



GRANDES LIBROS Y LITERATURA UNIVERSAL II

1. Historia de la decadencia y ruina del Imperio romano
de Edward Gibbon

Prof. Dr. Antonio Lastra

Miércoles 13 de enero de 2021, 19 h.

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Romiosyne de Yannis Ritsos

Prof. Juanjo Tejero

Miércoles 20 de enero de 2021, 19 h.

¿Qué significa “literatura española”?

Prof. Dr. Francisco José Martín

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Los últimos días de la humanidad de Karl Kraus

Adam Kovacsics

Miércoles 3 de febrero de 2021, 19 h.

GRANDES LIBROS Y LITERATURA UNIVERSAL II
La torre del Virrey. Instituto de Estudios Culturales Avanzados
CEFIRE Humanístic i Social

1 *La Historia de la decadencia y ruina del Imperio romano* de Edward Gibbon

Prof. Dr. Antonio Lastra
Webinar/Miércoles 13 de enero de 2020, 19 h.

La Historia de la decadencia y ruina del Imperio romano de Edward Gibbon

El estudio de la literatura y la historiografía de la Iglesia y del Imperio. Del paradigma de la “decadencia y ruina” (*Decline and Fall*) al paradigma de la “antigüedad tardía” (*Late Antiquity*): la guadaña y los lestrigones. Los límites del historiador: la Conclusión Final de 1787. ¿1776 o 1789? Europa y la revolución. La ecdótica de las autobiografías de Gibbon y sus dos educaciones: la reputación de un caballero. ¿Cómo empezar a leer la *Historia de la decadencia y ruina del Imperio romano*?

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1

Yes, almost unnoticed. For who, in eighteenth-century England, either among those who welcomed the new book, or among those who attacked it, showed any appreciation of its true character, its real novelty? (I say 'England' advisedly, for Scotland, of course, was different.) Those who praised Gibbon's work, at the time, praised it for its style. Some also —like Porson and Coleridge— deplored its style. Horace Walpole, the arbiter of contemporary taste, thought there was nothing new in it except the style. Even in our century, Lytton Strachey, a literary man of the 1920s, dogmatically stated that the foundation of Gibbon's work was its style: 'the style once fixed, everything else followed'. What rubbish! Reading such judgments, I am inclined to agree with that learned but tart Italian scholar, Signor Giarrizzo, who exclaims against 'the trite and vulgar judgments and insipid chatter' of most Anglo-Saxon writers on Gibbon.

HUGH TREVOR-ROPER

History and the Enlightenment, p. 144

2

In certain respects, Gibbon is a mirror of his age. But, on a wider perspective, I might suggest, first of all, that he is one of the successors to the humanist historians of the Latin Renaissance, with all their preoccupation with style and the models of Antiquity. But further, might we not regard him as the last of the classical historians themselves? He looks back to Tacitus, and already in the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, published in 1761, he firmly says that Tacitus is the only philosophical historian; 'je ne connais que Tacite qui ait rempli mon idee de cet historien philosophique'. I proceed to wonder whether we might not now be moving towards a new periodization in history, not the familiar Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, but perhaps regarding all history before the late eighteenth century as Ancient History. Given the rapidity of change in the two hundred years from 1776, can one not see Gibbon in the company of senators of the Antonine period, does he not belong with Tacitus and Pliny? On the other hand, to us, in this year-people used to use the term year of grace-this year 1976, the epoch of Gibbon is a long way away.

RONALD SYME

Roman Papers, ed. A.R. Birley, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1954, vol. III, p. 54

3

That curious and original letter will amuse the reader; and his gratitude should shield my free communication from the reproach of vanity.

Edinburgh, 18 of March, 1776

Dear Sir,

As I ran through your volume of History with great avidity and impatience, I cannot forbear discovering somewhat of the same impatience in returning you thanks for your agreeable present, and expressing the satisfaction which the performance has given me. Whether I consider the dignity of your style, the depth of your matter, or the extensiveness of your learning, I must regard the work as equally the object of esteem, and I own that if I had not previously had the happiness of your personal acquaintance, such a performance from an Englishman in our age would have given me some surprise. You may

smile at this sentiment, but as it seems to me, that your countrymen, for almost a whole generation have given themselves up to barbarous and absurd faction, and have totally neglected all polite letters, I no longer expected any valuable production ever to come from them. I know it will give you pleasure (as it did me) to find that all the men of letters in this place concur in their admiration of your work, and in their anxious desire of your continuing it.

When I heard of your undertaking (which was some time ago), I own that I was a little curious to see how you would extricate yourself from the subject of your last two chapters. I think you have observed a very prudent temperament; but it was impossible to treat the subject so as not to give grounds of suspicion against you, and you may expect that a clamour will arise. This, if anything, will retard your success with the public; for in every other respect your work is calculated to be popular. But, among many other marks of decline, the prevalence of superstition in England prognosticates the fall of philosophy and decay of taste; and, though nobody be more capable than you to revive them, you will probably find a struggle in your first advances.

I see you entertain a great doubt with regard to the authenticity of the poems of Ossian. You are certainly right in so doing. It is indeed strange that any men of sense could have imagined it possible that above twenty thousand verses, along with numberless historical facts, could have been preserved by oral tradition during fifty generations by the rudest perhaps of all the European nations, the most necessitous, the most turbulent, and the most unsettled. Where a supposition is so contrary to common sense, any positive evidence for it ought never to be regarded. Men run with great avidity to give their evidence in favour of what flatters their passions and their national prejudices. You are therefore over and above indulgent to us, in speaking of the matter with hesitation.

I must inform you that we are all very anxious to hear that you have fully collected the materials for your second volume, and that you are even considerably advanced in the composition of it. I speak this more in the name of my friends than in my own; as I cannot expect to live so long as to see the publication of it. Your ensuing volume will be still more delicate than the preceding; but I trust in your prudence for extricating you from the difficulties; and in all events you have courage to despise the clamour of bigots.

I am with great regard, Dear Sir, Your most obedient and most humble servant

David Hume

Some weeks afterwards I had the melancholy pleasure of seeing Mr Hume in his passage through London; his body feeble, his mind firm. On the 25 of August of the same year (1776) he died at Edinburgh the death of a philosopher.

EDWARD GIBBON

Memoir E, *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon*, pp. 311-13, n. 30

4

In the second century of the Christian era, the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilised portion of mankind. The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient renown and disciplined valour. The gentle, but powerful, influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury. The image of a free constitution was preserved with decent reverence. The Roman senate appeared to possess the sovereign authority, and

devolved on the emperors all the executive powers of government. During a happy period of more than fourscore years, the public administration was conducted by the virtue and abilities of Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the two Antonines. It is the design of this and of the two succeeding chapters, to describe the prosperous condition of their empire; and afterwards, from the death of Marcus Antoninus, to deduce the most important circumstances of its decline and fall: a revolution which will ever be remembered, and is still felt by the nations of the earth.

EDWARD GIBBON
Decline and Fall I (in princ.)

5

The division of Europe into a number of independent states, connected, however, with each other, by the general resemblance of religion, language, and manners, is productive of the most beneficial consequences to the liberty of mankind. A modern tyrant, who should find no resistance either in his own breast or in his people, would soon experience a gentle restraint from the example of his equals, the dread of present censure, the advice of his allies, and the apprehension of his enemies. The object of his displeasure, escaping from the narrow limits of his dominions, would easily obtain, in a happier climate, a secure refuge, a new fortune adequate to his merit, the freedom of complaint, and perhaps the means of revenge. But the empire of the Romans filled the world, and, when that empire fell into the hands of a single person, the world became a safe and dreary prison for his enemies. The slave of Imperial despotism, whether he was condemned to drag his gilded chain in Rome and the senate, or to wear out a life of exile on the barren rock of Seriphus, or the frozen banks of the Danube, expected his fate in silent despair. To resist was fatal, and it was impossible to fly. On every side he was encompassed with a vast extent of sea and land, which he could never hope to traverse without being discovered, seized, and restored to his irritated master. Beyond the frontiers, his anxious view could discover nothing, except the ocean, inhospitable deserts, hostile tribes of barbarians, of fierce manners and unknown language, or dependent kings, who would gladly purchase the emperor's protection by the sacrifice of an obnoxious fugitive. "Wherever you are," said Cicero to the exiled Marcellus, "remember that you are equally within the power of the conqueror."

EDWARD GIBBON
Decline and Fall III (in fin.)

(cf. CICERÓN *Ad Fam.* 4.7: "sed tamen, si iam ita constituisses, ut abesse perpetuo malles quam ea, quae nolles, videre, tamen id cogitare deberes, ubicumque esses, te fore in eius ipsius, quem fugeres, potestate")

6

Should these speculations be found doubtful or fallacious, there still remains a more humble source of comfort and hope. The discoveries of ancient and modern navigators, and the domestic history, or tradition, of the most enlightened nations, represent the human savage, naked both in mind and body, and destitute of laws, of arts, of ideas, and almost of language. From this abject condition, perhaps the primitive and universal state of man, he has gradually arisen to command the animals, to fertilise the earth, to traverse the ocean, and to measure the heavens. His progress in the improvement and exercise of his mental and corporeal faculties has been irregular and various, infinitely slow in the beginning, and increasing by degrees with redoubled velocity; ages of laborious ascent have been followed by a moment of rapid downfall; and the several climates of the globe have felt the vicissitudes of light and darkness. Yet the experience of four thousand years should enlarge our hopes, and diminish our apprehensions; we cannot determine to what height the human species may aspire in their advances towards perfection; but it may safely be presumed that no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism. The

improvements of society may be viewed under a threefold aspect. 1. The poet or philosopher illustrates his age and country by the efforts of a single mind; but these superior powers of reason or fancy are rare and spontaneous productions, and the genius of Homer, or Cicero, or Newton would excite less admiration, if they could be created by the will of a prince or the lessons of a preceptor. 2. The benefits of law and policy, of trade and manufactures, of arts and sciences, are more solid and permanent; and many individuals may be qualified, by education and discipline, to promote, in their respective stations, the interest of the community. But this general order is the effect of skill and labour; and the complex machinery may be decayed by time or injured by violence. 3. Fortunately for mankind, the more useful, or, at least, more necessary arts can be performed without superior talents or national subordination; without the powers of one or the union of many. Each village, each family, each individual, must always possess both ability and inclination to perpetuate the use of fire and of metals; the propagation and service of domestic animals; the methods of hunting and fishing; the rudiments of navigation; the imperfect cultivation of corn or other nutritive grain; and the simple practice of the mechanic trades. Private genius and public industry may be extirpated; but these hardy plants survive the tempest, and strike an everlasting root into the most unfavourable soil. The splendid days of Augustus and Trajan were eclipsed by a cloud of ignorance; and the Barbarians subverted the laws and palaces of Rome. But the scythe, the invention or emblem of Saturn, still continued annually to mow the harvests of Italy: and the human feasts of the Læstrygons have never been renewed on the coast of Campania.

Since the first discovery of the arts, war, commerce, and religious zeal have diffused, among the savages of the Old and New World, those inestimable gifts: they have been successively propagated; they can never be lost. We may therefore acquiesce in the pleasing conclusion that every age of the world has increased, and still increases, the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue of the human race.

EDWARD GIBBON

Decline and Fall XXXVIII

General Observations on the Fall of Roman Empire in the West (*in fin.*)

7

[...] of every reader, the attention will be excited by an History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: the greatest, perhaps, and most awful scene in the history of mankind. The various causes and progressive effects are connected with many of the events most interesting in human annals: the artful policy of the Cæsars, who long maintained the name and image of a free republic; the disorder of military despotism; the rise, establishment, and sects of Christianity; the foundation of Constantinople; the division of the monarchy; the invasion and settlements of the Barbarians of Germany and Scythia; the institutions of the civil law; the character and religion of Mahomet; the temporal sovereignty of the popes; the restoration and decay of the Western empire of Charlemagne; the crusades of the Latins in the East; the conquests of the Saracens and Turks; the ruin of the Greek empire; the state and revolutions of Rome in the middle age. The historian may applaud the importance and variety of his subject; but, while he is conscious of his own imperfections, he must often accuse the deficiency of his materials. It was among the ruins of the Capitol that I first conceived the idea of a work which has amused and exercised near twenty years of my life, and which, however inadequate to my own wishes, I finally deliver to the curiosity and candour of the public.

EDWARD GIBBON

Decline and Fall LXXI (Final Conclusion)

8

If my childish revolt against the Religion of my country had not stripped me in time of my Academic gown, the five important years, so liberally improved in the

studies and conversation of Lausanne, would have been steeped in port and prejudice among the monks of Oxford. Had the fatigue of idleness compelled me to read, the path of learning would not have been enlightened by a ray of philosophic freedom. I should have grown to manhood ignorant of the life and language of Europe, and my knowledge of the World would have been confined to an English Cloyster. Had I obtained a more early deliverance from the regions of sloth and pedantry, had I been sent abroad with the indulgence which the favour and fortune of my father might have allowed, I should probably have herded with the young travellers of my own nation, and my attainments in language and manners and science would have been such as they usually import from the continent. But my religious error fixed me at Lausanne, in a state of banishment and disgrace: the rigid course of discipline and abstinence to which I was condemned invigorated the constitution of my mind and body; poverty and pride estranged me from my countrymen : I was reduced to seek my amusement in myself and my books; and in the society of the natives, who considered me as their fellow-citizen, I insensibly lost the prejudices of an Englishman. My friends may indeed complain that this foreign education has eradicated the love and preference of my native country ; my mother-tongue was grown less familiar, and I had few objects to remember and fewer to regret in the British islands. If I was impatient of my situation, it was rather as a prisoner than as an exile ; and I should gladly have accepted a small independent estate on the easy terms of passing my life in Switzerland with the two persons who possessed the different affections of my heart.

EDWARD GIBBON

Memoir C, *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon*, pp. 239-40

