

The “Exasperating Predecessor”: Pocock on Gibbon and Voltaire

Pierre Force

With these comments I would like to pull one thread in the monumental tapestry that is *Barbarism and Religion*. This thread is the relationship between the *Decline and Fall* and Voltaire’s oeuvre, particularly the *Essai sur les moeurs*, which Gibbon quotes as *Histoire générale*. In the multifaceted context that Pocock reconstructs for the *Decline and Fall* there are of course many other aspects. Pocock’s treatment of Voltaire runs about ninety pages in volume 2 (pp. 72–159), and Voltaire appears briefly in many other places. This is quite substantial in absolute terms, but in a six-volume set it is relatively little. Yet Pocock shows that understanding Gibbon’s highly ambiguous appraisal of Voltaire may be the clearest path toward understanding Gibbon’s overall purpose.

GIBBON ON VOLTAIRE: AN AMBIGUOUS APPRAISAL

Pocock stresses the fundamental importance of Voltaire for Gibbon: “It is impossible to believe that the reading of Voltaire’s historical *oeuvre* was of other than vast importance to Gibbon, whenever and by what stages he carried it out.”¹ Voltaire had a unique role in that respect. No one else, “not even Montesquieu” had “displayed the enlightened narrative to him

¹ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, *Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 156.

with such breadth and fullness.”² No one else had shown that this narrative “could be constructed by means of a history of manners at once erudite and philosophical.”³ However, Voltaire was ultimately disappointing because he was philosophical but not erudite. He showed great imagination and generally sound judgment in displaying the “enlightened narrative” but he kept his sources and methods to himself, leaving readers unable to judge these things for themselves:

The imagination and the judgment, Gibbon once wrote, were the salient qualities of the scholar and consequently the historian; and the judgment must be openly exercised, in a context of shared knowledge and shared language, before it could be of value or of use. If Voltaire would not share his sources or his methods with others, it became doubtful whether he respected their judgment or even his own.⁴

Voltaire is irritating to Gibbon (and perhaps to Pocock as well) primarily for reasons of method (I am using the historical present as Pocock does). He has no footnotes and hardly ever discusses his sources. He is also excessively and dogmatically skeptical, unlike Hume, who knew how to turn skepticism against itself. In particular, when a historical fact conflicts with his anticlerical agenda, his kneejerk reaction is to reject it as a fabrication. A famous example is the presence of Nestorian Christianity in medieval China. Because in Voltaire’s world-historical scheme Chinese civilization developed in isolation from other civilizations, the presence of Christians on the borders of China in the Middle Ages must be a Jesuit invention, and the Nestorian Stele must be a fake. As Gibbon puts it, “La Croze, Voltaire . . . become the dupes of their own cunning, while they are afraid of a Jesuitical fraud.”⁵ Gibbon, for his part, sees no reason to doubt the authenticity of this document, and refers to the volume and page number of the publications of the Académie des inscriptions, where the Stele is transcribed, authenticated, and translated. Similarly, because he wants to destroy a legend about the existence of Christian martyrs in a Roman

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Barbarism and Religion*, 2:157.

⁵ Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols. (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1776–1788), 4:598, n. 119. See *Barbarism and Religion*, 2:113–19.

legion, Voltaire denies the existence of the legion itself, even though it is attested by good sources: “The zeal of M. de Voltaire to destroy a despicable though celebrated legend has tempted him on the slightest grounds to deny the existence of a Thebaean legion in the Roman armies.”⁶ Another example of Voltaire’s bias is his disingenuous praise of Islam, which is polemically aimed at discrediting Christianity. Voltaire praises a Turkish prince who retired to a monastery and calls him *le philosophe turc*. Gibbon seizes on this detail and notices that Voltaire would have never said such a thing about a Christian prince. He adds: “In his way Voltaire was a bigot, an intolerant bigot.”⁷

In Pocock’s treatment of Voltaire, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between Gibbon’s judgment and Pocock’s own judgment. In a few places, Pocock lauds Voltaire’s “historical intelligence.” For instance, Voltaire’s assertion that “the inundation of barbarism” was not universal in medieval Christianity earns Pocock’s praise:

This passage shows Voltaire’s historical intelligence at its broadest and most subtle . . . Beyond the recognition that we do not rise above our age, and that *moeurs* exercise a primacy over *le génie*, ‘nous’—it is not ‘vous’ this time—are being advised that even popes may govern cities and benignly exercise *la police*.⁸

Pocock comments favorably on Voltaire’s point that individual examples of genius or virtue cannot trump the spirit of the age. He also approves of Voltaire’s admission that the current government of Rome by the popes is decent and well ordered. He adds that Voltaire may have ulterior motives in making this assessment, which can be read as an endorsement of the dissolution of the Jesuit order by the pope. In this instance, Voltaire ought to be praised for finding the right balance between excessive severity and excessive indulgence. Similarly, Voltaire’s exclamation about the disasters of the fourteenth century: “Such were the times! And we still complain about ours!” earns the following comment: “These words indicate the limits within which Voltaire was and was not a historian.”⁹ If I understand Pocock’s judgment correctly, Voltaire was a historian because he understood the difference between the *moeurs* of his time and those of the

⁶ *Decline and Fall*, 2:135, n. 23.

⁷ *Decline and Fall*, 4:442, n. 13. See *Barbarism and Religion*, 2:156.

⁸ *Barbarism and Religion*, 2:132.

⁹ *Barbarism and Religion*, 2:129.

fourteenth century, but he was not a historian because he indulged in comparisons between the fourteenth century and his own.

In the final analysis, the difference in methods makes Gibbon a great historian and Voltaire a great intellect who may or may not qualify as a historian. One is reliable and the other is not. Pocock is quick to add that modern debates about historical objectivity should not be projected onto the comparison:

It was a question of reliability, but not altogether of objectivity; Gibbon knew what it was to see a beautiful hypothesis killed by a fact, but we are not on that account to see him as a Rankean before his time, or involve him in that most sterile of debates.¹⁰

According to Pocock, a fair comparison between the two should be framed in terms of early modern practices regarding the assessment of historical evidence. By this standard, Gibbon is clearly superior. We should notice in that respect that Gibbon enjoyed the respect of professional historians, including those of the Göttingen school, as Momigliano reminds us.¹¹ For Voltaire the same historians had only scorn. Schlözer accused Voltaire of errors, lies, and gross ignorance.¹²

MOMIGLIANO'S HYPOTHESIS

Pocock's analysis regarding the relationship between Voltaire and Gibbon develops a hypothesis that Arnaldo Momigliano sketched out some sixty years ago. Pocock mentions it briefly in volume 1 of *Barbarism and Religion*,¹³ and discusses it more extensively in the introduction to volume 2.¹⁴ He refers to it as the "Momiglianian model" in volume 6.¹⁵ In a 1954 article

¹⁰ *Barbarism and Religion*, 2:157.

¹¹ Arnaldo Momigliano, "Gibbon's Contribution to Historical Method," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 2, no. 4 (1954): 450–63, 450. The Göttingen reviewer nonetheless asserted the superiority of German source-criticism.

¹² August Ludwig Schlözer, *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, vol. 10 (1769), 254–55. See Gabriela Lehmann-Carli, "La critique par Schlözer de l'ouvrage de Voltaire *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand*," *Philologiques IV: Transferts culturels triangulaires France-Allemagne-Russie*, ed. Katia Dmitrieva and Michel Espagne (Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1996), 63–72; Pierre Force, "Voltaire and the Necessity of Modern History," *Modern Intellectual History* 6, no. 3 (2009): 457–84, 458.

¹³ *Barbarism and Religion*, 1:306.

¹⁴ *Barbarism and Religion*, 2:4–5.

¹⁵ *Barbarism and Religion*, 6:24.

on Gibbon's contribution to historical method, Momigliano argued that Gibbon's novelty was neither in his ideas nor in his methods. His ideas were philosophical and Voltairean. As to his criticism of sources, it was "the heir to a great tradition of learned studies,"¹⁶ illustrated in the eighteenth century by the *mémoires* of the Académie des inscriptions. The novelty was in the successful combination of philosophy and erudition, which had heretofore been practiced separately. In a series of lectures delivered at Berkeley ten years later, Momigliano took the hypothesis one step further and argued that the disconnect between philosophy and erudition was in many ways accidental. Bayle had shown in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* how the philosophical spirit could manifest itself in learned footnotes. Yet the most remarkable advances in source criticism came from Catholic scholars such as Mabillon and Le Nain de Tillemont. Suddenly, erudition was employed in the service of Catholic orthodoxy. As Momigliano puts it, "after Mabillon, Montfaucon, Tillemont, and Muratori, it was clearly difficult to accuse Catholics of being ignorant or uncritical."¹⁷ Since erudition no longer seemed to be unambiguously on the side of philosophy, the philosophes distanced themselves from it, and "Voltaire abolished footnotes altogether."¹⁸

The idea that Gibbon's strength is in the combination of philosophy and erudition does appear to match Gibbon's own assessment of the *Decline and Fall*. Or, to be precise, Gibbon's ideas about what constitutes the strength of his book appear in his assessment of other works. Alluding to a book by Jean-Baptiste Mably on the Crusades, Gibbon opines that "the lively skepticism of Voltaire is balanced with sense and erudition by the French author of the *Esprit des Croisades* . . ."¹⁹ A remark about a *mémoire* by Nicolas Fréret similarly sings the praises of the marriage between erudition and philosophy: "A dissertation of Freret (*Memoires de l'Academie des Inscriptions*, tom. X. p. 357–377) affords a happy union of philosophy and erudition."²⁰ We should also mention the passage from volume 1 of the *Decline and Fall* that Momigliano quotes as an epigraph to his 1954 article: "It is seldom that the antiquarian and the philosopher are so happily blended." The quote comes from an endnote in which Gibbon praises a *mémoire* of the Académie des inscriptions "on the origins and

¹⁶ Momigliano, "Gibbon's Contribution to Historical Method," 451.

¹⁷ Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 75.

¹⁸ Ibid. On footnotes and *philosophie*, see Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 94–121.

¹⁹ *Decline and Fall*, 6:58, n. 106.

²⁰ *Decline and Fall*, 4:323, n. 78.

migrations of nations.”²¹ The *mémoire* in question is an anonymous compilation and discussion of work by Nicolas Fréret on the methods for studying ancient history. The author of the *mémoire* argues that the successful study of ancient history must combine erudition and philosophy:

However, research of this kind [ancient history] is seldom fruitful not because of its subject matter but because of the manner in which it is examined. One proceeds without method, or one uses faulty methods. It is certain in any case that erudition does not suffice to bring about success in such difficult a study. If it is not led in its path by philosophical spirit it wanders off and goes astray.²²

We know that Gibbon read and appreciated this *mémoire* because he says so himself. This shows that the call to combine erudition and philosophy came from within the *érudit* tradition itself. Fréret (who was by most accounts a Spinozist) was also known as the author of an earlier *mémoire* that discussed the value and use of documents in ancient history. Advances in source criticism by Mabillon and other scholars had focused on archival sources like medieval charters kept in monasteries. Such documents were not available for earlier periods, which seemed to put the field of ancient history at a disadvantage. Fréret had argued that it was possible to make critical use of existing sources and to build a coherent narrative from the fragmentary information that was available.²³ Pocock does discuss Fréret, especially in his first volume, but he shows how Gibbon borrowed Fréret’s arguments for erudition *against* philosophy: erudition was to be defended against the “love of system.”²⁴ Fréret (and his anonymous commentator from the Académie des inscriptions) were arguably more important because they provided arguments that spoke to the central purpose of the *Decline and Fall*: they showed that it was possible to write ancient history in a

²¹ *Decline and Fall*, 1:xxxv, n. 86.

²² “Mais le peu de fruit qu’on tire souvent des recherches de ce genre [histoire ancienne] vient moins de la nature des objets que de la manière dont on les examine. On procède sans méthode, ou l’on se sert de méthodes vicieuses : il est certain cependant que l’érudition ne suffit pas pour réussir dans une étude si difficile ; et que si l’esprit philosophique ne la conduit dans sa marche, elle s’égare et se perd.” Nicolas Fréret, “Vues générales sur l’origine et le mélange des anciennes nations, et sur la manière d’en étudier l’histoire,” in *Histoire de l’Académie royale des inscriptions et belles-lettres*, vol. 18 (1753), 49–71.

²³ Nicolas Fréret, “Réflexions sur l’étude des anciennes histoires et sur le degré de certitude de leurs preuves,” *Mémoires de littérature tirés des registres de l’Académie royale des inscriptions et belles-lettres*, 8:229–99 (March 17, 1724). See Chantal Grell, *L’Histoire entre érudition et philosophie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1993), 84–93.

²⁴ *Barbarism and Religion*, 1:216–17; 234–36.

way that was intellectually defensible, and they called for the marriage of philosophy and erudition.

The other *érudit* on whom Gibbon relied, as Pocock reminds us, was the Jansenist scholar Le Nain de Tillemont:

He never ceased making fun of Tillemont for his adherence to Catholic tradition and authority, but never ceased to rely on his scrupulous accuracy in matters of document and fact. This reliance indeed came close to a dependence, as Gibbon did not deny. In his autobiographies he quoted and thereby endorsed, the judgment of a Göttingen reviewer of the completed *Decline and Fall*: *sine Tillemonte duce, saepius noster titubat atque hallucinatur*, and his ambivalence toward the orthodox scholar emerges in a description of Tillemont as ‘the sure-footed mule of the Alps [who] may be trusted in the most slippery paths.’²⁵

According to Pocock, for Tillemont’s “inexhaustible and nearly always successful pursuit of accuracy and verification,” Gibbon had “nothing but respect.”²⁶ There are few methodological pronouncements in Tillemont’s work, but we can find a brief one in the introduction to his ecclesiastical history. The church historian explains how one tells the difference between authentic documents and forgeries:

If one asks what rules were followed in distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic documents when the author is unknown, those who read the story of St. Polycarpus’s martyrdom, of the martyrs of Lyon in Eusebius, and those other stories that are generally accepted as true, will see that thanks to such reading one develops a taste that makes it possible to distinguish between what appears ancient and true and what smells of legend and popular tradition. Knowledge of history, of style, and of the discipline also allows one to tell the difference between what can have been written in a particular period and what can only be far removed.²⁷

²⁵ *Barbarism and Religion*, 5:48.

²⁶ *Barbarism and Religion*, 3:338.

²⁷ “Que si l’on demande quelles sont les règles par lesquelles on a prétendu discerner les pièces véritables des fausses, quand on n’en sait point les Auteurs; ceux qui auront lu l’histoire du martyr de S. Polycarpe, celle des martyrs de Lion dans Eusèbe, et les autres qui passent généralement pour incontestables, verront bien qu’en les lisant on se forme un goût pour discerner ce qui a cet air d’antiquité et de vérité, d’avec ce qui sent la fable

A general knowledge of history and a sensitivity to historically induced stylistic differences make it possible to tell whether a text is an authentic document from a particular period. Lorenzo Valla used similar techniques to determine that the donation of Constantine was a forgery. In that sense Gibbon was still relying on the unbroken humanist tradition of *artes historicae*.²⁸

Pocock argues that Momigliano's hypothesis, which relies on the opposition between philosophy and erudition, needs to be complicated with the addition of a third term: narrative. According to him, rightly to understand Momigliano's hypothesis, "we have to unpack the concept of philosophical narrative history, and see that beneath it lay a much older stratum of classical and neo-classical narrative, with which the philosophical had to effect a synthesis."²⁹ In this context Pocock refers to the work of Philip Hicks, who argued that "Clarendon and Hume explicitly imitated the ancient historians and were applauded for having done so."³⁰ Momigliano himself was sensitive to this aspect when he noted that Gibbon's history, "notwithstanding its reputation for naughtiness, is almost conventional in its solemnity and decorum. People educated by Plutarch to expect noble deeds and wise words were not disappointed."³¹ In sum, Pocock's argument is that in the combination of three terms—philosophy, erudition, and narrative—there were no necessary binaries. There was nothing necessary or preordained in the combination of philosophy and narrative, or in the combination of narrative and erudition.

GIBBON THE VOLTAIREAN

Pocock calls Voltaire "the exasperating predecessor,"³² and tells the story of how Gibbon succeeded where Voltaire failed. Now I would like to say a few words about the other side of that story.

ou la tradition populaire. La connaissance de l'histoire, du style, et de la discipline fait juger encore de ce qui peut avoir été écrit dans un temps, et de ce qui n'en peut être que fort éloigné." Le Nain de Tillemont, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique des six premiers siècles, justifiés par les citations des auteurs originaux*, vol. 1 (Brussels: Fricx, 1732), vii.

²⁸ See Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁹ *Barbarism and Religion*, 1:263.

³⁰ Philip Hicks, *Neoclassical History and English Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 211.

³¹ Momigliano, "Gibbon's Contribution to Historical Method," 459.

³² *Barbarism and Religion*, 2:153.

First, it is worth stressing again that Gibbon was broadly sympathetic to the enterprise of Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs*. Pocock quotes Gibbon's description of Voltaire as casting "a lively glance over the surface of history" and glosses it as symptomatic of Gibbon's ambivalent assessment: Voltaire's work was superficial, but it was ambitious in its scope, and it dealt with surface by design, since it was focused on *les mœurs*.³³ If we look at the context of Gibbon's judgment, it is not clear that "the surface of history" has pejorative connotations. Here is the full quotation: "Voltaire, who casts a keen and lively glance over the surface of history, has been struck by the resemblance of the first Moslems and the heroes of the Iliad; the siege of Troy and that of Damascus."³⁴ The expression may mean surface as opposed to depth, but it may also mean history in its fullest extension: universal, or, as we would say in modern lingo, global history. Because it is so ambitious in its scope, Voltaire's history can make connections between periods and cultures that are usually considered separately. In the eighteenth century, expressions like "the surface of the globe" or "la surface du monde" meant the world as a whole, without a connotation of superficiality. In addition, in displaying the "enlightened narrative," Gibbon borrowed Voltaire's own language. In the opening lines of the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon mentions "the gentle, but powerful influence of laws and manners," which "had gradually cemented the union of the provinces."³⁵ Gibbon's "manners" is a translation of Voltaire's "mœurs." Finally, even though Gibbon chastises Voltaire for taking his skepticism too far, there are many instances in which he goes along with it. About the iron cage in which Bajazet was imprisoned by Tamerlane, he writes: "The skepticism of Voltaire is ready on this, as on every occasion, to reject a popular tale, and to diminish the magnitude of vice and virtue; and on most occasions his incredulity is reasonable."³⁶ Similarly, discussing an anecdote regarding Mahomet II, Gibbon expresses his full agreement with Voltaire's disbelief: "With Voltaire, I laugh at the foolish story of a slave purposely beheaded, to instruct the painter in the action of the muscles."³⁷

As we have seen above, Pocock highlights the passages in which Voltaire shows some measure of indulgence for the lack of civilization of earlier periods. In other words, he endorses those passages in which Voltaire refrains from judging the past based on the values and criteria of the present. I would submit, however, that both Voltaire and Gibbon aimed at

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *Decline and Fall*, 5:301, n. 55.

³⁵ *Decline and Fall*, 1:1.

³⁶ *Decline and Fall*, 6:352, n. 46.

³⁷ *Decline and Fall*, 6:466, n. 7.

explaining the past in relation to the present, and this was perceived at the time as one of their fundamental contributions.³⁸ Between 1836 and 1848, Friedrich Christoph Schlosser, the standard-bearer of German academic history before the triumph of Ranke's school, published a cultural history of the eighteenth century that included a discussion of the history of historiography. He mentioned "the universal applause which Gibbon received, who by combining English industry and solidity with an education altogether French, first fully accomplished what Voltaire earnestly desired but was never able to attain."³⁹ So far the picture is a familiar one: Gibbon succeeded where Voltaire failed. However, Schlosser adds the following remark:

In one thing, however, Hume and Gibbon fully agreed,—they were the first historians, because like Voltaire they ventured it, who threw a light upon the life of the Middle Ages, not with the philosophy of the Middle Ages, but from the wisdom of the new period; and they were often unjust towards the Middle Ages, in order to benefit their own, by bringing their strong contrasts too conspicuously into view.⁴⁰

Schlosser chastised Hume, Gibbon, and Voltaire for their presentism and their excessive severity toward the dark ages, but if we dwell on this aspect we would miss the main point. The main contribution of philosophical history, which was initiated by Voltaire, was to explain the Middle Ages "from the wisdom of the new period."⁴¹

As we know, the words used in the title of Pocock's series, "barbarism and religion," are borrowed from Gibbon, but, as Pocock himself notices and Baridon noticed before him,⁴² this combination of words is already present in Voltaire. About the failure of Julian the Apostate to save the

³⁸ See Pierre Force, "Voltaire and the Necessity of Modern History" and "Croire ou ne pas croire: Voltaire et le pyrrhonisme de l'histoire," in *Érudition et fiction: Troisième rencontre internationale Paul-Zumthor*, ed. Eric Méchoulan (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014), 57–70.

³⁹ Friedrich Christoph Schlosser, *History of the Eighteenth Century and of the Nineteenth till the Overthrow of the French Empire, with Particular Reference to Mental Cultivation and Progress*, by F. C. Schlosser, Privy Councillor and Professor of History in the University of Heidelberg, vol. 2 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1844), 73 (Geschichte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts und des neunzehnten bis zum Sturz des französischen Kaiserreichs: mit besonderer Rücksicht auf geistige Bildung, vol. 2 [Heidelberg: Mohr, 1843]).

⁴⁰ Schlosser, *History of the Eighteenth Century*, 2:79–80.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Michel Baridon, *Edward Gibbon et le mythe de Rome* (Paris: Champion, 1977), 439.

declining Roman Empire, Voltaire writes: “Two scourges at length destroyed this great colossus, barbarians and disputes about religion.”⁴³ Pocock glosses the passage by saying that Voltaire offered an explanation “couched unequivocally if not profoundly in terms of the conjunction between barbarism and religion.”⁴⁴ The comment highlights the debt to Voltaire and downplays it at the same time, by invoking as above the distinction between superficiality and depth: the combination of terms had something accidental about it. This seems too harsh, since Voltaire’s chapter is precisely entitled “Causes of the Fall of the Roman Empire.” Momigliano makes an assessment that is much more clear-cut: “All [Gibbon’s] theory about the effects of the spreading of Christianity is an expanded version of what Voltaire wrote in two chapters (XI and XII) of the *Essai sur les mœurs*: ‘le christianisme ouvrait le ciel, mais il perdait l’empire’ [Christianity opened up the Heavens but it lost the Empire].”⁴⁵ I should add that Pocock convincingly argues that Gibbon changed his mind after the third volume of the *Decline and Fall* about the power of this explanation.⁴⁶

Voltaire’s rejection of antiquarianism and footnotes was deliberate, and in that sense it would be unfair to characterize it as a shortcoming in his method. Pocock points out that, unlike Voltaire, Robertson and Gibbon were close to “communities with a specialized discourse,” and therefore felt obliged to follow scholarly protocols: “Robertson was a divine, Gibbon was an admirer of the Académie des inscriptions.”⁴⁷ In addition, says Pocock, Voltaire was writing a cultural history, a fluid subject matter “not easily reducible to documentation and reference.”⁴⁸ All true, but Voltaire’s reasons could be expressed in a slightly different way. First, Voltaire was capable of writing footnotes. There are few footnotes in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, but in the *Siècle de Louis XIV* there are a significant number of footnotes, in which Voltaire occasionally discusses his sources. As to Voltaire’s relationship with “communities with a specialized discourse,” there is a letter to Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, which accompanies most modern editions of *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*. A Catholic priest, Du Bos was equally comfortable speaking the language of philosophy and the language of erudition,

⁴³ “Deux fléaux détruisirent enfin ce grand colosse, les barbares et les disputes de religion.” Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations* (II) in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 22 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009), 212.

⁴⁴ *Barbarism and Religion*, 2:122.

⁴⁵ Momigliano, “Gibbon’s Contribution to Historical Method,” 458.

⁴⁶ *Barbarism and Religion*, 6:493–95.

⁴⁷ *Barbarism and Religion*, 2:158.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

and was known in part for his work on the origins of the French monarchy.⁴⁹ In 1738 Voltaire sent him an early manuscript of the *Siècle* with a cover letter that discussed his sources (printed sources, archival records, and oral testimony). Voltaire concluded by expressing that his ambition was to write history “not as a flatterer, not as a panegyrist, not as a journalist, but as a philosopher.”⁵⁰ In his reply Du Bos recommended additional sources, and he noted that Voltaire had taken on a very difficult challenge: writing a short book on a vast subject matter. In most cases authors would be well advised to write shorter books, said Du Bos, but his advice to Voltaire was the opposite: “Multiply the scenes, because your Clío knows how to paint.”⁵¹ The exchange between Voltaire and Du Bos reads very much like a professional discussion between historians. For an explanation of the absence of footnotes in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, Pocock mentions the intended reader, Emilie du Châtelet, a noblewoman who showed “lordly impatience with trivia.”⁵² This is putting things negatively. Emilie du Châtelet’s dislike of details was related to a positive preference for a very specific kind of history, i.e., universal history. As Bossuet had demonstrated, a universal history should be short and without footnotes, because if the narrative was too long the connections could not be made and the big picture was lost.⁵³ In that sense, the absence of footnotes was simply a consequence of the genre in which Voltaire was writing. The same remark applies to Ranke: when he wrote a universal history at the end of his career he obeyed the conventions of the genre and used few footnotes.⁵⁴ It is worth mentioning that the edition of the *Essai sur les mœurs* that is currently being published as part of the complete works of Voltaire is a universal history with footnotes: the editors have retrieved Voltaire’s sources, which are discussed in detail at the bottom of each page.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ On the relationship between Gibbon and Du Bos, see *Barbarism and Religion*, 6:456–71.

⁵⁰ “Ni en flatteur, ni en panégyriste, ni en gazetier, mais en philosophe.” Letter from Voltaire to Du Bos, in *Œuvres historiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 605–7, 607.

⁵¹ “Multipliez plutôt le nombre de vos tableaux, car votre Clío sait peindre.” Jean-Baptiste Du Bos to Voltaire, December 3, 1738, *Voltaire’s Correspondence*, ed. Theodore Besterman, vol. 8 (Geneva, Institut et musée Voltaire, 1954), 5–7.

⁵² *Barbarism and Religion*, 2:103.

⁵³ Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, *Discourse on Universal History*, ed. and introduction by Orest Ranum (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1976) [*Discours sur l’histoire universelle* (Paris: Mabré-Cramoisy, 1681)].

⁵⁴ Leopold von Ranke, *Weltgeschichte*, 9 vols. (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1881–1888).

⁵⁵ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations*, in *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, vols. 22–26C (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009–2015).

Voltaire's apparent rejection of antiquarianism and erudition was driven by a positive preference for modern history. This preference stemmed first from methodological considerations: "Modern history has the advantage of being more certain, because of the very fact that it is modern."⁵⁶ This preference for modern history was shared by the British neo-classical historians and was consistent with the reaffirmation of the humanist *topos* of *historia magistra vitae*. Bolingbroke wrote about the "the more entire as well as more authentic histories of ages more modern" and stressed that only modern history could be called "magistra vitae." Ancient history could be "at best 'nuntia vetustatis,' the gazette of antiquity, or a dry register of useless anecdotes."⁵⁷ In addition, if the role of history was to display the "enlightened narrative," recent history ought to be preferred because it led up directly to the enlightened present. Referring to history since the end of the fifteenth century, Voltaire wrote:

Everything speaks to us; everything is done for us. The silver in which we dine, our furniture, our new needs and pleasures, everything reminds us every day that America and the Great Indies, i.e. all the parts of the entire world, have been joined for the past two-and-a-half centuries, thanks to the industry of our fathers. No matter where we go, we are reminded of the change that has taken place in the world.⁵⁸

For this reason, "the history of recent times" was "a matter of necessity," while ancient history was "only a matter of curiosity."⁵⁹

These statements can easily be read as expressing hostility towards erudition (or indifference at best). However, in the catalog of writers that accompanies Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV*, Mabillon and Tillemont are

⁵⁶ "La moderne a l'avantage d'être plus certaine, par cela même qu'elle est moderne." Voltaire, *Conseils à un journaliste* (May 10, 1737), in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Molland, 50 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1877–85), 22:244.

⁵⁷ Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and the Use of History* (London: Millar, 1752), letter 5, 1:150.

⁵⁸ "Tout nous regarde, tout est fait pour nous. L'argent sur lequel nous prenons nos repas, nos meubles, nos besoins, nos plaisirs nouveaux, tout nous fait souvenir chaque jour que l'Amérique et les Grandes-Indes, et par conséquent toutes les parties du monde entier, sont réunies depuis environ deux siècles et demi par l'industrie de nos pères. Nous ne pouvons faire un pas qui ne nous avertisse du changement qui s'est opéré depuis dans le monde." Voltaire, "Remarques sur l'histoire," in *Œuvres historiques*, 44.

⁵⁹ "Inspirez surtout aux jeunes gens plus de goût pour l'histoire des temps récents, qui est pour nous de nécessité, que pour l'ancienne, qui n'est que de curiosité." Voltaire, *Conseils à un journaliste*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 22:244.

treated with deference. The entry on Mabillon states that “he did profound research” and favorably reports his decision to quit a research post that involved displaying inauthentic relics “*because he did not like to mix truth with fable*” (Mabillon’s own words as reported by Voltaire).⁶⁰ About Tillemont, Voltaire states that he was “one of the most learned writers of Port-Royal.”⁶¹ The assessment of his work is ambiguous. His imperial and ecclesiastical histories “are written with as much truth as compilations of ancient historians can be.”⁶² According to Voltaire, histories written before the invention of the printing press were unreliable because they did not pass the test of public scrutiny: “Before the invention of print, history was seldom contradicted and therefore seldom exact.”⁶³

According to Pocock, Voltaire fell short in Gibbon’s eyes because “the judgment must be openly exercised, in a context of shared knowledge and shared language, before it could be of value or of use.” For Pocock, the “context of shared knowledge and shared language” has to be that of professional historians. Voltaire, too, was adamant about the open exercise of judgment, but he operated in a different forum. For him, public opinion was the best guarantor of the truthfulness of historical narratives. When the art of writing was the monopoly of a small group of people, “it was easy to make us believe the most preposterous things.”⁶⁴ It was the invention of the printing press and the emergence of a public sphere where assertions could be contradicted that made history reliable.

For Voltaire, the study of antiquity was not without purpose, but this purpose had been fundamentally altered by the progress of the human mind. Antiquity was now the object of scientific study, akin to the study of nature. Like Gibbon, Voltaire was an admirer of the Académie des inscriptions, but he compared the task of antiquarians to that of physicists:

The Académie des Belles-Lettres, initially comprised in 1663 of a few members of the Académie française in order to convey the

⁶⁰ “Il a fait de profondes recherches . . . parce qu’il n’aimait pas à mêler la fable avec la vérité.” *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, in *Œuvres historiques*, 1182.

⁶¹ “L’un des plus savants écrivains de Port-Royal.” *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, in *Œuvres historiques*, 1181.

⁶² “. . . sont écrits avec autant de vérité que peuvent l’être des compilations d’anciens historiens.” *Ibid.*

⁶³ “L’histoire, avant l’invention de l’imprimerie, étant peu contredite, était peu exacte.” *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ “. . . il a été facile de nous faire croire les plus énormes absurdités.” Voltaire, art. “Histoire,” in *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie, distribuées en forme de dictionnaire* (London, 1771–1772), 8:20.

actions of Louis XIV to posterity through the minting of medals, became useful to the public when it ceased to focus exclusively on the monarch and dedicated itself to research about antiquity and to a judicious critique of opinions and facts. It did more or less in the field of history what the Académie des sciences did in physics: it dispelled errors.⁶⁵

Voltaire used a satirical tone to describe the workings and purpose of the Académie française, but for the Académie des inscriptions he showed nothing but respect: “The Académie des belles-lettres has set a goal for itself that is wiser and more useful; it is to present to the public a collection of *mémoires* filled with curious research and criticism. These reports are already valued by foreigners.”⁶⁶ As we know, Gibbon was one of those “foreigners” who valued those *mémoires* highly. They are quoted a total of 77 times in the *Decline and Fall*.

Pocock is quite right to assert that the rise of *philosophie* did not mean that the *érudits* ceased to exist, and he rightly casts doubt on the idea that “the philosophes set out to defeat or displace them.”⁶⁷ In that sense there is something misleading about the title of Barret-Kriegel’s book *The Defeat of Erudition*.⁶⁸ For someone like Voltaire, there was no competition between philosophy and erudition, which he saw as operating in two different spheres. The remote past could and should be studied, but it was an object of scientific study, separate from the philosophical task of writing history.⁶⁹

GIBBON AND VOLTAIRE IN THE HISTORY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

Gibbon and Voltaire may have more in common methodologically than it seems. In the preface to volume 4 of the *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon mentions

⁶⁵ “L’Académie des Belles-lettres, formée d’abord, en 1663 de quelques membres de l’Académie française, pour transmettre à la postérité, par des médailles, les actions de Louis XIV, devint utile au public dès qu’elle ne fut plus uniquement occupée du monarque, et qu’elle s’appliqua aux recherches de l’antiquité, et à une critique judicieuse des opinions et des faits. Elle fit à peu près dans l’histoire, ce que l’Académie des Sciences faisait dans la physique; elle dissipa des erreurs.” *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, in *Œuvres historiques*, 1000.

⁶⁶ “. . . l’Académie des belles-lettres s’est proposé un but plus sage et plus utile, c’est de présenter au public un recueil de mémoires remplis de recherches et de critiques curieuses. Ces mémoires sont déjà estimés chez les étrangers.” *Ibid*.

⁶⁷ *Barbarism and Religion*, 1:147.

⁶⁸ Blandine Barret-Kriegel, *La Défaite de l’érudition* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1988).

⁶⁹ See Pierre Force, “Voltaire and the Necessity of Modern History,” 462–67.

his hesitation about providing the reader with a comprehensive bibliography, and alludes to the fact that Robertson had encouraged him to do so. In the end, the endeavor seemed impractical, and Gibbon asks the reader to trust that whenever possible he used first-hand testimony:

For the present I shall content myself with renewing my serious protestation, that I have always endeavoured to draw from the fountain-head; that my curiosity, as well as a sense of duty, has always urged me to study the originals; and that, if they have sometimes eluded my search, I have carefully marked the secondary evidence, on whose faith a passage or a fact were reduced to depend.⁷⁰

In the preface to his *History of America*, Robertson alludes to this conversation with Gibbon. He makes a distinction between “the historian who records the events of his own time” and “he who delineates the transactions of a remote period.”⁷¹ The former “is credited in proportion to the opinion which the public entertains with respect to his means of information and his veracity.”⁷² In other words, he does not need to use footnotes, because the public has access to the same information and can make a judgment about the historian’s reliability. The latter “has no title to claim assent, unless he produces evidence in proof of his assertions.”⁷³ In that sense the relative paucity of footnoting in *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* would not have struck Robertson and Gibbon as a methodological shortcoming: the arbiter of truthfulness for a history of the recent past was ultimately the public.

In volume 6 of *Barbarism and Religion*, Pocock states that his ambition has been to situate Gibbon in the “history of historiography.”⁷⁴ However, he seems reluctant to engage explicitly or more than in passing with the issues of historical method I have briefly discussed here. He mentions a reviewer of an earlier volume of *Barbarism and Religion* who asked the question “where is the historian?” and he concedes that “Gibbon the creator of his narrative is not the central figure”⁷⁵ of any of the six volumes. “Rather,” Pocock writes, “I have aimed to show him as acting in many

⁷⁰ *Decline and Fall*, 4:ii.

⁷¹ Robertson, *History of America*, in *Works of Wm. Robertson, D.D.*, 8 vols. (London: Pickering, 1825), 6: xii–xiii.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Barbarism and Religion*, 6:2.

⁷⁵ *Barbarism and Religion*, 6:8.

contexts—some of them shared by historians who have been allowed to speak in their own voices which were not his—employing many discourses, and constantly encountering problems to which he proposed solutions that were themselves the occasion of further problems.”⁷⁶ According to Pocock, the question “what made Gibbon a great historian?” probably “lies more in the province of the student of literature than in that of the historian of speech acts and discourse generally.”⁷⁷ In other words, the question of Gibbon’s “greatness” probably is a matter of aesthetic judgment and is not a matter for historians to decide. However, if we take Momigliano’s hypothesis seriously, and if we follow its brilliant and thorough development by Pocock, we will have to admit that in Gibbon’s achievement form and content cannot be dissociated. As Momigliano puts it, Gibbon’s presentation “pleased the educated generally.”⁷⁸ Gibbon managed the feat, both intellectual and stylistic, of adopting the scholarly protocols and footnoting used by antiquarians and making them attractive to a general audience.

Columbia University.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Momigliano, “Gibbon’s Contribution to Historical Method,” 459.