.
 2. Memoirs, p. 147.
 3. DF, xxiv, II, 514.

since it can 'afford the most valuable instruction'. He showed that the unscrupulousness of the first Christian emperor left its stamp on later Christianity and on government, while the weakness of the last 'apostle of paganism' not only helped the demise of the old religion, but also led to 'the calamities of the empire'.¹

Another chapter, the most celebrated and widely used in Gibbon's History,² also combines interest with moral instruction. It is almost a self-contained history and digest of a subject which Gibbon regarded as so important in the study of nations, but he saw it also in terms of its moral and ethical implications. These implications are suggested at various points and especially in the later sections of the chapter. The final paragraph on 'abuses of civil jurisprudence' gave Gibbon the occasion to make such assertions as the law being 'inscribed not only on brass or marble, but on the conscience of the offender', and to make an application still nearer home to the effect that, 'the experience of an abuse from which our own age and country are not perfectly exempt may sometimes provoke a generous indignation.'³ Indeed, Gibbon frequently closed his chapters with a moral reflection, a restatement of his theme of decline, or a hint of impending disaster.

Whatever the thematic unity or narrative coherence of a particular chapter, it was the construction, the sound and the final polish of the individual paragraph which became the focus of Gibbon's attention. Only when it satisfied him in these respects did he commit it to writing. It was thus his basic unit of composition. 'It has always

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1. Regarding the former, see DF, xx, II, 316, 325, 330-1, 333; xxvi, III, 1; and the latter, xxiv, II, 545, xxv, III, 4.
 2. Chap. xliv.
 3. DF, xliv, IV, 541, 542

been my practice', he wrote, 'to cast a long paragraph in a single mould, to try it by my ear, to deposit it in my memory; but to suspend the action of the pen till I had given the last polish to my work.'¹ The actual length of his paragraphs, some of them very long, almost miniature chapters, is thus closely related to the movement and onward sweep of the oration.

As a structural unit the paragraph gives us a clear view on a reduced scale, of Gibbon's process in his work as a whole. That process, as Tillyard reminded us, was not to draw random or incidental moral lessons but to set out 'from a series of great moral principles', the common heritage of the society to which Gibbon belonged, and to recall 'the reader's attention to them as they have been illustrated by the course of events. Like the epic, history was for Gibbon a solemn affair, offering large general lessons in morality.' Detail, therefore, had not only to be significant, but had also to subserve 'a worthy general truth or large event.'²

In Gibbon's scheme the paragraph is frequently based upon one of these general truths or principles. Sometimes the generalisation comes first and the illustrative instance follows; at other times it forms a conclusion to the more specific and particular facts of the narrative. So too, the length of the unit expressing the generalisation may vary from a phrase or a clause to a group of sentences. In the shortest of these there is simply a parenthetical

1. Memoirs, p. 159.

2. The English Epic and its Background, pp. 515, 514.

comment which broadens the scope of the whole statement: 'Hope, the best comfort of our imperfect condition, was not denied to the Roman slave'; or, 'Suspense, the worst of evils, was at length determined by the ministers of death.'¹ Sometimes the author turns from his narrative or description and introduces, in a clause or minor sentence, a qualification or condition which also carries an element of universality. Such insertions are signalled by a switch to the present tense, sometimes accompanied by the use of the first personal pronoun as the historian joins his readers in a general reflection. The sequence in this case is from a subordinate clause expressing a broad principle to the main clause making the specific statement of fact or announcing a particular event. Thus we find, 'Whatever evils either reason or declamation have imputed to extensive empire, the power of Rome was attended with some beneficial consequences to mankind.'² Here it is only the second part of the sentence which is strictly essential for the statement of a historical fact; the introductory clause merely broadens that statement beyond the particular exmpire of Rome and opens up a more general view of the nature of imperial expansion. In a somewhat similar type of example from the same chapter, we have: 'Notwithstanding the propensity of mankind to exalt the past, and to depreciate the present, the tranquil and prosperous state of the empire was warmly and honestly confessed, by the provinces as well as Romans.'³

In a sentence expressing the association of true nobility with worth not birth, an idea Gibbon would have found in the treatment of

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1. DF, ii, I, 44; xxxix, III, 216. Italics all mine in the following examples to indicate the section of the sentence referred to.
 2. DF, ii, I, 56.
 3. DF, ii, I, 61.

nobilitas by Horace and Virgil, he wrote: 'If we can prefer personal merit to accidental greatness, we shall esteem the birth of Tacitus more truly noble than that of kings.'¹ Here the historian's assertion is that the birth of Tacitus is more noble than that of kings, or at least, that we should esteem it so. The proposition in the dependent clause is an appeal to relative values and moral worth in the widest sense, Tacitus being the particular case. In a moral judgement which he shared with his readers, Gibbon wrote: 'If avarice were not the blindest of human passions, the motives of Rufinus might excite our curiosity and we might be tempted to inquire with what view he violated every principle of humanity and justice to accumulate those immense treasures which he could not spend without folly nor possess without danger.'²

The use of co-ordinate structure in which the statement of the general principle is followed by the announcement of the particular person or party exemplifying it, or presenting a contrast to the normal and expected line of conduct, is frequent in The Decline and Fall. 'Such disorders are the natural effects of religious tyranny; but the rage of the Donatists was inflamed by a frenzy of a very extraordinary kind.'³ Or again, 'But the subject who has reduced his prince to the necessity of dissembling can never expect a sincere and lasting forgiveness; and the tragic fate of Constans soon deprived Athanasius of a powerful and generous protector.'⁴ 'The government of a mighty empire may assuredly suffice to occupy the time and the abilities of a mortal: yet the diligent prince (Theodosius) always

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1. DF, xii, I, 344. See also the study of gloria, virtus and nobilitas in Donald Earl, The Moral and Political Tradition of Rome. London, 1967, especially pp. 67ff.
 2. DF, xxix, III, 233.
 3. DF, xxi, II, 412.
 4. DF, xxi, II, 392.

reserved some moments of his leisure for the instructive amusement of reading.'¹ And as we approach the last hours of the Eastern Empire, the threatening language of Mahomet II at the gates of Constantinople is introduced by the statement: 'Fear is the first principle of a despotic government.'²

A similar pattern is seen in the expression of the moral or general principle in a full sentence used to introduce the outworking of that principle in the history of men and nations: 'But it is no easy task to confine luxury within the limits of an empire. The most remote countries of the ancient world were ransacked to supply the pomp and the delicacy of Rome.'³ The paragraph from which this example is taken is, in fact, one of a sequence of six all beginning with a general truth from which the specific details of the narrative follow. Another instance is seen in Gibbon's introduction to the advancement of the wily Cleander by the emperor Commodus: 'Suspicious princes often promote the last of mankind from a vain persuasion that those who have no dependence except on their favour, will have no attachment, except to the person of their benefactor. Cleander, the successor of Perennis, was a Phrygian by birth...'⁴ In discussing Septimius Severus, Gibbon claimed that, even making such allowances as we commonly do in the case of public figures, this emperor must still stand condemned by whatever principles we invoke. He cannot, to use a characteristically Gibbonian term, be 'justified' in his actions. 'Falsehood and insincerity, unsuitable as they seem to the dignity of public transactions, offend us with a less degrading

1. DF, xxvii, III, 176.

2. DF, lxviii, VII, 195.

3. DF, ii, I, 59.

4. DF, iv, I, 98.

idea of meanness than when they are found in the intercourse of private life...Yet the arts of Severus cannot be justified by the most ample privileges of state-reason. He promised only to betray, he flattered only to ruin.'¹

Parallel instances run through the whole work, sometimes passing, more often implying a moral judgement which it is up to the reader to apply. Such is the comment on the 'rational voluptuary' which has been applied by biographers to the historian himself. The force of the statement in its context is that of a reasonable standard to be expected of the average self-indulgent man against which we may judge the imprudent excesses of Elegabalus. The standard is laid down for the reader in the general statement preceding the specific fact: 'A rational voluptuary adheres with invariable respect to the temperate dictates of nature, and improves the gratifications of sense by social intercourse, endearing connexions, and the soft colouring of taste and the imagination. But Elegabalus...abandoned himself to the grossest pleasures with ungoverned fury.'² The praise of 'the eloquent Libanius' for the moderation of his master Theodosius, who offered his enemies the alternatives of baptism or death, is introduced by the moral observation: 'A nation of slaves is always prepared to applaud the clemency of their master, who in the abuse of power, does not proceed to the last extremes of injustice and oppression.'³ It is against this principle that the reader is asked to judge for himself just how moderate the emperor really was. So too, the policy

1. DF, v, I, 127.

2. DF, vi, I, 159.

3. DF, xxviii, III, 217.

of Timour is shown to be just another example of the rationalisation of political expediency in the story of nations. 'For every war, a motive of safety or revenge, of honour or zeal, of right or conscience, may be readily found in the jurisprudence of conquerors. No sooner had Timour re-united to the patrimony of Zagatan, the dependent countries of Carizme and Candahar, than he turned his eyes to the kingdoms of Iran or Persia.'¹ And once again, a question of conscience in an opportunist is proposed in general terms before the summary historical fact is stated: 'A patriot who sacrifices his party and conscience to the allurements of favour may be possessed, however, of the private and social virtues; he no longer hears the reproachful epithets of slave and apostate; and the consideration which he acquires among his new associates will restore in his own eyes, the dignity of his character. The prudent conformity of Bessarion was rewarded with the Roman purple.'² Here the preceding generalisation throws scorn on the 'prudence' and 'conformity' of the cardinal, producing one of those 'intonational' effects which illuminate Gibbon's comments.

A characteristic formula to introduce either the generalisation or the specific instances, is the expression: 'such is, are, or were'. After his account of the desertion of Procopius' troops and the disastrous end of that emperor's reign, Gibbon opened the following paragraph with the general comment: 'Such indeed are the common and natural fruits of despotism and rebellion.'³ Thinking of the tragic loss of men and

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1. DF, lxvi, VII, 48. Cf. xlvi, 100, 'In the language of the usurpers of every age...'
 2. DF, lxvi, VII, 129.
 3. DF, xxv, III, 17.

of the treasures of civilization in a single battle, he introduced the outcome of the Battle of Poitiers with the observation: 'Such is the empire of Fortune...that it is almost equally difficult to foresee the events of war or to explain their various consequences.'¹ Prefacing his account of a Greek emperor with a reference to an old moral tale, he wrote: 'In some Oriental tale I have read the fable of a shepherd who was ruined by the accomplishment of his own wishes...Such was the fortune, or at least the apprehension, of the Greek emperor, Alexius Comnenus.'²

In all the above cases, the pattern has been that the generalisation or moral principle precedes the historical material by which it is exemplified. Frequently, however, we find the reverse, with the general application deduced from the preceding incidents or traits of character: 'Trajan was ambitious of fame; and as long as mankind shall continue to bestow more liberal applause on their destroyers than on their benefactors, the thirst for military glory will ever be the vice of the most exalted characters.'³ Of the elevation of Majorian to the imperial throne we read: 'The successor of Avitus presents the welcome discovery of a great and heroic character, such as sometimes arise in a degenerate age to vindicate the honour of the human species. The emperor Majorian has deserved the praises of his contemporaries and of posterity.'⁴ Then follow various events and a summary of the emperor's address to the senate.

1. DF, xxxviii, IV, 126.

2. DF, lviii, VI, 298.

3. DF, i, I, 6. In his 1782 revision Gibbon substituted 'minds' for 'characters'.

4. DF, xxxvi, IV, 16.

Just as within the individual sentence the general statement may either precede or follow the particular case, so too in the structure of his paragraphs, Gibbon would vary the placement of the sentence or sentences carrying the generalisation. Sometimes they occur initially, sometimes finally and, on occasions, medially. He frequently enunciated a principle or a general truth as the foundation for a whole paragraph, which illustrated, developed or discussed it. In other cases he proceeded from the historical events or the actions of a particular character to a final sentence which formed a generalised conclusion to the paragraph.

In the paragraph beginning, 'When the Roman princes had lost sight of the senate and of the ancient capital, they easily forgot the origin and nature of their legal power', Gibbon went on to discuss the titles Imperator and Dominus and the emperors' usurpation of 'even the attributes, or at least the titles, of the DIVINITY'. This leads to the final sentence where he drew a general conclusion applicable to the abuse of power, titles, honours and or royal prerogatives far beyond the limits of the empire of ancient Rome: 'Such extravagant compliments, however, soon lose their impiety by losing their meaning; and when the ear is once accustomed to the sound, they are heard with indifference as vague though excessive professions of respect.'¹ This loss of awareness and blunting of consciousness is seen as part of the tragic decline of Rome but as equally applicable to the modern adulation of rulers.

Amid the calamities of the Gothic war and in reaction against the suspicion of a conspiracy by the young Gothic warriors, came the carefully planned massacre of these young men throughout the provincial

1. DF, xiii, I, 411-2.

capitals, instigated by 'the cruel prudence of Julius', master-general of the troops. One might argue that the empire was endangered and that the sanguinary ruse by which these unsuspecting youths were slaughtered at least brought about a speedy deliverance. At a distance of fifteen centuries the moral issue remained somewhat confused, especially as Ammianus, the authority on whom Gibbon drew heavily in this section of his work, gave his approval to the deed. Gibbon's conclusion to the paragraph first lays down a definite principle, but then leaves the moral question for the reader to decide: 'The urgent consideration of the public safety, may undoubtedly authorise the violation of every positive law. How far that or any other consideration may operate to dissolve the natural obligations of humanity and justice, is a doctrine of which I still desire to remain ignorant.'¹

In the final sentences of certain paragraphs concerned with the characters and public actions of Constantine and of Julian, Gibbon stated some general conclusions about human nature.² So too, in considering Julian's motives for assuming the imperial rule, he turned in his concluding sentence from the man himself to humanity in general. He has shown us the philosophic Julian, thrust on to the throne apparently against his wishes and 'overwhelmed with real or affected grief'. Interpreting the motive in terms of the known character of the emperor, Gibbon suggested that his grief must have been sincere and innocent; but he admitted also that those who are always sceptical about the motives and professions of rulers would find this hard to accept.

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1. DF, xxvi, III, 124; and see Gibbon's note (p. 124, n. 105) referring his reader to the view of Ammianus; cf. also Memoirs, p. 78 concerning Grotius, 'the theory of justice...and the laws of peace and war which have had some influence on the practise of modern Europe.'
 2. For Constantine see DF xiii, I, 323-4 (final para.) and for Julian, xxiii.

And he confessed that Julian, the hero and philosopher, was not free from that very human element of religious superstition. In this ambiguous case a general principle is stated: 'The conduct which disclaims the ordinary maxims of reason excites our suspicion and eludes our inquiry. Whenever the spirit of fanaticism, at once so credulous and so crafty, has insinuated itself into a noble mind, it insensibly corrodes the vital principles of virtue and veracity.'¹

The long paragraph summing up the character of Bajazet culminates, as far as the action is concerned, in the striking anti-climax of his unexpected failure to fulfil his proud boast of feeding his horse from the altar of St. Peter's in Rome. Dramatically this would make a splendid end to the paragraph. Latent in this event, however, is a truth of more general application which Gibbon wished to make explicit. The conclusion is therefore not particular and physical, but general and moral, taking the reader beyond this half-forgotten conqueror to the great sweep of world history. Bajazet's progress, we are told 'was checked not by the miraculous intervention of the apostle, not by a crusade of the Christian powers, but by a long and painful fit of gout. The disorders of the moral are sometimes corrected by those of the physical world; and an acrimonious humour falling on a single fibre of one man may prevent or suspend the misery of nations.'²

1. DF, xxii, II, 427.

2. DF, lxiv, VII, 37.

Reminding ourselves of Gibbon's account of his care in the construction of his paragraphs, we can observe him not merely rounding off with a random or spontaneous moral afterthought such paragraphs as those we have been considering, but rather, having begun from a series of great moral principles, recalling the reader's attention to them as they have been illustrated by the course of events.¹ We can see the pen of the historian in the hand of the moralist who shapes the structure of the paragraph to give the maximum emphasis to principles which he regarded as more significant than the mere facts of history.²

For a further example, somewhat different from those already considered, but equally indicative of the movement of the sentences towards the expression of a moral principle, we might turn to Gibbon's account of the destruction of the fortress city of Maogamalcha. Our view is finally directed to 'the wanton ravages of war' and our emotional response to them, and the focus is at last fixed on a 'simple Greek statue', an object of great beauty which suggests to the historian the question of relative values. Such an object, Gibbon wrote, 'is of more genuine value than all these rude and costly monuments of barbaric labour.' But in a moral conclusion suggested by this recognition of values, he turned from the material to the human, jolting us all into the need for compassion: 'and if we are more deeply affected by the ruin of a palace than by the conflagration of a cottage, our humanity must have formed a very erroneous estimate of the miseries of human life.'³

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1. See E.W.M. Tillyard, The English Epic and its Background, p. 515.
 2. Cf. 'Memoire sur la Monarchie des Medes', MW, III, 126: 'Aux yeux d'un philosophe les faits sont la partie la moins interessante de l'histoire.'
 3. DF, xxiv, II, 526.

The insertion of the general statement towards the middle of the paragraph is found in that dealing with the softening influence of the beautiful Galla on Theodosius.¹ At this point Gibbon turned aside from direct narrative to refer to the judgement of 'the unfeeling critics who consider every amorous weakness as an indelible stain on the memory of a great and orthodox emperor.' This parallels the remark concerning Theodora to the effect that 'those who believe that the female mind is totally depraved by the loss of chastity' will be ready to accept all the scandalous criticisms of the empress which have been inspired by malice and resentment and which have caused her virtues to be forgotten.² In each case the historian's plea is for a fairer, more balanced, more humane judgement of the character concerned. Thus, after his reference to the unfeeling critics of an emperor's human weakness, he made a statement of general application: 'For my own part, I shall frankly confess that I am willing to find, or even to seek, in the revolutions of the world, some traces of the mild and tender sentiments of domestic life.' Following that general rule, he was very glad to discover 'amidst the fierce and ambitious conquerors' of history 'a gentle hero who may be supposed to receive his armour from the hands of love.'³

In the sections on government, nations and society, law and liberty, as well as those concerned with religion, superstition and intolerance, Gibbon found ample scope for generalisation and for the enunciation

1. DF, xxvii, III, 172.

2. DF, xl, IV, 230.

3. DF, xxvii, III, 172; cf. also another paragraph on 'The character of Theodosius', xxix, 232-4.

of moral principles. We find this illustrated at the beginning of chapter iii which opens with what Gibbon calls 'the obvious definition of a monarchy', which in turn leads to a consideration of the necessary safeguards of 'public liberty' and the influence exerted by the clergy, the military nobility and the 'stubborn commons'. Chapter v, which is to deal with usurpation of power by the Praetorian Guards in making and unmaking emperors, is introduced by a completely general paragraph on 'the power of the sword' in 'an extensive monarchy'. In certain parts of the work, paragraph after paragraph shows this movement from the particular to the general or vice-versa, reflecting the historian's main interest in getting down to the lowest common denominator of human nature and to the bases of man's communal, national or religious life. In his treatment of the Germanic peoples, Gibbon had before him the example of Tacitus who, he claimed, had led the way in applying 'the science of philosophy to the study of facts',¹ and in this chapter about one-third of the paragraphs either begin or end with general statements. But in some sections of the work the generalising tendency extends beyond the sentence or group of sentences so that a whole paragraph becomes the unit of generalisation from which a particular application can be drawn. We see in this the philosophic historian who, as Gibbon pointed out in an early work, 'sees in particular facts only the proof of his general principles.'²

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1. *DF*, ix, I, 230. 'The expressive conciseness of his descriptions', Gibbon continued, 'has deserved...to excite the genius and penetration of the philosophic historians of our own times.'
 2. 'Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Mèdes', *MW*, III, 126 ('ne voit dans les faits particuliers que la preuve de ses principes généraux.') Cf. above chap. V., p. 182.

Even in those parts where the subject did not lend itself quite so readily to such extended 'reflection', there are numerous examples of the more compact expression of a general truth which sometimes carries an explicit moral lesson for humanity. Writing of the neutrality of the Visigoths in a time of crisis, Gibbon began with the general statement: 'The experience of past faults which may sometimes correct the mature age of an individual, is seldom profitable to the successive generations of mankind.' Then follows the particular case in point: 'The nations of antiquity, careless of each other's safety, were separately vanquished and enslaved by the Romans.' And finally the moral: 'This awful lesson might have instructed the Barbarians of the West to oppose with timely counsels and confederate arms the ambition of Justinian.'¹ Thus in both the more extended and in the more limited structures, the application of language still bears the stamp of the moralist.

There are other, slightly different forms of expression, by which Gibbon sometimes introduced a moral point, suggested an instructive lesson or gave a greater degree of universality to the specific facts of history. Apart from the majority of general statements involving merely a switch to the present tense, which adds a certain timeless quality to the truth expressed, the historian may enter more directly in the first person, or, at one remove from this in his persona as 'the philosopher' or as the 'impartial spectator'.²

1. DF, xli, IV, 318-9.

2. See above, chap. V, p. 171 and cf. Adam Smith's 'indifferent' or 'impartial spectator', The Theory of Moral Sentiments, Pt. V., chapt. II, pp. 350, 353 and Pt. III, sect. VI, p. 370.

The plea for a more compassionate judgement on Theodosius quoted above¹ is made by the author directly: 'For my own part, I shall frankly confess that I am willing...' The aim of speaking in his own person to the reader is doubtless to ensure that there can be no missing his intention at this point in the story. In a rather different situation the historian once again takes the reader into his confidence to declare what he intends to do. 'From the paths of blood, and such is the history of nations,' he wrote in the broadest of generalisations, 'I cannot refuse to turn aside to gather some flowers of science and virtue.'² It is to be a personally conducted tour, taking us off the main course of his narrative; and he directs our attention away from the long sweep of 'history' and the extensive panorama of the 'nations' to a particular figure whose life can provide this welcome relief: 'The name of Mahmud the Gaznavide is still venerable in the East: his subjects enjoyed the blessings of prosperity and peace'. Thus, whatever we are shown about this ruler, we know the author's avowed purpose is to find some edification as well as a lesson in the possibility of discovering knowledge and virtue even in such an unexpected place.³ The 'philosophic historian' is again looking beyond the record of facts, especially those of war and destruction, to matters of wider human interest and moral value.

Akin to this direct word from the author is the slightly broader approach using the inclusive first person plural, at times almost equivalent to the indefinite 'one', but in other instances having the

1. See. p. 495 of this chapter, and n.3 .

2. DF, lvii, VI, 236.

3. DF, lvii, VI, 234.

effect of linking author and reader in their quest for truth. Sharing with his reader his own philosophical and psychological curiosity, Gibbon pointed out: 'We have seldom an opportunity of observing, either in active or speculative life, what effect may be produced, or what obstacles may be surmounted by the force of a single mind, when it is inflexibly applied to the pursuit of a single object.' Then to the particular instance, the rare exception to the rule: 'The immortal name of Athanasius will never be separated from the catholic doctrine of the Trinity to whose defence he consecrated every moment and every faculty of his being.'¹ Here was a 'saint', though one from whom Gibbon could not withhold a certain admiration, a controversy which he found intriguing, if essentially ridiculous, but above all an almost unique case study for the philosophic historian. Hence his invitation to the reader to seize the opportunity of investigating the moral force exemplified by this extraordinary man.

Sometimes it is 'the philosopher' who is used to make an observation on human nature or to express a moral principle. This may be regarded as the historian in his philosophic stance, though on some occasions it is a more impersonal, generic figure, like the impartial observer.² The historical evidence for the amazing sign which allegedly changed the career of Constantine and made possible the triumph of Christianity, is examined by Gibbon in the wider context of miracles. The credulous, he said, too readily attribute every apparent deviation from the ordinary course of nature to the direct intervention of the Deity. Hence he found it expedient to open this section³ with a philosophic view of the whole question: 'The philosopher,

1. DF, xxi, II, 383.

2. The latter is obviously indicated in the final words of chap. lxv, VII, 86: 'a philosopher, according to his temper, will laugh or weep at the folly of mankind.'

3. DF, xx, II, sect. III, 322ff.

who with calm suspicion examines the dreams and omens, the miracles and prodigies of profane or even of ecclesiastical history, will probably conclude that, if the eyes of the spectators have sometimes been deceived by fraud, the understanding of the readers has much more frequently been insulted by fiction.'¹

When Gibbon wished to introduce not just the Caledonian race but also the spirit which he felt had motivated their behaviour over a long period of history, he approached by the indirect route of a philosophic and moral observation: 'A philosopher may deplore the eternal discord of the human race, but he will confess that the desire of spoil is a more rational provocation than the vanity of conquest. From the age of Constantine to that of the Plantaganets this rapacious spirit continued to instigate the poor and hardy Caledonians.'²

Faced with the repeated 'tale of uniform calamity' to be encountered in the sack of great cities like Constantinople, and with the recurring lamentation over the pillage of monasteries, Gibbon pointed to the wisdom of maintaining a philosophic view. One should not be carried away by emotion or irrational regret, but should rather think in terms of relative values: the comparatively small worth of much that has been lost and the great value of much that has survived. 'Perhaps instead of joining the public clamour, a philosopher

1. DF, xx, II, 322.

2. DF, xxv, III, 46; cf. the philosophic reflection, beginning 'if, in a word, we contemplated the untutored Caledonians' in contrast to 'the degenerate Romans' which closes the fifth paragraph of chap. vi (I, 142).

will observe that in the decline of the arts the workmanship could not be more valuable than the work, and that a fresh supply of visions and miracles would speedily be renewed by the craft of the priest and the credulity of the people.'¹ Rather should he lament the loss of the Byzantine libraries and rejoice at the safe arrival in Italy of some of the 'classic treasures' which could later be multiplied by the aid of the printing press.

On occasions 'the philosopher' is called in for no more than an aside, which grammatically may take the form of a qualifying clause expressing a counter view. But its function is to offer a well-considered reply to the rash opinion of the multitude or the casual observer, or more especially to the misguided ideas of those who are swayed by prejudice or superstition. Thus in his treatment of the 'miracles and worship of the monks', Gibbon wrote: 'The monastic saints, who excite only the contempt and pity of a philosopher, were respected and almost adored by the prince and people.'² This function seems to account for approximately half the appearances of 'the philosopher' whether his reaction is conveyed by an explicit statement or merely by 'a smile'.

In examining Gibbon's language of moral comment, we find this philosophic persona playing a very significant role. Occurring over thirty times in one form or another, it is far more ubiquitous than that of 'the historian of the Roman empire'. We find 'the philosopher', 'a philosopher', 'in the mind of a 'philosopher', 'to a philosophic mind' or 'to a philosophic eye'; and once, where Gibbon wanted to make one of his value judgements, he did it by means of the virtual synonym,

1. DF, lxviii, VII, 206.

2. DF, xxxvii, IV, 80.

'in the eyes of a sage'.¹ The reader is informed that certain subjects are worth the attention of a philosophic mind,² that others would provoke a smile from a philosopher,³ or perhaps move him to pity, contempt or disgust.⁴ The message is clear even if the philosopher makes no verbal comment, though often he does so. In almost every case it can be affirmed, either from the immediate context or on the evidence of other sections of the work, that the 'philosophic' reaction or comment corresponds with that of Gibbon himself. In fact, I can find only two possible exceptions, one of which is a very open question.⁵ This stylistic device, so useful for stimulating thought, especially by way of revaluation, for pointing out prejudice, and for prompting moral judgements,⁶ can almost always be taken as an indication of the historian speaking in his philosophic tone, though only once does he equate himself with 'the philosopher' in so many words. On that occasion near the end of his History, as he considered the opposing viewpoints on a moral and religion question, he declared, 'Yet as a mere philosopher, I cannot agree with the Greeks.'⁷

1. DF, liii, VI, 68. This is the contrast between the value to humanity of the 'merits and miracles' of the sacred calendar and the toil of the farmer 'who multiplies the gifts of the Creator, and supplies the food of his brethren.'
2. DF, vi, I, 142; xv, II, 21; xxxviii, IV, 173; lviii, VI, 315, n. 101; lxiv, VII, 1.
3. DF, xv, II, 16; xlvi, V, 214; li, V, 484; lxix, VII, 258.
4. DF, xli, IV, 360, cf. xxxvii, IV, 76; xxxvii, IV, 80; lxx, VII, 309. We find also 'suspicion' (lvi, VI, 194, n. 54), and, as cited above, 'a philosopher may deplore' the strife of mankind (xxv, III, 46).
5. The case of Boethius cited below (and see n. 2 on p. 503) may seem to exclude Gibbon himself, though he would endorse Plato's precept; the 'open' case of 'a philosophic theist' probably able to 'subscribe the popular creed of the Mahometans' (l,V,362) may very well have fitted him also. At least one or two of his comments on that religion have been used by some writers to suggest his own simple monotheistic belief.
6. For examples, see DF, xxxvii, IV, 167, ('but a philosopher may be permitted to enlarge his views...'), xlvi, V, 259 ('he may search the motive...'), liv, VI, 131 ('a philosopher who calculates the degree of merit...'), lxx, VII, 309 ('A Christian, a philosopher, and a patriot will be equally scandalised...')
7. DF, lxx, VII, 294, n. 74.

On occasions the philosophic voice merges with that of a historical figure in the narrative who expresses an important principle. Examples are found in two characters who embody Gibbon's ideal combination of philosopher and man of action,¹ the one who yields to the call of the service of his country instead of a personal preference for retirement and study. In his treatment of Boethius, Gibbon stated: 'A philosopher, liberal of his wealth and parsimonious of his time, might be insensible to the common allurements of ambition, the thirst of gold and employment. And some credit may be due to the assertion of Boethius that he reluctantly obeyed the divine Plato, who enjoined every citizen to rescue the state from the usurpation of vice and ignorance.'² In this we have the general statement of the author, matched by the specific assertion of a particular man whose life seemed to mark him as a truly disinterested and practising philosopher.

So too, Gibbon's Julian reluctantly 'exchanged the cloak of a Greek philosopher for the military habit of a Roman prince' and later for the imperial purple.³ But while still in the subordinate rank of 'Caesar', he showed a philosophic respect for moral absolutes and 'was compelled to acknowledge that obedience was the virtue of the most eminent subject, and that the sovereign alone was entitled to judge the public welfare.'⁴ So, having resolved the matter in his conscience, he issued orders to carry out the commands of the emperor. Such statements as this on obedience as the duty of a subject, though cast in historic form using the past tense, are still to be seen as enunciations of a general abiding

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1. See. e.g. DF, xlviii, V, 220 and above, chap. VI, p. 253.
 2. DF, xxxix, IV, 213.
 3. DF, xix, II, 272.
 4. DF, xxiii, II, 423.

principle, analogous to those cited earlier in this chapter. Julian is shown as being instructed by philosophy to 'compare the advantages of action and retirement', but finding himself at the head of a great empire, he recollected 'the observation of his master Plato' on the qualities demanded of the leaders of nations. 'From this principle,' Gibbon continued, 'he justly concluded, that the man who presumes to reign, should aspire to the perfection of the divine nature; that he should purify his soul from her mortal and terrestrial part; that he should extinguish his appetites, enlighten his understanding, regulate his passions, and subdue the wild beast, which...seldom fails to ascend the throne of a despot.'¹ Here is an ideal for a philosophic ruler, justly deduced from the teaching of Plato and it is put into the mouth of Gibbon's 'imperial philosopher'.

Even amongst such unphilosophic characters as fierce conquerors, Gibbon could occasionally find a moral statement appropriate to his own theme. Totila, he noted, frequently ~~har~~angued his troops, 'and it was his constant theme that national vice and ruin are inseparably connected; that victory is the fruit of moral as well as military virtue; and that the prince and even the people are responsible for the crimes which they neglect to punish.'² In this way Gibbon used the voice of a military ruler to express the values on which The Decline and Fall is built, just as his Moslem leaders give expression to the recurring sentiment of 'the vicissitudes of fortune'.

Finally, the general statement or moral observation may be expressed not through persons, but by means of personified qualities,

1. DF, xxiii, II, 442.

2. DF, xliii, IV, 426.

virtues or vices or even philosophy which become the grammatical 'actor' or focus in the sentence. This type of sentence, not infrequent in The Decline and Fall, has already been mentioned in a specific connection, namely that of motives being presented as the real and active causes of conduct.¹ But the use of abstractions as prime movers in a particular situation and grammatically within the structure of the sentence has particular application to the present context. Discussing Rome's expansionist policy, Gibbon wrote:

'Censure, which arraigns the public actions and the private motives of princes, has ascribed to envy, a conduct which might be attributed to the prejudice and moderation of Hadrian.'² Another example in which the general moral sentiment prefaces the particular case, makes 'humanity' and 'philosophy' the subjects of the main clauses in this introductory sentence: 'Humanity will be disposed to encourage any report which testifies to the jurisdiction of conscience and the remorse of kings; and philosophy is not ignorant that the most horrid spectres are sometimes created by the powers of a disordered fancy and the weakness of a distempered body.' Then follows the historic illustration: 'After a life of virtue and glory, Theodoric was now descending with shame and guilt into the grave.'³ In a discussion of the decline of the church and of the abuses of papal elections, the blame is firmly laid on ambition. It becomes the heart of a metaphor in a moral generalisation introducing the specific example: 'Ambition is a weed of quick and early begetation in the vineyard of Christ. Under the Christian princes the chair of St. Peter was disputed by the votes, the venality and the violence of a popular election.'⁴

1. See above, chap. VI, p. 306.

2. DF, i, I, 8.

3. DF, xxxix, IV, 217.

4. DF, lxix, VII, 248.

Writing of Diocletian's salutary destruction of books on alchemy, a practice which, as Gibbon pointed out, flourished once again in the middle ages till the revival of learning 'suggested more specious arts of deception', he concluded the paragraph on a more optimistic note, namely the illumination of philosophy in his own day: 'Philosophy, with the aid of experience, has at length banished the study of alchemy; and the present age, however desirous of riches, is content to seek them by the humbler means of commerce and industry.'¹ It is not so much a generalisation here as a reflection on the progress of enlightenment, but like the general and moral reflections already noticed, it switches from past history to the present situation, thus transcending the temporal limitations of the narrative.

We thus find ourselves at the level of the sentence. Its structure exhibits a number of devices all very characteristic of Gibbon, which were obviously pleasing to the stylist and often useful to the moralist. Most prominent amongst them are parallelism, antithesis, the accumulation of items, climax or anti-climax and the use of co-ordination. Such features of Gibbon's style have been referred to by various commentators and biographers, though not in relation to his moral purpose. These structural organisations of the items of the sentence lie behind those effects I have described as 'intonational': irony, satire, high seriousness, pathos, innuendo, the implied question or the decisive conclusion. The stylistic features become familiar to the student of Gibbon and have often been mentioned in the literature on the historian; the means by which they are achieved has been dealt with by a few writers, though often somewhat cursorily; the effects to which

1. DF, xiii, I, 394.

they contribute in the work have received little attention. A comprehensive and penetrating study of all three levels, organisational, stylistic, affective, and their interrelation has yet to be written. Here, in a few paragraphs of a single chapter of a broad study of Gibbon's moral approach, only a few hints can be given.

The sentence describing Rome at the time of the emperor Majorian provides an interesting example of Gibbon's use of parallel structures, with the use of internal contrast and antithesis and also a series of co-ordinates. The intention was to suggest the decadence and decline in the middle of the fifth century. Gibbon opened the paragraph by pointing out that a casual observer of the city's ancient ruins might hastily blame the Goths and Vandals. But the destruction has been prolonged, slow and silent: 'the decay of the city', which came from within, merely reflected that of the spirit of its people. The decay of the national spirit is mirrored in their use or neglect of the four types of public buildings listed in the four parallel sections of the sentence. 'The circus and theatres might still excite, but they seldom gratified the desires of the people: the temples which had escaped the zeal of the Christians were no longer inhabited either by gods or men; the diminished crowds of the Romans were lost in the immense space of their baths and porticoes; and the stately libraries and halls of justice became useless to an indolent generation, whose response was seldom disturbed either by study or business.'¹

Exciting, without gratifying the people's desires: this antithetical pair seems to suggest the degeneracy and the jaded, coarsened response of these latter day Romans; the apathy and hollowness of that generation is sharply contrasted with the vitality and public spirit

1. DF, IV, xxxvi, 21.

of the creators and first users of these buildings. The final co-ordinate layering of the sentence produces a climactic moral explanation: the most imposing and important edifices were rendered useless by the people's indolence. A scornful sting in the tail is added by the relative clause describing a new breed of Romans who were unwilling to allow such secondary considerations as study or business to interfere with their repose. And this clause seems to qualify the population of Rome as it is referred to under different names in all four parts of the sentence: 'the people', 'men', 'diminished crowds' and 'an indolent generation' who have thus passed judgement on themselves.

Such structural features as balance, antithesis, the basic 'period of three members',¹ are so apparent throughout The Decline and Fall as to need no further illustration; but they are contributory and not merely a mannerism or an ornament. It has been said that they 'are typical of the mind that wished to fix with some exactitude the ambivalence in human affairs.'² The 'weighing of opposing or complementary ideas which is embodied in antithesis,' writes another critic, 'conveys a Gibbonian habit of thought which is no mere stylistic device but a method of judgement.'³ The habit, for it certainly did become habitual with him, is one of those features of a practised and polished style which the historian found highly useful in the expression of 'moral sentiments'. 'The irony and humour which result from Gibbon's use of balance and antithesis, comparison and contrast, are fully justified in the history which studies greatness and littleness, prosperity and decay, and virtue and vice.'⁴

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1. See, G.M. Young, Gibbon, p. 84.
 2. Bond, The Literary Art of Edward Gibbon, p. 152.
 3. Parkinson, Edward Gibbon, p. 119.
 4. Bond, op. cit., p. 153.

Satire, irony, sarcasm, innuendo are all part of the varied and finely controlled series of 'intonations' arising from the interplay of clauses and the selection of words; and they are of importance in suggesting or in prompting the reader to make moral judgements. This full range of effects, through slightly differing degrees of scorn to whimsical comment, shows the flexibility of the characteristic mode of expression which Gibbon achieved. 'Gibbon ventures upon satire in all its degrees...and antithesis is one of his favourite methods of conveying all shades of reprobation, from insinuation and innuendo to sarcasm and invective. When he remarks that, "The proection of the Rhaetian frontier, and the persecution of the Catholic church, detained Constantine in Italy," he is not only balancing good against evil, but he is also suggesting that the persecution of the Catholics was some sort of protection for the Empire.'¹

The aim and outcome of these structural devices with their intonational effects thus include the suggestion of 'ambivalence in human affairs', the presentation of contrasting qualities or situations, like greatness and littleness, glory and decay, and also the passing of a judgement. But an important aim throughout the work is that of enlisting the sympathies and moral convictions of the reader. This is very much a part of Gibbon's approach to the writing of history. And when we begin to look into the way these aims are achieved, we are continually thrown back on the actual grammar of The Decline and Fall, the syntactical equivalence, the use of the forms 'we' and 'our', or the placement of the elements of the sentence for emphasis or surprise. Nor are the effects in a simple, one to one relation to the structural devices. There is a complexity and a wealth

1. Parkinson, op. cit., p. 119. Parkinson is concerned very much with the rhythmic effect and thus marks the strong beats in this sentence.

here too. The 'Gibbonian antithesis' is an obvious and typical feature of the syntax and it is often associated with artful insinuation or the questioning of motives. Yet it is of much wider use than this. The suggestion has been made that 'it should be viewed rather as a way of marshalling materials, of communicating information clearly and concisely and of involving the reader with subtlety and persuasion in the patterns of historical fact which make the judgements of the History seem inevitable. It is part of the process of "exact identification of causal, temporal and other relations by means of grammatical form" which Yvor Winters admires in Hume's history.'¹

Another 'way of marshalling materials' involves the accumulation of words, phrases or clauses or similar pattern or import, often building up to a climax. It is essentially a rhetorical device and in this it seems to strengthen the impression of The Decline and Fall as a great oration and to emphasise the aural appeal of Gibbon's prose. Giving due weight to each item, it can serve to bring out with force and clarity such things as contributory causes, the blessings of peace or the miseries of war and disorder, or the virtues or vices of a particular character. Thus, surveying the damage and destruction suffered by ancient monuments and buildings in Constantinople, Gibbon listed defacing by zeal and violence, actual demolition, the burning of marbles for lime or their application to 'the meanest uses'. And in the following sentence, he continued: 'Of many a statue, the place was marked by an empty pedestal; of many a column, the size was determined by a broken capital; the tombs of the emperors were scattered on the ground; the stroke of time was accelerated by storms and earthquakes; and the vacant space was adorned, by vulgar tradition, with fabulous

1. Parkinson, loc. cit. His reference is to Yvor Winters's In Defence of Reason, N.Y., 1947, p. 417.

monuments of gold or silver.'¹ There is 'ample scope' in this piling up of the ravages of violent men and natural disasters 'for moralising on the vicissitudes of fortune'. The device can be used for an accumulation of good or praiseworthy things, but it seems particularly appropriate for disgust or censure, as when we read of 'the votes, the venality, the violence of a popular election', or of time and talents lost 'in the devotion, the laziness, and the discord of the church and the cloister',² or again of the discipline and training of the Janizaries contrasted with 'the pride of birth, the independence of chivalry, the ignorance of the new levies, the mutinous temper of the veterans and the vices of intemperance and disorder which so long contaminated the armies of Europe.'³ The rapacious John of Cappadocia stands condemned in Gibbon's work as one of 'the authors of the public misery' for 'his aspiring fortune was raised on the death of thousands, the poverty of millions, the ruin of cities, and the desolation of provinces.'⁴ We can hear the voice of the public orator, whether Cicero against Verres or Sheridan against Hastings, calling for the only just and possible verdict.

We must, however, beware of seeing in certain characteristic structures some inherent moral point. The same structures and stylistic devices can be used for a variety of effects by a particular writer. Nor did Gibbon have a monopoly of them. We can see them in writers before and after Gibbon and, amongst his contemporaries,

1. DF, lxvii, VII, 140.

2. DF, lxix, VII, 238; lxvi, VII, 121.

3. DF, lxvi, VII, 85.

4. DF, xl, IV, 256.

parallelisms, antithesis, doublets and triplets may be studies par excellence in the prose of Samuel Johnson.¹ Yet we can assert on the basis of Gibbon's use of language that the historian of decline and fall seemed to find such structures peculiarly appropriate to his purpose, whether to teach a lesson, suggest a judgement, deplore the crimes and follies of mankind, or to moralise on the passing of a great civilization. And what many critics recognised as inherent in Gibbon's view of history is a certain ambivalence or dualism. There are essential antitheses in his interpretation which, as has already been pointed out,² seem to have been present in the early contrast between Lausanne and Oxford, true enlightenment and dead traditional learning, vital, philosophical history and a dull chronicle. This same dualism runs throughout The Decline and Fall: appearance and reality, liberty and tyranny, impartiality and prejudice, virtues and vices, simplicity and luxury, credulity and scepticism, light and darkness.³ It is an opposition and parallelism, not of terms, but of underlying ideas and it is therefore not surprising that one of the most habitual features of the language of The Decline and Fall is the use of parataxis or of co-ordinate structures, at the level of the clause, the phrase or the single word.

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1. See, e.g. W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson, Yale University Press, 1941, chapters, II and III.
 2. See above chap. I, pp. 11, 13, 27-28
 3. There is a frequent implied contrast between 'the darkness of the middle ages' (DF, xiii, I, 394; xxxi, III, 385, n. 18; lxi, VI, 464, &c) and 'an enlightened age' (iii, I, 77; lxiv, VII, 25, n. 66), 'the light of science' (xl, IV, 281; xliii, IV, 453) and 'the light of history' (ii, I, 52).

Co-ordinate structures provided Gibbon with one of his most useful means of offering a suggestive and often a moral comment. Again and again we find clauses or phrases linked by 'and', 'but' and especially 'or', designed, it seems, with this end in view. To take but one example, already quoted to exemplify Gibbon's generalisations, he wrote concerning the numerous civil wars in Europe: 'They have generally been justified by some principle, or at least, coloured by some pretext, of religion, freedom, or loyalty.'¹ Here we have his much loved parallel structures, but with the alternative in the second clause suggesting a correction of the former, a view nearer reality, while even the 'pretext' contains within itself the three alternative possibilities. Co-ordinate clauses in parallel like this are repeatedly used not just for suggestion or comment, but for casting doubt upon a casually accepted view or allegation. In such cases Gibbon is saying: 'Look at this again; don't take it at face value.'

It is, however, within the clause itself, that we find Gibbon's most typical use of this pairing of alternatives, in most cases provocative and often disturbing. It has been mentioned by several writers. Braudy referred to 'epistemological doublets' like 'real and imaginary', 'by art or by accident', 'in truth or in opinion' as indicative of Gibbon's 'relative and pluralistic vision' and as being 'an integral part of his developing style'. The effect, he said, was to suggest 'the possibilities of interpretation' and 'to convey a sense of the multiplicity of causes that surround any event.'²

1. DF, v, I, 129.

2. Narrative Form in History and Fiction, p. 246.

Jordan, following Braudy's interpretation, noted these doublets appearing 'with increasing frequency' in the later volumes of The Decline and Fall and being 'but another of Gibbon's devices for expressing the multiplicity and complexity of history'.¹ Examples of this feature are plentiful throughout the whole work and call for a more careful examination.

I shall refer first to some couplets linked by 'and' which form part of Gibbon's language of moral comment. In this respect they have a somewhat similar force to those joined by 'or', with the second term suggesting either an abuse, a deception, or perhaps a motive of self-interest. In the very first paragraph of The Decline and Fall we are told that the 'peaceful inhabitants' of the empire 'enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury'. It is one of many instances where Gibbon suggests a moral judgement merely in passing without any heavy-handed pronouncement. The phrase, significant in itself, is even more suggestive in its larger context.

'Gibbon's more insidious skills,' according to Parkinson, 'are evidenced in the pairing of "enjoyed and abused" as though in Rome at least, it were impossible for pleasure to avoid falling into extravagance: the luxury of which he accuses the Romans has sinister overtones. His longer central sentence foreshadows one of the main causes of the decline of the Empire: The forms of freedom were kept while the emperors slowly but surely acquired despotic powers.'²

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1. Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 103. See also E.J. Oliver, Gibbon and Rome, pp. 139ff. and a short reference in Bond, op.cit., pp. 177-8.
 2. Edward Gibbon, p. 48.

Following the age of the Antonines, 'as the government degenerated into military despotism', the Praetorian prefect, as commander 'of these favoured and formidable troops', became the most important official in this new abuse of power and exercised control over the army, the finances and even the law. Plautianus, favourite minister of Severus, Gibbon informs us, was 'the first Praefect who enjoyed and abused this immense power'.¹ From the middle of the third century Gibbon cast a glance backward over three hundred years of 'apparent prosperity and internal decline' with the loss of martial vigour and of real independence. It was, he claimed, only the mercenary forces on the frontier, 'who preserved and abused their independence.'² After referring to the days when, without penal laws and sufficient civil actions, the peace and justice of Rome were left to 'the private jurisdiction of the citizens', Gibbon moved forward to his own time stating that 'the malefactors who replenish our gaols are the outcasts of society, and the crimes for which they suffer may be commonly ascribed to ignorance, poverty and brutal appetite'. Then back to comment on the situation in ancient Rome: 'For the perpetration of similar enormities, a vile plebeian...might claim and abuse the sacred character of a member of the republic.'³ And, when in a later age, the empress Constantina was allotted a monastery by the tyrant Phocas, she is said to have 'accepted and abused' the lenity of his passion'.⁴

The word 'abused' seems applicable to many of the moral comments contained in Gibbon's doublets since the second member of the pair often suggests an abuse of some kind or other. There are analogous

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1. DF, v, I, 135.
 2. DF, vii, I, 209.
 3. DF, xlv, IV, 531.
 4. DF, xlvi, V, 70.

examples throughout The Decline and Fall. The seven Greek philosophers who visited the court of Nushirvan were 'invited and deceived by the assurance that a disciple of Plato was seated on the Persian throne'.¹ Of Didius Julianus, whose purchase of the purple gave him a short and precarious reign, we read, that the Praetorians 'served and despised' the vain old senator to whom they had sold the empire.² Of the appointment of 'assessors' within the imperial legal system, Gibbon wrote that their humble advice 'might be accepted or despised, and in each tribunal the civil and criminal jurisdiction' was that 'of a single magistrate who was raised and disgraced by the will of the emperor'.³ A rather similar effect is gained by the addition of the word 'interest' when we are told that the clergy worked 'to promote the cause of a Catholic emperor' from 'motives of conscience and interest', and the Gordians, seeking a more official basis of authority than popular acclamation, 'were induced by principle as well as interest to solicit the approbation of senate'.⁴ The sentiment is not very different when we read of a weak and equivocating senate which began to fear for its own safety and for the rights of the people, debating 'these considerations, and perhaps others of a more private nature'.⁵

Much more characteristic and significant in The Decline and Fall is the coupling of alternatives by means of 'or'. We can distinguish four separate, though sometimes overlapping, uses of this device. They overlap because, in certain cases, only a rash critic would dare to say dogmatically which precise use was uppermost in the mind of the author as he wrote.

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1. DF, xlii, IV, 386-7.
 2. DF, v, I, 117.
 3. DF, xliv, IV, 539.
 4. DF, xli, IV, 300; vii, I, 191.
 5. DF, vii, I, 192.

In the first place it may signify merely an open question. As far as the evidence goes, Gibbon seems to be saying, the answer could be one or the other. He is sharing with his reader the undetermined fact or the uncertain motive behind an action. In this category we can place an expression like: 'The senator or bishop, whose death or exile Theodora had pronounced.'¹ In such instances the historian is admitting that it is impossible to be sure and also perhaps suggesting that it is not vital to the situation or to the character in question. Sometimes we find statements which reflect on a man's character but, as in the following case, may also suggest a doubt about the pursuit of rigid cause and effect: 'the flight of Nacoragan preceded or followed the slaughter of ten thousand of his bravest soldiers.'²

Where it is a question of motive, we may at times detect Gibbon reminding us, as he did in the case of the Gothic conquerors of Rome: 'At a distance of fourteen centuries', we cannot presume 'to investigate the motives' of these invaders.³ Near the beginning of the second chapter, he also admitted difficulty in discovering a motive for the introduction of a spirit of persecution in ancient Rome. It could not have been 'ambition or avarice', he reasoned and after considering a number of possibilities, he left the question undecided.⁴ With a similar inability to pronounce a single motive, he wrote: 'Whether fame or conquest or riches were the object of Alaric, he pursued that object with indefatigable ardour.'⁵ Here, though we may feel that on

1. DF, xxxix, IV, 231.

2. DF, xlii, IV, 408.

3. DF, xxxi, III, 330; cf. xvii, II, 158.

4. DF, ii, I, 34-5.

5. DF, xxxi, III, 350.

one occasion one object was uppermost, at other times, another, there is nevertheless the suggestion of mixed or undiscovered motives.

Similarly we find that the troops of Adolphus 'either by force or agreement' occupied certain cities of Gaul.¹

In this class may also be included some of Gibbon's doublets of uncertain intention like from 'design or accident', and a 'malicious or accidental tumult'.² Aurelian's disdain of other means of gaining possession than that of the sword is due to his being either 'ignorant or impatient of the restraints of civil institutions'; and 'the flight of Theodosius to the Persian court had been intercepted by a rapid dispute or a deceitful message.'³ What we are concerned with in interpreting such doublets is really the degree of openness. How far is Gibbon saying, 'We just do not know' and how far is he implying that there may have been intention and design; that the motives may have been mixed or that the circumstances were suspicious? Critics vary in the way they see particular instances and this may be a reflection of the sophistication of Gibbon's writing: his language indicating his 'awareness of multiplicity, complexity and pluralism.'⁴

There is another class of doublets, still entirely open, in which two opposite possibilities, hypothetical or still unfulfilled, are indicated. They express in most cases conflicting moral potentialities latent in men and women. After writing of the schools of Berytus being 'filled with the rising spirits of the age', Gibbon went on to declare

1. DF, xxxi, III, 352.

2. DF, xvii, II, 206; xlvii, V, 116.

3. DF, xi, I, 339; xlvii, V, 69.

4. Jordan, Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 102.

that 'many a youth was lost in the earthquake, who might have lived to be the scourge or guardian of his country.'¹ He expressed similar potentialities when writing of his friend Allamand in Lausanne, that given the power, this 'genius' might 'have enlightened or deluded the world'.² Such alternatives suggest the abuse of power or genius open to the person concerned. Thus an African usurper gathered such great forces as 'might have subverted or restored the greatest empires of the earth.'³ The only historical fact Gibbon has to convey is that many youths were lost in the earthquake or that the African usurper gathered extraordinarily large forces; the alternatives, almost gratuitously thrown in, reflect the historian's preoccupation with the moral possibilities open to mankind in such cases.

Within this open class of alternatives is a subclass which can be included under the generic terms 'real or affected', 'actual or apparent'. Their degree of openness is still a matter of interpretation in individual contexts, but the very use of such doublets to qualify a noun allows the historian to share his doubts with the reader and also to stimulate the reader towards a critical questioning of reported motives and reactions. Most of these have decided moral overtones and the frequency with which Gibbon cast his statements in this form reflects his attitude both to his sources and to the writing of history.

'Real or affected' is applied to the moderation of the emperors, to the humanity of Julian, as well as to his professed concern at the

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1. DF, xliii, IV, 465.
 2. Memoirs, p. 82. In Gibbon's Journal (JB, 1^{er} Jan, 1764, p. 197) it runs: 'Cet homme qui auroit pu éclairer ou troubler une nation.'
 3. DF, xxxi, III, 357.

hasty action of a minister, and to George of Cappadocia's 'zeal for Arianism'.¹ We read of 'sincere or affected reverence' for a synod, the emperors' 'zeal or affected reverence for the senate', and the 'honest or affected prejudice' of Cicero for the wisdom of his ancestors.² Gibbon used the word 'affected' in a number of other combinations, like 'indulged or affected the ambitious hope', 'enjoyed or affected to enjoy the festival', and wrote of the Sophists of every age despising 'or affecting to despise the accidental distinctions of birth and fortune.'³

Many other pairs are used to convey this possibility of affectation or unreality: 'artful and perhaps sincere overtures', 'ecclesiastics of real or at least apparent sanctity', 'sincere grief or ostentatious mourning', 'the love or ostentation of learning' and 'the virtue or the appearances of virtue' shown by Clodius Albinus, governor of Britain.⁴ In the case of this last, we have a reason for the use of the doublet in Gibbon's admission that, 'It is difficult to form a just idea of his true character.'⁵ No doubt the same reason lies behind many other doublets in this class. We are told of 'the remarkable alteration of his character or conduct' when Gratian's 'apparent virtues... the premature and artificial fruits of a royal education', were replaced by the darker side of his nature.⁶ Similarly we find 'sincere or well dissembled joy', 'sincere or well feigned contrition', the

1. DF, i, I, 29; xxii, II, 441; xxiii, 495; 496.

2. DF, xlviii, V, 147; v, I, 136; xlv, IV, 475.

3. DF, lviii, VI, 300; liii, VI, 79; xviii, II, 513.

4. DF, xxiv, II, 507; xxvii, III, 146; xxiii, III, 496; v, I, 119. Other pairs are: 'genuine or fictitious' (several times, e.g. i, V, 418; lvi, VI, 224), 'genuine or fabulous' (e.g. lxx, VII, 308), 'real or fictitious' (frequently, e.g. xlvi, V, 95; lviii, VI, 289) and 'real or fabulous' (e.g. lxix, VII, 261).

5. DF, v, I, 119.

6. DF, xxvii, III, 140.

ambition of the sons of Clovis 'inflamed or disguised by filial piety' and 'the false or genuine magnanimity of Mahmud'.¹

Such is one of the most frequent ways in which Gibbon questions both the reality of appearances and the genuineness of motives, on the basis of historical evidence and of his own 'knowledge of human nature'. The philosophical historian must continually look beneath the surface, not in any censorious fashion seeking to condemn his characters, but simply to impart to his reader his uncertainties, sometimes his suspicions about the outward show of things. Gibbon was aware that men and women usually plead a principle to justify their actions, but he was equally aware that they may only be deceiving others or at least self-deceived. Hence it seemed to him historically more accurate and morally safer to refer to the 'principle or pretext' and even to the 'principles or pretences' by which their actions were determined.² Appearances are seen to be deceptive, even in the case of a noble character like Julian, and perhaps most frequently in the case of a complex character like Pope Gregory the Great. Was Julian genuinely and consistently motivated by 'a tender regard for the peace and happiness of his subjects'? Gibbon could only venture to suggest that this regard 'directed or seemed to direct' his administration.³ Gregory was 'dragged from the cloister to the papal throne', apparently against his will, for 'he alone resisted or seemed to resist his elevation.'⁴ Why the doubt or the suspicion of a feigned resistance? Because, as Gibbon stated, 'his virtues and even his

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1. DF, see below p. 563*; xii, I, 341; xxxviii, IV, 122; lvii, VI, 247.
 2. DF, iv, I, 129;
 3. DF, xix, II, 302.
 4. DF, xlv, V, 36.

faults, were a mixture of simplicity and cunning, of pride and humility, of sense and superstition'.¹ This explanation provides a clue to Gibbon's fondness for these 'epistemological doublets' in terms of mixed characters, hidden motives and beguiling appearances. His mind was acutely aware of these alternatives and his style, as 'the image of his mind', reflected them continually. It was not so much that one must suspect Gregory's reaction, but knowing men and knowing himself, Gibbon appreciated the two possibilities and gave expression to them. Of another Gregory he wrote that his 'pride or humility... prompted him to decline a contest which might have been imputed to ambition and avarice'.² Maximus, too, 'in the midst of the tumult... artfully or modestly refused to ascend the throne'; while Odoacer showed a similarly ambiguous reaction when he 'modestly or proudly declined' the honour of the consulship.³ Indeed, the historian's self-knowledge, as well as his knowledge of human nature, led him in the maturity of experience and of literary success, to perceive the same ambiguity of motives in himself: 'I am too modest or too proud,' he wrote in his Memoirs, 'to rate my own value by that of my contemporaries.'⁴

In this second class of doublets, then, we have moved from the open to the less open where there is usually a strong suggestion that the author inclines to the second alternative or perhaps that neither is above suspicion. Referring to Gibbon's pairing of motives, Oliver wrote: 'Some of these remarks were made in a spirit of irony, some

1. DF, xlv, V, 37.

2. DF, xxvii, III, 158. Here it is Gregory Nazianzen, cf. also Mark of Ephesus who, 'mistaking perhaps his pride for his conscience', disclaimed all communion with the Latin heretics' (lxvi, VII, 116).

3. DF, xxvii, III, 144; xxxvi, IV, 58-9.

4. Memoirs, p. 178. He referred also to his 'modesty or affectation' regarding his work.

with a shrug, some in genuine uncertainty.'¹ Our judgement of which is which rests primarily on what I have termed 'intonation', but in some instances it is hard to say dogmatically just what intonation is intended. In this respect we might compare it with the expressive reading of a subtle poem or a producer's interpretation of a Shakespearian play. So we may ask in our reading of Gibbon, is it in this case the shrug of indifference, which Oliver detects in some of these doublets, is it 'genuine uncertainty', or is there a strong hint of suspicion, even an ironic smile at the alleged motive? In the case of such alternatives used to characterise St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Oliver concluded that 'it was perhaps indifferences that predominated'.² Yet here again we must be careful, for we know the fascination such complex characters as Athanasius, Gregory and Bernard held for Gibbon. Indifference seems not to allow for his deep human interest in what lay behind such figures, and what he actually wrote looks more like an admission of our inability to be sure at this distance from the event: 'it is impossible for us to ascertain the separate shares of accident, of fancy, of imposture, and of fiction.'³ But whatever else is uncertain about Gibbon's view here, it is clearly one of mixed or 'dubious motives'. This latter term is used by Oliver as a general caption for all the doublets to which he refers and it is a fairly accurate generic title for our second category.

1. Gibbon and Rome, p. 140.

2. loc. cit.

3. DF, lix, VI, 348.

The indications of this dubiousness are spelt out more deliberately at times as when Gibbon wrote: 'In the midst of these deliberations, two veterans of the guards, actuated either by curiosity or a sinister motive, audaciously thrust themselves into the house.'¹ Yet the suggestion comes through strongly enough in examples throughout the work. Confining ourselves to the first part of the History in order to show that this habit is not just a feature of Gibbon's maturer point of view, we may pick almost at random a handful from the huge heap of instances one soon accumulates: 'the virtues or policy of the emperors', the 'vice or folly' which promotes luxury, the 'sudden impulse or formed conspiracy' which led the troops to salute Maximin as emperor, Diocletian's 'bloody sacrifice' offered 'to prudence or revenge' Constantine consulting 'his own safety or ambition'²; 'the humanity or negligence' of overseers which allowed their prisoners some latitude', 'the sincerity or cunning of the Arian chiefs', a 'careless or criminal violation of truth and justice', the adoption of the emperor's religion 'either from interest or conscience'³; the barbarian soldiers in the Roman army revealing the weakness of the empire to their own countrymen, either 'imprudently or maliciously', and the Goths sparing the estates of the prefect Rufinus 'from a motive either of gratitude or of policy.'⁴

Moving into the first volume of the second part of The Decline and Fall, we notice Gelimer's motive of 'pride or piety', the 'credulity or prudence' of Gregory, conspirators being 'impartially punished by the revenge or justice of the conqueror', an empress being obeyed

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1. DF, vii, I, 202.
 2. DF, ii, I, 44; ii, I, 59; vii, I, 185; xiii, I, 380; xiv, I, 437.
 3. DF, xvi, II, 145; xxi, II, 370; xxiii, II, 466; xxiv, II, 514.
 4. DF, xxvi, III, 172; xxx, III, 254.

'from a motive of love or fear', and 'the bounteous alms of John the Eleemosynary' being 'dictated by superstition or benevolence or policy'. This last example is considered by Oliver 'a very striking case' and 'an extreme instance, for it so covers the possible motives of John's generosity as to leave them hardly less in the dark than if they had not been mentioned.' Yet he felt that Gibbon was still making a point, 'for the reader is left with the impression that John's motives were mixed if not dubious'.² One wonders, however, if this impression does not apply to all or most of the doublets I have grouped in this second category and one also asks, 'Why then did Gibbon raise such alternatives at all? It was surely to convey his own feeling of the complexity of the issues and to suggest from the nature of the character and the situation, the most likely possibilities. It was also to disturb any casual or passive reading of history and to undermine all simplistic explanations.

Of course, Gibbon 'was far from being alone in ascribing mixed motives to mankind, nor is such a view confined to cynics, but his doubts were more acute than those of most men. There is,' Oliver continues, 'a distinction in the English language between saying that motives are doubtful and suggesting that they are dubious - which is more often the effect of Gibbon's remarks.'³ This is so, and it is basically the

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1. DE, xli, IV, 314; xlv, V, 38; xlvi, V, 55; xlvii, V, 175, xlvii, V, 172 (which all fall within Gibbon's 4th volume.)
 2. op. cit., p. 141.
 3. loc. cit.

distinction between the first and the second categories of doublets. It is this suggestion of a dubious motive or suspicious policy which made these doublets so useful to Gibbon in dealing with what he saw as religious hypocrisy and imposition on the credulity of simple people. Both in his own day and since, he has been accused of using innuendo to ridicule religion. Innuendo there often is; no attentive reader can miss this particular intonation at times. But this and his other 'weapons', as Gibbon thought of them,¹ were forged less against religion itself than against its exploiters and against human corruption of the system. It was human nature with its vices and follies, its mixed and suspect motives and its pretended principles of conduct which felt the full force of Gibbon's moral indignation, whether the guilty happened to be kings, generals, officials, or clergy. And this device of coupling veiled motives and possibilities, offered him by no means the least effective means of achieving this end. As he thought how rewarding pilgrimages had proved to their sponsors, he felt justified in mildly, almost tentatively coupling to the alleged, a more likely motive: 'The zeal, perhaps, the avarice, of the clergy of Jerusalem, cherished and multiplied these beneficial visits.'²

The third class of doublets consists of opposites or virtual opposites, representing opposing viewpoints, different values or standards of judgement, such as sceptical versus superstitious, Roman versus barbarian, prejudiced versus impartial. It is another expression of the Gibbonian antithesis. It often represents the language of revaluation, presenting a view felt to be more truthful

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1. As he wrote of his development of irony in his Memoirs, p. 79.
 2. DF, xxiii, 480-1. The expression and effect is essentially the same with or without the insertion of an 'or'.

and unbiased than the traditional. We have noticed this in Gibbon's treatment of Constantine, whose character, he claimed, remained even in the present age, an object either of 'satire or of panegyric.'¹ There was the view of the orthodox party who saw the deliverer of the church as a hero and saint; there was that of 'the vanquished party' which ranked him with the most hated tyrants. To the historian of the empire, the real Constantine, 'the cruel and dissolute monarch' emerged with the achievement of absolute power, 'corrupted by his fortune or raised by conquest above the necessity of dissimulation.'² In this third class, it is no longer a case of two factual possibilities so much as an interpretation of the facts; not, it may have been this, it may have been that, or even, it was ostensibly this, but more likely that. Instead we have two irreconcilable viewpoints, with the position of the historian, and in fact that of his reasonable, informed and 'impartial reader' nearly always made abundantly clear. Of one such instance Gibbon wrote: 'the opinion...may be countenanced by the historian as a serious truth or a salutary prejudice.'³ But the position of the 'philosophical historian' is obvious.

Many of these doublets suggest antithetical standpoints very lightly, almost in passing, but the point is made nevertheless. The question of the rightness or wrongness of a woman's suicide to avoid possible rape provoked two irreconcilable views. Was she to be regarded as a heroine and a martyr? The Syrian bishops had taken the contrary position and deplored such a suicide, 'the guilt or glory', said Gibbon, 'of female chastity'.⁴ Indeed, in so many of these doublets, we find

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1. DF, xviii, II, 214.
 2. DF, xviii, II, 216.
 3. DF, xlv, V, 16.
 4. DF, xl, IV, 236, n. 47.

one man's vice is another man's virtue. Thus the Persian subjects of the imperial puppets placed on the throne by the first Caesars, 'were soon disgusted with the vices or virtues which they had imbibed in a foreign land'.¹ Of the buildings erected by Justinian, Gibbon wrote that 'the greater part of these costly structures may be attributed to his taste or ostentation.'² The British, due to a prolonged isolation from the Continent during the middle ages and consequent separation from Western Christendom, had remained 'in ignorance of the improvements or corruptions of a thousand years.'³ In the period of the Crusades, a 'holy madness' possessed many 'a saint or savage', though in fact Gibbon saw monks and especially hermits at any time in these terms. 'Several saints or mademen', he wrote in an earlier chapter, 'have been immortalised in monastic story.'⁴ He referred to the concept of the Crusades having been formed by Gregory VII, but noted that it was his successor to whom history attributed 'the glory or reproach of executing this holy enterprise.'⁵ And, in his assessment of Mahomet, he undertook a consideration of 'his beneficial or pernicious influence on the public happiness.'⁶

In doublets of this type the historian is saying, 'It all depends upon which way you look at it', though his own viewpoint is in no doubt. Were the Crusades a glory or a reproach to their promoters? Not only from The Decline and Fall as a whole, but even from the couplet itself in its immediate context, the 'enlightened' verdict is unmistakable. Yet even here, and especially in such cases as the 'beneficial or pernicious influence' of a religious leader, the

1. DF, xlvi, V, 55.

2. DF, xlvii, V, 142.

3. DF, xlvii, V, 162.

4. DF, xxxvii, IV, 71; 'Maron, a saint or savage', said Gibbon, 'displayed his religious madness in Syria.' (xlvii, V, 166).

5. DF, lviii, Vii, 271.

6. DF, I, V, 421.

complexity of historical judgements and of history as a reflection of the historian himself, comes through very clearly.

The fourth category of doublets is characterised by its being no longer open even in appearance as the form of words makes this quite clear. Grammatically it is marked by the use of the expression 'or rather' and in some cases, 'or at least'. It is thus only superficially an alternative that is given, as the second term is a rhetorical afterthought, but in fact an emendation deliberately appended to the former. It thus substitutes the real for the apparent, the genuine for the pretended, the factual for the alleged. If spoken, the almost parenthetical correction supplied by the second element would be indicated by a fall in pitch which represents a tone of disapproval, censure or even disgust. In Constantine's campaign against Maxentius, the imperial city was 'the noblest reward of his victory'; and its deliverance, Gibbon wrote, 'had been the motive, or rather indeed the pretence, of the civil war.'¹ 'Valens', he asserted, 'had gained, or rather purchased, the friendship of the Saracens';² and Chrosroes, 'if he was armed with philosophic indifference, he accommodated his beliefs, or rather his professions, to the various circumstances of an exile and a sovereign.' The 'ambition, or rather the avarice' of this same ruler was attracted by 'Palestine and the holy wealth of Jerusalem.'³ Of the emperor, John Palaeologus, we are told, 'Love, or rather lust, was his only vigorous passion.'⁴ In the massacre of the imperial family, the

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1. DF, xiv, I, 454. Cf. the example quoted in the introduction to this section, of the wars of modern Europe always having been 'justified by some principle, or at least coloured, by some pretext.' (iv, I, 129).
 2. DF, xxvi, III, 120, n. 98.
 3. DF, xlvi, V, 56; xlii, IV, 394.
 4. DF, lxiv, VII, 40.

unhappy females were spared 'by the mercy, or rather the discretion, of Phocas.'¹ During the great age of creeds and controversies, the uniform preaching of the orthodox definition of the incarnation as far afield as the British Isles, meant that 'the same ideas, or rather the same words, were repeated, by all the Christians' who followed the Greek or Latin rites.² And with the clamour of these contentions still ringing in his ears, Gibbon felt obliged to record that, 'in the fever of the times, the sense, or rather the sound, of a syllable was sufficient to disturb the peace of an empire.'³

Often very similar in its import, though not quite as categorical, are the expressions of the following type: 'Their ecclesiastical institutions are distinguished by a liberal principle of reason, or at least of policy.'⁴ Though Oliver referred to Gibbon's 'uncertainty' evidenced in this instance,⁵ it is surely a very deliberate emendation of the former term of the couplet which we have in this and in a number of similar cases. We find 'the most perfect, or at least the most popular, excuse', 'the name, or at least the abuse, of the Cross', 'disobedient to the letter, or at least the meaning, of the royal summons', 'and the citizens were illustrious by their spirit, or at least by their pride; by their riches, or at least by their luxury.'⁶ Referring to two letters from Gregory II to the Emperor Leo, Gibbon admitted that they 'exhibit the portrait, or at least the mask, of the founder of the papal monarchy.'⁷

1. DF, xlvi, V, 69.

2. DF, xlvii, V, 153.

3. DF, xlvii, V, 139.

4. DF, xlvii, V, 157.

5. op. cit., p. 140.

6. DF, lxvii, VII, 150; lvii, VI, 296; xlvii, V, 122; li, V, 458.

7. DF, xlix, V, 275.

Why, the ingenuous reader might ask, did Gibbon use the form of words found in such examples? Why not state his view simply and directly by using the second term of the doublet: why begin with 'motive' if he meant 'pretence'; 'belief' if it was only 'profession' that he could vouch for; 'love' if it was only 'lust'; 'portrait' if he intended to write 'mask'? The answer is not just that the formula apparently pleased his ear, but probably also that it was less blunt, and with its antithetical effect, more provocative and morally stimulating. For The Decline and Fall, is no spontaneous or impromptu speech, but a studied oration, carefully weighed and corrected, tried out for effect. In such an oration the use of epistemological or moral co-ordinates is one of those rhetorical devices consciously fashioned to give that interplay of appearance and reality, of alleged and actual motives, which could not be achieved by a single word. It is yet another of the moralist's carefully designed uses of language which can penetrate the complacency of the reader.

Coming now to examine Gibbon's language at the word level, we discover several points relevant to our subject. His habit of taking the reader into his confidence has come upon a number of occasions. The most obvious way of doing this grammatically is by the use of the first personal pronoun. It has a more confidential effect than a mere reference to 'the reader' or 'every impartial reader', though on occasions this too can involve an invitation to share the author's moral judgement: 'The prudent reader will judge whether Martin was supported by the aid of miraculous powers, or of carnal weapons.'¹ It may also involve an assessment by author and reader of the impartiality and justice of a historical source: 'The judicious reader will

1. DF, xxviii, III, 207.

not always approve the asperity of censure, the choice of circumstance, or the style of expression; he will perhaps detect the latent prejudices and personal resentments which soured the temper of Ammianus himself.'¹ A greater degree of confidentiality results when Gibbon asks 'the candid reader' to 'correct and excuse' a slip made in one of his earlier footnotes.² But a much more personal relationship is brought about when the 'he' is transformed into 'I' or 'we'. Gibbon did, in fact, in a later section of his work, refer to 'my' reader, one who now knows him well enough to take his assurance for having examined his sources: 'My long accustomed reader will give me credit for saying that I myself have ascended to the fountain head' of the particular authorities referred to.³

In most, perhaps three-quarters, of the 'I' passages, Gibbon was discussing his sources, his use of them, even, on three occasions his failure to trace a reference;⁴ or he was laying before the reader his method of procedure in his work. But in quite a number of cases he took the opportunity of using this first person approach to convey something of a broadly moral nature. 'For the credit of human nature', Gibbon confessed in one of his personal notes, 'I am always pleased to discover some good qualities in those men, whom party has represented as tyrants and monsters.'⁵ In a question of moral censure, he admitted personal responsibility for transferring the charge of avarice

1. DF, xxxi, III, 311.

2. DF, xlvi, V, 62, n. 46.

3. DF, lvi, VI, 174.

4. 'I have somewhere heard or read'; 'I cannot recover the place'; 'I have not been able to verify the quotation' (DF, xxxvii, IV, 76, n. 58; 77, n. 64; 103, n. 142). Cf. 'I have the original... and a translation', xxvii, III, 185, n.99.

5. DF, xxi, II, 389, n. 113.

from the emperor Valens to his servants, to whom, he claimed, it more properly belonged than to a monarch.¹ He was ready also to 'frankly confess' a willingness 'to find or even to seek...some traces of the mild and tender sentiments of domestic life' among the revolutions of the world with all their fierce and ambitious conflicts.² Again, it is the voice of the moralist speaking in his own person when, in the middle of a suitably objective legal survey of Roman jurisprudence, he broke in, 'I wish to believe, that at Rome, as in Athens, the voluntary and effeminate deserter of his sex, was degraded from the honours and the rights of a citizen.' And, in a note referring to the same aberration, 'I believe, and hope, that the negroes...were exempt from this moral pestilence.'³ Thus Gibbon would use the first person on occasions to deliver a moral judgement: 'I cannot applaud the clemency of a prince who, among a crowd of victors, condemned the son of a patrician for deploring with some bitterness the execution of a virtuous father'; or 'Hypocrisy I shall never justify or palliate; but I will dare to observe that the odious vice of avarice is of all others most hastily arraigned and most unmercifully condemned'; or again, 'I will not absolve the pope from the reproach of treachery and falsehood.'⁴

Even the plural pronoun can sometimes help to convey more than an impersonal or editorial 'we': 'A generous though transient enthusiasm seemed to animate the military order; and we may hope that a few real

1. DF, xxv, III, 20, n. 58.

2. DF, xxvii, III, 172.

3. DF, xlv, V, 535 & 537, n. 205.

4. DF, xlviii, V, 190; 227; xlix, V, 291.

patriots cultivated the returning friendship of the army and the senate, as the only expedient capable of restoring the republic to its ancient beauty and vigour.'¹ Have we, in this expression of hope, Gibbon's own enthusiasm for the republic being shared with his reader in a slightly more intimate way? In another place he admitted, 'Of all our passions and appetites, the love of power is the most imperious and unsociable in its nature.'² One instance is striking, not so much because of the pronoun, as because of the following notice of intention to the reader about giving Carinus his just deserts. Counting on the reader's tacit support, Gibbon assumed his co-operation in inflicting the deserved penalty on a despicable pretender: 'Before we enter upon the memorable reign of that prince (Diocletian), it will be proper to punish and dismiss the unworthy brother of Numerian.'³

The use of phrasal synonyms, elegant variations to avoid repetition of names and titles, is a habit of Gibbon's, sometimes cumbersome, even confusing.⁴ But in some pointed and very deliberately chosen instances, we perceive not just obvious irony, but beyond that, a moral comment springing from the incongruity of the office and the character and conduct of the person concerned. Thus instead of the personal name of the prelate commanding the support of his subordinate bishops, we have 'the despotic primate of Asia', and Cyril of Alexandria becomes 'the author of the twelve anathemas.'⁵ This type of periphrasis is

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1. DF, xii, I, 343.
 2. DF, iv, I, 93.
 3. DF, xii, 375.
 4. The reader is often forced to backtrack to be sure of the person referred to. Of a slightly different type of confusion, Young remarked: 'It is asking too much of a reader that he should send for Ammianus Marcellinus to find out what happened, but I see no other way of determining against whose breast whose sword was turned.' (op. cit., p. 91). The synonym here is 'the Imperial minister'.
 5. DF, xlvii, V, 122, 123.

especially useful to Gibbon for referring to an unworthy pope. There are several singularly appropriate instances: 'The successor of the apostles might have inculcated with decent firmness the guilt of blood, and the necessity of repentance.'¹ The troops of the military patriarch, Apollinaris, poised for battle in which soldiers were soon up to their knees in blood, awaited the signal of their leader; and 'a charge,' Gibbon recorded, 'was instantly sounded by the successor of the apostles.'² Eugenius, condemned by the Council of Basle, is referred to as 'the contumacious successor of St. Peter.'³ And in another spitefully apt turn of phrase to mark the blatant desecration of the sacred office, Gibbon drew attention to the misconduct and especially the rapes of John XII which 'had deterred the female pilgrims from visiting the tomb of St. Peter, lest in the devout act they should be violated by his successor.'⁴ The height of irony combined with understatement to produce his most scathing and contemptuous indictment of a pope already condemned by a church council. 'The most scandalous charges,' Gibbon claimed, 'were suppressed; the vicar of Christ was only accused of piracy, murder, rape, sodomy and incest.'⁵

Another means of suggesting such moral incongruity is the use of antithetical epithets. The censure is contained in the contradiction. We read, for example, that by Justinian who had never drawn a sword in the empire, 'some gentle violence was used to bend the stubborn spirit of the grandson of Genseric'; and we are told of 'the disgraceful honour' of a Christian chief who offered his services to the Moslem conquerors and introduced their arms into Spain.⁶ This type of

1. DF, xlvi, V, 68.

2. DF, xlvii, V, 171.

3. DF, lxvi, VII, 106.

4. DF, xlix, V, 318.

5. DF, lxx, VII, 300.

6. DF, xli, IV, 314; li, V, 502.

expression can also be used of 'virtues' and 'vices'. After the death of Suliman, his throne 'was degraded by the useless and pernicious virtues of a bigot.'¹ And the inhabitants of the Italian countryside, even under the equitable though strong rule of Totila, looked for deliverance 'from the virtues of a Barbarian'.² But such oxymorons, on the conventional pattern of 'pious fraud', are frequently and typically applied to religious subjects in The Decline and Fall. The conscience of the citizens of Herat was satisfied by a 'holy and meritorious perjury' in which they swore that certain houses of prayer, destroyed by their fanaticism, had never even existed.³ In the persecution of Nestorius, the magistrates, soldiers and monks 'devoutly tortured the enemy of Christ and St. Cyril.'⁴

The terms 'holy' and 'pious' are of particular service to Gibbon in these antithetical combinations which thereby gain such a stinging effect. So Gibbon wrote that the chronic popular dissensions in Constantinople, often fomented by religious faction, were founded 'on the most serious interest or holy pretence'; while, after 'the pious and profitable commission of despoiling the infidels', a force of Moslem 'holy robbers returned in triumph to Damascus.'⁵ Similarly we find 'pious' also applied to 'murder', 'falsehood', 'rebellion', 'hatred', 'warfare', robbers and robbery.⁶ A Saracen prince is said to have 'piously slaughtered' a royal captive, and Justinian, by whom

1. DF, lii, VI, 8.

2. DF, xliii, IV, 425.

3. DF, li, V, 518-9.

4. DF, xlvii, V, 128.

5. DF, li, V, 456-7.

6. DF, xlvi, V, 43; xlvii, V, 108; 140; 167; lviii, VI, 306; lviii, VI, 286 and cf. Mahomet's 'holy robbers' (I, V, 385).

'the slaughter of unbelievers' was not regarded as murder, 'piously laboured to established with fire and sword the unity of the Christian faith.'¹

The jarring incompatibility of expression in such cases draws our attention to the moral incompatibility of attitude or conduct to which it refers. We are alerted to those ambiguous principles and professions by which we often deceive ourselves and also to the ambiguous language by which we sometimes seek to disguise our lack of principle. Gibbon referred to 'ambiguous virtue', 'an ambiguous cast of religion', as well as to an 'ambiguous resolution', 'answer' or 'declaration',² and the 'prudent ambiguity' of expression used by courts, conquerors, and ambassadors.³

Like Fielding, Gibbon was keenly aware of and concerned with the ambiguity and the debasement of language in common usage. 'Laws and language', he wrote, 'are ambiguous and arbitrary.'⁴ And this awareness lay behind his questioning of the accepted use and abuse of words. It is at the root of many of his couplets with 'or', and it likewise informs the choice of many of his qualifiers, including those paradoxical combinations with 'devout', 'holy' and 'pious', which thereby gain a sort of corrective force. By what code of ethics could murder or falsehood be considered as 'pious' or what sort of

1. DF, I, V, 352; xlvii, V, 145.

2. DF, lviii, VI, 289; xlviii, V, 226; lix, VI, 371; lxxi, VII, 332.

3. DF, xxxix, IV, 189; lxvii, VII, 1489

4. DF, xlv, IV, 489.

religious system is it that can regard robbery or perjury as 'holy'? By means of such a contradiction, they stand self-condemned so that the historian need say no more. Here he was simply adopting, but with an ironic twist, the language and sentiments of those religious fanatics or opportunists whose actions and outlook he was holding up to ridicule and contempt. This contrasts with his use elsewhere of the plain and direct language of denunciation or exposure: 'impious', 'degenerate', or 'wicked'.¹

References to the abuse of language in a general sense recur throughout the work. For instance, Gibbon distinguished between his sources, finding some court historians mere sychophants - 'the voice of history' then became 'little more than the organ of hatred or flattery' - for those, who like Procopius did not flatter, wrote out of spite and enmity.² He accused the Byzantine princes of cultivating 'the language of falsehood and declamation'; the Magi and satraps of addressing the Persian monarch 'in a strain of artful adulation which assumed the language of freedom'; rival prelates of disguising their hatred 'in the hollow language of respect and charity'.³ And he wrote knowingly of 'the language of the usurpers of every age' by which they exonerate themselves and present a specious appearance of innocence.⁴ But one concerned with 'the truth of history' must face up to the abuse of language both in the records of the past, and in the debased currency of present usage.⁵ He was confronted by the two adjectives 'bad' and

1. Cf. e.g. 'impious robber', lix, VI, 359.

2. DF, x, I, 293, cf. 'venal orators'; and contrast the envy he found in Procopius and Ammianus.

3. DF, xlvī, V, 423; 73; xlvii, V, 120.

4. DF, xlvī, V, 100.

5. The phrase 'the truth of history' turns up several times. See above chap. V.

'good' employed to distinguish the son and grandson of Roger, King of Sicily; 'but', as he pointed out, 'these epithets which appear to describe the perfection of vice and virtue cannot strictly be applied either of the Norman princes.'¹ On the other hand, he had no reservations about referring to 'a king of France who has rightly deserved the epithet of wise.'²

It is, indeed, mostly at the level of the word or phrase - the verb, the epithet or the title - that Gibbon's specific references to the abuse of language are found, though as we have seen, he did object in more general terms to bombast and false declamation in the style of orators and historians.³ The eighteenth century cultivated a fastidiousness, almost a fad, for correctness in grammar and a 'proper' use of words.⁴ Gibbon, while no pedant, showed a laudable desire to clarify word usage. In a reference to 'a martyr', he added the corrective comment: 'how strangely has that word been distorted from its original sense of a common witness.'⁵ So too, he commented on 'aggressor', 'an ambiguous name', and 'faith' he called 'an ambiguous word.'⁶ Likewise he realised that the milder virtues of generosity, gentleness and humanity are liable to misjudgement on the part of

1. DF, lvi, VI, 227.

2. DF, lxx, VII, 292.

3. On the positive side we may note his use of the expression, 'the language of reason and virtue' (xxx, III, 260).

4. Apart from the comments in various books and grammars, there is a wealth of verbal criticism in the numerous periodicals, such as The Spectator, The Connoisseur, The Critical Review, The Monthly Review and The Gentleman's Magazine.

5. DF, xxxviii, IV, 121, n. 48.

6. DF, lxii, VI, 484; 491.

the insensitive and aspiring. By an insistence that no Christian blood be shed in his own quarrel, the emperor Michael, as Gibbon pointed out, clearly showed his 'humanity'. But he felt constrained to add in parenthesis, 'by the ambitious it will be called weakness.'¹

Since language, like the qualities it refers to, is continually being abused, Gibbon saw it as part of his task to keep the reader on his guard, and also from time to time, as we have seen, to expose examples of this abuse. The practice is seen when he reminds us, for instance, that 'the avarice of their chiefs was only coloured by the more specious names of ambition and glory.'² This caveat introduces us to one of Gibbon's indispensable terms, 'specious'. It recurs continually, not always with a suspicious suggestion, but is to be seen as one of those words which are there to alert the reader, prompting him to question a motive or assertion and to look beneath the surface of what is actually said. Gibbon referred to 'the smooth and specious surface of events'³ and used the word in such applications as 'specious virtues', 'specious arts', 'specious pretence', 'specious promises', 'the most specious reasons', 'specious professions' and 'specious language.'⁴

'Specious' is one of those danger signals which keep flashing from time to time warning us to beware of appearances and fine words.

1. DF, xlviii, V, 206.

2. DF, lv, V, 188.

3. DF, lxiii, V, 511; cf. 'smooth and specious manners', lxiii, V, 530.

4. Among the more neutral or even complimentary uses are the reference to the Institutes of Christianity as 'an elegant and specious work' and to the doctrine of the immateriality of the soul as 'a specious and noble tenet' (xliv, 501, n. 98; xlvii, 111).

But there is in The Decline and Fall a far more categorical set of terms which go beyond arousing our doubts or provoking our suspicion. I refer to Gibbon's habitual use of modifiers and verbs expressing approbation or censure which strike the modern reader as far removed from the approach of a detached historian. These lexical choices are yet another indication of Gibbon's commitment to moral and to value judgements. He expected 'every impartial reader to condemn the partiality' of a ruler, the wrongness of a character or an action, and he regarded such a verdict as endorsing the judgement of posterity.¹

One of the most characteristic of these qualifiers is the word 'just' and its derivatives. Actions are described as 'just' or 'unjust', offenders are 'justly punished' while the innocent suffer 'unjustly'. We find 'just contempt' and 'unjust suspicions', 'just severity' and an 'unjust death'. Theodosius was said to have been 'justly provoked', the cruelty of a 'profligate bishop' to have 'provoked the just indignation of mankind'; and in one of his general statements, Gibbon referred to 'the ambiguous reputation which is the just recompense of obscure and subtle policy'.² In a sentence like, 'The honours of the ancient martyrs were prostituted to these criminals who justly suffered for their murder and rebellion',³ the moral verdict is initially indicated by the verb 'prostituted' and confirmed by the adverb 'justly'. 'Justify' is used in similar contexts: 'The hasty retreat of Constantius might be justified by weighty reasons', where there is the slightly ambiguous suggestion of self-justification; 'the furious passions, which she indulged on this suspicious occasion, seemed to justify the severity of Theodosius', or more unequivocally, 'the ecclesiastical policy cannot

1. See, e.g. DF, xxiv, II, 506, n. 4 and xxiii, 491 and above chapt. V.

2. DF, xxvii, III, 163, 146.

3. DF, xlix, V, 271.

be justified'.¹ In one of the paratactic doublets, the peremptory effect of the first adjective is somewhat softened by the second: 'the hasty, perhaps the justifiable resentment of their fellow citizens.'² Perhaps his use of the term in his own defence throws some light on Gibbon's feeling of commitment to the justice of the historical views expressed in similar language: 'Yet I must excuse my own defects by a just complaint of the blindness and insufficiency of my guides.'³ In many cases the use of the modifier serves to confirm or to reverse historical judgements as Gibbon suggests that the conduct of a person or group has been 'justly applauded' or 'most unjustly deplored'. Herodian, he wrote, 'has been most unjustly censured for sparing the vices of Maximin'; and he took it upon himself to declare that the forty-seven accusations brought by the bishops and deacons against Chrysostom, 'may justly be considered as a fair and unexceptionable panegyric.'⁴

'Worthy' and 'unworthy' are examples of other adjectives applied to deeds and characters to convey the historian's moral estimate of them. There is sometimes a suggestion of rather conventional usage, but often there is a hint of the recurring typical epithets of the classical epic, like pious Aeneas. Gibbon tended to use such terms as 'worthy', 'honourable' and their opposites as appropriate attributives once the keynote of the character had been sounded.⁵

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1. DF, xxi, III, 362; xxxii, III, 411 (the sentence continues, 'and the empress...was disgraced, perhaps unjustly, in the eyes of the world');
 2. DF, xxxii, III, 286.
 3. DF, li, V, 428.
 4. DF, vii, I, 186, n. 11; xxxii, III, 399.
 5. We find, 'the unworthy Honorius'; 'his unworthy rival'; 'the worthy son of a respected father' &c.

Among the verbs of moral judgement readily employed by Gibbon are 'deplore', 'deserve' and 'disgrace'. The historian himself tended to deplore or to refer to earlier writers who rightly deplored certain conduct: his characters deserved praise or blame, and they sometimes disgraced their position, their country, or mankind. 'Gratian deserved and enjoyed the applause of his subjects' and Theodosius 'has deserved the singular commendation that his virtues always seemed to expand with his fortune', while 'great' was 'an epithet which he honourably deserved on this momentous occasion'.¹ On the other hand, 'The bishops had disgraced themselves by exercising the function of accusers in a criminal prosecution'; 'the new magistrate... disgraced his benefactor, by the contrast of a virtuous and temperate administration'; and the execution of 'the royal captive', Radagaisus, 'disgraced the triumph of Rome and of Christianity'.²

These are but a few samples of Gibbon's vocabulary of moral comment as found in The Decline and Fall, for he is continually justifying or acquitting, commending or censuring, either by direct statement or by implication. Thus, in the following sentence he is justifying a decision of 'the prudent Stilicho' just as clearly by implication as if he had written 'Stilicho was justified' or 'Stilicho acted very justly': 'But if Stilicho had any longer endured the revolt of Africa, he would have betrayed the security of the capital, and the majesty of the Western emperor to the capricious insolence of a Moorish rebel.'³ The tone is once again that of the orator at the bar, putting the moral alternatives before his hearers, and confident which

1. DF, xxvi, III, 113; xxvii, III, 176; xxvi, III, 129.

2. DF, xxvii, III, 163; xxix, III, 234; xxx, III, 281-2

3. DF, xxix, III, 244.

way the verdict must go. This sort of persuasive eloquence recalls Gibbon's earliest piece of serious historical writing, where, as he presented certain moral considerations against which the case should be judged, he concluded: 'It belongs to the reader to pronounce sentence...I pretend not to decide.'¹ Over the years his judgement had become more certain: in The Decline and Fall, he did pronounce sentence or, by various means, indicated the verdict which he felt it incumbent upon his impartial reader to pass. In the spirit of his model, Tacitus, and in accordance with his own Vindication,² Gibbon saw the historian's duty as involving the praise or blame of men's actions and motives and the recording of moral judgements. A man's conduct should be 'excused' or 'pardoned' or, on occasions, 'condemned'. Such were the verbs he used without evading the issue or passing on to his reader the judicial responsibility. He boldly and unequivocally indicated the 'just' deserts or 'disgrace' of his characters by such epithets as 'worthy', 'honourable' or by their antonyms; he freely used such terms as 'corrupted', 'degenerated', 'degraded', 'effeminate' and 'deplorable'; and his verdicts were often conveyed by expressions like 'violating every principle of humanity and justice', 'violated the laws of humanity and religion', 'of friendship and hospitality', 'of Christian charity and civil justice' or 'insulted the feelings of mankind'. Such expressions keep ringing in the reader's ears to such an extent that their very familiarity may rob them of some of their moral force. He is even, as Gibbon might have expressed it,

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1. 'Critical Researches concerning the title of Charles VIII to the Crown of Naples', MW, III, 221-2; and see above, chap. IV, p. 122.
 2. MW, IV, 531-2; and see above, chap. I, p. 1.

almost 'insensibly' conditioned into tacit acceptance of this message of degeneration and decline where he might not agree with all the historian's analyses or conclusions.

'Insensible' and its corresponding adverb may appropriately serve to introduce Gibbon's whole vocabulary of 'decline', for these words are frequently used in the context of both material and moral deterioration. In one place, where he justified his use of the term by adding a sort of ad hoc definition, he wrote: 'But the greatest part of the temples of Persia were ruined by the insensible and general desertion of their votaries. It was insensible, since it is not accompanied with any memorial of time or place, of persecution or resistance'.¹ Here it is a picture of 'ruin' and 'the vicissitude of fortune', behind which lay the insensible process of desertion and decay. More often, however, the word has a psychological or moral application, which can be seen in the following instances. 'When the spirit of fanaticism, at once so credulous and so crafty, has insinuated itself into a noble mind, it insensibly corrodes the vital principles of virtue and veracity.'² The process, to use another of Gibbon's frequent terms is 'insidious'. The crafty insinuation of a destructive principle, which eats away nobility of mind and imperial greatness, is fatal to both vitality and virtue. A similarly imperceptible process was operating in the military sphere. We recall the traditional Roman weapons, 'which had subdued the world', 'insensibly' dropping from the 'feeble hands' of 'the enervated soldiers' who thus 'abandoned their own and the public defence'.³ The

1. DF, li, V, 591.

2. DF, xxii, II, 427.

3. DF, xxviii, III, 197.

Arabian conquerors, mingling with the conquered peoples of the East, 'insensibly lost the freeborn and martial virtues of the desert', and the 'hardy virtue of the Vandals' succumbed to prosperity and a soft climate, so that they 'insensibly became the most luxurious of mankind.' A similar softness and luxury affected the Romans and in the same almost imperceptible way: 'The simplicity of Roman manners was insensibly corrupted by the stately affectation of the courts of Asia.'²

In his chapter on the Antonines, Gibbon explicitly drew attention to the seeds of decay, the destructive forces which might have passed almost unnoticed by most contemporaries: 'it was scarcely possible', he claimed, that they 'should discover in the public felicity the latent causes of decay and corruption'; nor would they perceive mankind 'daily sinking below the old standard 'of Roman greatness and freedom.'³ His common practice, however, in The Decline and Fall, is merely to slip in this word, 'insensibly' with reference to those tendencies -luxury, affectation, oriental pomp, credulity, superstition, fanaticism - which brought about a decline in Roman manners, in manly virtues of the hardy Arab or Germanic warriors, or in the life of the church. If the first signs often passed unnoticed, 'the progress of decay' was steady and continuous, in government, society and religion. There, 'a superstitious practice', the veneration of saints and relics,

1. DF, lii, Vi, 49; xli, IV, 300.

2. DF, xvii, II, 169. Maximus himself, 'was insensibly corrupted by the temptations of a court' (xxiii, II, 475).

3. DF, ii, I, 61-2, 64.

'which tended to increase the temptations of fraud and credulity, extinguished the light of history and reason in the Christian world'.¹ So much so that under this and other corrupting influences, the Christians of the seventh century 'had insensibly relapsed into a semblance of paganism'.²

The fathers of the church and of the Capitol, as well as the people of the Roman empire and before long its conquerors, 'alike degenerated from the virtues' of their predecessors. This is all part of the Gibbonian story of decline, involving several empires and kingdoms, ecclesiastical government, agriculture, the arts and learning. And it has its own ubiquitous vocabulary in The Decline and Fall. This vocabulary is, of course, traditional, for Gibbon was heir to a succession of writers who had dealt with the subject of decline. There were the classical authors who had nourished his earlier as well as his maturer intellectual growth. Sallust gave prominence to the corrupting influence of luxury on simple manners in much the way Gibbon expressed it; Tacitus stressed the loss of liberty and high standards, while two other writers to whom Gibbon expressed great indebtedness, the historian Ammianus and the satirist, Juvenal, supplied him with a wealth of example and rhetoric on the luxury-effeminacy theme and with their scorn of a lazy, ostentatious and vulgar urban society. Nearer his own time he found in Machiavelli the connection between decline in virtue and the loss of liberty in a republic, or in Guicciardini an emphasis once again on the corruption of Roman manners, and he learnt as we know, from Montesquieu's Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence.

1. DF, xxvii, III, 221.

2. DF, I, V, 361. See also Jordan's interpretation of the use of 'insensible', Gibbon and his Roman Empire, pp. 220-1.

Peter Burke, tracing 'the idea of decline from Bruni to Gibbon', has mentioned the common images of downward movement to be found in the languages of Europe, the Latin terms for which included declinatio, inclinatio, decadentia, lapsus, eversio, all part of 'a large repertoire of metaphors or schemata' describing a change mainly for the worse. The notion of 'decline', he reminds us, could be variously applied over this period, to cosmic decline, 'the decay of the universe, the old age of the world'; to moral decline, 'or the decay of manners'; to ecclesiastical decline; to political decline, 'or the fall of republics, kingdom and empires'; to cultural decline, 'or to the decadence of language, arts, and sciences'; and to economic decline, 'or the decline of wealth, trade, industry, and population.'¹ With the exception of the first, all these types of decline find their place in Gibbon's scheme, though he laid relatively little stress on the last.

Not only the underlying notion, the wide application of the term, but also the metaphors of 'decline' such as that of the collapsing fabric of an edifice, or the slow poison in the body politic were commonplace by the time Gibbon took up the theme. So too were the contrast between tyranny and freedom, luxury and simplicity as exemplified by 'degenerate' Romans or Greeks and the castigation of ecclesiastical despotism, ambition and superstition. But, while drawing on an ample tradition and a ready-made vocabulary, he showed himself, as Peter Burke points out, 'far more subtle and complex' than any previous writer, and his 'awareness of the complexity of the process of decline and fall makes his analysis much more satisfying

1. 'Tradition and Experience: The Idea of Decline from Bruni to Gibbon' in Bowersock, Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, pp. 88-92.

to a modern reader than that of any of his predecessors'. Thus, for example, on the one hand he uses the Roman writers' diagnosis of decline, 'with its emphasis on moral factors, such as the corruption of manners, and the rise of luxury, and he frequently repeats their judgements'; but, on the other hand, as the friend and admirer of Adam Smith, he also showed an awareness of the importance of economic factors, including in one instance even 'a defense of luxury from an economic point of view'.¹ But, if for once he could allow himself to view it through the eyes of an economist, it was almost invariably through those of a moralist: luxury was repeatedly 'enervating', 'effeminate' or 'corrupting'; and he saw it as contributing directly to decline in every sphere, military, political, social and religious.

How far is this true of the whole vocabulary of decline? Some of these terms have a definite moral content, others carry moral overtones and implications which are derived from a particular situational or verbal context. 'Degenerate' and its corresponding nouns, like 'corrupt' and 'corruption', almost invariably suggest a moral judgement, while 'decay', though often a close companion of 'corruption', is more context dependent and is applied to anything from agriculture and military power to a more general decline of Rome, Constantinople, or the empire as a whole. It is often used in the material sense of the deterioration of buildings, a sense which it shares with the commonest application of the word 'ruin'. 'Decline' is the all-embracing term, less morally committed and less frequently defined by context than the others, though it is sometimes applied to qualities like courage, genius and manly virtue.² Like its chief

1. op. cit., p. 99.

2. DF, ii, I, 61-2, headings, 63 text; 'valous', lxiv, VII, 34; xvii, II, 212.

alternative, 'sinking', it usually has an unspecified reference to a general loss of power and greatness, with a suggestion of impending 'ruin'.¹

'Degenerate' and 'degeneracy' on the other hand, recurring as they do throughout the whole work, need no qualification to specify their moral force. They carry their own message. And it is no doubt the recurrence of words like 'degenerate' and 'corrupt', especially as applied to aged and periods in Gibbon's History which gives to the notion of decline a strong moral connotation. If the story of decline in the West was largely that of 'the degenerate Romans',² that of the second part of the work focussed on 'the degenerate Romans of the East'.³ The word is applied to peoples, notably the Romans and Byzantine Greeks, but also to the mind or spirit, or to an age like that of the young Julian or of Honorius.⁴ The emphasis, even in the noun and adjective, is most frequently on the process of degeneration, involving a comparison either implied or expressed, with earlier and better times or ancestors of a nobler stamp.⁵ But apart from an inherent moral suggestion, these terms are often directly linked with vice and depravity in the emperors, or their citizens 'polluted with the meanest vices of wealth and slavery', or again with 'effeminacy', disorderliness, discord, and the loss of liberty and valour.⁶

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1. It is introduced in chap. ii in reference to a 'degenerate' period, p. 64, again in xxvi, II, 124 'a sinking world' and several times in later chapters, e.g. lxi, VI, 453, 'the sinking empire' (cf. also liii, VI, 72).
 2. DF, iii, I, 82; vi, I, 142; xi, I, 317; xvii, II, 191; xxx, III, 295; xxxv, III, 471; xxxvi, IV, 21.
 3. DF, lii, VI, 10; cf. 'the degenerate Greeks', xxx, III, 255 &c.
 4. See e.g. lxxv, VII, 75; xxvii, III, 145; xxiv, II, 512; xxx, III, 260.
 5. Thus, e.g. 'degenerate successors', xv, II, 34; 'sons', xix, II, 261; 'grandsons' xvii, II, 194. Often the expression is 'had degenerated from', or 'into'.
 6. DF, iii, I, 86; vi, I, 142; li, V, 503; li, V, 427; lix, VI, 348.

'Corrupt' and 'corruption' seem to stand out as the most recurrent and characteristic of this group of words portraying decline. In the second chapter we are introduced to 'the latent causes of decay and corruption' and throughout the rest of part one of The Decline and Fall, there is only a single chapter in which the word does not appear, in most appearing a number of times. And in that single chapter there are several occurrences of the fact even if the name itself is not mentioned.¹

We read of 'the progress of corruption' and we find a section subtitled 'the corruption of the times', where the text affirms that 'every species of corruption polluted the course of public and private life'.² In fact there are several references to the 'corruption' or the 'contagion' of an age, to 'the most corrupt of times' and even to 'the incurable corruption of the times'.³ Not only the state but also the church has been corrupted.⁴ Corruption characterised rulers and statesmen, courts and armies, whole cities like Rome, Constantinople or Antioch and both the Western and the Eastern empires. Gibbon even described it as 'universal' and associated it with 'the vices of a declining empire'.⁵ So overpowering, indeed, is this smell of corruption and decay,⁶ especially throughout the first part of the work that it

1. Chapt. xxx, see e.g. III, pp. 260-1, 289, 294, 297.

2. DF, xi, I, 337; xxvii, III, 195-6.

3. DF, vi, I, 169; xliii, IV, 435; xi, I, 308; xxiii, II, 456; xii, I, 373; x, I, 268.

4. DF, iv, I, 110 'the corrupted state'; for the church, see xx, II, 336; xxviii, III, 225; xxxii, III, 398; xxxvii, IV, 62; lxx, VII, 291.

5. DF, xxxiv, III, 454.

6. 'Decay', after its first appearance in chap. ii ('decay and corruption'), returns in Gibbon's 2nd volume (Bury xvii, II, 168), and occurs not infrequently in later chapters, e.g. xxxi and xl. Apart from its general sense, paralleling that of 'decline', it is applied to military spirit, discipline and virtue, the arts, agriculture, and population.

doubtless serves to confirm the involuntary feelings of the reader that here is Gibbon's primary answer to the question of Rome's fall: it was through moral corruption. And the very recurrence of the expression 'corruption of manners' helps to reinforce this impression.¹ Whatever Gibbon's thesis, or lack of it, and however tentatively or inconsistently any such thesis may be argued, as critics suggest, it is certain that the notion of corruption and decay is stamped on our mind and even on our moral sense as a direct result of its repetition.

And yet this is not to suggest that Gibbon ever substituted rhetoric for factual narration or that he resorted to a battery of figurative expressions to convey the persistent idea of decline. He scrupulously avoided the inflated and highly declamatory language of those he considered bad historians. He aimed at and hit what he considered the 'middle tone' and his style is sparing in the use of metaphor. In his second chapter he felt it necessary to affirm that the substance of certain contemporary passages quoted was 'perfectly agreeable to historic truth', since suspicions would naturally be aroused by their 'air of rhetoric and declamation.'² He was continually alert to the danger that 'the truth of history' might be compromised by the careless use of highly figurative language. He had taken to heart Hume's advice to him as an aspiring historian. Advising him to write in English, the philosopher had warned that the use of French 'has led you into a style more poetical and figurative, and more highly coloured, than our language seems to admit of in historical productions.'³

1. DF, iii, I, 67, 86; vi, I, 161; xxxiii, III, 435; cf. 'depravation of manners', xlviii, V, 209.

2. DF, ii, I, 61.

3. Hume's letter to Gibbon, 24 Oct., 1767, reprinted in Sheffield's edition of the Memoirs, MW., I, 204-5.

Coming to the writing of The Decline and Fall, Gibbon kept a critical eye on his sources, censuring what he saw as abuses of language in this respect. Even Ammianus, the 'impartial historian' from whom Gibbon took his most extended quotation on the moral deterioration of the Roman nobility,¹ is criticised for his abuse of metaphorical expressions. This was not merely 'bad taste' but involved a much more serious fault, that of confusing the reader: 'It is not easy to distinguish his facts from his metaphors'.² It was serious because it affected 'the truth of history.'

After referring to this comment on Ammianus, Braudy claimed that Gibbon himself was capable of 'such distortion' and cited the sentence '...a thousand swords were plunged at once into the bosom of the unfortunate Probus'.³ How far is this true? Certainly it is not Gibbon at his best. His moderation has for once succumbed to melodramatic effect. Yet there is no mistaking the fact. Nor is there really any metaphor to obscure it, though the hyperbole may depart somewhat from the habitual 'middle tone'. Yet even the rather immoderate exaggeration at least suggests the multitude of drawn swords each vying to be the first to strike. Perhaps it is more in the vein of Cecil B. de Mille than 'the historian of the Roman empire', but even so the fact of Probus' death at the hands of his enraged troops is abundantly clear. And this, after all, is our primary concern.

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1. DF, xxi, III, 312-8. In Gibbon's free rendering the passage contains such expressions as 'degraded and sullied', 'unbounded licence of vice and folly', 'pernicious luxury', and in its conclusion has this sentence: 'These vices, which degrade the moral character of the Romans, are mixed with a puerile superstition, that disgraces their understanding.'
 2. DF, xxxi, III, 72, n.1.
 3. Narrative Form in History and Fiction, p. 227.

Equally clear are the facts of decline, corruption and decay as revealed in the narrative, and the actual terms merely give a general significance to particular events or symptoms of this downward trend. It is the ubiquity rather than the metaphorical quality of these terms that is responsible for the desired effect.

'The metaphors of decline, fall and corruption,' according to Braudy, 'overshadow the first volume' of Gibbon's History. And this probably tallies with the general impression of the reader. Usually, however, Braudy continued, Gibbon 'is more scrupulous', as for instance when pointing out that a battle on the frozen Danube was 'a real fact', and not just 'a puerile figure of rhetoric'. But, 'after he has established his authority as a historian, Gibbon can afford to be metaphoric because his readers know exactly what liberties he is taking.'¹ Let us look at these statements in the light of the vocabulary of decline.

The distinction once again, in Braudy and in Gibbon, is between literal and metaphorical. Is it a fact or merely a figure of rhetoric? So we may ask, was any reader really in danger of mistaking 'decline' or 'fall' as physical, or 'corruption' as actual putrefaction? Furthermore, when so many of our everyday expressions contain what was once a metaphor, do we regard it as figurative language to refer to 'a dirty trick' or 'a bright student'? So much of Gibbon's terminology of 'decline', as we have seen, was traditional and readymade, its metaphors almost as dead as the empire to which they were applied. He expected

1. Braudy, loc. cit., the reference to the battle on the Danube is v, I, 124, n. 35.

his 'prudent reader',¹ to be acquainted with such terms in contemporary usage and not to interpret them as literal effects. If such intelligent readers were not familiar with the traditional terms in earlier writers, they may have heard of Montagu's Reflections on the Rise and Fall of the Ancient Republics, then a relatively recent work,² or at least of 'corruption' in high places even nearer home.

Gibbon, for his part, was indeed always 'scrupulous' about this question of fact and metaphor. As early as his second chapter, in one of his few extended metaphors of decline, namely that of the 'pigmies', he both labelled it as a metaphor³ and also acknowledged the quality of the writer from whom it was taken. It was no fresh coinage of his own but another 'classical' comparison from the lament of 'the sublime Longinus' on 'the degeneracy of his contemporaries', which Gibbon merely endorsed and extended: 'This diminutive stature of mankind, if we pursue the metaphor, was daily sinking below the old standard, and the Roman world was indeed peopled by a race of pigmies, when the fierce giants of the north broke in and mended the puny breed.'⁴ It formed a useful and effective comparison to conclude his chapter, as it allowed him to contrast the present littleness of the Romans not only with their former greatness, but also with the great and 'manly spirit of freedom' of the barbarian invaders. But the important point here is that the sentence is in no way inconsistent with Gibbon's habitual restraint in the use of figurative language.

1. See e.g. DF, xxviii, III, 207; lvi, VI, 200.

2. Edward Wortley Montagu's book appeared in 1759, the edition Gibbon owned.

3. Not that Gibbon underestimated his reader to the extent of fearing he might think mankind had become physically shorter.

4. DF, ii, I, 63-4.

Whatever view one may take of the Braudy-Jordan hypothesis concerning the development of the historian's persona in The Decline and Fall,¹ it can safely be said that Gibbon's clarity and avoidance of confusion between fact and metaphor do not have to wait till 'he has established his authority as a historian' and that his readers know from the beginning what liberties, if any, he is taking with the language of fact. His style is dignified and often imposing both because of its structure and rhythms and because of the precise choice of words. But it is predominantly plain, matter-of-fact and never fanciful. And this applies to the expressions connected with decline. One might say, though the distinction is by no means exclusive, that their effect is more often moral than metaphorical. Nor does this vocabulary change significantly as the work progresses. A careful study of its content in the later volumes, shows that it is substantially the same, with some terms predominating in certain chapters, though the objects to which they are applied have changed. It is now the Moslem religion, the empire of the caliphs, the Byzantine rulers, their degenerate subjects, or the monks and the medieval church.

After surveying these marks of decline displayed on such a broad canvas² and unrolled almost to its full length, we are still being reminded in the last chapters of 'ruin', 'the decline of the arts', 'the religion of Mahomet...corrupted even 'by the example of the Christian' monastic orders and 'the long decay of the Byzantine monarchy'.³ We are also reminded of the great extent in time of

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1. G.L. Voth used the term in his review essay, Eighteenth Century Studies, Vol. 8, No. 2, Winter 1974/5, pp. 213 ff.
 2. 'Our curiosity has been tempted to visit the most remote countries of Europe and Asia', Gibbon reminded his reader in chap. lxix (VII, 218).
 3. See lxviii, VII, 206; lxvii, VII, 146; lxix, VII, 218.

this decay, a whole millenium in the case of the eastern capital, which in Gibbon's view sprang out of the seeds of decay brought over from the West.¹ This sense of time and continuing decadence is accentuated by these backward glances of the historian: 'in the long career of the decline and fall of the Roman empire', 'in the first ages of the decline and fall of the Roman empire', 'the final extinction of the two dynasties... should terminate the decline and fall of the Roman empire in the East.'² But even at the end, despite the first rays of the revival of learning in the West, we return to the city itself only to discover that 'the character of the inhabitants was debased', 'the vices of the clergy had degenerated' and even the Roman hero and expected liberator, 'degenerated into the vices of a king'.³ And if one turned to view the ancient remains in order to recall the former greatness, it was all but impossible 'to measure the progress of decay'.⁴

By the time he has finished the final chapter, the thoughtful reader finds this vocabulary of decline imprinted on his mind as it was on the author who had lived in it for almost twenty years. Little wonder that we catch echoes of it in his letters and perhaps also in his Memoirs. For instance his reference to de Severy's death explaining that 'every vital principle had been exhausted' recalls that diagnosis in chapter xxxi of 'the decline of empire, when every principle of health and life had been exhausted'.⁵ The idea of decline and fall had been

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1. Its decay, said Gibbon, was 'premature and permanent', its 'decline almost coeval with her foundation' (DF, xxxii, III, 378; lxiv, VII, 33).
 2. DF, lxvii, VII, 161; lxix, 218; lxviii, 212.
 3. DF, lxix, VII, 255, 231; lxx, VII, 282.
 4. DF, lxxi, VII, 316.
 5. Letters, No. 830, 18/2/93, III, 317; D.F., xxxi, III, 377.

part of his thinking just as he had become 'the historian of the Roman empire' and he could write more jocularly to Lady Sheffield: 'The progress of my Gout is in general so regular, and there is so much uniformity in the history of its decline and fall.'¹ As he wrote to her husband, lamenting how his own place of retirement had recently been clouded by the disorders of France' and its 'domestic harmony... somewhat embittered by the infusion of party spirit', he was tempted to refer to 'the decline and fall of Lausanne', though he deleted the second term from his letter.² Perhaps he feared that 'the new barbarians'³ might undermine the stability of the city which he had made very much his own. 'From my early acquaintance with Lausanne', he wrote in his Memoirs, 'I had always cherished a secret wish that the school of my youth might become the retreat of my declining age.'⁴

It was during that early acquaintance that he had begun to acquire, especially from a study of Pascal, the control of his most characteristic tone, that of 'grave and temperate irony'. And, as Young has commented, 'his mingling of truth and malice in an innocent antithesis is often of the purest Pascalian quality.'⁵ It was during his second period in Lausanne that he made the acquaintance of Juvenal, whose Satires had such a lasting effect on him. He read and pondered each satire, going over most of them twice and making extended comments.⁶ He regretted not having become familiar with the satirist earlier, but added that from

1. Letters, no. 607, 28/10/83, II, 375.

2. Memoirs, pp. 184-5; Letters, no. 826, 6/1/93, III, 311.

3. Letters, no. 831, 23/2/93, III, 321 and see above chap. VII, p. 14.

4. Memoirs, p. 176.

5. Gibbon, pp. 20-21.

6. JB, Aout-Septembre, 1763, pp. 3-42. Satires 4 to 15 he re-read either completely or in part.

then on Juvenal would be one of his favourite authors.¹ We can see from Gibbon's notes on his reading how far Juvenal's view of imperial Rome corresponded with his own, and further, how 'the historian of the Roman empire' was being prepared by looking at corruption and decline through the eyes of the Roman satirist. Gibbon was struck by the penetration of this writer, by his brevity and by his ability to pare back everything in his verse, in order to bring out the main issue with clarity and precision.² But apart from these lessons in the use of language, he was struck by the moral force of the Satires: 'How coarse were the Romans amidst all their luxury', he exclaimed in his Journal,³ and the language of The Decline and Fall was later to reflect this judgement. Juvenal, he found, showed his 'serious indignation' and contempt for the degenerate Romans, he never lost an opportunity of arraigning the folly and tyranny of their rules, and he traced the progress of avarice in the human heart.⁴ Gibbon, the developing moralist, found in Juvenal 'the tone of a true censor who discomfits vice and exposes follies and makes the guilty tremble'.⁵ Juvenal's particular targets lay outside the period which Gibbon had chosen, but his characterisations of Roman life served the historian on many occasions and he referred his reader to passages in the satirist. He also learnt from the satiric approach to corrupt and degenerate persons, from this author's penetration and the liveliness of his pictures of Roman decadence. Thus the linguistic weapon which Gibbon first discovered in Pascal and that which he later found in Juvenal, he soon learned to wield for himself. The Roman satirist struck a responsive chord in the English historian.

1. JB, 17me, Sept., 1763, p. 38.

2. See JB, 16me, Sept., 1763, pp. 32-3.

3. JB, 24me, Aout, 1763, p. 8: 'Que les Romains etoient grossiers parmi tout leur luxe'. Here cited from Sheffield's version of the 'Extraits', M.W., V, 295.

4. See JB, 31me, Aout and 16me, Sept., 1763, pp. 16-7, 33.

5. JB, 31me, Aout, 1763, p. 16; compare Sheffield's translation, MW, V, 297.

When he came to the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Gibbon relied very heavily on another satirist, whom he praised for the same 'lively' descriptions and 'original' pictures which he had applauded in Juvenal.¹ Amongst the very numerous references to Claudian in this section of The Decline and Fall,² is one which draws a comparison between Claudian's description of the Council of Eutropius and that of Domitian in Juvenal's Fourth Satire, which Gibbon regarded as 'perhaps the most striking piece of satire in all of antiquity'.³ We can thus discern in the liveliness and sharpness of this satirical language something very congenial to the historian concerned with 'the vices and follies' of mankind. We recall his opinion that in one of Claudian's satirical comparisons, he violated 'the dignity rather than the truth of history'.⁴ Poetic truth, sharpened by satiric acuteness could often be of service to the moralist in his presentation of historic truth.

Yet Gibbon's approach is not that of the satirist. In his control of language and in his purpose he invites a comparison and a contrast with the great master of satire, Jonathan Swift, to whose works he had turned in forming his own English style.⁵ The linguistic weapons of

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1. E.G., Claudian's 'lively strains' (xxix, III, 251, here a wedding song); 'lively description' (xxx, III, 272 and xxxii, III, 381, n. 6); 'that agreeable satirist' 'has sketched a lively and original picture' (xxxii, III, 382). In xxxi, III, 334, n. 91, the reader is referred to 'the lively description of Juvenal' of the port of Ostia.
 2. In chap. xxix there are 26 and in chapt. xxx, 33 references as well as a two-page account of the satirist and his work. There are 6 more references in the first few pages of chapt. xxxi, and another 15 in the first eleven pages of chapt. xxxii. There are also several references to Juvenal in these chapters.
 3. See DF, xxxii, III, 388, n. 25 and JB, 24me, Aout, 1763, p. 8.
 4. DF, xxxii, III, 389.
 5. Memoirs, p.98. 'By the judicious advice of Mr. Mallet I was directed to the writings of Swift and Addison.'

both were directed towards exposing vice and folly but their tone and intention were markedly different. Writing of Gibbon's use of 'dismissive irony', A.E.Dyson pointed to a basic similarity but beyond that to even more significant differences. 'Gibbon shares with Swift an effortless mastery of irony in one of its classic forms: the apparent defence of a cause or position which is really a sustained betrayal... Swift is concerned to betray his readers, but Gibbon's betrayal is of targets which he and the reader have in common.' Unlike the great satirist, Gibbon's aim was not 'to establish the defects of his own age in terms of moral judgement' but rather 'to consolidate its superiority in terms of enlightenment.'¹ Hence the different stance towards his subject matter and the different relationship to his reader who is treated as 'a civilized equal' and invited to share in an examination of ideas, beliefs and manners of earlier times which, to an 'enlightened age' often have a ring of absurdity.

Gibbon's ostensible position, his use of words in either double or ambiguous senses, his little incongruities of context, soon make the author's assumption of acceptance or belief at first doubtful, then ridiculous, as he almost 'insensibly' undermines the premise with which he and his reader began. The technique and tone are seen by Dyson as essentially those of Hume, well illustrated in his essay 'Of Miracles', where starts out from a religious datum, generally accepted up to a century before, but rendered absurd in its new context

1. 'A Note on Dismissive Irony', English XI, No.61, Spring 1956, p.222.

of empirical philosophy.¹ In Gibbon, a similar 'pattern for dismissive irony' is firmly set in the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters, but the 'urbane iconoclasm' and the taste for the poignant word is a distinguishing mark of the whole work. His energy and exuberance find their most evident expression in the controlled gusto of his irony. 'He savours language like a connoisseur, and his especial delight is in ironic overtones.'²

But is not the effect of this energy, this ironic exuberance, negative and destructive? 'Is Gibbon not, then, at the opposite pole to a moralist, and wholly unconstructive in intention? Oddly enough, he is not,' Dyson concludes, for he is enlightened and humane, clear and firm in his moral values. 'The paradoxical fact seems to be that whereas Swift, the satirist, turns out to be largely negative in his moral effect, Gibbon, the cynic and sceptic, is remarkably sane and balanced.'³ How does this apply to the treatment of Christianity, notably that of its rise and establishment? In Dyson's view - and the thoughtful reader, whatever his final verdict, can easily check the evidence - the irony of these chapters is neither arbitrary nor irresponsible, 'but is wedded to very definite and salutary moral purposes. By demonstrating the dangers of irrationalism, both intellectual and moral, it seeks to confirm readers in the paths of enlightenment... His iconoclasm, likewise, arises naturally from the intellectual centralities of his age ... and from his far-seeing, epic vision of history.' And Dyson's conclusion sums up satisfactorily

1. ibid., pp.222-3.

2. ibid., p.223.

3. ibid., p.224.

the moral import of Gibbon's most characteristic tone, that most effective product of his masterly relish for language, for it stresses an intention, often missed by the casual reader, which is not so much to demolish as to edify. 'His real aim is not to castigate his age for not living up to its ideals, but to convince the age that its ideals are, after all, of supreme importance. The Decline and Fall is, then, a moral work at a more fundamental level than satire reaches. The irony is a mode of interpreting and evaluating history; and its moral, that darkness itself declares the glory of light.'¹

1. ibid., pp.224-5. Gibbon is shown to be using a 'potentially dangerous style to achieve a positive moral effect.

* I must confess with Gibbon over one of his lost references, 'I cannot recover the place' (IV, 77, n.64). However a number of similar examples could be supplied. I had planned to arrange all my examples in an appendix, but decided that this chapter was already long enough and that sufficient had been included in the text and notes.

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The historian as moralist: a study of
Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall
of the Roman Empire

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Dillon-Smith, David, The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Department of History, University of Wollongong, 1982. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/1426>

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CHAPTER TEN

AN INCONSISTENT MORALIST?

To some of his contemporaries, Gibbon must at best have seemed a very inconsistent moralist. Probably they would not have cast him in the rôle of moralist at all. They focused on the irreverent or indecent elements in his work for which they condemned him. The attitude of his clerical antagonists was perhaps most strongly expressed in the cry of one who numbered herself among his acquaintance. Hannah More, on hearing of his death, wrote: 'How many souls have his writings polluted! Lord preserve others from their contagion!'¹ On this entry G.M. Young remarked: 'Hannah More was giving voice to the sentiment of many thousands. And she spoke with the authority of a Mother in Israel who was also a best seller.'² In the following century these offensive elements were magnified by his critics who sometimes presented them as typical of The Decline and Fall, so that it was with reluctance that a writer like Emerson felt he 'must give this evil man his due.'³

Such a view of the historian certainly gained force from the censures of the greatest critic of the age whose fairness was demonstrated by his vindication of Gibbon's scholarship and accuracy and his flattering praise for his work as a whole. This praise from Porson, whose critical

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1. Jan. 19, 1794. 'Heard of the death of Mr. Gibbon, the calumniator of the despised Nazarine, the derider of Christianity. Awful dispensation! He too was my acquaintance.' Cited in Hill's edition of Gibbon's Memoirs, p. 226, n.2.
 2. To-day and Yesterday, London, 1948, p. 276.
 3. Letter to D.G. Haskins, 1839, printed in his Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Maternal Ancestors: With Some Reminiscences of Him. Boston, 1886, p.52 and cited by J.M. Robertson, Modern Humanists Reconsidered, London, 1927, p. 58.

powers he regarded so highly,¹ satisfied and encouraged Gibbon, especially in view of the numerous attacks on his History.² It is therefore wise to quote Porson's 'high encomium' so that the charges against Gibbon may appear in their true context.

'An impartial judge,' wrote Porson,³ 'I think, must allow that Mr. Gibbon's History is one of the ablest performances of its kind that has ever appeared. His industry is indefatigable; his accuracy scrupulous; his reading, which indeed is sometimes ostentatiously displayed, immense; his attention always awake; his memory retentive; his style just and profound; he pleads eloquently for the rights of mankind, and the duty of toleration.' But then follows the drastic qualification, in which, as Gibbon admitted, 'the sweetness of his praise is tempered by a reasonable mixture of acid'⁴: 'nor does his humanity ever slumber, unless when women are ravished or the Christians persecuted.'

After paying tribute to what Gibbon called 'those humble virtues' of industry, accuracy and attention, and commending the historian's style in general⁵, Porson singled out for praise just the sort of moral qualities which we have examined in the preceding chapters: 'just and profound' reflections, a plea for the 'rights of mankind' and for toleration and humanity. It is against this background, an acknowledgment of positive moral values, that the negative criticism is inserted

1. 'I consider Mr. Porson's answer to Archdeacon Travis as the most acute and accurate piece of criticism which has appeared since the days of Bently.' Memoirs, p. 174.
2. See Memoirs, p.193. A list of the 'Controversial Replies to Gibbon's History' is given in Bury's Bibliography, DF, VII, 361-4. Many are reprinted in a Garland series of facsimiles, Gibboniana, NY & London, 1974.
3. 'Letters to Mr. Archdeacon Travis &c.', Works, London, 1790, vol.I, Preface, xxviii.
4. Memoirs, p. 193.
5. 'Though his style is in general correct and elegant', certain particular faults were mentioned by Porson, op.cit., Preface, xxix-xxx.

as an exception to the rule. Taken thus, in its balanced and reasonable context, and from the pen of a learned and impartial critic, the acid comment might seem to give substance to a sentiment expressed by later and lesser critics, that Gibbon, for all his humanity and impartiality had two notable blind spots, namely religion and sex.¹

Unlike other eighteenth-century critics, Porson, for his part, declared that he saw nothing wrong with Gibbon's 'attack on Christianity', allowing that it probably 'proceeded from the purest and most virtuous motive', though exception might be found, he added, to the 'insidious manner' and the 'improper weapons' employed.² It was only when he came to the other objection that he waxed eloquent against the historian: 'A less pardonable fault is that rage for indecency which pervades the whole work, but especially the last volumes. And, to the honour of his consistency, this is the same man who is so prudish that he dares not call Belisarius a cuckold, because it is too bad a word for a decent historian to use. If the history were anonymous, I should guess that these disgraceful obscenities were written by some debauchee, who having from age, or accident, or excess, survived the practice of lust, indulged himself in the luxury of speculation; and exposed the impotent imbecility, after he had lost the vigour of the passions.'³ Little wonder that Gibbon felt 'a reasonable mixture of acid' in Porson's commendation. Yet the critic confessed that 'these few faults make no considerable abatement in my general esteem...I greatly admire the whole; as I should admire a beautiful face in the author, though it were

1. See for example Fuglum, Edward Gibbon, p. 12; cf. also p.111.

2. Preface, xxviii-xxix.

3. ibid, xxx-xxxi.

tarnished with a few freckles.'¹

Porson's criticism has been quoted at some length not only because it forms a good starting point for a discussion of the matters raised, but chiefly because of its authority and its same balance which Gibbon himself acknowledged. We should therefore note at the outset its almost unqualified praise for The Decline and Fall as a whole, as embodying some admirable moral qualities of the author, to which the defects, the alleged obscenities were merely the exception. It is a judgement which, despite its severe censure of the alleged lapses, at least maintained a true perspective. This cannot be said of some later criticisms.

It is important to remember that nearly all the controversial works provoked by The Decline and Fall were concerned with Gibbon's treatment of Christianity and were directed primarily to the famous final chapters of the first volume. That of Davis in particular goaded Gibbon to the one reply he made to his critics.² Since the attacks were not much occupied with matters of crudity or indecency, it would seem by implication at least, that the critics must have agreed with Porson that these were comparatively minor offences in Gibbon's work. Nor did Gibbon himself feel any need to defend himself along these lines, though he was aware of some shocked reactions from certain quarters. He did, however, state in his Memoirs that he could never understand 'the clamour which has been raised against the indecency of my three last volumes'.³

1. Ibid, xxxi.

2. 'A Vindication of some passages in the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', 1779 MW, IV, 515 ff.

3. Memoirs, p. 193.

The clamour did not pass with Gibbon's death or the coming of another century, even if it lost some of its immediacy when no longer directed against a living celebrity. There is a strange note from the eccentric William Beckford which is of interest in this regard. Beckford, who in his odd manner had suggested buying Gibbon's library in order to have something to read when passing through Lausanne, made a damning comment in his copy of The Decline and Fall. After castigating Gibbon for every kind of fault, he continued: 'in the midst of all the prurient and obscene gossip of your notes - your affected moral purity perking up every now and then from the corrupt mass like artificial roses shaken off in the dark by some Prostitute on a heap of manure.'¹ It was the effect of Gibbon's notes which roused Emerson's ire to produce his unbalanced vilification of the 'evil' historian. Such extravagant and unrestrained abuse marks the opposite extreme to Porson's rational criticism. But, despite the extreme language of certain individuals, it is indicative of a widespread, if less violent objection to what was seen as an offensive strain in Gibbon's work. This objection was publicly recognised in the five-volume edition in which Thomas Bowdler advertised 'the careful omission of all passages of an irreligious or immoral tendency'.² Similar expurgation was carried out by other nineteenth-century editors as can be seen for example in the so-called 'verbatim reprint' published by Frederick Warne and Company of London.³

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1. New Monthly Magazine, 1844, ii, 307 and comment in copy of DF, cited in Keynes, The Library of Edward Gibbon, p. 28.
 2. Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, for the use of Families and Young Readers, &c. London, 1826.
 3. Chandos Classics edition, 4 Vols. 1873, reissued 1887, 1893-4; 3 Vols. large crown 8vo., undated, editor unnamed. References in this chapter are to this 3-volume edition.

Depending on the attitude of the particular period or the fastidiousness of the individual reader, anecdotes, comments and footnotes can be found in Gibbon which may be thought amusing, drily ironic, risqué, or even offensive. And over the years critics have been ready to affirm such views. Sainte-Beuve, though moderate in his criticism of Gibbon, sensed a delight in reproducing 'quelques passages d'un obscénité érudite et froide'.¹ A recent biographer has written: 'it is undeniable that some of Gibbon's jests have a pruriency which smacks of a morbid compulsion in the author, and the remarks about ravished women that offended Porson are often of a kind which calls for a snigger rather than a laugh.'² Before turning to a detailed examination of the passages which lie behind such an objection as Porson's and which were dealt with by the expurgators, let us notice two general comments on an author's intention. Their evidence seems relevant in the case of Gibbon versus the censors.

We are fortunate in having Gibbon's considered comments on the satires of Juvenal, comments which can throw light upon his own approach to his History. In writing of the Sixth Satire,³ Gibbon showed awareness of the danger that an author might teach vice in the very process of condemning it: 'On pourroit souhaiter seulement de retrancher ces descriptions trop fideles qui enseignent le vice en le condamnant.'

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1. 'Causeries du Lundi, 22 Août, 1853, Ouevres, Paris, Garnier Frères, troisième édition, n.d., Tome 8, p.439. Sainte-Beuve refers also to his 'froideur' in connection with Christianity (p.432) and his lack of 'chaleur' in politics and in his conception of history (p.433, but cf. p.470).
 2. Michael Joyce, Edward Gibbon, p. 165. Joyce also quotes Sainte-Beuve's remark on this page.
 3. JB, 27me Août, 1763, p. 12.

Gibbon's answer is that of the moralist, an answer framed in the form of a rhetorical question: 'Why should the guilty creatures have their infamy concealed from the gaze of posterity?'¹ He then raised the very charge against Juvenal which Porson was later to level at Gibbon himself, namely that of using his descriptions to gratify his own pruriency. His answer to such an accusation against Juvenal is a valid comment on his own practice: the ardour of the satirist, he held, was that of indignation not of sensuality - 'Mais l'horreur qu'il en temoigne toujours me persuade assez que c'est la chaleur du genie et de l'indignation, plutot que celle de la Volupté.'² Gibbon's further comments on Juvenal are in similar vein, for he declared that he saw in all this writer's work, the tone of a true censor, arraigning vice, exposing absurdity and making the guilty tremble.³

The other expression of an author's intent is found in Bayle's Dictionnaire, a work to which Gibbon turned very frequently as a young man and for which he retained the highest respect throughout his life. In the section entitled 'Concerning Obscenities', Bayle maintained that if there were some in his work, they were of a kind which could not be justly censured. He then examined under nine heads what people meant when they alleged obscenities in an author. He absolved authors in general and himself in particular from personal involvement in the obscenities which they might be obliged to record and also from any

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1. 'Des malheureux pourront ils cependant se sauver de l'infamie à force de la meriter? Leur seroit il permis de cacher leurs excès aux yeux de la posterité, parce qu'ils en ont comblé la mesure?' JB, loc. cit.
 2. JB, loc. cit., Gibbon adds that he would be inclined to reproach Juvenal with malignity in seeing vice everywhere, rather than with moral depravity.
 3. JB, 31me Août, 1763, p. 16.

immoral purpose in so doing. In his final point, Bayle stated 'that the author relates Historical facts mentioned by other authors whom he carelessly cites, which facts are filthy and immodest, and adds a commentary on his Historical narrations to illustrate them by testimonies, by reflexions and by proofs &c. in which he sometimes alledges the words of certain authors who have wrote freely, some of them as Physicians, or Lawyers; others as Gallants, or Poets; but,' concluded Bayle, in answer to the allegation, 'he never says anything containing either explicitly, or even implicitly, the approbation of impurity; that, on the contrary, he endeavours, upon many occasions, to expose it to our abhorrence, and to confute loose Morality.'¹ One can be certain that Gibbon was familiar with this defence of Bayle's and can be confident that he would have been ready to apply it to his own case had he so desired.

When we come to examine the basis for the most quoted sentence of faint praise in Porson's comments, namely that Gibbon's humanity slumbered only when women were ravished or Christians persecuted, what in fact do we find? As an example of this alleged indifference to the ravishing of women, Porson referred his reader to a note in chapter lvii of The Decline and Fall.² The text at this point is concerned with the Seljukian domination of the Greeks of Asia Minor and the hardships endured by the conquered people. At the end of the list of troubles is the statement that 'many thousand captives were devoted to the service or the pleasures of their masters.'³ Here is a general and very broad assertion which one might feel needs elucidation before the narrative proceeds.

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1. I have quoted here from an English translation, The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle, London, 1734, vol. 5, p. 837.
 2. See Porson's Preface, p. xxviii.
 3. DF, lvii, VI, 260-261.

This is given, not in the text, but in a footnote which explains the text and provides some grim details of a scene in the Turkish camp, a description, which Gibbon declared, bore the stamp of an eyewitness account. There follows a fragment of the description, veiled indeed 'in the obscurity of a learned language', though to Porson, as of course to Gibbon, a language as lucid as his mother tongue: 'Matres correptae in conspectu filiarum multipliciter repetitis diversorum coitibus vexabantur cum filiae assistentes carmina praecinere saltando cogarentur. Mox eadem passio as filias &c.'¹

The question we ask ourselves as we follow Porson's finger pointing to the offending note, is: 'Does the quotation indicate callousness or lack of humanity?' It seems, like so many of Gibbon's notes to which no objection could be taken, merely to substantiate, amplify or illustrate a less specific statement in the text by quotation from a contemporary source. The details are horrible, but at least for us of the twentieth century, not beyond what we might expect to find recorded in plain English in our least sensational newspapers. There we would read them with the same disgust with which we would assume them to have been reported. And, despite the increased freedom of our own day, is there any reason to think Gibbon's reaction was so different? The text with its mention of 'hard conditions' and oppression seems to suggest a certain melancholy so often expressed in his scenes of conquest and ruin, and in the note, phrases like 'in conspectu filiarum' could be taken to provoke the same distaste which he explicitly admitted in somewhat similar descriptions elsewhere. And, having begun a second sentence of

1. DF, loc. cit., n.61; Porson numbers it note 54 in Gibbon's six-volume edition. Gibbon added in parenthesis after 'vexabantur', 'is that the correct reading?'

the quotation sufficient to suggest the unrestrained lust of the oppressors, he cut it short with an '&c.', as if to say enough of that. On the most censorious reading one could hardly feel this a good example to prove Gibbon's callousness in situations of rape. But Porson had carefully examined the whole work¹ and was well aware of other instances, of which one can find about twenty in The Decline and Fall. It seems necessary to look at these, some of which are deleted in the expurgated editions, to see whether they give more weight to the charge against Gibbon.

One such note, which disappeared from these editions, is that which simply states that Victorinus 'ravished the wife of Attitianus, an actuary, or army agent.'² The text, however, leaves us in no doubt about Gibbon's attitude: 'The shining accomplishments of that prince were stained by a licentious passion which indulged in acts of violence with too little regard to the laws of society or even those of love.'¹ In the case of Maximin, his vicious behaviour is that of one of Gibbon's 'monsters'. The narrative involves his cruel treatment of Diocletian and his family, especially his unsuccessful attempt to gratify his lust with Valeria the former emperor's daughter, and the spiteful revenge with which he pursued her. Yet here again the text refers to 'the fierce passions of the tyrant' and the accompanying footnote begins with the general indictment: 'The sensual appetites of Maximin were gratified at the expense of his subjects.'⁴ This note, another of those to suffer

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1. See for example, his reference to certain errors which Gibbon had still failed to correct in his later edition of DF; Porson, op. cit., Preface, pp. xxxi-xxxii.
 2. DF, xi, I, 323, n. 55.
 3. DF, xi, I, 323.
 4. DF, xiv, I, 461 and n. 93.

expurgation, goes on to instance from Lactantius, the way in which Maximin's creatures forced away from their homes the most charming and physically perfect 'wives and virgins' for the use of their master. There is nothing particularly offensive in the wording, only in the fact of the emperor's depravity, and certainly no indifference or lack of compassion in the historian's treatment of these deeds.

When Gibbon came to deal with Constantine's laws against rapes, there was no levity or absence of sympathy with the victims, but at the same time there was a compassionate condemnation of the barbaric punishments, more horrible than the crime itself. Gibbon regarded these laws as showing 'very little indulgence for the most amiable weaknesses of mankind', since they made no distinction between 'brutal violence' and 'the gentle seduction' which persuaded a young woman to leave her parents' house. Far from being deficient in humanity, however, the historian's reaction is a direct affirmation of it: 'Whenever the offence inspires less horror than the punishment, the rigour of penal law is obliged to give way to the common feelings of mankind.'¹

Another expurgated passage refers to Christian women's refusal to burn incense to Venus and is probably one that Porson and others saw as lacking sympathy for the persecuted Christians as well as being objectionable on grounds of impropriety. Possibly offence was taken at a sentence expressing the viewpoint of the pagan judge who regarded the violators of the honour of Venus as 'impious'. But the ironic thrust of the following sentence is directed not against the non-conforming Christians but rather against the timely and miraculous intervention which delivered the women from dishonour and especially against the legendary accounts

1. DF, xiv, I, 468-9.

of their escapes. Apart from this repeated reaction to miracles, Gibbon's scorn is here aroused also by these legends so seriously recorded by ecclesiastical writers: 'The more ancient, as well as authentic, memorials of the church,' he complained, 'are seldom polluted with these extravagant and indecent fictions.' It is interesting to note in passing that while his critics found indecency in any reference to the fact of this persecution, Gibbon saw it in the extravagant and fictitious nature of the tales which masqueraded as genuine history. On the other hand, his attitude to the behaviour of the youths to whom the women were abandoned is perfectly clear from his reference to their 'licentious embraces'.¹

In the account of the revolt of Gildo, the Moorish leader, we are told that 'the fairest of their wives and daughters were prostituted to the embraces of the tyrant.' Here again the whole tone is one of disgust as Gibbon wrote of 'the passions of avarice and lust' of 'days...terrible to the rich' and 'nights...not less dreadful to husbands and parents'.² In the narrative of the pillage of Rome in A.D. 410, occurs the incident of 'a Roman lady of singular beauty and orthodox faith', who conquered her would-be ravisher by her courage and resolution. After admitting that 'such instances of courage and generosity were not extremely common', Gibbon made a statement which is fairly typical of his reaction in nearly all these cases of women being ravished: 'The brutal soldiers satisfied their sensual appetites without consulting either the inclination or the duties of their female captives.'³ Such a comment seems a sufficient

1. DF, xvi, II, 103.

2. DF, xxix, III, 245.

3. DF, xxxi, III, 342. Even in his footnotes concerning the 'nice question of casuistry' in the case of suicide to avoid violation of chastity, Gibbon showed no levity or indifference. Augustine, he admitted, 'treats the subject with remarkable accuracy'. See notes 106, 107 on that page.

answer to Porson's objection.

The style of the language, and hence the attitude it reflects, is similar throughout the other instances: 'dissolute youth', 'noble matrons prostituted to the lust of their servants'; men 'inhumanly massacred; their widows and daughters...embraced by the licentious soldiers'; 'the noblest virgins...abandoned to the promiscuous lust of the barbarians'.¹ In fact the circumstances of these 'ravishings' are to Gibbon all quite plainly horrible and deplorable: a series of anarchic disorders, a riot of the blue faction in Constantinople, the sack of a city by fierce and unrestrained troops,² or the brutal career of an inhuman tyrant. And even where there is no overt expression of the historian's horror or disgust, but merely a plain statement of fact, the 'context of situation',³ generally supplies their absence. If we read simply that during the Mosaic Jubilee of 1350, 'many wives and virgins were violated in the castles of Italy', this is recorded as part of 'the triple scourge of war, pestilence, and famine'; and the sentence goes on to parallel the violation of women with the pillage and murder of many strangers 'by the savage Romans'.⁴

The chastity of 'the maids and matrons' of Rome was preserved from 'the passions of the hungry soldiers' of Totila: and this, we are told, was because of the humble request of the good archdeacon Pelagius who

1. DF, xl, IV, 236; xli, IV, 307; xlvi, V, 80.

2. See, e.g. DF, lxviii, VII, 205: 'In the fall and the sack of great cities, an historian is condemned to repeat the tale of uniform calamity; the same effects must be produced by the same passions; and, when those passions may be indulged without control, small, alas! is the difference between civilized and savage man.'

3. To borrow a useful term from the linguist J.R. Firth which he borrowed from Bronislaw Malinowski.

4. DF, lxix, VII, 257.

gained Gibbon's commendation on this account.¹ A more severe means of preservation is recorded in the proclamation of the death penalty for rape, issued by the crusading leaders in an attempt to save the people from their unruly invading bands. These leaders, the Marquis of Montferrat and the Count of Flanders, Gibbon described as 'the patron of discipline and decency' and as 'the mirror of chastity'.² There is also the case of the execution of such a sentence during the revolt of Sicily, when a French soldier assaulted a noble maiden and 'the ravisher was instantly punished with death'.³ Sexual violation is usually seen in The Decline and Fall as part of the violation of human rights, of respect for personal dignity and of the social order.

There is one case in which Gibbon's attitude might appear ambiguous, perhaps, detached, or even indicative of ironic amusement. It is the incident of the Muslim chief who, during the siege of Salerno, 'sacrificed each night the virginity of a Christian nun' on the altar of a church. As he struggled with one of his victims, we are told, a beam fell from the roof and put an end to the 'lustful emir'.⁴ This is the first of three 'anecdotes' selected by Gibbon from 'the hostilities of the Arabs, the Franks and the Greeks', each one being 'expressive of their national manners'. The second is a deed of heroism and self sacrifice by a citizen who gave his life to save his fellow countrymen. The third, the incident of the woman pleading with Theobald to spare the masculinity of their menfolk, is the only one which Gibbon suggested 'may provoke a

1. DF, xliii, IV, 431.

2. DF, lx, VI, 423. Gibbon added that the 'cruelty and lust were moderated by the authority of the chiefs and feelings of the soldiers.'

3. DF, lxii, VI, 498-9.

4. DF, lvi, VI, 178-9.

smile amidst the horrors of war'.¹ Furthermore the context once again helps us determine the tone of the historian in the first anecdote: the intention is to express the manners of the Saracens whose 'amusement' was 'to profane, as well as to pillage, the monasteries and churches'. This is its caption, and the absence of any suggestion of deep feeling or revulsion seems to be due to Gibbon's ironic comment directed against what he elsewhere called 'the seasonable interposition of some miraculous power'.² Thus when we disregard general impressions and examine specific instances of the violation of women in The Decline and Fall, we find little evidence of lack of humanity.

As to his other objection, namely an indifference to the persecution of Christians, Porson found it illustrated in the whole of the sixteenth chapter, 'On the conduct of the Roman government towards the Christians, from the reign of Nero to that of Constantine'.³ Though Gibbon's religious attitude does not concern us at this point,⁴ I think it may safely be said that there is more substance in this objection than in the former. There is in chapter xvi, as in later parts of The Decline and Fall, an ironic tone towards the persecutions, or at least the stories of persecutions as traditionally accepted. Part of Gibbon's intention was to question the validity of such accounts, to suggest prejudice and exaggeration, and to vindicate the general tolerance of pagan Rome.⁵

1. DF, lvi, VI, 179.

2. DF, xvi, II, 103.

3. Porson, op. cit., Preface, xxviii, and note; DF, chapter heading, chap. xvi.

4. The moral implications of Gibbon's attitude towards Christianity have been examined in chapter VII.

5. See, e.g. chap. xvi, II, pp. 95 (point 4); 103; 113 ff and 118. In the last of these Gibbon concluded: 'In this mitigated persecution, we may still discover the indulgent spirit of Rome and of polytheism...'

Yet he did censure even Julian for bigotry and unfairness towards the Christians in denying them ordinary human rights.¹ And it can truly be said that Gibbon never shows indifference to human suffering as such even where he may have had little sympathy with those who he thought provoked it.²

Whereas Porson observed but 'a few freckles' as a very minor blemish in The Decline and Fall, prudish editors of the following century discovered many more which they felt should be removed in order to present an inoffensive Gibbon to the readers of their day. Dr. Bowdler, the most famous or notorious of these censors, who had already brought out his Family Shakespeare, sought to purge The Decline and Fall of 'improper language and erroneous principles'. His design was prompted by good intentions. He not only recognised the value, even the necessity of a study of history for 'every man of education',³ but especially admired Gibbon's work. His Memoirs seemed to Bowdler to reveal 'a man of so much candour or so incapable of disguise' that the detailed discussion of his studies and his writing to be found there was such 'as no scholar can peruse without interest and admiration.' And for The Decline and Fall there is almost unqualified praise: 'As an historian, the universal acknowledgement of the literary world has placed him in the very highest rank; and in that rank, had his taste been equal to his knowledge, if his vast powers of intellect could have descended to a simplicity of narrative, he would have stood without a rival.'⁴ This work, Bowdler

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1. DF, xxiii, II, 487. But compare Gibbon's comment on Julian's edict of toleration: 'the only harshness which he inflicted on the Christians was to deprive them of the power of tormenting their fellow-subjects' (xxiii, II, 469).
 2. As a possible exception to this general rule, see above, chap.VII, pp. 400-1.
 3. Bowdler's Introduction, p.x.
 4. 'Life and Writings of Edward Gibbon, Esq.', prefaced to Vol. I, pp. xxxviii, xxxix.

was certain, would continue 'to be found from generation to generation, not only in the libraries of the learned, but on the reading-desk of every student.'¹ With a desire to extend the wide acceptance of so indispensable a work even further, the Doctor, in preparing an edition especially designed 'for the use of Families and Young Persons', showed an understandable desire to spare the blushes and embarrassed questions which the book might otherwise provoke in the refined homes of nineteenth-century England. And he looked forward to the day when his own name and other additions might disappear from the title page, so that Gibbon's work would stand solely as a monument to 'the exertion of the splendid talents of the original author.'²

A close comparison of Bowdler's edition with the original shows how conscientiously the expurgator had done his work of removing 'anything which might be thought objectionable, on account of irreligious tendency or indecent expression'.³ What sort of things had to go? First the contentious chapters on the establishment of Christianity disappeared along with a number of others, as being not merely irreligious, but also 'interruptions of the history'. Both in his Introduction and in his text, Bowdler seemed more concerned with the 'irreligious' than with the 'indecent'. Indeed, in dedicating his edition 'To the Christian Reader of Roman History', he declared that he would be satisfied if his efforts turned out to be 'the means of preventing the mind of one sincere believer in divine revelation from being perverted by learned and ingenious sophistry.'⁴ His only reference to Porson had to do with that critic's

1. Introduction, p.x.

2. Introduction, pp. xi-xii.

3. Introduction, p. ix.

4. Inscription to the reader, Vol. I, p.v. (inside fly-leaf). Bowdler concluded: 'Satis me vixisse arbitrator, si aliquis a semita speciosae sed falsae philosophiae ad iter coeleste veritas felix direxerim.' (p. vi).

charge that Gibbon seemed to look for an opportunity of insulting Christianity.¹ Moreover he was far less outspoken than Porson on the matter of Gibbon's 'indecencies' of which he made comparatively little in his Introduction. But within the text his scissors were busy removing offending passages, as a few examples will show.

In the description of the grove of Daphne 'consecrated to health and joy, to luxury and love', the next sentence was omitted as it was also by later expurgators: 'The vigorous youth pursued, like Apollo, the object of his desires; and the blushing maid was warned, by the fate of Daphne, to shun the folly of unseasonable coyness.'² Nothing very suggestive here, one would think, in comparison with what the young student would have encountered in ordinary editions of the Greek and Latin authors. Furthermore, the following sentence, where Bowdler returned to Gibbon's original text, shows the unmistakable moral point of the whole paragraph. Here the context and the historian's comment on the seductive power of the pagan grove underline the wisdom and manliness of avoiding unnecessary temptation. 'The soldier and the philosopher wisely avoided the temptation of this sensual paradise: where pleasure, assuming the character of religion, imperceptibly dissolved the firmness of manly virtue.' In Bowdler's eyes it was only the more specific scene, translating the general terms 'luxury and love' into actuality, which seemed dangerous to younger readers or objectionable to the refined adult.

Once again, in Gibbon's demonstration of the rigorous chastity of Julian, Bowdler deemed it prudent to omit certain phrases, those here shown between brackets: 'In the warm climate of Assyria [which

1. 'Life &c.', Vol.I. p. xxxviii.

2. DF, xxiii, II, 492.

solicited a luxurious people to the gratification of every sensual desire], a youthful conqueror preserved his chastity pure and inviolate: nor was Julian ever tempted even by a motive of curiosity to visit his female captives [of exquisite beauty, who instead of resisting his power, would have disputed with each other the honour of his embraces].' These textual omissions carried with them, needless to say, that of the footnote based on Sallust and Quintus Curtius, which referred to the behaviour of the women in 'the licentious banquets of Babylon'.¹

In the discussion of Valentinian's alleged polygamy, we find the deletion of the whole 'fable' as Gibbon himself called it, of the lovely Justina, introduced by the empress Severa 'into her familiar society', then by the emperor Valentinian into his bed; and consequent upon this his edict granting similar marital latitude to his subjects. However, one might almost say that there is no necessary reflection on Gibbon's moral sensitivity in this deletion, as the 'fable' could perhaps equally have been excluded on the grounds of tightening up the narrative, which is essentially an account of Valentinian's family and immediate successors; and Gibbon himself admitted the anecdote to have only the slightest support and to be a 'foolish story, so repugnant to the laws and manners of the Romans that it scarcely deserves the formal and elaborate dissertation of M. Bonamy.'² Granted that the reference to an emperor's taking a concubine would be seen by an editor of the Bowdler school as having both an 'irreligious' and an 'immoral tendency', the actual

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1. DF, xxiv, II, 527 and n. 63. See also Bury's addition to this note. The Warne editor (see above, p.568, n.3) retained the three words 'of exquisite beauty', but deleted all the following clause.
 2. DF, xxv, III, 69 and n. 162.

expression in the anecdote is certainly not 'stained with improper language'.¹

Bowdler carefully excised most references to amorous desires,² especially to the consummation of marriage,³ and to certain amorous adventures like those of the princess Honoria,⁴ which in her case, are closely related to the history of the times, as well as having a compassionate and pathetic appeal of their own. The account of the empress Theodora, which Gibbon undertook to defend against his detractors,⁵ was severely pruned by Bowdler.⁶ And, to take an example from his final chapter, that on the siege and fall of Constantinople, Bowdler expunged scenes of disappointed religious hopes as well as those of attacks on beautiful women and on nuns seeking refuge at the altar.⁷ Indeed, in view of the mildness of some of the deleted passages, we are surprised to find others that are left intact: 'the unfeeling critics who consider every amorous weakness an indelible stain', the homosexual assault of the charioteer on a beautiful boy of Constantinople, an unabridged account of the marriage of Arcadius with references to the bride being conducted to his bed, the record of the sale of the noblest maidens of Rome into 'matrimonial prostitution' - though with the strange emendation of 'lust' to 'licentiousness' - and the complete story of 'the ambitious Rosamond'.⁸

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1. Bowdler's phrase referring to what might mar any 'historical composition', Introduction, p.x.
 2. DF, xxix, III, 251-2 (Bowdler III, 484) is an example.
 3. For example, DF, lxix, VII, 42 (Bowdler, V, 314).
 4. DF, xxxv, III, 481-3 (Bowdler, III, 456).
 5. See Memoirs, p. 193.
 6. DF, xl, IV, 212ff. (Bowdler, xxxiii, III, around p. 394).
 7. DF, lxviii, VII, 203-4 (Bowdler, V, 436ff).
 8. For other retentions in Bowdler see DF, xxvii, III, 172; xxvii, III, 181; xxix, III, 235-6; xxxi, III, 346; xlv, V, 13-15 (Bowdler, II, 434; 444; 467-9; III, 94). See also Bowdler, II, 335; III, 99; IV, 268, 288; IV, 240ff, 266 (sections on 'incest, concubines, bastards and paederasty', in the Code of Justinian); V, 20 21; 402 (violent cruelty in the fall of Constantinople), none of which he deleted.

Such are the difficulties of maintaining a consistent prudery, that one case of retention of the text cancels out an equivalent expurgation and the dispassionate reader asks how the criteria of 'decency' are being applied. However, the effect of the expurgator's uncertainty as to what is offensive as distinct from mere plain speech, together with the relatively small amount of material actually deleted, is to leave Gibbon's moral reputation very little scathed even when the bowdlerisers have done their worst.

Yet it is hardly possible to gain from Bowdler's edition an accurate estimate of the extent of what he felt obliged to delete on the score of 'indecenty'. As has been shown, he was influenced even more strongly by purely religious considerations and also by his ideas of relevance to the actual aim and title of the History. In this way not only did he omit the two chapters on the rise and progress of Christianity, but also those on its establishment under Constantine, its heresies and controversies, the final destruction of paganism and the introduction of the worship of saints and relics, the monastic life, the doctrine of the incarnation, images and iconoclasm, the Paulicians and later sects, and the final chapters on Rome and the papacy.¹ These chapters, eleven in all, seemed to the editor, 'for the most part immaterial', as being part of the history of the church and the pontificate, rather than that of the declining empire.² Since Bowdler omitted seventeen complete

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1. Chapters xv, xvi, xx, xxi, xxvii, xxxvii, xlvii, xlix, liv, lxix and lxx.
 2. See Bowdler's Introduction, p. viii and Vol. V, pp. 449-450. Apart from the question of relevance of chapters up to lxviii, he stated: 'The taking of Constantinople is obviously the conclusion of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire'; and though he had once intended to include the final chapter, he felt it to be somewhat dated by 1825 in view of new discoveries and new views on ancient Rome.

chapters and these include the three in which the later expurgated edition published by Warne & Co. made the greatest cuts, one can only surmise what and how much he would have censored in these chapters.

It is therefore safer to base a comparison with the original work on this later edition which is described on its title page as a 'verbatim reprint', and which reproduces every chapter and every footnote except those notes or parts of them which are considered objectionable. The anonymous editor offers no introductory explanation, and no prefatory remarks other than those of Gibbon appear in the three volumes. Some of the passages or sentences omitted by Bowdler are also omitted in this 'reprint', but the editor is far less squeamish about indelicacies than his predecessor. Yet even a word or a short phrase has been removed in a number of places, showing that nothing seemed to escape the editorial scrutiny. Taking this edition as a more useful example of an expurgated Gibbon, let us see how far the historian's work still gave offence.

Religious objections lay behind a number of cuts, but unless we confine our attention to a few pages of chapter xv, this number is certainly small, for in the work as a whole there are probably not more than seventeen of such deletions amounting in all to about two full pages. Some of these were obviously seen as slurs on Christianity or on the clergy, or as the scornful innuendoes of a sceptical historian; some must have seemed to be unfair judgements or erroneous statements which should be removed; some again are purely questions of theology, like the reference to the doctrine of the Millenium or the illuminating example of the theological discussions to be heard in the market-places of Constantinople, an example taken, in fact, from one of the church

fathers.¹

There were certain passages, also in a religious context, but where the objection was quite clearly to the sexual suggestions,² while the rest were felt to be guilty of introducing matters of sex too explicitly or too suggestively, or at any rate of containing indelicacy of expression. The bulk of these, which reflect Bowdler's point of view in a less extreme form, consist of just a very few lines, even a phrase, though the section on Mahomet's relations with women³ and the anecdote of the wife's plea to Theobald, which Gibbon felt 'may provoke a smile amidst the horrors of war'⁴ necessitated extensive cuts. It is necessary to consider the tone of some of these passages in order to judge how far it might be inconsistent with that of the moralist or, indeed, of a 'decent historian' as Gibbon described himself.⁵

In the first place there are those already referred to amongst Bowdler's deletions, such as the description of the seductive vale of Daphne, Julian's avoidance of his female captives, the 'fable' of the lovely Justina, and the many references to the charms and the

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1. It is, as Bury pointed out, from Gregory of Nyssa (see DF, III, App. No. 8, p. 523), though Gibbon took it from Jortin's Remarks on Ecclesiastical History, having been unable to trace the original reference.
 2. For example, DF, xv, II, 39-40; xvi, II, 103, 123.
 3. DF, I, 402-5. The Warne editor cut 54 lines from this part of a chapter which suffered the heaviest pruning of all.
 4. DF, lvi, VI, 180; this anecdote occupies 32½ lines in Bury. The 'smile' freezes in the Warne edition, as the next sentence merely informs us of the 'wanton cruelty' of Theobald and leaves the matter there.
 5. DF, xli, IV, 358, where Gibbon avoided 'an appellation which may not drop from the pen of a decent historian', an excuse which Porson, in a paragraph on his 'rage for indecency' found highly incongruous: 'this is the same man who is so prudish that he dares not call Belisarius a cuckold...' (Preface, xxx). In the austere style of the Histories, Tacitus also sought to avoid 'vulgar words and the usages of common speech,' e.g. 'brothels', (II.93). See M. Grant, The Ancient Historians. London, 1970, p. 293, n. 33.

promiscuity of Theodora. But there are also other like the following: the mention of the women on the ramparts during the siege of Amida, revealing to the attackers 'their most secret charms', a scene interpreted by the Magi, we are told, as an omen of success;¹ a too detailed reference to the scandalous conduct of a patriarch of Alexandria and the females he entertained in his palace;² the suggestion that the mature age of the empress Zoe was 'less favourable to the hopes of pregnancy than to the indulgence of pleasure' and her disappointment in not finding her second husband 'a vigorous and grateful lover';³ the discussion of the sexual prowess of Charlemagne and his ambiguous relationship with his two daughters;⁴ the nefarious behaviour of Pope John XII;⁵ the gallantries of 'the great Bertha';⁶ the emir's nightly sacrifice of the virginity of the nuns of Salerno;⁷ or the enumeration of 'the deeds of darkness' alleged by Innocent III against the pilgrims in Constantinople and the certainty that the Eastern capital 'contained a stock of venal or willing beauty, sufficient to satiate the desires of twenty thousand' of their number.⁸ In none of these instances, nor in fact in any of the deleted passages, does one find any 'indecentcies' of language, however offensive the sentiments might have been to some readers.

The Warne editor, though retaining a number of passages too strong for Bowdler, nevertheless took offence at certain terms for which there

1. DF, xl, IV, 276.

2. DF, xlvii, V, 133 and note 64. This chapter on doctrine, was omitted by Bowdler.

3. DF, xlviii, V, 232.

4. DF, xliv, V, 303 and notes 101, 102.

5. DF, xliv, V, 318; the Latin source in note 141 is also omitted.

6. DF, liii, VI, 92.

7. DF, lvi, VI, 178-9.

8. DF, lx, VI, 423.

is hardly any real alternative.¹ Thus he deleted all references to Theodora as a 'prostitute' as well as the more daring allusions to her behaviour;² and the reference to 'the mother of Antonina' as 'a theatrical prostitute' is changed to 'an actress'.³ By the same rule, not only does his text omit the record of Theodora as 'a prostitute who had danced upon the stage',⁴ but also in a description of a scene of 'sacrilege and mockery' enacted by the crusaders in Constantinople, the record of another 'prostitute' who was 'seated on the throne of the patriarch'.⁵ So, too, the names of sins or crimes with which Innocent III charged the pilgrims, or those which the Council of Constance heard against John XXIII⁶ - fornication, adultery, incest, rape and sodomy - are carefully expunged from these records, though not from the Code of Justinian, which, with the exception of two-and-a-half footnotes, is printed unabridged.⁷

Such an editorial attitude and policy throws light on the uncertainties of those who by allegation or expurgation brought against Gibbon's History charges of indecency or of lapses from moral rectitude.

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1. A synonym such as 'harlot' is not a real alternative, and euphemistic periphrases would be awkward. He retained the phrase 'youthful harlot', IV, 230 (Warne II, 462). Surprisingly he was not offended by a metaphorical use in the nickname for the 'political verses', 'those common prostitutes, as from their easiness, they are styled by Leo Allatius' (liii, VI, 113, n. 119; Warne, III, 316, n. 2).
 2. DF, xl, IV, 230, 233; and cf. reference to 'the naked scenes' which she exhibited in the theatre as related by Procopius; also to a fragment of the Anecdotes, 'somewhat too naked' and suppressed in some editions; see p. 227 and n. 24.
 3. DF, xli, IV, 358, cf. Warne, II, 548.
 4. DF, xli, IV, 314, cf. Warne, II, 519.
 5. DF, lx, VI, 426, cf. Warne, III, 521.
 6. DF, lx, VI, 423, and lxx, VII, 300.
 7. DF, xliv, IV, 512, 535-6; in Warne, II, 650 and 666. The notes in question are numbers 120 and 200 on pp. 508 and 536. In note 201, p. 536, Warne printed the reference to the abolition of 'the subterraneous brothels of Rome', but deleted the following phrase, 'in which the prostitution of both sexes was acted with impunity.' (Warne, II, 666, n. 3).

Was it the record of an act or merely its name which gave offence?¹ Should a reprobate pope be charged with lesser crimes but not with those which had earned him his evil reputation? It seemed impossible for the censors to follow consistently even the rather doubtful principles they espoused. Nor can this inconsistency be due to their overlooking an offending passage in one place which they had deleted in another. The eagle eye of the Warne editor, for example, never failed to perceive the unacceptable word or phrase even in a footnote.²

This lack of consistency is thus to be found between different editors and between different parts of the same edition. Some passages which Bowdler retained intact, the Warne editor, though on the whole much more faithful to the original text, carefully removed.³ In one such case, dealing with the long and absolute control of Antonia over her husband, he dropped the words, 'and if Antonina disdained the merit of conjugal fidelity', before the main part of the sentence, 'she expressed a manly friendship to Belisarius, whom she accompanied with undaunted resolution in all the hardships and dangers of a military life.'⁴ Yet he had admitted in the preceding sentence that the chastity of 'the fair and subtle Antonina' has been stained with the foulest reproach', and somewhat further on that 'the evidence of facts' is such 'that the fame, and even the virtue of Belisarius, were polluted by the lust and cruelty of his wife'.⁵ A similar inconsistency shows

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1. As Gibbon remarked in connection with the policies of Augustus: 'mankind is governed by names', DF, iii, I, 78.
 2. He removed from the text the word 'successful' before 'ravisher' in the laws of Constantine (xiv, I, 468) and the phrase 'and had perhaps debauched' from a note stating that Francis Philadelphus 'married...the daughter of John' (lxvi, VII, 120, n. 82). The references in Warne are I, 326 and II, 672, n.5.
 3. For example, DF, xxxvi, IV, 3, Warne II, 312; xli, IV, 294, 307, Warne, II, 504. 514.
 4. DF, xli, IV, 294; Warne II, 504.
 5. DF, xli, IV, 358; Warne II, 548.

itself in other types of context. Silk garments, which exposed 'to the public eye naked draperies and transparent matrons' and 'which showed the turn of the limb and the colour of the skin', might, we are told in this edition, 'gratify vanity', though not, as we might also expect from this context, and as Gibbon went on to add, 'provoke desire.'¹ Still, apparently without a blush, this editor included the story of Aglae, the pious Roman lady who 'mixed love with devotion' and reputedly admitted her favourite steward, Boniface, 'to share her bed'.² It is hard to predict what one will find and what will be missing from the text.

The 'moral' criteria employed bear no apparent relation to the tone or intent of the passage as a whole. Strangely the Warne editor felt it incumbent on him to remove a number of references to women being 'ravished' or 'embraced', even some which gave no offence to Bowdler.³ Yet the historian's language is innocuous and his tone in these passages is usually one of horror and disgust. Stranger still is the deletion of passages of clearly moral tendency in which the expurgator and his prudish readers apparently failed to look beyond the surface of what strike us as quite harmless expressions, to the underlying intention. That on the wearing of silks might be one such, or the salutary examples of Julian and of Belisarius, untempted by the beauty of their female captives,⁴

1. DF, xl, IV, 244, cf. Warne, II, 472.

2. DF, xvi, II, 140; Warne I, 426. Contrast his omission of the two bracketed words in 'the palace was [adorned or] polluted by the visits of his female favourites', lxi, VII, 91.

3. DF, xxvi, IV, 14, a sentence on Avitus; xli, IV, 307, a reference to widows and daughters 'embraced by the licentious soldiers'. Both references, deleted in Warne, had been retained by Bowdler (see his chapters xxx, xxxiv, III, 268, IV, 23). Similar passages which Warne omitted are li, V, 460, n. 88, where only the second half of the note is dropped; and lxix, VII, 257; cf. Warne, III, 200, n.1; III, 761.

4. DF, xxiv, II, 527 and xli, IV, 357 (Warne, I, 691; II, 548).

the oblique and condemnatory reference to the horrors inflicted by Gildo,¹ Justinian's moral blindness in the choice of a consort,² or the virtuous resistance of Baldwin to the temptations of an amorous queen.³

One might with equal justice perceive an instance of the moral obtuseness of such editors in the deletion of an important sentence in Gibbon's discussion of the dangers encountered by 'the virtue of chastity' from a highly civilized, polished and luxurious way of life. The context is the strong preservation of this virtue amongst the Germanic peoples, especially as reflected in the 'honest pleasure' of Tacitus who contrasted it with the dissolute behaviour of the ladies of Rome. Seeking the 'probable causes' for the weakening of chastity in civilized society, Gibbon suggested 'softness of the mind', 'refinements' which 'polish' but also 'corrupt ... the intercourse of the sexes; the elegance of dress, of motion, and of manners, which gives a lustre to beauty', but also 'inflames the senses through the imagination'; and finally the 'luxurious entertainments, midnight dances, and licentious spectacles' which 'present at once temptation and opportunity to female frailty'. All this the Warne editor included, yet deleted the equally moral and equally inoffensive sentence which continues the argument from 'the intercourse of the sexes', and which lays an essential explanatory basis for the causes which are to follow: 'The gross appetite of love becomes most dangerous, when it is elevated, or rather disguised by sentimental

1. DF, xxix, III, 245 (Warne, II, 128).

2. DF, xl, IV, 233 (Warne, II, 464, end of paragraph).

3. DF, lxi, VI, 444 (Warne, III, 533). He might have been expected to have omitted merely the last part relating the brutal punishment inflicted on Baldwin.

passion.'¹ On what possible ground of decency or even delicacy was this sentence removed? One might suggest that it is not only a necessary unit in the sequence of Gibbon's exposition, but also a necessary warning for his young readers, exposed to the elegant 'disguises' of a superficial society so familiar to Gibbon from his experiences in both London and Paris. The sentence in question reminds us of the historian's description of his own early love in Lausanne. Recalling this episode, he was most careful to distinguish the 'pure and exalted sentiment' from that 'grosser appetite' which we share with the animal creation, and was equally careful to avoid any connotation of 'gallantry...which has originated in the spirit of chivalry and is interwoven with the texture of French manners'.² His early experience of love was not lost on the moralist historian or on the author of the Memoirs.

We have seen that the material deleted from The Decline and Fall by the inconsistent zeal of the expurgators was in most cases very brief and hardly what any fair-minded modern reader would class as 'indecent'. In passages of licentiousness and lust, these vices are shown for what they are, and even the social disguises are stripped off romantic love in the interest of truth and moral awareness. Where the passages concern the character of an individual or the life of a people, the author's broad aim is to throw light on as many aspects as possible in order to reach a deeper understanding of them. Even the deleted sections on Mahomet, his sexual and religious fervour, his relations with women, and his regulations on such matters for his followers, all form part of a

1. DF, ix, I, 245 (Warne, I, 179).

2. Memoirs, p.84; and see above, chap. II, p. 54.

serious and objective treatment of Islam and its founder.¹ The study of social life and manners was to Gibbon a very important and most interesting part of history as both his assertions and his practice show. These particular sections on Mahomet and the Arabs are part and parcel of his treatment of peoples and manners in The Decline and Fall, though here the subject is sexual manners. Under the same heading could be included the offending 'anecdotes' of 'the lustful emir' and the wife's plea on behalf of her husband's masculinity, which Gibbon selected as 'expressive of national manners'.² Or again, a more individual example of manners and attitudes can be found in the omitted note on the outstanding chastity of Zenobia, a historical figure who seemed intensely interesting to Gibbon. The note gives point to the general assertion of the text, by informing us in a very matter of fact fashion that 'she never admitted her husband's embraces but for the sake of posterity', only repeating the experiment in the following month 'if her hopes were baffled'.³

The few remaining examples of expurgation fall mainly into two classes: comments by the historian, dry, ironic or perhaps whimsical, and those more daring and frequently untranslatable quotations. Both these groups are almost confined to footnotes, but one, probably the earliest in the text to catch the eye of the bowdlerisers, has often been referred to by later writers on Gibbon. No objection was taken to the main point of the particular sentence, namely the varied inclinations of the younger Gordian, exemplified by his 'twenty-two acknowledged concubines and a library of 62,000 volumes'; but the comment which must

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1. This objectivity was on occasions influenced by his sources and by a strain of polemic; see above, chapter VII, p. 383.
 2. DF, lvi, VI, 178.
 3. DF, xi, I, 325, n. 63.

have appeared gratuitously naughty, had to go: 'and from the productions which he left behind him, it appears that both the one and the other, were designed for use rather than for ostentation.'¹ It is this type of passage which a recent biographer calls 'civilized entertainment'² even if it did not strike some earlier editors in this way.³ Then there is the footnote which quotes from Hume's History of England the account of the punishment of castration performed by order of Geoffrey of Normandy on the whole chapter of the cathedral of Sées. It was cited by Gibbon as a tyrannical and 'singular act of cruelty', but it is capped by an additional observation which he went on to make: 'Of the pain and danger they might justly complain; yet since they had vowed chastity, he deprived them of a superfluous treasure.'⁴ It is a philosophical observation, perfectly logical and perfectly fair. There is not even a definite tone of sarcasm. It is simply one of those remarks that the genteel might have described as 'unnecessary', an epithet strictly applicable in a more literal sense to the note as a whole. But it is one of those peripheral pieces of information which go to make Gibbon's History what it is. We might almost imagine the historian replying to anyone who took exception to the note, 'Honi soit qui mal y pense.'

But such a note seems to lead on naturally to that notorious group which hostile critics might seize on with perhaps more justice. They

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1. DF, vii, I, 191. The comment is deleted together with a mere three words in the accompanying note: 'His literary productions [though less numerous] were by no means contemptible'. (n. 23) The descriptive phrase, 'the saints who had forgotten the distinction of the sexes', is likewise erased from a reference to the only males not excluded by the pious Pulcheria and her sisters, xxxii, II, 406.
 2. Michael Joyce, Edward Gibbon, p. 166.
 3. Cf. also Virginia Woolf's reaction to it in 'The Historian and "The Gibbon"', The Death of the Moth and Other Essays. London, 1943, p.59.
 4. DF, lxix, VII, 225, n. 15.

are mainly of the type which Gibbon admitted 'may be transcribed but cannot be translated',¹ and of which the example cited by Porson, is one. Amongst these we find a bracket of three on the empress Theodora, consisting of a few lines from Procopius and a line of Latin, all 'somewhat too naked' for translation.² In a passage referring to the proscription of unnatural vice, Gibbon endorsed a very moral and very severe judgement against this 'degeneracy', but his note referring to the treatment of the subject by the Roman writers was expurgated. It simply stated that 'a crowd of disgraceful passages will force themselves on the memory of every classic reader', of which a couplet from Ovid, untranslated, provided a single illustration.³

Other notes in this category are one containing two lines in Greek of the evidence heard against the patriarch by the Council of Chalcedon, with the addition of an epigrammatic couplet from the Greek Anthology;⁴ another three lines of Greek from the Acts of the second Nicene Council, documenting the incident of the monk and the demon of fornication, and designed to show the 'superstition...ignorance...falsehood and folly' of these Acts;⁵ the Latin original from Liutprand, of the evil deeds of John XII, the substance of which is given in the text;⁶ and a mild line of Latin from one of Gibbon's major sources, Ammianus Marcellinus, concerning the 'libidinous complexion' of the Arabs.⁷ Certainly the

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1. DF, li, V, 424, n. 2, a phrase referring to the salutation between Mahomet and a prophetess.
 2. DF, xl, IV, 227-8, nn. 24, 25, 26.
 3. DF, xlii, IV, 536 and n. 200.
 4. DF, xlvii, V, 133, n. 64.
 5. DF, xlix, V, 296, n. 80.
 6. DF, xlix, V, 318, n. 141.
 7. DF, l, V, 403, n. 171.

most blatant note goes much beyond this general assertion, in its description of the sexual 'gifts' of Mahomet, though it is necessarily veiled in the Latin of Gibbon's authorities. With this must be grouped the note next but one, which discusses in plain English the thirteenth labour of Hercules.¹ But there is also a note which, despite its rather different ring, was nevertheless deleted. It consists of two lines of Latin from Liutprand referring to the trade in eunuchs and it called forth from Gibbon a cry of moral indignation: 'The last abomination of the abominable slave trade!'²

On this class of notes Gibbon wrote in his own defence in the Memoirs what he had already written by way of explanation in the History: they 'are left in the obscurity of a learned language'.³ First as mere footnotes and secondly as being left untranslated, that are doubly unobtrusive and therefore presumably inoffensive. In some cases he could also plead that he was simply citing, not just an original source, but an ecclesiastical author. A rather dubious remark of Manomet regarding his caresses for his daughter was not only veiled in Latin, but as Gibbon informed his reader, 'has been communicated to the public by the Reverend Father Maracci, in his Version and Confutation of the Koran'.⁴ In his note on the comparison of Mahomet's sexual vigour with the thirteenth labour of Hercules, Gibbon wrote: 'I borrow the style of a

1. DF, I, 404, n. 175 and 405, n. 177.

2. DF, liii, VI, 82, n. 39. Other such notes are that on Hugo's three favourite concubines (liii, VI, 92, n. 69); a line of Greek in which Gibbon felt that Anna Comnena 'somewhat too wantonly' praised her betrothed (lvi, VI, 202, n. 76); the description of a Turkish camp, cited by Porson as an obscenity (lvii, VI, 261, n. 61); and a seamy piece of court evidence from the Council of Constance (lviii, VI, 272, n. 6).

3. Memoirs, p. 193; DF, xl, IV, 228 ('veiled in the obscurity of a learned language').

4. DF, xxxiii, III, 418, n. 2. The reference in the text is to Constantius and his sister Placidia.

father of the church', namely Gregory Nazianzen.¹ For both the untranslated Latin of the charges heard against Conrad's wife at the Council of Constance, and for the 'anecdote' of 'the lustful emir', included in the text, Gibbon was able to express his indebtedness to Cardinal Baronius.² In defence of what he knew some would consider a 'licentious' anecdote, taken, like so many other references, from Liutprand, he suggested he might 'exclaim with poor Sterne, that it is hard if I may not transcribe with caution what a bishop could write without scruple! What if I had translated?' he asked, referring to an indelicate Latin phrase from the bishop's record of the anecdote in question.³ Similarly, in an ironical tribute to an English bishop with whom he had engaged in literary controversy, Gibbon confessed that 'without Warburton's critical telescope' applied to a particular reference, he would never have seen 'in the general picture of triumphant vice, any personal allusion to Theodora'.⁴ Was this the same bishop he had in mind a few notes earlier, when, after citing some untranslatable lines from Procopius, he referred to 'a learned prelate, now deceased', who, he had heard, 'was fond of quoting this passage in conversation.'⁵

Probably the first real publicity given to these 'obscene' footnotes was in the opening pages of the Gentleman's Magazine the month after the publication of Gibbon's final volumes.⁶ Without editorial comment and

1. DF, 1, V, 405, n. 176.

2. DF, lviii, VI, 272, n. 6 and lvi, VI, 179, n. 11. Cf. Baronius on Theodora, xl, IV, 233, n. 40.

3. DF, lvi, VI, 180-1, n. 15. Yet Gibbon did admit that 'the bishop of Cremona was a lover of scandal' (liii, VI, 92, n. 69).

4. DF, xl, IV, 230, n. 30.

5. DF, xl, IV, 227-8, n. 24. Warburton, who died in 1779, seems the most likely candidate.

6. Vol. 58, Pt. I, June 1784, pp. 476-8.

simply under the heading 'Selections from Mr. Gibbon's learned and entertaining Notes to the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Volumes of the DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE,' the first three pages of the June issue were devoted to the spiciest of these offending footnotes.¹ It was something of a test case and Mr. Urban had set the cat among the pigeons. A correspondent in the next issue, expressed in strangely archaic language, the grief of the editor's 'constant readers and well-wishers' that he had sullied his pages with 'those filthy extracts from a silly book called "The History of the Declension (sic) and Fall of the Roman Empire"' and pointed to certain texts of scripture forbidding indecent communication.² Other writers echoed these sentiments of indignation at the pure pages of the Magazine being 'for the first time defiled with the filthy rakings of a celebrated Historian.'³ One correspondent came forward with a moderate defence or extenuation of Gibbon, and though admitting concern that he had 'infringed on the dignity of history by the introduction of indecency,'⁴ denied that these notes, even when printed in the vernacular, would be likely to corrupt any virtuous woman. The debate smouldered on in the columns of the Magazine,⁵ though soon the theological issues reappeared with a trinitarian defence of the disputed 'Three Heavenly Witnesses' text and a review of Porson's demolition of it in his Letters to Mr. Archdeacon Travis.⁶

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1. Apart from a few quite innocuous ones on the gross appetite and greed of Charlemagne and a caliph, two brutal or bloodthirsty references, Alp Arslan's epitaph and a few uncomplimentary comments on Dr. Johnson. The selection, however, contained the offensive note cited by Porson. See pp. 571-2 above.
 2. Gentleman's Magazine, Vol. 58, Pt. II, July, 1788, pp. 599-600, unsigned.
 3. ibid., Supplement for the year 1788, Vol. 58, p. 1157.
 4. ibid., Vol. 59, July 1789, p.610.
 5. e.g. J.M.'s (Milner) return to the attack, Aug., 1789, Vol. 59, pp. 709-710 and Caroloman's retraction of a phrase to humour his opponents, Supplement for 1789, Vol. 59, p.1202.
 6. ibid., Vol. 58, Aug., 1788, pp. 700-2; Vol. 60, Oct., 1790, pp. 919-920.

Such was the beginning of that 'clamour' against the indecency of his final volumes, which Gibbon claimed he could never understand.¹ Yet, as with the religious clamour against which Hume had warned him,² he might have had his suspicions in view of the defence he had already built in for some of these contexts.³ And against the possible imputation of the 'indecency', or at least the 'freedom' of some of his notes, he had taken the opportunity of showing that he had good ecclesiastical support for their inclusion.⁴ He probably felt secure in the company of the Church Fathers, bishops and learned Catholic scholars.

But whatever defence he or his supporters might make, this small group of 'doubtful' footnotes should be seen as simply part of the numerous and many-sided collection which exhibit the author's keen and lively interest in an encyclopaedic range of odd and interesting topics: natural history, sociology, geography, classical erudition, etymology, religion, exploration, philosophy and sometimes sex. The host of innocent, odd, scholarly and informative notes remind us of Gibbon's remark about Bayle to whose work he so often sent his reader: 'The sceptic of Rotterdam exhibits, according to his custom, a strange medley of loose knowledge and lively wit.'⁵ A similar delight is shown by Gibbon in his own 'medley' of footnotes, always learned, often curious and intriguing, and occasionally perhaps a trifle indelicate. He wishes to share with his reader some 'odd particulars' he has learned

1. Memoirs, p. 193.

2. Ibid., p. 168.

3. See e.g. above, pp. 593 & n.2, 594 & n.5, 595 & n.3, 596 & nn. 2, 4.

4. This is shown quite clearly in the example cited above from Liutprand's Legatio (DF, lvi, VI, 180-1, n.15); and cf. Memoirs, p. 193, with its reference to the Rev. Mr. Joseph Warton.

5. DF, xxv, III, 17, n. 47.

from Malaterra about the introduction of camels and carrier pigeons into Sicily, about the flatulence allegedly produced by a tarantula bite, and throws in an equally odd etymology.¹ There is the surprising incident in which Martin of Tours 'imprudently committed a miracle' simply because he 'once mistook (as Don Quixote might have done) an harmless funeral for an idolatrous procession';² or there is a 'whimsical' piece of information on the origin of the name Picards.³ Gibbon's zest for such notes is felt again and again in his invitations or asides to his reader to enjoy an illuminating trifle: 'Read, if you can, the life and miracles of St. Louis';⁴ 'I must not conceal a piece of ancient scandal concerning the origin of this ulcer' said to have been inflicted by the devil on the thigh of St. Simeon Stylites;⁵ 'I cannot overlook a stupendous and laughable blunder of Rienzi', arising from a confusion of meanings and etymologies;⁶ 'I had forgot another popular and orthodox protester', the emperor's 'favourite hound' which usually lay quietly at his feet, but which 'barked most furiously' on hearing the reading of an act of union which might compromise the Greek creed;⁷ and there is that slightly apologetic afterthought: 'I have disdained to mention a very foolish, and probably a false report, of Honorius' alarm at the supposed loss of a favourite chicken named 'Rome', till he discovered it was 'only the capital of the world, which had been lost'.⁸

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1. DF, lvi, VI, 200, n. 70.
 2. DF, xxviii, III, 207, n. 36.
 3. DF, lviii, VI, 269, n. 1.
 4. DF, lix, VI, 374, n. 104.
 5. DF, xxxvii, IV, 80, n. 73.
 6. DF, lxx, VII, 271, n. 26.
 7. DF, lxvi, VII, 117, n. 71.
 8. DF, xxi, III, 358, n. 153.

It is not just in the light of the serious purpose of the work as a whole, but also in the context of such innocent and interesting addenda as these, illustrating the full spectrum of Gibbon's informative notes on a vast range of subjects, that those allegedly indecent exceptions should be judged. It is perhaps hard, he might have objected that 'the historian of the Roman Empire' should be singled out for including 'with caution' these very few notes of a sexual nature which clerics 'could write without scruple'.¹ And, of course, it was the clerics who made up the front line of the attack.

It is an unfortunate thing, and particularly unfortunate for writers like Gibbon, that in traditional Christian thinking, sex too often appeared perilously like sin, and the euphemisms, 'moral' and 'immoral' came to be narrowly identified with chastity. It may have seemed to him that his detractors had concentrated on the 'freedom' he took with religious matters in his earlier volumes and had then discovered another cause for attacking his later volumes. Yet he claimed to be no more guilty of indecency in these than in the first part of his work, while his treatment of church history and councils was just as free in the second part as had been his handling of primitive Christianity in chapters xv and xvi.² In fact, it seems as if the twin charges of 'irreligion' and 'indecenty' continued to be almost inseparable, and both these qualities in his writing were felt to be equally corrupting.³ However, in one aspect the two can be viewed together, that is, when

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1. In terms of his objection in DF, lvi, VI, 180-1, n.15.
 2. Gibbon could claim that these chapters offended all sections of the church including Protestants, whereas much in the later chapters would be offensive merely to Roman Catholic readers.
 3. As seen from Bowdler's words to the reader and Introduction; cf. Gibbon's Memoirs, p. 182: 'a religious clamour was revived; and the reproach of indecency has been loudly echoed by the rigid censors of morals.'

we examine the matter of Gibbon's integrity in his treatment of 'the pure and austere morals of the Christians', which he put forward as one of 'the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian church'.¹ Milman, one of the most honest and most scholarly editors of The Decline and Fall, in a note on this section wrote: 'These, in the opinion of the editor, are the most uncandid paragraphs in Gibbon's History.'²

It would be hard for any but the most naive reader to disagree with such a judgement. Indeed, the temperate ironist wrote more than these paragraphs with tongue in cheek. Can we, especially in view of Hume's warning,³ be convinced by Gibbon's expression of surprise at the way churchmen reacted to his chapters on the rise of Christianity? The stance of the ingenuous inquirer, he knew, was sometimes more effective to promote a thorough revaluation or to undermine a complacently accepted position than was an outright exposure or a head-on assault. But it was and is alleged that Gibbon actually made these 'uncandid' paragraphs as well as other parts of his work, the vehicle of scorn even for certain virtues themselves. Thus Parkinson claims: 'Gibbon's arguments against asceticism are used to ridicule the practice of chastity, temperance, economy, and all the sober and domestic virtues. He makes it a source of reproach to his devout predecessors that they disdained, or affected to disdain, every earthly or corporal delight; and he

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1. DF, xv, II, 3, point IV and pp. 34ff.
 2. Milman's 2nd edition, London, 1846, I, 486, n; cf. his Preface, p. xii. For his praise of Gibbon's accuracy, his vindication of him from carping critics and his extenuation of Gibbon's prejudices, see his Preface, pp. v, viii-ix, xii.
 3. Hume's letter (18/2/1776) expressed his feeling both before the publication of Volume I and more especially after it, that its final chapters must inevitably involve their author in suspicion - 'and you may expect that a clamour will rise', he added. (Memoirs, p. 168).

implies at the same time that they were hypocritical in merely pretending to this purity.' Indeed Parkinson sees in Gibbon's approach here not only an 'air of stoic superiority' but also a humour 'touched with salaciousness'.¹

How far is this true? No careful student of Gibbon, even in a century which has completely reinstated him, would labour to acquit him of all charges brought forward by competent and scholarly editors² or modern biographers. Even so, despite the tone of certain chapters with their possibly disingenuous and special pleading, he never seems to ridicule chastity as such, however he might deplore an imposed asceticism, which was sometimes esteemed at the expense of real virtues, and which he saw as singularly unproductive both physically and socially.³

Temperance and the 'domestic virtues' he valued highly and he lamented their comparative rarity amongst the rulers of the earth. But above all, his main thrust, as Parkinson hardly acknowledges, was directed against hypocrisy whether he found this in the chastity and asceticism of the primitive church or, as was more often the case, in the life of later ecclesiastics. He certainly regarded asceticism and enforced celibacy as misguided and he could easily have supported this view by an appeal to the New Testament with which he was so familiar.⁴ But a pretended or a falsely practised asceticism provoked his irony and scorn. If the bishops at least were celibate and chaste, 'the loss of sensual pleasure was supplied and compensated by spiritual pride'. Parkinson cites this

1. Edward Gibbon, p. 58.
2. Not only Milman, but Bury: 'Neither the historian or the man of letters will any longer subscribe, without a thousand reserves, to the theological chapters of "The Decline and Fall".' (Preface to 1896 edition of DF, p. xxxix).
3. DF, xx, II, 346; cf. a similar verdict concerning 'the Greek superstition', liii, VI, 72.
4. e.g. I Tim. 4; 1-4.

as a disingenuous comment by Gibbon,¹ while Bury, who saw in Gibbon a cynicism 'not inconsistent with partiality, with definite prepossessions, with a certain spite', saw also that this quality 'supplied the antipathy' which went into the production of 'his most effective colours'.² Nevertheless, the compensatory spiritual pride referred to is shown clearly enough in some of Gibbon's bishops, even if he tended to generalise on the strength of these. He could still appreciate the steadfastness of an Athanasius or the sincerity of an Ambrose, though the mere mask of sanctity was treated with irony, perhaps sometimes with a touch of 'salaciousness'. If some of his tilts at religion seem to show him carried away by his pet aversions, even irritated by what he understood only imperfectly - a genuine religious experience - it is equally true, as Parkinson admits in his criticism, that Gibbon's 'humanitarian sentiments have a truly philosophic nobility'.³ And this humanity, to echo Porson, rarely slumbers as he 'pleads eloquently for the rights of mankind, and the duty of toleration'.⁴

Since the work of Bowdler and his successors, the 'objectionable' element has sometimes seemed much larger than it really is, and any close consideration of the offending passages, as has been made here, runs the same danger of making a mountain out of a molehill. For a molehill it is. Even Bowdler, though for other reasons he reduced the

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1. Edward Gibbon, p. 58.
 2. Bury's Introduction to DF, 1901 edition, p. xxii.
 3. Edward Gibbon, p. 106. Parkinson qualifies this judgement, adding: 'but he, like most of us, is irritated by what he cannot understand, and attempts therefore to explain it away.' Such a view may be found, in one form or another, in a number of Gibbon's biographers and critics, however they may differ in their final assessment of his precise religious position. cf. Michael Joyce, Edward Gibbon, p. 146.
 4. Porson, Preface, p. xxviii.

number of chapters considerably, still brought very few charges of indecency against The Decline and Fall. Thus our first question in coming to an informed and just verdict must be: What is the extent of these 'indecencies' or 'indelicacies'? 'A few freckles', was Porson's judgement, and these few insufficient to make any great difference to his esteem for the work. Indeed, if a few anecdotes and footnotes were removed as well as a small number of comments, all that would remain of these 'indecencies' would be the occasional ironic or bizarre twist of a sentence and the occasional cheeky use of a verb or modifier, in most instances not very shocking to the most decent reader of today.

When all the cuts have been made the amount affected is surprisingly small. It is instructive to discover that the Warne editor deleted no more than 307 lines of text, roughly equivalent to 10 pages out of a total of almost 3,500¹. Of these deletions, just over two pages are on religion or doctrinal matters, and if we include also those on popes and councils and those which make a distinctly moral point, we are left with a mere seven-and-a-half pages which gave the expurgator any concern on grounds of propriety. It is perhaps also interesting to note that of these, two pages come from the chapter on Mahomet and one-and-a-quarter from the two anecdotes 'expressive of national manners' which have already been considered.

Gibbon's original six volumes contained 7,842 notes. Only about 52 are affected by the cuts in Warne's edition: 14 full notes in English

1. Counting in the Bury, 1901 edition, 30 lines to a fairly full page of text. Bury's 7 volumes contain 3,482 pages, Warne's in the 3-volume edition, 2,368 and in the 4-volume edition, 2,380.

and 21 in Latin and Greek on the basis of indelicacy, 8 or 9 on religious grounds, and about another 8 from which some material had been deleted.¹ Sometimes the criteria of religion and decency overlap and it is hard to say which was uppermost in the editor's mind; in some cases a Latin or Greek note expands or merely substantiates the passage in the text and thus certain notes simply disappeared along with the deleted section of the text to which they referred. So when such allowances have been made² we are looking at perhaps less than 50 out of a total approaching 8,000. To the charge that Gibbon lived his sex life in his footnotes, one might reply that it must then have been very sparse and moderate and also that the tone of these few notes is usually frank and straightforward rather than prurient.

It was the greatness, and indeed the historical and moral value of The Decline and Fall, which led the more prudish editors to expunge a few offending passages in order to preserve the work as a whole for readers of a more fastidious age than our own. That they found so little to remove is a testimony to the wholesomeness of such a voluminous work. But is it worth remarking that the Victorian cleric, Dean Milman, did not feel it incumbent upon him to purge Gibbon's text in this way.³

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1. I have not counted the few omitted notes which are simply references to the authorities used in the text, nor the note in which Gibbon merely defended his inclusion of an anecdote later to be deleted by the Warne editor.
 2. It is impossible to be more specific or exact since English notes often contain Latin or Greek quotations; notes in a religious context or concerned with religious characters sometimes contain 'indelicate' material; and an amended note is occasionally reduced by no more than a few words.
 3. Milman's 12 volume edition appeared in 1838-9, the 2nd 'carefully revised' edition, in 1846. McCloy saw this editor as 'a man singularly rich in the qualities essential to an historian, with liberality, candour, sympathy and fairness'. (Gibbon's Antagonism to Christianity, p. 317).

Nor did another clerical editor, described on the title page of the edition brought out a few years later by Henry Bohn, simply as 'An English Churchman'.¹ Like Milman, he sought in his ample notes to be scrupulously fair to Gibbon.² He even received the commendation of J.M. Robertson who, after taking a number of quotations from this edition, drew a comparison between its critical comments and those of the biographer, Cotter Morrison, whom he accused of blindly following Comte in his interpretation of Christian history. Referring to the Bohn editor's very sympathetic note on Julian, Robertson remarked, 'Once more we find the priest juster than the positivist.'³ Like Milman, this editor had something to say in his Preface about Gibbon's failure to do justice to Christianity, but we look in vain both there and in the individual notes for any reference to 'indecencies' or 'indelicacies'. Of this there is nothing; the text is Gibbon's own and no comment was felt necessary.

Our second question in arriving at a just verdict is: What is the author's general intention in his work? Gibbon's intention and approach have been the subject of the preceding chapters of this thesis - from his development of moral independence and assurance, and his assertions of moral principles in his earliest work, through his application of these principles both in his search for a worthy subject and in his actual writings, to the consummation in The Decline and Fall with its inescapable moral viewpoint continually making itself felt.

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1. The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, with various notes...London, Henry Bohn, 1853. (7 volumes). The title page shows 6 volumes as originally planned.
 2. See, for example his defence of Gibbon's use of Tertullian's evidence against Guizot's objection to this. (volume I, p. 21.n.)
 3. Edward Gibbon, p. 82.

Prima facie it is scarcely possible that an author whose major theme is moral and political corruption in the ancient world, who repeatedly deplores the 'degeneracy' of the Romans, who arraigns the 'vice and follies' or rulers and 'the depravity of mankind'¹, should knowingly, or even carelessly, write in such a way as to corrupt or deprave his readers. His passing criticism of 'the historian Sallust, who usefully practised the vices which he has eloquently censured',² is an incidental testimony to Gibbon's insistence on the need for integrity both in the man and in the History. It is well to affirm this in view of the long-standing impression to the contrary. 'For a century', says his best biographer, 'it was the habit to follow up ridicule of his person with persistent denigration of his character. Since then more sober evaluations of his qualities have demonstrated to those who will take the trouble to listen that while we may still laugh at the man's oddities, ...we must assert that Gibbon was a man of moral as well as intellectual integrity. He was a man of warm humanity as was recognised by his intimate friends, and these qualities pervade his history'.³

It is also worth remembering that not only in his conversation and his correspondence was he delicate, and sometimes a little prim,⁴ but in none of his other writings do we find the least suspicion of 'indecenty'.⁵

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1. See, e.g. DF, xxi, III, 347: 'the manners of Italy exhibited a remarkable scene of the depravity of mankind.'
 2. DF, xxxi, III, 344, n. 109.
 3. D.M. Low's Introduction to his Abridgement of DF, London, 1960, p. xiv. Low may safely be called Gibbon's best biographer in virtue of being the fullest, perhaps the most scholarly and most balanced. See Bonnard's reference to his work, JB, Preface, VIII ('la plus solide...la plus substantielle aussi, des biographies de l'historien.' Cf. JC, Preface, vi).
 4. Le Vicomte d'Haussonville (The Salon of Madame Necker, tr. H.M. Trollope. London, 1882, Vol. I, p. 71) found Gibbon's letters 'a little heavy' retaining something of 'the style of the grave historian.'
 5. See also Low's affirmation of the fact, Edward Gibbon, p. 266.

He was reticent in referring to his own fatal ailment¹ and the same reticence of language which, to Porson's surprise, avoided a word unfit 'for a decent historian',² showed itself elsewhere in The Decline and Fall: 'I touch with reluctance and impatience a more odious vice of which modesty rejects the name and nature abominates the idea.'³ In the same way he referred to 'the vague commerce' of Theodora when he meant sexual promiscuity.⁴ But his restraint in the choice of language never turned into prudery and his frankness in recording unseemly behaviour was sometimes responsible for earning him the accusation of 'indecenty' from some members of the public.

The main point at issue, however, is not the author's intent, but the tendency of his work as a whole. What, then, in view of the 'reproach of indecenty' levelled against the History 'by the rigid censors of morals',⁵ is the effect of the book on its readers? Obscenity trials are notorious for bringing out latent inhibitions and hallowed prejudices. Gibbon's work was never dragged through a court of justice but nonetheless suffered a de facto judgement against it from these 'rigid censors' who were offended by some of the material and some of the observations it contained. In the terms of the now classical common law definition laid down eighty years after the appearance of Gibbon's final volumes, the test of obscenity is found in 'the tendency to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral

1. Letters, No. 867, 11/11/93, III, 359-360, especially the last part.

2. Cf. the practice of his model, Tacitus, referred to above p. 586, n. 5.

3. DF, xliv, IV, 535.

4. DF, xl, IV, 228.

5. Memoirs, p. 182.

influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall.'¹ One clerical witness, Thomas Bowdler, seemed to look at The Decline and Fall in some such terms, though his fear of its readers 'being perverted' was largely confined to the sphere of divine revelation as distinct from moral attitudes and behaviour.² However, since his edition was specifically intended for 'young persons', there was no doubt in his mind about those into whose hands it might fall, and he therefore deleted not merely the 'irreligious' but also the 'indecent'. Yet over the years from Gibbon to Bowdler, 'young persons' of both sexes had been accustomed and encouraged to read in all its plain and explicit language, the unexpurgated Authorised Version of the Bible, even if certain parts were rarely discussed.³ For it was well known to all that the Bible, which recorded and commented on circumcision, castration, sexual intercourse, concubinage, prostitution, rape and sundry perversions, was a book with a profound moral intent and effect.

Yet as far as the tendency to corrupt is concerned, a more recent view has been that the test should be applied not so much to young persons - 'a fourteen year-old schoolgirl' - as to the general adult public. On this test, said Justice Stable, in his celebrated summing up:

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1. Cockburn, C.J., in R.v. Hicklin (1868 L.R. 3Q.B. at 371). In the Lady Chatterley trial, the judge directed the jury in this regard to bear in mind that the book was 'to be put...upon the market at a price of 3s.6d. a copy' (The Trial of Lady Chatterley, ed. C.H. Rolph, Penguin Books, 1961, p. 201) while DF, we remember, 'sold like a three-penny pamphlet'; 'my book was on every table, and almost on every toilette' (Memoirs, p. 157).
 2. According to the editor's word 'To the Christian Reader', Vol. I, v.
 3. The defender of 'the inimitable Mr. Gibbon' in the Gentleman's Magazine, Vol. 59, July, 1789, p. 610, made a similar point with regard to the Book of Common Prayer.

'A mass of literature, great literature, is wholly unsuitable for reading by the adolescent'. This fact, which has nothing to do with their intrinsic greatness as literature, is no reason, the judge implied, for not 'making those works available to the general public'.¹ A similar view is exemplified in another clerical witness to the greatness of The Decline and Fall, in an edition which appeared about a decade after Bowdler's.² Milman, far more liberal and scholarly than his predecessor, found no occasion to refer in his Preface to anything indecent or indelicate nor to expurgate the text of the work. On the contrary, despite a few strong criticisms, he found, just as Porson had found, very positive moral values expressed in it.

It is instructive to note the evidence of the clerics, since they are usually called during obscenity trials. And, as we have seen, Gibbon was not averse to calling clerical witnesses, or at least to citing clerical precedents to justify his own practice. For a number of notes and some passages in the text which might have involved him in accusations, he could thank his ecclesiastical sources, Jerome, Liutprand, Baronius, Warburton, as well as Maimonides, the Christian writer Lactantius, and Salvian, 'the preacher of the age',³ as Gibbon called him. So too, in later years, when offering a brief defence of his work, he took the opportunity of pointing to a delicate omission from his text. This gap, he noted, had already been supplied by an English clergyman, whose Essay on Pope dealt with the 'indelicate' subject of the Abelard's

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1. Stable, J. in the Philanderer case (1954).
 2. Milman's edition appeared in 12 volumes, 8vo, 1838-9 and in a second, 6 volume edition in 1846. The edition referred to here is the second.
 3. DF, xxxiii, III, 435, n. 42.

castration: 'The most naked tale in my history,' Gibbon claimed, 'is told by the Rev. Mr. Joseph Warton, an instructor of youth.'¹ In a more positive sense, however, Gibbon could point to the well-known acclamation of his entire work by the celebrated Scottish cleric and historian, William Robertson, who raised no eyebrow in his almost unqualified congratulation of the author of The Decline and Fall.²

In the most publicised trial of a book, whose central theme is sexual relationship, churchmen were called to give evidence, as to the ethical and moral qualities of the work. Canon Milford, Master of the Temple, saw Lady Chatterley's Lover as making a positive contribution to the recognition of 'the proper place of sex in human life'; the Bishop of Woolwich considered it a book which 'Christians ought to read'; Prebendary Hopkinson said that 'it was a book of moral purpose'; and Canon Demant of Christ Church, Oxford, thought the publication by Penguin 'was for the public good'.³ And what has that to do with the case of Edward Gibbon? One might imagine such a question from the lips of Lord Mansfield who retired as Chief Justice in the year that Gibbon's final volumes first appeared. The answer is that not only would the author have been able to rely on churchmen such as those just quoted to secure his acquittal had his case been heard in the Old Bailey in 1960,

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1. Memoirs, p. 193. The reference to DF, is lxix, VII, 229-30, where Gibbon merely alluded to 'the famous and unfortunate Abelard' as 'the lover of Eloisa'. Warton, in his Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope, 1756, admitted the difficulty of treating the catastrophe 'with any dignity and grace; in which there is still something indelicate, notwithstanding all the dexterity and management of our poet.' (Vol. I, p. 325).
 2. See Robertson's letters LXXVIII (15/3/1776) and CXLIX (12/5/1781) in MW, II, 159, 249-251; cf. also Rev. Dr. Joseph Warton's highly congratulatory letter, no. LXXII (11/3/1776) MW, II, 152.
 3. The Trial of Lady Chatterley, pp. 129, 65, 214, 221.

but that he could equally have called 'enlightened' clerical witnesses to vindicate The Decline and Fall before Lord Mansfield in 1788.¹

In Australia, following the Lady Chatterley decision, a group of academics at the Australian National University made a statement which seems directly applicable to Gibbon's work. They claimed that far from being an immoral work, as it was sometimes superficially held to be, the novel was 'animated by a profound concern with the moral issues raised by the situation with which it deals'.² The situation with which Gibbon's History deals is one of decline, corruption, depravity and often monstrous crime. Readers of earlier days, though their tribe is not extinct, sometimes failed to appreciate the distinction between being shocked and being corrupted, and failed to remember that an action or description which disgusts may have a cathartic effect rather than a tendency to deprave. In Fuglum's words, 'Gibbon does not dwell on his vicious characters because he is secretly attracted to them, but because he is so intensely aware of the power of evil.'³ He was however, attracted by genuine goodness and, in a narrative where vicious characters seemed to abound, he welcomed the occasional appearance of the virtuous. It was his expressed delight to seize a rare opportunity of 'discovering a single action which may be ascribed to...virtue',⁴ and to turn aside from violence and bloodshed 'to gather some flowers of science and virtue' exemplified in the life of a revered sultan who displayed justice, magnanimity and humility and who 'wept the instability of human greatness'.⁵

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1. The Quarto edition, vols. IV-VI appeared in May 1788.
 2. A.D. Hope et al. in a letter to the Minister for Customs and Excise, Melbourne Age, 27/2/1961, p. r.
 3. Edward Gibbon, p. 57.
 4. DF, xiv, I, 444.
 5. DF, lvii, VI, 236.

The Decline and Fall outlived its detractors and buried its hostile critics. Even the expurgating editors who deplored its anti-Christian sentiments and improprieties, responded to its grandeur and its positive values. In the nineteenth century many readers 'found their morale fortified by the contemplation of Gibbon's tremendous spectacle. The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire became an active moral force in Victorian England.'¹ If Coleridge and Lamb saw little to admire, others such as Landor agreed with the historian's friend and laureat, Hayley² that Gibbon had stripped off the false forms and disguises of churchmen, kings and nobles:

Through which men saw the murderer and the cheat
In diadem and cowl. Erectly stood,
After like work with fiercer hand perform'd,
Milton, as Adam pure, as Michael strong.

After quoting Landor's tribute in a lecture in 1935, Edmund Blunden declared that apart from 'the sheer pleasure of passing an hour...in thoughts of Mr. Gibbon,' his purpose was 'to find him in his devotional character.'³ This he discovered in those 'Observations' concluding the history of the Western Empire, from which he read to his audience the historian's instructive application of the 'awful revolution' to his own age and his speculations on the past and the future. Blunden brought his lecture to a close by declaring: 'Out of the age of "stalled theology" now forgotten, his lay sermon has become the voice of our time. A little more,' the lecturer confessed - and we can imagine the ironic smile on the face of the historian at the strange vicissitude of his fortune, 'a little more and I should be suggesting that Gibbon aspired to a pulpit.'⁴

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1. J.W. Swain, Edward Gibbon the Historian, p. 144. Swain refers to its profound effect on Cecil Rhodes and the young Winston Churchill.
 2. William Hayley, An Essay on History in Three Epistles to Edward Gibbon Esq. London, 1770 (Garland reprint, 1974), I, lines 7 ff., II, 7 ff.
 3. Edward Gibbon and his Age. Arthur Skemp Memorial Lecture delivered in the University of Bristol, 15 Feb. 1935. See pp. 34, 37.
 4. ibid., p. 37.

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Dillon-Smith, David, The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Department of History, University of Wollongong, 1982. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/1426>

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CONCLUSION

The last word on the historian as moralist was said by Gibbon himself and it is that with which we began: his statement of the historian's obligation to himself, to the present, and to posterity, to present a truthful record of the times and persons for praise, excuse, or censure,¹ though he admitted that he and his clerical opponents did not 'entertain the same notions of moral virtue.'² His dedication to historical truth obliged him never to 'conceal, by his own disgrace, that of his country, or of his religion.'³ That was his expression of his commitment and intention. His application of it, both to Rome and, by implication at least, to his own country, was equally clear to his contemporaries. Fox, whose moral character did not escape Gibbon's censure,⁴ seems to have written in his copy of The Decline and Fall, those lines which not only make this connection but also administer a rebuke to the parliamentary

placeman: King George in a fright
 Lest Gibbon should write
 The story of Britain's disgrace....

since, His book well describes
 How corruption and bribes
 O'erthrew the great empire of Rome;
 And his writings declare
 A degeneracy there
 Which his conduct exhibits at home.

Whatever in Gibbon and his work deserves to be praised, excused, or censured, has been amply brought to light by writers from his day to ours, and those who have given him highest praise have also admitted

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1. 'Vindication', MW, IV, 631, quoted above, chapter I, p.1.
 2. ibid., p. 605.
 3. ibid., p. 631.
 4. See above, chapter II, p. 66.

weaknesses and limitations. But on that particular aspect of his work which is the subject of this study, both his intention and his practice are unmistakable, as I think has been sufficiently shown. In the words of C.V.Wedgwood: 'He assumes that it is the right and duty of the historian to have a clearly defined moral attitude and he is exquisitely skilful in introducing judgement by way of implication.... Gibbon's just and generous admiration is reserved for those who best display the classic virtues: justice, fortitude, perseverance, moderation. He greatly admires cleverness but never for itself alone. His morality, classical again in this, did not permit him to respect success unless it was allied with these virtues.'¹ No one denies him his title as a historian: as moralist his claim is equally certain.

1. C.V.Wedgwood, Edward Gibbon. London, 1955, p.21.

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Bayle, P., Dictionnaire historique et critique (1697). One can follow Gibbon's directions to many an article from the footnotes of DF. He owned a 1740 edition of the work. I have quoted from the English edition of 1734, 5 Vols.

Bossuet, J.B., Discours sur l'histoire universelle, 1688. Gibbon's library contained the French editions of 1732 and 1782 and English translations of 1736 and 1747. The edition I have consulted is Tome XXIII of Oeuvres choisies de Bossuet. Versailles, 1822.

Bossuet, J.B., Histoire des variations des églises protestantes, 1688. I have used the Oeuvres choisies de Bossuet, Versailles, 1821 in which it forms tomes XV - XVII. It is not certain which English edition was put into Gibbon's hands at Oxford. Bonnard refers in his notes to the Memoirs to a translation from the 6th edition made at Antwerp in 1742. This is the edition I have consulted. Gibbon's library contained the French edition, Paris, 1718 - 30.

Encyclopédie; ou dictionnaire raisonné des arts, des sciences, et des métiers. Paris, 1751 - 65. 17 Vols. folio. Some of the articles Gibbon consulted or is thought to have consulted are referred to in the thesis text and notes.

Gaillard, M., Histoire de Charlemagne. Paris, 1782. In the writing of DF it was a work, he wrote, 'which I have freely and profitably used.' (xlix, V, 303, n.100). The edition is in 4 volumes, 12^o and the preface to Vol. I contains remarks on philosophic history and the lessons of history.

Giannone, P., The Civil History of the Kingdom of Naples...Written in Italian by Pietro Giannone,...and publish'd Anno 1723. Translated into English by Captain James Ogilvie. London, 1729.

In the list of subscribers at the beginning of the work appears the name of Edward Gibbon, Esq., so that the English translation was in the library of the historian's father, though only the Italian (Hague, 1723) is included in the catalogue of his own. Gibbon first read the work in a French translation (see my chapter III, p.82, n.5). Bonnard's notes to the Memoirs refer to a French translation by P. Desmaiseaux, published at Geneva in 1742. That I have consulted, Histoire Civile du Royaume de Naples, is dated A la Haye, 1742, but does not bear the translator's name.

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Montfaucon, B. de, Les Monumens de la monarchie française. Paris, 1729 - 33. This also was in Gibbon's library. I have seen only an English version, A collection of regal and ecclesiastical antiquities of France &c., London, 1750. 2 Vols. folio.

Mosheim, J.L., An Ecclesiastical History Ancient and Modern from the Birth of Christ to the Beginning of the Eighteenth Century. Translated from the original Latin..., by Archibald Maclaine. This work, which appeared in 1782, was in Gibbon's library together with the Latin original of which he made such great use in DF. I have consulted the English edition in a reprint at Berwick, 1819. 6 Vols.

Pascal, B., Les Provinciales ou Lettres par Louis de Montalte à un provincial de ses amis et aux RR. PP. Jésuites. Editions Garnier, Paris, 1965. Gibbon had three editions of this work which he claimed as instrumental in introducing him to a command of irony.

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La Curne de Ste Palaye, J.B., Memoire sur l'ancienne Chevalerie. A Paris, 1759-81. 3 Vols. This is another rare work which Gibbon must have relished and which he later added to his library. He refers to Ste Palaye amongst the eminent scholars of Paris (Memoirs, p.126) and both this and his other works would have supplemented those of Mabillon and Montfaucon in laying the foundations of Gibbon's scholarship. For Ste. Palaye see also under Gossman below.

An Universal History from the earliest Accounts to the Present Time. Compiled from Original Authors. Illustrated with Charts, Maps, Notes. The Ancient Part, that on which Gibbon cut his teeth, appeared first in folio and was reprinted in 21 volumes 8°, 1747 - 54. The edition I have used is dated in Vol. I, London 1779. The Modern Part in 43 volumes, 1759 - 66, contains amongst other things of interest in Gibbon's reading, the chapter on the life of Mohammed (Vol. I). The edition I have consulted is that of 1780.

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