

**FICTIONAL KNOWLEDGE:  
LIBRARIES IN GIBBON'S *DECLINE AND FALL***

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. The library in Alexandria was rebuilt and celebrated<sup>1</sup> shortly before the national library, and world patrimony, of Iraq were ransacked by people it is easy, even in the modern world, to call barbarians. It was the best of times and the worst of times, and oddly enough, Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) would probably have been comfortable in analyzing, if not in living in them. Indeed, under Gibbon's review, we might have squirmed even more than we have in recent months. For along with a sense that such events had happened before,<sup>2</sup> he would not have been able to forego commentary—what he called a smile—on the world's sense of piety and distress regarding artifacts of the most various degrees of historical interest and for which, years and even days before, it had shown near total indifference though now it was apparently expected to accord them a high market value.

In moments like this one, though taken from ancient history, Gibbon has a capacity to be disturbing that is not always visible in the great Enlightenment authors. Unlike Rousseau, and even more than Voltaire, he is capable of making such moments

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<sup>1</sup> The French daily *Le Monde* hailed the opening of the new library under the headline “Une bibliothèque pharaonique à Alexandrie” (14 June 2002), though its famous ancestor was created by the Ptolemies.

<sup>2</sup> “In every age the foundation and ruin of the Assyrian cities has been easy and rapid; the country is destitute of stone and timber, and the most solid structures are composed of bricks baked in the sun, and joined by a cement of the native bitumen” (iii.243). See also the account of Julian's invasion of Mesopotamia and Assyria in the fourth century (i.922f).

gleeful, though we are still left with an acute sense of incomprehension.<sup>3</sup> The example I wish to start with, from *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, is his reaction to the sack of the library of Alexandria in the seventh century. Gibbon pauses from narrating the Arab invasions of North Africa to discuss the famous incident in which the Arab general Amrou consults the caliph Omar about what to do with the library now that he has taken the city. Omar replies that the contents either repeat what the Koran already says or they are heretical and so for either reason, they can be dispensed with. The invading Muslims accordingly cart away the library's contents to fuel the city baths. Gibbon is one of several Enlightenment thinkers who would have sided with Omar.<sup>4</sup> Noting that much of the collection at that time would have been theological, he quips that "if the ponderous mass of Arian and Monophysite controversy were indeed consumed in the public baths, a philosopher may allow, with a smile, that it was ultimately devoted to the benefit of mankind" (iii.286). What is more important than the stroke of wit is Gibbon's general historical assessment. With remarkable sobriety, he writes: "I am strongly tempted to deny both the fact and the consequences" of the destruction of the library (iii.285). We might unravel Gibbon's temptation in a casuistical or scholastic style of argument: first, the loss of the library was not a tragedy because it was a comedy; second, it was not a tragedy because the library was not lost. And third, the library was not lost because, for one reason or another, it was not even there to destroy.

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<sup>3</sup> In all of these respects, Hume's judgement will seem peculiarly placid and comprehensible: "I have sometimes been inclined to think, that interruptions in the periods of learning, were they not attended with such a destruction of ancient books, and the records of history, would be rather favorable to the arts and sciences, by breaking the progress of authority, and dethroning the tyrannical usurpers over human reason" (*Essays*, 123).

<sup>4</sup> Near the end of the First Discourse, Rousseau appends a long footnote citing Omar's judgement as a positive action, because writing is dangerous. "Les souverains ne tarderont pas à se donner autant de soins pour bannir cet art terrible [writing] de leurs Etats qu'ils en ont pris pour l'y introduire" (57). D'Alembert will favor the destruction of writing not as such but as a vehicle of useless learning. See Gibbon's *Essai*, ch. LIII.

To try and gauge the significance of such moments, in which a place of learning becomes insignificant, elliptical, and dangerously transparent, we must step back and take a more general view of architecture and text in the writing of Edward Gibbon. For many reasons, including the fact that he was a genuinely cosmopolitan figure, Gibbon is a natural for such a discussion. Gibbon lived in the English language, and knew that he was one of its great prose builders. That knowledge probably led him to produce so vast an amount of writing (the *Decline* runs to about three thousand pages), that to describe the work one hesitates among hyperbolic measures of extent, mass, and volume. Furthermore, Gibbon was himself interested in and sensitive to architecture. The project of writing the *Decline* was, as he famously records it, conceived amid the ruins and the transformations of the Roman forum, during his Grand Tour in 1763.<sup>5</sup> In addition, his original intention was not to write about the Empire, but of something that figured it obliquely: the decline and fall of the city of Rome. This plan would not have entailed municipal history as such; in Britain, the fact and genre were largely still to come.<sup>6</sup> Instead Gibbon would have studied specific institutions of Roman life as they were embodied and related to one another in space, by the buildings of what he perceived as a sprawling, high-rise (ii.187f.) city and its suburbs (i.310). The narrative would have swollen with these developments, though it is still a mystery how the project of a city history then germinated into one of the entire Eurasian world and more.

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<sup>5</sup> “Yet the historian of the decline and fall must not regret his time or expense, since it was the view of Italy and Rome which determined the choice of the subject. In my Journal the place and moment of conception are recorded; the fifteenth of October 1764, in the close of evening, as I sat musing in the Church of the Zoccolanti or Franciscan fryars, while they were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter on the ruins of the Capitol. But my original plan was circumscribed to the decay of the City, rather than of the Empire; and, though my reading and reflections began to point towards the object, some years elapsed, and several avocations intervened before I was seriously engaged in the execution of that laborious work” (*Memoirs* 136-137). Mention had already been made of this inspiration on the last page of the *Decline* (iii.1082-1085).

<sup>6</sup> Though he is certainly sensitive to John Whitaker’s contemporary *History of Manchester* (1771-1775; cf. i.49, 64, et *passim*), not to mention the situation of modern cities.

We do know that Gibbon remained attentive to aspects of architectural history and its relation to the present. For instance, he made prominent use of contemporary archeological studies by the antiquarian Robert Wood and the Scottish architect, Robert Adam. The first of these speculative reconstructions concerned the Syrian or Hellenistic architecture of Palmyra, the ruins of which had been *discovered* by English travelers a century before (i.317, n. 69; Gibbon's thrilled italics); the second, Diocletian's palace at Spalatro.<sup>7</sup> In keeping too with his ideas of civic virtue, Gibbon's curiosity extends to other uses of the term, which relate to process rather than product, as when he speaks of innovations in "naval architecture" and the development of military and commercial ship-building.

Architecture was thus part of Gibbon's understanding of what it was to be a man of taste and erudition in a world of taste. But there is also a metaphorical need for architecture in the *Decline* that is not exactly to the greater glory of that art. In the same passage in which he hails Adam's account of Spalatro, Gibbon distinguishes between architecture and some of the other arts that often share the same space with it: "The practice of architecture is directed by a few general and even mechanical rules. But sculpture, and above all, painting, propose to themselves the imitation not only of the forms of nature, but of the characters and passions of the human soul" (i.397).

Compared to sculpture and painting, architecture is a poor cousin, a plebeian (or banausic) art, that does not imitate, and that may have interior spaces but that lacks interiority. Yet this distinction, which comes from antiquity, is not exactly an exclusion.<sup>8</sup> Gibbon aspired to the writing of philosophical history and the latter clearly in-

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<sup>7</sup> Adam is hailed, directly in the text, as "an ingenious artist of our own time and country, whom a very liberal curiosity carried into the heart of Dalmatia" (i.397) though, tellingly, Gibbon will suggest that his fellow Briton used too much artistry and taste to be a good historian.

<sup>8</sup> The situation of architecture is not unlike that of allegory in traditional literary conceptions. But the banausic dimension makes for an important difference.

corporates all of the arts, including the non-mimetic.<sup>9</sup> My design in this paper will be to study the logic of that incorporation, which is less content-oriented than structural; less cognitive than rhetorical; amounting to a casuistry of architecture as (non)-event.

We can begin with something of the rhetorical: architecture rarely appears in the *Decline* in its own right, but rather in virtue of its conventionality. Architecture implies places, *topoi*. If history is, “indeed, little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind” (i.102), what endows those repetitive events with some of their specificity is the palaces and temples in which they occur, and the narrative order in which they are told. Architecture serves as a marker in these registers, and this fact helps to explain why the city of Rome was Gibbon’s original focus. But *topoi* are also building-blocks in a larger argument or narrative, which is apparently why Gibbon had to move beyond the city of Rome as such. And the question of that larger argument highlights a problem readers commonly have with the origins and ends of the *Decline*. In a powerful scholarly attempt to describe how Gibbon came to write his book, Peter Ghosh has argued that Gibbon crossed through a decade of “Dark Ages” during which he experimented with a variety of subjects before finally realizing, so to speak, that he had seen the light on the forum many years before. Ghosh’s speculations help to illuminate an uncertain period in Gibbon’s intellectual development, and in his concluding paragraph, they lead to the following characterization of Gibbon’s work in general:

*[...] [T]he step-by-step approach typical of Gibbon’s Dark Ages was carried over into the years after 1772, and was to have fundamental consequences for the structure of the Decline and Fall itself. If we are to seek a metaphor for the architecture of that book, it is not to be found in what is classical and unitary, but, paradoxically, in the gothic and cumulative. But if the architecture is sublime only in its parts rather than in its entirety, it is the price paid for the highest historical virtues—flexible*

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<sup>9</sup> i.230. He forged this ambition in the wake of Tacitus, Montesquieu, Hume, and Robertson.

*sympathies, open-mindedness and, above all, a passion for truth. (Ghosh, 20)*

Gibbon's, it would follow, is an architecture of parts of speech rather than rigid whole sentences. But apart from that description of an aesthetics, one must be struck by Ghosh's wish "to seek a metaphor for the architecture of [the] book," since on the one hand, architecture is already a metaphor for its structure and, on the other, what Ghosh wants is in fact the reverse, an architectural label as a metaphor for the book. Of course we know what he means, and his expression goes a long way towards telling us how natural architecture is to Gibbon's work. But it may even be too natural. In the same way that Gibbon pretended to derive his decision to write Roman history from an architectural environment, so Ghosh echoes the association: what Gibbon wrote was a deliberately Gothic building—which compensates for some aesthetic barbarism by means of a robust intellectual frame. It would not be long, perhaps, before Gibbon could be seen as resisting the corruptions of modernity and of classical decline by dint of a healthy innocence. Exit the author's most famous gift, irony—in favor of a "paradox."

Ghosh may be right to look for an architectural metaphor for the *Decline*, but if so, it would be useful to let Gibbon's own broader sense of architecture—which would include the power to build and the power to destroy, conflict between "styles," and the non-mimetic—invalidate this attempt to qualify one of the great prose monuments of the English language. For it is at least questionable whether that automatic association with architecture does not conceal some sleight of hand. Whenever it was that Gibbon finally began writing the *Decline*, it seems likely that he intended to stop with the fall of the Western Empire in 582. What he found instead was that the fall did not, as it were, hit rock bottom.<sup>10</sup> And so he was led to write at tremendous length about Byzan-

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<sup>10</sup> As if it were easier to note rise or decline than fall. Cp. "The rise of a city, which swelled into an empire, may deserve, as a singular prodigy, the reflection of a philosophic mind. But the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fab-

tine history, a period and culture for which, early in his story, he expressed little more than disdain: as if, in the east, there had never been much from which to decline or fall (i.84). And yet he finally carries through the narrative of the Eastern Empire until the fall of a city, Constantinople, to the armies of Mohammed II in 1453, and the concomitant rediscovery of Greek culture in the west that Gibbon's world called the Revival of Letters. In other words, what Gibbon's architecture does, to a large extent, is implode—and *thereby* form the foundations of Western Europe's present. To continue my own "architectural" metaphor, it could be said that Gibbon's history does not treat us to a spectacle of earlier strata which have been incorporated meaningfully into the present, so much as to piles of rubble. The "laborious destruction" (ii.81), as he calls it at one point, of one civilization by another may even be a precondition for the modern building of happiness. Letters, new letters, revived in a new kind of soil.

This is an extreme view, and it could easily be qualified as a post-modern scenario for the relations between an enlightened world and its classical, barbarian and Judeo-Christian-Islamic past. But Gibbon associated this view with sophistry and he probably approved of it as such. The point is made when, to conclude his account of the three Gothic invasions of Greece in the third century, Gibbon unexpectedly alludes to architectural monuments in their own right. The passage is voluminous and needs to be quoted *in extenso*, though here it is presented without the supporting footnotes:

*In the general calamities of mankind, the death of an individual, however exalted, the ruin of an edifice, however famous, are passed over with careless inattention. Yet we cannot forget that the temple of Diana at Ephesus, after having risen with increasing splendour from seven repeated misfortunes, was finally burnt by the Goths in their third naval invasion. The arts of Greece, and the wealth of Asia, had conspired to erect that sacred and magnificent structure. It was supported by an hundred and*

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ric yielded to the pressure of its own weight. The story of its ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring *why* the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long" (ii.509; his italics).

*twenty-seven marble columns of the Ionic order. They were the gifts of devout monarchs, and each was sixty feet high. The altar was adorned with the masterly sculpture of Praxiteles, who had, perhaps, selected from the favourite legends of the place the birth of the divine children of Latona, the concealment of Apollo after the slaughter of the Cyclops, and the clemency of Bacchus to the vanquished Amazons. Yet the length of the temple of Ephesus was only four hundred and twenty-five feet, about two-thirds of the measure of the church of St. Peter's at Rome. In the other dimensions, it was still more inferior to that sublime production of modern architecture. The spreading arms of a Christian cross require a much greater breadth than the oblong temples of the Pagans; and the boldest artists of antiquity would have been startled at the proposal of raising in the air a dome of the size and proportions of the pantheon. The temple of Diana was, however, admired as one of the wonders of the world. Successive empires, the Persian, the Macedonian, and the Roman, had revered its sanctity, and enriched its splendour. But the rude savages of the Baltic were destitute of a taste for the elegant arts, and they despised the ideal terrors of a foreign superstition (i.281-282).*

For the last several pages Gibbon has been reviewing a long list of “general calamities,” such as the destruction of cities in the Eastern Mediterranean, the massacre of their populations, and the loss of temples and other buildings. He has alluded to Athens being plundered and to the ravaging of the remains of Troy. But it is only here, in the concluding paragraphs about the Goths, that he pauses in the narrative, apparently to assess the toll taken by their invasions. What strikes him is clearly not the human toll, and his pathos for a temple that had managed to revive itself seven times in the past amounts to a rhetorical flourish. In fact it becomes hard to know what he is assessing, since he does not tell the story here of the present (or previous) destructions of the temple at Ephesus but flatly announces the fact that it was “finally burnt,” lost for good. And yet the precision of his description of the temple already implies that the loss need not be mourned: we know the temple of Diana perfectly well on paper, and having got its dimensions, all we need is wealth—call it “the wealth of Asia”—and we can make another. So what has been lost? It may be that Praxiteles's sculptures

are the only real object of loss, since their mimetic glories, closely linked “perhaps” to the local superstitions, cannot be restituted by any form of measurement. Ephesus, the place, was one of the wonders of the world on their account too.

At the point when Praxiteles is mentioned, something happens to the argument: instead of simply being degraded by that comparison, architecture ceases to be the banal art and is elevated into an emblem of cultures and political power. As if to ironize about those “devout monarchs” who contributed the columns and the “successive empires” that revered the building, Gibbon launches into a denigrating point about the lost temple’s size. To do so, he is led to a comparison that seems to come from out of nowhere, which means, among other things, that it is far from those local legends that gave rise to pagan religion, temple, and sculpture. Perhaps the idea is that polite readers (and even English Protestants) may be familiar with St. Peter’s,<sup>11</sup> so he compares the diminutive size of the Greek with the greater extent of the Roman construction. But then, instead of returning to the temple, or wrapping up on the Goths, Gibbon highlights what he calls “the other dimensions,” in particular the dome of St Peter’s. This allows him to drift among comparisons—Greece vs. Rome, pagan vs. Christian, ancient vs. modern Rome—though he clearly admires the ability to set a pantheon atop an already vast building. In Ghosh’s terms, these “metaphor[s] for the architecture” of the temple of Diana may be meant to drive home a modern point about taste: Gibbon displays his capacity for “flexible sympathies” with Greek, Roman, and Christian achievements in architecture, all in the course of an even-handed account of how the Goths destroyed (or tried to destroy) some of the things he is admiring.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, the whole paragraph reads like a long *nihil mihi humanum*

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<sup>11</sup> He could of course have spoken of St. Paul’s in London as well. This is what he does in a preliminary review of the geography of the Roman Empire, when he compares the size of Palestine to that of Wales (i.53).

<sup>12</sup> He refers to the survival of the “majestic dome of the Pantheon” gratefully, but with a certain incomprehension (ii.80-81).

*alienum puto*, the *nihil* including destruction—which could be the credo of a philosophic historian who is generous within limits and who knows he prefers the present.

A particular modern version of that credo is conveyed in the very final paragraph on the Goths, which follows immediately after the mention of “foreign superstition”:

*Another circumstance is related of these invasions, which might deserve our notice, were it not justly to be suspected as the fanciful conceit of a recent sophist. We are told, that in the sack of Athens the Goths had collected all the libraries, and were on the point of setting fire to this funeral pile of Grecian learning, had not one of their chiefs, of more refined policy than his brethren, dissuaded them from the design; by the profound observation, that as long as the Greeks were addicted to the study of books, they would never apply themselves to the exercise of arms. The sagacious counsellor (should the truth of the fact be admitted) reasoned like an ignorant barbarian. In the most polite and powerful nations, genius of every kind has displayed itself about the same period; and the age of science has generally been the age of military virtue and success. (i.282)*

The anecdote is well-known, and Gibbon himself cites Montaigne’s use of it “in his agreeable Essay on Pedantry” (*ibid.*, n. 133). At first glance, Gibbon shows himself to be more of a humanist than Montaigne, for unlike the French skeptic he denies the wisdom of the “sagacious counsellor” who thinks that study is damaging to civic virtue. But as with the case of Alexandria, Gibbon’s general position is surprisingly radical. Firstly, what he is denying concerns people, or rather men, who study in libraries, rather than the libraries themselves considered as a particular category of architecture. Secondly, he imputes the whole story to “a recent sophist” who is not all that recent, the twelfth-century Greek historian Zonaras,<sup>13</sup> in order to claim once again that it

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<sup>13</sup> Gibbon elsewhere refers to “the more recent histories of Cedrenus and Zonaras of the xiith century” (iii.237 n. 10), in contrast to ninth-century historians. It is not impossible that his

never happened. Presumably the libraries of Athens continued to exist, and were never in danger, though characteristically, we are not told whether this was indeed the case and whether they survived the Goths. The proud *Nihil me alienum* thus turns into a very uncertain, virtual business: if the Greeks still had great libraries at that point, it would not have corrupted their ability to fight the Goths—except that, as Gibbon already noted, the Athenians gave in with fairly little resistance.<sup>14</sup>

In its way of putting down a sophistical attack on learning, one may feel Gibbon's defense of the "polite and powerful" weakening, becoming sophistical in turn and heading for the implosion I mentioned before. What exactly the Goths did or did not destroy comes to be of little importance, and they appear ignorant regardless of whether they tried to be sagacious and regardless of what the Athenians did. If we think of the architectural comparisons of the paragraph before, it is not clear that any harm, or anything more than the usual kinds of harm, was done at all. And yet the anecdote of the Athenian libraries reveals even more clearly how the sympathizing mind comes to depend for part of its identity on the external structure or form of a building. The library, the building that incorporates the spirit of books—or perhaps just the books themselves—is advanced as a *proof* that modern politeness and power are compatible. This possibility is part of the elevation of architecture that I mentioned before, and it takes on a new dimension when Gibbon refers to "a dome of the size and proportions of the pantheon." For at St Peter's, architecture acquires the power of figuring the spirit,<sup>15</sup> a power which is usually attributed to the mimetic arts only. This enhancement of the powers of architecture may look like a modern improvement, an

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reference to a "recent sophist" is not aimed at Zonaras but at a contemporary European, perhaps from Geneva.

<sup>14</sup> This is not to mention the Byzantine Greeks who, with much greater library resources, were incapable of defending the Empire. But to go back to Athens and the Goths, Gibbon does observe that some resistance came from Cleodamus, an engineer, or architect (i.279): architecture, again, is a mechanic trade.

<sup>15</sup> And even the body, "the spreading arms of a Christian cross."

event in the history of style and banal technique. “The boldest artists of antiquity would have been startled at the proposal of raising in the air a dome [...]” This is progress, or seems to be.

At various points in the *Decline*, Gibbon shows that the capacity to imagine a different role for architecture is a timeless act of the mind rather than a moment in the history of aesthetics or mechanics. Yet spirit in buildings, and even sublimity, bodes ill: it is always cast as an illusion and sometimes as a danger. An exemplary case involves the “final destruction of paganism” in the fourth century, which begins, in Gibbon’s telling of the story, when a political connection is made out between sculpture and architecture. To discredit the authority of paganism, the prefects decide first to remove the statues of the gods from the public temples.<sup>16</sup> This allows them later to forbid the rites of public sacrifice, and finally to destroy the temples themselves.

*Many of those temples were the most splendid and beautiful monuments of Grecian architecture: and the emperor himself was interested not to deface the splendour of his own cities, or to diminish the value of his own possessions. Those stately edifices might be suffered to remain, as so many lasting trophies of the victory of Christ. In the decline of the arts, they might be usefully converted into magazines, manufactures, or places of public assembly: and perhaps, when the walls of the temple had been sufficiently purified by holy rites, the worship of the true Deity might be allowed to expiate the ancient guilt of idolatry. But as long as they subsisted, the Pagans fondly cherished the secret hope, that an auspicious revolution, a second Julian, might again restore the altars of the gods; and the earnestness with which they addressed their unavailing prayers to the throne, increased the zeal of the Christian reformers to extirpate, without mercy, the root of superstition. (ii.79)*

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<sup>16</sup> So too, when Gibbon must mourn the sack of Constantinople by the Latins in the thirteenth century, his principal act will be to draft a long list of the sculptures destroyed. He ends by allowing that “we may drop a tear over the libraries that have perished” (iii.695-697).

The temple is here the site of a pitched battle in the history of ancient religion, a clash between superstition and “enthusiasm” (ii.79). But the particular gravity of that battle for an eighteenth-century author is that it recurs in history as part of the nature of the human mind. Gibbon’s narrative of the tragic destruction of architectural works throughout the Roman world can thus be considered remarkable for two reasons, which can be mentioned in closing. The first is that his account of the onslaught is intense, but at the same time off-handedly witty in the footnotes and sometimes even in the text. Once again Gibbon refuses to treat a world’s destruction as an inherently tragic subject, even as it produces a composed mirth in the reflecting enlightened mind. Such moments display the mind’s autonomy, if not its transcendence. But secondly, the effects of superstition are not denied this time, if only because the historian himself must believe in the spirit of ruins and texts in order to practice his vocation and write his mimetic book. Taken together, these reasons may shed some light on the architecture, or mystery, of the *Decline* itself.

**Robert MANKIN<sup>17</sup>**  
**University of Paris 7 – Denis Diderot**

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Mankin teaches English civilization at the University of Paris VII-Denis Diderot. He is currently completing an edition of Edward Gibbon’s first publication, the *Essai sur l’étude de la littérature* (1761).

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