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978-0-521-10345-9 - The Empire Unpossess'd: An Essay on Gibbon's Decline and Fall

Lionel Gossman

Excerpt

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## I

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*A name, a rank, a  
character, in the world*

**G**IBBON EMERGES FROM THE PAGES of his Autobiography as a man with an unusually intense experience of the precariousness of identity. As he was a feeble child, he tells, and not expected to live, his father gave his name to several male children born after him;<sup>1</sup> at the height of adolescence he underwent a religious conversion that resulted in his being exiled from his native land for several years and almost forgetting his native tongue; and for a considerable time he hesitated between English and French as the language of his literary work. Throughout his life he spoke both tongues with equal facility, and although he was always a patriotic Englishman, he also liked to think of himself as a loyal Swiss. As his relation to his father was troubled and uncertain, and as he did not succeed in becoming a husband and father in his own right, he never felt he possessed a secure, solidly founded, native identity and authority, but was obliged always to resort to substitutes. The identity he finally established for himself, in his own eyes and in those of his contemporaries, as “the historian of the decline and fall,”<sup>2</sup> was not a native identity, but one he had invented through his writing and with the help of “my other wife, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.”<sup>3</sup> He himself acknowledged with great candor the important role writing played in his life as a substitute for native virtues and powers that he felt he lacked. “Twenty happy years have been animated by the labour of my history,” he wrote, “and its success has given me a name, a rank, a character, in the World, to which I should not otherwise have been entitled.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the first topics of the Autobiography is the hero's relation to his Aunt Catherine Porten, his mother's sister. His mother died when he was ten years old, the hero recounts, but as her place had always been filled by his Aunt Kitty – “the true mother of my mind as well as of my health”<sup>5</sup> – he was not much affected by his mother's death.<sup>6</sup> Aunt Kitty, not his mother, nursed him through a difficult childhood, consuming “many anx-

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ious and solitary days . . . in the patient trial of every mode of relief and amusement" and "many wakeful nights . . . by my bedside in trembling expectation that each hour would be my last."<sup>7</sup>

Gibbon may well have had the early pages of Rousseau's *Confessions* in mind when writing this part of his autobiography. To Aunt Porten he ascribes a role very similar to that which Rousseau ascribed to Tante Suzon, and the portrait of Edward Gibbon senior also bears some resemblance to that of Isaac Rousseau in the *Confessions*. In both books the courtship and marriage of father and mother are likened to a "love tale,"<sup>8</sup> both men are said to have been passionately devoted to their wives, and both sons present themselves as having felt a kind of obligation to match these incomparable women in order to secure their father's affection. The famous scene in which Isaac Rousseau enjoins his son to take his mother's place for him is repeated in Gibbon's account of his first interview with his father after his mother's death:

I can never forget the scene . . . ; the awful silence, the room hung with black, the midday tapers, his sighs and tears, his praises of my mother, a saint in heaven, his solemn adjuration that I would cherish her memory and imitate her virtues; and the fervour with which he kissed and blessed me as the sole surviving pledge of their loves.<sup>9</sup>

In the end, both Rousseau and Gibbon depict their fathers as erratic, impulsive, incapable of providing protection or security of affection, and in their very weakness obscurely menacing. As one would expect, however, Gibbon's autobiography is more "noble," more conventional than Rousseau's, and there is less material to define Aunt Kitty's precise place in his childhood than Rousseau provides for Tante Suzon. Gibbon, moreover, does not present himself as suffering the successive brother–sister *ménages* (Suzanne Rousseau and Isaac Rousseau, Pastor and Mademoiselle Lambercier) that must have introduced considerable confusion into Rousseau's conception of sexual roles and identities in general, and of his own place in the family configuration in particular.<sup>10</sup> Aunt Porten never completely displaced Gibbon's mother in his father's household, and even though his maternal grandfather's house at Putney appeared to him in later life "in the light of my proper and native home,"<sup>11</sup> he spent only part of the time there, during vacations or his parents' visits to London, prior to his mother's death.

Nevertheless, Gibbon unmistakably emphasizes Aunt Porten's crucial role in his life.<sup>12</sup> It is she, the maiden aunt and nurse, who is presented in

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the Autobiography as the center and focus of his affective life as a child, and not his natural mother, the younger and more attractive Judith, whose vivacity and worldliness he never fails to underline. "I was a puny child neglected by my Mother, starved by my nurse, and of whose being very little care or expectation was entertained," he wrote to Lord Sheffield on Kitty Porten's death; "without her maternal vigilance, I should either have been in my grave, or imperfectly lived a crooked rickety monster a burthen to myself and others."<sup>13</sup> With Aunt Kitty, Gibbon achieved an intimacy that he never knew with his mother. "Like friends of an equal age," he tells, "we freely conversed on every topic, familiar or abstruse."<sup>14</sup> For the frail and sickly boy she was the perfect partner and playmate, as in later life she became the "faithful friend and agreeable companion,"<sup>15</sup> all the more so, perhaps, as the nephew she had raised had come in some ways to resemble her, being, like her, a victim of paternal improvidence and a bachelor, the fictitious parent of the children of others. Indeed, the price of intimacy with a spinster mother, for Gibbon as for Rousseau, was in all probability the strict suppression of sexuality.<sup>16</sup>

From earliest childhood, in sum, Gibbon seems to have experienced a division of woman into nurse and consoler on the one hand and sexual being on the other, into a sisterlike figure whose difference from him was outweighed by her closeness to him, and a creature whom he regarded with fear and anxiety as alien and even hostile. It is surely not without importance, moreover, that the foundation of his security was not the natural mother but the fictitious one, the substitute who made up for what the natural mother failed to provide. In his eyes, Aunt Kitty stood for the protection and contentment of a private and secluded world from which every menace of difference and disturbance had been eliminated, and throughout his life he was tempted by the idea of withdrawal to such a world. Thus he tells that he did not regret having to be removed – on grounds of poor health – from the society of his schoolfellows;<sup>17</sup> on the contrary, he was happy to be taken out of the rough and tumble of the competitive world of his peers. His mother, on the other hand, the siren whose charms had enslaved his father and brought the latter into conflict with *his* father, is associated in the hero's imagination with cruelty and deprivation:

Every time I have . . . passed over Putney common I have always noticed the spot where my mother, as we drove along in the coach, admonished me that I was now going into the World, and [had] much [to] learn to think and act for myself. . . . There is not, in the course of life, a more remarkable change than the removal of a

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child from the luxury and freedom of a wealthy house to the frugal diet and strict subordination of a school; from the tenderness of parents and the obsequiousness of servants to the rude familiarity of his equals, the insolent tyranny of his seniors, and the rod, perhaps, of a cruel and capricious pedagogue.<sup>18</sup>

The Horatian theme of withdrawal from the tumult of the city to an idyllic retreat “which should unite the society of the town with the beauties and freedom of the Country,”<sup>19</sup> in Gibbon’s own words, was a common literary topos of the eighteenth century and probably a broadly shared ideal of life. It is important in the writings of Pope and Voltaire, and it also determined major decisions in their lives. Voltaire chose to live at the gates of Geneva, as his philosophically minded Quaker in the *Lettres philosophiques* had settled near London, his Oriental philosopher Zadig near Babylon, and his chastened and enlightened optimist Candide near Constantinople. In the same way, Pope settled at Twickenham and Gibbon at La Grotte, at the gates of Lausanne. Gibbon’s description of Sheffield Place, the country seat of his friend John Holroyd, Lord Sheffield, as a “château . . . séjour du repos et de l’amitié,”<sup>20</sup> repeats a formula that Voltaire used frequently in his correspondence when referring to Mme. du Châtelet’s residence at Cirey.

In Gibbon’s case, the theme of withdrawal, the contrast of London and Lausanne developed in innumerable letters, seems to have been, in addition to a convenient epistolary topos, the expression of a deep-seated need. In Lausanne, he writes, he dominated and controlled his social environment as he could never do in London, and he remarks pointedly in a letter to his friend Sheffield that in England, when he was suffering from the gout, as he frequently was, “my confinement was sad and solitary; the many forgot my existence when they saw me no longer at Brookes’s; and the few who sometimes cast a thought or an eye on their friend were detained by business or pleasure, the distance of the way or the hours of the house of commons.” But at Lausanne, “the objects are nearer and more distinct, and I myself am an object of much larger magnitude. . . . During three months I have had round my chair a succession of agreeable men and women who came with a smile and vanished at a nod, and as soon as it was agreeable I had a constant party at cards which was sometimes dismissed to their respective homes, and sometimes detained by Deyverdun to supper without the least trouble or inconvenience to myself.”<sup>21</sup>

It is not surprising, perhaps, that as he came to acknowledge his preference for the order of Lausanne, in which he himself occupied a prominent and controlling place, over the free-for-all of London, where he was no

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more than “an obscure bachelor,” he also modified his view of the Bernese government of Lausanne and of the relative value of liberty as opposed to a protective and paternalistic order. “That incessant hurry of Politicks,” he wrote to his stepmother in 1785, “was indeed one of the things which disgusted me the most, and there is nothing pleases me so much in this Country as to enjoy all the blessings of a Good Government without ever talking or thinking of our Governors.”<sup>22</sup> Two years later he told Catherine de Sévery that at Lausanne “la tranquillité du gouvernement dont vous ne sentez pas assez le prix . . . vaut mieux peut-être que notre liberté orageuse.”<sup>23</sup> The growing conservatism of age in an increasingly restless world may have prompted these remarks,<sup>24</sup> but they are probably not inconsistent with Gibbon’s deepest desires and memories throughout his life. No schoolboy adventures ever seemed more desirable to him than the protective care, the gentle society, and the “maternal vigilance” of his Aunt Kitty Porten, and in the History the happiest period in the history of man is not that of the virtuous Republic but the benevolent and paternalistic rule of the Antonines.

Yet Gibbon’s withdrawal from the male world of competition and violence, from the “orageuse liberté” of politics and public life, was not a renunciation. It seems rather to have been a strategy of displacement or transposition. Even more than to Lausanne, it was to his library that the historian withdrew. “Though a lover of society my library is the room to which I am most attached,” he wrote.<sup>25</sup> Impulses and desires that could not even be acknowledged at one level found release at another, and the pen, it seems, substituted for the native instruments through which Gibbon failed to assert himself. To this failure – to the “unmanly” detour by way of the pen – we owe *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon, as we shall see, never gave up the ideal of direct engagement, of native authority, of the arms-bearing citizen; he did not draw the full lesson of his own history; nevertheless, his work bears important marks of his experience as a writer.

Gibbon provides several telling illustrations in the Autobiography of his inability or unwillingness to enter wholeheartedly into competition with his peers and of his adoption of the role of onlooker and recorder which was to serve him so well as a historian. In his account of the years he spent on his father’s estate at Buriton after his return from exile in Lausanne, he emphasizes that, though by then a young man of twenty-one, he took no part in the manly activities indulged in by his father. “When he galloped away on a fleet hunter to follow the Duke of Richmond’s foxhounds, I saw him depart without a wish to join in the sport; and in the command of an ample manour, I valued the supply of the kitchen much more than the

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exercise of the field. I never handled a gun, I seldom mounted a horse.”<sup>26</sup> Even his service with the Hampshire militia appears to have been more notable for carousing and good companionship than for arduous military exercise. Later, as a member of Parliament, in a situation of considerable verbal violence and competition, Gibbon confesses that he was a very poor speaker and presents himself as an observer and judge of parliamentary action rather than a participant in it:

After a fleeting illusive hope, prudence condemned me to acquiesce in the humble station of a mute. I was not armed by Nature or education with the intrepid energy of mind and voice – “*Vincentem strepitus, et natum rebus agendis.*” – timidity was fortified by pride, and even the success of my pen discouraged the tryal of my voice. But I assisted at the debates of a free assembly . . . I listened to the attack and defence of eloquence and reason; I had a near prospect of the characters, views, and passions of the first men of the age.<sup>27</sup>

The hero's muteness – *mutus pecus*, he called himself – is the more striking, as he appears from other evidence to have been a fluent conversationalist, the only criticism being that his talk was somewhat composed,<sup>28</sup> and as we have his own word for it that eloquence and oratory determined the patterns of his written prose, his practice as an author being “to cast a long paragraph in a single mould, to try it by my ear, to deposit it in my memory” and “to suspend the action of the pen till I had given the last polish to my work.”<sup>29</sup> It seems, therefore, that in Parliament it was the situation that intimidated and disarmed him, making him feel that before “the first men of the age” he somehow lacked the authority to speak. He certainly admired brilliant oratory, which he associated, traditionally enough, with manly energy and skill, and he paid tribute to “Mr. Sheridan's eloquence” at the famous impeachment trial of Warren Hastings before Parliament in 1788. In a curious note at this point in the Autobiography, which may well reflect a general anxiety about power and performance, Gibbon relates that, being struck – as indeed all those who heard him were – by Sheridan's “display of Genius, which blazed four successive days,” he tried to find out how many words “a rapid and ready Orator might pronounce in an hour.”<sup>30</sup> The hero of the Autobiography, moreover, himself suggests a connection between his lack of success and timidity in public oratory, his failure to perform as might have been expected of him, and his practice of the solitary and imaginative exercises of the pen: “even the success of my pen discouraged the tryal of my voice.”<sup>31</sup> The sexual symbol-

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ism of the substitution of the artifice of the stylus for the tongue, the natural organ, was not lost, we may surmise, on a writer who so often reported the punishment of rebels by the tyrants' cutting off or pulling out of their tongues.

Timidity and withdrawal are thus presented as characteristic, throughout his career, of the hero's relation to the world of power and domination. Equally, identification with women and friendship with the wives of other men are recurrent features of his relations with others. All through his life, he was attracted by the friendship of married couples. With them he happily adopted the role of the son-brother-consort, who for all practical purposes agrees to be excluded from any relation to the woman that might disturb the male partner's exclusive possession of her. From the outset, in short, and by the nature of the role he adopts, the hero deliberately excludes himself from the exercise of power and refrains from directly challenging established authority. In this way Gibbon became the close friend and consort of his stepmother, his father's second wife, and in his letters to her he addresses her commonly as "My Dearest Friend." He had awaited her arrival with apprehension, he writes, but the imaginary monster turned out to be "an amiable and deserving woman" of "warm and exquisite sensibility." Like Aunt Kitty Porten, the second Mrs. Gibbon was a mother yet not a mother, a woman yet not a woman but a friend. "My suspicions . . . were gradually dispelled. . . . After some reserve on my side, our minds associated in confidence and friendship; and as Mrs. Gibbon had neither children nor the hopes of children, we more easily adopted the tender names and genuine characters of mother and son."<sup>32</sup>

The hero at this point had reached an age that "abolished the distance that might yet remain between a parent and a son"<sup>33</sup> and gave him virtual equality with his father, and the latter was "satisfied" by his son's behavior. The situation at Buriton thus anticipates others in which Gibbon was a friend to husband and wife alike. He was equally close, for instance, to Abigail Holroyd, the wife of his friend and protector Lord Sheffield – later the editor of the Autobiography – and he considered Sheffield Place as his home. "I have a very noble country seat about ten miles from East Grinstead in Sussex," he wrote playfully. "That spot is dearer to me than the rest of the three kingdoms."<sup>34</sup> The Holroyd children, likewise, he treated as no family member and no stranger, but only an intimate friend of the family could – with a mixture of affection, indulgence, playfulness, and protectiveness. To the children, in short, he was at once a father and a brother, a superior and an equal, a father relieved of the weight – or the burden – of authority, just as to the wife he was a male without designs of possession.

At Lausanne, after he settled there, he became a close friend of Catherine

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de Sévery, the aunt of Benjamin Constant, and her husband Salomon de Sévery, a dignified member of the Grand and the Petit Conseils of Lausanne, whom young Maria Holroyd, on a visit to Gibbon in Lausanne, described as “a very friendly, good kind of man; but a little *ennuyeux*.”<sup>35</sup> Gibbon had known Catherine before her marriage; she appears to have been beautiful but cold. She “is called Mont Blanc, and I cannot give you a better Idea of her,”<sup>36</sup> Maria Holroyd wrote her aunt in England. With this gracious but reserved woman and her solid, reliable husband, Gibbon found “the most perfect system of domestic happiness,”<sup>37</sup> a family in which he felt himself at home, and whose children he regarded as his own.<sup>38</sup> In general, it seems, the role of the adopted father, son, consort, brother, suited Gibbon well.<sup>39</sup>

Of marriage there was a question only once in the hero's life. At the age of twenty-one, he tells, he wanted to marry Suzanne Curchod, the daughter of a protestant minister of the Pays de Vaud – later Madame Necker, wife of the famous banker and minister of finance under Louis XVI and mother of the redoubtable Madame de Stael. His father forbade the match, however, and the hero acquiesced with hardly a murmur. As his own historian, he distilled the episode into a characteristically memorable parallelism: “I sighed as a lover; I obeyed as a son.” The affair is recounted briefly in the Autobiography:

I hesitate, from the apprehension of ridicule, when I approach the delicate subject of my early love. By this word I do not mean the polite attention or the gallantry, without hope or design, which has originated from the spirit of chivalry, and is interwoven with the texture of French manners. [I do not confine myself to the grosser appetite which our pride may affect to disdain, because it has been implanted by Nature in the whole animal creation, “*Amor omnibus idem*.” The discovery of a sixth sense, the first consciousness of manhood, is a very interesting moment of our lives; but it less properly belongs to the memoirs of an individual, than to the natural history of the species.] I understand by this passion the union of desire, friendship, and tenderness, which is inflamed by a single female, which prefers her to the rest of her sex, and which seeks her possession as the supreme or the sole happiness of our being. I need not blush at recollecting the object of my choice; and though my love was disappointed of success, I am rather proud that I was once capable of feeling such a pure and exalted sentiment. The personal attractions of Mademoiselle Susanne Curchod were embellished by the virtues and talents of the



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mind. Her fortune was humble, but her family was respectable: her mother, a native of France, had preferred her religion to her country; the profession of her father did not extinguish the moderation and philosophy of his temper, and he lived content with a small salary and laborious duty in the obscure lot of Minister of Crassy, in the mountains that separate the pays de Vaud from the County of Burgundy. In the solitude of a sequestered village he bestowed a liberal, and even learned, education on his only daughter; she surpassed his hopes by her proficiency in the sciences and languages; and in her short visits to some relations at Lausanne, the wit and beauty and erudition of Mademoiselle Curchod were the theme of universal applause. The report of such a prodigy awakened by (*sic*) curiosity; I saw and loved. I found her learned without pedantry, lively in conversation, pure in sentiment, and elegant in manners; and the first sudden emotion was fortified by the habits and knowledge of a more familiar acquaintance. She permitted me to make her two or three visits at her father's house: I passed some happy days in the mountains of Burgundy; and her parents honourably encouraged a connection [which might raise their daughter above want and dependence]. In a calm retirement the gay vanity of youth no longer fluttered in her bosom; she listened to the voice of truth and passion, and I might presume to hope that I had made some impression on a virtuous heart. At Crassy and Lausanne I indulged my dream of felicity; but, on my return to England, I soon discovered that my father would not hear of this strange alliance, and that, without his consent, I was myself destitute and helpless. After a painful struggle I yielded to my fate.<sup>40</sup>

The reader of this narrative may be struck both by the narrator's diffidence on the subject of sex, under the guise of matter-of-factness, and by his apparent gratification that, thanks to Suzanne Curchod, his Autobiography will not lack the important ingredient of an affair of the heart, however brief and restrained. On her side, Suzanne appears to have sensed the literary character or inspiration of her romance with Gibbon. "Encore un mot sur notre roman," she writes as the affair was drawing to its inevitable conclusion, and in a later letter Gibbon is portrayed as having failed to live up to her "chymère céladonique."<sup>41</sup> Subsequently, and characteristically, the failed hero of the romance became the successful friend of the family. He visited the Necker couple in Paris, and especially after they returned to Switzerland to become virtually his neighbors, he was a frequent house

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guest at Coppet. During these years of renewed association, Suzanne Necker, who seems to have been strikingly close to her former lover temperamentally and who spent her later years, as he did, renouncing and repressing the impulses and fantasies of her youth, appears to have encouraged the rewriting of her early love for the historian as a Necker family legend. The most elaborate version of this legend was ultimately published as Madame de Stael's successful novel *Corinne*, but earlier versions of it are found among the juvenile writings of Suzanne Curchod's daughter. As the hero of the legend, the historian was finally united with his mistress in a way that left the rights of fathers and husbands unchallenged, almost exactly as the hero and heroine of that other Swiss romance, Rousseau's *La nouvelle Heloise*, were united in the second part of the novel in the family context of Clarens under the benevolent supervision of Julie's husband, Monsieur de Wolmar.

In general, Gibbon appears to have been satisfied with this kind of relation to women. He never wanted to marry and set up a family for himself, never sought to take on in earnest the role of husband or father, and hints that he was not much moved by sexual desire, his only "temptations" being those offered by a marriage of convenience.

A matrimonial alliance has ever been the object of my terror rather than of my wishes. I was not very strongly pressed by my family or by my passions to propagate the name and race of the Gibbons, and if some reasonable temptations occurred in the neighborhood, the vague idea never proceeded to the length of a serious negotiation.<sup>42</sup>

The historian's various "flirts" – with Madame de Cambis, Lady Elizabeth Foster, Eliza Hayley, Madame de Montolieu, Madame de Silva — have yielded nothing to the most careful investigation, and they all seem to have been harmless enough. Perhaps, as he wrote to Sheffield, his only passion was for "Fanny Lausanne."

The ideal relation, as the narrator of the Autobiography puts it himself, is that of brother and sister:

It is a familiar and tender friendship with a female, much about our own age; an affection perhaps softened by the secret influence of sex, but pure from any mixture of sensual desire, the sole species of Platonic love that can be indulged in with truth and without danger.<sup>43</sup>

In this modified version of the mother–son relation, sexuality is trans-