DOI: https://doi.org/10.4312/clotho.4.2.127-152

"And so with the moderns": The Role of the Revolutionary Writer and the Mythicization of History in J. Leslie Mitchell's *Spartacus*

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INTRODUCTION

"[T]he most splendid fellow in all ancient history."[1] Karl Marx's description of Spartacus, the gladiator who led a slave revolt against the Roman Republic from 73–71 BC, demonstrates the Thracian's eminence in the revolutionary political tradition. The German Spartacists took their name from him as they led an uprising against the Weimar government in the wake of Germany's defeat in World War I and this inspired Bertolt Brecht's play *Drums in the Night*, originally named *Spartakus*.[2] The most famous twentieth-century fictional representation of Spartacus is Stanley Kubrick's film of 1960, in which Kirk Douglas played the slave leader. The movie is based on the American writer Howard Fast's bestselling novel, first published in 1951. Fast began writing *Spartacus* on his release from prison, where he was incarcerated for his refusal "to turn over to the House Committee on Un-American Activities a list of supporters of the Joint Anti-fascist Refugee Com-

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1 Marx, "Letter of 27 February 1861 to Engels," 141.

2 See Willett, *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*, 24.

mittee."[3] Fast's novel emerged in part therefore from the conditions of American political life in the mid-twentieth century, in particular the blacklisting of artists alleged to have communist sympathies;[4] as Fast comments, "it was not the worst time to write a book like *Spartacus*."[5]

Writers of different eras and contexts have retold the story of Spartacus to galvanize revolutionary protest in their own times, and while Fast's *Spartacus* is modern fiction's best-known representation of the gladiator, J. Leslie Mitchell's *Spartacus* was published almost twenty years prior to Fast's book, in 1933. Mitchell had long been fascinated by the ancient figure of Spartacus and the modern Spartacists who bore his name. This article will explore these influences and their references throughout his work, taking in consideration Mitchell's significant source material for his novel. Like Fast, Mitchell, better known for the work published under his pseudonym, Lewis Grassic Gibbon,[6] was moved to write his *Spartacus* not only in condemnation of the violence of ancient history but in opposition to the continuing histories of violence during his own period in the 1930s, such as class oppression and the rise of fascism. Mitchell's position on the role of the revolutionary writer is examined through analysis of the *Left Review* debates of the mid-1930s. His radical perspective as a writer is also made clear in *Spartacus*: to advocate for the common folk of the world without resorting to political dogma or compromising his critical standards. As the article will argue, alert to the entanglements of historical reality and myth, Mitchell's novel is myth-history more than political or historical realism, and draws upon the legend of the Golden Age to conceive a better modern world.

THE ROLE OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WRITER AND THE *LEFT REVIEW* DEBATE

Mitchell (writing as Gibbon) declared his political position when writing to *Left Review* in 1935: "I am a revolutionary writer. […] I hate capitalism; all my books are explicit or implicit propaganda."[7] His contribution was part of a debate in *Left Review* in the mid-1930s that

3 Fast, *Spartacus*, vii; see also Fast, *The Naked God*, 90.

4 See Douglas, *I Am Spartacus!*

5 Fast, *Spartacus*, viii. In his memoir, *The Naked God*, Fast notes that *Spartacus* was also attacked by members of the Communist Party; *The Naked God,* 120.

6 I refer to the author by the name under which the relevant work was written and call him Mitchell; on the complexities of the Mitchell/Gibbon identities, see Sassi, "The Shifting Identities of Mitchell and Gibbon," 33–46.

7 Gibbon, "From Lewis Grassic Gibbon," 738, 739.

focused on the objectives of the recently-formed British section of the Writers' International, which according to Henry Pelling was a "front organization" for the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).[8] Founded in October 1934 and issued monthly, *Left Review* was launched by the Writers' International with "an explicitly anti-fascist agenda."[9] Members were asked to "use their pens and their influence against imperialist war and in defence of the Soviet Union," and Mitchell completed an application form to join the organization.[10] However, despite Gibbon's contention that his work was a form of propaganda, his item in *Left Review* robustly countered the suggestion from other contributors that the Writers' International should pursue the proletarianization of literary culture through the elimination of so-called bourgeois influences from revolutionary writing. Far from being "decadent" and "narrowing in 'content'" as argued by previous correspondents in the debate, "the period from 1913 to 1934" – broadly, the modernist period – had seen a "continuous display of fit and excellent technique" according to Gibbon. While "capitalist economics have reached the verge of collapse," literature has achieved its "greatest efflorescence" – as the arts do, so he argues – when civilization is decaying.[11] Modernism is a late literary bloom *reflecting* societal decline. However, it is not itself a literature *in* decline as his antagonists contend, whom Gibbon characterizes cuttingly as possessing merely "a little bad Marxian patter and the single adjective 'bourgeois' in their vocabularies."[12] The formal techniques of his later novels, such as the rhythmical run-on sentences and multiple narrative perspectives of *Spartacus* and *A Scots Quair*, mark Mitchell/Gibbon as an experimental writer whose work anticipated his own wish to see "a Scots Joyce, a Scots Proust" in Scottish literature.[13] It is little surprise then that while stating his position in *Left Review* as that of "a revolutionist," he maintains this is "no reason for gainsaying my own critical judgement," and although "in favour of a union of revolutionary writers," he thinks only those who are good writers – "those

8 Pelling, *The British Communist Party*, 80.

9 Malcolm, *Lewis Grassic Gibbon*, 27. According to Malcolm, *Left Review* was "run variously by eminent figures of the left such as Montagu Slater, Edgell Rickward, Randall Swingler, Amabel Williams-Ellis and Tom Wintrigham," with the latter as "Mitchell's main contact within Writers' International." Ibid.

10 "Writers' International, Statement of Aims," quoted in McGrath, "James Leslie Mitchell," 247.

11 Gibbon, "From Lewis Grassic Gibbon," 737–38.

12 Ibid., 738.

13 Gibbon, "Literary Lights," 164; for comparison of Gibbon and Joyce, see Lyall, "On Cosmopolitanism and Late Style."

who have done work of definite and recognized literary value (from the revolutionary viewpoint)" – should be admitted.[14]

Taking a broader view of the *Left Review* debate, Nick Hubble draws a distinction between Proletcult (or Proletkult, i.e., "proletarian culture") and "proletarian literature."[15] Emerging from the 1917 Russian Revolution, the initial experimentalism of Proletcult would give way to the cultural depiction of the assumed realities of working-class life, especially in industrial environments, combined with a distaste for avant-gardism. Leon Trotsky objected in *Literature and Revolution* (1925) to the notion that there could ever be a "proletarian culture,"[16] but Joseph Stalin's increasing grip on power led to the proscription of non-revolutionary literature and art and the revision of historical narratives.[17] According to Michael James McGrath, the Proletcult position from around 1928 was summed up in the motto "Burn Raphael," signifying antagonism to Western traditions of artistic beauty.[18] Propagandistic Soviet writing focusing on content and rejecting formal experimentation is contrasted by Hubble with "proletarian literature," which they define as "books written *about* workers" but "not necessarily always written *by* them or even (given the price of many books) published *for* them."[19] Mitchell, who was raised on a croft in what is now rural Aberdeenshire, was not of the urban working class, insisting, when writing as Gibbon in his essay "The Land," that he

14 Gibbon, "From Lewis Grassic Gibbon," 739.

15 See Hubble, *The Proletarian Answer to the Modernist Question*, 1–9.

16 "[T]here is no proletarian culture and there never will be any and in fact there is no reason to regret this. The proletarian acquires power for the purpose of doing away with class culture and to make way for human culture," Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 185–86.

17 Soviet historians contrived theories to ensure that events in the ancient world prefigured the culmination of Russian history in 1917. Wolfgang Zeev Rubinsohn explains that Stalin's theory "of the division of human history into five successive periods, defined on the basis of their social structure," was based "on a defective knowledge of history, and was quite simply wrong," placing, for instance, the end of Spartacus' revolt in 63 BC rather than 71 BC. According to Rubinsohn, "the theory of the two-phase or three-phase revolution was developed" to account for the historical gaps created by Stalin's thesis. This new theory placed the Spartacus War at the end of the first phase of history, making it "roughly the counterpoint in ancient history" to the revolution of 1905, which preceded the revolutions of 1917. Spartacus, on these terms, was a historical harbinger of the October Revolution; Rubinsohn, *Spartacus' Uprising and Soviet Historical Writing*, 6, 7.

18 McGrath, "James Leslie Mitchell," 245.

19 Hubble, *The Proletarian Answer to the Modernist Question*, 2.

was "of peasant rearing and peasant stock" and describing farmers as "the world's great Green International awaiting the coming of its Spartacus"; his interest in Spartacus may have been stimulated by the knowledge that, according to Barry Strauss, the slave uprising was "overwhelmingly a revolt of the countryside."[20]

Mitchell was plain about his revolutionary sympathies, but the precise nature of his political beliefs is less clear-cut. As a young journalist stirred by the Bolshevik Revolution, he was on the Aberdeen Trades Council committee of the "Industrial Council or Soviet" in 1918.[21] He claimed to be thrown out of the CPGB during his time in the army (1919–23) for Trotskyism and was subsequently refused membership when reapplying on two separate occasions in 1931.[22] William K. Malcolm calls Mitchell a "hidden member" of the CPGB, someone known to be sympathetic to communism but "for whom open declaration of official membership could have proved professionally harmful,"[23] while Charles Ferrall and Dougal McNeill suggest that "Gibbon was a Marxist who was never a Communist."[24] However, Mitchell also professed support for anarchism,[25] and Elinor Taylor is closest to the mark when describing his politics as "more eclectic and continually shifting" than the communist orthodoxy of the likes of the novelist James Barke.[26] The *Left Review* debate indicates Mitchell's aversion to what he regarded as the dogmatism and philistinism of Proletcult ideas and aesthetics. Yet, while there is an implied reflection of the present in the past in *Spartacus*, as a historical novel with a primary focus on Roman slaves rather than modern-day workers, it sits somewhat awkwardly in relation to the definition of proletarian literature offered by Hubble. Gibbon may have described himself as "a revolutionary writer" in *Left Review* while at the same time defending aesthetic and critical values, but *Spartacus* illustrates the limits of the writer's role in revolutionary action.

Mitchell's skepticism toward the literary class can be gauged through an examination of the character of Kleon in *Spartacus*. Malcolm describes Kleon as "the classic Aristotelian deuteragonist,

20 Gibbon, "The Land," 244, 247; Strauss, *The Spartacus War*, 41.

21 Malcolm, *Lewis Grassic Gibbon*, 19.

22 Ibid., 23–24.

23 Ibid., 24.

24 Ferrall and McNeill, *Writing the 1926 General Strike*, 141.

25 Mitchell described himself as "naturally an anarchist," "Letter of 10 November 1934 to Linklater," quoted in Malcolm, *Lewis Grassic Gibbon,* 24.

26 Taylor, *The Popular Front Novel in Britain,* 152.

second in the pecking order to the protagonist alone."[27] Yet, in some ways he is the most important character in the novel, and certainly the one most fully drawn by his author. Described as "a literatus," and so an "unchained" slave, the Greek Kleon reads to his master – the Romans are often called "the Masters" in order to demonstrate the continuing transhistorical significance of the particular social relations described in the novel – in Greek, Latin, and Syriac.[28] He is sexually abused by his owner, who has Kleon castrated; on his escape, Kleon emasculates his sleeping master in violent revenge and flees carrying a copy of Plato's *Republic*, a text often assumed to propose a communist society that would influence Thomas More's *Utopia* and other fictional utopias.[29] Kleon is the novel's skeptic and intellectual. An atheist, believing in "no Gods […] but Time and Fate," his vision in the face of life's meaninglessness is an "order on a planless earth, of endurance where all things meet and melt."[30] Kleon seeks initially to cynically craft Spartacus into his strongman leader who will deliver political transformation, but he, in turn, is transformed by Spartacus' qualities, in particular the Thracian's compassionate nature and his identification with the oppressed. Kleon the thinker and lawmaker, who teaches the slaves how to vote and who formulates the laws of the "New Republic,"[31] is one half of Plato's philosopher king from *The Republic*, with Spartacus, the man of action who becomes "the King of the Slaves" (later echoed in Christ as "King of the Jews"), forming the other half.[32] As Douglas Gifford comments, "Kleon is the head to Spartacus' heart."[33]

However, while Gifford's contention that "Kleon's maimed body causes him to retreat into cold aridity of intellectual theory and his playing with Platonic theory of a Republic is Gibbon's [*sic*] way of being ironic about political theorising" seems plausible on the surface, it misses the possibility that Mitchell emasculates the literatus as a self-reflexive comment on the position of the writer in relation to re-

27 Malcolm, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, 66.

28 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 3.

29 For example, "our purpose in founding our state was not to promote the particular happiness of a single class, but, so far as possible, of the whole community," Plato, *The Republic*, 120. For a refutation of Plato's communism, see Garnsey, "Plato's 'Communism,' Aristotle's Critique and Proclus' Response," 6–30, which points out that only the Guardians live communistically.

30 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 16, 80.

31 Ibid., 87.

32 Ibid., 47.

33 Gifford, *Neil M. Gunn and Lewis Grassic Gibbon*, 69.

volutionary political action.[34] Kleon's "great Law, the *Lex Servorum*, to use in the time when the leaders of the slave-legion sat in the Senate" in Rome, counsels that "[o]nly by Law may the perfect State and citizen be created," but this is scoffed at by the Jew Gershom ben Sanballat, who places "Jehovah" above human law, and undermined by Hiketas, who believes in a "Golden Age" of "perfect freedom" where there are no laws.[35] Later, before the final battle against Crassus' Roman legions at which the slaves will be defeated, Kleon looks again "with unseeing eyes" at the *Lex Servorum* and *The Republic*, and after a brief wish to re-read them, "his eyes glazed […] with weariness, and he put them away."[36] Kleon, representative of the writer type – a figure in many of the author's novels[37] – appears initially to have a central role in the formulation of a new state, but he is neutered not only in the act of castration perpetrated by his master and by the immense forces ranged against him and the slaves in battle, but by the very nature of his role as an intellectual in violent conflict.

FROM SPARTACUS TO THE SPARTACISTS: REFERENCES AND INFLUENCES

Malcolm's claim that for Mitchell the primary function of writing is as a "doctrinaire instrument" for revolutionary purposes does not wholly align with the argument made by Gibbon in *Left Review* for the importance of good revolutionary writing as opposed to a prescriptive dogmatism.[38] Mitchell's aims become clearer in the references to Spartacus and the Spartacists punctuating his work. His poem "Spartacus," in which "The creaking crosses fringed the Appian Way –," recalls a scene replayed at the end of the novel *Spartacus* and referred to in Gibbon's *Grey Granite* (1934).[39] Ryan D. Shirey calls "Spartacus" a "self-consciously Romantic poem," as Mitchell's verse tended to be.[40] Formally conventional and mannered in its vocabulary, it is unclear when the poem was written, although it seems likely to have been prior

34 Gifford, *Neil M. Gunn and Lewis Grassic Gibbon*, 69.

35 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 134, 135.

36 Ibid., 200, 201.

37 For example, John Garland and Andreas van Koupa in Mitchell's *Stained Radiance*, 142. While Koupa says of his retreat from idealism, "I will put by the dreams of Spartacus and Christ," Garland moves from a position of ironic freedom to communism.

38 Malcolm, *Lewis Grassic Gibbon*, 29.

39 Mitchell, "Spartacus," 186.

40 Shirey, "Gibbon, Shelley and Romantic Revolutionary Renewal," 99.

to the publication of the novel of the same name.[41] However, in spite of its aesthetical limitations, the poem indicates Mitchell's perspective not only on the figure of Spartacus but on how he perceives his own role as a revolutionary writer. Spartacus "lived for Freedom when the Night / Had hardly yet begun" suggests Spartacus' revolutionary goals derive from an early period in the history of oppression.[42] Although over time, "the blind drift of days and ways forgot" Spartacus, "Thy name, thy purpose: these have faded not!"[43] Spartacus' name not only lives on but shines out "from the darkling heavens of misty Time."[44] The first stanza, therefore, establishes Spartacus as a revolutionary hero in historical time who has become a legendary figure, with the grandiloquence of the language intended to communicate what Shirey terms Spartacus' "mythic status."[45] The second shorter stanza focuses on the use of Spartacus' name as an enduring call to revolutionary arms: "down the aeons roars the helots song / Calling to battle."[46] The slave rebellion led by Spartacus may have been defeated, but he has given to "the world the lordship of the slave!" and this remains vital to the continuing activism of the revolutionary tradition.[47] Shirey argues that "Spartacus triumphs in creating an idea, transmitted through word and song, that lives on and inspires."[48] However, it is not strictly Spartacus who creates the idea, but those writers who work in "word and song" and who, like Mitchell in poetry and prose, seek to apotheosize the man as a myth so as to animate the revolutionary spirits of future generations. As M. J. Trow points out, "Spartacus was not merely a symbol of the heroism of slaves; he became an icon of freedom against tyranny of any kind."[49] Nevertheless, Trow's *Spartacus: The Myth and the Man* locates Spartacus solely in his own historical era and resists the idea that Spartacus is relevant to the struggles of other periods, which Trow regards as anachronistic: "In reality, he was Spartacus, not for all time, but for his own time."[50] In this, Trow willfully misapprehends the manner in which history and myth are reagents catalyzing each other through the work of the creative imagination. History and myth

41 On Mitchell's poetry, see Bold, "From Exile," 115–23.
42 Mitchell, "Spartacus," 185.
43 Ibid., 186.
44 Ibid., 186.
45 Shirey, "Gibbon, Shelley and Romantic Revolutionary Renewal," 99.
46 Mitchell, "Spartacus," 186.
47 Ibid., 186.
48 Shirey, "Gibbon, Shelley and Romantic Revolutionary Renewal," 99.
49 Trow, *Spartacus*, 221.
50 Ibid., 16.

cannot be uncoupled, as Mitchell demonstrates in his poem and, as we shall see, in his novel on Spartacus. The role of the revolutionary writer is the recreation of myth-history in the cause of insurgency.

Mitchell's interest in the Spartacists, especially the figures of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, emerges not only from political conviction but from his approval of the way in which they carry on Spartacus' revolutionary legacy in Mitchell's own period. The semi-autobiographical Malcom Maudslay of Mitchell's *The Thirteenth Disciple* (1931) calls Liebknecht "still one of my heroes: one of the world's great heroes,"[51] while Gay in *Gay Hunter* (1934) thinks that Liebknecht "had been right" about militarism: "it was merely a half-witted ape dressed in an old newspaper and leaf-hat, posturing, red-posterior'd, before admiring females…."[52] The German Spartacists declared their opposition to war in their *Official Declaration of the Spartacus Union*, from 1919:

> The class rule of the capitalists – that was the real cause of the world war in Germany and France, in Russia and England, in Europe and America. The capitalists of all countries – these are the real initiators of the slaughter of the peoples. International capitalism is the insatiate Moloch into whose bloody jaws are thrown millions upon millions of fresh human sacrifices.[53]

The Spartacists considered military war to be another aspect of class war, with the World War I opening up the stark choice between continued destruction or the overturning of capitalism; they argued that "[o]nly socialism can save the people from this bloody chaos, this gaping abyss."[54] Mitchell's poem "On the Murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg" mentions neither figure directly but instead represents the Spartacists as god-like figures sent to Earth to improve the human lot: "Go down to the struggling Sons of Men, / And teach Them all Ye know."[55] The final lines of the poem – "And the longed-for Dawn shall glint our Spears / And the Splendid Two return!" – suggests not only the return to life of the murdered Liebknecht and Luxemburg to lead the revolutionary battle, but a return to the historical era of Spartacus himself.[56] Mitchell's various representations of Spartacus

51 Mitchell, *The Thirteenth Disciple*, 44.
52 Mitchell, *Gay Hunter*, 126.
53 *The German Spartacists*, 3.
54 *The German Spartacists*, 4.
55 Mitchell, "On the Murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg," 200.
56 Ibid.

mythicize history in order to inspire a revolutionary future, while at the same time exploiting classical sources to condemn his own era and the civilization that produced them.

SOURCES AND PARALLELS

Ian S. Munro advises us that Mitchell's "chief authority" for source material on Spartacus and the Third Servile War was "the Greek historian Appian," [57] presumably his *Civil Wars*, while according to Malcolm, Mitchell's wife Ray "helped her husband piece the Spartacus legend together in preparation for his novel by sifting through the main classical sources of the writings of Appian, Plutarch and Sallust."[58] Mitchell also consulted C. Osborne Ward's *The Ancient Lowly: A History of the Ancient Working People from the Earliest Known Period to the Adoption of Christianity by Constantine*; McGrath claims that Mitchell owned a copy of *The Ancient Lowly* and that Ray Mitchell "recalled using Ward's book while helping check the draft of *Spartacus*."[59]

Originally published in two volumes in 1888, Ward's book offers a Marxian perspective on the working lives of ancient peoples. Ward's account mythicizes Spartacus, who is described as "one of the great generals of history; fully equal to Hannibal and Napoleon, while his cause was much more just and infinitely nobler, his life a model of the beautiful and virtuous, his death an episode of surpassing grandeur," and who "committed no acts of brutality" in his campaigns against the Roman administration.[60] Ward also draws historical equivalences between the United States of his own time, "when working people […] are again on the rally and are forming the most compact and extensive organizations that have yet existed," and "the deeds of Eunus and Cleon or of Spartacus and Crixius [normally Crixus]" during the ancient slave rebellion.[61] Ward maintains that Spartacus' rise to a position of leadership among his fellow slaves from around 74 BC

57 Munro, *Leslie Mitchell*, 126.

58 Malcolm, *A Blasphemer and Reformer*, 116.

59 McGrath, "James Leslie Mitchell," 330. Ward's book was a source, too, for Fast's *Spartacus*: see Fast, "Letter of 8 June 1979 to McGrath": "Your letter is the first time I have seen the name of Lewis Grassic Gibbon, and I have absolutely no knowledge of his writings or his beliefs. […] If you are curious about some of the information I had in SPARTACUS, you might look at a very long, Marxist historical work called THE ANCIENT LOWLY," NLS, Acc. 1318.

60 Ward, *The Ancient Lowly*, vi, 264.

61 Ibid., 24.

corresponded "with the movement of the Roman senate to suppress the right of organization," which was "followed by a great struggle."[62] This suggests parallels with union-breaking practices in the United States from the later nineteenth century onwards and corresponding acts of worker resistance. Remarking on what he calls the "wholesale suppression" of unionization in the Roman Republic, Ward's claim that Spartacus' "remarkable conquest […] in the industrial centers of Italy actually revived the organizations or turned their membership to his use" appears to situate the famous gladiator in late-nineteenth century America and Roman Italy simultaneously.[63] Ward's descriptions are informed by historical source material – an impressive list prefaces the contents – while also recruiting Spartacus for socialist political purposes in his own place and time, a technique consonant with Mitchell's creative methods as a revolutionary writer.

Influenced by Ward's book, Mitchell used the phrase "the ancient lowly" in *Gay Hunter* and *Grey Granite* to describe the oppressed.[64] There are further parallels with Ward's work in *Spartacus*, which begins and ends with the following words: "*It was Springtime in Italy, a hundred years before the crucifixion of Christ*."[65] Ward proposes that Spartacus was "the last emancipator" until Jesus, thus representing the slave leader as Christ's forerunner.[66] *Spartacus* ends with the crucified Kleon's vision or hallucination of Spartacus and Christ as one:

> And he saw before him, gigantic, filling the sky, a great Cross with a figure that was crowned with thorns; and behind it, sky-towering as well, gladius in hand, his hand on the edge of the morning behind that Cross, the figure of a Gladiator. And he saw that these Two were One, and the world yet theirs; and he went into unending night and left them that shining earth.[67]

Spartacus and Christ are united in mystical revolutionary brotherhood in Kleon's mind and although in historical time Spartacus is dead and Jesus not yet born, the future of humankind belongs to their ideals, represented here as identical. Association with Christ further mythologizes Spartacus, who is described as "a God" and who him-

62 Ward, *The Ancient Lowly*, 243.
63 Ibid., 262.
64 See McGrath, "James Leslie Mitchell," 226, 304.
65 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 3, 210 (italics in the original).
66 Ward, *The Ancient Lowly*, 291.
67 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 210.

self believes "[t]here's a God in men," although an "Unknown God" rather than the god of a particular religion.[68] Malcolm interprets the concluding scene as meaning that "[t]he legacy of Spartacus' revolt for posterity […] is that it paved the way for the even more enduring radicalism of Christ and of Christian teachings."[69] But the real meaning of the image of Christ here is not simply the idea of Spartacus as His radical precursor, but that a revolutionary politics to end the recurrent history of the suffering of the common people must be suffused with mythic power in order to transcend the violent material circumstances creating that very suffering. This marks the limits of Mitchell's Marxism and indicates that his real aim as a revolutionary writer is the mythicization of history in the propagation of a powerful creative myth to inspire a radical transformation of the future.

MYTHICIZATION OF HISTORY, CIVILIZATION, AND THE GOLDEN AGE

To better understand Mitchell's approach to the mythicization of history in *Spartacus*, an outline of his attitude to history is required. Mitchell was an adherent of the anthropological theory of diffusionism. The diffusionists believed that civilization started in one place – Egypt – and was diffused to the rest of the world, as opposed to the evolutionist theory, which proposed that civilization developed in various locations simultaneously. Mitchell's novels often contain an intellectual propagandist for the theory, which he saw as the key to understanding history and civilization. For Mitchell, prior to the development of civilization – which, according to the diffusionists, had arisen accidentally due to the growth of crops on the flooding of the Nile Basin – humans had lived as free hunter-gatherers. Civilization, growing from human rootedness to agricultural communities, meant the development of repressions and taboos, religion, social class, war, and gender oppression. Many of his novels suggest glimpses of a pre-civilization Golden Age, with similarities to the thinking of the Romantics and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which informs Mitchell's political hopes for the future.[70]

Mitchell was especially interested in the death of civilizations. His non-fiction book *The Conquest of the Maya* (1934) focuses on the decline of the Mayan civilization and its ultimate defeat by the Spanish in the

68 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 203, 195.

69 Malcolm, *Lewis Grassic Gibbon*, 68.

70 For Mitchell's diffusionism, see Young, *Beyond the Sunset*, 9–22.

sixteenth century – Mitchell calls the Spaniards "scum from the sea" – and is written from a diffusionist perspective: Mitchell's diffusionist guru, Grafton Elliot Smith, provided a foreword.[71] Mitchell rejects Oswald Spengler's "theories of cyclic catastrophe," then popular among modernists, to explain the fall of Mayan culture.[72] Instead, he sees the Mayans as a people conquered by imperialists who viewed them as barbarians, when actually, for Mitchell, the simpler Mayan way of life was superior to the modern civilization of the Spaniards and showed glimpses of a lost Golden Age. This is captured in Mitchell's comment "that the motherland of the great civilization which built Chichen Itza was Mu, another name for Atlantis," an observation relevant to our examination of *Spartacus* to which we will return.[73] Mitchell ends *The Conquest of the Maya* by speculating whether the death of Mayan culture serves as an "indictment for the codes and crimes of our own civilization" and "prophecy for it of a fate as fantastic and terrible," a reminder that his accounts of historical violence are at the same time denunciations of his own period.[74] He comments that although the Maya doubtless "had their moments of hatred of these rulers, and possibly their moments of revolt," "no tale comes to us of the rise of a Maya Spartacus."[75] According to this, the Maya did not mount an organized resistance to protect their way of life from their invaders and so their civilization was overthrown, to be buried in the mists – and myths – of history. The story of the Maya is an implied warning to the common people of Mitchell's own time that their peace and welfare must be defended from the depredations of the powerful.

Spartacus can be classed as a historical novel since it is set in the past and is based upon an identifiable historical episode. However, as Douglas Young comments, it is not a historical novel "in the sense of trying to re-create in detail the events and ethos of a period in the past."[76] Indeed Mitchell makes some historical blunders: for one, a character reads Ovid, who was not contemporary with the action – although it is relevant to the themes of *Spartacus* that Ovid writes about the Golden Age in *Metamorphosis*.[77] Naomi Mitchison, who wrote many historical novels set in the ancient world, such as *The*

71 Mitchell, *The Conquest of the Maya*, 266.
72 Ibid., 126.
73 Ibid., 29.
74 Ibid., 269.
75 Ibid., 191.
76 Young, *Beyond the Sunset*, 64.
77 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 58; Munro, *Leslie Mitchell*, 127.

Corn King and the Spring Queen (1931), thought Mitchell failed to understand the historical contexts of *Spartacus*: "He had put it into modern terms without understanding what the ancient terms were."[78] But as Malcolm points out, *Spartacus* is "a work that is less historical simulation than political abstract."[79] *Spartacus* is, on one level, a historical novel, but, contra Mitchison, it is less concerned with historical verisimilitude – to represent the past through the knowledge we have gained of it in the present – than to judge the present in light of the past. What T. S. Eliot termed "the mythic method" of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, its "continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity," is reversed by Mitchell in *Spartacus*, which asks its readers to infer from the example of antiquity lessons for their own time.[80] *Spartacus* is revolutionary myth-history, and the novel enables Mitchell to point to historical degeneration and attack the moral and political sicknesses of civilization, past and present.

While Rome might be regarded as one of the pinnacles of ancient civilization, Mitchell characterizes the Romans as decadent and sexually diseased, and slaves are often used cruelly as their sexual playthings and "infected with the venereal diseases" of a degenerate civilization.[81] Cossinus and Kharmides discuss the rumor that Spartacus was "no Thracian, but a tribesman of remoter people […] captured from the Golden Age" and Cossinus dreams of owning Spartacus as a "body-slave" to "debate the life of the Golden Age while he rubs me in my bath."[82] Cossinus is one of the kinder, more cultivated Roman leaders, captivated by the Golden Age through his reading of Hesiod, but even he fails to see the irony of debating the Golden Age – an allegory of ultimate freedom – with a slave. Cossinus' interest in the Golden Age is merely historical, the whim of an educated patrician, and a self-interested fantasy of living in even greater personal comfort than at present. Mitchell's Spartacus, on the other hand, is depicted as a man-myth, a living reminder of the Golden Age, whose campaigns against Roman power seek not only freedom from slavery for himself and his followers in their own historical time but everlasting liberty for the commons of the world.

78 Mitchison, "Letter of 21 September 1983 to Malcolm," quoted in Malcolm, *Lewis Grassic Gibbon*, 64.

79 Malcolm, *Lewis Grassic Gibbon*, 65.

80 Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," 178, 177.

81 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 125; see Young, *Beyond the Sunset*, 65–66.

82 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 59.

Spartacus is a historical figure whom Mitchell characterizes in archetypal terms as the Great Leader on whom history turns. Becoming more authoritative as the novel progresses, he is described as a "giant" of a man, possessed of immense strength and iron will, yet also compassionate.[83] He is "the Voice of the voiceless," a figure who represents all of the oppressed, not only among the slaves but of all time, as well as a romantic hero with whom women experience "wild ecstasy" in bed.[84] As Strauss points out, Spartacus "was a failure against Rome" but "a success as a myth-maker" who was "whatever people made of him."[85] Mitchell is aware that inspirational myths can turn to politically-motivated misconstructions, and the Spartacus "legend" is not simply exaggerated in the Thracian's favor but also consists of scurrilous falsehoods: it is rumored he "tortured his captives and had virgins brought to his tent in order that he might violate them publicly. Also, he ate horses."[86] Kleon fears that "the story of the slaves' insurrection" will become "dim and confused, in the ages to be," and that while "[p]oets and writers of tales will yet tell of it," they will use the uprising to emphasize their "own loves and hates, with us only their shadowy cup-bearers."[87] An advocate of Plato's *Republic*, where poetry is distrusted,[88] Kleon believes it inevitable that history will be distorted by fiction. Recounting the rebellion almost entirely from the slaves' perspective indicates its author's resolve to fictionally retell history from the side of the subjugated as opposed to the winners, so countering some of Kleon's apprehensions, which are a skeptical antidote to the dangers of history turning into myth. Nonetheless, *Spartacus* tells the story of a historical event "destined to become legend and myth,"[89] as Gifford puts it. Mitchell's linking of the slave rebellion to the Golden Age indicates his calculated complicity in the mythicization of history of which Kleon warns.

Allusions to the Golden Age abound in *Spartacus*. Hiketas believes there existed a Golden Age "when there were neither Laws nor swords, Masters nor slaves –."[90] Titul alludes to "the vanished Western Isle," and Kleon speaks of "the Islands of the Blest" which are "[b]eyond

83 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 73.
84 Ibid., 194, 196.
85 Strauss, *The Spartacus War*, 166, 185.
86 Ibid., 57.
87 Ibid., 194.
88 See Plato, *The Republic*, 67–93.
89 Gifford, *Neil M. Gunn and Lewis Grassic Gibbon*, 67–68.
90 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 135.

drowned Atlantis."[91] Titul believes himself a descendant of the people of the Western Isle, which, according to Kleon, "was the island of Atlantis, for so Plato tells."[92] Plato's account of the rise and fall of Atlantis in *Timaeus and Critias* sparked continuing debates as to whether Atlantis was mythical or an actual place lost to history. Atlantis became a metaphor for the myth of the Golden Age and an allegory through which to criticize current societies; as Northrop Frye explains, "utopia is a *speculative* myth; it is designed to contain or provide a vision for one's social ideas."[93] In Mitchell's work, the Western Isle, Islands of the Blest, and Atlantis are different names for a Golden Age which he professes to believe once existed and which he uses as an ideal against which to measure the degeneration of the present. In his science-fiction novel *Three Go Back* (1932), the passengers of a crashed airship are sent back in time to Atlantis and vow on returning home to "preach Atlantis": to evangelize for humanity's utopian potential and a radically better world.[94] Titul's Western Isle is a mythical utopia, which as Kleon understands, is "[n]owhere, in fact" and does not actually exist.[95] Malcolm regards Kleon the atheist as illustrating a rational progression from the beliefs of Titul, whose faith rests in the god Kokolkh and who is often described as insane; yet, as referred to previously, Spartacus himself is represented by Mitchell as an aspect of the Golden Age in which Titul believes.[96] Titul believes in the reality of the myth, what we might term the Real, a feature of human history that yet sits outside time of which the transient world is merely a likeness, and in this, he might be a better Platonist than Kleon. Kleon may be right to say that the Western Isle is "[n]owhere, in fact" and so it cannot be discovered through exploration, but it is found in the human imagination and various fictional worlds. As Elpinice, Spartacus' lover, says: "I think it's neither in Thrace nor your Islands, this land you mock. It lives in our dreams and our hopes, and maybe we'll never attain it. But – we broke out of Batiates' ludus to *try*."[97] The Western Isle, Atlantis, the Islands of the Blest: these are the mythic standard of perfection against which Mitchell's capitalist society, with its histories of violent oppression, is judged wanting. Far

91 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 13, 46.
92 Ibid., 7.
93 Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias," 205.
94 Mitchell, *Three Go Back*, 194.
95 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 46.
96 Malcolm, *Lewis Grassic Gibbon*, 69.
97 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 46.

from discarding the notion of a mythic otherworld in the name of political materialism or intellectual progress, Mitchell builds his case for revolution around the idea of the Golden Age.

HISTORIES OF VIOLENCE

Elpinice's observation that the Golden Age remains to be established on Earth through revolutionary action indicates the importance of her character. She has Spartacus' ear and an equal place with the men on the insurrectionists' "council of war."[98] Through her, Mitchell endorses equality for women in the slaves' prospective New Republic as well as in his contemporary society. That a pregnant Elpinice is raped and killed by the Romans illustrates in the most brutal terms how far off the attainment of such hopes are, her unborn child with Spartacus symbolizing a lost radical future. Elpinice's murder happens off page, but other violent scenes are depicted with visceral detail, such as the capture of Roman legionaries by the slaves, described as "an orgy of hate":

> Pallid and filthy, denied the sun, denied the remembrance of wine or warmth, the slaves of the mines went mad in a lust of revenge, delighting in torments, bathing their arms to the shoulders in blood, tearing the entrails from still-living bodies.[99]

The violence of the slaves is revenge for the violent oppressions they have suffered at the hands of the Romans, but its gruesomeness suggests that morally, the slaves may be no better than their masters. Further, it raises a troubling question: to what extent does the originary moment of violence in overcoming their oppressors undermine the ideals of equality, peace, and freedom imagined by the slaves for their New Republic – in short, is the violence justified? Gershom ben Sanballat asks this very question of Kleon, who replies: "We must destroy before we build."[100] Arthur Koestler's *The Gladiators* (1939), a novel about the Spartacus revolt that, according to its author, likewise infers "parallels between the first pre-Christian century and the present," suggests that the violence of the slaves toward the achievement of their goals destabilizes the "Sun State" of communistic liberty before it is ever attained; Koestler's disillusionment with Stalinist tyranny and the Marxian

98 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 26.
99 Ibid., 40.
100 Ibid., 87.

theory of history would be precipitated by researching and writing *The Gladiators* and would see him quit the Communist Party in 1938.[101] Malcolm claims that in Mitchell's novel, "the ideal of a free society" can only be won "through violent revolutionary action."[102] Although Spartacus is far from the most bloodthirsty of the slave leaders and is generally depicted as noble in purpose and action, Malcolm's argument is supported by Spartacus' transformation "from a wayward slave to an archon-tyrant."[103] But Mitchell's real point in refusing to censor his portrayal of violence is that civilization itself is built on the violence – often invisible in modern societies – of hierarchical social relations. The horrors of actual violence in *Spartacus* condemn the cruelties of the ancient world in which it is set. However, it is also emblematic of the slow violence enacted through oppression and inequality during the period in which the novel was published.

Mostly reviewed positively on publication, *Spartacus* was criticized for its graphic depictions of violence. While Compton Mackenzie commented that "Mitchell has always had a pretty taste in horrors, and in 'Spartacus' he has been able to indulge it legitimately," Herbert Read thought the novel "full of violence which is pathological and not imaginative in origin," and Ivor Brown complained that the blood and gore undermined our sympathies for the slave cause.[104] The advertising card sent out by Jarrolds Publishers (*Figure 1*), which claimed *Spartacus* was "comparable to the best in Flaubert or [Lion] Feuchtwanger," prompted dissent from some critics who objected to the implied comparison to Gustave Flaubert's historical novel *Salammbô* (1862).[105] The card even cites American writer Christopher Morley, dedicatee of *Gay Hunter*, comparing *Spartacus* to Homer, perhaps in reference to the violence of *The Iliad*. The ancient setting of *Spartacus* allowed Mitchell to be especially extreme in his depiction of violence, but the point applies to the modern age as well. This is made clear in

101 Koestler, *The Gladiators*, 316, 129; see also Koestler, *The Invisible Writing*, 319–27.

102 Malcolm, *A Blasphemer and Reformer*, 120.

103 Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 81.

104 Mackenzie, *Daily Mail*, October 26, 1933, NLS MS. 26071/5; Read, *The Spectator*, October 13, 1933, NLS MS. 26071/6; Brown, *The Observer*, November 12, 1933, NLS MS. 26071/4.

105 For example, Howard Spring in *The Evening Standard* (September 29, 1933): "Mr Mitchell is hardly of Flaubert's rank, but one accepts with equanimity his publisher's assurance that he is." NLS MS. 26071/2. *Salammbô* was a favourite novel of Mitchell's, according to Munro, and "influenced his choice of theme" in *Spartacus*, *Leslie Mitchell*, 125.

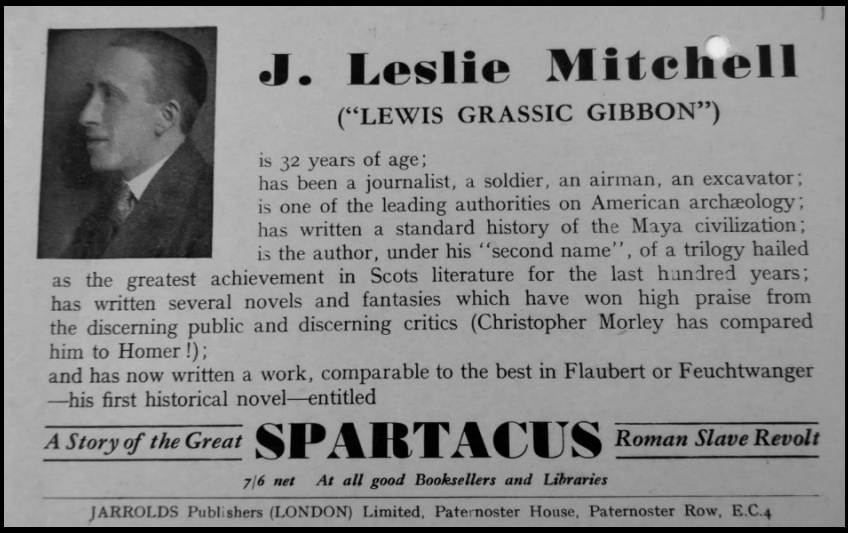


Fig. 1: "Publisher's advertising card for *Spartacus*." Source: National Library of Scotland, Special Collections, MS. 26071/1.

his letter to the poet Helen Cruickshank, who had been troubled by the novel's extreme descriptions of violence:

> Yes, horrors do haunt me. That's because I'm in love with humanity. Ancient Greece is never the Parthenon to me; it's a slave being tortured in a dungeon of the Athenian law-courts; ancient Egypt is never the pyramids; it's the blood and tears of Goshen; ancient Scotland is never Queen Mary; it's those serfs they kept chained in the Fifeshire mines a hundred years ago. And so with the moderns. I am so horrified by all the dirty little cruelties and bestialities that I would feel the lowest type of skunk if I didn't shout the horror of them from the housetops. Of course I shout too loudly. But the filthy conspiracy of silence there was in the past is coming again in Scotland in a new guise called Renaissance and objectivity, and National art and what not. Blithering about Henryson and the Makars, and forgetting the Glasgow slums.[106]

For Mitchell, civilization is not cultural glories such as the Parthenon, but the slaves and workers who built it. Civilization is not its classics; it is the social cost of creating those classics. As Walter Benjamin puts it, "[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," a point made in *Spartacus* through the Roman Cassius' fear that the progress of the slaves "meant the end of all beauty and culture."[107]

Mitchell's final comment to Cruickshank concerns his objections to the nationalistic Scottish literary renaissance of the 1920s and '30s. Powered by the poet Hugh MacDiarmid, this movement promoted the renewal of Scots cultural forms and language, with MacDiarmid basing his efforts in part on the example of early renaissance poets ("Makars") such as Robert Henryson (*c.* 1420–*c.* 1490) and William Dunbar (*c.* 1460–*c.* 1520) – namely, the early twentieth-century Scottish renaissance sought national revival through the cultural retrieval of Scotland's first renaissance.[108] For Mitchell, however, the culturalism of the modern Scottish renaissance ignored the

106 Mitchell, "Letter of 18 November 1933 to Cruickshank," NLS Acc. 5512; see also Cruickshank, *Octobiography*, 89.

107 Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 248; Mitchell, *Spartacus*, 132.

108 For an overview of the Scottish literary renaissance, see Lyall, "Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance Movement"; for the Scottish literary renaissance in relation to Scots poetry of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, see Dunnigan, "The Return of the Repressed."

appalling social conditions of an industrial city like Glasgow in the 1930s, as well as understating what he saw as the dangerous links between nationalism and fascism.[109] Similarly to Fast's *Spartacus*, then, Mitchell's novel was written in the context of the Scot's disquiet at political and cultural developments in his own country, as well as his disgust at continuing poverty and class oppression worldwide. While fighting the violence of ancient Roman civilization, Mitchell's Spartacus symbolizes enduring revolutionary hopes for a just society now and in time to come.

109 See Gibbon, "Glasgow," 114–25, especially 121. In *Fascist Scotland*, Bowd claims that the "noisy and fractious fringe of Scottish Nationalism […] had an at least ambivalent relationship with Fascism" in the interwar period, 138.

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is J. Leslie Mitchell's *Spartacus* (1933), his fictional representation of the slave rebellion in ancient Rome led by the eponymous gladiator. The article begins by examining Mitchell's contribution to debates over the role of the revolutionary writer in *Left Review* in the mid-1930s and his place in the British Left in this era, before going on to survey the ways in which the figure of Spartacus and the German Spartacists are represented across Mitchell's oeuvre. It then explores key source material utilized in the writing of the novel, as well as outlining comparisons between Mitchell's representation of Spartacus and those of his fellow novelists Howard Fast and Arthur Koestler. Including close readings of *Spartacus* and informed by archival research and previously unpublished manuscript items, the article argues that at the same time as denouncing the cruelties of Roman rule, *Spartacus* also signals Mitchell's passionate opposition to what he considered the violent histories of oppression suffered by the commons of the earth of all times, culminating in the capitalist crisis of Mitchell's own period in the 1930s. Mitchell creates this effect of historical simultaneity by writing a work of myth-history – as opposed to historical realism or political propaganda – that employs the utopian legend of the Golden Age to inspire radical dissent against modern deprivation.

KEYWORDS: Spartacus, J. Leslie Mitchell (1901–35), Lewis Grassic Gibbon, communism, myth-history

»In tako je tudi s sodobniki«: Vloga revolucionarnega pisatelja in mitizacija zgodovine v *Spartaku* J. Leslieja Mitchella

IZVLEČEK

Članek se osredotoča na roman *Spartak* (1933) avtorja J. Leslieja Mitchella in njegov fiktivni prikaz suženjskega upora v antičnem Rimu pod vodstvom istoimenskega gladiatorja. Avtor najprej obravnava Mitchellov prispevek k razpravam o vlogi revolucionarnega pisatelja v reviji *Left Review* sredi tridesetih let 20. stoletja in njegovo mesto znotraj britanske levice v tem obdobju. Zatem članek raziskuje, kako so znotraj Mitchellovega opusa predstavljeni lik Spartaka in nemški spartakisti. Sledi obravnava ključnih virov, ki jih je Mitchell uporabil pri pisanju romana, in primerjava njegove upodobitve Spartaka z upodobitvami pri pisateljih Howardu Fastu in Arthurju Koestlerju. Na podlagi podrobnega branja in raziskave arhivskega ter prej neobjavljenega rokopisnega gradiva članek dokazuje, da roman Spartak obsoja krutost rimske vladavine, obenem pa kaže tudi na Mitchellovo strastno nasprotovanje temu, kar je po njegovem mnenju predstavljalo nasilno zgodovino zatiranj, ki so jih doživljale različne zemeljske skupnosti poljubnih časov in so vrhunec dosegla znotraj kapitalistične krize Mitchellove lastne dobe, tridesetih let 20. stoletja. Učinek zgodovinske sočasnosti Mitchell doseže tako, da – v nasprotju z zgodovinskim realizmom ali politično propagando – napiše mitsko-zgodovinsko delo, ki z namenom spodbuditi radikalno nasprotovanje zoper sodobno izpraznjenost navdihuje z utopično legendo o zlatem veku.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Spartak, J. Leslie Mitchell (1901–35), Lewis Grassic Gibbon, komunizem, mito-zgodovina