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

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CHAPTER IX

THE LANGUAGE OF THE MORALIST

Even without Gibbon's explicit statement in his Memoirs, the attentive reader soon perceives the great importance he placed on the right use of language and the care he took to achieve his effects. The impression is confirmed by a study of the revisions made to the first volume of The Decline and Fall six years after its initial publication. Collating the first fourteen chapters in the two editions, Bury found that 'in most cases the changes were made not for the sake of correcting misstatements of fact, but of improving the turn of a sentence, re-arranging the dactyls and cretics, or securing greater accuracy of expression'. So keen was the historian's feeling for language that both sound and sense were once more carefully weighed in an effort to improve the style of a work which had already won almost universal acclaim.

The subject of language is one that turns up very frequently in The Decline and Fall. It may be the language of symbols, 'naval grammar', the dialects of Greece, the speech of the early Britons, the language of Russia, the arduous task for schoolboys in mastering the classical tongues, a question of etymology or a comment on the abuse of certain words by propagandists in church or state. But the remarks about the style historians are illuminating and give an indication of what Gibbon felt as appropriate or inappropriate in historical writing.

1. Memoirs, p. 155
2. Introduction to his 1900 edition of DF, p. xxxii.
3. See, e.g. DF, liii, VI, 97, 106; lxvi, VII, 100; lvi, VI, 157.
In the first place, he looked for a certain degree of 'gravity' in such a composition. He not only referred approvingly to grave historians, but, allowing such a requirement to govern his own practice, he opened a chapter on the crusades with the admission: "In a style less grave than that of history, I should perhaps compare Alexius to a jackal." A similar animal comparison by the poet Claudian, he felt to be a violation of 'the dignity rather than the truth of history'. It was again something of the Latin notion of gravitas that Gibbon had in mind, a dignity and high seriousness appropriate to the moral importance of a subject.

While Gibbon looked also for eloquence in the best historical writing, he was repelled by what he considered affectation or a pompous rhetoric which he found in the writing of Anna Comnena. What he found objectionable about this 'affected style' was the inflated language with its exaggerated comparisons and flattery. So too, he referred to 'the pompous style of the age' in which the

1. His references to 'the gravest historians', xxxviii, IV, 156, 168, are no reflection on their gravity, but merely an expression of surprise that even such grave writers could be mislead. Cf. 'the sober historian' forcibly awakened by hard facts from 'a pleasing vision' of the manners of pastoral peoples, xxvi, III, 75.
2. DF, lix, VI, 335.
3. DF, xxxii, III, 389.
4. He harshly criticised the lack of eloquence in Gregory of Tours, and referred to Falcandus as 'an eloquent historian' (xxxviii, IV, 148, n. 17; lvi, VI, 227 and n. 46).
5. DF, lvi, VI, 205.
president of the royal college of Constantinople 'was named the Sun of Science', his twelve associates, the professors in the different arts and faculties, were the twelve signs of the zodiac'. Gibbon rejected not only the fanciful exaggeration of size and numbers such as one found in 'the stupendous account' of a Byzantine historian, but also its reflection in a grandiose style. From his criticisms of the bombast of such writers the inference could be drawn that his own style would be free from hyperbole and highly fanciful metaphors. In revising his first volume he noted: 'Mr. Hume told me that in correcting his history, he always laboured to reduce superlatives, and soften positives.' Gibbon, who was marked by moderation in all things, showed a similar restraint in his writing and avoided the self-defeating 'amplification, which, by saying too much, says nothing.' Extended and highly poetic metaphors are rare in Gibbon, since they seemed to stand in the way of both clarity and plain truth. Ammianus, a very useful source for The Decline and Fall, was nevertheless felt to be guilty of such bad taste in his history 'that it is not easy to distinguish his facts from his metaphors.' 'Vague and doubtful metaphors' may be left to the poet, the historian will gain both our interest and our confidence by presenting his account of 'memorable events' 'with the simplicity of truth.'

1. DF, liii, VI, 108.
2. DF, lvi, VI, 223.
3. Marginal note from Gibbon's revision, final sentence of paragraph 1, chapt. i, Bury, Introd. DF, 1900 edition, xxxv.
4. DF, liii, VI, 97, n. 81. Gibbon associated such 'vain exaggeration' with the Byzantine historians.
5. There are some interesting and appropriate metaphors to be found in chapter. xlvi; Parkinson has drawn attention to some of these, Edward Gibbon, pp. 132f.
6. DF, xxvi, III, 72, n. 1.
7. DF, xxvi, III, 483.
Gravity and seriousness did not mean dryness, a fault which Gibbon found with some historians and more especially chroniclers, who became tedious in their detail which was not illuminated by philosophic perception. A wealth of specific facts was basic to a historical narrative, but there was a place for the generalisation and the moral truth to be drawn from the details of events or of character, and this is a marked feature of Gibbon's style.

While he had no patience with tedious enumeration of detail in historical writing, he was equally determined to avoid superficiality. We have seen that the aspiring historian found Hume's History 'superficial' and he later brought the same charge against Voltaire who, with all his brilliance, merely cast 'a keen and lively glance over the surface of history.' The truly philosophical historian will, like Tacitus, be concerned with the real motives of men, the causes of actions and the springs of character. It could never be said of Gibbon, as he wrote of Cantacuzene, that 'instead of unfolding the true counsels and characters of men, he displays the smooth and specious surface of events.' And his style, being the image of a mind keen to probe and reveal in this way, could be expected, with all its eloquence, to preserve a directness and a penetrating simplicity.

1. JA, 2 November, 1761, p. 32; and see above chap. IV, pp. 6-7.
2. DF, 1, VI, 446, n. 65; one of a number of similar criticisms of Voltaire.
3. DF, lxiii, VI, 411; yet his history is still an 'eloquent work'.
One might not perhaps think of describing Gibbon's style as 'simple', yet he repeatedly stressed the importance of simplicity and associated this quality with 'the truth of history.' It was 'an old chronical' of all things that gave him pleasure on account of its 'natural simplicity.' It contrasted with the affected style and artificial rhetoric which so disgusted him in the Byzantine writers. This he described as 'the language of falsehood and declamation', to be avoided by the true historian who will present his work 'with the simplicity of truth.'

Simplicity and eloquence: there was no essential incompatibility, and they were to be found together in the best historians. What made a writer like Gregory of Tours so distasteful to Gibbon was that his style was deficient in both. The problem of style which Gibbon had to face in embarking on his History was that of steering a course midway between the dullness of a chronicler and the florid, declamatory style of the later Greeks. As he took up his pen, these seemed to be the Scylla and Charybdis of historical composition and by the time he had reached the second part of his work, he confessed in various notes that he had suffered both from the tediousness, prolixity and uninspired minuteness of some of his sources, and from the pompous bombast of others. He came to endorse du Guignes' dichotomy of the Arab historians as consisting of either 'the dry annalist' or 'the tumid and flower orator.' In rising to

2. DF, xlvi, V, 42-3; xxv, III, 483. Cf. XI, 275, 'a sentiment whose simplicity persuades us of its truth.'
3. An unfavourable judgement which Gibbon claimed he had 'tediously acquired' the right to pronounce 'by a painful perusal' of Gregory's work. See DF, xxxviii, IV, 148, n. 117.
the greatness of the subject he had undertaken, it would be easy for eloquence to become pompous and artificial at the expense of both simplicity and truth. Earlier writers, particularly in the majestic days of empire, might perhaps be excused for a measure of grandiloquence in their accounts of the Roman world, but 'the temper as well as the knowledge of a modern historian', according to Gibbon, 'requires a more sober and accurate language.'\(^1\) Even if overshadowed by the grandeur and awe of his theme, the modern 'historian of the Roman empire' must never sacrifice accuracy or restraint in his expression. Instead of an 'elaborate affectation of rhetoric and science' which only betrays on every page the author's vanity, there must be that 'simplicity of style and narrative which wins our belief.'\(^2\)

Style, as Gibbon recognised, is not an end in itself. It serves a wider purpose, and this he kept in mind in his 'many tryals' to get it just right. For him it had to match his view of the historian's task and fit the great subject he had undertaken. Not only had the language to be an adequate vehicle for narrative and description, it had also to be appropriate for instruction and moral comment. Tillyard, after a close study of Gibbon's work, made this assertion: 'Voracious though Gibbon's appetite was for the facts of history, it yet remains true that the first principle of The Decline and Fall was that it should express certain great moral truths.'\(^3\)

1. DF, i, I, 29.
2. DF, xlviii, V, 241.
If that is so, and preceding chapters have attempted to demonstrate its truth, then the historian's medium of expression was shaped with this end in view. It is therefore important to examine certain aspects of Gibbon's use of language in order to see how he sought to convey these moral truths more effectively.

At the most general level, we have been thinking in terms of style, a broad and composite term often applied rather loosely and without further qualification to the total impression of a piece of writing. Various terms have been used to describe Gibbon's style according to the reaction of the critic and his degree of objectivity. Yet as 'the image of his mind' and as a reflection of his lofty theme, it could be basically defined as both precise and dignified. These two features remain constant despite the minor differences one may perceive between certain chapters, paragraphs and even sentences. The precision is the natural outcome of such a mind as Gibbon's but it is also the result of extraordinary care and revision. Gibbon was a precise man and was accustomed to frame his sentences and choose his words most carefully both in conversation and in his private correspondence. But he was also a very diligent man and the degree of exactness and clarity he achieved in his prose testifies to the work of shaping and refinement which continued till he was satisfied with what he had written. Where the occasional vagueness or ambiguity is found, it is nearly always intentional: it may be designed to avoid dogmatic assertion where

1. From the revulsion of Coleridge at the one extreme to admirers like J.B. Robertson at the other. In between there are those who have appreciated a little of Gibbon at a time. Gilbert Highet, writing of 'Baroque Prose' said that, 'the character of Gibbon's style, however, is partly a matter of taste.' (The Classical Tradition, Oxford, 1964, p. 348).
the sources are inconclusive or to reflect a confusion amongst these authors or in the thought of theologians.¹

But dignity is perhaps an even more striking characteristic of Gibbon's style. Like Robertson who insisted on 'the dignity of history',² Gibbon echoed the same sentiment and in the same words.³ But he was also conscious of the dignity of his own great theme. 'The historian of the Roman empire' had therefore to achieve a style worthy not only of his chosen discipline but also of what he had come to see as his destined subject.⁴ 'The greatest, perhaps and most awful scene' in human history surely demanded an appropriate dignity of style. Yet Gibbon's dignity is rarely, if ever pompous⁵ on the one hand, nor on the other, is it incompatible with his irony, with certain lighter touches of humour, or even with the occasional suggestions of ribaldry. It is never destroyed by a descent to abuse or by an incongruity of expression. The effect of Gibbon's delightful little incongruities, exposing some foible of character or conduct, are those of well-mannered, polished social discourse. Their intention is sometimes that of adminis-

1. However, G.M. Young does cite an unintentional ambiguity, Edward Gibbon, p. 90-1.
4. The Final Conclusion to DF endorses his experience in Rome and his sense of satisfaction in his task: 'The historian may applaud the importance and variety of his subject', 'the greatest, perhaps the most awful scene, in the history of mankind.' (VII, 338).
5. Though some might think of Gibbon's style as 'pompous', probably few would mean by this epithet 'bombastic'. See C.S. Lewis's remarks on the good sense of the word and 'the proper occasion for pomp', e.g. the epic. (A Preface to Paradise Lost, Oxford, 1942, p. 16.)
tering a gentle rebuke to affectation or hypocrisy. But the essential dignity which is not thereby impaired, remains a most fitting, perhaps a necessary feature, of the moralist historian.

Under the general heading of 'style' we may refer next to 'tone', the term Gibbon himself used for the mode of expression he required and which he knew he had finally achieved. "Many experiments were made before I could hit the middle tone between a dull chronical and a rhetorical declamation." These are the extremes which, as we have seen, Gibbon saw in so many other historical works and which he was determined to avoid in his own. His contempt for the 'dull chronicler' was expressed in his earliest search for a subject but he found the opposite extreme equally distasteful. A lover of the golden mean in all things, he achieved in his style, and without loss of dignity, a tone pitched midway between the flat and the inflated: one that never descends to the 'low' tone of Fielding's 'low' characters, or even the comic bathos of that author, nor does it have the ring of Johnsonese, let alone of pulpit declamation.

This quality of 'tone' was probably in the mind of G.M. Young when he wrote that 'Gibbon's style, though Johnsonian in its general movement, is Johnson transmitted through Robertson;' and Robertson, he continued in his manner of writing, 'much more modern than Johnson', in places even anticipating Macaulay. As a young writer

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2. 'Hints', MW, V, 487.
3. In the sense which Boswell's Johnson at least tended to translate plain and simple ideas into rotund and dignified language and often made even his 'little fishes talk like whales'.
4. Gibbon, pp. 82,83.
setting out, Gibbon had looked admiringly at 'the careless beauties' of Hume's History and had entertained 'the ambitious hope' of emulating 'the perfect composition, the nervous language, the well-turned periods of Dr. Robertson.' What he finally achieved was a style and tone peculiarly his own, 'the image of his mind', which became 'so natural to him that he could both write and speak it as easily as the unpretending English of his letters to Holroyd.'

Burke, according to Dugald Stewart, objected to a style which, he wrote, 'daily gains ground amongst us' tending 'to establish two very different idioms...and to introduce a marked distinction between the English that is written and the English that is spoken... From this feigned manner of falsetto...no one modern historian, Robertson only excepted, is perfectly free. It is assumed, I know, to give dignity and variety to the style. But whatever success the attempt may sometimes have, it is always obtained at the expense of purity, and of the graces that are natural and appropriate to our language.' Gibbon was equally averse to this false dignity and declamatory style in historical writing, though in Burke's view he does not appear to have escaped the danger. It was probably of this style in general that Bishop Hurd was thinking when, in 1800, he looked back over the past century: 'The pompous, or what may be called the

1. Memoirs, p. 99; cf. ibid., p. 121 with its reference to 'the vigorous sense' of Robertson. It is probable that 'nervous' in the earlier passage is used with the meaning of 'vigorous' as applied there to the actual expression.
2. G.M. Young, Gibbon, p. 84.
3. Robertson, Works, I, 179.
swaggering manner, was introduced by Bolingbroke; continued or rather heightened by Junius and Johnson: till now it has become the only style that pleases the mob of readers.' He did not mention Gibbon as contributing to this effect, but if, as Stewart believed, Burke's criticism was directed by implication towards Gibbon, then that critic at least must have had his doubts about the historian's having 'hit the middle tone' in The Decline and Fall. Yet Stewart felt that Burke, and worse still his numerous and uninspired imitators, had tended to fall into the other extreme by 'too close an adherence to what he recommends as the model of good writing, the ease and familiarity of colloquial discourse'. 'For my own part', he concluded, 'I can much more easily reconcile myself, in a grave and dignified argument, to the dulcia vitia of Tacitus and of Gibbon, than to that affectation of cant words and allusions which so often debases Mr. Burke's eloquence, and which was so long ago stigmatised by Swift as "the most ruinous of all the corruptions of language".

It was from the study of Swift, Addison and the English writers after the Revolution, Gibbon tells us, that he managed to restore the purity of his own language, and he continued to admire their simplicity, vigour and elegance. He would therefore be unlikely to tolerate

1. Richard Hurd, Works, quoted by Young, op.cit., p. 85.
2. Robertson, Works, I, 179.
3. Memoirs, p. 99. 'Wit and simplicity are their common attributes', he wrote of Swift and Addison, finding also 'manly vigour' in the former and 'the female graces of elegance and mildness' in the latter.
any of the corruptions censured by Swift. But while he achieved
elegance and refinement he was not guilty of false dignity or
declamation. There is no artificial raising of the style. And
probably most modern readers of *The Decline and Fall* who are fami-
liar with the range of eighteenth-century prose would agree that his
individual 'tone' is somewhere between the highly latinised and formal
at one end of the scale and the language of polite conversation at
the other. To borrow Gibbon's own idiom, one might describe it as
dignified without affectation and unadorned without banality. As
we open his first chapter, over which he took so much trouble to
achieve this appropriate 'tone', we notice a considerable proportion
of quite short, uncomplicated sentences and a vocabulary which is
plain and unpretentious. Looking at the opening sentences of each
paragraph in this chapter, we find that about one quarter are of
the simple, one-clause type whose length gets down as low as ten
words, while one third consist of just two clauses, either co-ordinate
or relative. The same sort of thing can be seen in later chapters
in both the first and second parts of the work.1

Gibbon did not sacrifice the 'simplicity' he valued, either in
the structure or in the vocabulary of most of his sentences, which are
sometimes not far removed in these respects from those of refined

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1. The average length of opening sentences in chap. i is 27.6 words
   and even some of the longer sentences are divided into two parts
   by a semi-colon. The proportion of single-clause opening sentences
to the number of paragraphs in the 'General Observations' which
conclude Part I is one half, in the first chapter of Part II
(xxxix) it is one fifth and in the final chapter of the work,
it is about one quarter. Again, there is a good proportion of
simply constructed co-ordinate or descriptive clauses amongst the
rest. The proportion of one- and two-clause opening sentences
in the paragraphs of these four sections is 26/39, 7/10, 15/22
and 8/14 respectively.
speech. The difference - the dignity or stateliness - is to be found rather in the patterning or movement of the sentence, with its balance, antithesis, climax or threefold arrangement. This tripartite or tri-colon pattern handed down from the Greek rhetoricians by way of Roman writers and orators, Cicero above all, was cultivated and fully developed by French and English writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and is very characteristic of Johnson and Robertson amongst Gibbon's contemporaries. But it is the simple forcefulness of which this threefold pattern is capable that is relevant here since it makes it so compatible with the 'middle tone' of the writer or orator. 'It is particularly useful', says Hightet, 'because it both seems natural and is memorable.' And, by way of illustration, he cites the famous speeches of two great American presidents - from the one: 'We cannot dedicate - we cannot consecrate - we cannot hallow - this ground', and 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'; and from the other during the grim days of the great depression: 'one-third of a nation, ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished'.

No one could deny that many of Gibbon's statements are 'memorable'; few would deny that his prose has a certain majestic or imposing movement like the march of history itself; but it is easy for us to forget the essentially simple and straightforward means by which he achieved this effect. A 'natural' and 'unpretending English', as Young put it, which owes much to Cicero, to Swift, Addison, Hume and Robertson, but which is ultimately the product of his own sensitive ear and precise judgement able to recognise this appropriate tone once he had attained it.

2. Gibbon's prose style has been seen as more symmetrical than Johnson's but less complex - that is in terms of transformations per sentence. See Curtis W. Hayes, 'A Transformational-Generative Approach to Style: Samuel Johnson and Edward Gibbon', Language and Style, Vol. I, Pt. 1, 1968, pp. 47-8.
It is this 'middle tone' with its ability to gain the reader's confidence which is most suited to the gentle moral persuasion and undogmatic comment of Gibbon's History. An elevated tone would sound patronising and might smack of a tedious clerical moraliser; a casual and familiar tone would prove inadequate to carry the great moral truths and generalisations, which would then sound strangely out of key. The 'middle tone' places the author on a level with his reader, but still allows him, by drawing on his knowledge of human nature with its vices and follies, to offer his moral comments without awkwardness and without pompousness.

Under 'tone' are subsumed the various effects of what can be termed 'intonation'. Just as the linguist thinks of intonation as a 'suprasegmental feature' over and above the individual phonetic segments, so in studying Gibbon's prose, it can be seen as producing a range of inflections over and above the grouping of sounds, words and sentences which contribute to the total effect of his writing.

Turning from these larger stylistic and tonal effects to the structures which carry them, one can move down the structural hierarchy from the overall theme, to the chapter, a fairly natural stretch of literary discourse and an almost universal subdivision of theme, to the paragraph, Gibbon's chosen unit of composition, and ultimately to the sentence and its parts. The chapter forms a convenient division based either on chronology and narrative sequence, or, as with Gibbon who chose to give preference where appropriate to an arrangement in terms of subject matter, on the need for exposition and description. By such

1. cf. Memoirs, p. 179: 'I preferred, as I still prefer, the method of grouping my picture by nations; and the seeming neglect of Chronological order is surely compensated by the superior merits of interest and perspicuity.'
arrangement he felt free to suspend the temporal progress of his narrative to provide information on religious issues or the manners of the pastoral peoples. Certain chapters, like that on Roman jurisprudence, thus become entities, famous in their own right.

Sometimes a group of two or three chapters forms a unit. Thematically those on the development of the early church exhibit this unity of design, so much so that J.M. Robertson felt free to publish them under the title Gibbon on Christianity. Gibbon, who always regarded the rise of the new religion as inextricably bound with the story of imperial decline, gave special attention to researching, writing and pruning this section of his work and was prepared to defend it as an entity in his Vindication. The chapters on Julian are basically a revaluation of what Gibbon regarded as a much maligned but essentially noble character, presenting him as 'the apostle of paganism.' They thus gain a thematic unity in two ways: by their concentration on a single character; and by their presentation of the ruin of the old pagan religion. In this latter respect they complement chapters xv and xvi showing the rise and establishment of Christianity from the other side. The chapters on Constantine form another unit in as far as they continue the treatment of imperial decline and church establishment, culminating in the chapter which investigates this 'public establishment' as 'one of the most important and domestic revolutions.' This revaluation, Gibbon claimed, is not only entertaining because it can 'excite the most lively curiosity', but is also of moral worth.

1. London, 1930. The 'propagandist' use of DF in this way has been unacceptable to some; see e.g. A Hamilton Thompson, Gibbon (Historical Association, General Series, G. 3, 1946), p. 9.
3. DF, xxiv, II, 514.
since it can 'afford the most valuable instruction'. He showed that
the unscrupulousness of the first Christian emperor left its stamp
on later Christianity and on government, while the weakness of the
last 'apostle of paganism' not only helped the demise of the old
religion, but also led to 'the calamities of the empire'.

Another chapter, the most celebrated and widely used in Gibbon's
History, also combines interest with moral instruction. It is almost
a self-contained history and digest of a subject which Gibbon regarded
as so important in the study of nations, but he saw it also in terms
of its moral and ethical implications. These implications are suggested
at various points and especially in the later sections of the chapter.
The final paragraph on 'abuses of civil jurisprudence' gave Gibbon the
occasion to make such assertions as the law being 'inscribed not only
on brass or marble, but on the conscience of the offender', and to
make an application still nearer home to the effect that, 'the experi-
ence of an abuse from which our own age and country are not perfectly
exempt may sometimes provoke a generous indignation.' Indeed, Gibbon
frequently closed his chapters with a moral reflection, a restatement
of his theme of decline, or a hint of impending disaster.

Whatever the thematic unity or narrative coherence of a particular
chapter, it was the construction, the sound and the final polish of
the individual paragraph which became the focus of Gibbon's attention.
Only when it satisfied him in these respects did he commit it to
writing. It was thus his basic unit of composition. 'It has always

1. Regarding the former, see DF, xx, II, 316, 325, 330-1, 333;
   xxvi, III, 1; and the latter, xxiv, II, 545, xxv, III, 4.
2. Chap. xliv.
3. DF, xlv, IV, 541, 542
been my practice', he wrote, 'to cast a long paragraph in a single mould, to try it by my ear, to deposit it in my memory; but to suspend the action of the pen till I had given the last polish to my work.'

The actual length of his paragraphs, some of them very long, almost minature chapters, is thus closely related to the movement and onward sweep of the oration.

As a structural unit the paragraph gives us a clear view on a reduced scale, of Gibbon's process in his work as a whole. That process, as Tillyard reminded us, was not to draw random or incidental moral lessons but to set out 'from a series of great moral principles', the common heritage of the society to which Gibbon belonged, and to recall 'the reader's attention to them as they have been illustrated by the course of events. Like the epic, history was for Gibbon a solemn affair, offering large general lessons in morality.' Detail, therefore, had not only to be significant, but had also to subserve 'a worthy general truth or large event.'

In Gibbon's scheme the paragraph is frequently based upon one of these general truths or principles. Sometimes the generalisation comes first and the illustrative instance follows; at other times it forms a conclusion to the more specific and particular facts of the narrative. So too, the length of the unit expressing the generalisation may vary from a phrase or a clause to a group of sentences. In the shortest of these there is simply a parenthetical

1. Memoirs, p. 159.
2. The English Epic and its Background, pp. 515, 514.
comment which broadens the scope of the whole statement: 'Hope, the best comfort of our imperfect condition, was not denied to the Roman slave'; or, 'Suspense, the worst of evils, was at length determined by the ministers of death.' Sometimes the author turns from his narrative or description and introduces, in a clause or minor sentence, a qualification or condition which also carries an element of universality. Such insertions are signalled by a switch to the present tense, sometimes accompanied by the use of the first personal pronoun as the historian joins his readers in a general reflection. The sequence in this case is from a subordinate clause expressing a broad principle to the main clause making the specific statement of fact or announcing a particular event. Thus we find, 'Whatever evils either reason or declamation have imputed to extensive empire, the power of Rome was attended with some beneficial consequences to mankind.' Here it is only the second part of the sentence which is strictly essential for the statement of a historical fact; the introductory clause merely broadens that statement beyond the particular empire of Rome and opens up a more general view of the nature of imperial expansion. In a somewhat similar type of example from the same chapter, we have: 'Notwithstanding the propensity of mankind to exalt the past, and to depreciate the present, the tranquil and prosperous state of the empire was warmly and honestly confessed, by the provinces as well as Romans.'

In a sentence expressing the association of true nobility with worth not birth, an idea Gibbon would have found in the treatment of

1. DF, ii, I, 44; xxxix, III, 216. Italics all mine in the following examples to indicate the section of the sentence referred to.
2. DF, ii, I, 56.
3. DF, ii, I, 61.
nobilitas by Horace and Virgil, he wrote: 'If we can prefer personal merit to accidental greatness, we shall esteem the birth of Tacitus more truly noble than that of kings.'

Here the historian's assertion is that the birth of Tacitus is more noble than that of kings, or at least, that we should esteem it so. The proposition in the dependent clause is an appeal to relative values and moral worth in the widest sense, Tacitus being the particular case. In a moral judgement which he shared with his readers, Gibbon wrote: 'If avarice were not the blindest of human passions, the motives of Rufinus might excite our curiosity and we might be tempted to inquire with what view he violated every principle of humanity and justice to accumulate those immense treasures which he could not spend without folly nor possess without danger.'

The use of co-ordinate structure in which the statement of the general principle is followed by the announcement of the particular person or party exemplifying it, or presenting a contrast to the normal and expected line of conduct, is frequent in The Decline and Fall. 'Such disorders are the natural effects of religious tyranny; but the rage of the Donatists was inflamed by a frenzy of a very extraordinary kind.' Or again, 'But the subject who has reduced his prince to the necessity of dissembling can never expect a sincere and lasting forgiveness; and the tragic fate of Constans soon deprived Athanasius of a powerful and generous protector.'

The government of a mighty empire may assuredly suffice to occupy the time and the abilities of a mortal: yet the diligent prince (Theodosius) always

2. DF, xxix, III, 233.
3. DF, xxi, II, 412.
4. DF, xxi, II, 392.
reserved some moments of his leisure for the instructive amusement of reading.'¹ And as we approach the last hours of the Eastern Empire, the threatening language of Mahomet II at the gates of Constantinople is introduced by the statement: 'Fear is the first principle of a despotic government.'²

A similar pattern is seen in the expression of the moral or general principle in a full sentence used to introduce the outworking of that principle in the history of men and nations: 'But it is no easy task to confine luxury within the limits of an empire. The most remote countries of the ancient world were ransacked to supply the pomp and the delicacy of Rome.'³ The paragraph from which this example is taken is, in fact, one of a sequence of six all beginning with a general truth from which the specific details of the narrative follow. Another instance is seen in Gibbon's introduction to the advancement of the wily Cleander by the emperor Commodus: 'Suspicious princes often promote the last of mankind from a vain persuasion that those who have no dependence except on their favour, will have no attachment, except to the person of their benefactor. Cleander, the successor of Perennis, was a Phrygian by birth...⁴ In discussing Septimius Severus, Gibbon claimed that, even making such allowances as we commonly do in the case of public figures, this emperor must still stand condemned by whatever principles we invoke. He cannot, to use a characteristically Gibbonian term, be 'justified' in his actions. 'Falsehood and insincerity, unsuitable as they seem to the dignity of public transactions, offend us with a less degrading

¹. DF, xxvii, III, 176.  
². DF, lxvii, VII, 195.  
³. DF, ii, I, 59.  
⁴. DF, iv, I, 98.
idea of meanness than when they are found in the intercourse of private life...Yet the arts of Severus cannot be justified by the most ample privileges of state-reason. He promised only to betray, he flattered only to ruin.¹

Parallel instances run through the whole work, sometimes passing, more often implying a moral judgement which it is up to the reader to apply. Such is the comment on the 'rational voluptuary' which has been applied by biographers to the historian himself. The force of the statement in its context is that of a reasonable standard to be expected of the average self-indulgent man against which we may judge the imprudent excesses of Elegabalus. The standard is laid down for the reader in the general statement preceding the specific fact: 'A rational voluptuary adheres with invariable respect to the temperate dictates of nature, and improves the gratifications of sense by social intercourse, endearing connexions, and the soft colouring of taste and the imagination. But Elegabalus...abandoned himself to the grossest pleasures with ungoverned fury.'² The praise of 'the eloquent Libanius' for the moderation of his master Theodosius, who offered his enemies the alternatives of baptism or death, is introduced by the moral observation: 'A nation of slaves is always prepared to applaud the clemency of their master, who in the abuse of power, does not proceed to the last extremes of injustice and oppression.'³ It is against this principle that the reader is asked to judge for himself just how moderate the emperor really was. So too, the policy

¹. DF, v, I, 127.
². DF, vi, I, 159.
³. DF, xxviii, III, 217.
of Timour is shown to be just another example of the rationalisation of political expediency in the story of nations. 'For every war, a motive of safety or revenge, of honour or zeal, of right or conscience, may be readily found in the jurisprudence of conquerors. No sooner had Timour re-united to the patrimony of Zagatan, the dependent countries of Carizme and Candahar, than he turned his eyes to the kingdoms of Iran or Persia.'¹ And once again, a question of conscience in an opportunist is proposed in general terms before the summary historical fact is stated: 'A patriot who sacrifices his party and conscience to the allurements of favour may be possessed, however, of the private and social virtues; he no longer hears the reproachful epithets of slave and apostate; and the consideration which he acquires among his new associates will restore in his own eyes, the dignity of his character. The prudent conformity of Bessarion was rewarded with the Roman purple.'² Here the preceding generalisation throws scorn on the 'prudence' and 'conformity' of the cardinal, producing one of those 'intonational' effects which illuminate Gibbon's comments.

A characteristic formula to introduce either the generalisation or the specific instances, is the expression: 'such is, are, or were'. After his account of the desertion of Procopius' troops and the disastrous end of that emperor's reign, Gibbon opened the following paragraph with the general comment: 'Such indeed are the common and natural fruits of despotism and rebellion.'³ Thinking of the tragic loss of men and

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¹ DF, lxvi, VII, 48. Cf. xlvi, 100, 'In the language of the usurpers of every age...'
² DF, lxvi, VII, 129.
³ DF, xxv, III, 17.
of the treasures of civilization in a single battle, he introduced
the outcome of the Battle of Poitiers with the observation: 'Such is
the empire of Fortune...that it is almost equally difficult to foresee
the events of war or to explain their various consequences.' Prefacing
his account of a Greek emperor with a reference to an old moral tale,
he wrote: 'In some Oriental tale I have read the fable of a shepherd
who was ruined by the accomplishment of his own wishes...Such was the
fortune, or at least the apprehension, of the Greek emperor, Alexius
Comnenus.'

In all the above cases, the pattern has been that the generalisation
or moral principle precedes the historical material by which it is
exemplified. Frequently, however, we find the reverse, with the
general application deduced from the preceding incidents or traits
of character: 'Trajan was ambitious of fame; and as long as mankind
shall continue to bestow more liberal applause on their destroyers
than on their benefactors, the thirst for military glory will ever
be the vice of the most exalted characters.' Of the elevation of
Majorian to the imperial throne we read: 'The successor of Avitus
presents the welcome discovery of a great and heroic character, such
as sometimes arise in a degenerate age to vindicate the honour of the
human species. The emperor Majorian has deserved the praises of his
contemporaries and of posterity.' Then follow various events and
a summary of the emperor's address to the senate.

1. DF, xxxviii, IV, 126.
2. DF, lviii, VI, 298.
3. DF, i, I, 6. In his 1782 revision Gibbon substituted 'minds'
   for 'characters'.
4. DF, xxxvi, IV, 16.
Just as within the individual sentence the general statement may either precede or follow the particular case, so too in the structure of his paragraphs, Gibbon would vary the placement of the sentence or sentences carrying the generalisation. Sometimes they occur initially, sometimes finally and, on occasions, medially. He frequently enunciated a principle or a general truth as the foundation for a whole paragraph, which illustrated, developed or discussed it. In other cases he proceeded from the historical events or the actions of a particular character to a final sentence which formed a generalised conclusion to the paragraph.

In the paragraph beginning, 'When the Roman princes had lost sight of the senate and of the ancient capital, they easily forgot the origin and nature of their legal power', Gibbon went on to discuss the titles Imperator and Dominus and the emperors' usurpation of 'even the attributes, or at least the titles, of the DIVINITY'. This leads to the final sentence where he drew a general conclusion applicable to the abuse of power, titles, honours and or royal prerogatives far beyond the limits of the empire of ancient Rome: 'Such extravagant compliments, however, soon lose their impiety by losing their meaning; and when the ear is once accustomed to the sound, they are heard with indifference as vague though excessive professions of respect.'

This loss of awareness and blunting of consciousness is seen as part of the tragic decline of Rome but as equally applicable to the modern adulation of rulers.

Amid the calamities of the Gothic war and in reaction against the suspicion of a conspiracy by the young Gothic warriors, came the carefully planned massacre of these young men throughout the provincial
capitals, instigated by 'the cruel prudence of Julius', master-general of the troops. One might argue that the empire was endangered and that the sanguinary ruse by which these unsuspecting youths were slaughtered at least brought about a speedy deliverance. At a distance of fifteen centuries the moral issue remained somewhat confused, especially as Ammianus, the authority on whom Gibbon drew heavily in this section of his work, gave his approval to the deed. Gibbon's conclusion to the paragraph first lays down a definite principle, but then leaves the moral question for the reader to decide: 'The urgent consideration of the public safety, may undoubtedly authorise the violation of every positive law. How far that or any other consideration may operate to dissolve the natural obligations of humanity and justice, is a doctrine of which I still desire to remain ignorant.'

In the final sentences of certain paragraphs concerned with the characters and public actions of Constantine and of Julian, Gibbon stated some general conclusions about human nature. So too, in considering Julian's motives for assuming the imperial rule, he turned in his concluding sentence from the man himself to humanity in general. He has shown us the philosophic Julian, thrust on to the throne apparently against his wishes and 'overwhelmed with real or affected grief'. Interpreting the motive in terms of the known character of the emperor, Gibbon suggested that his grief must have been sincere and innocent; but he admitted also that those who are always sceptical about the motives and professions of rulers would find this hard to accept.

1. DF, xxvi, III, 124; and see Gibbon's note (p. 124, n. 105) referring his reader to the view of Ammianus; cf. also Memoirs, p. 78 concerning Grotius, 'the theory of justice...and the laws of peace and war which have had some influence on the practise of modern Europe.'
2. For Constantine see DF xiii, I, 323-4 (final para.) and for Julian, xxiii.
And he confessed that Julian, the hero and philosopher, was not free from that very human element of religious superstition. In this ambiguous case a general principle is stated: 'The conduct which disclaims the ordinary maxims of reason excites our suspicion and eludes our inquiry. Whenever the spirit of fanaticism, at once so credulous and so crafty, has insinuated itself into a noble mind, it insensibly corrodes the vital principles of virtue and veracity.'

The long paragraph summing up the character of Bajazet culminates, as far as the action is concerned, in the striking anti-climax of his unexpected failure to fulfil his proud boast of feeding his horse from the altar of St. Peter's in Rome. Dramatically this would make a splendid end to the paragraph. Latent in this event, however, is a truth of more general application which Gibbon wished to make explicit. The conclusion is therefore not particular and physical, but general and moral, taking the reader beyond this half-forgotten conqueror to the great sweep of world history. Bajazet's progress, we are told 'was checked not by the miraculous intervention of the apostle, not by a crusade of the Christian powers, but by a long and painful fit of gout. The disorders of the moral are sometimes corrected by those of the physical world; and an acrimonious humour falling on a single fibre of one man may prevent or suspend the misery of nations.'

1. DF, xxii, II, 427.
2. DF, lxiv, VII, 37.
Reminding ourselves of Gibbon's account of his care in the construction of his paragraphs, we can observe him not merely rounding off with a random or spontaneous moral afterthought such paragraphs as those we have been considering, but rather, having begun from a series of great moral principles, recalling the reader's attention to them as they have been illustrated by the course of events.\(^1\) We can see the pen of the historian in the hand of the moralist who shapes the structure of the paragraph to give the maximum emphasis to principles which he regarded as more significant than the mere facts of history.\(^2\)

For a further example, somewhat different from those already considered, but equally indicative of the movement of the sentences towards the expression of a moral principle, we might turn to Gibbon's account of the destruction of the fortress city of Maogamalcha. Our view is finally directed to 'the wanton ravages of war' and our emotional response to them, and the focus is at last fixed on a 'simple Greek statue', an object of great beauty which suggests to the historian the question of relative values. Such an object, Gibbon wrote, 'is of more genuine value than all these rude and costly monuments of barbaric labour.' But in a moral conclusion suggested by this recognition of values, he turned from the material to the human, jolting us all into the need for compassion: 'and if we are more deeply affected by the ruin of a palace than by the conflagration of a cottage, our humanity must have formed a very erroneous estimate of the miseries of human life.'\(^3\)

2. Cf. 'Memoire sur la Monarchie des Medes', MW, III, 126: 'Aux yeux d'un philosophe les faits sont la partie la moins interessante de l'histoire.'
3. DF, xxiv, II, 526.
The insertion of the general statement towards the middle of the paragraph is found in that dealing with the softening influence of the beautiful Galla on Theodosius. At this point Gibbon turned aside from direct narrative to refer to the judgement of 'the unfeeling critics who consider every amorous weakness as an indelible stain on the memory of a great and orthodox emperor.' This parallels the remark concerning Theodora to the effect that 'those who believe that the female mind is totally depraved by the loss of chastity' will be ready to accept all the scandalous criticisms of the empress which have been inspired by malice and resentment and which have caused her virtues to be forgotten. In each case the historian's plea is for a fairer, more balanced, more humane judgement of the character concerned. Thus, after his reference to the unfeeling critics of an emperor's human weakness, he made a statement of general application: 'For my own part, I shall frankly confess that I am willing to find, or even to seek, in the revolutions of the world, some traces of the mild and tender sentiments of domestic life.' Following that general rule, he was very glad to discover 'amidst the fierce and ambitious conquerors' of history 'a gentle hero who may be supposed to receive his armour from the hands of love.'

In the sections on government, nations and society, law and liberty, as well as those concerned with religion, superstition and intolerance, Gibbon found ample scope for generalisation and for the enunciation

1. DF, xxvii, III, 172.
2. DF, xl, IV, 230.
3. DF, xxvii, III, 172; cf. also another paragraph on 'The character of Theodosius', xxix, 232-4.
of moral principles. We find this illustrated at the beginning of chapter iii which opens with what Gibbon calls 'the obvious definition of a monarchy', which in turn leads to a consideration of the necessary safeguards of 'public liberty' and the influence exerted by the clergy, the military nobility and the 'stubborn commons'. Chapter v, which is to deal with usurpation of power by the Praetorian Guards in making and unmaking emperors, is introduced by a completely general paragraph on 'the power of the sword' in 'an extensive monarchy'. In certain parts of the work, paragraph after paragraph shows this movement from the particular to the general or vice-versa, reflecting the historian's main interest in getting down to the lowest common denominator of human nature and to the bases of man's communal, national or religious life. In his treatment of the Germanic peoples, Gibbon had before him the example of Tacitus who, he claimed, had led the way in applying 'the science of philosophy to the study of facts', and in this chapter about one-third of the paragraphs either begin or end with general statements. But in some sections of the work the generalising tendency extends beyond the sentence or group of sentences so that a whole paragraph becomes the unit of generalisation from which a particular application can be drawn. We see in this the philosophic historian who, as Gibbon pointed out in an early work, 'sees in particular facts only the proof of his general principles.'

1. DF, ix, I, 230. 'The expressive conciseness of his descriptions', Gibbon continued, 'has deserved...to excite the genius and penetration of the philosophic historians of our own times.'

2. 'Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Médés', MW, III, 126 ('ne voit dans les faits particuliers que la preuve de ses principes généraux.') Cf. above chap. V., p. 182.
Even in those parts where the subject did not lend itself quite so readily to such extended 'reflection', there are numerous examples of the more compact expression of a general truth which sometimes carries an explicit moral lesson for humanity. Writing of the neutrality of the Visigoths in a time of crisis, Gibbon began with the general statement: 'The experience of past faults which may sometimes correct the mature age of an individual, is seldom profitable to the successive generations of mankind.' Then follows the particular case in point: 'The nations of antiquity, careless of each other's safety, were separately vanquished and enslaved by the Romans.' And finally the moral: 'This awful lesson might have instructed the Barbarians of the West to oppose with timely counsels and confederate arms the ambition of Justinian.'

Thus in both the more extended and in the more limited structures, the application of language still bears the stamp of the moralist.

There are other, slightly different forms of expression, by which Gibbon sometimes introduced a moral point, suggested an instructive lesson or gave a greater degree of universality to the specific facts of history. Apart from the majority of general statements involving merely a switch to the present tense, which adds a certain timeless quality to the truth expressed, the historian may enter more directly in the first person, or, at one remove from this in his persona as 'the philosopher' or as the 'impartial spectator'.

1. DF, xli, IV, 318-9.
The plea for a more compassionate judgement on Theodosius quoted above is made by the author directly: 'For my own part, I shall frankly confess that I am willing...'. The aim of speaking in his own person to the reader is doubtless to ensure that there can be no missing his intention at this point in the story. In a rather different situation the historian once again takes the reader into his confidence to declare what he intends to do. 'From the paths of blood, and such is the history of nations,' he wrote in the broadest of generalisations, 'I cannot refuse to turn aside to gather some flowers of science and virtue.'

It is to be a personally conducted tour, taking us off the main course of his narrative; and he directs our attention away from the long sweep of 'history' and the extensive panorama of the 'nations' to a particular figure whose life can provide this welcome relief: 'The name of Mahmud the Gaznavide is still venerable in the East: his subjects enjoyed the blessings of prosperity and peace'. Thus, whatever we are shown about this ruler, we know the author's avowed purpose is to find some edification as well as a lesson in the possibility of discovering knowledge and virtue even in such an unexpected place. The 'philosophic historian' is again looking beyond the record of facts, especially those of war and destruction, to matters of wider human interest and moral value.

Akin to this direct word from the author is the slightly broader approach using the inclusive first person plural, at times almost equivalent to the indefinite 'one', but in other instances having the

1. See. p. 495 of this chapter, and n.3.
2. DF, lvii, VI, 236.
3. DF, lvii, VI, 234.
effect of linking author and reader in their quest for truth. Sharing
with his reader his own philosophical and psychological curiosity,
Gibbon pointed out: 'We have seldom an opportunity of observing,
either in active or speculative life, what effect may be produced, or
what obstacles may be surmounted by the force of a single mind, when
it is inflexibly applied to the pursuit of a single object.' Then to
the particular instance, the rare exception to the rule: 'The immortal
name of Athanasius will never be separated from the catholic doctrine
of the Trinity to whose defence he consecrated every moment and every
faculty of his being.' Here was a 'saint', though one from whom
Gibbon could not withhold a certain admiration, a controversy which he
found intriguing, if essentially ridiculous, but above all an almost
unique case study for the philosophic historian. Hence his invitation
to the reader to seize the opportunity of investigating the moral
force exemplified by this extraordinary man.

Sometimes it is 'the philosopher' who is used to make an
observation on human nature or to express a moral principle. This
may be regarded as the historian in his philosophic stance, though
on some occasions it is a more impersonal, generic figure, like the
impartial observer. The historical evidence for the amazing sign
which allegedly changed the career of Constantine and made possible
the triumph of Christianity, is examined by Gibbon in the wider context
of miracles. The credulous, he said, too readily attribute every
apparent deviation from the ordinary course of nature to the direct
intervention of the Deity. Hence he found it expedient to open this
section with a philosophic view of the whole question: 'The philosopher,
who with calm suspicion examines the dreams and omens, the miracles and prodigies of profane or even of ecclesiastical history, will probably conclude that, if the eyes of the spectators have sometimes been deceived by fraud, the understanding of the readers has much more frequently been insulted by fiction.'

When Gibbon wished to introduce not just the Caledonian race but also the spirit which he felt had motivated their behaviour over a long period of history, he approached by the indirect route of a philosophic and moral observation: 'A philosopher may deplore the eternal discord of the human race, but he will confess that the desire of spoil is a more rational provocation than the vanity of conquest. From the age of Constantine to that of the Plantaganets this rapacious spirit continued to instigate the poor and hardy Caledonians.'

Faced with the repeated 'tale of uniform calamity' to be encountered in the sack of great cities like Constantinople, and with the recurring lamentation over the pillage of monasteries, Gibbon pointed to the wisdom of maintaining a philosophic view. One should not be carried away by emotion or irrational regret, but should rather think in terms of relative values: the comparatively small worth of much that has been lost and the great value of much that has survived. 'Perhaps instead of joining the public clamour, a philosopher

1. DF, xx, II, 322.
2. DF, xxv, III, 46; cf. the philosophic reflection, beginning 'if, in a word, we contemplated the untutored Caledonians' in contrast to 'the degenerate Romans' which closes the fifth paragraph of chap. vi (I, 142).
will observe that in the decline of the arts the workmanship could not be more valuable than the work, and that a fresh supply of visions and miracles would speedily be renewed by the craft of the priest and the credulity of the people. Rather should he lament the loss of the Byzantine libraries and rejoice at the safe arrival in Italy of some of the 'classic treasures' which could later be multiplied by the aid of the printing press.

On occasions 'the philosopher' is called in for no more than an aside, which grammatically may take the form of a qualifying clause expressing a counter view. But its function is to offer a well-considered reply to the rash opinion of the multitude or the casual observer, or more especially to the misguided ideas of those who are swayed by prejudice or superstition. Thus in his treatment of the 'miracles and worship of the monks', Gibbon wrote: 'The monastic saints, who excite only the contempt and pity of a philosopher, were respected and almost adored by the prince and people.' This function seems to account for approximately half the appearances of 'the philosopher' whether his reaction is conveyed by an explicit statement or merely by 'a smile'.

In examining Gibbon's language of moral comment, we find this philosophic persona playing a very significant role. Occurring over thirty times in one form or another, it is far more ubiquitous than that of 'the historian of the Roman empire'. We find 'the philosopher', 'a philosopher', 'in the mind of a 'philosopher', 'to a philosophic mind' or 'to a philosophic eye'; and once, where Gibbon wanted to make one of his value judgements, he did it by means of the virtual synonym,

1. DF, lxviii, VII, 206.
2. DF, xxxvii, IV, 80.
'in the eyes of a sage'. 1 The reader is informed that certain subjects are worth the attention of a philosophic mind, 2 that others would provoke a smile from a philosopher, 3 or perhaps move him to pity, contempt or disgust. 4 The message is clear even if the philosopher makes no verbal comment, though often he does so. In almost every case it can be affirmed, either from the immediate context or on the evidence of other sections of the work, that the 'philosophic' reaction or comment corresponds with that of Gibbon himself. In fact, I can find only two possible exceptions, one of which is a very open question. 5 This stylistic device, so useful for stimulating thought, especially by way of revaluation, for pointing out prejudice, and for prompting moral judgements, 6 can almost always be taken as an indication of the historian speaking in his philosophic tone, though only once does he equate himself with 'the philosopher' in so many words. On that occasion near the end of his History, as he considered the opposing viewpoints on a moral and religion question, he declared, 'Yet as a mere philosopher, I cannot agree with the Greeks.' 7

1. DF, liii, VI, 68. This is the contrast between the value to humanity of the 'merits and miracles' of the sacred calendar and the toil of the farmer 'who multiplies the gifts of the Creator, and supplies the food of his brethren.'

2. DF, vi, I, 142; xv, II, 21; xxxviii, IV, 173; lviii, VI, 315, n. 101; lxiv, VII, 1.

3. DF, xv, II, 16; xlvi, V, 214; li, V, 484; lxix, VII, 258.

4. DF, xli, IV, 360, cf. xxxvii, IV, 76; xxxvii, IV, 80; lxx, VII, 309. We find also 'suspicion' (lvi, VI, 194, n. 54), and, as cited above, 'a philosopher may deplore' the strife of mankind (xxv, III, 46).

5. The case of Boethius cited below (and see n. 2 on p. 503) may seem to exclude Gibbon himself, though he would endorse Plato's precept; the 'open' case of 'a philosophic theist' probably able to 'subscribe the popular creed of the Mahometans' (I, V, 362) may very well have fitted him also. At least one or two of his comments on that religion have been used by some writers to suggest his own simple monotheistic belief.

6. For examples, see DF, xxxvii, IV, 167, ('but a philosopher may be permitted to enlarge his views...'), xlvi, V, 259 ('he may search the motive...'), liv, VI, 131 ('a philosopher who calculates the degree of merit...'), lxx, VII, 309 ('A Christian, a philosopher, and a patriot will be equally scandalised...')

7. DF, lxx, VII, 294, n. 74.
On occasions the philosophic voice merges with that of a historical figure in the narrative who expresses an important principle. Examples are found in two characters who embody Gibbon's ideal combination of philosopher and man of action, the one who yields to the call of the service of his country instead of a personal preference for retirement and study. In his treatment of Boethius, Gibbon stated: 'A philosopher, liberal of his wealth and parsimonious of his time, might be insensible to the common allurements of ambition, the thirst of gold and employment. And some credit may be due to the assertion of Boethius that he reluctantly obeyed the divine Plato, who enjoined every citizen to rescue the state from the usurpation of vice and ignorance.' In this we have the general statement of the author, matched by the specific assertion of a particular man whose life seemed to mark him as a truly disinterested and practising philosopher.

So too, Gibbon's Julian reluctantly 'exchanged the cloak of a Greek philosopher for the military habit of a Roman prince' and later for the imperial purple. But while still in the subordinate rank of 'Caesar', he showed a philosophic respect for moral absolutes and 'was compelled to acknowledge that obedience was the virtue of the most eminent subject, and that the sovereign alone was entitled to judge the public welfare.' So, having resolved the matter in his conscience, he issued orders to carry out the commands of the emperor. Such statements as this on obedience as the duty of a subject, though cast in historic form using the past tense, are still to be seen as enunciations of a general abiding

1. See. e.g. DF, xlviii, V, 220 and above, chap. VI, p. 253.
2. DF, xxxix, IV, 213.
3. DF, xix, II, 272.
4. DF, xxiii, II, 423.
principle, analogous to those cited earlier in this chapter. Julian is shown as being instructed by philosophy to 'compare the advantages of action and retirement', but finding himself at the head of a great empire, he recollected 'the observation of his master Plato' on the qualities demanded of the leaders of nations. 'From this principle,' Gibbon continued, 'he justly concluded, that the man who presumes to reign, should aspire to the perfection of the divine nature; that he should purify his soul from her mortal and terrestrial part; that he should extinguish his appetites, enlighten his understanding, regulate his passions, and subdue the wild beast, which...seldom fails to ascend the throne of a despot.'\(^1\) Here is an ideal for a philosophic ruler, justly deduced from the teaching of Plato and it is put into the mouth of Gibbon's 'imperial philosopher'.

Even amongst such unphilosophic characters as fierce conquerors, Gibbon could occasionally find a moral statement appropriate to his own theme. Totila, he noted, frequently harangued his troops, 'and it was his constant theme that national vice and ruin are inseparably connected; that victory is the fruit of moral as well as military virtue; and that the prince and even the people are responsible for the crimes which they neglect to punish.'\(^2\) In this way Gibbon used the voice of a military ruler to express the values on which The Decline and Fall is built, just as his Moslem leaders give expression to the recurring sentiment of 'the vicissitudes of fortune'.

Finally, the general statement or moral observation may be expressed not through persons, but by means of personified qualities,

1. DF, xxiii, II, 442.
2. DF, xliii, IV, 426.
virtues or vices or even philosophy which become the grammatical 'actor' or focus in the sentence. This type of sentence, not infrequent in The Decline and Fall, has already been mentioned in a specific connection, namely that of motives being presented as the real and active causes of conduct. But the use of abstractions as prime movers in a particular situation and grammatically within the structure of the sentence has particular application to the present context. Discussing Rome's expansionist policy, Gibbon wrote:
'Censure, which arraigns the public actions and the private motives of princes, has ascribed to envy, a conduct which might be attributed to the prejudice and moderation of Hadrian.' Another example in which the general moral sentiment prefaces the particular case, makes 'humanity' and 'philosophy' the subjects of the main clauses in this introductory sentence: 'Humanity will be disposed to encourage any report which testifies to the jurisdiction of conscience and the remorse of kings; and philosophy is not ignorant that the most horrid spectres are sometimes created by the powers of a disordered fancy and the weakness of a distempered body.' Then follows the historic illustration: 'After a life of virtue and glory, Theodoric was now descending with shame and guilt into the grave.' In a discussion of the decline of the church and of the abuses of papal elections, the blame is firmly laid on ambition. It becomes the heart of a metaphor in a moral generalisation introducing the specific example: 'Ambition is a weed of quick and early begetation in the vineyard of Christ. Under the Christian princes the chair of St. Peter was disputed by the votes, the venality and the violence of a popular election.'

1. See above, chap. VI, p. 306.
2. DF, i, I, 8.
3. DF, xxxix, IV, 217.
4. DF, lxix, VII, 248.
Writing of Diocletian's salutary destruction of books on alchemy, a practice which, as Gibbon pointed out, flourished once again in the middle ages till the revival of learning 'suggested more specious arts of deception', he concluded the paragraph on a more optimistic note, namely the illumination of philosophy in his own day: 'Philosophy, with the aid of experience, has at length banished the study of alchemy; and the present age, however desirous of riches, is content to seek them by the humbler means of commerce and industry.'^1 It is not so much a generalisation here as a reflection on the progress of enlightenment, but like the general and moral reflections already noticed, it switches from past history to the present situation, thus transcending the temporal limitations of the narrative.

We thus find ourselves at the level of the sentence. Its structure exhibits a number of devices all very characteristic of Gibbon, which were obviously pleasing to the stylist and often useful to the moralist. Most prominent amongst them are parallelism, antithesis, the accumulation of items, climax or anti-climax and the use of co-ordination. Such features of Gibbon's style have been referred to by various commentators and biographers, though not in relation to his moral purpose. These structural organisations of the items of the sentence lie behind those effects I have described as 'intonational': irony, satire, high seriousness, pathos, innuendo, the implied question or the decisive conclusion. The stylistic features become familiar to the student of Gibbon and have often been mentioned in the literature on the historian; the means by which they are achieved has been dealt with by a few writers, though often somewhat cursorily; the effects to which

1. DF, xiii, I, 394.
they contribute in the work have received little attention. A comprehen­
sive and penetrating study of all three levels, organisational, sty­
listic, affective, and their interrelation has yet to be written. Here, in a few paragraphs of a single chapter of a broad study of Gibbon's moral approach, only a few hints can be given.

The sentence describing Rome at the time of the emperor Majorian provides an interesting example of Gibbon's use of parallel structures, with the use of internal contrast and antithesis and also a series of co-ordinates. The intention was to suggest the decadence and decline in the middle of the fifth century. Gibbon opened the paragraph by pointing out that a casual observer of the city's ancient ruins might hastily blame the Goths and Vandals. But the destruction has been prolonged, slow and silent: 'the decay of the city', which came from within, merely reflected that of the spirit of its people. The decay of the national spirit is mirrored in their use or neglect of the four types of public buildings listed in the four parallel sections of the sentence. 'The circus and theatres might still excite, but they seldom gratified the desires of the people: the temples which had escaped the zeal of the Christians were no longer inhabited either by gods or men; the diminished crowds of the Romans were lost in the immense space of their baths and porticoes; and the stately libraries and halls of justice became useless to an indolent generation, whose response was seldom disturbed either by study or business.'

Exciting, without gratifying the people's desires: this anti­
thetical pair seems to suggest the degeneracy and the jaded, coarsened response of these latter day Romans; the apathy and hollowness of that generation is sharply contrasted with the vitality and public spirit

1. DF, IV, xxxvi, 21.
of the creators and first users of these buildings. The final coordinate layering of the sentence produces a climactic moral explanation: the most imposing and important edifices were rendered useless by the people's indolence. A scornful sting in the tail is added by the relative clause describing a new breed of Romans who were unwilling to allow such secondary considerations as study or business to interfere with their repose. And this clause seems to qualify the population of Rome as it is referred to under different names in all four parts of the sentence: 'the people', 'men', 'diminished crowds' and 'an indolent generation' who have thus passed judgement on themselves.

Such structural features as balance, antithesis, the basic 'period of three members' are so apparent throughout The Decline and Fall as to need no further illustration; but they are contributory and not merely a mannerism or an ornament. It has been said that they 'are typical of the mind that wished to fix with some exactitude the ambivalence in human affairs,' The 'weighing of opposing or complementary ideas which is embodied in antithesis,' writes another critic, 'conveys a Gibbonian habit of thought which is no mere stylistic device but a method of judgement.' The habit, for it certainly did become habitual with him, is one of those features of a practised and polished style which the historian found highly useful in the expression of moral sentiments. 'The irony and humour which result from Gibbon's use of balance and antithesis, comparison and contrast, are fully justified in the history which studies greatness and littleness, prosperity and decay, and virtue and vice.'

1. See, G.M. Young, Gibbon, p. 84.
Satire, irony, sarcasm, innuendo are all part of the varied and finely controlled series of 'intonations' arising from the interplay of clauses and the selection of words; and they are of importance in suggesting or in prompting the reader to make moral judgements. This full range of effects, through slightly differing degrees of scorn to whimsical comment, shows the flexibility of the characteristic mode of expression which Gibbon achieved. 'Gibbon ventures upon satire in all its degrees... and antithesis is one of his favourite methods of conveying all shades of reprobation, from insinuation and innuendo to sarcasm and invective. When he remarks that, "The proection of the Rhaetian frontier, and the persecution of the Catholic church, detained Constantine in Italy," he is not only balancing good against evil, but he is also suggesting that the persecution of the Catholics was some sort of protection for the Empire.'

The aim and outcome of these structural devices with their intonational effects thus include the suggestion of 'ambivalence in human affairs', the presentation of contrasting qualities or situations, like greatness and littleness, glory and decay, and also the passing of a judgement. But an important aim throughout the work is that of enlisting the sympathies and moral convictions of the reader. This is very much a part of Gibbon's approach to the writing of history. And when we begin to look into the way these aims are achieved, we are continually thrown back on the actual grammar of The Decline and Fall, the syntactical equivalence, the use of the forms 'we' and 'our', or the placement of the elements of the sentence for emphasis or surprise. Nor are the effects in a simple, one to one relation to the structural devices. There is a complexity and a wealth...
here too. The 'Gibbonian antithesis' is an obvious and typical feature of the syntax and it is often associated with artful insinuation or the questioning of motives. Yet it is of much wider use than this. The suggestion has been made that 'it should be viewed rather as a way of marshalling materials, of communicating information clearly and concisely and of involving the reader with subtlety and persuasion in the patterns of historical fact which make the judgements of the History seem inevitable. It is part of the process of "exact identification of causal, temporal and other relations by means of grammatical form" which Yvor Winters admires in Hume's history.\(^1\)

Another 'way of marshalling materials' involves the accumulation of words, phrases or clauses or similar pattern or import, often building up to a climax. It is essentially a rhetorical device and in this it seems to strengthen the impression of The Decline and Fall as a great oration and to emphasise the aural appeal of Gibbon's prose. Giving due weight to each item, it can serve to bring out with force and clarity such things as contributory causes, the blessings of peace or the miseries of war and disorder, or the virtues or vices of a particular character. Thus, surveying the damage and destruction suffered by ancient monuments and buildings in Constantinople, Gibbon listed defacing by zeal and violence, actual demolition, the burning of marbles for lime or their application to 'the meanest uses'. And in the following sentence, he continued: 'Of many a statue, the place was marked by an empty pedestal; of many a column, the size was determined by a broken capital; the tombs of the emperors were scattered on the ground; the stroke of time was accelerated by storms and earthquakes; and the vacant space was adorned, by vulgar tradition, with fabulous

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monuments of gold or silver.' There is 'ample scope' in this piling up of the ravages of violent men and natural disasters 'for moralising on the vicissitudes of fortune'. The device can be used for an accumulation of good or praiseworthy things, but it seems particularly appropriate for disgust or censure, as when we read of 'the votes, the venality, the violence of a popular election', or of time and talents lost 'in the devotion, the laziness, and the discord of the church and the cloister', or again of the discipline and training of the Janizaries contrasted with 'the pride of birth, the independence of chivalry, the ignorance of the new levies, the mutinous temper of the veterans and the vices of intemperance and disorder which so long contaminated the armies of Europe.' The rapacious John of Cappadocia stands condemned in Gibbon's work as one of 'the authors of the public misery' for 'his aspiring fortune was raised on the death of thousands, the poverty of millions, the ruin of cities, and the desolation of provinces.' We can hear the voice of the public orator, whether Cicero against Verres or Sheridan against Hastings, calling for the only just and possible verdict.

We must, however, beware of seeing in certain characteristic structures some inherent moral point. The same structures and stylistic devices can be used for a variety of effects by a particular writer. Nor did Gibbon have a monopoly of them. We can see them in writers before and after Gibbon and, amongst his contemporaries,

1. DF, lxvii, VII, 140.
2. DF, lxix, VII, 238; lxvi, VII, 121.
3. DF, lxvi, VII, 85.
4. DF, xl, IV, 256.
parallelisms, antithesis, doublets and triplets may be studies par excellence in the prose of Samuel Johnson. Yet we can assert on the basis of Gibbon's use of language that the historian of decline and fall seemed to find such structures peculiarly appropriate to his purpose, whether to teach a lesson, suggest a judgement, deplore the crimes and follies of mankind, or to moralise on the passing of a great civilization. And what many critics recognised as inherent in Gibbon's view of history is a certain ambivalence or dualism. There are essential antitheses in his interpretation which, as has already been pointed out, seem to have been present in the early contrast between Lausanne and Oxford, true enlightenment and dead traditional learning, vital, philosophical history and a dull chronicle. This same dualism runs throughout The Decline and Fall: appearance and reality, liberty and tyranny, impartiality and prejudice, virtues and vices, simplicity and luxury, credulity and scepticism, light and darkness. It is an opposition and parallelism, not of terms, but of underlying ideas and it is therefore not surprising that one of the most habitual features of the language of The Decline and Fall is the use of parataxis or of co-ordinate structures, at the level of the clause, the phrase or the single word.

1. See, e.g. W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson, Yale University Press, 1941, chapters, II and III.
2. See above chap. I, pp. 11, 13, 27-28
3. There is a frequent implied contrast between 'the darkness of the middle ages' (DF, xiii, I, 394; xxxi, III, 383, n. 18; lxi, VI, 464, &c) and 'an enlightened age' (iii, I, 77; lxiv, VII, 25, n. 66), 'the light of science' (xl, IV, 281; xliii, IV, 453) and 'the light of history' (ii, I, 52).
Co-ordinate structures provided Gibbon with one of his most useful means of offering a suggestive and often a moral comment. Again and again we find clauses or phrases linked by 'and', 'but' and especially 'or', designed, it seems, with this end in view. To take but one example, already quoted to exemplify Gibbon's generalisations, he wrote concerning the numerous civil wars in Europe: 'They have generally been justified by some principle, or at least, coloured by some pretext, of religion, freedom, or loyalty.' Here we have his much loved parallel structures, but with the alternative in the second clause suggesting a correction of the former, a view nearer reality, while even the 'pretext' contains within itself the three alternative possibilities. Co-ordinate clauses in parallel like this are repeatedly used not just for suggestion or comment, but for casting doubt upon a casually accepted view or allegation. In such cases Gibbon is saying: 'Look at this again; don't take it at face value.'

It is, however, within the clause itself, that we find Gibbon's most typical use of this pairing of alternatives, in most cases provocative and often disturbing. It has been mentioned by several writers. Braudy referred to 'epistemological doublets' like 'real and imaginary', 'by art or by accident', 'in truth or in opinion' as indicative of Gibbon's 'relative and pluralistic vision' and as being 'an integral part of his developing style'. The effect, he said, was to suggest 'the possibilities of interpretation' and 'to convey a sense of the multiplicity of causes that surround any event.'

1. DF, v, I, 129.
2. Narrative Form in History and Fiction, p. 246.
Jordan, following Braudy's interpretation, noted these doublets appearing 'with increasing frequency' in the later volumes of *The Decline and Fall* and being 'but another of Gibbon's devices for expressing the multiplicity and complexity of history'.¹ Examples of this feature are plentiful throughout the whole work and call for a more careful examination.

I shall refer first to some couplets linked by 'and' which form part of Gibbon's language of moral comment. In this respect they have a somewhat similar force to those joined by 'or', with the second term suggesting either an abuse, a deception, or perhaps a motive of self-interest. In the very first paragraph of *The Decline and Fall* we are told that the 'peaceful inhabitants' of the empire 'enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury'. It is one of many instances where Gibbon suggests a moral judgement merely in passing without any heavy-handed pronouncement. The phrase, significant in itself, is even more suggestive in its larger context.

'Gibbon's more insidious skills,' according to Parkinson, 'are evidenced in the pairing of "enjoyed and abused" as though in Rome at least, it were impossible for pleasure to avoid falling into extravagance: the luxury of which he accuses the Romans has sinister overtones. His longer central sentence foreshadows one of the main causes of the decline of the Empire: The forms of freedom were kept while the emperors slowly but surely acquired despotic powers.'²

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¹. Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 103. See also E.J. Oliver, Gibbon and Rome, pp. 139ff. and a short reference in Bond, op.cit., pp. 177-8.
Following the age of the Antonines, 'as the government degenerated into military despotism', the Praetorian prefect, as commander 'of these favoured and formidable troops', became the most important official in this new abuse of power and exercised control over the army, the finances and even the law. Plautianus, favourite minister of Severus, Gibbon informs us, was 'the first Praefect who enjoyed and abused this immense power'.¹ From the middle of the third century Gibbon cast a glance backward over three hundred years of 'apparent prosperity and internal decline' with the loss of martial vigour and of real independence. It was, he claimed, only the mercenary forces on the frontier, 'who preserved and abused their independence.'² After referring to the days when, without penal laws and sufficient civil actions, the peace and justice of Rome were left to 'the private jurisdiction of the citizens', Gibbon moved forward to his own time stating that 'the malefactors who replenish our gaols are the outcasts of society, and the crimes for which they suffer may be commonly ascribed to ignorance, poverty and brutal appetite'. Then back to comment on the situation in ancient Rome: 'For the perpetration of similar enormities, a vile plebeian...might claim and abuse the sacred character of a member of the republic.'³ And, when in a later age, the empress Constantina was allotted a monastery by the tyrant Phocas, she is said to have 'accepted and abused' the lenity of his passion'.⁴

The word 'abused' seems applicable to many of the moral comments contained in Gibbon's doublets since the second member of the pair often suggests an abuse of some kind or other. There are analogous

1. DF, v, I, 135.
2. DF, vii, I, 209.
3. DF, xliv, IV, 531.
4. DF, xlvi, V, 70.
examples throughout The Decline and Fall. The seven Greek philosophers who visited the court of Nushirvan were 'invited and deceived by the assurance that a disciple of Plato was seated on the Persian throne'.

Of Didius Julianus, whose purchase of the purple gave him a short and precarious reign, we read, that the Praetorians 'served and despised' the vain old senator to whom they had sold the empire. Of the appointment of 'assessors' within the imperial legal system, Gibbon wrote that their humble advice 'might be accepted or despised, and in each tribunal the civil and criminal jurisdiction' was that 'of a single magistrate who was raised and disgraced by the will of the emperor'. A rather similar effect is gained by the addition of the word 'interest' when we are told that the clergy worked 'to promote the cause of a Catholic emperor' from 'motives of conscience and interest', and the Gordians, seeking a more official basis of authority than popular acclamation, 'were induced by principle as well as interest to solicit the approbation of senate'.

Much more characteristic and significant in The Decline and Fall is the coupling of alternatives by means of 'or'. We can distinguish four separate, though sometimes overlapping, uses of this device. They overlap because, in certain cases, only a rash critic would dare to say dogmatically which precise use was uppermost in the mind of the author as he wrote.

1. DF, xlii, IV, 386-7.
2. DF, v, I, 117.
3. DF, xliiv, IV, 539.
4. DF, xli, IV, 300; vii, I, 191.
5. DF, vii, I, 192.
In the first place it may signify merely an open question. As far as the evidence goes, Gibbon seems to be saying, the answer could be one or the other. He is sharing with his reader the undetermined fact or the uncertain motive behind an action. In this category we can place an expression like: 'The senator or bishop, whose death or exile Theodora had pronounced.' In such instances the historian is admitting that it is impossible to be sure and also perhaps suggesting that it is not vital to the situation or to the character in question. Sometimes we find statements which reflect on a man's character but, as in the following case, may also suggest a doubt about the pursuit of rigid cause and effect: 'the flight of Nacoragan preceded or followed the slaughter of ten thousand of his bravest soldiers.'

Where it is a question of motive, we may at times detect Gibbon reminding us, as he did in the case of the Gothic conquerors of Rome: 'At a distance of fourteen centuries', we cannot presume 'to investigate the motives' of these invaders. Near the beginning of the second chapter, he also admitted difficulty in discovering a motive for the introduction of a spirit of persecution in ancient Rome. It could not have been 'ambition or avarice', he reasoned and after considering a number of possibilities, he left the question undecided. With a similar inability to pronounce a single motive, he wrote: 'Whether fame or conquest or riches were the object of Alaric, he pursued that object with indefatigable ardour.' Here, though we may feel that on

1. DF, xxxix, IV, 231.
2. DF, xlii, IV, 408.
3. DF, xxxi, III, 330; cf. xvii, II, 158.
4. DF, ii, I, 34-5.
5. DF, xxxi, III, 350.
one occasion one object was uppermost, at other times, another, there is nevertheless the suggestion of mixed or undiscovered motives. Similarly we find that the troops of Adolphus 'either by force or agreement' occupied certain cities of Gaul.

In this class may also be included some of Gibbon's doublets of uncertain intention like from 'design or accident', and a 'malicious or accidental tumult'. Aurelian's disdain of other means of gaining possession than that of the sword is due to his being either 'ignorant or impatient of the restraints of civil institutions'; and 'the flight of Theodosius to the Persian court had been intercepted by a rapid dispute or a deceitful message.' What we are concerned with in interpreting such doublets is really the degree of openness. How far is Gibbon saying, 'We just do not know' and how far is he implying that there may have been intention and design; that the motives may have been mixed or that the circumstances were suspicious? Critics vary in the way they see particular instances and this may be a reflection of the sophistication of Gibbon's writing: his language indicating his 'awareness of multiplicity, complexity and pluralism.'

There is another class of doublets, still entirely open, in which two opposite possibilities, hypothetical or still unfulfilled, are indicated. They express in most cases conflicting moral potentialities latent in men and women. After writing of the schools of Berytus being 'filled with the rising spirits of the age', Gibbon went on to declare

that 'many a youth was lost in the earthquake, who might have lived
to be the scourge or guardian of his country.' He expressed similar
potentialities when writing of his friend Allamand in Lausanne, that
given the power, this 'genius' might 'have enlightened or deluded the
world'. Such alternatives suggest the abuse of power or genius
open to the person concerned. Thus an African usurper gathered such
great forces as 'might have subverted or restored the greatest empires
of the earth.' The only historical fact Gibbon has to convey is that
many youths were lost in the earthquake or that the African usurper
gathered extraordinarily large forces; the alternatives, almost
gratuitously thrown in, reflect the historian's preoccupation with the
moral possibilities open to mankind in such cases.

Within this open class of alternatives is a subclass which can
be included under the generic terms 'real or affected', 'actual or
apparent'. Their degree of openness is still a matter of interpretation
in individual contexts, but the very use of such doublets to qualify a
noun allows the historian to share his doubts with the reader and also
to stimulate the reader towards a critical questioning of reported
motives and reactions. Most of these have decided moral overtones and
the frequency with which Gibbon cast his statements in this form reflects
his attitude both to his sources and to the writing of history.

'Real or affected' is applied to the moderation of the emperors,
to the humanity of Julian, as well as to his professed concern at the

1. DF, xliii, IV, 465.
2. Memoirs, p. 82. In Gibbon's Journal (JB, 1er Jan,
1764, p. 197) it runs: 'Cet homme qui aurait pu éclairer ou
troubler une nation.'
3. DF, xxxi, III, 357.
hasty action of a minister, and to George of Cappadocia's 'zeal for Arianism'. We read of 'sincere or affected reverence' for a synod, the emperors' 'zeal or affected reverence for the senate', and the 'honest or affected prejudice' of Cicero for the wisdom of his ancestors. Gibbon used the word 'affected' in a number of other combinations, like 'indulged or affected the ambitious hope', 'enjoyed or affected to enjoy the festival', and wrote of the Sophists of every age despising 'or affecting to despise the accidental distinctions of birth and fortune.'

Many other pairs are used to convey this possibility of affectation or unreality: 'artful and perhaps sincere overtures', 'ecclesiastics of real or at least apparent sanctity', 'sincere grief or ostentatious mourning', 'the love or ostentation of learning' and 'the virtue or the appearances of virtue' shown by Clodius Albinus, governor of Britain. In the case of this last, we have a reason for the use of the doublet in Gibbon's admission that, 'It is difficult to form a just idea of his true character.' No doubt the same reason lies behind many other doublets in this class. We are told of 'the remarkable alteration of his character or conduct' when Gratian's 'apparent virtues... the premature and artificial fruits of a royal education', were replaced by the darker side of his nature. Similarly we find 'sincere or well dissembled joy', 'sincere or well feigned contrition', the

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1. DF, i, I, 29; xxii, II, 441; xxiii, 495; 496.
2. DF, xlvi, V, 147; v, I, 136; xlv, IV, 475.
3. DF, lviii, VI, 300; liii, VI, 79; xvii, II, 513.
4. DF, xxiv, II, 507; xxvii, III, 146; xxiii, III, 496; v, I, 119. Other pairs are: 'genuine or fictitious' (several times, e.g. I, V, 418; lvi, VI, 224), 'genuine or fabulous' (e.g. lxx, VII, 308), 'real or fictitious' (frequently, e.g. lxi, V, 95; lviii, VI, 289) and 'real or fabulous' (e.g. lxix, VII, 261).
5. DF, v, I, 119.
6. DF, xxvii, III, 140.
ambition of the sons of Clovis 'inflamed or disguised by filial piety' and 'the false or genuine magnanimity of Mahmud'.

Such is one of the most frequent ways in which Gibbon questions both the reality of appearances and the genuineness of motives, on the basis of historical evidence and of his own 'knowledge of human nature'. The philosophical historian must continually look beneath the surface, not in any censorious fashion seeking to condemn his characters, but simply to impart to his reader his uncertainties, sometimes his suspicions about the outward show of things. Gibbon was aware that men and women usually plead a principle to justify their actions, but he was equally aware that they may only be deceiving others or at least self-deceived. Hence it seemed to him historically more accurate and morally safer to refer to the 'principle or pretext' and even to the 'principles or pretences' by which their actions were determined. Appearances are seen to be deceptive, even in the case of a noble character like Julian, and perhaps most frequently in the case of a complex character like Pope Gregory the Great. Was Julian genuinely and consistently motivated by 'a tender regard for the peace and happiness of his subjects'? Gibbon could only venture to suggest that this regard 'directed or seemed to direct' his administration. Gregory was 'dragged from the cloister to the papal throne', apparently against his will, for 'he alone resisted or seemed to resist his elevation'. Why the doubt or the suspicion of a feigned resistance? Because, as Gibbon stated, 'his virtues and even his

1. DF, see below p. 563*; xii, I, 341; xxxviii, IV, 122; lvii, VI, 247.
2. DF, iv, I, 129;
3. DF, xix, 11, 302.
4. DF, xlv, V, 36.
faults, were a mixture of simplicity and cunning, of pride and humility, of sense and superstition'. This explanation provides a clue to Gibbon's fondness for these 'epistemological doublets' in terms of mixed characters, hidden motives and beguiling appearances. His mind was acutely aware of these alternatives and his style, as 'the image of his mind', reflected them continually. It was not so much that one must suspect Gregory's reaction, but knowing men and knowing himself, Gibbon appreciated the two possibilities and gave expression to them. Of another Gregory he wrote that his 'pride or humility... prompted him to decline a contest which might have been imputed to ambition and avarice.' Maximus, too, 'in the midst of the tumult... artfully or modestly refused to ascend the throne'; while Odoacer showed a similarly ambiguous reaction when he 'modestly or proudly declined' the honour of the consulship. Indeed, the historian's self-knowledge, as well as his knowledge of human nature, led him in the maturity of experience and of literary success, to perceive the same ambiguity of motives in himself: 'I am too modest or too proud,' he wrote in his Memoirs, 'to rate my own value by that of my contemporaries.'

In this second class of doublets, then, we have moved from the open to the less open where there is usually a strong suggestion that the author inclines to the second alternative or perhaps that neither is above suspicion. Referring to Gibbon's pairing of motives, Oliver wrote: 'Some of these remarks were made in a spirit of irony, some

1. DF, xlv, V, 37.
2. DF, xxvii, III, 158. Here it is Gregory Nazianzen, cf. also Mark of Ephesus who, 'mistaking perhaps his pride for his conscience', disclaimed all communion with the Latin heretics' (lxvi, VII, 116).
4. Memoirs, p. 178. He referred also to his 'modesty or affectation' regarding his work.
with a shrug, some in genuine uncertainty.¹ Our judgement of which
is which rests primarily on what I have termed 'intonation', but in
some instances it is hard to say dogmatically just what intonation
is intended. In this respect we might compare it with the expressive
reading of a subtle poem or a producer's interpretation of a Shakes­
pearian play. So we may ask in our reading of Gibbon, is it in this case
the shrug of indifference, which Oliver detects in some of these doublets,
is it 'genuine uncertainty', or is there a strong hint of suspicion,
even an ironic smile at the alleged motive? In the case of such
alternatives used to characterise St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Oliver
concluded that 'it was perhaps indifferences that predominated'.²
Yet here again we must be careful, for we know the fascination such
complex characters as Athanasius, Gregory and Bernard held for Gibbon.
Indifference seems not to allow for his deep human interest in what
lay behind such figures, and what he actually wrote looks more like
an admission of our inability to be sure at this distance from the
event: 'it is impossible for us to ascertain the separate shares of
accident, of fancy, of imposture, and of fiction.'³ But whatever
else is uncertain about Gibbon's view here, it is clearly one of
mixed or 'dubious motives'. This latter term is used by Oliver
as a general caption for all the doublets to which he refers and
it is a fairly accurate generic title for our second category.

2. loc. cit.
3. DF, lix, VI, 348.
The indications of this dubiousness are spelt out more deliberately at times as when Gibbon wrote: 'In the midst of these deliberations, two veterans of the guards, actuated either by curiosity or a sinister motive, audaciously thrust themselves into the house.'¹ Yet the suggestion comes through strongly enough in examples throughout the work. Confining ourselves to the first part of the History in order to show that this habit is not just a feature of Gibbon's maturer point of view, we may pick almost at random a handful from the huge heap of instances one soon accumulates: 'the virtues or policy of the emperors', the 'vice or folly' which promotes luxury, the 'sudden impulse or formed conspiracy' which led the troops to salute Maximin as emperor, Diocletian's 'bloody sacrifice' offered 'to prudence or revenge' Constantine consulting 'his own safety or ambition'; 'the humanity or negligence' of overseers which allowed their prisoners some latitude', 'the sincerity or cunning of the Arian chiefs', a 'careless or criminal violation of truth and justice', the adoption of the emperor's religion 'either from interest or conscience'; the barbarian soldiers in the Roman army revealing the weakness of the empire to their own countrymen, either 'imprudently or maliciously', and the Goths sparing the estates of the prefect Rufinus 'from a motive either of gratitude or of policy.'⁴

Moving into the first volume of the second part of The Decline and Fall, we notice Gelimer's motive of 'pride or piety', the 'credulity or prudence' of Gregory, conspirators being 'impartially punished by the revenge or justice of the conqueror', an empress being obeyed

2. DF, ii, I, 44; ii, I, 59; vii, I, 185; xiii, I, 380; xiv, I, 437.
3. DF, xvi, II, 145; xxi, II, 370; xxiii, II, 466; xxiv, II, 514.
'from a motive of love or fear', and 'the bounteous alms of John the Eleemosynary' being 'dictated by superstition or benevolence or policy'. This last example is considered by Oliver 'a very striking case' and 'an extreme instance, for it so covers the possible motives of John's generosity as to leave them hardly less in the dark than if they had not been mentioned.' Yet he felt that Gibbon was still making a point, 'for the reader is left with the impression that John's motives were mixed if not dubious'. One wonders, however, if this impression does not apply to all or most of the doublets I have grouped in this second category and one also asks, 'Why then did Gibbon raise such alternatives at all? It was surely to convey his own feeling of the complexity of the issues and to suggest from the nature of the character and the situation, the most likely possibilities. It was also to disturb any casual or passive reading of history and to undermine all simplistic explanations.

Of course, Gibbon 'was far from being alone in ascribing mixed motives to mankind, nor is such a view confined to cynics, but his doubts were more acute than those of most men. There is,' Oliver continues, 'a distinction in the English language between saying that motives are doubtful and suggesting that they are dubious - which is more often the effect of Gibbon's remarks.' This is so, and it is basically the

1. DF, xli, IV, 314; xlv, V, 38; xlvi, V, 55; xlvii, V, 175, xlvii, V, 172 (which all fall within Gibbon's 4th volume.)
2. op. cit., p. 141.
3. loc. cit.
distinction between the first and the second categories of doublets. It is this suggestion of a dubious motive or suspicious policy which made these doublets so useful to Gibbon in dealing with what he saw as religious hypocrisy and imposition on the credulity of simple people. Both in his own day and since, he has been accused of using innuendo to ridicule religion. Innuendo there often is; no attentive reader can miss this particular intonation at times. But this and his other 'weapons', as Gibbon thought of them, were forged less against religion itself than against its exploiters and against human corruption of the system. It was human nature with its vices and follies, its mixed and suspect motives and its pretended principles of conduct which felt the full force of Gibbon's moral indignation, whether the guilty happened to be kings, generals, officials, or clergy. And this device of coupling veiled motives and possibilities, offered him by no means the least effective means of achieving this end. As he thought how rewarding pilgrimages had proved to their sponsors, he felt justified in mildly, almost tentatively coupling to the alleged, a more likely motive: 'The zeal, perhaps, the avarice, of the clergy of Jerusalem, cherished and multiplied these beneficial visits.'

The third class of doublets consists of opposites or virtual opposites, representing opposing viewpoints, different values or standards of judgement, such as sceptical versus superstitious, Roman versus barbarian, prejudiced versus impartial. It is another expression of the Gibbonian antithesis. It often represents the language of revaluation, presenting a view felt to be more truthful

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1. As he wrote of his development of irony in his Memoirs, p. 79.
2. DF, xxiii, 480-1. The expression and effect is essentially the same with or without the insertion of an 'or'.
and unbiased than the traditional. We have noticed this in Gibbon's treatment of Constantine, whose character, he claimed, remained even in the present age, an object either of 'satire or of panegyric.'

There was the view of the orthodox party who saw the deliverer of the church as a hero and saint; there was that of 'the vanquished party' which ranked him with the most hated tyrants. To the historian of the empire, the real Constantine, 'the cruel and dissolute monarch' emerged with the achievement of absolute power, 'corrupted by his fortune or raised by conquest above the necessity of dissimulation.'

In this third class, it is no longer a case of two factual possibilities so much as an interpretation of the facts; not, it may have been this, it may have been that, or even, it was ostensibly this, but more likely that. Instead we have two irreconcilable viewpoints, with the position of the historian, and in fact that of his reasonable, informed and 'impartial reader' nearly always made abundantly clear. Of one such instance Gibbon wrote: 'the opinion...may be countenanced by the historian as a serious truth or a salutary prejudice.' But the position of the 'philosophical historian' is obvious.

Many of these doublets suggest antithetical standpoints very lightly, almost in passing, but the point is made nevertheless. The question of the rightness or wrongness of a woman's suicide to avoid possible rape provoked two irreconcilable views. Was she to be regarded as a heroine and a martyr? The Syrian bishops had taken the contrary position and deplored such a suicide, 'the guilt or glory', said Gibbon, 'of female chastity'. Indeed, in so many of these doublets, we find

1. DF, xviii, II, 214.
2. DF, xviii, II, 216.
3. DF, xlv, V, 16.
4. DF, xl, IV, 236, n. 47.
one man's vice is another man's virtue. Thus the Persian subjects of the imperial puppets placed on the throne by the first Caesars, were soon disgusted with the vices or virtues which they had imbibed in a foreign land. Of the buildings erected by Justinian, Gibbon wrote that 'the greater part of these costly structures may be attributed to his taste or ostentation.' The British, due to a prolonged isolation from the Continent during the middle ages and consequent separation from Western Christendom, had remained 'in ignorance of the improvements or corruptions of a thousand years.' In the period of the Crusades, a 'holy madness' possessed many 'a saint or savage', though in fact Gibbon saw monks and especially hermits at any time in these terms. 'Several saints or mademen', he wrote in an earlier chapter, 'have been immortalised in monastic story.' He referred to the concept of the Crusades having been formed by Gregory VII, but noted that it was his successor to whom history attributed 'the glory or reproach of executing this holy enterprise.' And, in his assessment of Mahomet, he undertook a consideration of 'his beneficial or pernicious influence on the public happiness.'

In doublets of this type the historian is saying, 'It all depends upon which way you look at it', though his own viewpoint is in no doubt. Were the Crusades a glory or a reproach to their promoters? Not only from The Decline and Fall as a whole, but even from the couplet itself in its immediate context, the 'enlightened' verdict is unmistakable. Yet even here, and especially in such cases as the 'beneficial or pernicious influence' of a religious leader, the

1. DF, xlvii, V, 55.
2. DF, xlvii, V, 142.
3. DF, xlvii, V, 162.
4. DF, xxxvii, IV, 71; 'Maron, a saint or savage', said Gibbon, 'displayed his religious madness in Syria.' (xlvii, V, 166).
5. DF, lviii, VII, 271.
6. DF, I, V, 421.
complexity of historical judgements and of history as a reflection of the historian himself, comes through very clearly.

The fourth category of doublets is characterised by its being no longer open even in appearance as the form of words makes this quite clear. Grammatically it is marked by the use of the expression 'or rather' and in some cases, 'or at least'. It is thus only superficially an alternative that is given, as the second term is a rhetorical afterthought, but in fact an emendation deliberately appended to the former. It thus substitutes the real for the apparent, the genuine for the pretended, the factual for the alleged. If spoken, the almost parenthetical correction supplied by the second element would be indicated by a fall in pitch which represents a tone of disapproval, censure or even disgust. In Constantine's campaign against Maxentius, the imperial city was 'the noblest reward of his victory'; and its deliverance, Gibbon wrote, 'had been the motive, or rather indeed the pretence, of the civil war.' Valens', he asserted, 'had gained, or rather purchased, the friendship of the Saracens'; and Chrosroes, 'if he was armed with philosophic indifference, he accommodated his beliefs, or rather his professions, to the various circumstances of an exile and a sovereign.' The 'ambition, or rather the avarice' of this same ruler was attracted by 'Palestine and the holy wealth of Jerusalem.' Of the emperor, John Palaeologus, we are told, 'Love, or rather lust, was his only vigorous passion.' In the massacre of the imperial family, the

1. DF, xiv, I, 454. Cf. the example quoted in the introduction to this section, of the wars of modern Europe always having been 'justified by some principle, or at least coloured, by some pretext.' (iv, I, 129).
2. DF, xxvi, III, 120, n. 98.
3. DF, xlvi, V, 56; xlii, IV, 394.
4. DF, lxiv, VII, 40.
unhappy females were spared 'by the mercy, or rather the discretion, of Phocas.' During the great age of creeds and controversies, the uniform preaching of the orthodox definition of the incarnation as far afield as the British Isles, meant that 'the same ideas, or rather the same words, were repeated, by all the Christians' who followed the Greek or Latin rites. And with the clamour of these contentions still ringing in his ears, Gibbon felt obliged to record that, 'in the fever of the times, the sense, or rather the sound, of a syllable was sufficient to disturb the peace of an empire.'

Often very similar in its import, though not quite as categorical, are the expressions of the following type: 'Their ecclesiastical institutions are distinguished by a liberal principle of reason, or at least of policy.' Though Oliver referred to Gibbon's 'uncertainty' evidenced in this instance, it is surely a very deliberate emendation of the former term of the couplet which we have in this and in a number of similar cases. We find 'the most perfect, or at least the most popular, excuse', 'the name, or at least the abuse, of the Cross', 'disobedient to the letter, or at least the meaning, of the royal summons', 'and the citizens were illustrious by their spirit, or at least by their pride; by their riches, or at least by their luxury.' Referring to two letters from Gregory II to the Emperor Leo, Gibbon admitted that they 'exhibit the portrait, or at least the mask, of the founder of the papal monarchy.'

1. DF, xlvi, V, 69.
2. DF, xlvii, V, 153.
3. DF, xlvii, V, 139.
5. op. cit., p. 140.
7. DF, xlix, V, 275.
Why, the ingenuous reader might ask, did Gibbon use the form of words found in such examples? Why not state his view simply and directly by using the second term of the doublet: why begin with 'motive' if he meant 'pretence'; 'belief' if it was only 'profession' that he could vouch for; 'love' if it was only 'lust'; 'portrait' if he intended to write 'mask'? The answer is not just that the formula apparently pleased his ear, but probably also that it was less blunt, and with its antithetical effect, more provocative and morally stimulating. For The Decline and Fall, is no spontaneous or impromptu speech, but a studied oration, carefully weighed and corrected, tried out for effect. In such an oration the use of epistemological or moral co-ordinates is one of those rhetorical devices consciously fashioned to give that interplay of appearance and reality, of alleged and actual motives, which could not be achieved by a single word. It is yet another of the moralist's carefully designed uses of language which can penetrate the complacency of the reader.

Coming now to examine Gibbon's language at the word level, we discover several points relevant to our subject. His habit of taking the reader into his confidence has come upon a number of occasions. The most obvious way of doing this grammatically is by the use of the first personal pronoun. It has a more confidential effect than a mere reference to 'the reader' or 'every impartial reader', though on occasions this too can involve an invitation to share the author's moral judgement: 'The prudent reader will judge whether Martin was supported by the aid of miraculous powers, or of carnal weapons.'

It may also involve an assessment by author and reader of the impartiality and justice of a historical source: 'The judicious reader will

1. DF, xxviii, III, 207.
not always approve the asperity of censure, the choice of circumstance, or the style of expression; he will perhaps detect the latent prejudices and personal resentments which soured the temper of Ammianus himself.\(^1\)

A greater degree of confidentiality results when Gibbon asks 'the candid reader' to 'correct and excuse' a slip made in one of his earlier footnotes.\(^2\) But a much more personal relationship is brought about when the 'he' is transformed into 'I' or 'we'. Gibbon did, in fact, in a later section of his work, refer to 'my' reader, one who now knows him well enough to take his assurance for having examined his sources: 'My long accustomed reader will give me credit for saying that I myself have ascended to the fountain head' of the particular authorities referred to.\(^3\)

In most, perhaps three-quarters, of the 'I' passages, Gibbon was discussing his sources, his use of them, even, on three occasions his failure to trace a reference,\(^4\) or he was laying before the reader his method of procedure in his work. But in quite a number of cases he took the opportunity of using this first person approach to convey something of a broadly moral nature. 'For the credit of human nature', Gibbon confessed in one of his personal notes, 'I am always pleased to discover some good qualities in those men, whom party has represented as tyrants and monsters.'\(^5\) In a question of moral censure, he admitted personal responsibility for transferring the charge of avarice

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1. DF, xxxi, III, 311.
2. DF, xlvii, V, 62, n. 46.
3. DF, lvi, VI, 174.
4. 'I have somewhere heard or read'; 'I cannot recover the place'; 'I have not been able to verify the quotation' (DF, xxxvii, IV, 76, n. 58; 77, n. 64; 103, n. 142). Cf. 'I have the original... and a translation', xxvii, III, 185, n.99.
from the emperor Valens to his servants, to whom, he claimed, it more properly belonged than to a monarch.¹ He was ready also to 'frankly confess' a willingness 'to find or even to seek...some traces of the mild and tender sentiments of domestic life' among the revolutions of the world with all their fierce and ambitious conflicts.² Again, it is the voice of the moralist speaking in his own person when, in the middle of a suitably objective legal survey of Roman jurisprudence, he broke in, 'I wish to believe, that at Rome, as in Athens, the voluntary and effeminate deserter of his sex, was degraded from the honours and the rights of a citizen.' And, in a note referring to the same aberration, 'I believe, and hope, that the negroes...were exempt from this moral pestilence.'³ Thus Gibbon would use the first person on occasions to deliver a moral judgement: 'I cannot applaud the clemency of a prince who, among a crowd of victors, condemned the son of a patrician for deploring with some bitterness the execution of a virtuous father'; or 'Hypocrisy I shall never justify or palliate; but I will dare to observe that the odious vice of avarice is of all others most hastily arraigned and most unmercifully condemned'; or again, 'I will not absolve the pope from the reproach of treachery and falsehood.'⁴

Even the plural pronoun can sometimes help to convey more than an impersonal or editorial 'we': 'A generous though transient enthusiasm seemed to animate the military order; and we may hope that a few real

¹. DF, xxv, III, 20, n. 58.
². DF, xxvii, III, 172.
³. DF, xlv, V, 535 & 537, n. 205.
⁴. DF, xlvi, V, 190; 227; xlix, V, 291.
patriots cultivated the returning friendship of the army and the senate, as the only expedient capable of restoring the republic to its ancient beauty and vigour. ¹ Have we, in this expression of hope, Gibbon's own enthusiasm for the republic being shared with his reader in a slightly more intimate way? In another place he admitted, 'Of all our passions and appetites, the love of power is the most imperious and unsociable in its nature.'² One instance is striking, not so much because of the pronoun, as because of the following notice of intention to the reader about giving Carinus his just deserts. Counting on the reader's tacit support, Gibbon assumed his co-operation in inflicting the deserved penalty on a despicable pretender: 'Before we enter upon the memorable reign of that prince (Diocletian), it will be proper to punish and dismiss the unworthy brother of Numerian.'³

The use of phrasal synonyms, elegant variations to avoid repetition of names and titles, is a habit of Gibbon's, sometimes cumbersome, even confusing.⁴ But in some pointed and very deliberately chosen instances, we perceive not just obvious irony, but beyond that, a moral comment springing from the incongruity of the office and the character and conduct of the person concerned. Thus instead of the personal name of the prelate commanding the support of his subordinate bishops, we have 'the despotic primate of Asia', and Cyril of Alexandria becomes 'the author of the twelve anathemas.'⁵ This type of periphrasis is

1. DF, xii, I, 343.
2. DF, iv, I, 93.
3. DF, xii, 375.
4. The reader is often forced to backtrack to be sure of the person referred to. Of a slightly different type of confusion, Young remarked: 'It is asking too much of a reader that he should send for Ammianus Marcellinus to find out what happened, but I see no other way of determining against whose breast whose sword was turned.' (op. cit., p. 91). The synonym here is 'the Imperial minister'.
5. DF, xivii, V, 122, 123.
especially useful to Gibbon for referring to an unworthy pope. There
are several singularly appropriate instances: 'The successor of the
apostles might have inculcated with decent firmness the guilt of blood,
and the necessity of repentance.'^ The troops of the military patriarch,
Apollinaris, poised for battle in which soldiers were soon up to their
knees in blood, awaited the signal of their leader; and 'a charge,'
Gibbon recorded, 'was instantly sounded by the successor of the apostles.'
Eugenius, condemned by the Council of Basle, is referred to as 'the
contumacious successor of St. Peter.'^ And in another spitefully apt
turn of phrase to mark the blatant desecration of the sacred office,
Gibbon drew attention to the misconduct and especially the rapes of
John XII which 'had deterred the female pilgrims from visiting the tomb
of St. Peter, lest in the devout act they should be violated by his
successor.' The height of irony combined with understatement to
produce his most scathing and contemptuous indictment of a pope already
condemned by a church council. 'The most scandalous charges,' Gibbon
claimed, 'were suppressed; the vicar of Christ was only accused of
piracy, murder, rape, sodomy and incest.'

Another means of suggesting such moral incongruity is the use
of antithetical epithets. The censure is contained in the contradiction.
We read, for example, that by Justinian who had never drawn a sword
in the empire, 'some gentle violence was used to bend the stubborn
spirit of the grandson of Genseric'; and we are told of 'the disgraceful
honour' of a Christian chief who offered his services to the Moslem
conquerors and introduced their arms into Spain. This type of

1. DF, xlvi, V, 68.
2. DF, xlvii, V, 171.
3. DF, Ixvi, VII, 106.
4. DF, xlix, V, 318.
5. DF, lxx, VII, 300.
expression can also be used of 'virtues' and 'vices'. After the death of Suliman, his throne 'was degraded by the useless and pernicious virtues of a bigot.' And the inhabitants of the Italian countryside, even under the equitable though strong rule of Totila, looked for deliverance 'from the virtues of a Barbarian'. But such oxymorons, on the conventional pattern of 'pious fraud', are frequently and typically applied to religious subjects in The Decline and Fall. The conscience of the citizens of Herat was satisfied by a 'holy and meritorious perjury' in which they swore that certain houses of prayer, destroyed by their fanaticism, had never even existed.

In the persecution of Nestorius, the magistrates, soldiers and monks 'devoutly tortured the enemy of Christ and St. Cyril'.

The terms 'holy' and 'pious' are of particular service to Gibbon in these antithetical combinations which thereby gain such a stinging effect. So Gibbon wrote that the chronic popular dissensions in Constantinople, often fomented by religious faction, were founded 'on the most serious interest or holy pretence'; while, after 'the pious and profitable commission of despoiling the infidels', a force of Moslem 'holy robbers returned in triumph to Damascus'. Similarly we find 'pious' also applied to 'murder', 'falsehood', 'rebellion', 'hatred', warfare', robbers and robbery. A Saracen prince is said to have 'piously slaughtered' a royal captive, and Justinian, by whom

1. DF, lii, VI, 8.
2. DF, xliii, IV, 425.
4. DF, xlvi, V, 128.
6. DF, xlvi, V, 43; xlvi, V, 108; 140; 167; lvi, VI, 306; lvi, VI, 286 and cf. Mahomet's 'holy robbers' (1, V, 385).
'the slaughter of unbelievers' was not regarded as murder, 'piously laboured to established with fire and sword the unity of the Christian faith.'

The jarring incompatibility of expression in such cases draws our attention to the moral incompatibility of attitude or conduct to which it refers. We are alerted to those ambiguous principles and professions by which we often deceive ourselves and also to the ambiguous language by which we sometimes seek to disguise our lack of principle. Gibbon referred to 'ambiguous virtue', 'an ambiguous cast of religion', as well as to an 'ambiguous resolution', 'answer' or 'declaration', and the 'prudent ambiguity' of expression used by courts, conquerors, and ambassadors.

Like Fielding, Gibbon was keenly aware of and concerned with the ambiguity and the debasement of language in common usage. 'Laws and language', he wrote, 'are ambiguous and arbitrary.' And this awareness lay behind his questioning of the accepted use and abuse of words. It is at the root of many of his couplets with 'or', and it likewise informs the choice of many of his qualifiers, including those paradoxical combinations with 'devout', 'holy' and 'pious', which thereby gain a sort of corrective force. By what code of ethics could murder or falsehood be considered as 'pious' or what sort of

1. DF, I, V, 352; xlvii, V, 145.
2. DF, lviii, VI, 289; xlviii, V, 226; lIx, VI, 371; lxxi, VII, 332.
3. DF, xxxix, IV, 189; lxiv, VII, 1489
4. DF, xlv, IV, 489.
religious system is it that can regard robbery or perjury as 'holy'? By means of such a contradiction, they stand self-condemned so that the historian need say no more. Here he was simply adopting, but with an ironic twist, the language and sentiments of those religious fanatics or opportunists whose actions and outlook he was holding up to ridicule and contempt. This contrasts with his use elsewhere of the plain and direct language of denunciation or exposure: 'impious', 'degenerate', or 'wicked'.

References to the abuse of language in a general sense recur throughout the work. For instance, Gibbon distinguished between his sources, finding some court historians mere sycophants - 'the voice of history' then became 'little more than the organ of hatred or flattery' - for those, who like Procopius did not flatter, wrote out of spite and enmity. He accused the Byzantine princes of cultivating 'the language of falsehood and declamation'; the Magi and satraps of addressing the Persian monarch 'in a strain of artful adulation which assumed the language of freedom'; rival prelates of disguising their hatred 'in the hollow language of respect and charity'. And he wrote knowingly of 'the language of the usurpers of every age' by which they exonerate themselves and present a specious appearance of innocence. But one concerned with 'the truth of history' must face up to the abuse of language both in the records of the past, and in the debased currency of present usage. He was confronted by the two adjectives 'bad' and

1. Cf. e.g. 'impious robber', lix, VI, 359.
2. DF, x, I, 293, cf. 'venal orators'; and contrast the envy he found in Procopius and Ammianus.
3. DF, xlvi, V, 423; 73; xlvii, V, 120.
4. DF, xlvi, V, 100.
5. The phrase 'the truth of history' turns up several times. See above chap. V.
'good' employed to distinguish the son and grandson of Roger, King of Sicily; 'but', as he pointed out, 'these epithets which appear to describe the perfection of vice and virtue cannot strictly be applied either of the Norman princes.'

On the other hand, he had no reservations about referring to 'a king of France who has rightly deserved the epithet of wise.'

It is, indeed, mostly at the level of the word or phrase - the verb, the epithet or the title - that Gibbon's specific references to the abuse of language are found, though as we have seen, he did object in more general terms to bombast and false declamation in the style of orators and historians. The eighteenth century cultivated a fastidiousness, almost a fad, for correctness in grammar and a 'proper' use of words. Gibbon, while no pedant, showed a laudable desire to clarify word usage. In a reference to 'a martyr', he added the corrective comment: 'how strangely has that word been distorted from its original sense of a common witness.' So too, he commented on 'aggressor', 'an arabiguous name', and 'faith' he called 'an ambiguous word.' Likewise he realised that the milder virtues of generosity, gentleness and humanity are liable to misjudgement on the part of

1. DF, lvi, VI, 227.
2. DF, lxx, VII, 292.
3. On the positive side we may note his use of the expression, 'the language of reason and virtue' (xxx, III, 260).
4. Apart from the comments in various books and grammars, there is a wealth of verbal criticism in the numerous periodicals, such as The Spectator, The Connoisseur, The Critical Review, The Monthly Review and The Gentleman's Magazine.
5. DF, xxxviii, IV, 121, n. 48.
6. DF, lxii, VI, 484; 491.
the insensitive and aspiring. By an insistence that no Christian blood be shed in his own quarrel, the emperor Michael, as Gibbon pointed out, clearly showed his 'humanity'. But he felt constrained to add in parenthesis, 'by the ambitious it will be called weakness.'

Since language, like the qualities it refers to, is continually being abused, Gibbon saw it as part of his task to keep the reader on his guard, and also from time to time, as we have seen, to expose examples of this abuse. The practice is seen when he reminds us, for instance, that 'the avarice of their chiefs was only coloured by the more specious names of ambition and glory.' This caveat introduces us to one of Gibbon's indispensable terms, 'specious'. It recurs continually, not always with a suspicious suggestion, but is to be seen as one of those words which are there to alert the reader, prompting him to question a motive or assertion and to look beneath the surface of what is actually said. Gibbon referred to 'the smooth and specious surface of events' and used the word in such applications as 'specious virtues', 'specious arts', 'specious pretence', 'specious promises', 'the most specious reasons', 'specious professions' and 'specious language.'

'Specious' is one of those danger signals which keep flashing from time to time warning us to beware of appearances and fine words.

1. DF, xlviii, V, 206.
2. DF, I, V, 188.
3. DF, lxiii, V, 511; cf. 'smooth and specious manners', lxiii, V, 530.
4. Among the more neutral or even complimentary uses are the reference to the Institutes of Christianity as 'an elegant and specious work' and to the doctrine of the immateriality of the soul as 'a specious and noble tenet' (xliv, 501, n. 98; xlvii, 111).
But there is in *The Decline and Fall* a far more categorical set of terms which go beyond arousing our doubts or provoking our suspicion. I refer to Gibbon's habitual use of modifiers and verbs expressing approbation or censure which strike the modern reader as far removed from the approach of a detached historian. These lexical choices are yet another indication of Gibbon's commitment to moral and to value judgements. He expected 'every impartial reader to condemn the partiality' of a ruler, the wrongness of a character or an action, and he regarded such a verdict as endorsing the judgement of posterity.¹

One of the most characteristic of these qualifiers is the word 'just' and its derivatives. Actions are described as 'just' or 'unjust', offenders are 'justly punished' while the innocent suffer 'unjustly'. We find 'just contempt' and 'unjust suspicions', 'just severity' and an 'unjust death'. Theodosius was said to have been 'justly provoked', the cruelty of a 'profligate bishop' to have 'provoked the just indignation of mankind'; and in one of his general statements, Gibbon referred to 'the ambiguous reputation which is the just recompense of obscure and subtle policy'.² In a sentence like, 'The honours of the ancient martyrs were prostituted to these criminals who justly suffered for their murder and rebellion',³ the moral verdict is initially indicated by the verb 'prostituted' and confirmed by the adverb 'justly'. 'Justify' is used in similar contexts: 'The hasty retreat of Constantius might be justified by weighty reasons', where there is the slightly ambiguous suggestion of self-justification; 'the furious passions, which she indulged on this suspicious occasion, seemed to justify the severity of Theodosius', or more unequivocally, 'the ecclesiastical policy cannot

¹ See, e.g. DF, xxiv, II, 506, n. 4 and xxiii, 491 and above chapt. V.
² DF, xxvii, III, 163, 146.
³ DF, xlix, V, 271.
be justified'. 1 In one of the paratactic doublets, the peremptory
effect of the first adjective is somewhat softened by the second:
'the hasty, perhaps the justifiable resentment of their fellow
citizens.' 2 Perhaps his use of the term in his own defence throws
some light on Gibbon's feeling of commitment to the justice of the
historical views expressed in similar language: 'Yet I must excuse
my own defects by a just complaint of the blindness and insufficiency
of my guides.' 3 In many cases the use of the modifier serves to
confirm or to reverse historical judgements as Gibbon suggests that
the conduct of a person or group has been 'justly applauded' or 'most
unjustly deplored'. Herodian, he wrote, 'has been most unjustly
censured for sparing the vices of Maximin'; and he took it upon
himself to declare that the forty-seven accusations brought by the
bishops and deacons against Chrysostom, 'may justly be considered
as a fair and unexceptionable panegyric.' 4

'Worthy' and 'unworthy' are examples of other adjectives applied
to deeds and characters to convey the historian's moral estimate of
them. There is sometimes a suggestion of rather conventional usage,
but often there is a hint of the recurring typical epithets of
the classical epic, like pious AEnaeas. Gibbon tended to use such
terms as 'worthy', 'honourable' and their opposites as appropriate
attributives once the keynote of the character had been sounded. 5

1. DF, xxi, III, 362; xxxii, III, 411 (the sentence continues,
'and the empress...was disgraced, perhaps unjustly, in the eyes
of the world');
2. DF, xxxii, III, 286.
3. DF, li, V, 428.
4. DF, vii, I, 186, n. 11; xxxii, III, 399.
5. We find, 'the unworthy Honorius'; 'his unworthy rival'; 'the
worthy son of a respected father' &c.
Among the verbs of moral judgement readily employed by Gibbon are 'deplore', 'deserve' and 'disgrace'. The historian himself tended to deplore or to refer to earlier writers who rightly deplored certain conduct: his characters deserved praise or blame, and they sometimes disgraced their position, their country, or mankind. 'Gratian deserved and enjoyed the applause of his subjects' and Theodosius 'has deserved the singular commendation that his virtues always seemed to expand with his fortune', while 'great' was 'an epithet which he honourably deserved on this momentous occasion'.

On the other hand, 'The bishops had disgraced themselves by exercising the function of accusers in a criminal prosecution'; 'the new magistrate... disgraced his benefactor, by the contrast of a virtuous and temperate administration'; and the execution of 'the royal captive', Radagaisus, 'disgraced the triumph of Rome and of Christianity'.

These are but a few samples of Gibbon's vocabulary of moral comment as found in The Decline and Fall, for he is continually justifying or acquitting, commending or censuring, either by direct statement or by implication. Thus, in the following sentence he is justifying a decision of 'the prudent Stilicho' just as clearly by implication as if he had written 'Stilicho was justified' or 'Stilicho acted very justly': 'But if Stilicho had any longer endured the revolt of Africa, he would have betrayed the security of the capital, and the majesty of the Western emperor to the capricious insolence of a Moorish rebel.'

The tone is once again that of the orator at the bar, putting the moral alternatives before his hearers, and confident which

1. DF, xxvi, III, 113; xxvii, III, 176; xxvi, III, 129.
2. DF, xxvii, III, 163; xxix, III, 234; xxx, III, 281-2
3. DF, xxix, III, 244.
way the verdict must go. This sort of persuasive eloquence recalls Gibbon's earliest piece of serious historical writing, where, as he presented certain moral considerations against which the case should be judged, he concluded: 'It belongs to the reader to pronounce sentence...I pretend not to decide.'¹ Over the years his judgement had become more certain: in The Decline and Fall, he did pronounce sentence or, by various means, indicated the verdict which he felt it incumbent upon his impartial reader to pass. In the spirit of his model, Tacitus, and in accordance with his own Vindication,² Gibbon saw the historian's duty as involving the praise or blame of men's actions and motives and the recording of moral judgements. A man's conduct should be 'excused' or 'pardoned' or, on occasions, 'condemned'. Such were the verbs he used without evading the issue or passing on to his reader the judicial responsibility. He boldly and unequivocally indicated the 'just' deserts or 'disgrace' of his characters by such epithets as 'worthy', 'honourable' or by their antonyms; he freely used such terms as 'corrupted', 'degenerated', 'degraded', 'effeminate' and 'deplorable'; and his verdicts were often conveyed by expressions like 'violating every principle of humanity and justice', 'violated the laws of humanity and religion', 'of friendship and hospitality', 'of Christian charity and civil justice' or 'insulted the feelings of mankind'. Such expressions keep ringing in the reader's ears to such an extent that their very familiarity may rob them of some of their moral force. He is even, as Gibbon might have expressed it,

1. 'Critical Researches concerning the title of Charles VIII to the Crown of Naples', MW, III, 221-2; and see above, chap. IV, p. 122.
2. MW, IV, 531-2; and see above, chap. I, p. 1.
almost 'insensibly' conditioned into tacit acceptance of this message of degeneration and decline where he might not agree with all the historian's analyses or conclusions.

'Insensible' and its corresponding adverb may appropriately serve to introduce Gibbon's whole vocabulary of 'decline', for these words are frequently used in the context of both material and moral deterioration. In one place, where he justified his use of the term by adding a sort of ad hoc definition, he wrote: 'But the greatest part of the temples of Persia were ruined by the insensible and general desertion of their votaries. It was insensible, since it is not accompanied with any memorial of time or place, of persecution or resistance'. Here it is a picture of 'ruin' and 'the vicissitude of fortune', behind which lay the insensible process of desertion and decay. More often, however, the word has a psychological or moral application, which can be seen in the following instances. 'When the spirit of fanaticism, at once so credulous and so crafty, has insinuated itself into a noble mind, it insensibly corrodes the vital principles of virtue and veracity.' The process, to use another of Gibbon's frequent terms is 'insidious'. The crafty insinuation of a destructive principle, which eats away nobility of mind and imperial greatness, is fatal to both vitality and virtue. A similarly imperceptible process was operating in the military sphere. We recall the traditional Roman weapons, 'which had subdued the world', 'insensibly' dropping from the 'feeble hands' of 'the enervated soldiers' who thus 'abandoned their own and the public defence'.

1. DF, li, V, 591.
2. DF, xxii, II, 427.
3. DF, xxviii, III, 197.
Arabian conquerors, mingling with the conquered peoples of the East, 'insensibly lost the freeborn and martial virtues of the desert', and the 'hardy virtue of the Vandals' succumbed to prosperity and a soft climate, so that they 'insensibly became the most luxurious of mankind.' A similar softness and luxury affected the Romans and in the same almost imperceptible way: 'The simplicity of Roman manners was insensibly corrupted by the stately affectation of the courts of Asia.'

In his chapter on the Antonines, Gibbon explicitly drew attention to the seeds of decay, the destructive forces which might have passed almost unnoticed by most contemporaries: 'it was scarcely possible', he claimed, that they 'should discover in the public felicity the latent causes of decay and corruption'; nor would they perceive mankind 'daily sinking below the old standard of Roman greatness and freedom.' His common practice, however, in *The Decline and Fall*, is merely to slip in this word, 'insensibly' with reference to those tendencies -luxury, affectation, oriental pomp, credulity, superstition, fanaticism - which brought about a decline in Roman manners, in manly virtues of the hardy Arab or Germanic warriors, or in the life of the church. If the first signs often passed unnoticed, 'the progress of decay' was steady and continuous, in government, society and religion. There, 'a superstitious practice', the veneration of saints and relics,

1. *DF*, liii, Vi, 49; xli, IV, 300.
2. *DF*, xvii, II, 169. Maximus himself, 'was insensibly corrupted by the temptations of a court' (xxiii, II, 475).
'which tended to increase the temptations of fraud and credulity, extinguished the light of history and reason in the Christian world'.

So much so that under this and other corrupting influences, the Christians of the seventh century 'had insensibly relapsed into a semblance of paganism'.

The fathers of the church and of the Capitol, as well as the people of the Roman empire and before long its conquerors, 'alike degenerated from the virtues' of their predecessors. This is all part of the Gibbonian story of decline, involving several empires and kingdoms, ecclesiastical government, agriculture, the arts and learning. And it has its own ubiquitous vocabulary in The Decline and Fall. This vocabulary is, of course, traditional, for Gibbon was heir to a succession of writers who had dealt with the subject of decline. There were the classical authors who had nourished his earlier as well as his maturer intellectual growth. Sallust gave prominence to the corrupting influence of luxury on simple manners in much the way Gibbon expressed it; Tacitus stressed the loss of liberty and high standards, while two other writers to whom Gibbon expressed great indebtedness, the historian Ammianus and the satirist, Juvenal, supplied him with a wealth of example and rhetoric on the luxury-effeminacy theme and with their scorn of a lazy, ostentatious and vulgar urban society. Nearer his own time he found in Machiavelli the connection between decline in virtue and the loss of liberty in a republic, or in Guicciardini an emphasis once again on the corruption of Roman manners, and he learnt as we know, from Montesquieu's Considerations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence.

1. DF, xxvii, III, 221.
2. DF, 1, V, 361. See also Jordan's interpretation of the use of 'insensible', Gibbon and his Roman Empire, pp. 220-1.
Peter Burke, tracing 'the idea of decline from Bruni to Gibbon', has mentioned the common images of downward movement to be found in the languages of Europe, the Latin terms for which included declinatio, inclinatio, decadentia, lapsus, eversio, all part of 'a large repertoire of metaphors or schemata' describing a change mainly for the worse. The notion of 'decline', he reminds us, could be variously applied over this period, to cosmic decline, 'the decay of the universe, the old age of the world'; to moral decline, 'or the decay of manners'; to ecclesiastical decline; to political decline, 'or the fall of republics, kingdom and empires'; to cultural decline, 'or to the decadence of language, arts, and sciences'; and to economic decline, 'or the decline of wealth, trade, industry, and population.' With the exception of the first, all these types of decline find their place in Gibbon's scheme, though he laid relatively little stress on the last.

Not only the underlying notion, the wide application of the term, but also the metaphors of 'decline' such as that of the collapsing fabric of an edifice, or the slow poison in the body politic were commonplace by the time Gibbon took up the theme. So too were the contrast between tyranny and freedom, luxury and simplicity as exemplified by 'degenerate' Romans or Greeks and the castigation of ecclesiastical despotism, ambition and superstition. But, while drawing on an ample tradition and a ready-made vocabulary, he showed himself, as Peter Burke points out, 'far more subtle and complex' than any previous writer, and his 'awareness of the complexity of the process of decline and fall makes his analysis much more satisfying

to a modern reader than that of any of his predecessors'. Thus, for example, on the one hand he uses the Roman writers' diagnosis of decline, 'with its emphasis on moral factors, such as the corruption of manners, and the rise of luxury, and he frequently repeats their judgements'; but, on the other hand, as the friend and admirer of Adam Smith, he also showed an awareness of the importance of economic factors, including in one instance even 'a defense of luxury from an economic point of view'.

But, if for once he could allow himself to view it through the eyes of an economist, it was almost invariably through those of a moralist: luxury was repeatedly 'enervating', 'effeminate' or 'corrupting'; and he saw it as contributing directly to decline in every sphere, military, political, social and religious.

How far is this true of the whole vocabulary of decline? Some of these terms have a definite moral content, others carry moral overtones and implications which are derived from a particular situational or verbal context. 'Degenerate' and its corresponding nouns, like 'corrupt' and 'corruption', almost invariably suggest a moral judgement, while 'decay', though often a close companion of 'corruption', is more context dependent and is applied to anything from agriculture and military power to a more general decline of Rome, Constantinople, or the empire as a whole. It is often used in the material sense of the deterioration of buildings, a sense which it shares with the commonest application of the word 'ruin'. 'Decline' is the all-embracing term, less morally committed and less frequently defined by context than the others, though it is sometimes applied to qualities like courage, genius and manly virtue.  

1. op. cit., p. 99.
Alternative, 'sinking', it usually has an unspecified reference to a general loss of power and greatness, with a suggestion of impending 'ruin'.

'Degenerate' and 'degeneracy' on the other hand, recurring as they do throughout the whole work, need no qualification to specify their moral force. They carry their own message. And it is no doubt the recurrence of words like 'degenerate' and 'corrupt', especially as applied to aged and periods in Gibbon's History which gives to the notion of decline a strong moral connotation. If the story of decline in the West was largely that of 'the degenerate Romans', that of the second part of the work focussed on 'the degenerate Romans of the East'.

The word is applied to peoples, notably the Romans and Byzantine Greeks, but also to the mind or spirit, or to an age like that of the young Julian or of Honorius. The emphasis, even in the noun and adjective, is most frequently on the process of degeneration, involving a comparison either implied or expressed, with earlier and better times or ancestors of a nobler stamp. But apart from an inherent moral suggestion, these terms are often directly linked with vice and depravity in the emperors, or their citizens 'polluted with the meanest vices of wealth and slavery', or again with 'effeminacy', disorderliness, discord, and the loss of liberty and valour.

1. It is introduced in chap. ii in reference to a 'degenerate' period, p. 64, again in xxvi, II, 124 'a sinking world' and several times in later chapters, e.g. lxvi, VI, 453, 'the sinking empire' (cf. also liii, VI, 72).
2. DF, iii, I, 82; vi, I, 142; xi, I, 317; xvii, II, 191; xxx, III, 295; xxxv, III, 471; xxxvi, IV, 21.
3. DF, I, VI, 10; cf. 'the degenerate Greeks', xxx, III, 255 &c.
4. See e.g. lxv, VII, 75; xxvii, III, 145; xxiv, II, 512; xxx, III, 260.
5. Thus, e.g. 'degenerate successors', xv, II, 34; 'sons', xix, II, 261; 'grandsons' xvii, II, 194. Often the expression is 'had degenerated from', or 'into'.
6. DF, iii, I, 86; vi, I, 142; li, V, 503; li, V, 427; lix, VI, 348.
'Corrupt' and 'corruption' seem to stand out as the most recurrent and characteristic of this group of words portraying decline. In the second chapter we are introduced to 'the latent causes of decay and corruption' and throughout the rest of part one of The Decline and Fall, there is only a single chapter in which the word does not appear, in most appearing a number of times. And in that single chapter there are several occurrences of the fact even if the name itself is not mentioned.¹

We read of 'the progress of corruption' and we find a section subtitled 'the corruption of the times', where the text affirms that 'every species of corruption polluted the course of public and private life'.² In fact there are several references to the 'corruption' or the 'contagion' of an age, to 'the most corrupt of times' and even to 'the incurable corruption of the times'.³ Not only the state but also the church has been corrupted.⁴ Corruption characterised rulers and statesmen, courts and armies, whole cities like Rome, Constantinople or Antioch and both the Western and the Eastern empires. Gibbon even described it as 'universal' and associated it with 'the vices of a declining empire'.⁵ So overpowering, indeed, is this smell of corruption and decay, ⁶ especially throughout the first part of the work that it

1. Chapt. xxx, see e.g. III, pp. 260-1, 289, 294, 297.
3. DF, vi, I, 169; xliii, IV, 435; xi, I, 308; xxiii, II, 456; xii, I, 373; x, I, 268.
4. DF, iv, I, 110 'the corrupted state'; for the church, see xx, II, 336; xxviii, III, 225; xxxii, III, 398; xxxvii, IV, 62; lxx, VII, 291.
5. DF, xxxiv, III, 454.
6. 'Decay', after its first appearance in chap. ii ('decay and corruption'), returns in Gibbon's 2nd volume (Bury xvii, II, 168), and occurs not infrequently in later chapters, e.g. xxxi and xl. Apart from its general sense, paralleling that of 'decline', it is applied to military spirit, discipline and virtue, the arts, agriculture, and population.
doubtless serves to confirm the involuntary feelings of the reader
that here is Gibbon's primary answer to the question of Rome's fall:
it was through moral corruption. And the very recurrence of the
expression 'corruption of manners' helps to reinforce this impression.¹
Whatever Gibbon's thesis, or lack of it, and however tentatively or
inconsistently any such thesis may be argued, as critics suggest, it
is certain that the notion of corruption and decay is stamped on our
mind and even on our moral sense as a direct result of its repetition.

And yet this is not to suggest that Gibbon ever substituted
rhetoric for factual narration or that he resorted to a battery of
figurative expressions to convey the persistent idea of decline. He
scrupulously avoided the inflated and highly declamatory language of
those he considered bad historians. He aimed at and hit what he
considered the 'middle tone' and his style is sparing in the use of
metaphor. In his second chapter he felt it necessary to affirm that
the substance of certain contemporary passages quoted was 'perfectly
agreeable to historic truth', since suspicions would naturally be
aroused by their 'air of rhetoric and declamation.'² He was continually
alert to the danger that 'the truth of history' might be compromised
by the careless use of highly figurative language. He had taken to heart
Hume's advice to him as an aspiring historian. Advising him to write
in English, the philosopher had warned that the use of French 'has led
you into a style more poetical and figurative, and more highly coloured,
than our language seems to admit of in historical productions.'³

1. DF, iii, I, 67, 86; vi, I, 161; xxxiii, III, 435; cf. 'depravity
    of manners', xlviii, V, 209.
2. DF, ii, I, 61.
    edition of the Memoirs, MW., I, 204-5.
Coming to the writing of *The Decline and Fall*, Gibbon kept a critical eye on his sources, censuring what he saw as abuses of language in this respect. Even Ammianus, the 'impartial historian' from whom Gibbon took his most extended quotation on the moral deterioration of the Roman nobility,\(^1\) is criticised for his abuse of metaphorical expressions. This was not merely 'bad taste' but involved a much more serious fault, that of confusing the reader: 'It is not easy to distinguish his facts from his metaphors'.\(^2\) It was serious because it affected 'the truth of history.'

After referring to this comment on Ammianus, Braudy claimed that Gibbon himself was capable of 'such distortion' and cited the sentence '...a thousand swords were plunged at once into the bosom of the unfortunate Probus'.\(^3\) How far is this true? Certainly it is not Gibbon at his best. His moderation has for once succumbed to melodramatic effect. Yet there is no mistaking the fact. Nor is there really any metaphor to obscure it, though the hyperbole may depart somewhat from the habitual 'middle tone'. Yet even the rather immoderate exaggeration at least suggests the multitude of drawn swords each vying to be the first to strike. Perhaps it is more in the vein of Cecil B. de Mille than 'the historian of the Roman empire', but even so the fact of Probus' death at the hands of his enraged troops is abundantly clear. And this, after all, is our primary concern.

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1. *DF*, xxii, III, 312-8. In Gibbon's free rendering the passage contains such expressions as 'degraded and sullied', 'unbounded licence of vice and folly', 'pernicious luxury', and in its conclusion has this sentence: 'These vices, which degrade the moral character of the Romans, are mixed with a puerile superstition, that disgraces their understanding.'
Equally clear are the facts of decline, corruption and decay as revealed in the narrative, and the actual terms merely give a general significance to particular events or symptoms of this downward trend. It is the ubiquity rather than the metaphorical quality of these terms that is responsible for the desired effect.

'The metaphors of decline, fall and corruption,' according to Braudy, 'overshadow the first volume' of Gibbon's History. And this probably tallies with the general impression of the reader. Usually, however, Braudy continued, Gibbon 'is more scrupulous', as for instance when pointing out that a battle on the frozen Danube was 'a real fact', and not just 'a puerile figure of rhetoric'. But, 'after he has established his authority as a historian, Gibbon can afford to be metaphoric because his readers know exactly what liberties he is taking.'¹ Let us look at these statements in the light of the vocabulary of decline.

The distinction once again, in Braudy and in Gibbon, is between literal and metaphorical. Is it a fact or merely a figure of rhetoric? So we may ask, was any reader really in danger of mistaking 'decline' or 'fall' as physical, or 'corruption' as actual putrefaction? Furthermore, when so many of our everyday expressions contain what was once a metaphor, do we regard it as figurative language to refer to 'a dirty trick' or 'a bright student'? So much of Gibbon's terminology of 'decline', as we have seen, was traditional and readymade, its metaphors almost as dead as the empire to which they were applied. He expected

¹ Braudy, loc. cit., the reference to the battle on the Danube is v, I, 124, n. 35.
his 'prudent reader'\(^1\) to be acquainted with such terms in contemporary usage and not to interpret them as literal effects. If such intelligent readers were not familiar with the traditional terms in earlier writers, they may have heard of Montagu's *Reflections on the Rise and Fall of the Ancient Republics*, then a relatively recent work,\(^2\) or at least of 'corruption' in high places even nearer home.

Gibbon, for his part, was indeed always 'scrupulous' about this question of fact and metaphor. As early as his second chapter, in one of his few extended metaphors of decline, namely that of the 'pigmies', he both labelled it as a metaphor\(^3\) and also acknowledged the quality of the writer from whom it was taken. It was no fresh coinage of his own but another 'classical' comparison from the lament of 'the sublime Longinus' on 'the degeneracy of his contemporaries', which Gibbon merely endorsed and extended: 'This diminutive stature of mankind, if we pursue the metaphor, was daily sinking below the old standard, and the Roman world was indeed peopled by a race of pigmies, when the fierce giants of the north broke in and mended the puny breed.'\(^4\) It formed a useful and effective comparison to conclude his chapter, as it allowed him to contrast the present littleness of the Romans not only with their former greatness, but also with the great and 'manly spirit of freedom' of the barbarian invaders. But the important point here is that the sentence is in no way inconsistent with Gibbon's habitual restraint in the use of figurative language.

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1. See e.g. *DF*, xxviii, III, 207; livi, VI, 200.
3. Not that Gibbon underestimated his reader to the extent of fearing he might think mankind had become physically shorter.
Whatever view one may take of the Braudy-Jordan hypothesis concerning the development of the historian's persona in *The Decline and Fall*, it can safely be said that Gibbon's clarity and avoidance of confusion between fact and metaphor do not have to wait till 'he has established his authority as a historian' and that his readers know from the beginning what liberties, if any, he is taking with the language of fact. His style is dignified and often imposing both because of its structure and rhythms and because of the precise choice of words. But it is predominantly plain, matter-of-fact and never fanciful. And this applies to the expressions connected with decline. One might say, though the distinction is by no means exclusive, that their effect is more often moral than metaphorical. Nor does this vocabulary change significantly as the work progresses. A careful study of its content in the later volumes, shows that it is substantially the same, with some terms predominating in certain chapters, though the objects to which they are applied have changed. It is now the Moslem religion, the empire of the caliphs, the Byzantine rulers, their degenerate subjects, or the monks and the medieval church.

After surveying these marks of decline displayed on such a broad canvas and unrolled almost to its full length, we are still being reminded in the last chapters of 'ruin', 'the decline of the arts', 'the religion of Mahomet...corrupted even 'by the example of the Christian' monastic orders and 'the long decay of the Byzantine monarchy'. We are also reminded of the great extent in time of

2. 'Our curiosity has been tempted to visit the most remote countries of Europe and Asia', Gibbon reminded his reader in chap. lxix (VII, 218).
3. See lxviii, VII, 206; lxvii, VII, 146; lxix, VII, 218.
this decay, a whole millenium in the case of the eastern capital, which in Gibbon's view sprang out of the seeds of decay brought over from the West. ¹ This sense of time and continuing decadence is accentuated by these backward glances of the historian: 'in the long career of the decline and fall of the Roman empire', 'in the first ages of the decline and fall of the Roman empire', 'the final extinction of the two dynasties... should terminate the decline and fall of the Roman empire in the East.'² But even at the end, despite the first rays of the revival of learning in the West, we return to the city itself only to discover that 'the character of the inhabitants was debased', 'the vices of the clergy had degenerated' and even the Roman hero and expected liberator, 'degenerated into the vices of a king'.³ And if one turned to view the ancient remains in order to recall the former greatness, it was all but impossible 'to measure the progress of decay'.⁴

By the time he has finished the final chapter, the thoughtful reader finds this vocabulary of decline imprinted on his mind as it was on the author who had lived in it for almost twenty years. Little wonder that we catch echoes of it in his letters and perhaps also in his Memoirs. For instance his reference to de Severy's death explaining that 'every vital principle had been exhausted' recalls that diagnosis in chapter xxxi of 'the decline of empire, when every principle of health and life had been exhausted'.⁵ The idea of decline and fall had been

¹. Its decay, said Gibbon, was 'premature and permanent', its 'decline almost coeval with her foundation' (DF, xxxii, III, 378; lxiv, VII, 33).
². DF, lxvii, VII, 161; lxix, 218; lxviii, 212.
³. DF, lxix, VII, 255, 231; lxx, VII, 282.
⁴. DF, lxxi, VII, 316.
part of his thinking just as he had become 'the historian of the Roman empire' and he could write more jocularly to Lady Sheffield: 'The progress of my Gout is in general so regular, and there is so much uniformity in the history of its decline and fall.' As he wrote to her husband, lamenting how his own place of retirement had recently been clouded by the disorders of France and its 'domestic harmony... somewhat embittered by the infusion of party spirit', he was tempted to refer to 'the decline and fall of Lausanne', though he deleted the second term from his letter. Perhaps he feared that 'the new barbarians' might undermine the stability of the city which he had made very much his own. 'From my early acquaintance with Lausanne', he wrote in his Memoirs, 'I had always cherished a secret wish that the school of my youth might become the retreat of my declining age.'

It was during that early acquaintance that he had begun to acquire, especially from a study of Pascal, the control of his most characteristic tone, that of 'grave and temperate irony'. And, as Young has commented, 'his mingling of truth and malice in an innocent antithesis is often of the purest Pascalian quality.' It was during his second period in Lausanne that he made the acquaintance of Juvenal, whose Satires had such a lasting effect on him. He read and pondered each satire, going over most of them twice and making extended comments. He regretted not having become familiar with the satirist earlier, but added that from

6. JB, Aout-Septembre, 1763, pp. 3-42. Satires 4 to 15 he re-read either completely or in part.
then on Juvenal would be one of his favourite authors. 1 We can see from Gibbon's notes on his reading how far Juvenal's view of imperial Rome corresponded with his own, and further, how 'the historian of the Roman empire' was being prepared by looking at corruption and decline through the eyes of the Roman satirist. Gibbon was struck by the penetration of this writer, by his brevity and by his ability to pare back everything in his verse, in order to bring out the main issue with clarity and precision. 2 But apart from these lessons in the use of language, he was struck by the moral force of the Satires: 'How coarse were the Romans amidst all their luxury', he exclaimed in his Journal, 3 and the language of The Decline and Fall was later to reflect this judgement. Juvenal, he found, showed his 'serious indignation' and contempt for the degenerate Romans, he never lost an opportunity of arraigning the folly and tyranny of their rules, and he traced the progress of avarice in the human heart. 4 Gibbon, the developing moralist, found in Juvenal 'the tone of a true censor who discomfits vice and exposes follies and makes the guilty tremble'. 5 Juvenal's particular targets lay outside the period which Gibbon had chosen, but his characterisations of Roman life served the historian on many occasions and he referred his reader to passages in the satirist. He also learnt from the satiric approach to corrupt and degenerate persons, from this author's penetration and the liveliness of his pictures of Roman decadence. Thus the linguistic weapon which Gibbon first discovered in Pascal and that which he later found in Juvenal, he soon learned to wield for himself. The Roman satirist struck a responsive chord in the English historian.

1. JB, 17me, Sept., 1763, p. 38.
2. See JB, 16me, Sept., 1763, pp. 32-3.
4. See JB, 31me, Aout and 16me, Sept., 1763, pp. 16-7, 33.
5. JB, 31me, Aout, 1763, p. 16; compare Sheffield's translation, M.W., V, 297.
When he came to the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Gibbon relied very heavily on another satirist, whom he praised for the same 'lively' descriptions and 'original' pictures which he had applauded in Juvenal. Amongst the very numerous references to Claudian in this section of The Decline and Fall, is one which draws a comparison between Claudian's description of the Council of Eutropius and that of Domitian in Juvenal's Fourth Satire, which Gibbon regarded as 'perhaps the most striking piece of satire in all of antiquity'. We can thus discern in the liveliness and sharpness of this satirical language something very congenial to the historian concerned with 'the vices and follies' of mankind. We recall his opinion that in one of Claudian's satirical comparisons, he violated 'the dignity rather than the truth of history'. Poetic truth, sharpened by satiric acuteness could often be of service to the moralist in his presentation of historic truth.

Yet Gibbon's approach is not that of the satirist. In his control of language and in his purpose he invites a comparison and a contrast with the great master of satire, Jonathan Swift, to whose works he had turned in forming his own English style. The linguistic weapons of

1. E.G., Claudian's 'lively strains' (xxix, III, 251, here a wedding song); 'lively description' (xxx, III, 272 and xxxii, III, 381, n. 6); 'that agreeable satirist' 'has sketched a lively and original picture' (xxxii, III, 382). In xxxi, III, 334, n. 91, the reader is referred to 'the lively description of Juvenal' of the port of Ostia.
2. In chap. xxix there are 26 and in chapt. xxx, 33 references as well as a two-page account of the satirist and his work. There are 6 more references in the first few pages of chapt. xxxi, and another 15 in the first eleven pages of chapt. xxxii. There are also several references to Juvenal in these chapters.
4. DF, xxxii, III, 389.
5. Memoirs, p.98. 'By the judicious advice of Mr. Mallet I was directed to the writings of Swift and Addison.'
both were directed towards exposing vice and folly but their tone and intention were markedly different. Writing of Gibbon's use of 'dismissive irony', A.E. Dyson pointed to a basic similarity but beyond that to even more significant differences. 'Gibbon shares with Swift an effortless mastery of irony in one of its classic forms: the apparent defence of a cause or position which is really a sustained betrayal... Swift is concerned to betray his readers, but Gibbon's betrayal is of targets which he and the reader have in common.' Unlike the great satirist, Gibbon's aim was not 'to establish the defects of his own age in terms of moral judgement' but rather 'to consolidate its superiority in terms of enlightenment.' Hence the different stance towards his subject matter and the different relationship to his reader who is treated as 'a civilized equal' and invited to share in an examination of ideas, beliefs and manners of earlier times which, to an 'enlightened age' often have a ring of absurdity.

Gibbon's ostensible position, his use of words in either double or ambiguous senses, his little incongruities of context, soon make the author's assumption of acceptance or belief at first doubtful, then ridiculous, as he almost 'insensibly' undermines the premise with which he and his reader began. The technique and tone are seen by Dyson as essentially those of Hume, well illustrated in his essay 'Of Miracles', where starts out from a religious datum, generally accepted up to a century before, but rendered absurd in its new context

1. 'A Note on Dismissive Irony', English XI, No.61, Spring 1956, p.222.
of empirical philosophy. In Gibbon, a similar 'pattern for dismissive irony' is firmly set in the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters, but the 'urbane iconoclasm' and the taste for the poignant word is a distinguishing mark of the whole work. His energy and exuberance find their most evident expression in the controlled gusto of his irony. 'He savours language like a connoisseur, and his especial delight is in ironic overtones.'

But is not the effect of this energy, this ironic exuberance, negative and destructive? 'Is Gibbon not, then, at the opposite pole to a moralist, and wholly unconstructive in intention? Oddly enough, he is not,' Dyson concludes, for he is enlightened and humane, clear and firm in his moral values. 'The paradoxical fact seems to be that whereas Swift, the satirist, turns out to be largely negative in his moral effect, Gibbon, the cynic and sceptic, is remarkably sane and balanced.' How does this apply to the treatment of Christianity, notably that of its rise and establishment? In Dyson's view - and the thoughtful reader, whatever his final verdict, can easily check the evidence - the irony of these chapters is neither arbitrary nor irresponsible, 'but is wedded to very definite and salutary moral purposes. By demonstrating the dangers of irrationalism, both intellectual and moral, it seeks to confirm readers in the paths of enlightenment... His iconoclasm, likewise, arises naturally from the intellectual centralities of his age ... and from his far-seeing, epic vision of history.' And Dyson's conclusion sums up satisfactorily

1. ibid., pp.222-3.
2. ibid., p.223.
3. ibid., p.224.
the moral import of Gibbon's most characteristic tone, that most
effective product of his masterly relish for language, for it stresses
an intention, often missed by the casual reader, which is not so much
to demolish as to edify. 'His real aim is not to castigate his age
for not living up to its ideals, but to convince the age that its
ideals are, after all, of supreme importance. The Decline and Fall
is, then, a moral work at a more fundamental level than satire reaches.
The irony is a mode of interpreting and evaluating history; and its
moral, that darkness itself declares the glory of light.'

1. ibid., pp.224-5. Gibbon is shown to be using a 'potentially
dangerous style to achieve a positive moral effect.
* I must confess with Gibbon over one of his lost references,
'I cannot recover the place' (IV, 77, n.64). However a number
of similar examples could be supplied. I had planned to
arrange all my examples in an appendix, but decided that this
chapter was already long enough and that sufficient had been
included in the text and notes.