

GIBBON

I.

IT gives a literary man something of a shock to realise that there is only one historian in modern times who is generally read *as* a historian after the lapse of over a hundred years. Only the ancients, it would seem, are secure of what we call immortality in that province, and not all of *them*. Herodotus and Thucydides are indeed inevitable, the first in virtue of his primordial fashion, the second for his mastery, and both by reason of their monopoly ; but it is hard to say who now reads Livy for his interest. Mr. Lang tells us that it was a singularity on Mr. Grant Allen's part to spend an evening over him in his university life ; and it is certain that the repute of Sallust for style no longer brings him willing readers, whatever may be the hap of Tacitus. As for Diodorus the Sicilian, and Dionysius the Halicarnassian, and Dion Cassius, they may go hang ; it is only the researcher who gives them heed.

Medievals are in not much better case : even Comines and Froissart are not thought a necessary part of either a liberal or a conservative education ; and it is long odds that even Clarendon and Bishop Burnet, whose interest as literature is greater than their value as history, are to-day little read save by special students. Men will not now give the time their fathers gave to the past : and what they do give they prefer to spend on recent historians who revise

and condense. Of the admired compilers of the eighteenth century, only one, our one, holds his ground. Hume as a historian no longer counts. Robertson, who was as popular and as well paid in his day as Macaulay in his, is forgotten: you can buy his complete works almost at waste-paper price; Watson and Henry, his countrymen, are rarely even to be seen on book-barrows. Voltaire, to be sure, is still supposed to be read in history because he was Voltaire, and because the *Essai sur les Mœurs* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV*—neither of them a history proper—have real sociological value; but *Charles XII* is not now seriously regarded by adults. Gibbon alone of that age is re-edited, re-published, and re-read.

On more than one count the fact is surprising. If the power to learn were as common as the habit of reading, or even of reading Gibbon, the *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* would be the most educative, politically, of all historical works; whereas it quite obviously failed to educate the nineteenth century. It has not educated the Russians, who presumably have translations of Gibbon:¹ it has not educated the Germans; it did not educate Guizot, who translated him a second time for the French, and it has therefore probably counted for little in their education; it has not educated the Italians, who probably do not read Gibbon much;² above all, it

¹ The only one in the British Museum Catalogue is dated 1883-86: I do not know if it is the first. There was a Polish version in 1830, and a Greek in 1840. In French there are four translations, two of which were begun in Gibbon's own day.

² He was, however, translated into Italian in his lifetime, the translator taking care to append treatises by way of orthodox antidote to some of Gibbon's heresies. See the *Autobiography*, note to Memoir E in Murray's ed. 1896, p. 322: placed in the text of Sheffield's ed. Of this Italian translation, the last volume was destroyed; but another appeared in 1820-24.

has substantially failed to educate the English. Still they read him : at least, the excellent edition of Mr. Bury was abundantly bought. The explanation, I take it, lies in the nature of Gibbon's gift, partly in his greatness, but partly also in his very defects. In any case, he constitutes a unique problem, were it only because he is such a solitary specimen in literature ; and to-day, perhaps, the task of understanding him is more feasible than it used to be. To begin with, through the happy resurrection of the Lausanne portrait by General Meredith Read,¹ we of these days are enabled to see Gibbon as none of his English contemporaries saw him after he became famous—as he was in his blond prime, before his face was deformed by corpulence and dropsy. To look on that portrait is to secure at once a correction of our habitual impression, set up by the grotesque mask of disease preserved for us by Reynolds. But above all, we have the true transcript of the six memoirs out of which Lord Sheffield, or rather his daughter, all too skilfully constructed the classic *Autobiography* ; and we have the true text of the letters which the same hands at times so strangely manipulated—not only suppressing at will, but at times piecing a bogus letter out of scraps taken from several. If we cannot realise him now, we never shall ; and after all it is not quite certain that the twentieth century will cherish him to the end.

¹ In his *Historic Studies in Vaud, Berne, and Savoy, from Roman Times to Voltaire, Rousseau, and Gibbon* (Chatto & Windus, 2 vols. 1897). In those copious posthumous volumes a number of Gibbon's letters are printed for the first time, a year after what was meant to be the definitive "centenary" edition (Murray). The reproduction of the portrait with the present essay in the *Reformer* is believed to be the first after that in General Read's work, from which it was copied with permission.

II.

In the life of Gibbon we learn, first of all, how many conditions must or may combine to yield us a great performer in any field. In his case, even seemingly adverse items count in the end for good. First there is the sickly child, with a great head and a small and feeble body,¹ which last entails on him a semi-invalid life till he has thoroughly fixed his bookish bent.² Withheld for the greater part of his boyhood from that regular schooling which in England then, as now, served mainly to turn out mobs of young animals of one brand, he had in that period read dozens of volumes of history, ancient and modern, European and Oriental, and much else, theology included. Educational orthodoxy would of course have had him play hockey or cricket instead, through five or more years spent in not learning the Latin grammar, and so grow into an average Briton, warranted to think nothing new. A series of happy mischances, including the circumstance of a rather careless father,³ left him to develop a blessed variation. And not the least fortunate chance, perhaps, was that father's sudden decision, so often blamed, to

¹ The whole family stock was stamped with malady. Five brothers and one sister were born after our Edward, and all died in infancy. He himself was so sickly that all five brothers were in succession baptised Edward, to preserve that name in the family in the case of his death. In the last years of his life he writes of his endless illnesses as a child, that "My body is still marked with the indelible scars of lancets, issues, and caustics" (*Autobiography*, the unmutated ed. 1896, pp. 37, 112-13).

² His aunt Charlotte Porten (who kept him alive during the years when his mother, always child-bearing, could not attend to him) began his education, and gave him his first love of reading. At her boarding-school in London, later, he was allowed to study in his own way, free from the bullying companionship of his robust fellows.

³ His mother died when he was ten, of her seventh confinement, at the age of thirty-eight.

enrol the boy as a gentleman commoner at Oxford at the age of fourteen,¹ when, almost suddenly, his hitherto wretched health became strengthened, and he seemed at last fit for a normal career. The zest with which he turned, not to study but to undergraduate pleasure, showed what might have become of him had he been healthy from the start; but destiny now saved him from frivolity as before from mediocrity.

Gibbon's account of his idle fourteen months at Magdalen College is one of the best-known episodes in autobiography and in university history. It tells of a decadence of academic life hardly to be matched in the Catholic Europe of that period; and seeing that genius is at best a rare variation, and that the average man cannot evince it in virtue of any opportunities, but may yet be much bettered by careful culture, it is obvious enough that England was thus going back incalculably in the intellectual life. There is no saying what was lost through the state of things which left or drove Gibbon to evolve his individuality.² But the fact remains that the utter neglect alike of teaching and of discipline in Oxford about 1750 did conduce to his mental making, though he himself, on looking back, could see only a scandalous episode of disorder.

¹ Born May 8th, 1737, Gibbon went to Oxford in 1752.

² "An academical education in England," wrote Lord Sheffield forty years later in a note to his edition of Gibbon's *Autobiography*, "is at present an object of alarm and terror to every thinking parent of moderate fortune. It is the apprehension of the expense, of the dissipation, and other evil consequences, which arise from the want of proper restraint at our own universities, that forces a number of our English youths to those of Scotland, and utterly excludes many from any sort of academical instruction."—*Gibbon's Misc. Works*, 1796, i, 52. Gibbon himself remarked, in a suppressed passage (Memoir F, p. 95) that "the inveterate evils which are derived from their birth and character must still cleave to our ecclesiastical corporations."

First, he was left free, like Adam Smith, to read and think for himself, instead of having his plastic young mind fixed in the moulds of as cramp a theory of life as modern times have seen. Where Smith, at the age of seventeen, took to philosophy and sociology, Gibbon at fourteen carried on his boyish propensity to theology,¹ being fascinated by the problems raised in Middleton's *Free Inquiry* concerning ancient ecclesiastical miracles; and he had the luck, by turning Catholic, to get himself cut adrift from Anglican Oxford² and England, and sent by his flurried father to the care of a Protestant pastor at Lausanne. The father was himself no zealot in religion, being indeed something of a deist, and the friend of David Mallet, who edited Bolingbroke's posthumous works. But the deists discriminated sharply between an Anglican Protestantism which had grown half deistic in spirit and tone, and the "superstition" of "Rome"; and it was after colloquies with friends at Mallet's house, whither Edward had been taken by his father on his official expulsion from Oxford, and where the lad was repelled by his host's opinions, that the Swiss plan was decided on.

The episode of conversion to Catholicism is already a proof of the independent turn given to the boy's spirit by his invalid experience and his precocious reading. A robust lad, whether a genius or not, could not at that age have made the psychological growth needed for either the inquiry or the decision:

¹ "From my childhood I had been fond of religious disputation; my poor aunt has been often puzzled by my objections to the mysteries which she strove to believe" (*Autobiography*). As one of her favourite books was Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*, she cannot have been very orthodox.

² "By the fact of his conversion to Romanism he had ceased to be a member of the University." It was his father who divulged the fact of his conversion (June, 1753).

he would have gone on maturing under the obscure control of educational habit ; and it seems more than likely that had Gibbon reached adolescence in the Oxford environment, his very clear eye to the main chance, then sufficiently developed by his father's thriftlessness, would have led him to choose "the fat slumbers of the church"¹ as his natural refuge from the hardships of what for his class was a small income. In that event there had probably been no *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, but instead some treatise on ecclesiastical antiquities, or the development of the papacy.²

For it was only in his precocious boyhood that he had enough concern about creed as such, or enough quixotry, to get into serious trouble about the inference to be drawn from the evidence as to ecclesiastical miracles. The large-brained boy, whose mind had so far been formed in the atmosphere of books, and gathered nothing of "the world's slow stain," exhibited all the moral fervour that was congenital to him, and acted as only an enthusiast would act in later life. Even the credit of this has been denied him by his Comtist critic, the late Mr. Cotter Morison, who observes that

No one nowadays, one may hope, would think of making Gibbon's conversion a reproach to him. The danger is rather that it should be regarded with too much honour.

¹ "I lamented that at the proper age I had not embraced the lucrative pursuits of the law or of trade, the chances of civil office or India adventure, or even the fat slumbers of the church."—*Autobiography*, Murray's ed. p. 275.

² In writing this I had forgotten Mr. Cotter Morison's speculation (*Gibbon*, p. 13) that if Gibbon had become a churchman "his literary labours would probably have consisted of an edition of a Greek play or two, and certainly some treatise on the Evidences of Christianity." I question both guesses. Gibbon had not much passion for mere academic scholarship, and he never did much violence to his convictions.

It unquestionably shows the early and trenchant force of his intellect; he mastered the logical position in a moment; saw the necessity of a criterion of faith; and being told that it was to be found in the practice of antiquity, boldly went there, and abided by the result. But this praise to his head does not extend to his heart. A more tender and deep moral nature would not have moved so rapidly. We must in fairness remember that it was not his fault that his religious education had been neglected at home, at school, and at college. But we have no reason to think that, had it been attended to, the result would have been much otherwise. The root of spiritual life did not exist in him. It never withered, because it never shot up.....He had no profound associations to tear out of his heart.....If we read the *Apologia* of Dr. Newman, we perceive the likeness and unlikeness of the two cases.....Ground which Gibbon dashed over in a few months or weeks, the great Tractarian took ten years to traverse. So different is the mystic from the positive mind.¹

Such "fairness" is edifying, apart from the acceptance of Gibbon as a "positive" mind by a Positivist. The mental experience of a boy of fifteen is pitted against that of a full-grown man, who had received all the culture of which he was capable; and because the boy saw clearly and acted swiftly where the man swayed confusedly and acted crookedly for long years, the boy is to be damned as having no "spiritual life" or tenderness of nature, while the man is credited with "conscience and heart ties, 'strong as life, stronger almost than death,'" which "arrested the conclusions of the intellect." To make the injustice complete, not a word is said in this connection of Gibbon's faithful affection for his kin and friends,² which in late life he exhibited to a degree never seen in Newman; nor is a word said of Newman's own

¹ *Gibbon*, in "English Men of Letters" series, pp. 16-17.

² Admitted by Mr. Morison at other points (pp. 57, 142, 169).

admission that "upon a syllogism"¹ he utterly broke with his heretical brother (a fanatic with a difference), and that when he was in France, before his conversion, his Anglican fanaticism made him shut himself in his chamber and refuse to look on a "liberal" people²—admissions which are now supplemented by his brother's account of how he "could not permit" his sister's pretension to think for herself.³

Spiritual life, otherwise the life of "the heart," appears on Mr. Morison's view to consist in a temper which paralyses at once natural affection and rational judgment, and keeps a man, it may be, fanatical now on this side and now on that, but always necessarily fanatical. Decidedly the mystic is different from the positive mind; and if we were to judge from Mr. Morison it might appear that the Positivist mind is different from both, though it be as ready to extol the zealot as to disparage his contrary. For Mr. Morison had shown the same lack of critical balance in his earlier work on St. Bernard, wherein superstition and fanaticism are lauelled, and nascent rationalism vilified,⁴ in a fashion which Comte himself, one would think—in any mood save that in which he proposed a day of cursing for Julian—must have felt to be overdone. Happily neither Positivism nor positivism is likely to codify a criterion which makes the life of the heart and the "spirit" consist in either the neurotic negation of human ties or the prostration of the intellect before tradition. Rational criticism will indeed not give "too much honour" to a boy's

¹ *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, ed. 1875, p. 47.

² *Id.* p. 33.

³ F. W. Newman, *Contributions.....to the early history of the late Cardinal Newman*, 1891, p. 113.

⁴ Compare the comment of Mr. R. L. Poole, in his *Illustrations of the History of Medieval Thought*, 1884, p. 146.

conversion from Protestantism to Catholicism ; but it will not think to keep the balance true by giving the excess of honour to the spirit of unreason.¹

For the rest of us, it may suffice to note that Gibbon's intellectual interest in theology and church history, thus early evinced, was one of the propensities which made him, by Newman's later admission, the one great ecclesiastical historian of his age, and by so much the better fitted to write the history of the Roman Empire. With the solitary exception of Bayle, who was by nature too much of a discursive casuist to be a devoted historian, he was the first student of ecclesiastical origins who combined thorough knowledge with perfect detachment of spirit. In him, the cessation of fear of the Lord constituted a beginning of wisdom. The series of his lucky chances continuing, he found in his Swiss guardian a man of kindly good sense, but no special culture ;² and after the good man had ostensibly persuaded him, at the end of a year's patient discussion, that transubstantiation was a worse difficulty than the Protestant cessation of miracles, he was beneficently left to himself. To all appearance, Gibbon effected his own re-conversion as he effected his own conversion, by seeing things, after study, from his own point of view. He never tells us at what point he

¹ It was Mr. Morison's idiosyncrasy to be unable to deliver himself from the partisanship of youth even when he had given up the beliefs on which they had proceeded ; and to the last he copied Comte's fallacy of demanding, on the score of historic relativity, a wholly sympathetic estimate of the characters of past pietists, however narrow and intolerant, while constantly refusing the same measure to their rationalist critics, however humane.

² "Truth compels me to own," wrote Gibbon in one of the suppressed passages of one of his six sketches of his Autobiography, "that my preceptor was not himself eminent for genius or learning." "A just though superficial knowledge of most branches of literature" is the further criticism that Lord Sheffield and his daughter allowed to stand. (Ed. cited, p. 135.)

passed to absolute disbelief in Christian supernaturalism ; and the chances are that he moved on that line in the year in which pastor Pavilliard was talking him out of Catholicism.

Through the enamel of Gibbon's highly artificial style it is hard to reach any vivid sense of his earlier psychological states ; but in that first year of his Swiss life, especially in the earlier months, when he could not converse, and lacked what for him had been "the indispensable comfort of a servant," he must have known much moral suffering. "My condition," he writes in his latter years, "seemed as destitute of hope as it was devoid of pleasure"; and in a suppressed passage of one of the memoirs¹ he writes concerning Madame Pavilliard, who half-starved him : "I now speak of her without resentment, but in sober truth she was ugly, dirty, proud, ill-tempered, and covetous." What he would have said of her while he did harbour resentment it would be entertaining to know. Moral and intellectual pride might for a while withhold the boy from surrender ; but when the ravenous reader, having mastered French, found himself again free to try his profoundest appetite on the library of his tutor, everything must have conduced to make him feel that what began to look like the differences of Tweedledum and Tweedledee were not worth being miserable for. In his conversion, as he tells in one of his suppressed pages, "the hard doctrine of transubstantiation ['transubstantiation' it stands in his precarious spelling, which yields also the form 'transubstantian'] was smoothed by the protestant belief in the mystery of the trinity";² and when transubstantiation began to look like

¹ Ed. cited, p. 132.

² *Id.* pp. 128-9.

nonsense, the trinity can scarcely have remained intact. What he tells us is that his reversion "was principally effected by my private reflections," and that he had felt a "solitary transport at the discovery of a philosophical argument"—a very oddly constructed one—against the Catholic mystery, to wit, that the text which alleges the real presence is vouched by only one sense, our eyesight, while it is disproved by three—sight, touch, and taste. If it was really that argument that set Gibbon against transubstantiation, he was certainly acute enough to see that it told equally against the "mysteries" accepted by Protestants.

He proceeds to tell that "the various articles of the Romish creed disappeared like a dream; and after a full conviction, on Christmas Day, 1754, I received the sacrament in the church of Lausanne"; and he adds, in his most significant manner of innuendo: "It was here that I suspended my religious inquiries, acquiescing with implicit belief in the tenets and mysteries which are adopted by the general consent of Catholics and Protestants." After the publication of the unexpurgated Memoirs it is pretty certain that even as regards his frame of mind in 1754, this is the solemn jest, the "official" falsehood, it was naturally taken to be by his contemporaries. In one of the suppressed passages he tells that while he was staying at his father's house at Buriton in 1759 he went to church "commonly twice every Sunday, in conformity with the pious *or decent* custom of the family"; and that he was there wont to follow the lessons and readings in the Greek of the New Testament or the Septuagint. He then continues:—

Nor was the use of this study confined to words alone: during the psalms, at least, and the sermon, I revolved the

sense of the chapters which I had read and heard ; and the doubts, alas ! or objections that invincibly rushed on my mind were almost always multiplied by the learned expositors whom I consulted on my return home.....Since my escape from Popery I had humbly acquiesced in the common creed of the Protestant Churches ; but in the latter end of the year 1759 the famous treatise of Grotius (*De veritate religionis Christianæ*) first engaged me in a regular trial of the evidence of Christianity. By every possible light that reason and history can afford, I have repeatedly viewed the important subject ; nor was it my fault if I said with Montesquieu, "*Je lis pour m'édifier, mais cette lecture produit souvent en moi un effet tout contraire,*" since I am conscious to myself that the love of truth and the spirit of freedom directed my search. The most accurate philosophers and the most orthodox divines will perhaps agree that the belief of miracles and mysteries cannot be supported on the brittle basis, the distant report, of human testimony, and that the faith as well as the virtue of a Christian must be formed and fortified by the inspiration of Grace.¹

Even if we take this as it stands, without cavil, it is clear that the "doubts" of 1759 were not the first ; and that if he then first made a "regular trial of the evidence" he had previously been impressed by the need for such a trial. There thus remains a reasonable presumption that when he reverted to Protestantism in 1754 he was already a doubter ; and in any case it is clear that when at the age of twenty-four he published his first work, the French *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, and began in earnest his studies for his History, he was at most a philosophic deist.

Thus was completed his detachment from common religious prejudice—an essential qualification of a historian who should justly write the history of the Roman Empire. But yet another detachment was

¹ Memoir C, pp. 248-250. The final sarcasm is borrowed from Hume.

involved in his mere change of place.¹ Apart from his study of original authorities, Gibbon is a product not of English but of French scholarship. "Every man who rises above the common level," he truly says, "has received two educations: the first from his teachers; the second, more personal and more important, from himself."² But how he is to educate himself depends largely on his intellectual environment. In the libraries of Lausanne this was substantially French; and French scholarship, from Tillemont to the *Mémoires* of the Academies, had collected and interpreted antiquity for him to an extent that the students of no other nation had then approached. To this day those researches are valuable; and Gibbon's debt to them is great. The earliest extracts from the journal of his special historic studies (which as preserved begins in 1761, while he was serving as a captain of militia in England, and was making up his mind on what should be his *magnum opus*), refer almost solely to French scholars' works; Homer, at that stage, he read with French grammars; he praises Fréret and de la Bletterie in his first writings with an ardour that he seldom showed in later life for anything; and in 1762 we find him studying Tillemont's *Histoire des Empereurs*, with the note: "It is much better to read this part of the Augustan history in so learned and exact a compilation than in the originals, which have neither method, accuracy, eloquence, nor chronology."³

¹ "Such as I am, in genius or learning or manners, I owe my creation to Lausanne: it was in that school that the statue was discovered in the block of marble; and my own religious folly, my father's blind resolution, produced the effects of the most deliberate wisdom."—Memoir B, p. 152—a suppressed passage. Compare that preserved by Sheffield, who has, however, substituted "banishment" for "shipwreck."—Memoir C, p. 239.

² *Autobiography*, Memoir C, p. 231—embodied in Sheffield's version. A different expression is given in Memoir B, p. 131 of ed. cited.

³ In the *Autobiography* he avows the use he made of both of the great

On this puissant help he relied to the last. Mr. Bury, his latest and most competent editor, pronounces that "it is only just to the mighty work of the Frenchman to impute to him a large share in the accuracy which the Englishman achieved. From the historical though not from the literary point of view, Gibbon, deserted by Tillemont, distinctly declines."

French, too, by his own avowal, was Gibbon's training in logic. The bulky and now forgotten system of De Crousaz, who indeed was of the school of Locke, the young Gibbon "studied, meditated, and abstracted" till, he says, "I had obtained the free command of an universal instrument, which I soon presumed to exercise on my Catholic opinions." In his second year at Lausanne we find him mastering, besides French and Latin, "with which I was very superficially acquainted before," Giannone's History of Naples in French, the Abbé Banier's treatise on Mythology, and Boehat's *Mémoires sur la Suisse*; "but what I esteem most of all," he adds in his journal, "from the perusal and meditation of De Crousaz's Logic, I not only understood the principles of that science, but formed my mind to a habit of thinking and reasoning I had no idea of before." Not till 1756 does he mention that he "read and meditated Locke upon the understanding."

Clearly he gained intellectually from being bilingual, from being not merely a French student but an English lad transplanted into French conditions, and guarded by his antecedents against loss of independence, there as before. The "languid state of science at Lausanne," he tells, made him "solicit a literary correspondence with several men of learning";

works of Tillemont, "whose inimitable accuracy almost assumes the character of genius."

but of these one was French (Crevier, of the University of Paris); one German (Gesner, of Göttingen); and one German-Swiss (Breitinger, of Zürich). With the two latter he corresponded in Latin; and England at this stage had no part in forming him: he had "ceased to be an Englishman." What intercourse he had with his countrymen in his earlier years at Lausanne was not advantageous: they led him into "some irregularities of wine, of play, of idle excursions," the play going so far that he lost a hundred and ten guineas.¹ After this he left them alone, and "seclusion from English society was attended with the most solid benefits." As he himself summed up the case in his Autobiography:—

If my childish revolt against the religion of my country had not stripped me in time of my academic gown, the five important years, so liberally improved in the studies and conversation of Lausanne, would have been steeped in port and prejudice among the monks of Oxford. Had the fatigue of idleness compelled me to read, the path of learning would not have been enlightened by a ray of philosophic freedom. I should have grown to manhood ignorant of the life and language of Europe, and my knowledge of the world would have been confined to an English cloister. Had I obtained a more early deliverance from the regions of sloth and pedantry, had I been sent abroad with the indulgence which the favour and fortune of my father might have allowed, I should probably have herded with the young travellers of my own nation, and my attainments in language and manners and science would have been such as they usually import from the continent. But my religious error

¹ For this sum he astutely wrote home to his devoted aunt; but that lady drew the line at such a draft, and, to his deep disgust, laid the matter before his father. His stepmother, who became an excellent mother to him, thus annotated for Lord Sheffield the boy's letter to his aunt: "Pray remember this letter was not addressed to his mother-in-law, but his aunt, an old cat she was to refuse his request." Posterity will not endorse the epithet, and Gibbon after a year certainly would not have done so.

fixed me at Lausanne, in a state of banishment and disgrace; the rigid course of discipline and abstinence to which I was condemned invigorated the constitution of my mind and body; poverty and pride estranged me from my countrymen; I was reduced to seek my amusement in myself and my books; and in the society of the natives, who considered me as their fellow-citizen, I insensibly lost the prejudices of an Englishman.

It is to his French reading of those years, finally, that he most markedly ascribes the qualities of his later work.

I cannot forbear to mention three particular books, since they may have remotely contributed to form the historian of the Roman Empire. 1. From the *Provincial Letters* of Pascal, which almost every year I have perused with new pleasure, I learned to manage the weapon of grave and temperate irony, even on subjects of ecclesiastical solemnity. 2. *The Life of Julian*, by the Abbé de la Bletterie, first introduced me to the man and the times; and I should be glad to recover my first essay on the truth of the miracle which stopped the rebuilding of the temple of Jerusalem. 3. In Giannone's *Civil History of Naples* [French translation] I observed with a critical eye the progress and abuse of sacerdotal power, and the revolutions of Italy in the darker ages.

He might perhaps have added that he gained something from Montesquieu, as he avows that his "delight was in the frequent perusal" of that writer, "whose energy of style and boldness of hypothesis were powerful to awaken and stimulate the genius of the age." But that raises the question of his special bias as a historian, which we shall have to consider at another point.

In fine, it was his fortune to gain some special qualification from nearly every circumstance of his career. When, after five years at Lausanne, he returned to England, and, after an interval, proceeded

there to serve as a captain of the Hampshire militia¹ for over two and a half years, even that ostensible waste of time really counted for much, as he himself claims, in fitting him to deal with military history. He threw himself into his work with a zest not often displayed by British officers of militia or anything else, doing the work not only of his careless father, the major, but of the equally careless old colonel; and though Gibbon confesses, with regard to his drinking bouts with the colonel, that "the same drum which invited him to rest has often summoned me to the parade," and that "those acts of intemperance have sown in my constitution the seeds of the gout,"² he seems in other ways to have toughened his constitution; and he really learned how troops are handled and armies fed. All the while, recoiling from the "rustic officers, who were alike deficient in the knowledge of scholars and the manners of gentlemen," he contrived to read and even to study in months of furlough, keeping by him always his Horace, re-reading his Homer, and mastering a treatise on tactics. As he summed it up in a familiar sentence, "The discipline and evolutions of a modern battalion gave me a clearer notion of the phalanx and the legions; and the captain of the Hampshire Grenadiers (the reader may smile) has not been useless to the historian of the Roman Empire."

When, finally, his father died in 1770, the fates had once more been signally propitious. After his Italian journey (1764-5) Gibbon had returned to his father's house, to spend "the portion of my life which I passed

¹ A considerable militia was at that time embodied, under apprehension of a French invasion. Gibbon showed himself ready enough to defend his country.

² Suppressed passages in *Memoirs B and C*, pp. 189, 259-260.

with the least enjoyment, and which I remember with the least satisfaction," though he rose in that period to a lieutenant-colonelship of militia. His father's wasteful ways bade fair to consign him to poverty; and the fear of that weighed upon his faculties. As Mr. Morison has well noted, "A few more years of anxiety and dependence.....would probably have dried up the spring of literary ambition and made him miss his career." But just as the danger becomes imminent his father dies, and he becomes his own master, with the power to carry out his great plan. So many are the chances that must at times concur to permit of a genius giving the proof of what is in him. Not in the case of Shakespeare himself are the pressures and permissions of fate more impressive as determinants than in that of Gibbon.

Even his experience as a member of Parliament,¹ though worse than undistinguished—since he not only never spoke but voted mechanically for the ruinous policy of Lord North, and in return held for a time a well-paid sinecure—was profitable to him as an introduction behind the scenes of active political life. And it is essential to remember that not till he had made much of this practical acquaintance with men and life did he follow up, at an interval of fifteen years, the abortive *Essai* of his youth with the first volume of

¹ In 1774 he was offered by his cousin Edward (afterwards Lord) Eliot the seat for the pocket borough of Liskeard. Accepting, he was returned at the general election of that year. In 1779 he received the post of Lord Commissioner of Trade and Plantations, with a salary of £750. At the general election of 1780 his cousin withdrew the Liskeard seat, for no clear reason (see Gibbon's letters of August 11th and September 8th). In 1781 Gibbon was returned for Lymington at a by-election; but the Board of Trade was abolished in 1782. In 1783 he resigned and went to live with his friend Deyverdun at Lausanne. His debt to the companionship of that accomplished and amiable friend has not been commonly recognised, but is rightly insisted on by General Read (ii, 292).

his massive masterpiece, the great *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.¹

III.

We have seen in outline the path of growth, the pressure of environment, that determined the life's work of the historian ; but we have still to reckon with the specific cast of the organism, the bias and genius that would have subsisted somehow, however undeveloped, in any environment. Again there is no obscurity. The master tendencies of Gibbon are stamped upon his whole work, and are abundantly avowed in his Autobiography and letters.

To see them in full relief we need but compare his early failure, the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* ("written in two months, and forgotten in four") with the *History* and the *Autobiography*, his great successes. To the *Essai*, while recognising its special fault of incoherence, he always looked back with a good deal of complacency, precisely because it represented some measure of capacity for a kind of effort that in his *History* he had almost ceased to make, and so lost power for. Its ideas, being those of a precocious young student, are not exactly deep, and not always original; and their inconsequence is already significant of lack of zeal for theoretic construction ; but they stand for real reflection, genuine and hardy speculation. "To the eyes of a philosopher," he writes in his youthful *Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Mèdes* (a creditable and highly suggestive research written between 1758 and 1763), "events compose the least interesting part of history. It is the knowledge of man, the ethics and the politics he finds there, that

¹ Published in February, 1776. The second and third volumes appeared in 1781.

exalt it in his mind";¹ and to the last he is in a manner true to this ideal. In his youthful journal he notes how the reading of one book would open up to him many trains of thought; and in his later years he again tells how in his studies he "stept aside into every path of inquiry which reading or reflection accidentally opened."²

This indeed lies on the face of his work, with its tireless variety of theme; and when Coleridge, in his classic paragraph of disparagement, which we must later examine, denies him all merit as an interpreter of historic movement, he is merely giving vent to the spite which in his latter years flowed from him at every contact with the work of an unbeliever. "The true key," he declares, "to the declension of the Roman Empire—which is not to be found in all Gibbon's immense work—may be stated in two words: the *imperial* character overlaying everything, and finally destroying the *national* character. Rome under Trajan was an empire without a nation."³ It is pretty decisive of Coleridge's own merit as a critic in such a case that this very unoriginal formula, which is at best a mere description or definition of a total process without any account of real causation, was actually bettered by Gibbon in his youthful *Essai*, where, confessedly following Montesquieu, he remarks⁴ that "the *corruption* of all orders of the Romans arose

¹ *Miscellaneous Works*, vol. iii, 1815, p. 45.

² *Autobiography*, Memoir E, p. 340.

³ *Table Talk*, August 15th, 1833.

⁴ § 81—end of the *Essai*. Montesquieu had said: "Si la grandeur de l'empire perdit la république, la grandeur de la ville ne la perdit pas moins"; pointing out further, as against the historians who saw nothing wrong save the strifes of classes, that such strifes were normal and necessary, and that "ce fut uniquement la grandeur de la république qui fit le mal, et qui changea en guerres civiles les tumultes populaires" (*Grandeur et décadence des Romains*, ch. ix). Here is a step in real explanation which Coleridge does not take.

from the extent of their empire, and produced the greatness of the republic," adding in a footnote: "I distinguish between the greatness of the Roman empire and that of the republic: the one consisted in the number of its provinces, the other in that of the citizens." The whole of Coleridge's formula is here, with an added explanation; and Gibbon further notes that whereas "an ordinary degree of penetration is sufficient to discern when an action is at once a cause and an effect.....it requires an extraordinary judgment to discern whether two things, which always exist together, and appear intimately connected, do not reciprocally owe their origin to each other"—a remark which, with its sequel, tells of deeper reflection than Coleridge gave to the problem.

It is worth noting, also, that while modern criticism, albeit more temperate than Coleridge's, may find Gibbon lacking as an interpreter of the process he unrolls, some in his own generation rather held him to err in excess of interpretation. At least, as he himself notes in the *Autobiography*, the Abbé de Mably asked, "Is there anything more wearisome than a Mr. Gibbon who, in his eternal history of the Roman emperors, suspends every instant his slow and insipid narrative, to explain to you the causes of the events that you are going to read? Nothing ought to arrest me in a recital; and it must be clear—that is the first law for every historian; but it must be made so with an art that shall not repel me."¹ On the face of his treatise, however, Mably is grown splenetic and unreasonable in his old age; and his further fling at Gibbon² suggests even the special

¹ *De la manière d'écrire l'histoire*, 1783, pp. 217-218.

² P. 331.

personal enmity he is said to have felt,¹ though he is tolerably comprehensive in his censures. Gibbon certainly did not overdo the tracing of causes: it is in failure to trace them closely and fully that his limitation lies. He indeed made a signal and admirable effort to trace on natural principles the causes of the rise of Christianity; and he had his thanks in the explosive resentment of the orthodox and the intutional, who denounced him precisely where he had surpassed himself and raised all historiography to a higher scientific plane. But whether or not the outcry against his fifteenth and sixteenth chapters checked his zest for sociological study, he never again attempted such a large service to historic science; and when, as at the end of his fifty-third chapter, he gives us a just and philosophical view of the causes of Byzantine stagnation, he is but applying a sociological law laid down by Hume.² Broadly speaking, he grows less explanatory, less sociological, as he proceeds.

In this one respect he compares closely with both Macaulay and Carlyle. All three had in youth a genuine interest in historical explanation, in synthesis, in comprehension of causes; and all three came to write laborious histories in which the conception of synthesis and causation has either disappeared or lingers only as a fitful parenthesis. Macaulay, who in his maturity has perhaps least concern for a sociological seizure, had in his youth perhaps not the least faculty for it to be seen in the three. It is the

¹ See the story as given in the Autobiography (from the Supplement to a later edition of Mably's book) of Gibbon's having exasperated him in discussion. Gibbon deftly retaliates by praising the better works of Mably, and adding that "*even the Manière d'écrire l'histoire* contains several useful precepts and judicious remarks."

² *Essay Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences.*

immense acquisitive faculty in his case, with his vibrating energy, that finally expels the instinct of reverie. Carlyle's trouble was his raging impatience of all calm analysis, his need to feel that he saw truth intuitively, whereof the end is prophetic obscurantism. The too eupeptic Gibbon, more equably impressible, never quite lost his early appreciation of general ideas, of speculative analysis; but his long absorption in the immense pageant of his history, his overmastering interest in the many-patterned web he wove, soon sated his philosophic needs, and left him at last wondering respectfully how he came to have so many abstract ideas in his youth.

IV.

We must take him as we find him, dowered with the devouring eye and the insatiable ear, unwearied with infinite detail, sitting in his quiet belvedere before the vast vistas of an extinct world. No mystic, no poet, he is content simply to know how once it all went; to fix its sequences; to unearth its ruins and make plain its roads; to rehearse, with a slow and tranquil mastery, the lapse of its generations, their strifes, their creeds, their follies, their crimes, their hapless sufferings, their mysterious decadence. He is at home in those echoing solitudes. No item in the endless vision is too small for his scrutiny; no cataclysm staggers his composure: with the same imperturbable complaisance he follows the slow decay of a mighty civilisation and the wild inroads of the barbarians who work its downfall: he is equally alert to argue over their exact line of march, to compliment their energy, to dismiss a myth concerning their extraction, chronicling "now a bubble burst, and now a world." He may tell us, with his formal

phrase and courtly gesture, that "the history of empires is the record of human misery,"¹ and that "history is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind,"² but all the while he is well at his ease in his ruined Zion: to the last he is without passion as he is without gloom, and the iron cannot enter his soul. With clear, untroubled eyes he scans curiously each new scene in the eternal drama, unaffectedly interested in every phase, steadily sedulous to know all there is to be told. We can figure him following Virgil through the Inferno with ink-horn and scroll, pleasantly tolerant of his guide's moralities, amiably cataloguing the victims, accurately noting the itinerary, and gathering statistics as he goes. Often he is conscious of comedy, *la comédie humaine*, and his wise smile is full of a well-bred relish; but the far-off long-drawn tragedy oppresses him not. Might he not say, with the physician, that his vocation would be insupportable if he should let himself be hourly saddened by the age-long vision of "the sorrow and the labour and the passing-away of men"?

Such a gift, in such measure, is as rare as any: it is genius, in virtue of its fulness and its rarity. Some historians are concerned with battles, some with archæology, some with geography, some with literature, some with law, some with the aspect of life, some with moral phases, some with particular peoples; but Gibbon takes in all. "Before I was sixteen," he tells us, "I had exhausted all that could be learned in English of the Arabs and Persians, the Tartars and Turks"; his first childish essay was "On the Age of Sesostris"; and in his miscellaneous

¹ *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, § 1.

² *Decline and Fall*, ch. iii, Bohn ed. i, 102-3.

remains are special studies in the history of Naples, Denmark, the House of Brunswick, Burgundy, Switzerland, Feudalism, the Sybarites, and the Medes, to say nothing of twenty excursions on matters classical. When he settled on his subject he absorbed it whole. He knows the old world in its physical aspect as a good traveller knows the modern; he can paint like a Canaletto, like a plan-drawer, the cities he never saw, placing his finger on the sites of the vanished forts, the wharves, the palaces; he knows the lie of the land in every province, has journeyed with Cicero and Horace to Brundisium, and marched with Julian from Paris to Constantinople. Whatever is known in his day concerning revenues, taxes, statistics of ancient population, the routes and the staples of commerce, the status of magistrates; whatever testimony is yielded by coins and medals and monuments—the whole circle of antiquarian knowledge is his. And all the while he is never so distracted by detail as to fail in formal arrangement, never so moved by any aspect of things as to let it over-balance his picture. He is the first to bring the history of Roman law into intelligible sequence; the specialists who can correct him on points of detail admit his easy and orderly grasp of the evolution. From first to last he is an artist in form.

This would be as readily recognised to-day as in his own time were it not for the inevitable distaste that has set in towards his style. Even in our day it has been admired, by such variously modern spirits as Mr. Cotter Morison and Mr. Bury; and it must always be allowed the praise of art and elaboration;¹ but its

¹ Though it is not so vigilantly correct as Mr. Morison represents it to be (p. 166). For instance, he constantly misplaces "only," like all the rest of us, from Stevenson downwards.

faults are more vital than its merits. From the first it was denounced by the men who, besides disliking Gibbon's opinions, had in them a faculty for a freer and more organic way of utterance—for instance, Burke and Coleridge. Burke called his style "vicious and affected, deformed by too much literary tinsel and frippery";¹ Coleridge held it "detestable," while piously counting it "not the worst thing about him." Quite recently it has been solemnly arraigned by Mrs. Meynell, who is of opinion that Ruskin often used "which" where "that" would be "both more correct and less inelegant," and that he probably "had the habit from him who did more than any other to disorganise the English language—that is, Gibbon." She further pronounces "the common language of letters, the refuse of an English style, profusely ready to the hand of every writer in the middle of the century," to have been "a derogation not so much from Johnson as from Gibbon."² The charge of disorganising the language surely goes too far. Gibbon indeed affected for the worse the style of several historians in the nineteenth century, in particular Milman and Merivale, in their own despite; not to speak of the slovenly and platitudinous Alison, whom no example could serve to make a good writer; but he did not so influence Hallam, James Mill, Macaulay, Grote, Buckle, or Thirlwall; nor did his lead ever spoil any man's style as Carlyle's did those of Masson and Forster. There were, besides, plenty of traders

¹ Prior's *Life of Burke*, Bohn ed. p. 171.

² *John Ruskin*, in "Modern English Writers" series, pp. 17, 34. It is a pity to have to add that Mrs. Meynell is herself a blamably cumbrous writer, and that she discounts her verdict on Gibbon's style by the tone in which she speaks of him (p. 262) as one who "darkens the air of some eight hundred years with a squalid dust-storm of demolition." Comment is needless.

in machine-made phrase before his day. Still, there is no gainsaying the charge that his writing is inveterately mannered, heavily periwigged, ceremoniously affected, as it were always in court dress. I confess that when I have been living with it long it always makes me think of stuffed animals. A good style is one which puts the nerve of meaning, so to speak, in circuit with the perceiving sense; which searches for the idea, so to say, with the hand ungloved. Its movement should be as that of a man lightly clad, free in all his limbs, the life defining itself continuously to the watching eye. But Gibbon's is always in stays, in ruffles, in processional robes. He seems to wave his hand and take snuff, with the fore-finger cocked (as was actually his habit), at every sentence.

There is mannerism and mannerism. Johnson had a highly mannered style; but his manner had a certain massive force, like his figure; he has the moral benefit of his mostly sombre mood; and if he marks time with his fist, at least the fist is bare. Thus he is relatively tolerable where Gibbon soon sets us fidgeting or mechanically mimicking. It is as if the lethargy of his obese body, which gradually lost the power of locomotion, set him upon attaining a kind of inorganic expression, as of a highly articulated machine. You open the last volume at random, and find a sentence like this: "Before the introduction of trade, which scatters riches, and of knowledge, which dispels prejudice, the prerogative of birth is most strongly felt and most humbly acknowledged."¹ This is the final manner, the machine-turned style of the time when he was reputed unable to rise from his

¹ Ch. lxi: *Digression on the Family of Courtenay.*

knees after he had been rash enough to get down on them. It gives a new definiteness to the word "artificial." We are at the other pole from a style like Newman's, sensitive without tremor, easily natural as the stride of a staghound, saying things—wise or otherwise—at once with the simplicity of cultured talk and the charm of fine art; or a style like Cobbett's, masculine and muscular, like a strong young peasant stripped for the wrestling-ring. Most writers must be content to be somewhere on the way towards such models, their style moving with the business-like but elderly gait of Hallam, the breathless trot of Macaulay, the pre-occupied but unaffected shuffle of Grote, or the more self-conscious step of Dr. Gardiner. All of these modes of progression, however, are better than Gibbon's, which seems to carry an effigy in a show, and can neither stride nor spring.

But once more we must take him as we find him. He made his style as he built up his knowledge, in virtue of his idiosyncrasy. In his youth, writing French, he had the affectation of a rather invalid beau, carefully poising his cane and mincing as he goes. "Alas!" he writes of it in the Autobiography, "how fatal has been the imitation of Montesquieu!" It would have been well if he had not gone further and fared worse; for Montesquieu's only tic is his sententiousness, and even the conscious step of the beau is better than the inorganic progression invented in thought by the gentleman who has ceased to walk. But the great and ultimate fact is that with this taxidermic manner, stiffening as he goes, Gibbon has made the greatest of all historic journeys, wrought the greatest of all historic structures, and won the prize of architectonic art where men far more happily equipped have got nowhere. The style of

Newman is to the style of Gibbon as Hyperion to a mandarin ; but weigh the *History of the Decline and Fall* against *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, and Hyperion's work is jerked into the void. Nay, weigh the *Autobiography* against the *Apologia*, and see which is worth the more in the coin of the ages.

And let us remember that, however we may make light of his manner to-day, Gibbon carried it with a perfect composure, no man making him ashamed. Nay, with that very style he achieved new literary effects, touching history for the first time with the light of a fine irony, and contriving in his notes to make erudition itself entertaining. This gift in turn was French ; but in the sustained use of it, the steadfast pressure of the personality, lies the testimony to Gibbon's unshaken self-possession. He is even disappointing in the entire self-satisfaction with which he meets any company : not once does he seem excited by contact with a great celebrity, be it Voltaire himself. Nothing ever overthrew his self-possession, save the French Revolution. Then indeed he shrieked wildly, betraying the final infirmity of his moral basis like so many another—like Burke, like Coleridge, like some in our own day on a lesser perturbation. But as a man and as a writer, in all his relations with his friends and opponents, he was as well poised as any paladin or stoic ; and, what is more, we cannot attain his work through his style. The mandarin is in his own way the master of his material, and when we realise as much our derision of his manner is apt to seem a little cheap. In the skull of that flaccid little figure, for every purpose of retrospective judgment, there was casketed as imperturbable a spirit as ever constituted a statesman or a thinker, a great man's share of the all-fusing force

to which flesh is as wax, and mere temperamental grace as the charm of a child.

V.

Besides the co-ordinating and composing skill which we have been considering, two other essential factors went to make the success of the *Decline and Fall*: one being the judicial stability of the whole comment, the other the centrality of the subject. It was after many tentatives that he made his choice. Among his mooted themes were a life of Sir Walter Raleigh, a history of the Swiss Confederation (actually begun), and one of the expedition of Charles VIII into Italy. None of the three projects, however executed, could have placed him in the first rank of historians, because none had a European significance. The first, indeed, could not have been more than a minor work for him; and neither of the others could have strung his powers or challenged universal interest. The really great idea came to him, as he has told us—to quote the finer phrasing of the version which Sheffield did not give—“while the barefooted fryars were chanting their litanies in the temple of Jupiter,” on the 15th of October, 1764. “My original plan,” he goes on, “was confined to the decay of the City; my reading and reflection pointed to that aim; but several years elapsed, and several avocations intervened, before I grappled with the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.”¹

So that it needed the actual visit to Rome to give the inspiration, and long reflection to ripen the architectonic plan. No other theme could have so availed

¹ Murray's ed. p. 406.

for his fame. He had chosen the essential problem of European history, the keystone of its arch; and with his faculties, his learning, and his judgment, he was secure of the attention of the civilised world for his performance.

To attempt to assess its merits, where so many accomplished experts have given their verdict, would be presumptuous if we did not begin by using their light. But it may not be amiss to acknowledge first of all that the very deficiencies which leave a student desirous of another survey of the same field—to wit, the lack of sociological analysis and synthesis—are probably part of the secret of Gibbon's success. Even the great sociological effort he makes in the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters is not and could not be decisive, simply because sociology was in his day in its infancy. As it is, he has there achieved the first comprehensive treatment of the rise of Christianity as a natural phenomenon; and to make light of it is to exhibit the ordinary blindness either of religious prejudice or of the sentimentalism which it is apt to leave in ill-founded rationalists. No student who comes to it in a scientific spirit can fail to pay tribute to the original power and the sanity it reveals. Yet, since even that is but a first seizure of a great and complex problem, it must be improved upon like every other scientific beginning. If, however, Gibbon had sought to handle at once the economic and the intellectual problems of Roman decadence with the same deliberation, he would probably have yielded us much more imperfect seizures, because the economic science needed was not at all within his reach, and the literary attitude of his age was specially ill-suited to the grasp of the total relations. He would thus have left, not an artistic construction with a great scientific

sketch embedded in it, but a scientific work which must throughout be found inadequate after a generation or two. As it is, the construction is so spacious and on the whole so sound, on the simpler plane of historic narrative, that it can still satisfy and edify us.

The element of decay in most histories is either their defect in point of knowledge or the inadequacy of their theory of events. Gibbon had, for one thing, the luck to come to a great subject on which the possible information was for the most part collected, and, for another, the industry to master it all. On the other hand, he had either the prudence to shun the search for a theory which he could not compass, or the good fortune to be undisturbed by the need for theories. The latter, we may decide, is in the main the true explanation. Despite his interpretative success in one special field, on which he had long meditated, and in which he had the lead of Middleton, of Hume, and of Voltaire, he is not a sociologist. His criticism of Warburton's theory of the sixth book of the *Æneid*, by the admission of many students who have no love for Warburton, is pragmatically deaf to reasonable suggestions; and his latest hint of his own theory of Roman decline, put by way of an annotation on his own book, is quite superficial. Thus his abstention was not a matter of prudence. He has positively gained from his limitations; though there is evidence that his critical faculty, playing maturely on much in Montesquieu that had fascinated him in youth, distinctly warned him of the risks of a bias to explanation. When, therefore, I meet him in my dreams, and fantastically urge him to remedy his omissions, he always smiles wisely and takes snuff!

It is not, I think, a contradiction of the foregoing conclusion to repeat that, nevertheless, the effort of

the fifteenth chapter has been an essential element in Gibbon's intellectual importance. For, on the one hand, adequate sociology is a weightier thing than adequate narrative; and, on the other hand, the inadequacy of Gibbon's stroke of sociology has not yet been demonstrated by a better piece of work. For the student his *is* inadequate; but no one has yet superseded it. Nine-tenths of the censure passed upon it is the expression of far less competent thought.

Of the common line of censure one sample may here suffice. Sir M. E. Grant Duff, in the speech delivered by him as President of the Royal Historical Society and Chairman of the Gibbon Commemoration of 1894, thought fit to say of the historian that "undoubtedly his attitude to Christianity is the feature in his great work which has done most to diminish its influence; and all educated men, to whatever school they belong, would now admit with his masterly biographer, Mr. Cotter Morison, that this is a most serious blemish."¹ Let it be asked what "influence" Gibbon could have had as a historian but for his attitude to Christianity, and the nullity of the criticism will be evident. It was in that regard only that he can be held to *faire école*, as the French say; because it was there only that he rounded a sociological teaching; and it is largely on that score that he has remained permanently and massively interesting. Had he given an orthodox or conventional account of the rise of Christianity he would hardly have ranked otherwise than as a signally laborious and skilful compiler. The contrary judgment above cited, posited without a semblance of justification, comes from a distinguished dilettant, who in a

¹ Cited by General Meredith Read, in his *Historic Studies in Vaud, Berne, and Savoy*, ii, 287.

dozen volumes has done nothing durable for either history or criticism ; yet his modest claim to express the views of "all educated men, to whatever school they belong"—a typical touch of the English critical method—suffices to "bluff" the bulk of our reading public.

A sufficient answer to such conventionalism is given by Professor Bury, whose title to speak for historical science, not to say "all educated men, to whatever school they belong," is hardly to be annulled by the *obiter dictum* of the ex-Governor-General of Madras. As Dr. Bury sums up in the introduction to his edition,

'Gibbon has his place in literature not only as the stylistbut as the expounder of a large and striking idea in a sphere of intense interest to mankind, and as a powerful representative of certain tendencies of his age. The guiding idea or "moral" of his history is briefly stated in his epigram : "I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion." In other words, the historical development of human societies since the second century after Christ was a history of retrogression.....for which Christianity was mainly to blame.....We are thus taken into a region of speculation where every traveller must make his own chart. But to attempt to deny a general truth in Gibbon's point of view is vain, and it is feeble to deprecate his sneer.....All that has since been added to our knowledge of facts has neither reversed nor blunted the point of the *Decline and Fall*..... For an inquirer not blinded by religious prepossessions, or misled by comfortable sophistries, Gibbon really expounded one of the chief data with which the philosophy of history has to reckon.' Again : 'We need not hide the fact that Gibbon's success has in a large measure been due to his scorn for the Church.'¹

Opinion for opinion, the expert's is rather the more convincing. But the essential rightness of Gibbon's

¹ Introduction cited, pp. xxxviii, xxxix.

conception of Christian beginnings is implied at once in the admissions of recent clerical students and in the attempts of some of them to make light of the service they avow. Says one of these :—

The question which Gibbon asked when he proposed five causes for the spread of Christianity, first introduced *a new problem and a completely new method of treatment*. To suggest that the laws of cause and effect should be applied in the region of history, shocked the commonplace orthodoxy of the day, and has given rationalists a considerable amount of weak-minded pleasure.¹

The strength of mind which petulantly imputes weakness to the rational pleasure taken in what is admittedly a new achievement in historical science, may be left to speak for itself. Of course, the clerical partisan goes on to repeat the pulpit aphorism that "God works through human and natural agencies"; but that formula is scientifically as void as the further suggestion that "Gibbon was too keen-sighted not to see the limitations of his own theory, and.....was probably quite sincere in speaking only of secondary causes." The very use of the expression "secondary causes" (though Gibbon diplomatically suggests by it the acceptance of a supernatural origin) amounted philosophically to a rejection of "first causes" from the whole historic field; and to assert that Gibbon "limited" his theory in the sense of seeing any more of "God" in Christianity than in any other historic process is to misstate the case. His intelligent contemporaries certainly and rightly saw only one of his "solemn sneers" in his observation that

Some deities of a more recent and fashionable cast might soon have occupied the deserted temples of Jupiter and Apollo, if, in the decisive moment, the wisdom of Providence

¹ Rev. A. C. Headlam, art. on "Methods of Early Church History," in the *English Historical Review*, Jan. 1899, p. 13.

had not interposed a genuine revelation, fitted to inspire the most rational esteem and conviction, while at the same time it was adorned with all that could attract the curiosity, the wonder, and the veneration of the people.¹

For the "insincerity" of such passages Christian intolerance has itself to thank; and though they prove that Gibbon's was not the heroic temper, their ironical method lies at the door of the Church which, insincere to the very heart, had always menaced open criticism with pains and penalties. Gibbon's meaning, all the while, was only too exasperatingly clear to his Christian readers. When he goes on to speak of the Christian miracles his irony is even less veiled. He had evidently no belief in a single supernatural item in the entire record, for his attitude to those he discusses implies his rejection of all. So far as it goes, then, his theory of the progression of Christianity is purely naturalistic. The critic last cited is ruffled by Renan's verdict that a man cannot write the history of a religion unless he has first believed it and then ceased to do so; and for his own part he lays it down that "the Church historian.....must have a calm and judicial and *believing* mind." The obvious answer is that such a mind can have no part in Gibbon's method. If, as the clerical critic insists, Christianity is "true," the principle of natural causation is dismissed, and we are back once more in the chaos of tradition and miracle from which Gibbon helped to effect our deliverance.²

¹ Ch. xv. Bohn ed. ii, 68.

² Circulation has been given (*Notes and Queries*, Sept. 10th, 1853) to part of a sentence of one letter of Gibbon's to his Aunt Hester, in which occur the words: "I consider Religion as the best guide of youth and the best support of old age." General Read, who quotes the letter, reluctantly concedes that it counts for little (ii, 281-3). Gibbon was in fact making himself agreeable, in his usual affectionate way, to his orthodox aunt; and there is not a grain of reason for believing that he ever recurred to her beliefs.

It is bare justice to him to say that the sociological study of Christian origins cannot do better than begin with his fifteenth chapter, which has weathered the criticism of four generations of prejudiced editors and critics, including the splenetic and short-sighted attack of Mr. Cotter Morison, a performance which has the distinction of doing less justice to the chapter in the name of positive science than has been done to it by some priests—for instance, the writer last cited. There can, indeed, be no better vindication of Gibbon's power and judgment than a strict confrontation of his great chapter with the typical hostile criticisms from first to last.

VI.

It is one of the chagrins of orthodoxy that while Gibbon's explanation of Christian origins is notably damaging, the replies have been notoriously ineffective. Macaulay, in the dressing-gowned freedom of his diary, puts the case with much point:—

October 9. I picked up Whitaker's criticism on Gibbon. Pointless spite, with here and there a just remark. It would be strange if in so large a work as Gibbon's there were nothing open to just remark. How utterly all the attacks on his History are forgotten! this of Whitaker; Randolph's; Chelsum's; Davies's; that stupid beast Joseph Milner's; even Watson's. And still the book, with all its great faults of substance and style, retains, and will retain, its place in our literature; and this though it is offensive to the religion of the country, and really most unfair where religion is concerned. But Whitaker was as dirty a cur as I remember.¹

This from a prudent but somewhat sentimental Nothingarian who thought Gibbon "really most unfair." We may leave Whitaker as sufficiently

¹ Trevelyan's *Life*, ch. xii, 1-vol. ed. pp. 544-5.

disposed of ; noting that " poor Chelsum," as Gibbon called him, is on the other hand very gentlemanly, though dull ; that Davis (whose name is misspelt by both Gibbon and Macaulay) was as fatuously insolent as Gibbon showed him to be ; and that Milman, as Sir George Trevelyan notes, indicates concerning Milner an opinion like unto Gibbon's, but " in terms more befitting the pen of a clergyman." As he puts it : " In his answer to Gibbon, Milner unfortunately betrays the incapacity of his mind for historical criticism." In reality this applies to nearly all of Gibbon's Christian critics, even to the decorous and scrupulous Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes, who laboriously found in the History some small flaws, and vainly imputed others.

Gibbon had in fact opened a new window on the historical field, and none of them would or could consent to see by it. Instead of making good the imperfections of the new survey by a more thorough use of its method, they spent themselves in demonstrating that the old survey through stained glass was the only true species of vision. Hailes had a real faculty for historic scrutiny where he was not prejudiced, and his sifting of Scottish history was perhaps the best work of the kind done in his day ; but when it came to the religious problem, on which his mind and temper were made up, he could only cavil over minutiae and frame *a priori* rebuttals to every hint that Christianity made its way by purely human means. It is the old story of ankylosis of the judgment—the weary summary of more than half the intellectual life of mankind. Faced by new truths which need the most candid attention to be understood, the most flexible adjustment of the thinking machine, so poor a thing at best, men grow rigid

with wrath at contradiction, and scan it with the rictus of spite in their eyes.

Only by the slow lapse of generations do the rigid machines get replaced by some more adaptable. The first signs of a general disposition to learn Gibbon's lesson appear in the edition of Milman, who in his Introduction expresses "the highest admiration as to his general accuracy," and admits that "it is astonishing how rarely we detect contradiction." Again, "Gibbon, it may be fearlessly asserted, is rarely chargeable even with the suppression of any material fact which bears upon individual character." No such praise, be it observed, can be given to *any* Christian historian who as such had hitherto dealt with the life of non-Christian antiquity. So much for the preliminaries of the dispute. Next comes the question whether any of Gibbon's gainsayers has shown a modicum of his rectitude. Milman himself, annotating the Autobiography, thought fit to speak in the professional tone of Gibbon's "bold and disingenuous attack on Christianity"; a fling mildly described by Dr. Bury¹ as "one of those futile charges which it would be impossible to prove and impossible to disprove—such imputations as are characteristic of historians in the heat of controversy, and may be condoned to politicians in the heat of electioneering, but in an historical critic are merely an impertinence."²

¹ In his Introduction, pp. xi-xii.

² Any man who might be concerned to be severe on Milman could with very good colour charge upon *him* a grave disingenuousness at more points than one. In his account of Marcus Aurelius (*History of Christianity*, B. II, c. vii) he not only calls him "a violent and intolerant persecutor," but asserts that "the general voice of Christian history arraigns" him "as withdrawing even the ambiguous protection of the former emperors, and giving free scope" to popular feeling against the Christians. From a historian of Christianity, this is something to remember. We have the explicit testimony of

When he seeks by argument to impugn the argument of Gibbon, Milman is more seemly but not more successful. His main position is that "Christianity proclaims its Divine Author chiefly in its first origin and development"; and he charges Gibbon with "confounding together in one indistinguishable mass the *origin* and *apostolic* propagation of the new religion with its later progress." For the rest, his case works down to an acceptance of Gibbon's verdict against ecclesiastical miracles from the second century onwards, with an insistence on the actuality of the miracles ascribed to Jesus and the Apostles.

For clear intelligences such as Hume's and Gibbon's, it had not needed the full establishment of the code of natural science to show that the latter position is untenable. They realised at once that the kind of minds which affirmed and the kinds of testimony

Tertullian (*Apol.* v) that Marcus decreed severe punishment against the unjust accusers of the Christians. This account Eusebius accepts without contradiction (*Hist. Eccles.* v, 5); and the leading Christian historian among Milman's modern predecessors, Mosheim, gives him small excuse for his perversion of the facts. Mosheim, indeed, in his rambling and incoherent discussion of the subject in the *De rebus Christianorum* (Saec. ii, § 15) says of Marcus that "neque satis videbatur Imperatori frena laxare hostibus Christianorum, quae parens eius iniecerat: addebat etiam edicta Christianis inimica"; but in a footnote he expressly retracts: "Manifestum est, ut arbitror, noluisse Imperatorem unius religionis causa Christianos occidi, sed Antonini legem confirmasse." And in his later *Ecclesiastical History* (Cent. II, Pt. I, ch. i, § 2) he tacitly retracts everything, pronouncing both Antonines "models of excellence and benignity." Probably Milman copied the text of the *De rebus* without reading the notes, and without consulting the passage of Melito, transcribed by Eusebius (on a highly strained interpretation of which Mosheim founded his first charge), or the testimony of Tertullian, also cited by Eusebius. This is the most charitable view of the case, and it leaves the Dean poorly entitled to charge disingenuousness on Gibbon. It is but fair to add that his contemporary Dean Waddington, who had preceded him with a history of Christianity (*History of the Church*, 1833, p. 37), positively distorts Mosheim's words by way of bringing against Marcus a similar charge to Milman's, for which he gives Mosheim as his sole authority.

which vouched miracles in later times were exactly those which alleged and established them in the first century. Milman's thesis is the childish one that in an age in which all cults claimed miracles, and none scrutinised them, we are first to accept Christian prodigies and reject all others, and then to reject all post-apostolic Christian prodigies but stand firm to the earlier. It is under cover of such muddling compromises that reason makes its way among middling minds. To that dispensation we must submit; but it does not follow that the mediocracy of mind shall be left free to asperse their betters for being more candid of spirit and more clear of eye. There are, of course, always trimmers to encourage them; priests of the modern Pasht, the sacred Jumping Cat, who make it an offence in a pioneer to see the truth before the crowd are ready. To this day that spirit enters into criticism of Gibbon in unforeseen incarnations. But there remains to be met the continued resistance of prejudice, sentimental or fanatical.

None of the contemporary replies to Gibbon, I think, outlived the eighteenth century, with the slight exception of that of Bishop Watson, whose way of defending the faith was so lacking in the livelier signs thereof that he became suspect of Socinianism, and was denied further preferment, to his own unconcealed disgust. To avow an imperfect acquaintance with early church history and fall back on quaint common-sense guesses (such as that the sun was merely "obnubilated" at the crucifixion) by way of dodging the difficulties of miracles—this was not the way to rise in the church. As Gibbon notes, the blundering and incompetent Davis got a pension, and one or two other forgotten champions got livings, but the courteous Chelsum and the dignified Watson got

nothing. But still the attack went on. In 1820, Richard Carlile, learning that some of the London publishers proposed to issue an edition of the History without the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters, defeated that sagacious scheme by publishing them serially in his *Republican*; and no one, so far as I know, ever carried it out.¹ It became, however, the business of orthodox editors, since they might not suppress the bane, to supply an antidote. Hence much annotation, doing Gibbon little harm.

The reciprocal criticism of the editors, as it happened, was his security. A continuous flow of tranquil amusement is to be had by reading Gibbon in the Bohn edition with the variorum notes. Over the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters there are at least thirty distinct fights. The German and French editors, Wenck and Guizot, the latter especially, are chronically at him for some alleged fault of mind or matter; and the English editors, perhaps not unmoved by patriotism, usually contrive to show that Gibbon was partly or mainly or perfectly right and the foreigners more or less gratuitously wrong. Milman's churchmanship, and his own purpose of vindicating primitive Christianity, did not withhold him from a multitude of raps on the too Christian knuckles of M. Guizot, whom he might more economically have disposed of by summing up that he is often spiteful and generally mistaken.² Wenck, a good scholar, but unduly contentious, could compile an elaborate note to convict Gibbon of having understated "the

¹ There was, however, an edition by Bowdler, "with the careful omissions of all passages of an irreligious or immoral tendency." 5 vols. 1826.

² Guizot himself, in the preface to his revised translation, avows that Gibbon's critics "were far surpassed by him in information, acquirements, and talents." Yet he contrives to deserve the blame incurred by them.

revenue of the Roman Empire," when Gibbon had expressly spoken of the "income of the Roman provinces."¹ The Bohn editor, who reproduces such notes with grim fidelity, is never so happy as when supporting Milman against Guizot and Wenck, unless it be when he is showing that all three are at fault together. Among them, Gibbon comes off extremely well. The best of the fun is that the Bohn editor, "an English Churchman," has a special fury against all financial ecclesiasticism, and devotes countless declamatory notes to showing that "hierarchies" have been the ruin of all religion, Christian and pagan alike.²

The loss of all this chaste entertainment is the one drawback to the study of the masterly edition of Dr. Bury, which attends sternly to business, and leaves the wars of commentators to cold oblivion. In the lost old leisurely days, the commentator's chief joy was to quote the other commentators and prove them to be wrong: hence the *Variorum Shakespeare* in twenty-one large volumes—a mine of recreation to the bookworm, human or diabolic. And let us not sourly condemn them, for Gibbon himself shared their mood, stopping as he does to foot-note, in his first chapter, how "M. de Voltaire, tom. 14, p. 297,

¹ Ch. vi, pp. 205-6.

² For a churchman, the Bohn editor is notably impartial. In one note on ch. ii (Bohn ed. i, 39) and elsewhere (*e.g.*, ch. viii, p. 259) he presses vivaciously the economic motive as fundamental in the maintenance of the ancient cults; and later on (ch. xvi: vol. ii, p. 101) he gives the application: "The stream of sacred revenue had thus been cut off; and in such a case no religion, having the power, has ever failed to have recourse to persecution." Elsewhere (i, 53) he writes: "Modern writers have been too willing to flatter the pride of their contemporaries or the prejudices of their sect, by exaggerating their moral improvement under the benign influence of religion. It is to be wished that they could produce less vague and dubious proofs of what they assert."

unsupported either by fact or probability, has generously bestowed the Canary Islands on the Roman Empire";¹ and again to suggest: "See Templeman's Survey of the Globe; but I dispute both the doctor's learning and his maps." Who would forego such comments? and who would miss seeing Gibbon make an irrelevant reference in order to note that "Dr. Burnet (*Archæologia*, l. 2, c. 7) has discussed the first chapters of Genesis with too much wit and freedom"?² Nay, who would miss hearing Wenck, stung by Gibbon's praise of Hume and gibe at Bossuet and smile at Pope, hotly assert that monotheism was "the early fundamental principle of natural and revealed religion," and cite in proof "Pfanneri Systema Theologiæ Gentilis Purioris, cap. 2, 11, 13"?

If, however, we seek for anything solidier than entertainment from the comments of the editors on the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters, we shall be hard pressed to find it. The old trouble is uncured: the critics set out with a false and fixed idea, that of the supernatural origin and success of Christianity, and they beat the air in their demonstrations. Guizot, unable to wait for the fifteenth chapter, jumps at a

¹ Elsewhere (ch. xlix: vol. v, p. 413) in a note on the Carolingians, he refers the reader to various historians, "and even Voltaire, whose pictures are sometimes just, and always pleasing." He did not greatly appreciate his great contemporary (see the *Journal*, 1764, March 14th), though he praises *Tancredè* highly (vi, 157). In his *Autobiography* (Memoir B, p. 148) Gibbon speaks of his early "desire of beholding Voltaire, whom I then rated above his real magnitude." It has been stated (by the Rev. Peter Anton, *Masters in History*, 1880, p. 19) that "the Frenchman received the English youth in the coldest manner," but for this Gibbon gives no authority.

² After this, it is hard to take seriously the rebuke to Voltaire for his tragedy of *Mahomet*: "Some reverence is surely due to the fame of heroes and the religion of nations" (note to ch. 1). Moslem scholars recognise Gibbon's merits, but it may be doubted whether they much prefer Gibbon's handling of the prophet to Voltaire's.

passage in the second, where Gibbon incidentally mentions that Roman slaves were mostly barbarian captives, to declare that it was this usage which made ancient wars so bloody, and that "by putting an end to the cruel institution of slavery, Christianity extended its mild influence to the practice of war." Nothing but religious obscurantism can account for so vain a thesis on the part of so able a man. Every student will to-day grant the counter thesis that the usage of enslavement was probably the first effectual check to massacre in war; and that the enslavement of captives remained the common practice for many centuries after the introduction of Christianity.¹ Still more perverse positions, however, follow, which the English editors could not but repudiate; and when in the sixth chapter Guizot is found snapping at Gibbon for not praising warmly enough the demi-Christian Emperor Alexander Severus, and Wenck growling at him for drawing too bright a picture of that emperor's reign, his compatriots are again united in his defence. Guizot is headlong enough to denounce Gibbon for not mentioning in the sixth chapter details which he gives in their proper place in the sixteenth. There would seem to be a fatality of miscalculation among his antagonists.

The wisest thing done by Guizot is to leave the subject of miracles alone, beyond making the usual attempt to naturalise the darkness at the crucifixion: when he undertakes to be corrective he becomes disastrous to his cause. One of his earliest shots is the assertion that the first Christians were called Ebionites (*Ebionim*=poor) "on account of the poverty to which

¹ The great systematiser of Christian thought for the Church in the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, if he wrote the *De Regimine Principum*, expressly justifies slavery on the score that the menace of it serves to make soldiers fight bravely. Treatise cited, ii, 10.

their charities had reduced them"—a theory of which the single merit is that, from the heterodox point of view, it brightens the subject. More than once he repeats a bad cavil of Davis without noticing Gibbon's reply; and at times he commits exploits of textual perversion which the English editors have either overlooked or thought it fit to ignore. A series of head-shakes from them, however, marks the devout Frenchman's path: "unfortunate," "irrelevant," "mistaken," "uncandid," are their normal verdicts on his apologetics. And they themselves, in turn, do little or nothing to controvert Gibbon in historical essentials. They can but fall back on the charge, sometimes put with asperity, sometimes with moderation, that he does not do justice to the evidence for supernatural influence and abnormal virtue, and does not show a proper sympathy with the martyrs. Apart from the more just objection that his frequent sarcasm is not in the true historical spirit, this is the gist of the case against Gibbon to-day.

As to the supernaturalism it is no longer necessary to argue. When clerical cyclopædias are fain to deal with Jesus on Unitarian lines, the real debate lies elsewhere. In point of fact, indeed, much of the non-supernaturalist exposition of Christism to-day is in the spirit of supernaturalism, though it has abandoned the name and the thesis. Instead of a man born of a virgin, supernaturally revived after death and visibly removed from the earth into space, we are asked to conceive of a man who suddenly introduced into a decadent world a set of ideas and precepts which speedily altered, once for all, its whole moral dynamics. As, however, the full refutation of this fantasy takes us away from Gibbon, who did not dispute the historicity of Jesus, we need on his behalf

concern ourselves merely with the charges of injustice and antipathy to the early Christians.

To answer merely that he *did* exhibit a certain unscientific animus, howbeit by way of irony, would be accurate, but would not be to hold the balances fairly between him and his opponents. It has to be remembered that those who, in his day and ours, have charged him with want of sympathy and want of spiritual insight, themselves show an indurated incapacity for sympathy with ninety-nine hundredths of the human race in the past. The sympathy so profusely bestowed on the supposed characters of the first Christians is normally given in terms of a hard aversion to everybody else around them. To indict all paganism as a mass of corruption, to vilify it as religion in terms of the worst phenomena of its decadent ages, to deny goodness and elevation of feeling to all who would not be Christians, to represent all Jewry as made up of odious Pharisees, stupid Scribes, and heartless Sadducees—this has been as regular a function of Christian apologetics, from De Mornay to Dean Farrar, as the vituperation of unbelievers. To this day it is exceptional to find a Christian or even a Positivist writer who recognises the moral parity of early Christism with much of the surrounding Hellenism: Dr. Edwin Hatch, who did so, had even less preferment than Watson; and I could cite some professed rationalists who have never fully delivered themselves from the prepossessions set up by Christian declamation and Christian art.

Gibbon, then, reacted against a habit of stolid injustice; and he finally seems, perhaps, more moved by antipathy than he really was because of the resort to sarcasm that was forced on him by Christian bigotry. Had he been free to state his case straight-

forwardly and seriously, his more favourable estimates might have stood free of the suspicion of irony that now attaches to every laudatory passage in his two chapters. Doubtless the time will come when, the old fanaticism being fully discredited, his sarcasm will be felt to be beside the case; and then, without any disparagement of his judgment relatively to his period, the time will have come to supersede him—if the required operator is ready.

VII.

Meantime, his irony has still a work to do, and it will never be put out of court by the mere disguised fanaticism which impugns it as malicious injustice. Macaulay's "most unfair" echoes his friend Milman's charge without sustaining it. Presumably the strongest case that can be made on that charge is the one drawn up by Mr. Cotter Morison, who had the inspiration of later scholarship and sociology than were available to Milman. Let us then consider his indictment. Thus it begins:—

Gibbon's account of the early Christians is vitiated by his narrow and distorted conception of the emotional side of man's nature. Having no spiritual aspirations himself, he could not appreciate or understand them in others. Those emotions which have for their object the unseen world and its centre, God, had no meaning for him; and he was tempted to explain them away when he came across them, or to ascribe their origin and effects to other instincts which were more intelligible to him. The wonderland which the mystic inhabits was closed to him; he remained outside of it, and reproduced in sarcastic travesty the reports he heard of its marvels.¹

It must have taken some nervous effort to work up the last metaphor in particular. What it means it

¹ *Gibbon*, p. 122.

would be brutal to ask ; but it is necessary to warn the ingenuous reader that it has no intelligible bearing on the case. "Mystics," including mystics *manqués* like Mr. Morison, are really not the abstruse natures they suppose themselves to be ; and the proof of it may at any time be had by putting a few of different tribes together. The amenity with which each contemns the others and their "marvels"—the Catholic the Protestant's, the Buddhist the Christian's, and the Christian the pagan's—is an index of the value of their joint scorn for the rationalist. A sane man, a rationalist, duly attentive to morbid psychology, may understand them well enough, which is more than they can attain to in regard to him, whether he be the *a priori* rationalist, as Hegel, or the *a posteriori*, as Gibbon. And the phenomena of early Christianity, so far as they can now be traced, are perfectly familiar, and normally intelligible, to all who have thoughtfully looked into modern Salvationism, or Sufism, or Babism, or Hinduism, or Buddhism, or Mormonism, or "Christian Science."

The common types of primitive Christian, as they are to be gathered from the New Testament writings, were (1) the simple Messianist, looking for either a new kingdom on earth or an end of things opening on a new life somewhere in the skies ; (2) the more thoughtful or more practical, who sought to find the kingdom in a community within the community ; (3) the imaginative fetishists, who believed themselves brought into communion with the supernatural by the magic rite of the Eucharist and by prayer, or by the hysterical *glossolalia*, a species of alienation. The two latter types approximated to the first in a common belief in a hereafter ; and on the bases of all three there was evolved (4) the legalist or Pauline Christian,

who proceeded by a technical argument from faith in the covenant with Abraham to faith in the redemption through Jesus. Lastly came (5) the Judæo-Gentile philosopher who related the Christian apparatus to the cosmic conception of the Logos. All believed in miracles and evil spirits; all looked on pagan "idolatry" with fear and hatred; all were more or less capable of fanatical malice, by force of their exclusiveness; all were to be matched by the hundred among the orthodox Jews, and, apart from their bigotry, among the mystery-cultivating Pagans.

The secret of such resentment as Mr. Morison's lies in the clinging to Milman's notion that the *first* Christians were a wholly or fundamentally different set of people from the later; that those of the Catacombs were saints and those of Constantinople sinners—a conception as disintegrating to orthodoxy in the end as it is unmanageable to sociology. True, the State establishment at once brought to the church swarms of worldlings, bent on self; and, though already worldly types had become prominent in the third century, the earlier converts were relatively disinterested. But that does not mean that they were saints. The first Christians are supposed to have been, almost without exception, loving, blameless, forgiving, utterly unselfish. Such an inference can be framed and held only in virtue of a dumb defiance of all the evidence. In the Gospels, we have the disciples from time to time represented as jealous and self-seeking, stupid, unsympathetic, and traitorous. Either there were such disciples or there were gospel-makers who spitefully invented them or libelled them. In the Synoptics, Jesus is made alternately to preach love and racial separation, unlimited forgiveness and prompt punishment, a universal fatherhood of God

and a dispensation of hell-fire. You are taught to love your enemies and loathe the Scribes and Pharisees and stand aloof from the Samaritans. Even in the Fourth Gospel Jesus at times disputes bitterly and egotistically : the Logos becomes an angry priest. In the Acts we have Peter miraculously murdering Ananias and Sapphira for a falsehood venial in comparison with the treason ascribed (doubtless later) to himself in the Gospels. In the epistles we find Paul¹ alternately preaching love and shrieking anathema at variant doctrine ; and there too are pictured believers who commit incest in the name of Christian freedom, go to law with each other before heathen judges, and drink too much and go to sleep over the Eucharist itself. In the Apocalypse we have fresh allusion to backslidings, and a fulmination of "hate" against an antinomian sect.

So far from being unjust to such phases of faith, Gibbon is positively over-lenient in that he does not track them. A just induction would consist in noting the variations and inferring that at all times there were *some* who had the natural gift of love and serene devotion, never wholly perverted by zealotry. But there were presumptively such in many pagan cults ; and there were surely some such even in the ages of Christian schism and dogmatic insanity. Nay, are there not presumptively such among the Moslems² and the Mormons ? Gibbon, passing with light irony over the conventional picture, did not impugn it as he might, but all the while set up a fair counter-suggestion to the view that the primitive Christian constituted the sole salt of an evil earth.

¹ That is, if we take the "four" epistles as genuine.

² See in Mr. Morel's *Affairs of West Africa* (1902, p. 222) an account of a Moslem missionary who, by patient endurance of injury, won over an African tribe to his faith.

What happened in the period of a socially prosperous Christianity was simply, as aforesaid, the accession of multitudes of more worldly or less zealous cast; but even with those multitudes there would come the better types, docile and serene or humble souls who went naturally with the household or the mass, and were kindly and credulous under any creed. The worst features of Christian history, antinomianism and fanaticism, licence and strife, are traceable in the very earliest documents. They are just as intelligible as anything else in history—intelligible as expressions of the ordinary, unwise, headstrong, credulous, self-asserting human being. Mr. Morison's blast is simply so much rhetoric. His assertion that "the simple-hearted emotions of God-fearing men were a puzzle and an irritation" to Gibbon, proves finally only this, that the processes of rational analysis were apt to be a puzzle and an irritation to himself.

It is true that he proceeds, though with every show of a foregone conclusion, to debate Gibbon's sociological theses as such. Gibbon, he contends, "puts effects for causes," as if an effect cannot also be a cause. "The zeal produced the effects alleged, but what produced the zeal?" he asks; and to the remark that it was "derived from the Jewish religion" he retorts that nothing is said by Gibbon to show why Gentiles of every race should "derive from a despised race tenets and sentiments which would make their lives one long scene of self-denial and danger." A quiet explanation may suffice to supersede this and some further convulsive polemic.

1. Gentiles had already become Jewish proselytes in considerable numbers before the Christian period. They were moved in the same way as Romans were moved to adopt the rites of Isis and Osiris, deities

also of a "despised race,"¹ or as the Roman army was moved to adopt Mithraism, the cult of the Cilician pirates, and also of the Persian enemy. Such phenomena are common in ancient religion; and there is nothing more remarkable in one case than in the others. Gibbon expressly specifies the nature of the attraction in the Judæo-Christian cult.

2. The converts did *not*, save in a minority of cases, look forward to "one long scene of self-denial and danger." They did not count on perpetual persecution; and when persecution came, numbers always lapsed. If a number did eagerly face persecution, they were doing what was to be done later by Babîs and Mormons. As for self-denial, that has been a cult with some of every race in every age: before or apart from Christianity there were zealous ascetics in Egypt, in Syria, in India, in Mexico. In Mr. Morison's own words, the ascetic temper is "one of the most widely manifested in history." Yet he triumphantly demands, "Whence arose the sudden blaze of conviction" seen among the Christians? The answer is that such phenomena constantly go with forms of religious belief, and that Gibbon really did not doubt that Christian believers believed.

3. Mr. Morison proceeds to argue that the ascetic temper was beyond Gibbon's "comprehension." It is really just as comprehensible as any other temper; and Mr. Morison is badly at fault when he says that Gibbon, "with a strange ignorance of the human heart, attributes the austere morals of *the* early Christians to their care for their reputation." Gibbon

¹ It is now well known that the adoption of deities of conquered and despised races by their conquerors is an almost universal feature of early religion. See Mr. Gomme's *Ethnology in Folklore*, 1892, ch. iii.

distinctly specifies two motives, "repentance for their past sins," and concern for the reputation of "their society"—a very different doctrine from that put in his mouth by Mr. Morison. A critic who undertakes to sit in judgment on Gibbon should be more careful to realise what he reads.

4. It is not clear whether Mr. Morison really believed in miracles; but he writes that Gibbon "seems to think that the claim of supernatural gifts somehow had the same efficacy as the gifts themselves would have had, if they had existed." This is exactly what took place, as regarded the making of converts to the faith. If Mr. Morison could not "comprehend" this, he was critically deficient in a degree never approximated to by Gibbon.

5. Mr. Morison is still more at fault when he represents that Gibbon "attributes to the scepticism of the pagan world the easy introduction of Christianity." Gibbon really argues that the discrediting of the simpler ethnic religions prepared the way for a new in terms of the common "necessity of believing." Mr. Morison (who in his comments suppresses the context of what he quotes) has presumably missed the point, which is that the old civic cults had to be out of fashion before universalist cults could make general headway. A more just objection is to the effect that Gibbon does not fully recognise ("was evidently unaware of" are the critic's words) "the striking religious revival which uplifted paganism in the age of Hadrian and grew with the sinking empire." It is true, as Mr. Morison urges, that Gibbon does not take note of the pressures of misery and life-weariness in driving men to cults which promised a future state; but this is a constant aspect of his narrative, and is in no way special to his treatment of Christianity; and he

expressly specifies as constant the play of all forms of superstition, and the projection of "hopes and fears beyond the limits of the visible world."¹

To the last, then, the specifically hostile criticism of Gibbon fails seriously to discredit him; and it nearly always tends to discredit itself. A student who desires to profit by what Gibbon has achieved may easily do more to supplement him than has been done by Mr. Morison, with Comte and Hausrath behind him. Where Gibbon fell short was in not tracing (1) the effect of despotism in driving men who were debarred from the active life of self-government, with its simpler religious usages, to the intenser and more polemic religious life which partially compensated for social passivity; and (2) in failing to realise the *economic* causation that underlay the phenomena of ecclesiastical evolution. Such omissions are excusable for Gibbon's time, but hardly so is the entire disregard of the ecclesiastico-economic process seen in the comment of Mr. Morison. He was really at a point of view not more scientifically sociological than Gibbon's own.

For the comparison is entirely in Gibbon's favour when we consider the problem of Christian evolution as a whole. What he clearly saw was that the rise of Christianity went step for step with the decay of civilisation, and that its triumph involved the reign of barbarism. This Mr. Morison would not see. Following Comte, in the spirit of Comtist prescription rather than in that of sociological science, he conventionally treats Christian history as one of continuous progress; and, coming to Julian, he is delighted to think that Gibbon saw in the hapless emperor "pitiful superstition, huge vanity, weak affectation." Such is the

¹ Ch. ii and xv. Bohn ed. i, 38; ii, 67-68.

measure meted to the anti-Christian mystic by the champion of the mystic temperament. Conscious of being nobly impartial, he grants to Julian some "real merits," but proclaims that "a certain intellectual disdain for the reactionary emperor is difficult to avoid." Such intellectual disdain, which he avows in professing to avoid it, is exactly the temper he thought he found in Gibbon, and so hotly denounced as the manifestation of a narrow and distorted temperament. The truth is that in Mr. Morison it is not so much intellectual as sectarian.

To call the reforming Julian reactionist, and by implication to make Gregory the Great progressive, is to make fanaticism pass for evolutionary science; but that is only half of the critic's sin against light. Julian was a mystic if ever one lived; but because his mysticism, his "wonderland," was another zone than that of the creed in which Mr. Morison had dreamed, his "marvels" are "pitiful superstition," his humorous affectation is "weak," his boyish and innocent vanity is "huge." Such is the range of sympathy in some who claim to be monopolists of it; such the equity of a critic who pronounces Gibbon lop-sided and unjust; such the sociology of one who finds Gibbon's vein of remark on Christianity "completely out of date."

Once more we find the priest juster than the Positivist. It is the Bohn editor who writes at the close of the twenty-third chapter:—

Sensitiveness to the acrimony with which his fifteenth and sixteenth chapters had been assailed, made Gibbon cautious here. So far did he carry this, that recent editors, who in republishing his History undertook to correct all that he had mis-stated respecting Christianity, have raised no objection to any part of the present chapter. If he has erred, it has been rather by sometimes doing injustice to the imperial mystic. There are instances of his having wrongly supposed

Christians at large to have been the objects of vindictive feelings and coercive measures which were directed only against the priesthood.....That he [Julian] wished by gentle and more persuasive convictions to win the laity, and first the educated portion of them, is clearly evident from the fragments which we possess of what he wrote against their faith.

And that is the bare fact.

VIII.

The quality in Gibbon's character that, with his special rationalistic training, gives such solidity to his fifteenth chapter, is in one or other aspect really present throughout his work. Dr. Bury has well summed up his capital virtue as a historian in the remark that the *Decline and Fall*, the greatest of modern histories, is noticeably devoid of enthusiasm. This is apt to sound a damaging compliment; and Mr. Cotter Morison is within his rights when he puts it that "his cheek rarely flushes in enthusiasm for a good cause." On deep reflection it must be granted that a historian of whom this can be said is probably deficient in his realisation of much of his subject-matter. But it must also be avowed that there is a compensation when we can say of Gibbon, what is scarcely predicable of Mr. Morison, that he never—in his History at least—flushes on behalf of a bad cause. And even Mr. Morison makes amends for some perverse criticism by this final and judicial appraisal of Gibbon's total performance:—

If.....the historian, forsaking his high function and austere reserve, succumbs to the temptations that beset his path, and turns history into political pamphlet, poetic rhapsody, moral epigram, or garish melodrama, he may become conspicuous to a fault at the expense of his work. Gibbon avoided these seductions. If the *Decline and Fall* has no superior in historical literature, it is not solely in consequence

of Gibbon's profound learning, wide survey, and masterly grasp of his subject. With wise discretion, he subordinated himself to his task. The life of Gibbon is the less interesting, but his work remains monumental and supreme.

This tribute fully presents the abiding value of Gibbon's view of things. His lack of enthusiasm left him, to use the modern phrase, finely "objective." Historic enthusiasms, like historical philosophies, are precarious things: it is so nearly certain that our enthusiasms will not be entirely shared by the next inquirer; and if we hold to them we must take the hazard. Gibbon's insusceptibility left him a juster judge than any historian of the enthusiastic type can well be; and his coolness further saved him from the common snare of his craft, recognised by Milman in his remark on the astonishing rarity of contradiction in Gibbon's pages. It needs, perhaps, some critical acquaintance with a number of historians to make one realise how high a praise that is; but to Milman's words may be added the remark that not only does Gibbon nearly escape self-contradiction: he rarely forgets what he has written. In all his *History* I recall only one repetition: it is a note on Cosmas Indicopleustes, of which the substance is given twice over—on the fortieth and on the forty-seventh chapters.¹

Now, the student of (for instance) Finlay, whom Mr. Morison praises as "the judicious," knows that that very thoughtful writer not only forgets in one volume what he has said in another, but repeats particular passages in one chapter,² and recurs to his generalisations, as often contradicting as repeating them, in a way that shows he had no coherent view

¹ Bohn ed. iv, 319; v. 259.

² *E.g.* a textual repetition on pp. 6 and 22 of vol. vi, ed. Tozer.

either of his book or of his theories. He is at all times interesting and suggestive in his interpretations of historic movement; but he is so frequently and so radically self-contradictory that after a time no student can follow him without an invincible distrust. At the same time he exhibits to the full the danger from which Gibbon, as we have noted, escaped in virtue of his developing distaste for speculation—the danger of explaining historic processes in terms of impermanent theories, economic and sociological. Such work cannot endure. A zealous student may reach more scientific views by habitually analysing Finlay and weighing his contradictions against each other; but the labour is one that few will undertake. The work must be done over again; it is too inconsistent to last.¹

Such shortcomings, up to a certain point, may indeed be excused in a writer who lacks leisure; but Finlay had about as much leisure as Gibbon. His failing is organic: one seems to realise it at once on seeing his portrait, with the high brow and the dreaming eyes. He has more faculty of reflection than of recollection; the speculative bent overbalances the sceptical, and can visibly lead him off obliviously on a new theoretic trail at any moment; he lacks at once the force of will which should control the musing habit, and the clear view of realities which should save him from inconsistency. Another gifted writer of our own time, John Richard Green—in whom beauty of character is so marked that to criticise him is an effort—serves as an illustration of the risks both of the enthusiastic mood and of the bias to generalisation.

¹ I have noted some of Finlay's series of self-contradictions in *An Introduction to English Politics*, pp. 85-86, 110-111. Many more could be adduced from his seven volumes.

Green indeed had never a fair share of leisure, but his theoretic contradictions are not to be accounted for like his mistakes and repetitions, by the pressures of his task on his time. His series of irreconcilable dicta on the Lollards,¹ and on the characters of Teutons and Celts, English and Irish;² his three incompatible theories of the fall of feudalism³—such inconsistencies are proofs of a certain critical infirmity. In Green as in Finlay we get suggestiveness at the price of incoherence and error. Gibbon never matches their lapses of memory, and if he leaves us to theorise for ourselves he seldom wastes our time by offering us false clues, and still seldomer gives us a false fact.

Mr. James Bryce, in his very interesting obituary notice of Green,⁴ draws up a graded table of modern historians in terms of their accuracy. In the highest grade are put Thirlwall and Ranke; in the second Gibbon and Carlyle; then Grote, some way below whom the Professor places Green, on a level with Macaulay and Robertson; while "decidedly" below these are ranked Milman and Hume. It is a curiously suggestive list, drawn by a very competent hand; and it is not for me to venture to challenge it, beyond contending that Gibbon makes a much wider and harder research, and has surely fewer notable miscarriages, than Carlyle. But in any case the adjudication will help us to realise what the merit of accuracy means, provided that we remember the scope of Gibbon's work in comparison with Thirlwall's, the immense variety of his detail, and the weight of his

¹ Noted in *The Dynamics of Religion*, pp. 18-21.

² Discussed in *The Saxon and the Celt*, pp. 221-233.

³ See pp. 243, 279, 282, and 295 of the original edition of the *Short History*.

⁴ *Macmillan's Magazine*, 1892.

thought in comparison with Ranke's ;¹ provided also that we remember what an ordeal of scrutiny Gibbon has undergone in comparison with those others.

For the rest, his non-enthusiasm preserved him from the bias, noble but unjudicial, that partly deflects the fine historic vision of Grote ; his rationalism saved him alike from the occasional theologic absurdity of Hallam, and the Christian prejudice of Guizot ; and of the grotesque racial animus of Motley and Mommsen he was incapable. Ranke in comparison is but an annalist ; Motley, aiming higher, fails utterly to maintain critical enthusiasm at the level set by Froude, who pronounced him to possess eminently "all the essentials of a great writer" ;² and even so solid a student as Bishop Stubbs exhibits a chronic vertigo of critical vacillation which reminds us how uncommon is Gibbon's steady balance of mind. Bishop Thirlwall, perhaps, best compares with him in solidity of judgment and firmness of grasp ; and Thirlwall is as inferior to Gibbon in artistic breadth and variety of presentment as to Grote in command of interest. For the fact remains that Gibbon, with all his full-dress mannerism, is still one of the most interesting of all historians : the mandarin style has more colour and character than the episcopal ; and the man of the world, with his ironies and his levities, his range of allusion, and his endless asides by way of footnotes, has the more intimate tone of humanity. So much does it take to

¹ A French critic has gone so far as to dub Ranke *le Capefigue allemand*—a characterisation more telling to-day than it would have been forty years ago, when Capefigue was popular. But it is perhaps obscure for the large contemporary multitude who do not read Capefigue at all.

² *Westminster Review*, April, 1856, cited by Dr. Moncure Conway, introd. to Bohn ed. of Motley's *Rise of the Dutch Republic*, 1896, i, p. xxxv.

build a great repute ; and so rare is the combination of gifts that yields a perdurable masterpiece.

I shall not be accused, I believe, of lack of sympathy with Buckle ; but the task of minutely revising the pages of that favourite author has brought home to me the full force of Mr. Bury's remark about enthusiasm. Buckle abounds in enthusiasm : he writes with the litten eye ; and there is no question about the flush on his cheek for good causes. But this very enthusiasm, carrying him in a rapture of conviction into and over regions of speculation and generalisation on which Gibbon would never have ventured, brings it about that he falls into positive error, not only of argument and inference but of concrete statement, thrice for Gibbon's once. Here we have at last the sociological historian—for Buckle is the first who fully deserves the name—with an outfit as ample as his energy and his zeal ; and his performance is a great achievement, which none of his detractors has come near rivalling. It will surely not soon die. And yet when we compare its substance with that of Gibbon's, matter for matter and manner for manner, setting the non-mannered, nondescript nineteenth-century style against the mannered eighteenth, the flushed cheek against the slow smile, and the bounding declamation against the posed epigram, we realise anew the sagacity which underlay Gibbon's general abstention from sociological interpretation. Buckle's monument, so to speak, contains much sterling silver and veins of fine gold ; but that it will cohere as well as the fused bronze of Gibbon, who shall venture to predict ? He will stimulate as Gibbon never did ; he opens up a new field of science ; his very taking of risks is a challenge to our admiration and a spur to our thought ; but there the fact stands : the solidity

of Gibbon's result is vindicated anew by its juxtaposition with this more inspired and less guarded enterprise.

IX.

When we have thus at least partially recognised the power and plenitude of Gibbon's performance, we may venture, albeit still diffidently, to estimate his deficiencies. I have said that they substantially lie on the side of his sociology, his entire theory of things. He is open, indeed, to challenge at a good many points in respect of his mere use of his authorities, which is apt to be arbitrary when they clash, and variable on the side of scepticism. A new sense of the dubiety of history comes to us at times on comparing his text with his notes: he will calmly avow that he has put together from conflicting accounts what seems to him a likely narrative, leaving it tolerably clear that his sense of symmetry has been one of his standards; and anon we find him taking without question some staggering record from a witness long after the event, where doubt would be as natural as belief. It is not that he is credulous: on many points, such as the numbers slain in battles, he is normally and soundly critical; but his scepticism follows no rule, and leaves us asking for canons. Here, however, he is not only abreast of the best historiography of his own day: he is on a level with all but the most critical work of ours. Men still write history in the spirit of the bone-setter's "right or about right"; and when all is said, the most critical has cause to admit with Dr. Gardiner that he does but relate things as they seem to him to have happened. It is therefore to the problem of explanation, of the tracing of causation,

that we must come in the end, and it is over that that we are moved to pronounce Gibbon's performance inadequate.

And yet even on that side we shall misjudge him if we do not realise that he was not backward for his day, and that indeed his scepticism at times keeps him on the line of sound historical philosophy where later enthusiasms have gone astray. One of Mr. Morison's complaints against him is that he is not at all enthusiastic for Charlemagne: it is, the critic says, "perhaps the only instance in his work where he has failed to appreciate a truly great man, and the failure is the more deplorable as it concerns one of the most truly great men who have ever lived."¹ As usual, Mr. Morison does not judicially argue the point, but assumes to settle it by a dictum. "Properly considered," he declares, "the eighth century is the most important and memorable which Europe has ever seen"; and he uncandidly quotes some of Gibbon's lighter ironies without once noting his weighty impeachment of the conventional verdict. It was not lightly that Gibbon chose to counter a panegyric in which, even in his day, there had been joined the voices of Voltaire, Montesquieu, Mably, and Robertson. Let us note his graver words on the great emperor:—

His *real* merit is doubtless enhanced by the barbarism of the nation and the times from which he emerged; but the *apparent* magnitude of an object is likewise enlarged by an unequal comparison; and the ruins of Palmyra derive a casual splendour from the nakedness of the surrounding desert.....I shall be scarcely permitted to accuse the ambition of a conqueror; but in a day of equal retribution..... the four thousand five hundred Saxons who were beheaded

¹ *Gibbon*, p. 162.

on the same spot would have something to allege against the justice and humanity of Charlemagne.....His military renown must be tried by the scrutiny of his troops.....but the two heroes who preceded Charlemagne bequeathed him their name, their examples, and the companions of their victories.....his campaigns are not illustrated by any battle of singular difficulty and success ; and he might behold with envy the Saracen trophies of his grandfather.....He wished to improve the laws and the character of the Franks ; and his attempts, however feeble and imperfect, are deserving of praise ; the inveterate evils of the times were suspended or mollified by his government [*Note.*—Yet Schmidt, from the best authorities, represents the interior disorders and oppression of his reign] ; but in his institutions I can seldom discover the general views and immortal spirit of a legislator who survives himself for the benefit of posterity. The union and stability of his empire depended on the life of a single man ; he initiated the dangerous practice of dividing his kingdom among his sons ; and after his numerous diets the whole constitution was left to fluctuate between the disorders of anarchy and despotism. His esteem for the piety and knowledge of the clergy tempted him to intrust that aspiring order with temporal dominion and civil jurisdiction.His law enforced the imposition of tithes, because the demons had proclaimed in the air that the default of payment had been the cause of the last scarcity.

And then, finally :—

Perhaps, in his expeditions beyond the Rhine and Elbe, he aspired to save his monarchy from the fate of the Roman Empire, to disarm the enemies of civilised society, and to eradicate the seed of future emigrations. But it has been wisely observed that in a light of precaution all conquest must be ineffectual unless it could be universal ; since the increasing circle must be involved in a larger sphere of hostility.¹

Beside this deadly cumulation of rebuttal, Mr. Morison's page of declamation simply disappears.

¹ Ch. xlix, Bohn ed. v, 404-413. The last comment avowedly follows Gaillard.

He has not so much as glanced at the essential problem, on which Gibbon so weightily pronounces. To-day, I believe, even the balance of votes is with Gibbon. Schmidt¹ in Gibbon's own day had argued that the collapse of civilisation after Charlemagne was due to his imperialism; Lappenberg² later put him below Alfred as a constructor and healer; Sismondi put him below Otto;³ Guizot pronounced his whole attempt "belle, mais stérile";⁴ Frédéric Morin, one of the most penetrating minds of the French republican reaction against the school of Guizot, pronounced the empire of Charlemagne "a monstrous and inefficacious unity, the barbarous copy of the corruption of old Rome";⁵ Hallam, while leaning to the general eulogy, decided that the son Louis, who passes for a weakling, was as a legislator superior to his father;⁶ Seignobos points to the fatal division of power between the spiritual and the temporal arms, the bishops and the clergy, as the characteristic and disastrous work of the Karolings; and says for Karl's over-rated educational policy only that the effort was "not entirely lost."⁷ Against these critical verdicts, those of patriotic Germans like Menzel and Gregorovius, of whom the first⁸ called Charlemagne the sun of the new day of the Middle Ages, and the second⁹ figured him as "the Moses of the Middle Ages, who had happily led mankind through the wilderness of barbarism," are not impressive. They simply ignore

¹ *Geschichte der Deutschen*, 1785, i, 471-5.

² *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, Eng. trans. 1845, ii, 43, 83.

³ *Histoire des républiques italiennes*, ed. 1826, i, 85-91.

⁴ *Essais sur l'histoire de France*, 7e édit. p. 238.

⁵ *Origines de la démocratie*, 3e édit. 1865, Intr. p. 95.

⁶ *Middle Ages*, ed. 1885, i, 15.

⁷ *Histoire de la Civilisation*, ed. 1893, i, 405-10.

⁸ *Geschichte der Deutschen*, Cap. 103.

⁹ *Geschichte der Stadt Rom*, B. v, K. i, § 2.

the eclipse of civilisation for two centuries after the hero.

Mr. Bryce, who takes their tone, admits that after Charlemagne "the mass dissolved into that chaos out of which it had been formed," and gives no evidence for his countervailing claims; any more than for his repetition of the old fable that the emperor was "of strength and stature almost superhuman," and that as his activity "made him the conqueror of Europe, so was it by the variety of his culture that he became her civiliser."¹ Mr. Bryce, who puts Gibbon in the second rank of historians for accuracy, might have learned from Gibbon that Gaillard determined the hero's height at 6ft. 1¼ inch English measure; and that Eginhard's testimony clearly shows him to have begun to learn to write in mature age, and not to have succeeded.² One hesitates to say it, but Mr. Bryce here falls for a moment below Gibbon's standard of accuracy and research.

The important point, however, is that Gibbon in this matter realised and hinted the futility of imperialism as a factor of civilisation. Where the Christian Menzel decides that Christianity could not triumph save by massacre, and that massacre was accordingly right, the sceptic points to the speedy collapse of the imperial house of cards, and the evocation of centuries of ferocious heathen retaliation on the Christianised countries as a result of Karl's frightful ravages among the Saxons. The time has come, I think, when even Christians may begin to realise that barbarism, *pace* the Comtist, is not best to be transmuted into civilisation by the bludgeon.

¹ *The Holy Roman Empire*, 8th ed. pp. 71-74.

² Bohn ed. v, 407. Compare Hallam's note of 1848, ed. cited, iii. 286, and Seignobos, as cited, p. 409.

It is told of certain tribes of the Australian aborigines that among them it is usual for a man to make a woman his wife by knocking her down and carrying her off senseless ; and those wooers doubtless argue that that is clearly the only way to preserve the species. The European who is so unaffectedly aghast at their psychology is not immeasurably distant from them in his sociology while he reasons that the only way to convey culture from the higher level to the lower is by murderous conquest.

X.

But if Gibbon could read the capital lesson in the case of the empire of Charlemagne, why, one asks, did he not draw the same inference in the case of the whole imperialism of Rome? In a measure he did draw it: several times he partially frames it;¹ but in regard to the main theme of his history he offers no such summary and generalisation as he does on the episode of Charlemagne's empire. Here we must assent unreservedly to the judgment of Mr. Morison:—

It is quite evident that he was not at all unconscious of the deep economic and social vices which undermined the great fabric. Depopulation, decay of agriculture, fiscal oppression, the general prostration begotten of despotism—all these sources of the great collapse may be traced in his text, or his wonderful notes, hinted very often with a flashing insight which anticipates the most recent inquiries into the subject. But these considerations are not brought together to a luminous point.....They lie scattered, isolated, and barren over three volumes, and are easily overlooked. One may say that generalised and synthetic views are conspicuous by their absence in Gibbon.²

The fact is that he began his work with neither a

¹ *E.g.* the last four paragraphs of ch. ii.

² *Gibbon*, p. 133.