Par Lagerkvist, religious atheist

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PÅR LAGERVIST: RELIGIOUS ATHEIST

By

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Par Lagerkvist, novelist, poet, playwright and critic, has had a long and influential career as perhaps the best known Swedish writer of the twentieth century. As the author of more than thirty-five volumes of fiction, drama, poems and essays, his literary reputation has gained steadily and considerably on the continent during the past thirty years, but with the publication of Barabbas in 1950 (Swedish edition), which earned him the Nobel Prize in the following year, his renown has taken on an international luster. Many of his works have since been translated into German, French, Spanish, Italian and English.

Despite this widespread growth in recognition, meaningful criticism of Lagerkvist's work has lagged far behind its popular acclaim. Possibly because he is still a significantly productive writer at the age of 75, critics have hesitated to undertake a definitive analysis of his life's work, perhaps rightly so. The criticism which has been written, however, has been less than adequate. Some rather extensive, though regrettably spotty, studies have appeared in Swedish and Norwegian,\(^1\) while Otto Oberholzer's Par Lagerkvist: Studien zu seiner Prosa und seinen Dramen (Heidelberg, 1958) is the only major critical work by a non-Scandinavian to have appeared up till now.

The lag in penetrating criticism becomes more serious in light of the fact that Lagerkvist's most significant work as a novelist has been done only within the past 15 years, work which has not, I believe, done so.

\(^1\) Notably Gustaf Fredén's Par Lagerkvist (1934) and Par Lagerkvist: från Gudstaken till Barabbas (1954), Ragnhild Fearnley's Par Lagerkvist (1950), and Jöran Mjöberg's Livsproblemet hos Lagerkvist (1951). These studies, like Oberholzer's, are essentially surveys of Lagerkvist's life and work, and their authors make little or no attempt at close textual analysis. They are adequate introductions to Lagerkvist, but they are of only limited value to a reader who is attempting to cope with the complex philosophy of the Swedish novelist.
received the close critical attention it deserves. Largely for this reason, but also because I believe Lagerkvist's acclaim can be better substantiated through interpretive analysis than through praise which is too often unsupported by anything resembling logic, I propose in this thesis to offer a textual analysis of his three most recent novels, The Sibyl, The Death of Ahasuerus, and Pilgrim at Sea, which combine to make up his first and only trilogy.

There are two difficulties to be encountered in all of Lagerkvist's fiction, but they are especially apparent in the trilogy and in its immediate predecessor, Barabbas. The first difficulty is one of perspective---Lagerkvist's most recent work needs to be "placed" within a frame of reference with respect to both the unique philosophical vision it conveys and to its niche in the realm of modern literature. It is my contention that a fruitful critical perspective of the trilogy can only be achieved through exploring the full implications of the term "religious atheist", a term which Lagerkvist once used to characterize his difficult and paradoxical vision of experience. The reader who can grasp what Lagerkvist means by "religious atheist" is a reader who, as I shall attempt to establish, has travelled far towards penetration of his thought and art. He is also a reader who will recognize several significant parallels between Lagerkvist's vision and that of existentialists such as Camus and Sartre on one hand, and that of theologians such as Tillich or Buber on the other.

I have implied that Lagerkvist is a "philosophical" novelist---this is beyond doubt true. But he is also a unique stylist. During his long career as a writer, he has experimented, with greater or lesser success, with nearly every imaginable fictional technique: expressionism,
impressionism, symbolism and, among others, even "lyricism". But be-

ginning with Barabbas, he has increasingly relied upon symbolism as

his primary means of imaginative expression, a fact which has all too

often been ignored by his recent critics. Lagerkvist's use of symbol-

ism is what I consider to be the second major difficulty encountered

in the trilogy.

The symbolic patterns found in Lagerkvist's recent work are diffi-
cult primarily because they are quite frequently both obscure and deeply

personal. Unlike a poet such as, for example, T. S. Eliot who uses sym-

bolism with recognizable roots in the central cultural tradition of the

West (especially in his later poems and plays), Lagerkvist relies most

heavily upon symbols drawn from less easily identifiable cultural sources.

Hence in Barabbas he dips into the well of Gnostic symbolism, and in the

trilogy he makes use of symbols drawn from Greek myth, Jungian psychology

(consciously or not), and folklore, as well as from Christianity. Desp-

ite its obscurity, the importance of Lagerkvist's use of symbolism can-

not be over emphasized. It is finally the key to his vision, since he

most deliberately uses symbols which in themselves embody the quality

of radical dualism so endemic to his thought. This will I hope become

more clear in the course of my analysis of the trilogy.

Before I proceed to an analysis of The Sibyl, I wish to acknow-

ledge my indebtedness to my long suffering wife Kari who, with only

a minimal number of complaints, gave me invaluable assistance in my

efforts to translate more than five volumes of Swedish and Norwegian

criticism of Lagerkvist.
CHAPTER I

The Sibyl
The Sibyl is quite probably the finest work of fiction written by Lagerkvist. Though it precedes both The Death of Ahasuerus and Pilgrim at Sea, it is superior to both in terms of aesthetic balance—in point of fact, Lagerkvist achieves a symmetry of thought and symbol in The Sibyl which is unmatched in any of his other works. The novel's successful fusion between symbol and concept is perhaps most apparent in its structure. Lagerkvist builds upon a cultural and mythological framework which is ideally suited to his perplexing vision of the relationship between man and "god"\(^1\), since it is itself steeped in the aura of mysterious and inevitable dualism which is endemic to his thought and art. The framework, of course, is provided by the Delphic oracle, with its unique position among Hellenic temples as the home of two very different, and very powerful, gods—Apollo and Dionysus. Because the mythological background and associations of the Delphic world are so important to the novel, it will be necessary for me to deal with them at considerable length. If the reader will bear with me, he will, I trust, soon see some wisdom in my method of approach.

It seems clear that The Sibyl is built upon contrasts. The contrastive technique is deliberate; it helps to promote a disparity between the transcendental world, as the Sibyl experiences it, and the natural world of physical drives and common human needs. On a deeper level, the disparity widens to include a number of symbolic and actual contrasts between Apollo and Dionysus, between a theistic (knowable and to some extent "defined") god and a non-theistic, mysterious god, between a love for the "divine" and a love for the human, and between a vital en-

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\(^1\)The word "god" will remain uncapsitized in this thesis as it is in Lagerkvist's later novels.
counter with the noumenal which involves suffering, doubt, and ceaseless unrest and a non-vital "institutional" response to "it". The contrasts all finally point towards one central issue which is both obliquely and overtly present in the novel from beginning to end—the "search" for god (more specifically, a search for an understanding of "him"). The search finally results in an affirmation of god's existence, in fact of the inescapability of his presence, despite his apparent incomprehensibility and total "otherness". Yet a word of caution is in order at this point. The "god" whom the Sibyl encounters is hardly a "god" in any traditional Western sense; on the contrary, "he" frequently appears to be what could only be called a principle of mystery in human experience, a driving force which, as in Dylan Thomas's words, "...through the green fuse drives the flower". One could accurately say, in fact, that Lagerkvist is deeply concerned with a "god" who is not a "God".

Of course, in order to accept the reality of and the value of the mysterious in life, one must necessarily accept one's humanness—hence the Sibyl's final "reconciliation" with god is based upon her recognition of universal human limitations. She finally accepts that the mysterious god who has so governed her destiny is not subject to rational definition, and on this level The Sibyl is an extension of the central motif in Barabbas, though the circumstances are of course quite different. In the final analysis, the interaction between human limitation (embodied as symbol in the character of the Sibyl) and the element of mystery in life is the central focus in the novel.

Perhaps the best way to "get into" the world of The Sibyl is to deal with two important related points at the start: the place of the novel in the trilogy as a whole and its relation to the following two
novels, and some possible answers to the question of why Lagerkvist chooses to develop the issues within the particular mythic and historical atmosphere of Delphi, one of which we have already mentioned.

Lagerkvist's intention in the trilogy as a whole is open to more than one plausible interpretation. Yet one has to begin somewhere, and I am convinced that the most valid way of approaching the three novels is to regard them as evincing three disparate cultural responses to the existence of god and his relationship to the natural world, all of which have played an important role in the development of Western culture as we know it today, though Lagerkvist is perhaps more interested in their personal rather than their cultural implications. If the trilogy is viewed in this way, then Ahasuerus, whom we first encounter in The Sibyl, could be seen as representative of the Hebraic religious tradition. His attitude towards his meeting with the Crucified One, and his final rejection of the divinity of Christ (this takes place in the sequel to the novel we are dealing with now) and with it the cornerstone of Christian theology, is broadly suggestive of the skeptical heritage so commonly identified with Western Judaism, though Lagerkvist undoubtedly would be drawn to the Wandering Jew legend even if it carried no deeper cultural associations, since he is always fascinated by outcasts, especially spiritual outcasts.

Tobias, whose pilgrimage begins in The Death of Ahasuerus, and who is a spiritual brother to Barabbas in many ways, might then be seen as broadly representative of a specifically Christian-directed (though hesitant, resistant, and skeptical) response to god, in that his life becomes centered upon his obsession to journey to the Holy Land, an obsession stimulated in the first place by a strange miracle. The fact that he is a
skeptic and that he does not consummate the pilgrimage in no way detracts from the specifically Christian nature of his quest, since for many Christians doubt and ceaseless struggle are inescapable facets of their faith.

The Sibyl, if regarded only on a historical level, might be seen as representative of a particular pagan response to the world of transcendent meaning, since the whole novel is set within the "pagan" world of Delphi. But to see the novel in this way would be to severely limit it through ignoring the universality of its issues and their implications with reference to contemporary experience. The Sibyl's experience of god, and her attitude toward it, though set within the historical framework of Delphi and in many ways only explainable in terms of it, is in no way "dated" or topical; Lagerkvist carefully uses the Delphic world in much the same way as he uses Gnostic symbolism in Barabbas: as a means of revitalizing a fictional treatment of the eternal questions which have always been a part of civilized human experience. The Delphic framework, as we shall see, is magnificently suited to this purpose.

From a purely stylistic point of view, the Delphic milieu makes sense when viewed in the light of Lagerkvist's unceasing regard for the value of mystery itself. Just as he had used his seemingly secure knowledge of Gnostic symbolism to establish and reinforce an atmosphere of mystery, and ironically, of immediacy in Barabbas, so too does the dark labyrinthine inner sanctuary of Delphi provide him with a wealth of mythic and religious associations with which he can breathe new life into issues which might appear staid or even exhausted to many modern readers. Moreover, mystery is in itself a crucial issue in the novel, and Ahasuerus is certainly speaking for Lagerkvist when he says near the end of the novel, after he has heard the Sibyl's remarkable narration, that "...one might
have doubts about anything and everything in this half-real world.\textsuperscript{2} Hence \textit{The Sibyl} is at least in part deliberately ambiguous and deliberately dependent upon the mysterious (to modern minds) mythological suggestiveness of Delphi, precisely because Lagerkvist wishes to establish the value of the mysterious in human experience, something which would be far more difficult to do within a conventional framework using conventional language.\textsuperscript{3}

There are, however, more specific reasons why Lagerkvist is drawn to Delphi. H. W. Parke, in his \textit{A History of the Delphic Oracle}, states that Delphi for many centuries occupied a central position in the Hellenic world somewhat comparable to the position of Jerusalem for medieval Christendom.\textsuperscript{4} The historical reasons for Delphi's great importance are too complex to be dealt with here, but we safely assume that Lagerkvist is aware that for more than a thousand years both Greeks and Romans regarded Delphi as the major temple of Apollo and believed that it was the "place to go to" if one wished to know the will of the gods.


\textsuperscript{3}In a series of essays collected under the title of "The Clenched Fist", Lagerkvist makes it clear that the one aspect of twentieth-century life he finds most decadent is what he terms "self-satisfaction", which he argues is the result of an overly-rational, and therefore naive, cultural and intellectual atmosphere. Both his art and his life have been a kind of protest against the "self-satisfied", since it is his belief that our (from his point of view) predominantly rationalistic, scientific, and materialistic century is gradually choking itself through its tendency to equate "reality" with systematic rational interpretations of it. Like D.H. Lawrence, Rilke, Thomas and others who "hold out" for the mysterious in life, Lagerkvist is passionately convinced that it is preferable to believe Pan is hiding behind a tree than to understand the botanical structure of it.

It is therefore no accident that there is a prophetic strain running throughout the Sibyl's narrative, since in a very real sense the novel may be seen as Lagerkvist's own way of revealing his prophetic vision of the inescapability of "god". Ironically, as we shall see, Lagerkvist's vision is in many ways antithetical to the Apollonian heritage of Delphi.

The most important aspect of the Delphic Oracle, with respect to the Sibyl, is undoubtedly rooted in its unique history as the "home" of both Apollo and Dionysus. Lagerkvist himself called the "meeting" of these two gods within the temple's inner sanctuary the "Wonder of Delphi", and the thematic structure of the novel cannot be grasped without holding in mind the images of the two gods, and their respective attributes, since the specific ritualistic and symbolic details of the novel are heavily dependent upon them. For this reason, I will have to say a few words about Apollo and Dionysus, and how they seem to function within the world of the novel.

Apollo was of course the sovereign god at Delphi, the spokesman of Zeus who, in addition to being the Archer-god, the master of the lyre, and the healer, is primarily known, according to Edith Hamilton, as the "God of Light, in whom is no darkness at all, and so he is the God of Truth." Miss Hamilton adds that "Apollo at Delphi was a purely beneficent power, a direct link between gods and men, guiding men to know divine will." The Pythia ("Pythia" and "Sibyl" are not synonymous according to Parke, though Lagerkvist uses them as if they were so) acted

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7 Ibid., p. 31.
as an intermediary between Apollo and the world of man, but was only an
"unconscious instrument of divine revelation and as such she counted for
little." It was Apollo's priests who interpreted the Sibyl's wild words,
uttered in a state often bordering on hysteria. But it is important to
note that the "light" and wisdom and truth which is associated with Apollo
is grounded in an interpretation of a noumenal experience which is not
their own, and it is at this point that Lagerkvist distinguishes be­
tween a theistic and a non-theistic attitude towards the supra-rational
fathoms of human experience.

It seems clear that the institution of the Delphic Oracle, which is
devoted solely to Apollo, is meant to be seen as broadly representative
of any world of religious orthodoxy, a world unquestionably dependent
upon a theistically defined god. The contrast between this kind of
public "religious" world and the Sibyl's private noumenal world lies
at the core of the novel's central motif— as an experience "god" must,
in the final counting, lie beyond the realm of human comprehension, be­
yond the realm of what Paul Tillich means by the word "theism". This
is perhaps made most clear when the Sibyl contrasts her experience of
god with how the priests interpreted it. She says that her:

...inspiration was divine, no doubt, but it was they who in­
terpreted it and knew how to extract a meaning from confused
utterance which was unintelligible to everyone else. The
great thoughts, the lofty wisdom which they put into the or­
cacle's answers—those famous answers which conferred world­
wide power and prestige upon the oracle—had nothing to do
with the wild shrieks of this ignorant woman...She was pos­
sessed by god, certainly; god spoke through her. But it was
they who knew what god really meant and wanted to say—they
who knew how to penetrate to the core of him and reveal it.
(p. 60).

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8Parke, p. 32.
The question which the novel raises from beginning to end is: can man know and understand what God "means" and intends to "say"? Is it possible for man to "penetrate to the core of him and reveal it"? The Sibyl's whole life, her passionate and tortured experience of God, are in effect an answer to the questions—a most emphatic no! One could say that her experience is an illustration of the mystery, the total enigma which by definition belongs to the word "God", while it sets in relief the incredible pretension implicit in mankind's attempts to Reduce God to "light", which within the novel carries its archetypal connotation of "understanding" on a rational level. When man attempts to comprehend God in this way, Lagerkvist suggests, he must necessarily anthropomorphize him, suck the mystery and the awe and the dread out of the inherently noumenal, and transform him finally into an idol who safely and securely fits human conceptual though patterns. Implicit too is the suggestion that such a "response" to God is tainted with deception, perhaps conscious; hence the institutional world of Delphi is deliberately depicted as a den of corruption, hypocrisy, and "shamelessness". Within the world of the novel, then, Apollo is seen as a false god of theism—a god who is not experienced but is rather constructed according to the dictates of a bureaucratic theocracy. The point which Lagerkvist is driving at is a recurrent one in his fiction: institutionalized religion militates against a vital and direct response to the mysterious in life (or "God")

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9 Not Apollo himself, of course, but rather the conception of "God" which the Delphic theocracy chooses to call "Apollo". Though it is true that Apollo, as the Greeks knew him, is somewhat foreign to Lagerkvistian notions of God, I do not wish to imply that the God has no place in his vision. Since Lagerkvist holds that all possibility is God's, it follows that he can be "light" to some people.
through its reliance upon a system of rational barriers (dogma or systematized theology in any form) which can only deaden the roots of any potentially vital religious experience. Ironically, Lagerkvist the "religious atheist" is then overwhelmingly protestant in his near obsession with the uniquely individual encounter with god, his hatred for idolatry and formality in religion, and his ingrained suspicion of "priests".

Though Delphi is predominantly known and thought of as the major temple of Apollo in the Hellenic world, Parkes establishes that Dionysus, no later than the middle of the sixth century B.C., began to play a conspicuous and very important role in the rituals of the oracle. Be this as it may on a historical level (and Lagerkvist is clearly working rather closely with a historical account of the oracle), it seems more than likely that The Sibyl is constructed upon a religious experience which is essentially "Dionysian", and that Lagerkvist is using the God of the Vine as a focal symbol for the "god beyond the god of theism". In any event, the role of Dionysus is certainly the key to an understanding of the novel's most conspicuously enigmatic (and vitally important) symbols: the goats, the river (and moisture of any kind), the "idiocy" of god's son, and the vapours rising from the chasm beneath the "holy of holies".

Dionysus is most commonly thought of today as the God of the Vine—the inspirer of joy and ecstasy, but also of unbounded cruelty, as evidenced in Euripides' play, The Bacchae. But Walter F. Otto, in a recently translated study entitled Dionysus: Myth and Cult, fairly conclusively establishes that the Greeks themselves possessed a more
complex and deeper apprehension of his nature. The particular characteristics which Otto argues ought to be understood as attributes of Dionysus are important, for they almost without exception coincide with the symbolic patterns in The Sibyl, and just as importantly, they shed much light on the problem of why the Sibyl's vision of god is finally immersed in a riddle of duality and paradox.

Otto develops a portrait of Dionysus which the Sibyl would surely recognize:

We know him as the wild spirit of antithesis and paradox, of immediate presence and complete remoteness, of bliss and horror, of infinite vitality and the cruelest destruction. The element of bliss in his nature, the creative enraptured and blessed elements all share, too, in his wildness and madness... Here we have hit upon a cosmic enigma—the mystery of life which is self-generating, self-creating. The love which races towards the miracle of procreation is touched by madness.

The passage helps to suggest why Dionysus is such an ideal "god figure" (almost a god symbol) for Lagerkvist. First of all, the "mad god" embodies the elemental source of tension in human experience, that source of mystery which is always a mocker of reason—duality. He is paradoxically a god who causes immediate and direct unrest in the soul, yet who is finally "remote" in the sense that he is remote from human understanding. He is a god who encompasses the enigmatic flux of life and death, love and cruelty, light and darkness. He is, in short, a god who is himself a "cosmic enigma"—a god who encompasses the elemental mysteries in life, who cannot be reduced to neat theistic categories, who is finally a symbol of all that lies beyond, as Ahasuerus

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puts it in the sequel to The Sibyl, "all the abortions of human imagination."

I think it fruitful to hold that it is "Dionysus," and not Apollo, who "possesses" the Sibyl in Delphi, though this would only be true in so far as I have defined the attributes of these gods within the context of the novel. Such an approach is justified, I maintain, because the symbolic detail of the novel supports it, and one of my central contentions in this thesis is that Lagerkvist is a symbolist novelist, a fact which has not been heretofore sufficiently recognized.

Let us look, as a beginning, at the symbolic detail of the holy of holies, where as Pythia the Sibyl is ostensibly to be filled with the spirit of light (Apollo). The holy of holies, according to Otto, was by the Greeks commonly considered to be the place where the grave of Dionysus was located. More to the point, in sharp contrast to the temple of light just above it, the holy of holies is dark, moist, and is permeated with a "faint, sour smell of goat." These are the three attributes or signals which point towards the presence of the incomprehensible god throughout the novel. Darkness frequently functions on a symbolic level in Lagerkvist's fiction, since it is an archetypal symbol of the mysterious, the unknown, the inscrutable—all those areas of experience which lie beyond rational comprehension.

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I will put "Dionysus" in quotation marks from here on out when I wish to remind the reader that Dionysus is, in a sense, only a device which Lagerkvist uses to suggest the "nature" of a "god beyond the god of theism.

The god finally could be said to encompass both "Dionysus" and "Apollo", and I do not wish to ignore Parke's observation that ecstatic experience could be inspired by Apollo and even by Zeus.

Otto, p. 104.
In The Sibyl, darkness is closely identified with "Dionysus" in deliberate contrast to Apollo (the god whom Miss Hamilton says contains no darkness at all), in order to buttress the central motif that god is not necessarily "light"—i.e., he is not necessarily knowable in rational terms, though he can be light since all potentiality is his.

Moisture, too, according to Otto, is particularly (by the Greeks) associated with Dionysus, as in its several forms it also is an archetypal symbol suggestive of the "primal mysteries of all life." More significantly, water is regarded by the worshippers of Dionysus as the carrier of his divine power, and it is also a source of inspired prophecy. This may perhaps help to explain why the Sibyl's hut above Delphi "always dripped with moisture" (p. 5), why the holie of holies itself is "wet" and "slimy," why the Sibyl is sprinkled with water before she enters the sanctuary, and most significantly, why the river plays such an important part in the latter half of the novel.

The "sour smell of goat" is also an attribute of Dionysus. Otto maintains that goats were commonly considered to be the servants or instruments of Dionysus, since on the one hand they are suggestive of sexual fertility and desire (lechery to later ages), while on the other hand the Greeks were well aware of "the dark and eerie character of the animal" which made it a "genuine symbol of the two-fold god." Dionysus is a "two-fold" god because of his dual nature as giver and taker, and it is vitally important to recognize this in the novel.

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15 Ibid., p. 161.
16 Ibid., p. 162.
17 Ibid., p. 169.
since it is finally Lagerkvist's intention to suggest that god is a presence or a force or even a life "sap" which is two-fold, both evil and good, both creative and destructive, both life and death. Hence the suggestiveness of the goat as a symbol of duality is one of the recurrent streams of symbolic continuity and reinforcement which combine to buttress the motif of enigma and paradox in the novel.

The importance of goats in The Sibyl seems self-evident since they appear, in one form or another, in nearly every crucial scene (e.g.: when the Sibyl first enters the holy of holies; when she is raped by a "he-goat"; when she is guided, later in her pregnancy, to a mountain hut by goats; when her "idiot" son dotes only on goats while ignoring his mother's attempts to communicate with him) in the novel. They are clearly meant to be seen as symbolic of the inexorable presence of "Dionysus" in the Sibyl's life, the presence of a god who is "dark and eerie" as well as joyous and ecstatic. More will be said about this later.

Finally, though the Sibyl is supposed to be inspired through inhaling the smoke from the glowing embers of laurel leaves, and from chewing the leaves themselves (among other aspects of the ritual), she herself traces the spirit which fills her to a far different source:

But it was the fumes rising from the cleft which affected me most...they were poisonous and noxious...and the thought flashed through my mind that the cleft was believed by some to run down into the realms of death, from which the oracle really drew its powers.

(p. 48)

If Apollo's Olympian realm towers above the cyclical flux of life and death, love and hate, joy and sorrow which is endemic to human experi-
once, the realm of Dionysus, at least according to Otto, emphatically
does not. In point of fact, as the suffering god who must die and be
reborn each spring, Dionysus is known as the god who sometimes dwells
in the mysterious realms of death:

But the god himself is not merely touched and seized by the
ghostly spirit of the abyss. He, himself, is the monstrous
creature which lives in the depths. From its mask it looks
out at man and sends him reeling with the ambiguity of near-
ness and remoteness, of life and death in one. Its divine
intelligence holds the contradictions together.18

By suggesting that the oracle draws its power from the realms of
death, Lagerkvist clearly cuts the Sibyl off from the institutional
world, and the institutional god, of Delphi. We can now take a
closer look at the novel's internal structure.

The Sibyl may, somewhat arbitrarily, be divided into five sec-
tions. The first contains Anasueres's narration of his experience
of god. The remaining four sections might then be seen as breaks,
or turning points, in the Sibyl's life, all of which, though they
may provide her (and the reader) with no immediate understanding of
her relationship with god, combine to lay the necessary groundwork
for her final thrust at understanding "Dionysus". The sections may
be delineated as follows: (1) the Sibyl is "chosen" by god to be
Pythia at Delphi, and she discovers that he, as an experience, is
hostile and alien to human expectations. (2) The death of her mother
draws the Sibyl home, this time to experience another kind of awak-

18 Ibid., p. 140.
ening, an awakening to the value of natural love and procreation which in turn are linked with the mysterious "two-fold" god. (3) The Sibyl returns to Delphi, is raped by "Dionysus", and is finally driven from the temple when her pregnancy is betrayed to the mob. (4) Through perceiving the hidden significance of her "idiot" son's origin and meaning, the Sibyl achieves a final reconciliation with god through acknowledging her own limitations (the limitations of reason) when confronted with an inscrutable transcendent reality. All four of these sections are ultimately bound together by the central motif—god's (as the Sibyl experiences him) "otherness", his paradoxical and mysterious power which is foreign to human understanding—"attributes" which are summed up in the mocking figure of the idiot son, whose "idiocy" is finally symbolic of Lagerkvist's (and the Sibyl's) vision of an unknown god who cannot be reduced to the light of reason.

Except for a few brief opening passages, the entire first section of The Sibyl is devoted to Ahasuerus's narration of his fateful encounter with Christ. His narration is tied in with the novel's themes in at least two important ways. First of all, like the Sibyl he has experienced the hostility and apparent malignancy of a powerful transcendent "being", but unlike her, he assumes an almost entirely defiant attitude towards this "being." Why? On one level, he is a kind of negative foil to the "believers" in the temple, since he too anthropomorphizes god, though in this case god is reduced to a less comforting

17 We do not learn that this is his name until we come to The Death of Ahasuerus, the sequel to The Sibyl. I use his proper name at this point for reasons of simplification.
conceptualization. If the "believers" cling to an image of god which is untainted by uncomfortable darkness, Ahasuerus's vision entails an image which is equally possible, though equally extreme:

To those who love him he gives peace, they say, and he takes them up with him into his heaven; but they say too, that he9 hurls those who don't believe in him into hell. If this is true, then he seems to be exactly like ourselves, just as good and just as bad. Those we love we too treat well, and we wish the rest all the evil there is. If we had the power that he has, we too, perhaps, would hurl them to damnation for all eternity, though we can't be sure. Only the malignity of a god, perhaps, could be great enough for that. (pp. 25-6)

Already in this passage, Lagerkvist is establishing a dichotomy between an experience of god vs. an idea of god, which in turn is contrasted with the Sibyl's experience. At the same time, he is, through Ahasuerus, beginning to suggest that the Christian vision also entails an anthropomorphization of ultimate being through "reducing" Christ to the moral duplicity of human patterns of behavior. But while the Sibyl eventually recognizes that god is not "like ourselves", and that he cannot be reduced to rational categories of good and bad, Ahasuerus remains hounded by an image of god as "evil like ourselves" throughout the novel, which in the Lagerkvistian world is as serious an error as that which the theocracy makes in Delphi. In the sequel to The Sibyl, The Death of Ahasuerus, Ahasuerus too finally realizes this through discovering that the image or conception of god which has plagued his almost endless life is false.

Another and more significant tie between Ahasuerus and the novel's themes is the fact that his narration introduces a contrast between a specifically Christian vision of god and the Sibyl's. The repeated
allusions to Christ and to Mary which both he and the Sibyl utter are clearly meant to induce within the reader an awareness of the vast gulf which separates their experience of god from a "conventional" Christian "experience" of him. Moreover, there is a deliberate parody involved in these contrasts. The Sibyl's rape by "Dionysus", the fact that she is driven to seek shelter when her birth pangs strike, her giving birth to an "idiot" son of god, and finally the son's return to his "home", are almost certainly meant to parody the Christian version of the immaculate conception, the birth of Christ, and the resurrection and ascension. Why? Lagerkvist's personal view, so far as I understand it, is that the Christian vision too, like the institutional vision of Delphi, is an anthropomorphizing of the power which lies beyond all the constructions of human imagination. Yet, though he quarrels with Christian theism, one should not assume he is debunking "religion" itself. One of his primary concerns in The Sibyl, and in most of his later fiction, is to suggest the potential for vital religious experience in an age in which intellectuals frequently assume that, if the god of theism is "dead", then all gods are dead. True, his "god" is both unreachable and incomprehensible (like Tillich's "being in itself"), but he is also a god who cannot be theistically destroyed.

At the end of the novel, when the Sibyl achieves her "reconciliation" with god, Ahasuerus is still "cursed", still condemned to seek an answer

\[\text{\cite{Oberholzer, p. 132.}}\]

\[\text{\cite{The fact that Nietzsche's "obituary" is so easily tossed around in much contemporary literature and criticism is a marvellous illustration of what Lagerkvist means by "self-satisfaction." Certainly the statement "god is dead" has now become an insidious cliche, having taken on the stale odor of words without real meaning though accepted as truth.}}\]
to his quest for understanding. This is important, since the ceaseless quest of Ahasuerus may be seen as Lagerkvist's way of saying that the questions he asks the Sibyl are eternal. Such questions are never finally resolved, but as a dramatic device they successfully lead into the Sibyl's narrative of her own experience.

The remaining four sections of the novel are for the most part narrated by the Sibyl. From a stylistic point of view, Lagerkvist mixes a present and past perspective in her narration, which makes difficult any attempt to chart her growth as a character. It is possible to argue that there really is no character growth in the novel. Yet it is not true that the Sibyl is a static figure like Barabbas or the dwarf in The Dwarf, since her idiot son's disappearance does lead to a fundamental change in her attitude towards experience. What movement there is in the novel, then, can be said to drive towards her recognition of the true significance of her son's "idiocy".

The first section of the Sibyl's story may be seen as an awakening from innocence and naivete about god, and about what a transcendent religious experience might involve. It is noteworthy that she feels she is "chosen" by god. This is how she perceives the "call" from Delphi (with one brief exception) throughout the novel, and her belief that she was predestined to be possessed by god helps to account for her sometimes fatalistic attitude towards what happens to her. Hence she says later that "Dionysus" would "never forsake her", could "never give me up", and she is sure that her love for the one-armed man was bound to fail since she was "not meant for anyone else" but god (p. 95). God, in Lagerkvist's later fiction,
is almost always this kind of mysterious power (something akin to the Law in Kafka's *The Trial*) which grips a protagonist and finally seems to control his or her destiny. "Dionysus" in *The Sibyl* is such a god, perhaps significantly so because we finally do not know whether the Sibyl's love for god is a burden which "Dionysus" thrusts upon her (she seems to have no choice in the events which lead her to Delphi in the first place and which govern her life thereafter), or whether she herself chooses to abide by the demands of this love as her highest value. I suspect that, though the Sibyl's love for god lies at the core of her entire experience and attitude towards the transcendent world, she, like Barabbas, Ahasuerus and Tobias, is chosen to be filled with "god". Conscious choice seems to be of very little importance in the novel (or in any of Lagerkvist's works) in connection with religious experience, which suggests that such experience may entail more recognition of what actually is rather than any conversion to a system of beliefs. Certainly the Sibyl's life is focused upon a struggle to understand the reality of mystery and power with which she is confronted, a struggle which is broad enough in terms of what it could include to extend to almost any man's experience, since only a fool would deny that the totality of experience is not both mysterious and powerful in its impact upon the imagination.

When the Sibyl is first called to Delphi, she is innocent and naive. The description of her home life establishes that she knew next to nothing about Delphi, about sex, and about people in general. She says of herself that she was like a child, and we are asked to see, I think, her expectations concerning what god would be like as childish and even shallow. These are theistic (the theocracy would
find nothing unusual in them) expectations.

There are three things which the Sibyl expects of god before she first enters the temple. She wants to be filled with "light"—to understand, like the "believers", the god who will possess her, to understand him as if he were a human being with human drives, desires, attributes, etc. This is why she is so perplexed by all the mysterious (dark) aspects of the inner sanctuary, and finally of god himself, when she is first embraced in his Dionysian rapture. The second and third things she expects are closely related to the first. She wants peace and she wants security (p. 40). On one level, she is denied these things with god precisely because she does not "understand" him. Mankind is always in fear of the unknown, of the darkly mysterious, and a compulsion to do away with the mysterious or the unaccountable phenomena of experience is a universal characteristic of post-Reformation Western man. Rational comprehension of experience does not always promise peace and security, but it does provide a substitute in the form of imagined (for all intents and purposes it is real) control or mastery over experience (the scientific impulse?). Yet reducing the mysterious to the comprehended entails a limiting of experience, since what is inherently amorphous is "squeezed" into conceptual patterns which may distort and even falsify it. This is something the Sibyl, in sharp contrast to the priests who "interpret" her ravings in the "light" of reason, cannot do with god:

Security. Peace. How could I desire such things? How could I believe I could find such things in his embrace? How could I ask security of god? God could not be as I wished him to be, as I so much wanted him to be. He could not. God was not security and repose and rest. He was unrest, conflict, and uncertainty. (p. 52)
The key sentence is "God could not be as I wished him to be." Though she has scarcely begun her narrative when she makes this statement, it is really a kind of refrain in the novel, for in contrast to the priests on one hand, and her parents on the other ("they ordered their own relationship with god"), the Sibyl never really questions the right of god to be and to remain a mystery. Unlike Barabbas, and later Ahasuerus, she is from the beginning willing to acknowledge that "Dionysus", despite the fact that he has disappointed her human desires for peace, security, and understanding, is still a god and therefore not subject to human limitations, though like Job she questions god within an awareness of her own finiteness.

By the end of the first section, the Sibyl's basic experience of god and her attitude towards it have been established. Her rapturous experience in the holy of holies becomes her life, and she is more than ever an outcast from her family and from the entire Delphic community, especially the latter since she is tainted with mystery. She says of herself that she "existed only for god", that she had "no life of my own", and that she was "no longer a person in the usual meaning of the word" (p. 72). But just as her parents' faith in Gaia seems dependent upon their ignorance of the darker side of god (the Sibyl says they "had no idea" of "god's might and depth and dreadful power over the human soul"), so is her own faith grounded in a kind of innocence and ignorance. Though she is well up in her thirties when she returns home upon her mother's death, she has had no sexual experience (as "god's bride" she was expected to practice strict chastity) and she knows nothing about "natural" love. Hence the second section of the novel involves
her in another kind of awakening—this time an awakening to the world of adulthood, sexuality, and human love, but also an awakening, though not conscious, to another intimation of the power of "Dionysus". For as the novel develops, it becomes clear that "Dionysus" is meant to be seen as the power which sprouts in procreation, the power of joy and new life, as well as the darkly mysterious source of suffering and death.

The Sibyl's return to the family farm home outside of Delphi draws us into a familiar Lagerkvistian realm of tension between the "earthly", the "natural", or as the Sibyl herself chooses to call it, the "real" world and the mysterious world of transcendental meaning and involvement in human affairs. The world of the Sibyl's parents is the world of Gaia, the Earth Goddess whom they worship (p. 35) and who sums up the values they live by. This is a world which is predominantly physical and natural—deeply rooted in the cyclical order of growth and decay, sowing and reaping, life and death—and which is both symbolically and actually an antithesis to the world of spiritual values, or their negation, which Delphi represents. The world of Gaia seems to rest upon an instinctive and non-reflective bond between man and nature, something which is supposed to have ended in its ideal form with the loss of Paradise but which is revived periodically by romanticists who think they know what it is like to "live on the soil". But though there is a naive quality to the world of Gaia, its values are not grounded in escapism but rather in acceptance of physical reality. Lagerkvist portrays the Earth Goddess's "realm" in this way, I believe, in order to deepen the contrasts between natural love and "divine" love, but finally to suggest that
these seemingly dissimilar "worlds" ultimately rest upon the same source of mysterious fruitive and regenerative power—"Dionysus".

The tension between the world of Gaia (natural love) and the world of "Dionysus" is most poignantly introduced in the mother's death-bed scene. The Sibyl is dressed in the bridal gown of Apollo:

> Slowly, she [her mother] stretched out her emaciated hand and fingered my bridal gown, the stuff of it, without comprehension. It must have seemed to her that I was masquerading—\(\text{as indeed I was}.\) She must have thought so—she who had really been a bride and borne children to a man and loved him and them. (p. 72)

It is true that the Sibyl, as "god's bride", is divorced from the natural world of human love and sexuality, which is nearly the same, at least from Lagerkvist's point of view, as being divorced from the divine in human life. But is he then suggesting that the world of Gaia and the world of "Dionysus" are inevitably incompatible? It might appear so, since the Sibyl's parents seem only to be aware of one facet of the divine: they have no fear of death, they believe only in a goddess who is beneficent to man and nature, and at the same time they seem ignorant of the darker spiritual forces which grip their daughter in Delphi. It is the Sibyl's intense moral awareness (her sense of duty to god and her knowledge of the extent of the moral pollution in Delphi), moreover, which seems to prevent her from reestablishing a harmonious relationship with the natural world.

The tensions between "natural" and "Dionysian" love are of course more sharply drawn in the Sibyl's affair with the one-armed man. Their love affair begins in a characteristically Lagerkvistian way: they meet
by a spring which in this novel, as in the sequel, is suggestive of the eternal cyclical movement of the natural order (the Sibyl's mother calls the spring "holy" since it is stirred by the invisible finger of god) which in turn suggests the mysterious duality of the "two-fold" being, who is so much a part of the natural order that a death and regeneration ritual is endemic to Dionysian worship in many Greek cults. But while the Sibyl has experienced only the "spiritual" possession of "Dionysus", she has remained ignorant of the joy in physical possession. Hence the sense of surprise in her description of her first sexual experience:

For the first time I experienced love—the marvel of not being alone, of another person being in me. The marvel of embracing another and being myself embraced, and of feeling a profound, wild satisfaction in my powerful body which, without always knowing it, had always longed for this.

(p. 86)

The Sibyl adds that she and her lover made love like the "animals" in nature—out in the open, in the wind and the rain and the sun, which is of course a place far different from the dark and musty atmosphere of the holy of holies. More importantly, her lover is a source of the peace and security which god "could not be":

Yes, with him there was safety, safety at last...if only god would let me keep it—he could never be safety.

(p. 89)

The lines prove to be ironic because the Sibyl's later experience implicitly affirms that it is "Dionysus" who lights the sparks of natural love.

We do not know if it really is "Dionysus", or the Sibyl's own commit-
ment to him which finally leads to the end of the affair. The symbol-
ism of this section seems to suggest that "Dionysus" is both an inner
and an outer reality, existing both as "thoughts" which plague the Sibyl
and as an external and active metaphysical force. Why, for example, does
she always associate the scent of pine needles and a dull roar of a river
with her first experience of "human happiness" in sexual union? On a
physical level, of course, she was first possessed by the one-armed man
on a bed of pine needles near "the river". But symbolically, the pine
is the tree most sacred to Dionysus, and water, as mentioned before,
was considered to be the agent of his divine power in nature. Finally,
it is "the river" which is the most crucial symbol in this section,
since it functions as a symbol of the Sibyl's consciousness of her com-
mitment to god and to chastity (many Dionysian sects, says Otto, de-
manded strict chastity among the god's followers), and as an actual
instrument of divine observation and apparent vengeance.

Whether the river is an external or internal symbolic reality, or
both, it clearly intimates the inexorable power of "Dionysus" to govern
the natural order, and perhaps to intrude into it. It is the Sibyl's
thoughts about the "river" which begin to poison her joy in natural love
almost from the start. Just after she has first betrayed her vow of
chastity to god, for example, she says that she:

...began to think it had been very wrong of us to forget the
river, and not even to look at it. Perhaps it was angered be-
cause of that...there is no river which is not divine; this
one by its mighty roar showed us that it was...I could still
hear its menacing thunder...and now in my solitude it fright-
ened me.

22Otto, p. 167.
Moreover, she says that rivers do not easily forgive, and it is her belief that the "river knew" about her transgression which seems to lead her to believe that god too knows (p. 89). Certainly it is true that whenever the Sibyl thinks of the river she thinks of god, and of what she believes to be the irreconcilable tension between her desire for human love and her commitment to god:

God? God? Would he forgive me this that I had done? I belonged to him; I was his bride. Yes, truly. But I was human too. I was a human being, a woman like all other women...I was chosen by god; I was god's elect. But I was also chosen by the life of this earth, by ordinary human life, to live it. I was chosen by love, by a man who loved me, who wanted to possess me and whom I wanted to possess. I was his bride. God's bride—and his.

Anyone who has "quarreled" with god, or with the idea of a transcendent being, should easily understand the emotion lurking beneath the Sibyl's comments. For it seems sadly true that any theistic vision impinges upon man's freedom—freedom to be a natural being living in a natural world and obeying natural impulses. Certainly the Sibyl discovers she cannot be both "God's bride and his." Just as with Ahasuerus, Barabbas, and Tobias, the transcendental world demands all or nothing: its "call" is a kind of spiritual duty which cannot be shirked, despite the fact that the highest "call" of human life, which is unquestionably the "call" to love and to create new life, is also in a sense (Lagerkvist would say it is) divine. This is the tension which Adam faced and which Lagerkvist wisely makes no attempt to resolve. But he does imply, strongly, that the "call" of the natural world is as divine, as mysteriously divine, and ultimately as valuable as the "call" of the transcendent, but only if it is re-
garded as such, as is the case with the Sibyl's parents. It is another way of saying that the divine is present in the most common, yet most precious, areas of human experience.

The Sibyl seems predestined to lose her lover, ironically because her love for him becomes in many ways similar to God's love for her:

My passion was like a savage chasm that sought to engulf him. And I saw that it frightened him...Yes, my love was too great. Too much love cloys the beloved, but that I didn't know or understand...He recoiled before this excess, this wild conflagration that was so foreign to him and his world---to the security and reality in which he lived...No, my love was of the wrong kind; it did not belong there. In spite of everything I did not belong to this world, the real world of men; I was not meant for it.

(p. 95)

The Sibyl's love, and even her language, is a deliberate parody of God's love for her. "Dionysus's" love too is like a "savage chasm", and it too causes her fear, and is foreign to the "real" world and to human needs for peace and security. Why this parody? Lagerkvist is, I would think, asking us to look at the nature of love, and to perceive the impossibility of determining whether one kind of love is more divine than another if both are passionately experienced. Be this as it may, in the final analysis it is the Sibyl's too intense (too "unnatural" or "Dionysian") desire to possess her lover which leads to the end of the affair, for he ceases to love her only when she becomes too ardent and too demanding of him, just as God is too ardent and too demanding of her.

But "Dionysus" is something more than an internal or psychic reality lodged in the Sibyl's consciousness. "He" is also a god who
intrudes into human affairs—the one-armed man is found dead by the river, though instead of a pine cone he clutches a twig of laurel in his hand. Just as in the holy of holies, the fusion of a symbol of "Dionysus" (the river) with a symbol of Apollo (the laurel twig) suggests the radical duality of this god—a "two-fold" god who is both light and darkness, a giver of ecstasy and of rapturous spiritual and procreative joy, but who is also a "taker" who is evidently a part of the death as well as the life process. One could, in point of fact, accurately say that he is a god of death as well as of life (the river carries her lover's blood within its flow), and the suggestion is not accidental. The entire novel flows out of Lagerkvist's initial assumption that, if god is the creator and the moving principle of the world men know and live in, he is also the "creator" of death. This is rank heresy from a Christian point of view, but it is only a beginning step in the series of evidently heretical parodies of the Christian vision which make up the second half of the novel, and which have the cumulative effect of affirming that god is something more than any theological conceptualization of him.

The rape scene is in a sense a culmination of the Sibyl's whole experience of "Dionysus", since it encompasses the flux of flesh and spirit, love and fear, pain and desire which have marked it from the beginning. The "mighty roar of the river", which she hears while god is raping her, suggests that the act is anything but arbitrary:

What happened was just as I was losing consciousness I smelled a sour stench of goat; and the god in the shape of the black goat, his sacred beast in the cave of the oracle, threw itself
upon me and assuaged itself and me in a love act in which pain, evil, and voluptuousness were mingled... a stranger possessed me, mastered me—a wild and terrible power which stunned me with its ruthless enormity... While it was going on I heard the mighty roar of the river as never before. (pp. 102-03)

Dionysus was known for his ability to change himself into a goat, particularly a he-goat, black in this case because Lagerkvist wishes to emphasize the mysteriously evil and dark aspects of his being. The sexual act itself extends into two levels of parody. On one level, its physical qualities, its mixture of pain and desire, consciousness and unconsciousness, suggest a parody of the Sibyl's "spiritual" possession by "Dionysus" in the holy of holies. On a deeper level, the rape can be seen as a deliberate parody of the Christian version of the Immaculate Conception. "Dionysus", instead of engendering a savior of mankind out of love and mercy, ruthlessly rapes his "elected one" out of seeming envy and malice.

Why this parody? Lagerkvist has been suggesting something from the beginning which the parody helps to bring to the surface—god may be, as the Christians affirm, "light, love and truth" (as revealed in Christ), but he may also be darkness, evil, and "meaninglessness". Lagerkvist has always quarreled with traditional Christian explanations of evil and its relationship to god, and this novel is built upon a vision of a god who encompasses all things, including the realms of "darkness". That god could be the creator of evil as well as of good is heresy from a Christian point of view, but everyone knows what kind

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23Cf. Oberholzer, p. 131.
of theological quagmire this belief leads in to, witness Augustine, Aquinas, and Milton. In "The Clenched Fist" Lagerkvist says that Christianity will "disappear like every other religion," though the mysterious "god" which all theistic systems try to "capture" will remain. In all three of the trilogy's novels, the major protagonists affirm that god lies beyond the powers of human conceptualization, and this motif is particularly strong in *The Sibyl*. The parody of the Immaculate Conception, then, may be seen as Lagerkvist's way of suggesting (the whole of the Sibyl's experience also suggests this) that the Christian vision, or the Christian view of God, is only one way of responding to the mystery which is "Dionysus." It is not necessarily the wrong way (there is no right or wrong way), but for Lagerkvist himself, judging from the short autobiographical stories, "Father and I" and "Guest of Reality," found any mystical experience of the unknown, whether it be the death of his grandmother or a sudden apprehension of threatening forces in nature, more believable than any theistic explanation of it.

The parody of the Immaculate Conception leads to a further parody of the birth of Christ, and finally to a parody of the Ascension, through which the contrasts between the Sibyl's encounter with the unknown and the traditional Christian vision are extended and deepened. That "Dionysus" is guiding the Sibyl's destiny, and that he has somehow chosen her to bear him a son, seems evident when one looks at the symbolism following the rape scene. After her expulsion from Delphi,
she is literally sustained by "Dionysus"—she lives on goat's milk and protects herself from the winter by wearing a goat-skin. Whether the goats which always seem to surround her are seen as servants of "Dionysus" or as personifications of the god himself, they are clearly something more than goats. They come to the Sibyl of their own accord because, as she sees it, they are attracted to her, and throughout they are seen by her as sentient. Earlier in her narrative, she had asked herself, "Could it be that god would want to save the child?" The life-sustaining milk of the goats seems surely to be "His" answer.

The birth of "Dionysus's" son, just like the conception, is described in exaggeratedly physical terms, in contrast to the Christian version of the birth of Christ which, of course, stresses only the peace and the wonder and the hope of Christ's nativity. We know nothing of Mary's labor pains, but the birth of the "idiot" son of "Dionysus" is contrastively built upon an atmosphere of violence, pain, and eerie mystery. Christ's birth could be seen as an answer to Ahasuerus's earlier questions about his destiny and the destiny of man; the birth of the "idiot", rather than providing answers, seems only to raise more questions—who is he, why is he, for what possible reason has he been born? All of these questions (and others) suggest a comparatively simple truth which is found in much of Lagerkvist's fiction: god is the uncertain, the unexpected, the unaccountable. As the Sibyl later reflects upon the birth and all the events which led up to it, she says essentially the same thing:

With him anything may happen. He reveals himself at any time and in anything. The thunderstorm that drove me into the cave, the goats
that were sent to take care of me, the scorching summer, charged
with unparalleled heat, the birth in the goat cave while heaven
hurled its lightnings at the earth, the queer behavior of the goats,
their eager interest in the birth of the baby, the vile, repugnant,
inhuman events in the goat cave—what lay hidden behind all that?
Something divine? Something, cruelly, savagely divine?
(p. 136)

Ironically, the Sibyl's birth pangs, her violent agony, her feeling of
being rent to pieces, and her shouts seem to be an obviously quite sub-
tle parody or echo of her possession by "Dionysus" in the holy of holies.
"Dionysus" is then, within the novel, linked with three of the most ele-
mental physical realities (and mysteries) of life—procreation, child-
birth, and death. Lagerkvist has implied all along that the divine is
both physical and spiritual; it is deeply rooted in the mysteries of
the physical world (the enigmatic darkness which is death), the myster-
ious joy of physical union, the miracle of spring) as well as in the
ungraspable super-sensory world. This is why, I am sure, Lagerkvist
so repeatedly emphasizes the concretely physical, almost tangible, ways
in which "Dionysus" reveals himself: in smells and odors (the sour
stench of goat or the fragrance of pine-scent), in a feeling of damp-
ness and moisture, in a river, in a thunderstorm, in a tree, or as
the Sibyl finally acknowledges, in a turf altar or an ear of corn.
There is no escaping the implication that god, if he is a part of the
physical cycle, must also be involved in the evils of the natural world.
But even if this is true, Lagerkvist's vision of "Dionysus", precisely
because it posits his immanence in the natural cycle, also posits his
immanence in the realm of ordinary human experience. Lagerkvist is
possibly suggesting, then, that the Christian vision of experience (ex-
cepting the visions of near mystics such as St. Teresa), which has tended
to emphasize the spirituality of God and His remoteness from the fallen world of man and nature, may obscure and devitalize the primal roots of religious experience—man's apprehension of the divine in the world of sight and sound and smell. It is finally a pagan vision which we discover emergent in The Sibyl, but it is no more so than D. H. Lawrence's or even Albert Schweitzer's.

The concluding section of the novel is constructed around the enigmatic figure of the "idiot" son. His ascension is the culminating touch in Lagerkvist's parody of the Christian vision, and it is what he represents, which in a sense sums up everything Lagerkvist has said about a god who lies beyond the god of theism, though, ironically, the more we learn about the "idiot" son the more theistic he becomes—an inevitable result of the limitations of human speech.

The question which lies just below the surface of the section, and which includes the questions raised by the totality of the Sibyl's experience, is why is the son of "Dionysus" an "idiot". Why is he regarded so by his mother? If she has been mistaken about him, why is this so? What is it finally that this mysterious "idiot" with the crooked smile is meant to represent?

The fact that we can have no sure answers to these questions is the answer to them. The "idiocy" of god's son, in other words, is a comprehensive symbol suggesting the irrational and unanswerable ways in which god may run counter to human understanding and expectations. The "idiocy" is then essentially symbolic of god's "otherness", his incomprehensibility and mysteriousness, the enigma which Lagerkvist believes lies at the core of all potential value in life, and which no
man can grasp rationally.

There exists a fundamental irony in this final section. The Sibyl, who of all the characters in the novel is most excruciatingly aware of god's otherness, has apparently not been able to acknowledge her son as the son of "Dionysus" precisely because of his "idiocy"—i.e., his remoteness from the realm of human comprehension. Hence what embitters her most is the fact that her son is not a "man", not anthropomorphic:

Begotten by god? God's son—an idiot who is not even a man? A child which if it lives will be a poor idiot without understanding, not even knowing that he is alive; an idiot with a meaningless smirk and a mind like a new-born baby's.

Her statement is ironic because the one thing which stands out most from her experience with "Dionysus" is the fact that he is anything but human or like a man, but also because the reader inevitably thinks of Christ, whose importance for mankind rests upon the mystery of the Incarnation, upon God's becoming "like a man". The Sibyl clearly recognizes that "Dionysus" himself is not anthropomorphic, though she later qualifies the following statement:

...he is the most inhuman being there is...The divine is not human; it is something quite different. And it is not noble or sublime or spiritualized, as one likes to believe. It is alien and repellent and sometimes it is madness.

(p. 137)

But, as the Sibyl has experienced him, this is surely an ironic comment about "Dionysus" in light of her inability to accept his son. She persists in believing that her smiling idiot boy cannot be god's because he is not "like a god" (p. 137) and because he is
like no human being:

I had to bear this witless son, who is a mockery of man—of reason and of man—a mockery of me who had to bear him.  
(p. 138)

An irony to end all ironies: the Sibyl cannot believe in her son’s divinity because he is a "mockery" of reason—as if her whole tortuous relationship with "Dionysus" has not been just such a mockery. "Dionysus" throughout the novel has mocked her efforts to conceptualize him, to understand him rationally. God is a mockery of reason, and of man too, since he encompasses all those areas of experience which no man can rationally grip or reduce to the "light" of reason. If Christ is the embodiment of God's light—the promise of redemption, the answer to man's questions about his destiny—the "idiot" son is Lagerkvist's ironic foil to Him, since he brings not light, or hope, or promises, but only the vague intimation of a remote and enigmatic power beyond man's reach or understanding.

The "idiot" son's disappearance is the catalyst through which the Sibyl realizes that she has misunderstood him, his origin, and his significance. Inexplicably, the "idiot" son "returns" to the "mountain of god" because, as the Sibyl perceives it, "The father has fetched him home" (p. 138). The mountain functions as a kind of parody of the Christian heaven, since it is both "white and dark", covered with everlasting snow (once again the moisture), and "mysterious". The "return" is beyond doubt a parody of Christ's Ascension into Heaven, and Lagerkvist has Ahasuerus bring it to the surface in order to set the contrast in relief. The ironic implications of Ahasuerus's statement result from both the tone of his comments and from the fact that the en-
tire Christian vision of significance in sacrifice is implicitly called into question:

He [Ahasuerus] reflected that the son of god who was the source of his own appalling fate...was said to have ascended into heaven from a mountain, too, and was received by the father-god in a cloud, if one were to believe those who worshipped and loved him. But he had first been crucified, which according to them made him extraordinary and his life full of every sort of meaning and significance, for every age. Whereas this son of god seemed to have been born merely to sit at the dim entrance of a ruinous goat hut and look out over the world and the breed of men and their many inventions, and his own magnificent temple, and laugh at it all.

(p. 146)

Why the parody? An answer depends upon who one views the novel as a whole. But in line with all that Lagerkvist has implied about the mystery of the transcendent, the "idiot" son's return may be seen as god's way of enlightening the Sibyl to the meaning of meaninglessness. Ahasuerus speaks for Lagerkvist, I believe, when he says that the son "must have come into the world just to show that meaninglessness, too, is divine" (p. 147). The meaning (the "famous answers") of Apollo, the meaning which the priests claim to perceive, is never experienced by the Sibyl. But what, finally, is the meaninglessness which Ahasuerus says is divine? It is surely something more than the "idiot" son himself. All through the novel, meaninglessness has been equated with what is unknown, ungraspable, "Dionysian", with all those areas of experience which are real but at the same time wholly or part-

25Of course meaninglessness is meaningful, and in this sense the Sibyl does experience the "meaning" of the divine. The distinction I wish to make is this: the Sibyl, unlike Apollo's priests, knows nothing about the will of god; her knowledge of "Dionysus" extends only so far as her experience, and the latter only affirms that questions rather
ially incomprehensible yet valuable if seen as a part of a transcendent cyclical regenerative order. The divine, implies Lagerkvist, is mystery—the mystery of procreation, of spring, of spiritual communion with an enigmatic power so remote that human language is inapplicable to it, and finally of death itself, the "holy land" which Ahasuerus yearns for in the sequel. Who finally can penetrate, as the priests of Apollo claim to do, into the core of mystery—of love, of spring, of procreation, of death? Are they not all something more, necessarily, than ordered forms poured into the molds of human conceptualization? Lagerkvist, as I see it, is asking us to perceive the mystery in life as a kind of god, behind which lies an attitude towards experience which is vitally religious, and which is sharply opposed to the "I have seen them all already" syndromic sterility of Eliot's modern man. The idiot son, then, may be taken as symbolic of life's persistent and unaccountable mysteries which are ultimately the fountainhead of all religious experience.

Why then does the idiot son smile? Ahasuerus says the smile is like a smile he had seen on an ancient image of a god at Delphi, a smile both "enigmatic and remote, at once meaningless and inscrutable. A smile neither good nor evil, yet for that very reason frightening" (p. 147). One may presume that Lagerkvist is alluding to the archaic smile worn by the kouroi (early statues of Apollo in the Egyptian style), the same smile which captivated Leonardo da Vinci. John Sewall, in his A

than answers exist. Lagerkvist's own experience offers a parallel. He has said more than once that he does not understand Golgotha—in short, he does not understand the event which revealed God's will to mankind.
Facial expressions usually demonstrate ludicrous lack of control. If serious, they appear to be either stupid or surly; and if a smile is intended, we see the smirk of an idiot. But to the best of my knowledge, no critic of Greek archaic sculpture has been able to explain why the kouro has a twisted smile, and this I am sure is the point. The "imperfections" in the facial expression of the kouro may not be imperfections at all, since the period of style in which they were created was a period in which the Olympian hierarchy of gods was not solidified—the Greeks were still unsure, one might say, about the nature of the "gods", and about their relationship to man. The smile might suggest such uncertainty. Certainly neither the Sibyl nor Ahasuerus nor Lagerkvist nor the reader knows why the son of god, or the kouro, wears an enigmatic smirk, but it is the smile of a god, frightening because it suggests the inexplicable dualism ("it is neither good nor evil") of a pre-theistic deity—a god who later is revealed or conceptualized as a Gaia, an Apollo, a Dionysus, and finally as a Christ, but who nevertheless remains, as the Sibyl says, "a riddle which is intended not to be solved but to exist. To exist for us always. To trouble us always" (p. 149).

The "idiot" son's return to the mountain of god solves, at least for the Sibyl, the "dark riddle of his origin and significance". Certainly her final words are balanced in a tone of calm acceptance, as

when Ahasuerus asks her if she does not hate the god who has used her so cruelly:

I don't know who he is. How then can I hate him? Or love him? I believe I neither hate him nor love him. When I think about it, it seems to me that such words have no meaning when applied to him. He is not as we are and we can never understand him. He is incomprehensible, inscrutable. He is god—and so far as I comprehend it he is both evil and good, both light and darkness, both meaningless and full of meaning which we can never perceive, yet never cease to puzzle over. (p. 119)

The Sibyl has conquered, finally, her impulse to "conquer" god through understanding him. She is able to accept his mystery for what it is—a total mystery, about which no man can be sure. She tells Ahasuerus that god can be "a little turf altar", or a spring, or a "wild chasm", but her tone of calm acceptance belies her complete acknowledgment that he is god. "He" is the mystery which is endemic to human experience in all ages, the inescapable mystery of all we call the unknown, of death and of the miracle of regeneration. This is why, I suggest, the Sibyl answers Ahasuerus's final question with a prophecy that, no matter how men respond to the unknown, whether he finds it "known" in Christ or present in a turf altar, or "unknown" in the darkness of the oracle pit at Delphi, human destiny and the god of "non-theism" will continue to be inseparable:

You want me to look into the future. I can't do that. But I know enough of the life of mankind and can glimpse enough of the road that lies before them to know that they can never escape the curse and the blessing that comes to them from god. Whatever they may think and do, whatever they may believe or disbelieve, their destiny will always be bound up with god. (p. 152)

Though the Sibyl obviously achieves a reconciliation with the
mysterious god who is her destiny, Ahasuerus clearly does not. He remains at the end of the novel what he was at the beginning—the Wandering Jew, the subject of a curse he can neither understand nor escape. His voice, the voice of impassioned rebellion against the ruinous impact of the "mysterious" upon his life, is carried into the sequel.
The Death of Ahasuerus manifests almost all of the peculiarities of style and thought which make criticism of Lagerkvist's works demanding. Once again, though, the symbolic patterns in the novel hold the key to its success or failure. On the surface, The Death of Ahasuerus appears to lack unity since there seems to be no obvious relationship between the story of Diana and Tobias, which constitutes the bulk of the novel, and the predicament of the title character, who in The Sibyl has been placed under a "curse" by Christ to wander aimlessly through the centuries with no hope of dying. Furthermore, this novel, even more than The Sibyl or Barabbas, is heavily dependent upon short iconographic episodes which are meant to function on both discursive and symbolic levels. Many of the episodes, moreover, may seem irrelevant to whatever unifying motif the novel might possess, and this problem leads back to symbolism.

The seeming lack of unity in The Death of Ahasuerus is dealt with briefly by Richard M. Ohmann in The Commonweal:

The entire story of this book seems merely a scaffold erected to hold the death-bed of Ahasuerus, and his final thrust at understanding. ¹

Ohmann's view is that the novel fails because it lacks "...a hard-won concreteness that stands for and evokes the abstract feeling or thought," a failure particularly evident with respect to Ahasuerus's death-bed oration upon the death of God and the existence of a "god" beyond this God.

Though one may question the validity of applying T.S. Eliot's critical "hand-hold" (Oehmnn's comment surely owes much to the "objective correlative") to the work of an author who would shun it as foreign to his interests and intentions as an artist, Oehmnn's remarks are useful because they inadvertently point towards a number of problems which any careful reader of the novel must cope with, problems such as a blurring out of distinctions between "inner" and "outer" reality, an almost total lack of concern for psychological insight or character "development" in any traditional sense, and most importantly, the difficulty raised by Lagerkvist's return to the drastic symbolistic and expressionistic technique he had made use of in his early short stories. In these stories (e.g., "Savior John" or "Father and I") he places the burden of "meaning" squarely on the reader's ability to grasp suggestion through symbol and understatement, and the symbolism he employs is largely "private" and therefore difficult to cope with. The more "private" the symbols are, the easier it is for the reader to fail to grasp the totality of thematic impact. But though the same problem exists with *The Death of Ahasuerus*, it is possible to argue that it is a unified novel. In point of fact, the question of unity is itself of primary importance in any attempt to establish what issues Lagerkvist is dealing with and how they are resolved.

The structure of *The Death of Ahasuerus* cannot be approached without first establishing who Ahasuerus is, that he represents, and how his spiritual odyssey relates to the recurring religious and ethical concerns with which Lagerkvist is dealing in the novel. It seems clear that Lagerkvist, with some significant alterations, is working within the
framework provided by the legendary "Wandering Jew" myth. Joseph Gaer, in his *The Legend of the Wandering Jew*, summarizes the basic pattern of the myth as follows:

The legends concerning the Wandering Jew most popular in the Western world are, naturally, Christian versions, and they are in accord with the Christian concept of salvation. These legends revolve about a person who rejected or reviled Jesus in his hour of sorrow, and was doomed to wander over the earth until Judgment Day, or until he gained salvation through repentance. It is understandable that in the legends the man so doomed is presented as a Jew, since, in the days of Jesus, only Jews were either his Disciples and followers, or his repudiators and detractors. And this Jew so doomed must wander as a symbol to the world of the Second Coming—or as a symbol of the repentant sinner, or the unrepentant heretic.

Gaer adds that, though the legend has been passed on from generation to generation in a multitude of versions which deviate from its central pattern, it became on a general level "...refined into a universal symbol which conveyed man's preoccupation with the enigma of death and the search for redemption." This is essentially the same pattern found in *The Death of Ahasuerus*, though Lagerkvist places the issues of "sin," guilt, and "redemption," as I hope to establish, within a humanistic rather than a theistic context.

It is important to recognize that Lagerkvist's Ahasuerus, in *The Sibyl*, is condemned to wander aimlessly for centuries because he recognized no common bond with humanity—Christ to him was just "like any other criminal," and he saw no reason why he should offer kindness to a condemned man. His denial of kindness may be seen as a kind of...

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3 Ibid., p. 78.
"fall"—a "fall" which occurs not through eating forbidden fruit, but through the commission of what would be, from Lagerkvist's point of view, a grievous moral error. His "sin" is not seen as a sin against god but rather as a "sin" against mankind, and his "fall" is essentially a "fall" from a state of ignorance and non-reflection concerning la condition humaine:

Though the "fall" is the catalyst which brings about the awakening of Ahasuerus's moral conscience, Lagerkvist strongly implies that his punishment is incommeasurate with his error. Ahasuerus is then seen as a prerepresentative symbol of man in a "fallen" condition living in a fallen world, burdened with a crippling sense of guilt and injustice, who is unable to find meaning in existence; he is, in other words, the "victim" of his own awakened vision—a vision of bleak existential "reality":

"...doomed to live on in this world...and to possess no other... and to look about...day after day, year after year, for centuries and tens of centuries...and perceive the vanity of all things."

The meaning of the "curse" itself, however, is puzzling and leads us into a typically Lagerkvistian realm of ambiguity. It is possible to regard it as a psychological phenomenon which is purely internal. On this level, Ahasuerus is "cursed" by his own awakened moral consciousness and sense of guilt (an "Ancient Mariner" motif), and he is "cursed" in the sense that he must come to grips with evil, and with his evolving vision of the human condition—an admittedly painful process. Or one can take the "curse" literally, in which case Ahasuerus actually is victimized by a hostile deity who is too harsh in his demands upon mankind. This is how he himself perceives his situation.

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A third way of viewing the "curse" is to regard it, and Ahasuerus himself, as semi-allegorical. Though this view would not exclude the first two (a definite advantage since all three interpretations are illustrations of what different levels are involved in the psychic process of guilt), it is perhaps the strongest since it is overtly supported by numerous passages in *The Sibyl* which suggest that Ahasuerus is deliberately meant to be seen, not as a character or an individual, but as a kind of "representative man." He says of himself, for example, that he is a "quite ordinary" man, "like most others," and that there is nothing extraordinary about him. As a kind of symbol for man in a "fallen" condition, moreover, his search for "redemption" (in this case, death) may be seen as both a psychological quest and as an actual journey, since both are a part of his experience.

Whether or not Ahasuerus is an allegorical figure, in the pure sense of the term, may not be too important. But the curse, if the novel is to make sense, must be viewed symbolically. My own view is that Lagerkvist does not wish us to perceive it as an actual intrusion of a hostile deity into Ahasuerus's life, but rather as an idea or image of reality and finally of god, which once embedded in his consciousness completely disrupts the habitual order of his experience and rather abruptly poisons his vision of the universe. The question of why the curse has this mysterious effect is what links *The Sibyl* with *The Death of Ahasuerus*. Once he believes he is the victim of a "malignant power" which never releases him from its "talons," Ahasuerus becomes completely alienated from the natural world. He is severed from his role of husband and provider, he becomes sexually impotent, and everything which
he had formerly found beautiful in life (olive trees, vineyards, his child, his wife) now seems covered with a "gray ash." In essence, he is therefore severed from "Dionysus"—from the regenerative & procreative life process. I can offer no other explanation for the most crucial symbolic effect of the curse: the disruption of the most elemental mystery of the natural order—the cycle of growth and decay, life and death. Lagerkvist is suggesting, through his characteristic device of pushing particular states of mind and being to their extremes, a state of total physical and spiritual (the two overlap in Lagerkvist's vision: they are inseparable) alienation within Ahasuerus. Are we to believe that Ahasuerus literally cannot die?—is this the level on which we are asked to perceive his situation? I think not. Lagerkvist has "cursed" him in this way, I suggest, because he wishes the reader to respond to the issue of what is, and what is not, "natural," and to begin to question what values are implicit within the "natural life" and the ways in which they may be negated or lost. These questions lead into the sequel.

The central issue in The Death of Ahasuerus is ostensibly, as in The Sibyl, Ahasuerus's struggle to understand the nature of his curse and to overcome it. But on a deeper level, the novel may be said to center upon the problem of death (the title implies this), and its relationship to life, since the book drives towards Ahasuerus's symbolic reunification with the natural cycle when he accepts death as "life's sister." Herein lies the key to the unity of the novel, though Lagerkvist's method of unifying it is not entirely successful, in part because the issue never really surfaces on a psychological or motivational
level, but also because he seems to have lost some of his power to fuse ambivalent attitudes around a central motif (which he does successfully in Barabbas and in The Sibyl) out of which an aesthetic whole can emerge.

Essentially what Lagerkvist attempts to do is to establish, through the persona of Diana (who functions both as a character and as a symbolic embodiment of "naturalism" and the cyclical order of nature), and through sparse iconographic passages of strange lyric intensity which celebrate the richly sensual and mysterious, though transient, beauty of the "natural" life, a subterranean debate between two antithetical attitudes towards death (and life): Diana's and the pilgrims'. The debate extends into the issues of suffering, freedom, and life negation vs. life affirmation, and Lagerkvist's ultimate intention is to establish a link between what Diana represents and Ahasuerus's final realization that his alienation from the natural world is based upon a misunderstanding of Christ and His relationship to man. The greatest structural weakness of the novel results from Lagerkvist's failure to make the "link" more explicit (a failure which stems from his use of too excessively private symbols), though it is complicated by the fact that Tobias's tale seems to be "out of joint" with the central motifs as I see them. As a consequence the novel may easily appear.

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A disregard for the psychological "causes" of human behavior, in any deterministic sense, is of course a salient feature in all of his fiction. He has always shown a strong distaste for Freud and for the attitude towards experience which lies behind a psycho-analytic approach to life (Cf., an essay entitled "Modern Theater: Points of View and Attacks"), and it is not going too far to say that, for all intents and
to be hopelessly disjointed.

It seems obvious that Lagerkvist's Ahasuerus plays a largely passive role prior to his death-bed scene (I use the language of drama because Lagerkvist uses a "dramatic" technique: the novel's impact depends more upon visual imagery and response than upon dialogue or direct statement). He is felt as a gloomy presence who absorbs impressions of the Pilgrims, Tobias, and Diana without reacting to them overtly. Yet, as what Diana represents becomes gradually more clear to the reader, Ahasuerus too begins to respond to the world of nature and of man in a newly vital way, though again there cannot be said to exist a cause and effect relationship between her symbolic function and his emergence from alienation.

The associations which Lagerkvist develops between Diana and the cyclical order of creation are frequently not overt: they are rather touched upon through compact symbolic passages, or through recurring image patterns of lyric intensity which he relates to her passion for the "natural." As is usual in his fiction, he works with understatement—a few compact lines often contain symbolic meaning central to the total thematic structure of the novel. One such passage occurs when Tobias encounters Diana for the first time in the forest and asks if he may drink at her spring. Of particular importance in the following passage or thematic "prose poem" are the allusions to hunting, blood, and purposes, he chooses to make no distinction between the psychological and the moral levels of human action. This of course leaves him wide open to the charge of ignoring the "realities" of cause and effect in human experience as a motivational factor over which man may have only limited control.
...As she didn't answer
I lay down at the brink, but saw that there was blood in
the water because she had been rinsing her dismembered quarry
in it. It made me pause a little...and I noticed then that
her mouth went a little crooked when she smiled..."are you
so frightened of a little blood?" she said, with that mock­
ing smile.

In Lagerkvist's fictional world, a "crooked" or "mocking" or "ironic"
smile is consistently associated with inscrutable wisdom. Its sym­
bollic value is "private" in the sense that Christian symbols such as
the cross or the rose are not, since the latter are supported by a
shared cultural tradition while the former stems from the intensely
personal and subjective world of symbol and myth which Lagerkvist is
working with. In any event, Diana's crooked smile establishes her
role as the "wise one," and as such she functions as a kind of norm
against which the other characters and issues are measured. Just like
the mythical Diana, in her unspoiled condition she is a huntress close
to the earth, close to the life and death cycle of the natural world
(the mixture of blood and water in her spring surely is an echo of
the "river" in The Sibyl), and close to the mysteriously dual life
process which is dependent upon both fertility and death in order to
endure and reproduce. Symbolically, then, it may be fair to suggest
that Lagerkvist intends for her to be seen as an allegorical represent­

6Mr Lagerkvist, The Death of Ahasuerus, trans. Naomi Walford (New
York: Random House, 1962), p. 22. All subsequent quotations from the
novel will be cited from this edition.

7Cf., the short story entitled "The Eternal Smile," in which the
inscrutable "wisdom" of "god" (the mystery principle) is symbolized by
"his" ironic smile, or, of course, the smile of the Sibyl's "idiot" son.
ation of Nature, something akin perhaps to the Hindu mythological view of her as the *primum mobile* of the natural world:

She is the *primum mobile*, the first beginning, the material matrix out of which all comes forth. To question beyond her into her antecedents and origin, is not to understand her... The meaning is: *I am the Mother without a spouse, the Original Mother; all are my children.*

If one can accept that Diana is a symbolic embodiment of the natural order of creation, then it is possible to *see how Lagerkvist develops her as a kind of contrapuntal voice to the world of the pilgrims, which is for her an incomprehensible world of transcendental (supranatural) suffering and joy, eternal life as opposed to cyclical life, vision as opposed to physical reality—everything, in fact, which from a "natural" point of view represents an intrusion into the natural order. The pilgrims' world is, in other words, a structured theistic world, as is Ahasuerus's, though their separate attitudes towards this structure are radically different. Diana's world, by way of contrast, is finally not structured according to any theological or even intellectual conception of experience; it is a world of instinct, an emotionally-based world of ebb and flow and constant flux. It is a world which gradually begins to draw Ahasuerus out of his self-lacerating vision of himself as the victim of an "unnatural" curse.

The qualities and attitudes towards experience which Lagerkvist associates with Diana deepen her image as a representative of "natural-

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ism" and establish the groundwork for the contrasts he wishes to make between her and the pilgrims. Tobias says that "she was like a virgin, whom no one could utterly possess," and that "no one can gain any real power over her" (p. 26). As a character, she resists any sort of complete submission to anything outside herself—there is within her something which is inviolable and indomitable. All of Lagerkvist's "heroes" in his later fiction, Barabbas, Ahasuerus, Tobias and Giovanni, share this quality with Diana, a quality which, though indefinable, may be roughly termed "life sap" in a Laurentian sense, a flowing of natural strength against the forces of restraint which might consume it. It lies at the core of Lagerkvist's vision that anything of value, be it ethical or spiritual or aesthetic, results from an intense struggle between the self (which draws this strength from the "most secret abyss of nature") and the forces which negate the "natural."

What Diana represents is thus linked with Ahasuerus's unceasing struggle against the curse, since it is grounded in a rebellion against the image of a god who is hostile to human interests.

Why then does Lagerkvist portray Diana as a whore in the middle section of the novel? I think he is suggesting something about the relationship between man and the natural order once again. Tobias's rape of Diana may be seen, on a symbolic level, as mankind's rape of what was once inherently good and undefiled. Lagerkvist earlier dealt with the same issue in a short story entitled "Paradise," in which he like Milton, argues that mankind "fell" through disrupting the harmon-

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Cf. Oberholzer, p. 131.
ious order of creation, though in this story God was to blame because he had ordered man to eat of the tree of knowledge. In any event, even as a "whore" Diana represents something which can be superficially corrupted, but which will resist total submission to the end. Hence, though she has slept with scores of men, she has really surrendered to none of them, and the world of robbers, pilgrims and murderers never ceases to appear "strange" and "alien" to her (p. 30).

In the middle section of the novel, Diana assumes a dual role. She is both a spokesman for Lagerkvist's recurrent aversion towards the transcendental aspects of the Christian vision and an example of the ethical qualities (compassion and involvement in human suffering in the here and now---ironically, these are clearly Christian qualities) which Ahasuerus lacked in *The Sibyl*. The latter role is the more important to the novel's resolution since Ahasuerus's release from the curse is finally attained through his parallel identification with the misery of mankind.

Diana regards the group of pilgrims, who represent the kind of closed and self-contained religious community which Lagerkvist is both drawn to and repelled by, as people who "attract the scum of the earth" and who are themselves "the worst scum of all" (p. 52). Why?---as usual Lagerkvist offers no motivational clues. Yet Diana's bitter denunciation of the pilgrims does seem consistent with her role as the voice of "naturalism." The pilgrims are pursuing something which, from her point of view, does not belong to the natural world: their lives are in fact focused upon a desire to escape from the natural world, to transcend death, to leave this earth, the world of suffering and misery,
and enter into a "celestial city" (p. 64).10

But the actual focus of Diana's attack, and Lagerkvist's, is ethical. The pilgrim community, as he portrays it, fails to act in accordance with Christ's example. Instead of actively confronting the reality of human suffering in the here and now (which Christ both practiced and taught), the pilgrims seem only to be concerned with the possibility of avoiding the evils of the natural world. Lagerkvist is suggesting what he always suggests about Christianity: as a religion it is its own greatest enemy. In The Death of Ahasuerus, moreover, he implies that it is the hope of salvation itself which leads to all the excesses of pietism and "other-worldliness," to the negation of life in this world, and finally to a negation of what Christ himself represented. Certainly it is true that the pilgrims are as far removed from active love and concern for their fellow men as Ahasuerus has been in The Sibyl.11

If the pilgrims' greatest weakness is their failure to combat evil (which stems from their desire to escape from it), Diana illustrates an opposite extreme. Her most important quality, and this is what links her
with the resolution of the novel's themes and with Ahasuerus, is her hostility towards anything which might attract her attention away from the everyday realities of life, sordid and miserable though they may be. Her attention is always drawn to the world of man, to human suffering and misery, to human degradation and potential, as opposed to the pilgrims who, as Ahasuerus says, follow a big "unpainted wooden cross...as if the whole world belonged to it," as if "He Christ alone was held to be of any account and the rest were as nothing" (pp. 68-69). Though Diana is herself hardly an imitator of Christ, she does exemplify the "reverence for life" which, in Lagerkvist's humanistic perspective, must be the basis for any positive ethical action. Her attitude towards experience is, then, a kind of antithesis to the pilgrims', since they kneel to Christ, not because he represents a way of life, but because His sacrifice makes possible a way out of life.

Diana's role as spokesman for "natural" compassion, however, cannot be measured in terms of how she acts. She is primarily a "voice" and not a character (though she fluctuates between these two roles), so that whatever values she represents must be ascertained through contrasting what she "likes" with what she does not "like." As the voice of naturalism, she dislikes anything which seems to pervert the natural order; hence she finds Ahasuerus "queer" and asks him point blank why he doesn't die because he looks as if he "died long ago." She finds the girl who sleeps with men in order to gain money for her pilgrimage "peculiar" because she holds her body to be of no account, though she likes this portrayed because they transcend the worst evils of institutional religion.
strange girl and feels she is better than the other pilgrims, who she thinks are scum because they are pretentious and even dishonest with themselves about their own natures and motives. The one person in the novel whom she really likes is Elizabeth, the innkeeper. Diana says she is "the only one who's really what people ought to be" (p. 53). Elizabeth has seen pilgrims, rogues, robbers, and saints (in fact, a representative cross-section of humanity) come and go year after year, "treating everyone the same" (p. 53). Diana says of her that she knows "much more than the Almighty...let him say what he likes...And judge as much as he likes" (p. 55). Diana's comment foreshadows the insight which Ahasuerus attains in the final episode: "God" is more alien from the world of man and nature than a simple innkeeper who makes no distinctions between saint and sinner. Why? Because the innkeeper loves this earth and the people who live on it, while God, as Diana and Ahasuerus conceive him, cares nothing for the suffering or misery of men.

The short symbolic episode in which Diana dies is meant, I think, to sum up much of what has been (through Diana) implied about nature, its implicit values, and the relationship between life and death, as well as to "set the stage" for Ahasuerus's death-bed scene. If it fails totally to do this, it is partly because the mysterious arrow which takes Diana's life stretches any reader's willingness to suspend his disbelief, and partly because the miraculous transformation of Diana into her former state of "purity," through death, seems to be both unaccountable and irrelevant. Yet it is possible to argue that the passage is lyrically successful, and is suggestively relevant to the novel's resolution.

The arrow itself may be seen as symbolic of death, since it strikes
suddenly, is unexpected, and literally comes out of "nowhere." When it strikes Diana, she shrinks to the ground with a "painful little smile," which echoes the smile she possessed when Tobias first met her in the forest. On a symbolic level, Lagerkvist is sounding the note on which the novel will end: death "belongs" to nature, to the natural cyclical order of growth and decay (Diana looks at Tobias in reproach when he draws the arrow out), and life finally owes its mysterious beauty to it. The absence of death (which is what the pilgrims yearn for) is foreign to the natural order; it leads to a negation of natural life, of beauty, of all creation, of the importance of human suffering and joy. This interpretation is further buttressed by Ahasuerus's later suggestion that the arrow was "meant" for Diana. He tells Tobias, who is hopelessly perplexed by the mysterious circumstances of her death, that "the arrow might have been intended for her" (p. 95), though he adds that he cannot "find any real explanation" for it. There is a vague suggestion in his words, however, which I think is significant. Ahasuerus says that the

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The short story, "The Myth of Mankind," which Lagerkvist read at the Nobel Festival in Stockholm on December 10, 1951, is perhaps his clearest statement of belief with regard to this issue. In the story Lagerkvist remolds the biblical account of Adam and Eve to suit his purpose of affirming the "natural" as opposed to the "unnatural." His Adam and Eve come to this world to stay for a short time, even though it (the world) seemed to them more "insignificant and poorer" than their "other" world. Yet they remained on earth because they were strangely drawn to its cyclical beauty—"everything here was changeable," winter "died" and gave birth to spring, spring to summer, etc. But because they came from another world, and because they would return to it when they died, their children found them "strange." The climax of the story occurs after both have died: "Now the old ones were dead. The young ones felt such a strange relief, liberation, as if something had been severed. It was as if life had been freed from something which did not belong to it... Now human life was beginning."
arrow was "intended" for Diana (nature)—the question implicit in his view is "intended by whom?" Once again, it is probable that Lagerkvist is suggesting, as he had done in The Sibyl, that death is only part of a larger mystery which theology cannot grasp, a mystery which he chooses to call "god" (with no capital letter) and which is finally the underpinning of all human existence.

Diana's transformation may seem more difficult to accept:

...he [Tobias] bent over the woman who had saved his life, given her life for his. When in the utmost agitation he told her this, she just smiled at him: a pale smile. For she had turned very white, and this made her beautiful—as beautiful as she had once been, so long ago. Everything about her was pure and lovely again; she was unravaged, undeformed by anything that did not belong to her—could not really belong to her. There was nothing left of it.

(p. 89)

There are two issues buried in this passage. Lagerkvist wishes us to view Diana's transformation as miraculous, yet not incredulously miraculous, since it occurs through something which, potentially at least, belongs to all mankind: the miracle of natural love and compassion. Her unravaged and undeformed appearance cannot be taken as a purely physical phenomenon. Diana is inwardly transformed, in the same way that the hairlip was in Barabbas, and her transformation points once more to the recurring Lagerkvistian belief that it is love and only love which can make life (and death) meaningful, or even beautiful. Secondly, he suggests that it is death itself which justifies life (Ahasuerus comes to realize this) since it cleanses life of everything which does not belong to the unspoiled cyclical order of creation. This suggestion may seem mysterious and possibly naive, yet it is deeply
rooted in Lagerkvist's "pagan" world view, in which culture, beauty, and value of any kind ultimately spring from nature's mysterious regenerative powers which in turn rest upon a constant flux between life and death. Without the "purification" of life through death, the "soil" out of which all life sprouts would become impoverished and sterile. In short, Diana's death is meant to be seen as an affirmation of life (of the "Dionysian" life process), and it foreshadows Ahasuerus's parallel affirmation in the final passages of the novel.

Ahasuerus's symbolic reentry into the natural cycle (his overcoming of alienation) seems inexplicable and unprepared for. Yet if it is possible to accept my contention that Lagerkvist, through Diana, the innkeeper, and the lyric passages celebrating "natural" compassion and identification with human suffering, has been driving towards a statement that alienation results from an inability or unwillingness to love above everything man and the world he is born to live in, then Ahasuerus's release from the curse, though motivationally unaccounted for, may be aesthetically acceptable as it culminates the debate Lagerkvist has established between the "natural" and the "unnatural."

If we bear in mind that Ahasuerus, in The Sibyl, came under the curse because he recognized no common bond with humanity, then it may be argued that his alienation in many ways parallels that of the pilgrims, since both he and them regard their particular destinies, and their relationship to a theistic deity, as more important than their place within the human community, and since both lack concern for the

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13 Oberholzer, p. 131.
suffering and misery which surrounds them. If this argument be granted, then it seems clear that Ahasuerus's release from the curse results from a fundamental shift in his attitude towards man and the natural world, a shift which may or may not be directly related to his exposure to the "world view" of Diana, but which nevertheless is directly parallel to everything she symbolically represents.

Ahasuerus's changing attitude towards the human situation (as he comes to view this situation) is already apparent prior to the death-bed scene. When, for example, he watches the pilgrims embark upon their journey to the Holy Land, squeezing their crucifixes until their hands hurt, he is already moving towards and involved in a recognition of human suffering on a broad scale:

It was indeed strange. So many had been crucified on that Golgotha, that little hill to which all now made pilgrimage... many others had been tortured... Then there were all the other crosses before and after His, and all who suffered on them... they had been forgotten long ago; indeed no one had ever cared about them, or had any idea of why they suffered, whether they were guilty or innocent... Only He was remembered... They say His suffering and death are the greatest events ever to have come to pass in the world, and the most significant. Perhaps; that may be so. But how many there are who must suffer without their suffering having any significance at all! (pp. 68-69)

This is hardly the same man who had watched numerous condemned criminals dragging their crosses towards Golgotha thinking there was "nothing extraordinary" about it. Moreover, his newly awakened compassion is reflected in the fact that he feels responsible for Tobias after he (Ahasuerus) has partly been to blame for the yellow dog's death (in a scene wherein he admits that he had never felt responsible for anyone before), and by the fact that he "understands" Diana's death through perceiving the
deep significance of her willing sacrifice for Tobias.

Despite these facts, however, he is still under the curse at the
beginning of the final section, because there remains one man for whom
he feels only hatred—Christ. Ahasuerus's tormented vision is still
conditioned by his belief that Christ is the alien and hostile God who
has wrenched him from his home and family, and it is not until he achieves
a radically different insight into the relationship between Christ and
him that he is able to overcome the curse.

The concluding section of the novel, which Guénon argues is irrele-
vant to the whole, is actually a part of the sensitive focus of what has
gone before. Ahasuerus's final insight, which reunites him with the nat-
ural world, is achieved through his gradual recognition that "God," (or
the theistic image which he believes to be "God"), and not Christ, is "re-
sponsible" for his curse. This explanation may seem mere word play, yet
behind it lies a fundamental shift in Ahasuerus's vision of his condition
and of the condition of mankind—Ahasuerus is united with the natural or-
der through accepting it, and not "God", as the final source of reference
in human experience. In effect, he casts away theism and accepts humanism
as the ultimate source of value in life. His recognition of this is seen
as the result of his growing understanding of and sympathy for the plight
of humanity as he conceives it:

All mankind is crucified, like you; man himself is crucified;
you're just the one they look up to when they think of their
fate and their suffering...I understand this; I discovered it
at last: man lies forsaken on his bed of torment...sacrificed
and forsaken, stretched out upon a little straw, marked by the
same wounds as yourself.

(p. 111)

When does Ahasuerus hold responsible for the crucifixion of mankind and
of Christ himself? "God," the "God" who allowed Christ to hang forsaken on the cross. As Ahasuerus perceives "Him," this is the "God" of "power and vengeance," the "God" who is inimical to man's deepest natural instincts and needs, the "God" who finally "divides us from the divine."

How are we to regard this "God" whom Ahasuerus "vanquishes" through understanding "Him?" Is "He" a real "God"—does Lagerkvist ask us to believe that this alien "God" exists? The answer is yes and no. Throughout the novel Lagerkvist has been developing an image of an alien and hostile God which is finally just that—an image. Yet the image itself does exist, not only within the consciousness of Ahasuerus but also within the consciousness of Lagerkvist. As a self-proclaimed atheist and humanist, Lagerkvist has consistently been repelled by the idea of a "God" who would sacrifice "His" son and suffer him to torment, who would condemn a sinner to eternal torment (Ahasuerus is surely speaking for him when he says that "only the malignancy of a god" could be great enough for that), or who would be in some way responsible for the "evils" (from a humanistic point of view) which Christian theology attributes to him. This image of "God" is repugnant to Lagerkvist, I suggest, possibly because "He" lacks precisely those qualities which Christ possessed—boundless compassion and love for mankind. Of course Lagerkvist's (and Ahasuerus's) attitude towards this "God" is colored with irony, since it obviously rests upon an inability to accept the Christian interpretation

\[11\] Cf. "Guest of Reality" in The Eternal Smile.
interpretation of Golgotha and its significance for mankind, but his "misunderstanding" is surely the point. For if one does not accept the divinity of Christ, then the Christian vision of experience will necessarily (I think) appear to be burdened with the grim irony of a "God" who sometimes condemns the fallible creatures "He" chose to create. Though this may indeed by the way things are and have to be from a Christian point of view, it is a structured vision of the universe which neither Lagerkvist nor Ahasuerus can finally accept.

When Ahasuerus, therefore, says that he has "vanquished" god by his own strength through understanding who "He" is, we cannot take him literally as Ohmann does. Ahasuerus has vanquished his own belief in an image of a theistic "God," through understanding that a "God" who would allow his son to die on a cross is finally, from his point of view, no God. It is this image which "divides us from the divine" through imposing a structured theistic vision upon the mystery which lies "beyond all that falsifies and coarsens the world of holiness, beyond all lies and distortion, all twisted divinities and all the abortions of human imagination" (p. 114).

Where does all this leave Christ? Perhaps the most important irony in the novel resides in the fact that Ahasuerus does not "understand" Christ until he becomes, in his own way, an imitator of Him. It is only after Ahasuerus has experienced love and compassion for mankind that he reaches the insight that Christ was his "own brother" who had himself been "handed over, sacrificed, and forsaken" (p. 112). Yet it is important to note that Ahasuerus disassociates Christ from "God" the Father: he calls Christ his brother because he now sees Him as a man.
who belongs to the natural, not to an alien transcendental, world. This of course is how Lagerkvist perceives Christ too, and it is this vision of Christ which finally lies at the core of his faith in a source of compassion and love within the order of nature itself:

Das Gebot der Liebe...ist nicht von Christus gegeben, sondern entstammt den Tiefen des menschlichen Wesens selber...Mein Inneres had dich nie auf irgendeine mystische Weise erlebt, und es wird dich auch nie so erleben. Aber die Menschenliebe, der du ein Deuter warst, spätre ich als Grundton meines Wesens. Es kann so sein für einen Nichtgläubigen wie für einen Glaubigen. Es hängt dies nicht vom Christentum ab...15

Ahasuerus, then, through his acceptance of Christ as his brother (and in fact of all men as his brothers), has finally tapped the sources of natural love which Lagerkvist implies lie dormant within "everyman." This is ultimately what lifts the curse, a "release" which has its closest parallel in literature, I think, in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner": the Albatross falls off the Mariner's neck only after a "spring of love" for creation has "gushed" from his heart.

In the final analysis, Christ and Diana belong to the same world—the natural world, and each in their own way epitomize the values, and a way of relating to life, which are available to all men. The only way to understand Christ, however, is to imitate Him. Barabbas could not do so, and died without understanding what was meant by "love one

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15 The Commandment of love...is not given to us by Christ, but stems from the depths of human nature itself...I have never in any way experienced you [Christ] in my soul as a mystical sage, and I will never experience you in this way. But the love of man, of which you were a teacher, I feel as the 'keynote' of my being. It can be so for a non-believer as for a believer. It does not depend upon Christianity. (The German translation is from Oberholzer, p. 131. The translation into English is my own.)
another" and without ever being able to overcome his alienation from the natural world. Ahasuerus, in his own way, does imitate Christ, and his victory over alienation fructifies in symbol when he welcomes death as "life's sister":

...I lie here and feel death approaching: kind merciful death, which I have yearned for so long—which was not vouchsafed to me. Now I feel it coming to me in its great mercy; life's sister, who would have nothing to do with me, is coming. (p. 113)

The lines clearly echo Diana's death scene, though with Ahasuerus they lead on to a further twist. Death for him is a kind of door, a door which may lead to a "spring." The "spring" is surely the mystery which is superior to theistic vision:

"Yes, god is what divides us from the divine. Hinders us from drinking at the spring itself. To god I do not kneel—no, and I never will. But I would gladly lie down at the spring to drink from it—to quench my thirst, my burning thirst for what I cannot conceive of, but which I now exists...I don't know what it hides in its dark depths. If I did I might well be terrified. But I desire to drink from it." (p. 115)

Yet paradoxically, it is Ahasuerus's belief in a "god" who is a total mystery, who is part of the natural cycle yet remote from it, which seems finally to account for his lyric acceptance of the mystery of life (and death) itself. The sparse simplicity of his final lines in the novel almost belie the fact that they contain a kind of hymn to the world of nature, a hymn which finally is in praise of being:

"What's this light—this glorious light I can see?"...for the sun had broken through the clouds and was now shining straight into the room...[the lay brother] explained that the clouds had dispersed and that the sun was shining straight in upon him...the
dying man appeared content with this simple explanation of something that had filled him with great wonder. He shut his eyes, but still felt the light upon them: that it was there, that it was. And with this light—the light so familiar to earth—upon him, he left the world...But his peace was great. That one could see.

(p. 118)

Though Ahasuerus and Diana find peace in death, the third major character in the novel, Tobias, remains immersed in a conflict which Lagerkvist makes no attempt to resolve. Tobias's function is to act as a contrapuntal mirror to Ahasuerus in some ways, and to illustrate still another dimension of the "search for god" or a search for an "understanding" of "him." In some ways, his situation closely parallels Ahasuerus's, since from the beginning of the novel their lives, their thoughts, and their desires and fears are focused upon a similar experience—their encounter with Christ and its effect upon them. But Tobias, unlike Ahasuerus, is not lifted out of his morass of mental and moral stagnation by a "curse" or by a direct encounter with the "Crucified One." On the contrary, though he awakens under the impact of witnessing the stigmata on the emaciated face of an old woman, he seems self-awakened in the final analysis. Inexplicably he becomes aware of the horror of a universe which to him seems morally bankrupt, nonsensical, and meaningless, yet, unlike Camus' "absurd man", he feels that something meaningful and absolute may lie behind the "absurdity" he discovers. Hence the awakening places him in a quandary which is familiar to most twentieth-century readers—he becomes caught in the paradox of adhering to a vision of of the universe as "absurd" while retaining a passionate thirst for something which would contradict the vision.
There are two things about Tobias’s awakening which stand out. The first is that it leads him to become a "pilgrim" in the Lagerkvistian sense of the word—he becomes, in short, a man who is "chosen" or feels himself "chosen" to seek answers (which are symbolized in the concept of the "Holy Land") to the eternal questions (e.g., what is death, truth, god?) in human experience. Yet, though Tobias feels he is "chosen" by Christ, he paradoxically cannot accept the Christian vision of Him; in fact, he passionately tells Ahasuerus that he does not want Christ or anyone else to have "power" over him (p. 45) and he feels repugnance towards his projected pilgrimage (p. 33). Yet this paradox lies beneath his entire attitude towards experience. Tobias may not believe in the traditional theistic vision of Christ, but he nevertheless believes in what Christ represents—an ethical and spiritual image of perfection which is strangely compelling, Lagerkvist implies, to any man seeking meaning in meaninglessness. Tobias is, then, "chosen" (just as Ahasuerus is) by his own awakened conscience, and Christ is the image of what he is seeking.

The second thing of importance about Tobias’s pilgrimage is that finally he has no place to anchor his thirst for meaning. When Ahasuerus asks him why he does not join the other pilgrims, Tobias replies: "why should I? I’m no pilgrim, and never will be" (p. 71). He goes on to explain why he is no pilgrim:

Perhaps I did have some idea of being a pilgrim. But I’ve put that right out of my mind; I’m not giving it another thought. It’s not for me. For I don’t believe in anything, and I hold nothing sacred, so far as I know. So how could I ever be a pilgrim? How could I journey to places that they call holy, when they’re not so to me? To be a pilgrim one must have some-
thing to make a pilgrimage to. And I haven’t.

Ironically, Tobias is meant to be seen as perhaps the only "true" pilgrim in the novel. Despite his self-disparagement, he remains in the grip of his obsession to make a pilgrimage, and this finally leads him to board a dubious ship which may or may not (Lagerkvist is deliberately ambiguous on this point) take him to the "Holy Land." He becomes a "pilgrim at sea," a term which functions both literally and symbolically. He is symbolically at "sea" in the sense that he is lost, directionless, confused—-a "pilgrim" who has nothing to make a pilgrimage to, nothing to hang on to, nothing to contradict his existential vision of absurdity. Yet he is nevertheless a pilgrim in search of a "Holy Land," and as such he will find, in the sequel, a "meaning" in the search itself. Pilgrim at Sea, in point of fact, is a novel which attempts to define what is meant by its title, and to this question we now turn.
CHAPTER II

The Death of Ahasuerus
CHAPTER III

Pilgrim at Sea
Pilgrim at Sea is built upon many of the same unusual technical devices which, depending upon one's point of view, either mar or enhance the impact of The Death of Ahasuerus. Certainly a strong case can be made against this final novel in the trilogy. If the reader is annoyed by Ahasuerus's seemingly unprepared-for oracular comments which dominate his death scene, he may be equally befuddled by the choppy structure of Pilgrim at Sea, wherein the ostensible protagonist Tobias, like Ahasuerus, plays the role of a passive observer throughout the novel, then suddenly assumes a position in the limelight (after having deduced a "bitter message" from Giovanni's tale) to conclude the novel with a series of too obtrusively omniscient remarks upon la condition humaine. Going further, Pilgrim at Sea may easily appear to be not a novel at all, but rather a loosely glued-together pair of novelettes, since there is seemingly only the barest of connections between Giovanni's tale and the iconographic episodes on the sea which constitute the first half of the story. One could add to these charges the observations that Tobias himself is a hopeless bore, that the revelations Giovanni experiences in his great "awakening" (particularly the inexplicable transformation of his mother from a saintly paragon of mother-love into a poor man's Lady Macbeth) are unconvincing and unearned, that the novel lacks flow and jerks from episode to episode, and that the symbolism on which the novel so heavily depends does not work. All of these charges are to some extent justified, yet I believe Pilgrim at Sea is still an interesting novel and is in many ways a more than adequate summation of the trilogy.

The issues in Pilgrim at Sea appear to be obvious. Tobias, in the grip of an obsession to make a pilgrimage to the "Holy Land", has missed
(in *The Death of Ahasuerus*) the "true" pilgrim ship and instead finds himself aboard a dubious ship with an even more dubious crew of pirates. On the ship he meets Giovanni, who tells him that a quest for the Holy Land is foolish, that it would be far wiser to surrender himself to the "sea". On the surface, the "sea" is merely a symbol of the moral indifference which Giovanni believes pervades the universe, and on this level his advice to Tobias is, in effect, to cease looking for any ultimate meaning or purpose in life since life finally has none. Tobias feels strangely relieved by this advice, and after Giovanni explains why he has chosen to live on the "sea", he (Tobias) reappears to affirm that "we are only pilgrims at sea" who cannot reach the "Holy Land" though it finally does exist (just as Ahasuerus affirms that the "holies of holies" must exist) even if we can only know it as a dream. This interpretation is adequately summed up by Robert Spector in his brief analysis of the novel which appears in The American-Scandinavian Review:

> We are only "pilgrims at sea," on our way to we-know-not-where. For us, then, it is important to "be content with uncertainty, content and happy with it; to choose it." It is time to put away the pretensions of religion, to stop demanding the impossible of our natures, "to dare to be what one is, without self-reproach." Lagerkvist has now made clear his existentialist position, his place in modern literature alongside such European writers as Camus and Sartre, his logical development and turning away from a Kierkegaardian Christian existentialism to a more agnostic type.¹

Mr. Spector's analysis is, however, based upon an error which critics of Lagerkvist's fiction may easily make. He apparently assumes that the novel's major character, Giovanni, is only a spokesman for his creator's

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transitional statement on mankind's "search for God," put this.
hypocrisy, mutability, and ingrained evil?" Going further, Giovanni's comments about the sea call into question all moral and religious values, since they (and his own experience as well) imply that mankind's attempts to create or to sustain lasting values must ultimately fail, since the "sea" (symbolic on one level of life in its ungraspable totality, as in the cliché the 'sea of life', though I will establish its more specific extensions of meaning in the course of this analysis) is a "reality" which transcends all human powers of interpretation and comprehension. Giovanni's attitude towards experience postulates a universe which is essentially amoral, and a vision of man as at best amoral, though his actions betray an ironic resistance to his own vision. I say ironic because Giovanni, in obvious contrast to such existential "heroes" as Dr. Rieux in Camus' *The Plague* or Orestes in Sartre's *The Flies*, argues for capitulation to the overwhelming forces of circumstance which, taken together, constitute his vision of "reality".  

But Giovanni's response to the "sea" is not the novel's only one. He is "in the middle" between two responses which Lagerkvist clearly asks us to see as extreme and each in its own way as dangerously irresponsible. The pirates graphically portray the ultimate result of Giovanni's

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2 I will use quotation marks around "sea" since I wish the reader to bear constantly in mind that the sea functions as a complex symbol rather than as a mere physical reality.

3 This is only one of the major distinctions between Giovanni's position and that of a characteristic (if there can be said to be such a thing) "existential hero". Spector is somewhat misleading when he suggests that Lagerkvist has "taken his place" alongside Sartre and Camus through arguing that man should be "content" with himself and with uncertainty. The French humanistic existentialists would probably quarrel with the statement and so too would Lagerkvist, since the existentialist position (as I evaluate it) arises from discontent with the "absurdity" of a thirst for value in a valueless universe.
line of reasoning -- they practice what he preaches (though of course not in a direct sense) and certainly their actions reveal its fatal weaknesses. The pirates are immersed in the "sea", in a "sea" of moral irresponsibility and nihilistic destructiveness. The pilgrims, by way of contrast, seek refuge from the "sea", and Giovanni's attitude towards them is almost surely Lagerkvist's: they are ethically irresponsible ironically in much the same way as the pirates, since both are finally morally indifferent towards the "sea". The pirates' indifference towards the "sea" is revealed in their disregard for the moral implications of their actions; like the "sea" they are cruel, hard, ruthless and incognizant of values. The pilgrims, at least as Giovanni perceives them, are also (though not equally) irresponsible, because they fail, as Lagerkvist's "true pilgrims" always do, to commit themselves to a demanding spiritual struggle with the "sea". Like Milton, Lagerkvist cannot praise a "fugitive and cloistered virtue".

What then is the "sea"? Since everything we learn about it comes through Giovanni, the place to begin is with his own experience. The second half of the novel establishes that Giovanni has become spokesman for the "sea" as the result of intense disillusionment: every value which he had more or less believed in was shattered through what he terms an "awakening". His belief in god crumbled under the pressure of a self-awakening (he discovers that he had "never really loved" god, though he had become a priest in good faith) and an awakening to the hypocrisy and apparent rottenness of the "religious" world around him. His belief in the value of love is also shattered through his recognition that his affair with a wealthy widow is saturated in "error, deception, and conscious and unconscious falsehood," a discovery which fills him with
"loathing," "fury" and "contempt." His mother he discovers is not the pious loving woman he had supposed she was, but rather a castrating malignancy who comforts him, after her discovery of his affair, with pictorial descriptions of the torments he will undoubtedly suffer in hell. Under the pressure of these "awakenings," Giovanni we learn has evolved a vision of experience which, in the first half of the novel, lies behind his talk about the "sea." Hence he is somewhat bitter and cynical, though this is tempered because, intellectually at least, he has found a partial answer to his painful experience in the "sea."

Giovanni's vision of the "sea" and what it implies is immersed in complexity. He speaks of it as "holy" and he says one ought to regard it with "humility" and "veneration." The "sea" he says "knows more than anything on earth if you can get it to teach you," and on this level Giovanni is clearly talking about the "sea" as a symbol of life (perhaps "nature") itself. The language he uses is religious and it obviously suggests the more archetypal connotations of "sea": mystery, the womb, darkness (death itself), and the constant ebb and flow of the natural life cycle. Giovanni finds the "sea" holy on this level, and so also do Lagerkvist, Schweitzer, Lawrence, and countless other writers of our time and of past times, since finally he is affirming a basic "reverence for life" in its wholeness and mysterious totality. But even on this level the "sea," precisely because it includes all things, precisely because it manifests, like "Dionysus" in The Sibyl, an indiscriminate mixture of the forces of life and death, growth and decay, good and

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evil, fertility and destruction, is inherently meaningless. Value (or meaning) is and must be, at least on the level of moral action, the result of distinction and choice. If one does not distinguish qualitatively between areas or aspects of experience, but instead calls the symbolic mixture of them all "holy," one is essentially affirming the negation of "values" if by "values" one means the traditional distinctions between good and evil which lie at the roots of Western Culture. Giovanni is not unaware of this, as his persuasive dialogue with Tobias reveals. I will return to this later.

Broadly speaking, Giovanni equates the "sea" with "reality" as he perceives it. This is why he calls it "cruel and hard and ruthless," for on this level the treacherousness of the "sea" is merely a reflection of the cruel treacherousness of reality as Giovanni has known it. The "sea" is life and life is "cruel and hard and ruthless" — this is the core of Giovanni's vision. It is the "sea" which is the reality Giovanni discovered beneath the misleading pretensions of his church, his mistress, his mother, and finally of himself. It is not only, then, an external reality but also an internal one — a "heart of darkness" endemic not only to the non-sensient physical world but to human nature as well. As the novel progresses, it becomes ever more clear that Giovanni regards the "sea" as the only reality, as that which underlies all of man's pretensions, illusions, values, and dreams, though he continues to act as if this were not the case.

On an ethical level, Giovanni finds the "sea" to be a source of peace, despite its cruelty, or rather because of it. Life is overwhelming and cruel, he argues, so what in effect does man have to gain through his vain attempts to find a meaning or purpose in the "sea?"
The "sea" will always win -- this thought lies beneath Giovanni's conscious response to experience, and it pervades all of his dialogue with Tobias. Hence he contrasts the seemingly irresistible power and might of the "sea" with man's efforts to construct values upon it:

How can one grasp anything of life—understand and penetrate men and their lives—until one has learnt from the sea? How can one see through their empty strivings and odd ambitions until one has looked out over the sea... until one has learnt to think like the sea and not like these restless creatures who fancy that they're going somewhere, and that this going is the most important thing of all—that the goal is the meaning and purpose of life.

(p. 14)

Though Giovanni is probably alluding specifically to the pilgrims, his vision includes all men. But what, then, does it mean to "think like the sea?" Essentially, to think like the sea is the equivalent of surrendering to the meaningless morass of "reality" in its totality, of surrendering one's human potential for demanding, as Camus puts it, a meaning from meaninglessenes. No one familiar with Lagerkvist's life and work should, then, assume that Giovanni's persuasive comments about the "sea" represent only the author's point of view; they do and they do not. That the "sea" as Giovanni sees it is also a part of Lagerkvist's vision of "reality" is undeniable, yet it is going too far to say that Lagerkvist is unaware of Giovanni's limitations. Giovanni's explanation of what it means to think like the "sea" includes far more than a justifiable attack upon those who negate life in favor of a goal; it carries with it an implicit rejection of all value distinctions and, in point of fact, of everything which can potentially separate man from the "sea:"

Until one has learnt to be carried along by the sea, to surrender to it utterly, and cease fretting about right and wrong, sin and guilt, truth and falsehood, good and evil—about devil and god and their stupid disputes. Until one has become as indifferent
and free as the sea and will let oneself be carried, aimless, out into the unknown—surrender utterly to the unknown—to uncertainty as the only certainty, the only really dependable thing when all's said and done.

To surrender to the "sea" in this fashion involves an escape from the demands of moral choice — it is a surrender to the meaningless and overpowering totality of experience. Giovanni says, in effect, that since the universe appears to be both good and evil, though predominantly "cruel and ruthless and hard," why should not man be the same? His comment lays the existential cards on the table, and Lagerkvist's imagistic portraits of the pirates, merchants, pilgrims and Tobias all manifest possible ways of playing a hand.

Giovanni is obviously vexed by Tobias. Tobias does not strike him as a "real" pilgrim, and though he is trying to reach that "distant, longed-for land" he finally does not know why he is making the pilgrimage. The land is the "Holy Land," which for Tobias seems never to be located in space or time, though we may presume that the "true pilgrims" know where they are going — to Jerusalem. Tobias' "Holy Land," however, is actually undefined -- it represents a vague and almost nebulous absolute which, if found or reached or believed in, would lend significance to man's voyage on the "sea." The "true pilgrims" do of course possess a vision of significance in human life, and for them the "Holy Land" is not only a physical reality but a spiritual one as well since it is a land or "harbour" of revealed truth, of the affirmed answers to Dostoyevsky's "eternal questions." Though Tobias apparently cannot believe in the Christian vision, Giovanni sees that he is nevertheless a pilgrim — i.e., a man who cannot accept the meaninglessness of the "sea"
(in The Death of Ahasuerus, Tobias became a pilgrim in the first place at least partially because he was "tired of his meaningless existence," of the chaotic and violent world he had known) and who is therefore on a "quest" (a pilgrimage) for ultimate meaning:

It's your own affair. So you say. And that's why you're not with the ordinary lot, the ordinary flock of sheep that trail along behind that cross, possessing a soul in common, as it were. You come alone. You make pilgrimage on your own, in your own way.

(p. 11)

Tobias is therefore another in the long line of Lagerkvistian "seekers" who are disgusted with the actuality of experience and long for something to counteract it. Whether he is seen as a prototype of Kierkegaard's "Single One" (in which case he would be a "true" pilgrim while the group of pilgrims would perhaps be representative of "crowd" so abhorrent to the Danish philosopher) or as simply an "outsider" who is unable to make a leap to faith, Tobias is certainly a brother to any man who would like to "believe" in a religious value system but cannot. Yet Lagerkvist has so frequently explored this type of character that one senses a quality of frustration in his portrait of Tobias. He (Lagerkvist) therefore seems to relegate Tobias to a quite minor role as the "listener" (like Ahasuerus in The Sibyl) to the oracular voice of Giovanni.

Giovanni undertakes to free Tobias from his empty illusions about what he will find at the end of his journey. He tells the pilgrim that, if he is seeking peace (and this is what he ultimately seeks), he ought to commit himself to the "sea," to surrender to it, to become like it, but he adds that the "sea" can only give him peace if he will give himself to it entirely, and not expect it to regard human "trifles" while it's "hurling itself over the ship." "Ship" in this context may be taken
as a symbol of consciousness, and more specifically of man's potential
to create (or to find) a meaning or purpose in life. Ship, moreover,
suggests direction, control, and a kind of rational order which is
pitted against the "sea." Significantly, throughout the novel we are
aware that the pirate ship "has no goal" -- it is going nowhere, it
merely wanders aimlessly over the "sea," through which Lagerkvist
suggests that the pirates are governed, or controlled by, life, rather
than vice versa. Giovanni's advice to Tobias is, then, to cease craving
for order, meaning, direction or values in a world which is inherently
disordered and valueless. Hence the "sea" hurling itself over the ship
suggests drowning, the drowning of moral awareness, and in this sense
the pirates are drowned men.

Giovanni appears to "win the field" with Tobias, which comes as no
surprise since Tobias's pilgrimage has always burdened him with mental
anguish. He is immensely attracted to the "freedom" which Giovanni's
vision of the "sea" seems to offer, freedom from the torment of moral
choice, of guilt, of seeking for what may not be found. The "sea" can
"free" him from torment because to become like it would be to become
morally unconscious:

Not to keep on judging oneself, blaming oneself for one's mis-
deeds, for one's falseness and dishonesty; for being perhaps no
true pilgrim, and for the blood that might be on the money that
pays one's passage to the Holy Land... that is, if there is a
holy land, and not just the sea...

(p. 15)

5A useful parallel is perhaps to be found in modern psychology.
Freud, Thomas Mann and others have used the word "sea" as a symbol of the
unconscious---of that psychic area which is unpredictable, uncontrolled,
and finally perhaps never fully comprehensible. The ship, as a symbol
of consciousness and rational control, is pitted against the totality
of the unconscious, of the mysterious and frequently threatening nature
of the "reality" which rests "below" the ego.
But Tobias is finally involved in the same contradiction as Giovanni. Though he does not know why, something within him resists capitulation to the "sea" (for example, he exhorts the pirate captain to take the survivors off the sinking merchant ship). He nevertheless becomes reconciled to the futility of his pilgrimage. After his "conversion" to the religion of the "sea," a conversion which is finally only intellectual and not emotional, Tobias slips quietly into the background until the final scene of the novel, when he re-emerges to unite, crucially, the concepts of "pilgrim" and "sea."

Lagerkvist has, then, shown us what the "sea" is, at least by implication. Giovanni, who claims to have learned to "think like the sea," proceeds in his dialogue with Tobias to measure the other characters in the novel in terms of how they relate to the sea, whether they resist it or submit to it, whether they seek to escape it or to become like it. Because he associates dishonesty and deception with his former life, which was built upon an ignorance of the "sea" within himself and within the world around him, he now equates honesty with submission to the "sea." Hence he remarks more than once that the pirate skipper is an "honest" man, while the crew are "decent, honest fellows" who "fear nothing, neither god nor devil." Finally he tells Tobias that he does not look like a "true Christian," but rather "like an honest man ... like the rest of us" (p. 11). As the novel develops, it becomes clear that Giovanni believes the Christians are dishonest towards the "sea;" i.e., he feels they are escapists who fear involvement in the harsh meaninglessness of everyday reality, and who seek refuge from it in the "harbour" of their faith. But if the Christians are dishonest towards the "sea" (and as Lagerkvist portrays them they surely are), what does it mean to
be honest? What does it mean to surrender to the "sea?" Giovanni thinks the pirates are honest, and at the end of the novel he calls the prostitutes who entertain him in every port "honest." The associations of the word "prostitute," however, suggest the weaknesses of Giovanni's vision. Prostitutes, like the pirates, "surrender" to the "sea," either through ignorance of another way of life, through hard luck, or through an implicit or overt capitulation to the harshness of physical circumstances. Reality for them, generally speaking, is physical reality only, and as such it can be overpowering and sometimes irresistible. But Giovanni respects them precisely because they have apparently ceased trying to resist the "sea," because they do not pretend "to be anything but what they are" (p. 112). As for his own life upon the "sea," in all its violent brutality, he says that it is "at least not a lie" as presumably his former life had been. Spector says that Lagerkvist's "message" is "to dare to be what one is, without self-reproach," which is precisely what Giovanni argues. Yet Giovanni's vision is determined by his belief that, since man is an "evil beast," the only honest thing for him to do is to recognize his evilness (the "sea" within him) and submit to it. This is certainly not Lagerkvist's position, as his portraits of the decent and "honest" pirates reveal.

Lagerkvist's imagistic descriptions of the pirates, and of their brutal encounter with the merchant ship, are his way of suggesting what man is like when he completely capitulates to the "sea," when he chooses to be content with the "cruel and hard and ruthless" reality within him and his surrounding world. Though his graphic portraits seem exaggerated, they are no more so than the portraits of men such as Hitler, Nero, Richmann and other similar historical figures. There is no easy or
flippant moral judgment to be passed upon such men, for Lagerkvist’s ultimate concern is to suggest through the pirates, just as he had once suggested through the *persona* of the dwarf, that the "sea" is an undeniably real facet of human nature and as such it is an ever-present threat to the stability of values and even of life itself.

There is no need to discuss in detail Lagerkvist's portraits of the pirates. The "skipper" and Ferrante are both finally motiveless malignancies, far less subtly drawn than Shakespeare's Iago, yet nevertheless frightening in their ruthless bestiality. Their impact depends upon a familiar Lagerkvistian technique: he exaggerates physical detail to suggest an almost tangible sense of evil, as he does with the one-eyed man in *Barebba*, with the dwarf, and with numerous minor "evil" characters in his shorter fiction. Giusto, for example, "leers," has "sour breath" and a "rat-like" face, while Ferrante has "long, thin, black-haired hands . . . like claws." The giant looks like an "ogre," and the skipper's "chill, reptilian eyes" reflect his inner fibre which is snake-like and poisonous. The pirates are "honest" towards the sea, but like the "sea" they are treacherous, full of hidden and sudden danger, and indifferent towards human culture and humanity itself. They are finally personifications of a principle of evil which Lagerkvist sees as deeply embedded in the nature of the universe. We finally cannot say why they are pirates, we can only view them and their actions as one of the possible directions in which human beings can go.

The pirate's encounter with the merchants is, however, significant because it symbolically illustrates a clash between the forces of the "sea" and forces of resistance to it, which on the lowest level may be only a desire to preserve one's material possessions (the salient motivation of the merchants), but which on a higher level may be a commitment
to a moral code or ethical standard which necessarily involves integrity.
The captain of the merchant ship certainly embodies the "higher" type of
resistance, as captains are traditionally expected to do, since he adheres
to the code which his position demands. He had refused to leave his ship
when it was mistakenly thought to be sinking, an act which, in our culture
at least, is almost archetypal in its traditional connotations of defiance
of the "sea" in the face of certain death and destruction. As Lagerkvist
develops the clash, "victory" belongs, on a physical level, to the "sea"
as it so often does, though the quality of such a victory is finally made
questionable through the captain's self-sacrificing courage and defiance.

The pirate skipper's demands upon the merchants echo the theme of
"surrender" or capitulation to the "sea." He warns them that, unless they
meet his demands, their very lives are at stake and:

... when this was so a man paid not this sum or that, but all
he had. All. Now did they understand? (p. 37)

When the skipper demands all, on a symbolic level he is demanding more
than the merchants' material possessions; he is also demanding the
capitulation of their integrity and "honour," for he is asking them to
acknowledge the superiority of physical force over the values which they
have professed to hold. The issue is sharply drawn. If the merchants
meet the pirates' demands, presumably they will be spared their lives.
But this is all they will then possess, since they will have sacrificed
not only their goods but their integrity as well. They will then become
the same kind of moral nonentity as Giusto, who, though he gives lip-
service to traditional values, lacks the courage to stand up for them
against the "sea." They are thus faced with a Kierkegaardian "Either/Or"
situation in reverse (in this case it is the "sea" and not God which
demands all), a situation not uncommon in life.

The merchants finally refuse to capitulate to the pirates, saying that "death itself was preferable to the loss of all they possessed" since "some things were dearer to them than life" (p. 37). They regard themselves as "men of honour and courage who would yield to no one in defense of themselves and their property" (p. 35). Their defense of course is futile; they are unskilled and even the efforts of their captain cannot prevent defeat in their attempt to resist the "sea," to sustain values other than self-preservation. But their resistance, particularly the captain's, cannot easily be brushed off as "vain" and "empty" (the words Giovanni uses to condemn the futile moral struggles of humanity), though their physical defeat is undeniable. At least this is what Lagerkvist implies through his deliberate contrast between the pirate skipper's childlike outburst when the merchant captain calls him a hyena, along with his bestial anger and thirst for revenge, and the captain's evident and imperturbable moral superiority, which is reflected in his contempt for the pirates despite an immanent and cruel death.

The captain's death, then, calls into question (just as any martyr's death does) the "victory" of the forces aligned against him. Even when he is bound and completely helpless, moreover, his resistance and contempt for the pirates may be seen as a kind of "victory," since the pirate skipper cannot endure the sight of it:

It was this contempt that so greatly infuriated the pirate skipper, and not without reason he suspected the other of regarding him as a commander of a lower order altogether. Hate gleamed in his reptilian eyes, and with it the desire to be revenged upon this worthy old man, who fancied himself superior because he commanded a so-called honorable vessel, laden with traders and with wares that were bought and sold in a so-called honourable manner; to be revenged upon all this honesty and upon this man with the grey hair and candid seaman's eyes... .

(p. 42)
Lagerkvist suggests in this passage what Shakespeare suggests through Iago: once man has sunk to the level of the "sea," once he has capitulated to the "sea" within him, the mere sight of those who continue to abide by or to construct positive values can inspire hatred and a thirst for revenge, or scorn which is ultimately insecure. Hence Lagerkvist completes the contrasts between the two "skippers" with antithetical images — the merchant captain remains calm and self-controlled at the moment of his ultimate "defeat" (death) by the "sea," while the pirate skipper, at this moment of "victory" for him, loses all control over himself in his anxiety for Giusto to finish the murder. The question, then, of who is the real victim of the "sea," he who resists it or he who surrenders to it, is left open.

The symbolic contrasts between "sea" and "shore," "land," or "harbour" reveal a characteristically Lagerkvistian attitude towards the pilgrims' response to temporal reality. The pilgrims may be regarded as loosely representative of Lagerkvist's vision of Christianity in the twentieth century. Their portrait is, like the pirates', deliberately exaggerated, I suspect, because Lagerkvist wishes to set in relief the tension, symbolic and actual, which a man who exists between the two positions, and who does not and cannot know if either are finally right or wrong, must endure. Both Tobias and Giovanni are clearly in this position, though they do not perceive their situation in these terms. In any event, Lagerkvist associates "land" and "harbour" in this novel with security: the security of answers to the "sea." The "Holy Land" on a symbolic level, of course, represents the answers of Christianity to human destiny and to the harshness of the "sea." But on an ethical level, Giovanni is surely speaking for Lagerkvist when he charges the
pilgrims with moral cowardice. Like Blake, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, and, beyond doubt, numerous Christian theologians, Lagerkvist abhors a tendency in Christianity (particularly in institutionalized Christianity) to complacently reside in the inflexibility and exclusiveness of the religious dogma in the face of new and challenging movements of the "sea." Religion which ignores or seeks refuge from the "sea," he once more implies, is self-defeating.

The clash between "sea" and "shore" (a symbolic clash that brings the issue of escape vs. surrender to the surface) takes place when Giovanni engages in a passionate outburst against the pilgrim after the pirate ship has weathered a violent storm upon the "sea." As Giovanni sees it, the sleek and handsome pilgrim ship has "fled" from the storm (from the cruel and ruthless sea) into the harbour, "the best and safest harbour imaginable." The captain of the pilgrim ship, and the pilgrims themselves, are in a ship which "lay very high in the water," so that they must peer downwards to see the pirate ship and the "sea." Symbolically, Lagerkvist suggests that the pilgrims are "above" temporal reality, having sought refuge in a ship which glides over its surface, though it is potentially far superior (more sea-worthy) than the pirate ship. Yet this ship, Giovanni shouts angrily, will run for port when the "sea" becomes dangerous rather than risk a journey on it. Giovanni is saying, in effect, that the security offered by the church (the handsome pilgrim ship) is purchased at the expense of an unfettered, and by implication more courageous, confrontation with the stark harshness of the "sea."

Giovanni proceeds to indict the pilgrims for their cowardice. They have sought refuge "just because there's a little sea on," and
he bitterly contrasts their apparent thirst for security, their fear
of involvement with the "sea," with what their Savior represented:

The passage sums up Lagerkvist's quarrel with Christianity, which is
obviously not a quarrel with Christ. The pilgrims run for port -- i.e.,
they fail to take the risks which Christ took, they fail to grapple
with the "sea" as he did. Lagerkvist's vision of Christianity has always
been focused upon the ethic of "love one another" -- he invariably
measures modern Christianity and Christians in terms of it, and he in-
variably finds them lacking. But loving one another is never easy,
and Christ's own life showed how difficult it is to create and to abide
by values in a world so immersed in the "sea." Giovanni's vitriolic
attack reflects Lagerkvist's disillusionment with mankind, and more
particularly with "pilgrims," a disillusionment which results from man's
failure to imitate, or even to try to imitate, Christ's struggle with
the "sea." As in The Death of Ahasuerus, Lagerkvist implies that
Christianity's "failure" may stem from its tendency to negate the poten-
tial values of a life on the "sea" in favor of a "celestial city,"
though he apparently ignores the fact that the major focus of contem-
porary religious reform is in the direction of positive ethical in-
volvement in the "sea."

In the final analysis, however, the pilgrims' "answer" to Gio-
vanni's tirade is Christianity's "answer" to Lagerkvist: they sing a
hymn, which is beautiful and seems to stem from a "marvellous" and "remarkable" power with them. The hymn may be taken as symbolic of the Christian's inner vision and light; his faith in the existence of a "Holy Land" which assures him that the "sea" is not everything. It is a vision which finally cannot be shared; it can only be experienced. Thus, though Tobias moves his lips "as if he wanted to sing too," he chooses to remain on the pirate ship with Giovanni, rather than to join the "true" pilgrim ship, because he senses that the Christian vision is something he cannot enter into.

Between the pirates and the pilgrims there remains Giovanni, whose life is an apparent contradiction. Despite his persuasive and deceptive role as the spokesman for capitulation to an indifferent and meaningless universe, and his nihilistic denigration of value distinctions, he himself clearly has not become indifferent to "right and wrong," to "truth and falsehood." From the beginning, the distinctions he draws between Tobias and the "true" pilgrims reveal the contradiction, for if there is no meaning in value judgments as he implicitly suggests, why make the distinctions? If the "sea" is all there is, and if man ought to learn to "think like the sea," why does Giovanni even concern himself with the pilgrims, let alone castigate them for their failure to risk a fight with the "sea?" Why does he distinguish between the ethical "standard" of the pirates (honesty to the "sea") and the moral escapism which he sees in the pilgrims' vision and quest? The list could be extended, but it is obvious that something within Giovanni resists "thinking like the sea." In point of fact, though he is intellectually a nihilist, he is on an emotional level a rabid moralist. He has even chosen to live on the "sea" in the first place for essentially a moral
reason: he finds it "more honest" and "less of a lie" than his previous life in the church. Giovanni seems clearly representative of Lagerkvist's own vision of the "absurd man" -- a man who can no longer believe in (intellectually at least) the validity of value systems external to the self, yet who ironically and paradoxically affirms through his actions precisely those value distinctions which he intellectually debunks. He is also a spiritual brother to any man who cannot answer the question, "Why live?", yet who nevertheless continues to act as if life is ultimately meaningful. There would seem to be little purpose in suggesting reasons for the paradox; Giovanni, like Barabbas, is finally a man whose life illustrates, rather than explains, a spiritual condition.

Giovanni's unwillingness to capitulate to the "sea" is driven at obliquely throughout the novel. Aside from the contradictions mentioned above, he obviously cannot be like the "honest and decent" pirates he pretends to admire. He takes no part in the massacre of the merchants, he is disliked by the most "sea-like" member of the crew, Ferrante, and no one on the ship thinks him of any use in "a tight place" (p. 51). Put perhaps the most telling illustration of his contradiction occurs when he prevents the murder of Tobias. When he spots Ferrante stealing towards the sleeping pilgrim, Giovanni, without knowing why, immediately springs to Tobias' aid at the undeniable risk of his own life (we have already witnessed Ferrante's skill with a knife). He disarms Ferrante, and Lagerkvist curiously refers to him as "that elderly man of god." This is indeed strange, for we have already seen Giovanni mock the pilgrims and heap scorn upon their faith, and we learn later that he was repelled by the crucifixes which surrounded him in his childhood home. Yet Giovanni, though he claims to be "free" of god and the Christian value system, has acted as if he did believe in those values.
In this sense, he is a "man of god," perhaps even more so than the pilgrims. Why he acts in this way is an unanswerable question, and the question extends to ourselves, for Lagerkvist is suggesting something about the paradoxical quandary which the humanistic existentialists claim is the modern condition humaine. If, as Camus asserts, man is condemned to live in a meaningless universe, why does he demand meaning? Neither Camus nor Sartre really answer the question — they merely observe that the "absurd" results from man's demand for value in a world which seems to provide none. Lagerkvist cannot answer the question either, but his portrait of Giovanni suggests that the demand itself, if manifested in action, contradicts the supposed meaninglessness of the universe. Life cannot finally be meaningless, he implies, as long as there exists a demand for meaning which is acted upon, consciously or not, and the act of demanding itself, from Lagerkvist's point of view, can make one a "man of god." The suggestion is buttressed symbolically when Lagerkvist adds that "Tobias and Giovanni stood side by side in the darkness, which was not true darkness, for the sky was full of stars" (p. 54). Darkness in Lagerkvist's fiction is almost always suggestive of the labyrinthine groping of the rational mind seeking "light" or answers to the meaning of existence, while "stars" are of course a recurring symbol of ultimate meaning, since they archetypally point towards "the way," "truth," and "value" (cf. Barabbas when he buries the hair-lip or the lovers in The Dwarf). "No true darkness" means, in effect, that Giovanni's action negates his own vision of the "sea," since it posits a meaning in meaninglessness. "Stars" are also contrasted with the "dark embrace" of the sea, an embrace which "cleanses" (wipes out;) all moral distinctions between right and wrong.
Lagerkvist follows the rescue of Tobias with a statement about the "sea" which is obviously meant to heighten the reader's awareness of the moral qualities which distinguish Giovanni from it:

To surrender to the sea—the great and endless sea which is indifferent to all things, which erases all things; which in its indifference forgives all things.

Primeval, irresponsible, inhuman. Freeing man through its inhumanity, making him irresponsible and free—if he will only choose the sea and surrender to it.

(p. 55)

Do Giovanni's words and actions, as seen in the immediately preceding section of the novel, show that he is "irresponsible," "inhuman" and "indifferent to all things" like the sea? Obviously not. He is a man caught in the tension of an existential contradiction, for which the second half of the novel offers a possible explanation.

Giovanni's tale, which constitutes the bulk of the remainder of the novel, essentially traces his awakening to the "sea" of temporal reality underlying the values he had cherished in his "naivety." The theme is a familiar one in modern fiction. Like Joyce's Stephen in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, or Hartley's Leo in The Go-Between, or Lawrence's Paul in Sons and Lovers, Giovanni, under the pressures of experience which run counter to the value system(s) of his culture, feels compelled to chuck the system(s) rather than to retreat from the experiences. It is a peculiarly modern pattern—it cannot be found in Fielding, Jane Austen, or George Eliot, for instance, in whose works a reconciliation between human experience and an established value standard is not only possible but desirable—and it necessarily calls into question the validity of value structures themselves, since the pattern suggests an irremedial split between experiential actuality and conception. Giovanni's experience, like Stephen's or Leo's, thus
raises the question: are values illusions? Do they necessarily rest upon deception of some sort, conscious or unconscious? Even if they rest upon an exclusion of those areas of experience which would undermine them, are they nevertheless as "real" as the "sea?" Lagerkvist is far too clever to attempt to propose definitive answers to the questions; he is simply concerned, deeply, with the indefinable something which distinguishes, or has the potential to distinguish, a man such as Giovanni from the "sea."

Perhaps the best way to deal with the second section is to begin with the "veil" symbolism. Giovanni's awakening comes about through his affair with the wife of a prominent townsman, and prior to the consummation of their "love," the woman is always veiled; Giovanni has never till then seen her face, just as she has never seen him because he has only spoken to her through the curtain of a confessional booth. The veil may be taken as symbolic of the deception which seems to pervade Giovanni's world; his love affair is based upon it, his lover's life depends upon it, and he himself is immersed within it, since a "veil" of naive illusion, as he eventually discovers, has hidden the "sea" beneath the values he has taken for granted.

In what ways, then, is Giovanni "veiled" from "reality" prior to his awakening? He is essentially ignorant (like the younger Sibyl) of human nature, ignorant more specifically of his mother's motives when she "gave" him to the priesthood (to god), ignorant of sexuality (which

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6Lagerkvist touches upon the same question which is being increasingly dealt with in fields ranging from philosophy to religion to science. It is finally an epistemological problem which is loaded with levels of complexity, though surprisingly enough men such as Whitehead, Heisenberg, and Henry Adams, with their widely divergent backgrounds and occupations, have at least in principle concurred that values are impossible without deception or distortion of experience on some level. "Distortion," however, need not necessarily carry pejorative connotations, since the creative process is one supreme example of it.
of all aspects of experience may be the most difficult to define or "fix" as a value), and ignorant of his own feelings towards his commitment to the church and to "god." In other words, he knows nothing about the "sea" within himself (the discovery eventually horrifies him) and within the world around him. One could just as easily say he knows nothing about evil, which is implied by the fact that his "sins" were always so insignificant that they brought a smile to his confessor's lips.

One cannot assume a scornful or mocking attitude towards his naivety however. Just as the illusions of so many of Chaucer's characters rest upon naivety and ignorance, yet still account for whatever meaning or purpose exists in their lives, so Giovanni's illusions function, in effect, as his values. Thus, though he later discovers that this world (the world of youth and deception) was "enclosed and narrow," his unexamined faith in god did give him "security and complete certainty about everything" (p. 59). His assumption that his mother had given him to "god" out of love provided him with another seemingly secure handhold on the "sea" -- the value of love itself. Like the pilgrims, who are protected from the "sea" by their faith in a "harbour" which shelters them from it, Giovanni was "secure" essentially because he believed the ideal was more real (or more important) than the actual:

During my childhood and youth my mind was altogether turned away from this world and bent upon holy things -- upon that world where the divine lived its serene and tranquil life.

(p. 58)

But Giovanni's security (like any man's) was precariously suspended over the "sea." No major character in Lagerkvist's world remains "veiled" for long; sooner or later, just as in most ordinary human experience, an encounter with the "sea" is inevitable.
Giovanni's awakening occurs under the pressure of an experience which he knows to be in violent contradiction to his value system — as a priest and a celibate, he gets involved in an adulterous affair which he realizes almost from the start can only bring him to grief. Yet it is precisely his disregard for the impending catastrophe which his affair must precipitate that makes him a representative figure in the twentieth-century "awakening" pattern, since his situation exemplifies the "either/or" tension between the "sea" and "harbour" which seems embedded in the post-romantic psyche. There is no possibility, for Giovanni, of a reconciliation between the two — once he is in the grip of passion he craves experience no matter what the cost, he wants to "burn in the fire of love," nothing besides his mistress matters to him any more, "only she and love" exist. The language Lagerkvist uses to color Giovanni's awakened feelings is deliberately suggestive of his urge to break all bounds, to destroy anything within himself and within his world which could prevent him from doing so. Hence his imagination is "inflamed," he sees her love as "burning" and he wants to "burn" too; his passion is insatiable, his sexual appetite "famished." His home, with the crucifixes hanging on the wall, almost overnight becomes a "prison" which is "stifling" and "narrow." He realizes that he no longer wants the "safety of god's embrace," the security and peace which his former value system gave him; he desires only to confront experience unfettered by any regard for consequences. But an unfettered confrontation with experience, at least in much twentieth-century fiction, almost always foreshadows (as in Henry James' The Ambassadors, for example) the dissolution of traditional values as a valid means of interpreting the experience. Just as Woollett is
crushed within the consciousness of Lambert Strether under the exper-
diental "squeeze" of his introduction to Paris and its continental
values, so is the religious vision of Giovanni (and with it the sustain-
ing structure of all of his values) shattered by his love affair. He
discovers that he had never loved God, that his spiritual advice in the
confessional reeked of "familiar, hackneyed phrases without fire, with-
out living content," that prayers are of no value, that the thought of
his sin only inflamed his sexual desire. Giovanni, in other words,
"awoke" to find the "sea" washing over his harbour.

Giovanni's awakening to the "sea" takes place through his gradual
apprehension of the ugly gap between illusion and reality (deception and
fact) which is actually more like a chasm within the world of the novel.
When his mother learns of his affair, for example, the "sea" within her
figuratively surges out; Giovanni discovers that his conception of her
as a "loving" and "concerned" woman was disastrously misconceived. She
revels in the thought of the devil torturing him for his sin, and it is
she who reports him to the ecclesiastical authorities. Giovanni sees
through the "veil" at last:

One may well wonder why she was so fanatical; she seemed possess-
ed, and at length it dawned upon me how violent a nature was
hidden beneath her peaceable exterior. Clearly her mother-love
---always warped---had twisted into something like hatred for me.
(p. 102)

Not only his mother but the whole "godly little town" exude the "sea."
As a sinner, Giovanni might have hoped for some forgiveness since he had
been a Christian priest in a Christian city. Instead the sea surges
once more: children throw stones at him, adults hurl curses at him, and
a former colleague at St. Thomas's spits in his face.
Giovanni is equally disillusioned by his discovery of the "sea" within himself. Before the consummation of his affair he finds to his alarm, when hearing the confession of his future mistress, that he craves to hear more about the "purely physical aspect" of her supposed affair. He is even more alarmed by the awakening of his sexual passion, since he senses its limitlessness and the threat it poses to his ability or even his willingness to order his life in a structured way. But finally it is the evil within himself which, when brought to the surface, most upsets him, for he discovers that his own capacity for viciousness matches even that of his mother:

... without the least understanding or compassion I condemned her as a vile, despicable creature. I began to loathe her; I gave no thought to the fact that she was my mother and that at one time my feelings for her had been quite different. ... Everything about her now seemed to me repulsive, and my tendency to perceive the ludicrous and foolish side of her behavior and utterances made me as malicious and as evilly observant as herself.

(p. 102)

His most shattering awakening, however, is to his mistress's "reality."

It is difficult to know what to make of Giovanni's mistress, and I question whether any reader of the novel is not surprised when he learns that her "true lover," who was the ostensible reason for her confessional outpourings in the first place, actually does not exist. Perhaps Lagerkvist withholds the secret deliberately in order to buttress the theme of conceptual deception -- certainly the reader, like Giovanni, has no reason to suspect that she is a liar. Or perhaps she is not a liar at all, since it could be argued that she too is self-deceived. On this level, she could only be seen as a sick woman who cannot endure the bitterness of the reality she must live with, having been given in marriage to an old and apparently impotent sadist who
leaves her sexual drives unfulfilled, and who is driven to seek refuge in a fantasy world of "ideal love." I think the latter view is more plausible, since the locket in which the portrait of her "ideal love" is ostensibly kept is real to her. On a symbolic level, her belief (if one can accept it as a belief) in the existence of a "true lover" is a belief in a value which makes the "sea" she lives with bearable. Without it, she would presumably have only the "real" world of stagnation and unfulfillment, and her life would lack all meaning and direction. Though the locket finally is empty, it is nevertheless a value, even if the value is only a hope which is ultimately illusory. But this value, implies Lagerkvist, like all values rests upon a denigration (or limiting) of actual experience, since it is the mistress's commitment to her dream of "ideal love" which actually prevents her from accepting what value there is in actual love. She clings to her illusion during her affair with Giovanni (he says that "her true beloved in that locket between her breasts was someone different from me"), and it is this ever-present escape valve from the "sea" which finally seems to account for her willingness to bring Giovanni to his ruin.

True to the twentieth-century "awakening" pattern, Giovanni, once he has disassociated himself from his older values, seeks an ultimate meaning in love. He thinks of his love as "a whole" and as "holy," the same words he uses to describe his feelings towards the religion of submission to the "holy" sea. He is a romantic in search of a romantic absolute, which helps to explain why he is "shattered" by his mistress's betrayal, since he has for all intents and purposes endowed her with the qualities of immutability and absolute fidelity, qualities which are finally not to be found in the physical world.
Giovanni's sense of betrayal, then, actually is a sense of sacrifice. After his lover has renounced him and sought refuge in the church, for example, he leaves in "violent agitation, fury and contempt":

... not because I was dismissed, thrown out, expelled, but because she had lied about me. About herself and our union. Especially was I stricken by her besmirching of that holy night of love that we had experienced together, and which for me was still the greatest miracle that could ever be. Or was it?

(p. 108)

The cycle is complete. Sexual love was the value on which he had pinned all his desire for meaning and significance; his discovery that the "sea" surged beneath her as well convinced him that it, and not god, love, Christian charity or any other value, was reality. Hence he concludes his tale by telling Tobias that he chose a life on the "sea" because, in effect, no one on it or in it pretends that values exist:

In time I found myself aboard this vessel, where on the whole I have been well content—where life is rough and brutal and bloody, and if not exactly honest, at least not a lie. At sea, the boundless sea, indifferent to all, caring for nothing, neither devil nor god—inhuman. And that is surely good: one must feel so if one has learnt to know men.

(p. 112)

Giovanni assures Tobias that he may judge him as he chooses, and Giusto's evaluation seems apropos. Giovanni, he says, is a "rascal," a "terrible sinner," "a godless man," and an "abominable blasphemer and lecher— but he is also a good man" (pp. 21-2). We have seen Giusto's comments borne out, and perhaps Lagerkvist is suggesting that men who are driven to despair by the pressures of a crushing awakening (certainly he himself underwent a similar experience, cf. "Quest of Reality") may find themselves in the ironic position of affirming, through their despair, their concern, and finally through their actions, the very values which they claim do not exist.
The concluding section of the novel (which encompasses only four pages in the Random House edition) sums up, by means of symbolism, the contradiction of Giovanni's life, though Lagerkvist inexplicably (and from my point of view, foolishly) shifts his focus from the existential paradox to the "quest" for god, a theme which has not been of much importance to the novel. We learn that the mistress's locket is empty, and that she went on a pilgrimage to the "Holy Land" in an effort to atone for her adultery. She "never arrived," says Giovanni, and Tobias too melodramatically clasps his hands over his chest in apparent anguish. Is Lagerkvist suggesting that the "Holy Land," like the inside of the locket, is finally an empty dream which mankind clings to as a refuge against the "sea?" Possibly. Yet there lurks another paradox in Tobias's reflection upon her failure to arrive:

He thought about the highest and holiest in life and of what nature it might be: that perhaps it exists only as a dream and cannot survive reality, the awakening. But that it nevertheless does exist.

(p. 116)

His comment refers to Giovanni, whose vision of the "highest and holiest in life," whether focused upon god or love or any value, melted away under the acidic pressure of reality. But Tobias adds that it **nevertheless** does exist. The lines could be taken as an affirmation of an unreachable transcendental "Holy Land" (the lines which follow imply as much), or they may suggest the paradox of Giovanni's life. Certainly Tobias's succeeding comment leaves the question open:

Yet the sea is not everything: it cannot be. There must be something beyond it, there must be a land beyond the great desolate expanses and the great deeps which are indifferent to all things: a land we cannot reach but to which we are on our way.

(p. 116)
The actions of Giovanni, the merchant captain, and Tobias himself have already intimated that the "sea is not everything," even though they may intellectually believe that it is. Yet Tobias seems to refer to the "holy of holies" which Ahasuerus earlier concluded must lie beyond all the abortions of human imagination. But whether the focus of Tobias's comments is seen as transcendental or ethical, it finally implies the same thing: values, even if they cannot be tasted, smelled, or heard, even if they appear to be illusory and non-existent in any absolute sense, do nevertheless exist, though they may remain rationally unsupportable.

Tobias's thoughts about the locket encapsulate the paradox:

And he thought of how Giovanni had kept that locket, cherished it and never wanted to part with it, but had worn it constantly at his breast, although it was empty. And even had it not been empty, it would have contained the likeness of another man. Yet he had always worn it, as she too had worn it at her breast, close to her heart.

How precious, how indispensable a thing it must be. Although it was empty.

(p. 116)

On one level, the empty locket may be symbolic of man's dream of a transcendental absolute, something "not like ourselves," which counter-balances the desolate harshness of the "sea." On this level, it is a dream which functions as a goal, and though it may be illusory, it nevertheless gives direction and meaning to life. This is why it is precious, just as it was precious to Giovanni's mistress. But on another level, the empty and "indispensable" locket symbolizes the paradoxical value position of Giovanni throughout the novel. On a rational level, he knows the locket is empty, he knows the "sea" is all, he knows that values are deceptive dreams which only hide the "sea" beneath them. But he "wears" the dream close to his heart, the heart which impulsively
demands the rescue of Tobias, which impulsively reacts against the moral failure of the pilgrims, and which finally contradicts his vision of absurdity in life. Just as surely as Tobias, Giovanni is a "pilgrim at sea," a term which suggests proverbially a sense of bewilderment and confusion, though to be a pilgrim at sea suggests a quality of direction or purpose in the midst of the "great deeps." Hence the ship glides forward, imperceptibly "without a goal": Giovanni has no reason to believe there is a meaning in existence. But though he is on the "sea," he is somehow superior to it, and therein lies his "pilgrimage."
I stated at the beginning of this thesis that Lagerkvist needed to be "placed" within a frame of reference if his works were to be understood. I also stated that this was a difficult problem to deal with, partly because his vision of experience is uncommonly difficult to grasp, since it rests upon a faith in the ungraspable, but also because of the fundamental paradox implicit in the term "religious atheist." Yet at this point I think it possible to view his vision in perspective.

Lagerkvist is beyond doubt an iconoclastic writer. Implicit in his concept of experience, on its deepest levels, is an apparent conviction -- all "icons" of rationalism are to be distrusted. Any rational construct of experience, be it scientific, psycho-analytic, deterministic, or theistic is, on an epistemological and an emotional level, suspect because any or all of these constructs exclude those areas of experience which would contradict them. Lagerkvist is therefore a romantic rather than a "classical skeptic" as at least one critic has argued. He is romantic because, in the final analysis, his vision is grounded in a belief that the mind will distort or betray man's deepest religious impulses through a process of reduction, and because he most strongly implies, through the Sibyl, Ahasuerus, and Giovanni, that instinctive or emotionally-based action is superior to any rationally-based response to experience. The values of these characters are "instinctual" -- they "believe" in their emotions and in what they sense about experience through them -- while they admit the inadequacy of their minds to construct a coherent (logically ordered) vision of what they feel. They are all, therefore, "at sea," in the sense that the deepest levels of their experience are unintelligible to them. Such a characteristic is to be found in almost all romantic literature.
Perhaps now we can come to grips with the central paradox in Lagerkvist's work. Various critics have attempted to pin it down, but with less than satisfactory results. Some have labeled him a "humanist," an "existentialist," and a "religious seeker," labels all of which are partly true yet, in terms of what they might exclude, misleading. In despair, some recent critics have resorted to the vagueness of "the meditator" and "the master," while others have argued that he is everything from a Christian in disguise to a nervously unsure atheist. But finally, Lagerkvist is what he calls himself: a "religious atheist."

Lagerkvist is "religious" in the sense that he believes categorically in the value of man's search for "light," "good," and cosmic significance in life. Though he apparently believes that as a religion, as a theological structure of faith, Christianity fails to meet man's deepest religious needs, he continues to believe in the value of the needs themselves since, once awakened, they are finally what stir the roots of an ethical conscience without which human life can truly have no significance. Hence the Sibyl, Ahasuerus, Tobias and Giovanni are all in the final analysis not only seekers but moralists, who through their very "search" for "god" are forced to search for "him" within themselves. Lagerkvist implies through them that the impulse or instinct which prods man to seek a source of ultimate meaning beyond the self, which prods him in other words to seek transcendence of the meaningless "sea," is in itself an intimation of a power or "spirit" beyond the grasp of rational comprehension. Though this is finally a romantic notion (Rousseau, for example, would argue that man's highest knowledge and potential is reached through the prodding of "natural" instinct), it is perhaps a most valuable one to consider. For we live
in an age, Lagerkvist continually suggests, which has rejected the
theocratic, scientific, and philosophical systems of its predecessor,
without, like the sibyl or Ahasuerus, being able to construct anew.
Lagerkvist's conviction that the religious impulse in itself can be of
tremendous value is, in effect, a source of anchorage in a conspicuously
unanchored century.

It is no accident that the closest parallels to the "religious"
strain in Lagerkvist's thought are to be found in Paul Tillich's words:

"The faith which makes the courage of despair possible is the
acceptance of the power of being, even in the grip of nonbeing
... The act of accepting meaninglessness is in itself a
meaningful act. It is an act of faith. We have seen that he
who has the courage to affirm his being in spite of fate and
guilt has not removed them... The same is true of doubt
and meaninglessness. The faith which creates the courage to
take them into itself has no special content. It is simply
faith, undirected, absolute. It is undefinable since every-
thing defined is dissolved by doubt and meaninglessness."

As a "religious seeker," then, Lagerkvist may and in fact ought to be
identified with the iconoclastic movement in modern Christian-
Existential theology, a movement led by men such as Tillich and John
A.T. Robinson and inspired, most probably, by Søren Kierkegaard. As
a spokesman for a faith without structure, a "god" without meaning, a
religion without religiosity, he is truly both "religious" and a "seeker."

As an "atheist," Lagerkvist's thought bears close affinities with
the existentialist visions of Sartre and Camus. Despite his belief in
the value of the "search," Lagerkvist maintains a firm foothold in the
actualities of experience as he perceives them. The actualities,

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1Paul Tillich, The Courage to Be (New Haven: Yale University
though they may offer intimations of "light," are themselves immersed in darkness---Lagerkvist's vision is therefore atheistic and existential in the sense that he can perceive no final meaning in life, which is almost the same as saying that existence is without rational justification. Yet, unlike Sartre or Camus, Lagerkvist insists upon the "search"—upon the possibility of finding a means of reconciling experience with some transcendental conception of it which would cancel out man's apprehensions of a "dark" (meaningless) reality. Such a "search" would quite possibly be labelled a "search for an illusion" by the humanistic existentialists.

The "atheistic" and "existential" strain in Lagerkvist's thought could be said to be the "victor" over the religious strain. His heroes, Barabbas, Ahasuerus, Tobias and the Sibyl, are all characters who crave to reach a coherent vision of "reality" which would attribute significance (in a rational sense) to their experience. They never achieve it! They never find a rational antidote to "absurdity"; "meaninglessness" is their fate in death as well as in life. One could, however, just as easily say that these characters chose to remain in "darkness"—they are all finally unable to compromise their visions of "reality" through making a Kierkegaardian "leap" to faith in a God with a capital G. But a qualification is needed here. Though neither the Sibyl, nor Ahasuerus, nor Tobias achieve a belief in a "God of theism," they do finally believe in a "god above the God of theism," a "god" who, as Ahasuerus says in The Death of Ahasuerus, "...by our very failure to capture it, demonstrates how inaccessible it is."
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