

# Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)

---

Volume 4  
Issue 2 *Syracuse Scholar Fall 1983*

Article 7

---

1983

## Last Years of an Ironist

James Vink

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Vink, James (1983) "Last Years of an Ironist," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar/vol4/iss2/7>

This Poetry is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991) by an authorized editor of SURFACE. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).

# Last Years of an Ironist

(Edward Gibbon in 1790)

Yes, that day I remember well.  
An Englishman had come to tell  
Expatriate news, and left his card.  
I wrote a little. Afterward,  
Desirous of some company,  
I asked him to sit down with me.  
It wouldn't do in London. There  
It seemed nothing irregular  
Where Englishmen are brothers; still  
I would have thought it something ill  
But peaches came across the lake  
And he seemed happy to partake.  
He took his leave just before dark  
And wished completion for my work  
At which I bowed. I took a stroll  
Alone with the *Decline And Fall*  
That day completed. That was all.

What does it signify? I trust  
Geneva, Lausanne and the rest  
Will get along without me better  
Than I without them — but no matter.  
Rome, where I came on the Grand Tour  
Like any lordling amateur,  
Is mine, all mine. The place itself  
I'd rather witness on the shelf  
Than in the nostrils. Well, it's done,  
And never to be done again.

Old age alone I had not planned  
(And I'm much given to command  
Each era of my life) — but still  
London suits me nothing ill  
Except its cold, rain, lack of love,  
It seems desirable enough  
Though no Geneva, no Lausanne,  
The empty cities where Suzanne,  
Pavilliard and Deyverdun  
Lived together; now all gone  
And I the last to go; all those  
Who were the models of my prose  
And spoke it over my best plate  
To ask the weather, or the date.  
So carefully they had been bred  
They ascertained in all they said  
The correct word, though they might speak  
Latin, English, French or Greek,  
It was all the same, all Cicero.  
Burke has something of that trick too.  
I've still the Club — not parliament  
(Although you laugh) — our Club I meant.

Mine is the life chronicled. It comes  
From my decline as much as Rome's  
And any who will read it can  
Know me as myself, the man  
I used to be — perhaps still am,  
Though the best part I gave to Rome.  
Well might you ask how I presumed  
To tell that people self-entombed  
And censure them. I say, why not?  
Early I took it as my lot  
To tell not the Augustan age  
But the decline, the missing page  
Of a millennium none knew  
To bridge the ancient to the new  
Civilized order. Well you may  
Believe I chose it carefully  
As my peculiar province, and  
Old age alone I had not planned.

It came almost as a surprise.  
After the autobiographies  
What's to be done? A footnot here  
Saying he lived another year  
Or six or twelve? I said it all  
And told my own decline and fall  
And might have pulled the ladder in  
After me. Shall I begin again  
Or leave a particle untold?  
It isn't like me — but I'm old.

Do I digress? My youth, I say,  
Was ethical philosophy  
In an historical disguise.  
That was my life, my enterprise.  
I wrote myself into my book:  
"If a philosopher could look  
Coldly at such and so" — that's I,  
The witness of philosophy  
Who might have made old Marcus blush  
For being passionate. I confess  
I had a hero of my own  
The stern, the apostate Julian —  
But that's not to be talked of here.

Ah, London, and the winter's near.  
Holroyd's dead and young Suzanne's  
Become a minister of France.  
A minister! My father wished  
Me to become a Calvinist  
And sent me off to Switzerland.  
Old age alone I had not planned.

—James Vink