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DAVID P. JORDAN

## Edward Gibbon: The Historian of the Roman Empire

THE COST OF GENIUS IS HIGH. Some are condemned to pay the price incessantly in the agony of their lives. Others, like Edward Gibbon, endowed with a cool, dispassionate temperament and the gift of irony, are able, through a supreme effort of the will, to transmute the pain into an art that breathes the spirit of happiness and a life that seems a model of self-awareness and control. Gibbon's serene spirit, free of the passionate disruptions that plagued so many of his contemporaries, finds its natural expression in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: the history, one of the architectural wonders of historical writing, was built, patiently and elegantly, out of the learning of the ages; his unique vision of the emergence of European civilization, out of his inimitable style and the ruins of Rome. His other masterpiece, *Memoirs of My Life*, was built out of less promising materials. Gibbon left his *Memoirs* unfinished, but from its six and a half drafts we can see the historian wresting serenity from frustration and trying to give to his life the same order he bestowed on the Roman Empire. But here and there the incongruities show through, and the self-apotheosis of "the historian of the Roman empire" remains incomplete.

It is incongruous that Mr. Gibbon, Sr., the historian's capricious and irresponsible father, should have reared England's great historian. It is incongruous that the sickly and misshapen boy who pored over massive tomes of scholarship and spent sleepless nights reconciling the chronologies of antiquity or remembering the dynasties of Egypt and Assyria should have written a great book. It is incongruous that the man who prided himself on the elegance and correctness of his manners, the probity of his sentiments, the tastefulness of his appearance, the eloquence of his conversation, should have been a subject of fun, even of caricature. It is incongruous that the short, fat little man should have called attention to his ridiculous physique with extravagant clothes, or carried his Frenchified manners, which verged on parody, into English society, or cultivated a style of conversation that closely resembled a French theatrical declamation. It is incongruous that Gibbon was a literary genius; more incongruous still that he should have devoted his gifts to historical writing. It is incongruous that England's most remarkable gentleman-scholar should have been self-educated, or that insular England with its parochial squirearchy should have produced so cosmopolitan a writer. Above all, it is incongruous that Europe's history, through more than a thousand years, should have been mirrored in the mind of an eighteenth-century English gentleman.

Nowhere are these incongruities more obvious than in his portraits. The most

famous was painted in 1779 by Gibbon's friend, Sir Joshua Reynolds. It was the historian's favorite and hung in his study for years. Gibbon enjoyed contemplating himself as he paced back and forth, casting his magnificent paragraphs in his mind before setting them down. Sir Joshua's portrait is flattering, a fit monument to an intellectual hero. Gibbon sat for the artist in a red coat, "the national colour of our military ensigns and uniforms," and Sir Joshua has successfully harmonized Gibbon's irregular features to complement his martial pose. The historian looks out at us with a steady, even arrogant, gaze. He is formidable, dignified, aloof. His huge forehead seems almost a symbol for the massive erudition of the *Decline and Fall*.

I prefer, as Gibbon did not, the less formal portraits: Henry Walton's intimate Gibbon as man about town, with his lively eyes and amused look; Mrs. Brown's silhouette of a short (he was apparently under five feet), fat little man with an overly large head, standing on spindly legs and about to take a pinch of snuff; Lady Diana Beauclerk's pen drawing, actually a caricature, emphasizing Gibbon's huge forehead and equally huge double chin, with the sober historian ridiculously crowned with an olive wreath. But most revealing of all is Michel-Vincent Brandoin's drawing, done in the last decade of the historian's life. Gibbon is seated on a square plinth in the garden of La Grotte, his Lausanne home. In the background is Lake Lemane and, beyond it, the Alps. His pose is informal but regal, for Gibbon thought of himself as "the king of the place" and referred to La Grotte as "Gibbon Castle."

Obese, short, his head too large for his body, disfigured by a hydrocele, his left arm akimbo, his right hand resting on a walking stick with his index finger extended to punctuate an anecdote, he seems about to speak, perhaps about the garden he himself designed. The round, resolute mouth is petulant rather than sneering while his delicate feet, in buckled pumps, look too small and fragile to support his grotesque bulk. Here is "the Gibbon"—he never minded the ironic sobriquet—in the autumn of his life, basking contentedly and a bit foolishly in the glory won by twenty years' labor on the *Decline and Fall*. Here is the man we occasionally glimpse through the lush and beautiful foliage of his rhetoric: pompous, vain, self-satisfied, a bit ridiculous, even ugly, but indifferent to the absurdity of his appearance and perhaps absorbed in contemplating his own genius.

Gibbon loved to sit for his portrait, but lest his many admirers pay homage incorrectly he decided to do his own portrait by writing his *Memoirs*. And his self-portrait more resembles Sir Joshua's oil than Brandoin's sketch. It is a portrait of "the historian of the Roman empire" as he liked to call himself, rather than of Edward Gibbon the man. Like the Fairy Godmother, Gibbon swept his magic wand over the incongruities of his life, turning pumpkins into coaches, mice into footmen.

Gibbon was born at Putney, Surrey, April 27, 1737, according to the old calendar: when England finally adopted the Gregorian calendar in the middle of the eighteenth century—most of Western Europe had been using the new calendar by 1587—he celebrated his birthday on May 8. He was the oldest son, as it turned out the only surviving child, of Edward Gibbon, Sr., and Judith Porten. The family fortune had been established by Gibbon's grandfather, a merchant and war profiteer who was ruined by the collapse of the South Sea Bubble (1720), yet managed to amass another fortune. An obscure quarrel between Gibbon's father and grandfather had deprived Mr. Gibbon, Sr., of a more substantial share of the family's wealth, but he was rich enough to lead the life of an English squire. He was incompetent in financial matters, vengeful, capricious, moody, and self-indulgent.



Henry Walton, *Portrait of Edward Gibbon*  
NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

Gibbon's mother, apparently a pretty and vivacious woman, found little time for her son. Her willing submission to the eccentricities and confused ambitions of Gibbon's father and a series of pregnancies deprived the child of a mother's love so long as she lived, and the last of these pregnancies killed her when Gibbon was nine. The maternal role was filled by Gibbon's maiden aunt, Catherine Porten, a simple, loving, exceptionally kind woman who encouraged her nephew's precocious and curious intellectual inclinations.

Gibbon was a sickly child, plagued by a succession of mysterious illnesses and ignorant, incompetent doctors. He spent more time confined to bed than at school. His only companion was his Aunt Porten; his only amusement, desultory reading. During one of his few periods of relative good health, he was sent to Westminster School and "purchased," as he put it, a rudimentary knowledge of Latin "at the expense of many tears and some blood." But he hated school. His weak constitution kept him from joining the games of his contemporaries, and they taunted him for his clumsiness and the supposed sins of his Tory family (it was just after the abortive rebellion of 1745). Along with his few scraps of Latin, he carried from childhood a lifelong aversion to schools and doctors.

At the age of fifteen his disorders "most wonderfully vanished," and his father enrolled Gibbon in Magdalen College, Oxford, as a Gentleman Commoner (1752). He arrived there, in his self-mocking description, "with a stock of erudition that might have puzzled a Doctor, and a degree of ignorance of which a school boy would have been ashamed." Gibbon was delighted with his new freedom and loved the velvet cap and silk gown that distinguished a Gentleman Commoner from a plebeian student. But the naïve little boy was as unprepared for Oxford as Oxford was for him. Gibbon later described the tutors of Magdalen as "sunk in port and prejudice," safe and lazy in their sinecures.

At Oxford, Gibbon read a few plays of Terence and was discouraged from learning Arabic before he discovered the secret of the place: the lamest excuse for truancy was readily accepted by his tutor. He was absent from Oxford more often than not. He says his youth and bashfulness kept him from "the taverns and bagnios of Covent Garden" during his frequent elopements to London, but he got himself into mischief of another kind. After reading some controversial books and talking to a Roman Catholic student, Gibbon was converted to Catholicism (1753). He was immediately forced to leave Oxford, and with it he also left the promise of an easy and conventional life.

Scandalized by his son's conversion, Mr. Gibbon, Sr., sent the boy into exile in Lausanne, in the doctrinally correct house of Daniel Pavilliard, a Calvinist minister. Gibbon spent almost five years in Switzerland (1753-58), and was reconverted to Protestantism on Christmas Day, 1755. He was recalled to England on the eve of his twenty-first birthday and settled into his father's country home at Buriton, Hampshire. He quickly made the library his private preserve, a safe refuge from the boring round of country obligations. He also met his new stepmother, Dorothea Patton, of whose existence he learned from a neighbor rather than from his own father.

In Lausanne, Gibbon had become bilingual in French and English, and with the systematic passion of an autodidact had mastered Latin and learned some Greek as well. He would take one of the Latin classics, for example an epistle of Cicero, translate it into French, and then lay it aside for some days or weeks. He would then retranslate it into Latin and compare his version with the original. He also set himself

the task of reading a couple of hundred lines of Homer every day, but he never became as comfortable with Greek as he was with Latin. French literature, especially the classical French theater from Corneille to Voltaire and the works of the *philosophes*, filled his hours of study. He was influenced by the ideas of the *philosophes*, but even more he was seduced by their style. His first book, the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* (1761) was begun in Lausanne, and Gibbon played the sedulous ape to Montesquieu's pungent, aphoristic style. He was also influenced by Continental scholarship, wrote some essays on abstruse points of ancient history and literature, and entered into a Latin correspondence with several scholars. And he fell in love with a Swiss girl, Suzanne Curchod. He hid his infatuation from his father until he was back in England. When he broached the subject of marriage, his father threw a tantrum. The dutiful son gave up Suzanne and retreated to the library. The years in Lausanne made Gibbon a scholar and a European: by the time he returned to England he aspired to be a man of letters.

In 1760, Gibbon's routine of study and intellectual idleness at Buriton was interrupted by the Seven Years' War. It was not an unwelcome break: Gibbon was not made for the life of a country squire. He neither rode nor hunted, and his Frenchified manners appeared odd to his country neighbors. A few pathetic attempts had been made to launch him in London society, but they had no more success than his father's efforts to make his son a country gentleman. But Mr. Gibbon, Sr., was as stubborn as his son, and, without consulting him, he got Gibbon a captaincy in the Hampshire Militia. The young man spent almost three years (1760-63) marching his recruits up and down the countryside and debauching, too often he thought, with his fellow officers. But all was not idleness and dissipation. Gibbon had a knapsack full of books and found enough time to complete and publish one of his own, or, as he put it, he lost his literary maidenhead.

Mr. Gibbon, Sr., thought the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, the fruit of Gibbon's foreign education, might be put to some practical use. The *Essai* had value for Gibbon's father only as evidence of his son's mastery of French, for it might secure him a diplomatic post. Gibbon was pushed to complete the manuscript and the dutiful son obeyed. Written in graceful, if imitative, French, the *Essai* is a spirited defense of classical literature as the best subject to exercise the mind, improve the critical faculties, and teach a sense of style while inculcating the principles of human nature.

Alas, no diplomatic post was offered, and Mr. Gibbon, Sr., had to resign himself once again to his son's failure to please him. As soon as the war was over and the Hampshire Militia disbanded, Gibbon talked his father into sending him on the grand tour. He arrived in Paris on January 28, 1763, where he stayed until spring. Then he moved on to Lausanne where he spent nearly a year and prepared for the Italian leg of his journey by writing a historical geography of ancient Italy (*Nomina Gentesque Italiae*). When the snows melted, he crossed the Alps and made his way to Rome. The city where he had lived in his imagination for years enthralled him, and he spent several months studying the ruins with a professional antiquary. The tour, however, was cut short by his father's parsimony. After some weeks of financial distress, Gibbon obediently returned to England.

Gibbon once again resumed his country routine and began seriously writing history. In the summer of 1767, he started his *Histoire générale des républiques Suisses* but soon abandoned the project. At about the same time he co-authored, with his friend

Georges Deyverdun, a periodical journal, *Mémoires littéraires de la Grande Bretagne*, of which only two issues appeared. The only other literary project of these years was his first English essay, *Observations on the Sixth Book of the Aeneid* (1770). His father's last illness and death that same year interrupted any further work. Untangling the family's confused finances occupied him for the next two years. When the estate was finally settled, Gibbon moved to London, installed his substantial library, indulged his taste for elegance by acquiring a coach and a couple of servants, and joined the best clubs. In 1773, he started writing the *Decline and Fall*; the following year, he entered Parliament for Liskeard where he supported the government with "many a sincere and *silent* vote."

The first volume of the *Decline and Fall* appeared on February 17, 1776, and was immediately hailed as a masterpiece. The reading public and polite society alike were taken by surprise. "Lo," wrote Horace Walpole, expressing the enthusiasm of London society, "there is just appeared a truly classic work." The first printing of one thousand copies, in boards, was exhausted in a few weeks: second and third editions, not to mention two pirated Irish editions, quickly followed. The second and third volumes were published in 1781, carrying his history down to the fall of the Western Empire. In 1783, Gibbon retired to Lausanne to become the "king" of La Grotte and complete the *Decline and Fall*. His sinecure at the Board of Trade, along with its substantial income, had been suppressed by a government under attack. Gibbon decided to settle where his reduced income would still be adequate to support the domestic comfort he craved. This, at least, is the practical explanation he gives in the *Memoirs*. But retirement to Lausanne, a sleepy yet refined little town, was a virtual retreat from the world. Gibbon had always preferred to move on the fringes of society, finding himself more comfortable among men and women a bit intimidated by his reputation. Retreat to Lausanne also gave the theatrical little man the social importance, even celebrity, he never had in London or Paris. He was the most important Englishman in Lausanne; indeed he was the most important resident Lausanne ever had.

The last three volumes of the *Decline and Fall*, carrying the story down to the fall of Constantinople to the Turks (1453), were finished in late 1787. Publication was delayed until May 8, 1788, to coincide with Gibbon's fifty-first birthday. He lived in Lausanne for the rest of his life, basking in his reputation, enjoying the homage of Swiss neighbors and visiting Englishmen, dabbling with his autobiography and other literary projects, and caring for his garden. In 1793, he set off for England on a mission of mercy and friendship. He wanted to be with his friend, John Holroyd, Lord Sheffield, whose wife had just died.

The journey literally killed him. Afflicted by the gout and his grotesque infection, grossly corpulent and sedentary by nature and choice, he was exhausted by the long winter journey. After some weeks of harried visits and dinners in England, he took to his bed at Sheffield Place (Sussex), complaining of feeling tired and having little appetite. But Gibbon had no intention of dying. Holding court in his room, propped up on pillows, he chatted with visitors, discussing how long he could expect to live—he was only fifty-six—and what literary projects he had planned. On the day of his death (January 16, 1794), he asked to be left alone with Dussaut, his French valet. He apologized to his loyal servant for any difficulties death might cause and hoped Dussaut would never be as sick as his master had been. Then he lay back among the pillows, half dozing, mumbled a few words incoherently—it was the only time in his life he was incoherent—and fell unconscious at about 12:45 in the afternoon. He was

buried in the Sheffield family vault in the little country church in Fletching, Sussex: in death, as in life, the most distinguished resident of an obscure place.

Had Gibbon merely reported the few facts of his “quiet and literary” life, we would know him only from those rare passages in the *Decline and Fall* where he unconsciously spoke about himself. His portrait, for example, of the fourteenth-century scholar, Barlaam of Calabria:

He is described by Petrarch and Boccace, as a man of a diminutive stature, though truly great in the measure of learning and genius; of a piercing discernment, though of a slow and painful elocution. For many ages (as they affirm) Greece had not produced his equal in the knowledge of history, grammar, and philosophy; and his merit was celebrated in the attestations of the princes and doctors of Constantinople.<sup>1</sup>

But Gibbon wanted to paint a formal portrait of himself. He wanted to present to the public not Edward Gibbon the man, with his deformities, his flaws, his carefully contrived personality, but “the historian of the Roman empire,” as unique a creation as was the *Decline and Fall*. By watching Gibbon transform his “quiet and literary” life into a romance, a quest for literary fame, with himself as the hero valiantly overcoming all obstacles, slaying all dragons, we can perhaps see why (and how) he created his *persona*, why and how he forged the incongruities of his life into a satisfying and compelling vision of the man who created the Roman Empire for his age.

Gibbon saw far more pattern and purpose in his own life than he was willing to see in history. But to create “the historian of the Roman empire” Gibbon paid dearly, not in the coin of the realm but in loneliness, frustration, unfulfilled love. He learned to live in books and was only a realized personality in the *Decline and Fall*. His history gave meaning to his life—a life full of false starts and occasional anguish. No wonder that, when he sat down to make a reckoning, fat and famous and lazy at La Grotte, it was easy to pass over the years of pain, to gaze contentedly at the years of achievement.

There are two famous episodes in Gibbon’s *Memoirs*, intimately related—his youthful conversion to Catholicism and his mature conversion to pagan Rome—where we can see the autobiographer at work on his self-image. And in Gibbon’s relationship with his father, we catch a glimpse of the emotional cost of the *Decline and Fall*.

Gibbon reached Rome on October 2, 1764; he commemorates his arrival in a moving passage in the *Memoirs*. It is one of the few passages in which Gibbon abandoned his customary emotional detachment in favor of an almost romantic attitude:

My temper is not very susceptible of enthusiasm and the enthusiasm which I do not feel I have ever scorned to affect. But at the distance of twenty five years I can neither forget nor express the strong emotions which agitated my mind as I first approached and entered 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 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.<sup>2</sup>

Were it not for the fascination with pagan antiquity the passage might well be mistaken for the effusions of a Christian pilgrim. Indeed, the whole Roman visit is



treated by Gibbon as a kind of religious experience, and this second conversion to Rome can usefully be compared to Gibbon's description of his first conversion, when he was at Oxford. He dismisses his youthful conversion with a carefully contrived apothegm: "I read, I applauded, I believed," he says of his seduction by the arguments of Bishop Bossuet, "I surely fell by a noble hand." He then goes on, at considerable length, to excuse his conversion—he speaks of it as a "religious folly" or a "childish revolt"—reminding himself and his readers that Chillingworth and Bayle had been similarly seduced by Catholicism and *they* were mature men at the time.

Gibbon's first conversion was not only, as he would have it, a lapse of good judgment, a piece of "folly." It was a "childish revolt." But against what? Gibbon was not a pious man, nor had he ever had a strong Protestant faith to lose. It was, I think, a revolt against his father, against Oxford, even, perhaps, against English society. Gibbon certainly hated Oxford. Indeed that institution has probably never suffered so much insult and scorn as Gibbon poured on his would-be alma mater. As we will shortly see, he also hated his father. Conversion to Catholicism on the part of a young Englishman interested in religious controversy was probably a barely conscious way of disobeying his father and getting out of Oxford. And conversion, despite the unanticipated severity of Mr. Gibbon, Sr., had the great attraction of not being a definitive revolt. It was only "childish." As soon as Gibbon returned to the church of his father, he was readmitted to the family, restored to society. Conversion to Catholicism in post-Reformation England was a disgrace, but not an unusual one. It was as if English history had created a traditional form of revolt against family, friends, institutions, society itself, and through the relatively broad tolerance of the Anglican Church left the door open to forgiveness.

Gibbon's second conversion to Rome is another matter. It is enthusiastically celebrated in the *Memoirs*, and the contrast between the two conversions is surely intentional:

It was at Rome, on the fifteenth of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol while the barefooted 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.<sup>3</sup>

It is almost too perfect; not just the elegance of expression but the event itself: it is so obviously the kind of experience "the historian of the Roman empire" should have had, so obviously the kind of experience that would have appealed to Gibbon's keen sense of drama. The passage has a history.

Gibbon kept a journal of his grand tour. The account of his entry into Rome is matter-of-fact: he entered the city over the Milvian Bridge, absorbed in a dream of antiquity which was interrupted by the customs officials. Twenty-five years later this germ became the famous moment of inspiration for the *Decline and Fall*. There is no evidence to suggest that Gibbon invented the chanting friars who interrupted his melancholic reverie on the Capitol, but there is evidence that he worked the passage up for the greatest effect and, in doing so, altered facts. Gibbon wrote two earlier versions of his moment of inspiration, the first in January, 1790, the second some months later:

In my Journal the place and moment of conception are recorded; the fifteenth of October 1764, in the close of evening, as I sat musing in the Church of the Zoccolanti or Franciscan fryars, while they were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter on the ruins of the Capitol.<sup>4</sup>

It was on the fifteenth of October, in the gloom of evening, as I sat musing on the Capitol, while the barefooted fryars were chanting their litanies in the temple of Jupiter, that I conceived the first thought of my history.<sup>5</sup>

Gibbon's final version of the episode is superior to the first two in style and impact, but not necessarily in truth. And the addition and subtraction of details, the altering of facts, are more important than changes in diction. Perhaps Gibbon did have a vision on the Capitol—although it is difficult to know where he sat on the fateful October evening, for the romantic “ruins of the Capitol” no longer existed in the eighteenth century—but I think it more likely that his memory either betrayed him or led him to gather into a single dramatic moment discrete impressions from his weeks in Rome. The *Decline and Fall* was the central activity in Gibbon's life; its creation gave coherence and meaning to all that had gone before. It is not difficult to imagine Gibbon bending or stretching the truth in order to explain the genesis of his history.

Had Gibbon been less of an artist, had he had an identity outside the *Decline and Fall*, he might have told the story of his inspiration more prosaically. For years he had been a student of Rome, for years he had subordinated everything in his life to his obsession with writing a great book. The idea of writing Rome's history had long been on his mind. He had even sketched—sometime between 1758 and 1763—the outlines of the *Decline and Fall* in his “Outline of the History of the World.” No moment of illumination was necessary, but Gibbon could not attribute so great an achievement to such mundane causes.

If Gibbon created himself, or rather created “the historian of the Roman empire,” he had good reason to do so. He had, so to speak, retreated from English society, taken refuge in his history, as earlier he had taken refuge in the Buriton library. But it was, in many ways, Mr. Gibbon, Sr., and the accident of a lonely childhood caused by poor health and neglect that started Gibbon on his journey into himself.

Mr. Gibbon, Sr., always disapproved of his son and intimidated him. Apparently Gibbon could do nothing right. Dependent on his father for money and emotional sustenance, Gibbon found himself a stranger, an outcast, in his father's house. In 1760, for example, while Gibbon was living at Buriton, he wrote his father a letter asking that the fifteen hundred pounds Mr. Gibbon, Sr., was anxious to spend on buying his son a seat in Parliament be used to send him on the grand tour: “An address in writing, from a person who has the pleasure of being with you every day may appear singular. However I have preferred this method, as upon paper I can speak without a blush and be heard without interruption.”<sup>6</sup> This was not the first time Gibbon had tried to explain himself to his father, but it was the most pathetic. His father apparently ignored the letter, for the whole question of the grand tour comes up again in 1763.

Gibbon's father was “neither a bigot nor a philosopher,” but he was passionately attached to the values of his class. He could not understand why his own son took no pleasure in the life and values of an English squire, why a seemingly cruel fate had given him a sickly, clumsy, timid, Frenchified son who would rather read a book than ride to hounds, rather take the grand tour than sit in Parliament, rather write history than be a gentleman farmer. He made Gibbon's life hellish. Everything the boy did was seen as a deliberate act of disobedience. Mr. Gibbon, Sr., struck back at his son by withholding his affection and his money. Even when he acted with apparent generosity, his real motives were selfish and capricious. Having ignored his

son's pathetic letters from Lausanne, Mr. Gibbon, Sr., after almost five years, summoned the exile home. But it was not so much out of love as out of the need for money. Gibbon had just reached his majority and could now break the entail on the family lands. "The priests and the altar had been prepared," writes Gibbon of his homecoming, "and the victim was unconscious of the impending stroke."

As long as his father was alive, every important event in Gibbon's life was controlled, and the son was repeatedly subject to the kind of emotional blackmail that only an insensitive parent can use against a child. He sent Gibbon into exile, he called him home to break the entail, he forbade his marriage, he remarried without telling him, he pushed him to publish the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, he enlisted him in the Hampshire Militia, he insisted Gibbon live at Buriton, he reneged on his commitment to finance the grand tour, he tried to force his son into Parliament: in a word he tried to make Gibbon what he imagined he ought to be. Fortunately, for historical literature at least and for Gibbon himself, the son was as stubborn as his father. After his youthful conversion to Catholicism, Gibbon avoided direct confrontations with his father. But despite his external complacency he tenaciously pursued his studies, obstinately refusing to become the gentleman his father wanted.

Only as his father lay virtually blind and dying, sunk in a deep depression, did Gibbon find out how the tyrant's incompetence had ruined the family fortune and seriously compromised Gibbon's future. During the last months of his father's life, Gibbon tried to restore some order to the chaos created by his father's incompetence. But the old man had lost or misplaced important papers and viciously attacked Gibbon's integrity whenever he asked for a document or a signature. He refused to face the truth: only a serious amputation could save what remained of the Gibbon fortune, one half the property had to be sold to pay the mortgages on the other half. Mr. Gibbon, Sr., resisted to the end. Then he died—without a will!

But the long summer of 1770, during which Gibbon struggled almost daily with his father, gave the historian a new sense of himself. Gibbon was thirty-three when his father died, a magical age for any student of antiquity. At least he was free, and he suddenly found himself able to do all the things he had been incapable of doing when his father was alive. Gibbon's energy and self-confidence in the years after 1770 are astonishing. With his father dead, he had "the first of earthly blessings, Independence." The new Gibbon, "the historian of the Roman empire," for years stifled by Mr. Gibbon, Sr., was about to emerge.

Somehow the years of paternal oppression had not crushed Gibbon, or rather they had forced upon him the creation of a unique personality. He remained resilient. The *Decline and Fall* testifies not only to Gibbon's genius, but to his tenacity as well. The twenty years he spent writing his history were but one manifestation of his stubborn will. The twenty years he spent in single-minded preparation for that work, all the while badgered and humiliated by his father, are at least as impressive, if not astonishing.

Gibbon's triumph was that of genius and will over his father, his society, his physical disabilities, and chance itself. Genius, someone has said, is the ability to think about a problem until it is solved. Trained to self-amusement by his sickly childhood, inured to loneliness by his years in Lausanne, bookish by nature (and for self-defense), Gibbon fixed his attention, concentrated his extraordinary gifts, on the problem of Europe's genesis. He himself recognized that some of his achievement was a matter of luck:

When I contemplate the common lot of mortality, I must acknowledge that I have drawn a high prize in the lottery of life. The far greater part of the globe is overspread with barbarism or slavery: in the civilized world the most numerous class is condemned to ignorance and poverty; and the double fortune of my birth in a free and enlightened country in an honourable and wealthy family is the lucky chance of an unit against millions.<sup>7</sup>

But it was not all luck. Gibbon's triumph went beyond the cosmic odds that so fascinated him in his last years. He indeed had the leisure to spend most of his life brooding over Roman history, but he paid for his leisure. Gibbon's struggle was different from that of most of his contemporaries.

Of all the Englishmen of his generation who achieved some intellectual distinction—with the obvious exception of Horace Walpole, that “elegant trifler”—none came from the squirearchy. Scotsmen such as Boswell, Hume, William Robertson, and Adam Smith, Irishmen such as Edmund Burke, poor boys such as Dr. Johnson, David Garrick, Oliver Goldsmith, and the poet Thomas Gray had to struggle to make their way in English society by their wits or by connecting themselves to a patron. Gibbon was spared such a struggle. He had the ironic task of overcoming the stultifying obligations of “a high prize in the lottery of life.”

Gibbon created two works of art: his history and “the historian of the Roman empire.” And he cherished both as only a creator can. Yet the crude bricks and mortar that support the dazzling façade—like the masonry of a Roman temple, masked by beautiful marble—he deliberately hid from public view. His person he enveloped in extravagant clothes, and his ideas he enveloped in an ironic style. The man and his work are rich in ambiguities and incongruities. Only now and then do we catch a glimpse of Gibbon, for he was an extremely self-protective man. Unlike Oscar Wilde, who put his genius into his life and his talent into his books, Gibbon was able to put his genius into both.

“Style,” said Gibbon, “is the image of character,” and he used his style, carefully refined over the years, to put a patina of self-satisfaction and rational happiness over the incongruities of his life and his achievement. The inveterate theater-goer—and Gibbon preferred the refinement and formality of the French classical theater—donned his *persona* before appearing in public (or in print).

If the price of genius was high, Gibbon paid it willingly. By the time he sat down to dabble with his *Memoirs*, he could scarcely remember the early years of pain and anguish and loneliness. He had become “the historian of the Roman empire,” and, reflecting on his satisfying life, it was easy for him to celebrate his becoming as an inevitable, if meandering, process. From the fourteen-year-old boy “immersed in the passage of the Goths over the Danube” when “the summons of the dinner-bell reluctantly dragged me from my intellectual feast” to the author of the greatest and most imposing history of his age doubtless seemed to Gibbon a logical development. He had merged himself into his history, and as he created his Roman Empire he also created himself. Now, in retirement from the world and from the strains of scholarship and composition, he could sit back and enjoy his work.

#### REFERENCES

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<sup>2</sup>*Memoirs of My Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London, 1966), p. 134 (hereafter cited as *Memoirs*).

<sup>3</sup>*Memoirs*, p. 136, n. 7, and p. 305.

<sup>4</sup>*Memoirs*, p. 136.

<sup>5</sup>*Memoirs*, p. 304.

<sup>6</sup>*The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton, 3 vols. (New York, 1956), I, p. 123. The letter is undated, but was written in the summer of 1760.

<sup>7</sup>*Memoirs*, p. 186.