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Author(s): Sherman B. Barnes

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Edward Gibbon's Utopia

Read before the Ohio Classical Conference, Akron, 1952

BORN IN 1737, the eldest son in an English family of means, Edward Gibbon began his acquaintance with the Latin language at age nine, when, he states, he "purchased the knowledge of the Latin syntax at the expense of many tears and some blood." The earliest authors he "painfully construed and darkly understood" were Phaedrus, whose Latinity he admired for its terseness, and Cornelius Nepos. A sickly boy, a fact he described as not being possessed of "the insolence of health," he was an avid reader, and when arriving at Oxford at age fifteen he possessed "a stock of erudition, that might have puzzled a doctor, and a degree of ignorance, of which a schoolboy would have been ashamed." He spent fourteen months at Magdalen College, "the fourteen months the most idle and unprofitable of my whole life." His stay was terminated by his conversion to Roman Catholicism, from which he was reconverted to Protestantism after a five year sojourn in French Switzerland.

In this self-taught, assiduous reader of the Latin classics there was steadily growing the "aspiration to the character of an historian." His mind was inflamed by the historical writings of Montesquieu, David Hume, William Robertson, and by the English Whig writers since the Revolution of 1689, —Swift, Addison, and others, whom he admired for breathing "the spirit of reason and liberty."

In Rome in October, 1764 Gibbon was deeply stirred by the sight of the eternal city.

> After a sleepless night, I trod, with a lofty step, the ruins of the Forum; each memorable spot where Romulus stood, or

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machus' royalism and Apollonius' classicism; his Catholicism is his own, and to the heirs of the Christian tradition it may seem a greater thing.

PAUL MACKENDRICK

University of Wisconsin

NOTES

Since this article was written, J. F. Carspecken has published (*Yale Classical Studies* 13 [1952] 35-142) a sensitive paper. "Apollonius and Homer," which in part supports the conclusions presented here; e.g., Apollonius' gods, like Callimachus', are ladies and gentlemen of Alexandria (104); Jason is evil (98) and unheroic (107); the poet is cynical about the love affair between Jason and Medea (123); his characters want romantic escape, like true Alexandrians, into the security of a known past (131). But to Carspecken, Apollonius is "perhaps unconsciously, dubious of the Homeric ideal and its worth" (133); the objective correlative Apollonius chooses is a myth of a circular journey, where the joy is not in the deeds but in the return (137). Carspecken's conclusions are drawn mainly from the unheroic character of the hero; those of the present paper, drawn from analysis of Homeric similes applied to unHomeric circumstances, suggest, if they do not prove, that Apollonius sighed for the rugged individualism of a heroic age to whose level he knows his own could not rise.

[1] In "The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth," from *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, Chapel Hill, 1939.

[2] Timon of Phlius, in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, Book I, 22D.

[3] Callimachus is cited from the Budé text edited by Emile Cahen, Paris, 1922. The translations are my own. *Hymn to Zeus*, 2-3.

[4] *ib.*, 63

[5] *ib.*, 75

[6] *ib.*, 87

[7] The remark is proverbial (Frg. 359 Schneider = 465 Pfeiffer). The closest approximation to it in the surviving fragments of Callimachus is in frg. 160 Schroeder = 1.19 Pfeiffer.

[8] *Hymn to Artemis*, 70.

[9] *Hymn to Delos*, 318-324.

[10] *Bath of Pallas*, 129-130.

[11] "Homeric" *Hymn to Demeter*, 398-403, 425-430.

[12] *Hymn to Demeter*, 137.

[13] The *Argonautica* is cited from the text of G. W. Mooney, Dublin, 1912. The translations, as before, are my own. All references are to Book III. The scene of Eros cheating is from III, 119 ff.

[14] 508-514.

[15] *Il.* 7.161-199.

[16] 957.

[17] *Il.* 5.5.

[18] 962-963.

[19] *Il.* 10.93.

[20] 968-972.

[21] *Il.* 12.131

[22] 829-835.

[23] *Il.* 14.170

[24] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 689 Sidgwick.

[25] *Il.* 19.25.

[26] 1008-1009, 1024.

[27] *Il.* 13.88.

[28] 1111.

[29] *Il.* 2.93.

[30] 1113-1117.

[31] *Od.* 5.291 ff.

[32] 1259-1260.

[33] *Il.* 6.506.

[34] 1294-1295.

[35] *Il.* 15.618.

[36] 1299 ff.

[37] *Il.* 18.470.

[38] 1359.

[39] *Iliad* 8.553 ff.

[40] 1399.

[41] *Il.* 8.306.

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> Tully spoke, or Caesar fell, was at once present to my eye; and several days of intoxication were lost or enjoyed before I could descend to a cool and minute investigation.

And, continuing from his autobiography:

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

From these passages we catch a glimpse of the emotional fervor which drove Gibbon on to write his great *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* the first volume of which appeared at London 1776, and which enjoyed, like its successors, impressive success. Gibbon said that copies of it were "on every table and on almost every toilet." The final volume appeared in 1788. In these volumes he single-handedly accomplished the astonishing feat of linking the ancient world with the modern world, of traversing the long era from Augustan Rome to the Renaissance. Half of his stately narrative covers the period from the Principate to the seventh century, especially from 180 A. D. to Heraclius. The second half includes an equally long period of time and many more kingdoms, the Franks, the Ostrogoths, the Lombards, the Bulgars, Magyars, the rise of Mohammedanism, the Holy Roman Empire, the Normans in Sicily and Italy, the Crusades, the Tartars, Slavs, Turks, and Rome in the Great Schism and Renaissance. The second half is not so well proportioned or connected, often giving excessive space to minor incidents and slighting major factors, such as the Byzantine Empire, to tell whose history he said would be "an ungrateful and melancholy task" for the reason that he disliked despotic empires and organized Christianity. His personal preferences caused much distortion of his subject. Yet it is true that without his personal preferences he probably would not have been able to produce his masterpiece of historiography.

At this point, we are confronted with the main problem or dilemma which it is the purpose of this paper to point out. Gibbon had in his mind a utopia, a picture of ideal perfection, a body of timeless and eternally true principles, called Nature, Virtue, Wisdom, or Reason. And holding such ideals gave emotional fervor and drive to Gibbon. We recall the intoxication he felt when he stood in the Roman Forum and first visualized the writing on the decline and fall of Rome. Brought up on the Latin classics, he came to regard the Roman Republic as having been the very incarnation of right principles and hence of happiness. In the Roman Republic he saw his ideal of rule by the natural aristocracy and of a balanced constitution which "united the freedom of popular assemblies with the authority and wisdom of a senate and the executive powers of a regal magistrate." He admired the "honour, as well as virtue" that was "the principle of the republic." The Whig principles of reason and liberty he read into the Roman Republic, which to him taught inspiring lessons of civic virtue and ordered freedom.

Now for an historian to hold an inverted utopianism of this sort is bound to affect the history he writes. The past becomes a series of examples or warnings, teaching timeless truths. Gibbon himself defends the view that the historian owes "to himself, to the present age, and to posterity, a just and perfect delineation of all that may be praised, of all that may be excused, and of all that may be censured." Such a style of writing history is normative rather than genetic. Gibbon did not see history as the genetic or evolutionary study of how we in the present come to be the way we are, how we "got that way." He cannot, with his normative and censorious outlook, see inside the individuality of the persons, ideas, or

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institutions he depicts. He must judge the persons, ideas, or institutions by whether they conform to his utopian principles. Gibbon practiced the dictum which Lord Bolingbroke preached, — "history is philosophy teaching by examples." In doing this Gibbon was not alone. Other great historians of his age did the same. Vico set his cycles within a framework of Platonic universals. Winckelmann saw in Hellenic sculpture the perfect principles of proportion, symmetry, and beauty, in the light of which he judged the art of other peoples, times and places. As Winckelmann said in his *History of Ancient Art:*

> The History of Ancient Art which I have undertaken to write is not a mere chronicle of epochs, and of the changes which occurred within them. . . . It is my intention to present a system . . . the principal object is the essential of art, on which the history of the individual artists has little bearing.

Similarly, Gibbon had his principles, embodied in the Republic, by the light of which he judged the movements of history—determining whether they conformed to his Classical standards, his belief in the cardinal virtues of the Greco-Roman world.

It is important to realize that Gibbon's utopianism was centered on the Republic rather than on the Empire. There is much misunderstanding on this aspect of Gibbon's utopianism. The misunderstanding is fortified by the frequent quoting, out of context, of the following Gibbonian paragraph:

> If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom.

In this same passage, however, Gibbon went on to state that Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines "delighted in the image of liberty" and "deserved the honour of restoring the republic, had the Romans of their days been capable of enjoying a rational freedom." Moreover, Gibbon spoke of how very few emperors there were "who added lustre to the imperial purple." There is little doubt that Gibbon preferred individual freedom and a system of competing, independent states (as Greece had and modern times have). Despotic empires of any type he disliked. In his first volume he wrote that the historian should never condescend "to plead the cause of tyrants, or to justify the maxims of persecution." He wrote harshly of Octavian Augustus, calling him a hypocrite. Regarding freedom as the source of public virtue, as "the happy parent of taste and science," "the source of every generous and rational sentiment," Gibbon deplored the fact that Trajan and the Antonines failed to set up a system of representative assemblies, or checks and balances. If this had been done, he wrote, "the seeds of public wisdom and virtue might have been cherished and propagated in the empire of Rome." He even believed that if these reforms in the Empire had been made, the Roman Empire "under the mild and generous influence" of freedom, "might have remained invincible and immortal." Such words strikingly reveal Gibbon's self-assured belief in timeless principles,—his utopianism.

There is much pathos in an historian writing *The Decline and Fall* of an empire he believed might have been "invincible and immortal." In the history of a thousand years he sadly watched the human passions, barbarism and religion, cause his timeless principles to go down to defeat. Out of sympathy with the genius of the Middle Ages because medieval civilization did not conform to the Classical standards and cardinal virtues in which he had been brought up, Gibbon could not build a narrative which was genetic, which moved, and which penetrated the

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unique spirit or genius of the Middle Ages. The late Carl Becker has beautifully analyzed this immobility in Gibbon:

> In the pages of the Decline and Fall, we seem to be taking a long journey, but all the time we remain in one place; we sit with Gibbon in the ruins of the Capitol. It is from the ruins of the Capitol that we perceive, as from a great distance, a thousand years filled with dim shapes of men moving blindly, performing strangely, in an unreal shadowy world. We do not enter the Middle Ages, or relive a span of human experience; still we sit in the ruins of the Capitol, becoming cramped and half numb listening, all this long stationary time, to our unwearied guide as he narrates for us, in a melancholy and falling cadence, the disaster that mankind has suffered, the defeat inflicted by the forces of evil on the human spirit.

One would surmise that a thousand years of defeat for his ideal principles would cause an historian to inquire whether there were perhaps defects in the principles rather than to paint the folly and barbarism of men who perverted or rejected the principles. Perhaps after writing such monumental narrative, Gibbon had no energy left to analyze causes. He was more a descriptive painter of scenes than an analyst of causes, in handling which he was muddled and hesitant. For example, Gibbon could write that "every age of the world has increased, and still increases, the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue, of the human race." The account which Gibbon gave of a thousand years simply does not agree with that dictum!

One of the causative forces to which Gibbon assigned great importance was the power of heroes, of strong personalities. "In human life, the most important scenes will depend on the character of a single actor." But he did not portray personalities from within, giving their inner struggle and development. Persons were types. Jargon adjectives were used. A person was credulous, crafty, artful, haughty, intrepid, profligate, effeminate, pusillanimous. Constantine was a mixture of "rapaciousness and prodigality." As a son of the Enlightenment, Gibbon judged his array of emperors, bishops, prophets and monks in terms of whether they brought happiness to mankind; he felt they usually did not do so because they lacked the right principles of virtue. He saw persons as artfully shaping events by their frauds, impostures, and ambitions. He used this view of human nature to explain the decline of not only the wisdom and virtue of the Republic, but also the retrogression from the Gospel which took place in the history of Christianity. To him the rise of papal authority was largely the result of conscious fraud. Gibbon, then, did not truly know the individuality or uniqueness of persons. Also, he lacked proportion when he wrote about a favorite character. Thus over Julian the Apostate Gibbon became warmly sentimental, characterizing him as "deserving the empire of the world" and devoting one hundred pages to him—space out of proportion to his importance. In his account of Julian's death, Gibbon omitted his famous words, "O Galilean, thou hast conquered," although these words were in the source Gibbon used.

Other causes which Gibbon mentioned for the decline of the Empire, without carefully discriminating the relative importance of each, appear in these passages:

> . . . this long peace, and the uniform government of the Romans, introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the Empire. The minds of men were gradually reduced to the same level, the fire of genius was extinguished, and even the military spirit evaporated.
>
> . . . the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest. The victorious legions, who, in distant wars, acquired the vices of strangers and mercenaries, first oppressed the freedom of the republic, and afterwards violated the majesty of the purple.

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