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The Empire Unpossess'd

An Essay on Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*

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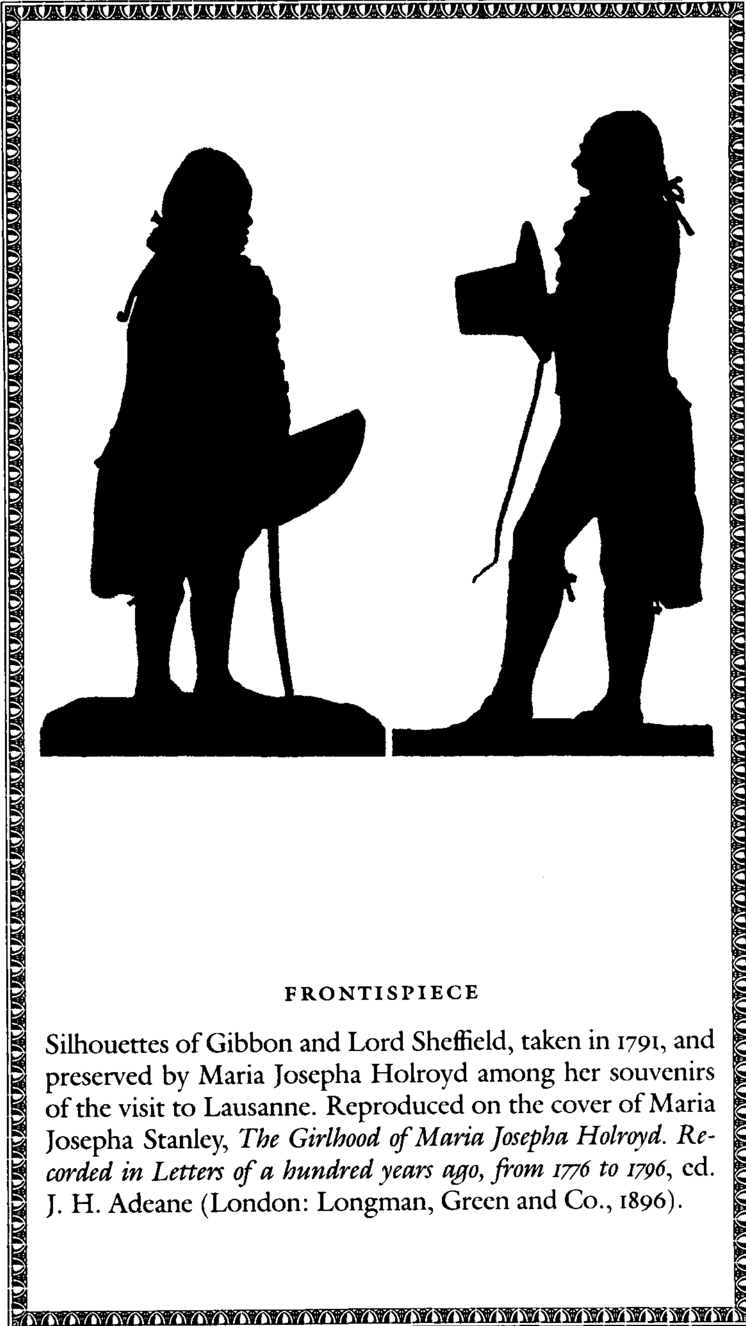

FRONTISPIECE

Silhouettes of Gibbon and Lord Sheffield, taken in 1791, and preserved by Maria Josepha Holroyd among her souvenirs of the visit to Lausanne. Reproduced on the cover of Maria Josepha Stanley, *The Girlhood of Maria Josepha Holroyd. Recorded in Letters of a hundred years ago, from 1776 to 1796*, ed. J. H. Adeane (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1896).

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THE EMPIRE UNPOSSESS'D

An Essay on Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*

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"Is the chair empty? Is the sword unsway'd?
Is the King dead, the empire unpossess'd?"

Shakespeare, *Richard III*

"Il n'y a plus qu'un sexe, et nous sommes tous femmes par l'esprit."

Montesquieu

"En véritable élève du XVIIIe siècle, il se plaisait surtout au laisser-aller d'un pouvoir absolu, et jugeait que le plus agréable des gouvernemens, c'est celui dont on peut se moquer tout bas, sans risquer de le renverser."

Barante

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Preface

IN THE 1930s the literature on Gibbon took the form of biography. The historian and his age, it appears, fascinated the men of that troubled time as much as did the History itself. We may speculate that they were disturbed by the destructiveness of the Great War, bewildered by intractable social, economic, and international problems, and apprehensive for the future of civilization as they knew it, and that they looked back for inspiration as well as for relief to the rationalism, the cosmopolitanism, the decorum, and the modest personal courage of the Age of Enlightenment. Whatever the reasons, we shall not see the like of their work again. The books they wrote are not scholarly, in our contemporary sense, though they are grounded in solid scholarship and research. Mingling interpretation freely with biographical narrative, they are far closer in spirit and style than any contemporary study to Gibbon himself and seem still to belong to that liberal belletristic tradition of which Gibbon is one of the chief ornaments. To write about Gibbon, one suspects, was in large measure, for G. M. Young, R. B. Mowat, and D. M. Low, to reaffirm the values Gibbon stood for.[1]

The student of Gibbon in our own time, professional and academic, has generally abandoned the biographical mode in favor of scholarly analysis of Gibbon's place in the history of ideas and the history of historiography and of the rhetoric and narrative art of the *Decline and Fall*. Gibbon and his time no longer represent a set of values to which the critic looks back with sympathy and respect. The text of the *Decline and Fall* itself, the intellectual and ideological context in which it was produced, and the literary conventions by which it was shaped are now the focus of interest.[2]

I could not hope to match the achievement of Young or Low, and I have not attempted to do over what has been very well done in the last two decades by Giarrizzo, Jordan, Bond, Brady, and Baridon, to mention only a few of the recent Gibbon scholars from whom the reader of Gibbon has much to learn. Biography, history of ideas, rhetoric, and narrative strategy

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are by no means ignored in the following pages, but my business has not been with any of these exclusively or principally.

The main thesis of my study is that Gibbon's essential concern in the *Decline and Fall* is with authority – with political authority in the first instance, but also with other kinds of authority, including that of language, of narrative, and of the historical text itself. Indeed, I believe Gibbon's grappling with a problem that presses heavily on the modern consciousness may well save his work, in our time, from exile to the narrow province of the antiquarian or the academic.

Throughout the *Decline and Fall*, it is argued, the highest value is placed upon what is original, undivided, one with itself, as the only possible foundation of authority. Whatever marks a rupture with the origins – interpretation, which takes the place of immediate understanding; rhetoric, which exploits the autonomy of language and the fateful gap between sign and thing; history itself, which Gibbon so readily associates with "intrigue" – is nearly always denounced and deplored. The reader of the *Decline and Fall* is clearly expected to accept the outlook of the narrator. This is not surprising, since it is a persistent feature of the tradition they both share not only to perceive the world in terms of the original or unitary versus the derived or alienated but to privilege the first of these terms absolutely over the second. Even in the century of Enlightenment disputes were most often conducted with reference to competing origins or sources – Revelation on the one hand, Nature or Reason on the other.

In Gibbon, however, as in some other eighteenth-century writers, accompanying the theme of origins and threatening to undermine it there is also a repeated suggestion that civilization is possible only because the supposed origin, the point of absolute presence, is in fact an empty space, an erasure. The "vacant space" at the heart of the Empire, in Gibbon's words, is what makes the substitution of humanly devised meanings and orders possible and necessary. It is both a scandal and an opportunity. The attempt to refound authority in the absence of origins and to discover an acceptable middle ground between what Gibbon and his contemporaries readily thought of as the "extremes" of anarchy and despotism, each of which involves a breakdown of social order and communication, appears in the *Decline and Fall* as a political problem in the narrative and as a rhetorical and esthetic problem of the narrative – one for which a solution is sought above all in a redefinition of the relation of reader and narrator and the adoption of an ingratiating yet decorous discourse equally remote from the playful conceits of libertines and the sublime enthrallment of metaphysicians and divines. There seems no doubt that Gibbon's solution of the esthetic problem went far to ensure the literary success of the *Decline*

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and Fall, its appeal to an audience that was at once feminine ("feathered ladies") and masculine ("judges"), and its ability to function simultaneously as literature, stimulating the imagination, and as history, limiting and restraining it.

The possible relation between Gibbon's perception of the problem of authority and response to it and the ideological requirements of a particular social group in eighteenth-century England is sometimes hinted at but has not been an object of investigation in the present study. Such an investigation, it seemed, was best left to a trained historian competent to handle the methodological issues involved. On the other hand, it is suggested in the first chapter that the problem of authority, which is found to be central to the *Decline and Fall*, was experienced in a variety of contexts by Gibbon himself as a human being – as a son, as a man, and as a friend – or at the very least was again projected, after the completion of the *Decline and Fall*, onto the historian's narrative of his life. The intention here is not to offer a psychoanalytical interpretation of Gibbon's achievement as a writer and a historian in terms of his family relations and early experience. It is simply to point out that Gibbon might have discovered the problem that preoccupied him in his great work not only in his reflection on the State and the Empire but also in the humbler situations of everyday life. In the historian's relation to his father, to his mother, to Aunt Kitty Porten, to his friends Deyverdun, the Holroyds, the Neckers, the de Séverys, it is almost impossible not to discern the same difficulties and the same strategies for dealing with them that we find in his work as an artist. No causal chain need link the man to the historian and the artist, but the same pattern of unmasking, veiling, and substitution is characteristic of all three.

Countless strands connect a reader and a text and most, no doubt, must remain concealed, especially from the reader himself. I think, however, that I may be able to identify three conscious experiences or concerns which converged, in my case, on Gibbon and his History.

The first and most obvious is the decline and fall of the British Empire, which still astonishes me even though it is now past history. No doubt it was already visible, by the 1920s, not only to those on the Left who wished for it but to many upper-class people who had much to fear from it. To a child of modest background, however, as I was, born and raised in a grimy industrial metropolis, which consoled itself for its many miseries with the sobriquet "Second City of the Empire" (after Calcutta, it was conceded), it came as a completely unexpected and disorienting experience. Everything in my education had encouraged me to believe in the miraculous and prov-

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idential character of the process by which the inhabitants of a small group of islands off the coast of northwestern Europe had made themselves the center of a universal Empire and the custodians of world order. The war years intensified the feeling of being at the world's center in a crucial and heroic role, even though mine, as a schoolboy, was limited to helping with the annual potato harvest and running occasional errands on my bicycle for the Home Guard.

Perhaps no one who did not live through that time can understand how keen the communal commitment was, adroitly fostered as it was by government propaganda, and how bright the hope that a better social order would accompany the peace, not only at home but throughout the world, and especially in the territories under British administration. My growing up coincided with the end of the war. The euphoric expectations that swept the Labour government into office were extinguished not only by the Cold War and the sobering realization that the social order would not be easily or speedily renewed but by the transformation of the international order itself. Soon after the elation of victory, the extent of the decline of British power and influence became apparent. It gradually dawned on the young men and women of my generation that the destinies of the world would no longer be decided in Britain and that the seemingly vast power we had dreamed of turning to noble ends had been changed, in an astonishingly short time, into a kind of political Pantaloon, still commanding enough strength on the international stage to obstruct a few straggling opponents but devoid of grandeur, heroism, or dignity.

Everyone has to reappraise the values and authorities of his childhood, and it is not an easy thing to do. In my case, because of my experience as a British *subject* – a status I have retained out of piety, affection, and gratitude – that reappraisal assumed a more than personal or familial character. In Gibbon's time, the phase of Empire of which I observed the close was barely beginning. But he too stood close to the end of an international order, and the boyhood sweetheart of Suzanne Necker lived to see a large part of the world of his youth crash into the fires of the French Revolution. No one may claim to have heard everything Gibbon is saying, but I think my own experience may have made me particularly attentive to certain inflections of that voice "from the other shore."

To be raised in the United Kingdom, with its class distinctions and intense regional particularism, means to be especially sensitive to the forms and codes of communication and to be able to sympathize both with the desire to break them down in order to reach a more authentic, unmediated community with others – to build Jerusalem in England's green and pleas-

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ant land – and with the conviction that they are the indispensable means of any social communication and of any social order. It happens that the question of codes and masks has proved to be a central one for me also in my professional work as a teacher of French literature. It is especially important for understanding the eighteenth-century texts with which I most frequently have to concern myself professionally. Gibbon, as is well known, was by no means a stranger either to the French language or to French literature. It was inevitable, perhaps, that I should be drawn one day to a figure whose situation astride two cultures reminded me, *mutatis mutandis*, of my own.

Finally, because of my interest in masks and codes, I have long been intrigued by forms of writing in which the literary imagination appears to disguise itself and to submit to significant constraints – literary criticism, historiography, scholarship and erudition, natural history. As long as literary studies were dominated by rhetoric, the literary character of Buffon, Michelet, Carlyle, or Macaulay was recognized, and these authors were regularly studied as models of style to be followed or avoided. When rhetoric ceased to be the focus of interest in literary studies, however, such writers were most often quietly dropped from the literary canon and abandoned to students of biography and cultural history. I believe we are now ready to reread, reconsider, and, where appropriate, reinstate them. We now know that there are no firm boundaries separating literary from other forms of writing. Any text can be seen as a point of intersection of other texts, as a reorganization, revision, and redeployment of them for the purpose of generating new meanings, and as a stimulus to further reorganizations, revisions, and redeployments. At the same time, in its particularity, each text is a singular utterance, emitted at a specific point in time, the engagement of an individual user of language and of texts with the world. Gibbon's History, it seems to me, does not simply convey information. It utilizes other texts, other histories, to create meaning and to bear testimony. In trying to hear Gibbon's voice, to grasp his meaning, I stumbled, as a reader, on my own, and the movement of reading the History was continued for me, however modestly, in the act of writing this essay. A text that can unlock its reader's imagination and quicken his pen seems to deserve from him the gratitude and respect that readers usually accord to great works of literature.

Though I have been reading Gibbon and thinking about him for a number of years, I did most of the writing of this essay in 1978–9, during tenure of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. I wish to express my gratitude to the Endowment. I am also indebted to Princeton

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University for granting me a sabbatical leave that was largely earned at another institution. Finally, I would like to thank the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and its Director, Harry Woolf, for their generous hospitality.

Princeton, N.J. L.G.
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Historical note

EDWARD GIBBON WAS BORN in 1737 at Putney, near London, the son of Edward Gibbon, member of Parliament for Petersfield (1734) and Southampton (1741), and of Judith Porten, the daughter of a London merchant. His childhood was sickly, and his formal education suffered frequent interruptions. At the age of fifteen, he went up to Oxford as a gentleman-commoner at Magdalen College, but he claims that the time he spent there was "the most idle and unprofitable of my whole life." In 1753, in the fortress of Anglicanism, he was converted to Roman Catholicism. His father immediately sent him to Lausanne in Switzerland, where a local Calvinist minister, M. Pavilliard, was entrusted with completing his general education and bringing him back to the Protestant fold. Pavilliard executed both tasks with fair success. Gibbon read widely (Latin, some Greek, logic, metaphysics, jurisprudence, French literature, and some mathematics), and at the end of 1754 he received the sacraments in the church at Lausanne. During this period he met Suzanne Curchod, the daughter of another pastor, and the two young people planned to marry, but Gibbon's father refused his consent and in 1758 recalled his son to England. Gibbon gave up his matrimonial plans, and Suzanne Curchod subsequently married Jacques Necker, the Genevan banker who became French minister of finance in the last years of the *ancien régime*.

Gibbon spent the decade after his return to England serving in the Hampshire militia, managing his father's dilapidated affairs, and tolerating as best he could the tedium and dependency of his existence in the simple old manor house at Buriton, Hampshire, which had been acquired by his wealthy grandfather and to which his father had retired on Judith Porten's death. This period was punctuated by the publication of his first book, an *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, which appeared in French in 1761, by travel abroad (between 1763 and 1765 he was on the Continent, with extended stays at Paris, Lausanne, and Rome), and by some abortive literary projects: The first volume of a projected *Histoire générale de la République des Suisses* was composed, again in French, in 1767, and in 1768 he began a

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literary journal, *Mémoires littéraires de la Grande Bretagne*, which ceased publication, however, after the second volume. Above all, Gibbon read a great deal during this period and conceived the design of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

In 1770 Edward Gibbon Senior died, and the historian moved to London to pursue seriously his work on the *Decline and Fall*. The first volume appeared in 1776 and was an instant success. The others – six in all – followed at various intervals until 1788. In 1774 Gibbon was elected member of Parliament for Liskeard, but his parliamentary career was short (1774–83) and undistinguished. In 1779, at the request of the Secretary of State for the Southern Department, Lord Weymouth, he drew up for distribution to the courts of Europe a substantial and well-argued reply, in French, to a French government circular justifying the position taken by France in the American war. In return for this service, he was appointed to a sinecure at the Board of Trade, but the position disappeared when the Board of Trade was abolished in 1782. One year later, Gibbon began negotiations for the sale of all his property except his library, and left England to live with Georges Deyverdun, a Swiss friend of long standing, at Lausanne. Here he wrote the final volumes of the *Decline and Fall*.

With the publication of these in 1787 and the sale of Buriton to Lord Stawell in 1789, Gibbon's ties to England were further loosened. In May, 1793, however, he undertook an arduous journey back to his native country in order to be with his friend John Baker Holroyd, Lord Sheffield, who had just lost his wife. A few months later, in London, he underwent a series of operations for an ailment that had been with him for decades. An infection set in, and he died on January 16, 1794. He was buried in the village church at Fletching, Sussex, the Sheffield family burial place. An autobiography, on which he had been working before his death, was published posthumously by Sheffield in two volumes of *Miscellaneous Works*.

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