

Sara Culeddu*

**Barabbas by Pär Lagerkvist:
from the Novel to the Play**

Med sitt finger gjorde han ett tecken på rutan,
på den immiga rutan
med det mjuka av sitt finger,
och gick vidare i sina tankar.
Lämnade mig övergiven
för evigt¹.

The literary work of Pär Lagerkvist seems to entirely spring out of his search for God. His writing is an attempt to recover the lost faith of his childhood, and his novels, tales, dramas, collection of poems and philosophical works are filled with travellers without a country moving around, trying to escape and to fill an inner emptiness. Barabbas, protagonist of the eponymous novel, is one of these restless and cursed characters: orphan and patricide, Barabbas the thief bears the mark of evil on him, the scar on his face as red as his hair. He is a drinker, a rapist and a murderer, but when he meets Jesus and is “freed”, he is turned into a reckless, gruff traveller, silently and continuously searching for answers.

In his story the most recurrent and significant symbols of Lagerkvist’s imagination come together: the desert, the darkness and the cross.

Barabbas is a man of the desert, an *outsider*, but his condition as an outcast is not limited to the social level. The encounter with the Crucified One inti-

* University of Trento.

¹ P. Lagerkvist, *Aftonland*, 1953. Cf. I. Schöier, “Drabbad av Gud och övergiven. Den frånvarande guden hos Pär Lagerkvist”, in *Pär Lagerkvist 100 år. Föreläsningar och anföranden i Växjö våren 1991*, Växjö, Pär Lagerkvist-Samfundets förlag, 1992, pp. 39-61.

mately compels him to an existential search which on the one hand estranges him from his old world, but on the other does not lead him to a new one, as it is doomed to failure. His social loneliness is, therefore, evidence of a more profound spiritual isolation. “Barabbas is outside belief”², and he will be so until the last moments of his life, when he is “left hanging there alone”³ away from the line of the other crosses, and dies commending his own soul to an indefinite “thee”, which is likely to be darkness.

There is no historical concern behind the tale of Barabbas’ imaginary life⁴. Instead, it revolves around the existential story of the “acquitted man”, an existence that is extremely modern and elevates him to a universal symbol for a humanity full of doubt, incapable of surrendering with faith to a God who, though existing, is absent. The desert, the darkness and the cross are metaphorical images that, beyond their actual presence in Barabbas’ experience, are also used to connote divinity, or rather its absence, as we shall see.

“Who are you who so fill my heart with your absence? Who fill the entire world with your absence?”⁵. The adventure of Lagerkvist’s characters often starts from a condition of abandonment and is strewn with bare crosses and other textual spaces in which the divinity is missing or has been deleted, spaces expressing the ambivalence of a God who is both deserter and deserted.

The novel *Barabbas* won Lagerkvist the Nobel Prize for literature in 1951, reverberated throughout Europe and was a huge publishing success; perhaps

² G. Schwab, “Herod and Barabbas. Lagerkvist and the Long Search”, in *Scandinavica. An International Journal of Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 20, n. 1, May 1981, p. 78.

³ P. Lagerkvist, *Barabbas*, transl. by A. Blair, New York, Vintage International Edition, 1989, p. 144.

⁴ Some critics have rather focused on the anachronisms that are found in the text (cf. for example S. Stolpe, “Pär Lagerkvist och Gud”, in *Myt och verklighet. Från Heliga Birgitta till Lars Forsell*, Stockholm, Askild & Kärnekull, 1972 and H. Riesenfeld, “Barabbas och Nya testamentet”, in G. Tideström, *Synpunkter på Pär Lagerkvist*, Stockholm, Bokförlaget Aldus/Bonniers, 1966). The chronological displacement of the setting mostly results in an exotic, mythical atmosphere that is recurrent in the work of Lagerkvist. Already in *Ordkonst och bildkonst* (1913) we read a plan that still during the 50’s was being carried out in his works: “Never descriptive, just going forward. Only what is most essential. Gathering from the historical reality only those details that are suitable to communicate the essential”, my translation; “Aldrig skilrande, bara gå på. Bara det väsentligaste. Endast ta upp sådana detaljer om den historiska verkligheten som passar för att framföra det väsentliga”, P. Lagerkvist, *Ordkonst och bildkonst. Om modern skönlitteraturs dekadans – Om den moderna konstens vitalitet*, med ett efterord av T. Sandqvist, Stockholm, Raster Förlag, 1991.

⁵ P. Lagerkvist, “My Friend is a Stranger”, in *Evening Land*, transl. by W. H. Auden and Leif Sjöberg, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1975; “Vem är du som uppfyller mitt hjärta med din frånvaro? Som uppfyller hela världen med din frånvaro?": “En främling är min vän”, in *Aftonland*, 1953. Cf. Schöier, “Drabbad av Gud och övergiven. Den frånvarande guden hos Pär Lagerkvist”, cit., p. 39.

it was also for that reason that the writer decided to try his hand at a stage adaptation of the text. In 1934 he had already brought to the stage the short novel *The hangman*. Its adaptation had involved only minor adjustments, the original work being mostly in the form of dialogue. In fact both *The hangman* and *Barabbas* originate in the theatre. The former had initially been devised as a theatre text, and then had been carried out as a novel, probably for practical reasons connected with the events of the *Dramaten* theatre⁶. In the case of *Barabbas*, instead, it was the character itself that originated in the theatre, towards the end of the 1940s, as a minor character near the Devil in the conception of a play on the history of humankind⁷ (which probably evolved into *Låt människan leva* of 1949). However, the interest in the freed thief grew in Lagerkvist to the point that he considered the play too limited to probe the deep mystery of this character. Therefore, he chose the novel form: “Rather writing a novel with all these motives and ideas? The dramatic form is so unsatisfactory because one can neither go into more depth nor expand whenever one wants”⁸.

However, an intrinsic theatricalness remains in the text, and the character of Barabbas really seems to inspire show business. As a matter of fact both the debut of the theatre version and the first film version, directed by Alf Sjöberg, date from 1953, while in 1962 Dino De Laurentis produced the classic movie directed by Richard Fleischer and starring Antony Quinn as the main character.

With the idea of focusing on the theatre version written by Lagerkvist himself and analysing the passage from novel to play script, we will first look at some of the dramaturgical principles stated by the author.

In the 1950s Lagerkvist already had a broad long-lasting experience as a playwright. In 1918 he had written the essay “Modern teater. Synpunkter och angrepp” in which he sided against the naturalist theatre – which deprived the stage of all poetry⁹ – and the idea of the “fourth wall”, and in favour of a reval-

⁶ U.-B. Lagerroth, “Pär Lagerkvist dramatiker och teaterteoretiker”, in *Pär Lagerkvist 100 år*, cit., p. 16.

⁷ Cf. I. Scobbie, “The origins and Development of Lagerkvist’s ‘Barabbas’”, in *Scandinavian Studies*, 55, n. 1, 1983, pp. 55-66.

⁸ My translation; “Hellre skriva en prosabok med alla dessa motiv och uppslag? Den dramatiska formen så otillfredsställande för att man aldrig får färdjupa sig så mycket när man vill och inte breda ut sig”, in *ibid.*, p. 57. Reference is to the Lagerkvist collection at the Royal Library in Stockholm, L 120: 17: VII, p. 704.

⁹ “Naturalism has also implied a more severe and one-sided definition of the dramatic, a more forbidding demand on dramatic structure, the elimination of all lyric elements and all immediate poetic effects as basically irrelevant”, in P. Lagerkvist, “Modern Theatre: Points of View and Attack”, transl. by Th. R. Buckman, *The Tulane Dra-*

uation of ancient theatre and above all of mediaeval theatre, “the freest which has ever existed”¹⁰. The Middle Ages and our times are “both chaotic, both a conglomeration of powers too resolutely storming heaven”¹¹. This glance backwards therefore goes together with a deep knowledge of modernity and with the need to express it. Lagerkvist chose (both in his theoretical works and in his plays) unreal but not stylised scenes, as he was also against pure symbolism and considered stylisation “the antithesis of all art”. He suggested, instead, a free theatre, both expressive and expressionistic; in opposition to Ibsen’s dramas, made up of “words, words, words”, modern theatre must be on the one hand a show for the eye, and on the other “the simple, self-evident, living dramatic power to *tell a story*, and the scenic imagination which [...] really *creates and forms*, and does not merely illustrate”¹².

Remarkable consistency with these principles can be found in Lagerkvist’s following plays as well as in the theatre version of *Barabbas*. In this article the latter will not be analysed as a show but as a text. We want to highlight that it is a hybrid text, as the adaptation moves from the novel’s inclination towards the theatre and produces a script with a strong narrative quality. Therefore, we want to investigate in which way the hypertext is influenced by intermodal transformation¹³ and to what extent the identity between novelist and playwright comes into play in this operation.

ma Review, vol. 6, n. 2 (Nov., 1961), p. 10; “Naturalismen har också betytt en strängare och ensidigare definition på det dramatiska, en bistrare fordran på dramats struktur, ett eliminerande av alla lyriska moment, all omedelbar poetisk verkan, såsom i grund och botten ovidkommande”, in P. Lagerkvist, “Modern Teater. Synpunkter och angrepp”, in *Dramatik*, 1, Stockholm, Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1956, p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11. With regard to this Lagerkvist cannot avoid mentioning the great model of Swedish modern theatre, Strindberg: “I do not know if Strindberg specifically had the mediaeval drama in mind when he created this motif of the passion play to which he returns time and time again. But in the freedom with which the dramatic theme is handled, in the seeming looseness and the apparently fortuitous juxtaposition of the scenes which one feels in reading but which on the stage is not noticed, and in the immediacy and richness of the narration there is much of the medieval drama. But still, quite naturally, everything is entirely new”, in “Modern Theatre”, cit., p. 21; “Om Strindberg vid utformandet av detta passionspelsmotiv som han gång på gång återvänder till direkt haft medeltidsdramat i tankarna, vet jag inte. Men i den frihet varmed det dramatiska motivet behandlas, i den skenbara lösligheten, det skenbart tillfälliga i scenernas sammanställande, som man vid läsningen har en känsla av men som på scenen inte märks någonting till, i omedelbarheten och rikedom i fabuleringen går mycket av medeltidsdramat igen. Och dock är naturligtvis allting helt nytt”, in “Modern Teater”, cit., p. 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹³ According to Genette’s terminology in G. Genette, *Palimpsesti*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997, pp. 334-9.

Analysis of the Adaptation

Choice of Scenes and Narrative Temporality

In the passage from novel to play, the author must make a choice of the scenes and reorganise the overall architecture of the work. The selection of the peak moments of the novel is necessary because the theatre unavoidably poses a limit to the duration of the show, which usually does not go beyond two hours. Adaptation is therefore an operation of synthesis.

The novel *Barabbas* is divided into twenty chapters, while in the script we have two acts, each of five scenes, which closely follow the structure and chronology of the chapters. Even the beginning and ending of each scene mostly mirror those of the chapters of the novel, while some of them are completely eliminated (especially narrative passages digressing from the main thread of the story, adding secondary episodes¹⁴ or focusing on characters other than the protagonist). The selection of the episodes gives the adaptation a sort of discontinuity, and therefore leads to a “picture-structured” dramaturgy, with evident space and time breaks between the scenes. Each of the ten scenes of the play happens in a different place, and between them there are time spans which are not easily worked out. Though enhanced by theatrical needs, the elliptical character is already in the novel.

Some reflections are prompted by these data: the temporal simplification demanded by theatre and the following choice of a structure made up of pictures are not necessarily a limitation. On the contrary, it appears to be in accordance with Lagerkvist’s dramaturgical principles, also because it contributes to the creation of a vaguely unreal and legendary atmosphere.

An interesting consequence of the ellipsis is narration compensating for the parts that are not acted. Though not addressing the audience directly, some characters have the task of summarising events that are not shown on the stage, by narrating them in retrospect. This feature represents part of the narrative heritage of the hypotext. For instance, in the second scene of the first act, the audience hears the narration of the crucifixion from some disciples. This is nowhere to be found in the novel, but in the script it is used to summarise the events that Barabbas had witnessed in Chapter I. Another example: Chapter X of the novel, where the hare-lip girl is stoned to death, is not included in the play but in the fifth scene of Act I Barabbas relates this episode to an old her-

¹⁴ This is, for example, the case of Chapters XII and XIII, where Barabbas tries to go back to his life of thievery and where the facts that made him an orphan and a parricide are told.

mit, in a conversation that never happens in the novel. Another example concerns the fourth scene of the second Act, where we meet Barabbas as a slave in ancient Rome. Lagerkvist decides not to represent Barabbas' journey from Cyprus to Rome, so he invents a conversation among slaves who share his room and "gossip" about his arrival. These characters do not really converse in the strict sense of the word; rather they narrate. They could be seen as a kind of temporary narrators who are not fully integrated with the story and whose function clearly shows the novelistic source of the play.

The consequences of this kind of *dialogisation* are evident in the play script. Perhaps these dialogues are too functional to information to be always convincing in their intrinsic nature, and we can detect a difference in quality between dialogue lines coming directly from the novel – which appear to be the most effective, dialogue adapted from the narrator's speech – a little less incisive (we feel a loss of fluency due to the forced passage from narration to dialogue) and finally those dialogue passages which are entirely new, with the sole purpose of filling the voids of the visual representation. The latter seem to pass into scarcely effective lines, where characters neither seem to be really talking to each other nor – in case – to the audience.

Focalisation and Narrative Instances

It is of course in the modal aspects of speech that we encounter the most significant alterations generated by the process of adaptation.

In the novel narration is in the third person, the narrator is omniscient and external to the story, focalisation is internal, variable, and constantly slipping into free indirect speech. In the play script focalisation becomes fixed, firstly because "the only dramaturgical point of view is the one *of* the audience"¹⁵, but also according to a contraction of the focus *on* the main character which is typical of stage adaptation. In fact, since this process tends to favour the personal story of the hero, it affects the selection of the facts in the novel that will be included in the play.

In this respect, one of the most difficult aspects of the adaptation of *Barabbas* is represented by the fact that the novel, in which there is not much action, develops through the thoughts of an uncommunicative protagonist characterised by eyes swollen "as though they wanted to hide"¹⁶. Since Barabbas does not express his mind through words or gesture, the author decides to intro-

¹⁵ Genette, *Palinsesti*, cit., p. 337.

¹⁶ Lagerkvist, *Barabbas*, cit., p. 12.

duce him through the dialogue of other characters talking about him. Thus, deviating from the original voice and focalisation, we must forgo all the nuances of the main character's mind.

In the opening of the play, for example, Barabbas arrives in a tavern, where thieves and prostitutes are talking about him and his release, whereas in the novel he is followed throughout his journey from Golgotha to the tavern. The dialogue in the tavern is therefore an addition in the adaptation, brought about by the removal of Barabbas' inner monologue.

As well as through dialogue, the protagonist is often introduced by stage directions. When he appears for the first time we find a physical description in the script that literally repeats that of the novel: "*Barabbas is a man in his thirties, strongly built but with a sallow complexion. His beard is reddish, his eyes hollow, as though his look wanted to hide. Under his eye he has a deep scar. He does not say anything and does not look at anyone*"¹⁷. Again in the first scene, the stage directions concerning him are of such kind as: "*he forces himself to smile but it is as though his thoughts were somewhere else*", "*he doesn't answer*", "*lost in his thoughts with his hand on his beard*", "*he stands there with the cup in his hand and it seems as if something has come to his mind*"¹⁸, and they are not followed by any words. It should be noticed that some stylistic features emerge from the stage directions, bringing together the usual function of gestural or technical promptings and the peculiar one of satisfying the author's poetic needs: the many "as thoughts" tell something about Barabbas that goes beyond acting, they can be appreciated by a reader, not by a viewer, and moreover they reveal an unidentifiable voice, which allegedly belongs to the author and will be discussed later.

In this case the introduction of the character is thus committed to the mute gestures of the player, while in reading the novel we are admitted directly into his mind, into the most profound nature of his thoughts. On the other hand replacing the interior monologue of Barabbas with an exterior, spoken one would have offered an opening on his mind but would also have upset his nature.

Lagerkvist does not even resort to the expedient of a narrating character,

¹⁷ My translation; "*Barabbas är en trettiårs man, kraftigt byggd men med gulblek hy. Skägget är rödaktigt, ögonen ligger långt in, som om blicken helst ville gömma sig. Under det ena har han ett djupt ärr. Han säger ingenting och ser inte på någon av dem*", P. Lagerkvist, "Barabbas. Skådespel i två akter (1953)", in *Dramatik*, III, Stockholm, Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1956, p. 225.

¹⁸ My translation; "*[han] försöker le lite men det förefaller som om hans tankar vore på annat håll*", "*[han] svarar inte*", "*[han] faller i tankar med handen över sitt skägg*", "*[han] sitter med bägaren i handen och tycks ha kommit att tänka på nogonting*", *ibid.*, pp. 225, 230, 231, 232.

which could have exposed the complexity of the protagonist to the audience. The inner sufferings of Barabbas, forming the subject of the novel, remain non-spoken on stage, but not invisible. The character's silence (which gains even more meaning in the light of Lagerkvist's statements against the theatre of words) does not prevent us from *seeing* his crisis on the stage. From this point of view the intermodal transformation may produce a shift of accent: from a masterwork of existentialist literature to an expressionist theatrical production, the two bents obviously coexisting in both forms.

Moving on to the analysis of *voices*, we realise that the omniscient narrator of the novel often leaves the word to the flow of thoughts of the characters. Most frequently it happens with Barabbas' inner monologues, but we also find whole chapters committed to minor characters. Generally the novel's polyphony is different from that of the theatre¹⁹, while in the novel it is controlled and coordinated by a narrator, on stage there are as many voices as there are speaking characters.

The script necessarily implies a *dialogisation*, in which voices multiply, while the narrator's should disappear. Concerning the novel *Barabbas*, the scholar Marion Lund²⁰ detects an *extreme* polyphony, where the narrator's voice, instead of coordinating the others, mingles with those of the protagonist and the other characters, actually undermining the possibility of univocal interpretation. This being the case, the narrator contributes with his voice to the polyphony of the text, which is built in such a way that voices – and interpretations – coexist. According to this reading then, the vocal plurality typical of the theatre, though a formal constriction, strengthens the purpose of the novelistic narration of creating a juxtaposition (and a plot!) of voices that will not allow the reader/viewer to gather a uni-vocal truth from the text.

In confirmation of this we understand another element peculiar to this text, namely, the authorial voice not explicitly on stage but emerging from stage directions.

A consequence of the identity between the author of the novel and the author of the play is that stage directions can be considered as real excerpts from the novel “copied and pasted” onto the script. Their nature often overcomes the function of scenic indication to achieve a poetic function that involves the act of reading. A significant example of self-quotation in a stage direction, with aesthetic rather than practical purpose, is found in the third scene of Act II:

¹⁹ Cf. C. Segre, *Teatro e romanzo*, Torino, Einaudi, 1984, pp. 85-101.

²⁰ M. Lund, “Barabbas mellom myten og historien”, in *Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning*, 2, 1995, Universitetsforlaget, pp. 147-59.

Barabbas has just heard the death sentence of his only friend, Sahak, the Christian who could have taught him to believe, pronounced by the Roman prosecutor, while he has been pardoned once again:

Barabbas gave him a quick look and the Roman found that the man's eyes did in fact have an expression, harmless though it was. Hatred was quivering there like the point of an arrow that would never be shot.

And so Barabbas went to do as he had been commanded²¹.

Barabba gives him a quick look in which hatred is quivering like [!] the point of an arrow – an arrow that will never be shot. So he goes to do as he has been commanded²².

The simile from the novel text passes into the stage direction, but there is no facial expression capable of reproducing a look that vibrates like the point of an arrow that will never be shot. Thus the aside “an arrow that will never be shot” spoken by an allegedly authorial voice goes beyond scenic function and can be understood as an anticipation or as a subtle psychological nuance.

Let us read from Chapter VI of the novel and from scene IV of Act I of the play, where Barabbas, in search of answers, visits Lazarus, the Resurrected.

Barabbas sat opposite to him and was drawn to examine his face. It was sallow and seemed as hard as bone. The skin was completely parched. Barabbas had never thought a face could look like that and he had never seen anything so desolate. It was like a desert²³.

A desolate room with whitewashed walls. At a long and narrow table by the wall at the end of the room sits a man whose face is as dry as a desert. His skin is as yellow as a skeleton and seems as hard as bone.

²¹ Lagerkvist, *Barabbas*, cit., p. 118; “Barabbas såg hastigt på honom och romaren fann att mannen verkligen hade en blick, om också en ofarlig sådan. Hatet stod och darade inne i den som spetsen av en pil som aldrig skulle bli avskjuten. / Och så gick Barabbas för att göra så som han hade blivit befalld”, P. Lagerkvist, *Barabbas*, Stockholm, Bonniers, 1984 (1950), p. 106.

²² My translation; “*Barabbas ser hastigt på honom med en blick där hatet står och darar som spetsen av en pil – en pil som aldrig ska bli avskjuten. Så går han att göra vad han blivit befalld*”, Lagerkvist, “Barabbas. Skådespel i två akter”, cit., p. 288.

²³ Lagerkvist, *Barabbas*, cit., pp. 49-50; “Barabbas satt mitt emot honom och måste iaktta hans ansikte. Det var gulaktigt och verkade hårt som ben. Skinnet var alldeles uttorkat. Barabbas hade aldrig trott att ett ansikte kunde se ut på det sättet och han hade aldrig sett någonting så ödsligt. Det var som en öken”, *ibid.*, pp. 45-6.

His arms are stretched out on the table and he is staring in front of him in the room with an empty, colourless look²⁴.

Such stage promptings are characterised by a strong poetic quality. The use of simile is clearly a narrative heritage of the dramaturgical text, within this episode which is very dramatic in the novel too. Introduced by this direction, the “monstration”²⁵ of the action communicates a crescendo of inquietude that reaches its peak in the moment when the old man shares the agape with Barabbas: he breaks the bread, dips it in the salt and offers it to the thief. This silent ritual, interrupted by Barabbas’ trembling voice asking: “Why are you eating like this with me?” seems to be more effective on stage than it is in the novel. On the other hand though, the most macabre point of the scene must disappear in the play and the author transfers it into the stage direction: “Barabbas accepts it [the bread] from his dried hands and eats it, but it is as though [!] he were tasting a piece of a dead body”²⁶. The ending of the scene is beautiful: Barabbas almost runs away and a stage direction describes the resurrected man who “remains still as though [!] he has already forgotten the visitor, with the pale reflection of an oil lamp on his face”²⁷.

These “as thoughts” offer some emotive nuances of the character that a player could take advantage of, but most of all represent a stylistic mark peculiar to Lagerkvist, especially regarding *Barabbas*. According to the scholar Gwenet Schwab²⁸, the language of the novel could be summarised in the phrase “as though”, which effectively represents the theme of ambiguity. This phrase expresses the gap between what we read/see and another potential truth. In the passages just quoted these words introduce alternative sides of the same story that do not affect its interpretation.

The same cannot be said of the novel’s end: “When he felt death approach-

²⁴ My translation; “Ett ödsligt rum med vitkalkade väggar. Vid ett långt smalt bord utefter fondväggen sitter en man med ett ansikte uttorkat som en öken. Huden är bengul och verkar hård som ben. Han sitter med armarna framför sig på bordet och den tomma, färglösa blicken rätt ut i rummet”, Lagerkvist, “Barabbas. Skådespel i två akter”, cit., p. 252.

²⁵ My translation of the French word “monstration”, introduced for the first time by A. Gaudreault in *Du littéraire au filmique. Système du récit*, Paris, Méridiens Klincksieck, 1988.

²⁶ My translation; “Barabbas tar emot det ur hans torra fingrar och äter av det, men det är som om han fick liksmak i munnen”, Lagerkvist, “Barabbas. Skådespel i två akter”, cit., p. 256.

²⁷ My translation; “Den återuppväkte står kvar som om han redan glömt den besökande, med oljelampans bleka sken över sitt ansikte”, *ibid.*

²⁸ G. Schwab, “Herod and Barabbas. Lagerkvist and the Long Search”, in *Scandinavica. An International Journal of Scandinavian Studies*, cit., pp. 75-85.

ing [...], he said out into the darkness, *as though* he were speaking to it: – To thee I deliver up my soul”²⁹: the real central theme of the novel is the tension of Barabbas toward a faith he can never feel, and the ambiguity behind this last “as though” is thus extraordinary since, even at the end, it does not permit a solution of the crisis of the man in his search for the divine.

In the ending the symbolism of the cross and that of darkness come together, both in the novel and in the play script. Crucifixion is a main theme in *Barabbas*, the novel opens on Golgotha with Barabbas hiding between the bushes witnessing Jesus’ death, it culminates in the crucifixion of Sahak in Cyprus (a scene identical to the opening one) and ends in Rome with the crucifixion of Barabbas himself.

The play begins with a vision of three crosses the central one of which outlines itself, but this scene is not echoed in the crucifixion of Sahak nor in that of Barabbas, which can be guessed but is not represented on stage. Anyway the cross motif is tripled also in the play script, since two other visions of Golgotha echo the opening one, at the end of the first scene of Act I and at the end of the play. The Golgotha scene thus becomes a real *frame scene*.

The sight of the three crosses is always described in stage directions. The opening one is visual and narrative at the same time, working as a summary of previous events and as a visual representation of what happened: three bare crosses are shown in the dark and Barabbas is at their foot, then the cross in the middle stands out from the others, the image fades away and we find ourselves in the tavern. On the other two occasions, instead, the scene does not have a narrative function, but it is a “representation” of Barabbas’ thoughts. At the end the protagonist, sentenced to crucifixion together with a group of Christians, is left alone and is last in the procession towards death. The final stage direction of the drama says: “*The three crosses on Golgotha loom up high in the darkness, he looks up towards the cross in the middle, which is soon the only visible one. Exit*”³⁰. If we compare the endings of the play and of the novel, it is clear that the author has no intention of resolving the ambiguity of the text. For Lagerkvist it is important that his work keeps provoking questions.

He chooses to represent Golgotha with three bare crosses. This image hints at an absence of the divine which in the novel is less explicit, though still pres-

²⁹ Lagerkvist, *Barabbas*, cit., p. 144; “När han kände döden komma, den som han alltid hade varit så rädd för, sade han ut i mörkret, som om han talade till det: – Till dig överlämnar jag min själ”, *ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁰ My translation; “*De tre korsen på Golgata avtecknar sig uppe i dunklet, han ser upp mot det mittersta av dem, som snart är det enda som syns. Ut*”, Lagerkvist, “Barabbas. Skådespel i två akter”, cit., p. 300.

ent. To underline this absence there are other symbolic objects, such as the tag that slaves wear around their necks, on which the sign of their owner is inscribed and where Barabbas has asked Sahak to carve the sign of Christ. Of great significance is the scene in which before the Roman prosecutor Barabbas renounces his belief in God and a cross is scratched over Jesus' name to delete it. Barabbas will thus continue his existential journey with the emblem of the absence of God (and faith) around his neck. The place of the divinity and of its absence is also represented with darkness in the work of Lagerkvist. Once made visible, this darkness is much more intrusive in the theatre than in the novel. Interrupted only by flashes of flickering light, it permeates every scene assuming a clear symbolic value. Again at the end the crosses loom up in the darkness but they seem not to dissolve it. Barabbas looks up at them, but then he goes out in silence, swallowed by darkness, perhaps surrendering to it, as in the final words of the novel. The possibilities of interpretation are manifold but, what is most striking, Lagerkvist's hero is unable to rid himself of his doubt. Perhaps he simply surrenders to doubt, the human condition *par excellence*. Thus the play does not provide the viewer with an answer, but with the invitation to keep on searching, according to one of the most important principles of modern theatre expressed in *Modern Teater. Synpunkter och angrepp*:

And above all: a theatre which stimulates the dramatist and the actor to *seek* instead of being satisfied, and which opens perspectives forward instead of enclosing us in the present and the past³¹.

References

- LAGERKVIST P. (1950), *Barabbas*, Stockholm, Bonnier.
- LAGERKVIST P. (1956), *Barabbas. Skådespel i två akter (1953)*, in *Dramatik*, III, Stockholm, Albert Bonniers Förlag.
- LAGERKVIST P. (1956), "Modern Teater. Synpunkter och angrepp", in *Dramatik*, I, Stockholm, Albert Bonniers Förlag.
- LAGERKVIST P. (1989), *Barabbas*, transl. by A. Blair, with a preface by L. Maury and a letter by A. Gide, New York, Vintage International.
- LAGERKVIST P. (1991), *Ordkonst och bildkonst. Om modern skönlitteraturs dekadans – Om den moderna konstens vitalitet*, Stockholm, Raster Förlag.
- LAGERKVIST P. (1993), *Barabba*, trad. di G. Oreglia e C. Picchio, Milano, TEA.

³¹ Lagerkvist, "Modern Theatre", cit., p. 31; "Och först och sist: en teater som eggjar såväl dramatiker som skådespelare att *söka* i stället för att låta sig nöja, och som öppnar utsikter framåt i stället för att stänga oss inne i det närvarande och förgångna", Lagerkvist, "Modern Teater. Synpunkter och angrepp", cit., p. 50.

- LAGERKVIST P. (2004), *Barabba. Dramma in due atti*, trad. di F. Perrelli, Milano, Iperborea.
- AA.VV. (2005), *Il romanzo a teatro*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale della Società Universitaria per gli Studi della Lingua e Letteratura Francese (SUSLLF), Verona, 11-13 novembre 2004, a cura di F. Piva, Fasano, Schena.
- CIARAVOLO M. (1997), "Introduzione" a P. Lagerkvist, *Il boia*, Milano, Iperborea.
- FERRARI F. (1991), "Introduzione" a P. Lagerkvist, *Pellegrino sul mare*, Milano, Iperborea.
- GENETTE G. (1997), *Palinsesti. La letteratura al secondo grado*, Torino, Einaudi.
- GIORDANO LOKRANTZ M. (2005), "La tematica religiosa nella letteratura del Nord Europa; Un ospite della realtà. La vicenda umana e l'opera letteraria di Pär Lagerkvist", in *Una voce dal Nord. Scritti di Margherita Giordano Lokrantz*, a cura di M. Ciaravolo, Studia Scandinavica Mediolanensia, Milano, CUEM.
- LÖNNROTH L., DELBLANC S. (1987-90), *Den Svenska Litteraturen. Modernister och arbetardiktare*, Stockholm, Bonnier Alba.
- LUND M. (1995), "Barabbas mellom myten og historien", in *Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteratutforskning*, 2, 1995, Universitetsforlaget.
- PERRELLI F. (1998), *Pär Lagerkvist. Un ospite della realtà*, Milano, Iperborea.
- SALLIT D., *On Barabbas*, Film Journal, <http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue13/barabbas.html>.
- SCHÖIER I. (1987), *Pär Lagerkvist. En biografi*, Stockholm, Albert Bonniers Förlag.
- SCHWAB G. (1981), "Herod and Barabbas", in *Scandinavica, an International Journal of Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 20, n. 1, May.
- SCOBIE I. (1983), "The origins and Development of Lagerkvist's *Barabbas*", in *Scandinavian Studies*, 55, n. 1.
- SEGRE C. (1984), *Teatro e romanzo*, Torino, Einaudi.