

'Spartacus's wife, a woman who came from the same tribe as Spartacus, was a prophetess'¹: Gender and Utopia in Three Spartacus Novels.

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We know very little about Spartacus as a real person. We know even less about his wife. Unlike her husband, even her name is not remembered. Among all of the references in Roman writings to Spartacus and the slave revolt he led from 73-71 BC, there is only one single mention of his wife, that in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. Her appearance in Plutarch's history is linked to her role as a seer who interpreted the symbolic meaning of a snake that appeared while Spartacus was a slave in Rome:

People tell the following story about him when he was brought to Rome to be sold as a slave. While he was sleeping, a snake coiled up around his head. Spartacus's wife, a woman who came from the same tribe as Spartacus, was a prophetess who was possessed by ecstatic frenzies that were part of the worship of the god Dionysus. She declared that this was the sign of a tremendous and fearsome power that would bring him to an unfortunate end. She was living with him at the time and ran away with him when he escaped.²

Plutarch does not say very much more about Spartacus as a person, except to indicate in a similar way his singular qualities: "Spartacus was a Thracian, born among pastoral nomadic people. He not only possessed great spirit and bodily strength, but he was more intelligent and nobler than his fate, and he was more Greek than his [Thracian] background might indicate."³ That a slave like Spartacus would have a wife who was with him at the slave market in Rome and then sold together to a gladiator school in Capua is remarkable. As De Ste. Croix notes: "[T]he slave, who could not legally 'marry' at all, had no redress if his master decided to sell him separately from the woman he regarded as his 'wife' and their offspring."⁴ Trow also characterises the sale of Spartacus and his wife together as "an unusual situation."⁵ The whole question of their relationship is, according to Barry Strauss, "tantalizing," their fates so entwined that, he suggests, the "Thracian woman" became "Spartacus's messenger, perhaps even his muse."⁶

We will probably never know who this woman really was or what she was like. However, she has become incorporated into the fictional narrative of the Roman slave leader that has formed the basis of modern film, television and novel versions of the story, not least in three radical works written in English about the uprising: Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Spartacus* (1933)⁷, Arthur Koestler's *The Gladiators* (1939)⁸, and Howard Fast's *Spartacus* (1951). In this article, I want to look more closely at the representation of Spartacus's wife in these novels.

Not only because she tends to be neglected in the critical discussion, but also because the figure of the wife has, I would argue, often a direct bearing on the political ambitions of the writers to utilise the past as a comment on the present. Moreover, the space that Spartacus's female companion is given in each story is, I would claim, in direct proportion to the utopian dimensions of the narrative. This focus on the connection between gender and utopia will, hopefully, contribute to a deeper and more critical understanding of some of the key issues of revolutionary politics that these historical novels seek to dramatisate.

Compared to the scant personal information about either Spartacus or his wife, the slave revolt itself received a lot more attention in Roman historiography. Moreover, its historical representation was from the very beginning linked to questions of ideology, interpretation and appropriation. In his collection of classical Roman writing concerned with the Spartacus uprising, Brent D. Shaw reminds us that the way the events were depicted reflected very much the political prejudices of those who wrote about them: "None of these authors, whether writing history or biography, had much sympathy for slaves. Indeed, they regarded anything that was servile or tinged with the realities of slave life as inherently inferior and unworthy, and in most cases they did not even note or report it as part of their normal historical narratives."⁹ The very fact that they devoted space at all to the revolt is, however, an indication of its traumatic impact on the collective Roman psyche, even though the accounts of what happened are made to fit in with "deliberately crafted, self-conscious interpretations."¹⁰ This is a narrative practice that has continued through to the present day, where Spartacus has acquired more of a varied political and cultural status as a Communist, Stalinist, Hollywood and Gay icon.¹¹ It is, therefore, the ideological "use, and abuse, of Spartacus as a symbol,"¹² and the particular way this is translated into contemporary terms in the above-mentioned novels, that I want to explore more fully.

Viewing the portrayal of the Spartacus uprising primarily in a modern rather than a historical context is something that was encouraged by the novelists themselves. It is clear, for example, from their own comments, that they were interested in these tumultuous Roman events mainly in terms of the latter-day revolutionary insights that could be gleaned from them. This intention is also linked to the fact that they all shared a background as Marxist writers who had a similar ideological understanding of the interconnection between politics and literature. In 1935, Lewis Grassic Gibbon declared for instance in *Left Review*: "(I am a revolutionary writer) [...] I hate capitalism; all my books are explicit or implicit propaganda."¹³ Howard Fast was also clear about the radical political connotations of his work: "I wrote it so that those who read it, my children and others, may take strength for our own troubled future and that they may struggle against oppression and wrong – so that the dream of Spartacus may come to be

in our own time.”¹⁴ Even more dramatically, Arthur Koestler admitted in a 1965 postscript to his novel how much it represented his break with the Communist movement in which he had been active since 1931:

My progressive disillusionment with the Communist Party reached an acute state in 1935 – the year of the Kirov murder, the first purges, the first waves of the Terror which was to sweep most of my comrades away. It was during this crisis that I began to write *The Gladiators* – the story of another revolution that had gone wrong.¹⁵

Clearly, the story of Spartacus in these novels was always about something more than just a rebellion of slaves in Rome in 73 BC.

With respect to the gender aspects of the story however, the writers show rather different levels of awareness. Koestler, for example, is the one who is least interested in portraying Spartacus's female companion, or indeed slave women in general, taking an active part in the uprising. Women in *The Gladiators* are usually shown as the objects of male lust or violence. There is a Thracian female in the beginning who sleeps with Spartacus, but not as his wife. The fact that she possesses prophetic powers is also mentioned, but this has no particular relevance to the story. She is described mainly in erotic terms and then forgotten: “There was also a girl, dark, slender and of childlike airs, a Thracian priestess who could read the stars and the future. She was the woman of the one with the fur-skin, but she slept with others too and afflicted all men with like desire.”¹⁶ When she returns for the second and last time towards the end of the novel, she appears as the same inscrutable sexual creature that attracts Spartacus, but whose oracular gifts remain frustratingly elusive:

[S]he had gained this reputation earlier on, being a former priestess of Bacchos of Thrace, initiate of the Orphic cult; had she not announced to Spartacus the terrible power in store for him, when he was a mere common circus-gladiator? He had been lying on the floor, asleep, but the woman watched the serpent sneaking towards him and coiling round his head without harming him in any way; and thus she had known of all that was to be. [...] Spartacus had been neglecting her for a long time; and people said he shunned her to avoid meeting and touching the dark and allusive powers she bore within her. [...] Before, he had shunned her for the sake of her eery powers; but now he wanted her because of them. [...] He lay still, and longed to know the answer to his question. He had searched for it in the touch of her body, and now he looked for it within her eyes, until she began to feel uncomfortable and averted her head. So he let her go, disappointed, and knew that here there was no answer either.¹⁷

Apart from the fact that the woman withholds her powers of prophecy, her long absence in the story is even more perplexing: one wonders what their relationship has been throughout the uprising and whether or not the priestess had any influence on the political decisions Spartacus has made. Typically, she is relegated to the many marginal gendered silences in the novel. Women in Koestler's story exist either to cook the food or receive the physical advances of the men, abusive or otherwise. Not that Koestler is particularly interested in exploring the character of Spartacus any more deeply. Since the novel is primarily aimed at exposing the ethical deficiencies of all revolutionaries alike, Spartacus and the other slave leaders in Koestler's novel tend simplistically to fit into the "God that failed" mould of Roman-style Stalinists. In this masculine world of Bolsheviks in sandals, the slaves function merely as pawns in Koestler's morality tale of 'the law of detours': how the principle of the end justifying the means inevitably compels them to slaughter their own in the name of some obscure political ideal. In Koestler's version, all social revolutions are basically doomed, Roman or Russian. As a writer, he is not concerned with the psychological portrayal of ordinary men, women or children, except as hapless victims of history. Their thoughts and desires do not move him, nor does their involvement in the uprising. Consequently, his fictional account falls into the same contrived narrative trap he himself sets for Spartacus, that of mechanical historical determinism, the utopian implications of which I want to return to later.

Women play a much more prominent role in both Gibbon's and Fast's novels. In Gibbon's story, in particular, the Athenian-born slave, Elpinice, becomes not only Spartacus's lover and companion, but also his closest co-revolutionary. It is, for example, Elpinice who releases the gladiators from their incarceration, thereby starting the uprising:

Lovers, she found in his bed delight, not agony. He found with her something that cleansed the dark gloom from his eyes. Lying together, they planned the revolt, with the restive mutter of the Gladiators around them. Elpinice brought the keys in the dead of night, and unlocked the chains. [...] the Gladiators marched from the city in a compact body, armed with the weapons of the lanistae, led by the Thracian bandit, the woman Elpinice in their midst.¹⁸

Feminist critics of Gibbon's writing have pointed to his increasing preoccupation with the plight of women in patriarchal society. His complex portrayal of the life of Chris Guthrie in the classic trilogy, *A Scots Quair* (1932-4), is, according to Carol Anderson, informed by Gibbon's "new and self-conscious interest in the role of women in society" where "the struggles of women are made a central concern."¹⁹ In *Spartacus*, Gibbon takes this awareness a step further and shows a woman as one of the main driving forces behind the slave rebellion. Thus, for instance, in the ensuing debate about what they should do with their new-found

freedom, it is Elpinice who argues for a common military strategy, thus provoking their male prejudices about women:

Elpinice stood up, her woman's voice strange and mild in the bass rumblings of the ragged horde.'

'The Wolf is Rome. Spartacus will lead us from Italy, but only as a united army. Let us march and meet the next army of the praetor's.'

'What will that help?' asked Gershom ben Sanballat, and he voiced the slave-army.

'If we defeat the Masters we can arm ourselves and be strong enough to fight a way through Italy.'

Hearing this, the slaves were again divided, some favouring the boldness of the woman, others crying that she was mad.²⁰

In his introduction to Gibbon's novel, Ian Campbell writes that "Spartacus develops a character of his own, one which commands respect from the other figures in the story and consistent attention from the reader."²¹ He makes no mention of Elpinice's decisive role in this context. Instead, he insists that it is Spartacus who remains the focus of the radical trajectory of the novel: "As an individual hero, as leader of a significant political rebellion, as potential destabiliser of Rome, and as an inspiration for future class struggle, Spartacus plainly is important."²² However, a closer scrutiny of the story shows that it is Elpinice who emerges as the constant radicaliser of the rebellion, to the point of impelling the slaves to go beyond their simple belief in the Strategos or individual leaders and begin deciding for themselves what to do:

'Spartacus and the slaves are one,' said Kleon. 'For the Leader is the People.'

Then Elpinice spoke, strangely, as once before in Kleon's presence.

'Yet I think a time will come when men will swear by the people alone.'

Gershom ben Sanballat looked at her, with veiled eyes, for she was a woman. 'That is your counsel, then? I should swear by the slaves, as their tribune, and not by your lover, as their Strategos?'

'That's for you to decide. Yet in your case I'd not swear myself the Strategos's man.'²³

Indeed, one could argue, that in Gibbon's version of the story, it is the murder of the pregnant Elpinice by the Romans that signals the beginning of the end of the slave uprising. It is after this tragic event that Spartacus, without the guidance of his revolutionary companion, loses his sense of political direction. An indication of this is his taking a captured Roman aristocrat, Lavinia, as his mistress. When the slave army becomes divided, she betrays Spartacus by not informing him that Crixus, his ally, is surrounded and in need of reinforcements. This results in the first great military defeat of the rebellion. A note of tragedy

enters the story at this point, as Spartacus realises their cause has faltered, a cause that Elpinice so radically personified. Significantly, Gibbon also begins to shift the narrative emphasis in the remaining bloody unravelling of the uprising away from the immediate historical context to the more lasting revolutionary impact of the events, from Spartacus the slave leader to the revolt of the down-trodden throughout history. The time of the Roman slaves will pass, but their rebellion will form part of the ebb and flow of a class struggle that will continue. Thus, Spartacus becomes less of a dominant leader in the story and more of a figure who is fused with the collective that make up this radical groundswell:

For he found himself entering their hearts and thoughts, with a new and bitter impatience upon him – often; yet also a comprehension, an understanding, as though somehow he himself were these men, these women, these lost stragglers of rebellion against the Masters and their terrible Gods; as though the life in their bodies was a part of his, he the Giver of Life and this multitude that had risen about him in the storm of days and shaken the Republic to its foundations. As though he were all of the hungered dispossessed of all time: as though at moments he ceased to live, merging his spirit in that of the horde, his body in that of a thousand bodies, bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh.²⁴

It is this awareness of history that transforms Spartacus in the final part of the novel. Thus, Gibbon's narrative is as concerned with the fate of revolutions as Koestler's. However, in Gibbon's case, he shows that the defeat of the uprising is not primarily due to the individual flaws of leaders, but the specific conditions in which they act. The moment may not be ripe for a successful slave revolt, but theirs is a battle in a social war that will not end with them. This new insight is translated into the third and final relationship Spartacus develops with a woman, this time with Mella, a slave girl from Sicily. Sicily saw some of the greatest slave rebellions previous to the Spartacus uprising and it is Mella who tells him of these other momentous struggles: "She whispered, the little Sicel, gazing at the Strategos in awe, that indeed there were many slaves there, many thousands, they had risen in revolt many times."²⁵ As with Elpinice, it is Mella's knowledge that helps Spartacus place their revolt in a wider context of the victories and defeats of slaves everywhere.²⁶

The same radical teleological perspective is developed in Fast's novel. Moreover, this is once again intimately connected to the character of Spartacus's wife, in this case a German woman called Varinia. Like Spartacus, Varinia is from the beginning not naturally submissive as a slave. On the contrary, when her Roman owner, Batiatus, who runs the gladiator school, tries to rape her: "She became a wild cat. She became a kicking, spitting, scratching, clawing monster – and since she was large and strong, he had a bad time beating her into unconsciousness."²⁷ It is this independence of spirit that inspires Spartacus.

They are both slaves who refuse to deny their own value as human beings, qualities which form the seed of rebellion.

It is perhaps not surprising, given the context in which it was written, that Fast's story of Spartacus is one that situates itself most directly in an ongoing tradition of democratic struggle. Fast had been a member of the American Communist Party since 1944 and it was while in prison for three months in 1950 for contempt of Congress that he began to write his novel about the slave rebellion. When called before the House of Un-American Activities, he refused to disclose the names of contributors to a fund for a home for orphans of American veterans of the Spanish Civil War. As he later commented: "[W]ithout that prison term, I never would have written *Spartacus*, a book I began to brood over during that time at Mill Point, where I began more deeply than ever before to comprehend the full agony and hopelessness of the underclass."²⁸ Moreover, as a Party member, Fast would probably have been familiar with the celebrated status of Spartacus among Communists. Both Marx and Lenin for example had established the revolutionary credentials of Spartacus as an early example of a revolutionary leader. Famously, Marx not only chose Spartacus as his own personal "Hero",²⁹ he also described him as "the most splendid fellow in the whole of ancient history. Great general (no Garibaldi), noble character, real representative of the ancient proletariat."³⁰ Lenin, in his turn, sought to promote a similar awareness of the historical importance of both the man and the slave revolt that he led:

Spartacus was one of the most prominent heroes of one of the greatest revolts of slaves, which took place about two thousand years ago. For many years the seemingly omnipotent Roman Empire, which rested entirely on slavery, experienced the shocks and blows of a widespread uprising of slaves who armed and united to form a vast army under the leadership of Spartacus. In the end they were defeated, captured and put to torture by the slaveowners. Such civil wars mark the whole history of class society.³¹

According to W Z Rubinsohn, it was pronouncements like this by the founders of the Communist movement that elevated Spartacus into "the revolutionary mythology and martyrology of the Soviet Union."³² Spartacus was, therefore, already established as a revolutionary forefather in the Soviet Hall of Fame when Fast began writing his own story of slave uprising. The connection between Fast's Spartacus novel and contemporary politics was also quickly noticed in the US. Initially, by the publisher's reader, Angus Cameron, to whom he first sent the book: "The novel has suspense, excellent characterizations, a feeling of the times, and a profound comment on those times and, indeed, on any time of crisis."³³ More dramatically, the potential impact of Fast's radical message alarmed

J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI, who immediately blacklisted the manuscript among American publishers, forcing Fast to finance its first printing himself. The political implications of the fate of his novel were not lost on Fast, as he later recalled:

All this increased my understanding. I would never again fulminate against the German people for not defying Adolf Hitler. He, at least, had firing squads and concentration camps. Here, it was simply the threat of J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI, for the story of what had happened at Little, Brown was all over the industry, and no "brave" publisher wanted to be Horatius, standing at the bridge.³⁴

In contrast to the traditionally masculine image of Spartacus as the great slave leader, both Gibbon and Fast give their narratives a more unconventional gendered twist by including a woman as the story's most radical protagonist. Indeed, in Fast's version, the figure of Spartacus's wife takes on a central political role. She is the key to the revolt and comes to personify, much more than Spartacus himself, all of its libertarian aspirations, not least when she becomes the mother of Spartacus's son. Thus, Fast portrays Varinia as the person in whom the whole meaning of the uprising is concentrated: it is her escape with her son that gives the ending its essentially utopian transcendence.

Ian Campbell suggests that "perhaps Fast's most vivid achievement is to realise, in a low-key way, the full horror of being a slave."³⁵ He also notes that "Fast implants the story within the Roman society of the time, with flashback and forward through the experience of Crassus, Gracchus, Cicero and a young pleasure-seeking aristocratic Roman circle."³⁶ Although it is true that Fast's novel is made up of mainly male narrators, whose fragmented recollections of the slave uprising create a multi-faceted picture of the events, none of these Romans have any deeper, personal understanding of Spartacus himself. It is primarily through the female voice of Varinia that we hear of Spartacus's transformation as a leader of the slaves. It is also through their relationship that Spartacus is revealed as a man whose thoughts and attitudes, not least towards women, are continually being challenged. The actions of the women in the initial breakout from the gladiator school represent, for example, the first indication of the need for more gender recognition:

"I want the women inside," [Spartacus] said. "They are not to be exposed. They are not to fight."

The fury of the women had surprised him. It was beyond and more than the fury of the men. The women wanted to fight; they wept with him out of their need to fight. They pleaded for some of the precious knives, and when he denied that, they belted their tunics and filled them

with rocks to throw [...]

"Follow me!" he cried. "Follow me!" Varinia stayed next to him. They went off the road and across the fields, mounting up onto the sloping hills. "Never leave me behind, never leave me behind," said Varinia. "I can fight like a man can fight."³⁷

Thus, as with Elpinice in Gibbon's story, Varinia is the catalyst of Spartacus's political development, although in Varinia's case, this process continues throughout the story. Indeed, it is Varinia who, in a song she sings, suggests to Spartacus a much more all-encompassing revolutionary goal of the uprising: the destruction of Rome and the creation of a new egalitarian world:

"You must destroy Rome – you, Spartacus. You must take these people away and be stern and strong with them. You must teach them to fight and kill. There is no going back – not one single step back. The whole world belongs to Rome, so Rome must be destroyed and made only a bad memory, and then, where Rome was, we will build a new life where all men will live in peace and brotherhood and love, no slaves and no slavemasters, no gladiators and no arenas, but a time like the old times, like the golden age. We will build new cities of brotherhood, and there will be no walls around them."

Then Varinia stopped singing and asked him. "What are you dreaming, my man, my Thracian?"³⁸

It is clear from passages like the above that Fast envisaged Varinia as the ideological driving force in the novel. Indeed, Varinia becomes such a presence that by the end it is not only Spartacus who loves her: even Crassus and Gracchus, the two Roman generals who pursue and finally destroy the rebellious slaves, admit to their fascination with her. The gender implications of this somewhat unexpected turn in the plot are evident when Gracchus tells of his own feelings for Varinia: "I never knew a woman who was a human being; how many of our women are? I've feared them and hated them. Maybe we made them that way – I don't know. Now I want to go crawling on my knees to this woman. I want her to look at me just once and tell me that I mean something to her."³⁹ That it is a slave woman who has such a dramatic impact on a Roman is no doubt meant to be taken as part of Spartacus's posthumous victory over this class of misogynist aristocrats. But it is also an indication of how the character of Varinia has become the pivotal figure in the story.

As I mentioned before, the case that I am arguing here is that the issue of gender is not just part of the subtext of these novels. In a much more fundamental way, it permeates the whole utopian projection of an alternative to class-based society. Moreover, it is in this context that the relevance of the Spartacus story to contemporary revolutionary politics is made most tangible. I

want, therefore, to devote the latter part of this article to examining in more detail this key narrative connection between gender and utopia.

In his postscript to *The Gladiators*, Koestler recalled how early in the 1930s he “felt attracted by the Soviet utopia”. However, by the time the book was published in 1939, he had completely abandoned his support for Communism. The writing was, therefore, “not so much an escape as a form of occupational therapy which helped me to clarify my ideas; for there existed some obvious parallels between the first pre-Christian century and the present.”⁴⁰ He also goes on to explain how the novel, together with two others written soon after, *Darkness at Noon* (1940) and *Arrival and Departure* (1943), came to form a trilogy of fictional works in which he sought to interrogate “the central question of revolutionary ethics and of political ethics in general: the question whether, or to what extent, the end justifies the means.”⁴¹ Koestler’s story of Spartacus was, therefore, a case of writing back at the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet worker state.

While being generally dismissive of women in all three of these overtly political works,⁴² the tensions of gender also recur at critical moments in Koestler’s other related writings. In his confessional contribution to *The God That Failed* (1949), the recollection of his early commitment to the Communist Party is couched in terms of female seduction. Thus, in a curious mixture of ideological and sexual metaphor, his initial Party affiliation is transcribed into the language of erotic attraction and repulsion:

But, in fact, though I accepted the necessity for conspiratorial vigilance, I felt increasingly frustrated. I was running after the Party, thirsting to throw myself completely into her arms, and the more breathlessly I struggled to possess and be possessed by her, the more elusive and unattainable she became. So, like all rejected suitors, I racked my brain for gifts to make her smile and soften her stony heart.⁴³

Moreover, in the concluding remarks about his ultimate rejection of Communism, another female allusion appears in the text, this time in the form of the biblical story of Jacob’s wooing of Rachel, his marriage and betrayal. It provides a further insight into Koestler’s utopian disillusion that is haunted by fears of sexual betrayal and loss:

I served the Communist Party for seven years – the same time as Jacob tended Laban’s sheep to win Rachel his daughter. When the time was up, the bride was led into his dark tent; only the next morning did he discover that his ardors had been spent not on the lovely Rachel but on the ugly Leah.

I wonder whether he ever recovered from the shock of having slept with an illusion. I wonder whether afterwards he believed that he had ever believed in it. I wonder whether the happy end of the legend will

be repeated; for at the price of another seven years of labor, Jacob was given Rachel too, and the illusion became flesh.⁴⁴

In his biography of Koestler, David Cesarani writes that “the slave revolt allowed him immense scope to explore questions of revolutionary strategy, utopian ideology and the human dimension of history that was so neglected in dialectical materialism.”⁴⁵ At the same time, Cesarani’s own interpretation of *The Gladiators* points to a somewhat more contradictory reading than one that simply draws a direct parallel between Spartacus and Stalinism:

The novel reflected a deep shift in Koestler’s political thinking. In it he suggested that a revolution can only succeed if its leaders are ruthless and indoctrinate people with a new set of beliefs. Any humanity or toleration of dissent is fatal. Spartacus fails because he still has old-fashioned scruples and applies repression inconsistently, continuing to value human life over the cause he champions.⁴⁶

Cesarani’s conclusion is that the novel is politically ambiguous: “This is a chilling message which can be read in two ways, according to the reader’s taste [...]. In essence, however, it is a pessimistic, un-Marxist novel.”⁴⁷ Thus, Koestler seems to suggest that any revolution would have to be so violently repressive that such sacrifices would morally compromise the whole project. Paradoxically however, Spartacus appears even more politically treacherous in the novel because of his naïve idealism, as one of his slave followers explains: “For the damage done by the congenitally wicked tyrant is confined to the field of his personal interests and his personal cruelty; but the well-meaning tyrant who has a lofty reason for everything, can do unlimited damage.”⁴⁸ Translated into modern terms, does this imply that Stalin’s terror was the only pragmatic way to save the Soviet Union and his actions should, therefore, be defended? In his recently published biography of Koestler, Michael Scammell also points to this political flaw in Koestler’s thinking at this time:

In truth, Koestler was still confused in his attitude to revolution and its aftermath. While condemning the fanatical ruthlessness that had led to the Soviet show trials, he seemed to think that a “moderate ruthlessness” was still in order and that it could be turned on and off as needed. It was essential for exerting control over the masses but shouldn’t be deliberately encouraged or allowed to get out of hand, as was the case in fascist countries.⁴⁹

This ideological contradiction remains at the core of the novel which, despite Koestler’s insistence on the “pedantic accuracy” of its historical detail,⁵⁰ never really succeeds in explaining the reasons for the failure of the uprising. There is, for instance, no direct debate between Spartacus and the other leaders, including

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the rebellious Crixus, about either the aims or tactics of the revolt. Nor is there any discussion of the ideological basis for the utopian Sun City that is founded by Spartacus. There is, instead, a looming sense of historic inevitability in Koestler's depiction of revolutionary defeat, which in the end reveals nothing about the specific causes of the fall of Spartacus or the rise of Stalin. Inexplicably, for example, Spartacus turns himself into a new "Imperator", suddenly adopting all the trappings of a Roman aristocrat and living apart from the other slaves in a luxurious tent.⁵¹ The only reason given for this startling transformation is once again to fall back on a deterministic "law of detours" involving more and more, seemingly unavoidable political compromises that eventually result in a corrupt dictatorship:

You talk of detours which lead to the goal? Dirty detours, they are. Dangerous detours, I say to you, for you never know where all those detours will land you in the end. Many a man has strutted the road of tyranny, at the outset solely with the purpose of serving his lofty ideals, and in the end the road alone made him carry on. Just remember the dictatorship of the People's Friend Marius, and what became of it.⁵²

The attack on the Roman city of Nola is another such "dirty detour", resulting in the massacre of its inhabitants by the slave army. Despite the obvious fact that they would find potential allies more readily among the town's slave population, Koestler chooses to portray Spartacus's supporters murdering the poor rather than the rich because "they felt more at home" in the slum areas.⁵³ It is a telling example of the way Koestler manipulates the story in accordance with his own anti-revolutionary agenda. The justification for this pointless atrocity is, moreover, obscured by a metaphysical contemplation of the flawed essence of human beings. This is formulated in the story by the supposed historian of the slave uprising, the lawyer Fulvius, who begins his account with the declaration: "ON THE CAUSES WHICH INDUCE MAN TO ACT CONTRARY TO THE INTERESTS OF OTHERS WHEN ISOLATED, AND TO ACT CONTRARY TO HIS OWN INTERESTS WHEN ASSOCIATED IN GROUPS OR CROWDS."⁵⁴ In other words, the struggle for human liberation is basically hopeless because people are too perniciously contradictory by nature to cooperate with each other. Thus, in another significantly gendered context, the final indictment of the utopian Sun City is made by a slave girl who bemoans her life in the supposedly egalitarian conditions of the new republic. Koestler once again seeks to discredit the politics of social revolution by another feminised image of political perverseness. In this contrived clash between illusion and reality, Koestler reduces the libertarian aspirations of the uprising to the level of arbitrary personal preference:

'I suppose you ran away from your master in Nola?'

‘They killed him,’ she said without interrupting her work.
 ‘Were you glad when they came and killed him?’
 ‘Glad? What for?’
 ‘Because you are free now,’ said Publibor. ‘Before your master could do with you as he pleased.’
 It seemed as though she were about to laugh again, but she only gave him an amused look. ‘That he could,’ she said, smiling.
 ‘He could have you whipped,’ said Publibor.
 ‘Whipped? What for?’
 ‘He could, if he wanted to,’ said Publibor obstinately.
 ‘Well, is that so terrible?’
 He pondered, did no longer know himself what it was he wanted. Then he asked: ‘Isn’t it marvellous to be free?’
 ‘What’s the difference?’ She asked indifferently. ‘Don’t I have to go on working?’
 Free is he who needn’t work.’
 ‘Before, you worked for your master, now we work for ourselves. Is there no difference in that?’
 She had got herself a fresh corn cob. ‘Oh yes,’ she said, obviously bored.⁵⁵

Clearly, the comments of the girl are meant to question the concept of freedom in the slave republic. Yet there is no real argument provided as to why there has been no substantial change in the lives of the slaves. The girl appears just generally sceptical about the whole thing, at the same time suggesting that given the choice she would probably prefer to be back at the Roman villa working as a slave. It is an image of ordinary people hardly knowing their own interests, something that in the end seems to justify the dictatorial rule of those at the top. This ideological caricature is typical of the political reductionism that underpins Koestler’s novel. Basically, he has no confidence in the radical consciousness of working people, then or now. They are all lambs to the slaughter, either as victims or henchmen in the thrall of corrupt or misguided leaders who make decisions above their heads. As Koestler himself admitted in the postscript to the novel, “both roads” – Spartacist or Bolshevik – “end in a tragic *cul-de-sac*.”⁵⁶

In contrast, the portrayal of the rising in Gibbon’s *Spartacus* is informed by a very different political rationale, one that challenges the trope of ineluctable revolutionary retreat. There is also a more dialectical understanding of the revolt as historically premature, but one whose example will live on in a tradition of popular resistance. This is the radical utopian conclusion that the novel seeks to promote:

‘As this story will grow, dim and confused, in the ages to be, the story of the slaves’ insurrection. They’ll mix the marches and forget our

names, and make of Gannicus a loyal hero and of Gershom here a strayed Gaul from Marsala! Poets and writers of tales will yet tell it, perhaps, each setting therein his own loves and hates, with us only their shadowy cup-bearers. All dim and tangled in the tales they'll tell, except their beginnings with that Spring when we roused the slaves. And all the rest a dream or a lie.⁵⁷

Certainly, like Koestler, both Gibbon and Fast are concerned with the function of revolutionary leadership and the ethical link between means and ends.⁵⁸ For Gibbon and Fast, however, there is a dynamic interrelation between leaders and the historical conditions in which they act. Gibbon in particular shows how people can change in the course of a revolution, how they rise to the occasion so to speak and reveal qualities they might not think they had before. He also poses the need for a very different set of revolutionary moral values, one that is both progressive and humane. The slaves do not simply repeat the brutal violence of their Roman masters. Indeed, it comes as a surprise to the Romans that Spartacus was "one who neither tortured his captives nor looted unnecessarily."⁵⁹ Moreover, unlike Koestler's depiction of an increasingly aloof dictator, Gibbon's Spartacus grows more and more identified with the slaves he is leading:

And he knew now, with a great faith, the reason for that. None of his marchings and plannings had been his alone, but an essence of the dim wills in the minds of the multitude, in the Negro slave who had starved and shivered up by the Rhegine dyke, the Thracian shepherd who limped with a bloody heel, the Bithynian porter who disputed with the Thracian land-serf the name for victory and defeatlessness. He was but a voice for many, the Voice of the voiceless.⁶⁰

In this narrative of revolt, Gibbon includes the even more radical intervention of the women. In their struggle to realise the new utopia, the female slaves do not only participate equally with the men in the uprising. We also see them transformed into warriors who know why they are fighting and what they are dying for. This gendered awareness in Gibbon's novel brings the struggle of the slaves alive in human terms, revealing the integral connection between the personal and the political in history:

And the women of the slave army felt on their faces that same rain, in their hearts the same thoughts as their men. They had tramped the length and breadth of the Peninsula, it under their feet, it was theirs, THEIRS, bought in the travail of the unending roads, in the travail of wounds and death and birth, the horde of children that had been born in the snow-smitten, sun-smitten camps of revolt. The Masters – they were the Masters, they who went ragged and hungry. And they looked on their children crawling out with little eager hands to grasp at the rain and laugh at its touch; and a fierce, weeping tenderness took the slave

women. These should never endure what they had endured, to them sun and security and the citizen's name when the Free Legions went down on Rome.⁶¹

Passages like the above create a tangible sense of solidarity in Gibbon's text that opens up a direct line of communication between the slaves in the story and oppressed people everywhere. In contrast to Koestler, who is dismissive of the common people as passive victims of circumstances they never really comprehend, Gibbon celebrates the collective heroism of ordinary men and women who keep on fighting for their egalitarian ideals against all odds. When the retrospective utopian question is posed in the novel: "Would ever again the men of the Golden Age stir in the blind, dull hearts of the great slave-hordes?"⁶² it is through the actions of the women that it is answered. Their revolt is already a return of the Golden Age, since the idea of a slave army bringing the Roman Empire to its knees is proof of the historic ability of the so-called lower orders to overcome their individual shortcomings and transform their lives. It is, moreover, Elpinice who in the debate about democracy among the slaves is the one to project this more radical view of ordinary people emancipating themselves.

However, it is in Fast's novel that this utopian vision is most fully and consistently realised, through the fate of Spartacus's companion, Varinia. Thus, it is in her role as mother of Spartacus's son that she not only becomes the main focaliser of the story, but also the one who reveals the deepest grasp of the historic implications of the slave revolt. Spartacus is silent about these things, it is Varinia who speaks instead. For example, in relation to the ethical dilemmas involving the use of violence, it is she who, in reply to Gracchus's question about what motivated Spartacus, shows an understanding of how means and ends are interlinked and why both have to be justified in the context of the struggle for human liberation:

'It's hard for some people to know. Do you know what I will tell my son? I think you will understand me. I will tell him a very simple thing. I will explain to him that Spartacus was pure and gentle because he set his face against evil and opposed evil and fought evil – and never in all his life did he make his peace with what was wrong.'

'And that made him pure?'

'I'm not very wise, but I think it will make any man pure.' Varinia said.

'And how did Spartacus know what was right and what was wrong?'

Gracchus asked.

'What was good for his people was right. What hurt them was wrong'.⁶³

Symbolically, it is important, therefore, in the story that Varinia and her son survive the suppression of the revolt. They are not among the six thousand slaves crucified between Capua and Rome along the Via Appia at the end. Varinia

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remains instead as their spokesperson for the future. It is also she who conjures up the image of an alternative society that the slaves were fighting to create. Once again, it is the lesson of Spartacus, but it is Varinia who continues it:

When the slaves would fight and bicker, Spartacus would call them together, and they would all talk, and then he'd talk to them and they'd listen. They did bad things, but they always wanted to be better. They were not alone. They were a part of something; they were a part of each other, too. At first they used to steal from the spoils. Spartacus showed me how they couldn't help that; they came from places where they saw stealing. But the common store was never locked or guarded, and when they saw that they could have all they needed without stealing, and no way to use what they stole, they stopped stealing. They lost their fear of being hungry and poor. And Spartacus taught me that all the bad things men do, they do because they are afraid. He showed me how men could change and become fine and beautiful, if only they lived in brotherhood and shared all they had among them. I saw this. I lived through it. But in some way, the man I had for my own was always like that. That's why he could lead them all. That's why they listened to him. They weren't just murderers and butchers. They were something like the world never saw before. They were the way people can be.⁶⁴

The novel ends on rather a pastoral note, with Varinia and her son living anonymously in a peasant village in the mountains, the sort of liberation that was perhaps all that could reasonably be expected at the time. Fast makes no fictional concessions in this context as to the historic viability of a state, run by the slaves themselves, in a Roman world where slavery was still the norm. Spartacus's son lives his life in hardship but in freedom, an ending that is nevertheless endowed with transcendent political meaning, however tenuously patrilineal this might appear:

With this kind of a life, the son of Spartacus lived and died – died in struggle and violence as his father had. The tales he told his own sons were less clear, less factual. Tales became legends and legends became symbols, but the war of the oppressed against those who oppressed them went on. It was a flame which burned high and low but never went out – and the name of Spartacus did not perish. It was not a question of descent through blood, but descent through common struggle.⁶⁵

In his study of the “desire called utopia” in literature, Fredric Jameson reminds us of the unique potential of the utopian genre to contest the conventions of the present by imagining another way of living: “For it is the very principle of

the radical break as such, its possibility, which is reinforced by the Utopian form, which insists that its radical difference is possible and that a break is necessary".⁶⁶ What I have tried to bring out in this comparative discussion of these novels about the Spartacus uprising is precisely this radical utopian dimension. I have, therefore, argued that the story has been reinvented in all three cases, not so much to recapture the moment of this remarkable event in Roman history, but more to transform the past into a prism through which the question of revolution in our own times can be viewed. Moreover, my focus has been a gendered one, since I believe that the utopian element of these novels revolves around the role of women, in particular that of the female companion of Spartacus.

In his retrospective appraisal of the totalitarian lessons of the Spanish Civil War, George Orwell compared the political amnesia of his own dark times to the anonymity of slavery throughout history: "In the whole of Greek and Roman history, how many slaves' names are known to you? I can think of two, or possibly three. One is Spartacus and the other is Epictetus".⁶⁷ This historical absence is even more the case with female slaves. Spartacus's wife was, however, one extraordinary exception. We know she existed. We know she played an active part in the great slave uprising. In these novels, she once again appears on the historical scene to speak to us about the radical challenges of both her own epoch as well as our own.

Notes

¹ Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, quoted in Brent D Shaw, *Spartacus and the Slave Wars* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 132.

² Quoted in *Ibid*, 132.

³ *Ibid*, 131-132.

⁴ G E M De Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 148.

⁵ M J Trow, *Spartacus: the Myth and the Man* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton, 2006), 60.

⁶ Barry Strauss, *The Spartacus War* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 26.

⁷ Lewis Grassie Gibbon was the pen-name of James Leslie Mitchell.

⁸ Koestler originally wrote his novel in German under the title *Der Sklavenkrieg* (The Slave War). It was translated into English as *The Gladiators* by Edith Simon. According to Michael Scammell, "Koestler always maintained that the translation was excellent." *Koestler: The Indispensable Intellectual* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 166.

⁹ Shaw, 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ See further in Trow, 1-16.

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¹² Shaw, 29.

¹³ Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Smeddum* (Edinburgh: Cannongate Books, 2001), 738-739.

¹⁴ Howard Fast, *Spartacus* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), v.

¹⁵ Arthur Koestler, *The Gladiators* (London: Hutchinson, 1974), 316-317. In his recent biography of Koestler, Michael Scammell writes that Koestler, while “researching political and economic conditions in the Roman Empire during the first century B.C. [...] discovered vivid parallels with his own century: mass movements and social unrest, rapid economic development, high unemployment, a corrupt and decadent ruling class, and colonialism. But the central question that fascinated him was why the uprising had failed to bear fruit. Why had Spartacus failed where Lenin, say, had succeeded?” Scammell, 117.

¹⁶ Koestler, 1974, 37.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 301-302.

¹⁸ Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Spartacus* (London: Hutchison, 1970), 37-38.

¹⁹ Quoted in Alison Lumsden, “Women’s Time: Reading the *Quair* as a Feminist Text” in *A Flame in the Mearns*, Margery Palmer McCulloch and Sarah M Dunnigan, Eds., (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2003), 42.

²⁰ Gibbon, 1970, 48.

²¹ Ian Campbell, “Introduction” to *Spartacus* (Edinburgh: Pegasus, 2001), xvii.

²² *Ibid*, x.

²³ Gibbon, 1970, 81.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 173-174.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 201.

²⁶ This utopian quality is also reflected in a poem Gibbon wrote about Spartacus, whose first lines are: “O thou who lived for Freedom when the Night/Had hardly yet begun: when little light/Blinded the eyes of men, and dawntime seemed/So far and faint – a foolish dream half-dreamed!” Quoted in Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *A Scots Hairst* (London: Hutchison, 1974), 186.

²⁷ Fast, 1970, 103.

²⁸ Howard Fast, *Being Red: A Memoir* (Boston: M.E. Sharpe, 1990), 269.

²⁹ Lee Baxandall, Ed., *Marx & Engels, On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 436.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 261.

³¹ V I Lenin, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 268. In a decree signed by Lenin on August 2, 1918, concerning “Persons Monuments to Whom Are to Be Erected in Moscow and Other Towns of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic”, Spartacus was the very first name on the list. Lenin, *On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 224.

³² W Z Rubinsohn, *Spartacus' Uprising and Soviet Historical Writing* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1987), 1.

³³ Quoted in Fast 1990, 287. Cameron, who was one of the editors at the firm of Little, Brown Inc., resigned in protest when the publisher gave in to J. Edgar Hoover's censorship threat to ban the novel.

³⁴ Ibid, 290.

³⁵ Campbell, xiv.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Fast, 1996, 158-159.

³⁸ Ibid, 170.

³⁹ Ibid, 337.

⁴⁰ Koestler, 1974, 316-317.

⁴¹ Ibid, 316.

⁴² In *Arrival and Departure*, the main character, Peter, a revolutionary in exile, rapes a young French girl, after which she admits to actually wanting it: "You see, the whole point is that if you knock a woman about for long enough and get on her nerves and wear her down, there comes a moment when she suddenly feels how silly all this struggling and kicking is, so much ado about nothing, and this is the moment when she thinks – or when somewhere in her body the thought occurs to her: After all, why not..." (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 51. A similar attitude is to be found in *Darkness at Noon*, where the Bolshevik Commissar, Rubashov, seduces his blond secretary, Arlova, but is later complicit in her wrongful arrest and execution in a Party purge. Her own reaction is summed up by her vapid admission to Rubashov: "You will always be able to do what you like with me". (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 95.

⁴³ Arthur Koestler, *The God That Failed* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2001), Richard Crossman, Ed., 32.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 74-75.

⁴⁵ David Cesarani, *Arthur Koestler* (London: Free Press, 1998), 112.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 150.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 150-151.

⁴⁸ Koestler, 1974, 203.

⁴⁹ Michael Scammell, 165.

⁵⁰ Koestler, 1974, 319.

⁵¹ Koestler 1974, 151. There is no historical basis for this image of a corrupted Spartacus. On the contrary, as Tom Holland notes in a recent study of the Roman Empire: "Spartacus himself appears to have fought for a genuine ideal. Uniquely among the leaders of slave revolts in the ancient world, he attempted to impose a form of egalitarianism on his followers, banning them from holding gold and silver and sharing out their loot on an equal basis." *Rubicon: the Triumph*

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and Tragedy of the Roman Republic (London: Random House, 2009), 147.

⁵² Koestler, 1974, 141.

⁵³ Ibid, 112.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 119.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 187.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 317.

⁵⁷ Gibbon, 1970, 265.

⁵⁸ Although he died in 1935, Gibbon was already an anti-stalinist. In *Beyond the Sunset*, Douglas Young writes: “In 1917 his enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution had been great but like many others he became disillusioned by later events in Russia and was not blind to what he called ‘the blood and iron government of Stalin’” (Aberdeen: Impulse Publications, 1973), 25. Young also mentions that Gibbon’s close friend, the poet Hugh MacDiarmid, recalled that Gibbon “was a member of the [Communist] Party for only a short time but was expelled as a Trotskyist” (Ibid) 23. In contrast, Fast was a faithful Communist Party member from 1944 to 1957. It was Krushchev’s revelations of Stalin’s crimes at the Soviet Party Congress of 1956 that caused Fast to resign from the American CP. Describing his reactions to the speech, Fast wrote in his autobiography: “[I]t is an awful and terrifying list of infamies, murders, tortures, and betrayals [...] When I first read those twenty thousand words of horror and infamy, I exploded with rage – as did so many others on the staff of *The Worker*. Today, I look back on it with great sorrow, but with some understanding of the forces that created the situation and some knowledge of what an awful price mankind pays for a small step forward, for a little knowledge”. Fast, 350.

⁵⁹ Gibbon, 1970, 131.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 264.

⁶¹ Ibid, 273.

⁶² Ibid, 227.

⁶³ Fast, 1996, 348.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 335.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 363.

⁶⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), 231-232.

⁶⁷ George Orwell, *The Collected Journalism and Letters of George Orwell. Volume 2. My Country Right or Left 1940-1943*, Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, Eds., (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 298.