

Gibbon

G. M. Young

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EDWARD GIBBON

From a contemporary silhouette cut by Mrs. Brown

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By
G. M. YOUNG

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GIBBON

I

EDWARD GIBBON was born at Putney in 1737 of an old but undistinguished Kentish family, a younger branch of which had migrated to the City. There his grandfather, a pious, black-browed tyrant, rose rapidly to great wealth after the Revolution, and forfeited it all as Director of the South Sea Company. He escaped with £10,000, and as much more as he had been able to conceal. In a few years he had rebuilt his ruined fortune, and was able to give his son the education of a gentleman, the run of his teeth in Paris, and in due course a seat in Parliament. Edward Gibbon II. was a vague impulsive person, ineffectually vibrating between the opposite attractions of business and gentility. Marrying for love, against his father's intentions, the daughter of another but less solvent Putney family, he found himself and their children deprived by the old man's will of a large share in the fortune they had a right to expect. Of Judith Gibbon we know only that she had seven children, lost six, and neglected the frail little mortal who survived, while she was making a social position for her husband in London, and trying to keep his passion for deep play within bounds. Her sister Catherine supplied her place, and won the lasting affection of her child. Once it is said (but Gibbon declined to confirm the story) he proposed to kill her. 'You see,' he explained, 'you are perfectly good now, so if you die you will go to heaven. If you live you may become wicked and go to hell.' 'But where do you expect to go if you kill me?' 'That,' he replied, 'my godfather will answer for. I have not been confirmed.' The first piece of the historian's writing we possess is a letter to his aunt in a bold round hand of thirteen, reporting his visit to an Ancient Camp near King's Weston. His education, at home or at private schools, was constantly interrupted by ill-health: 'fevers and lethargies, a fistula in the eye, a tendency to a dropsical and consumptive habit, a contraction of the nerves, with a variety of nameless disorders,' including a bite from a dog 'most vehemently suspected of madness.' At Westminster, where he spent two years and a half, he seems to have learnt little more than some lower-form Latin. His mother was now dead: his father had abandoned Parliament and the town and buried himself in his Hampshire estate. With the approach of adolescence the pains which had tortured his childhood and frustrated his education disappeared. He was not quite fifteen when he matriculated as a gentleman commoner of Magdalen.

Catherine Porten was a wise woman: she saw that the best treatment for an ailing child with an active brain, who disliked games and schoolboys, was books and talk. With Pope in hand they debated the characters of Homer: languid hours were comforted by the *Arabian Nights*. The combination is suggestive. Into the classical world, as the eighteenth century conceived it, Gibbon always had the entry. He thinks of the Decline like one who had lived among the sages and heroes of a greater age. His judgment was on the side of the West, but his imagination moved most freely in the East, and the work of his manhood is shot with a child's visions of grave and bearded Sultans who only smiled on the day of battle, the sword of Alp Arslan, the mace of Mahmoud, 'Imaus, and Caf, and Altai, and the Golden Mountains, and the Girdle of the Earth.' Half his History is written from the point of view of an ancient Roman, watching with mournful and indignant contempt the encroachments of barbarism and religion, the other half from the point of view of a Turk or Arab impatient for the end to come. To the Christian middle ages his imagination had no such key. No place in the world demands historic explanation so insistently as Venice. He passed through it with indifference and something like disgust. Gibbon's incomprehension of Mediaeval Europe is the measure of what history owes to Scott.

Where Catherine Porten--she soon becomes and remains my dear Kitty--could not follow, she encouraged. She was not a woman of much education, and the boy was a scholar born. The *Universal History* in octavo began to appear when he was eight, and the last and twentieth volume came out when he was twelve. The presiding spirit in this co-operative enterprise was that Campbell whose reputation among his brother Scots was such as to put Johnson on his guard. 'I used to go pretty often to Campbell's on a Sunday evening till I began to consider that the shoals of Scotchmen who flocked about him might probably say when anything of mine was well done, "Ay, ay, he has learnt this of CAWMELL."' The collaborators were an odd set: the learned Swinton, who once told a pewful of condemned criminals that he would give them the second half of his discourse on the following Sunday; the still more learned Sale, who was indeed the best Orientalist in Europe; Shelvocke, whose father sailed with the man who shot the Albatross; and the pious impostor, George Psalmanazar. 'I never sought much after anybody,' Johnson once mused. 'I sought after George Psalmanazar the

most. I used to go and sit with him at an ale-house in the city.' Gibbon devoured the successive volumes as a later generation devoured the Waverley Novels. From 'this unequal work' he ranged, backwards and forwards and far afield, to translations of Herodotus and Tacitus, Machiavelli and Fra Paolo, to descriptions of China, Mexico and Peru. His twelfth year was his intellectual spring: his fourteenth fixed his destiny. On a visit to the Hoares at Stourhead, city friends of his father it may be supposed, he found a book on the later Roman Empire. He has chronicled the moment with affectionate recollection. 'I was immersed in the passage of the Goths over the Danube when the summons of the dinner bell reluctantly dragged me from my intellectual feast.' In the passage of the Goths over the Danube, and all it meant and brought about, he was immersed for the rest of his life. From the successors of Constantine he plunged into the sea of Oriental history. Some instinct of criticism directed him to the original sources, and taught him also how to build with maps and tables that solid framework of time and place in which a historian must set his learning. He spelt his way through French and Latin translations, and he dreamt of chronology. 'I arrived at Oxford with a stock of erudition that might have puzzled a doctor and a degree of ignorance of which a schoolboy would have been ashamed.' Untaught and unguided he had ranged round the whole circle of his life's work.

From Oxford he got even less than he had got from Westminster. He paid slight attention to the authorities or the undergraduates, and they paid less attention to him. In later years Magdalen faintly recalled her most illustrious son as a little creature with a big head, who always wore black and was usually late for dinner. A vague idea of learning Arabic was not encouraged by his tutor, and he was too immature to read profitably alone. Thrown on himself, his mind turned to religious controversy, not on the theological so much as the historical side. He had always been fond, in a childish way, of religious speculation, and something in his early reading had impressed him with a deep respect for the Church of the Fathers. As he went further he did not fail to notice that in its beliefs and observances the Church of the Fathers was much more like the Church of Rome than Protestants usually allowed. Newman was to take the same road. In this mood he fell in with the writings of Bossuet and of the Elizabethan Jesuit, Parsons: the majestic unity and antiquity of Rome, some transient flush of adolescent piety, combined to carry him away, and he announced his conversion, as he afterwards told a friend, with the pomp, the dignity and the self-satisfaction of a martyr. He was just sixteen.

A gentleman commoner of Magdalen was a person of sufficient importance for his conversion to attract attention, and the Privy Council examined the bookseller who had found the priest to receive him. Technically, both the convert and the priest had committed high treason. But the law was dormant, and the priest was further protected by his diplomatic status as chaplain to the Sardinian Embassy. The worst that could have happened to Gibbon was some annoyance from informers. But he could not, as a Catholic, return to Oxford, and his father determined to send him out of the country. Chesterfield had made a Swiss education fashionable, and one of the Eliots, who had married a Gibbon cousin, had been at Lausanne with the young Stanhope. To Lausanne accordingly the renegade was dispatched in wrath.

II

The religious episode was liquidated: after eighteen months of earnest but polite dialectic with his Swiss tutor Gibbon decided to suspend his enquiries and receive the sacrament. History had sent him to Rome, and logic, with a growing indifference to the subject-matter, sent him far across the opposite frontier. The only permanent consequence of his lapse and recovery was a delight in the refinements of theological debate, and a profound conviction of the worthlessness of religious emotion. As an ecclesiastical historian and an ironist, Gibbon owed much to those encounters with M. Pavilliard. Later, it pleased him to reflect that Bayle had followed the same course, from Protestantism to Rome and from Rome to a universal Protestantism of his own making. 'Je suis protestant, car je proteste contre toutes les religions.' This profession of faith Gibbon could at all times have signed with perfect sincerity. Once when pressed by a friend, he declared himself, emphatically, a theist, with no interest in a future life, and his final opinion is recorded in the chapter where he traces the history of Reform from the Paulicians to his own times. The Protestants had overthrown a vast fabric of superstition: but they had kept the inspiration of Scripture and added, in the Justification theology, fresh absurdities of their own: their chief service to humanity was accidental and unintended. By appealing to private judgment they made the ultimate triumph of reason inevitable, a triumph to be qualified, however, by the doubt whether rational religion can ever be sufficient to satisfy the emotions, or regulate the conduct, of the vulgar.

Released from controversy, he gave himself wholly up to study. His eighteenth year was a second spring. His tutor appreciated both his gifts and his defects, and set his course accordingly. For the first time in his life he was made to read systematically. One omission indeed Pavilliard, an excellent schoolmaster but no great scholar, was not equipped to supply. Gibbon had missed the steady drill in conjugations and declensions which a school provides, and to the end he was capable of mistakes which a very ordinary schoolboy learns to avoid. He was never, in the Westminster and Oxford sense, a scholar, and when he disclaimed the scrupulous ear of a well-flogged critic, he knew that he did not possess it. His genders and his quantities were both shaky: he will write *ἅγιος πέλαγος*, and begin a hexameter with *Optimus est Niger*. A friend who looked over his posthumous papers declared that his early manuscript was faulty beyond belief. Even Voltaire, who had passed through the excellent discipline of a Jesuit school, had the advantage of him here. In particular, Gibbon was never really at home in Greek, and sometimes he seems to be skating over awful depths of ignorance. 'The name of Werdan has very little of a Greek aspect or sound. In transposing the Greek character from left to right, might not the Arabs produce from the familiar appellation of Andrew, something like the anagram Werdan?' Certainly they might, if the Greeks had called Andreas Andrew. But they did not, and to find Gibbon in the full tide of his History proffering this nonsense in cold print is a warning, and a consolation, to us all.

But unwearied, unimpatient, he made his way under Pavilliard's guidance through the main body of Roman literature. Logic, mathematics and international law were taken as recreations. He began to write, always in French or Latin, letters to classical editors, essays on points of interpretation, such things as would now find their way into the *Classical Review*. One of his emendations (a fairly easy shot) has proved acceptable to editors.^[1] Over another it is best to draw a veil. Latin versification may be an idle pursuit, but it does prevent a man from pronouncing Aetōlus Aetōlus.

Daily translating French into Latin and Latin into French, he lost his ear for English idiom. In fact, by the time he was eighteen he could hardly write English at all.

These people are very free in all the extent of the natural rights and it seems as if the liberty banished from almost all the rest of the earth has chose her retreat here. Nothing diverts them so much as to hear talk of obeying the King. That makes them laugh. They cannot adjust the idea of submission with that of a real man. Every Iroquois thinks himself sovereign and pretends to be subordinate of none.

The birth makes a gentleman, the virtue alone a knight. How great lord soever one was it was not allowed to wear the cloak before one was knighted.

And this is how he announces his re-conversion in a letter to his aunt:

I have at length good news to tell you; I am now good protestant and extremely glad of it. Brought up with all the ideas of the Church of England, I could scarce resolve to communion with Presbyterians as all the people of this country are. I at last got over it in considering that whatever difference there may be between this church and ours in the government and discipline they still regard us as brethren and profess the same faith as us. I do assure you I feel a joy pure and the more so as I know it to be not only innocent but laudable.

After this mollifying introduction, he proceeds to business. He had been prevailed upon by an English visitor to play Pharaon and had lost forty guineas. He demanded his revenge, and lost seventy more. 'Never have I felt a despair equal to that I had then. I was a great while hesitating upon the most violent parties.' The party he resolved on was to borrow a horse, travel to London, and raise the money. But Pavilliard was on his tracks.

Was successful as far as Geneva, but there the difficulty I found to dispose of my horse having stopped me some days, Pavilliard who had perceived my evasion, ran after me and half entreaties half force brought me back to Lausanne with him.

The escapade seems to have caused more amusement than annoyance at home. Kitty passed the letter on to his father; it survives with his stepmother's endorsement--'Old cat to refuse his request.' Pavilliard pleaded for the erring child, and Mr. Gibbon paid up.

Gibbon had from nature a happy temperament. His first few months in Lausanne were uncomfortable, but he soon reconciled himself to the contrast between the luxury of Magdalen and the chilly, not over-cleanly, quarters provided by Madame Pavilliard, and the mutton roasted twice with a gash in it. Mr. Gibbon's instructions were that he should be kept at home on short pocket-money, but Pavilliard got the régime relaxed, and he was gradually allowed to make a place for himself in local society: 'though I am the Englishman here who spends least money, I am he who is most generally liked.' He learnt to walk through a minuet and to draw: he became a Free Mason: he formed the friendship with Deyverdun which gave so much contentment to his later years. Pavilliard took him round Switzerland to observe, not the landscape, but the institutions of the country, and to gaze with Protestant abhorrence on the splendour and superstition of Einsiedeln. The addition of a stepmother to the family circle, announced not by his father but by a Hampshire neighbour, and the possible effect, if she had children, on his own fortunes, alarmed him. He sent affectionate and respectful messages to the lady, but he was annoyed, and at a distance disposed to hate her. His father, possibly as a set-off, offered him a tour in France or Italy: he declined. 'I never liked young travellers: they go too raw to make any great remarks, and they lose a time which is (in my opinion) the most precious part of a man's life.' He was reading ten or twelve hours a day, and he wanted to finish his studies at Cambridge or a Dutch university. The world has reason to be grateful to M. Pavilliard, who taught Gibbon how to read; but his economy of time and purpose, like the even clerkly hand in which he kept his journals, all neatly paged and headed, with hardly an erasure in a hundred lines, suggests a throwback to his commercial grandfather.

At Lausanne Gibbon ceased to be an Englishman, but he did not become a Frenchman. He was a young provincial, and a certain provincial foppishness hung about him to the end of his life. His studies were not of the modern fashionable kind. His solitary education kept him out of the main stream of contemporary thought, and it may be doubted whether the latest literature was to be found in the Pastor's library. One influence indeed could not be excluded. The great event of the years while Gibbon was at Lausanne was the arrival of M. de Voltaire at Les Délices in the territory of Geneva. He was close on sixty, incomparably the most famous and the most influential man in Europe. The Venerable Consistory of Geneva were not so easily impressed. They disapproved of the theatre, and Voltaire, to gratify his passion for the stage, had to form a private troupe, outside their jurisdiction, at Monrepos, near Lausanne. Gibbon got to know them, supped with them, listened to the old-fashioned declamation of Voltaire on the stage. He was introduced to the great man, who received him with an indifference which helped him afterwards to realize that Voltaire was perhaps not so great a man as he had thought.

Of Voltaire's influence on Gibbon as a historian I must say something later. Meanwhile, of far more importance than this casual encounter was his reading of Montesquieu and Pascal. Gibbon used to read the *Provinciales* once a year, and his mingling of truth and malice in an innocent antithesis is often of the purest Pascalian quality, as for example when he writes of the Popes' attitude to the Filioque clause: 'They condemned the innovation but they acquiesced in the sentiment.' Or more broadly (and there is plenty of fun in Pascal):

In the last and fatal siege of Syracuse, her citizens displayed some remnant of the spirit which had formerly resisted the powers of Athens and Carthage. They stood about twenty days against the battering-rams and catapultae, the mines and tortoises of the besiegers,

--really it seems as if Gibbon, who thought Lord Heathfield of Gibraltar 'a glorious old fellow,' had for once taken fire--'and the place might have been relieved if the mariners of the Imperial fleet had not been detained at Constantinople in building a church to the Virgin Mary.' Pascal would have condemned the irreverence, but no one would have enjoyed the expression of it more keenly.

The influence of Montesquieu was still more extensive. There are few famous books about which it is so difficult to make up one's mind as the *Esprit des Lois*: Macaulay's impertinent image of the Learned Pig will intrude itself into the picture. But one thing may be affirmed with confidence. Montesquieu's apprehension of Impersonal Causes was a positive and memorable advance in historic method, of which Gibbon was the first historian to avail himself. His magnificent deduction, for example, of the history of the nomads from the nomad way of life is much finer than anything in Montesquieu, because Gibbon had a much finer intellect. But without Montesquieu's guidance it could not have been written. Very often, no doubt, Montesquieu attaches the wrong cause to the wrong effect. But that there must be a cause, and that the cause is to be looked for not in the individual will, in the wisdom of the good, or the cleverness of the wicked, but in circumstances, in climate, in the culture appropriate to a particular time and place, all this, though it seems elementary doctrine now, had to be discovered once, and, so far as any idea can ever be self-born, it was the issue of Montesquieu's unaided meditation. *Prolem sine matre creatam* he wrote on his title-page, a device which few philosophers could take with equal right. And his style, the pungent blend of epigram and solemnity, not unlike what admiring disciples have related of Lord Acton's conversation, might very well seem to a young reader to be compact of rich oracular wisdom. For a time Gibbon copied his idol with the fervour of a youthful passion, and traces of his early allegiance mark his writing to the end. French critics have praised the skill with which Montesquieu enlarged the language by casting back to Latin idiom.

La Suède était comme *répandue* dans les déserts de Pologne.

Gibbon was equally diligent, but less successful. In Siam a *just* army is divided into four brigades: the Praetorian prefect *moderated* the trades which he regulated: a general *pervaded* a province by marching through it, and Aurelian *dejected* the invaders of Italy not by pointing out the difficulties of their enterprise, but by slaughtering them in large numbers. That military engines were *occasionally* issued to the army is not meant as a reflexion on the Roman War Office. Apart from these floral tributes, Gibbon's mature judgment reserved for his master one signal honour. The only modern writer whom he transcribes at length in the *Decline and Fall* is the President de Montesquieu.

III

If Gibbon had grown up in England, varying desultory reading at Buriton with port and prejudice at Magdalen and the pleasures of a manly Oxonian among the taverns and bagnios of Covent Garden, his mind would not have ripened so quickly or so evenly, and his boyhood would not have lasted so long. The portrait surviving from those years shows a thoughtful and sensitive face from which the lines of childhood have not quite disappeared. He must have been an attractive boy, red-haired and tiny--helplessly clumsy with hands and feet, but with an excellent bearing and most expressive features. Lausanne in 1757 was the scene of an idyll which Rousseau might have approved: a young scholar from the unknown island, a young beauty from a parsonage in the hills, the summer meeting by the shores of Lemane when he was twenty and she eighteen. Gibbon, we may believe, was sincerely, if not very strongly, in love: Suzanne Curchod, we may suspect, wanted to marry someone, and would have preferred him to any of the young clergymen who, with suspicious assiduity, rode out to Crassy every Sunday to help the pastor in the performance of Divine Service. Her parents smiled on their encounters: Gibbon's behaviour after that unlucky faro party seems to have been irreproachable, and by Swiss standards he was rich.

He has briefly registered the progress of their loves:

1757, June. I saw Mademoiselle Curchod. Omnia vincit amor et nos cedamus amori.

August 1st. I went to Crassy and staid two days.

Oct. 15th. Passed through Crassy.

Nov. 1st. Saw Mdlle. Curchod on my way through Rolle.

Nov. 17th. I went to Crassy and staid there six days.

The family picture completed his enchantment. 'I saw you attentive to your father's needs, responsive to your mother's tenderness, displaying without affectation the virtues which enthralled me. Carried away by love, I swore an attachment beyond the assaults of time. You did not withdraw your eyes and in them I thought I read your tenderness and my happiness. My distraction was observed: they teased me about it: my heart was too full to reply. I pretended business and locked myself in my room.' That sounds genuine even if we do not believe the story that Gibbon stopped strangers in the lanes round Lausanne with a dagger, and forced them to acknowledge the superior charms of Mlle. Curchod. But there was a strong vein of self-regard in Gibbon's character, and as the date of his return to England grew nearer he began to prepare her for disappointment. He had nothing but his father's bounty and his prospects to live on, and he probably realized that marriage with a dowerless foreigner would seem an outrage to his father, and would really be a disaster to himself.

He left Lausanne in the spring of 1758. All Europe was at war, and he had to make his way, in Dutch uniform, in the character of a Swiss officer returning to Holland. On an afternoon in May he presented himself, sound in body and religion, at Kitty's boarding-house in College Street, and 'the evening was spent in effusions of joy and confidence' with his parents. He found his father reconciled, his stepmother a charming and intelligent woman, and both of them anxious to make him happy. But the family fortunes were not flourishing, and in return for an annuity of £300 he was induced to join in cutting off the entail so that his father might mortgage Buriton for £10,000. His grandfather had left the bulk of his disposable property to his daughters. One of them had transmitted her share intact to the Eliots of Port Eliot: the other, Miss Hester, disciple, patroness and almoner of the mystic, William Law, was living a life of seclusion and good works in Northamptonshire. Gibbon always took some pride in the family connection with Law: he seems to have felt that if the Gibbons were to have a spiritual director they showed their judgment by selecting a scholar and a gentleman. To Miss Hester, no doubt at his father's suggestion, he addressed the first of those inimitable exercises in polite letter-writing which diversify and adorn his correspondence:

DEAR MADAM,--Tho' the public voice had long since accustomed me to think myself honoured in calling Mrs. Gibbon my aunt, yet I never enjoyed the happiness of living near her, and of instructing myself not less by her example than by her precepts. Your piety, Madam, has engaged you to prefer a retreat to the world. Errors, justifiable only in their principle, forced my father to give me a foreign education. Fully disabused of the unhappy ideas I had taken up, and at last restored to myself, I am happy in the affection of the tenderest of fathers. May I not hope, Madam, to see my felicity compleat by the acquisition of your esteem and

friendship? Duty and Inclination engage me equally to solicit them, all my endeavours shall tend to deserve them, and, with Mrs. Gibbon, I know that to deserve is to obtain. I have now been in England about two months, and should have acquitted myself much sooner of my duty, but frequent journeys to London scarce left me a moment to myself, and since, a very ugly fever my father has had, engrossed all my thoughts. He is now entirely recovered, and desires his love and service to you, Madam, as well as to Mr. Law.--I am, dear Madam, with the sincerest esteem and most profound respect, your most obedient humble servant and dutiful nephew,

E. GIBBON, Junior.

Thoroughly re-established in the confidence of his family, Gibbon cautiously opened the subject of his engagement. As he had expected, his father would not hear of it, and after holding out two hours the lover gave way. Two hours is not much. But Gibbon's family feelings were strong: he could never forget the agony of grief and despair he had witnessed when his mother died, the darkened room, the tapers burning at midday, and he yielded to his father's emotions--'an Englishman, and my son!' Suzanne fought hard; she suggested as a compromise that he should spend three months every year in Switzerland till his father died. But Mrs. Gibbon, who intercepted her letters, made it clear in the kindest way that there was no hope, and, when her first agitation had subsided, she had sufficient self-control to accept the admiration and encourage the attentions of more likely suitors. Some months later he renewed his plea. But his father's objections were unshaken. 'Even if you could afford to marry, Suzanne is a foreigner. You are too fond of foreign ways already--you cannot even speak English properly. She would be uncomfortable in England and she would always be trying to get you back to Switzerland. I could not blame her, but for me it would be misery, for you a crime.' And by now, after a summer in England, Gibbon must have realized that they were unanswerable.

He was the heir to an English estate, but if he was to take a position in English society he would have to make it first. Socially the Gibbons were betwixt and between; in the country something, in London nothing. In dropping out of London society his father had dropped out of recollection, and there was no one, except David Mallet and his daughter, who had married the Genoese envoy, to give the son a start. He took rooms in Bond Street at a guinea and a half a week, and hoped for the best. He had no friends of his own age: he knew nothing of English ways: a young man from the country could hardly expect to make a good entrance with no better introducers than a pushing journalist and the wife of a minor diplomat. They did their best, but it was not much, though old Lady Hervey was induced to extend a vague patronage. An occasional night out relieved the monotony, but for the most part while the coaches rattled along Bond Street, Gibbon was left alone with his books, reading Hume and Robertson, and sighing for Lausanne.

Buriton, under his stepmother's management, was a pleasant and always available retreat when funds ran low. A Tudor house with early Georgian additions, where 'if strangers had nothing to see, the inhabitants had little to desire'; good grounds; fine views of wood and down; handsome horses, sometimes in the coach and sometimes at the plough; a sanguine farming squire with an elegant and careful wife; a library stuffed with old Tory folios, classics, Fathers, and a random collection of modern English books: against such a background we must set, as in a Conversation Piece of the day, the little courtly figure of the son of the house. True, Mrs. Gibbon's conversation in the morning, Mr. Gibbon's newspaper in the afternoon, visitors who had to be entertained, visits which had to be returned, and dinners out when the full moon made the heavy Hampshire roads least dangerous, absorbed much precious time. But Gibbon was an early riser--it is one of the surprises in his character--and his library grew as he read. 'I cannot forget the joy with which I exchanged a bank-note of twenty pounds for twenty volumes of the Memoirs of the Academy of Inscriptions.' His Greek studies still languished, but the Gibbons were regular church-goers, and the village congregation may have observed with awe the young squire following the lessons in a Septuagint or a Greek Testament. To the other pursuits of his class he was not drawn. Mrs. Gibbon once made him tramp near five miles after rabbits: it seems to have been his record for physical exertion. A race meeting was just tolerable because it reminded him of the Olympic games: an election furnished instruction in English manners. But he rarely rode and never shot, and his walks usually ended at the nearest seat. He was finishing his first book.

'The design of my first work, the Essay on the Study of Literature, was suggested by a refinement of vanity, the desire of justifying and praising the object of a favourite pursuit.' He resented, with a touch of personal pique, the low esteem in which learning was held in the France of Voltaire and Diderot. The philosophers had turned their backs on antiquity: the faithful few were branded with the new-coined name of Erudite: and the current doctrine, which assigned judgment to the philosopher and imagination to the *bel esprit*, left the scholar with nothing to be proud of but his memory. It was in defence of the Erudite that Gibbon sharpened his first pen. The Essay in itself is no great matter. But by hints and

glimpses which he had not yet the skill to combine, it gives us the programme of his intellectual life.

Philosophy, he writes, is the search for first principles: in history, for the principles of movement, the concatenation of cause and effect. Facts are of three orders: those which prove nothing beyond themselves; those which can be used to establish a partial conclusion, to determine a motive or illustrate a character; those which are integral to the general system and move its springs. These are few, but fewer still are the minds which can perceive them and draw them out of 'the vast chaos of events.' The historian, like the naturalist, must collect everything and put his system together as the meaning of the particulars becomes clear. The opposition of Philosopher and Erudite is partial: in the true Historian the two are reconciled.

IV

The Essay had been begun at Lausanne, and was therefore written in French, with a florid dedication to Suzanne, which was afterwards suppressed. It was finished in February 1759. But it was not published till 1761, and one of the first copies was presented under canvas to the Duke of York. One does not easily picture the young author, belted and sworded, drilling the yokels of South Hampshire or roystering with their officers in Portsmouth taverns. Yet this was the life to which fate had consigned him. The Seven Years' War was in progress, the militia had been embodied, and Major Gibbon the elder, and Captain Gibbon the younger, had to take the field in the summer of 1760. Otherwise he would probably have gone back to Switzerland, and his life and Suzanne's might have run a different course.

For two whole years and more the militia marched and countermarched along the downs, from Winchester to Blandford, pleasant and hospitable, to Devizes, populous and disorderly, to Dover, where they exercised in sight of the Gallic shores. The Captain enjoyed his duties more than his society: for seven months, while he was learning his drill, he was cut off from books, and against his cautious judgment that in reviews the South Hampshires were *rather* a credit than a disgrace to the line, must be set his confession that his military fever was cooled by the enjoyment of a mimic Bellona. But he was a keen and active officer: he brought to his military duties the professional thoroughness that he applied to everything except his finances and his correspondence. 'The militia,' he avers, 'made me an Englishman and a soldier,' and he purrs with pride over those unfortunate scholars who were so far from understanding the discipline of a legion that they had never, perhaps, even seen a battalion under arms. Wherever the South Hants Grenadiers marched--their motto *Falces conflantur in Enses* was Gibbon's selection--a small classical library travelled in the baggage: Blandford was the scene of his first grand attack on the difficulties of the Greek tongue, and the Journal is almost evenly divided between field days, court martials, drinking bouts, the *Iliad* and *Les Racines Grecques*.

March 31st. The Battalion was out this morning with officers and 12 rounds. I exercised them. As it blew a storm of wind the whole time, I went directly to the firings, which considering the weather they performed very well. I tried for the first time firing them in the single column. In the evenings I read the *Enquiry*, p. 56-80, went thro' *Racines Greques*, 12-16; and reviewed the first three hundred lines of the fifth book of the *Iliad*. Wallis of the Dorset dined and supped with us.

April 5th. This morning was terribly broke into by the adjournment of our Court Martial which lasted 8 to 10, and a field day which I attended eleven to one. However, as the greatest difficulties are those occasioned by our own laziness I found means to go through the *Racines Greques* from 28-32, to review the whole VIth book of the *Iliad*, and to read the VIIth v. 1-123 in this busy day.

May 7th. We had a very good field day with officers. I never saw the Battalion do anything better than marching in battalion slow time down the hill, and halting to fire by subdivisions every ten or twelve paces. We tried a new thing of my invention; firing six deep. When you are marching in battalion, the four centre subdivisions advance out, the two upon each flank incline inwards and form in their rear, the Grenadiers dress upon the right and left with the front subdivisions. On the preparative the Grenadiers make ready; when they fire, the two right-hand subdivisions make ready; that is to say, the rear subdivisions make ready three ranks standing, and the front subdivision comes down, the three ranks as front rank. The moment the rear has fired, the front subdivision (except the front rank) rises. The two left-hand subdivisions make ready in the same manner when the second subdivision of Grenadiers fires. In a word, each of the four front and rear subdivisions makes ready when the front subdivision upon their right or left fires. The order of firing is, the Grenadiers, the rear subdivisions on the flanks, the front subdivisions on the flanks, rear subdivisions in the centre, front subdivisions in the centre. The battalion is formed again in the same manner as from the single column. I read to-day the XIth Book of the *Iliad*, v. 542-847 the end. In the evening Williams and Thresher came over from Dorchester to sup with us.

May 8th. . . . This was my birthday, on which I entered into the 26th year of my age. This gave me occasion to look a little into myself, and consider impartially my good and bad qualities. It appeared to me, upon this enquiry, that my Character was virtuous, incapable of a base action, and formed for generous ones; but that it was proud, violent, and disagreeable in society. These qualities I must endeavour to cultivate, extirpate, or restrain, according to their different tendency. Wit I have none. My imagination is rather strong than pleasing. My memory both capacious and retentive. The shining qualities of my understanding are extensiveness and penetration; but I want both quickness and exactness. 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. When I talk of my situation, I must exclude that temporary one, of being in the Militia. Tho' I go thro' it with spirit and application, it is both unfit for, and unworthy of me.

June 12th. I reviewed the XVth Book of the *Iliad*. Miss Page and Miss Fanny Page dined with us, the eldest is that dangerous female character called a wit. Fanny is quite the reverse, a pretty, meek (but I am afraid) insipid Girl. She has been talked of for me, but tho' she will have a noble fortune, I must have a wife I can speak to.

13th. I read the XVIth Book of the *Iliad*, v. 1-113.

July 19th. I sacrificed the morning rather thro' curiosity than any other motive to Miss Fanny's company. As she is under no constraint there, she is very chearfull and chatty, but discovers little understanding and less improvement. The education of both the sisters was totally neglected. All that the eldest is she owes it entirely to her own natural genius. She (I mean the eldest) in company with Miss Farrel and young Batten came in to dine with us. Batten is a proof how well an ordinary genius may go through the world. Without either parts, knowledge or address, his good nature, good humour, great spirits, and acquaintance with country affairs make him acceptable to every family round the country. Miss Farrel is a good pretty girl.

July 20th. Fanny was sent for home early in the morning to meet some company who were expected at Watergate; but I fancy it was to avoid the Millers. They all (Sir John and Lady Miller, Mrs. M. and the two Miss Millers) came to dine with us by invitation. Mrs. Gibbon gave them a most excellent dinner of eleven and eleven with a desert. We are to dine with them Saturday.

July 21st. A Violent headache.

Of more consequence than his acquirements as a soldier was the shaking, as he calls it, which dissipated his reserve and removed the traces of his foreign education. He got to know, and even to like, his father, who appeared to his best advantage, a cultivated country gentleman, among rustic Tories who were only by large allowance gentlemen and by no reckoning cultivated men. 'I was much pleased with him,' he afterwards told his friends. He cannot have enjoyed those rough nights with his fellow-officers, except when Colonel Wilkes of the Bucks Militia dined in mess, bubbling over with wit and mischief and plans for turning Lord Bute inside out. But he endured them and they hardened him. Perhaps they over-hardened him. It was in the course of his military service that he sustained the injury which, neglected, was to shorten his life. A young man with Gibbon's physical disadvantages put in authority over lusty young squireens may have overdone it in more ways than one: even Tom Jones had his awkward moments in a militia mess.

On the return of peace in 1763, his future was still to consider. He had been nominated for Petersfield in 1761, and declined the poll in a spirited little speech. The family income, though steadily declining under his father's optimistic management, was just sufficient to secure him a seat. But he refused a prospect to which he felt himself unequal, and asked that the money might be spent on a foreign tour. Thirty-six days after the disbandment of the militia he was in Paris, with liberty to go where else he liked and a fund of £1200 for extraordinaries. At first he was delighted. The Ambassador indeed neglected him, and Mallet's introductions were received with a smile. But Lady Hervey sent him to Madame Geoffrin, *mère des philosophes*, and there he met Helvétius, who showed him great attention and passed him on to Baron d'Holbach. 'I do assure you,' he writes to his stepmother, 'that in a fortnight passed at Paris I have heard more conversation worth remembering, and seen more men of letters among the people of fashion, than I had done in two or three winters in London.' But a certain dissatisfaction soon makes itself felt. Gibbon had not made up his mind whether he wished to be received as a gentleman or a man of letters, and he was not quite sure of himself on either footing. His book helped him to fix his position. 'Il décida de mon Etat. J'étais homme de lettres reconnu et ce n'est qu'à Paris que cette qualité forme un Etat.' But not even French politeness could take the *Essai* very seriously: and Paris no doubt was well aware that, though he left his name at proper intervals at the Duke of Bedford's door, he was not admitted. He was never comfortable in large societies, and he found the artists and writers better company, 'less vain and more reasonable,' by themselves in the morning than when they united their brilliancy at the tables of the great. Before his fourteen weeks were up, he had begun to withdraw from the splendours of society to the homelier entertainment furnished by Madame Bontemps: 'a very good sort of a woman,' he assures his stepmother, 'agreeable and sans prétensions. She seems to have conceived a real motherly attachment for me (Gibbon already knew her son, a young diplomat in London). I generally sup there three or four times a week quite in a friendly way.' This is not quite how he

confided the story to his Journal.

Elle m'aimait, j'étais son fils et son ami. Mes sentiments répondaient aux siens. J'ai peu vu des femmes aussi aimables que celle-là. Son cœur sentait vivement et avec délicatesse jusqu'aux moindres impressions. Elle est bonne, franche, et douce. Elle commença d'abord à s'attacher à moi: me parlait de ses affaires les plus secrètes et me donnait des conseils et jusqu'à des réprimandes. Elle avait même quelquefois des Ouvertures que je ne comprends pas trop encore. Elle me parlait des plaisirs des sens, m'encourageait à en parler, m'entendait lire les contes de la Fontaine, et lorsque échauffé par ces agaceries je m'émancipais un peu, elle me repoussait faiblement et paraissait émue. Avec un peu plus de hardiesse j'aurais peut être réussi. Peut être aussi cette conduite n'était l'effet que de la liberté françoise et de la franchise d'un caractère qui agissait sans façon parce qu'il agissait sans dessein.

Madame Bontemps completed his education. But even the 'exquisite blessing' of her friendship and instructions could not conceal the fact that Paris was very expensive, and that the round of calls, dinners, galleries, churches and libraries, in the style befitting an Englishman of condition, were making a hole in that fund for extraordinaries. To economize for the descent on Italy he retired to Lausanne. With this departure his real life begins.

V

Lausanne, at once a University town, a social capital for the gentry of the Pays de Vaud, most of whom had relations in the French army or the German courts, and a holiday resort for all Europe, provided a livelier, simpler and more intelligent society than could have been found in any town of France or England, *une dissipation continue, douce et réglée*. The high-born Bourg looked down on the highbrow Cité, but they worked in alliance, and the bourgeoisie had to take some pains to get their foot in either. The girls were for the most part well-educated and well-behaved, and in the Société du Printemps they were allowed to entertain their young men friends without chaperons and without ill report.

They laughed, they sang, they danced, they played at cards, they acted comedies: but in the midst of this careless gaiety, they respected themselves, and were respected by the men: the invisible line between liberty and licentiousness was never transgressed by a gesture, a word, or a look, and their virgin chastity was never sullied by the breath of scandal or suspicion: a singular institution, expressive of the innocent simplicity of Swiss manners.

Holroyd's account is more direct. 'They are not so reserved as English misses but are extremely shy of pawing or handling.' Gibbon's Journal touches lightly on the cabals and petty warfare of the palace, and some of his thumbnail sketches of the townspeople and the visitors have a neatness which suggests that, if he had had a mind to it, he would have been a famous letter-writer. There is M. le Maire, a pitiless talker, whose wife and daughter had to coach him before he could be shown at a party: there is the heavy English traveller who agreed with everyone because he had no ideas of his own: the tradesman who had prospered and become Banquier Anglais, but still sweated with agitation when he sat down to play: the erratic Thomas, wicked Lord Lyttleton, so called in after days less from any failings of his own than from contrast with the intense virtue of his sire, who shocked Gibbon by saying that anyone could see Rome in three weeks. There is the chapter of the averted duel when William Guise called a Dutch rival an impertinent fellow, and Gibbon and Holroyd ran to and fro arranging a settlement: Guise swearing, Vanberchen trembling, the young lady's mother gabbling, her sister weeping, and through all the storm Marianne herself, indifferent and tranquil, with a smile sometimes passing over her calm face. This incident kept him from his books for one whole day, but what, he adds, sublimely if inconsequently, is Knowledge compared with Virtue? And the very sad story of the Fourteenth of September, when twenty-five bottles of Burgundy sent twelve guests sounding through the town, knocking up the burghers and annoying their daughters, and its sequel:

Le matin à vomir et à dormir: un bouillon à midi,

with the reflexion that Lausanne, small and censorious, was no place for these militia ways:

J'avais une très belle réputation ici pour les mœurs mais je vois qu'on commence à me confondre avec mes compatriotes, et à me regarder comme un homme qui aime le vin et le désordre. Ont-ils tout à fait tort?

But the Journal, though introspective, is discreet, and we can only guess how far this flirtation with La Petite Femme, Madame Seigneux, *à moitié tendre, à moitié libertin*, was swagger, how far it was designed to keep Suzanne at bay.

Because Suzanne was very persistent. For years she had figured in the rôle of Ariadne: he had, very imprudently, sent her a copy of his book, and when he was known to be on his way to Lausanne, a friend of hers had asked Rousseau to help in bringing the young things together again. He declined: he did not like Gibbon's book, and he thought Gibbon had behaved badly in leaving Suzanne at all. Rousseau was hardly a judge of behaviour, but in any case his intervention would have been fruitless. Time, and the militia, and possibly Madame Bontemps, had killed Gibbon's early passion: and he knew that Suzanne, very pardonably one might suppose, had been thinking of other men. The faithful Deyverdun had been told off to comfort her, and Gibbon made it a grievance that she had allowed herself to be comforted. She was now a governess in Geneva, in the prime of her short-lived beauty and brilliant colour, blue-eyed and golden-haired, the admiration of all men and the envy of all women. From there in May she wrote begging him to tell her whether he still loved her, yes or no. He answered honestly. Why then, she rejoins, has he wasted five years of her life by not saying so before? Would he, she asks ingenuously, like an introduction to Rousseau? She had read his book and admired it very much. She thought of going to England as a companion--did he consider it a good plan? This was really getting dangerous. Gibbon could only profess his entire esteem, his inability to offer any advice, and his very definite opinion that this correspondence should now cease. They met in September by accident at Voltaire's theatre, and he preserved an inflexible chilliness. Returning home, the poor girl poured out her heart in a letter which had, at least, the result of

thoroughly annoying him.

‘Fille dangereuse et artificielle!’ he writes in his Journal: ‘à cet air de candeur qui règne dans ta lettre, à ces sentiments de tendresse et d’honnêteté que tu fais paroître, j’ai senti des regrets et presque des remords’: which was no doubt what he was intended to feel.

She gives an account of her whole behaviour from the moment that she knew me, her constancy, her contempt for M. de Montplaisir, and the delicate and lasting fidelity which she discerned in the letter in which I announced there was no more hope. Her trips to Lausanne, the adorers she had there, and the satisfaction with which she listened to them, formed the article the most difficult to justify. Neither Deyverdun, she says, nor anybody else has effaced for an instant my image from her heart. She amused herself at Lausanne without setting any store by it. That may be so. None the less these amusements convict her of the most odious dissimulation, and if infidelity is sometimes a weakness, duplicity is always a vice. It was in July 1758, when she wrote to me from Crassie that extraordinary letter full of tenderness and despair, her eyes filled with tears and her health enfeebled by grief. That very July she was at Lausanne, in full health and beauty, the object of the women’s jealousy and the men’s sighs, tasting all pleasures, founding Academies, distributing prizes, writing clever essays, playing at love if not busy with it. Is this contrast not enough to enlighten me? I say enlighten, because it is only a question of ideas not of feelings at all. The most complete justification might restore my esteem but could not relume the fires so utterly dead. As she tells me she must soon leave Geneva I shall never see her again. It is over. This affair, in all respects so strange, has been very useful to me. It has opened my eyes to the character of women, and it will long serve me as a safeguard against the seductions of love.

The new year brought her to Lausanne, and all that spring they were much together. Suzanne was a bold, good woman: Gibbon a shy but very resolute young man, heartily afraid of reviving the embers of dead passion and regret. So their comedy ran its course. On February 21st he notes that he could only write three-quarters of a page for thinking of her, and he braced himself to make a call. Her mind had grown, and if only they could forget the past she was clearly a delightful person to spend an afternoon with. On February 22nd he allowed himself two hours: it was coming on again: *c’est un penchant qui m’entraîne*. Friends took a hand and arranged little parties where they might meet. She teased him about his elegance and his fondness for La Petite Femme. In the Journal, he is always stopping to put his manner straight and strutting off to Madame Seigneux to show her that he doesn’t care. He takes Suzanne to a dance:

La bienséance m’arrêtoit quelque fois auprès d’elle mais je m’échappois toujours vers la petite femme et pour cette fois les sens ont triomphé chez moi sur l’esprit. Ces deux femmes que j’avois sur les bras m’ont amusé beaucoup.

We soldiers know how to manage women, even if we are not much more than five feet high.

They made such progress that they could even talk about their young loves. He gave her back her letters, and her last appeal--the letter from Lausanne in May--was found with her endorsement:

A feeling heart is punishment enough,
And every thought draws blood.

Que cette fille joue la sensibilité! They went to see *Zaire*, where she sobbed so bitterly as to draw all looks towards her. But when she took her handkerchief down, her eyes were dry and her face quite cheerful. The spring was disturbing. Her friends, always trying to nurse the idyll back to a happy ending, had already taken him to task for his unworthy attachment to Madame Seigneux, who did not, one gathers, share the common Swiss objection to pawing. On March 11th her melting eyes encouraged him to put his arm round her and kiss her. But her husband was standing by to see that nothing happened: ‘Les obstacles,’ Gibbon sagely remarks, ‘fortifient une passion et détruisent une fantaisie,’ and he draws the correct conclusion from the fact that he has ceased to call her La Petite Femme and slipped back to Madame Seigneux. Suzanne was feeling the spring too, and he took the opportunity to change his tactics.

March 12th. Il n’est plus question avec elle que de l’amour pur des anges, mais mes sens ont été émus et les siens n’ont point été tranquilles.^[2]

March 20th. Beaucoup de badinage: quelques licences lui faisant sentir beaucoup de goût et peu de

considération. Je vois que mon procédé la dérouta.

After which, Suzanne, who never forgot that she was a clergyman's daughter, spoke to him seriously about La Petite Femme and the Fourteenth of September. And so they parted.

Le tems, l'absence, mais surtout la connaissance du caractère faux et affecté de cette fille ont éteint jusqu'aux dernières étincelles de ma passion.

It is not chivalrous, and it was not deserved. Gushing, over-mannered and provincial, Suzanne, as her whole life showed, was true at heart. She was a born wife. Unluckily for her, Gibbon was a born bachelor.

VI

The journal which relates these butterfly doings records in alternate paragraphs a course of study for the Italian journey as rigorous as a young divine's preparation for Holy Orders. The comparison would have put the diarist out of countenance, and indeed it is inadequate. Gibbon is one of the saints of the Intellectual Life, the Happy Warrior,

one who wrought
Upon the plan that pleased his boyish thought,

or, as he put it himself, in the last words he addressed to the world, 'one who should accomplish in the maturity of age the immortal work which he had conceived in the ardour of youth.' His self-dedication was entire and indeflectible: and his acute distrust of all strong emotion seems like an instinctive defence set up to guard the machine from friction or disturbance, just as his elaborate manner concealed, and defended, an intense shyness. 'I was pleased with myself,' he writes after a party, 'and really I may be allowed to say so, because I so often come away feeling that I have done everything wrong.' Not that he was by nature solitary. He needed friends, and in the temperate sympathies of friendship his emotions found all the exercise they could bear. At Lausanne his loyal and lifelong association with John Holroyd began. He started by mimicking Gibbon's martial strut, was snubbed, carefully observed over several weeks, and finally admitted to a place in Gibbon's regard which no one else, man or woman, ever occupied. Deyverdun, well-born and artistic, sunny, lazy and fragile, is a pleasant accompaniment in the background of Gibbon's life. Holroyd, as the portrait emerges from Gibbon's letters and his own, is a much more positive figure: a good lover and a hearty swearer, sound on Church and State, impetuous in action but docile to advice, he and Gibbon supplied the defects in each other's temperaments. Gibbon is profoundly Augustan: Holroyd belonged to the new generation which went abroad with *Héloïse* in their pockets to verify Mr. Rousseau's descriptions on the spot, and at home farmed scientifically and built canals:

A quarter sessions chairman, abler none,
A pamphleteer on guano and on grain,

equally ready to raise a regiment of dragoons in time of war, to put his household on short commons and feed the village in time of dearth, to challenge the county interest at an election, and to manage the Exchequer Bills in a crisis.

He was making the grand tour before settling down, but he could not lure Gibbon away to look at glaciers and the sources of the Rhine. For nature, except as the background of pleasant or philosophic meditations, Gibbon's indifference was as complete as Johnson's; his favourite landscape was something flat and well cultivated where he could read Homer aloud in a post-chaise.

I know nothing more delightful than the country between Parma and Piacenza. One travels along the line of the Via Emilia which was certainly more magnificent and less pleasant than the road we now use. You journey through a beautiful garden where every bit of ground is under cultivation with corn and vines, and divided by a beautiful alley running as far as you can see, and planted on both sides with mulberry trees.

But, intellectually, his sense of place is one of the determining elements in his character as a historian. The earth and its configuration, its seas and mountains, their straits and passes, the climates which they unite or divide, lay always spread before him, and, like Milton's, his imagination seems to rise in great spaces. A geographical mistake really shocks him, and his vigilance is sometimes amusing. In a birthday Ode, Laureate Pye introduced the founder of the Brunswick race in these simpering couplets:

When Otbert left the Italian plain
And soft Ateste's green domain,
The genius of the Julian hills
(Whose piny summits nod with snow,
Whose Naiads form their thousand rills
To swell the exulting Po)
An eager look prophetic cast
And hailed the hero as he passed.

You are wrong, says Gibbon. Othbert would have passed the *Rhaetian* hills, and the streams which flow from the *Julian* hills do not, and cannot, reach the Po. After this, it is painful to record that he himself makes the Mincio flow into Garda instead of out of it.

His eye for a countryside appears in unexpected places, as in this letter from Cornwall:

Blind as you accuse me of being to the beauties of nature, I am wonderfully pleased with this country. Think of a hundred solitary streams peacefully gliding between amazing cliffs on one side and rich meadows on the other, gradually swelling by the aid of the tide into noble rivers, successively losing themselves in each other, and all at length terminating in the harbour of Plymouth whose broad expanse is irregularly dotted^[3] with two and forty line of battle ships,

--a pencil sketch from the hand which painted the incomparable picture in Chapter XVII of the *Golden Horn*, the Propontis and the Hellespont.

It is therefore characteristic of him to begin his work by mastering the historical geography of Italy. His text-books were four noble folios: Ezechiel Spanheim on Coins, the *Italia Antiqua* of Cluverius, a learned Danziger, and the *Roma Antica* of Famiano Nardini, a less learned Florentine who was to lead him astray. But the largest book to Gibbon was less a source of information than a starting-point of doubt and fresh enquiry: his annotations often run to the length of essays: his attention seems to have been as fresh at the end of five hundred folio pages as at the beginning: but for his self-reproaches we should have guessed him incapable of idleness or fatigue.

Thus equipped, he crossed the Alps in April 1765 on a very fine day with 'a most romantick variety of prospects and a perfect consciousness that there could not be the smallest danger.' 'Le plus beau soleil du monde devrait toute cette scène romanesque ou ne lui laissait qu'un coloris sombre qui disposa à une mélancolie agréable.' He made the journey with William Guise, the hero of the unfought duel. They stopped at Turin, where Gibbon contrived to violate the etiquette of the stiffest court in Europe.

The most sociable women I have met are the king's daughters. I chatted for about a quarter of an hour with them, talked about Lausanne, and grew so very free and easy that I drew out my snuff box, rapped it, took snuff twice (a crime never known before in the presence chamber) and continued my discourse, in my usual attitude of my body bent forward and my forefinger stretched out.

Then on by Milan, and Lago Maggiore in a fog, to Genoa and Florence, where he met Walpole's Horace Mann, and nourished a slight *tendresse* for Madame Gianni of the House of Medici. Gibbon once thought of writing a history of Florence under the Medici. The Revival of Learning he would have done admirably, and Savonarola is a character he would have enjoyed dissecting. The chapter on Quattrocento art would have been very odd reading. The Journal is so minute in the details of sight-seeing, so abundant in its criticism of pictures and statues, that one might suspect Gibbon of more aesthetic interests than he really possessed, were it not for an incidental confession that they were all copied out of guide-books. He could say the correct things, and probably brought himself to feel the correct things, when he stood before the Venus de Medici or the Gladiator. But once home, I doubt if he looked at a picture again--with one exception. His portrait by Reynolds hung in his room, and as he paced up and down framing his sentences, visitors observed that at each turn he contemplated it with no little gratification. For music he had, and professed to have, no ear whatever.

We arrived at Rome at five in the evening of October 2nd. From the Milvian Bridge I was in a dream of antiquity from which I was woke by those very modern figures, the Customs officials, who made us get out and look for a lodging while they were taking our chaise to the Dogana. The approach to Rome is not inviting.

After a sleepless night, I trod with lofty step the ruins of the Forum: each memorable spot where Romulus stood, or Cicero spoke, or Caesar fell, was at once present to my eye.

The Forum which he trod was a grassy valley: an avenue of trees connected the Arch of Severus with the Arch of Titus--itself no more than an opening in the side of a mean street: the Temple of Vespasian was buried almost up to its entablature in rubbish shot down the slopes of the Capitol. Only a few columns rising here and there among cowpens and barns indicated that fathoms deep below the soil of a thousand years lay the Forum. But the Coliseum stood, and the gigantic wrecks of the Baths; and looking round the wilderness of churches and ruins from the height of Trajan's column,

the young scholar pronounced his verdict on the scene: 'I am convinced there never, never existed such a nation, and I hope for the happiness of mankind there never will again.'

It was at Rome, on the 15th of October 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the bare-footed friars were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the City first started to my mind.

It is curious to find Gibbon stumbling on the threshold, but there is an error in this famous prelude which he would have enjoyed correcting. The Ara Celi where the Descalzi were singing vespers is on the site of the Temple of Juno: the Temple of Jupiter was part of the ruins amidst which he was musing.^[4] He settled down to eighteen weeks' hard work on Rome with the assistance of a professional antiquary. The journal, if one was ever kept, has, except for some perfunctory notes on pictures and statues, disappeared. Holroyd joined him, and has left some casual sketches of Rome as they saw it together. Their tailor was an Irishman, Meighan, who figured in the municipal Fasti as Thrice Consul. At the Carnival, the ballet produced Voxhall, Giardino Inglese, with a Quaker as chief personage, hornpipes and Alley Choker. The Italian journey, prolonged by an excursion to Naples and a short visit to Venice, lasted a year. But the news from England was ominous: drafts were sometimes not met, and his father was trying to secure his agreement to a fresh mortgage by the offers, not altogether consistent, of further travel, a larger allowance and a seat in Parliament. Gibbon had to return sooner than he meant.

On his way back he saw Suzanne. Not long after his departure for Italy, she had gone to Paris as companion to a rich widow, to whom Necker, a still richer banker from Geneva, was paying his addresses. Whether he transferred his affections of his own accord, or whether the lady indicated that a person of his own class would be a more suitable match for him, is not quite clear. Both stories are told. But he chose wisely. Suzanne adored him: she was astonished but not dizzied by her elevation, and she gave him for thirty years the admiration and support which his irresolute melancholy temper needed. She had no illusions: 'the failings of great men,' she once wrote to Gibbon, 'are a present from kind nature to the women who love them. A perfect man would be sufficient to himself.' And Necker was very far from perfect. But his glory and failure, his repeated triumphs and his ultimate fall, lay in the far future. Gibbon found her living over the bank.

She was very fond of me and the husband particularly civil. Could they insult me more cruelly? Ask me every evening to supper; go to bed, and leave me alone with his wife--what an impertinent security! It is making an old lover of mighty little consequence. She is as handsome as ever and much genteeler; seems pleased with her fortune rather than proud of it. I was (perhaps indiscreetly enough) exalting Nanette de Illens's good luck and her fortune. 'What fortune?' said she, with an air of contempt, 'not above 20,000 livres a year.' I smiled, and she caught herself immediately. 'What airs I give myself in despising twenty thousand livres a year, who a year ago looked upon 800 as the summit of my wishes.'

Suzanne's account of the meeting has also come down to us:

I forget if I told you that I have seen Gibbon. It gave me more pleasure than I can express, not that I have any feeling for a man who I see hardly deserves it, but my feminine vanity never had a more complete and honourable triumph. He had become gentle, submissive, humble, *décent jusqu'à la pudeur*, constantly observing the tenderness of my husband, his intelligence, and his devotion. Fervent admirer of opulence, he called my attention for the first time to that which surrounds me, or at least until then had only caused me unpleasant sensations.

No: Suzanne was not meant to be the wife of an ironist.

VII

The next few years, spent between London and Buriton, were the least happy part of Gibbon's life. Time was passing--he was twenty-eight when he returned: it was too late to enter on a profession, and the competence on which he had reckoned to support him as an independent man of letters was visibly shrinking. He was convinced of his vocation, but he could not fix himself on a subject. In London, though he was gradually making his way into society and the clubs, he was little known; at Buriton he could not command his time. The annual meeting of the militia, in which he rose to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, bored him, and he resigned his commission. He was succeeded by another historian, whose career bears a certain resemblance, though at a great distance, to his own. William Mitford of Exbury was seven years younger than Gibbon, had spent an equally profitless time at Oxford, had made the Italian tour, retired to the country to learn Greek, and spent some years as a silent member of the House of Commons. They were certainly acquainted, because it was at Gibbon's suggestion that Mitford undertook that *History of Greece* for Tories which confirmed the English public through the revolutionary years in their just abhorrence of democracy. But he nowhere figures in Gibbon's Life or Correspondence. Gibbon's links with his county were very frail. 'Sufficient to the summer,' he once wrote, 'is the evil thereof, of one long country excursion.'

His chief comfort was in the annual visits of Deyverdun. They worked and planned together, and with his assistance Gibbon, who had already turned over a half a dozen subjects, composed in French the first book of a History of Switzerland. It did not please the small audience to whom it was imparted, and 'the imperfect sheets were delivered to the flames.' The only result was three years wasted and the discovery, which really Gibbon might have made at less cost, that it was injudicious to write history in a foreign language. But his recollection was at fault: the imperfect sheets survived, and the draft may be read in the *Miscellaneous Works*. It is very dull, and quite uncharacteristic. No one would have guessed that it was a trial piece by the author of the *Decline and Fall*. The *Critical Observations on the Sixth Aeneid*, which appeared anonymously in 1770, are hardly more remarkable. Twenty people might have written them, and Bishop Lowth would have written them much better. Gibbon's finished manner is as unmistakable as Carlyle's, and like Carlyle, he had to work hard to find it.

In 1768 and 1769 the young men issued under the title *Mémoires Littéraires de la Grande Bretagne* some twenty full-dress reviews of recent books. Gibbon claimed only one as his unaided work: the rest were produced in collaboration with Deyverdun. The two volumes brought the authors no profit--the home circulation appears to have been exactly twelve copies, the foreign twenty-five--but some notice. For the second volume Hume good-naturedly gave them some notes on Horace Walpole's *Historic Doubts*, which involved him in a quarrel with the author: Chesterfield marked down Deyverdun as a fitting companion when his heir was ready for the grand tour.

Left alone by the departure of Deyverdun on a bear-leading expedition with a young Hampshire baronet, Gibbon settled down to the labours which expanded as he advanced from a History of the City to a History of the Empire. But his progress was interrupted by family anxieties. His father's health had begun to fail: his affairs were in confusion, title-deeds mislaid, mortgages overlooked, leases lost. The situation was relieved by his death in 1770, and Miss Hester was gratified by a report which omits no circumstance, physical, spiritual or financial, of the elder Gibbon's dissolution.

The first affliction with which my father was visited was a gradual decay of sight, which at last terminated in an almost total blindness. . . . Last Spring we were still more terrified by the symptoms of an approaching dropsy, a shortness of breath, swelling of the legs and body, and the loss of rest, strength, and appetite. Dr. Addington advised the use of broom ashes. They immediately produced a very great evacuation of water, and reduced my father's legs and body to their natural size. . . . Long before the melancholy event my father was sensible of his approaching end, and prepared himself for it with the truest resignation. Besides his private prayers he was attended by the clergyman of the parish from whom he received the Communion, who testified the highest satisfaction in his edifying behaviour. But my father's best preparation was the comfort of a well-spent life. He was followed to the grave by the tears of the whole country, which for many years had experienced his goodness and charity,

exercised, unfortunately, at the expense of his wife and son. 'Economy was not amongst my father's virtues.' So little so, in fact, that half the estate would have to be sold to pay the mortgage on the other half. Gibbon's compliance, or ignorance, had cost him dear. But

it is a satisfaction to reflect that I have fulfilled, perhaps exceeded, my filial duties, and it is still in my

power to live an agreeable and rational life. I am sensible that as no estate will answer the demands of vice and folly, so a very moderate income will supply the real wants of nature and reason.

Another two years, full of vexations and alarms, had to pass before he felt himself a free man. But Holroyd was now at hand to take the cares of business off his shoulders, and the result was more comfortable than he could have expected. Mrs. Gibbon was established in Bath; Gibbon, in the neighbourhood of Portman Square, at 7 Bentinck Street. He was turned thirty-five; his forces were concentrated, and the great march could begin.

VIII

The writing of history in Modern Europe began afresh in the fifteenth century. The new history, which submerged the monastic chronicle, flowed in two streams: the animated, rhetorical narrative based on Livy, and the topographical study of ancient Italy, its tribes and cities. They correspond to the master tendencies in humanism, the desire to behave like the ancients and the desire to understand them: they foreshadow the issue between History an Art and History a Science. The only mediaeval growth which pushed through the humanist overlay was the French memoir.

We cannot follow the two lines strictly in England, because the Revival, like the Reformation, skipped us on its way to Scotland. We have no humanist historian to set against Buchanan, as we have no Protestant Doctor to set against John Knox, and we must do as best we can with Hakluyt and Hooker. But none the less, the general movement can be traced even here. In Italy, history written in Latin by scholars made way for history written in the vernacular by men of political experience, and Bacon's *Henry VII.* is an offshoot from the great Italian school of Machiavelli and Guicciardini. The French memoir, carried into the new age by Commynes, helped to shape Clarendon's *Great Rebellion*. The topographical study produced Camden's *Britannia*, ancestor of a vigorous progeny. Camden modelled his work closely on the learned Italians, and in this way, through the great County Histories, a pedigree can be traced without interruption from the last report of the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments back to the *Italia Illustrata* of Biondo of Forli. And to make our circle complete, Biondo was the first writer to conceive the transition from the ancient to the modern world--*Historia ab Inclinatione Romanorum Imperii*--as an historical topic. He finished his book while the Empire was still standing, and Gibbon, starting with the ancient geography of Italy and ending with the Fall of Constantinople, was following in the steps and completing the work of a scholar three hundred years before him.

Gibbon, who bore proudly *ce nom flétrissant d'érudit*, was nurtured on the learning of a past age--'the age of Herculean diligence which could digest and devour whole libraries,' the learning, at once encyclopaedic and microscopic, of the seventeenth century, which could bring the whole of antiquity to bear on the elucidation of a word or the fixing of a date. Without it, he would have been nothing. Unlike the imprudent Middleton, who helped himself abundantly to his predecessors in the vain hope that his borrowings would not be noticed, Gibbon never conceals his dependence, his admiration and his gratitude. His last piece of writing--a draft proposal for the publication of the English chronicles--is a muster roll of the heroic age, his final salute to his peers, Leibnitz and Muratori and the Benedictines of St. Germain des Près. The last name mentioned in the *Decline and Fall* is Montfaucon's. The consent of Europe had awarded to Montfaucon the primacy in scholarship which Newton enjoyed in science. Like Gibbon, he had read as a child every history he could lay hands on; as a young man he had served for two years in the army, and had used the opportunity to learn Greek. Retiring into the Benedictine house of St. Maur, he had been required by his Superiors to employ his accomplishment in editing the Fathers. The work needed an extensive knowledge of classical literature, which he proceeded to acquire. The crown of more than forty years of research was the princely *Antiquité Expliquée* of 1719: 4000 sets, each of ten volumes in folio, were sold in a year, and the French edition was followed by an English translation. Like Gibbon again, when his work among the ancients was complete, his mind turned to the mediaeval records of his own country. In one respect their situation differed as widely as possible. Gibbon worked alone: he never exchanged a word or a letter with another scholar. Montfaucon lived at the centre of a great intellectual organization, the Benedictine Order, and his prodigious correspondence covered almost every country in Europe and almost every class, from Sicilian priests to English diplomats.

But Montfaucon was only the greatest of a great race of which the father was Joseph Scaliger. Near him must be ranked the Jansenist, Le Nain de Tillemont, whom Gibbon scolds and pats through five centuries, finally dismissing his sure-footed friend with the testimonial that his inimitable accuracy almost assumes the character of genius. It was a misfortune for Gibbon that he had no such faithful guide to the history of the Byzantine Empire: he would have avoided many errors, detected many omissions, and perhaps corrected some misjudgments. For the history of the Church, Tillemont was backed by Fleury and Mosheim, a Gallican and a Lutheran: another Frenchman, the Protestant exile Beausobre, showed the way through the labyrinth of heresy: the highroad of orthodoxy was marked out by the *Dogmata Theologica* of the Jesuit Petavius. Mrs. Montagu, the Blue Stocking, who had the First Volume bound up without the peccant chapters on the Church, once observed that Mr. Gibbon had the merit of giving the substance of the bad writers *medii aevi* in a more agreeable form. It was a very foolish remark. But to say that he applied the mind of the eighteenth century to the learning of the seventeenth would fix Gibbon's position exactly in the movement of European letters. In his own studies he traversed the distance from Du Cange to Voltaire, and the *Decline and Fall* is the memorial of his journey.

The Academy of Inscriptions, as Sainte Beuve said, is Gibbon's spiritual home. If he had an ambition at twenty-three, it was probably to be a corresponding member and have a paper on Ancient Weights and Measures printed in their Memoirs. To the French belongs the honour of inventing that indispensable organ of scholarship, the learned Journal. The *Bibliothèque, Raisonnée* or *Universelle*, founded by another Protestant exile, Leclerc, the *Journal des Savants*, the Memoirs of the Academy, Gibbon absorbed from cover to cover. From the French he learnt to be independent in judgment, attentive in scrutiny, and to deliver his conclusions in the language of the world. They kept him, working in solitude, abreast of his age. They could not carry him into the next.

The criticism of sources, which is simply the art of cross-examination applied to written evidence, was the creation of the nineteenth century, and the first Englishman to apprehend it consistently was Grote. Gibbon's critical method rarely goes beyond the elementary device of sorting his authorities into primary and secondary, well-informed and ill-informed, judicious and credulous, and then striking such an average as will satisfy his personal sense of probability. So keen is his attention to detail, so firm his grasp of the general movement of history, that the justice of his results has earned the admiration of a scientific age. But his triumph was the triumph of genius, not of method. He accepted the assumption of the Renaissance that when, by careful examination of the text, we have found what the ancients really meant, we have also discovered what really happened. Except by a few daring raiders, the assumption had never been challenged. The curtain was the picture. To lift the curtain and disclose the picture was the task of the next age and the Germans. As a general proposition Gibbon knew as well as anybody that the ultimate evidence for a fact in history is the testimony of a competent and disinterested contemporary: better still of several contemporaries: best of all the unconscious contemporary, the inscription or the document. But the processes by which the modern historian elicits the contemporary witness from a later narrative, or constructs a story from the unconscious testimony of a coin or a charter, though they were not quite unknown to him, he could not apply systematically. He can doubt, but he does not methodize his doubts.

That common probability is the ultimate historic canon must of course be acknowledged. But a historian must have an extraordinarily fine feeling for the mind of a past age before he can say with any assurance what the men of that age were likely to think or do, or what relation their reports will bear to the facts. The psychology of the eighteenth century was narrow, and the French had made of it, as they made of everything, a weapon of offence against established institutions. England, with its revolutions over, its Church under control, and its Nonconformists busy making money, could afford to be large-minded. Gibbon was an Englishman, and his sense of the significance of the past is as profound and pervasive as Burke's. But of all Englishmen, he is the most French. Both Burke and Johnson, though in their way fanatics, have a reserve of ease and tolerance which is lacking in the detachment of Gibbon. There is something alien in his composition, a certain knowingness, quite unlike the dogmatism of Macaulay, equally unlike the searching judgment of Tacitus, but very like that self-centred malice which to an Englishman is often the most conspicuous, and always the least agreeable, element in French literature, French manners and French diplomacy. It is the vital principle of French rationalism, which Gibbon aptly defines as rejecting popular stories and reducing the magnitude of vice and virtue. Rationalism, so inspired, passed like a destroying flame over reverence and fancy, but it could do no more than clear the ground for science.

I have sometimes wondered what would have happened if the Gibbons had been less well off or the French Government less inexorable, if M. Edouard de Guibon had settled in Lausanne at twenty-five, with an occasional trip to Paris, and Mr. Francis Walters had naturalized himself in England. He would have bought an estate in Buckinghamshire--he might have taken over the Lenborough property which hung round Gibbon's neck for years: he would have hunted violently, acquired the patronage of several livings and written sermons for them all. Imagination can faintly trace him through a career of love-affairs, law-suits and East India speculations, financing Watt's steam-engines, discharging the last shafts of his wit against the American rebels, and earning a grave in the Abbey by his Defence of Reasonable Religion against Wesley. But there would have been no *Candide* and assuredly no *Decline and Fall*. Without the French it could not have been written. But it could only have been written in English and in an English atmosphere. A man of letters could not have girded himself to the twenty years' task of making literature out of dead empires in a society almost feverish with contempt for the past, and impatient of all knowledge which could not forthwith be hammered into weapons of war. The sight of Voltaire busy on the historic field never fails to elicit an epigram charged with the contempt of the scholar for the publicist. 'M. de Voltaire, unsupported by fact or probability, has generously bestowed the Canary Islands on the Roman Empire.' 'The prejudices of a philosopher are less excusable than those of a Jesuit.' 'Voltaire is the dupe of his own cunning.' If Gibbon had known that some day he would figure in a Swiss History of Historiography^[5] among the disciples of Voltaire, with Schlözer, Spittler and Schmidt, his attachment to his adopted country would have been sorely

strained. Yet his determination to assert his independence is itself a tribute to Voltaire's ascendancy over his age and over Gibbon's mind.

If we divide the eighteenth century into the age of Voltaire and the age of Rousseau, there is no doubt on which side of the line Gibbon stands. He believed in the civilized life: he had no regard for the rights or the virtues of the Natural Man: and his political philosophy was in the main a belief in the value of his own class. Where the populace is contented--and the England of his youth was on a high tableland of prosperity--there is little fear of disorder or plunder. At the other end of the scale, so long as the educated classes, the citizens and gentry, exercise a reasonable measure of control over the executive, there may be some corruption but there will be little oppression. Between the nations there is, as it were, a division of labour: 'the gallant nobles of France and the intrepid freemen of Britain' have each their own place in the picture, their function in the commonwealth of civilization. Gibbon's ideal world is a reproduction on a larger scale of the Hellenic balance, an emulous unity of science and manners overriding the temporary disturbances of war, and gradually expanding till there are historians in New Zealand, observatories in the Siberian or American desert, and 'theology is replaced by religion and reason.'

IX

But in all this, if Gibbon is the follower of Voltaire, he is equally, and far more directly, the pupil of Robertson. Of all our forgotten classics, Robertson most deserves to be remembered. There are few better books in the language than the *History of America*, and not many so readable. Robertson was engaged on it in the years when Gibbon was at work on his first volume. But he was already a name of European importance. The *History of Scotland* (1759) was indeed only of national interest, and Robertson's remark that Mary Queen of Scots was 'an agreeable woman' does not suggest that he was at home among the profounder passions of mankind. *Charles V.* (1769) was read as far afield as St. Petersburg. We may take it, therefore, as the standard which Gibbon set himself to reach, or, if he could, excel. The 'careless inimitable beauties' of Hume filled him with delight and despair. But Hume belongs to a different order of mind and there was no rivalry. 'The perfect composition, the nervous language, the well-turned periods of Dr. Robertson, inflamed me with the ambitious hope that I might one day tread in his footsteps.'

Robertson had, short of genius, all the gifts which Gibbon valued in himself: his view is wide, his learning solid, his judgment is never seduced by enthusiasm. His most influential work, the *View of the Progress of Society*, created for English readers the conception of a European evolution overriding the details of national history. His stages are firmly, professorially, marked out, and the test we are invited to apply to each is its contribution to 'the order, regularity, and refinement of life.' 'The dominion of the Romans, like that of all great Empires, degraded and debased the human species.' The fall was followed by an interim in which, it must be owned, order, regularity and refinement would not have been easy to discover. From about the year 1000 we can trace the revival of government and manners. And as Robertson proceeds to arrange the causes which brought about the upward movement, we see how closely Gibbon was to follow the route laid down by his master. The two sentences at the end of the second chapter, in which he states his theme, would serve equally well as a summary of Robertson's philosophy. 'The diminutive stature of mankind was daily sinking below the old standard, and the Roman world was indeed peopled by a race of pygmies, when the fierce giants of the north broke in and mended the puny breed. They restored a manly spirit of freedom, and after the revolution of ten centuries freedom became the happy parent of Taste and Science.'^[6]

Robertson once described himself as a Moderate Whig. 'Yes,' said Horace Walpole, 'you are: a very moderate Whig.' He was also, and almost officially, a moderate Christian, in which capacity, we are told, he gave peace to the Church of Scotland for eighty years. His scheme did not require him to enter into the growth of Christianity: he begins when it was degenerating into an illiberal superstition. 'Religion comprehended nothing but rites, and the rites were either so unmeaning as to be altogether unworthy of the Being to whose honour they were consecrated, or so absurd as to be a disgrace to reason and humanity.' The Mediaeval Church has never been put in her place more briskly. Virtue and sanctity alone render man acceptable to the great Author of order and excellence. But even sanctity must be reasonable. A carpenter of Guienne who appeared about the end of the twelfth century with a message of peace and disarmament is set down as a 'low fanatic,' and the historian records with complacency that the superstitious terror or devotion which he created was not of long continuance. Gibbon would at least have spared a tear for the poor man's disappointment, and possibly a smile for his occupation.

Even Gibbon's style, though Johnsonian in its general movement, is Johnson transmitted through Robertson.

It was not merely a point of honour with the feudal nobles, to dispense justice to their vassals; but from the exercise of that power arose one branch of their revenue; and the emoluments of their courts were frequently the main support of their dignity. It was with infinite zeal that they asserted and defended this high privilege of their order. By this institution, however, every kingdom in Europe was split into as many separate principalities as it contained powerful barons. Their vassals whether in peace or war were hardly sensible of any other authority. They felt themselves subject to no other command. They were amenable to no other jurisdiction. The ties which linked together these smaller confederacies became close and firm: the bonds of public union relaxed or were dissolved.

Without Johnson, Robertson would never have written like this. But it is much more modern than Johnson: in places it anticipates Macaulay. Now for the pupil:

The fidelity of the legions might defend his authority against open rebellion, but this vigilance could not secure his person from the dagger of a determined republican; and the Romans who revered the memory of Brutus would applaud the imitation of his virtue. Caesar had provoked his fate as much by the ostentation of

his power as by his power itself. The consul or the tribune might have reigned in peace. The title of king had armed the Romans against his life. Augustus was sensible that mankind is governed by names; nor was he deceived in his expectation that the senate and people would submit to slavery, provided they were respectfully assured that they still enjoyed their ancient freedom.

The diction and the music are all Gibbon. But the build of the paragraph, the alternation of long and short sentences, the firm but not obtrusive antithesis were there already.

On this basis, within this framework, Gibbon constructed that unique style which became indeed so natural to him that he could both write and speak it as easily as the unpretending English of his letters to Holroyd. It first appears in the Outline of the History of the World which he must have put down to clear his ideas before he began his book.

The existence of a Supreme Being was indeed acknowledged;
his mysterious attributes were minutely, *and even indecently*, canvassed in the schools;
but he was allowed a very small share in the public worship, or the administration of the Universe.

In this blend of formality and innuendo we have the essentials of Gibbon's mature style. His picture is drawn with the integrity of a scholar, and coloured with the intention of an artist. The period of three members is the foundation of his prose, the basis from which he conducts his operations. The epithet, whether adjective or adverb, is the instrument with which he operates. His period develops the story: the epithet conveys Gibbon's opinion on it.

By the middle of the eighteenth century the conversational manner of Addison, Swift and Berkeley was exhausted. Gibbon was borne, willingly enough, on the full tide of the second, the oratorical, Augustan period. A Roman critic, Cicero or Quintilian, opening Swift's *Letter to a Young Clergyman* and Gibbon's *Vindication*, would have seen at once where he was. This, he would have said, is Attic: the other is Asiatic--observe the well-marked structure, the emphatic rhythm, the resonant epithets. Old Bishop Hurd, who had sounded the first wavering call of Romance when Gibbon was a boy, and lived to see Romance advancing with banners spread long after Gibbon was no more, put down in 1800 a note on the century he had almost covered.

The pompous, or what may be called the 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.

Bolingbroke created a manner which sounded on long after his voice was silent. Gibbon's ear was attuned to the eloquence of a great age of oratory, nurtured on the Latin classics, and the apophthegms and asides with which he punctuates his narrative are charged with the sarcasm, the moral dignity, and the urbanity of the senatorial style.

Valentinian drawing his sword (the only sword he had ever drawn) plunged it into the heart of the general who had saved his Empire.

Extreme distress, which unites the virtue of a free people, embitters the factions of a declining monarchy.

In the creed of Justinian the guilt of murder could not be applied to the slaughter of unbelievers; and he piously laboured to establish with fire and sword the unity of the Christian faith. With these sentiments it was incumbent on him, at least, to be always in the right.

They lack the gnomic weight which sinks a phrase of Burke or Johnson into the mind, and no saying of Gibbon's has found its way into the common stock of proverbial or political lore. They betray their origin in the spoken word, winged for an immediate effect and a long oblivion.

Sometimes, especially in the first volume, which Gibbon confessed to be crude and elaborate, the rhetoric is so transpontine as to remind us in what nest the eagles of the Great Republic learnt their cry.

The slave of Imperial despotism, whether he was condemned to drag his gilded chains in Rome and the senate, or to wear out a life of exile on the barren rock of Seriphus or the frozen banks of the Danube [which at this rate cannot be far from our native plains of Chickabiddy Lick] expected his fate in silent despair.

Gilded chains--barren rocks--frozen banks! *Nosti istas lecythos*. Then, after this circling, the swoop. 'To resist was

fatal: and it was impossible to fly.' This is spoken prose. It needs to be read aloud. It almost invites a cheer. And if anyone will make the experiment of substituting 'To resist was fatal: to fly was impossible,' he will understand something of what oratory was on a night when Burke was speaking and Gibbon was listening.

Nowhere in Gibbon do we feel, as for example we feel everywhere in Hazlitt, that here is a great prose mind expressing itself in the only way it can. Gibbon's style is not instinctive but deliberate: it has the calculated solidity of a Roman aqueduct. But it has, not less, the resilience which keeps the aqueduct standing. So many thousand sentences all bearing the same mason's mark ought to weary the attention. In fact, his narrative is astonishingly alive and pungent, and the secret lies in his mastery of variation and surprise. The triple sentences are expanded to four or five members, contracted to two or one, doubled, divided, laid side by side, or intricately interlaced. But the steady marching rhythm sounds all through, a ground tone which gives each sentence its individual musical effect. So his diction may for a paragraph at a time appear conventional, generalized, periphrastic, differing in nothing, except its amplitude, from staple Augustan prose. But it is the smooth fall of the toga that makes the hidden steel so deadly, and when it flashes it never misses its mark.

The troops of the Anatolian theme or province approached the city on the Asiatic side, demanded for the royal brothers the partition or exercise of sovereignty, and supported their seditious claim by a theological argument. They were Christians (they cried) and orthodox Catholics: the sincere votaries of the holy and undivided Trinity. Since there are three equal persons in heaven, it is reasonable that there should be three equal persons on earth. The Emperor invited these learned divines to a friendly conference, in which they might propose their arguments to the senate; they obeyed the summons; but the prospect of their bodies hanging on the gibbet in the suburb of Galata reconciled their companions to the unity of the reign of Constantine. He pardoned his brothers, and their names were still pronounced in the public acclamations; but, on the repetition or suspicion of a similar offence, the obnoxious princes were deprived of their titles and noses, in the presence of the Catholic bishops who were assembled at Constantinople in the sixth general synod.

Beyond the seventh heaven, Mahomet was alone permitted to proceed: he passed the veil of unity, approached within two bowshots of the throne, and felt a cold that pierced him to the heart when his shoulder was touched by the hand of God. After this familiar though important conversation . . .

This is not mere mischief. Gibbon's irony marks the height at which he holds himself above the subject. 'The History of the Royal Society,' Johnson said, 'is now read, not with the wish to know what they were doing, but how their transactions are exhibited by Sprat.' We are never for a moment to forget that what we are reading is not Everyman's History but Gibbon's, narrating, judging, interpreting, all at once and always from his own point of view. Every fact is to reach our minds with the colour of his mind on it. Usually his psychological appreciations are conveyed in the narrative itself. 'The fine problems of the Incarnation were forgotten in the more *popular and visible* quarrel of the worship of images.' Sometimes by a more elaborate device the psychology is made to carry the story on its back.

The two princes and the archbishop of Toledo occupied the most important posts: their *well-timed* defection broke the ranks of the Christians: each warrior was prompted *by fear or suspicion* to consult his personal safety: and *the remains* of the Gothic army were scattered or destroyed in the flight and pursuit of the three following days.

Notwithstanding the decay of agriculture, Sicily still supplied the granaries of Rome: the farmers were graciously exempted from the oppression of military quarters: and the Goths, who trusted the defence of the island to the inhabitants, had some reason to complain that this confidence was ungratefully betrayed.

In short (and Gibbon sometimes invites a Micawberesque descent into the language of this life), the Sicilians made terms for themselves. This habit of subordinating facts to their circumstances, and narrative to commentary, finally induces the trick, to which in his later chapters Gibbon too often succumbs, of leaving the whole story to be picked out from its implications.

The honest indignation expressed by Martin, vice-praefect of the island, was interpreted as an evidence of his own guilt: and the governor was urged to the necessity of turning against his breast the sword with which he had been provoked to wound the Imperial minister.

It is asking 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. Here one would have preferred a little more transaction and a little less Sprat.

X

The *Decline and Fall* opens quietly and impersonally. 'In the Second century of the Christian era, the Empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth and the most civilized portion of mankind.' But in the second paragraph Gibbon adjusts himself to his theme in one of those interlocking sentences where every word seems to reflect part of its meaning on every other.

Inclined to peace by his temper and situation, it was easy for Augustus to discover that Rome in her present exalted situation had much less to hope than to fear from the chance of arms: and that in the prosecution of remote wars, the undertaking became every day more difficult, the event more doubtful, and the possession more precarious and less beneficial.^[7]

'It was easy for him to discover.' In the infinitely remote superiority of this phrase, we hear the voice of Gibbon only. His French training no doubt helped him to articulate it. But Montesquieu would have been more oracular and Voltaire more impudent. The ring of authority is not within their compass. The argument is serious: it is presented with the weight and brevity of a State minute: Augustus, one feels, might have used those very words, and Gibbon would never have thought of denying them. Only, as he stepped down from the Palatine, he would have adjusted the balance and asserted the right of freedom and criticism. Obvious and convincing as the discovery was, Julius, we realize, would not have made it. Is the Roman Empire declining already?

Before putting pen to paper, Gibbon had made a reconnaissance in force, through the Imperial centuries and the Dark Ages up to the walls of Renaissance Rome. It was this preliminary synopsis which gives the *Decline and Fall* its dramatic compactness and stylistic unity: the whole history of the City was before him: however far his eye may range, the clue is always firmly in his fingers, and the conclusion of the third volume was in draft before the first volume was written. He worked downwards from the theme to the chapter, and from the chapter to the paragraph. When his magnificent picture of the state of the Empire has been rounded off, his progress is in one straight line, except when he pauses to expatiate over Iran and Germany, lingering with reluctant disbelief on the legend which afterwards held Wordsworth's imagination:

How vanquished Mithridates northward passed
And, hidden in the cloud of years, became
Odin, the father of a race by whom
Perished the Roman Empire.

Hume told him that his narrative of the years succeeding Commodus was concise but superficial. It could hardly be otherwise, because the materials for anything deeper were not to be had. The best sources for the early third century are inscriptions and excavations: Gibbon had few inscriptions, archaeology was hardly born; he could do little more than combine the scanty statements of dubious authorities. The Empire seems to be not only declining but falling to pieces in the darkness, when the great Illyrian princes rescued it and Diocletian created the new absolutism. Nothing has prepared us for the dramatic turn which in a generation placed a Christian Emperor on the throne and opened the long history of the victorious Church.

Macaulay said that Gibbon wrote of Christianity like a man who had received a personal injury. Many years later, he owned that he felt about the Early Church very much as Burke felt about the French Revolution. He regarded it as a disastrous episode in the history of the race, not unlike his own conversion on a vaster scale. He was before all things a humanist, and to a humanist any religion with an apparatus of sacred books and beliefs deduced from them, with an organized hierarchy diverting wealth from productive expenditure, and theological schools seducing intellect from more fruitful exercise, must appear, except so far as it satisfies certain irrational impulses which culture has not eradicated, a mischievous folly. On the value of those impulses, which Gibbon had felt, and seen through, the whole question turns. But as a matter of historical fact, the ascendancy of Christian institutions in Europe, from Constantine to the eighteenth century, had coincided with the absence of 'order, regularity and refinement' in private and civil life. Rome of the Antonines was civilized: England under George II. was civilized. But for the most part, the interim was barbarous. Was it only coincidence, or ground and consequence, or the parallel effect of some common original cause?

Gibbon's answer is that the rise of Christianity and the fall of the Empire are parallel effects of a general collapse of the intellect under the pressure of a world-tyranny. The Church inherited the monotheistic fervour of the Semite, which he

admired, and applied it to the syncretism of obscure faiths gradually coalescing into a Christian theology, which he despised. Thus from the beginning, or almost the beginning, it had the twofold advantage of being at once a capacious and an aggressive institution, engaged in a holy war against polytheism, strong in the promise, or the threat, of immortality, and the performance, or the pretence, of miracles. The violence of conversion, the strict discipline required in an isolated and unpopular society, raised the early Christians to a moral level which their age was constrained to respect: asceticism found its compensation in administrative activity for which the world afforded no outlet: insensibly and unremarked, the Christian society was consolidated as a body politic, with organs of government, revenue and legislation. A clear and zealous faith, organized and certain of its aim, clove its way through a bewildered and half-hearted paganism, 'and finally erected the triumphant banner of the Cross on the ruins of the Capitol,' where, we remember, the historian had heard its victorious chant.

Now, whether or no we regard them as adequate to the effect, these are *verae causae*. We may indeed go one step farther back and ask how it was that in the third or fourth century the educated classes were found accepting as their guide to life and the history of the world a literature and philosophy which their ancestors would have rejected as barbarous and unintelligible. We may ask--and for answer we may reflect with what astonished contempt Gibbon and Robertson if restored to earth would have viewed the Tractarian movement or the Disruption of the Scottish Church. 'The use and abuse of religion,' Gibbon once wrote, 'are feeble to stem, they are strong and irresistible to impel the stream of national manners,' and in the closing centuries of the Ancient World 'national manners' in the widest sense were setting towards Faith, towards mystery and credulity, as they were in Gibbon's own later years. In the next generation a bishop could speak of the 'prostration of intellect' which Christianity demands. Hume, watching the growth of Methodism with anxious eyes, warned him that the discreditable episode was not closed. The great Deistic battle had died away for want of ammunition on both sides. But the stout old tradition, Anglican or Nonconformist, still ran true, and new springs of religious sentiment were gathering to form the great flood of Evangelicalism. Hume undertook to show that Christianity rested on a philosophic absurdity, the possibility of miracles. Gibbon undertook to bring it within the framework of historic causation, and the purpose of his irony is to sterilize those feelings, half-devotional, half-conventional, which, as he had good cause to remember, had gathered round the history of the Early Church. To make the evolution of the Church, as a historic phenomenon, intelligible, it was necessary to make its claims to be any other kind of phenomenon, faintly but persistently ridiculous. Gibbon took no risk: the two chapters were written and rewritten again and again. It was not a raid but a set field, and the victory was overwhelming and decisive. In conquering a province, he had created a new balance of power. No institution could ever again profess to be outside the empire of history and not subject to its laws.

XI

While engaged on the first volume Gibbon had become a member of Parliament. The mixture of study, society and business appealed to him: he accepted with pleasure his cousin Eliot's offer to put him in for Liskeard, and he was not disappointed. 'I never found my mind more vigorous or my composition more happy than in the winter hurry of society and Parliament.' He took his seat in November 1774. It was an inexperienced House, tragically inexperienced for the crisis which it had to face. 'Is that where the King sits?' one young member was heard to ask, pointing to the Speaker's chair. Gibbon was tempted to try his luck as an orator. But he refrained, and his career as a public man was limited to silent participation in the routine of Parliament and passive enjoyment of the spectacle. The first volume was finished in the excitement of his first session. It was expected with curiosity, because Gibbon was by this time something of a personage in London, and he had the advantage of a market prepared by Robertson and Hume. Declined by Elmsley, the publication was undertaken by Cadell the bookseller and Strahan the printer, Gibbon's colleague in the House as Member for Malmesbury, and the first of that line of publishers who have been the friends of authors. The whole edition, a thousand quartos at a guinea, was sold in six weeks. A second and third followed. The French translators got busy.^[8] Gibbon told his aunt that an Irish edition had come out in Dublin. 'But can you understand it?' she asked.

He was now thirty-nine: comfortably off, famous, and as popular as he ever cared to be. We have noticed, at Lausanne and in the militia, Gibbon's aptitude for living two lives quite independent of each other. The soldier and the elegant never encroached on the scholar; the student was never too tired for a dinner or an all-night sitting. Even Holroyd did not guess how he had been working, and warned him against publishing too soon. In the London of that decade, so intimately known to us from Boswell and Horace Walpole, Gibbon was a noticeable but unobtrusive figure. He had parted from Buriton without regret. He loved the dust, and only the society of Holroyd and his wife could lure him into the country. Once, in a hot summer, we hear of him in Kensington Gardens, and wonder how he got there. London provided him with books and company, and he wanted nothing else. He dressed well, rather too well, and ensured a high standard of personal comfort by living above his means: at Bentinck Street there was a butler, a cook, four maids, a parrot, and a Pom called Bath, 'the delight of my life, pretty, impertinent, fantastical.' The most energetic action recorded of Gibbon is thrashing a servant at Buriton for beating his dog. There was no more hard drinking, but he found that Madeira, and plenty of it, was necessary for his health. The walls were covered with white flock paper, with a blue and gold border: decorations by Adam: mahogany proscribed.

He had resumed his freemasonry: he was a member of all the best clubs, the Cocoa Tree, White's, Brooks's: he was elected to The Club in 1774. But Johnson and he frankly disliked each other. Reynolds once wrote an imaginary dialogue between the two, in which Gibbon is allowed about one word to Johnson's ten. Johnson talked about his ugliness--face and figure were beginning to assume the grotesque rotundity which earned for him the name of Monsieur Pomme de Terre. It came to his ears and he retaliated, when Johnson was dead, in acid footnotes. Gibbon could not converse in large companies, and he gave Johnson no opportunities for the Faithful Disciple to record. For Boswell he was an ugly affected fellow who poisoned the Club. So did Adam Smith. *Un gentilhomme est toujours gentilhomme*, and neither of them came up to Boszy's standard of select merit. For theatres and ridottos--Gibbon had a simple delight in illuminations and fine clothes--his favourite companions were Reynolds and Garrick. His acquaintance with Goldsmith provides one of the best stories in the Gibbon legend. Calling one morning, he found him hard at work on the *History of Greece*. 'Tell me,' said Goldsmith, 'what was the name of that Indian king who fought Alexander?' 'Montezuma,' replied Gibbon promptly. 'But stay,' he added, as Goldsmith was innocently writing it down, 'I mistake. 'Twas not Montezuma. 'Twas Porus.' To this decade belongs the Colman portrait which must always be quoted:

On the day I first sat down with Johnson, in his rusty brown, and his black worsteds, Gibbon was placed opposite to me in a suit of flower'd velvet, with a bag and sword. Each had his measured phraseology; and Johnson's famous parallel between Dryden and Pope, might be loosely parodied, in reference to himself and Gibbon. Johnson's style was grand, and Gibbon's elegant; the stateliness of the former was sometimes pedantick, and the polish of the latter was occasionally finical. Johnson march'd to kettle-drums and trumpets; Gibbon moved to flutes and hautboys; Johnson hew'd passages through the Alps, while Gibbon levell'd walks through parks and gardens. Maul'd as I had been by Johnson, Gibbon pour'd balm upon my bruises, by condescending, once or twice, in the course of the evening, to talk with me; the great historian was light and playful, suiting his matter to the capacity of the boy;--but it was done *more suo*; still his mannerism prevail'd;--still he tapp'd his snuff-box,--still he smurk'd, and smiled; and rounded his periods with the same air of good-breeding, as if he were conversing with men. His mouth, mellifluous as Plato's,

was a round hole, nearly in the centre of his visage.

A slightly absurd figure, doubtless: fussy and affected; but not unkindly, and though he could be very rude to people he disliked, not ill-bred. In one who acknowledged 'an aversion to epistolary conversation' a correspondence maintained throughout thirty years with an old lady is an unanswerable proof of goodness: he was supported, no doubt, by an intense enjoyment of his own variegated epistolary style: but Gibbon in his letters to his stepmother always appears at his best. Playful little notes mark his progress along the Bath Road.

Tuesday, the 14th January, about 1788.

Andover, 5 o'clock in the afternoon--safe, well and hungry. Not a single Lyon or giant to be seen on Salisbury Plain--very odd.

More serious occasions receive a more majestic treatment. Finding Bath expensive, she thought of retiring to Essex, and he writes:

I now find, what indeed I have sometimes feared, that your design of retiring from Bath is not entirely the effect of choice and inclination; that a stronger power, the power of necessity or at least of prudence, urges you to take that resolution, and that in a word you find the place too expensive. You do not explicitly say what income would support your present establishment, and I am not so stupid or so ungrateful as not to feel the generous delicacy of your behaviour. If my own circumstances were affluent, the obligations of friendship of twenty years would instantly prompt me to gratify my own inclinations in the performance of sacred duty. I am not insensible that in my present situation, you have a substantial and even legal claim upon me to a very considerable amount, and while I feel the value of your tenderness on this occasion, I must lament that it is not in my power to attain even the humble though indispensable virtue of justice.

She was apt to be *aggitated* about his health, and the pen purrs musically to soothe her alarms:

Nothing but my absence (on a visit to Mr. Jenkinson in Surrey) should have prevented me from writing by the *first* post to remove those fears which could be suggested only by too exquisite a sensibility. I am well and happy; the modest expression of *tolerably* was intended to express a very high degree of content, and I most sincerely assure you that my journey to Brighthelmstone is in search not of health but of amusement and society.

To please her, or Kitty, he could contrive most delicate attentions. Once, when she was ill, he posted to Bath to be near her, but not to frighten her by the appearance of haste, he waited two days before he made his call. Divining that Kitty would like to sleep in the room he always used at Sheffield Park, he arranged that the old lady's fancy should be gratified. Inevitably the two desired to see him settled, and when he was thirty-seven, Mrs. Gibbon, Aunt Kitty and Mrs. Holroyd seem to have woven a plot for his capture. He entered into his part with becoming gravity. But the lady's family had severe religious views, and he escaped, protesting faintly that his character at least was above reproach.

'Your evasion,' he writes to Mrs. Holroyd, 'was very able, but will not prudence as well as honour require us being more explicit in the suite? Ought I to give them room to think that I should patiently conform to family prayers and Bishop Hooper's sermons? After all, what occasion is there to enquire into my profession of faith? It is surely much more to the purpose for them to ask how I have already acted in life, whether as a good son, a good friend, whether I game, drink, etc.? You know I never practised the one, and, in spite of my old Dorsetshire character, I have left off the other. You once mentioned Miss F. I give you my honour that I have not with her or any other woman any connection that would alarm a wife.'

Whether this guarded allusion conceals the occasional presence of a little French milliner at Bentinck Street is not so clear.

The Neckers came to London in time to witness his triumphant arrival as an author, and in the following year he returned their visit in Paris. Mrs. Gibbon was much upset, and Gibbon had to explain, first that Suzanne was no longer a young beauty, second that he was not going to live with her but only near her, and third that in a country where Voltaire was tolerated and Hume idolized, there was no risk of his spending the rest of his life in a dungeon as an Infidel. There was more danger of his cross-channel trip ending in the hold of an American privateer and a detention at Philadelphia. However, nothing of the sort happened, and Paris and Gibbon were well pleased with each other. Horace Walpole sent

him to Madame du Deffand, and her reports show that if not such a triumph as Hume's, his visit was well enough. *On se l'arrache*. He had two footmen in livery behind his coach, and his apartment was hung with damask. He went to Court, and the Neckers saw that he met all the right people, including the Emperor Joseph II. Of these encounters, the most impressive has unfortunately gone unrecorded. To his great regret, Gibbon had missed Buffon on his earlier visit to Paris. Acquaintance confirmed his admiration. Of style as a purely intellectual operation, a logical evolution of ideas, those two were the greatest masters in eighteenth-century literature: one would like to know what they had to say to one another when they met, and in what majestic periphrases they said it. The Duc de Choiseul nearly persuaded him to come to his seat in Touraine, but the thought of the journey, and the destination, was too much. Sixty leagues, and into the country: no. He returned home with gout in both feet, and he was never out of danger again.

The visit to Paris, where he could see for himself into what humiliation Lord North was leading the country, made Gibbon for a time take politics more seriously than was his wont. He had read up the American case, decided that the colonials were in the wrong, and never saw occasion to change his mind. But the mismanagement of the campaign weighed on him. 'Upon the whole,' he writes from Paris, 'I find it much easier to defend the justice than the policy of our measures: but there are certain cases, where whatever is repugnant to sound policy ceases to be just.' He had attracted attention by his independence in some divisions and the surrender of Burgoyne in 1777 strained his party loyalty to the utmost. 'I shall never give my consent,' he wrote, 'to exhaust still further the finest country in the world in this prosecution of a war from whence no reasonable man entertains any hope of success. It is better to be humbled than ruined.' Of Lord North as a statesman he had the lowest opinion: the only Minister with whom he was at all closely associated was Wedderburn, Solicitor-General: his natural affinities were with the Patriots, with Horace Walpole and Fox and the Whig society at Brooks's.

On the strength of the first volume, Walpole had conceived for Gibbon one of his rapid and petulant attachments which Gibbon, who was not at all insensible to the charms of the great, reciprocated with assiduous attention. We find him sitting down to whist with Walpole, Lady Lucan and the Archbishopess of Canterbury. The *Vindication*, which he published in January 1779, raised Walpole's regard to enthusiasm. The two chapters had provoked a small library of Criticisms and Rejoinders. Dr. Chelsum of Christ Church opened the attack, and showed his quality by getting the date of Herodotus a century out: Dr. Watson of Cambridge followed it up, in an *Apology for Christianity*, too polite to provoke, and too dull to require, an answer. Dr. Apthorp issued some harmless Observations from Croydon Vicarage. Gibbon would have noticed none of them, if a more impudent assailant had not delivered himself into his hands. Mr. Davies, in an Examination of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters, charged him with plagiarism whenever he agreed with a predecessor, misrepresentation whenever he differed, and inaccuracy whenever his pen slipped in copying a reference or his eye in correcting a proof. Gibbon chose to regard the Examination as an attack on his moral character, and he took the opportunity, after annihilating the unlucky B.A., of administering some instruction in Patristics to a Margaret Professor of Divinity. The honour of his craft was at stake, and Robertson approved.

If the *Vindication* ranks lower than other famous pieces of controversy, below Bentley on Phalaris and Porson's Reply to Travis, one reason is that Gibbon's critics are so far beneath him as to be almost invisible. It has at times a nightmarish effect as of a dream in which we had seen the Great Pyramid eternally pursuing, and always about to tread upon, a mouse. As the guns come into action, and the line is swept from end to end with authorities, we realize the enormous head of learning there is behind even an *obiter dictum* of Gibbon's: we see, as if we had called at 'the shop' in working hours, what patient, self-devoted labour those musical periods conceal. Probably Robertson was the only man who was qualified to judge this side of Gibbon's work, and his verdict was decisive: 'I have traced Mr. Gibbon in many of his quotations (for experience has taught me to suspect the accuracy of my brother penmen), and I find that he refers to no passage but what he has seen with his own eyes.' The praise was not the less welcome, because Robertson had already said of Voltaire that for want of references he could not appeal to his authority in confirmation of any unknown or doubtful fact. Porson's experience with the later volumes was even more conclusive. He read through all the Byzantine historians to see if he could catch Gibbon misquoting. He could not find one instance. On this, the technical side of his craft, Gibbon established a standard of workmanship for English historians once for all.

His method was to make his notes, on cards, as he read: compose a paragraph at a time, walking up and down his room: commit it to writing, add the references, and then proceed to the next. I think this ambulatory habit may have helped his accuracy. Hume, who wrote with his feet on the sofa, found it 'unco fashious' to get up and verify his facts. It is much easier to turn over a folio when you are standing up. His memory, though not of the legendary quality of Macaulay's, served him well. Like Pascal, he never forgot anything he wanted to remember, and he could carry it in his mind till the

moment came to use it. His reading, though select, was very wide: he had a great taste for books of science and travel: his recollections helped to give his narrative that peculiar richness of inlay which is one of its charms. His borrowings and allusions have the air of royal compliments. 'The tidings of misfortune fly with a rapid wing: yet such was the extent of Constantinople that the more distant quarters might prolong, some moments, the happy ignorance of their ruin.' The words are Gibbon: the idea is Herodotus. 'Salvian has attempted to explain the moral government of the Deity: a task which may be readily performed by supposing that the calamities of the wicked are *judgments* and those of the righteous *trials*.' Nothing could be more like Gibbon. But he took it from Augustine.

By the command of the Sultan, the churches and fortifications of the Latin cities were demolished: a motive of avarice or fear still opened the holy sepulchre to some devout and defenceless pilgrims; and a mournful and solitary silence prevailed along the coast which had so long resounded with the WORLD'S DEBATE.

Many a knight
From tawny Spain, lost in the world's debate.

So the mountain tops salute each other.

XII

From 1778 on he was working steadily every morning at the second and third volumes. He had undertaken to reach the fifth century, and he probably realized by now that the fifteenth was his real goal. But the difficulties rose up before him as he advanced. From Commodus to Diocletian the clue of collapse and reorganization is comparatively simple to follow. How was it possible to keep within one framework the dynastic wars of the fourth century, the Pagan revival under Julian, the evolution of the Nicene theology, the growth of monasticism, the movements of the nomads from the Great Wall of China to the Danube, and the rise of the Germanic kingdoms from Carthage to York? Half a volume went into the fire before he was satisfied. Livy had found himself in the same difficulty when, after the victories of Scipio, Roman history broadened out and took the whole Mediterranean world for its scene, and the analogy was gracefully anticipated in the motto which Gibbon put on his first title-page. But if Gibbon's task was incomparably harder, the powers he displays in mastering it were incomparably greater. Standing by themselves, the first sixteen chapters would be a memorable piece of scholarship, narrative and irony. They would give us no conception at all of Gibbon's superb capacity for historical architecture. Here, as he had no master, so he has had no successor.

The Galilean has conquered. Yet the cause is not quite lost. A line of heroic figures--Valentinian, Stilicho, Majorian--keep the Empire standing: if cataclysm can be averted or postponed, it is not beyond hope that civilization will come to rest again about a new centre and 'order, regularity and refinement' will be preserved. But all the while a wave of calamity is gathering far out of sight in the plains of Scythia and Tartary. The impact of the Goths on the Roman *limes*--that crossing of the Danube in which the boy had been immersed at Stourhead--is the front of a surge whose undulations can be traced to the Arctic solitudes, where 'in that dreary climate, the smoke which issues from the earth, or rather the snow, betrays the subterraneous dwellings of the Tongouses and the Sanoieds.'

On the field of Adrianople, not two nations but two cycles of history encountered each other, and the result was the atomizing of the maturer system. 'In the disastrous period of the fall of the Roman Empire'--when the decline became a ruin--'the happiness and security of each individual were personally attacked.' Personally attacked: the words are emphatic and calculated. That is what Decline and Fall means. Ancient civilization has proved both morally and physically unequal to the forces assembled against it, and the world must start again. Julian, the only character in his history for whom Gibbon seems to feel some affection, belongs to the past. The future is with Athanasius, the barbarians and the monks.

One might ask what Gibbon's reflexions were on the decline of another empire for which he had a certain personal responsibility. The truth is that he thought very little about it. When Parliament met after the disaster of Saratoga, and his French impressions were still fresh, he voted in the minority with Fox on the motion that no more of the Old Corps be sent out of the kingdom. In the face of a victorious enemy and a confident opposition, Lord North made a desperate change of front, offering the Colonies more than they had ever asked. A solemn fast was proclaimed, and Gibbon calls Holroyd's attention to the injunction in the Liturgy for the occasion. 'And all the people shall say after the Minister: Turn us again, O Lord, and so we shall be turned.' But it was too late. The American treaty with France was signed in February 1778, the French Ambassador dismissed in March, the first shot fired in June. Spain joined in a year later. The Government borrowed Gibbon's pen to compose the answer to the Bourbon manifesto. It is well written. In Vienna and St. Petersburg they said that the English Government had at last got someone who could write French, and in July 1779 he was appointed to a Lordship of Trade and Plantations at £800 a year. It was not an unusual or excessive reward for a distinguished man of letters who had been, on the whole, a steady supporter of the Government--Addison and Locke had held the place--but the Patriots professed to be deeply shocked. Not long before the appointment was announced he had been heard to say at Brooks's that nothing would save the country but the heads of six Ministers laid on the table. Gibbon averred that he had said the heads of Fox and North, but the popular version appeared in Fox's writing in a presentation copy of Volume I, which, to the huge delight of the public, was sold for the benefit of his creditors. It fetched three guineas. Squibs flew about the town. The King, it was said, had given him a place to stop him writing the Decline and Fall of the British Empire. For more severe punishment he was delivered over to Horace Walpole. Gibbon lent him an advance copy of the second volume. 'I returned it with a most civil panegyric. He came for more incense: I gave it, but alas! with too much sincerity, I added, "Mr. Gibbon, I am sorry you should have pitched on so disgusting a subject as the Constantinopolitan History. There is so much of the Arians, and the Eunomians and the semi-Pelagians: and there is such a strange contrast between Roman and Gothic manners, and so little harmony between a Consul Sabinus and a Ricimer Count of the Palace that though you have written the story as well as it could be written I fear few will have patience to read it." He coloured: all his round features squeezed themselves into sharp angles: he screwed up his button-mouth, and

rapping his snuff-box, said, "It had never been put together before"--so *well*, he meant to add, but gulped it. He meant so *well* certainly, for Tillemont, whom he quotes in every page, has done the very thing. I well knew his vanity, even about his ridiculous face and person, but thought he had too much sense to avow it so palpably.'

Walpole's judgment was always at the mercy of a passing prejudice. In another mood he would have found the contrast of Roman and Gothic manners admirable. 'The patriots,' Gibbon wrote to his stepmother, 'wish to damn the work and the author.' The two volumes were searched for evidence of his defection, and evidence was found. Gibbon closed his third volume with a compliment to his royal Master which sent Walpole into ecstasies of amusement.

The same prince, adapting his benefactions to the different stages of society, has founded a school of painting in his Capital, and has introduced into the islands of the South Sea the vegetables and animals most useful to human life.

Let us hope that Sir Joshua was equally gratified at the implied comparison of the Royal Academy to a potato-patch and the Academicians to pigs.

Burke spiced his attack on the Lords of Trade with sarcasms over the grave, religious researches of their historical colleague. But Gibbon's detachment was so serene that he could admire the eloquence of which he was the victim: and he could bear ridicule with more fortitude than contradiction. During the Gordon Riots, in which Holroyd distinguished himself by his gallant defence of the Holborn breweries against the Protestant mob, the officers were entertained at a dinner in Lincoln's Inn to which Gibbon was invited. 'He was then,' the host^[9] writes, 'at the zenith of his fame, and certainly not at all backward in availing himself of the deference universally shown to him, by taking both the lead, and a very ample share of the conversation, in whatever company he might honour with his presence. His conversation was not, indeed, what Dr. Johnson would have called *talk*. There was no interchange of ideas, for no one had a chance of replying, so fugitive, so variable, was his mode of discoursing, which consisted of points, anecdotes, and epigrammatic thrusts, all more or less to the purpose, and all pleasantly said with a French air and manner which gave them great piquancy, but which were withal so desultory and unconnected that, though each separately was extremely amusing, the attention of his auditors sometimes flagged before his own resources were exhausted. He had just concluded one of his best foreign anecdotes, in which he had introduced some of the fashionable levities of political doctrine then prevalent, and, with his customary tap on the lid of his snuff-box, was looking round to receive our tribute of applause, when a deep-toned but clear voice was heard from the bottom of the table, very calmly and civilly impugning the correctness of the narrative and the propriety of the doctrines of which it had been made the vehicle. The historian, turning a disdainful glance towards the quarter whence the voice proceeded, saw, for the first time, a tall, thin, and rather ungainly-looking young man, who now sat quietly and silently eating some fruit. There was nothing very prepossessing or very formidable in his exterior, but, as the few words he had uttered appeared to have made a considerable impression on the company, Mr. Gibbon, I suppose, thought himself bound to maintain his honour by suppressing such an attempt to dispute his supremacy. He accordingly undertook the defence of the propositions in question, and a very animated debate took place between him and his youthful antagonist, and for some time was conducted with great talent and brilliancy on both sides. At length the genius of the young man prevailed over that of his senior, who finding himself driven into a corner from which there was no escape, made some excuse for rising from the table and walked out of the room. I followed him, and, finding that he was looking for his hat, I tried to persuade him to return to his defeat. "By no means," said he. "That young gentleman is, I have no doubt, extremely ingenious and agreeable, but I must acknowledge that his style of conversation is not exactly what I am accustomed to, so you must positively excuse me." And away he went in high dudgeon, notwithstanding that his friend had come to my assistance.'

The deep clear voice was soon to make itself heard in a larger theatre. It was the voice of the younger Pitt.

XIII

The second and third volumes, which appeared in the spring of 1781, were accepted quietly as a classic. The novelty had gone off, and they contained nothing so provocative as the Two Chapters. A fusillade of objections and criticisms still went on, but Gibbon paid no attention. One rash intruder did indeed come in for crushing punishment, but not from Gibbon. In Chapter XXXVII he had remarked incidentally that the text, 'There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one,' was spurious. He was of course right, but it would have been no great reproach to him if he had been wrong. It was not his subject, and he had consulted the best authorities. Archdeacon Travis undertook to defend the text, and was answered by Porson so conclusively that neither Travis nor the Three Witnesses could ever appear in scholarly company again. Porson took the occasion to interpose a few observations on Gibbon himself. After praising as they deserved (and Porson was qualified to praise them) his accuracy, his learning, his vigilance, and his style, Porson continues:

I confess I see nothing wrong in Mr. Gibbon's attack on Christianity. It proceeded, I doubt not, from the purest and most virtuous motives. We can only blame him for carrying on the attack in an insidious manner and with improper weapons. He often makes when he cannot readily find an occasion to insult our religion which he hates so cordially that he might seem to revenge some personal injury. Such is his eagerness in the cause that he stoops to the most despicable pun or to the most awkward perversion of language for the purpose of turning the Scripture into ribaldry, or of calling Jesus an impostor. A less pardonable fault is that rage for indecency which pervades the whole work, but especially the last three volumes. 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, still indulged himself in the luxury of speculation.

It is severe, but not on the whole more severe than Gibbon deserved. The quantity of Gibbon's indecency has been exaggerated by the repetition of a few notorious specimens. It is the quality of it that is so repulsive. There was unquestionably a false streak, in his literary character, which crops out whenever women or religion are the theme. He cannot let them alone: like an ill-bred talker, he is constantly forcing the unwanted note. It is artificial and deliberate: there is hardly a trace of it in his private correspondence, and with his command of the superior weapons, irony and humour, it was really unnecessary. It was also out of date: the naughty old Deist was as much behind the times in 1780 as the Restoration wits were out of date in the well-conducted society of Queen Anne's days. And, more seriously, his furtiveness annoyed many people who could not understand why an Englishman in a free country should practise the slyness which in self-protection was natural and permitted to a Frenchman. He had in fact impaled himself on a whole row of dilemmas. Either the Church was dead and not worth attacking, or it was alive. Alive, it was either right or wrong. If it was right, a sneer was unwarranted: if it was wrong, a sneer was no argument. Priestley, who certainly believed not less than Gibbon, challenged him to come out into the open. Gibbon replied with ill-temper so unusual that it betrays a bad conscience, and hinted rather plainly that Priestley deserved the attention of the police. The exactness of his learning, the sustained perfection of his irony, made his attitude exasperating: he was at once too strong to be attacked and too elusive to be refuted. He was to the new England growing up in seriousness--the England, say, of Bennet Langton, Miss Burney and Pitt, as contrasted with the England of Topham Beauclerk, Fielding and Fox--what the old French aristocrat was to the new French bourgeoisie. Walter Bagehot said, with his usual penetration, that Gibbon was the sort of man that a revolutionary mob likes to hang. He was certainly the sort of man that the evangelical mob was bound to excommunicate. To Hannah More his death was a direct manifestation of the divine disapproval.

Gibbon lived on into a world which had begun to be impatient with elegance, to mistrust wit, and to find the noble generalization unsatisfying. The age of Rousseau, avid for sensation, description and local colour, broke through the senatorial prose of the Augustans. 'Bring out number, weight and measure in a year of dearth!' To the romantic generation at the doors, the whole Augustan age was a year of dearth: its insistence on number, weight and measure an oppression to be thrown off. It did not want the Two Chapters. It wanted Scott: it wanted Chateaubriand. Johnson was protected by his personality and his fitness for family reading. Gibbon had to take the first discharge of the reaction.

Only a generation trained in definition and coherence could appreciate the integrity behind the virtuosity of such prose as this:

When Justinian ascended the throne, about fifty years after the fall of the Western Empire, the kingdom of the Goths and the Vandals had obtained a solid, and as it might seem, a legal establishment both in Europe

and Africa.

Time and place are fixed, and the theme is stated in the two words *solid* and *legal*. It is next to be developed in a sentence of rich and intricate harmony:

The titles which Roman victory had inscribed were erased with equal justice by the sword of the Barbarians: and their successful rapine derived a more venerable sanction from time, from treaties, and from the oaths of fidelity already repeated by a second and third generation of obedient subjects.

But the state of the Mediterranean world is only an incident in a still larger cycle of events.

Experience and Christianity had refuted the superstitious hope that Rome was founded by the gods to reign for ever over the nations of the earth.

Then comes a subtle transposition of the theme. Against the solid, and apparently legal, establishment of the Barbarians are set the legal, and partially effective, claims of the Empire.

But the proud claim of perpetual and indefeasible dominion, which her soldiers could no longer maintain, was firmly asserted by her statesmen and lawyers, whose opinions have been sometimes revived and propagated in the modern schools of jurisprudence.

The bearing of this last phrase is not immediately apparent. Its significance is kept in reserve. Five hundred pages--and eight hundred years--later, it reappears as the legal basis of the visionary Western Empire. Meanwhile, the idea is growing towards action, the legal claim is to be consolidated by an Emperor who is at once a lawyer and a soldier.

After Rome herself had been stripped of the Imperial purple, the princes of Constantinople assumed the sole and sacred sceptre of the monarchy: demanded, as their rightful inheritance, the provinces which had been subdued by the consuls or possessed by the Caesars; and feebly aspired to deliver their faithful subjects of the West from the usurpation of heretics and barbarians. The execution of this splendid design was in some degree reserved for Justinian.

Here the whole argument is gathered up: sole--sacred--rightful, on the one side: on the other, feebly--in some degree. An intervening episode is brushed aside: our eyes must be kept, with Justinian's, firmly on the West.

During the five first years of his reign he reluctantly waged a costly and unprofitable war against the Persians: till his pride submitted to his ambition, and he purchased, at the price of four hundred and forty thousand pounds sterling, the benefit of a precarious truce which in the language of both nations was dignified with the appellation of the *endless* peace.

With this epigram we return to the highway of narrative.

The safety of the East enabled the Emperor to employ his forces against the Vandals: and the internal state of Africa afforded an honourable motive, and promised a powerful support, to the Roman arms.

The Romantics could not appreciate this combination of close thinking and ample phrasing. 'You see,' Walpole remarks to a correspondent, 'that he is never thinking of his subject but only intending to make his periods worthy of himself.' Madame de Staël said exactly the same of Buffon: 'il ne veut faire, avec de beaux mots, qu'un bel ouvrage: la parole est son but autant que son instrument.' Across the Atlantic, Noah Webster raised his voice to warn his countrymen against the seduction of Gibbon's style. Bishop Hurd passed the strain on to Coleridge. 'Gibbon's style is detestable, but his style is not the worst thing about him: when I read a Chapter in Gibbon I seem to be looking at a luminous haze, or fog.' Coleridge was an authority on haze, or fog.

Gibbon had no followers, and he founded no school. In thirty years he had fallen out of the curriculum of ordinary readers. The pilgrimages to La Grotte, to cut a piece of wood from his pavilion, twice renewed, ceased. Shelley went in 1816.

The rain detained us two days at Ouchy. We, however, visited Lausanne, and saw Gibbon's house. We were shown the decayed summer-house where he finished his History, and the old acacias on the terrace from which he saw Mont Blanc after having written the last sentence. There is something grand and even

touching in the regret which he expresses at the completion of his task. It was conceived amid the ruins of the Capitol. The sudden departure of his cherished and accustomed toil must have left him, like the death of a dear friend, sad and solitary.

My companion gathered some acacia leaves to preserve in remembrance of him. I refrained from doing so, fearing to outrage the greater and more sacred name of Rousseau; the contemplation of whose imperishable creations had left no vacancy in my heart for mortal things. Gibbon had a cold and unimpassioned spirit. I never felt more inclination to rail at the prejudices which cling to such a thing, than now that Julie and Clarens, Lausanne and the Roman empire, compelled me to a contrast between Rousseau and Gibbon.

To Shelley, Gibbon has become a monument of the insolent and heartless civilization of the world before the Flood. The companion who picked the acacia leaves was Byron. But Byron's heart, always loyal to the age which bred him, had room both for Gibbon and Rousseau, for Voltaire and Germaine de Staël.

Leman! these names are worthy of thy shore,
Thy shore of names like these! . . .
How much more, Lake of Beauty, do we feel,
In sweetly gliding o'er thy crystal sea,
The wild glow of that not ungentle zeal,
Which of the heirs of immortality
Is proud, and makes the breath of glory real!

XIV

Gibbon guarded his inmost thoughts even from Sheffield. I can only guess, but I certainly suspect, that a sense of homelessness in the sobering England of his maturity turned his thoughts abroad. In '81 he confided to Suzanne his project of retiring to Switzerland. The friendship renewed with the Neckers in '76 was never again interrupted. Germaine, aged eleven, had offered to complete it by marrying Mr. Gibbon. Intellectually, Gibbon and Suzanne were not ill-matched. Suzanne, fervid and scatter-brained, was none the less a woman of very uncommon gifts: she has her place in French history, not only as the mother of Madame de Staël, but as a hospital reformer. She found the patients sleeping four in a bed. When they died . . . sometimes before they were dead . . . so Premature Interment became one of her subjects, and worked her mind into a macabre obsession with the circumstances of her own embalmment and burial. The hospital which she reorganized still bears her name. Yet she found time to keep pace with the intellect of her age. Her Friday evenings, though the food was bad, and Necker, brooding over the national debt, added little to the gaiety of the company, drew all the best brains of Paris, and her letters to Gibbon show what they came for. Once her husband found among her memoranda for the day a note: 'Praise M. Thomas' poem again, only rather more strongly.' 'Que vous avez bien raison, Madame,' Gibbon wrote, 'de célébrer l'art perfectionné de l'exagération!' Her praise was precious because, even when she exaggerated, she was sincere, and she could be sincere because she understood how a man's mind works. Of all Gibbon's critics, none, I think, shows so fine a comprehension of his aim, or of the exact quality of his success. The first volume filled a great lacuna in the historic culture of Europe. A lost age had been restored to knowledge, and the historic succession which had lapsed with the death of Tacitus had been resumed. 'I see he was the model and perhaps the source of your work, but the source has been enlarged by the torrents of thought of all the ages: you show what a fertile and sensitive imagination can add to depth and breadth of intellect. . . . I read with delight that history where I see the intelligence of so many centuries concentrated in one intelligence, the judgments of all the nations coming together in one judgment, which illuminates them and gives them back to us with all the grace of novelty and with none of their ancient, noble fashion lost. Your style is yours alone. Follow the impulse of your own genius: anyone who advised you to do anything but give yourself boldly to yourself would be unworthy to admire you or to feel the value of a great individuality.'

'Gibbon,' Carlyle wrote, 'is a kind of bridge that connects the antique with the modern ages. And how gorgeously does it swing across the gloomy and tumultuous chasm of those barbarous centuries.' It is perhaps the finest thing ever said of the *Decline and Fall*. But Suzanne said it first.

'Je vous rends grâce,' she writes of the first three volumes, 'd'avoir rempli un intervalle immense dans l'histoire et d'avoir jeté sur le chaos ce pont qui joint le monde ancien au monde moderne.'

Gibbon repaid her nobly, for the Empress, Athenais Eudoxia, with 'large eyes, a well proportioned nose, a fair complexion, golden locks, a slender person, a graceful demeanour, an understanding improved by study and a virtue tried by distress,' who 'wisely dedicated her talents to the honour of religion and her husband,' was meant, and was accepted, for a portrait of Suzanne as he remembered her in the white parsonage with green shutters standing back from the village street of Crassy, and as he knew her afterwards, wife of the chief Minister of France. She begged him to join her and Necker in France, and display himself on the more conspicuous stage which Paris offered to a man of genius. The eighteenth century was no doubt highly civilized. But I doubt whether even in the eighteenth century an English M.P. would have been allowed to go and live with the Minister of a State with which we were at war. The difficulty seems to have occurred to Suzanne, and she suggests that if the occasion was unfavourable he might come later, and in study and friendship they would all together spend the pleasant evening of a beautiful day. The letter was hardly written when her own day suddenly broke in storm. Necker was dismissed, and she had, after all, to plan the retreat to Switzerland from which she had dissuaded Gibbon.

Meanwhile, Gibbon's position in England was becoming every quarter less agreeable. It is difficult to make out what his private income from Buriton, Lenborough, New River shares, and a Cornish copper mine, really was, but from various indications I should reckon it at about £750 a year. His rate of expenditure was a thousand a year and more. Hitherto he had avoided financial cares by not thinking about them, and sending on business letters unopened to Holroyd. Eliot, having now gone over to the Opposition, withdrew his nomination for Liskeard at the election in 1780. The Treasury put Gibbon in for Lymington, but his future was precarious. The Lords of Trade had weathered one squall, but they foundered with Lord North and the British Empire, and on Rockingham taking office in May 1782 Gibbon found himself poorer by £800 a year. He might hold on and hope for a post at the Customs or Excise: £1000 a year, five mornings a

week, an insecure tenure, and no more Roman Empire. He preferred the Roman Empire, and of the two he might with some confidence regard it as the more profitable venture. He got £4000 for the first three volumes, and was offered the same for three more. For once in his life he was taking his health seriously: he had spent the summer of '81 at Brighton, scrupulously promising Mrs. Gibbon not to bathe without medical advice. In '82 Single Speech Hamilton lent him a house at Hampton Court with a private door into the gardens, where he would walk a mile, and even more, before breakfast, work all the morning, and drive out calling as far as Isleworth. Through all changes he stood by Lord North, or rather by Wedderburn, from whom he had more hopes, and in true eighteenth-century manner he was carried, with flannels and crutches, to record at eight in the morning a silent vote in the division which overthrew Shelburne and brought the Coalition into office. But it was clear that Lord North could or would do nothing for him; his claims were shadowy and the claimants were a host.

In May 1783 he wrote to Deyverdun proposing a joint establishment in Lausanne. The two old bachelors threw themselves with delight upon the details, and on July 10th Gibbon announced to Lord Sheffield his IRREVOCABLE decision. Up to the last minute he had expectations, rather than hopes, of a place at the Excise or the Secretaryship to the Paris Embassy, the pros and cons of which he enumerated in a memorandum recalling Robinson Crusoe and anticipating Mr. Michael Finsbury. Fox, who had, in fact, already disposed of the place, advised him not to wait, and on September 17th he crossed the Channel with Henry Laurence, President of Congress, who had been captured in 1779 and set free on the declaration of peace, and the loyalist Benjamin Thomson, afterwards Count Rumford and the inventor of kitchen ranges. He arrived at Lausanne, 'safe in harbour,' on the 27th. His books followed early in February: for a few days all was rapture and confusion, and then the great progress was resumed. Up at seven or eight: work till two: dinner, followed by chess or a novel: calls, visitors, shilling whist: bread and cheese for supper: bed at eleven. The last three volumes were finished in 1787. They were the fruit of this second youth at Lausanne.

La Grotte has long made way for a post office, and survives only in the careful observations of an American pilgrim in the nineteenth century. It stood on the foundations of an old Franciscan house: in the neighbouring Church of St. Francis, Gibbon and the other notables worshipped every Sunday. He kept up the Buriton habit of taking his Greek Bible to church with him. With all its gaiety Lausanne was a pious city: Communion Sunday was observed as rigorously as in Geneva or Edinburgh. The house itself was a high-pitched rambling structure, backing on the street, with four acres of garden, orchard and vineyard, and an unbroken view of the lake and the mountains. The rooms were large and many: each of the partners had his own suite which the other never entered without notice, with dining-room and parlour for common use. The library and working-room looked south over the lake: a passage led down to the Terrace, the Pavilion, and the covered way of plum-trees, la Gibbonnière.

It was a fancy of Gibbon's to keep his books behind shutters. He had none of the tastes of a collector: he could read his classics in old school texts. The only book he valued as a book was the Foulis Homer. When he migrated, two-thirds of his library was scrapped without the least concern. Installed at La Grotte, he began buying again. His lighter literature was mostly French, but he had a good array of English classics, including sermons: Chaucer is missing from the catalogue, and so is Smollett. An English Bible was always at his bedside, and a visitor peeping into the workroom noticed a Spenser open on his desk. Like Macaulay, who read some books at dinner and others only at breakfast, Gibbon had his specialities. He crossed France reading Clarendon and Homer, but his favourite companion in a post-chaise was the Correspondence of Busbequius, the Flemish envoy at Constantinople, who had the curiosity to note down the language of the Crimean people and so preserve for posterity the last echo of the Gothic speech.

From this safe retreat he watched English politics with a placid eye. 'I am not sorry to hear of the splendour of Fox: I am proud in a foreign country of his fame and abilities, and our little animosities are extinguished by my retreat from the English stage.' He was hurt by Lord North's neglect, and followed his extinction with some malicious satisfaction. 'But the happy souls in Paradise are susceptible only of love and pity, and though Lausanne is not a paradise, especially in winter, I do assure you in sober prose that it has hitherto fulfilled and even surpassed my warmest expectations.'

Aided by Deyverdun, Gibbon's eye for the first time learned to look at nature.

My library is about the same size with that in Bentinck Street, with this difference, however, that instead of looking on a paved court twelve feet square, I command a boundless prospect of vale, mountain, and water, from my three windows. Deyverdun, who is proud of his own works, often walks me round pointing out with knowledge and enthusiasm the beauties that change with every step and with every variation of light. I have, or at least I sympathize with, his pleasure: he appears content with my progress, and has already told

several people, that he does not despair of making me a Gardener.

Lausanne had become one of the fashionable resorts of Europe, and if he professed to be annoyed by the interruption, he was evidently flattered by the spectacle of cosmopolitan elegance taking the air on his Terrace.

A few weeks ago, as I was walking on our terrace with M. Tissot the celebrated physician; M. Mercier, the author of the *Tableau de Paris*; the Abbé Raynal; Monsieur, Madame and Mademoiselle Necker; the Abbé de Bourbon, a natural son of Louis xv.; the Hereditary Prince of Brunswick, Prince Henry of Prussia and a dozen Counts, Barons and extraordinary persons, among whom was a natural son of the Empress of Russia--are you satisfied with this list? . . . The Neckers have purchased the barony of Coppet near Geneva. They afford a new example that persons who have tasted of greatness can seldom return with pleasure to a private station. . . . Prince Henry must be a man of sense: for he took more notice, and expressed more esteem for me than anybody else. He talked with freedom, and generally with contempt, of most of the princes of Europe: with respect of the Empress of Russia, but never mentioned the name of his brother, except once when he hinted that it was *he himself* that won the battle of Rosbach. . . . The Eliza passed through Lausanne in her road from Italy to England: poorly in health but still adorable (nay do not frown!) and I enjoyed some delightful hours by her bedside.

If any woman after Suzanne touched Gibbon's fancy, it was the Eliza, Lady Elizabeth Foster, governess to the Duke of Devonshire's illegitimate daughter, friend, and in due course successor, of his wife. He pronounced her irresistible: she might beckon the Lord Chancellor off the woolsack, he told Lady Sheffield, and he would have to come. She was now an accomplished young widow of twenty-six--the charming sketch of Gibbon's terrace with the lake and mountains beyond is from her hand--with a genuine, if erratic, fondness for the classics. She sprinkled her letters with Greek: later, as Duchess of Devonshire, she patronized the most splendid production of the Bodoni press, and it was her workmen who, in 1820, first uncovered the Sacred Way in the Roman Forum.

Thus stimulated, amused and flattered, in easier circumstances and better health than he had known for years, Gibbon faced the last miles of his long journey in high and confident spirits. Every stage of his progress had been a preparation for the next. The first volume supplied his style and gave him confidence. In the next two, expanding his powers, he revealed his mastery of the strategy of history in the disposition of his masses. In the last three, the style is at once swifter and richer, and the movement of the centuries is controlled and dominated with a sovereign assurance. Sixteen chapters had gone to the events of one hundred and twenty years, twenty-two to the next hundred and sixty: the last thirty-one carry the story from the middle of the fifth century to the middle of the sixteenth. Yet at no point are we conscious of any sudden change either in speed or scale, though at one place he will linger for pages over the events of a few hours, at another he sweeps a generation into oblivion with an epigram or an epithet. Such is the ease and certainty with which he moves, that the immense difficulty of his task hardly strikes our attention: the transitions leave no edge, the lengths are expanded and contracted at will: only after repeated readings, when the narrative is familiar, can we appreciate the miraculous judgment with which the proportions are regulated.

Like all good scholars, Gibbon was a great novel-reader, a habit which he elegantly excuses in the *Autobiography*—‘After a certain age the new publications of merit are the sole food of the many, and the most austere student will be often tempted to break the line for the sake of indulging his own curiosity and of providing the topics of fashionable currency.’ He read the five volumes of *Cecilia* through in a day, thereby spoiling Burke’s record, who took three. He brought to novels the same even attention with which he read all books. ‘More than once I have been led by a novel into a deep and instructive train of thinking,’ and one such train of thought can, I believe, be followed still. Gibbon’s admiration for *Tom Jones* is on record, and at the opening of the Second Book Fielding had written that his intention was rather ‘to pursue the Method of those writers who profess to describe the revolutions of countries than to imitate the painful and voluminous historian who, to preserve the regularity of his series, thinks himself obliged to fill up as much paper with the details of months and years in which nothing remarkable happened, as he employs upon those notable eras when the great scenes have been transacted on the human stage. Now it is our purpose in the ensuing pages to pursue a contrary method. When any extraordinary scene presents itself we shall spare no pains nor paper to open it at large to our reader, but if whole years should pass without producing anything worthy his notice we shall not be afraid of a chasm in our history but shall hasten on to matters of consequence and leave such periods of time totally unobserved.’ These sentences might almost stand as the programme of Gibbon’s last three volumes, and a justification of his plan.

From the fall of the Western Empire to the Pontificate of Gregory and the triumph of Heraclius, a period of one hundred and fifty years, the theme remains the same, the struggle of a not yet divided Mediterranean civilization to maintain itself against Germania and Iran. In the West the invasion of the Lombards turns the scale: in the East the age-long issue is for the time decided in favour of Rome. In A.D. 600 the Eastern Empire is still standing: the West an almost unrelieved spectacle of ruin and desolation. But look a little closer. At the Lombard Court of Pavia, in the Papal government of Rome, there are indications of a new, an unexpected life. The laws of the Lombards point forward to a fresh cycle of ‘order, regularity and refinement’: the conflux of pilgrims to the tombs of the Apostles will raise Rome to even higher ascendancy over the minds of men: all the forces which are shaping the future West are shown incorporate in Gregory, pontiff, missionary and feudal lord. In the East there is no corresponding principle of vitality to sustain the splendid but exhausting victories of Heraclius.

At this, the most difficult point he had reached, when the history must be expanded from a Mediterranean to a Eurasian ambit, Gibbon quietly turns back to trace the history of the theological doctrine of the Incarnation from the ‘distant and domestic prodigy’ of the Virgin Birth to the Council of Chalcedon. The placing and conduct of this chapter is his master-stroke as a historian. The Council of 451 is one of the crises of European history. But it is only now, after a hundred and fifty years have passed, and the Saracens are gathering on the frontier, that its consequences can be effectively exposed. The religious unity of the East was shattered by the official acceptance of the Roman formula, Christ in two natures,^[10] and Islam entered by the breach. With swift, almost sympathetic strokes, he touches in the history of the forlorn, despised fragments for a thousand years--the Nestorians of China, the Indian Christians of St. Thomas, the Maronites of Mount Lebanon, closing with that strange and romantic episode, the victory of the Abyssinians in the seventeenth century over the missionaries and theology of Rome. ‘The Monophysite Churches resounded with a song of triumph that the sheep of Aethiopia were now delivered from the hyenas of the West, and the gates of that solitary realm were for ever shut against the arts, the science, and the fanaticism of Europe.’

But the East is not only broken in itself, it must be divided from the West. Gibbon, as it were, is bent on isolating the Eastern Empire before he allows the Saracens to deliver their blow. He is moving in the realm of general causes, and the dynastic history of Byzantium is dismissed in a chapter which is little more than a string of lurid anecdotes. If you want to read about Emperors, he seems to mean, this is what they are like. Then, defying all chronology, he passes to the eighth century, the iconoclastic controversy, the division of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and the Alliance of Rome with the Franks, from which emerges the new Empire of the West. We have reached the year 1378 before the scene is finally set for the entrance of the Saracens in the year 629, and the first siege of Constantinople in 670.

The City of Constantine stands, and while it stands the Roman Empire stands. But to Gibbon's eye, it is less an object in itself than a vortex of forces, ethnic, economic, religious. We can calculate the strength and significance of the Eastern Empire at any moment by reckoning up the countervailing pressure of the Orthodox Church, the Paulicians and the Iconoclasts, or of the Saracens, the Slavs and the Central Asiatic hordes. At the centre, in a precarious but persistent equilibrium, is that extraordinary creation, the theocratic Byzantine state; sometimes, when the pressures relax or counteract each other, the sovereign of a great Eurasian empire, at other times, when they are concentrated against it, no more than a lonely fortress, looking out over lost and desolated provinces. And all the while, in the West, the fragments of the Old Empire are stirring and closing up into a new civilization, of which the notes are feudalism and Catholicism. Very early in his studies, when he was reading Giannone with M. Pavilliard, Gibbon had grasped the conception of a Mediterranean history. Stroke by stroke, this Mediterranean phase grows before our eyes. Issuing from their deserts, the Saracens become masters of the great port of Alexandria: along the African coast they reach the Atlantic and Spain: they are lords of the classic islands, of Cyprus, Crete and Sicily. But the ships of Venice and Genoa, Amalfi and Aragon are pushing south and east to meet them, and the field is set for the World's Debate, of which the prize was the Holy Places and the consequence the fall of New Rome. Fatally, the fourth Crusade was diverted against Constantinople. Roman history ended on the day when Baldwin of Flanders was elected Emperor and the Doge was proclaimed lord of a fourth part and a half of the Roman Empire. The rest, the expulsion of the Latins, the long postponement of the final assault by the Turks, is epilogue, and the historian closes, not with the fall of Constantinople, but, circling back for the last time to his starting-point, with the meditations of a Renaissance scholar among the ruins of the Capitol. 'It is almost morning.' The rebirth of Taste and Science is at hand.

It is essential to Gibbon's thesis that the Byzantine Empire should be, in itself, a nullity, a passive nucleus of contending forces; 'a tedious and uniform tale of weakness and misery--a dead uniformity of abject vices, which are neither softened by the weakness of humanity nor animated by the vigour of memorable crimes--a spiritual despotism which shackled not only the actions but the thoughts of the prostrate votary.' This indictment of the Byzantine Empire has long been known to rest on a profound misconception. For three hundred and fifty years, from the accession of Leo III. in 717 to the disastrous day of Manzikert in 1071, the Byzantine Empire was efficient and successful: the immobility of its forms conceals a most dramatic alternation of advance and recoil; and at the height of its power in the tenth century, it furnished stronger guarantees of security and well-being to a greater number of subjects than were gathered under any sceptre of Europe. Of all this, of the capacity of many of the Emperors, of the efficiency of the army and the administration, he seems to be unaware, and the first step toward the comprehension of Byzantine history is to forget all that Gibbon has said about it.

The errors of the great are more instructive than their triumphs; why did Gibbon go so wrong? One reason is that he did not know enough to go right. In particular, he miscalculated the weight of Slavonic pressure through the Balkan peninsula. It makes all the difference whether we think of Byzantium facing east with a few inconsiderable Slavs in its rear, or fighting on two fronts between an aggressive Slavonic power in the West and Islam in the East. It has taken a hundred years' work to make Byzantine history intelligible, and Gibbon spent only four. His knowledge of the Orient and the Latin West was based on a lifetime of study: his Byzantine sources he read with impatience and contempt. The preliminary work had not been done: except Du Cange, no scholar of the first rank had concerned himself with Byzantine history, and Du Cange had only touched a corner of it.

Gibbon had, moreover, a profound instinctive sympathy--for which his childish reading does not seem a quite adequate explanation--with Islam. 'Tis said he has been a Mohammedan,' Johnson once said, laughing. Before the discovery of the Middle Ages and the North, the Orient nourished the romantic impulses of Europe. Whenever he is on Eastern ground, Gibbon applies his local colour with a free, delighted touch: if he has to relate a Western story, from Gregory or Paul the Deacon we feel his hand is out. A saga becomes a *conte*.

The new Constantine was immediately baptized with three thousand of his warlike subjects; and their

example was imitated by the remainder of the *gentle Barbarians* who, in obedience to the victorious prelate, adored the Cross which they had burnt and burnt the idols which they had formerly adored.

Mitis depone colla Sicamber: adora quod incendisti, incende quod adorasti. It is one of the great sayings of history, and how the point is blunted in paraphrase! But he will give the inscription on Alp Arslan's monument in its very words, and the epitaph of Constantinople is spoken in a Persian couplet:

The spider hath wove her web in the Imperial palace: and the owl hath sung her watchsong on the tower of Afrasiab.

The epic of Islam is written in the fifty-first chapter, the Book of the Wars of Allah:

We have marched from the Indus to Spain
and by God we will go back again:
We have stood on the shores of the Plain
where the waters of destiny boom.

With a slight deflection of sympathy, he might have given a no less epic colour to the age-long resistance of Byzantium. But Gibbon, without realizing it, had inherited that Latin abhorrence of Constantinople and the Orthodox Church which, first appearing in Luitprand of Cremona, has ended by making the word Byzantine a synonym for portentous ineptitude. Byzantine history contained nothing to attract the regard of a philosopher, a man of taste, or the citizen of a free country: it was servile, sterile, senile. He glowed--it is strange to speak of Gibbon glowing--with an exalted patriotism of his own, of which the object was the whole history of the West, that rational civilization which from Greece had spread through Rome and Italy to the modern world, and had culminated in France and England and their spiritual dependencies. In this process Byzantium was a closed episode, a blind alley, a severed and withered stock. Historically, the West, even Western Christianity, was a success: Eastern Christianity had failed. At the height at which Gibbon is moving above the centuries, the quality of the Byzantine state considered by itself is indeed of no more importance than the domestic virtues of the commander in an isolated and unsuccessful engagement. But it is a canon of dramatic art that the victim should not be wholly bad, and, artistically as much as historically, Gibbon's last three volumes, great as they are, would have been greater still if the balance of his sympathies had been less partially adjusted, if his scepticism, so wakeful when the virtues of the saints are alleged, had not slumbered over the oft-repeated tale of Byzantine vices.

XVI

It was on the day, or rather night, of the 27th June 1787, between the hours of eleven and twelve, that I wrote the last lines of the last page in a summer house in my garden. After laying down my pen, I took several turns in a berceau or covered walk of acacias which commands a prospect of the country, the lake and the mountains. The air was temperate, the sky was serene, the silver orb of the moon was reflected from the water, and all nature was silent.

The manuscript was handsomely bound, and some chapters were read to Lady Elizabeth. Gibbon seems to have misconceived the bearing of the enthusiasm with which she listened. He asked her to luncheon alone. As they walked up and down, her admiration of the view, the mountains, and the white sails skimming over the lake, made Gibbon pettish. Suddenly falling on his knees, he delivered an eloquent profession of love. Recovering from her laughter and astonishment, she enjoined him in vain to resume his feet. In this attitude they remained for some time consulting what was to be done. They agreed that she should call the servants and explain that M. Guibon had had a tumble. Two stout Suissesses emerged from the offices at her summons, and replaced him in the pavilion with a good scolding for venturing to walk about unattended.

With some hesitation, I think this story must be pronounced authentic. It appears in the *Biographie Universelle* (Supplement), s.v. DEVONSHIRE, over the signature A-D==Artaud, who knew the Duchess Elizabeth in Rome, where he was French Chargé d’Affaires. He claims to have had it from her own mouth, and there are certain particulars, such as the bound manuscript and Gibbon’s jealousy of the landscape, which have an air of verisimilitude missing from the other versions. We must assume that Lady Elizabeth had told the story at the time (without herself as heroine), and that it branched out along two lines: an anonymous anecdote, which was turned into verse by George Colman in *The Luminous Historian* (1816); and Madame de Genlis’ version, which makes the heroine Madame de Montolieu, a friend from early Lausanne days, whose novel Gibbon and Deyverdun touched up. This is the popular version: ‘Levezvous, Monsieur.--Mais, Madame, je ne peux pas.--Relevez donc M. Guibon.’ But the two women had quarrelled: Madame de Montolieu denied the story publicly: Madame de Genlis’ daughter was much annoyed at her mother’s putting the story into circulation: Madame de Genlis was a liar. It does not matter much: men have died and the worms eaten them, but they have not written the *Decline and Fall*. That neither party took the incident seriously is proved by the tone of their correspondence afterwards, and by the fact that Gibbon repeated the gesture publicly. This time it was a game--a mock order of chivalry where Gibbon as Severy’s proxy had to kneel before the Duchess (with whom was Lady Elizabeth), kiss her hand and vow fidelity. He tells the story in a letter to Severy, and it is conceivable that this episode was the foundation of the whole story.

He arrived in London with his manuscript on August 8th, and as soon as possible hurried to Sussex. Christmas he spent at Bath, lame with gout, and supported in his attendance on Mrs. Gibbon by the society of Lord Sheffield and his daughter. Lord North had long been forgiven, and the book appeared on Gibbon’s fifty-first birthday with a compliment to the lively vigour of his mind and the felicity of his incomparable temper. The public applauded: the old statesman was touched.

The publication was celebrated by a dinner at Cadell’s and an ode by Hayley:

England, exult! and view not now
With jealous glance each nation’s brow,
Where History’s palm has spread!
In every path of liberal art,
Thy sons to prime distinction start,
And no superior dread.

Science for thee a Newton raised;
For thy renown a Shakespeare blazed,
Lord of the drama’s sphere!
In different fields to equal praise
See History now thy Gibbon raise
To shine without a peer!

Gibbon seems to have been gratified. He had known the bard for some years: he often visited the little Paradise at Earham: he valued his elegant mind, and was satisfied that since Pope's death England had not seen so happy a mixture of strong sense and flowing numbers as in Mr. Hayley's *Essay on Epic Poetry*.

He was sensitive enough to recognize that London had passed him by: he had lost the power of keeping up with new acquaintances and a new generation, and he was impatient to return to his little kingdom in Lausanne. He spent the summer quietly with the Sheffields in Downing Street and Sussex. Gibbon must be unique among the men of letters of the eighteenth century in detesting Bath, and his stepmother's pressing invitations elicited a refusal in terms as gravely pondered as any paragraph in the History.

In your last letter you express some joy at the approach of Summer as it is connected with my second visit to Bath which I had promised to make before my departure for the Continent. On my side the promise will be most cheerfully performed, and in the prospect of embracing a dear and valuable friend I shall ever esteem fatigue and expense as of small account. Yet before you resolve I wish you coolly to weigh whether prudence should advise us to gratify or restrain our inclination. In my Christmas visit, confined as I was by the gout I could not but observe how much my presence and your desire of inviting company to amuse me deranged the privacy of your life and the distribution of your hours. Delicate health and spirit like yours are agitated even by the pleasure, the tumultuous pleasure, of an interview and that pleasure is embittered by the painful foresight of an approaching separation.

She gave way, and Gibbon went to Sussex instead. 'They have not,' he writes, 'been so firm and reasonable as yourself, and in the bitter mixture of our last interview I strongly feel the propriety of your choice.' In short, he did not like scenes: when he pensioned off his old housekeeper he could hardly bring himself to face the parting interview: and he wanted to spend his last weeks in England with Sheffield. But before he left London, Gibbon, the master of compliment, received one compliment which by itself was almost worth the labour of twenty years. The excitement over the impeachment of Warren Hastings was at its height: fifty guineas was offered for a place in Westminster Hall to hear Sheridan open the charges relating to the Begums of Oudh. He spoke for four days, and on the last day, as he approached his peroration, he spoke of a criminality 'to which nothing equal could be traced in ancient or modern history, in the correct periods of Tacitus, or the luminous page of Gibbon.' A mischievous but authentic story reports that the historian, fluttering with pride, asked his neighbour what Mr. Sheridan had just said. 'Something about your voluminous pages,' was the reply.

By August 1788 he was back in Lausanne. There is an odd symmetry in the later lives of Gibbon and Suzanne. Necker fell from power when Gibbon produced his second and third volumes. He returned to power commissioned to avert a revolution, just at the publication of the last three, and Gibbon could write with affectionate pride of his old love, now the wife of the minister, perhaps the legislator, of the French monarchy. Outwardly his circumstances were more agreeable than ever. The Government of Berne were proud of their guest and passed his Madeira duty-free. Buriton had been sold at last for £16,000. But Deyverdun's health was failing, and much of Gibbon's time was now spent watching over and comforting a dying man. Fox passed through with the lady whom, somewhat late in the day, he afterwards married.

I have eat and drank, and conversed and sat up all night with Fox in England; but it never has happened, perhaps it never can happen again, that I should enjoy him, as I did that day, alone, from ten in the morning till ten at night. We had little politics, though he gave me in a few words such a character of Pitt as one great man should give of another, his rival; much of books, from my own on which he flattered me very pleasantly, to Homer and the Arabian nights; much about the country, my garden (which he understands much better than I do), and, upon the whole, I think he envies me and would do so were he minister.

Homer and the *Arabian Nights* again. No doubt Fox was aware that in this interview he was cast for the rôle of Caesar dining with Cicero, and played up royally.

Gibbon was growing less apt for general society: more and more he domesticated himself with one family, the Severys of Château Mex. He had taken young Severy to England, and had determined in effect to adopt him as his son. In their company, in the composition of his autobiography, in replanning his house, and in pacing up and down his alley in view of the lake and the mountains, his last year of peace slipped by. In the summer of 1789 Deyverdun died: Lausanne was soon overrun with exiles from France, and as the crowd increased, Gibbon's restlessness and loneliness increased with it. He worried the patient Holroyd with long letters about his financial affairs, now further improved by the death of Miss Hester, who had left him a comfortable little property at Newhaven. He alarmed him by vague hints of a possible

marriage; more seriously he thought of having a niece to live with him. Gout was growing on him: five months were spent indoors in a wheeled chair. He was distressed by the progress of the Revolution, an upheaval which he had not foreseen and in which he could not find his bearings. Burke's *Reflections* sent his spirits up. 'I admire his eloquence,' he writes to Sheffield, 'I approve his politics, I adore his chivalry, and I can forgive even his superstition.' He thought of drafting a declaration in support of the Constitution 'such as all thinking men might adopt.' In September 1790 Necker arrived, stunned by his fall and his failure to avert the catastrophe which his good intentions had precipitated.

Gibbon had devised a new occupation, composing and recomposing those drafts out of which Sheffield was to construct the classic *Autobiography*. He had discovered that he had a genealogy, and took great pleasure in climbing up his family tree and in justifying the exercise. He was also trying a fresh literary form, the historical essay. Buried in the *Miscellaneous Works*, his *Antiquities of the House of Brunswick* has received little notice. It is only a fragment, but it is enough to show what Gibbon had in reserve, and what another ten or fifteen years would have yielded. All the familiar gifts are there, the range, the pungency, the firm articulation of the theme. But along with them appears a freedom and picturesqueness which are new. Gibbon's idea was to issue his *Historical Excursions*, a volume at a time, until the public was tired or he was tired. Unconstrained in choice, he could have wandered over the centuries, starting problems for the pleasure of solving them (why, for example, are there more executions in English history and more assassinations in French?), or letting his fancy loose among those remote names that had such a charm for his ear, and the mysterious tales of ancient seafarers, African forests blazing with nocturnal lights and re-echoing with the joyous sound of flutes, cymbals and drums, or those 'mute and ferocious animals' whose skins were exhibited at Carthage, which Hanno took for women but Gibbon pronounces with more probability to have been Pongos.

Without doubt Gibbon had earned his holiday, and without doubt he was doing his best to enjoy it. His satisfaction was complete when Lord and Lady Sheffield, Maria and Louisa arrived in the summer of 1791. They passed through Paris, rocking with excitement over the Flight to Varennes, where Sheffield as an English Patriot was given a seat by the President at the Jacobin Club. They returned by Coblenz, where as an Irish peer he dined with the emigrant Princes. Sheffield, always high-spirited and capable, made root and branch reforms in the Lausanne establishment: new rooms were thrown out, the view opened up, acacias and plane trees planted. There was much gaiety at La Grotte, and mountain excursions in which the historian did not join.

To be studied at close range by the fearless eyes of twenty is a test out of which not many old gentlemen would come so well as Gibbon. He struck up a lively friendship with Maria Holroyd. 'Mon âme est sans culottes,' she begins a letter, and signs, 'Citoyen Gibbon: ton égale MARIA.' Gibbon's dilatoriness over his correspondence was a constitutional failing. Once it had caused him the keenest self-reproach. He had neglected Aunt Kitty, and when at last he braced himself to write, it was too late.

'When I reflect that my letters would have soothed and comforted her decline, I feel more deeply than I can express, the real neglect and seeming indifference, of my silence. To delay a letter from the Wednesday to the Saturday, and then from the Saturday to the Wednesday, appears a very slight offence: yet in the repetition of such delay, weeks, months, and years will elapse, till the omission may become irretrievable, and the consequence mischievous or fatal. The hard thoughts which you must entertain of me press so much on my mind, that I must frankly acknowledge a strange inexcusable supineness, on which I desire that you would make no comment, and which may in some measure account for my delay in corresponding with you. Oblige me so far as to make no reflexions: my own may be of service to me hereafter.' They were not, and Maria's success in getting him to answer regularly was regarded in the family as something of a miracle. But she could not help giggling over his social pre-eminence in Lausanne and the complacency with which he related the progress of his attachments. Suzanne, who seems to have been afraid that he might slip through her fingers once more, warned him with grave and flattering eloquence against the dangers of a late marriage. 'An imperfect association resembles the statue in Horace where a beautiful head is joined to the body of a stupid fish.' Suzanne's culture was one of the things that upset her daughter. The stupid fish seems to have been Madame de Montolieu. 'I was in some danger,' he told the Holroyds. 'It does not seem to have occurred to him,' is Maria's comment, 'that he might have been refused.' But his assurances to Suzanne were evidently more than satisfying.

'Votre première et votre dernière amie!' she replies. 'Je ne saurais découvrir encore lequel de ces deux titres est le plus doux et le plus cher à mon cœur.'

XVII

But as summer passed into winter, and winter into spring, it became more and more doubtful how long Lausanne would furnish a safe retreat, or France a safe passage home. The Pays de Vaud in which it lay was chafing under the patrician Government of Berne. The democrats of Geneva were looking towards the republicans of France. Altogether there was too much history going on for a historian to feel quite safe. In September 1792, Montesquiou seized Savoy and prepared to advance on Geneva. Anxious eyes were strained across the lake to see the tricolour advancing: the Neckers retreated inland from Coppet. Gibbon provided himself with two strong horses and a bag of gold. War was drawing nearer and nearer, and the reports of the September massacres, the astounding repulse of Brunswick at Valmy, the sight of Montesquiou's army, 'black, daring desperate buccaneers,' strolling by hundreds through the streets of Geneva, showed that when it came it would be a very different thing from 'the temperate and indecisive contests' in which the armies of eighteenth-century kings were exercised. And news from home made it doubtful whether England would escape the storm. Gibbon was distracted between a desire to be among friends, an intense dislike to moving, and a certain curiosity to see Pandemonium under the Republican régime and to meet the Principal Devils. His chief resource was Lady Elizabeth: his principal occupation, to support and comfort the Neckers. Uprooted and broken, they both clung to him. Necker was making a last effort to bring the French back into the ways of sense and constitutional government. No one listened to him, but he was sustained by Gibbon's ever-ready and discriminating praise of his treatise on Executive Power. Suzanne learnt to watch for his approach when they were in Lausanne, and he came every evening to talk about the day's reading and old times. She had not given up all hope of converting him, her health was failing, and she was in sore trouble. The war of the generations was being fought out in that household. Like many good wives, Suzanne was a bad mother, and Germaine was a daughter whom the best of mothers would have found a handful. Now she was breaking loose altogether. Her mother sent her to Geneva, hoping that the pressure of public opinion would make her more amenable--as if Germaine, who could face exile, Fouché and Napoleon himself for her ideas, was in the least likely to mind what a few old tabbies in Geneva thought about her.

'J'aurois besoin,' Suzanne wrote to Gibbon, 'd'un intermédiaire et même d'un interprète entre le siècle et moi: car je n'entends plus sa langue, et malgré tout le dédain avec lequel on rejette les opinions qui ont gardé et embelli ma vie, je m'aperçois souvent qu'elles répandent quelques fleurs, même sur mes cheveux blancs.'

To Germaine, he was merely her mother's old admirer, in every way an inferior being to the father whom she worshipped.

Gibbon might have lingered making up his mind for the rest of his life but for the sudden death of Lady Sheffield. He determined to return at once. In the state of his health the decision was hardly less than heroic, because for some time he had not been able to cross a street without help. Posting all day, he hurried back by Frankfurt and Brussels, within sound of Dumourier's guns bombarding Mayence, and reached Downing Street at the beginning of June. His last summer was spent, happily and almost gaily, in the library at Sheffield Park, reading and talking with the Holroyd girls and their young men, who, Maria noted, were much better company when Mr. Gibbon was there to draw them out.

He had decided on a new undertaking. He was not satisfied with the *Memoirs*, or the *Historical Essays*, or, in spite of Suzanne's enthusiastic encouragement, with a later plan for a series of historical biographies. A young Scottish antiquary approached him with a scheme for publishing the English chronicles from Gildas to the accession of the House of Tudor. Gibbon reflected, approved, took fire: he promised first his interest, then his assistance, and finally his collaboration. The impending stroke was the cruellest which fate has ever dealt to English scholarship, for Gibbon was the one man who could have rescued our mediaeval history from its insularity and put it firmly in the European highway, who would have seen the English Middle Ages as a province of general European history, and approached the Saxons from their Frankish side, the Norman conquest of England from the Norman conquest of Sicily, Domesday from the Assise of Jerusalem, and the struggle of Henry and Becket from the struggle of Emperor and Pope. His collaborator Pinkerton was to edit the texts, Gibbon to provide the historic surveys. Pinkerton, so far, had distinguished himself by the forged ballad of Hardyknute, which deceived the elect, and, years later, drew tears from Byron; and, even more conspicuously, by a proposal to improve our language on this wise:

I drew nearo with tha reverencë whico iz due to superior naturë; ando, az my hearto woz entirely subduen by the captivating straina I had heard, I fell downo ato hiza feet, ando weeped. He lifted me fro the groundo, ando taking me by the hando, Mirza, said he, I havë heard thee in thya soliloquëa, follow me.

But he had repented, or, as Gibbon in the last of his Roman sentences avers, he had learnt that 'in popular institutions, reason herself must obey the law of custom.' They settled their plan together, and Gibbon drafted the prospectus. His intellect was as young as ever, the nervous elegant hand as firm. Montfaucon, asked about his age, had answered, 'In thirteen years I shall be a hundred,' and died two days later. Gibbon was confident that he had ten, twelve, perhaps twenty years' work left in him.

In October he paid his last visit to Mrs. Gibbon at Bath. From there he slipped away to Althorp to enjoy a morning among Lord Spencer's first editions. The hydrocele which had been developing for some years was now embarrassingly obvious to everyone but himself: in a sketch made by Lavinia, Countess Spencer, his condition is painfully and grotesquely apparent. Back in London, he took rooms in Elmsley's house, 76 St. James's Street, and there he at last braced himself to receive advice. A first operation gave relief, but a second was soon necessary. He still went about; Wedderburn, now Lord Chancellor, made merciless demands on his company: and he struggled down to Lord Auckland's at Beckenham, to meet the Archbishop and Pitt. It was a service of friendship on behalf of Sheffield, who was craving for activity and a place. The effort was too much for him, and his friends noticed when he reached Sussex that his strength, his conversation and his appetite were failing. He returned to London at the New Year for a third operation. Cheerful and confident as ever, he talked of a radical cure and a return to Lausanne. The programme of the English Chronicles was to be issued on January 20th: his reading was planned, and he was impatient to be in harness. On the 19th he collapsed, and after a night of pain he was found by the doctor at eleven visibly dying. 'He was quite tranquil and did not stir, his eyes half shut. About a quarter before one he ceased to breathe.' He was buried privately among the Holroyds at Fletching in Sussex. His estate, after gifts to friends in England and Lausanne, was divided between his cousins and young Severy. Nearly a hundred years afterwards, his linen and Wedgwood service were still in use at Mex. Most unaccountably, and to her great grief, he forgot to mention Mrs. Gibbon in his will. Sheffield sent extracts from the Memoirs to Severy. They arrived on the day Madame Necker died. Severy hurried over to Coppet just in time, and her last hours were comforted by the assurance, which in truth she hardly needed, that the place she had once filled in his life, no other woman had ever taken.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The foundation is the Six Autobiographical drafts, first printed by John Murray in 1896. Out of these, Lord Sheffield put together the *Memoirs of My Life and Writings* which appeared in the *Miscellaneous Works* in 1795. The best edition is BIRKBECK HILL's 1900, with much valuable but ill-arranged comment. Gibbon's Journal down to the end of his militia time has been printed in full with notes and introduction by Mr. D. M. LOW. Sheffield printed part of the Paris-Lausanne-Italy Journal, but some still remains in MS. among the Gibbon papers at the British Museum. He also printed much of Gibbon's correspondence in the *Miscellaneous Works*, the second edition of which (1814) contains the important group of letters from Madame Necker. Gibbon's own letters were published in full by R. E. PROTHERO (Lord Ernle) in 1896.

Some readers may wish to compare the *Decline and Fall* with the latest results of scholarship. The literature is of course enormous. BURY's edition in seven volumes (1897 onwards) is indispensable. Of the rest, I think, for the Decline, ROSTOVTSSEV's *History of the Ancient World* and Mr. HEITLAND's essays, *The Roman Fate* and *Iterum*, are the most suggestive. For a brilliant and forcible statement of the modern attitude to Byzantium, *The Byzantine Achievement* by ROBERT BYRON and Mr. NORMAN BAYNES' compact masterpiece, *The Byzantine Empire*. But in its mastery of all previous research and in its lucid construction FERDINAND LOT's *Fin du Monde Antique* seems to me to have a larger portion of Gibbon's own genius than any other book dealing with the same theme.

The Frontispiece is a copy of the figure put by Lord Sheffield as frontispiece to the *Memoirs*, 1796. It was cut with scissors by Mrs. Brown, in Gibbon's absence, near the end of his life. Lord Sheffield says that it is 'as complete a likeness of Mr. Gibbon, as to person, face and manner, as can be conceived.'

FOOTNOTES

1. In Livy xxx. 44: 'nec esse in vos odio vestro consultum a Romanis credatis,' Gibbon proposed *otio*. Madvig made the same correction independently.
2. This is no doubt what Gibbon meant to write. He actually says: 'Il n'est plus question avec elle de l'amour pur des anges.' Psychologists will draw their inferences from the slip.
3. Gibbon felt the word had to be apologized for. This is forty years earlier than the first occurrence recorded in the *Oxford Dictionary*.
4. He was misled by Nardini, who got the Capitoline buildings the wrong way round. In Memoir C we find an alternative version. 'The 15th of October 1764 in the close of evening, as I sat musing in the Church of the Zoccolanti or Franciscan fryars while they were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter on the ruins of the Capitol.'
5. By Fuetter. This estimable scholar's complaint that Gibbon's style is *too clear* can only be answered in Gibbon's language. 'Ce dernier est un peu fat. Et quelle horreur que la fatuité allemande!'
6. Students of texture will find much to interest them in Gibbon. Observe here how the Stature Sinks below the Standard and how the giants of the north break in between two contemptuous Ps--pygmies and puny. Mended and manly did not come there by accident either.
7. This schema came in useful, twenty years later, to convey his views of marriage. 'The choice is difficult, the success doubtful, the engagement perpetual.'
8. A later hand was responsible for what must be the best howler in history. In Chapter LIX, note 3, Gibbon wrote: 'Anna Comnena adds that, to complete the imitation, Bohemond, [who had crossed the sea hidden in a coffin] was shut up with a dead cock.' The French version reads: *avec le cavavre d'un cuisinier*.
9. Sir James Bland Burges.
10. 'This momentous particle (which the memory rather than the understanding must retain).' Ay, ay, he has learnt this of PASCAL.

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