Pär Lagerkvist, *Barabbas* and the Nobel Prize for Literature

Håkan Möller*

University of Gothenburg

hakan.moller@lir.gu.se

Abstract

Barabbas (1950) and the Nobel Prize of 1951 made Pär Lagerkvist—for a while—world-famous. In this article, I give an account of what the rapid and considerable success of *Barabbas* involved and how this commercial success also considerably increased Lagerkvist's chances of winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. His name had already been mentioned several years running, but it took courage to award the prize yet again to a Scandinavian writer, let alone to a Swede who was also one of the Swedish Academy's own members. How this problem affected the preliminary discussions, together with reactions in the press, and how the members of the Swedish Academy's Nobel committee argued round this sensitive question, are subjected to a comprehensive analysis.

Keywords

Pär Lagerkvist – *Barabbas* – book-market – reception – Nobel Prize for Literature – Swedish Academy

Introduction

Few Swedish writers have enjoyed more international breakthrough in the twentieth century than Pär Lagerkvist. Two related factors decisive in this respect occurred in quick succession: his novel *Barabbas* was published to great

* Thanks to my translator and collaborator, Silvester Mazzarella.

acclaim in 1950, and the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to him the following year. During the early 1990s he was still described by his publishers as a “giant of international publishing,” at a time when his work could be read in thirty three languages; *Barabbas* itself has also been translated into thirty languages (Enderlein).¹

The novel is a symbol-laden version of the story of a criminal who was pardoned in exchange for Jesus in the New Testament. We follow Barabbas the “robber” as he is first called in St John’s Gospel—from Golgotha where he witnesses Jesus’ crucifixion and death, via his meeting with Christians in Jerusalem and imprisonment in the copper mines of Cyprus, to his own eventual crucifixion in Rome.

Barabbas—Masterpiece and Bestseller

An advertisement for Lagerkvist’s *Barabbas* placed by its publishers, Bonniers, on the Christmas Eve of 1950 in important newspapers in Stockholm, contained a sensational statement: “50 thousandth copy in the press” (*Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Stockholms-Tidningen* and *Morgon-Tidningen* 24 December 1950). The novel had been in bookshops since 6 September, and had reached its eighth impression on 23 December. During the first four months, 47,000 copies had been printed.

Not only this, but it was unusual for a Swedish novel to be published so rapidly in so many countries as *Barabbas*. This gave rise to special notices in the press, telling that Lagerkvist’s latest book has come out in eight countries. By New Year 1951, the publishers were also claiming that “Sweden’s book of the year” (*Svenska Dagbladet* 12 September 1950) was turning into an international bestseller: “Translated or in process of being translated in 9 countries” (*Dagens Nyheter* and *Expressen* 31 December 1950; *Svenska Dagbladet* 2 January 1951). As its sales increased, its promotion in newspapers became ever more wordy and bombastic. In fact, mere words were inadequate for succinct descriptions of what had become an almost unbelievable public success: “Everyone wants to read it.” A well-known and frequently-used advertising technique for books to quote complimentary excerpts from reviews, such as: “One of the few Swedish prose works that may expect to become immortal in the true meaning of the

1 Charlotte Enderlein was the head of Bonniers’ Foreign Rights department. Besides, there still seemed to be some interest in his writing in at least some places outside the Nordic countries in the early 1990s, when a new edition of many of his works was in preparation in Italy.

word.” (*Dagens Nyheter* 10 January 1951; *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Stockholms Tidningen* 11 January 1951; *Sydsvenska Dagbladet Snällposten* 12 January 1951; and *Göteborgs-Posten* 13 January 1951). Barely a year later this quote had been replaced in advertisements for the novel, which had now reached 55 thousand copies printed, by a hyperbolic quotation from a review, on 7 December 1950, by Marcel Brion in the French *Le Monde*: “The unprecedented human value and universal importance of this book cannot possibly be doubted” (*Dagens Nyheter* 9 February 1951; *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Stockholms Tidningen*, *Morgon Tidningen* 13 February 1951; *Sydsvenska Dagbladet Snällposten* and *Göteborgs-Posten* 15 February 1951). A few months later, this had been replaced by yet another quotation from the same Parisian daily—no less far-fetched than its predecessor: “We are rarely brought face-to-face with a work of such depth and brilliance as this” (*Dagens Nyheter* and *Expressen* 5 March 1951; *Stockholms Tidningen* and *Svenska Dagbladet* 6 March 1951).

This life story of a New Testament criminal was an immediate and huge sales success. The first edition was reprinted for the thirteenth time in October 1952, so that in two years 89,000 copies had left the press. This sales success would continue into the next millennium. If we take the novel's appearance in various collected works, cheap editions, book club versions and paperbacks, by the first years of the twenty-first century it had reached more than 300,000 printed copies.² Nor were the publishers slow to introduce *Barabbas* on the international market. The many translations that came out in the year of its first publication and in 1951 are evidence of remarkably widespread diffusion: Danish, Finnish, French, German and Norwegian in 1950, and Armenian, Flemish, English, Italian and Latvian in 1951 (Ryberg 14).

Barabbas and the Nobel Prize for Literature 1951

The publication of *Barabbas* was perfectly timed for the Nobel Prize, though Lagerkvist had already been mentioned as a possible candidate for this several years before. He had first been proposed in 1947 by the literary historian and academician Henrik Schück. Schück, then 91 years old, had two Lagerkvist works in mind: a play—*The Man Without a Soul*—and the novel *The Dwarf*

2 Between June 1950 and October 1952, 89,000 copies of *Barabbas* were printed. The novel then came out in the Swallow (Svalan) Series (1952) and B.F.B (Bonniers Peoples' Library Cheap Series, 1955) and Prose Vol. 6 (1958), Bonniers Library (1961–1965) and the Delfin series (paperback, 1966–2000). Including the last Delfin series edition, 6,000 copies, altogether 313,000 copies of *Barabbas* had been printed (information from Bonniers' archive, Stockholm).

(Förslagsskrivelser 1947).³ According to the literary critic and writer Sten Selander, *The Dwarf* had had an overwhelming effect on the elderly literary historian. But the Nobel Committee's notes reveal that Lagerkvist had asked not to be considered for the prize on this occasion and for this reason was not discussed as a possible candidate (*Nobelpriset* 375). The same story was repeated two years later. This time the proposer was Erik Ekelund, Professor of the History of Literature at Åbo Akademi in Finland, but again Lagerkvist asked not to be "taken into consideration" (*Nobelpriset* 398). The Nobel committee respected Lagerkvist's wish, but added that they wished to "record that the Academy had received" the proposal, presumably meaning that they were now more impressed by it than they had been two years before (*Nobelpriset* 400).

It was not only the Swedish Academy's Nobel committee whose attention had been drawn to Lagerkvist's name, but also the press in its annual speculations on various candidates. Rumors began in *Expressen* on 3 November 1949, when the question was raised as to whether it was not high time for the prize to go to a native Swedish writer. Lagerkvist was the favorite, with Eyvind Johnson and Vilhelm Moberg not considered quite sufficiently mature yet for the big prize. While there was plenty of speculation in the evening press about a possible native prizewinner, it seems no further progress was made that year by the Nobel committee. No agreement could be reached on any obvious candidate among the names mentioned, so the subject was put aside until the following year (*Nobelpriset* 403–409).

On 8 February 1950, Lagerkvist's name appeared among the hottest tips for the prize in *Aftonbladet*. His name had been put forward by the writer's associations of both Sweden and Norway, adding strength to his candidacy. Several papers also mentioned that the council of the Norwegian writers' association was unanimous in its support for Lagerkvist, who had "achieved mastery in all branches of literature," while they also emphasized the expressive originality of his writing. His most striking qualities, in other words, were range of genre, with expressivity and originality of form. According to *Aftonbladet*, his rivals for the 1950 prize were Martin Andersen Nexö, Arnulf Överland, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway and Thornton Wilder. That year, the Danish PEN-club topped their list with their own Andersen Nexö and Thornton Wilder.

If one turns aside from the press's generally rather narrow and rumor-prone views to an enquiry directed by the editors of *Bonniers Litterära Magasin* to a number of foreign critics to ask which writers they considered best quali-

3 Henrik Schück's proposal is dated 5 December 1946.

fied for the 1950 Nobel Prize, a very different picture emerges. Each of these foreign critics was asked to nominate one writer from their own country plus one writer from elsewhere. The replies to this questionnaire clearly underlined Lagerkvist's strong position in the Nordic countries but, even so, only three out of seven Nordic critics nominated him (Lauri Viljanen in *Helsingin Sanomat*, Paul Gjesdahl in *Arbeiderbladet*, and Tom Kristensen in the Danish *Politiken*). On the other hand, no other foreign writer received more votes from Nordic critics than Lagerkvist did. Yet no critic from outside the Nordic countries nominated Lagerkvist at all. The English critic V.S. Pritchett of *The New Statesman* chose François Mauriac, and his fellow-Englishman Alan Pryce-Jones of *The Times Literary Supplement* preferred Ortega y Gasset. Maurice Blanchot, in *Critique*, nominated the philosopher Martin Heidegger, and his fellow-Frenchmen Gabriel Marcel, in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, picked Giuseppe Ungaretti. But none of the English or French suggestions appeared among the other critics' choices; in USA, Malcolm Cowley suggested Mikhail Sholokhov, and Philip Rahv favored André Malraux; in Italy, Francesco Flora suggested Paul Claudel; in Brazil, Manuela Bandeira picked Benedetto Croce; in Argentina, Victoria Campo chose Alfonso Reyes; in Switzerland, Max Rychner suggested William Faulkner. Finally, Benno Reiffenberg of the German *Die Gegenwart* offered the unorthodox suggestion of awarding the current year's Nobel Prize for Literature to the editorial board of the English periodical *Punch*. In other words, the answers offered by the critics to this questionnaire named no foreign writer more than once, thus offering no outstanding candidates for the prize. Admittedly, Hemingway was mentioned twice by Nordic critics, but in neither case as their sole candidate. One must also remember that the questionnaire had presumably already been sent out in 1949, while its answers were published at the beginning of 1950, at a time when *Barabbas* had not yet been published and Lagerkvist was still little-known outside the Nordic countries.

There can be no doubt that Lagerkvist's already positive reputation in Scandinavia, built up not least through his anti-fascist political poetry of the 1930s and 1940s, was influential in the decision to award him the Nobel Prize in 1951. Also relevant was the fact that the number of those proposing Lagerkvist had increased to a remarkable degree by the time the prize was awarded in 1951. It was now no longer a case of a single member of the Academy proposing his name, but the combined Nordic Writers' Associations through their respective chairmen: Gunnar Beskow (Sweden), Hans Heiberg (Norway), Ragnar Ekelund (Finland) and Cai M. Woel (Denmark). In addition, no fewer than three members of the Academy now voted for Lagerkvist: in addition to Hjalmar Gullberg, already positively-inclined, were Martin Lamm and Harry Martinson (*Nobelpriset* 411).

Barabbas was already a bestseller by the beginning of November 1950, and had also had a certain international impact. The success of the novel came to be seen by many during that autumn as proof of its suitability as a candidate for the Nobel Prize. More than one reviewer or commentator drew attention to the relationship between this widely praised novel, its triumph both at home and abroad, and Lagerkvist's rising stock in the Nobel Prize stakes.⁴ One reason for such wide emphasis on the relationship between the novel and the possibility of a Nobel Prize—which was so widely commented on—was without doubt a message circulated by the Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå (TT, or Newspaper Telegraph Agency) to the Swedish press. This message revealed that the publisher, Åke Bonnier, referring to an advertisement for the novel in New York, had hinted that the next Nobel Prize for Literature might well go to Lagerkvist: "I have heard in literary circles in Stockholm that Pär Lagerkvist will get this year's Nobel Prize for his 'Barabbas', said the publisher Åke Bonnier who arrived in America on Sunday on board the ms 'Gripsholm'" (*Skånska Dagbladet* 17 October 1950).⁵ In other words, the rumor was already doing the rounds in autumn 1950, the year when the prize had gone to Bertrand Russell, as well as the prize already reserved from 1949 for William Faulkner.

The link between the launch of *Barabbas* abroad and the increasing strength of Lagerkvist's position as a leading candidate for the Nobel Prize was obvious to many. In January 1951, the evening paper *Expressen* clearly hinted at this possibility and, at the same time, at the Swedish Academy's need to keep itself free from accusations of literary nepotism:

Pär Lagerkvist got his *Barabbas* out in good time in French translation, since when words of praise have rained on it like flowers, from among others André Gide, and most recently on 11 January in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*—from René Lalou. One may wonder whether the publishers' aim is to prepare the ground for a Nobel award and inspire courage in the members of the Swedish Academy, who always run the risk of bitter criticism abroad when they give the prize to a Swede.

Expressen 30 January 1951

4 As one among many examples may be mentioned *Hudiksvalls Nyheter* of 20 October 1950, under the headline "Nobel Prize for Barabbas?" The reviewer in this country paper was clearly adding to an already popular argument in favor of the novel getting the prize: "Let our modest little commentary add to the suggestion that Lagerkvist should get the Nobel Prize for Barabbas."

5 See also, for example, *Göteborgs Posten*.

This attention in France also attracted attention at home. In her “Popular if Literary” column in *Kvällsposten*, Rita Vinde referred to the well-known French literary critic André Rousseau’s widely reported article on Lagerkvist’s novel in *Le Figaro Littéraire*: “It is seldom that a foreign writer is praised so emphatically in *Figaro Littéraire*—I think the last time such a thing happened was to Strindberg.” She finished with the fact, familiar in this context, “that several earlier French Nobel Prize winners for literature—Gide and Martin du Gard—had suggested Lagerkvist for the next year’s Nobel Prize” (Vinde). This naming of him in the same breath as Strindberg had first occurred during his schooldays to draw attention to his profile and aspirations, and later to place him as a promising expressionist playwright. Now, forty years later, it was repeated to draw attention to his status as one of the very few Swedish writers with names familiar outside Sweden. The whole story of Lagerkvist’s success lay in this simple comparison of the two Swedish writers in France. That *Barabbas* had achieved such a remarkable breakthrough expressly in France was reinforced not only by the many columns of reviews and articles, but also by the fact that it had won a prize that spring from the Club Français du Livres for the best foreign novel in French translation.⁶

One person who had worked with particularly well-directed energy to ensure that *Barabbas* was noticed by the most important writers in France was Lucien Maury, the man who had ensured the success of Lagerkvist’s earlier novel, *The Dwarf*. In a letter of late February 1951, Lagerkvist thanked Maury for his efforts, which had already given results:

What you have done for *Barabbas*’ reception in France through your contacts in the literary world and your attention to people who can be expected to be interested in a work of this kind, cannot be praised too highly. Without you not much could have been achieved, despite the fact that the book has qualities that may indeed arouse interest outside Sweden. It is not enough for a book to be good—we both of us well know how all-consuming indifference can be and how difficult it can be to combat inertia. That such appreciation comes from France naturally fills

6 See, among other things, the notice in *Le Parisien Libéré* (16 June) and in *Aftonbladet* (7 July) in 1951. In the same year, bigger reviews and articles on *Barabbas* appeared in the French press: *Nouvelles littéraires* (11 January), *Le Figaro littéraire* (10 February), *République du Var* (11 February), *Le Table Ronde* (March), *Christianisme social* (March), *Carrefour* 28:3, *L’Education Nationale* (1 March), *L’Observateur* (1 March), *Combat* (15 March), *La Dépêche* (17 March), and *Réforme* (24 March). Articles also appeared in Switzerland in *Gazette de Lausanne* (24–25 March) and in Belgium in *Le Soir*.

me with particular pleasure; I attach more importance to my reception there than anywhere else. And that three of the most famous names in French literature and literary history have suggested me for the Nobel Prize has much greater significance for me than being valued elsewhere.

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The Swedish press was quick to respond to notices of the success of *Barabbas* from abroad. On 26 October, 1950, *Dagens Nyheter* published a letter from André Gide to Maury, from which it appeared that it was Maury who had first drawn Gide's attention to the novel. Gide's letter was later published as a foreword to the French translation as well as the English and American editions of the novel. How important Gide's letter may really have been for the novel's success in France has been disputed. But there can be no question that it contributed to the notice Lagerkvist's writing as a whole attracted in France at that time (Eriksson 13–15). But more important for long-term progress on the foreign market were cultural figures who worked in various ways to spread knowledge of Swedish culture and literature in general. Such leading figures for the English-language market were Peter Tennant and Erik Mesterton, and for the French market Maury and C.G. Bjurström (Eriksson 15–16). Lagerkvist's own irrepressible commitment and his own tireless work as an entrepreneur took him a long way, but without this enthusiastic network abroad it would have been extremely difficult for his writing to have reached an international public.

In November 1951, Lagerkvist's name reached a climax in the preliminary discussions on the choice of the next Nobel Prize winner. Even if several Nordic writers were named in the Swedish press, such as Laxness, Andersen-Nexö and Øverland, speculation tended to be one-way: Pär Lagerkvist would be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for the current year. A few days before the final announcement, *Svenska Morgonbladet* conducted an enquiry on 10 November 1951, asking Swedish authors and other cultural figures who they would most like to see winning the Prize. Their favorite candidate was without question Pär Lagerkvist.

Lagerkvist as a Nobel Prize Candidate

The increasing interest in the Swedish press in Lagerkvist as a potential Nobel prizewinner in the late 1940s and thereafter was naturally related to his ever stronger standing in discussions within the Nobel committee. We have already seen evidence of suggestions from national writers' associations in the Nordic countries.

How did Lagerkvist's candidacy appear in these more detailed suggestions? What part did *Barabbas* play in the suggestions leading up to the 1951 prize and how did these suggestions measure up to ideals the post-war Nobel committee considered particularly relevant in choosing prizewinners?

Kjell Espmark has maintained that the selection of T.S. Eliot in 1948 made it clear that new values were becoming prominent. It was above all the chairman of the 1948 Nobel committee, Anders Österling, who represented this change of direction. The increased representation of actual writers on the Nobel committee, Espmark believes, was intended to reinforce this new direction. In Sigfrid Siwertz and Hjalmar Gullberg, Österling was given two fellow-reformers in his battle on behalf of literary "pioneers" (Espmark 103 ff.). The frequently-recurring value-loaded keywords Espmark has drawn attention to, were—in addition to "pioneer," "guide," "precursor," "renewer" and "regenerator"—used to define leading writers considered "daring" or "adventurous" in the 1946–1960 period. A striking example was the "experimenter" William Faulkner (Espmark 110–119). But as Espmark has also observed, it was important to be aware of the tension between these dominating ideal pioneers and outstanding traditional writers who were solitary "masters" in the same period (Espmark 116). Where should Lagerkvist be placed in this exciting field and on what lines could one argue for him as a prize candidate in the most thorough-going of these suggestions?

Erik Ekelund, professor at Åbo Akademi, who proposed Lagerkvist to the Nobel committee in 1949 seems to have been deliberately appealing to the pioneer-oriented aspect of the committee. Lagerkvist, earlier defined as an expressionist, was now stated to be "one marking out the way, a prototype" of "the greatest possible importance," not only in Sweden but in Ekelund's Finland too. It is worth noting that Ekelund also emphasized Lagerkvist's prestigious status as a battling humanist. It was in this role, as Ekelund saw it, that Lagerkvist fulfilled the expressed will of the founder that the prize should go to a writer who had "produced the most outstanding work from an idealistic point of view" (Förslagsskrivelser 1949).

Ekelund's misreading of the word "ideal" as "idealistic" is typical of the confusion that Nobel's expression had long given rise to during the history of the Prize. Thus Ekelund placed himself firmly in the tradition that during the first decade of the Prize had insisted on interpreting Nobel's word "ideal" as "idealistic." The rigid persistence of this interpretation caused the supposed purpose of the Prize to have agreed ill for a considerable period with what we have good reason to believe was Nobel's original intention. In fact, it has been convincingly demonstrated that, by using the Swedish word "idealisk," Nobel must have meant "directed towards an ideal" and that in Espmarks

interpretation, “the sphere of the ideal is taken in the more general sense of the prizewinner having done ‘the greatest possible good’ to humanity” (Espmark 8). There is also a good deal in favor of the view that Nobel’s own intellectual orientation suggests an interpretation not in accordance with the Swedish word “idealistisk,” in the sense of “related to nineteenth-century conservative ideals and classicist aesthetics” (Espmark 9). But it is not likely that Ekelund, in 1949, was thinking along the same ideological and aesthetic lines as the very first Nobel committee half a century earlier. The most important thing for him was presumably to find a way of interpreting Nobel’s flexible will so as to be able to find an overwhelming argument in favor of awarding the prize to a battling humanist, and his contribution to and belief in humanity during a dark and difficult era. This, without doubt, was the Lagerkvist who, with academic support, was now selected as a representative of recent idealistic poetry. To put it another way, it seems as if Ekelund saw Lagerkvist as the poet whose work came closest to uniting the two roles of pioneer and master.

Lagerkvist would reappear as a pioneer in the 1950 proposal, when Ragnar Ekelund, representing the Finland-Swedish Writers’ Association, emphasized in his brief presentation, that Lagerkvist “had forged new paths in Swedish literature” (Förlagsskrivelser 1950). His clinching argument in favor of Lagerkvist as a candidate is interesting: if going to Lagerkvist the prize would be able to contribute to increasing knowledge of a great, though as yet outside the Nordic countries too little-known body of writing. In the Norwegian Writers’ Association’s reasoning too, originality of form was linked with mastery. And here again special emphasis was laid on Lagerkvist’s contribution as a battling humanist. Thus Lagerkvist’s poetry of the 1930s and 1940s had laid the foundations in the Nordic countries for his Nobel Prize candidacy (Förlagsskrivelser 1950).

In the 1951 discussions a new and very powerful argument appeared: *Barabbas*. The Swedish national librarian Oscar Wieselgren drew special attention, in his short argument, to the exceptional novel. *Barabbas* is also a frequent title in proposals from outside Scandinavia—including those from Roger Martin du Gard, André Gide and Fernand Baldensperger (honorary professor of Literature at the Sorbonne University and professor Emeritus at Harvard University). Roger Martin du Gard was particularly enthusiastic about *Barabbas* and Fernand Baldensperger drew attention to the very positive reception *Barabbas* had received in the Finnish press (Förlagsskrivelser 1951).⁷ The 1947 Nobel

7 Other proposals in 1951: Herr Gullberg, Prince Wilhelm as chairman of the Swedish PEN (according to unanimous appointment at the 1950 Annual General Meeting), the Norwegian

prizewinner, André Gide, mentioned its remarkable success in France, where he himself had also written a foreword:

A few words of over-brief preface written for the French edition of 'Barabbas,' which has already alerted the public to my interest in its author and my pleasure, thanks to him, in hearing the voice of Sweden raised in the peaceful chorus of threatened culture.

Nobelkommitténs utlåtanden 1951

Here the perspective has clearly shrunk and beyond the French judges' horizon lies Lagerkvist as a "forger of new paths." Instead of a mere "master," he is now the author of a "masterwork" whose candidacy thus gains added power from its international influence. There are a couple of details in the Nobel committee's final verdict in favor of Pär Lagerkvist that are of special interest. The declaration by the Academy's own members dispenses with the usual obligatory appraisal of the prizewinner's work; in this case the statement restricts itself to "recommending" his candidacy. On the other hand, two positive details seem to have been considered essential for inclusion. First, that the current year's proposal had been "overwhelmingly and powerfully supported by well-founded evidence from various countries so that it cannot be said to have originated merely from the restricted circle of the Swedish Academy"; and secondly, that notice "should be brought to the extremely flattering attention that Lagerkvist's most recent work had attracted abroad, and particularly in France (Nobelkommitténs utlåtanden 1951). The reputation of his work outside Sweden and the success of his latest novel had gone hand-in-hand as determining factors on Lagerkvist's behalf.

The Nobel Prize Winner

In presenting the new Nobel Prize Winner for Literature, the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy and Chairman of the Nobel Committee, Anders Österling, also stated two principal reasons for the choice. One was the importance of *Barabbas* as the most recent evidence that Lagerkvist's writing was of undoubted Nobel class, and also that the success of this novel abroad was evidence of the growing international reputation of his work in the early 1950s.

Writers' Association, Lorentz Eckhoff, professor of English Literature at the University of Oslo, Paul Svendsen, professor of Literary History at the University of Oslo.

The Academy itself was worried that awarding the prize to a Swede and, even more, to one of their own, might draw criticism. Lagerkvist was the fourth Swede to have won the award since its foundation in 1901, and ten of the previous 46 awards had gone to Nordic writers. This was almost as many as had gone to English-speaking writers (11), and more than had gone to either French- or German-language writers. The Academy was aware that it was difficult to defend the fact that so many prizes had gone to Scandinavian writers. Österling thus felt a need to show restraint when naming yet another prizewinner from Scandinavia. In his English-language presentation directed at listeners outside Sweden, he drew attention to the preface to Nobel's will where it was stated that "no regard should be paid to nationality" (*Stockholms Tidningen* 16 November 1951).

The newspaper columns also thought the choice of Lagerkvist could lead to complaints from abroad about the considerable quantity of Swedish and Nordic prize-winners.⁸ Sensitivity to increasing worldwide criticism of such unfair distribution caused repeated defense of Lagerkvist as an internationally-known writer.

The literary critic and historian of literature Erik Hjalmar Linder had been one of Lagerkvist's most energetic supporters. Like others, Linder in his congratulatory article, "Pär Lagerkvist and the Great Symbols," in *Stockholms-Tidningen* (16 November 1951) was well aware of the risk of suggesting yet another Scandinavian writer for the Nobel Prize. It was criticism of the biased awarding of the prize in earlier times that persuaded Linder to insist that any Scandinavian winner must have achieved a breakthrough not only at home but also outside their own language area, and that the prizewinning work must have a universal general purpose. Lagerkvist fulfilled the requirements, and Linder devoted the rest of his article to presenting a body of work whose principal feature was indeed just such a universal significance and monumental quality (Linder).

Thus the question of whether an international perspective could legitimate the awarding of the prize to a Swedish writer was a vital one—which is also seen in other articles relating to the prize. It was necessary to assure a potentially hostile wider world that the prize was very well motivated and easy to defend. Thus it is not surprising that the faithful Lagerkvist critic Selander should have given a good deal of space in his introduction to his article "The Swedish

8 See Selander and the reference there to research on universities the world over by the American periodical *Books Abroad*; see also comments on the prizewinner in *Dagens Nyheter* 16 November 1951.

Nobel Prizewinner” in *Svenska Dagbladet* (16 November 1951) to agonizing over this problem. He based his defense on two arguments. For one thing, Lagerkvist undoubtedly deserved the prize, being a classic modernist in the same class as two other recent winners, Faulkner and Eliot, and he was head-and-shoulders above earlier Nordic prizewinners like Gjellerup, Pontoppidan and Sillanpää. Furthermore, Lagerkvist’s lack of universal fame could not be used as conclusive proof against his being awarded the prize. The Academy could not restrict itself to the reactions of the world press, but must use its “own judgement” (Selander); and since only a fraction of Lagerkvist’s work had so far been published in translation, most foreign critics were in no position to form an accurate impression of his work. In fact, at this point the ambitions of the Swedish Academy and those of Lagerkvist’s publishers coincided: both wanted to make his work better known abroad for its own sake, as well as to make it easier to justify his receiving the prize, since as we have seen the full range of his writing, at least in Selander’s opinion, was only known to a sadly limited extent outside the Nordic countries.

Selander was right in that although Lagerkvist’s work was at that time on the point of becoming better known in France, particularly through *Barabbas*, he was having considerably more difficulty establishing himself in England, and had so far made very little impression in the USA. This state of affairs gives some idea of the importance of advertising in relation to *Barabbas*, which had enjoyed unusually high sales in Sweden, partly without doubt through advertising. In fact, marketing had such a considerable effect that it led to the novel’s international success being claimed as a fact in the Swedish press. But if *Barabbas* had a decisive effect in Lagerkvist winning the Nobel Prize, so the Nobel Prize also had a decisive effect in *Barabbas* becoming a hugely successful Swedish literary export. A couple of years later, *Svenska Dagbladet* was able to report that the novel was on its way to becoming a bestseller even in Japan, with three editions in less than a year, and it was named in the Tokyo newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* as one of the best literary works in translation in Japan of 1953 (Håkansson).

Conclusion

Pär Lagerkvist was not a writer whose work fell away or was judged by Swedish critics as having followed a clear downward curve after he won the Nobel Prize. Perhaps it was the type of writer he was that protected him from such a fate: the shy poet guided by lofty thoughts and his belief in the importance of poetry, he often referred to writing poetry being an endless journey of search into

one's own world. This was the attitude that may have protected him from creative paralysis and fading energy.

In 1953, *Aftonland* (*Evening Land*), which many believed to be his most important collection of poetry, reached the bookshops, and was received with great enthusiasm (Yrlið).⁹ This collection contained poems that would soon come to be favorites in major anthologies, adding to the image of a poet already accepted as a classic. Three years later came the novel *Sibyllan* (*The Sibyl*), also enthusiastically received in Sweden, and judged by some critics to be more important than *Barabbas*. Following the fame that *Barabbas* and the Nobel Prize had brought the author, *The Sibyl* quickly reached the international market—it was published in the Nordic countries the same year as in Sweden, and a year later in the Netherlands, France, Germany and Spain, and in Great Britain and the USA in 1958 (Ryberg 15). A moving little letter that reached Lagerkvist less than six months before his death gives an indication of his position on the North American book market. It came from a bookseller who wrote to Lagerkvist in February 1974, to ask for a contribution to his collection of autographs of world-famous authors. He said he admired Lagerkvist's work, adding that, as a bookseller, he could certify that he is not alone in his opinion: "I have long enjoyed your work and as a bookseller here in New Hampshire thought that you might like to know that your books sell very well in my store" (Allen).

However, *The Sibyl* was far less positively received in the USA than *Barabbas* had been. It was not another Biblical-historical novel in the style of *Barabbas*, which was clearly a major disappointment to many American reviewers (White 8–9).

Lagerkvist's fame seems to have faded rather quickly outside the Nordic countries as his books received steadily cooler reviews in the USA (White 8 ff.). In France, his most important work continued to be very well received, but seems not to have reached a wider readership and one cannot point at any permanent interest in his work (Eriksson 28). It is not difficult to guess which of his works continued to find the greatest success internationally: nothing would ever match the success of *Barabbas*. Harold Bloom's widely-discussed book *The Western Canon* mentions few Scandinavian writers or their works. In the last of four chronologically arranged lists—"The Chaotic Age: A Canonical Prophecy"—Bloom speculates which twentieth-century writers he believes will survive as classics. His list contains eight Scandinavian names: Dinesen, Andersen Nexö (Denmark), Hamsun, Undset (Norway) and four Swedes; beside

9 *Aftonland* was translated into English by W.H. Auden and Leif Sjöberg in 1977.

the poets Ekelöf, Tranströmer and Lars Gustafsson (his "Selected Poems") only *one* Swedish prose work is mentioned: *Barabbas* (Bloom 557). This means perhaps more than anything that the novel's rapid fame, not least in the USA and France, prepared the ground for a fame which has proved unusually long-lived for any single work.

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