

Akutagawa studied English, French, and German literature; the subject of his doctoral dissertation was William Morris; and it is evident that he knew Schopenhauer, Yeats, and Baudelaire well. The psychological reinterpretation of the traditions and legends of his country was one of the tasks he undertook.

Thackeray declared that to think about Swift is to think about the collapse of an empire. A similar process of vast disintegration and pain operates in Akutagawa's last works. In *The Kappa*, the novelist employs the familiar artifice of lambasting the human race under the guise of a fantastic species; perhaps he was inspired by Swift's Yahoos, or the penguins of Anatole France, or the strange kingdoms crossed by the stone monkey in the Buddhist allegory. Halfway through the story, Akutagawa forgets the satiric conventions: it hardly matters to him that the Kappa, who are water imps, turn into humans who talk about Marx, Darwin, or Nietzsche. According to the literary canons, this negligence is a flaw. In fact, the last pages of the story are infused with an indescribable melancholy; we sense that, in the author's imagination, everything has collapsed, even the dreams of his art. Shortly afterward, Akutagawa killed himself. For the author of these final pages, the world of the Kappa and the world of man, the everyday world and the aesthetic world, are equally fruitless and mutable.

A more literal document of the final twilight of his mind is *Cogwheels*. Like the *Inferno* of Strindberg, who appears toward the end, this story is the diary, atrocious and methodical, of a gradual hallucinatory process. One might say that the meeting of the two cultures is necessarily tragic. On account of forces that began in 1868, Japan has come to be one of the great powers of the world, defeating Russia and forging alliances with England and the Third Reich. This nearly miraculous rebirth exacted, as might be expected, a heart-rending and sorrowful spiritual crisis. One of the artists and martyrs of that metamorphosis was Akutagawa, who died on July 24, 1927.

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### Edward Gibbon, *Pages of History and Autobiography*

Edward Gibbon was born in the vicinity of London on the 27th of April, 1737. He was of ancient but not particularly illustrious lineage, though an ancestor of his was Marmorarius or architect to the king in the fourteenth

century. His mother, Judith Porten, appears to have paid him little attention during the hazardous years of his childhood. The devotion of a spinster aunt, Catherine Porten, enabled him to overcome several lingering illnesses. Gibbon would later call her the true mother of his mind and his health; from her he learned to read and write, at so early an age that he was able to forget his apprenticeship and almost believe that those faculties were innate. At the age of seven he acquired, at the expense of many tears and some blood, a rudimentary acquaintance with Latin syntax. Aesop's fables, Homer's epic poems in the majestic version of Alexander Pope, and *The Thousand and One Nights* which Galland had just revealed to the European imagination were his preferred readings. To these Oriental sorceries must be added another from the classical sphere: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, read in the original.

He first felt the call of history at the age of fourteen, in a library in Wiltshire: a supplementary volume of Echard's history of Rome revealed to him the vicissitudes of the Empire after Constantine's fall. "I was immersed in the passage of the Goths over the Danube, when the summons of the dinner bell reluctantly dragged me from my intellectual feast." Gibbon's other fascination, after Rome, was the Orient, and he studied the biography of Mohammed in French or Latin versions of the Arabic texts. From history he went on, by a natural gravitation, to geography and chronology, and at the age of fifteen he attempted to reconcile the systems of Scaliger and Petavius, Marsham and Newton. Around that time, he enrolled at Oxford University. Later he would write, "I have no reason to acknowledge an imaginary debt in order to assume the merit of a just or generous retribution." On the antiquity of Oxford, he observes,

Perhaps in a separate annotation I may coolly examine the fabulous and real antiquities of our sister universities, a question which has kindled such fierce and foolish disputes among their fanatic sons. In the meanwhile it will be acknowledged that these venerable bodies are sufficiently old to partake of all the prejudices and infirmities of age.

The professors—he tells us—"had absolved their conscience from the toil of reading, or thinking, or writing"; their silence (class attendance was not obligatory) led the young Gibbon to undertake a course of theological study on his own. A reading of Bossuet converted him to Catholicism; he believed, or believed he believed—he tells us—in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. A Jesuit baptized him into the faith of Rome. Gibbon sent

his father a long and polemical epistle, written with all the pomp, dignity, and complacency of a martyr. To be a student at Oxford and to be a Catholic were incompatible things; the fervent young apostate was expelled by the university authorities, and his father sent him to Lausanne, at that time a Calvinist stronghold. He took lodgings in the home of a Protestant minister, M. Pavilliard, who after two years of dialogue set him back on the straight path. Gibbon spent five years in Switzerland; the habit of the French language and an absorption in its literature were this period's most important results. These are also the years of the only sentimental episode recorded in Gibbon's biography: his love for Mlle. Curchod, who later became the mother of Mme. de Staël. Gibbon *père* registered an epistolary objection to the match: Edward "sighed as a lover, obeyed as a son."

In 1758 he returned to England; his first literary task was the gradual formation of a library. Neither ostentation nor vanity had any part in the purchase of its volumes, and over the years, he was able to confirm Pliny's tolerant maxim that there is no book so bad it does not contain something good.<sup>1</sup> In 1761, his first publication appeared, written in French, which remained the language of his innermost thoughts. Entitled *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, it defended classical letters, which then were somewhat scorned by the Encyclopedists. Gibbon tells us that his work was received with cold indifference in England, where it was scarcely read and quickly forgotten.

A trip to Italy that began in April 1765 required several years of preliminary readings. He visited Rome; his first night in the eternal city was sleepless, as if he had foreseen and was unsettled by the murmur of the millions of words that would make up its history. In his autobiography, he writes that he can neither forget nor express the strong feelings that shook him. Amid the ruins of the Capitol, as the barefoot friars sang vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, he glimpsed the possibility of writing the decline and fall of Rome. The vastness of the enterprise intimidated him at first, and he chose instead to write a history of the independence of Switzerland, a work he would not complete.

An unusual episode occurred during those years. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Deists argued that the Old Testament is not of divine origin, for its pages do not teach that the soul is immortal and do not mention a doctrine of future punishments and rewards. Despite the existence of certain

<sup>1</sup>Pliny the Younger retained this generous maxim from his uncle (*Letters* 3, 5). It is commonly attributed to Cervantes, who repeats it in the second part of the *Quixote*.

ambiguous passages, this observation is correct; Paul Deussen, in his *Philosophie der Bibel*, declares, "Initially, the Semites had no knowledge whatsoever of the immortality of the soul. This unconsciousness lasted until the Hebrews established relations with the Iranians." In 1737, the English theologian William Warburton published a lengthy treatise entitled *The Divine Legation of Moses*, which reasons, paradoxically, that the lack of any reference to immortality is an argument in favor of the divine authority of Moses, who knew himself to be sent by the Lord and therefore had no need to resort to supernatural rewards or punishments. The argument was very clever, but Warburton knew in advance that the Deists would counter it with the example of Greek paganism, also devoid of any teaching of future penalties and compensations, yet nevertheless not divine. To salvage his hypothesis, Warburton resolved to attribute a system of otherworldly pleasures and chastisements to the Greek religion, and maintained that these were revealed during the Eleusinian mysteries. Demeter lost her daughter Persephone, stolen away by Hades, and after years of wandering across the world, she came upon her in Eleusis. Such is the mythic origin of the rites which, though initially agrarian—Demeter is the goddess of wheat—later symbolized immortality, by a sort of metaphor analogous to one St. Paul would use. ("So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption.") Persephone is reborn from the underworld of Hades; the soul will be reborn after death. The legend of Demeter is recorded in one of the Homeric hymns, where we also read that the initiate will be happy after death. Warburton thus appears to have been right in the part of his hypothesis having to do with the meaning of the mysteries; but not in another part which he added as a sort of flourish and which was censured by the youthful Gibbon. The sixth book of the *Aeneid* relates the journey of the hero and the Sibyl to the infernal regions; Warburton speculated that this represented the initiation of Aeneas as an officiant in the mysteries of Eleusis. His descent to Avernus and the Elysian Fields completed, Aeneas goes out by the gate of ivory, which is reserved for vain dreams, not by the gate of polished horn, which is the gate of prophetic dreams; this could mean that Hell is fundamentally unreal, or that the world to which Aeneas returns is also unreal, or that Aeneas, the individual, is a dream, just as we ourselves may be. The entire episode, according to Warburton, is not illusory but mimetic. Virgil was describing the mechanism of the mysteries in this fiction; to erase or allay the betrayal he thus committed, he made the hero go out by the gate of ivory, which, as I said, corresponds to deluding lies. It is inexplicable, without this key, that Virgil

would suggest that a vision prophesying the greatness of Rome is apocryphal. Gibbon, in an anonymous 1770 work, argued that if Virgil had not been initiated, he could not reveal what he had not seen, and if he had been initiated, he was equally prohibited, since such a revelation would (to the pagan sensibility) have constituted a profanation and an outrage. Those who betrayed the secret were sentenced to death and publicly crucified; divine justice could act in anticipation of this sentence, and it was fearsome to live beneath the same roof as a wretch accused of this crime. Gibbon's *Critical Observations* were his first exercise in English prose, Cotter Morrison notes, and perhaps his clearest and most direct. Warburton elected to remain silent.

After 1768, Gibbon devoted himself to the preliminary tasks of his enterprise; he knew the classics almost by heart, and now he read and reread, pen in hand, all the original sources of Roman history, from Trajan to the last Caesar in the West. Upon these texts he shed, in his own words, "the subsidiary rays of medals and inscriptions, of geography and chronology."

The composition of the first volume, which appeared in 1776 and sold out in a few days, took him seven years. The work inspired the congratulations of Robertson and Hume, and what Gibbon would call almost a library of polemics. "The first discharge of the ecclesiastic ordnance" (I transcribe his own words here) stunned him, but he soon found that "this empty noise was mischievous only in the intention," and he replied disdainfully to those who contradicted him. With regard to Davies and Chelsum, he says that a victory over such antagonists was a sufficient humiliation.

Two subsequent volumes of the *Decline and Fall* appeared in 1781; their subject was historical, not religious, and they did not give rise to controversies but were read, Rogers tells us, with silent avidity. The work was concluded in Lausanne in 1783. The three final volumes are dated 1788.

Gibbon was a member of the House of Commons; his political activities merit no further comment. He himself has confessed that his shyness rendered him useless for debates and that the success of his pen discouraged the efforts of his voice.

The composition of his autobiography took up the historian's final years. In April of 1793, the death of Lady Sheffield brought him back to England. Gibbon died without suffering on the 15th of January, 1794, after a brief illness. The circumstances of his death are provided in an essay by Lytton Strachey.

It is a perilous thing to attribute immortality to a literary work. The risk increases if the work is of a historic nature and was written centuries after

the events it studies. Still, if we resolve to forget some moodiness on Coleridge's part, or certain incomprehensions by Sainte-Beuve, the critical consensus in England and the continent has for two hundred years lavished the title of classic on the history of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and this adjective is known to include the connotation of immortality. Gibbon's own deficiencies, or if you wish, forbearances, are favorable to the work. If it had been written in adherence to any theory, the reader's approval or disapproval would depend on his opinion of the hypothesis. This is certainly not the case with Gibbon. Except for the warning against religious feeling in general, and the Christian faith in particular, that he voices in certain famous chapters, Gibbon appears to abandon himself to the facts he narrates and reflects them with a divine unconsciousness that makes him resemble blind destiny or the course of history itself. Like a man who is dreaming and knows he is dreaming, like a man who lowers himself to the hazards and trivialities of a dream, Gibbon, in his eighteenth century, dreamed again what the men of earlier cycles had lived or dreamed, within the walls of Byzantium or in the deserts of Arabia. To construct his work, he had to consult and summarize hundreds of widely divergent texts, and it is indisputably more pleasurable to read his ironic synopses than to lose one's way in the original sources by obscure or inaccessible chroniclers. Good sense and irony are habits of Gibbon's. Tacitus praises the form of worship practiced by the Germans, who did not shut their gods inside walls and did not dare represent them in wood or marble; Gibbon confines himself to observing that a people who barely had huts were hardly in a position to have temples or statues. Rather than writing that there is no confirmation whatsoever of the miracles recounted in the Bible, Gibbon reproaches the inexcusable carelessness of the pagans, who in their long catalogs of wondrous occurrences tell us nothing of the sun and moon that stood still in their course for a whole day, or of the earthquake and eclipse that accompanied the death of Jesus.

De Quincey writes that history is an infinite discipline, or at least an indefinite one, as the same events may be combined or interpreted in many ways. This observation dates from the nineteenth century; since then, interpretations have expanded under the influence of the evolution of psychology, while previously unsuspected cultures and civilizations have been exhumed. Nevertheless, Gibbon's work remains undiminished and it may plausibly be conjectured that the vicissitudes of the future will not touch it. Two causes work together toward this longevity. The first and perhaps most important is of an aesthetic order; it arises from enchantment, which

according to Stevenson is the indispensable and essential virtue of literature. The other reason comes from the perhaps melancholy fact that with the passage of time, the historian is transformed into history; what matters to us is not only to know what Attila's camp was like but also how an English gentleman of the eighteenth century imagined it. There were periods in which Pliny's pages were read in search of precise facts; today we read them in search of marvels, and this change has not injured Pliny's fortunes. For Gibbon, that day has not yet arrived, and we do not know if it will. We suspect that Carlyle or any other Romantic historian is further from us than Gibbon.

To think of Gibbon is to think of Voltaire, whom Gibbon read so often and of whose aptitude for the theater he has left us an unenthusiastic estimation. They share the same disdain for human religions or superstitions, but their literary conduct differs greatly. Voltaire employed his extraordinary style to show or suggest that the facts of history are contemptible; Gibbon has no better opinion of humanity, but man's actions attract him as a spectacle, and he uses that attraction to entertain and fascinate the reader. He never participates in the passions that moved the former ages, and he views them with an incredulity that is not devoid of indulgence and, perhaps, compassion.

To read through the *Decline and Fall* is to enter and delightfully lose oneself in a crowded novel, whose protagonists are the generations of mankind, whose theater is the world, and whose enormous time span is measured in dynasties, conquests, discoveries, and the mutations of languages and idols.

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### Catalog of the Exhibition *Books from Spain*

As the sunset contains both day and night, and the waves, foam and water, two disparate elements of nature inseparably constitute a book. A book is a thing among things, an object among the objects that coexist in three dimensions, but it is also a symbol like an algebra equation or an abstract idea. We may compare it to a chess game: a checkered black and white board with pieces and an almost infinite number of possible moves. The analogy to musical instruments is also clear, such as the harp Bécquer glimpsed in the corner of a drawing room and whose silent world of sound