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

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PROSPECT FROM THE CAPITOL: THE VICISSITUDES OF FORTUNE

It was the prospect from the Capitoline Hill which gave 'the learned Poggius' in the fifteenth century and young Edward Gibbon in the eighteenth, 'ample scope for moralising on the vicissitudes of fortune, which spares neither man nor the proudest of his works, which buries empires and cities in a common grave.'¹ This sentiment runs right through The Decline and Fall and is integral to the spirit of the whole work. It was the physical impact of this scene, Gibbon claimed, which gave him the inspiration to write the history, first of the city, then of the empire. Thus, with a sure artistic touch and an acute sense of history, he returned in his closing chapters to the city in order to survey with his Renaissance predecessor the greatness that was Rome.

As one sits on the same hill, so changed even since Gibbon's time,² trying to recapture the scene, and using as he did the eye of imagination to assist the outward vision, it is not hard to feel that revolution of the wheel of fortune which overturned so great a civilization whose centre is represented by a number of solid foundations, two substantial arches, a massive cavernous basilica and a series of lonely columns. The prospect which opened up to Gibbon was not merely of the ruins before him, but back across the centuries to the very origins of the city. Nor can 'the modern traveller' of the twentieth century easily escape similar

¹. DF, lxxi, VII, 313.
². Gibbon has left us some account of the Capitol though more particularly of its museum and statues, in his Journal at Rome. In his manuscript journal, he devoted the left page to painting, the facing page to architecture, antiquities etc. BM. Gibbon Papers, vol.VI, Add. MSS. 34879, pp. 76ff.
feelings of the change which time has wrought. The reaction is no doubt commonplace, as it had become in Gibbon's day, but it is none the less real. Yet his response went much deeper than this. The archaeologist studies and reconstructs the remains, the poet and the romantic enjoy a pleasing melancholy induced by them, but the moralist ponders the 'vicissitudes' of human history, the nature of greatness, the causes and inevitability of decay in empires past and present, and from it all draws instructive lessons for his own and future generations. This was Gibbon's viewpoint. 'This awful revolution,' he observed, 'may be usefully applied to the instruction of the present age;' for history as he understood it, 'undertakes to record the transactions of the past for the instruction of future ages.'

Modern commentators have expressed some doubt as to where Gibbon actually sat and whether it was in this particular environment at all that he actually received his inspiration to write The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Bonnard, both in his notes to the Memoirs and in an earlier paper, questioned the factual basis of the famous statement as finally recorded.

One of the main reasons for this scepticism is the absence of any similar statement of this experience of October 1764 in the Journal, which breaks off, or may be more aptly said to peter out at Rome.

1. DF, IV, 175-6; xvi, II, 87.
3. See the discussion of this question above, chap. IV, pp. 151ff.
4. This is the impression one gets from the final pages in Gibbon's own handwriting: half pages, blank pages and on the last a mere three-and-a-half lines. (BM. Gibbon Papers, vol.VI, Add.MSS 34, 879, pp. 76ff.)
There is also the long interval between the experience in Rome and the writing of *The Decline and Fall*, an interval during which Gibbon thought of other subjects and in fact began to write his Swiss history. The real point of departure, as we have seen, and as Bonnard was at pains to point out, was the period of preparation at Lausanne prior to the Italian journey. There Gibbon studied the ancient writers and later works on the buildings of the city and the geography and highways of the empire. His travelling library was an extension of this preparatory study. In imagination he had already traversed the great roads of the empire and walked among the buildings of the ancient capital even before he set out on his tour.

All this is certain and it is essential to the climax in Rome. But most conversions, even sudden conversions like that of St. Paul, are only the culmination of a process and fuse together elements already prepared. The fact is, as Trevor-Roper has reaffirmed in an appreciative essay on Gibbon, that though we can believe what the historian has told us of his great moment in 1764, we must not forget all that lay behind it. But what are we to make of the reactions of the Memoirs? In these careful reworkings of the famous statement of the Roman experience Bonnard saw the poet striving after the most satisfying effect rather than the historian recording a plain fact: 'Cette phrase est un vrai poème... Elle est d'un art si sûr, si maître de ses effets qu'on se demande si Gibbon ici n'a pas fait œuvre d'artiste plus que d'historien, s'il n'a pas sacrifié peut-être la vérité des faits à la reserche de la

2. His reading included Nardini's *Roma Vetus*, Cluverius' *Italia Antiqua*, Bargaeus' *De Privatorum Publicorumque Aëdificiorum Urbis Romanae* and his work on the Obelisks of the city and Bergier's *Histoire des grands Chemins de l'Empire Romain*. (see JB, entries over this period).
beauté.'¹ Yet it is only when the scene or the vision is very real and compelling that it demands of an author the most careful polishing and repolishing in order to convey the effect which it has exercised on him. And in the epilogue to the great work which Gibbon claimed owed its inspiration to this view or vision of ancient Rome, the voice is surely that of the historian rather than the poet when he declares in simple, unvarnished prose: 'It was among the ruins of the capitol that I first conceived the idea of a work which has amused and exercised nearly twenty years of my life.'² In fact, when we combine the statement in the History with that in the Memoirs we are given two actual and quite definite places, the Capitoline Hill for its conception and the summer-house in Lausanne for its completion.³

There is, however, no occasion for controversy on this point, especially as our concern is with the historian as moralist. The famous statement of 'the moment of conception' may be given due weight. What 'the historian of the Roman Empire' considered and wished his readers to accept as central to the inspiration of his work is of prime significance, and this has to do with ruins and an impression of vanished greatness. We must recognise not only historical truth, but also poetic and moral truth.⁴ On one level we find The Decline and Fall a monument of painstaking scholarly research and accuracy; on another we find sentiments and truths about decline and fall which arise from the recorded facts of history. The alleged inspiration on the Capital is

¹ 'L'importance du deuxième séjour de Gibbon' &c., Mélanges, p. 401.
² DF, lxxi, VII, 338.
⁴ Cf. also Essai, chaps. XXVIII, XXXVI-XXXVIII and XXIV, note, p. 38.
reaffirmed and consummated in the final chapter of the History where the historian stops to reflect on greatness and decay. It forms a consummation of these themes, though not without a ray of hope, simply because the whole work has been concerned with them. It has been built around 'revolutions' in states and empires, and it constantly presents the reader with 'ruins' both material and metaphorical, with the process of decay both in buildings and in the life of peoples. In his first published work Gibbon had declared it to be a task 'worthy of an accomplished man to trace that revolution in the religions, governments and manners, which have successively misled, devastated and corrupted mankind'. In view of this his own description of The Decline and Fall in terms of 'revolutions' has not received the emphasis it deserves. But many of these were slow processes, not necessarily initiated by violence, and more akin in the traditional terminology to the 'Industrial' than to the 'French Revolution', while the greatest was that all inclusive 'long revolution' from the ancient to the modern world in which the wheel had made a complete turn. In Poggio's celebrated dialogue which he pondered among the ruins of Rome, Gibbon found not only a catalogue of its ancient buildings, which he incorporated into his final chapter, but also the 'eloquent' expression of the reactions they inspired in the beholder.

The hill and the Tarpeian rock, changed, as Virgil had sung, from

1. See also DF, xxxviii, VII, 258-9.
2. Essai, chap. III, p.17. The words are 'égaré, désolé et corrompu'.
3. Trevor-Roper, however, has at least stated it boldly in passing: 'Gibbon's subject is the revolutions of society between Antiquity and Modernity; but its centre is the city of Rome.' 'Appreciation', DF, ed. Trevor-Roper, p.665.
4. DF, lxxi, VII, viii, 4, 'the wheel of fortune has accomplished her revolution' translating Poggio's words.
horrid thorn to glittering gold, had reverted to their primitive state, reconquered by the thorns and briars. \(^1\) With this seminal reflection Poggio opened his dialogue. 'Nothing,' he continued, 'that history can relate offers any comparison to the calamitous turn of fortune which has overthrown the queen of nations, once the most beautiful and most magnificent of all. There could be no examples of greater change either in the past or in what was yet to be.' \(^2\) To Gibbon it was 'the greatest perhaps and most awful scene in the history of mankind.' \(^3\) And he quoted Poggio's regret that the public and private buildings which had been designed to last for ever lie broken and in ruins. \(^4\)

But if Gibbon pictured himself musing, like his predecessor, among the wreck of vanished grandeur, it was not ruined buildings and material decay which appalled him most. It was the loss of liberty and true greatness in a people, their moral decay evidenced in the spread of luxury and licence. The aspect of this calamity which provoked Poggio's companion, Antonio Lusco, to exclaim over the cruel injustice of fortune towards Rome, was that this was the city which had produced 'so many illustrious men, commanders and generals, the nourisher of so many of the most excellent leaders, the parent of such outstanding virtue, the mother of so many worthy arts — military discipline, the sanctity of morals the sanctions of the laws, examples of every virtue, the rule of right living'. \(^5\) It was the ruin of men and morals, the disappearance of

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2. ibid, p. 6.
5. Opera Omnia, I, Lib. 1, pp.6-7 ('Quo magis dictu...deflendum quippe est hanc urbem...bene vivendi ratio defluxerunt.')
excellence, of arts and virtues, which was the severest blow. The few surviving columns and temples merely emphasised and symbolised this greater loss.

After gazing on the awful scene for a few minutes, Antonio told his companion how there came to his mind the case of Caius Marius, once a pillar of the Roman republic, but afterwards banished and finding himself an exile in North Africa. There above the ruins of Carthage, he sat wondering whether his own fall or the fate of Rome's ancient rival presented a more signal spectacle of the turn of fortune. Such physical and human examples of ruin are brought out in The Decline and Fall with its numerous instances of the destruction of cities and of the instability of human greatness.

In his Introduction, addressed to the humanist Pope, Nicholas V, Poggio pointed out the usefulness of history from which, over a long period of time, he had collected and arranged his own examples. These historical examples, he declared, would give his dialogue a moral value, since their evidence of the instability of fortune's favour and of the mutability of human affairs, should check empty ambition and the insane desire to dominate. He noted the similarity of theme to that of his earlier work On the Unhappiness of Princes and reminded Nicholas that, even if his ecclesiastical majesty seemed beyond the reach of misfortune, yet as temporal ruler of Rome, he was just as liable to suffer a reversal as any other prince. Poggio went even further, and before offering his patron this new work, added a word of warning to the effect

1. ibid., p. 6.
that, by carefully heeding the example of the fall of his predecessors, the Pope would learn the salutary lesson of caution.¹

The 'philosophic historian' of the Roman empire, himself both humanist and moralist, found much to his taste in the moral reflections of the Renaissance humanist, as also in the Poggiana of Jean Lenfant, whose history of the councils he used in the final volume of The Decline and Fall.² What he found congenial and instructive in Poggio's other discourses we can surmise. There was that on the nature of nobility, wherein the author considered how it was acquired and went on to reject the opinion of those who made it consist in anything other than virtue;³ there were those On the Misery of the Human Condition and On the Unhappiness of Princes.⁴ On this latter subject we recall Gibbon's own comment: 'I shall not descant on the vulgar topics of the misery of kings; but I may surely observe, that their condition, of all others, is the most pregnant with fear, and the least susceptible of hope.'⁵ Poggio also wrote a discourse On Avarice which discusses the place of ambition.⁶ These twin vices or follies, avarice and ambition are to be found at every turn in The Decline and Fall and Gibbon's work endorses Cincio's remark in this last dialogue that, though we are all naturally avaricious, this quality reigned principally in ecclesiastical circles; that, while Judas sold the Saviour for money, the contagion had gained ground in the church to such a degree that in his day there was nothing

1. ibid., p. 3. ('Hanc vero historiam ...')
2. POGGIANA: ou la vie, le caractèrè, les sentences et les bons mots de Pogge Florentin &c. 2 vols. Amsterdam, 1720. The book was not in Gibbon's library (see Keynes); but he refers to Lenfant's work on the church councils in two places, DF, lxvi, VII, 105, note 40 and lxx, VII, 301, note 87, and six of his volumes were on Gibbon's shelf.
3. 'De Nobilitate', Opera Omnia, I, pp. 64ff.; cf. Poggiana, I, p.53
4. 'De Miseria Conditionis Humanae', 'De Infelicitate Principum', Opera Omnia, I, pp. 88ff; 392ff.
5. DF, xlviii, V, 259.
6. 'De Avaritia', Opera Omnia, II, pp. 2-34.
rarer than a priest who was free from avarice. In a later work, *Against Hypocrisy*, Poggio was still more outspoken and, with a freedom like Gibbon's, castigated the vices and follies of the clergy, their pretended piety but secret debauchery, their scramble for preferment and, above all, their pride which they sought to conceal under a cloak of humility and sanctity. Their conduct produced in Poggio the same sort of moral indignation and scorn which hypocritical ecclesiastics aroused in Gibbon.

Thus, in more senses than one we may say that Gibbon sat where the earlier humanist had sat and moralised. And though he could not have failed to endorse the moral observations of Poggio's other discourses, it was pre-eminently that inspired by the ruins of Rome and the fall of princes which influenced his own History. There he not only gave it honourable mention on two occasions but also used it as both a documentary and an inspirational source. Furthermore, he found in this dialogue two examples which he introduced towards the end of his narrative.

Poggio, after referring to some ancient instances of the mutability of fortune, related the amazing success of Tamerlane and the calamities of Bajazet and these same moral illustrations appear in chapter lxv of *The Decline and Fall*. All this and much more by way of the lessons of

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2. 'Contra Hypocritas', Opera Omnia, 2nd work in vol.II (no continuous pagination). Once holding avarice the chief vice, Poggio now considered hypocrisy to be much worse. ('...tanquam monstrum perniciosissimum Hypocrisim videlicet multo scelesius vitium...')
3. DF, lxv, VII, 65, notes 58, 59 and lxxi, VII, 313ff. and notes. This chapter not only grows out of Poggio's 'prospect' of Rome and his dialogue but uses his description of the buildings of the city.
4. 'De Varietate Fortunae', Lib.I, Opera Omnia, I, pp.36-8; DF, chap. lxv. Gibbon, however, acknowledged the lack of historicity in the story of Bajazet's iron cage, 'so often repeated as a moral lesson'. (VII, 63).
history Gibbon found in Poggio's most celebrated work, to which he paid tribute as an 'elegant moral lecture'. Both in the ruin of empire and in the downfall of notable persons, he too found 'ample scope for moralising on the vicissitudes of fortune.'

The opening paragraph of Gibbon's first chapter introduces us to the 'revolution which will ever be remembered, and is still felt by the nations of the earth', while the final paragraph of the work brings down the curtain on this 'greatest, perhaps and most awful scene in the history of mankind'. Near the beginning of chapter 1 we are told that the resilience of the Germanic peoples and their bid for independence 'reminded Augustus of the vicissitudes of fortune', and this same theme drawn from Poggio's title becomes the text for Gibbon's closing oration as he takes his leave of the reader.

Had Gibbon been content simply to relate the course of events in tracing the story of the declining empire, he would have recorded that a particular person, monarch, empress, minister or general, assumed control or rose to a position of authority, enjoyed a season of power, did certain things, then either died at the height of success, or, as was more often the case, declined to an ignoble end or was overthrown. But his conception of history went beyond this. Instead, he paused over and over again to reflect on the shape of the life and career he had unfolded, as yet another instance of a general principle in human affairs from which a philosophic mind might draw a useful lesson, even if mankind as a whole seldom proved any the wiser. This approach has been shown in

1. DF, Ixxi, VII, 338.
2. DF, i, I, 3.
3. DF, Ixxi, VII, 313 and n.1.
examining his treatment of character. It is also poignantly brought out in the recurring theme of 'vicissitude', transitoriness and the revolutions of history. Let us notice some instances of this theme.

The empress Julia, consort of Severus, was raised from a humble station to greatness, 'only to taste the superior bitterness of an exalted rank'; from this eminence she sank to 'the condition of a subject' and finally escaped degradation only by 'a voluntary death'. Thus she had during her life, 'experienced all the vicissitudes of fortune'. A later empress, Eudocia, rose from nothing to become the wife of the Western Emperor, Theodosius. Her story, as Gibbon admitted, was indeed 'an incredible romance'. But after her spectacular elevation to power, fame, honours and an ostentatious style of living, she overplayed her hand by aspiring to govern the empire and ended in exile and disgrace. She too is described as having gone through 'a full experience of the vicissitudes of human life'.

A very different case is that of the great general of Justinian. 'The name of Belisarius can never die,' Gibbon declared as he related 'the simple and genuine narrative of his fall' from the heights of fame and success to rejection and poverty. But the story of his having to beg in the streets for food, is 'a later fiction which gained credit, or rather favour, as a strange example of the vicissitudes of fortune.' Yet the 'genuine' account of his career as told by Gibbon is sufficient

1. See above chap. VI in general and pp. 305-6 in particular.
2. DF, vi, I, 154.
3. DF, xxxii, III, 412.
Valerian, kept by the victorious Sapor in chains, but still in his imperial purple and exposed to the insults of the crowd, is displayed by Gibbon as 'a constant spectacle of fallen greatness'; and the proud conqueror was said to always mount his horse after placing a foot on the emperor's neck, heedless of 'all the remonstrances of his allies who repeatedly advised him to remember the vicissitudes of fortune.' It was a timely warning. In a later chapter we are told how the Romans recovered their spirit after the defeat of Dura: 'the transient presumption of Sapor had vanished' when he observed the uncertainties of war; and, having learnt from bitter experience, he at last, 'feared to provoke the resistance of despair, the vicissitudes of fortune, and the exhausted powers of the Roman empire which might soon advance to relieve or to revenge the successor of Julian.'

Olympius, the weak, foolish, self-seeking and obstinate minister of Honorius, 'might have continued to insult the just resentment of a people', but for a palace intrigue which brought about his downfall. 'The escape or exile of the guilty Olympius,' as Gibbon stated, 'reserved him for more vicissitudes of fortune' which included a period of wandering, a restoration to power and a final fall from favour to end in disgrace.

In The Decline and Fall, such vicissitudes habitually attend the

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1. _DF_, x, I, 293-4. By contrast Alp Arslan who had already learnt to respect 'the vicissitudes of fortune', treated his royal captive, Romanus, with the utmost respect. _DF_, lvii, VI, 250-1.
2. _DF_, xxiv, II, 549.
3. _DF_, xxxi, III, 332.
career of ministers, they are acutely felt by 'the royal vassals in a disputed succession to the throne,' and they are continually exemplified in the uncertain outcome of battles, where the decision sometimes seems to hang in the balance, only to turn unexpectedly against the superior force. We read of nine battles in the Third Crusade, fought in the vicinity of Mt. Carmel, 'with such vicissitude of fortune' that on one occasion the Sultan pushed into the city while on another the Christians entered the royal tent; so that 'the vicissitude of success' might have taught the opposing monarchs 'to suspect that Heaven was neutral in their quarrel.'

It is in such a context of the fluctuating fortunes of battle, when its vicissitudes inclined the fierce spirit of Clovis to acquiesce in an advantageous treaty of peace', that Gibbon came closest to giving an indication of what he meant by 'fortune', even though he may have only defined it negatively. In attempting a definition of 'fortune' Poggio and his companion took different sides, Antonio adopting an Aristotelian position and calling it an accidental cause, whereby circumstances happen to a man contrary to his own intention and design. When challenged by Poggio he shifted his ground somewhat to admit an overruling providence behind circumstances commonly considered fortuitous. Gibbon, familiar with the problem as presented in this dialogue, and having in mind the campaigns of Clovis in Poitou and Aquitaine which resulted in the futility of a so-called victory won at the expense of

1. Such was the situation with the four sons of Malek Shāh, who 'in the vicissitudes of their fortunes' confused the allegiance of the royal vassals, DF, lviii, VI, 318-9.
2. DF, lix, VI, 363, 367.
3. DF, xxxviii, IV, 126-7. So, too, the abdication of Charles V 'appears to have been hastened by the vicissitude of fortune.' (DF, xiii, I, 416).
ten thousand lives, exclaimed: 'Such is the empire of Fortune (if we may disguise our ignorance under the popular name) that it is almost equally difficult to foresee the events of war, or to explain their various consequences.'

This description of 'fortune' is negative because Gibbon admitted it to be a synonym for an unknown quantity, though both here and elsewhere he clarified its use by its context. The recurrence of the term in The Decline and Fall is partly a concession to traditional and popular usage, partly a matter of convenience. It is a sort of complex variable in two senses of the word, sometimes substituting for an imaginary quantity which cannot be ascertained, and sometimes being a symbol for variability or inconstancy. Such is the dual function of this indispensable word.

Gibbon allowed a place for fortune in peoples' lives, including his own, as well as in public and military affairs. To take three instances from two consecutive pages, we are told that the general Fabius was not compelled to share any great proportion of his 'solid and independent fame...either with fortune or with his troops'; that an emperor's prudence 'was seconded by fortune' as he always seized and improved 'every favourable circumstance'; and that the Goths made the best 'of the advantages of their fortune'. So too, when emperors were raised to the throne by the support of their soldiers, an obsequious senate 'was always prepared to ratify the decision of fortune'.

1. DF, xxxviii, IV, 127.
2. DF, xxvi, III, 130-131.
3. DF, xxxii, III, 392.
that 'the elevation' of Gainas, the Gothic leader, whose career presents another example of strange vicissitudes, 'had been the work of valour and fortune'. Even in reviewing the life of 'the historian of the Roman Empire' himself, wherein to a great extent Gibbon liked to see everything in his earlier years as preparatory, and contributing to his destined vocation, he made room for fortune and what we popularly call 'the luck of the game'. 'When I contemplate the common lot of humanity,' he wrote, 'I must acknowledge that I have drawn a high prize in the lottery of life. The far greater part of the globe is overspread with barbarism or slavery; in the civilized world the most numerous class is condemned to ignorance and poverty; and the double fortune of my birth in a free and enlightened country in an honourable and wealthy family is the lucky chance of an unit against millions.'

Without pursuing any further the place of the fortuitous in Gibbon's own view of the world, we can safely say that he did not try to avoid a convenient term, hallowed by ancient, medieval and Renaissance usage, a term which still conveyed to his contemporaries that enigmatic area of life about which philosophic minds might speculate, but the reality of which every man knew from happy or from bitter experience. The original pagan term of classical Greece and Rome seemed the obvious one to choose - what other word could one find? Yet it was emptied of old superstitions and unenlightened connotations: the goddess was demythologised. Even so, the notion was never allowed to replace or

1. DF, xxxii, III, 392.
3. The recurring symbol of the wheel of fortune in medieval literature, which was carried over into humanistic use, is also a convenient one for Gibbon in his 'revolution' figure.
obstruct rational explanation nor absolve the philosophic historian from
the pursuit of discoverable causes. Thus Gibbon opened his 'General
Observations' with the statement that the declining Greeks had attributed
the triumph of the Roman Republic not to its merit, but to its Fortune:
'the inconstant goddess' had simply redistributed her favours. But, he
continued, 'a wiser Greek', Polybius, 'who has composed with a philosophic
spirit the memorable history of his own times, deprived his countrymen
of this vain and delusive comfort by opening to their view the deep
foundations of the greatness of Rome.' These Gibbon went on to affirm,
were moral, not fortuitous.

With these safeguards against the abuse of the word 'fortune', it
matters little that Gibbon chose to employ the term in a popular sense,
without any great precision or philosophical clarification. It served
the moralist well when his emphasis was particularly on instability,
change and decay, a context which he found both in Poggio and in Boethius,
who philosophically took solace in his calamity from a recognition of
'the inconstancy of fortune'. Throughout The Decline and Fall such a
recognition conveys its message even to some of the proudest and most
ruthless conquerors, like Sapor or Clovis, who learned from their
experience of fortune's vicissitudes, the necessity for moderation and
restraint.

It is the cogency of this argument from bitter experience, no doubt,
which makes the sentiment of the fickleness of fortune a favourite with

1. DF, IV, 172.
2. It is one of a number of favourite terms, including 'philosophy'
which Gibbon did not set out to define.
3. DF, xxxix, IV, 215.
ambassadors, especially when presenting their case from a position of weakness rather than strength. The Alemanni, reduced by Aurelian to distress, sued for peace. Surrounded by the imposing army of Rome and facing the emperor, majestically seated on his throne, their ambassadors, when given permission to rise and speak, 'extenuated their perfidy, magnified their exploits, expatiated on the vicissitudes of fortune and the advantages of peace.'¹ In somewhat similar circumstances, Apharban, ambassador of 'the Great King', Narses of Persia, a nation whose spirit had been broken by defeat, was allowed to submit his cause to the decision of the emperors. He based his appeal for clemency on the same grounds, 'convinced as he was that in the midst of prosperity, they would not be unmindful of the vicissitudes of fortune.' Galerius, exasperated at the hollowness of this diplomatic cliché from the mouth of an envoy of the proud and mercilous eastern potenate, replied: 'It well becomes the Persians to expatiate on the vicissitudes of fortune and calmly to read us lectures on the virtues of moderation.'² So, too, at a later period the Roman ambassadors reminded Barbarossa that, 'like all sublunary things Rome has felt the vicissitudes of time and fortune.'³

The same theme is enunciated by a number of Moslem rulers who philosophically bear witness to the fact of transitoriness, either in the very words we have been considering or in others having the same force. The emperor Romanus, following his defeat and capture by Alp Arslan, was forced 'to kiss the ground before the lord of Asia'. Whether, in accordance with national custom, the Sultan actually placed

1. DF, xi, I, 319.
2. DF, xiii, I, 402.
3. DF, lxix, VII, 244.
his foot on the emperor's neck seems doubtful. But certainly, in contrast to the arrogant Sapor, Arslan showed himself mindful both of his prisoner's rank and of the uncertainties of warfare. 'He instantly raised the royal captive from the ground; and thrice clasping his hand with tender sympathy, assured him that his life and dignity should be inviolate in the hands of a prince who had learned to respect the majesty of his equals and the vicissitudes of fortune.'¹ The moral of the incident was not overlooked by Gibbon, who added that such conduct 'may afford a lesson to the most civilised ages.' The same sultan's tomb also bore what he called 'this useful inscription: "O YE WHO HAVE SEEN THE GLORY OF ALP ARSLAN EXALTED TO THE HEAVENS, REPAIR TO MARU, AND YOU WILL BEHOLD IT BURIED IN THE DUST."' Gibbon's final comment was, 'The annihilation of the inscription, and the tomb itself, more forcibly proclaims the instability of human greatness.'²

As the story of the Roman Empire is brought to an end with the victorious Mahomet II entering the palace of Constantine and his successors, now 'stripped of the pomp of royalty', we are told that, 'a melancholy reflection on the vicissitudes of human greatness forced itself on his mind; and he repeated an elegant distich of Persian poetry: "The spider has wove his web in the imperial palace; and the owl hath sung her watch-song on the towers of Afrasiab."'³

Here we have yet another instance of Gibbon's use of his historical characters to convey a moral reflection or generalisation which is one of

1. DF, lvii, VI, 250-1.
2. DF, lvii, VI, 253.
3. DF, lxviii, VII, 208. Gibbon made a comparison with Scipio who, at the sack of Carthage, repeated Homer's famous prophecy. (n.104).
the motifs of the whole work. And the particular sentiment in question seems to come from none more easily and appropriately than from these eastern rulers, these followers of the religion of the crescent. So characteristic is it that Braudy has gone as far as to assert: 'Almost every major Arab figure who appears in The Decline and Fall has a highly developed and poetic sense of what Gibbon usually calls "the vicissitudes of fortune". The Arab's awareness of the vanity of human wishes is in fact a reflection of the historian's view of the rapid passage of time.'

The main emphasis, however, as we have seen, is not on rapidity but rather on the completeness of the change that time has brought about within the life of an individual, of a reign, or of an empire. The individual person experiences a full turn of the wheel - from obscurity to eminence and back to obscurity or even worse - though on occasions a second turn may bring another taste of power. The empire of Rome suffered a complete revolution, symbolised by its ruins and by the return of 'the sacred ground' to its pristine state 'disfigured with thorns and brambles'. But whether rapid and violent, like the capture of Constantinople, or the work of centuries, like the decay of Rome, the melancholy fact of change remains and is continually and explicitly stated in The Decline and Fall as part of the moral: 'Sic transit gloria mundi'.

The expression of the 'vicissitudes' sentiment recurs in a number of phrases, but all are variations on a single theme. Besides 'the vicissitudes of fortune', we find 'the vicissitudes of human life',

1. See reference to this aspect in chapter IX below, pp. 503-4.
2. Narrative Form in History and Fiction, p. 256.
3. DF, lxxi, VII, 313-4.
illustrated in a career such as that of the empress Eudocia. ¹ There is 'the vicissitude of human affairs', a reflection which, Gibbon felt, would suggest itself to 'a philosophic spectator' of the decline of Rome, were he to imagine Tacitus once again appearing in a Senate which had 'degenerated from the virtues' of its founders², or were he to contemplate the recurrence of the same scenes of disaster which had afflicted Rome at an earlier period of her history.³ There is 'the vicissitude of human and divine things' evidenced by 'the splendid relics of two temples, or rather of two religions 'remaining after the Vandal sack of Rome.⁴ We also find opposing monarchs each enjoying in turn 'the vicissitude of success' in their battles⁵; or the Emperor Cantacuzene, seeking to re-establish himself, but dismissed by his ally and protector 'to a new vicissitude of hopes and perils'.⁶ Procopius was prompted by 'the vicissitudes of courage or servitude, of favour or disgrace', to compose successive histories of his times, on the one hand as panegyric, on the other as satire.⁷ The artful but vacillating Emperor Manuel, in his negotiations with an equally artful Pope, 'advanced or retreated; alternately instructed and disavowed his ministers', 'according to the vicissitudes of danger and repose'.⁸ And Gibbon, as he reflected on the

¹. DF, xxxii, III, 412 and see above p. 426. I find altogether about 17 combinations, in addition to phases of similar force, like 'the alternative of favour and disgrace', 'the incessant change of human affairs', 'the transitory series of human life' and the word 'mutability'.
². DF, xx, II, 348.
³. DF, xlvii, V, 46. ('By the fatal vicissitude of human affairs, the same scenes were renewed at Ctesiphon, which had been exhibited in Rome after the death of Marcus Antonius."
⁴. DF, xxxvi, IV, 6.
⁵. DF, lxxvi, IV, 367, and see above, p.428.
⁶. DF, lxxiii, VI, 522.
⁷. DF, x, IV, 224.
fall of the Empire in the West, and contemplated man's slow progress from savagery, a long ascent followed by 'a moment of rapid downfall', was led to the observation that 'the several climates of the globe have felt the vicissitudes of light and darkness.'

The central truth common to all these variants is that of instability, transitoriness and the unpredictable factor in human life and in the rise and fall of empires. It is a very significant aspect of Gibbon's concept of history. Its embodiment in The Decline and Fall is associated with an actual and an imaginative view of the remains of ancient Rome; but the exponents of this theme are very diverse: the ruins of countless cities, of palaces and temples, of religions, of institutions, and of men and women of many races and ranks, whose eminence was followed by wanderings, misery and death, as well as of ecclesiastics who found themselves no less the victim of fortune or fate, or whatever name be used to personify and disguise the unforeseen element in human affairs. Against such a background, it is little wonder that the philosophic historian found occasion to moralise on vicissitudes of men and nations, or that he considered it 'a just but melancholy reflection' that the unity of a great empire, the happiness of many peoples and the stability of the Roman world depended on something as precarious as 'the character of a single man', the succession to the throne, or even the outcome of a battle. Indeed, it is in large part, the recurrence of such fateful situations often followed by disastrous results, which makes 'melancholy' one of the characteristic words in The Decline and Fall.

1. DF, IV, 180 'General Observations &c.' Cf. 'the vicissitudes of light and obscurity' which marked the course of 'the ascending meteor', Rienzi (DF, lxx, VII, 278); his 'strange vicissitudes and magnanimous spirit' we are told, excited 'the pity and esteem' of Pope Clement VI. One might list other vicissitudes such as those 'of famine and plenty'. (DF, xxvi, III, 77).
2. see DF, ii, I, 86 where the phrase is used of the Antonine Age and xlix, V, 305 where it refers to Charlemagne's empire.
The classic statement of the 'sic transit' motif is found in a passage previously cited, where, having swept through the long line of 'phantom' emperors displaying 'the crimes and follies of human ambition, so eager in a narrow span to grasp at a precarious and short-lived enjoyment' of power, Gibbon claimed that the historian's extended view allows him to survey such an insubstantial pageant in truer perspective. Yet he felt obliged to state the melancholy truth that 'the duration of a life or reign is contracted to a fleeting moment; the grave is ever beside the throne; the success of a criminal is almost instantly followed by the loss of his prize.'¹ The sentiment is expressed more pithily and with greater generality in a comment on the succession to the crown of Sicily: 'Of human life, the most glorious or humble prospects are alike and soon bounded by the sepulchre.'²

The thought of life being 'contracted to a fleeting moment,'³ is not only attested by persons in The Decline and Fall, it is also, as we have seen, part of Gibbon's concept of history and of his sense of the passage of time. That it continued also to characterise his attitude to his own life is borne out by the conclusion to his last published work, the Memoirs. In taking his leave of the reader, he declared: 'The present is a fleeting moment: the past is no more; and our prospect of futurity is dark and doubtful. This day may possibly be my last: but the laws of probability, so true in general, so fallacious in particular, still allow me about fifteen years.'⁴ Ironically, Gibbon's experience of the

2. DF, lvi, VI, 217.
3. It recurs in DF, lxxi, VIII, 317; 'the narrow span' of man's existence, his life and labours 'a fleeting moment'.
4. Memoirs, p. 188 and see p.196 for additional sentences included by Sheffield.
uncertainty of these laws proved justified for he enjoyed barely three years of 'this autumnal felicity'.

This personal awareness of impermanence and the brevity of life, merging with the moral reflection on vicissitude as handed down from Poggio and the humanist tradition, thus found very varied expression on the wide canvas of history presented by The Decline and Fall. It is illustrated in numerous lives and its spokesmen include the philosophic Boethius, ambassadors of various nations and Muslim rulers. It is brought out by Gibbon, not only in empires and dynasties, but even in the history of a notable family whose English branch was still one of distinction in that country. His 'Digression the Family of Courtenay', with its account of their changing fortunes, may have had the effect of bringing the notion of vicissitude much nearer home. After noting their loss of splendour in an earlier age, as 'they descended from princes to barons', then to 'simple gentry' and finally to soldiers or mere peasants, Gibbon pictured the present generation, who, 'while they sigh for past greatness, ... are doubtless sensible of present blessings.' 'Yet the Courtenays,' he stated, 'still retain the plaintive motto', Ubi lapsus? Quid feci?. which asserts the innocence, and deplores the fall of their ancient house.'

But the vicissitude motif, so frequently associated in Gibbon's History, with the fall of kings, as in its classic expression quoted above, assumed a startling and current relevance for Gibbon five years after completing his work. Writing from Lausanne to Lord Sheffield,

1. DF, 1xi, VI, 466-474.
2. DF, 1xi, 470, 474.
he urged: 'Do not suffer yourselves to be lulled into a false security. Remember the proud fabric of the French monarchy. Not four years ago it stood founded as it might seem on the rock of time, force and opinion, supported by the triple Aristocracy, of the Church, the Nobility and the Parliaments. They are crumbled into dust, they are vanished from the earth.'

Vicissitude, impermanence, a revolution of the wheel of fortune: central to all these is the historian's concept of time and of our experience of time. This, like his wider notion of revolutions as the raw material of his History, has received very little attention. In providing some suggestive comments on the matter, Ian White has written: 'Studies of Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire have, it seems to me, generally failed to bring out the most persistent and characteristic moral impression of the work ... It may briefly be called the theme of time.' And he noted that such writers as Tillyard and Bond appear to have missed the unique significance of Gibbon's chosen subject in this regard. Tillyard denied any 'exclusive connexion' between this subject and 'the general truths' Gibbon had to convey, which were, in fact, 'nothing but the common stuff' of his particular century and social class. Against such a suggestion White maintained that 'an historian's moral purpose is expressed in his choice of topic,' and that Gibbon's subject 'illustrates his theme better than would a

1. Letters, No. 803, 30/5/92, III, 258.
general history of the world. The continuity of the Empire makes us the more conscious of its changes, in the same way as a series of ancestors does, or the revolutions of a comet, or the identity, over many years, of the self ... It is still important to the point of his history that the man killed defending Constantinople in 1453 should be the successor of Augustus. The ruins of Rome, to which he returns in the last three chapters of the History, enforce the same moral. As continuity makes us conscious of change, so what remains makes us conscious of what has been lost.'

Over and above the incidental philosophic comment, there are the particular illustrations of the theme of time here referred to. The continuity of the family and the idea of lineal descent are brought out both in the History and in the Memoirs. In the former we have, for example, the excursus on 'the long series of Courtenay annals', illustrative not only of vicissitude but also of continuity beyond the short life span of the individual. In the latter, Gibbon began by tracing his own ancestry, but prefaced his account by referring to 'the posterity of Confucius' with its 'perpetual succession' over more than two thousand years. This is associated with the philosophic reflection on the individual person who seeks to 'stretch forwards' in hope beyond death, and backwards by associating himself with his forebears: 'We seem to have lived in the person of our ancestors,' thus extending our span of existence vicariously into the remote past. And the work closes with the reflection that 'in old age' we find 'a consolation of hope' in the new life of our children.

2. DF, lxii, VI, 466-474.
4. ibid., p. 189.
Another illustration of the theme of time is found in the remarks on comets, volcanoes and earthquakes, with which Gibbon concluded his forty-third chapter. His point of observation for the comet is the year 531 A.D., during the reign of Justinian. Its seven recorded 'revolutions' embrace the whole 'narrow space' of human 'history and fable'. Its last appearance was to the 'enlightened age' of Bayle and its next takes us forward to the year 2255, when the calculations of that age 'may perhaps be verified by the astronomers of some future capital in the Siberian or American wilderness.' An analogous but irregular measurement of time is observed in the recurrence of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and the visitations of the plague.

Apart from these illustrations, the extension of the individual life span is, of course, seen in the frequent mention of eras and ages, usually characterised by some distinguishing mark or epithet. At the end of chapter xl, reference is made to the record of eras dated from creation: 3000 years of 'ignorance and darkness', another 2000 years 'fabulous or doubtful'; then the dawn of the historic eras, 1000 years of ancient history, a further 1000 years from the fall of the Western Empire to the discovery of America, and a balance of almost 300 years up to the historian's own day. We find, indeed, a quite frequent bracketing of years, often in round figures: the thousand years' separation of the Mar Thoma Church of Malabar from the Western world; the recollection of a thousand years 'since Egypt had ceased to be a kingdom', and the eleven centuries' leap to 'the present misery of

1. DF, xliii, IV, 463.
3. DF, xl, IV, 287, n.160; cf. also n.161.
the Jacobites' of that land. The Ethiopians, we are reminded, 'slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten;' while the preservation of the same features and complexion by a people 'afford a proof that two thousand years are not sufficient to change the colour of the human race.' The temporal dominion of the popes 'is confirmed by the reverence of a thousand years', a similar period marks the era during which Constantinople resisted its several assaults, and looking back to the earliest times, Gibbon recalled that 'a hundred generations' had fallen into the grave since the building of the pyramids.

In this way, perhaps so obvious and commonplace, the historian repeatedly reminds his reader of these great leaps of time, sometimes conveying him back over a span of history — 'we shall imagine ourselves transported five hundred years backwards' — or carrying him forward — 'I shall step over the interval of eleven centuries to observe the present.' The minute and rigid concern with a 'doubtful chronology' which had engrossed the young Gibbon has given way to a feeling for the grand sweep of history and the sense of eras and millenia.

The corollary of this focus on the passage of time and ages is the hypothetical elimination of the interval between two periods or events. The sense of shock is imagined if they were presented to the observer in their stark and unbelievable contrast as a testimony to those changes which time had wrought. There are two interesting

1. DF, xlvii, V, 162, 173, 174.
2. DF, xlvii, V, 176, 175, n.155.
examples of this use of the time machine which seemed to fascinate Gibbon. The first is that of a tale which was 'engraved' on his memory so early that he could not say when, as he recalled the experience in his Memoirs. It was the story of 'The Cavern of the Winds', wherein Prince Adolph, 'after three months or three centuries ... is overtaken by Time,' which had continuously pursued him. The unexpressed idea seems to be that, though time eventually catches up with us, we may become oblivious of it, as when engrossed in some pleasing experience including perhaps that extended view of the past afforded us by history.

The other example is the story of 'The Seven Sleepers', recorded in The Decline and Fall. This is a rare instance, for Gibbon was not given to recounting religious legends, but chose to include this one largely for the 'moral' it contained. Here again the interim is obliterated and this annihilation of time gave the historian the opportunity to comment: 'We imperceptibly advance from youth to age without observing the gradual, but incessant, change in human affairs, and even in our larger experience of history, the imagination is accustomed by a perpetual series of causes and effects to unite the most distant revolutions. But if the interval between two memorable aeras could be instantly annihilated,' the surprise and the reflections of the spectator 'would furnish the pleasing subject of a philosophical romance.' This startling juxtaposition of the old world and the new seems basic to Gibbon's own reflections on history -- the sharp contrast between the reign of Decius and that of Theodosius the Younger,

1. Memoirs, p. 36. The episode is cited from an English translation of La Mothe's Histoire d'Hipolite, Comte de Douglas, and given in Bonnard's Notes, p. 247.
2. DF, xxxiii, III, 439.
and above all else, that revolution represented by Roman magnificence turned to ruins, the Capitoline hill and the Tarpeian rock reconquered by thorns and briars.  

What is the essence of this theme of time in The Decline and Fall? It is this. Man's mind is immortal but his life is brief and momentary in the boundless annals of time. Even his material works and memorials, though apparently so permanent, are but temporary and eventually either disappear or fall into decay. His only means of transcending time and its ravages is his 'larger experience of history', which extends his view and lifts him above the temporal limitations of his own existence or those of mighty empires and their civilizations. This recurring thought is expressed in terms of breaking through the confines of his 'narrow span' by means of this enlarged experience. It should 'enlarge our hopes', and raise us above the pitiful and futile 'crimes and follies of human ambition' by which successive rulers grasp at short-lived power and satisfaction. 'It is thus that the experience of history exalts and enlarges the horizon of our intellectual view,' enabling us to look down on this mortal scene with 'a smile of pity and contempt' for both its pettiness and its impermanence. 

But there is also a complementary 'moral' associated with this theme of time. It is the relative value of reigns and eras. 'Ages of ignorance' or 'superstition' are not to be equated with 'enlightened

1. The surprising contrast between the reigns of Decius and Theodosius is brought out by the illustration of 'The Seven Sleepers' See DF, xxxiii, III, 439.
2. DF, xxxviii, IV, 180.
3. DF, xlviii, V, 258-9. This is quite different to Swift's misanthropic contempt.
ages' no matter what their actual length may be.¹ Significance is not to be measured in years. Annals and chronicles become 'barren' as all facts tend to be given roughly the same space irrespective of their intrinsic value and relative importance. By contrast, Gibbon tended to hurry over what he considered barren periods, lacking in instruction, and to dwell instead on those periods and activities which merited attention. In this way he was asserting moral value and instruction over merely temporal duration or even the mistaken acclaim formerly given to a 'hero', a conqueror, or a 'great man', which the verdict of history should now reverse.

The major example of this recognition of moral perspective and proportion is to be seen in the construction of The Decline and Fall itself. The obvious disparity between the parts, between the attention and detail in the former and those in the latter, has been repeatedly pointed out in criticisms of the work. Gibbon himself was, however, the first to point it out and his familiar reference to the six hundred years of Byzantine rulers being condensed into the task of a few days' writing and a few hours' reading, emphasises this reduction of the record of kings to what the historian saw as their true worth. He made clear his opinion of both the period and its sources whose inferiority is reflected in his summary treatment. He faced an 'ungrateful and melancholy task' which he would have 'abandoned without regret' but for its passive connection with 'the most splendid and important revolutions' which ushered in the rise of modern Europe.²

1. Cf. DF, xli, IV, 286-7, n.160; xliiv, IV, 498, n. 90; lxii, VI, 505, n. 69; xxv, III, 30; xxxviii, IV, 124; lxi, VI, 447 with iii, I, 77; xxv, III, 17 and n. 46.
2. DF, xlviii, V, 180, 182.
The phrases used of the Western and Eastern empires respectively, show how his estimate was based on his sense of moral proportion. The Western emperors 'exhibit a strong and various picture of human nature, ... the utmost lines of vice and virtue.' In contrast to this variety and wide spectrum, those of the East presented 'a dead uniformity of abject vices'. The Western rulers were marked by 'the most exalted perfection and the meanest degeneracy' of our species; the Eastern were 'neither softened by the weakness of humanity nor animated by the vigour of memorable vices.'\(^1\) Thus, in continuing his narrative beyond the reign of Heraclius, Gibbon explained: 'Should I persevere in the same course, should I observe the same measure, a prolix and slender thread would be spun through many a volume,... without adequate reward of instruction or amusement... These annals must continue to repeat a tedious and uniform tale of weakness.'\(^2\) In fact, it is in this extensive chapter that Gibbon comes nearest to the style of the 'annalist' even though his philosophic and moral observations still reveal an immeasurable gap between such compilers and himself. Nevertheless the structure and emphases of The Decline and Fall testify to the author's scale of moral significance.

We have approached the sic transit theme as Gibbon himself did, namely by way of the prospect from the Capitol, the view of 'the spectator, who casts a mournful eye over the ruins of ancient Rome.'\(^3\) These familiar ruins, and many others less famous, constitute an image

1. For the contrast see DF, iii i, 86-7 and xlviii, V, 181.
2. DF, xlviii, V, 180. The monotonous uniformity is emphasised also by the expression: 'the same path of servitude and corruption'(V,182)
3. DF, xxxvi, IV, 21. This is the way Gibbon approached it in his own experience, though in his History, the full statement is reserved for the final chapter.
in *The Decline and Fall*, and because of the significance of this image, require a closer study. The thought and vocabulary of the work repeat the idea of ruin, decline, decay, degeneration and collapse. The reader becomes accustomed to the word 'ruin' in both its literal and metaphorical senses ringing out from page after page to remind him of the persistence of this motif, while from time to time the melancholy prospect of such ruins moves the historian to pause and moralise on change and decay.

Ruins begin to be prominent as early as the second chapter, where attention is focused on the unity and happiness of the empire under the Antonines. Yet the age is shown to carry in itself the seeds of decay, the inevitable cause of its own ruin. Having given a general account of the situation in Rome and the provinces, Gibbon directed the reader's thoughts to the surviving monuments of Roman greatness: 'Among the innumerable monuments of architecture constructed by the Romans, how many have escaped the notice of history, how few have resisted the ravages of time and barbarism! And yet even the majestic ruins that are still scattered over Italy and the provinces would be sufficient to prove that those countries were once the seat of a polite and powerful empire.'¹ A little later we are reminded of 'some considerable ruins' which still 'preserve the fame' of the young Herod's 'taste and munificence', and informed that 'modern travellers have measured the remains of the stadium he built in Athens.'² It is left to such ruins

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1. *DF*, ii, i, 47. Such ruins, according to Gibbon, not only reveal greatness and a sense of beauty, but also illustrate 'the more useful history of human manners', since the buildings were in many cases erected at private expense, though almost all for public benefit.  
2. *DF*, ii, i, 50.
to maintain something of the reputation of a once great people or powerful ruler and their survival gives at least an imperfect impression of this greatness. Then, for the third time, Gibbon casts his eye in the latter part of this chapter over some memorable ruins. This time it is in the eastern provinces of the empire where they 'present the contrast of Roman magnificence with Turkish barbarism.' These 'ruins of antiquity scattered over uncultivated fields' now 'scarcely afford a shelter to the oppressed peasant or wandering Arab.'\(^1\) But the former greatness of these Asian cities, long extinguished, can be gauged from the remains of Laodicea, 'whose splendour is still displayed in its ruins.'\(^2\)

The silent message conveyed by all these ruins to which Gibbon directs our attention is one of vanished greatness, of magnificence overwhelmed by barbarism, and of a scene of desolation. Sometimes the notion of barbarism and destruction is uppermost, as in the appearance of the countryside after the German invasion of Gaul: 'The scene of peace and plenty was suddenly changed into a desert; and the prospect of the smoking ruins could alone distinguish the solitude of nature from the desolation of man.'\(^3\) The moral indictment of humanity, or at least of its barbaric conquerors, if only implied, is still unmistakable.

From the multitude of ruins, material, political, human, and moral, with which we may say the pages of The Decline and Fall are strewn, it is worth while noticing the main categories and the wide application of

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1. DF, ii, I, 54.
2. DF, loc. cit.
3. DF, xxx, III, 284-5.
this word which Gibbon found so indispensable. We find the ruins of numerous cities and towns, from Cologne to Caesarea, from Jerusalem to Bagdad.¹ There are references to the ruin of the countryside, such as that of Assyria, Thrace and Dacia, of 'the opulent provinces of Gaul' and of 'a populous district which had once been adorned with the flourishing cities of Bologna. Modena, Regium and Placentia.'² There are ruins of temples such as those of Daphne or Serapis, and those over which monasteries had been built, while in Rome 'the solitary temples were abandoned to ruin and contempt', the most interesting, that of Jupiter on the Capitol, having 'crumbled into dust.'³ It was this last that Gibbon, in describing the prospect from the hill, confused or artfully merged with the church of the Zoccolanti, whose chanting friars seemed to mock 'the ruin of paganism' and to symbolise the triumph of

¹ These include Laodicea (x, I, 54), Cyzicus (x, I, 285-6), Tarsus (x, I, 292), Spolatro (xiii, I, 422), Jerusalem (xv, II, 10; xvi, II, 89, 95), Amida (xix, II, 287,9), Cologne (xix, II, 293), Cyrene (xx, II, 344), Babylon (xxiv, II, 523), Perisabor (xxiv, II, 524), Maogamalcha (xxiv, II, 529), Modain or Ctesiphon (xxiv, II, 529), Seleucis (xxiv, II, 530), Leptis and Sabrata (xxv, III, 49, n.124), Caesaria (xxv, III, 51), Argentaria (xxvi, III, 112, n.88), Italica (xxvi, III, 125, n.109), Corinth (xxx, III, 258), Carthage (xxxiii, III, 434, 6; li, V, 499; Lix, VI, 377), Naissus (xxxiv, III, 455), Sardica (xxxiv, III, 459, 460; xl, IV, 219), Tongres (xxxv, III, 484), Aquileia (xxxv, III, 494), Anderida (xxxviii, IV, 164, n.51), Milan (xli, IV, 351), Genoa (xli, IV, 352), Antioch (xlii, IV, 393; lxv, VII, 51, n.24), Phasis (xlii, IV, 408), Sirmium (xlvi, V, 60), Thebarna or Ormia (xlvi, V, 89), Nineveh (xlvi, V, 95), Axume, xlvi, V, 177), Palmyra (xliv, V, 303), Cuja (I, V, 413, n.193), Baalbek (I, V, 458), Erbe or Lambesa (I, V, 494), Heraclea (III, VI, 38), Selinus (III, VI, 41), Septizonium (IV, VI, 213), Agrigentum (IV, VI, 217, n.117), Philippiopolis (Ixi, VI, 446), Bagdad (lxv, VII, 60), Palestrina or Praeneste (lxix, VII, 262).

² DF, xxiv, II, 523; xxx, III, 255 (cf. xxxii, III, 394); xxxi, III, 370; xxxvi, IV, 60.

³ DF, xxiii, II, 494; xxviii, III, 212; xxviii, III, 205; lxix, VII, 236 ('the solid walls and long shelving porticoes were decayed or ruined by the lapse of time.'
religion over the fallen empire. There are the ruins of buildings like
the Coliseum, the palace of Salust, 'the eastern hemisphere of St. Sophia' and, in an all embracing phrase, 'the ruin of the fairest structures of antiquity'.

Apart from the ruin of material things, Gibbon wrote of 'the ruin of the Empire', as well as that of 'the Roman name' and of 'the Roman world'; of various kingdoms, of a dynasty, of one's country, of church and state, of 'the civil and common law' and, in both Athens and Rome, of that of civil liberty, on whose ruins, he claimed, 'the Latin clergy had erected their tribunal'. We read also of the ruin of a religion, like that of the Egyptian Serapis, 'of the Christian Church', 'of the seven churches of Asia', of an ecclesiastical party like the Arians or the iconoclasts, and perhaps most significantly, on several occasions of 'the ruin of paganism'.

1. For Gibbon's identification of this church with the temple of Jupiter, compare his reworkings of the famous sentence about his experience in Rome; see also Bonnard's note, Memoirs, 304,5 and G.M. Young, Gibbon, pp. 59-60 regarding the confusion of sites.
3. DF, xxxi, III, 333; liii, VI, 87, cf. also iii, I, 80; vi, I, 153; xxvii, III, 188; xxxvii, IV, 87 and xxxviii, IV, 106-7 ('the ruins of that mighty fabric').
5. DF, xxxvi, IV, 18.
6. DF, xxxviii, IV, 121 (Burgundy); xlix, V, 284 (Gothic); lxiv, VII, 29 (Greek).
7. DF, ii, I, 42 (the Ptolomies); xxvi, III, 93 ('the dynasty of the South'); lvii, VI, 234, n.2 (the Samanides).
8. DF, ii, I, 36; xlv, V, 9; lxv, VII, 80; lxvii, VII, 160.
10. DF, xxiii, II, 342.
11. DF, xxvii, II, 346, 342.
12. DF, xxviii, III, 212.
13. DF, xx, II, 486.
15. DF, xxvii, III, 153 (subheading).
16. DF, xii, II, 417; xxxviii, III, 198; and xlix, V, 261; cf. 'the ruin of the pagan religion', xxxviii, III, 219; and 'the ruins of pagan superstition', xxiii, II, 489.
Among the human examples of 'ruin' are 'the noblest provincials of Spain'\textsuperscript{1}, imperial ministers like Plautinus, the minister of Severus, and Rufinus, the minister of Theodosius\textsuperscript{2}; 'an innocent youth'\textsuperscript{3}, the great general Stilicho\textsuperscript{4}, an archbishop\textsuperscript{5}, and emperors such as Valens and Julian\textsuperscript{6}. The ruin of some is attributed directly to temperamental or moral causes. Mousa, son of Bajazet and King of Anatolia, was 'ruined by his timorous disposition and unseasonable clemency'; Geta, the weaker of Severus' sons, would, as his father could see, 'be ruined by his own vices'; while Nero, one of the imperial 'monsters', 'involved the whole empire in his ruin'\textsuperscript{7}. Gibbon considered that the enormous losses even in a single battle like that of Châlons, seemed 'to justify the historian's remark that whole generations may be swept away, by the madness of kings, in the space of a single hour'\textsuperscript{8}. He made it quite clear that most of the ruin of cities, provinces, temples, public buildings and human beings was solely or largely the work of man\textsuperscript{9}, though in some instances the ravages of time had played their part; in the case of the destruction of non-material things, a religion, law and liberty, or the collapse of a state or empire, human agents were either deliberately or unwittingly responsible. Bad or ineffectve rulers, he saw as sometimes the cause, sometimes merely the helpless and apparently careless 'spectators of the public ruin'.\textsuperscript{10}

1. DF, v, I, 132.
2. DF, v, I, 135; xxxi, III, 380 and see xxix, III, 235.
3. DF, xxvii, III, 170 (Valentinian).
4. DF, xxx, III, 295 (and as 'patron' of Claudian, xxx, III, 294, 8).
5. DF, xxxii, III, 398, 400 (Chrysostom).
6. DF, xxvi, III, 115; iv, I, 123.
7. DF, lxv, VII, 77; v, I, 140; iii, I, 80.
8. DF, xxxv, III, 490 and see n.45.
9. The notorious and corrupt John of Cappadocia reared his 'aspiring fortune on the death of thousands, the poverty of millions and the ruins of cities (xl, IV, 256).
10. DF, lxiv, VII, 40 (of John Palaeologus); almost identical phrases are used of Honorius (xxix, III, 252) and Vistiges, King of Italy (xli, IV, 331), while Paschal II is called 'the cause and the witness of the public ruin' (lxix, VII, 226).
Such extended surveys of word usage almost inevitably tend towards the tediousness of a shopping list, yet only in this way can we visualise the broad spectrum covered in *The Decline and Fall* by the noun and verb 'ruin'. Nor are we merely looking at a word which dropped almost too readily from Gibbon's pen, but at an essential part of his view of history, a concept woven inextricably into the texture of his work. In that immense work, ostensibly conceived among the ruins and returning to them for its conclusion, the reader is never far from this image in either its physical or figurative application.

By the time Gibbon wrote his *History* the ruins of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East had gripped the imagination of scholars and tourists. They were on the itinerary of 'curious travellers' and well illustrated articles on celebrated ruins like those of Palmyra were to be found in journals like the Gentleman's Magazine. Gibbon was greatly indebted to the accounts of these 'modern travellers' to whom he referred in his notes. He even made such general statements about the fame of a particular site as that in a note on the former Greek colonies in Sicily: 'The ruins of Agrigentum are the theme of every traveller.' And though Gibbon the traveller may not have been able to visit many of these sites, Gibbon the historian visited them with his reader, not merely out of antiquarian interest but because he found in them a far deeper

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2. See e.g. ii, i, 54, n.3 'I have taken some pains in consulting and comparing modern travellers, with regard to the fate of those eleven cities of Asia'; also n.1 and in fact most of those referring to the ruins of cities listed on p. 449 above. Works like Chandler's *Travels* are constantly appearing in these notes.
3. *DF*, i vi, VI, 217, n.117.
significance. Whether or not we see him 'as a true precursor of the romantic cult of ruins', we may still agree with the other part of Fuglum's assertion: 'When in the eighteenth century men's thoughts and longings were directed towards the future, and an optimistic belief in progress made its triumphant entry, ... Gibbon, alone in his age, devotes the best part of his life to the problem of decadence.' He 'focusses his attention on the manifestations of decay.' Among historians of the decline of the Roman Empire, 'his vast work shows a coherence, a consistency of treatment at which one can only stand amazed. This treatment finds its natural centre in the ruin image whose ubiquity contributes in large measure to that coherence and consistency.

There are several levels on which the idea of ruin and decay makes its impact in *The Decline and Fall* as the historian reacts to their silent but powerful message. The simplest and most obvious is a sense of awe and an acute awareness of fallen greatness. Then there is the feeling of transience in the life of men and empires. A contemplation of ruins also leads to the question of the causes of destruction and the measure of guilt of those responsible. At an even deeper moral level ruins are eloquent reminders of the human suffering inflicted by the destroyers, and at this level there can be no real distinction between the most imposing and the most humble ruins, between the remains of the Capital and those of a cottage. Finally, at the very heart of the work,

1. After stating that the ruins of Baalbec, now once again visible, excite the curiosity and wonder of the European traveller, 'Gibbon added this enthusiastic note: 'every preceding account is eclipsed by the magnificent description and drawings of M.M. Dawkins and Wood, who have transported into England the ruins of Palmyra and Baalbec.' *DF*, li, V, 458, n.85.
is the theme of the inner decay of the empire in its ideals, its institutions and its rulers.

Gibbon, the historian who produced a prose epic, may not have possessed the poet's fancy nor the romantic's vision, but he was deeply susceptible to the effect of ruins. He found them not only 'stately', but 'majestic' and the majesty of the ruins of Rome stirred his spirit as it had that of Petrarch, confirming his 'lively impressions' of the city and empire in its noblest days. A traveller himself, who drew widely on the literature of travel in documenting his History, he looked from time to time once again with the traveller's eyes. The transcendent and unfading view was that which recreated for young Gibbon in October 1764 the living heart of the empire. Recapturing this vision he would write: 'the traveller, who has contemplated the ruins of ancient Rome, may conceive some imperfect ideas of the sentiments which they must have inspired when they reared their heads in the splendour of their unsullied beauty.' But ruins also appeared 'awful' in their expression of departed glory. The temple of Daphne was 'left a naked and awful monument of ruin'; while 'the awful remains' of the Coliseum, in its day so 'expressive of Roman greatness', could still, though 'reduced to its naked majesty', be 'contemplated with awe and admiration by the pilgrims of the North'. The theme of greatness and decline was also conveyed a sight like 'the awful ruins of Spalatro' which 'are not less expressive of the decline of the arts than of the greatness of the Roman empire in the time of Diocletian'.

1. DF, xxxi, III, 344 (Salust's palace, 'a stately monument').
2. DF, ii, I, 47; 1xx, VII, 268.
3. DF, xxix, II, 277.
4. DF, xxiii, II, 494 (strictly 'the walls of the edifice').
5. DF, xii, I, 371; lxxi, VII, 331. Of these pilgrims Gibbon became one in a later age.
6. DF, xiii, I, 422.
By way of the 'Roman monuments' and 'the majestic ruins that are still scattered over Italy and the provinces', Gibbon conducted his reader to the happiest age of empire, when men had enjoyed the benefits of peace and good government as well as of the good life as they walked amongst buildings aesthetically satisfying and majestic. This age, which, with its failure to achieve personal liberty and self-fulfilment, carried within it the seeds of ruin, was too soon over and all but forgotten. Yet even in a later period of artistic decline, the emperor Constantius was able to visit Rome and admire 'the awful majesty of the Capitol' and to modern pilgrims like Gibbon and his fellow travellers from the North, something of this former majesty and awe remained and inspired the historic imagination to recreate the splendour of the eternal city.

In his recreation of the past, Gibbon could also turn to the reflections of two 'eloquent' humanists: one who celebrated the capital of the Western empire, the other that of the East. If, like Poggio, he actually climbed the Capitoline Hill to see for himself, he was not able to compare the description of Chrysoloras with the actual view of Constantinople; he could visualise its splendour only through books. This he did with the help of ancient authors and modern travellers so that he was able to assert: 'With the decline and fall of the empire, the cities of the West had decayed and fallen; nor could the ruins of Rome, or the mud walls, wooden hovels, and narrow precincts of Paris and London, prepare the Latin stranger to contemplate the situation and
extent of Constantinople, her stately palaces and churches, and the arts and luxury of an innumerable people.' Yet Emanuel Chrysoloras, 'father of the Italian schools', found that the ancient capital of the West surpassed his highest expectations to such an extent that he could not blame 'an old sophist' for regarding Rome as 'the habitation, not of men, but of gods'. 'Those gods and those men,' wrote Gibbon, 'had long since vanished; but to the eye of liberal enthusiasm, the majesty of ruin restored the image of her ancient prosperity.' One cannot forget that rare 'enthusiasm' which Gibbon felt as he approached the ruins of Rome and which enabled him to imagine its former glory. When, however, he compared the present with the past there was that inevitable strain of 'melancholy'. This he found also in Chrysoloras' 'flattering picture' of Constantinople, wherein 'the past and the present, the time of prosperity and decay, are artfully confounded; but a sigh and a confession escape from the orator, that his wretched country was the shadow and sepulchre of its former self. The works of ancient sculpture had been defaced by Christian zeal or barbaric violence; the fairest structures were demolished.'

If such a 'melancholy reflection' was inspired by the sad contrast between the present and the past, there was also that more poignant reflection which sprang from the thought of transience and impermanence. We have noticed the sentiment of life's 'narrow span' and 'fleeting moment', expressed in the Memoirs and in the famous passage reflecting on the swift passage of sixty emperors across six hundred years of history,

1. DF, liii, VI, 71.
2. DF, lxvii, VII, 138.
4. DF, lxvii, VII, 140.
which occupies the historian for a mere space of 'some days' and the reader for only a matter of 'some hours'. In Gibbon's final chapter, this transience is associated with ancient buildings and ruins. In the earlier chapter it was 'the experience of history' which helps to transcend the brevity of life: in the latter it is the relative permanence of some enduring structures that have continued from antiquity. But most of these structures, like the empires which raised them, come at last to ruin. 'The art of man is able to construct monuments far more permanent than the narrow span of his own existence: yet these monuments, like himself, are perishable and frail; and, in the boundless annals of time, his life and his labours must equally be measured as a fleeting moment.' Only a few 'simple and solid' structures, like the pyramids, survive, while 'an hundred generations, the leaves of autumn, have dropped into the grave.'

It is in the context of the disappearance and ruin of monuments by which the Romans sought to establish something more lasting than man, that Gibbon discussed the causes of this loss. In the two hundred years before Poggio's 'melancholy picture was drawn', many public buildings apparently disappeared. Apart from the slow operation of 'time and nature', this destruction seemed to Gibbon to be due less to 'barbarism and religion' than to the 'folly' of the unworthy Romans, pillaging their own priceless heritage for building materials, and above all, to their insane 'domestic hostilities'. One structure alone shows what

1. See this chapter, p. 437 and relevant footnotes.
might have been done for the rest of the city had reverence for the
noblest work of antiquity consistently transcended fanaticism, violence
and destructive intolerance: a pope was commended for 'the meritorious
act of saving and converting the majestic structure of the Pantheon'.

Because of its unique conversion to the new religion and its special
preservation, the Pantheon, like the pyramids of Egypt, could look down
on the passing generations of men. But when, in his concluding survey
of the city, the historian's gaze finally focused on the Coliseum, he did
not hesitate to accuse its destroyers. The costly statues clothed in
precious metals 'became the first prey of conquest and fanaticism, of the
avarice of the barbarians or the Christians'. Yet in 'its naked majesty'
it still excited the 'awe and admiration' of the northern pilgrims.
Eventually it was pillaged continuously by the populace for building
materials, till in the fourteenth century, by what Gibbon censured as 'a
scandalous act of concord', both Roman factions turned it into a quarry,
and in their stupidity, burnt its stones for lime. In condemning the
Pope's nephews for their wanton destruction, Gibbon asserted that 'every
traveller who views the Farnese palace may curse the sacrilege and luxury
of these upstart princes.' Here the moral indignation of the historian
reaches a climax of an almost religious intensity, marked by a 'curse'
at such 'sacrilege'.

The new Rome, built around and sometimes out of the ruin of the old,
seemed to mock its ancient greatness. After condemning the 'ignorance
and barbarism of the Romans' up to the fifteenth century when 'the clouds

1. DF, lxxi, VII, 322.
of barbarism were gradually dispelled', Gibbon drew a very uncomplimentary picture of the modern city. In population it fell far below the great capitals of Europe, the major part of the seven hills was 'overspread with vineyards and ruins' and most of the Campagna was 'reduced to a dreary and desolate wilderness'. The neglect of the forum, the centre of the ancient greatness, must have disturbed Gibbon greatly. But 'the triumph of religion' incensed him most. The 'bare-footed friars' chanting their vespers where the temple of Jupiter should have stood, symbolised this triumph in a city, which, to use one of his own words, was 'infested' with their kind. 'The beauty and splendour of the modern city' which he readily admitted, may, he wrote, be ascribed to the abuses of government and to the influence of superstition'. And the final words of the chapter made the clear distinction that it was 'the relics, not of superstition, but of empire' which were 'devoutly visited by a new race of pilgrims' from the North. These pilgrims, filled with 'enthusiasm' for the ancient imperial city, deplored its annexation by the clerical hierarchy. Each new Pope, Gibbon continued, enriched his relatives 'at the expense of the church and country'; his nephews filled their palaces and gardens with the ancient treasures of their nation: 'the perfect arts of architecture, painting and sculpture have been prostituted in their service', as they adorned their private dwellings with 'the most precious works of antiquity'.

This 'ruin of the works of antiquity', hastened by 'every successive age', in what Gibbon called 'the progress of decay', was almost beyond

1. DF, lxxi, 334 (sub-heading); 336.
2. DF, lxx, VII, 336.
3. DF, lxxi, VII, 337-8. His final words that is apart from his 'final conclusion'.
the powers of the historian to trace and the task seemed a fruitless one. Yet he did not merely deplore the fact. If he did not try to ascertain the share of each particular age, he was concerned to shift the blame from those on whom it had been wrongly placed and to suggest where it rightly belonged. It was transferred from the 'innocent barbarians' to the Romans themselves – their churchmen, princes, ruling families and irresponsible populace. Theirs was the true vandalism: the Gothic kings were preserves rather than destroyers. Theodoric is shown to have been the protector of the citizens as well as of the works of art, and Totila appears in a similar light. By contrast, at the close of the sixth century, when the fortunes of Rome were at the lowest ebb, and its edifices 'were exposed to ... ruin and decay ...the monks who had occupied the most advantageous stations, exulted in their base triumph over the ruins of antiquity.' If more Romans had followed the example of the Gothic kings or that of a pope who had saved the Pantheon, more of classical antiquity would have been preserved for posterity.

Two years after Gibbon's return from his Italian tour, a young French artist, Hubert Robert also returned from Rome to make his official début in Paris at the Salon of 1767. Diderot, who was greatly impressed by Robert's many representations of real and imaginary classical buildings, gave a full discussion of them in his Salon of that year. Although Diderot and Gibbon were basically in different camps and it is not even

1. DF, lxxi, VII, 316.
2. DF, xxxix, IV, 204.
4. DF, xlv, V, 34.
certain that they met during Gibbon's second visit to Paris,¹ their
reaction to classical ruins shows an interesting similarity. Both had,
indeed, clarified their response to the sublime and the beautiful by
reference to Burke's treatise,² and for both 'the image of the ruin
held great symbolic significance'.³ There is even an interesting verbal
correspondence between Gibbon's oft-repeated 'vicissitudes' and a remark
of Diderot on a picture entitled, Autres Ruines: 'Une autre chose qui
ajoutait encore à l'effet des ruines, c'est une forte image de la
vicissitude.'⁴ But Diderot's appreciation of the melancholy of inevitable
decay was mixed with a more optimistic response, as he saw a positive
value in the destruction of ruins symbolic of autocracy. A scene
depicting the remains of a palace, the temple of Jupiter and the dwelling
of Augustus used as a stable, struck him as a hopeful omen of the ultimate
victory of social justice. There was a sense of irony also in the
inscription above what had become a simple shop: DIVO AUGUSTO, DIVO NERO,
its poetic justice appearing to mock the monsters of imperial Rome.⁵
It has been suggested that with Diderot, ancient ruins, after long
continuing as symbols of frustration and melancholy, had become
'illustrations of a lesson in political morality'.⁶

There was no doubt in Gibbon's mind about the lessons to be drawn

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1. Gibbon's words are, 'Among the men of letters whom I saw, d'Alembert
and Diderot held the foremost rank in merit, or at least in fame.'
(Memoirs, p.126). But Bonnard in a note commented, 'Whether G met
either of them is not clear from his ambiguous sentence.' (p.301)
2. It had appeared in a French edition in 1765. Gibbon had a copy of
the 1759 London edition (see Keynes). See also Weinshenker:
'Diderot and Burke: a Study in Aesthetic Affinity', PMLA, LXXV,
5. Weinshenker, op. cit., p.323. Diderot refers to 'un lâche
proscritpeur, un tigre couronné', 'Salons', III, 243.
from ruins and from the fate of empires. He shared Diderot's sense of the irony of ruined splendour and pretension, his passion for social justice and his concern for political morality. This is clear from his early works, his Memoirs and from The Decline and Fall. And in that work, each man-made ruin seems to accuse the violence and inhumanity of man. In this way, 'the history of nations' meant 'the paths of blood', from which he gladly turned aside to something more edifying when the opportunity offered. If the destruction of the city of Amida proved to be 'the safety of the Roman provinces', the emperor Constantius was still constrained to weep over its 'smoking ruins'. Nevertheless the fate of this city was later 'revenged by the total ruin of Perisabor'. Of this exploit Gibbon wrote with real humanity and anger: 'After the full gratification of every military appetite, Perisabor was reduced to ashes; and the engines which assaulted the citadel were planted on the ruins of the smoking houses.' The reader can sense the historian's feeling of pity, disgust and indignation as he recorded such scenes on a number of occasions with their 'prospect of smoking ruins', of 'the desolation of man' and above all of 'the smoking houses' of those unparticipating victims of war.

It is perhaps easy and even commonplace to be affected by the 'majestic' or 'awful ruins' of noble structures and imposing monuments, but for the sensitive mind and the conscience of the moralist, it is not

1. We might recall his phrase about Ctesias' system 'sur l'origine, la durée, et la ruine des empires des Mèdes et des Assyriens' ('Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Mèdes'; MW, III, 59) and the opening words of his Essai, 'L'Histoire des empires est celle de la misère des hommes.'
2. DF, lvii, VI, 236.
4. DF, xxiv, II, 525, 524.
5. e.g. DF, xxvi, III, 120; xxvii, III, 196; xxviii, III, 209; xxx, III, 285.
the splendour or fame that counts, for 'the ruin of a single town,...the misfortunes of a single family' have their human story to tell. Nor is the moralist's sense of social justice and human value dependent on the size and magnificence of the object of destruction: 'If we are more deeply affected by the ruin of a palace than by the conflagration of a cottage, our humanity must have formed a very erroneous estimate of the miseries of human life.' Here is Gibbon's own verdict, but the student of The Decline and Fall can confidently affirm that he would also have endorsed the sentiments of Diderot on a ruin painting by Robert which 'indicate that the palace is associated with tyranny, idleness and evil, the cottage with utility and justice. Only the ruin of the palace will enable it to acquire the virtues of the cottage.'

At the most basic level there is the inner decay and collapse of which the ruin image speaks throughout The Decline and Fall. In this, the metaphor of 'ruin' has its counterpart in that of 'fabric', a term which is also used to evoke the idea of instability and decay. The best known instance is that in the centre of the work where the historian is reflecting on the collapse of the Western Empire. With the removal of its artificial supports by time or accident, 'the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight. The story of its ruin is simple and obvious.' The twin metaphors are again linked in a reference to the elaborate code of titles and social rank perfected in the Byzantine system: 'this baseless fabric, the monument of pride and servitude, was for ever buried in the ruins of the empire.' In the

1. DF, xxvi, III, 121.
2. DF, xxiv, II, 526.
5. DF, liii, VI, 88.
late third century, 'the expiring senate' with high hopes proclaimed its restoration to 'its ancient dignity'. It was no more than a facade which could not withstand the power of the armies and the provincials who realised the hollowness of the senators' boast. 'On the slightest touch, the unsupported fabric of their pride and power fell to the ground.'

So too, 'the ruin of paganism', already cited, can be matched with Constantine's decision 'to undermine the irregular and decayed fabric of polytheism,' which he then literally carried out with 'the demolition of several temples in Phoenicia.' And in the 'final destruction of paganism', Gibbon pictured Gratian completing the demolition of the immaterial structure, propped up as it was, by age-old custom: he 'dissolved the ancient fabric of Roman superstition, which was supported by the opinions and habits of eleven hundred years.' In this way the 'fabric' of the empire or of the old religion suggests its 'decay', an insubstantial structure already undermined and ready to topple in ruins.

If Gibbon started out from an impression of the ruins of Rome, his intention was to reveal something far more fundamental: 'the problem of decadence', the manifestations and the causes of decay. His work is not about the decline and fall of cities and buildings, but of an empire and its former greatness; it is about the decay of the ancient Roman spirit, of patriotism in the best sense, embracing civic responsibilities, public service and a sense of honour; the decay of freedom and social justice, the degeneration of senate and people. The senate, that great republican survival, becomes a sort of index of the soundness of Rome.

1. DF, xii, I, 347.
2. DF, xxi, II, 415.
4. Fuglum, op. cit., p. 148; see also the present chapter, p. 453, n.2.
5. See, e.g., DF, I, I, 10-12.
Like the Coliseum, it underwent a period of neglect, followed by a brief era of care and concern, finally to be ruined by its abusers and saboteurs. Indeed, we are told: 'The fate of the Senate suggests an awful lesson of the vicissitude of human affairs.' Gibbon's History records not only 'the triumph of barbarism and religion' as destructive forces, but also that of luxury, effeminacy, crimes and follies unchecked and unpunished, and of emperors, generals and politicians who rode roughshod over the ordinary people. He made it clear that these things constitute the sort of ruin and decay which lie behind the death of a great civilization. And these are all moral values.

In his earlier, or projected works, Gibbon had considered the themes of political expediency, the loss or recovery of freedom, and the rights and responsibilities of rulers, governments and peoples. He had considered the nature of vice and virtue in the life of individuals and nations. None of these themes was abandoned. The subject was altered and extended when he came to write his great work, but within its far grander sweep of history, these same essential moral questions ultimately found a still more ample scope.

It has been the aim of the preceding chapters to show that Gibbon brought to history the outlook and convictions of a moralist, and that his work thus presupposes and also exemplifies certain moral values and lessons. The decline is essentially and in the deepest sense a moral

1. During Valentinian's reign, 'a republican spirit was insensibly revived in the Senate' (xxxv, III, 504), and we can trace its ups and downs till its final extinction. (see xliii, IV, 445-6).
2. DF, xliii, IV, 445.
3. Like his work on Charles VIII, his Swiss Liberty and his projected work on the Florentine Republic.
decline reflected in what he regarded as 'degenerate Romans' and
'degenerate Greeks'. If he failed to do justice to the Eastern Empire
and Byzantine civilization, largely because of the inadequacy of current
historical data and methodology, his judgements, however harsh, were still
those of a moralist. He condemned what he saw as degeneracy, effeminacy
and imitation of oriental despotism. And the facts, at least as he
related them, give substance to most of these judgements. Behind the
would-be 'impartial historian' we are sometimes aware of the over earnest
moralist, castigating the vices and follies of rulers, churchmen and
citizens, the self-destruction of dynasties, and the weak or wicked
emperors who slowly but surely brought about the ruin of their country,
and who, by their refusal to co-operate with the West, opened the gates
to the ultimate destroyer in the person of Mahomet II.

Behind 'the vicissitudes of fortune', the transience, the destruction
of cities, works of art and human habitations, lies the decay of those
values and ideals which had once made the Roman world great. Their
loss becomes the ruin of the empire. The ruin image throughout The
Decline and Fall is suggestive of a spiritual and moral ruin of which
that of cities and the countryside is but the visible expression. In a
section of the 'Contrast of vice and virtue', Gibbon considered how the
virtues of leaders like Belisarius had been replaced 'by the various
or uniform vices' of corrupt officials. In this situation of betrayal
and debasement, Totila, the barbarian, is introduced as chaste, temperate

1. See, e.g. Bury's Introduction to DF, especially, pp. xviff.;
A. Hamilton Thompson's 'Gibbon' (Historical Association, Gen.
Ser. 1946, which is concerned to a great extent with Gibbon's
inadequate view of the Eastern Empire (see, especially pp.7-9);
also Speros Vryonis Jr., 'Hellas Resurgent' in Lynn White Jr.
The Transformation of the Roman World. Univ. of California, 1966,
pp. 92ff.
and trustworthy, a restorer of peaceful pursuits and the protector of the ordinary people. From the mouth of this defender of civilization, whose virtues Gibbon found so 'laudable', he borrowed the 'theme that national vice and ruin are inseparably connected; that victory is the fruit of moral as well as military virtue; and that the prince, and even the people are responsible for the crimes which they neglect to punish.'

One could perhaps find no better motto for The Decline and Fall. It was the failure to remember this that lay behind the ruin of the world's greatest empire. Despite his reverence for Rome and her civilization, Gibbon made no attempt to hide her weaknesses and cruelty nor his own disgust at her contempt for the rights of other peoples. These feelings and his own deep humanity penetrate even his lament over 'the most awful scene' of her collapse and the greatness still inherent in her ruins. As the young traveller wrote to his father on the eve of his experience 'among the ruins of the Capitol': 'Whatever ideas books may have given us of the greatness of that people, Their accounts of the most flourishing state of Rome fall infinitely short of the picture of its ruins.' Then he added, and it is the voice of the moralist anticipating by some years that of 'the historian of the Roman Empire': 'I am convinced there never, never existed such a nation, and I hope for the happiness of mankind there never will again'.

1. DE, xlii, IV, 426.
2. Letters, No.61, 9/10/64, I, 183.