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

David Dillon-Smith
University of Wollongong
NOTE

This online version of the thesis may have different page formatting and pagination from the paper copy held in the University of Wollongong Library.

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

COPYRIGHT WARNING

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
CHAPTER THREE

THE STATUE IN THE MARBLE

Gibbon's Essai sur l'\'étude de la littérature was a trial of strength, a first attempt, an initial survey of the ground. The author stresses this in his foreword. 'C'est un véritable essai que je produis au grand jour', were the opening words and in his third paragraph, 'C'est un essai, je le repète encore; ce n'est point un traité complet qu'on va lire'.\(^1\) It was perhaps above all a writer's attempt at self-knowledge, which had developed steadily during his 'exile'. 'Je souhaiterois me connaître'. But there were other aims also, chief among them being, as we have seen, to defend his favourite study, the classics, against the contempt of the moderns.\(^2\)

And with his sharpened self-awareness, he could see and admit to a measure of honest pride behind the project. Defence of one's favourite study, is after all he confessed, 'L'amour-propre un peu déguisé'.\(^3\)

Nor would Gibbon tolerate the banal excuse of authors that, in spite of themselves, they were forced by their friends to publish'.\(^4\)

In his case, however, it was his father's persuasion to which he ultimately yielded. At first, he confessed, 'ma jeunesse, et un fonds d'orgueil qui me rend beaucoup plus sensible aux critiques qu'aux éloges, m'empêchèrent de goûter son project'.\(^5\) Eventually his reluctance gave way, and after Mallet's introduction to a London bookseller, the Essai was given to the public.

---

1. 'Avis Au Lecteur', MW, IV, pp. 5-6.
2. ibid., p. 5.
3. ibid., loc.cit.
4. Essai; introductory remarks 'in Mr. Gibbon's handwriting, on the back of the title-page of an interleaved copy of this Essay', printed by Sheffield, MW, IV, 1.
5. MW, loc.cit.
The carefully balanced sentence in the Memoirs which still admits the mixture of obedience and self-interest, is reminiscent of that which summed up his decision about Suzanne Curchod, but on this occasion with more obvious irony: 'I yielded to the authority of a parent, and complyed like a pious son with the wish of my own heart'. ¹

The filial piety expressed in the case of the love affair is here shown in the light of his own ambitions, which in the Spring of 1761 when the Essai was published, were 'influenced by the state of Europe'. Gibbon had hopes of attending the proposed Congress of Augsburg in the capacity of 'a Gentleman or a secretary'. His father believed that a proof of his son's literary talents, seconded, no doubt, by his command of French demonstrated in the Essai, would bring him to the notice of those who could secure him some official position. Hence it would seem that in this instance, the wishes of both father and son happily coincided.

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

². The Essai, begun in Lausanne in March 1758 and completed in England early the following year, was published in 1761. (See JA, 8 March, 11 July, 1758; 11 February 1759, and for its revision, 23 April, 1761.) An English translation, often inaccurate, appeared in 1764. A facsimile of this, An Essay on the Study of Literature is published by Garland. N.Y., 1970.
not the work of a young man of twenty-two. But already the essential viewpoint is forming, the moral outlook is apparent and the basic authors are making their impression. When recalling the programme of deep and extensive reading undertaken at Lausanne, Gibbon saw certain elements which were guiding him towards his destined theme. Thus in seeking with his reader clues to his historical development, he selected three book which 'may have remotely contributed to form the historian of the Roman Empire'.

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

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

1. Memoirs, p. 79.
so closely with Gibbon's that his words concerning that emperor may on occasions have an autobiographical ring. In the *Life*, he discovered something of the man and his times; and he was also led to a maturer consideration of miracles than that at the time of his Oxford conversion. This reconsideration prompted him to set down his thoughts on this subject. Having in mind a celebrated case of alleged divine intervention in the story of Julian, he later wrote, 'I should be glad to recover my first essay on the truth of the miracle which stopped the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.' Gibbon's account of this miracle in *The Decline and Fall* involves a careful assessment of the value of historical testimony. His weapon of irony on ecclesiastical subjects is seen in a remark in his *Journal* on Bleterie's moderate treatment of the pagan emperor. 'Quelle litterature, quel gout, et quelle elegance! J'ajoute et quelle moderation! Julien etoit payen et L'Abbé ne hait que les Jesuites.'

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

---

1. e.g. Low's reference to the regard of both men for their 'Athens' (op. cit., p. 299) and Gibbon's remark (DF, xix, II, 305) 'If Julian could now revisit the capital of France &c.' which seems to correspond with Gibbon's own feeling. Cf. also several laudatory comments on Julian's character as an active philosopher, in chaps. xxii and xxiii of DF.
2. Memoirs, p. 79.
3. DF, xxiii, II, 457-460.
4. JB, 25\textsuperscript{me} Febriier, 1764.
6. MW, III, 206ff; see especially note to p. 217. See also JA 14 April, 1761.
sacerdotal power, and the revolutions of Italy in the darker ages.'
The abuse of sacerdotal and papal power forms one of the prominent
moral strains in *The Decline and Fall*, which is also built around
a series of 'revolutions' of many types. But regarding the former
of these matters, Gibbon surely reflected sympathetically on the author
who had been pursued by ecclesiastical hatred and vindictiveness.
Writing later in his Lausanne Journal that 'la candeur, la penetration
et la liberté de cet Excellent Jurisconsulte feront toujours estimer
son ouvrage par tous les sage', he added, 'Les Ecclesiastiques ne
sont pas de ce nombre'. Again, the tone of 'temperate irony', the
admiration of qualities Gibbon himself espoused, candour, penetration
and liberty, and a developing sense of moral outrage at ecclesiastical
tyranny are seen.

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

1. Memoirs, p. 79. Gibbon altered his earlier 'Rome and Italy'
to 'Italy'. Cf. the reference to the 'revolutions of Rome in
the middle age' in the conclusion to *DF* (VII, 338) as one of
those 'events most interesting in human annals', connected with
the causes and effects of the fall of Rome.
2. Such were revolutions in governments and rulers, in society, in
religion and in the art of war.
3. JB, 11 Novembre, 1763. The History of Naples had, as Low remarks,
'introduced him to the seamy side of ecclesiastical history'.
(JA, Intr. lxiii).
4. Memoirs, p. 78. Of the theory of justice, he exclaimed, 'it is
alas! a theory'.
5. ibid., p. 76.
he tackled Locke and Bayle, a 'bridle' and a 'spur', he said 'to the
curiosity of the young philosopher.' The Treatise of Government
introduced him to Whig principles, based as he came to see, rather
on 'reason than experience'. He found himself from time to time
consulting the most interesting articles in Bayle's Dictionnaire
historique et critique, which he called 'a vast repository of facts
and opinions'. Nor did he fail to acknowledge his indebtedness to
Bayle when writing his own History. But the greatest single influence
at this stage in the making of the historian was without doubt that of
Montesquieu, to whom he discharged his debt, first in the Essai, later
in The Decline and Fall. In the former it was rather to L'Esprit des
Lois, but in the latter he drew also upon the Considérations sur les
causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence. He recorded
his delight while at Lausanne in the frequent perusal of this author,
'whose energy of style and boldness of hypothesis were powerful to
awaken and stimulate the Genius of the Age.' Gibbon became, in fact,
the first historian to take up Montesquieu's theories in his work.

1. ibid., p. 78.
2. ibid., loc.cit.
3. ibid., p. 64.
4. There are about twenty-five references to Bayle in DF, nearly all
to the Dictionnaire. See e.g. DF, cii, I, 195, n. 36; xii, I, 344,
n. 10; xxix, III, 242, n. 34; xlv, V, 34, n. 71; lxix, VII, 229,
n. 30.
5. Memoirs, p. 78.
6. See, e.g. Bonnard's note (JB, 224, n.3): 'Gibbon fut le premier
historien a tirer parti de théories de Montesquieu et subit même
son influence dans son style...' H.R.Trevor-Roper writes of
Gibbon's discovery of Montesquieu at Lausanne: 'It was the greatest
single inspiration of his years of study.' ('The Idea of the Decline
and Fall of the Roman Empire', in W.H.Barber et al., The Age of the
Enlightenment. London, 1967, p. 420. This article appeared, with
very minor but interesting alterations, in The Listener, 22 & 29
Oct., 1964, pp. 617-9; 657-9.)
The Essai, which is the fruit of all this study and reflection, was certainly the exploratory work of a young aspiring historian eager to test his skills and ideas and to find himself. Yet it is entitled to greater recognition than it has commonly received. It has suffered from its eclipse by the History. Even its author, who offered some of the soundest criticism, was unduly harsh in his judgement. Looking back from under the shadow of The Decline and Fall with its consumate texture of narrative and style, he was perhaps too conscious of the weaknesses of his first published work.

The initial reception, in Europe at least, was more than encouraging. 'I was delighted', wrote Gibbon, 'by the copious extracts, the warm commendations, and the flattering predictions of the Journals of France and Holland: and the next year (1762), a new Edition (I believe at Geneva) extended the fame or at least the circulation of the work.'

This made up somewhat for the 'cold indifference' and relative neglect in England. Gibbon felt this reaction natural enough in view of the foreign language, style and sentiments of the Essai. The Monthly Review which gave it little more than a page notice, certainly took offence at its being written in French, somewhat unfortunate no doubt during hostilities with France, but still hoped to see the work translated as 'there is much merit and a variety of erudition' in it. The Critical Review in a much more lengthy and harsher criticism, which found fault with its sententiousness, its dogmatism and the validity of many of its views, nevertheless praised the author's 'erudition and

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

The acclaim of the French journals, however, was not only flattering but most useful to the young author. Their 'copious extracts' from 'un des meilleurs ouvrages de littérature que l'Angleterre ait produits', made Gibbon at once well known in France in the circle in which he most wanted to be known. It gave him entrée into the salons and literary society of Paris. When he visited the French capital after the conclusion of the war, he found that he 'carried a personal recommendation' more valuable than the letters of recommendation given him by friends.

In an interesting fragment of his *Journal*, entitled 'Idée générale de mon séjour à Paris', Gibbon explains this. 'Mon livre me fut très utile. J'eus même le plaisir de voir que c'étoit ma meilleur[e] recommandation & de sentir que je ne la devoir qu'à moi-même. Il y aurait de la vanité de rapporter même dans cet acrit, tous les éloges et toutes les politesses qu'il m'attira. Il decida de mon Etat; J'étois homme de Lettres reconnu, et ce n'est qu'à Paris que cette qualité forme un Etat'. The entry continues with an attempt at a just and impartial estimate which might be put alongside those in Gibbon's English *Journal*. 'Je n'ai point assez de vanité, pour

3. Published as one of 'Trois Morceaux' of 'Le Séjour de Gibbon à Paris, du 28 Janvier au 9 Mai 1763', in *Miscellanea Gibboniana*, Lausanne, 1932, pp. 101-7. (See also above chap. I, p. 4 and n. 3.)
m'en croire exempt. J'avoue naturellement, qu'en retranchant les compliments et les hyperboles, je me flatte qu'ils (ces Eloges) étoient fondés sur quelque vérité. La façon avantageuse dont la plupart des Journalistes en ont parlé(...) me persuade, qu'il fait honneur à un jeune auteur, et qu'il peut lui inspirer quelque confiance pour l'avenir.'

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


2. Miscellanea Gibboniana, p. 105. Gibbon almost quotes his last sentence in his comment in the Memoirs that 'the Essay does credit to a young writer...'

3. Memoirs, p. 103. He is speaking particularly of the style but it can apply also to the content and ideas.

remarks without method or connection', and that its 'most serious
defect...is a kind of obscurity abruptness'.

C.V. Wedgwood using Gibbon's criticism to damn his work out of his own mouth, goes even further in saying that, 'it is indeed difficult to make out exactly what thesis Gibbon was trying to prove.'

Yet the thesis, if one may call it that, is plainly announced in Gibbon's Avis au Lecteur: 'Je voulois affranchir une science estimable, du mépris où elle languit aujourd'hui. Il est vrai qu'on lit encore les anciens, mais on ne les étudie plus.'

And this attempted vindication of the classics takes up the greater part of the Essai, either in the form of arguments for their value in developing the mind and ordering the life, or of application and example. The work presents a plea for 'cette connaissance philosophique de l'antiquité', and despite some disjointedness and uncertainty of emphasis, this theme seems to dominate. There is certainly not the consummate texture and inevitable progression of The Decline and Fall and 'the historian of the Roman Empire' was very much aware of this as he looked back

1. Memoirs, p. 103. Perhaps this 'obscurity' seemed half intentional and may have been what Rousseau had in mind when he said of Gibbon's manner in the Essai 'il s'y guinde'. (See above chap. II, p. 51 and note 1.)
3. MW, IV, 5; and see above p. 1, note 2.
4. This phrase occurs in chap. XLVII, p. 61.
over nearly thirty years to his apprentice effort. But in criticising its lack of plan and method, Gibbon was, Bonnard suggests, 'far from fair to his own early work. The chief fault of the Essai is not lack of method or connection, but lack of proportion. The sequence of ideas is, I submit, clear throughout.'\(^1\) The careful reader must surely agree with Bonnard that any difficulty he may encounter in following this sequence 'is essentially due to some of the examples and illustrations being treated at such length that they are liable to draw the reader's attention away from the main trend of reasoning, but not to any lack of logical coherence in that trend itself.'\(^2\) Indeed, despite his own severe criticism, Gibbon discovered in the retrospective view which he took in his Memoirs, a number of admirable points for which he could feel the same modest pride experienced by the young man in the Paris Journal.\(^3\) Probably his greatest satisfaction in his mature review of the Essai was that, 'Some dawning of a philosophic spirit enlightens the general remarks on the study of history and of man.'\(^4\)

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

---

2. ibid., p. 152.
3. See above, p. 86.
that it caused any ambiguity to readers or reviewers. It is quite clear that 'literature' throughout the work meant essentially that of ancient Greece and Rome, which 'a philosophic age', especially in France, had come to undervalue as somewhat irrelevant. The young scholar was registering his protest against this contemptuous neglect of the classical heritage; and its lasting value for the modern student is the main thesis he was trying to establish. 'I was ambitious of proving by my own example as well as by my precepts that all the faculties of the mind may be exercised and displayed by the study of ancient literature.'\(^1\) Hence his examples are drawn mainly from Greece and Rome, though in all honesty he pointed out with reference to de Caylus's admiration of the young author's extensive reading, that his 'genuine and personal acquaintance was confined to the Latin classics.'\(^2\) On the one hand there were the classical scholars, like those with whom Gibbon had been corresponding in Lausanne, heirs of the humanist tradition; on the other, some of the new scientists, here represented by d'Alembert's Discours préliminaire à l'Encyclopédie, who looked down on such men as mere 'Erudits'. The Academy of Inscriptions, guardian of classical learning, and an institution revered by Gibbon,\(^3\) had thus been degraded he said, 'to the lowest rank among the three royal societies of Paris.'\(^4\)

---

2. Ibid., p. 103.
3. For his admiration of the Academy, see Memoirs, p. 97. He never forgot the joy with which he exchanged 20 pounds for the first 20 volumes of the Academy's Memoirs. 'At a time when I assiduously frequented this school of ancient literature I thus expressed my opinion of a learned and various collection...'
In his *Essai* Gibbon thus appears as the champion of erudition as opposed to an indiscriminate adulation of the modern exact Newtonian sciences. Each age and country, he said, is attached to a particular science or discipline; in the France of his own day he saw natural science and mathematics on the throne, holding other intellectual pursuits in abject subjection. In a later chapter of the *Essai* he reiterated this pretentious claim of the sciences as he approached a definition of 'l'esprit philosophique' by way of a warning as to what it is not. Some want to identify it with geometry, 'cette reine imperieuse, qui non contente de regner, proscrit ses soeurs et declare tout raisonnement peu digne de ce nom, s'il ne roule pas sur des lignes et sur des nombres.' But for Gibbon, a study worthy of an able man would be to trace that revolution in religions, governments and manners which have successively bewildered, devastated and corrupted mankind.

This emphasises moral categories, in the Humean sense, as against physical and mechanistic ones. The moral and ethical approach to history also asserts itself at several points in the *Essai* just as it did a little later when Gibbon was weighing certain attractive historical subjects which seemed to display nobility and corruption, and which in this way presented useful lessons. In the *Essai*, the young author who had already rejected the habit of rigid mathematical demonstration as fatal to those 'finer feelings of moral evidence'

1. See *Essai*, chap. II, p. 16 and quotation from Fréret in Gibbon's note.
2. Chap. XLV, p. 58.
3. ibid., chap. II, p. 17.
4. The Swiss and the Florentine subjects, he wrote in his *Journal*, contained 'great lessons' and 'both subjects are perhaps equally instructive'. (Memoirs, p. 122 records the *Journal* entry for 26 July, 1762, where, however, 'useful' replaces 'instructive'.
by which our lives must be governed, explicitly proclaimed his alienation from the ruling intellectual culture of his day.

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

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

1. Memoirs, p. 78.
2. C.P. Snow would probably have seen it as foreshadowing the current split in the world of learning.
4. Gibbon cited the examples of Newton, Gassendi and Leibnitz (VII, 21-2).
5. Essai, XVI. Other critics have remarked and all thoughtful readers have noticed what Bury pointed out about Gibbon 'as the stylist, who never lays aside his toga when he takes up his pen.' (DF, 1909 ed. Introd. I, vii). But, of course it is not in his style alone that Gibbon presents a Roman appearance.
have perfected their art during the intervening years. Yet they still disagree as to their real object. To Gibbon it is 'l'art de juger des écrits et des écrivains, ce qu'ils ont dit s'ils l'ont bien dit, s'ils ont dit vrai'. There are three areas of criticism. The first, the province of 'critiques grammairiens', includes grammar, the knowledge of languages and manuscripts, recognition of genuine works and the restoration of true readings. The second, the province of 'critiques rhéteurs' covers poetry and eloquence. The third, which is very extensive and deals with the examination and criticism of facts, is the concern of 'critiques historiens'. The exclusive pretensions of the first class of critic Gibbon considered to have been prejudicial not only to their own work but also to criticism in general. He himself had already shown acute perception in this field with his suggested readings in his Latin correspondence with Breitinger, and was later to do so as a mature historian, notably in the emendation which secured Porson's support against his clerical adversary, Travis. But he showed in the Essai that he knew the limits of this branch of criticism and did not mistake a subsidiary part for the whole. Criticism, then, is concerned not only with what writers have actually said, nor how well they may have said it, but also with the truth of their statements.

In an interesting note on the critic's task in this matter, Gibbon added that it was confined to questions of historic truth, to the

1. Essai, XXIII, p. 38.
3. 'I proposed my interpretations and amendments', he said of his correspondence with Breitinger, while his substitution of otio for odio, in a letter to Crevier, has since been verified by manuscript evidence. See Memoirs, p. 80 and Letters, I, App. I, p. 390.
truth of their evidence, not that of their opinions, which is rather
the concern of logic.¹

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

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

1. Essai, XXII and note p. 38.
2. ibid., XXVI, p.39-40.
3. ibid., XXVI, p. 40.
4. ibid., chaps. XXVI-XXXIII, pp. 40-45.
5. Polybius, 'historien exact et éclaire'. Gibbon may have been
   influenced by de Crousaz's classic refutation of Huet's pyrrhonism.
had encountered modern scepticism. Gibbon offered his own explanation in an attempt to reconcile the ancient account with the view of historians like M. Beaufort, a scholar with whom he discussed the early centuries of Rome in his journey home to England. But his main concern in this lengthy example in defence of 'a useful and interesting history' was as he said, to show the delicacy of such critical investigations, in which the object is not to produce demonstrations, 'Mais de comparer le poids des vraisemblances opposées'.¹ The exercise of the critical faculty, weighing probabilities in such a case, is of the greatest value in training, not only the mind for thinking, but also the person himself for living - 'développer ou perfectionner l'homme'.

In the business of criticism, as in other concerns of the Essai we cannot miss an emphasis on what Hume designated 'moral' as distinct from 'physical' subjects.² The materials of criticism, according to Gibbon are, 'Tout ce qu'ont été les hommes, tout ce que le génie a créé, tout ce que la raison a pesé, tout ce que le travail a recueilli.'³

As we follow the 'littératureur' into his study, says Gibbon, we see him surrounded in a well stocked library by the works of every age; his mind is enlightened but not overburdened. His diligent research may lead to the critics' hypotheses being either confirmed or overthrown. At this point, 'le travail de l'érudit est achevé. Le philosophe de nos jours s'y arrête et loue la mémoire du compilateur. Celui-ci en est

1. Essai, XXXIV, p. 45. DF abounds in references to the probability or improbability of events, the 'internal probability' of the core of an embellished story, etc..
quelquefois la dupe, et prend les matériaux pour l'édifice.' As was clear to the author of The Decline and Fall, which he more than once likened to a great edifice, one must not mistake the scholar's collection of materials for the building itself. No, 'le vrai critique sent que sa tâche ne fait que commencer. Il pese, il combine, il doute, il décide. Exact et impartial, il ne se rend qu'a la raison, ou 'a l'autorité qui est la raison des faits. C'est-à-dire, l'autorité combinée avec l'expérience.' Here is an interesting preview of 'the historian of the Roman Empire' at work on his own edifice.

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

1. ibid., XXIV, p. 39.
2. e.g. in a letter to Lord Sheffield, No. 642, 20/1/87; III, 59.
4. ibid., XXXVI.
5. Gibbon quotes from Ars Poetica, V, 119 et seq.
6. e.g. xxxviii, IV, 152, lxii, VI, 475. Cf. also the remark in 'Hints' (MW, V, 487) that 'the part of an historian is as honourable as that of a mere chronicler or compiler of gazettes is contemptible.' This corresponds with the superficial admiration of 'le philosophe de nos jours' for the 'compilateur' (see above p. 95-6 and note 1.)
the mind. Laws must be seen only as aids to these purposes not as restricting them. We have seen philosophy bristling with demonstrations, hardly daring to admit accepted opinions. Yet poetry to be pleasing must rely on them. Poets are not as bound by chronology as the historian, though glaring anachronisms may offend us. Poets in writing their history may be pardoned for presenting it as it ought to have been rather than as it really was. An interesting reflection this as far as the moralist is concerned. But even the poet, who may take liberties with historical truth, must not tamper with moral truth. Inconsistencies of character are inadmissible. We cannot accept, even from the greatest poets, a cowardly Caesar or a virtuous Cataline.

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

1. Essai, XXXVII.
2. ibid., p. 47. 'Les anachronismes d'Ovide nous déplaisent. La vérité y est corrumpue sans être embellie.'
3. ibid., XXXVIII.
opinion; nor, as some held, is it to be equated with mathematics, which sees all science in terms of lines and numbers. Not for one moment, Gibbon insisted, must we forget our great debt to mathematics; even its errors have sometimes pointed the way to truth. But this 'esprit philosophique' is wider and more universal in its operation. It consists in getting back to the simplest ideas and in combining first principles. It enables the possessor, as if from a more elevated vantage point, to take not only an exact, but also a more extensive view. One is reminded of Gibbon's words regarding the rapid and short-lived series of Byzantine emperors. 'A being of the nature of man, endowed with the same faculties, but with a longer measure of existence, would cast down a smile of pity and contempt on the crimes and follies of human ambition...It is thus that the experience of history exalts and enlarges the horizon of our intellectual view. This faculty, displayed by a few geniuses like Cicero, Tacitus, Bacon, Leibnitz, Bayle, Fontenelle and Montesquieu, is not formed by study: it is a gift of heaven. Yet the true study of literature, this habit of becoming in turn a Greek, a Roman, a disciple of Zeno or of Epicurus, is most appropriate for developing and exercising it.

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

1. Chaps. XLIV-XLVI. ('à saisir et à combiner les premiers principes.' p. 58). For the 'idées simples' and 'premiers principes' as a reflection of Malbranche see Baridon, op.cit., p. 279. See also p. 100 below.
3. See Essai, chap. XLVII, headed 'Le secours qu'il peut tirer de la litterature.'
can discover those essential qualities which make persons and nations what they are. Such a spirit can perceive, throughout the infinite variety of minds, a general conformity amongst those whose century, country and religion have inspired an almost identical way of contemplating the same objects. Even those minds most free from prejudice do not know how to rid themselves of it completely. And in his own case, Gibbon was able to observe a gradual freedom from prejudice as a measure of his moral development.¹

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

1. See above, chap. I, p. 31 (cf. Memoirs, pp. 73, 82); and chap. II, p. 57-8 which shows Gibbon's triumph over an unfounded prejudice against his stepmother.
2. In DF we see Gibbon's opposition not to the 'barbarian' nations as such, but to the spirit of barbarism wherever found.
3. Essai, XLVI-XLVII.
4. ibid., XLVII, p. 61 ('Nous y apprendrons non seulement à avouer, mais à sentir la force des préjugés, à ne nous étonner jamais de ce qui nous paroît le plus absurde, et a nous défier souvent de ce qui nous semble le mieux établi'.)
5. ibid., loc.cit., 'Les Romains étoient éclairés; cependant ces mêmes Romains ne furent pas choqués de voir reúir dans la personne de César un Dieu, un prêtre et un Athée.' (See also Gibbon's note on 'athée', p. 61.)
Gibbon was scandalised at such behaviour, as can be seen. His comments, in the Essai, on the Roman people with their superstition, their double standards of morality, their ferocity and cruelty, are significant in view of similar remarks in The Decline and Fall.

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

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

1. Chaps. LI, pp. 65-6 and L, p. 64.
2. See e.g. DF, Ix, IV, 234-5; lxix, VII, 221, 228-9; lxx, VII, 307; lxxi, VII, 326-9.
3. Baridon, op.cit., p. 279. ("Les idées simples", "les premiers principes", autant de concepts clefs de cartesianisme sur lesquels Malebranche revient sans cesse dans le Livre VI de la Reserche de la Vérité, et que Crouzaz...avait mis en bonne place dans son traité de logique.'
4. ibid., pp. 279-280.
Encyclopédie article 'Philosophie', which Gibbon must surely have used, as we know he used that on 'Erudition', sets the one against the other. Gibbon found, or at least was seeking, a resolution, a synthesis. This comes out especially in his treatment of the historian's use of facts and of ancient learning.

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

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

---

101
and give rise to springs of action are rare and it is even rarer to find a person who can distinguish between these kinds of facts.\(^1\)

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

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

1. ibid., loc.cit. Encyclopédie, art. 'PHILOSOPHIE', points out: 'La connaissance des faits est sans contredit utile, elle est même un préalable indispensable à leur explication; mais être philosophe ce n'est pas simplement avoir beaucoup vu et beaucoup lu...c'est avoir des principes solides et surtout une bonne méthode pour rendre raison de ces faits et en tirer de légitimes conséquences...'
2. Essai, I, p. 64.
4. 'Préférez souvent les petits traits aux faits brillans.' (loc.cit.)
5. 'J'observe plutôt ses actions que ses discours.' (loc.cit.)
as moralist. It comes out in the *Essai* through precept, through historical example and especially through the description of a people's manners. Indeed, in bringing out a moral comparison, Gibbon very deliberately chose the court of Tiberius because at that time, he said, vice was at its height.¹

In that age of the emperors, he noted a few chapters further on, a servile world bestowed the title of gods on monsters unworthy of the title of men, and called these monsters benefactors of mankind.²

Since apparently insignificant matters can be so revealing, the historian needs great perception in selecting his facts. Without this sense of proportion and deeper significance, he is likely to miss a unique trait simply in order to daze us with the sound of a battle.

It is once again a question of the philosophic spirit: 'Si les philosophes ne sont pas toujours historiens, il seroit du moins à souhaiter que les historiens fussent philosophes.'³ The only writer Gibbon knew who came up to his idea of the philosophic historian was Tacitus. In this regard Livy, interesting as he is, cannot be compared with him. The essential difference is between writing history 'en rhéteur' and writing it 'en philosophe'. Not that Tacitus was ignorant of the language of the passions or Livy ignorant of that of reason. It is all a question of the purpose which the appeal of eloquence to the heart is made to serve. With Livy, according to Gibbon, the aim was

2. *ibid.*, LXV, 77.
3. *ibid.*, LII, 66.
to please rather than to instruct; with Tacitus it was to bring out the connection between events and to fill the soul with the wisest lessons.¹

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

1. Gibbon frequently referred to such lessons in the Essai, DF and other works. This must be borne in mind when critics write of his rejection of the history with a purpose thesis, as represented by Bossuet or Bolingbroke. See, e.g. Louis Althusser, Montesquieu, la Politique et l'Histoire. Paris, 1969, also cited in Baridon, op.cit., p. 281.
2. That is in Hume's terms, with which Gibbon was familiar and from his laudatory remarks on Hume's work, surely in agreement.
4. Essai, LII, 67. Gibbon's reverence for the Roman republic is clear and is well expressed in his famous chapter XLIV on Roman jurisprudence, 'although I have devoted myself to write the annals of a declining monarchy, I shall embrace the occasion to breathe the pure and invigorating air of the republic'. (DF, IV, 471). Cf. Gibbon's comments on 'the crafty tyrant' Augustus abolishing 'popular assemblies' (DF, iii, I, 67 and xliiv, IV, 477.)
Here Gibbon has outlined his ideal of the historian and the shape of his own aspirations. His delineation is very significant for our study of the historian as moralist. In his analysis he distinguished three levels of writers. At the bottom, and not worthy of the name of historian, are the 'frigid annalist', the 'mere chronicler' of events and the whole tribe of 'compilateurs grossiers'. Far above these blind recorders of facts are writers like Livy and Tacitus who have a true historical genius. Here, however, we encounter a second crucial distinction. The one has eloquence, vivid description and power to move the emotions; but that is all. To reach the highest level, as represented by Tacitus, the historian must possess that 'esprit philosophique' which will enable him to display connections and causes, to explore character and the manners of a nation, and to discern motives and the moral springs of action. Gibbon invited the reader to try to follow 'l'enchainement, non des faits, mais des idées,' in an endeavour to sound the human heart. This is beyond the power of the uninspired historian, but it is here that a Tacitus or a Montesquieu can demonstrate his powers of philosophic analysis.

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

Probably nowhere again in his writings did Gibbon bring out more clearly this moral discrimination of facts as a distinguishing mark of the truly philosophical historian.\(^1\) D'Alembert had suggested\(^2\) that at the end of each century all the facts should be collected, a choice made of a certain number, and the rest committed to the flames. Gibbon did not agree. On the contrary, he claimed, all the facts should be carefully preserved because only the philosophic historian is able to distinguish between them. A Montesquieu will unravel amongst the most trivial, connections unperceived by the ordinary person:\(^3\) 'Montesquieu partait les faits - et non plus "des essences"...pour remonter aux principes et rendre l'histoire intelligible. L'audace de cette demarche avait conquis le jeune Gibbon.'\(^4\)

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

1. See chaps. XLIX, L, LII, LIII.
3. Essai, LIII, p. 68.
5. Essai, LIV, p. 68.
At the opposite extreme are those who have banished design altogether from the moral world\textsuperscript{1} to replace it by chance, so that weak mortals are seen acting only from caprice. The rise and fall of empires is attributed to the rage of a madcap or the weakness of a woman.\textsuperscript{2} The study of determinate but general causes should satisfy both schools of thought: those who are glad to see man 'humilié, les motifs de ses actions inconnus à lui-même le jouet des causes étrangères' and those who find in general causes the connections they love and the speculations on which their mind feeds.\textsuperscript{3}

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

\begin{enumerate}
\item 'Ils ont banni l'art du monde moral'. (loc.cit.)
\item ibid., LIV, pp. 68-9. 'La fureur d'un écervelé établit un empire; la foibless d'une femme le détruit.'
\item ibid., LV, p. 69.
\item See Essai, chap. LXXIII, Systèmes de la liberté et de la nécessité.
\end{enumerate}
Thus the young author 'called for a new Montesquieu to carry out this project, and who was this Montesquieu but Gibbon himself?'

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

1. ibid., LV, p. 69.
3. See JA, 11 July, 1758, 'I took in hand again my essay and in about six weeks finished it from C. 23-55...besides a number of chapters from C. 55 to the end which are now struck out'. (Gibbon was born in April O.S. or May, N.S., 1737.)
4. Essai, LV, p. 69. As J.M. Robertson pointed out (Gibbon. London, 1925, p. 39), Gibbon does not show any great love of theorising. The inconsequence of the ideas 'is already significant of lack of lasting zeal for theoretical construction.'
5. Essai, loc.cit., ('tout ce qui est soumis au joug de l'opinion.')</p>
6. DF, ii, I, 47.
7. e.g. DF, i, I, 12, n. 38; xxvi, III, 120; cf. also the rise of and changes in the development of Christianity or of Islam.
'The key word in Gibbon's philosophico-historical reflections in the *Essai*, according to Frank Manuel, 'is *ressort*, one of the widely current, baffling terms of eighteenth-century Anglo-French thought that are so difficult to understand precisely.'¹ Such 'springs of action',² motivating causes, as we might call them find ample illustration in Gibbon's great *History*, but as Manuel points out, it is to the *Essai* we must turn for his 'sweeping theoretical imperatives' on the subject. There one senses implicit in all the treatment of causation, and of systems of liberty and necessity, another ideal so dear to Gibbon's heart, that of individual freedom. Since man has this power of moral choice, his manners and morals are especially worthy studying. If he were only 'a toy of external forces', 'an instrument of the Deity', what is left for the philosophic historian to discover, since the providential element is an unknown quantity?

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

2. 'Springs of action', which is the equivalent used in the English translation of the *Essai*, (London, 1764, p. 100), is that used by Manuel, *op.cit.*, p. 167. Cf. Hume's use of it in the quotation of page 110 below.
3. *Essai*, chapter heading, XLVIII.
suggested that the chief use of history for the philosopher 'is only
to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature,
by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and
furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations
and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and
behaviour. These records of wars, intrigues, factions and revolutions,
are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or
moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same
manner as the physician or the natural philosopher becomes acquainted
with the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects,
by the experiments which he forms concerning them'.

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

1. Hume, 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding', Sect. VIII,
2. Essai, LVII, p. 70.
3. James Chelsum, Remarks on the Two Last Chapters of Mr. Gibbon's History
and A Reply to Mr. Gibbon's Vindication, (2nd ed., 1785, Preface).
Quoted by McCloy, op. cit., p. 56. Chelsum's book is reprinted by
4. Some of these authors, like Fontenelle and Banier, appear in Gibbon's
notes; others can be supplied from his account of his reading over
these years. He was very much indebted to Hume's Natural History of
Religion.
the rigidity of systems in favour of a much more flexible approach
to historical examination. Indeed, he was still turning this question
over in his mind when he wrote his Memoirs. But even at that stage
of maturity this early treatment gave him satisfaction. It also
impressed some contemporary critics as perhaps the most acute and
original part of the Essai.

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

1. Memoirs, p. 104. ('I am not displeased with the enquiry into the
origin and nature of the gods of polytheism. In a riper season of
judgement and knowledge I am tempted to review the curious question
whether these fabulous deities were mortal men or allegorical beings...')
2. 'Morceaux très-sage et très-ingénieux' said the reviewer in the Journal
Etranger and transcribed the section in full; 'l'esprit et le savoir
abondent', (Bibliothèque des sciences et des beaux Arts); 'this curious
and most original part of the essay' (Critical Review). See above
pp. 85-7, and Bonnard's article there cited.
3. See chaps. LXXIX & LXXX ('Mélange de causes dans les événements
particuliers') 'il y en a très peu qui ne tiennent plus ou moins
de la nature de l'une de l'autre'. (p.92)
4. Essai, loc.cit.
The *Essai*, begun and partly written in Switzerland, completed and published in England, marks both an end and a new beginning in Gibbon's career: an end of his apprenticeship in Lausanne and a beginning of a more independent development in his native land, as he gave serious consideration to realising his historical ideals. He had written this first major work in French, partly because as he said, at that time he thought in French, but also as he later admitted, because of the honour due to a young Englishman writing with ease in that language of European culture.¹ His success can be judged by the acclaim accorded him in the French journals, one of which hailed this phenomenon of 'un Gentilhomme Angois...qui ose écrire en François, imprimer son ouvrage à Londres, & continuer à manger du Roast Beef avec ses compatriotes.'² Even his style was highly praised by these reviewers. The only qualification was that it was perhaps a little too oratorical and given to overfrequent antitheses.³ Similarly The Critical Review, though generally favourable to his literary effort, objected to his love of maxims and apothegms, adding that 'Almost every line constitutes a dogma; every sentence includes a decision.'⁴ Gibbon himself, its shrewdest and fairest critic, later remarked on its 'sententiouness and oracular brevity.'⁵ This sententiouness may strike one as the mark of a young man, or even as a mark of Gibbon as a stylist; but sententiouness is certainly the mark

---

1. *Memoirs*, p. 105, 'but my true motive was doubtless the ambition of new and singular fame, an Englishman claiming a place among the writers of France.'
3. 'Seduisant, mais trop oratoire, un peu affecté...& chargé d'antithèses, justes à la vérité, mais trop fréquentes', said the *Journal encyclopédique*, 15 Nov., 1761. Gibbon himself admitted some affectation (*Memoirs*, p. 103).
or a moralist. The moralistic writer, the didactic author, like the preacher, casts his thoughts into this mould. It is very obvious in many parts of the Essai as we might expect from its opening declamation: 'L'histoire des empire est celle de la misère des hommes. L'histoire des sciences est celle de leur grandeur et de leur bonheur.'

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

1. Essai, I, p. 15.
2. Hume's letter to Gibbon on reading the manuscript of his Swiss history, dated 24 Oct., 1767, is printed in Sheffield's edition of the Memoirs, MW, I, 204-5n. Dr. Maty, in his foreword 'A L'Auteur' in the first edition of the Essai, also chided Gibbon: 'Vous etes Anglois, et vous choisissez la langue de vos enemis.' (p. 9).
3. 'Many experiments were made before I could hit the middle tone between a dull Chronicle and a Rhetorical declamation'. (Memoirs, p. 155)
the relative importance of facts. And, thereby, he perhaps forecast
his own future as the Tacitus of the modern world.¹ Thus, even
during his Swiss exile, he had a clear view of what the writing of
history should mean and who his model would be. Lausanne, he said,
was the 'school' in which 'the statue was discovered in the block of
marble.'² Looking at the Essai, the product of that school, we can
see that the statue, though still unfinished, is unmistakably Roman.³

The Essai's final example is itself prophetic of Gibbon's Roman
Empire waiting to be written. To illustrate a circumstance which is
'a la fois cause et effect',⁴ he returned to his mentor Montesquieu
and to the question of causation in the moral world. Having in mind
Considerations sur la grandeur et sur la décadence des Romains,⁵ he
stated that the corruption of all orders of Romans arose from the
extent of their empire and was itself productive of the greatness
of the republic.⁶ In The Decline and Fall, on one of those occasions
when Gibbon explicitly suggested a cause for the decline of Rome, he
said it was 'the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness.'⁷
Again, in other places it is implicitly or explicitly connected with
the spread of luxury.⁸ The Essai begins by linking empires with 'la

---
1. C.N. Cochrane, 'The Mind of Edward Gibbon' (I), University of
   Toronto Quarterly, XII, No. 1, Oct. 1942, p. 17.
3. Gibbon himself pointed to the Roman examples throughout the Essai.
4. Essai, LXXXII, p. 91.
5. ibid., LXXXII, p. 92. Gibbon's footnote refers to Montesquieu's
   work,* but omits causes from the short title; cf.n.2, p. 216 below.
7. e.g. DF, xxxi, III, 310, n. 30; 311; xlii, IV, 377; xlvi, V, 81,
   97; xlix, V, 281; and cf. examples of luxury in the decline of
   other peoples in DF.
misère des hommes' and the sciences with 'leur grandeur et...bonheur';
it ends with the observation, 'à mesure que le luxe corrompt les moeurs,
les sciences les adoucissent'.

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

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