

Charlotte Roberts, *Edward Gibbon and the Shape of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 185. ISBN 9780198704836.

The dominant vision of a monumental, indeed monolithic, Gibbon, a model of Enlightenment rationality (a vision which owes much to Gibbon's friend and executor Lord Sheffield) has in recent years received significant qualification. David Womersley, Peter Ghosh and others have highlighted the developmental processes through which *Decline and Fall* was continuously transformed up to the publication of its final installment in 1788. Roberts' sinewy monograph takes a more radical approach, probing fissures in the polished surface of Gibbon's ironic prose. Tonal instability emerges as a dominant trait of the *Decline and Fall* and indeed of Gibbon's (multiply reworked) *Memoirs*. Negotiating a volatile position, shifting between detachment and sympathy, Roberts's Gibbon articulates the shifting complexity of his own – and his reader's – engagement with the past.

How the historian deals with character – both his own and that of those who feature in his history – is the concern of Roberts's Chapter 1. Gibbon's history and his memoirs, also, inflected by contemporary debates about epistemology and the nature of personal identity, are characterised both by a focus on the heroic, indeed transcendent, individual and an increasing concern with the social and cultural conditions by which individuals are shaped and constrained. Gibbon himself and many of those who figure in his history thus appear curiously discontinuous and provisional.

Roberts's sensitivity to the linguistic texture of Gibbon's narrative also informs her portrayal of its overall shape. She traces the operation of some key figures to convincing effect: 'equivalence' in Chapter 2's analysis of volume 1, 'inheritance' in Roberts's treatment of volumes 2 and 3 (the second installment of *Decline and Fall*, discussed in Chapter 3), and 'repetition', in her discussion of the final installment (volumes 4, 5 and 6, which constitute the focus of Chapter 4). Here Roberts tracks some of the ways in which Gibbon implicitly takes issue with the idea of history as teaching by example, an idea associated with ancient historians such as Livy but also, in a rather different way, with the eighteenth-century *philosophes*. Sensitive though he is to the variety of the specific, Gibbon equally distances himself from the position of the *érudits* (with their focus on antiquarian detail). His writing constantly renegotiates the balance between rationality, totalising explanation, grand pattern, on the one hand, and, on the other, the often puzzling or inexplicable irruption of the local, the particular, the personal. For Gibbon, on Roberts's reading, it is precisely the precarious nature of this balance, which gives drive both to societies (past and present) and to the historian's treatment of them. Increasingly, heroic character functions as a disruptive force in Gibbon's narrative. Yet such disruptions impart a welcome, indeed necessary, energy.

Roberts's analysis homes in particularly on those moments when Gibbon appears to revise or amend his position. As she trenchantly underlines, the reader of subsequent installments is not the same as the reader of volume 1. Later volumes deliberately play on expectations set up in the first, subtly modulating the more sustained ironies of Gibbon's earlier chapters. Roberts highlights the disturbing degree of detachment expressed by the figure of the philosophic narrator in relation to the crimes of the Empress Irene in Volume 5. Such indifference is explicitly problematized in Chapter 10 of Volume 1. To the alert reader, recollecting this earlier passage, the contrast serves as a demonstration of the potentially damaging effect of the spectacle of the empire's decline and fall on the humanity of the historian-observer.

Roberts rightly notes Gibbon's suggestive ambivalence towards Virgil's *Aeneid* as a product of the Rome of Augustus but perhaps plays down the degree to which he engages with the writings of other classical authors, particularly Tacitus. Tacitus, of course, is a master of the ironic alternative, especially in relation to the motivation of individuals, a tactic

so frequently deployed by Gibbon. If Gibbon's assessment of Julian's character is 'anti-classical in its ambivalence' (29), the same might be said of Tacitus' treatment of numerous key figures (notably Otho, Germanicus, Seneca).

Architectural metaphors, as Roberts emphasises in Chapter 5, are of critical importance in Gibbon's work. The tyranny of individual emperors is repeatedly assimilated to monumental construction. Though *Decline and Fall* seems at times to aspire to its own kind of monumentality, Gibbon, in aligning himself with Hannibal or sympathising with Alaric, whose intentions towards Rome are hostile and destructive, signals the ways in which the historian's creativity is necessarily implicated in Rome's destruction – like the glorious new structure of St Peter's, perhaps, built from the ruined monuments of antiquity. Fragmentation can serve, too, as a figure for personal liberation; the multiple and incomplete *Memoirs*, in yielding a fragmented version of the historian, disclose his resistance to the tyranny of paternal authority. Roberts's reading of Gibbon is a fine, subtle and largely compelling one, offering important new insights into the potent ambiguities of his writing.

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