

Gibbon's Essay on the Study of Literature: A New English Translation

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INTRODUCTION

EDWARD GIBBON WROTE MOST OF THE *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* at the end of the 1750s, and the work was published in London in 1761. Gibbon was then twenty-four years old. An inept English translation, of which he was critical, appeared in London in 1764. What is more, by the mid-1760s Gibbon had set his mind to other projects, including what became *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776, 1781, 1788). Because of the *Decline's* celebrity, the *Essai* was pirated twice in Dublin, in the French original in 1777 and in the English translation in 1788. But by 1777, Gibbon was content to dismiss it as an *ouvrage de jeunesse*. A new English version by a gifted writer with insufficient French was published much later, in 1837, as part of Gibbon's "Miscellaneous Works." The present translation, the third in this lineage, hopes to be accurate with the French and generally readable. The *Essai* deserves more careful treatment of style than I have given it in this rendering, but presumably those interested in style and wordplay will look at the original.

What follows is a complete translation of the *Essai* as published in 1761 except for my omission of Matthieu Maty's long prefatory "À l'auteur." In addition, distinct passages that Gibbon wrote and subsequently revised or scrapped have also been included here, at the end of the translation of the published *Essai*. Readers interested in the French or in annotations to particular passages or in how Gibbon came to be writing in French in the first place may consult my critical edition.¹

Why might the *Essai* be of interest to readers today? First of all, it is the earliest publication by one of the great historians of the English language and one of the great minds of the eighteenth century. The young Gibbon could be arch and overly ingenious but he was already

¹ Edward Gibbon, *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature: A Critical Edition*, ed. Robert Mankin, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010).



capable of thinking profoundly on the basis of extraordinary learning. The *Essai* may not reveal the hiding places of his power, but it demonstrates that power. Second, the *Essai* shows him trying to make his way with “literature,” a word that in 1761 could be parsed as something more than just learning: the state of knowledge, ancient and modern. The text tells us in some detail about Gibbon’s desire to defend erudition and scholarship as key components of the historian’s craft, while also displaying a modern ambivalence on that subject. Third, the *Essai* suggests that the young Englishman, who began his career by describing the role of the “literary man” (*littérateur*), hesitated between the roles that spoke to him most powerfully. There was the critic (chap. XXV) and above all there was the philosophical historian and the history-minded philosopher. The same author could assert that “[w]hether he [the ‘philosophical spirit’] be a geometrician, an antiquarian, or a musician, he is always a philosopher, and by dint of penetrating into the first principles of his art, he becomes superior to it” (chap. XLVI), and he could be reasonable with a sigh: “If philosophers are not always historians, it would at least be desirable for historians to be philosophers” (chap. LII). Likewise, in the unpublished passages, Gibbon could alter the meanings of his work by replacing, as he did, the word “Philosopher” by “Historian” in the following statement: “How can the Philosopher who confines himself to partial Causes explain this Phenomenon?” (paragraph 55). Such tensions may even help to account for some of the skittishness of the performance. In the 1790s the author of the *Decline and Fall* looked back on the *Essai* with a mixture of reservations and satisfaction: “The most serious defect of my Essay is a kind of obscurity and abruptness, which always fatigues, and may often elude, the attention of the reader.”²

As the reader will see, the unpublished passages that here follow the *Essay* (and which have never to my knowledge appeared in English translation) add a great deal to the story, particularly in relation to historical method and to Gibbon’s early assessment of Christianity. Moreover, some of the paragraphs are unforgettable. And yet Gibbon left them in a rough state that to some extent belies his claim much later to have always composed his works orally, committing each paragraph to paper only when he was perfectly satisfied with its formulations and cadences.³ The translation has not tried to render the roughness of these passages. A great deal of punctuation has been added, sometimes in brackets, to make the text easier to read. For information on the position of these passages in the original structure of the *Essai*, or to get a sense of the unpolished original, the reader may again consult the SVEC edition.⁴

As a matter of curiosity, the original uppercase letters have been left in the translations of both the *Essai* and the unpublished passages. In the printed *Essai*, capitalization is erratic at best and perhaps the work of several hands (including the printers’). By contrast, the presentation of the unpublished passages was most likely the work of Gibbon alone. Another curiosity, the system of footnotes and (in some cases) footnotes to footnotes, has not been easy to duplicate with an ordinary word-processing program. I have therefore simplified the notation, which is deployed by page rather than by paragraph. The abbreviated titles that Gibbon cites in his notes have been slightly expanded. A



Robert Mankin’s translation can be found here:

<http://arcade.stanford.edu/rofl/essay-study-literature-translation>

² Edward Gibbon, *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon*, ed. John Murray (London: John Murray, 1896), 172.

³ See *ibid.*, 316.

⁴ Gibbon, *Essai*, ed. Mankin, 145ff.