

BIRRELL AUGUSTINE

RES JUDICATÆ: PAPERS
AND ESSAYS

Augustine Birrell
Res Judicatæ: Papers and Essays

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Res Judicatæ: Papers and Essays:

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Augustine Birrell

Res Judicatæ:

Papers and Essays

PREFACE

The first two essays in this volume were composed as lectures, and are now printed for the first time; the others have endured that indignity before. The papers on 'The Letters of Charles Lamb' and 'Authors in Court' originally appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine*; and the short essays entitled 'William Cowper' and 'George Borrow' in the *Reflector*, a lively sheet which owed its existence to and derived its inspiration from the energy and genius of the late Mr. J. K. Stephen, whose too early death has not only eclipsed the gaiety of many gatherings, but has robbed the country of the service of a noble and truth-loving man.

The other papers appeared either in *Scribner's Magazine* or in the columns of the *Speaker* newspaper.

Although, by the kindness of my present publishers, I have always been practically a 'protected article' in the States, I cannot help expressing my pleasure in finding myself in the enjoyment of the same modest rights as an author in the new home of my people as in the old.

A. B.

Lincoln's Inn, London.

SAMUEL RICHARDSON

A LECTURE

It is difficult to describe mankind either in a book or in a breath, and none but the most determined of philosophers or the most desperate of cynics have attempted to do so, either in one way or the other. Neither the philosophers nor the cynics can be said to have succeeded. The descriptions of the former are not recognisable and therefore as descriptions at all events, whatever may be their other merits, must be pronounced failures; whilst those of the cynics describe something which bears to ordinary human nature only the same sort of resemblance that chemically polluted waters bear to the stream as it flows higher up than the source of contamination, which in this case is the cynic himself.

But though it is hard to describe mankind, it is easy to distinguish between people. You may do this in a great many different ways: for example, and to approach my subject, there are those who can read Richardson's novels, and those who cannot. The inevitable third-class passenger, no doubt, presents himself and clamours for a ticket: I mean the man or woman who has never tried. But even a lecturer should have courage, and I say boldly that I provide no accommodation for that person tonight.

If he feels aggrieved, let him seek his remedy – elsewhere.

Mr. Samuel Richardson, of Salisbury Court, Fleet Street, printer, was, if you have only an eye for the outside, a humdrum person enough. Witlings, writing about him in the magazines, have often, out of consideration for their pretty little styles, and in order to avoid the too frequent repetition of his highly respectable if unromantic name, found it convenient to dub him the 'little printer.'

He undoubtedly was short of stature, and in later life, obese in figure, but had he stood seven feet high in his stockings, these people would never have called him the 'big printer.' Richardson has always been exposed to a strong under-current of ridicule. I have known people to smile at the mention of his name, as if he were a sort of man-milliner – or, did the thing exist, as some day it may do, a male nursery-governess. It is at first difficult to account for this strange colouring of the bubble reputation. Richardson's life, admirable as is Mrs. Barbauld's sketch, cannot be said to have been written – his letters, those I mean, he wrote in his own name, not the nineteen volumes he made his characters write, have not been reprinted for more than eighty years. He of all men might be suffered to live only in his works, and when we turn to those works, what do we find? *Pamela* and *Clarissa* are both terribly realistic; they contain passages of horror, and are in parts profoundly pathetic, whilst *Clarissa* is desperately courageous. Fielding, with all his swagger and bounce, gold lace and strong language, has no more of the

boldness than he has of the sublimity of the historian of Clarissa Harlowe. But these qualities avail poor Richardson nothing. The taint of afternoon tea still clings to him. The facts – the harmless, nay, I will say the attractive, facts – that he preferred the society of ladies to that of his own sex, and liked to be surrounded by these, surely not strange creatures, in his gardens and grottos, first at North End, Hammersmith, and afterwards at Parsons Green, are still remembered against him. Life is indeed full of pitfalls, if estimates of a man's genius are to be formed by the garden-parties he gave, and the tea he consumed a century and a quarter ago. The real truth I believe to be this: we are annoyed with Richardson because he violates a tradition. The proper place for an eighteenth-century novelist was either the pot or the sponging house. He ought to be either disguised in liquor or confined for debt. Richardson was never the one or the other. Let us see how this works: take Dr. Johnson; we all know how to describe him. He is our great moralist, the sturdy, the severe, the pious, the man who, as Carlyle puts it in his striking way, worshipped at St. Clement Danes in the era of Voltaire, or, as he again puts it, was our real primate, the true spiritual edifier and soul's teacher of all England? Well, here is one of his reminiscences: 'I remember writing to Richardson from a sponging-house and was so sure of my deliverance through his kindness and liberality, that before his reply was brought I knew I could afford to joke with the rascal who had me in custody, and did so over a pint of adulterated wine for which at that moment

I had no money to pay.'

Now, there we have the true, warm-hearted, literary tradition of the eighteenth century. It is very amusing, it is full of good feeling and fellowship, but the morality of the transaction from the great moralist's point of view is surely, like his linen, a trifle dingy. The soul's teacher of all England, laid by the heels in a sponging-house, and cracking jokes with a sheriff's officer over a pint of wine on the chance of another man paying for it, is a situation which calls for explanation. It is not my place to give it. It could, I think, easily be given. Dr. Johnson was, in my judgment, all Carlyle declared him to be, and to have been called upon to set him free was to be proudly privileged, and, after all, why make such a fuss about trifles? The debt and costs together only amounted to £5 18s., so that the six guineas Richardson promptly sent more than sufficed to get our 'real primate' out of prison, and to pay for the pint. All I feel concerned to say here is, that the praise of this anecdote belongs to the little printer, and not to the great lexicographer. The hero of the parable of the Good Samaritan is the Good Samaritan himself, and not the unfortunate, and therefore probably foolish, traveller who must need fall amongst thieves.

But if you violate traditions, and disturb people's notions as to what it is becoming for you to be, to do, or to suffer, you have to pay for it. An eighteenth-century novelist who made a fortune first by honest labour and the practice of frugality, and wrote his novels afterwards; who was fond of the society of ladies, and a

vegetarian in later life; who divided his time between his shop and his villa, and became in due course master of a city company, is not what we have a right to expect, and makes a figure which strongly contrasts with that of Richardson's great contemporary, the entirely manly Henry Fielding, whose very name rings in the true tradition; whilst as for his books, to take up *Tom Jones* is like re-entering in middle life your old college rooms, where, so at least Mr. Lowell assures us,

‘You feel o'er you stealing

The old, familiar, warm, champagne, brandy-punchy feeling.’

It may safely be said of Richardson that, after attaining to independence, he did more good every week of his life – for he was a wise and most charitable man – than Fielding was ever able to do throughout the whole of his; but this cannot alter the case or excuse a violated tradition.

The position, therefore, of Richardson in our literature is that of a great Nonconformist. He was not manufactured according to any established process. If I may employ a metaphor borrowed from his own most honourable craft, he was set up in a new kind of type. He was born in 1689 in a Derbyshire village, the name of which, for some undiscovered reason, he would never tell. The son of poor parents – his father was a joiner – he had never any but a village school education, nor did he in later life worry much about learning, or seek, as so many

printers have done, to acquire foreign tongues. At fourteen years of age he was bound apprentice to a printer in Aldersgate Street, and for seven years toiled after a fashion which would certainly nowadays be forbidden by Act of Parliament, were there the least likelihood of anybody either demanding or performing drudgery so severe. When out of his apprenticeship, he worked for eight years as a compositor, reader, and overseer, and then, marrying his late master's daughter, set up for himself, and slowly but steadily grew prosperous and respected. His first wife dying, he married again, the daughter of a bookseller of Bath. At the age of fifty he published his first novel, *Pamela*. John Bunyan's life was not more unlike an Archbishop of Canterbury's than was Richardson's unlike the life of an ordinary English novelist of his period.

This simile to Nonconformity also holds good a little when we seek to ascertain the ambit of Richardson's popularity. To do this we must take wide views. We must not confine our attention to what may be called the high and dry school of literary orthodoxy. There, no doubt, Richardson has his admirers, just as Spurgeon's sermons have been seen peeping out from under a heap of archidiaconal, and even episcopal Charges, although the seat of Spurgeon's popularity is not in bishops' palaces, but in shop parlours. I do not mean by this that Richardson is now a popular novelist, for the fact, I suppose, is otherwise; but I mean that to take the measure of his popularity, you must look over the wide world and not merely at the clans and the cliques, the noble army

of writers, and the ever lessening body of readers who together constitute what are called literary circles. Of Richardson's great fame on the Continent, it will be time enough to speak in a few minutes; for the moment I will stop at home. Mr. Leslie Stephen, who has been called to be editor of our first really great Dictionary of National Biography, and has in that capacity to sit like a coroner's jury upon every dead author, and to decide whether his exploits are to be squeezed into one miserable paragraph, or may be allowed proudly to expand over a page – he, I say, pronounces *Pamela* to be neither moral nor amusing. Poor Pamela, who through two mortal volumes thinks of nothing but her virtue, and how to get married according to law! to be thus dismissed by her most recent, most distinguished editor! But, I repeat, we must take wide views. We must not be content with the verdict of the university; we must seek that of the kitchen: nor is the distance ever great between these institutions. Two months ago a cook in a family of my acquaintance, one Saturday evening, when like old Caspar 'her work was done,' suddenly bethought herself of *Pamela*, a book she had not read since girlhood. Rest was impossible – get it forthwith she must. The housemaid proffered her *The Heir of Redclyffe*, and the kitchen-maid, a somewhat oppressed damsel, timidly produced *Gates Ajar*. The cook was not to be trifled with after any such feeble fashion. The spell of *Pamela* was upon her, and out she sallied, arrayed in her majesty, to gratify her soul's desire. Had she been a victim of what is called 'Higher Education of Women,'

and therefore in the habit of frequenting orthodox bookshops, she would doubtless have found the quest at so late an hour as hopeless as that of the *Holy Grail*; but she was not that sort of person, and the shop she had in her mind, and whither she straightway bent her steps, was a small stationer's where are vended *Family Herald*s and *Ballads* and *Pamelas*; for the latter, in cheap sixpenny guise – and I hope complete, but for this I cannot vouch – is a book which is constantly reprinted for sale amongst the poor. The cook, having secured her prize, returned to her home in triumph, where a dinner worthy of the name was not to be had until Pamela's virtue was rewarded, which, as you doubtless remember, it only was when her master brings her a license and presses for a day. She desires it may be on a Thursday, and gives her reasons. He rallies her agreeably on that head. The Thursday following is fixed upon. She reflects seriously on the near prospect of her important change of condition, and is diffident of her own worthiness, and prays for humility that her new condition may not be a snare to her, and makes up her mind how to behave herself to the servants, she herself having been one.

There are well-authenticated instances of the extraordinary power *Pamela* possesses of affecting those who are not much in the habit of reading. There is a story of its being read aloud by a blacksmith round his anvil night after night, to a band of eager rustics, all dreadfully anxious good Mr. Richardson would only move on a little faster, and yet unwilling to miss a single one

of poor Pamela's misadventures; and of their greeting by hearty rounds of British cheers, the happy issue out of her afflictions that awaits her, namely, her marriage with the cause of every one of them.

There are living writers who have written some admirable novels, and I have known people to be glad when they were finished, but never to the pitch of three times three.

I am not, of course, recommending anyone to read *Pamela*; to do so would be an impertinence. You have all done so, or tried to do so. 'I do not remember,' says Charles Lamb, 'a more whimsical surprise than having been once detected by a familiar damsel, reclining at my ease upon the grass on Primrose Hill, reading *Pamela*. There was nothing in the book to make a man seriously ashamed at the exposure; but as she seated herself down by me, and seemed determined to read in company, I could have wished it had been – any other book. We read on very socially for a few pages; and not finding the author much to her taste, she got up and went away. Gentle casuist, I leave it to thee to conjecture whether the blush (for there was one between us) was the property of the nymph or the swain in the dilemma. From me you shall never learn the secret.'¹

Miss Pamela Andrews was, to tell the truth, a vulgar young person. There is nothing heroic or romantic about her; she has not a touch or a trace of the moral sublimity of Jeannie Deans, who though of the same rank of life, belonged to another country and

¹ *Last Essays of Elia*, 52.

had had an entirely different up-bringing. What a reply was that of Jeannie's to the Rev. Mr. Staunton, George Robertson's father, when he, entirely misapprehending the purport of her famous journey, lets her perceive that he fancies she is plotting for her own marriage with his son. Says the father to the son: 'Perhaps you intend to fill up the cup of disobedience and profligacy by forming a low and disgraceful marriage; but let me bid you beware.' 'If you were feared for sic a thing happening with me, sir,' said Jeannie, 'I can only say that not for all the land that lies between the twa ends of the rainbow, wad I be the woman that should wed your son.' 'There is something very singular in all this,' said the elder Staunton; and so Pamela would have thought. She, honest girl that she was, was always ready to marry anybody's son, only she must have the marriage lines to keep in her desk and show to her dear parents.

The book's origin ought not to be overlooked. Some London booksellers, knowing Mr. Richardson to be a grave man of decorous life, and with a talent for moralising, desired him to write a series of familiar letters on the behaviour of young women going out to service for the first time; they never intended a novel: they wanted a manual of conduct – that conduct which, according to a precise Arithmetician is three-fourths, or some other fraction, of human life. It was in this spirit that Richardson sat down to write *Pamela* and make himself famous. He had a facile pen, and the book, as it grew under his hand, outstripped its design, but never lost sight of it. It was intended for Pamelas, and

is *bourgeois* to the very last degree. The language is simple, but its simplicity is not the noble, soul-stirring simplicity of Bunyan, nor is it the manly simplicity of Cobbett or Hugh Miller: it is the ignoble, and at times almost the odious, simplicity of a merely uncultured life. It abounds in vulgar phrases and vulgar thoughts; still, it reflects powerfully the scenes it portrays, and you feel as you read a fine affinity between the communicating medium, the language, and the thing communicated, the story. When people said, in the flush of their first enthusiasm, as they did say, that there were but two good books in the world, the *Bible*, and *Pamela*, this is what, perhaps unconsciously they were thinking of; otherwise they were talking nonsense. Pamela spoke a language still understood of many, and if she was not romantic or high-flown, there are others like her. We are always well pleased, and it is perhaps lucky for the majority of novelists that it should be so, to read about people who do not in the least resemble us; still, anyone who describes us as we are, 'strikes the electric chain wherewith we are darkly bound,' and makes humanity quiver right down the centuries. Pamela was a vulgar little thing, and saucy withal: her notions of honour and dishonour were neither lofty nor profound; but she had them and stuck to them in perilous paths along which the defenceless of her sex are too often called to tread; and when finally her virtue is rewarded, and she is driven off in a chariot drawn by the four long-tailed mares upon whom she had been cruelly twitted for setting her affections, I for one am quite prepared to join with the rustics

round the blacksmith's anvil in loud cheers for Pamela.

Ten years after *Pamela* came *Clarissa*. It is not too much to say that not only Great Britain and Ireland, (the latter country not yet deprived of her liberties by the Act of Union, and therefore in a position to pirate popular authors, after the agreeable fashion of our American cousins,²) but also France, Germany, and Holland, simply gulped *Clarissa* down; and she was in seven volumes. It was a kind of gospel, something good and something new. Its author was a stout tradesman of sixty, but he was not in the very least degree what is now called – perhaps to the point of nausea – a Philistine. By a Philistine I suppose we must understand someone who lives and moves and has his being in the realm of ordinary stock conventional ideas – a man who is as blind to the future as he is deaf to the past. For example, that Dr. Drummond, Archbishop of York, who just about this very time told the Rev. Mr. Conyers, one of his clergy, 'that he would be better employed preaching the morality of Socrates than canting about the New Birth,' was a Philistine – I doubt not a very amiable one, but, being a Philistine, he had no chance of recognising what this nascent methodism was, and as for dreaming what it might become – had he been capable of this – he would not have been a Philistine or, probably, Archbishop of York!

Richardson on the other hand had his quiver full of new ideas; he had his face to the east; he was no mere inheritor, he was a progenitor. He is, in short, as has been often said, our

² Since abandoned, *Laus Deo!*

Rousseau; his characters were not stock characters. Think of Fielding's characters, his Tom Joneses and Booths, his Amelias and Sophias. They are stage properties as old as the Plantagenets. They are quite unidea'd, if I may use a word which, as applied to girls, has the authority of Dr. Johnson. Fielding's men are either good fellows with large appetites, which they gratify openly, or sneaks with equally large appetites, which they gratify on the sly; whilst the characters of his women are made to hinge solely upon their willingness or unwillingness to turn a blind eye. If they are ready to do this, they are angels; Sophia comes upon the stage in a chapter headed 'A short hint of what we can do in the sublime, and a description of Miss Sophia Western.' Poor neglected Amelia, whenever she is forgiving her husband, is described as 'all one blaze of beauty;' but if they are not willing to play this *rôle*, why then they are unsexed and held up to the ridicule and reprobation of all good fellows and pretty women. This sort of thing was abhorrent to the soul of the little printer; he hated Fielding's boisterous drunkards with an entire hatred. I believe he would have hated them almost as much if Fielding had not been a rival of his fame. He said he was not able to read any more than the first volume of *Amelia*, and as for *Tom Jones*, in the year 1750, he was audacious enough to say that its run was over. Regarded merely as writers, there can, I suppose, be no real rivalry between Fielding and Richardson. The superiority of Fielding is apparent on every page. Wit, good-humour, a superb lusty style which carries you along like a pair of horses over a

level moorland road, incidents, adventures, inns, and all the glory of motion, high spirits, huge appetites, pretty women – what a catalogue it makes of things no doubt smacking of this world and the kingdom thereof, but none the less delightful on that account! No wonder *Tom Jones* is still running; where, I should like to know, is the man bold enough to stop him. But for all this, Richardson was the more remarkable and really interesting man of the two; and for the reason that he was the evangel of the new sentimentalism, that word which so puzzled one of his most charming correspondents that she wrote to ask him what it meant – this new word sentimental which was just beginning to be in everybody's mouth. We have heard a good deal of it since.

Clarissa Harlowe has a place not merely amongst English novels, but amongst English women.

It was a new thing for a woman to be described as being not only in herself but by herself commendable and altogether lovely, as triumphing in her own right over the cruelest dishonour, and rejecting, with a noble scorn new to literature, the hand in marriage of the villain who had done her wrong. The book opened the flood-gates of human tears. The waters covered the earth. We cannot weep as they used to do in 'the brave days of old.'

Listen to the wife of a Lancashire baronet: 'I verily believe I have shed a pint of tears, my heart is still bursting though they cease not to flow at this moment, nor will I fear for some time... Had you seen me I surely should have moved your pity. When

alone in agonies would I lay down the book, take it up again, walk about the room, let fall a flood of tears, wipe my eyes, read again, perhaps not three lines, throw away the book, crying out: "Excuse me, good Mr. Richardson, I cannot go on, it is your fault, you have done more than I can bear;" threw myself upon my couch to compose; again I read, again I acted the same part, sometimes agreeably interrupted by my dear man, who was at that time labouring through the sixth volume with a heart capable of impressions equal to my own – tho' the effects shown in a more justifiable manner – which I believe may be compared to what Mr. Belfort felt when he found the beautiful sufferer in her prison-room. Something rose in my throat, I knew not what, which made me guggle as it were for speech.'

Nor did the men escape; a most grave and learned man writes: "That *Pamela* and *Clarissa* have again "obtained the *honour* of my perusal," do you say, my dear Mr. Richardson. I assure you I think it an *honour* to be able to say I have read, and as long as I have eyes will read, all your three most excellent *pieces* at least once a year, that I am capable of doing it with increasing pleasure which is perpetually doubled by the reflection, that this good man, this charming author, is *my friend*. I have been this day weeping over the seventh volume of *Clarissa* as if I had attended her dying bed and assisted at her funeral procession. Oh may my latter end be like hers!'

It is no wonder the author of *Clarissa* had soon a great correspondence with ladies, married and single, young and old,

virtuous and the reverse. Had he not written seven volumes, all about a girl? had he not made her beautiful, wise and witty and learned withal? had he not depicted with extraordinary skill the character of the fascinating – the hitherto resistless Lovelace, who, though accomplishing Clarissa's ruin does thereby but establish her triumph and confound himself? It is no doubt unhappily the case that far too many of Richardson's fair correspondents lacked the splendid courage of their master, and to his infinite annoyance fell in love with his arch-scamp, and prayed his creator that Lovelace might first be led to see the error of his ways, and then to the altar with the divine Clarissa. But the heroic printer was adamant to their cries, and he was right if ever man was. As well might *King Lear* end happily as *Clarissa Harlowe*.

The seven volumes caused immense talk and discussion, and it was all Clarissa, Clarissa, Clarissa. Sophia Western was, as we have seen, a comely girl enough, but she was as much like Clarissa as a ship in dock is like a ship at sea and on fire. What can you find to say of her or to her?³ When you have dug Tom Jones in the ribs, and called him a lucky dog, and wished her happy, you turn away with a yawn; but Clarissa is immense. Do you remember Thackeray's account in the *Roundabout Papers* of Macaulay's rhapsody in the Athenæum Club? 'I spoke to him

³ Richardson in a letter says this of her, 'the weak, the insipid, the runaway, the inn-frequenting Sophia;' and calls her lover 'her illegitimate Tom.' But nobody else need say this of Sophia, and as for Tom he was declared to be a foundling from the first.

once about *Clarissa*. "Not read *Clarissa*?" he cried out. "If you have once thoroughly entered on *Clarissa* and are infected by it, you can't leave off. When I was in India I passed one hot season at the hills, and there were the governor-general, the secretary of government, the commander-in-chief and their wives. I had *Clarissa* with me, and as soon as they began to read the whole station was in a passion of excitement about Miss Harlowe and her misfortunes, and her scoundrelly Lovelace. The governor's wife seized the book, and the secretary waited for it, and the chief justice could not read it for tears." He acted the whole scene, he paced up and down the Athenæum Library. I dare say he could have spoken pages of the book, of that book, and of what countless piles of others.'

I must be permitted to observe that lawyers have been great Richardsonians. The Rev. Mr. Loftus, writing to our author from Ireland, says: 'I will tell you a story about your sweet girl Pamela. Our late lord chancellor,⁴ who was a man more remarkable for the goodness of his heart than even for the abilities of his head, which were of the most exalted kind, was so struck with her history that he sat up reading it the whole night, although it was then the middle of term, and declared to his family he could not find it in his heart to quit his book, nor imagined it to be so late by many hours.'

The eminent Sergeant Hill, though averse to literature, used to set *Clarissa*'s will before his pupils, and bid them determine

⁴ Jocelyn, founder of the Roden peerage.

how many of its uses and trusts could be supported in court. I am sorry to have to add that in the learned serjeant's opinion, poor Clarissa, in addition to all her other misfortunes, died intestate.

All this commotion and excitement and Clarissa-worship meant that something was brewing, and that good Mr. Richardson, with his fat, round face flushed with the fire, had his ladle in the pan and was busy stirring it about. What is called the correspondence of Samuel Richardson, which was edited by that admirable woman, Mrs. Barbauld, and published in six volumes in 1804, is mostly made up, not of letters from, but to, the author of *Clarissa*. All the more effectually on that account does it let us into the manufactory of his mind. The letters a man receives are perhaps more significant of his real character than those he writes. People did not write to Mr. Richardson about themselves or about their business, or about literature, unless it were to say they did not like *Tom Jones*, or about politics, or other sports, but they wrote to him about himself and his ideas, his good woman, Clarissa, his good man, Sir Charles, and the true relation between the sexes. They are immense fun, these letters, but they ought also to be taken seriously; Mr. Richardson took them as seriously as he always took himself. There was, perhaps, only one subject Richardson regarded as of equal importance with himself, and that was the position of woman. This is why he hated Fielding, the triumphant, orthodox Fielding, to whom man was a rollicking sinner, and woman a loving slave. He pondered on this subject, until the anger within him imparts to his style

a virility and piquancy not usually belonging to it. The satire in the following extract from a letter he wrote to the good lady who shed a pint of tears over *Clarissa*, is pungent: 'Man is an animal that must bustle in the world, go abroad, converse, fight battles, encounter other dangers of seas, winds, and I know not what, in order to protect, provide for, maintain in ease and plenty, women. Bravery, anger, fierceness are made familiar to them. They buffet and are buffeted by the world; are impatient and uncontrollable; they talk of honour, run their heads against stone walls to make good their pretensions to it, and often quarrel with one another and fight duels upon any other silly thing that happens to raise their choler – their shadows if you please; while women are meek, passive, good creatures, who used to stay at home, set their maids at work, and formerly themselves, get their houses in order to receive, comfort, oblige, give joy to their fierce, fighting, bustling, active protectors, providers, maintainers, divert him with pretty pug's tricks, tell him soft tales of love, and of who and who's together, what has been done in his absence, bring to him little master, so like his own dear papa, and little pretty miss, a soft, sweet, smiling soul, with her sampler in her hand, so like what her meek mamma was at her years.'

You cannot, indeed, lay hold of many specific things which Richardson advocated. Ignorant of the classics himself, he was by no means disposed to advocate the teaching of them to women. *Clarissa*, indeed, knew Latin, but Harriet Byron did not. The second Mrs. Richardson was just a little bit too much for her

husband, and he was consequently led to hold what may be called 'high doctrine' as to the duty of wives obeying their husbands. Though never was man less of a revolutionary than Richardson, still he was on the side of the revolution. He had an ethical system different from that which stood beside him. This did not escape the notice of a keen-witted contemporary, the great Smollett, whose own Roderick Randoms and Peregrine Pickles are such unmitigated, high-coloured ruffians as to induce Sir Walter Scott to call him the Rubens of fiction, but who none the less had an eye for the future; he in his history speaks in terms of high admiration of the sublime code of ethics of the author of *Clarissa*. Richardson was fierce against duelling, and also against corporal punishment. He had the courage to deplore the evil effects produced by the works of Homer, 'that fierce, fighting *Iliad*,' as he called it. We may be sure his children were never allowed to play with tin soldiers, at least, not with their father's consent.

Having written *Clarissa* it became inevitable that Richardson should proceed further and write *Grandison*. In reading his correspondence we hail Sir Charles afar off. Richardson had deeply grieved to see how many of his ladies had fallen in love with the scoundrelly Lovelace. It wounded him to the quick, for he could not but feel that he was not in the least like Lovelace himself. He turns almost savagely upon some of his fair correspondents and upbraids them, telling them indeed plainly that he feared they were no better than they should be. They had

but one answer: 'Ah, dear Mr. Richardson, in *Clarissa* you have shown us the good woman we all would be. Now show us the good man we all should love.' And he set about doing so seriously, aye and humbly, too. He writes with a sad sincerity a hundred years cannot hide:

'How shall a man obscurely situated, never in his life delighting in public entertainments, nor in his youth able to frequent them from narrowness of fortune; one of the most attentive of men to the calls of business – his situation for many years producing little but prospects of a numerous family – a business that seldom called him abroad when he might in the course of it see and know a little of the world, as some employments give opportunities to do – naturally shy and sheepish, and wanting more encouragement by smiles to draw him out than anybody thought it worth their while to give him – and blest (in this he will say blest) with a mind that set him above dependence, and making an absolute reliance on Providence and his own endeavours – how I say, shall such a man pretend to describe and enter into characters in upper life?'

However, he set about it, and in 1754 produced *Sir Charles Grandison*, or as he had originally intended to call it, the *Good Man*, in six octavo volumes.

I am not going to say he entirely succeeded with his good man, who I know has been called an odious prig. I have read *Sir Charles Grandison* once – I cannot promise ever to read it again, and yet who knows what may happen? Sir Walter Scott, in his

delightful, good-humoured fashion, tells a tale of a venerable lady of his acquaintance, who, when she became subject to drowsy fits, chose to have *Sir Charles* read to her as she sat in her elbow chair in preference to any other work; because, said she, 'should I drop asleep in the course of the reading, I am sure when I awake I shall have lost none of the story, but shall find the party where I left them, conversing in the cedar-parlour.'

After *Sir Charles*, Richardson wrote no more. Indeed, there was nothing to write about, unless he had taken the advice of a morose clerical friend who wrote to him: 'I hope you intend to give us a bad woman – expensive, imperious, lewd, and, at last, a drammer. This is a fruitful and necessary subject which will strike and entertain to a miracle.' Mr. Richardson replied jocosely that if the Rev. Mr. Skelton would only sketch the she-devil for him, he would find room for her somewhere, and the subject dropped. The wife of the celebrated German poet, Klopstock, wrote to him in her broken English: 'Having finished your *Clarissa* (oh, the heavenly book!) I would prayed you to write the history of a manly *Clarissa*, but I had not courage enough at that time. I should have it no more to-day, as this is only my first English letter; but I am now Klopstock's wife, and then I was only the single young girl. You have since written the manly *Clarissa* without my prayer. Oh, you have done it to the great joy and thanks of all your happy readers! Now you can write no more. You must write the history of an Angel.'

The poor lady died the following year under melancholy

circumstances, but her prophecy proved true. Richardson wrote no more. He died in 1761, seventy-two years of age. His will, after directing numerous mourning-rings to be given to certain friends, proceeds as follows: 'Had I given rings to all the ladies who have honoured me with their correspondence, and whom I sincerely venerate for their amiable qualities, it would even in this last solemn act appear like ostentation.'

It now only remains to say two or three words about Richardson's great popularity abroad. Until quite recently, he and Sterne may be said to have been the only popular English authors abroad; perhaps Goldsmith should be added to the party. Foreigners never felt any difficulty about him or about the tradition he violated. The celebrated author of *Manon Lescaut* translated *Clarissa* into French, though it was subsequently better done by a less famous hand. She was also turned into German and Dutch. Foreigners, of course, could not be expected to appreciate the hopeless absurdity of a man who lived at Parson's Green attempting to describe the upper classes. Horace Walpole when in Paris did his best to make this plain, but he failed. Say what he might, *Clarissa* lay on the toilet tables of the French Princesses, and everybody was raving about her. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was also very angry. 'Richardson,' says she, writing to the Countess of Bute, 'has no idea of the manners of high life. Such liberties as pass between Mr. Lovelace and his cousins are not to be excused by the relation. I should have been much astonished if Lord Denbigh should

have offered to kiss me; and, I dare swear Lord Trentham never attempted such impertinence to you.' To the English reader these criticisms of Lady Mary's have immense value; but the French sentimentalist, with his continental insolence, did not care a sou what impertinences Lord Denbigh and Lord Trentham might or might not have attempted towards their female cousins. He simply read his *Clarissa* and lifted up his voice and wept: and so, to do her justice, did Lady Mary herself. 'This Richardson,' she writes, 'is a strange fellow. I heartily despise him and eagerly read him, nay, sob over his works in a most scandalous manner.'

The effect produced upon Rousseau by Richardson is historical. Without *Clarissa* there would have been no *Nouvelle Heloïse*, and had there been no *Nouvelle Heloïse* everyone of us would have been somewhat different from what we are.

The elaborate eulogy of Diderot is well-known, and though extravagant in parts is full of true criticism. One sentence only I will quote: 'I have observed,' he says, 'that in a company where the works of Richardson were reading either privately or aloud the conversation at once became more interesting and animating.' This, surely, is a legitimate test to which to submit a novel. You sometimes hear people say of a book, 'Oh, it is not worth talking about! I was only reading it.'

The great Napoleon was a true Richardsonian. Only once did he ever seem to take any interest in an Englishman. It was whilst he was first consul and when he was introduced to an officer called Lovelace, 'Why,' he exclaimed with emotion, 'that is the

name of the man in *Clarissa*!' When our own great critic, Hazlitt, heard of this incident he fell in love with Napoleon on the spot, and subsequently wrote his life in numerous volumes.

In Germany *Clarissa* had a great sale, and those of you who are acquainted with German sentiment, will have no difficulty in tracing a good deal of it to its original fountain in Fleet Street.

As a man, Richardson had perhaps only two faults. He was very nervous on the subject of his health and he was very vain. His first fault gave a great deal of trouble to his wives and families, his second afforded nobody anything but pleasure. The vanity of a distinguished man, if at the same time he happens to be a good man, is a quality so agreeable in its manifestations that to look for it and not to find it would be to miss a pleasure. When the French poet Boileau was invited to Versailles by Louis Quatorze, he was much annoyed by the vanity of that monarch. 'Whenever,' said he, 'the conversation left the king's doings' – and, let us guess, just approached the poet's verses – 'his majesty always had a yawning-fit, or suggested a walk on the terrace.' The fact is, it is not vanity, but contending vanities, that give pain.

As for those of you who cannot read Richardson's nineteen volumes, it can only be said you are a large and intelligent class of persons. You number amongst you poets like Byron – for I presume Byron is still among the poets – and philosophers like d'Alembert, who, when asked whether Richardson was not right in imitating Nature, replied, 'Yes, but not to the point of ennui.' We must not bear you malice or blacken your private characters.

On the other hand, you must not sneer at us or call us milksops. There is nothing to be proud of, I can assure you, in not being able to read *Clarissa Harlowe*, or to appreciate the genius which created Lovelace.

A French critic, M. Scherer, has had the audacity to doubt whether *Tristram Shandy* is much read in England, and it is commonly asserted in France that *Clarissa* is too good for us. *Tristram* may be left to his sworn admirers who could at any moment take the field with all the pomp and circumstance of war, but with *Clarissa* it is different. Her bodyguard is small and often in need of recruits. This indeed is my apology for the trouble I have put you to.

EDWARD GIBBON

A LECTURE

'It was at Rome, on the 15th of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the bare-footed fryars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter that the idea of writing the Decline and Fall of the City first started to my mind.

'It was on the day, or rather night, of the 27th of June, 1787, between the hours of eleven and twelve, that I wrote the last lines of the last page, in a summer-house in my garden. After laying down my pen I took several turns in a *berceau*, or covered walk of acacias, which commands a prospect of the country, the lake and the mountains. The air was temperate, the sky was serene, the silver orb of the moon was reflected from the waters and all nature was silent. I will not dissemble the first emotions of joy on recovery of my freedom and perhaps of the establishment of my fame. But my pride was soon humbled and a sober melancholy was spread over my mind by the idea that I had taken an everlasting leave of an old and agreeable companion, and that whatever might be the future date of my history, the life of the historian must be short and precarious.'

Between these two passages lies the romance of Gibbon's

life – a romance which must be looked for, not, indeed, in the volumes, whether the original quartos or the subsequent octavos, of his history – but in the elements which went to make that history what it is: the noble conception, the shaping intellect, the mastered learning, the stately diction and the daily toil.

Mr. Bagehot has declared that the way to reverence Gibbon is not to read him at all, but to look at him, from outside, in the bookcase, and think how much there is within; what a course of events, what a muster-roll of names, what a steady solemn sound. All Mr. Bagehot's jokes have a kernel inside them. The supreme merit of Gibbon's history is not to be found in deep thoughts, or in wide views, or in profound knowledge of human nature, or prophetic vision. Seldom was there an historian less well-equipped with these fine things than he. Its glory is its architecture, its structure, its organism. There it is, it is worth looking at, for it is invulnerable, indispensable, immortal. The metaphors which have been showered upon it, prove how fond people have been of looking at it from outside. It has been called a Bridge, less obviously an Aqueduct, more prosaically a Road. We applaud the design and marvel at the execution.

There is something mournful in this chorus of approbation in which it is not difficult to detect the notes of surprise. It tells a tale of infirmity both of life and purpose. A complete thing staggers us. We are accustomed to failure.

‘What act proves all its thought had been?’

The will is weak, opportunities are barren, temper uncertain and life short.

‘I thought all labour, yet no less,
Bear up beneath their unsuccess;
Look at the end of work: contrast
The petty done – the undone vast.’

It is Gibbon's triumph that he made his thoughts acts. He is not exactly what you call a pious writer, but he is provocative of at least one pious feeling. A sabbatical calm results from the contemplation of his labours. Succeeding scholars have read his history and pronounced it good. It is likewise finished. Hence this feeling of surprise.

Gibbon's life has the simplicity of an epic. His work was to write his history. Nothing else was allowed to rob this idea of its majesty. It brooked no rival near its throne. It dominated his life, for though a man of pleasure, and, to speak plainly, a good bit of a coxcomb, he had always the cadences of the *Decline and Fall* in his ears. It has been wittily said of him, that he came at last to believe that he was the Roman Empire, or, at all events, something equally majestic and imposing. His life had, indeed, its episodes, but so has an epic. Gibbon's episodes are interesting, abrupt, and always concluded. In his sixteenth year he, without the aid of a priest or the seductions of ritual, read himself into the Church of Rome, and was one fine June morning in 1753

baptized by a Jesuit father. By Christmas, 1754, he had read himself out again. Gibbon's conversion was perfectly genuine and should never be spoken of otherwise than respectfully, but it was entirely a matter of books and reading. 'Persons influence us,' cries Dr. Newman, 'voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us. Many a man will live and die upon a dogma; no man will be a martyr for a conclusion.' It takes all sorts to make a world, and our plump historian was one of those whose actions are determined in libraries, whose lives are unswayed by personal influences, to whom conclusions may mean a great deal, but dogmas certainly nothing. Whether Gibbon on leaving off his Catholicism ever became a Protestant again, except in the sense that Bayle declared himself one, is doubtful. But all this makes an interesting episode. The second episode is his well-known love affair with Mademoiselle Curchod, afterwards Madame Neckar and the mother of that social portent, Madame de Stael. Gibbon, of course, behaved badly in this affair. He fell in love, made known his plight, obtained mademoiselle's consent, and then speeded home to tell his father. 'Love,' said he, 'will make me eloquent.' The elder Gibbon would not hear of it: the younger tamely acquiesced. His very acquiescence, like all else about him, has become classical. 'I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son.' He proceeds: 'My wound was insensibly healed by time, absence and the habits of a new life.' It is shocking. Never, surely, was love so flouted before. Gibbon is charitably supposed by some persons to have regretted Paganism,

but it was lucky for both him and for me that the gods had abandoned Olympus, since otherwise it would have required the pen of a Greek dramatist to depict the horrors that must have eventually overtaken him for so impious an outrage; as it was, he simply grew fatter every day. A very recent French biographer of Madame Neckar, who has published some letters of Gibbon's for the first time, evidently expects his readers to get very angry with this perfidious son of Albion. It is much too late to get angry. Of all the many wrongs women suffer at the hands of men, that of not marrying them, is the one they ought to find it easiest to forgive; they generally do forgive. Madame Neckar forgave, and if she, why not you and I? Years after she welcomed Gibbon to her house, and there he used to sit, fat and famous, tapping his snuff-box and arranging his ruffles, and watching with a smile of complacency the infantine, yet I doubt not, the pronounced gambols of the vivacious Corinne. After Neckar's fall, Gibbon writes to Madame: 'Your husband's condition is always worthy of envy, he knows himself, his enemies respect him, Europe admires him, *you* love him.' I decline to be angry with such a man.

His long residence in Switzerland, an unusual thing in those days, makes a third episode, which, in so far as it led him to commence author in the French language, and to study Pascal as a master of style, was not without its effects on his history, but it never diverted him from his studies or changed their channels. Though he lived fifteen years in Lausanne, he never climbed

a mountain or ever went to the foot of one, for though not wholly indifferent to Nature, he loved to see her framed in a window. He actually has the audacity, in a note to his fifty-ninth chapter, to sneer at St. Bernard because that true lover of nature on one occasion, either because his joy in the external world at times interfered with his devotions, or, as I think, because he was bored by the vulgar rhapsodies of his monkish companions, abstained from looking at the lake of Geneva. Gibbon's note is characteristic, 'To admire or despise St. Bernard as he ought, the reader should have before the windows of his library the beauty of that incomparable landscape.' St. Bernard was to Gibbon, as Wordsworth to Pope,

‘A forest seer,
A minstrel of the natural year,
A lover true who knew by heart
Each joy the mountain dales impart.’

He was proud to confess that whatever knowledge he had of the scriptures he had acquired chiefly in the woods and the fields, and that beeches and oaks had been his best teachers of the Word of God. One cannot fancy Gibbon in a forest. But if Gibbon had not been fonder of the library than of the lake, though he might have known more than he did of 'moral evil and of good,' he would hardly have been the author he was.

But the *Decline and Fall* was threatened from a quarter more likely to prove dangerous than the 'incomparable landscape.' On

September 10th, 1774, Gibbon writes:

'Yesterday morning about half-past seven, as I was destroying an army of barbarians, I heard a double rap at the door and my friend Mr. Eliot was soon introduced. After some idle conversation he told me that if I was desirous of being in parliament he had an *independent* seat, very much at my service. This is a fine prospect opening upon me, and if next spring I should take my seat and publish my book – (he meant the first volume only) – it will be a very memorable era in my life. I am ignorant whether my borough will be Liskeard or St. Germans.'

Mr. Eliot controlled four boroughs and it was Liskeard that became Gibbon's, and for ten years, though not always for Liskeard, he sat in parliament. Ten most eventful years they were too, both in our national and parliamentary history. This might have been not an episode, but a catastrophe. Mr. Eliot's untimely entrance might not merely have postponed the destruction of a horde of barbarians, but have destroyed the history itself. However Mr. Gibbon never opened his mouth in the House of Commons; 'I assisted,' says he, in his magnificent way, 'at,' (mark the preposition,) 'at the debates of a free assembly,' that is, he supported Lord North. He was not from the first content to be a mute; he prepared a speech and almost made up his mind to catch Sir Fletcher Norton's eye. The subject, no mean one, was to be the American war; but his courage oozed away, he did not rise in his place. A month after he writes from Boodle's: 'I am still a mute, it is more tremendous than I imagined; the

great speakers fill me with despair, the bad ones with terror.' In 1779 his silent assistance was rewarded with a seat at the Board of Trade, and a salary of between seven and eight hundred a year. Readers of Burke's great speech on Economical Reform will remember the twenty minutes he devoted to this marvellous Board of Trade, with its perpetual virtual adjournment and unbroken sitting vacation. Such was Gibbon's passion for style that he listened to the speech with delight, and gives us the valuable assurance that it was spoken just as it reads, and that nobody enjoyed either hearing or reading it more than he did. What a blessing it is to have a good temper! But Gibbon's constituency did not approve of his becoming a minister's man, and he lost his seat at the general election of 1783. 'Mr. Eliot,' this is Gibbon's account of it, 'Mr. Eliot was now deeply engaged in the measures of opposition and the electors of Liskeard are commonly of the same opinion as Mr. Eliot.' Lord North found him another seat, and for a short time he sat in the new parliament for the important seaport of Lymington, but his office being abolished in 1784, he bade parliament and England farewell, and, taking his library with him, departed for Lausanne to conclude his history.

Gibbon, after completing his history, entertained notions of writing other books, but, as a matter of fact, he had but one thing left him to do in order to discharge his duty to the universe. He had written a magnificent history of the Roman Empire. It remained to write the history of the historian. Accordingly we

have the autobiography. These two immortal works act and react upon one another; the history sends us to the autobiography, and the autobiography returns us to the history.

The style of the autobiography is better than that of the history. The awful word 'verbose' has been launched against certain pages of the history by a critic, formidable and friendly – the great Porson. There is not a superfluous word in the autobiography. The fact is, in this matter of style, Gibbon took a great deal more pains with himself than he did with the empire. He sent the history, except the first volume, straight to his printer from his first rough copy. He made six different sketches of the autobiography. It is a most studied performance, and may be boldly pronounced perfect. Not to know it almost by heart is to deny yourself a great and wholly innocent pleasure. Of the history it is permissible to say with Mr. Silas Wegg, 'I haven't been, not to say right slap through him very lately, having been otherwise employed, Mr. Boffin;' but the autobiography is no more than a good-sized pamphlet. It has had the reward of shortness. It is not only our best, but our best known autobiography. Almost its first sentence is about the style it is to be in: 'The style shall be simple and familiar, but style is the image of character, and the habits of correct writing may produce without labour or design the appearance of art and study.' There is nothing artless or unstudied about the autobiography, but is it not sometimes a relief to exchange the quips and cranks of some of our modern writers, whose humour it is to be as it were

for ever slapping their readers in the face or grinning at them from unexpected corners, for the stately roll of the Gibbonian sentence? The style settled, he proceeds to say something about the pride of race, but the pride of letters soon conquers it, and as we glance down the page we see advancing to meet us, curling its head, as Shakespeare says of billows in a storm, the god-like sentence which makes it for ever certain, not indeed that there will never be a better novel than *Tom Jones*, for that I suppose is still just possible, but that no novel can ever receive so magnificent a compliment. The sentence is well known but irresistible.

'Our immortal Fielding was of the younger branch of the Earls of Denbigh who draw their origin from the Counts of Hapsburg. Far different have been the fortunes of the English and German divisions of the family. The former, the knights and sheriffs of Leicestershire, have slowly risen to the dignity of a peerage, the latter, the Emperors of Germany and Kings of Spain, have threatened the liberty of the old and invaded the treasures of the new world. The successors of Charles the Fifth may disdain their brethren of England, but the romance of *Tom Jones*, that exquisite picture of human manners, will outlive the Palace of the Escorial, and the imperial eagle of the House of Austria.'

Well might Thackeray exclaim in his lecture on Fielding, 'There can be no gainsaying the sentence of this great judge. To have your name mentioned by Gibbon is like having it written on the dome of St. Peter's. Pilgrims from all the world admire

and behold it.'

After all this preliminary magnificence Gibbon condescends to approach his own pedigree. There was not much to tell, and the little there was he did not know. A man of letters whose memory is respected by all lovers of old books and Elizabethan lyrics, Sir Egerton Brydges, was a cousin of Gibbon's, and as genealogies were this unfortunate man's consuming passion, he of course knew all that Gibbon ought to have known about the family, and speaks with a herald's contempt of the historian's perfunctory investigations. 'It is a very unaccountable thing,' says Sir Egerton, 'that Gibbon was so ignorant of the immediate branch of the family whence he sprang'; but the truth is that Gibbon was far prouder of his Palace of the Escurial, and his imperial eagle of the House of Austria, than of his family tree, which was indeed of the most ordinary hedge-row description. His grandfather was a South Sea director, and when the bubble burst he was compelled by act of parliament to disclose on oath his whole fortune. He returned it at £106,543 5s. 6d., exclusive of antecedent settlements. It was all confiscated, and then £10,000 was voted the poor man to begin again upon. Such bold oppression, says the grandson, can scarcely be shielded by the omnipotence of parliament. The old man did not keep his £10,000 in a napkin, and speedily began, as his grandson puts it, to erect on the ruins of the old, the edifice of a new fortune. The ruins must, I think, have been more spacious than the affidavit would suggest, for when only sixteen years afterwards, the elder Gibbon died he

was found to be possessed of considerable property in Sussex, Hampshire, Buckinghamshire, and the New River Company, as well as of a spacious house with gardens and grounds at Putney. A fractional share of this inheritance secured to our historian the liberty of action so necessary for the accomplishment of his great design. Large fortunes have their uses. Mr. Milton, the scrivener, Mr. Gibbon, the South Sea director, and Dr. Darwin of Shrewsbury had respectively something to do with *Paradise Lost*, *The Decline and Fall*, and *The Origin of Species*.

The most, indeed the only, interesting fact about the Gibbon *entourage* is that the greatest of English mystics, William Law, the inimitable author of *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life, adapted to the State and Conditions of all Orders of Christians*, was long tutor to the historian's father, and in that capacity accompanied the future historian to Emanuel College, Cambridge, and was afterwards, and till the end of his days, spiritual director to Miss Hester Gibbon, the historian's eccentric maiden aunt.

It is an unpleasing impertinence for anyone to assume that nobody save himself reads any particular book. I read with astonishment the other day that Sir Humphry Davy's *Consolations in Travel; or, The Closing Days of a Philosopher's Life*, was a curious and totally forgotten work. It is, however, always safe to say of a good book that it is not read as much as it ought to be, and of Law's *Serious Call* you may add, 'or as much as it used to be.' It is a book with a strange and

moving spiritual pedigree. Dr. Johnson, one remembers, took it up carelessly at Oxford, expecting to find it a dull book, 'as,' (the words are his, not mine,) 'such books generally are; but,' he proceeds, 'I found Law an overmatch for me, and this was the first occasion of my thinking in earnest.' George Whitfield writes, 'Soon after my coming up to the university, seeing a small edition of Mr. Law's *Serious Call* in a friend's hand, I soon purchased it. God worked powerfully upon my soul by that excellent treatise.' The celebrated Thomas Scott, of Aston Sandford, with the confidence of his school, dates the beginning of his spiritual life from the hour when he 'carelessly,' as he says, 'took up Mr. Law's *Serious Call*, a book I had hitherto treated with contempt.' When we remember how Newman in his *Apologia* speaks of Thomas Scott as the writer 'to whom, humanly speaking, I almost owe my soul,' we become lost amidst a mazy dance of strange, spectral influences which flit about the centuries and make us what we are. Splendid achievement though the *History of the Decline and Fall* may be, glorious monument though it is, more lasting than brass, of learning and industry, yet in sundry moods it seems but a poor and barren thing by the side of a book which, like Law's *Serious Call*, has proved its power

'To pierce the heart and tame the will.'

But I must put the curb on my enthusiasm, or I shall find myself re-echoing the sentiment of a once celebrated divine who

brought down Exeter Hall by proclaiming, at the top of his voice, that he would sooner be the author of *The Washerwoman on Salisbury Plain* than of *Paradise Lost*.

But Law's *Serious Call*, to do it only bare literary justice, is a great deal more like *Paradise Lost* than *The Washerwoman on Salisbury Plain*, and deserves better treatment at the hands of religious people than to be reprinted, as it too often is, in a miserable, truncated, witless form which would never have succeeded in arresting the wandering attention of Johnson or in saving the soul of Thomas Scott. The motto of all books of original genius is:

'Love me or leave me alone.'

Gibbon read Law's *Serious Call*, but it left him where it found him. 'Had not,' so he writes, 'Law's vigorous mind been clouded by enthusiasm, he might be ranked with the most agreeable and ingenious writers of his time.'

Upon the death of Law in 1761, it is sad to have to state that Miss Hester Gibbon cast aside the severe rule of female dress which he had expounded in his *Serious Call*, and she had practised for sixty years of her life. She now appeared like Malvolio, resplendent in yellow stockings. Still, it was something to have kept the good lady's feet from straying into such evil garments for so long. Miss Gibbon had a comfortable estate; and our historian, as her nearest male relative, kept his eye

upon the reversion. The fifteenth and sixteenth chapters had created a coolness, but he addressed her a letter in which he assured her that, allowing for differences of expression, he had the satisfaction of feeling that practically he and she thought alike on the great subject of religion. Whether she believed him or not I cannot say; but she left him her estate in Sussex. I must stop a moment to consider the hard and far different fate of Porson. Gibbon had taken occasion to refer to the seventh verse of the fifth chapter of the First Epistle of St. John as spurious. It has now disappeared from our Bibles, without leaving a trace even in the margin. So judicious a writer as Dean Alford long ago, in his Greek Testament, observed, 'There is not a shadow of a reason for supposing it genuine.' An archdeacon of Gibbon's period thought otherwise, and asserted the genuineness of the text, whereupon Porson wrote a book and proved it to be no portion of the inspired text. On this a female relative who had Porson down in her will for a comfortable annuity of £300, revoked that part of her testamentary disposition, and substituted a paltry bequest of £30: 'for,' said she, 'I hear he has been writing against the Holy Scriptures.' As Porson only got £16 for writing the book, it certainly cost him dear. But the book remains a monument of his learning and wit. The last quarter of the annuity must long since have been paid.

Gibbon, the only one of a family of five who managed to grow up at all, had no school life; for though a short time at Westminster, his feeble health prevented regularity of

attendance. His father never won his respect, nor his mother (who died when he was ten) his affection. 'I am tempted,' he says, 'to enter my protest against the trite and lavish praise of the happiness of our boyish years which is echoed with so much affectation in the world. That happiness I have never known.' Upon which passage Ste. Beuve characteristically remarks 'that it is those who have been deprived of a mother's solicitude, of the down and flower of tender affection, of the vague yet penetrating charm of dawning impressions, who are most easily denuded of the sentiment of religion.'

Gibbon was, however, born free of the 'fair brotherhood' Macaulay so exquisitely described in his famous poem, written after the Edinburgh election. Reading became his sole employment. He enjoyed all the advantages of the most irregular of educations, and in his fifteenth year arrived at Oxford, to use his celebrated words, though for that matter almost every word in the *Autobiography* is celebrated, with a stock of erudition that might have puzzled a doctor, and a degree of ignorance of which a schoolboy would have been ashamed – for example, he did not know the Greek alphabet, nor is there any reason to suppose that he would have been taught it at Oxford.

I do not propose to refer to what he says about his university. I hate giving pain, besides which there have been new statutes since 1752. In Gibbon's time there were no public examinations at all, and no class-lists – a Saturnian reign which I understand it is now sought to restore. Had Gibbon followed his father's

example and gone to Cambridge, he would have found the Mathematical Tripos fairly started on its beneficent career, and might have taken as good a place in it as Dr. Dodd had just done, a divine who is still year after year referred to in the University Calendar as the author of *Thoughts in Prison*, the circumstance that the thinker was later on taken from prison, and hung by the neck until he was dead being no less wisely than kindly omitted from a publication, one of the objects of which is to inspire youth with confidence that the path of mathematics is the way to glory.

On his profession of Catholicism, Gibbon, *ipso facto* ceased to be a member of the university, and his father, with a sudden accession of good sense, packed off the young pervert, who at that time had a very big head and a very small body, and was just as full of controversial theology as he could hold, to a Protestant pastor's at Lausanne, where in an uncomfortable house, with an ill-supplied table and a scarcity of pocket-money, the ex-fellow-commoner of Magdalen was condemned to live from his sixteenth to his twenty-first year. His time was mainly spent in reading. Here he learnt Greek; here also he fell in love with Mademoiselle Curchod. In the spring of 1758 he came home. He was at first very shy, and went out but little, pursuing his studies even in lodgings in Bond Street. But he was shortly to be shaken out of his dumps, and made an Englishman and a soldier.

If anything could provoke Gibbon's placid shade, it would be the light and airy way his military experiences are often spoken of, as if, like a modern volunteer, he had but attended an Easter

Monday review. I do not believe the history of literature affords an equally striking example of self-sacrifice. He was the most sedentary of men. He hated exercise, and rarely took any. Once after spending some weeks in the summer at Lord Sheffield's country place, when about to go, his hat was missing. 'When,' he was asked, 'did you last see it?' 'On my arrival,' he replied. 'I left it on the hall-table; I have had no occasion for it since.' Lord Sheffield's guests always knew that they would find Mr. Gibbon in the library, and meet him at the dinner-table. He abhorred a horse. His one vocation, and his only avocation, was reading, not lazy glancing and skipping, but downright savage reading – geography, chronology, and all the tougher sides of history. What glorious, what martial times, indeed, must those have been that made Mr. Gibbon leap into the saddle, desert his books, and for two mortal years and a half live in camps! He was two months at Blandford, three months at Cranbrook, six months at Dover, four months at Devizes, as many at Salisbury, and six more at Southampton, where the troops were disbanded. During all this time Captain Gibbon was energetically employed. He dictated the orders and exercised the battalion. It did him a world of good. What a pity Carlyle could not have been subjected to the same discipline! The cessation, too, of his habit of continued reading, gave him time for a little thinking, and when he returned to his father's house, in Hampshire, he had become fixed in his determination to write a history, though of what was still undecided.

I am rather afraid to say it, for no two men could well be more unlike one another, but Gibbon always reminds me in an odd inverted way of Milton. I suppose it is because as the one is our grandest author, so the other is our most grandiose. Both are self-conscious and make no apology – Milton magnificently self-conscious, Gibbon splendidly so. Everyone knows the great passages in which Milton, in 1642, asked the readers of his pamphlet on the reason of Church government urged against prelacy, to go on trust with him for some years for his great unwritten poem, as 'being a work not to be raised from the heat of youth or the vapour of wine, like that which flows at waste from the pen of some vulgar amorist or the trencher fury of a rhyming parasite, nor to be obtained by the invocation of Dame Memory and her seven daughters, but by devout prayer to that Eternal Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out His seraphim with the hallow'd fire of His Altar to touch and purify the lips of whom He pleases: to this must be added industrious and select reading, study, observation and insight into all seemly opinions, arts, and affairs.' Different men, different minds. There are things terrestrial as well as things celestial. Certainly Gibbon's *Autobiography* contains no passages like those which are to be found in Milton's pamphlets; but for all that he, in his mundane way, consecrated himself for his self-imposed task, and spared no toil to equip himself for it. He, too, no less than Milton, had his high hope and his hard attempting. He tells us in his stateliest way how he first thought of one subject,

and then another, and what progress he had made in his different schemes before he abandoned them, and what reasons induced him so to do. Providence watched over the future historian of the Roman Empire as surely as it did over the future author of *Paradise Lost*, as surely as it does over everyone who has it in him to do anything really great. Milton, we know, in early life was enamoured of King Arthur, and had it in his mind to make that blameless king the hero of his promised epic, but can brook a moment's comparison with the baffled hero of *Paradise Lost*; so too, what a mercy that Gibbon did not fritter away his splendid energy, as he once contemplated doing, on Sir Walter Raleigh, or squander his talents on a history of Switzerland or even of Florence!

‘What resounds

In fable or romance of Uther's son,

Begirt with British and Amoric knights,’

After the disbanding of the militia Gibbon obtained his father's consent to spend the money it was originally proposed to lay out in buying him a seat in Parliament, upon foreign travel, and early in 1763 he reached Paris, where he abode three months. An accomplished scholar whose too early death all who knew him can never cease to deplore, Mr. Cotter Morison, whose sketch of Gibbon is, by general consent, admitted to be one of the most valuable books of a delightful series, does his best, with but partial success, to conceal his annoyance at Gibbon's stupidly

placid enjoyment of Paris and French cookery. 'He does not seem to be aware,' says Mr. Morison, 'that he was witnessing one of the most singular social phases which have ever yet been presented in the history of man.' Mr. Morison does not, indeed, blame Gibbon for this, but having, as he had, the most intimate acquaintance with this period of French history, and knowing the tremendous issues involved in it, he could not but be chagrined to notice how Gibbon remained callous and impervious. And, indeed, when the Revolution came it took no one more by surprise than it did the man who had written the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Writing, in 1792, to Lord Sheffield, Gibbon says, 'Remember the proud fabric of the French monarchy: not four years ago it stood founded, and might it not seem on the rock of time, force, and opinion, supported by the triple authority of the Church, the Nobility, and the Parliament?' But the Revolution came for all that; and what, when it did come, did it teach Mr. Gibbon? 'Do not, I beseech you, tamper with Parliamentary representation. If you begin to improve the Constitution, you may be driven step by step from the disfranchisement of Old Sarum to the King in Newgate; the Lords voted useless, the bishops abolished, the House of Commons *sans culottes*.' The importance of shutting off the steam and sitting on the safety-valve was what the French Revolution taught Mr. Gibbon. Mr. Bagehot says: 'Gibbon's horror of the French Revolution was derived from the fact that he had arrived at the conclusion that he was the sort of person a populace invariably kills.' An excellent reason, in my opinion,

for hating revolution, but not for misunderstanding it.

After leaving Paris Gibbon lived nearly a year in Lausanne, reading hard to prepare himself for Italy. He made his own handbook. At last he felt himself fit to cross the Alps, which he did seated in an osier basket planted on a man's shoulders. He did not envy Hannibal his elephant. He lingered four months in Florence, and then entered Rome in a spirit of the most genuine and romantic enthusiasm. His zeal made him positively active, though it is impossible to resist a smile at the picture he draws of himself 'treading with a lofty step the ruins of the Forum.' He was in Rome eighteen weeks; there he had, as we saw at the beginning, his heavenly vision, to which he was not disobedient. He paid a visit of six weeks' duration to Naples, and then returned home more rapidly. 'The spectacle of Venice,' he says, 'afforded some hours of astonishment.' Gibbon has sometimes been called 'long-winded,' but when he chooses, nobody can be shorter with either a city or a century.

He returned to England in 1765, and for five rather dull years lived in his father's house in the country or in London lodgings. In 1770 his father died, and in 1772 Gibbon took a house in Bentinck Street, Manchester Square, filled it with books – for in those days it must not be forgotten there was no public library of any kind in London – and worked hard at his first volume, which appeared in February, 1775. It made him famous, also infamous, since it concluded with the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters on Christianity. In 1781 two more volumes appeared. In 1783 he

gave up Parliament and London, and rolled over Westminster Bridge in a post-chaise, on his way to Lausanne, where he had his home for the rest of his days. In May, 1788, the three last volumes appeared. He died in St. James's Street whilst on a visit to London, on the 15th of January, 1794, of a complaint of a most pronounced character, which he had with characteristic and almost criminal indolence totally neglected for thirty years. He was buried in Fletching Churchyard, Sussex, in the family burial-place of his faithful friend and model editor, the first Lord Sheffield. He had not completed his fifty-eighth year.

Before concluding with a few very humble observations on Gibbon's writings, something ought to be said about him as a social being. In this aspect he had distinguished merit, though his fondness of, and fitness for, society came late. He had no schooldays, no college days, no gilded youth. From sixteen to twenty-one he lived poorly in Lausanne, and came home more Swiss than English. Nor was his father of any use to him. It took him a long time to rub off his shyness; but the militia, Paris, and Rome, and, above all, the proud consciousness of a noble design, made a man of him, and after 1772, he became a well-known figure in London society. He was a man of fashion as well as of letters. In this respect, and, indeed, in all others, except their common love of learning, he differed from Dr. Johnson. Lords and ladies, remarked that high authority, don't like having their mouths shut. Gibbon never shut anybody's mouth, and in Johnson's presence rarely opened his own. Johnson's dislike of

Gibbon does not seem to have been based upon his heterodoxy, but his ugliness. 'He is such an amazing ugly fellow,' said that Adonis. Boswell follows suit, and, with still less claim to be critical, complains loudly of Gibbon's ugliness. He also hated him very sincerely. 'The fellow poisons the whole club to me,' he cries. I feel sorry for Boswell, who has deserved well of the human race. Ironical people like Gibbon are rarely tolerant of brilliant folly. Gibbon, no doubt, was ugly. We get a glance at him in one of Horace Walpole's letters, which, sparkling as it does with vanity, spite, and humour, is always pleasant. He is writing to Mr. Mason:

'You will be diverted to hear that Mr. Gibbon has quarrelled with me. He lent me his second volume in the middle of November; I returned it with a most civil panegyric. He came for more incense. I gave it, but, alas! with too much sincerity; I added: "Mr. Gibbon, I am sorry *you* should have pitched on so disgusting a subject as the Constantinopolitan history. There is so much of the Arians and Eunomians and semi-Pelagians; and there is such a strange contrast between Roman and Gothic manners, that, though you have written the story as well as it could be written, I fear few will have patience to read it." He coloured, all his round features squeezed themselves into sharp angles; he screwed up his button-mouth, and rapping his snuff-box, said, "It had never been put together before" – so *well* he meant to add, but gulped it. He meant so *well*, certainly, for Tillemont, whom he quotes in every page, has done the very

thing. Well, from that hour to this, I have never seen him, though he used to call once or twice a week; nor has he sent me the third volume, as he promised. I well knew his vanity, even about his ridiculous face and person, but thought he had too much sense to avow it so palpably.' 'So much,' adds Walpole, with sublime nescience of the verdict of posterity upon his own most amusing self, 'so much for literature and its fops.'

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