

Barabbas in Literature and Film

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Abstract

Barabbas, unlike Pilate or Judas or even other biblical characters who, like him, are barely mentioned in various Gospel accounts and yet who have received much attention – such as Mary Magdalene or Salome – received little attention before the twentieth century. But since then his ambiguous status as bandit, murderer, or freedom fighter fits in well with the ambiguous positions of art and religion in the modern world. A person who was given just a few sentences in the Bible finally has become a subject of artistic interest, reflecting the contradictory aspects of modern culture in which rebellion can run the spectrum from noble self-sacrifice for the greater good to self-serving justification of the love of violence. Though some of the works exploring the meaning of Barabbas are obviously of inferior quality, the others offer trenchant explorations of an engrossing character, reflecting to us our struggles with religious faith in the contemporary, secularized world. Barabbas represents the condition most of us have experienced: through forces outside our control we are placed in a relationship with possible truth, a relationship we can either turn away from for other, proximate human truths, or we can turn toward, even if we cannot always decipher its meaning. Barabbas is a noble revolutionary, a vicious criminal, an accident of politics and mob psychology, perhaps even a love interest, and a shadowy figure whose brief contact with Jesus is left in the dark. In his own way, differing from that of Pilate or Judas, Barabbas can speak uniquely from the distant world of the Gospels to the modern world in ways we immediately recognize.

Introduction

[1] One of the first things to happen after the production of the Gospels in the second half of the first century CE was the production of more gospels and ancillary legends about Jesus in succeeding centuries. Apocryphal gospels extended the canonical Gospels or filled in some of their gaps or provided alternative versions of the Gospels in an attempt to get at the real, secret history of Jesus. Through these non-canonical adumbrations several characters other than Jesus received additional attention, most noticeably Pilate and Judas. But the cryptic figure of Barabbas, a character who appears in all four canonical Gospels, did not

seem to catch the imagination of those who happily expanded Pilate's character into an entire gospel of his own. The *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* states simply, "In early patristic commentary there is little interest in Barabbas himself" (76).

[2] Beyond the formative period of canonical development in the first few centuries of the Church, Medieval culture also apparently found little purchase on Barabbas, relegating him to just a few lines in the York mystery plays. Not until the twentieth century did Barabbas come into his own as a figure who could generate enough interest to appear prominently in a narrative. Barabbas did not seem to resonate strongly in an age of established faith, his complete subjection to forces beyond his control providing little allegorical interest. Barabbas does not choose or refuse. He stands simply as a pawn for Roman and Jewish authorities, a blank, a man whose already cryptic identity is challenged by his circumstances. The best known (and probably the best in artistic terms) is undoubtedly Par Lagerkvist's novel *Barabbas*. But in nearly all forms of narrative art – novel, play, film, poetry – Barabbas has finally attracted sustained attention. This paper will briefly survey works that have amplified the few biblical passages referring to Barabbas and comment on them in terms of the specific handling of Barabbas and in terms of their overall quality. The purpose for doing so is to outline the general direction of Barabbas through the twentieth century, and this survey will proceed by suggesting that there seems to be at least three primary ways of characterizing Barabbas, though these three usually overlap at some point within most of the works examined here.

[3] One way the story seems to have spoken to modern readers in a way that it has not to previous generations is that Barabbas can reflect the freedom fighter whose presence as a character worth writing about at length has been allowed by the revolutionary movements of the twentieth century. This image of the rebel occurs with some frequency but it is on the whole minimized in favor of another way. Barabbas also characterizes the modern age in that he can stand as an existential figure in an age of doubt, a man who cannot decide about the truth about Jesus Christ, and so far this has been the preferred way of dramatizing him. This image is used about as frequently as the rebel emphasis, but in terms of quality the best artistic treatments of the character so far fall on the loner instead of the rebel. Finally, and in the nearly opposite way, Barabbas fits the standard Evangelical pattern of Christian belief in that he *does* make the choice of faith, finding peace in an individualistic response to the summons of Jesus outside of any institutionalized ecclesiastical context. Given the general lack of interest in art that has typically marked this brand of Protestantism, it is not surprising that only a few attempts at this version of Barabbas have been made.

[4] The biblical information about Barabbas is both brief and ambiguous. Barabbas appears in each of the four Gospels, but details vary, leading to the possibility of convincingly depicting his character in contradictory ways depending on the author's or filmmaker's needs. In the Gospel of Matthew, Barabbas is called "a notorious prisoner." The other Gospels vary slightly, creating some confusion as to the identity of Barabbas. Mark's Gospel calls him a rebel who had "committed murder in the insurrection" (15:7). Though scholars might be able to suggest what this insurrection was, the Gospel itself shows no interest in developing this reference, though the image here is slightly more focused than the one given by the Gospel of Matthew. The Gospel of Luke states that Barabbas was "a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder" (22:19). The

Gospel of John merely states, “Now Barabbas was a robber” (18:40). These sparse details typically add up in modern narrative to a violent character but one whose violence may be justifiably channeled into subversive action against Roman occupation forces and their Jewish collaborators. Perhaps it is because the twentieth century has seen numerous instances of revolutionary activity that the shadowy biblical vision of the man has finally become compelling to modern readers, though, again, the rebel is balanced by that other twentieth century preoccupation of the loss of a shared understanding of who Jesus is.

Novels, a Play, and a Poem

[5] In perhaps the first attempt at utilizing Barabbas as the central character of his own narrative, the novel *Barabbas: A Dream of the World's Tragedy*, by Marie Corelli, appeared in 1893. Corelli was an immensely popular – and immensely vilified – author whose lush, melodramatic novels drew on many Victorian and *fin de siècle* tendencies. Her novels were read eagerly by ordinary people, but critics habitually ridiculed her writing as excessive in every way. This criticism certainly applies to her seventh novel, which deals with Barabbas from just before his encounter with Jesus to just after the crucifixion. This relatively brief amount of time is stretched out to several hundred pages due entirely to Corelli's verbose amplification of speeches and descriptions. The narrative is propelled by two intersecting lines of development. One is that one of the original Magi, Melchior, has returned to witness the death of Jesus; Melchior crosses paths with Barabbas early on and becomes a kind of tutor, explaining to Barabbas the future meaning of Jesus. The second is Barabbas' fruitless love for Judith, sister of Judas Iscariot.

[6] Much of the novel is given over to lengthy speeches by Barabbas, Melchior, and Judith, along with others whom they encounter in the course of their movement through Jerusalem during the hours leading up to and through the crucifixion. Corelli attempts to depict the emotional atmosphere and the social environment of the city, but her heavy-handed dialogue and descriptions – as well as her blatant anti-Semitism – make the novel nearly unreadable today. For example, in one early scene when Melchior explains to Barabbas the latter's purpose within the drama being played out in Jerusalem at that moment, he says, “thy name, Barabbas, shall serve them [the Jews] as a leading title; 'tis *thou* shalt be their King of the Jews as far as this world holds . . .” (72). The future “triumph of the Jews” with Barabbas symbolizing their rejection of Jesus will be by “By fraud, by falsehood, by cunning, by worldly wisdom, by usury, by every poisoned arrow in Satan's quiver” (72). Melchior points to the symbolic significance of Barabbas for all generations: “Thou art the emblem of the race in days to come” (132).

[7] The problem with this reading of Barabbas – aside from its noxious, overt anti-Semitism – is that in every other way Barabbas is presented as a heroic figure in the novel. He was cast into jail for murdering a particularly unlikeable Pharisee, and his physical qualities are those of a rugged, masculine man who simply needs a little civilizing. His love for Judith is ultimately rejected as she slides into a kind of madness that is first brought on by her brother Judas' joining the Apostles and then accelerated by his suicide. Barabbas finally renounces his love for Judith, having tasted something of the new kind of love brought by Jesus. For instance, in one scene Barabbas accidentally encounters Mary, the mother of Jesus. As with every other scene, this one is played out with suffocating rhetoric, a kind of ultimate Sunday

School lesson: “Above the fragrant lilies, her radiant face grew warm with speechless eloquence – and lifting up her eyes she gazed upward – upward – far into the vistas of the ethereal blue . . .” (228-29). Mary obviously forgives Barabbas (without saying a word), which in turn propels him farther down the path of redemption. But at the same time, Barabbas must stand for the Jews who reject Jesus, so his character is unresolved. This does not matter much since the novel is so overwhelming that it fails as an attempt to imagine Barabbas as a figure that can reflect either an historically accurate rendition of a Jewish freedom fighter or an embodiment of the author’s or the readers’ present day concerns. Also, later artists hardly ever pick up the romantic direction Corelli takes.

[8] In contrast to Corelli’s over the top novel in which everyone’s speech sounds like a bad imitation of the King James Bible, the next attempt at utilizing Barabbas for artistic purposes is the play *Barabbas* by one of the most important Belgian writers of the twentieth century, Michel de Ghelderode. Though not as well known in America as other important European playwrights, Ghelderode (1898-1962) wrote over sixty plays, some of them still being produced. His 1928 play on Barabbas was commissioned as a Passion Play by the Flemish Popular Theater because his 1927 play on St. Francis of Assisi had been so successful. *Barabbas* also became a success upon its production. Ghelderode was a unique artist in that, in spite of his being recognized as an important author, most of his plays have never been produced, making *Barabbas* that much more important (American actor Bill Pullman played the title character in a 1986 Los Angeles Theater Center production of the play). Also in contrast to Corelli, Ghelderode is an artist commenting on an accelerating culture that seems on the verge of collapse: WWI, new philosophies of humanity like those propounded by Freud and Marx, revolutionary movements, incipient fascism, and modernist art have created the conditions in which a fully developed Barabbas begins to make sense.

[9] Ghelderode’s plays typically run toward the experimental, but not because he was ideologically committed to using avant garde techniques as a means of transgression and provocation such as the Dadaists and Expressionists or the later playwrights associated the Theater of the Absurd were often to do. Instead, Ghelderode’s unique dramatic vision grew out of his Flemish background that prompted him to utilize the anarchic and grotesque methods of representation of artists like Hieronymous Bosch along with narrative and theatrical practices drawn from traditional fairs and marionette shows. Though not a practicing Christian, Ghelderode nevertheless claimed to believe in the supernatural and his desire to dramatize the fear of physical death in a way paralleling Medieval art drives many of his plays, including *Barabbas*: “Only the brute can deny we are surrounded by the supernatural, that we lose our footing to the extent that reason advances its sloping territories, its nocturnal badlands” (Ghelderode: 13).

[10] *Barabbas* is a three-act play, in which Acts I and II present an interesting version of Barabbas who is consistently portrayed as a distorted parallel of Christ. Act III is more typical of Ghelderode’s style, exploding into a pandemonium in which nearly all the Gospel characters involved in the crucifixion come together along with Barabbas, a showman selling images of the “hero” Barabbas, and a dwarf clown dressed in imitation of Jesus when he was dressed as a mock King by soldiers. The play as a whole moves swiftly with characters coming and going, many of them shifting moods unexpectedly, all of the action leading to

Barabbas' frustrated desire to avenge Jesus, whom Barabbas recognizes as a kindred rebel born of the ordinary people.

[11] Act I opens with Barabbas in prison along with two unnamed thieves and with a third silent figure who turns out to be Jesus. Though various characters circulate through the act, the primary dramatic energy derives from an exchange between Barabbas and Judas, who has come to see Jesus. This Judas is merely a "fence" and not an "honorable brigand" like Barabbas himself, and most of Barabbas' characterization is shaped by his pride at being both a man of the common people and from being a fearless pillager of the wealthy, whom he despises. Ghelderode dispenses with any hint of Barabbas being a freedom fighter. He is something of a bully to the other two prisoners, and he is voluminous in his speeches, swinging quickly between arrogance and fear. Though Barabbas at first disdains the unspeaking Jesus for his pacifism, he does not hold Jesus entirely in contempt. Barabbas is ultimately expressive of what will become a rather typical twentieth century nihilistic apathy; speaking of his violence and Jesus' vision of peace, Barabbas says, "We haven't been able to alter anything of all that we found baneful, sickening, and hateful. And after our useless death, justice will still not be done, and untruth will reign no less supremely than it has reigned since human beings have existed" (69).

[12] Act II picks up the pace with more characters involved. This act also includes Judas but also – perhaps uniquely in literature – adds the wife of Judas, Yochabeth. Pilate and Pilate's wife, the Apostles, Caiaphas, and Herod all represent some point of view or psychological state, e.g., Herod the bored hedonist, Caiaphas the manipulative politician, the Apostles the shamed cowards, and so on. The action of Act II propels the plot forward, but nothing uniquely challenging or inspiring yet occurs to make this play a real artistic contribution to using the character Barabbas, though the act ends with Barabbas expressing his view on his release, setting up the final act. Barabbas fully despises the machinations that have led to his release and to the condemnation of Jesus. Barabbas first prays to God to understand why it is possible in this world to render a good (preserving the religious and public order) that actually is evil (condemning a clearly innocent man). In his desperate attempt to gain insight, Barabbas turns back toward his habitual anger and rebels against God: "God, You whom I shall insult every day, give me strength, courage, wickedness. O Thou of whom we only know the crushing anger and the unquenchable thirst for vengeance!" (93).

[13] In the final scene of Act II, Barabbas returns to his beggar army, kisses a dagger in dedication to his new service of vengeance, and proclaims: "Comrades, a new age is beginning. It is the advent of beggars. Everything has been overthrown. . . I, Barabbas, am the one who will smash the universe!" (94). This depiction of Barabbas as the ultimate rebel who will avenge Jesus makes it appear initially that Ghelderode is establishing a kind of revolutionary momentum in the text, using his play as a mouthpiece for modern iconoclastic rebellion against the religious, political, and social status quo. But Ghelderode is not simply a revolutionary artist, dedicating his art to progressivist causes. In Act III, Barabbas the rebel of the common people is deflected from his purposes not by the police but by that most Ghelderodian figure, a clown.

[14] Act III is the most fluid of the three acts, with all of the previous characters reappearing, along with three non-biblical ones: the Watcher, who periodically narrates the offstage

process of Christ's crucifixion; the Showman, a sort of entrepreneur/entertainer who sells drawings of the now famous Barabbas and who wants to hire Barabbas himself when he shows up; and a dwarf Clown, the employee of the Showman. The dramatic tension in this act arises from the Showman's loss of audience to the crucifixion and his desire to hire Barabbas to make money from the latter's sudden fame. As the Showman and the Clown interact with Barabbas, the Apostles, Mary Magdalene, Herod, and so forth come and go across the stage, expressing their reactions to the crucifixion. All of this activity creates a hurried, cramped environment that nearly explodes into violence at one point. The Showman attempts to persuade Barabbas to join his show, and he demonstrates what he has in mind by having the Clown dress as Jesus with robe and crown of thorns. Barabbas, however, disgusted with everything, takes over the Showman's play by turning it into real violence, choking the Clown and then threatening to crucify him to demonstrate to the Showman the accurate way Christ suffered silently. Letting the Clown go, Barabbas begins smashing the Showman's booth and equipment, saying, "I like destruction. Let the fire consume the booth and spread to the city and to Calvary. Let nothing but ruins be left. Let calcined bones be the only thing still in existence from this tainted society!" (111). The frenzy of this action continues as Peter, Mary Magdalene, and others cry out their despair, creating an increasingly chaotic scene with multiple actions going on (such as the spies, sent by the priests to assassinate Barabbas, circulating in the background). In the final confrontation, Barabbas pulls a knife and turns on the "cops" but the Clown slips up and stabs Barabbas in the back. Collapsing, Barabbas says, "Hey! Jesus! I too am bleeding. Sacrificed the same day . . . But you died for something. I am dying for nothing" (123).

[15] Ghelderode's purpose is ambiguous, but it seems that the play points to an essentially nihilistic world instead of suggesting revolutionary engagement with the forces of social and political oppression. Regardless of how one wants to interpret the play, it contrasts with Corelli's novel by showing how Barabbas can be used as a character in a serious work of literature. When a competent artist like Ghelderode turns to Barabbas, he or she is confronted with a figure who seems to speak to the needs and the fears of the twentieth century. Ghelderode's Barabbas is the kind of man who finds something compelling in Jesus but doesn't know what to do with him, having turned away from institutional religion. Ghelderode himself characterized the play as a "dramatization of man's desire for purity" (Gassner and Quinn: 356), but this purity seems no longer attainable, remaining an anachronistic dream that previous generations – such as Corelli's – believed was attainable.

[16] Following the genres of novel and drama, the long narrative poem by American poet and suffragette Sara Bard Field, *Barabbas: a Dramatic Narrative* (1932), sets forth another variation on the biblical figure, suggesting how Barabbas can appear variously as a reflection of different religious, social, political, and artistic needs of a writer. Indeed, Barabbas is a somewhat surprising choice for Field, and her surprisingly deft handling of his character indicates what might be done with him. Field (1882-1974) is hardly known today, but in the first decades of the twentieth century she was prominent in the suffrage movement, though she considered herself a writer first and an activist second. Born the daughter of missionary parents, Field left her first husband to marry the well known radical West Coast lawyer and poet Charles Erskine Scott Wood. With him, Field interacted with influential early twentieth century American writers like Vachel Lindsey, Robinson Jeffers, and John Steinbeck.

[17] Though book length verse narrative had begun dying out by the twentieth century, Field manages to use it to achieve a fully realized character for Barabbas and to generate a captivating plot. In nearly two hundred pages, in seven main chapters each with three to five sections, Field deftly uses a five line stanza form with an ABAAB rhyme scheme. Her novel-like treatment of Barabbas reverses the compressed time of Corelli's and Ghelderode's account from a few hours to the entire life of Barabbas, foreshadowing Lagerkvist's treatment several decades later. Also in contrast to Corelli and Ghelderode, Field centers her narrative upon the political. Barabbas is brought up among hard-core Zealots whose hatred of Rome's occupation determines every aspect of their lives. From infancy Barabbas is fed stories of the great martyrs of the movement and so when he first encounters Jesus he is hopeful at combining their groups since Jesus seems to be growing quickly in influence. But upon discovering the otherworldly pacifistic love for all, Roman or Jew, that Jesus preaches, Barabbas turns away with disgust to carry out his own righteous war:

[Jesus] rose to go and to my shame I felt
That locked duality of blood and tears:
From a strange reverence I would have knelt,
From a contemptuous anger would have dealt
A sword thrust. I did neither.

. . . I shook with passion that he would not prove
How ripe for him to pluck, the fruit of fate,
And there I stood, a mountain charred with hate.
And there he stood a mountain white with love (63).

This confrontation and parting of ways points to the central purpose of Field's poem, which is to advocate a universalist, anti-violence hope for the world. Field draws on her own post-Christian radicalism in drawing her portrait of Barabbas, yet she manages to keep her poem from falling into mere propaganda. Her Barabbas is well-rendered and unique, an individual who believes strongly, suffers deeply, and at the ends transforms in a credible way.

[18] A central development in the plot concerns the comradeship between Barabbas and a fellow Zealot, Joel. The Apostle Simon, another Zealot, contrasts with Joel by becoming an apostle of the rebel Jesus, whereas Joel remains a terrorist fired up with unquenchable hatred for all things Roman (and possessed of an equally strong hatred for all Jewish collaborators). Barabbas eventually and slowly moves from Joel's fury to Simon's faith but the change occurs painfully over his lifetime and with much disillusionment along the way. Field's narrative poem is surprisingly good given her identity as a lesser poetic talent. Without any sentimentalizing of Barabbas (completely opposite of Corelli's mawkish treatment), Field ends her work with Barabbas as an aged and physically broken man working as a hired shepherd. At the end of his failed life, a lame Barabbas sits on a hillside and experiences a vision of Christ judging all violence and summoning Barabbas home out of his mortal life. The poem expresses something of the pacifist Christian tradition, but it also stresses Jesus as a universal religious persona who stands beyond specific theological boundaries. Consonant with her own mixture of Buddhist and Unitarian leanings, Field turns Jesus into an avatar of universal religious yearnings, though she subsumes this non-creedal story within the strongly

detailed setting of first century Jewish culture. This helps anchor the poetry in a finely realized story instead of making it merely propaganda for a vague New Age spirituality.

[19] Field changed the direction that seemed to be emerging with the treatment of Barabbas in modern literature. Her book took the long view of his life, from birth to death. The next literary treatment, the novella *The Hour of Barabbas* by the German Otto Michael, returns to the compressed time frame used by Corelli and Ghelderode. This sets the poles for nearly all subsequent treatments of Barabbas: either a few hours or a lifetime perspective. Who Barabbas is and what he represents will also float between the poles of bandit and political fighter, and along the spectrum his conversion or lack of conversion to the message of Christ will determine the nature of the work.

[20] *The Hour of Barabbas* came out in English translation in 1943. Significantly, it was first published in German in 1938, with a brief introductory note stating that the novel was written “during the Munich crisis.” This connection is left unexplained, yet the novella (just 53 pages) is only slightly suggestive about the issues surrounding Hitler’s threats to Czechoslovakia. Instead, the novel’s stress on mobs and their manipulation transcends the geopolitical context of the late 1930’s Europe, becoming a story that easily fits any situation in which fickle crowds are whipped into a frenzy by anyone, whether for religious or for political gain, regardless of ideology at stake. It is worth reading once, a portrait of Barabbas as a self-deluded freedom fighter who thinks he is more important than he really is. He hears the crowd screaming for him and takes it for granted that he deserves his freedom. The final image is well worth the read, though, and it gives a unique twist to the biblical account by showing Barabbas forgotten by the mob who had shouted for his release, by the Jewish authorities who no longer need him, and by the Romans who understand that he is not much more than a common hoodlum and not the great liberator he fools himself into believing. Barabbas is left standing alone, wailing pitifully to be released since no one had taken the time to cut away the ropes binding his hands. His final desperate comment, “But they did love me!” (53), reduces him to a pathetic, whining failure, an image sharply different from the Barabbas of Corelli, Ghelderode, and Field.

[21] Following closely on *The Hour of Barabbas* came *Barabbas: a Novel of the Time of Jesus* (1946) by Emery Bekessy. Whereas Michael’s novella utilized some traditional Catholic iconography, such as the depictions of the flagellation of Jesus and references to the Via Dolorosa, Bekessy provides a more Protestant take on Barabbas. As with Michael’s novella, Bekessy’s novel lacks the qualities of artistic merit that should make it better known – as Ghelderode’s works should be. Bekessy’s *Barabbas* is competent enough, like thousands of novels produced and forgotten year after year, but it does not add distinctively to the narrative tradition beginning to form around Barabbas. Also like Michael’s novella, Bekessy’s indirectly comments on the geopolitical situation, though the latter’s work obviously comes after the war while Michael’s precedes it. However – also like Michael – Bekessy buries his commentary almost completely, rendering the novel as a message about perennial human behavior, though putting it this way might lend too much weight to the novel.

[22] In contrast to Michael, Bekessy takes the narrative route of Field and extends his treatment to cover years, though he does not fill in as much detail concerning the early life of Barabbas as Field does. The final image of Barabbas uniquely situates Bekessy’s novel

among the small but growing number of works utilizing Barabbas. In contrast to the previous versions of the character, this Barabbas is, at the end of his story, an implacable enemy of Jesus, literally “an apostle of hate for all ages and all nations” (324). Here, Barabbas is neither transformed by contact with Jesus nor does he recognize the error of fighting oppression through terroristic means. Barabbas remains dedicated to the politically and personally satisfying use of violence and hate, finding self identity in them and also believing that they will be the only effective weapons against the Roman occupiers. Bekessy clearly means to deliver a message similar to Field’s – Barabbas’ rage and murderous dedication to freedom is clearly wrong, whereas the transcending of national and ethnic identities taught by Jesus is the only way forward.

[23] Bekessy’s novel more or less disappeared from public view right after it appeared, though one review in *Commentary* attacks the novel not only for its lack of subtlety, invention, and historical accuracy, but also for what the reviewer perceives as anti-Semitism: “The author’s anti-Semitic zeal is exceeded only by the banality of his style – and his ignorance” (Chertoff: 99). The problem is that a very real lack of artistry is coupled with a deeply Evangelical Protestant suspicion of all outward forms of religion, not with a strident anti-Semitism. Bekessy makes it clear in his novel that any organized version of Christianity that relies on a clerical hierarchy turns one away from the genuine intentions of Jesus. Scattered through the novel are hints that Christianity will unfortunately evolve into more institutionalized forms of religious ritual that remove the practitioner from direct contact with the spirit of Jesus. Bekessy’s effort, though not exactly a failure artistically, is an interesting addition to the Barabbas tradition by inflecting the biblical accounts with an archetypal Protestant version of a hardened heart, one who refuses the invitation of Jesus to a new life.

[24] In a way, the writers covered so far set the stage for the most recognized and probably the best version of Barabbas, the novel *Barabbas* by Par Lagerkvist (published in Swedish in 1950 and in English in 1951, the year Lagerkvist won the Nobel Prize for literature). Lagerkvist had been writing for decades, but this novel launched him into international recognition and he is still considered the most influential Swedish novelist of the twentieth century. Of the writers who have dealt with Barabbas, only Ghelderode comes close to Lagerkvist in style and also in profundity of treatment.

[25] But Lagerkvist’s story deviates sharply from Ghelderode’s in several ways. Lagerkvist takes the direction established by Field and Bekessy by projecting the long-range view of Barabbas’ life. Though the novel opens at the point of Pilate’s releasing Barabbas, comments sprinkled through the story allow glimpses of Barabbas’ terrible childhood. Also unlike any other work on Barabbas, Lagerkvist’s novel presents him as an intellectually limited bandit, a bully of a man with a talent for survival through brute stamina. As Barabbas lives out the rest of his life dimly pondering the significance of his escape from certain crucifixion, he repeatedly runs into those who force him into an unwilling recognition of the claims of Jesus, though these claims are only half understood. Lagerkvist was not a practicing Christian when he wrote the novel – had indeed been a rather determined atheist when young – but at the point in his career when he wrote *Barabbas*, he had become more favorably disposed to the possibility of truth that transcended the merely physical realm. The journey of Barabbas through the remainder of his life reflects both Lagerkvist’s own

struggles with religious verities and with the general twentieth century secularism that had grown extensively by mid-century. Not a part of the Existentialist movement, Lagerkvist nevertheless foreshadowed many of its concerns in his early writings and on up through *Barabbas*, demonstrating that literary art can be used to explore Existential themes as writers like Camus and Sartre would also discover.

[26] The central theme of the novel is the inability of Barabbas to understand how the teaching of love that Jesus gave to his followers makes any sense in a brutalizing world. This theme is developed through a set of repeated images, especially those having to do with light and dark, and death and resurrection. References to eyes and gazing occur on nearly every page, and Barabbas' constant questioning of himself and others creates the pervasive ambiguity that envelopes the novel. The ending, for instance, finds Barabbas finally crucified, in Rome at the time of Nero, along with a number of Christians being crucified for putatively setting the fires that burned portions of the city. Barabbas had mistakenly assumed that the Christians *did* start the fires, and in a desperate attempt to settle his own persistent, painful doubt about Jesus, he actually torches some buildings. In the dungeon, though, he discovers his mistake, which separates him yet again from the followers of Christ, and as he dies on his cross the scene ambiguously positions him regarding the truth of faith:

Only Barabbas was left hanging there alone, still alive. When he felt death approaching, that which he had always been so afraid of, he said out into the darkness as though he were speaking to it:

– To thee I deliver up my soul.
And then he gave up the ghost (144).

Lagerkvist presents an intentionally unclear ending that refuses to resolve for Barabbas whether or not Jesus was who his followers claimed. Barabbas speaks to “it,” the darkness, isolated physically on the cross by his distance from the other executed Christians, but he is also emotionally and spiritually isolated, unable to understand the teaching about love or to accept the purported supernatural identity of the man he replaced so many decades ago.

[27] Lagerkvist has written a profoundly sad and beautiful novel, making it easily the most important utilization of Barabbas artistically. Lagerkvist achieves this power through a spare, even simple, prose, and through a persistent refusal to sentimentalize any aspect of his story. In introducing Lagerkvist to the Nobel presentation, Anders Osterling said, “On each page of Lagerkvist’s novel are words and ideas which, in their profound and fearful tenderness, carry at the very heart of their purity a message of terror. Their origin is in a simple, rustic life, laborious and frugal words” (203). Stylistically in *Barabbas*, Lagerkvist simulates a kind of limpid biblical prose that nevertheless deflects a simple reading (Spector: 68) in contrast to most of those who have expanded the few biblical details into longer narratives. Winston Weathers sums up Lagerkvist’s achievement in his fiction this way:

Not really Christian himself, Lagerkvist is remarkably true somehow to the Christian gospel, a gospel stripped to the living bone; and he is remarkably true somehow to the Pauline concept of the new man, rotting mankind blasted into new dimensions of life and glory (45).

Though Lagerkvist's Barabbas produces none of the volubility of Ghelderode's, both versions present him as little more than an overpowering criminal. Neither a freedom fighter nor "converted," this kind of Barabbas nevertheless is mesmerized by Jesus, unable to understand him or himself in relation to Jesus but unable to turn away. Whether or not this version will always provide the most artistically compelling version remains to be seen, but so far the existential Barabbas has been the most successful.

Film and Television (and a Literary Detour)

[28] Lagerkvist's *Barabbas* was turned into a film in 1953 by Swedish director Alf Sjöberg, but this version was completely overshadowed by the 1961 English language version starring Anthony Quinn as Barabbas. The screenplay was by the English dramatist Christopher Fry and produced by Dino de Laurentiis who would go on to a very successful career as a producer and director. Of all the Barabbas narratives so far produced, without doubt this film is the best known, the novel on which it is based being a distant second, and the rest of them virtually unknown and forgotten. Appearing at the crest of the wave of the Hollywood biblical epics of the 1950's, the movie *Barabbas* departs significantly from the by then standard movie treatment of biblical material. However, the film also departs significantly from the novel in a few key ways, losing some aspects of Lagerkvist's design without compensating by adding cinematically important elements of its own. Nevertheless, Quinn as Barabbas makes the film work as film, creating a believable version of the morose, nearly always silent, Barabbas of the novel. Though downplayed in the film, the confusion over and skepticism about love remains, as do some filmic equivalents of light and dark symbolism along with Barabbas' final inability to decide fully what to believe. The final scene of Barabbas on the cross is especially powerful, and though the film has some problems in the way it cleans up some of the main characters from the novel – such as the girl with the hair lip who becomes a beautiful saintly martyr, and Peter who is transformed from the oafish and somewhat dimwitted apostle into the heroic and intelligent martyr – it still manages to convey the essential characterization of Barabbas through the remarkable acting of Quinn.

[29] With the two movie versions of Lagerkvist's novel (the 1951 version is currently unavailable), the Barabbas narrative has mostly turned toward visual media. Also appearing in 1961, for example, Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* presents Barabbas as a pivotal character in this revisioning of the Gospels. Most Jesus films before and after Ray's either cut out Barabbas entirely or merely refer to him or show him briefly. In fact, Ray's film not only made Barabbas a significant character in the story line, it really brought back to filmmaking a willingness to represent Jesus since the last movie based on the Gospels was Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927). Hollywood biblical epics like *The Robe* (1953) and *Ben Hur* (1959) visually referred to Jesus in passing, but Ray's film began a flow of movies about Jesus stretching from Passolini's *Gospel According to Matthew* (1964) to Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

[30] *King of Kings* presents Barabbas as a principled freedom fighter waging guerilla warfare against the Romans. An early scene shows him leading an ambush against the new Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, and the term "patriots" is applied to the rebels without irony as an accurate description. Echoing some of the earlier Barabbas narratives, Barabbas here seeks to meet Jesus in order to assess Jesus' usefulness to his own aims. For instance, in this

film's version of the woman caught in adultery, one man actually starts to throw a stone after Jesus says, "Let him who is among you without sin cast the first stone." But Barabbas restrains the man, wanting to understand the motives of Jesus. However, later upon seeing Jesus consort with the hated tax collectors, Barabbas stomps away, recognizing the irreconcilable gap between him and Jesus.

[31] Indeed, this film consistently pairs Jesus with Barabbas, with Judas serving as a link between the two story lines that coalesce around Jesus' Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem. It is at this time that Barabbas wants to instigate a full-scale rebellion, and one scene shows a spring pouring out red water, indicating the hidden underground workshop where Barabbas' men are forging their weapons. The blood Barabbas wishes to shed contrasts with the blood Jesus will shed, and this contrast is played up with maximum melodrama. Ray's movie is, in fact, a strange mishmash of scenes from the four Gospels with the interpolated Barabbas plot, and it is all tied together with some often ridiculously sounding faux biblical material (e.g., Orson Welles narrating lines such as "and knowing the sum thereof, Jesus spent time with his mother" with an almost self-parodying delivery).

[32] In the failed insurrection, Barabbas is caught, jailed, and claims that he and Jesus have sought the same thing – freedom. The famous exchange is made, and Barabbas, foreshadowing the image of Satan and Mary in Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, walks along in the crowd as Jesus makes his way to Calvary. Seeing Jesus on the cross, Barabbas ponders, "That man is dying in my place. Why should he do that? I never did anything for him." Barabbas disappears from the film at this point, and the viewer is left to wonder if this confrontation provokes a crisis of faith or doubt.

[33] Ray's version of Barabbas parallels some of the previous narratives, such as Field's and Bekessy's, in whose versions Barabbas meets Jesus several times before their final meeting before Pilate. But *King of Kings* loses any dramatic appeal it might have had through its poor production values and stilted dialogue. Barabbas speaks like an American soldier, his "kilt" is too short, his hair and beard look obviously false, and his questioning of his own values as a freedom fighter remain unconvincing. Barabbas is positively played as a manly character who would resonate with American audiences of 1961, but his ambiguous status and unconvincing looks detract from any psychologically, socially, politically, or religiously grounded purpose for his character. The movie opens with holocaust-like images of Romans executing Jews, and thus Barabbas' loathing of the occupiers is given some basis. Geoff Andrew, in a chapter on *King of Kings* from his book on Ray's films, tries to argue that this is one of the best Jesus films and that the contrast drawn between Jesus and Barabbas helps present Jefferey Hunter's Jesus as one of the "richest of all films portraying the life of Christ" (142). But the same year *King of Kings* appeared, so did Richard Fleischer's film version of Lagarkvist's *Barabbas*, and the contrast between the two could not be stronger, at least in terms of how Barabbas is portrayed. Although the film departs from the novel in some important ways and not always for the best, Quinn's Barabbas nevertheless manages to bring into the visual medium something of the conflicted, Christ-haunted character. Even taken on its own terms aside from the literary source material, *Barabbas* is much more successful than *King of Kings*. Ray's film aptly deserves the criticism it has received, Andrew's defense notwithstanding, and pairing the two movies reveals both how Barabbas can be used for maximum artistic effect and for maximum Hollywood fumbling.

[34] The shift to visual media continues with the next Barabbas narrative, this time with television. In 1977 Franco Zeffereilli's six-hour mini-series *Jesus of Nazareth* aired, though since then most viewers have probably seen the three-hour edited version instead. Following the lead of *King of Kings*, *Jesus of Nazareth* links Judas with Barabbas, though in the mini-series Barabbas plays a much less prominent role than in the film. Instead of forming a plot line parallel to the main narrative thread, Barabbas plays a much lesser role compared to Judas who, in this version, is an idealist who wants to bring peace and who sees Jesus as the means to successfully liberating the Jews. In a now standard scenario, Barabbas, clearly marked here as a Zealot and not as a criminal, confronts Jesus to force either a rapprochement with the Zealots or a parting of ways. Taking the road of pacifism, Jesus disappoints Barabbas who must follow his own path. In the struggle for rightly conceptualizing their rebellion against Rome, Judas and Barabbas also part ways from each other, but Judas mistakenly follows Jesus as merely a kinder, gentler liberator. Zeffereilli's Jesus, though, comes off as an unworldly figure who in a way echoes the pacifist universalist of Field's poem. Even more than *King of Kings*, *Jesus of Nazareth* writes into the bare Gospel accounts all manner of back story and dialogue, fundamentally altering the straightforward accounts of Jesus with a multitude of big name stars who chew their scenes (an example of this over the top approach is American tough guy actor Stacy Keach playing Barabbas with a bogus Middle Eastern accent whereas British actor Robert Powell as Jesus retains his elegant native accent). After his brief encounter with Jesus in the temple precincts, Barabbas disappears from the story, not even being brought back at the sentencing by Pilate.

[35] Throughout the twentieth century (and slightly before, beginning with Corelli), Barabbas has been treated by Catholics, Protestants, agnostics, and Unitarians. In 1996, an earnest Evangelical novelist, Grace Johnson, brought out her novel *The Rebel*. Along with Corelli's, Michael's, and Bekessy's works, Johnson's novel does not aspire to any serious artistic purposes, though the work does manage to do more than simplistically use Barabbas as an occasion to convert her readers. Paralleling Corelli, Johnson adds a large element of romantic interest to Barabbas, and like Field, Johnson casts her story widely, tracing the early years to the final years of the Rebel. She also manages to combine several of the different identities given to Barabbas, showing him as a criminal whose success unwittingly propels him into leadership, from which point he actually begins to believe his own fantasies of being the Messiah who will unify the various bands of rebels into one army. By driving out the Romans, Barabbas will go on to reform the corrupt temple hierarchy, becoming a new Holy King of Israel. This is the framework for a potentially compelling story, and parts of the novel aspire to some dramatically convincing re-creations of the social, religious, and political contexts of the day, but in the end the modern language of falling in love and the stress on Evangelical individualism regarding religious belief make the novel suitable only for its probable intended audience, which is female Evangelicals.

[36] In 2000 another television mini-series made Barabbas a central character, but the treatment was so unique and successful that it bears little comparison with Zeffereilli's: *Tales from the Madhouse*, directed and partly written by British television director Norman Stone. The series consists of eight fifteen-minute stories told by a minor character from the Gospels. The story-tellers are set in a Victorian asylum that has been converted from a country mansion, with each character dwelling in a room symbolically appropriate for his or

her characterization. The distancing effect produced by the setting (were they really there with Jesus, or are these just insane people?) and their intense personal reflections on what their encounter with Jesus means (the actors speak directly to the camera), help make the series remarkably effective.

[37] Barabbas, played by British actor Joss Ackland, is portrayed as an old, broken down socialist who obsessively polishes some worn out boots. Located in a room in the attic, Barabbas is surrounded by memorabilia of the cause. He was a rebel, an idea-crammed revolutionary who was utterly dedicated, even breaking into a verse of “The Internationale” at one point, having worked himself into a near frenzy remembering his participation in the movement. But the present-tense isolation and age bring him back to the failure of the cause, and this failure is greatly amplified by his years of brooding on his encounter with Jesus. As Barabbas recalls the scene, as he was being taken out of the jail, he sees Jesus at a distance behind bars. Jesus says something inaudible to Barabbas, but Barabbas can tell that Jesus is mouthing the words “thank you” to him. Going back to his comrades, Barabbas calls Jesus a “loser,” and even after all these years he still considers him a loser, but Barabbas has obviously remained obsessed with not only the meaning of the brief encounter but with the man himself. At the end of the short piece and as the camera pulls away from the closeup that most of the scene utilizes, Barabbas is revealed to be sitting in an old-fashioned wheelchair while still polishing the useless boots. He tells his audience that one never knows when the revolution might occur and it is good to be ready in any case.

[38] This is the briefest of all the Barabbas narratives so far, and yet artistically it is one of the most powerful. Effectively utilizing the parameters of the medium of television, the fifteen-minute drama doubly defamiliarizes the biblical story by placing Barabbas as a Red and as a Victorian in a lunatic asylum. Barabbas here is clearly aligned with his identity as a rebel, and he even obliquely admits at one point to some of the atrocities he helped commit in the name of Revolution. Yet he also hesitantly admits that his total dedication deprived him of an ordinary family life, psychologically reinforcing his physical isolation. The utter sadness of his condition is matched only by Lagerkist’s and Quinn’s Barabbas, and Stone’s little drama reaches back to Ghelderode’s in showing how dramatically powerful the Barabbas character can be if used in a theater-like setting. It is surprising that more has not been made of Barabbas as a revolutionary figure, but even with Stone’s version that stresses this, Barabbas still links up with Ghelderode’s and Lagerkvist’s in showing how the encounter with Jesus is personally shattering even as the meaning of that encounter remains inscrutable.

Music

[39] The most recent appearance of Barabbas in narrative art marks a major shift in medium, and it along with *Tales from the Madhouse* suggest that Barabbas might remain a character of interest to various artists into the twenty-first century. Finnish composer Aulis Sallinen composed *The Barabbas Dialogues* in 2002, a fifty-minute work that was commissioned by the Naanti Music Festival. Made of seven dialogues, the piece does not tell a story but instead sets a mood by using six characters, including Barabbas, Judas, an unnamed Apostle, and three other unnamed figures. The dialogues derive either from poems by Finnish poet Lassi Nummi or from the Finnish translation of the Bible. Echoing older artistic manifestations of

Northern European Existentialism (such as Bergman's films), Sallinen creates an ambience of longing, loss, and confusion within the context of transient mortal beauty. A Maiden and a Youth sing of love, whereas Barabbas and the Woman sing of the disappointments of life. Judas and the Apostle echo these sentiments, bringing the weight of the dialogues to the side of ambiguity and doubt. Nevertheless, hope is held out, though this hope is evanescent, completely detached from Christ, who is mentioned only briefly. Barabbas also briefly mentions his struggle against the power of Rome, but the emphasis is placed more on Barabbas being a voice of one who has experienced the mutability of human endeavor. At the end of dialogue six, Barabbas and the Woman sing:

In the confined limitations of life is its beauty
Beauty is also in its doing good, its gentle thought;
hidden in them lie virtue's constancy, immortality.
We do not know what else there is. As through a
dimly glowing alabaster vase we see,
we, full of hope, see divinity,
all the gods of all mankind,
through all the ages (40).

Sallinen's Barabbas comes closest to the Barabbas of the other two Europeans, Gheldrode and Lagerkvist, speaking out of a heavily secularized Europe. Even so, Sallinen's comment on Barabbas fits all the works based on him:

Barabbas is a character who excites the imagination. His name is only glimpsed in the record of history which Christianity regards as one of its main pillars. It is pointless to concern ourselves with who really played this important minor role: bandit, murderer, or freedom fighter? But, we can always imagine what he might have been like (12).

Conclusion

[40] At the beginning of the twentieth century, Oswald Spengler claimed in his infamous 1918 work *Decline of the West* that modern Western civilization was Faustian. But the endless striving for new knowledge and power had just about run its cycle, placing the West in the winter of its life. George Bernard Shaw, on the other hand, claimed in the preface to his 1916 anti-Christian play *Androcles and the Lion* that Western society was "Barabbesque" (525). Shaw meant that the West had embraced Christ on the cross as an impossible ideal but in actual practice was like Barabbas, a murderous villain. Shaw uses Barabbas as a metaphor for the West, claiming that Christendom had used the teachings of Jesus as a justifying veneer while implementing violent authoritarianism that was the opposite of all that Jesus stood for. As Shaw put it, "The choice of Barabbas thus appears as a popular choice of the militant advocate of physical force as against the unresisting advocate of mercy" (540). Shaw was an aggressive atheist who nevertheless claimed that the message of Jesus – the message that so confused Lagerkvist's Barabbas – contains the true way for secular humanity to follow. In reality, though, "Barabbas is triumphant everywhere; and the final use he makes of his triumph is to lead us all to suicide with heroic gestures and resounding lies" (551). Shaw goes on from this observation to explain his own rather ridiculous faith in the Life Force that would help some people somehow evolve beyond their Barabbesque barbarism and religious

hypocrisy, but his metaphor compares interestingly with Spengler's claim that we dwell in a Faustian society. Perhaps.

[41] But for the more ordinary person, the one outside of or merely on the margins of social, economic, religious, and political power, Barabbas is also us. The majority of us stand aside, away from the military thugs and the religious experts, knowing ourselves to be unholy and confused. As the works discussed here can show and in contrast to Shaw's claim that Western civilization is Barabbesque, modern individuals can feel an intuitive identification with Barabbas. In any event, both Spengler and Shaw were wrong in one way. Faust and Barabbas are still with us, and we do not seem to be evolving or devolving beyond them any time soon. Faust still remains a potent figure of aggressive, hubristic individualism. But Barabbas also still signifies a person of unstable identity and full of self-doubt, an accidental man who, in the most powerful representations of him, is something of a loner who realizes that all his verities have been put into doubt by Jesus.

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