

GIBBON OBSERVED*

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The preliminary aim of this paper is documentary: to clarify and confirm the dating of Gibbon's famous essay 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West'. According to a new view, this essay may reasonably be read as if it were written in the early months of 1780.¹ The obvious objection to this position is that, in a now familiar passage from his *Memoirs*, Gibbon explicitly assures us that the 'General Observations' were written before 1774, and thus in all probability before 1773, when he began writing his History.² I argue that we should believe what Gibbon tells us. But though the discussion originates in the dry terrain of dates, important interpretative consequences follow. These stem from the interest of the 'General Observations' in their own right — a panoramic view of ancient and modern history as broad as the entire range of Gibbon's History — and from their insertion at the end of Volume III of that work (published in 1781). Were the 'Observations' so revised as to be virtually written in sequence (as the new view supposes), or do they present a more problematic case — being written before the beginning of Volume I but inserted at the end of an independent text completed eight years later?³ Consideration of this point raises issues fundamental to the understanding of Gibbon's compositional and intellectual processes, and is the principal justification for what follows.

David Womersley has sought to re-date the 'General Observations' on two grounds: first, by implicitly challenging the veracity of Gibbon's statement as to their dating in the *Memoirs*, and secondly by scrutiny of the text itself. After considering these arguments in order (I), I shall proceed to explain or interpret this enigmatic text from a series of perspectives (II–V), on the broad premiss that it can only be understood as a microcosm of Gibbon's procedures when writing the History (or indeed history) as a whole.

I

To challenge Gibbon's *Memoirs* on a matter of fact is not a challenge to a mere detail, but to a central feature of an apparently established intellectual persona. I have, it is true, argued that, in describing his general intellectual evolution through seven complex years prior to the composition of his History, Gibbon was guilty of some 'humane suppression and mendacious inference'⁴ in his *Memoirs*. If they fall short in this respect, might they not be challenged in others? However, it is one thing to suggest a degree of interpretative ellipsis, and another to challenge a statement of fact. In the latter case we disregard Gibbon's intense concern for factual truth in general,⁵ and in particular his obsession with precise chronology. He proclaimed 'an early and constant attachment to the order of time and place' (*Mem. B*, 121) to be a foundation stone of his intellectual culture, just as it was an organizing principle of his life:

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¹ D. Womersley, 'From polybianism to perfectibilism: the influence on Gibbon of "Le Chevalier de Chastellux"', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 13 (1990), 47–55, at p. 54. Cited as 'Womersley'.

² *Memoir E*, p. 324 n. 48, *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon* (1896), ed. John Murray. (Since it prints the six drafts of the memoirs consecutively, this edition is still preferable, despite inferior critical apparatus, to *Edward Gibbon, Memoirs of My Life* (1966), ed. G. A. Bonnard. Drafts of the memoirs cited in the text as '*Mem.*'). Cf. 'Gibbon's Dark Ages', *JRS* 73 (1983), 1–23,

at p. 18. Hereafter cited as 'Gibbon's Dark Ages'.

³ Womersley supposes that this point of view, as presented in the *Memoirs*, is an attempt 'to smooth the jagged edges of life into art' (p. 54). This seems a curious inversion, when what Gibbon offers is so obviously puzzling (or jagged), and the new solution is so convenient; see below (II).

⁴ 'Gibbon's Dark Ages', 20. These words were preceded by others: 'The memoirs rarely, if ever, lie...'. Their fallibility is in fact at the level of minutiae: compare *Mem. E* 308 and *The Letters of Edward Gibbon* (1956), ed. J. E. Norton, no. 316 (hereafter cited as *Letters*) and n. 167 below.

⁵ loc. cit.

in the words of Maria Holroyd, 'he is Clockwork'.⁶ Correct chronology was essential to virtually all of his writings, given their narrative mode and the perpetual need to collate imperfect sources deriving from separate calendars. Most directly, concern with dates marks the text and margins of the *Memoirs* to a remarkable and obtrusive degree,⁷ and this reflects the way they were written — with the full range of his papers before him (perhaps a fuller range than we now possess). Not the least of their remarkable characteristics was that the *Memoirs* were written with as careful and scrupulous a reference to sources as the History itself (a procedure which reflects their intensely academic purpose).⁸ If we choose to doubt Gibbon's veracity on dating, and on indirect grounds only, then the entire structure of the *Memoirs* is called into question, and serious study of his intellectual evolution would be rendered difficult, if not impossible.

Happily we have not reached that Berkeley-esque impasse. We *know* that when in 1781 Gibbon published the 'General Observations', they included an offensive image which supposed that, in his own day, 'Arcadius and Honorius slumber on the thrones of the House of Bourbon';⁹ at an unspecified later date he made a minor alteration in a new edition of Volumes II and III of his History, so that Arcadius and Honorius were now seen slumbering less precisely 'on the thrones of the South';¹⁰ and in 1791, when writing Draft E of his *Memoirs*, Gibbon offered a typically dense and compacted explanation of the change in his text:

It may not be generally known that Louis XVI is a great reader, and a reader of English books. On the perusal of a passage of my History . . . which seems to compare him with Arcadius or Honorius, he expressed his resentment to the Prince of Beauvau, from whom the intelligence was conveyed to me. I shall neither disclaim the allusion nor examine the likeness; but the situation of the *late* King of France excludes all suspicion of flattery, and I am ready to declare that the concluding observations of my third Volume were written before his accession to the throne.¹¹

Womersley reads the change in the text and the proffered explanation solely in terms of Gibbon's relation to Louis XVI. He focuses on the pointed 1791 description of Louis as practically 'the *late* king of France'¹² and on the strength of this proceeds to impugn the

⁶ To Ann Firth, 22 Sept. 1793, pr. *The Girlhood of Maria Holroyd* (1896), ed. J. H. Adeane, 239. As examples: (1) from September 1778 (*Letters*, 432) until Gibbon's arrival in England with a completed MS. in August 1787, the History was always composed with an eye to future dates of completion, sometimes two or three years in advance; (2) he was perpetually calculating his life expectancy, to establish the time available to him, *Mem. E*, 347 and n. 72, Add. MSS 34882 ff. 49–50, Note of a conversation on immortality, between G[ibbon] and H[olroyd]; (3) he was both sensitive to the ideological point behind French revolutionary chronology, and skilled in its usage, *Letters*, 859, 875; (4) for his sentiments on those who were 'regardless of futurity' and the calculation of time, e.g. *DF* vii.216.

⁷ cf. *Memoirs of My Life*, op. cit. (n. 2), pl. 5. P. B. Craddock, *Edward Gibbon, Luminous Historian 1772–1794* (1989), implies, p. 371 n. 24, that Gibbon indulged in 'memorial reconstruction of dates'. Generally, this is not so. Not every date is documented, but when so many are, they narrow the range of error for those which are not, and inspire confidence in the scruple of the author; at *Mem. B*, 148 Gibbon engages in self-imposed memory tests when writing his *Memoirs*.

⁸ Parallels to the History abound, as one might expect. Thus in the final drafts of the *Memoirs* (E and F) Gibbon was unable to restrain the habit of writing with full references. Again, besides his own papers, he sought to enlarge his fund of knowledge by research: this is well known in the case of his genealogical researches; see *inter alia* the request to Sheffield for the use of correspondence, *Letters*, 791; J. E. Norton, *A Bibliography of the Works of Edward Gibbon* (1940), 182; Craddock, op. cit. (n. 7), 290–1. His preoccupation with chronology is well to the fore here.

⁹ *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1781), iii.636.

¹⁰ *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1909–14), ed. J. B. Bury, iv.178; hereafter cited in the text under '*DF*'. However, references to volumes of the History assume the volume divisions of the first edition (1776–88). As Dr William Smith pointed out in his edition of 1854–5 (iv.407 n.a), the emendation might then be construed as a reference to Naples and Spain.

¹¹ *Mem. E*, 324 n. 48. The attribution to the Prince of Beauvau is William Smith's, loc. cit. (n. 10), and seems at least plausible given Gibbon's contacts with the Princess, 'a most superior woman' (see *Letters*, 391, 387, 452, 498), and the Beauvaus' central position in that small group who carried on Anglo-French cultural interchange either side of the Channel; for Gibbon and the Prince, *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon* (1972), ed. P. B. Craddock, 213–14; hereafter cited as *EE*.

¹² The force of this reference depends upon its precise dating amidst the French revolutionary flux; and we may note the groundlessness of the view that the notes to *Memoir E* were written after 2 March 1791, the date with which Gibbon signs the text, just because the notes come after the text (Bonnard, op. cit. (n. 2), xxvii–xxviii). This would be to assume, in a parallel case, that Gibbon did not finish his History on 27 June 1787 — the date with which he signs the text — although we can be sure he did, both from his *Memoirs* (*E*, 333) and from the convention of signing the date, which would be meaningless if it were not a terminus. The notes to draft E have, of course, been fair copied (Add. MSS 34874 ff. 97–102b), but it is clear from the cases of draft F and the continuous draft of the *Antiquities of the House of Brunswick* (cf. n. 104), that Gibbon habitually wrote his notes or their gist on small or folded paper in parallel with the text (cf. Add. MSS 34874 ff. 124–7, 34881 f. 249b) — after all, a most convenient way of proceeding. Textual arguments may also be adduced in the same direction: cf. *Mem. E*, 325 n. 66 and Gibbon to Sheffield 5 Feb. 1791, *Letters*, 771; also *Mem. E*, 319 n. 41.

pre-1774 attribution of the 'General Observations'. The underlying implication is that this attribution was an attempt by Gibbon to do a post-revolutionary kindness to Louis, and may thus be substantially disregarded.¹³

However, this structure of inference is some way from either the demonstrable or the likely construction of events; and Gibbon's starkly negative description of his motives is quite consistent with his dating. We may note, first, that if Gibbon made a sympathetic gesture to Louis XVI, it was not in 1791 when he was writing his *Memoirs* — which (anyway) were not, and were not then intended to be, published until after his death¹⁴ — but when he modified the text of the History. This modification first appears in the third edition of Volumes II and III, advertised on 1 December 1789.¹⁵ No evidence survives to cast light on Gibbon's agency in the matter, but we must presume it was one of the incidental fruits of his presence in England between August 1787 and July 1788,¹⁶ when he came over from Lausanne to supervise the publication of Volumes IV–VI. It is unlikely that he would have made so small a change as this subsequently, after his return to Lausanne;¹⁷ if he had, we might fairly seek some reference to the subject in (surviving) correspondence with Cadell or Sheffield — but there is none. Thus the French Revolution hardly comes into it. Secondly, Gibbon did not withdraw his original, offensive allusion, either in the emended text of the 'Observations' or when glossing it in the *Memoirs* but remained anxious to defend himself from the 'suspicion of flattery' — the odious charge of changing his History to flatter a monarch.¹⁸ He only alludes to the revolutionary events of 1791 to bolster up his defence on this score. Generally the 'polybian' spirit of the mixed and balanced English constitution pervades this passage, not that of deference to *ancien régime* France. The trumpet call which ends this draft of the *Memoirs* may be somewhat inflated, but its substantial truth can hardly be discounted: 'I cannot boast of the friendship or favour of princes; the patronage of English literature has long since devolved on our booksellers, and the measure of their liberality is the least ambiguous measure of our common success.'¹⁹

Why, then, did Gibbon change his text? The answer lies in the reason given, however elliptically, in the *Memoirs*. As he states, he wrote the 'General Observations' before the death of Louis XV. His long and apparently feeble reign came in the wake of Le Roi Soleil, and was marked by military failure and the apparent predominance of women at court. In all these respects it corresponded obviously and plausibly to the reigns of those late Imperial *rois fanéants*, Arcadius and Honorius, 'the degenerate successors of Theodosius'.²⁰ But when the statement was published in 1781 it contained a nonsense. It seemed to allude to Louis XVI who had reigned for only a short while; who had suffered no great military reverse; whose court was supposed to suffocate and exclude his wife rather than be dominated by her; and who had displayed considerable reforming energy²¹ — not least in presiding over the financial administration of Necker, the husband of Gibbon's old *enamorada* Suzanne Curchod and a personal friend. For these reasons Gibbon firmly marked his original allusion as one 'which

¹³ Womersley, 53. I am grateful to Dr Womersley for his kindness in elucidating his argument at this point.

¹⁴ He did not intend publication in 1788 (*Mem. A*, 353), 1791 or January 1793 (*Letters*, 791, 826). Subsequently, according to Sheffield in 1796, Gibbon stated in conversation that he would publish (*The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon* (1796 ed.) i.1 n. *). But this might reflect a misunderstanding on Sheffield's part, apparent in January 1793 (cf. Sheffield to Gibbon, 23 Jan. 1793, pr. *Private Letters of Edward Gibbon* (1896) ed. R. E. Prothero, ii.366). Sheffield had a clear interest in justifying publication (cf. *Miscellaneous Works* (1796 ed) i.v), but even if we set aside the dubiety of his evidence, it is well beyond the term of the composition of draft E of the *Memoirs* in early 1791.

¹⁵ *History of the Decline and Fall...* (1789 ed.), iii.636; the 1787 edition, also iii.636, is unchanged from that of 1781 — (for Gibbon's disinclination to revise this, *Letters*, 638) — and supplies a *terminus a quo*. On the dating and numbering of editions, Norton, op. cit. (n. 8), 51–3.

¹⁶ Dates of stay given with equal accuracy in *Letters*, 649, 702, 704 or *Mem. E*, 334, 336, 340.

¹⁷ Presence in London was a virtual necessity for

Gibbon in transacting this sort of revisory business with the printer, e.g. *Letters*, 663, 666, 668.

¹⁸ At the time I suppose Gibbon to have emended the text of the 'General Observations', he was drafting the dedication of Volumes IV–VI of the History: 'LORD NORTH will permit me to express the feelings of friendship in the language of truth: but even truth and friendship should be silent, if he still dispensed the favours of the crown' (1788 Preface, *DF* i.xlvi). This makes Gibbon's sentiments on the flattery of authority — even of the English kind — abundantly clear; as he commented in 1790–1 (also when writing draft E of the *Memoirs*), 'I disdained to sink the Scholar in the politician' *EE*, 341; cf. *Letters*, 771; *Essai sur l'Étude de la Littérature* (1758–61), ch. xi n*. For his general view of the worth of kings, *DF* ii.454–5, iv.493 and n. 75, *EE* 340.

¹⁹ *Mem. E*, 347, cf. *Letters*, no. 702, *DF* i.xlvi (on 'the Public'), vii.45 n. 4.

²⁰ *DF* iv.174 ('General Observations'); Gibbon's stereotype of Arcadius and Honorius is, of course, expanded in the History, iii.195–418 *passim*.

²¹ For the distinction in Gibbon's mind between Louis XVI and Louis XV, see also *Letters*, 752.

seems to compare him [Louis XVI] with Arcadius or Honorius'; but, since it did not in fact do so, he declined to 'examine the likeness'. Furthermore, Gibbon's estimate of Louis XVI and the strength of his monarchy remained in this favourable (if progressively unrealistic) mould until 1789 itself, thus covering the period when he emended the text of the History.²² In short, the text was changed on the intellectual grounds of clarity and perspicuity, rather than the political one of royal favour, for Gibbon retained the notion that Latin Europe *had* witnessed monarchy on the pattern of Arcadius and Honorius, as in the cases of Louis XV or Philip V of Spain. It is fair to suspect that personal contact with French court circles influenced him,²³ but only by warping his perception of the monarchy in the 1780s; they did not command his obedience, so causing him to alter the text contrary to his real view. Again we see that it is pre-revolutionary opinions which are relevant to this incident. Another moral is that, while we have no evidence that the main text of the 'General Observations' was revised after 1774, the allusion to Louis XV suggests strongly that it was not. Had Gibbon really re-written his essay twice, as is suggested,²⁴ he could hardly have failed to have spotted the difficulty this passage presented. Analysis of the context of the *Memoirs*, then, confirms rather than undermines the early dating given by Gibbon for the 'Observations'.²⁵

Turning to the text of the essay, the strength of the new view is that there are elements of the 'General Observations' which, undeniably, were written after 1774, viz. footnotes which refer to the British voyages to Tahiti, to books published in 1776, and to the previous text of the History. We may add, in all probability, a footnote on the American colonies, which glances at possible 'changes of their political situation'.²⁶ However, all these passages come in the notes to the essay, not the main text.²⁷ Womersley cites only one passage from the main text as coming after 1774 — the remark that one might 'without surprise or scandal' connect the history of Christianity with the decline of Rome (*DF* iv.175) — but this can tell us little as to dating. The connection between the secular and ecclesiastical history of Rome was already a

²² Gibbon was acutely interested in the French monarchy and the basis of political consent underlying it. His criterion of stability was that natural to an Englishman and parliamentarian — the ability of the monarchy to raise taxes — as is evident in the memoranda from his 1777 Paris visit, which also display some typically English awareness of the unpopularity and regressive nature of French finance, *EE* 213–24 *passim*. These data were used in the History, where the French people are adjudged 'industrious, wealthy, and affectionate', *DF* ii.208, cf. iv.501. Gibbon's interest in the subject and his ultimately favourable assessment are explained and confirmed by his investment in the French funds in 1784 which, despite the expensive American war, he adjudged 'at least as solid as our own', 24 Jan. 1784 to Sheffield, *Letters*, 612, cf. 609. For the maintenance of this distorted, but typical and explicable view, *Letters*, 730, 752, 803.

²³ Besides the Beauvaux (n. 11), Gibbon corresponded with Leclerc de Septchènes, a secretary to Louis XVI; but this related to the latter's translation of the History — which Gibbon dismissed as feeble (*Mem. E*, 339 n. 63) — not the lure of monarchy (*Letters*, 364). Craddock, *op. cit.* (n. 7), 88 states it as 'certain' that Gibbon met the king, but gives no evidence. In fact Gibbon's principal source, and influence, on these matters was Necker (*Letters*, 501, 623, 626, *Mem. E*, 331 n. 49); what warped his perspective was social and administrative elitism, not monarchical deference. Less tangibly but yet probably, the monarchy's patronage of learning might predispose him to assume not only its legitimacy but its beneficence — relevant here are (1) his preoccupation with the Royal Academy of Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres in the years c. 1757–69 (whilst its *Mémoires* are much cited in the History, despite the falling-off implied at *Mem. B*, 164), and (2) the profit he derived from using the Royal Library (*Mem. E*, 314, cf. *DF* i.295 n. 171, iii.84, n. 24; *B*, 201–2).

²⁴ Womersley, 54.

²⁵ We should note that there is a *second*, hitherto unnoticed reference to the 'Observations' in the *Memoirs*,

which again places them in 1772 and is entirely free of any complicating allusion to the French monarchy. After describing the studies preliminary to the History of 1771–2, Gibbon states: 'As I believed, and as I still believe, that the propagation of the gospel and the triumph of Christianity are inseparably connected with the decline of the Roman Monarchy, I weighed the causes and effects of the Revolution . . .' (*Mem. C*, 285). This would seem a fair description of the 'General Observations' — a text assessing what it calls 'this awful revolution', and one which makes a central insistence on the connection of Christianity with the fall of Rome (*DF* iv.175).

²⁶ Changes in the footnotes are listed in Womersley, 53–4, with the exception of *Mémoires sur les Chinois*, par les missionnaires de Pékin (Paris, 1776), cited *DF* iv.177 n. 6, cf. iii.85 n. 25; G. Keynes, *The Library of Edward Gibbon* (1980 ed.), 196.

²⁷ The argument here involves the important but intricate question of Gibbon's practice in revision and redrafting, and I can only summarize my findings: (1) apart from Volume I of the History (and the publicised emendation to the 'Observations'), Gibbon never in fact changed the text of any work after publication; (2) nor did he ever revise a manuscript he regarded as finished (a statement which, admittedly, requires elaboration); (3) thus most revision in detail and all redrafting *in extenso* took place at the time of composition and before publication; (4) anyway, when Gibbon revised — or at least contemplated revision, as in the case of the History in the 1780s — this meant principally stylistic revision or the addition of new materials and references (in his own terminology 'improvements') designed to buttress existing positions; (5) there was but little 'correction' in matters of fact, and no fundamental 'change' of intellectual position. In short, the proposal that Gibbon went through the 'General Observations' twice after finishing them, making substantial corrections so as to reflect changes in viewpoint, has no parallels in his practice, and we must decline to entertain it; cf. Womersley, 54.

datum with Gibbon in his *Essai sur l'Étude de la Littérature* of 1758–61, and was embodied in his initial plan to write the history of Rome the City, i.e. a history of the transformation of the heart of the Empire into the seat of the Papacy.²⁸ Furthermore, since Gibbon did *not* think this connection need occasion scandal, it can give us no solid ground for connecting these words to the notorious outcry over his treatment of Christianity in Volume I (published in 1776). If scandal attached nevertheless, it might derive from the prior experience of many Enlightenment authors — for example, Voltaire, in whom Gibbon was steeped from the 1750s.²⁹ Lastly, looking to the content of the post-1776 footnotes, two are demonstrably trying to bring an older text up to date (*DF* iv. 177 nn. 6, 7) — one by the light of a later publication, the other pointing out differences in detail between the ‘Observations’ and the text of Volumes I and III. One might, then, conclude that we may accept Gibbon’s early dating for the ‘General Observations’, and that the only concession he made by way of integrating the essay into the History was to append some additional matter in the notes — a procedure he had used in revising the *Essai*.³⁰

II

The more general point at issue is whether, or how, Gibbon’s mind changed while writing his History. Besides its intrinsic interest, some decision on the point is an essential preliminary to considering the ‘General Observations’, much of whose significance stems from their insertion in the History out of compositional sequence. I have myself been concerned to subvert the idea of Gibbon’s History as a monolith, showing how this redounds to his credit, as he displays ‘flexible sympathies, open-mindedness and, above all, passion for truth’³¹ in response to evidence. Womersley’s view is, however, distinct: Gibbon’s mind changed utterly. Its changes were discrete, and resulted in positions which may be precisely labelled (‘polybian’, ‘perfectibilist’, etc.); by an unexplained good fortune such changes of mind coincided with the various ‘instalments’ in which the History was published; and their overall result was coherent and progressive — Gibbon was by 1788 a better, more developed historian than in 1776.³² The clarity and convenience of this conception is matched only by the suspicion which those virtues excite. Suspicion may be substantiated in two ways: by detailed (or pedantic) illustration that Gibbon’s views did not change between his volume of 1776 and those of 1781 (which include the ‘Observations’), and by more general consideration of his intellectual evolution.

²⁸ *Essai*, chs. XLVII, LXV; *Mem. C*, 270; cf. *Le Journal de Gibbon à Lausanne 1763–4* (1945), ed. G. A. Bonnard, 55–6: [Nardini] est enfin arrivé au . . . *Forum Romanum*, où l’on ne peut faire un pas sans rencontrer les monumens de la religion, de la grandeur et de la politique des Romains’ (25 Sept. 1763). This view may be traced a long way back in embryo: ‘Common Place Book’ 1755, *EE* 17–19; ‘Remarques Critiques sur les Dignités Sacerdotales de Jules César’, 1757 pr. *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon* (1814), ed. Lord Sheffield (hereafter cited as *MW*), v. 61–5.

²⁹ cf. Voltaire, *Essai sur les Moeurs* (Paris, 1963), ed. R. Pomeau, i. 180–6, 277–310; for Gibbon and Voltaire: *Mem. F*, 79; *Mem. B*, 148–9; *EE* 17–21. The connection between Christianity and the fall of Rome was drawn by many authors to whom Gibbon had access, the root being Macchiavelli (‘Gibbon’s Dark Ages’, 19 n. 120); cf. Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, § X, and Bayle, *Miscellaneous Observations on the Comet*, cxli. Of course, behind Macchiavelli stands Augustine, but there is no evidence that Gibbon had read him before 1771–2, cf. *DF* i. 8 n. 25.

³⁰ The argument here is pursued further in the Appendix, below. On dating, Craddock, *op. cit.* (n. 7), 8–14, generally concurs, but thinks the ‘General Observations’ may have been composed in 1773 rather than 1772. This supposes a complex and unexplained series of events — that Gibbon began his History, put it aside to write the ‘Observations’, and then returned to it — to which we may

fairly apply Ockham’s razor; the evidence cited (p. 8) is *nilhil ad rem*. On the *Essai*: none of the long prose notes to chs 1–26, 34–55 are in the original 1758 text, these were thus added subsequently. For a majority no MS. survives, but in some important cases a MS draft or other evidence enables us to date the time of addition and so confirm the point: (1) Add. MS 34,880 f. 158b, note on Lucretius (cf. ch. XLVII); (2) ff. 155b, 184, on Augustus’ donative (ch. xx); (3) *Gibbon’s Journal to January 28th 1763* (1929), ed. D. M. Low, 11 Feb. 1759, note on Newtonian chronology (ch. xxxviii). The edition in *MW* incorporates a second stage of post-publication additions to the notes for chs xvii, xx, xli, lxiii taken from an interleaved copy of the text given to Sheffield by Gibbon, *MW* (1796 ed.), i. ix; the autograph is untraced, but there are copies of these in Add. MSS 34882 ff. 54–9, and the authenticity of the interleaved material is attested in another context by *Mem. C*, 254–5, cf. *MW* (1815 ed.), iv. 1–2. However, consistently with what else we know of Gibbon’s indolence in post-publication revision, he never incorporated these changes in his lifetime, and indeed refused to sanction a new edition of the *Essai* in 1776, *Mem. B*, 171; cf. n. 27.

³¹ ‘Gibbon’s Dark Ages’, 20.

³² The title (and substance) of Womersley’s *The Transformation of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1988) exemplify this most fully; but his later article (n. 1, *passim*) pursues the idea in terms more easily measured by the historian.

Taking briefly the low road of pedantry, we may consider two related cases: Gibbon's attitudes to Polybius, and towards luxury and progress.³³ A sustained interest in Polybius is only evident in the 'General Observations'³⁴ and Chapter 1 of the History (*DF* i. 13–19). Given an 'early' dating for the 'Observations', these two pieces were written sequentially, and the coincidence of preoccupation is understandable. (Indeed this argument may be pursued much further, since the three introductory chapters of the History constitute an extended gloss on arguments from the 'General Observations'.)³⁵ However, his loyalty (partial or complete) to Polybian attitudes is maintained throughout. Adherence to the idea of a balanced constitution — the quintessence of the eighteenth-century English reception of Polybius — is as absolute when surveying the Roman constitution at the beginning of Chapter 3 as it is at the end of Chapter 31, when Honorius sought to convene a 'representative assembly' for Gaul in 418.³⁶

Another litmus test is Gibbon's attitude to luxury, which tells us both about his loyalty to Polybian ideas on the corruption of states and his view of progress, notably the development of modern commercial society. It is clear that 'luxury' was an ambivalent concept for Gibbon,³⁷ which varied in its connotations between two poles. It might be morally vicious, with greed and excess implying, in a fashion epitomized by Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, social injustice and collapse; seen in this light, Gibbon's attitude to luxury was traditional and Tacitean (or Polybian). But it might also betoken wealth or 'opulence', with many favourable connotations as to morals and manners — politeness, comfort and, above all, the achievements of genius and learning.³⁸ For an absolutely succinct early formulation of the ambivalent view of luxury, we can do no better than the first page of the History: the 'peaceful inhabitants [of the empire] enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury'.³⁹ Both the 'ancient' and 'modern' attitudes to luxury, approbation and disapprobation, are present here, but there is no foundation to the idea that, as time passes, Gibbon somehow dropped or matured out of the former usage. Thus his famous description of Roman society on the eve of the sack of the city in 410 (ch. 31) is — as the narrative context would suggest — heavily weighted towards a traditional condemnation of the moral decline and social collapse associated with luxury: 'The greater part of the nobles, who dissipated their fortunes in profuse luxury, found themselves poor in the midst of wealth, and idle in a constant round of dissipation.'⁴⁰ Concomitant with this were the entire absence of the useful and respectable 'middle ranks of society' (*DF* iii. 318), and division into two mutually debauched and dependent sections of nobles and plebs (*DF* iii. 322 n. 61), with the latter either legally or really enslaved (*DF* iii. 319). Rousseau, with his 'classical' dislike of monied and urban wealth, could hardly have put it more directly.⁴¹

Taking a wider view, it does not appear that Gibbon thought he was changing in any qualitative or fundamental sense as he grew older. In the *Memoirs*, as in the History,⁴² he subscribed to the view that character was innate and essentially unchanging — 'Without

³³ i.e. issues highlighted by Womersley, in seeking to illustrate the influence on Gibbon of the Marquis of Chastellux (op. cit. (n. 1), *passim*); but since Gibbon neither cited nor corresponded with Chastellux, I do not feel myself competent to pursue the speculation. *The Transformation of the Decline and Fall* also argues that Gibbon abandoned a belief in uniform principles of human nature in writing the history (e.g. pp. 4–6). In fact his adherence to this view is so comprehensive that space precludes adequate demonstration of the fact; but see the only direct evidence Womersley quotes on the subject (p. 210), against his thesis; and J. Robertson's review, *Notes and Queries* 37 (1990), 477–8, and nn. 111, 127 below.

³⁴ Given that the 'Observations' open with the most sustained hymn to Polybius anywhere in Gibbon's *oeuvre* (*DF* iv. 172–3), it is one of Womersley's most marked paradoxes that they symbolize his departure from Polybianism (op. cit. (n. 1)). This stems from a prior misreading of one of Gibbon's sentences on Polybius and an ignorance of his pages thereon in *Transformation of the Decline and Fall*, 188. Such an error, and no isolated one, seems to the historian a consequence of a literary critical methodology, which places a premium on linguistic virtuosity in the analysis of minute portions of text.

³⁵ Chs 1–3 centre on the following themes from the 'General Observations': (i) the preservation of the Empire by (more or less) abstaining from the expansionist

adventurism which was seen to have destabilized the Republic (*DF* i. 1–10); (ii) the military, religious and political institutions identified by Polybius and their moral basis (*DF* i. 10–20, 31–46, 65–79); (iii) the idea — far too little noticed — that Rome's basic transgression was against the idea of nationhood, at least in Europe. The unification of Italy, had the career of conquest stopped there, would have been acceptable (*DF* i. 20–5, 36–47 (esp. 38), 61–4, 86–90).

³⁶ *DF* iii. 376–7; cf. v. 523, *Letters*, 752 (15 Dec. 1789) for later opinions to the same effect.

³⁷ Failure to observe the elementary truth that Gibbon was a moralist rather than a political economist or sociologist has, however, led to some confusions: (1) underestimation of the importance of (vicious) luxury, e.g. Pocock, 'Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*', 148; Roy Porter, *Edward Gibbon: Making History* (1988), 147, cf. *DF* iii. 196; (2) ignorance of Gibbon's moralism and moral consistency: e.g. J. W. Burrow, *Gibbon* (1985), 88 (on Mandeville), cf. *DF* vii. 309 and n. 104.

³⁸ e.g. *Essai* ch. LXXXIII; *DF* i. 62.

³⁹ *DF* i. 1; for a more intricate (and early) working of the same idea, i. 58–61.

⁴⁰ *DF* iii. 311; cf. iii. 196–7, v. 458, etc.

⁴¹ Further 'Polybian' consequences are apparent: the nobles' distaste for military service and their inability to sustain a properly balanced constitution (*DF* iii. 310).

⁴² e.g. *DF* ii. 272 n. 34; iii. 140–1; vii. 157–8.

engaging in a metaphysical or rather verbal dispute, *I know*, by experience, that from my early youth I aspired to the character of an historian' (*Mem. B.*, 193, cf. 119). Endowed at birth with 'the love of study', he comments: 'I am not sensible of any decay of the mental faculties. The original soil has been highly improved by labour and manure [i.e. books]; but it may be questioned whether some flowers of fancy, some grateful errors, have not been eradicated with the weeds of prejudice' (*Mem. E.*, 344). This quintessential eighteenth-century idea of 'improvement' rather than organic change is reiterated in his discussion of the *Essai sur l'Étude de la Littérature* (1758–61). Its learning could not compare with his later achievement, whilst its style was obscure⁴³ and derivative; even so, 'he was rather humbled than flattered by the comparison with his present works; and . . . after so much time and study, he had conceived the improvement to be much greater than he found it to have been' (*Mem. B.*, 174). The basic intellectual concerns of maturity were seen to be present, in the 'dawning of a philosophic spirit [that] enlightens the general remarks on the study of history and of man' — and it is precisely at this general and fundamental level that the links between the *Essai* and the *History* are so strong.⁴⁴ Within the publication span of the *History* even 'improvement' ceased to apply. Volumes II and III of 1781 are adjudged 'more prolix and less entertaining than the first' (*Mem. E.*, 324) — as we shall see,⁴⁵ a structural criticism of the utmost consequence — whilst Volumes IV–VI of 1788 are reproved stylistically and on grounds of detailed substance due to their rushed composition.⁴⁶

The relative constancy of Gibbon's thinking and attitudes is also illustrated by his willingness to use and to publish written material long after its composition and out of chronological sequence — both in the *History*, and in its proposed supplement (envisaged as an appendix in 1786 and a full companion volume in 1790).⁴⁷ He borrowed repeatedly from the *Nachlass* generated by the preliminary reconnaissance of 1771–2⁴⁸ in composing his finished text after 1773 — as for example in the case of Radagaisus in A.D. 406 (*DF* iii.283); an early 'dissertation on the miraculous darkness of the Passion' which was subsumed in the text of Chapter 15;⁴⁹ and, more generally, the very considerable vestiges within the *History* of his original plan to write the history of *urbs Roma*.⁵⁰ Delving back into the past went further than this, however, since the text of the *History* is directly based at points on material deriving from the *Essai* of 1761, as well as *Du Gouvernement Féodal* (1768) and *Critical Observations on the Sixth Book of the Aeneid* (1769).⁵¹ In the supplement to the *History* Gibbon envisaged

⁴³ And here Gibbon is too generous to his later self. As the foregoing discussion (pp. 133–4) of just one note in the *Memoirs* shows, the criticism attached to the *Essai* — 'brevis esse laboro, obscurus fio' (*Mem. B.*, 173) — applies throughout Gibbon's life (though it is but the obverse of a laudable desire for concision). His abjuration of the style of Montesquieu (loc. cit.) is frequently noted, but we may as well note with Robertson a continued loyalty to Tacitus and the obliquity (or polyvalence) of meaning this entailed, *MW* ii.249, no. CXLIX.

⁴⁴ *Mem. B.*, 173 referring to *Essai* chs XLIV–LV; for the central importance of these paragraphs to the *History*, below pp. 141f., 146f. However, the specific links between the two are greatly enhanced by cognisance of two long passages cancelled by Gibbon in the original MS, Add. MSS 34880 ff. 151–2, 153–5, passages of such importance that I hope to publish them in due course (cf. also nn. 51, 105). Though Gibbon refused to allow the *Essai* to be reprinted in 1776, by c. 1790 he came to think this might represent excessive pride in his later work (*Mem. B.*, loc. cit.); already in 1784 we find him ordering from Cadell six copies of the *Essai* alongside six of the *History*, to give as presents in Lausanne, Add. MSS 34886 f. 199. As is well-known (*Mem. B.*, 137, 152), Gibbon dated his own intellectual maturity from the period of his first stay at Lausanne (1753–8), which again implicitly focuses attention on the *Essai*, the culmination of his studies from January 1756 on, cf. Add. MSS 34880 ff. 86–159b, *Mem. B.*, 206.

⁴⁵ cf. below, pp. 144–6.

⁴⁶ *Mem. E.*, 333; with typical candour, Gibbon marks signs of haste in the notes to the final two volumes, e.g. *DF* v.401, n. 168, 460, n. 88; vi.34 n. 81; vii.139 n. 2, 167 n. 6, 330 n. 63; cf. v.377 and n. 125 — an obvious slip. Another striking instance of self-mortification is the

famous lament, that he had not given 'the history' of the age of the Antonines: this *marginale* in one of Gibbon's copies of the *History* [B.L. C.60 m.1] was *not*, *pace* Craddock, simply a 'marginal comment' (*EE* 338), but a new note designed for publication on page 1 of the text — in as prominent a position as it well could be.

⁴⁷ *Letters*, 638, 768.

⁴⁸ cf. below pp. 155–6.

⁴⁹ *Mem. D.*, 412; cf. *DF* ii.74–5 (c.15); see n. 54 below.

⁵⁰ *DF* i.208–9, 407–10, 433–4, 456–8; ii.276–8; iii.31–3, 199–205, 271–3, 279–83, 291–3, 304–48; iv.2–8, 21–2, 35–6, 48–9, 65–6, 201–5, 233–5, 285–6, 331–47, 427–38, 445–6, 470–542 *passim*; v.32–41, 273–331 *passim*; vii.138–40, 218–338. This list of figures makes an elementary point about the significance of the preliminary reconnaissance. It is, however, especially inadequate for Volumes I and VI: since we cannot know how Gibbon meant to distinguish in his original scheme between the history of 'Roman' institutions, such as the senate and the papacy, and the wider history necessarily involved therein, I have excluded references to these (cf. *DF* i.407, 'the form and the seat of government were intimately blended together'); but the passages which remain leave no doubt as to their internal coherence, in theme and detail.

⁵¹ On the *Essai*, compare chs LVI–LXXVII, *DF* i.31–6, ii.20–3, cf. n. 105 below; on *Du Gouvernement Féodal*, 'Gibbon's Dark Ages', 4, 10; on the *Critical Observations*: compare *EE* 146, *DF* i.33; *EE* 139, *DF* ii.17; *EE* 146–8, *DF* ii.20–3; *EE* 146, *DF* ii.357 n. 18; *EE* 155, *DF* ii.461 n. 15; *EE* 136–7, *DF* ii.465 and n. 25. Although Gibbon esteemed the *Critical Observations*, a published work, he did not cite it — presumably because he was already suffering remorse about its anonymity, *Mem. C.*, 283; *EE* 310.

publishing material intact and entire from the 1760s in at least three cases (and thus probably in several others): the essay *Sur les Triomphes des Romains* of 1764;⁵² the *Digression on the Character of Brutus*, probably of 1769;⁵³ and a dissertation on the Passion of 1771–2.⁵⁴ This was the culmination of the habit of reliance on past researches. There is thus nothing intrinsically strange or implausible — however it may seem *prima facie* — about the suggestion that an essay of 1772 be inserted at the end of a text completed in 1780.⁵⁵

Generally, then, we may take it that there was no transformation of ideas within the writing of Gibbon's History; nor did his thought alter in such radical ways that the work of his earlier maturity may be discounted. He cannot then be read as just a one- or two-book man — 'the Historian of the Roman Empire' — with all the condescension attaching to that phrase;⁵⁶ rather Gibbon was 'the Historian' *tout court*, the author of an *œuvre*, possessed of central preoccupations and profound continuity throughout. It is in this light that we must interpret the 'Observations': by comparison and contrast with the History of course, but also with reference to earlier work, notably the *Essai*.⁵⁷

III

Doubtless all would agree that the status of the 'Observations' is problematic and mixed, though they might not agree on the mixture. The essay apparently serves as an analytical conclusion, yet it was not written as such; nor is it *the* conclusion to the History, which is typical of its age in eschewing a conclusion in the modern sense. The principal occasion for sustained analytical reflection was seen to be at the beginning of a work, to orient the reader — as is evident from Gibbon's opening three chapters, which are very similar in form to the early

⁵² Gibbon's proposal for a supplementary volume of 17 Nov. 1790 (*Letters*, 768), comprised: '1. a series of fragments, disquisitions, digressions &c more or less connected with the principal subject. 2. Several tables of geography, chronology, coins, weights and measures &c; ... 3. A critical review of all the authors whom I have used and quoted.' (1) and (2) point to the *Nachlass* from the 1771 reconnaissance, as well as to several of Gibbon's 'early' or pre-1772 manuscript works, later published by his explicit sanction in the *Miscellaneous Works* (1788 Will, pr. Prothero, op. cit. (n. 14), i.vi). In fact, the seriousness of Gibbon's intentions as to Volume VII may be questioned: the plan for a review of authors (3) was pre-empted by his occasional and latterly (Volumes V and VI) systematic practice of commenting on them in the History itself, and it was renounced in the Preface of 1788 (i.xlv–xlvi, cf. *MW* (1796 ed.), i.686 n. *); whilst even at the point of maximum financial interest, he was chilled by the fatigue of 'these obscure labours' (*Letters*, 768), for he would have had much new work to execute notwithstanding. But the principle of utilizing early material is clearly established. On *Sur les Triomphes des Romains*: *EE* 338; cf. 'Gibbon's Dark Ages', 7.

⁵³ On the dating of this text, 'Gibbon's Dark Ages', 14. We know that: (i) Gibbon made what was in effect a précis of the *Digression* in the annotations to his copy of the fourth edition of the History [B.L. C.135 h.3], (dateable in fact to 1781, cf. Add. MS 34882 ff. 176–9); (2) there are two fair copies of the text. Presumably that with Gibbon's own marginal corrections was made at the time of composition (Add. MSS 34,880 ff. 264–72b), and the second one later (Add. MSS 34,881 ff. 242–8b). The inference must be that having epitomized the *Digression* as a note in 1781, it then occurred to him to reproduce the essay as a whole. This parallels his expanding conception of to how to supplement the History.

⁵⁴ Gibbon wrote in *Memoir D* that 'in this supplement I

may perhaps introduce a Critical dissertation on the miraculous darkness of the Passion' (p. 412). The memoir was not, as Bonnard notes, any sort of supplement, but it was written at precisely the same time that Gibbon was considering the supplementary volume (*Edward Gibbon: Memoirs of My Life*, xxvi and n. 4, cf. *Letters*, 768), and it seems almost certain that Gibbon was here thinking of Volume VII, which he always referred to as the '*Supplement to the History*...', *EE* 342.

⁵⁵ On the repetitive nature of Gibbon's procedures before 1772, 'the refurbishing or writing up of themes in Roman history which he had worked out previously', 'Gibbon's Dark Ages', 14. Cf. the degree of repetition in the 1783 musings entitled 'Notes', to the first three volumes of the History: compare *EE* 319–21, *DF* ii.496–8; *EE* 321–2, *DF* ii.67; *EE* 324, *DF* iii.436–9; *EE* 325, *DF* ii.479–80; *EE* 327–9, *DF* iii.110 n.84; but also iv.535–7.

⁵⁶ cf. D. P. Jordan, *Gibbon and His Roman Empire* (1971); but a too narrow focus on the perceived symbiosis between the History and the *Memoirs* is characteristic of modern criticism, cf. Roy Porter, *Gibbon* (1988), Conclusion, W. B. Carnochan, *Gibbon's Solitude* (1987), e.g. chs 1,3 — the best of recent historical and literary treatments of Gibbon.

⁵⁷ The view that Gibbon saw the *Essai* as 'a minor work' (loc. cit. (n. 56), here Jordan, p. 10) is emphatically contradicted by the prominence it is accorded in the *Memoirs* (*Mem. B*, 167–74; *C*, 250–7); and by Gibbon's explicit descriptions of it as 'a more elaborate composition' than his other writings at Lausanne in the 1750s (*Mem. C*, 250), and as his 'first work' or 'performance' (*Mem. B*, 167–8), i.e. his first published work, and the first intended as such from the outset (cf. *Letters*, 21 and Appendix II 1.397–8), albeit with subsequent hesitations on this score. (We may, with Gibbon, discount the humorous episode of the 'Age of Sesostris', *Mem. F*, 79–81.)

chapters of Voltaire's *History of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great* (1763),⁵⁸ or, in a much more elaborate case, from Robertson's *History of ... Charles V* (1769).⁵⁹ Of course, endings could not be neglected where literary form was valued, but given the universally accepted precept that history should entertain as well as instruct (e.g. *DF* i.422–3, ii.306), a reluctance to indulge in mere abstract rehearsal of causes at the end of a work is readily understandable. The typical forms of ending included reaching an obvious narrative break⁶⁰ — such as the death of a monarch or a political settlement; working through and exhausting a set of thematic categories — with political narrative often being followed by sections on manners and religion;⁶¹ or else providing a descriptive review. In more refined vein, Robertson — the most consciously literary of Gibbon's historian contemporaries — had supplied a composite ending to his *Charles V*, combining a narrative terminus with a descriptive review of the European nations at that time.⁶² But running against these literary conventions were 'philosophical' counter-currents. It was only in the eighteenth century that the writing of 'remote history'⁶³ became seen as a central field of intellectual and philosophical inquiry, superseding in importance for the first time the classics of contemporary history — a European tradition stretching from Thucydides to Davila. This produced a crossover from 'philosophy' (under various guises) into history, as is apparent in the cases of Hume and Voltaire who, not surprisingly, were less sensitive to established canons of literary taste and structure. Unlike Hume, Voltaire was interested in these, and his example illustrates the latent power of the established conventions, as he gradually approximated to them. But still such conventions should not be treated as rigid in an era when history's relative standing amongst the disciplines was undergoing a revolution.⁶⁴

Gibbon's concern with the formal architecture of his *History* is notorious, and Adam Smith was surely right to place him amongst the 'literary tribe'⁶⁵ rather than with those philosophers who were prepared to compromise form in the severe pursuit of truth. But Gibbon's awareness that history could and should suit the highest capacity as well as the meanest (*Mem. E*, 311) is equally notorious, and the 'philosophical', i.e. explanatory and analytical,⁶⁶ mode of the 'General Observations' is a signal instance of this. Thus any assessment of the essay must view it in a twofold light: first as an analytical device, and in the light of Gibbon's views on causality (III–IV); but secondly, with an awareness of literary conventions, and with some attempt to explain how Gibbon used or modified these (v). It is (rightly) conventional to see the *History* as suspended between the polarities of erudition and philosophy;⁶⁷ it ought to be as conventional to examine the balance Gibbon struck between literature and philosophy.

⁵⁸ Chs 1–2. Ferguson's *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (1783) is a variant: narrative proper starts in Bk. I ch. 5 with the second Punic War, but the first four chapters, while containing much general matter, also endeavour to take in the 'legendary' period in snatches; hence the comment 'I have ... endeavoured to give, even to the first part of my labours, the form of narration' (i.5) — which is its own testimony to contemporary expectation in the matter. W. Mitford, *History of Greece* vol. 1 (1784), chs 1–2 is similar, working in a parallel context.

⁵⁹ His procedure here is a vast expansion of that followed in the *History of Scotland* (1759), Book I; another example of the elephantine introduction derives from Voltaire's insertion of the 1765 *Philosophie de l'Histoire* as a proem to subsequent editions of the *Essai sur les Moeurs*.

⁶⁰ A variant was the brief narrative sequel — Robertson's *History of Scotland* stopped in 1603, but its 'Conclusion' took in the years to 1707 in a few pages (Book VIII); likewise Ferguson's *History of the Roman Republic* runs from Tiberius to Nerva in Book VI ch. 7.

⁶¹ e.g. Hume's *History of England* (1754–61) in all its parts; Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751). Gibbon's Volumes V and VI might be regarded as falling under this rubric, but see below v.

⁶² *History of Charles V*, Book XII; Gibbon's Volume III is comparable, below p. 150.

⁶³ *DF* v.180; cf. Hume's *History of England* (1754–61), i.1. Hegel's recognition that 'original' history was no longer the prime category of historical writing, being subordinate to reflective or philosophical history, was an

eloquent reflection of an achieved intellectual revolution, 'Die Arten der Geschichtsschreibung' (1822/8), in *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte* (1955), ed. J. Hoffmeister. Of course, the great works of Enlightenment historiography have their roots in the antiquarianism of the previous two centuries; but whilst the latter had many uses, it did not have the centrality that history enjoyed progressively from the mid-eighteenth century on; cf. *Essai* ch. II.

⁶⁴ The *Essai sur les Moeurs*, for example, was a ramshackle assemblage of material frequently altered and re-sited — its enormous introduction (n. 59 above) being partly balanced at the end by a much slighter 'Résumé'; the latter is indeed 'philosophical', being a series of general reflections on history, but it is not, like the 'General Observations', a causal or analytical review, ch. cxcvii (1963), ed. R. Pomeau. That Voltaire felt the tug of convention is also evident from the similar 'Discours sur l'Histoire de Charles XII', originally placed at the end of the first edition of the *Histoire de Charles XII* (1731–2), but then moved to the beginning, being further preceded by 'Remarques sur l'Histoire' (1742) in the 1756 edition; *Oeuvres Historiques* (1957), ed. R. Pomeau, 1660–1, 1670.

⁶⁵ Smith to Gibbon 10 Dec. 1788, in *The Correspondence of Adam Smith* (1977), ed. E. C. Mossner and I. S. Ross, no. 283; cf. Strahan to Hume 12 Apr. 1776, *pr. ibid.*, p. 193 n. 1; Hume to Gibbon 18 Mar. 1776, *Mem. E*, 311 n. 30.

⁶⁶ On this collocation, below p. 141 and n. 68.

⁶⁷ A. Momigliano, 'Gibbon's contribution to historical method', repr. *Studies in Historiography* (1966), 40–55.

Though not originally intended as such, and though containing other matter, there can be no question that both the historical and the more contemporary halves of the 'Observations' serve the purposes of causal review: the first half directly and the second — on the possibility of a new barbarian incursion — by plain implication (*DF* iv.176). Such an aim is entirely consistent with Gibbon's orthodox definition of the *raison d'être* of philosophic history: 'L'histoire est pour un esprit philosophique . . . un système, des rapports, une suite, là, où les autres ne discernent que les caprices des fortune. Cette science est pour lui celle des causes et des effets.'⁶⁸ How, then, do we account for the paradox that readers find it hard to perceive the causal shape of the History, especially in its first three volumes, which are unitary in theme in a way that the later ones are not? In the well-known words of Coleridge: 'I protest I do not remember a single philosophical attempt made throughout the work to fathom the ultimate causes of the decline or fall of that empire.'⁶⁹

One answer to this is that, while relying disproportionately on the 'Observations' in their readings of the History, critics are so quick to depreciate them that they omit the essential sense in which they harmonize with the first half of the History — by (re)stating what Gibbon saw as the 'ultimate cause' of Roman decay. He might perhaps have avoided such misrepresentation by printing the words not only of 1772, but of the *Essai*, when he penned his single most pithy 'general observation' on the fall of Rome:

La théorie de [l]es causes générales . . . nous les feroit voir réglant la grandeur et la chute des empires, empruntant successivement les traits de la fortune, de la prudence, du courage, et de la foiblesse, agissant sans le concours des causes particulières, et quelquefois même triomphant d'elles. Supérieur à l'amour de ses propres systèmes, dernière passion du sage, [le philosophe] auroit su reconnaître que, malgré l'étendue de ces causes, leur effet ne laisse pas d'être borné, et qu'il se montre principalement dans ces événemens généraux, dont l'influence lente mais sûre change la face de la terre, sans qu'on puisse apercevoir de l'époque de ce changement, et surtout dans les moeurs, les religions, et tout ce qui est soumis au joug de l'opinion.⁷⁰

In part this is a conventional insistence that the kernel of the historical process lies in the *longue durée* and the slow motions of morals and manners — those widespread, habitual, and public practices which were held to embody and to reflect the collective moral *esprit* of a nation. But Gibbon goes beyond the *philosophes* in his realization that the history of these 'profound' or 'secret' causes must bear some relation to detailed narrative. He was as unhappy as they were that, so far as available source material went, 'Wars, and the administration of public affairs, are the principal subjects of history' (*DF* i.255), and thus the history was 'little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind'.⁷¹ (Need it be said that it is only in

⁶⁸ *Essai* ch. XLIII; the association of 'philosophy' with causal analysis was of course universal, see Robertson to Gibbon, *MW* ii.417, no. CCXIX. Other attributes of the 'philosopher' may be mentioned: (a) detachment; (b) universality of standpoint; (c) [from (a)] association with Stoicism and its moral values; (d) hostility to metaphysics; (e) from all of these, the ability to speak a portion of the truth, cf. n. 111 below. 'Remote history' or 'the distant view of history' (*DF* iv.86, cf. *Letters*, 498) was seen as compatible with all these attributes. Porter's assertion, op. cit. (n. 37), 136, that from their title the 'Observations' could not supply causal analysis, is specious and no more. 'General Observations' supplied those 'general pictures which compose the use and ornament of a remote history' (*DF* v.180), the large view being one taken by that central Enlightenment fiction, the 'impartial' or 'philosophic spectator' (e.g. *DF* ii.348; cf. iv.176 'a philosopher may be permitted to enlarge his views', v.258–9; *Essai* ch. XLVI; D. Raphael, 'The Impartial Spectator', *Proc. Brit. Acad.* 58 (1972), 335–54). Thus, from their title, 'General Observations' were philosophic, here performing one of the central functions of philosophy, viz. causal analysis. This is of course evident from the text of the essay, and in the prominent equation of 'general observations' and causal enquiry at *DF* vii.329. Naturally, on other occasions summary 'observations' are linked to other functions of the philosopher, notably judgement and assessment, where no causal problem exists: vii.73–5, cf. vi.462–6.

⁶⁹ *Table Talk*, 15 Aug. 1833, to appear in the Princeton ed. of the *Collected Works* vol. 14 (forthcoming); cf.

J. Cotter Morison, *Gibbon* (1878, English Men of Letters), 130–1, who espouses a two-tier model similar to Gibbon's but cannot see it in the History — perhaps because the latter does not talk the language of 'social evolution' (or perfectibilism). But though both authors were demonstrably poor readers of Gibbon in detail, a substantial point remains: see p. 143.

⁷⁰ *Essai* ch. LV, emphasis added. This chapter, although written in 1761 (Add. MSS 34880 f. 175), summarizes one of the long cancels in the original 1758 MS. (Add. MSS 34880 ff. 151–2) which was to make way for his thoughts on the evolution of paganism. To suppose (in the final text) that these ideas might be put 'entre les mains d'un Montesquieu' was thus perhaps a blind — they had already been worked at some length by the hand of Gibbon.

⁷¹ *DF* i.84, my emphasis, cf. iv.191, 471. This reworks Voltaire's *mot* in the 'Résumé' of the *Essai sur les Moeurs* — 'toute cette histoire est un ramas de crimes, de folies, et de malheurs' (ed. Pomeau, 804) — so as to highlight the evidential point. That Gibbon did not think reality and the evidential register were at one is evident from e.g. *Essai* ch. I, *DF* i.293, iii.364, v.27 and n. 60. His passionate dislike of war is also relevant — even 'in its fairest [contemporary] form . . . a perpetual violation of humanity and justice' (iii.429, cf. *Letters*, 32). Gibbon was opposed to every foreign war fought by England in his lifetime. (Commentators habitually overlook the scathing irony behind his comments about the Captain of the Hampshire grenadiers, which was really a 'peaceful service', *Mem. B*, 190.)

the History, the fourth and last of his major classical studies — after the *Essai*, the *Recueil Géographique* and the projected History of the City of Rome — that Gibbon even attempts narration, and to unite the manner of Livy with that Tacitus?)⁷² Every effort to turn aside from ‘the paths of blood’ (*DF* vi.236) and to correct the evidential imbalance should thus be made, but ultimately its unpalatable reality had to be faced, so driving Gibbon to one of his central insights: that historical motion must be seen as stratified — as between narrative contingency and profound forces — in which, of course, he anticipated every major historical thinker of the next century. Typically, he did not adhere rigidly to any one scheme but could see different geological patterns according to his angle of view — be it evidential⁷³ or conceptual (whilst the close of the ‘General Observations’ presents yet another model, *DF* iv.180–1). Nevertheless, the two-tier conceptual model presented above, divided between the profound and sympathetic study of ‘manners’ on the one hand, and the repellent but fascinating political superficialities on the other, provides the first and best guide to the causal framework of the History — and also to the meaning of the ‘General Observations’.

It goes without saying that in so short a compass, the latter could not represent both levels of approach, but must concentrate on ‘the deep foundations of the greatness of Rome’. These lay, of course, not simply in ‘Polybian’ institutions *per se*, but in their moral basis, of ‘honour, as well as virtue’ (*DF* iv.173). None the less, the notorious assertion that, ‘The story of [Rome’s] ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring *why* the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long’ (*DF* iv.174), is an epitome of the two-tier point of view. The profound causes were obvious — like his audience Gibbon knew, and had always known,⁷⁴ that Rome was morally decadent *a priori*, just as he knew the moral history of the Swiss and Florentines⁷⁵ — but the contingent, political ‘subsistence’ of the Empire over the huge span of 300 or 400 years (to c.476) remained obscure.⁷⁶ Hence the implicit positing of further enquiry (given present ‘surprise’) into its survival. This much controverted sentence was in fact *prophetic* of the History still to come and, on that ground, reads very curiously placed at the end of the text of 1781. But it highlights the substantive strength and weakness of the ‘Observations’: though they convey directly the essential truth of moral decay, they do not foreshadow the shape (or rather shapelessness)⁷⁷ of the narrative in the History. Writing with a brevity analogous to Montesquieu in his *Considérations* or Voltaire in the *Essai sur les Moeurs*, the narrative outline which was to be traced in painstaking detail in Chapters 17–38 of the History, could be glossed over here by purely stylistic means. With a foreshortening worthy of Caravaggio, the pen was made to run from Augustus to Augustulus in a sentence:

⁷² On Livy and Tacitus, *Essai* ch. LII; cf. *Letters*, 341 where they are equated with Hume and Robertson respectively. The Swiss History was an earlier, but hardly encouraging, excursion into narrative. As will be evident from n. 50, the History of the City would not have been primarily narrative, but structural, concentrating on buildings, spectacles, games, laws, population, etc.

⁷³ cf. iv below.

⁷⁴ As he had written in 1758: ‘L’Esprit Philosophique en trouvera sans difficulté les raisons [of Roman decline]’, Add. MSS 34880 f. 152, c.56.

⁷⁵ See for example the revealing terminology in *Mem. C*, 284: ‘I more seriously undertook (1768) to methodize the form, and to collect the substance of my Roman decay, of whose limits and extent I had yet a very inadequate notion’; cf. ‘Du Gouvernement Féodal’ (1768), *MW* ii.185. This shows how open-minded Gibbon was empirically, but that the underlying fact of Roman decay was never in doubt; which ambivalence is another central idea he sought to express in the *Essai*: ‘Qu’il [the historian] se gardât bien de chercher un système; mais qu’il se gardât bien davantage de l’éviter’ (ch. II). On the Swiss and Florentine histories: *Mem. B*, 196–7, a free version of *Gibbon’s Journal to January 28th, 1763* (1929), ed. D. M. Low, at 26 July 1762. Horace Walpole’s pre-publication criticism of Gibbon’s Volume II is comprehensible only in the light of his own *a priori*,

against ‘so disgusting a subject as the Constantinopolitan history’: thus he begins by referring to matter treated in the first and *third* volumes (the last not in his possession) before turning to Volume II itself, *Horace Walpole’s Correspondence* (1939–83), ed. W. S. Lewis, to W. Mason 27 Jan. 1781, xxix.97–9.

⁷⁶ *Mem. C*, 284; *E*, 308. Given the pre-eminence of profound causes in his conception of history, Gibbon was fascinated by sheer duration, and statements about the *longue durée* abound, wholly divorced from any narrative consideration (e.g. *DF* i.64, 230, ii.168, 306, iv.180–1, 470, v.42; cf. Add. MSS 34880 f. 151, *Essai* MS. cancel c.52). Unlike Braudel, however, he could see that there were surprising cases of survival at the contingent level — as in the case of the empire, or of Islam, whose monotheistic rationality ran contrary to Gibbon’s view of what a weak human nature required of a popular religion: ‘It is not the propagation but the permanency of [Mahomet’s] religion which deserves our wonder’ (*DF* v.419). ‘Surprise’ or ‘wonder’ may have been what seduced Gibbon into the excessive length of Volumes II and III. Nevertheless, given a conceptual scheme where politics were seen as superstructural, this could lead to no new revelation, and thus in the subsequent case of Islam he was content merely to posit surprise, maintain reserve, and achieve brevity.

⁷⁷ See below pp. 143–4, 154–5.

The emperors, anxious for their personal safety and the public peace, were reduced to the base expedient of corrupting the discipline which rendered them alike formidable to their sovereign and to the enemy; the vigour of the military government was relaxed, and finally dissolved, by the partial institutions of Constantine; and the Roman world was overwhelmed by a deluge of barbarians.⁷⁸

Contrariwise, the agreement between the History and the 'Observations' on the moral *a priori* postulated by the latter is fundamental — and constitutes the obvious justification for their resurrection in 1781. Gibbon returns almost obsessively — or necessarily⁷⁹ — to the moral decadence established in the opening chapters, be it in sentences, paragraphs, the full-scale 'picture of the manners of Rome' (DF iii. 311) in Chapter 31, or the very vocabulary of 'decline' and 'decay'.⁸⁰ Indeed, concern with '*les mœurs*' is so absolute that it spills over into other areas of text as well. Having introduced the barbarians of Germany with a full-dress portrait of their manners in Chapter 9, Gibbon stipulates that, 'As the ancient or as new tribes successively present themselves in the series of this history, we shall concisely mention their origin, their situation, and their particular character' (DF i. 254), and this principle of evoking the manners and moral character of barbarian entrants on the stage is faithfully adhered to.⁸¹ Within the empire as well as without, Gibbon diversifies his analysis, notably in his treatment of major provincial cities — 'the licentious and effeminate manners of Antioch' (DF ii. 511, cf. vi. 315), the corruptions of Carthage where 'the habits of trade and the abuse of luxury' went with paederasty (DF iii. 435), or the maritime 'manners of the Venetian fugitives . . . gradually formed by their new situation' (DF iii. 496) — and this is a central illustration of how, even at its unitary core, the History inevitably runs into plural or federal concerns and illustrations.

There is then an ultimate cause for Roman decay, but the Coleridgean reader might still be dissatisfied with this, on various grounds. Since the explanation derived from Roman manners and morals is proclaimed as 'simple and obvious', it might seem bathetic: can the simple also be profound, as Gibbon wished?⁸² Again, as just indicated, even in its opening three volumes the History is not simply unitary or Rome-centred; its detail is quite as important as its architecture, and so deflects attention from any causal centre.⁸³ Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Gibbon's insistence on moral decay left him with a formidable problem: how to conjoin his moral premiss with political narrative. How could one write 'a busy and interesting narrative' (DF iii. 358) of 300 to 400 years in the history of an empire which was decadent from the start?

It cannot be said that he succeeded, or that, in a structural sense, philosophic analysis and erudite narrative were successfully wedded.⁸⁴ The simplicity of the former pointed to

⁷⁸ DF iv. 174. A similar abridgement is effected in the cancelled MS for the *Essai* of 1758, where Gibbon simply notes of the period between Claudius Gothicus and Augustulus, that 'L'Esprit Philosophique . . . attendoit la prochaine dissolution.' Add. MSS 34880 f. 152, c. 56.

⁷⁹ Milman made the important point, perhaps difficult to appreciate today, that without any prior historiographical tradition 'the whole period . . . seems to offer no more secure footing to an historical adventurer than the chaos of Milton — to be in a state of irreclaimable disorder', so making Gibbon's firm insistence on Roman decay a necessity rather than a wearisome iteration, 'Guizot's Edition of Gibbon', *Quarterly Review* 50 (Oct. 1830), 273–307, at 287. This may be confirmed from widely varying contemporary perspectives: H. Walpole, *Historic Doubts on . . . Richard III* (1768), Preface, iv–viii; Robertson to Gibbon 12 May 1781, *MW* ii. 249.

⁸⁰ Gibbon's most frequent usage in describing the moral history of the empire was neither 'decline' nor 'fall' but 'decay' — so expressing a state of corruption over the very long term most graphically (e.g. DF iv. 173–4; *Mem. C.*, 270, 284). Of course, 'decline' is virtually synonymous, but so, too, is 'fall' in one of its principal meanings (*OED* s.v., 5c, 16, also 1b); and whether we consider 'the period of the fall of the [Western] empire' (DF iii. 73) — which covers one century or a quarto volume — or the soundlessness of its final 'extinction' (iv. 56 and n. 134), there is justice in supposing this the closest to Gibbon's central meaning. The title 'Decline and Fall' is, then, a tautologous insistence on the moral theme so repeatedly invoked in the text. The other central term in this vocabulary, 'ruin', equally evokes the *longue durée*

and gradual declivity, moral and physical, cf. p. 151 below.

⁸¹ e.g. DF ch. 26, iii. 442–54 *passim*. The link between 'situation' and 'manners' or 'character' is made explicit at i. 249 n. 73.

⁸² Coleridge by his terminology ('fathom', loc. cit. (n. 69)), and Porter, op. cit. (n. 37), 136, both suppose that if there had been an 'ultimate' cause, which they deny, it would have been hidden, 'some grand arcanum', cf. Womersley, op. cit. (n. 32), 211. In fact the resolution of this paradox lies in the idea that 'profound' causes of historical motion are 'secret' to contemporaries, but visible to the philosophic historian with the advantage of the 'distant' or 'general' view, as is repeatedly emphasized, DF ii. 212, iii. 196, 289–90; *Essai* ch. LV, cf. *Letters*, 609. (Interpretation of 'secret' as 'occult', 'random' or 'vertiginous' is a modern invention, Womersley, op. cit. (n. 32), 184.) This was not to patronize the past, but to remember that, in Gibbon's view, no age, however enlightened, could shake off its historically conditioning prejudices, *Essai* ch. XLVII.

⁸³ cf. iv below.

⁸⁴ This is not to question the *general* rectitude of Momigliano's seminal thesis — of Gibbon's linkage of philosophy to erudition or Belles-Lettres — though it is argued without direct reference to the History (op. cit. (n. 67); cf. O. Murray, 'Momigliano e la cultura inglese', *Rivista Historica Italiana* 100 (1988), 422–39, at 427–8): Gibbon indubitably saw himself as trying to illustrate this link in the *Essai*, and was indeed successful in doing so at a more detailed level in the History — p. 147 below.

concision, but in fact the latter ran out of control, generating immense length, and Gibbon was almost certainly wrong (structurally, at least) to depart from his original plan of reaching 476 in just two volumes.⁸⁵ The result is a sense of divorce between the two tiers. The force of Gibbon's ultimate cause is devalued, and so is his narrative, which is all too often reduced to mere unrelated contingency, or (in a favourite phrase) 'the vicissitudes of human affairs'.⁸⁶ Despite the utmost care and control of language in detail — 'decline' only is used in the first volume, never 'fall', whilst the reduction of Rome to a mere 'name' emerges as a sustained *topos* only in the third⁸⁷ — and despite the partial exploitation of Christianity or Diocletian's 'new system' as pathological phenomena, a coherent pathology is never achieved, and over such a span of time and pages was hardly possible. For example, the Praetorian Guards 'whose licentious fury was the first symptom and cause of the decline of the Roman empire' in Chapter 5 (*DF* i.114) are metamorphosed without warning into protectors of the majesty of Rome against Diocletian (*DF* i.409) and then quietly removed from the story altogether (*DF* ii.175–6). Again, it makes little sense to talk of the 'rapid decay'⁸⁸ of the empire under Constantine at the beginning of Chapter 17 with two quarto volumes and 150 years' narrative to come; whilst Gibbon is defeated by his own scholarly scruple in trying to illustrate 'the increase of luxury' in the late empire, when he reflects that 'all luxury is relative; and . . . the elder Scipio . . . was himself accused of that vice by his ruder contemporaries'.⁸⁹ So many examples might be adduced to illustrate the difficulty of imparting narrative motion to a supposed corpse.⁹⁰ No wonder Gibbon thought his second and third volumes were simply too long,⁹¹ and amended his conduct subsequently.

We may then vindicate the 'Observations' in two senses. First, as summarizing the History in its profound yet obvious causes. Secondly, though the essay did not summarize the narrative content of the History adequately, this was not simply the result of an inability to prophesy in 1772 what would be written in the next eight years. Rather the narrative's lack of shape in Volumes II and III, in particular its defiance of the theme of decay, precluded summary even *after* the event; and the appending of the 'Observations', simple no doubt yet coherent, may plausibly be read as Gibbon's first, implicit criticism of the main text.⁹² We need not deny the historical achievement embodied in these volumes, but we should be aware that in applauding it we subscribe our own view and not that of the author. It is not merely that in their superficially unitary focus these tomes are the easiest for us to read, but that, by dint of pursuing his narrative sources as and where they took him, Gibbon tended to subvert his moralistic *a priori* — something deeply sympathetic to the intellectual 'manners' of today. This was greatness of a kind, but it was evidently unbalanced in terms of Gibbon's own priorities, being a victory for erudition and scepticism at the expense of philosophical and literary coherence, and it neither could⁹³ nor would be repeated.

⁸⁵ The 1776 Preface looks forward 'most probably' to one more volume to 476; as late as March 1779 Gibbon refers to bringing out 'the second Volume'; September 1779 is the first sure indication that he will take up two more volumes; these went to press the following June (*Letters*, 445, 457, 477). (From his silence we may presume that Gibbon had by then completed his text, as with Volumes IV–VI, in contrast to the procedure he describes for Volume I, *Letters*, 315–16).

⁸⁶ Uses or variants in: *DF* ii.348; iii.377; iv.6, 173 n. 4, 224, 364 n. 2; v.46, 53, 392; vi.238; vii.146, 208. It is clear from the 'General Observations' that Gibbon was trying to improve on the fatalism of the Renaissance historians' appeal to mere 'Fortune' (cf. iv.126, vii.65), without, however, falling into the system-builder's trap of assuming that his two tiers necessarily moved in parallel, cf. *Essai* ch. LV (pr. p. 141 above). His failure was not, it should be stressed, necessarily conceptual, but one of literary construction.

⁸⁷ *DF* iii.197, 243, 265, 304; later, even the 'name' of Rome becomes limited, near extinction and then finally abhorred, iii.379, 421–2, 507; iv.502.

⁸⁸ *DF* ii.168, my emphasis; on this see, however, pp. 145–6 below.

⁸⁹ *DF* iii.196, iv.57 n. 137; cf. iii.318–19 and n. 51.

⁹⁰ One of the most striking is that, despite the evaporation of Roman spirit, *discipline* is revived more or

less at will by every commander from Claudius Gothicus to Aetius. Gibbon is clear that discipline is in itself something superficial as compared to moral fibre (*DF* i.12, 250, ii.303), and is thus consistent in supposing this to happen. Still it is unsatisfactory: one suspects that 'discipline' is brought in to explain Roman victories *post hoc propter hoc*; and if superficial discipline is so powerful, what is the worth of the 'profound' analysis from manners and morals?

⁹¹ *Mem. E*, 334; notwithstanding his prejudices, Walpole's dissection of the sheer difficulty for the contemporary reader of Volumes II–III is devastatingly exact: to W. Mason 3 March 1781, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, xxix.114–15.

⁹² Even before publication, Gibbon harboured seeds of doubt about Volumes II and III, which were to harden over the next decade. Though they retained the pictorial quality of philosophic instruction and commercial amusement he so valued — 'un tableau interessant et instructif' — he upheld only his continued diligence, and was thus 'tout préparé à un jugement moins favorable de la part de mes lecteurs' (*Letters*, 498). This is but one step away from the view of the *Memoirs* (*E*, 323–4).

⁹³ i.e. given Gibbon's much lesser knowledge of the sources after the sixth century, 'Gibbon's Dark Ages', 2–3, n. 167 below.

After deliberately appending the 'Observations' in 1781, Gibbon reverted first to the much expanded time-scale of Volume I when writing about the age of Justinian;⁹⁴ he then proceeded to compose the much neglected Volumes V and VI, whose conciseness (or superficiality) and narrative motion recall the 'Observations' rather than the monument to the fourth and fifth centuries we so much admire.⁹⁵ Effectively unshackled from any allegiance to a unitary theme — Byzantium is a mere 'passive' focus⁹⁶ — and thus from narrative organization itself, Gibbon proportions his coverage precisely, not to say brutally, according to the *a priori* interest of the subjects under review: 'I preferred, as I still prefer, the method of grouping [*sic*] my picture by nations, and the seeming neglect of Chronological order is surely compensated by the superior merits of interest and perspicuity' (*Mem. E*, 332). The abbreviation of Byzantine history in Chapter 48 is only the most notorious example of what was for Gibbon a virtue, and a consistent procedure throughout the last two volumes, as he declared when describing their plan: 'each [nation] will occupy the space to which it may be entitled by greatness or merit, or the degree of connexion with the Roman world and the present age'.⁹⁷ This freedom from the hegemony of narrative and the ability to highlight or foreshorten at will were but the perspective of the 'General Observations' writ large. Modern critics should beware lest, in accusing the latter, they accuse most of the History itself, whilst exalting Gibbon the *érudit* at the expense of Gibbon the *philosophe*.⁹⁸

To some extent we can reconstruct Gibbon's original plan for the coverage of the years to 476 — as if he had *not* degenerated into narrative prolixity after Volume I — and in doing so, the 'General Observations' appear in a quite new light. It is a reasonable inference from the marked expansion of coverage and chapter length at the end of Volume I (chs 13–16), from the late date at which Gibbon realized that he would need more than one additional volume to

⁹⁴ A simple table makes clear the widely varying density of coverage in the different Volumes of the History. For all its crudity, this was clearly an exercise performed by Gibbon himself, cf. 1782 Preface, *DF* i.xli, v.180:

Volume I	covers c.A.D.180–324, or c.144 years per volume of text
Volumes II–III	cover c.324–476 or 76 years per volume of text
Volume IV	covers c.476–628 or 152 years per volume of text
Volumes V–VI	cover c.628–1453 or 422 years per volume of text

At no point, even in Volumes II–III, is Gibbon writing an evenly proportioned narrative, as he occasionally reminds us: 'The general design of this work will not permit us minutely to relate the actions of every emperor after he ascended the throne' (*DF* i.313, cf. ii.457). However, as the table implies, and despite a unity of subject, Gibbon drew a clear distinction between Volume I and its two successors by always exempting it from criticisms of the latter (e.g. *Letters*, 677). Though piously noting Hume's objection to the too 'concise and superficial narrative of the first reigns from Alexander to Commodus', he makes it plain that this was an isolated viewpoint (*Mem. E*, 308). If we suppose Volume I to start with Augustus, the elision of the period between the Principate and c.180 represents a further, radical decision about narrative structure. However, Gibbon's subsequent doubts about his effective omission of this period do not weaken the point, since he only sighed after giving its 'history', which, as he emphasizes, was not mere description, *EE* 338. (Craddock's supposition to the contrary, *EE* 588, n. 1, is confuted by her reference to *OED*.) Below p. 146 on Volume IV.

⁹⁵ Even in authors who suppose that the 'true' or mature Gibbon is to be found only in the final volumes of the History — Jordan, *op. cit.* (n. 56), Womersley, *op. cit.* (n. 32) — coverage of the text is in inverse proportion to their theses.

⁹⁶ *DF* v.182; cf. *Letters*, 638, where Gibbon states, even as he writes (December 1786), that he is allowing

himself the 'utmost latitude' in the choice and treatment of subject matter. He continues to the end the bizarre process of minuting the decline and fall of the empire — its 'last and fatal stroke' (*DF* vi.523) is still five chapters and 100 years short of 1453 — but since he is really writing 'the eventful story of the barbarians', albeit linked to the Byzantine annals (v.183, cf. *Letters*, 677), the defect or curiosity is no longer central.

⁹⁷ *DF* v.183, cf. *Letters*, 518; Horace Walpole to Lady Ossory 8 Nov. 1789 (approving the procedure but deprecating the arrangement), *Correspondence* xxxiv.79. For the 'consistent procedure': vi.135–6 (barbarians after the Saracens), 305–6 (the Crusades); vii.11 (Genghis Khan), 225–6 (the Papacy) etc. In acting thus Gibbon might fairly claim to be following the example of his principal sources, *DF* iv.421 n.13 (Procopius). His control of overall length in Volumes IV–VI is as perfect as the handling of Volumes II–III was inflationary. In September 1783 — before he had devised the organizational plan of Volumes V and VI — he forecast three more volumes; shortly after its devising, he wondered if the radical economy it permitted might not bring him down to two volumes (October 1784); by December 1786 (halfway through the composition of Volume VI, Add. MSS 34882 f. 175) he forecast three volumes again, apologizing to his publisher that they might be 'somewhat thinner, perhaps, than their predecessors', but on publication day — aided doubtless by such fillers as the 'Digression on the House of Courtenay', *DF* vi.466–74, cf. *Mem. B*, 195–6 — he managed to give almost identical value for money, 1950 pages of quarto text and notes compared to 1955 in the first three volumes (1st edition). Given Gibbon's acute awareness of literary length and commercial value — 'I can exactly compute, by the square foot, or the square page, all that remains to be done' (January 1787) — this was almost certainly deliberate: *Letters*, 592, 623, 638, 642.

⁹⁸ Of course, it has long been recognized that the 'General Observations' represent Gibbon *en philosophe*, G. Giarizzo, *Edward Gibbon e la cultura europea del settecento* (1954), 231; but this has not been a favourable or sympathetic evaluation.

reach his terminus,⁹⁹ as well as from remarks in the *Memoirs*, that 'the age of Constantine' (*Mem. E*, 315) was to be the pivot about which the first volumes were to revolve. (In Volume IV he adhered much more successfully to Voltairean principle in writing what was in effect 'Le Siècle de Justinian', concentrating on the reign of the latter, with sharp foreshortening at either end of the notional chronological span.)¹⁰⁰ Thus the constructional failure in Volumes II and III was not so much in the weight given to the first half of the fourth century, but in the extreme length of what came after it. If this plan had been adhered to, the aptness of the 'Observations' would be unmistakable. In their narrative prevision they repeatedly abridge the period from Constantine to the fall of the Western Empire,¹⁰¹ and their focus on the direct causes of imperial decline, Polybius apart, is wholly Constantinian, viz. the foundation of the new Rome and the establishment of Christianity. In short, the 1772 'General Observations' broadly encapsulate, as we might expect, Gibbon's original conception of the period to 476. Reprinting them in 1781 was a true summary, in that they still indicated the focal point of the 300 years covered in the first volumes — for he had no new 'philosophical' conception to put in place of the old, despite the effective deconstruction of this view represented by Volume III.

IV

Of course, the worth of the History and the light of contrast it sheds on the 'General Observations' are not exhausted by reference to the *a priori* or 'simple and obvious' history of manners. Evidential as well as conceptual stratification pervades the History and this, like so much else, is foreshadowed in the *Essai*:

Parmi la multitude des faits, il y en a, et c'est le grand nombre, qui ne prouvent rien au delà de leur propre existence. Il y en a encore qui peuvent bien être cités dans une conclusion partielle, d'où le philosophe peut juger des motifs d'une action, et d'un trait dans un caractère: ils éclaircissent un chaînon. Ceux qui dominent dans le système général, qui y sont liés intimément, et qui en ont fait mouvoir les ressorts, sont fort rares; et il est plus rare encore de trouver des esprits qui sachent les entrevoir dans le vaste cahos des événements . . .¹⁰²

It would be unwise to rest too literally on a theoretical formulation of this sort — particularly the idea of two distinct strata of significant facts — but the importance of the telling fact, and a preference for the 'petit trait' over than the 'fait brillant',¹⁰³ remained with Gibbon always. The principal intellectual endeavour underlying the History was not to question the truth of the moral decay of the empire, but — as the opening page announced — 'to deduce the most important *circumstances*'¹⁰⁴ which would substantiate it. The texture of the History is a richly

⁹⁹ As early as December 1777 he was aware of the lengthy coverage which the 'age of Constantine' would require (*Mem. E*, 315), but it was not until September 1779, when he must have been composing the chapters which make up the period after the death of Julian (or Volume III) — he went to press the following May (*Letters*, 467) — that he became aware that an extra volume would be necessary, cf. n. 85; i.e. he was diverted from plan by his later rather than earlier material. *DF* ii.138 (ch. 16) also looks forward to 'the second volume of this history' in terms implying the centrality of Constantine. This point of view would also explain the portrayal of the new system of government under Diocletian and Constantine (chs 13, 17) as pathological (cf. p. 144 and n. 88 above on 'rapid decay'), when to all appearances it is part of an imperial revival.

¹⁰⁰ *DF* iv.226, *Mem. E*, 326; cf. *Mem. F*, 79 on 'the Age of Sesostris' with explicit acknowledgement to Voltaire. This non-linear method of computing time may also be discerned in the 1776 Preface, *DF* i.xxxix–xli. The Voltairean 'Siècle' is in turn indebted to Bossuet's 'Époque', another author who affected Gibbon significantly, *Mem. F*, 86. Volume IV could, of course, equally be described as the 'Age of Procopius', *DF* iv.224–6.

¹⁰¹ *DF* iv.174 (pr. above p. 143), cf. iv.179. The only significant reference to emperors apart from Constantine is to Arcadius and Honorius (iv.174, 177–8), but they are conspicuous by their absence, and could thus hardly be seen or foreseen as a problem relating to the length of the text.

¹⁰² Ch. XLIX, cf. *DF* i.238.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, ch. L.

¹⁰⁴ *DF* i.1, my emphasis; cf. v.183: 'each circumstance of the eventful story of the barbarians . . .' The term is frequently evoked in the detailed texture of the History, e.g. *DF* i.127, 238, 303; ii.457; iii.38 and n. 100, 324, 378 and n. 1, 457 n. 39; iv.62, 90, 104 n. 143, 152 etc. The idea was, of course, common, e.g. Hardwicke to Gibbon 20 Sept. 1781, *MW* ii.254–5. History as defined by its leading circumstances is also evoked in the 1776 Preface (i.xxxix–xl) and the summaries Gibbon gives at the end of chs 38 and 71 (though here the notion of *a priori* interest intersects, iv.170–1, vii.338); cf. *Mem. B*, 193–4, *Letters*, 463, *MW* v.487–8. This idea accords with what we know of Gibbon's methods of literary composition, where he frequently starts with discrete fragments of text and works out from these. The *Antiquities of the House of Brunswick* is a major and complete example of the process. Here we have two MS states: (1) single or sometimes two-page folio fragments, Add. MSS 34,880 ff. 326–353b; which are then (2) smoothed into a continuous prose draft, Add. MSS 34,880 295–324 and 34,881 f. 149b. (Alas, the two states are garbled out of all recognition in *EE* 398–531.) Compare the so-called 'Circumnavigation of Africa', Add. MSS 34,880 ff. 355–66, which represents the first state only and must therefore be regarded as unfinished. Gibbon's statement about the MS. of the History (*Mem. E*, 334) does not necessarily stand against this point of view, though the apparently seamless drafts of the *Memoirs* as a whole do represent a quite different model.

coloured mosaic of such 'circumstances'. Many sit loosely with the theme of 'decline and fall'; they illustrate (like the *Essai*) the miscellaneous interest of classical studies,¹⁰⁵ display the eternal truths of human nature regardless of period or theme, or else curry popularity with the audience in the manner of a light entertainer.¹⁰⁶ But the many that are more or less within the unitary theme of the History — be they sober on laws and taxes, splendid on Roman spectacles and buildings, or piquant on eunuchs and witchcraft¹⁰⁷ — build up a web of causal suggestion less abstract and less obvious than that of mere blanket reference to 'decay'. It is a web of enormous cumulative richness, which lies at the very heart of the work's greatness. Indeed there can be few modern approaches to the period which Gibbon did not foreshadow. Furthermore, 'circumstance' really includes his strongly personal evocations and derivations from contemporary interpretative writing — Ammianus, Julian (*DF* ii.505–6), Synesius (*DF* iii.259–60), Claudian, Gregory of Tours (*DF* iii.406–9) — alongside his chiaroscuro with matters of fact, adding yet a further dimension to the range of suggestion.

It is thus at the level of the paragraph or couple of pages — 'those beautiful episodes' which suspend the narrative¹⁰⁸ — rather than the volume, that Gibbon's personal synthesis of 'erudition' and 'philosophy' is achieved. The root of his procedure here is erudite in that it is evidentially-led — 'Déférez plutôt aux faits qui viennent d'eux-mêmes vous former un système, qu'à ceux que vous découvrez après avoir conçu ce système';¹⁰⁹ as matter crops up in the sources Gibbon relates it to his philosophic theme, the working of Roman manners as they overlay timeless human nature. But unlike the *philosophes*, who might at first blush appear to do something similar, Gibbon's command of sources and range of suggestion is so wide that it can only emerge piecemeal, and defies unitary summary; he produces — as he had forecast — a series of 'conclusions partielles'.¹¹⁰ However, it would be wrong to suggest that this produces a collapse into 'radical contingency' as a result.¹¹¹ In the first place, Gibbon adheres to the historical truth of Roman 'decay' alongside those timeless certainties which produce their own staccato on the page: 'the eternal laws of the universe', 'the immutable constitution of human

¹⁰⁵ i.e., apart from general historical-philosophical use, literary criticism and taste, and natural science. Gibbon's discussion of sources throughout his text, according to both style and substance, illustrates the first; as to science, the History (i.101–3) relies directly on the *Essai* (ch. xli) with respect to the natural history of animal species; compare also ch. xliii and iv.441–2 and n. 59, vii.319–20. Note, too, linked interests in climate (i.231–3, vii.219 and n. 2), demography (i.233–41 *passim*), natural disasters (iii.72, iv.461–9, vii.318–20), and sub-Lamarckian ideas as to the effect of environment on human evolution (iii.74–80, 442–3; iv.400 and n. 84, 411–12 and n. 103; v.335) — and the history of science generally (e.g. vi.5–6, 28–34, vii.85–6). Such inquiry was a necessary concomitant of history founded on the premiss that there were laws of human nature, though Gibbon carried from science to history (via his friends Buffon or Dr Watson vi.10 n. 21, cf. *Mem. E.*, 317 n. 35) rather than vice versa.

¹⁰⁶ The History converses with the reader at many levels: (1) generally, reading in this period was seen as 'familiar converse' or 'intercourse' (e.g. *DF* iv.269 n. 117; vii.128, 136, *Mem. B.*, 141); and dialogue with 'his friends' (*Mem. E.*, 346, cf. Add. MSS 34874 f. 95b) rather than egotism is the principal function of Gibbon's Fielding-like insertion of the author into the text, cf. *Letters*, 247, 251; p. 151 below; T. B. Macaulay, 'Francis Bacon' (1837), *Critical and Historical Essays* (1907, Everyman), ii.291–2. (2) English and 'domestic' accentuation in the text continually appeals to the home audience (starting with the promotion of Britain out of the circuit of Roman provinces in ch. 1, *DF* i.3f, and ending at vii.300 n. 86), but other national or regional audiences are identified too (e.g. i.240 n. 38, iv.526 n. 167, Lausanne and the Swiss, ii.304–5, iv.309 n. 32 Paris and the French, iii.42–7 the Scots); (3) finally, there are directly personal messages, to Mme. Necker (iii.409–12, cf. *Letters*, 498), Lord Loughborough (vi.333 n. 148), his Scots friends (ii.509 n. 15, vi.465 n. 89), Deyverdun (vi.483 n. 23), Sir William Jones (iii.84 n. 20, iv.527 n. 173, cf. *MW* ii no. CLI).

¹⁰⁷ On eunuchs, *DF* ii.260–2, iii.380–2; on witchcraft *et al.*, i.393–4, iii.17–20; on Roman spectacles and buildings n. 50 above, p. 151 below. Gibbon's concern with other issues still topical, such as paederasty, women and slaves, needs no labelling; his great omission is the history of ideas, pre-empted or evacuated by a focus on manners and morals.

¹⁰⁸ *DF* i.211; cf. v.180 on 'those general pictures which compose [?]comprise] the use and ornament of a remote history.'

¹⁰⁹ *Essai*, ch. L.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, ch. XLIX, pr. above p. 146.

¹¹¹ Porter, *op. cit.* (n. 37), 136, a representative modern view. Gibbon saw clearly that each person's perspective was different, relative to their role or situation in life, be it patriot, philosopher, saint, member of the *menu peuple* or whatever: 'some animals are made to live in water, others on the earth, many in the air, and some, it is now believed, even in fire [the House of Commons]' (*Letters*, 609). The love of knowledge was thus one among many (irrational) 'passions' or endowments, *Mem. E.*, 344, C, 248, and one should not be snobbish or unrealistic about this. Few had the leisure to pursue such a career (*DF* i.238); historically, the philosopher's view was frequently a minority one (e.g. iv.80); and though Gibbon set a high value on truth, he seconded John Vataces who 'without deciding the precedency, ... pronounced with truth that a prince and a philosopher are the two most eminent characters of human society' (vi.477, cf. v.220), having himself oscillated between careers in politics and truth-telling, *Letters*, 571. Nonetheless, the philosopher dealt in (portions of) absolute truth, which the text clearly assumes to exist. This position entails one assumption: that the relative category of 'the philosopher' (and thus all the other types) is viewed as timeless rather than historical — and such is the case in fact. For example, Theodoric, Caliph Ali and Louis IX are all 'heroes' regardless of the apparently specific, classical connotations of the term (*DF* iv.184, cf. 182; v.412; vi.374).

nature', 'the rights of mankind', 'the dictates of reason', 'the laws' of prudence, humanity, justice and nations, and 'the truth of history'.¹¹² The Pyrrhonist and partisan Horace Walpole noted with a shudder Gibbon's writing 'with the fear of the *laws* of history before his eyes'.¹¹³ Secondly, Gibbon's historical remarks are given coherence by the elastic concept of 'manners': here is the soft centre to which the whole incessant series of causal suggestion about Roman decline is related. The result is neither contingency nor — which Gibbon equally shunned — rigid system, but rather a controlled pluralism,¹¹⁴ a rich palette of views on Roman decay and Roman history. Provided one does not suspect the notion of manners in any fundamental sense¹¹⁵ — which no contemporary did¹¹⁶ — this *sui generis* balancing of unity and diversity will hold.

To take a familiar but central case, we are told firmly that 'If all the Barbarian conquerors had been annihilated in the same hour, their total destruction would not have restored the empire of the West' (*DF* iii.507). The origin of Roman decay is unquestionably internal; but that does not prevent Gibbon giving as much prominence as his slender materials allowed to barbarian manners,¹¹⁷ their superiority to those of the Romans in the vital particular of liberty, and, consequently, their unstoppable force over the long-term (e.g. *DF* iii.137–9). On this issue at least, he goes so far as to state his agnosticism directly: the 'great body [of the empire] was invaded by open violence, or undermined by slow decay'.¹¹⁸ Precisely the same refusal to erect a causal hierarchy is apparent within the 'General Observations' where the first half of the essay gives, as we have seen, a Polybian or Tacitean account of decline *pur sang*, but the second evokes 'the endless columns of barbarians [which] pressed on the Roman empire with accumulated weight; and, if the foremost were destroyed, the vacant space was instantly replenished by new assailants' (*DF* iv.176, cf. iii.440). The rationale of this conduct lay, first, in Gibbon's habitual reserve — what Walpole called his 'modesty'¹¹⁹ — about speculating on the unknowable, be it the motive of an individual or the fate of the empire (e.g. *DF* iii.330, v.400); and secondly, in his view of the History as, to a large extent, a decentralized or federal work which afforded not so much one as 'a long series of instructive lessons'.¹²⁰ A plural perspective was self-confessedly for Gibbon the best route that any mere discipline could offer to the higher unitary truth of philosophy, 'cette première science': 'Quelle étude peut former cet esprit [philosophique]? Je n'en connois aucune . . . mais je crois l'étude de la littérature, cette habitude de devenir, tour à tour, Grec, Romain, disciple de Zénon ou d'Épicure, bien propre à le développer et à l'exercer'.¹²¹ Such immersion in plural perspectives was the last

¹¹² 'The truth of history' is frequently an appeal to the limitations of such knowledge; all the same it is a species of truth, which leads, for example, to specific prescriptions — such as the advocacy of religious toleration — and which after all qualification has been made, is not vacuous, since history still 'undertakes to record the transactions of the past for the instruction of future ages' (*DF* ii.87, cf. i.197; ii.68, 306; iii.119, 135; iv.471; vi.374, 511 etc.).

¹¹³ To W. Mason 3 March 1781, *Correspondence* xxix.115; cf. n. 119 below for a parallel judgement, with a different valuation attached.

¹¹⁴ cf. Milman, op. cit. (n. 79), 288–9, 291–2. Of course, such pluralism invited the further inquiry and debate Gibbon hoped his History might inspire, p. 151 below.

¹¹⁵ Gibbon's handling of the concept of 'manners' is a great advance in rigour over that of the *philosophes*, but also exposes its primitive simplicity. In effect 'manners' was a catch-all of moral factors which lost analytical identity under the close examination he gave it: thus it was not a purely social (or sociological) concept, since it included Polybian military institutions, for example; even 'the discipline and tactics of the Greeks and Romans form an interesting part of the national manners' (*DF* iii.489, cf. iv.172–4); and it was quite consistent with an undifferentiated evocation of the *Zeitgeist* (e.g. ii.456, iii.260). Gibbon and the *philosophes* stand somewhere between the moralism of Christian tradition and the sociological development of 'manners' pioneered by Durkheim and Weber; and evaluation of 'manners' as a concept may be influenced by the view taken of any or all of these three.

¹¹⁶ This may be shown by a silence in the criticism of the History, or by the vitality of moralistic analyses of society in the England of the 1780s: Joanna Innes, 'Politics and morals. The reformation of manners movement in later eighteenth century England', in E. Hellmuth (ed.), *The Transformation of Political Culture* (1990), 57–118, cf. *DF* iv.536, vi.274 etc.

¹¹⁷ See eg. p. 143; in Volumes IV–VI Gibbon applauded the 'new Barbarians who . . . enjoy the advantage of speaking their own language and relating their own exploits', *Letters*, 677.

¹¹⁸ *DF* ii.1, my emphasis. This is, however, a unique utterance; normally Gibbon does not make such direct juxtapositions, which might allow the need for some reconciliation of ideas. While adhering to this view, it may also be suggested that Gibbon saw barbarian virtues as a *reflex* of those of the Romans, i.e. adhering to the primacy of internal decay, but linking the internal and the external explanations thereof. Such is the burden of the cancelled MS of the *Essai* in 1758, Add. MSS 34880 f.152, chs 55–56; due to the paucity of 'barbarian' sources, this argument is rarely made explicit in the History (*DF* i.271, iv.364), but it underlies Gibbon's concern with the power of the Roman name (n. 87 above).

¹¹⁹ 14 Feb. 1776, *MW* ii.154; cf. *Letters*, 638; *EE* 338 (on Hume, superlatives and positives); Mackintosh's table talk, 12 Oct. 1830, pr. *Memoirs of . . . Sir James Mackintosh* (1836), ii.476 etc.

¹²⁰ *DF* iv.171; cf. iv.105, *Letters*, 638, 677.

¹²¹ *Essai*, ch. XLVII.

stage short of the Archimedean detachment of the born 'philosopher';¹²² and in the History he offered a macrocosm of the rich pluralism of classical studies as a whole alongside a *réchauffé* of the traditional, unitary concept of manners.

Apprehending Gibbon's causal and explanatory procedures supplies a second major ground of harmony between the 'General Observations' and the main text of the History: given that a unitary summary of causes at the 'circumstantial' level (as well as that of narrative) was hardly possible,¹²³ the 'Observations' form the last and grandest of 'conclusions partielles' on the fall of Rome. Between Chapters 26 and 35, 'the disastrous period of the fall of the Roman empire' (*DF* iii.73), Gibbon had returned to the use of chapter endings as moments for general reflection on the empire's decay.¹²⁴ The nature of the barbarian threat (ch. 26), luxury and the disuse of defensive armour (ch. 27), the lack of a mixed and balanced constitution (ch. 31), the Fable of the Seven Sleepers (ch. 33), and the prophecy of Varro, 'that the *twelve vultures* which Romulus had seen, represented the *twelve centuries* assigned for the fatal period of his city'¹²⁵ — these supply a typical *mélange*, both in range of explanation, and the differing modes of suggestion invoked (evidential, interpretative, and purely rhetorical).¹²⁶ They were succeeded by the 'General Observations' at the end of Chapter 38. The formal and substantive similarities between the essay and the other chapter endings are apparent: they are short in length, but great in vision, be it in the free range over time from Romulus onwards,¹²⁷ or in the *topos* of taking contemporary interpretative ideas as their starting point — from Polybius, Varro, Vegetius or Gregory of Tours. They all agree as to the central theme of moral decay. But there are obvious differences. By taking Polybius as their starting point, the 'Observations' are not simply repetitive, yet they recall the reader to the pristine theme of decay stated at the beginning of the book. Perhaps it was this which first suggested to Gibbon the usefulness of disinterring his early manuscript. Secondly, though the 'Observations' cannot summarize the full range of Gibbon's causal suggestion (or insinuation) and are in this sense necessarily a partial conclusion, they are of course grander than an ordinary chapter ending, being formally distinct,¹²⁸ and long enough at least to cover the main areas of explanation — Roman political and military institutions, the relation of the city to the provinces, Christianity, the force of barbarians, the principle of nationality, and the art of war. Short of the sort of summary which resembled a contents list — and which indeed Gibbon supplied at the end of Volumes III and VI (*DF* iv.170–1; vii.338) — this was a sufficient assembly of ideas for the reader to mull over.

V

Finally, since it is evident that the 'General Observations' represent some sort of closing gesture, it is more than a little surprising that they have never been examined in this light. The

¹²² Gibbon was unaffectedly modest — and clear-sighted — in matters of intellect, and never aspired to place himself on a level with 'philosophers' such as Hume or Adam Smith, cf. *Letters*, 227, 335, 402. (Even in the case of historical writing, Gibbon did not coin the image of a 'triumvirate' grouping him with Hume and Robertson, and when that association was made, he declared himself the Lepidus, *Letters*, 592, cf. 389.) Those who, since Guizot, accuse Gibbon's lack of 'une grande élévation d'idées' (Preface, *History of the Decline and Fall* (1828), 5, cf. H. Walpole to W. Mason 18 Feb. 1776, *Correspondence* xxviii.244), may be right, but they ignore both his own conception of philosophic truth (cf. p. 143 and n. 82 above) and his real, historiographical achievement (n. 75 etc.)

¹²³ cf. p. 151 below.

¹²⁴ Gibbon was explicit about the special status allotted to chapter endings: *DF* vi.531. He had previously made use of them in chs 4–7, as a forewarning of 'the general irruption of the barbarians' in ch. 10.

¹²⁵ *DF* iii.506; cf. *Essai* 1758 MS. cancel, ch. 56 n. †, Add. MSS. 34880 f. 151b.

¹²⁶ Other chapter endings make points about decline at the narrative or contingent level, directly or indirectly,

by pointing out unrepresentative individuals, Marcian ch. 34, Claudian ch. 30; ch. 28 deals with the *longue durée* in religion. I do not of course wish to suggest that, except in a formal sense, chapter endings supply the only 'conclusions partielles' in the History.

¹²⁷ Compare (e.g.) *DF* iii.506, iv.172–3. Ranging outside the (immense) time span of the History is, of course, a common procedure for Gibbon, particularly in pursuing the timeless bases of human nature through the fashionable Enlightenment (or Plutarchian) device of the historical parallel, which knows no chronological or geographical limit.

¹²⁸ In the 1781 edition, the 'General Observations' start on a new page (iii.629); there is no chapter number in the margins; and their italicized title is explained by the italicized short contents summarizing the main sections of chapters prior to the detailed contents linked to page numbers (iii.[i–viii]). The 'Observations' thus represent an independent, unnumbered sub-chapter, i.e. a formal anomaly — powerful evidence of their extraneous origin. Resolving the anomaly by making them part of ch. 38, as is done by Bury (in his contents, page layout and marginal chapter numbers), is illegitimate and misleading.

History can be divided up in a bewildering number of ways — according to three distinct periods announced in the 1776 Preface; the different periodization adhered to in fact; the three publication instalments; and two radically different formal principles¹²⁹ — but if we cut through these intricacies, it has just two substantive endings. These occur at the end of Volumes III and VI.¹³⁰ Gibbon's task in the former was to set a terminus to the history of the Western Empire, while (of course) leaving the way free to pursue subsequently 'the distinct series of the Byzantine history' in Volume IV.¹³¹ This he did in the course of the three final chapters (36–38), which constitute a monument to the orthodox literary conventions. Effectively ignoring the Eastern Empire, they close the Western history by all the conventional routes.¹³² in Chapter 36 by reaching a narrative terminus; in Chapter 38 by providing a review of the successor states in the West; and in the three chapters taken together, by exhausting the principal thematic categories of what had gone before, respectively, Roman, Christian, and barbarian history. To these final chapters Gibbon added the 'General Observations', and together they make an end of the Western Empire.¹³³

The complementarity of the essay and the final chapters is apparent: the main text does not contain any sustained causal reflections on Roman decay of the type that can be located in Chapters 26–35,¹³⁴ and it is this which the 'Observations' supply. Whether Gibbon wrote the final chapters with the latter in mind, or whether having written them he perceived the vacancy left for his early essay is matter only for speculation.¹³⁵ What can be said is that he consciously desired to satisfy the claims of both literature and of philosophy, and that he did this in somewhat literal fashion by lumping together two discrete units: a weighty expository terminus according to established conventions, with an analytical supplement tacked on. Such was the second principal reason for the inclusion of the 'General Observations' in the History.¹³⁶

We can speak with some confidence on this matter owing to the obvious similarities and resonant differences in Gibbon's procedure at the end of Volume VI. In a large sense, the final conclusion is again a three chapter unit (chs 69–71). By way of announcement that a review is impending, at the outset we are taken back to the beginning of the empire and of the History (*DF* vii.218, cf. v.185), an allusion which recurs in discussing and dissecting the patriot fantasies of Petrarch (*DF* vii.267, 291) — and this retrospect may be compared with the 'Observations' which first take us from A.D. 476 back to the era of Polybius. However, just as Chapters 36–8 are mainly expository so, too, are Chapters 69–70, and the concluding kernel is to be found in the short final chapter (ch. 71). This chapter strongly resembles the 'Observations', both literally — in that *its* core is made up of 'general observations' *ipsis verbis* (*DF* vii.329) comparable in brevity to the original set (*DF* vii.317–29) — and also functionally. The chapter does not attempt to summarize the History (excepting the merest glance at past content headings),¹³⁷ and, like the 'Observations', it is necessarily a partial conclusion in this sense; on the other hand, like the essay, it does try to state what the essence of the History has been — which is, of course, the theme of the decay of the morals and manners of classical Rome and the Roman world over the long-term. The great difference between the 'Observations' and the final chapter is that, whereas the former deals with the theme of moral decay directly — the

¹²⁹ i.e. that of Volumes V and VI, as distinct from Volumes I–IV; cf. p. 145 above.

¹³⁰ Womersley claims that the end of Volume I represents 'the conclusion of a work' because in chs 15–16 'the real villain of the fall of the Roman empire is revealed', *op. cit.* (n. 32), 101, 102. But no evidence is cited to support this contention. In fact the narrative of Volume I breaks off midway through the reign of Constantine, whilst its Preface proclaims it is *not* independent (i. xxxix–xl) — serving to confirm that chs 15–16 are not a conclusion. That, nonetheless, Gibbon felt it desirable to end a volume published in isolation in a striking way may be readily conceded; chs 15–16 are paralleled by ch. 47, also a major religious statement, at the end of Volume IV.
¹³¹ *DF* iv.31 [ch. 36]; cf. iv.105 [ch. 37], 171 [ch. 38] which accord with the 1776 Preface (i. xxxix–xl).

¹³² cf. above p. 140.

¹³³ In its new context in the History, the paragraph in the 'Observations' on Rome and Constantinople, whilst focusing on the theme of decay, can also be read, in parallel with the strands in the main text (n. 131 above),

which point to the future continuation of the Eastern narrative: 'The foundation of Constantinople more essentially contributed to the preservation of the East than to the ruin of the West' (*DF* iv.174–5). This is another justification for this passage to set off against the positivistic criticism given below (Appendix).

¹³⁴ Above p. 149.

¹³⁵ Regardless of the presence or absence of the 'Observations', there were good reasons why Gibbon should not descant on Roman decay here: neither ch. 37 nor ch. 38 is Rome-centred, whilst in ch. 36 the narrative closes not with the insignificant Augustulus but with the subsequent reign of Odoacer, making a forcible point about the unimportance of high political chronology (cf. 1776 Preface, *DF* i. xxxix), and the extreme difficulty of separating Roman from barbarian which had obtained since the early third century at least (i. 182–3); and such is the burden of Gibbon's general reflection when he reaches 476 (iv. 58).

¹³⁶ For the other, p. 143 above.

¹³⁷ P. 149 above.

chain of argument from Polybius' prophecies to the brutal candour of 'simple and obvious' moral decline is not a long one — the latter takes ruins as the potent symbol of decay.

Gibbon has, of course, been concerned with the history of buildings throughout his text, from the works of Herodes Atticus in Chapter 2 to the fortified towers of the Roman nobles in Chapter 69 (*DF* vii.240), and this is firmly marked as connecting 'the agreeable history of the arts with the more useful history of human manners.'¹³⁸ The 'General Observations' themselves glance at the connection when they allude to the barbarian subversion of 'the laws and palaces of Rome' (*DF* iv.181). Thus though the new 'general observations' offer, in a literal sense, four causes for the decay of Roman buildings — the workings of nature, of the barbarians and Christians, of functional and economic need, and of civil strife — they need little translation to be read as the various contributions of nature and climate; of barbarian, Christian and Roman manners; and of economic factors in the History as a whole. Doubtless one might take innumerable analytic sections of this sort, with the same end in view, and none would be quite complete; but the range of this one is apparent. Like the original 'Observations' it evokes the *longue durée* and stratified motion in history with great power; but, not content with descending to the level of man outside civil society — that which 'each village, each family, each individual must always possess' (*DF* iv.180) — it widens the scope of historical enquiry yet further, to include the impact of inanimate nature itself.¹³⁹

Apparently, Gibbon does allow himself some causal hierarchy in his last pages, when he tells us that 'the most potent and forcible cause of destruction [lay in] the domestic hostilities of the Romans themselves' (*DF* vii.326). However, this is only a return to the Polybian or Tacitean theme which is but one strand of the History (e.g. chs 1–3) or the 'General Observations', and we may fairly infer that, as with the latter, he did not seek to reduce his History to a simple formula within twelve pages.¹⁴⁰ The more or less tautologous explanation of Roman decline as a function of moral decay is adhered to¹⁴¹ but so too is the controlled pluralism of explanation at the level of the principal causal 'circumstance'. Given such pluralism, we can see why Gibbon's hopes for his work were akin to what he saw as Montesquieu's achievement with *L'Esprit des Loix*: 'no work has been more read or criticised; and the spirit of inquiry which it has excited is not the least of our obligations to the author' (*DF* vi.332 n. 147). Such is the meaning behind the otherwise 'forced self-deprecation of the *Memoirs*, where his principal hope for the futurity of the History was that it might 'perhaps, an hundred years hence, continue to be *abused*', besides a devout hostility to being 'flattered by vague indiscriminate praise' from the idolatrous reader.¹⁴²

The sublimity, and superiority, of Gibbon's achievement at the end of Volume VI as compared with that of Volume III is apparent. Beneath a conventional pictorial appeal somewhat in the manner of Piranesi¹⁴³ — powerful because relatively direct and more

¹³⁸ *DF* i.47, cf. i.23, 422 etc.

¹³⁹ *DF* vii.317–20. Gibbon thus vindicates the original inclusion of 'Les Sciences Naturelles', one of the main headings of classical study in the *Essai* chs xxxix–xlIII, as part of a unity. The patent connection between this strand of Enlightenment historiography and the French *Annalistes* of this century is curiously ignored; indeed 'lay' opinion seems to suppose the two are diametrically opposed, e.g. L. Stone, 'The revival of narrative', in *The Past and the Present Revisited* (1987), 74–96, at 74.

¹⁴⁰ However, following in the wake of Bury (*DF* i.vii), J. G. Pocock appears to reduce the History to the unitary theme of just one sentence, extracted out of context from these later 'observations' — 'In the preceding volumes of this History, I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion . . .' (*DF* vii.321) — and foreshadows an entire book based upon it ('Gibbon . . . and the Late Enlightenment', in *Virtue, Commerce and History*, 143 n. 1, 146 and n. 8). He would overlook: (1) that this is not all Gibbon has described; (2) that, in the context of ch. 71, he allocates a subordinate role to these factors; (3) that he uses the term 'triumph' in its technical sense, i.e. as a spectacle; (4) that by departing from his plan to write the history of the City (and of the Papacy) he failed to complete the account of the triumph of religion.

¹⁴¹ Although this is logically tautologous, it must be

remembered that moral *esprit* did not exist apart from its historically specific embodiment in social or private practices, 'manners'; the specificity of the latter saves the former from vapidty.

¹⁴² *Mem. E*, 338, my emphasis, 346. These expressions are of a piece with the idea of reading as a dialogue or converse, n. 106.

¹⁴³ There is danger in any analogy of this sort, given Gibbon's lack of interest in the visual arts, but it is a good deal more promising than those hitherto pursued (notably by Michel Baridon, e.g. 'Le style d'une pensée: politique et esthétique dans le *Decline and Fall*', in *Gibbon et Rome à la lumière de l'historiographie moderne* (1977), 73–101). In terms of chronology (his principal works appeared 1750–78), historicism, *Romanitas*, international rather than merely national orientation and reputation, and what one may call a distinctively neo-classical evocation of the power of ruins, Piranesi and Gibbon have much in common; cf. J. Wilton-Ely, *The Mind and Art of Giambattista Piranesi* (1978). That Gibbon was working within a cultural mainstream is also evident from his dependence on Muratori's *Antiquitates Italiae Medii Aevi* (1738–42) for his pungent treatment of the 'strong towers' of medieval Rome (*DF* vii.326 n. 48), and on Maffei's *Verona Illustrata* (1731–2) for material on Italian amphitheatres (vii.329 n. 59). On his orthodoxy in aesthetic taste, cf. 'Gibbon's Dark Ages', 5, n. 26.

obviously sincere — the integration of philosophical analysis and literary effect is now seamless, and Chapter 71 could never be accused of being a poor attempt at a summary as has been the case with the ‘Observations’. At the same time Gibbon was able to express his *credo* as to the roots of our perception of, and inspiration from, the remote past. These were twofold: the survivals of mind in literature, and physical survivals.¹⁴⁴ But whereas literary texts could be invoked with both frequency and rhetorical power in every ‘conclusion partielle’ — Poggio opens Chapter 71 just as Polybius does the ‘Observations’ — buildings could hardly carry the same generalized resonance so often, if only because they were insufficiently known, and the historiographical invocation of the ruins of Rome on the scale of the last chapter was a unique or climactic effort.¹⁴⁵ This reminds us, however, that it would have been mistaken of Gibbon to have produced a finer or ultimate literary effect at the end of Volume III. Though it *might* have had to serve as his last word, this was of course planned as a terminus within the continuing scheme of the History.¹⁴⁶ Thus the formal orthodoxy of Chapters 36–8, and the rude simplicity of appending an analytic supplement to these, may be seen as appropriate. On the other hand, the common feature between the two endings — their mingling of literary form and ‘philosophical’ analysis — illustrates both the uniformity of Gibbon’s thinking and an essential rationale of the ‘General Observations’.

VI

The foregoing argument yields a clear, or at least a highly probable, dating for the ‘General Observations’, and certainly one without an obvious rival, viz. before 1774, and in fact 1772. Of course, establishment of the date would be barren but for the light it casts on Gibbon’s intellectual processes. That the ‘Observations’ were inserted in the History out of compositional sequence highlights, first and foremost, the moral *a priori* which underlay the latter, as it did all of Gibbon’s plans for historical composition. It is worth noting that Gibbon chose to reveal this small passage in the secret history of his *magnum opus*,¹⁴⁷ which could not otherwise have been known. His reasons for doing so were not methodological, but in revealing the *a priori* nature of his approach, it never occurred to him that any stigma attached to this — here or indeed elsewhere in the *Memoirs*.¹⁴⁸ The placing of the ‘Observations’ illustrates, secondly, that the truly rewarding part of historical composition lay not only in its ‘simple and obvious’ moral theme but also in its decentralized or federal construction, which defied summary before or after the event. This was exemplified by an interest in striking ‘circumstances’; in the exposure of an eternal human nature beneath its historical garb of custom, prejudice and habit; and in the miscellaneous riches of classical letters — all for their own sake, and only loosely controlled by the elastic central theme of Roman decay. The

¹⁴⁴ The other principal *physical* survivals Gibbon identified were geographical and topographical, and secondly, genealogical or ‘the history of blood’ (vii.1). Both broad types of survival are equally important to the History, though the latter is less recognized. The History (like its predecessor, the History of *urbis Roma*) represents an attempt at uniting these two historical roots which Gibbon had treated discretely in the *Essai* and the *Receuil Geographique* of 1763–4.

¹⁴⁵ (1) Gibbon’s farewells to Athens and Constantinople involve allusion to their buildings or ruins in a sentence and a page respectively (*DF* vi.507–8, vii.140, cf. vii.210) — the former a remarkable comment on his lack of interest in the nascent ‘Greek revival’ in architecture. Given their unfamiliarity (not least to himself), Gibbon describes the buildings of Constantinople at length in *DF* iv.258–70, in his *first* chapter (ch. 40) on Justinian. (2) The last page of the History (on the connection between Roman ruins and its conception), is repeated in one of the most famous passages of the *Memoirs* (*Mem. C*, 270; see also *DF* vii.235 n. 47); given the elemental logic it embodies, verifiable through the entire History, the quibbling of commentators on the *Memoirs* alone may be seen in its true proportions; cf. ‘Gibbon’s Dark Ages’, 5–6.

¹⁴⁶ Though the progression from the Preface of 1781 to that of 1782 (*DF* i.xli), from a tentative to a definite resolution to proceed through to 1453, may seem smooth, it was not so in fact — as Gibbon candidly recognized once sure of completing his project (*DF* vii.1 n. 1; 308 n. 102). Simply put, we are lucky to have the last *two* volumes of the History: these owe their existence to (a) the surmounting of major intellectual obstacles — it was one thing to preach abjuration of prolix narrative, another to achieve it (*Mem. E*, 332); (b) the contingency that Gibbon went to Lausanne, rather than trying to earn his living as a Commissioner of Customs or Secretary at the Paris Embassy, which must have put an end to writing — *Letters*, 570–611 *passim*; Add. MSS 34882 f. 256 ‘Reasons for and against accepting [the Paris embassy]’.

¹⁴⁷ The note to the *Memoirs* explaining the point (p. 133 above) was no accidental insertion. Draft C of the *Memoirs*, though it stops c. 1770, was divided up into sections, and Gibbon’s content headings for the subsequent sections survive; ‘Sect. IV’ covering 1776–82 includes the heading ‘Louis XVI’, a reference to this note, Add. MSS 34882 f. 253b.

¹⁴⁸ *Mem. B*, 195–7; cf. p. 142 and n. 75 above.

supposed 'inadequacy' of the 'Observations' is only the inadequacy of *any* unitary summary to work constructed as Gibbon's is. But (thirdly) if the 'Observations' had not previously existed, they would have had to be created: both to offset the narrative shapelessness of Volumes II and III and to supply an analytical counterweight to the otherwise unreflective ending to Volume III — just as Gibbon created wholly new 'general observations' in Volume VI. Thus though we can imagine him relishing the hidden ironies of translating the original essay into a rather different context,¹⁴⁹ its consistency with, or necessity to, so many of his procedures shows that its insertion was in no sense an accident. Indeed, given Gibbon's control and fastidiousness in matters of detail, the opposite hypothesis has always beggared comprehension.

Yet though they may be explained and perhaps vindicated in this manner, the 'General Observations' have placed, and will continue to place, the modern critic in a poignant dilemma. It is, of course, a striking fact that the 'General Observations' were not criticized by contemporaries, nor were they considered worth separate mention by nineteenth-century writers such as Milman or Cotter Morison,¹⁵⁰ which almost certainly indicates that modern criticism of them in isolation is in one sense unhistorical. When moderns see the essay as thin and superficial,¹⁵¹ we may detect an implicit preference for the data-rich second and third volumes, which may be derived from either the positivism of the later nineteenth century¹⁵² or its multitudinous successor, the disciplinary specialization of the twentieth. Secondly there is frustration at the lack of unitary summary, and of some clearly-argued but specific thesis.¹⁵³ This is in some sense an attempt to evade the difficulties in reading Gibbon: his pluralism, his attempt to write what was in practice universal rather than specific history,¹⁵⁴ and, so far as specific Roman history was concerned, his lack of interest in originality for its own sake. However, these are echoes from a lost world, where scholars might view themselves as an independent and cosmopolitan estate raised above national loyalties¹⁵⁵ or a university context, assumptions in progressive decay after 1790. Again, Gibbon personally was engaged at the historical end of a grandiose Enlightenment project to link history with philosophy at an extremely high level of coherence — something which collapsed in continental Europe with 'the putrescence of the absolute spirit' of Hegelianism in the 1840s,¹⁵⁶ and which has become largely alien to historians (and philosophers) ever since. So is today's critic wrong to espouse the cause of erudition, of Gibbon's spectacular command of late antique sources, of the ability

¹⁴⁹ Note three examples of this change in context, from the original essay of 1772 — in some sense self-sufficient, yet coming at the end of the 'draught' of 1771 — to the insertion of 1781: p. 142 on 'simple and obvious'; n. 133 on Rome and Constantinople; p. 155 on 'this history'.

¹⁵⁰ Milman, *op. cit.* (n. 79); J. Cotter Morison, *Gibbon* (1878).

¹⁵¹ e.g. Momigliano, *op. cit.* (n. 67), 49; M. Baridon, *Edward Gibbon et la mythe de Rome* (1975), 656–8; J. G. Pocock, 'Gibbon as civic humanist', *Daedalus* (Summer 1976), 103–19, at 115–16. Womersley is exempt from the criticism, but occupies the still less tenable position that the 'Observations' and Volumes II and III of the History form part of a progressive sequence — n. 1 above, *Transformation of the Decline and Fall*, *op. cit.* (n. 32), 188–91.

¹⁵² e.g. Cotter Morison, *op. cit.* (69), chs 7, 9, esp. p. 116: 'From Constantine to Augustulus Gibbon is able to put forth all his strength'; Bury in *DF* i.x–xxi — representing 'positivism' both in its stricter, Comtean sense and its broader historiographical or evidential one. Bury in turn was greatly influenced by a linear historical, though not philosophical, descendant of Gibbon, E. A. Freeman, who came to the same conclusion: thus his famous declaration that 'Whatever else we read, we must read Gibbon too' (*The Methods of Historical Study* (1886), 104) is offset by stringent criticism of Gibbon on Byzantium ('The Byzantine Empire', in *Historical Essays* (3rd Series, 1879), 235–47).

¹⁵³ cf. Coleridge, Porter, *op. cit.* (n. 82); Bury's argument that Gibbon was trying 'to prove a congenial thesis (*DF* i.ix) — a thesis which Bury had composed and, predictably, regarded as unanswerable (i.vii–viii) — is another vent to the same frustration.

¹⁵⁴ cf. 'Gibbon's Dark Ages', 21. Among many indications, we may note that, from the famous footnote on the Canary Islands (*DF* i.28 n. 94) to the end of Volume VI (vii.211 n. 114), Gibbon is waging a long-distance competition with Voltaire. The latter's great compilation the *Essai sur les Moeurs* (revealingly cited by Gibbon as *Histoire Générale*) held the field in 1772 as the first philosophical universal history; a central, though implicit, ambition of the History was to supersede it, which it did with great success, even in France, though cf. Walpole to Lady Ossory 8 Nov. 1789, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, xxxiv.79. Sniping at a lesser rival, the *Universal History* (1747–54), is also obvious: e.g. iii.58 n. 142; v.43 n. 3, 339 n. 24, 422 n. 204, 484 n. 145, cf. *Mem. F*, 56.

¹⁵⁵ These are *mots justes*; after moving to Lausanne in 1783, Gibbon was careful to reassure his domestic audience that 'I shall ever glory in the name and character of an Englishman' (1788 Preface, *DF* i.xlvi); but he gloried yet more in the philosophical character of 'Citizen of the World', e.g. *Letters*, 642 (20 Jan. 1787); cf. *Essai* ch. xxxix, *Mem. E*, 335 etc.

¹⁵⁶ Marx (and Engels), *The German Ideology* Part I, ed. C. J. Arthur (1970), 39; Marx individually was an (the?) exception, but not his nineteenth-century followers. In Britain and France this pathology may be traced simultaneously but separately, with J. S. Mill and Comte attempting to embrace history in their broader philosophical schemes, but failing actually to write it. Conversely, historical authors such as Macaulay, though retaining distinct and interesting philosophical notions, had too little system or originality to make any impact in this guise.

to subvert his own *a priori*, all of them displayed to such remarkable effect in his first three volumes? Is it mere scholarly casuistry to suppose that we cannot, or at least will not, read the History precisely as Gibbon's contemporaries would have done?¹⁵⁷ The present writer may have preferences in the matter, but, following a distinguished precedent (*DF* ii.32), would regard it as ill-judged to obtrude them here.

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APPENDIX

BETWEEN 'THIS HISTORY' AND THAT HISTORY: THE TRANSITIONAL STATUS OF THE 'GENERAL OBSERVATIONS'

Whilst the arguments on dating presented (above, 1) are largely complete, one detail remains to be considered, which raises in its train issues of general importance. Surprisingly, Womersley makes no reference to the following passage in the 'General Observations':

The decay of Rome has frequently been ascribed to the translation of the seat of the empire; but this history has already shewn that the powers of government were *divided* rather than *removed*. The throne of Constantinople was erected in the East; while the West was still possessed by a series of emperors who held their residence in Italy . . . (*DF* iv.174).

There is an unmistakable reference to *a* history here; is it not to the published History, from within the main body of the 'Observations'? Before pronouncing on this, we may ask a preliminary, albeit crudely positivistic question: if it is a back reference, what is its worth? It is a serious weakness of Womersley's approach that he effectively ignores¹⁵⁸ the issue of whether the substantive content of the 'General Observations' corresponds to that of the History, and also the many pronouncements by scholars that it does not. The previous consensus — emanating, it may be said, from scholars ignorant of Gibbon's remark on dating — has been that the 'Observations' are somewhat superficial, and fail adequately to summarize the wealth of causal explanation offered for Roman decline in the History.¹⁵⁹ But this is a point of view which sits more happily with the idea that Gibbon composed the 'Observations' first and the History second than vice versa.

Without comparing them systematically, we may at least test the sample case offered in the quotation above. Gibbon's emphatic rejection of the *removal* or translation, in favour of the *division*, of the powers of government is not sustained in the published History. There Diocletian, whose 'new system of government' prefigures that of Constantine, is reported as inflicting 'the most fatal though secret wound [on the old constitution] . . . by the inevitable operation of . . . absence', that is, removal (*DF* i.409). Constantine's erection of a new capital is repeatedly described as an act of 'translation', 'removal' and 'transport[ation]' (*DF* ii.163, iii.200, 439). Nor is the antithesis of 'removal' to 'division' of powers maintained in the History; 'division' was, after all, the second principle of Diocletian's new system, a verdict repeated for Constantine (*DF* i.413, ii.189). Again, the later concept of division is both different and more complex. In the 'Observations', the unifying principle of Gibbon's paragraph is simply the division between the capitals, Rome and Constantinople, merging into that between the Eastern and Western empires. But in the History, 'division' of powers is, first of all, qualitative rather than merely territorial — as, for example, between the civil, religious and military powers (*DF* ii.187); secondly, it is quantitative, that is *within* powers and to a near infinite extent:

The vast countries which the Roman conquerers had united under the same simple form of administration were imperceptibly crumbled into minute fragments, till at length the whole empire was distributed into one hundred and sixteen provinces, each of which supported an expensive and splendid establishment.¹⁶⁰

It follows that the idea of a simple division between East and West is of much less consequence in the History than in the 'Observations' (where it is effectively one out of three principal explanations of decline). Gibbon remained profoundly interested in the differences between the Eastern and Western

¹⁵⁷ cf. nn. 79, 111, 115. Neither the aim of reading itself, nor the reading and critical environment of the modern academic is remotely like that of the contemporary audience; the obstacles cited, for example, by Walpole (n.91) to reading Gibbon's second and third volumes hardly apply today, but it is this apparently helpful fact which has tended to deceive us.

¹⁵⁸ Barring his opening *a priori*, Womersley, 47.

¹⁵⁹ See n. 152 above.

¹⁶⁰ *DF* ii.181. This is a more sophisticated version of a view expressed by Gibbon in his *Essai* of 1761, ch. LXXXII n.*; *Le Journal de Gibbon à Lausanne 1763-4*, ed. Bonnard, 19 December 1763.

parts of the Empire — of language, climate, wealth, character, military geography, mores, and religion¹⁶¹ — and the separateness of East and West is a persistent, if not highly profiled, element in the narrative. But in point of fact, the political division between East and West contributed apparently little to imperial decline,¹⁶² and Gibbon's rhetorical invocations of 'the solemn and final division' of the empire between separate rulers are more or less inconsequential.¹⁶³ It is precisely as if he were seeking to execute a prepared theme (as we might expect given an early dating for the 'Observations'), but failed to do so for want of matter.

If then we construe mention of 'this history' in the 'Observations' as a cross-reference to the published History, it is neither adequate nor accurate.¹⁶⁴ This positivistic critique may be performed on several of the verdicts with which the 'General Observations' are free, and with the same, perplexing result. It must cast considerable doubt, therefore, on the idea that they were re-written in the later 1770s. (Or on the alternative hypothesis that there was a simple interpolation of the few words 'this history has already shewn that' prior to publication in 1781. If this were so, why was it done in this one case and nowhere else in the 'Observations?')¹⁶⁵ Doubt hardens when we recall the mass of consonant evidence: the dating given in the *Memoirs*; those points in the text of the 'General Observations' which supply otherwise indigestible evidence for the early (1772) date — the reference to 'the thrones of the house of Bourbon' (which we have examined), and the image of 'the iron monarchy of Rome' (a gratuitous allusion to the Book of Daniel and Jerome's comments thereon, which were at the front of Gibbon's mind due to a controversial exchange with Bishop Hurd in the spring and summer of 1772); and the footnotes which attempt to bridge the gap between the older 'Observations' and the newer History.¹⁶⁶

There is, however, a simple resolution of the difficulty posed by Gibbon's reference to 'this history': he alludes not to the published text but to the 'rough draught' (*DF* iii.283 n. 88) of the History composed in 1771–2. The importance of this so-called draft is initially suggested by the prominence given to it in the *Memoirs* (*Mem. C*, 284–5; *D*, 411–2). While these preliminary studies probably did not result in a continuous prose draft for the history of the City of Rome (Gibbon's original project), they did yield 'many remarks and memorials', which had at least an outline, chronological coherence, as he investigated 'the descending series [of years] . . . with my pen almost always in my hand'. Thus in his mind they constituted some sort of corporate entity, as is evident from his dubbing them a 'draught'. Secondly, Gibbon drew a clear distinction as to the nature of his 'preparatory studies' before and after the era of the Western Empire: 'from the reign of Trajan to the last age of the Western Caesars' he worked from primary sources, 'the original records'; afterwards he relied on secondary works — Muratori, Sigonius and Maffei, Baronius and Pagi.¹⁶⁷ The period division marked by 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West' was thus intrinsic to the studies of 1771–2. To refer summarily to the first, original part of these as an entity when writing the 'Observations' seems wholly plausible.

Lastly, Gibbon's preliminary studies were confined — as he repeatedly tells us¹⁶⁸ — to pursuing the history of the city of Rome, rather than of the empire. Seen in this light, the status of the 'General Observations' as a transition between these two projects is unmistakable. Of the first four paragraphs, which deal directly with Rome — the latter half of the essay looks to 'the instruction of the present age' (*DF* iv.175–6) — the first two trace her rise and fall. Here, he plays on the ambiguity of the term 'Rome', hovering between Rome the city and Rome the republic or empire. But Gibbon's development beyond

¹⁶¹ *DF* i.41–3, 56; ii.61–7; iii.379–80; iv.73–4, 104–5, v.52–6 and n. 22 etc.

¹⁶² Sometimes the mutual support of East and West is highlighted (*DF* iii.417, iv.2), sometimes the reverse (iii.243–4, 454–5); and some cases are enmeshed in Gibbon's ambiguities (iv.30–1). Territorial division within the Western empire is also of great significance, *DF* iii.422.

¹⁶³ *DF* iii.11; reiterated iii.229, 421. The confusion of this experience in detail corresponds to larger structural uncertainties as to the merits of 'Eastern' versus 'Western' history, and will also account for the declaration of 1790–1 — when considering revision of the History — that 'The distinction of North and South is real and intelligible . . . But the difference of East and West is arbitrary, and shifts round the globe', *EE* 339.

¹⁶⁴ The lack of any footnote cross-reference is a striking negative argument here, given the presence of such notes elsewhere in the 'Observations', *DF* iv.177 n. 7. On the inadequacy of mere positivistic criticism: above pp. 144–6 and n. 133.

¹⁶⁵ However, those not convinced by the reconstruction which follows may be attracted by this solution as the most free from other perplexities.

¹⁶⁶ On Hurd: 'Gibbon's Dark Ages', 18; on the

footnotes, above p. 136. Further evidence will be found at p. 137 and n. 35; p. 142 ('prophetic'); and n. 128 above.

¹⁶⁷ *Mem. C*, 284; on the distinction made there between Muratori's *Annali* and *Antiquitates*, as against the *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, cf. *DF* vi.174 n. 1, vii.311 n. 110. The last is not cited until the beginning of Volume IV, *DF* iv.218 n. 120 [ch. 39]. It should be noted that 'the era of the Western empire' is not precise; the 'General Observations' plainly take in Justinian's reconquest (*DF* iv.174), and this is mirrored by Gibbon's 'reconnaissance' of 1771–2, where his coverage of primary sources remained extensive into the sixth century, including all of Procopius, Agathias, Jordanes, Cassiodorus and Justinian's Code. This is not to be inferred directly from the *Memoirs*, but from Gibbon's command of these sources when writing the early chapters of Volume I, cf. Add. MSS 34882 ff. 108–115b, an index of first citations of sources in the History. Thus, so far as chronology goes, the 'General Observations' might as well have been inserted at the end of Volume IV as of Volume III — renewed indication of the plasticity of Gibbon's original structural outlines, and his particular difficulties in the years 1781–4, cf. *Mem. E*, 308, 325; 'Gibbon's Dark Ages', n. 109 and pp. 20–3.

¹⁶⁸ *DF* iv.21 n. 52; *Mem. C*, 270, 284.

the former and towards the latter is clearly marked; indeed, we can catch him changing horses: 'The rise of a *city*, which swelled into an *Empire*, may deserve, as a singular prodigy, the reflection of a philosophic mind' (*DF* iv.173). The same balance occurs in the latter two paragraphs: the third focuses on the city, whilst the fourth is emphatically about religion and 'the empire' (the premiss of a connection between ecclesiastical and secular history was, perhaps, a principal motive for Gibbon's switch from the history of the city to that of the empire).¹⁶⁹ The paragraph given to the city, making it one of three principal causes of decline (alongside Polybian decay and Christianity) seems disproportionate if contrasted with its relative demotion in the published History, but predictable given the focus of the 'rough draught'. It is this paragraph which begins with the back reference to 'this history'. We see now why it was natural in this paragraph — and this paragraph alone — to refer back to the draft of 1771–2, a draft sketching the history of the city rather than of the empire.

¹⁶⁹ 'Gibbon's Dark Ages', 19.