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

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CHAPTER TWO
PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND MORAL GROWTH

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

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

1. Memoirs, 'C' version, Bonnard, App. I, p. 208. This part of the account is not incorporated into the text as published by Sheffield or Bonnard, though written probably a little later than the 'B' sketch used by them.
nature and his consequent growth in moral stature. Through it all can be seen a growing devotion to the idea of personal freedom, a theme which would grip the conscience of the historian of Rome. Gibbon was well aware that in these years of exile he might have drawn towards some of the frivolous and empty young Englishmen travelling in Switzerland or the sizeable colony of people of fashion in Lausanne.¹ He was saved both by the constraints of his situation and later by his growing moral discernment. He wanted the reader to see that his closest associations were formed with those who would uplift rather than degrade, and the recollection of this fact, though introduced into the Memoirs for this purpose, nevertheless filled him with honest pride.

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

1. See, e.g. above, p. 29 and n. 1.
2. Combining the accounts of 'B' and 'C' sketches (Memoirs, pp. 76 and 208).
3. ibid., p. 76.
Back in England at the end of the fruitful period in Lausanne, Gibbon missed this valued association. On receiving a letter from his friend, he confided to his Journal, 'D'Eyverdun from his character and way of thinking is the only friend I ever had who deserved that name.' He was indeed Gibbon's alter ego. 'Every idea, every sentiment was poured into each other's bosom; and our schemes of ambition or retirement always terminated in the prospect of our final and inseparable union.' So Gibbon wrote after this happy prospect had been shattered by his friend's untimely death in 1789. But it reflects exactly his feelings at twenty-six as he finished an eight-page letter to Deyverdun: 'it is a kind of pleasure I have not had a great while, that of pouring out my whole sole to a real friend.' On Deyverdun's death, his large house, 'La Grotte', passed to Gibbon for his own use. There, in the garden so tastefully laid out by his late friend, and commanding a boundless view across the meadows and lake to the breathtaking mountains of Savoy, Gibbon faced the painful prospect that in his declining years he would feel himself 'alone in Paradise.'

It was under the guidance of Deyverdun, a keen gardener, that Gibbon, 'whose considerable eye for landscape had nevertheless seldom seen the trees for the woods,' began, as he confessed, to 'dwell with pleasure on the shape and colour of the leaves, the various hues of the blossoms, and the successive progress of vegetation.' This

1. JA, entry for 10 June, 1762.
3. This 'C' sketch was probably written in 1790. (See Bonnard's Introduction, xvi.)
4. JA, 9 July, 1762.
6. D.M. Low., Edward Gibbon, p. 303; cf. Memoirs, p. 177, point 3. One tends to think of Wordsworth's debt to his sister Dorothy, 'She gave me eyes, she gave me ears...' ('The Sparrow's Nest'.)
deep relationship, which began and ended in Lausanne, contributed
greatly to the enrichment of the historian's life and literary career. It gives a valuable insight into the man behind the book, one who has often been accused of lacking warmth and deep feeling, of being all head and no heart.

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

1. Low says, 'Deyverdun is a shadowy although constant figure in Gibbon's life. Only in the letter (at the end of Gibbon's political career) is his voice heard with any clearness...the voice of an eager yet prudent friend full of understanding and solicitude.' (op.cit., p. 295). It was at that time he made available to Gibbon an ample part of the large house he had inherited.
3. Memoirs, p. 84.
estimate still admits that with Gibbon 'duty to a parent counted for more than passion.' Both contrast with the very sympathetic and understanding views of earlier biographers like D.M. Low or Cotter Morrison.

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

There is no reason to doubt genuine affection for Suzanne. 'I saw and loved' in the Memoirs echoes the brief Journal entry for June 1757, 'I saw Mademoiselle Curchod, omnia vincit amor et nos cedamus amori, which in turn agrees both with his letters and with the stories that arose in Lausanne about his infatuation.

'He fell in love seriously, completely, and honourably', says Low, and he began to picture his future life with Suzanne. Nor need we

2. op.cit., chapt. 6, especially pp. 80-82; 90-91.
4. p. 85 (The report of such a prodigy awakened my curiosity; I saw and loved. I found her learned with pedantry, lively in conversation, pure in sentiment, and elegant in manners.)
5. JA, p. 6.
7. JA, Introd. lxiv.
doubt her tender feelings for him, if we accept her letters as the 
expression of her heart: 'Vous etes le seul homme pour qui j'ay
verse les larmes, le seul dont la perte m'ait arraché des sanglots...'.

It is only when we ask the third question, 'Why then did Gibbon give
her up?', that the answers differ and hence the verdict on his behaviour.

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

1. Letters, No. 27a, 7/9/58, I, 107; cf. her appeal to him on his
return to Lausanne (45a, 30/5/63, I, 145): 'je vous demande a
genoux de dissuader un coeur insensé; signez l'avoeu complet de
votre indifférence, et mon âme s'arrangera à son état.'
2. No. 27, 24/8/58, I, 106, where Gibbon conveys to Suzanne his
father's reply. (The singularity of Gibbon's spelling and
accentuation is noted by editors of his French writing. Suzanne's
is perhaps just as erratic.)
3. No. 34, 25/2/58, I, 121. 'Mademoiselle Curchod trouveroit peu de
douceurs en Angleterre", and, he adds, 'Elle se serviroit de son
ascendant pour vous engager à vous expatrier.'
We have the correspondence which gives the views of the three principal parties in the affair; and we have the final ironic touch of Gibbon's comment written long after the feelings of youth had cooled, that in response to 'the prejudice or prudence of a parent, I sighed as a lover; I obeyed as a son.'

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


2. Memoirs, 'C' sketch, Bonnard, 85, n. 7 (printed in Sheffield's text, MW, I, 107.)

3. See below chapter IX, pp.

4. See, e.g. R. Alter, Fielding and the Nature of the Novel (Harvard, 1968), especially chap. V, 'The Uses of Style'. Alter draws attention to Fielding's development of 'strategies to call the received usage into question', the most sustained instance being the concept of 'prudence' in Tom Jones. The 'prudent' people in the novel, as Gibbon would have known, are the least desirable. See also G.W. Hatfield, Henry Fielding and the Language of Irony University of Chicago Press, 1968, chap. V, 'The Serpent and the Dove: Prudence in Tom Jones'.

5. Nos. 34, 23/2/59 and 34a (c. end April 1759?), I, 122-3.
'I sighed as a lover: I obeyed as a son'. It is, like so many of Gibbon's carefully considered phrases, very quotable and every biographer has quoted it. But what does it tell us of the man? Our answer depends on how we read it in the context of the affairs. Michael Joyce sees 'the well turned frigidity' of this famous sentence anticipated in 'the careful phrases' of Gibbon's final, decisive letter to Suzanne, in which it is just as 'hard to detect the least warmth or feeling.'¹ Low, with more penetration, points out that while the whole correspondence may strike a modern lover with its apparent 'lack of intimacy on both sides', this does not indicate the absence of deep feeling underneath.² Per Fuglum, in his study of the historian's thought, does not accept the celebrated remark at its face value and says we must look elsewhere for the truth. 'Gibbon', he suggests, 'gave up Suzanne Curchod because he loved his independence, his free, quite way of life and above all his books.'³ Put like this, it is hard to deny. It agrees so well with the manner of life into which he eventually settled when his father's death gave him the elegant sufficiency he needed to enjoy his independence. It agrees also with his comment in later years: 'A matrimonial alliance has ever been the object of my terror rather than my wishes.' Nor could single life have any sense of emptiness 'for a man whose hours were insufficient for the inexhaustible pleasures of study.'⁴ We may therefore think that after a brief and disturbing interlude of the heart, Gibbon returned with relief to the calmer, more predictable pleasures of study and of the mind.

1. op.cit., p. 32.
2. op.cit., p. 90. ('The feeling is undoubted, but the approach sometimes makes one imagine that the letters were exchanged by sympathetic attorneys to the Court of Love rather than by the principals.')
4. Memoirs, p. 140. Gibbon is referring to the year 1770 and his literary work in England at that time.
All this is true enough; it is in fact obvious after the event. But it refers us to the consequence rather than to the reason for Gibbon's action in the circumstances. It is not the whole truth or even the most important part of it. It leaves no room for the other side of Gibbon's character, that of the moralist who was aware of the voice of duty in this unhappy situation. To simply maintain as Jordan does, that Gibbon hated his father will not do. It is much more accurate to say with Low, a very perceptive biographer, that 'in spite of divergence of tastes, Gibbon got on well with his father.' He may have resented the paternal management of his life, whether it involved a love affair, taking a commission in the Hampshire Militia, or a government post. He was keenly aware of his father's domineering and incompetence. Yet he was still bound to him by ties not only of financial dependence, but also of what he saw as 'filial piety'. His letters are evidence of this. They show a concern to please, a solicitude for his father's health, even a delight at the prospect of being with him again at Buriton, and in one letter, written admittedly when some misgivings might have prompted a soft answer, he four times addressed him as 'mon tres Cher Pere', concluding, 'et faites moi la justice de moi croire avec une tendresse et un respect sans bornes.' Gibbon was not given to dissimulation.

2. op.cit., p. 92.
3. See e.g. Gibbon's agitated letters regarding his father's mismanagement of the property and the burden which fell on him after his father's death, Nos. 51, 52, 62, 87-9; and an unbroken series of appeals in Nos. 92-105. In the Militia too, his father was 'neither conscientious nor competent', see Low's Introduction to JA, p. xvi.
4. No. 16, 26/10/57, I, 74. See also No. 32, 30/12/58, I, 116: 'Your illness really alarmed me...If you had not assured me that you was so much better, I would have set out immediately for Beriton.' (cf. No. 23, 29/3/58; I, 102.)
More than once he stated that what he did not feel he would not feign. He said as much in a letter to his father where he was unable to conceal from him the whole scheme he had in mind: 'I abhor the least appearance of art.'\(^1\) In the same letter he also wrote, 'If my letter displeases you, impute if Dear Sir only to yourself. You have not treated me like a son but like a friend. Can you be surprised that I should communicate to a friend all my thoughts and all my desires.' If this is not the language of art, then it expresses attachment and deference. When he foresaw that his proposal to settle in Switzerland with Suzanne would not be well received by his father, the excuse was that 'il choquera également la tendresse et l'ambition', tenderness and ambition that is for the son.\(^2\) His father's letter is 'si tendre si affectionnée'. Even in reporting his father's unyielding opposition to their marriage, he wrote of him reproachfully but still with respect, asserting that he had his son's happiness in mind. Certainly the father played on his son's attachment and submission. After his ultimatum, 'Marry your foreigner...', he added a self-pitying appeal, 'Il s'endit ensuite sur la cruauté de l'abandonner et se mettre avant son temps dans le tombeau, sur la lâcheté qu'il y aurait de fouler aux pieds ce que je devois à ma patrie'.\(^3\)

1. No. 34, Summer 1760, I, 126; cf. No. 20 to Suzanne, 9/2/58, I, 90: 'Je n'y ai point mis d'art...il n'est pas de mon caractere.' Cf. also the celebrated sentence (Memoirs, p. 34), 'My temper is not very susceptible of enthusiasm, and the enthusiasm which I do not feel I have ever scorned to affect.'
2. No. 20, 9/2/58, I, 91.
It was with this appeal ringing in his ears that the young man went to his room, weighed up the issues for two hours, and returned, as he said, to tell his father that he was ready to sacrifice to him all his life's happiness. True, even after his father's last word on the matter six months later, 'Prenez votre parti et tâchez d'en perdre le souvenir, car rien ne pourra me faire consentir à cette alliance', young Gibbon still had his doubts. Writing in this turmoil, 'agitée, déchirée tour à tour par des mouvements contraires', he admitted to Suzanne, 'Il est des moments, Mademoiselle, où ce refus me fait croire que je ne lui dois plus, et que libre de tout devoir je puis tâcher chercher mon bonheur quoi qu'il en coute ou à lui ou à moi'. But, he added, 'ces moments sont peu nombreux et peu longs.' Could they not, she had suggested, marry but with Gibbon remaining in England and visiting her for three months each year? Such an arrangement need last only as long as her father lived and would thus not mean giving up all hope. 'Mais quelle espérance?' was Gibbon's reply. 'Celle de la mort d'un Père.'

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

1. ibid., No. 34, 23/2/59, I, 119, 121.
2. ibid., I, 121.
3. See letter 20a, Feb. 1758, I, 92-3, for reference to her 'project'; and in particular, 93, n.2.
4. ibid., I, 121.
duty must carry the day. Gibbon does not present himself as a hero, yet perhaps he felt something of the old Roman virtue in his stoical acceptance of his duty to his father and his fatherland. 'I yielded to my fate', he afterwards wrote, as he recalled this submission.¹

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

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

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1. Memoirs, p. 85. It is worth comparing this with his sense of duty in regard to taking his seat in the House of Commons. (See Letters, No. 35, Summer 1760, I, 124) and below, pp. 71-2 of this chapter.
3. p. 85. Even on this line of defence there is something to be said; see Low, Edward Gibbon, pp. 90-1.
it at that, it is helpful to make a comparison with the account of his conversion at Oxford. His real reason for including that event, though ostensibly to show the progress of his mind, was, as we have seen, to justify his step by showing how reasonable it was in the circumstances.

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

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

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

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

¹. See above, chap. I, p. 20 and note 3. In the same conversation here referred to Johnson mentioned the rumour that the author of The Decline and Fall had also once been a Mohammedan; this possibly arose from Gibbon's desire to study Arabic at Oxford. (See Boswell's Life of Johnson, ed. Hill-Powell, London, 1934, II, 447.)
². In Sheffield's edition, I, 107n. (As in World's Classics, ed. Bury, p. 84.)
³. Rousseau, Correspondence, ed. Leigh, No. 2735, XVI, 270-1.
⁴. See Moulton's letter to Suzanne Curchod, ibid., No. 2736, XVI, 273.
Gibbon and so would spoil the plan. 'Le refroidissement de M. Gibbon me fait mal penser de lui; j'ai revu son livre, il y court après l'esprit, il s'y guinde. M. Gibbon n'est point mon homme; je ne puis croire qu'il soit celui de Madlle Curchod. Qui ne sent pas son prix n'est pas digne d'elle, mais qui l'a pu sentir et s'en détache est un homme à mépriser.' Gibbon's comment in the Memoirs was, like that on the love affair itself, very brief. It was also mild and tolerant, but he apparently felt it quite necessary since his own moral conduct was at stake. 'As an author I shall not appeal from the judgement, or taste, or caprice of Jean Jacques: but that extraordinary man, whom I admire and pity, should have been less precipitate in condemning the moral character of a stranger.'

The final question we ask is: what effect did the affair have on Gibbon? His own answer at the time was that it disabused him; it opened his eyes. Suzanne, as Gibbon was well aware, was a much sought after young lady. There were other suitors, even persistent ones, during the time of their correspondence. Indeed, after his renunciation, he mentioned his concern that he might have spoiled her chances.

Later on, however, he learned that even while she was writing to him, distraught at the thought of losing him, 'arrache' des sanglots', 'coeur ulcéré', and pleading 'la foible de ma santé', she was

2. See above n. 2.
3. Suzanne referred to this in her letter of 5/11/58 (Letters, No. 28a, I, 111): 'après tant d'aveux vous comprenez Monsieur que votre délicatesse sur la crainte de ruiner ma fortune...'
4. We hear earlier of two such groups she founded in the young society of Lausanne, La Société du Printemps and L'Académie de la Poudrière. See Low, JA, Intr. lxvi.
apparently enjoying the social life of Lausanne, 'goutant tous les plaisirs, fondant les Académies, distribuant les prix, composant elle même des ouvrages d'Esprit, et se jouant de l'amour si elle ne s'en occupoit pas.' So he wrote in his Journal on receiving from Suzanne what he called a most unexpected letter, five years after the break had been made.

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

1. JB, 22me September 1763 (pp. 51-2). In her third letter to Gibbon, Suzanne had rather playfully admitted to 'quelques grains de coquetterie.' (No. 18a, 10/1/58, I, 81.).  
2. No. 51a, 21/9/63, I, 159-162.  
3. JB, Septembre, 1763.  
4. JB, 5me Mars, 1764 (p. 234.)  
5. JB, 22me September, 1763.
This was part of Gibbon's own 'enlightenment' at Lausanne. Though he continued to delight in women's company, he kept himself free from further entanglements. There were those references which Sheffield carefully deleted from the published Memoirs, like the account of Gibbon's ambiguous relationship with the vivacious Mme. Bontems. 'I have reserved for the last the most pleasing connection which I formed at Paris, the acquisition of a female friend by whom I am sure of being received every evening with a smile of confidence and joy...'

Thinking of this little flutter and of what he calls Gibbon's 'cool opportunism' towards Mme. Seigneux, 'la petite femme', Michael Joyce says that with 'his one true passion...behind him', Gibbon showed 'something of the male flirt'; and that he was even 'becoming increasingly cynical in his attitude towards sex...'

This attitude, which apparently had its origin in his enlightenment 'sur les caractère des femmes', seems to lie behind the general view of women, as distinct from admiration for a number of exceptional women, in The Decline and Fall. Indeed, there is little doubt that it would earn him the epithet 'chauvinist' from many women readers today. They could point to his low opinion of women's mental firmness and judgement, as evidenced by his description of Julia Domna, to his slur on 'female fortitude' and to such phrases as 'the infirm minds of children and females' or 'the vanity of a female author'.

1. Bonnard's edition of the Memoirs, 127-8. Sheffield omitted twenty-two lines beginning with these words. Cf. Letters, Nos. 42, 44; I, 135; 143. Low remarks, 'It does not seem to matter very much whether he was Mme. Bontemps' lover or not. He had learned one lesson clearly enough...'; Edward Gibbon, p. 136.

2. See also Low's description of 'the incorrigible old flirt', op.cit., p. 336.


4. See DF, vi, I, 139; xi, I, 332; xxxvii, IV, 68; xlviii, V, 241.
Nor would references like that to 'the wiser and stronger of the sexes' be likely to win them over. Suzanne, in an acute appraisal of the first volume, remarked: 'Monsieur, dans le nombre de vos lecteurs, vous compterez autant de femmes que d'hommes; j'ai dit malgré vous, car vous les avez maltraitées; à vous entendre toutes leurs vertus sont factices.' And Porson's celebrated comment, in the midst of his enthusiastic defence of the historian, struck deeper: 'Nor does his humanity ever slumber, unless when women are ravished or the Christians persecuted.' Gibbon's early experiences of love and religion seem to have left their mark on the Decline and Fall.

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

3. Memoirs, p. 84. In their letters, both Gibbon and Suzanne refer to the purity of their love, e.g. No. 20; I, 91, ('une passion aussi pure...'); No. 27a; I, 107 (L'inclination...si pure."
4. JB, 23me Août and Septembre 15, 1763; also 29me Février, 1764 which ends, 'Quel train de vie. A Paris j'étois un sage.'
so Gibbon was maturing in this respect. As he remarked to his father about two years after his decision regarding Suzanne, 'Whatever else I may be ignorant of, I think I know myself.' And in his post-mortem on a love affair which he had pronounced as dead, he could see with the eye of the moralist\(^2\) that the lady's behaviour and outlook were incompatible with his own principles: 'Duplicity', he confided to his journal, 'is always a vice'. Even Rousseau with all his sympathies on the opposite side, had written of Suzanne Curchod: 'Elle ne sait ce qu'elle veut; cet homme (Gibbon) la sert mieux que son propre coeur.'\(^3\)

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

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

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

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

1. DF, xxxii, III, 409ff. Remarking on the resemblance in a letter to Suzanne, Gibbon referred to 'l'Athenais de nos jours' and to that rare mixture of beauty, virtues and talents which can raise a woman from obscurity to eminence.
2. op.cit., Low, p. 136.
historian's staunch attachment to the family and his unselfish decision to uproot himself from Lausanne and hasten to the side of his friend in his hour of bereavement, make a delightful story, not without its own moral value. In his Advertisement to the Miscellaneous Works, Sheffield commended the letters in the following terms: 'They will prove how pleasant, friendly, and amiable Mr. Gibbon was in private life; and if, in publishing Letters so flattering to myself, I incur the imputation of vanity, I shall meet the charge with a frank confession, that I am indeed highly vain of having enjoyed, for so many years, the esteem, the confidence, and the affection of a man whose social qualities endeared him to that most accomplished society and whose talents, great as they were, must be acknowledged to have been fully equalled by the sincerity of his friendship.'

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

2. Ibid., pp. 92-3.
duty can inspire.' Then came yet another of young Gibbon's lessons in escaping from prejudice. He had to admit his mistake. Even at first meeting, he realised 'the injustice was in my own fancy; and the imaginary monster was an amiable and deserving women...After some reserve on my side our minds associated in confidence and friendship, and as Mrs. Gibbon had neither children nor the hopes of children, we more easily adopted the tender names and genuine characters of mother and of son.' The delightful little account in the Memoirs tallies exactly with words entered in his Journal for only himself to see: 'I can't express the pleasure I had at seeing her, I love her as a companion, a friend and a mother'. Their affectionate correspondence over the years was based on a happy arrangement expressed in the opening words of one of Gibbon's letters to her, 'You remember our agreement; short and frequent letters.' His affection and respect for Dorothea remained to the end of his life.

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

2. See above, chapter, I, p. 31 and notes 1 and 2.
4. JA, 16th May, 1762 (p. 72).
in the Memoirs, he attacked and Gibbon defended. Gibbon described Allamand as 'un des beaux Genies que je connois' and as one who exhibited a mastery of both language and science but who shone above all else in dispute. He tells us with suitable irony that 'his acute and flexible logic could support with equal address and perhaps with equal indifference the adverse sides of every possible question.' It is little wonder, as Gibbon claimed, that with such a skilful debating partner, 'I gained some dexterity in the use of my philosophic weapons.' Yet in this genius who 'might have enlightened, or deluded the World', he seemed to detect a secret scepticism. The character Gibbon has given us of Allamand leaves the impression of an intellect severed from morality in contrast to his own which was becoming subordinated to it.

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

1. Memoirs, p. 82.
2. JB, 1er Janvier, 1764, p. 197.
3. This phrase in the Memoirs (p. 82) corresponds to that in the Journal (JB, loc.cit., 'Cet homme qui auroit pu éclairer ou troubler une nation'.
4. Bonnard claims that 'had Gibbon ever seen Allamand's major work, L'Anti-Bernier (1770)...; he would hardly have suspected him of scepticism.' (Notes, p. 278). However, Allamand must have given Gibbon this impression.
him making up for lost time at Oxford, \(^1\) and it is a testimony to his intellectual attainments that such men as these accepted 'the invitation of an unknown youth' to correspond on learned subjects. \(^2\)

The plan of disciplined study begun in the middle of 1753 was already showing signs of maturing scholarship. \(^3\)

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

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1. In the Memoirs, (p. 77) Gibbon wrote, 'It was now that I regretted the early years which had been wasted in sickness, or idleness, or mere idle reading.' (For Sheffield's 'mere', Bonnard has 'more'.)


3. It is reflected later in the Journals and 'Extraits raisonnés de mes lectures'.

4. See Memoirs, p. 78 and cf. the dutiful son of the letters cited above, pp. 45-47.
the finer feelings of moral evidence which must however determine the actions and opinions of our lives.\textsuperscript{1}

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

\begin{itemize}
\item[1.] Memoirs, p. 78.
\item[2.] ibid., p. 93f.
\item[3.] Cf. a later reference (ibid., p. 155) 'To a lover of books the shops and sales of London present irresistible temptations'.
\item[4.] Memoirs, p. 90.
\item[5.] Sheffield altered the last phrase to 'the pleasures of London.'
\end{itemize}
his money and his company." And though, he confessed, he was sometimes seduced by the example of others, yet the 'better habits' formed at Lausanne led him to look for 'a more elegant and rational society.' In the retrospect of twenty-five years he frankly attributed any failures to follow this better way, to the disadvantages of his own 'situation and character.'

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

1. Memoirs, p. 93. The 'C' sketch has 'to the Bagnio', the others omit the word.
4. Gibbon's account to Suzanne Curchod of his father's displeasure, quoted him as saying, 'Vous n'avez deja que de penchant pour les moeurs Etrangéres. La Langue de votre pays ne vous est plus connue'. (Letters, No. 34, 23/2/59; I, 121).
5. Memoirs, p. 86.
this, the language of his conversation and studies, in which he said he found it easier to compose than in his mother tongue.¹ He had left Lausanne with real regret and as he later put it, 'I should have cheerfully accepted the offer of a moderate and independent fortune on the terms of perpetual exile.'² Hence, when attending Lady Hervey's select dinners in London, he was not 'displeased at her preference and even affectation of the manners, the language and the litterature of France.'³ By a half-hearted effort he gradually came to terms with the English world,⁴ and by reading his favourite English authors, those of the period since the Revolution, who 'breathed the spirit of reason and liberty', he was able to restore his command of his native tongue.⁵ He read not only Swift and Addison, to whom his friend Mallet directed him, but also the historians whose works he felt had at last removed the reproach of British neglect in this field. Hume and Robertson thus became his inspiration and his models when he came to consider his chances of following their steps.⁶

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

¹ ibid., p. 105.
² ibid., p. 86.
³ ibid., p. 94.
⁴ His efforts, he said, were 'languid and slow'. (loc.cit.)
⁵ Memoirs, p. 98.
⁶ Memoirs, p. 98-9. We can see this also in his Journal, e.g. Buriton, JA, 26 July, 1762.
state of life. 'I am persuaded that had I been more indigent or more wealthy, I should not have possessed the leisure or the perseverance to prepare and execute my voluminous history.'

It was during these years following his return to England that he resolved and began to keep an exact journal of his actions and studies. This was, as he wrote at the time, 'both to assist my memory, and to accustom me to set a due value upon my time.' This journal he assiduously kept with few and infrequent breaks. On such occasions he reproached himself with idleness and neglect and felt obliged to spend some days bringing his account 'au courant'. We see in this journal Gibbon's habit, at the close of each year, of balancing his account, 'not of money but of time'. Indeed, as Low has suggested, 'he has an almost religious sense of the value of time.'

In the personal observations of the Journal, we may thus discern something of the growth of the moralist; for, unlike the carefully edited reflections of the Memoirs, these are spontaneous records of day-to-day events and reactions not meant for other eyes to see.

1. Memoirs, p. 89. Gibbon may have recalled the unique compliment he had heard in the Commons when Sheridan had linked the style of Tacitus with 'the luminous pages of Gibbon', a description he had afterwards whimsically corrected to 'the voluminous pages'. (Sheridan's famous speech of 13th June 1788 in the Hastings trial. See Walter Sichel, Sheridan, 2 vols. London, 1909, ii, 149, 150.

2. 24 August, 1761, (JA, p.3).

3. JA, 13 Oct., 1762; cf. 27 Sept., 1762, 'I have not almost this fortnight, set down anything in the literary way. Indeed, I was very idle'. Having brought the journal up to date and begun 'a second time from the 25th of March 1762', he had asked himself, 'Shall I be more constant than the first?'

4. JA, 30 Dec., 1762.

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

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

1. JA, 8 April, 1762.
2. JA, loc.cit.
3. JA, 26 July, 1762.
Gibbon's self-portrait gains an added significance by its contrast with his sketch of John Wilkes, at that time Colonel of the Buckinghamshire militia, who dined with both Gibbon's and his own fellow officers a few months later. Once again, however, as in the portraits in the History, he began with the good qualities. 'I scarcely ever met with a better Companion; he has inexhaustible spirits, infinite wit, and humour, and a great deal of knowledge'. Then comes the damning moral judgement, somewhat akin to those Gibbon would pass on some of the monstrous emperors of Rome: 'but a thorough profligate in principle as in practice; his character is infamous, his life stained with every vice, and his conversation full of blasphemy and bawdy. These morals he glories in - for shame is a weakness he has long since surmounted'.

Man, as Gibbon could see, may be born good, formed for generous actions, but he can choose whether he will follow or forsake the path of virtue. Wilkes chose depravity; he appeared a success in a tainted society, but was a failure in his own moral character where he refused to 'extirpate or restrain' the vicious impulses. Years later Gibbon wrote of another highly successful public figure and entertaining companion, 'Will Fox never learn the importance of character'.

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

1. JA, 23 Sept., 1762.
2. In his self-portrait, Gibbon had written, 'Wit I have none...'
Wilkes' visit, not surprisingly 'proved a very debauched day.'

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

¹. See e.g. JA, 28 and 29 August, 29 September and 27 October, 1762 (pp. 130; 151; 163).
². This was during his second residence in Lausanne; see JB, 23me Aout, 1763, and see App. I, pp. 278-280.
³. JA, 23, 24 and 29 August; 10 October, 1762 (pp. 127-8; 130; 163).
⁴. JA, 29 September, 1762.
⁵. DF, ix, I, 240.
Militia life at first aroused some enthusiasm in young Gibbon, though it was eventually abandoned with considerable relief.¹ But, just as he balanced his accounts of his use of time, so he also weighed the pros and cons of military life. There was certainly an unpleasant side, but a moralist should look beyond this: 'In every state there exists, however, a balance of good and evil. The habits of a sedentary life were usefully broken by the duties of an active profession.' Once again, on this occasion in the experience of soldiering, Gibbon did not forget to place the credits alongside the debits. He was aware, as his *Journal* shows, that his good qualities of diligence and conscientiousness were developed by this experience. He was zealous in the discharge of his duties, above all in making sure his men were well turned out on parade. As Captain, he shouldered the responsibilities of the battalion, which were taken too lightly by his father, the Major, and by Sir Thomas Worsley, the Colonel.² His lists and field reports bear witness to his care in such matters, which one might well have expected a scholar addicted to the pleasures of his study to have found too tedious to both with.³ In fact he showed 'incredible powers of application' and 'though he might quite easily have rid himself, as others did of his military obligation, he devoted himself unreservedly, and in circumstances wholly uncongenial to himself, to the efficiency of his corps and his duties as an Officer. His personal pride may have been priggish

¹ 'I am glad the militia has been, and glad that it is no more'. *(JA, 23 Dec., 1762)*; see also 1 Sept., 1762, and cf. *Memoirs*, pp. 115-7.

² '...in fact I commanded the batallion', he wrote *(JA, 23 Dec., 1762)*. There are several references also to Worsley's intemperance, laziness and general incompetence. 'The Major' too, is shown to be averse to exertion and responsibility.

³ See *JA*, 1 Sept.; 6 and 23 Oct., 1762.
and pragmatical, but he had a pride of regiment as well.\(^1\)

It was during his military service that his reading also branched out in a new direction. He diligently read\(^2\) and commented on a book which was to be of great service to him as he prepared his *History*. This book, Guichardt's *Memoires militaires sur les Grecs et les Romains*, even drew him away for a time from his beloved Homer.\(^3\) Gibbon's attention to military matters, both practical and historical, emphasises his active acceptance of all vicissitudes,\(^4\) the chosen and the unchosen, as contributing to the formation of mind and character. In keeping with this attitude, the militia days are given quite considerable space in the *Memoirs*, which are primarily concerned with the making of the historian.\(^5\) He then pointed out what he saw as the chief benefit of his term of service. 'My principal obligation to the militia was the making me an Englishman and soldier.'\(^6\) His own *History* gained immeasurably from its author's first hand experience of tactics, manoeuvres and of the camp; and the making of the soldier is clear enough, but what of 'the Englishman'? The answer seems to be that when Gibbon was recalled from Lausanne, he was so alienated from English life and society that he might easily have renounced them forever. He was

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1. C.P. Hawkes, *Authors at Arms. The Soldiering of Six Great Writers*. London, 1934, p. 83. Hawkes is quite critical of some of Gibbon's petty faults but also brings out his moral strengths. His three sections on Gibbon are on pp. 49-83.
2. 'Diligently' is Gibbon's word in the *Memoirs* (p. 117).
3. See JA, 14 May, 1762, when he began this book. He continued to comment on his reading which he completed on the 23rd of that month. He also read de Savornin's *Les Sentiments d'un homme de Guerre* (26/5/62).
4. 'Vicissitudes' is quite a favourite term and concept of Gibbon's running through *The Decline and Fall*. See chapter VIII below.
5. In Bonnard's edition, pp. 107 to 117; in Gibbon's MS, 47vto 51.
at first, as he admitted, tempted to do so as soon as the opportunity offered for him to return to Switzerland. Instead he was gradually able to re-enter the life of his native land. In this process of re-education, the militia played its part. 'After my foreign education, with my reserved temper, I should long have continued a stranger in my native country had I not been shaken in this various scene of new faces and new friends: had not experience forced me to feel the characters of our leading men, the state of parties, the forms of office and the operation of our civil and military system'\(^1\) England was again brought into Gibbon's orbit and the importance of this must not be forgotten. If, in a famous sentence, he noted that 'the Captain of the Hampshire grenadiers...has not been useless to the historian of the Roman Empire',\(^2\) we may safely add, 'nor has the Englishman', since The Decline and Fall is about more than just the empire of Rome; the historian seemed at times to be writing with one eye on England.\(^3\)

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

\(^1\) ibid., loc.cit.
\(^2\) ibid., loc.cit.
\(^3\) See below, chap. IV, pp.
\(^4\) We have noticed his comments on the moral effects of the 'debauches'; he also traced his old enemy the gout to this same source.
and degrading aspect of their mock campaigns against 'enemies' who were sometimes 'naked unarmed prisoners' the objects of pity rather than terror. In his description of his changing reaction to military life, we hear the moral reflections of the historian on the young man 'dazzled even by the play of arms', who in his initial 'enthusiasm' wants to become a professional soldier. 'This military fever', he commented, 'was cooled by the enjoyment of our mimic Bellona, who gradually unveiled her naked deformity.' It is essentially a description of 'the triumph of barbarism', but it is also the triumph of the moralist over the realist. It is about war and the pity of war.

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

1. ibid., p. 115.
3. See the opening of this section on the militia in the Memoirs (p. 107f).
inattentive to the particular Interests of the Borough I had the Honor
to represent. 1 Making due allowance for the rhetoric of political
speeches and for the fact that Gibbon was relieved not to have to take
his seat at this time, 2 the sentiments here match those of a letter to
his father the previous year 3 about the prospect of entering the House
of Commons. There he wrote of the offer as flattering his vanity,
but flattering also 'a nobler passion', that 'I might be one day,
the instrument of some good to my country'. With reference to this
'nobler' ambition, Swain perceptively remarked that 'the hope of being
"the instrument of some good to my country" is not, according to Namier,
one of the reasons for which 'men went into parliament in the eighteenth
century'. 4

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

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2. Shown not only by his letter to his father, but also in the Journal,
'One Barnard of Alresford, made me lose the Election or rather gave
me an opportunity of giving it up with honor.' (JA, 22 March, 1761).
3. Summer, 1760, Letters, No. 35; I, 123-6. Gibbon wrote this as a
letter to his father though living with him at Buriton, because he
found it easier to set his reply down on paper. Was this a comment
on his lack of ease in thinking on his feet?
4. Swain, Edward Gibbon the Historian, Notes to chap. V, No. 9,
p. 154. The reference to Lewis Namier is from his The Structure
of Politics at the Accession of George III. London, 1929, vol. I,
5. 'Whatever else I may be ignorant of, I think that I know myself
and shall always endeavour to mention my good qualities without
vanity and my defects without repugnance.' (Letters, I, 124).
necessary talents to make a worthwhile contribution in the House of Commons, in particular what seemed to him the essential gift of eloquence. Gibbon had a very clear notion of what membership of the Commons should involve and he believed that he did not possess this requisite qualification. When he eventually took his seat in 1774, he maintained a discreet silence throughout his seven years of regular attendance. He voted, as he said, with his feet, but his lucid comments and criticisms of parliamentary business went into his letters.

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

¹. DF, x1, IV, 280.
It was the power of the orator to move the heart to virtuous actions that struck Gibbon most forcibly, as he noted in his Journal. After a visit to the French church in London, he reflected on the sermon: 'Except in some particular cases where we are blinded by popular prejudices, we are in general so well acquainted with our duty that it is almost superfluous to convince us of it. It is the heart, and not the head, that holds out: and it is certainly possible, by a moving eloquence, to rouse the sleeping sentiments of the heart, and incite it to acts of virtue. Unluckily it is not so much acts as habits of virtue, we should have in view... Gibbon could equally have found this though in Hume's first premiss on the subject that reason being 'perfectly inert' can never of itself move us to action; that morality is 'supposed to influence our passions and actions, and to go beyond the calm and indolent judgements of the understanding.'

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

1. St. Julian's made available in 1567 by Queen Elizabeth to Walloon refugees.
2. JA, 22 August, 1762.
of freedom and truth and, like his admired Tacitus, to present 'a just and perfect delineation' of the vices and virtues of the illustrious characters of the past.'\(^1\) Other characteristics too, all moral qualities, are apparent in these three early compositions: the Gibbonian ideals of moderation, impartiality and freedom from prejudice. There is also his esteem for a life of active virtue to which the heart and emotions need to be stirred. It was this practical, useful goodness rather than contemplative goodness or mere moral precepts which won his approval for great figures in history like Marcus Aurelius Antonius\(^2\) and Boethius.\(^3\) He would follow the maxim of his most esteemed Latin author, Cicero, that 'to be drawn away from active life is contrary to moral duty.'\(^4\)

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

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1. See above, chapter I, p. 1, and notes 1-3 on that page.
2. e.g. DF, iii, I, 84-5; xv, II, 72-3.
3. 'From these abstruse speculations, Boethius stooped or to speak more truly, he rose to the social duties of public and private life.' (DF, xxxix, IV, 213.)
4. De Officiis, i, vi, 19, tr Walter Miller (Loeb Classical Library, 1913).
by other factors such as 'the coldness of our northern constitutions' or the lack of immediate opportunity to put our good resolutions into practice.¹

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

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

¹ JA, 22 August, 1762.
² JA, 12 December, 1762. ('I have borrowed of Mr. Barnouin, a French moral and political Romance of the Abbé Terasson called Sethos'.)
⁴ Memoirs, p. 78.
and almost a necessary study in the intellectual world of the day.

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

1. JA, 10 May, 1762.
2. Memoirs, p. 118. The letter containing Scott's plan, is No. XIV in Sheffield's collection, MW, II, pp. 41-51. He recommended a number of French mathematicians, 'because you are a thorough master of that language' and also because their style and clarity was best suited to beginners. Then followed some English authors leading up to Newton, Cotes, the Bernouillis and de Moivre and concluding with a number of works by Newton.
There was for Gibbon more humanity, more moral instruction and enrichment of mind in the ancient poet than in the modern mathematician; there was also a more appropriate preparation for the historical writing to which he aspired. His first published work, the *Essai*, which he had seen through the press the previous year, was basically a defence of ancient literature against its current disdain by the moderns. In it had had spoken of mathematics as an imperious queen ready to prescribe other studies and mistaken by some for the true spirit of philosophy.\(^1\) Gibbon's decision about the direction his own studies were to take from his twenty-sixth year, set the seal on what he had already affirmed and defended in his *Essai*.

\(^1\) *Essai*, chap. XLV, p. 58.