

The Mythical Female in the Fictional Works of Pär Lagerkvist

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Lagerkvist may be viewed from many angles. Labelled an "existentialist" by some critics,¹ he can be compared to his hero Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew who revolts against the injustice of fate, the opacity of the world, the silence of nature and of the divine. For him the Schopenhauer-Freudian concept is valid: man is the author of his own fate, since whatever happens to the individual comes from within. Yet man needs a sense of purpose. Even if there is no real proof of the existence of an external God or Ideal Love or of any ultimate truth, man will create a pattern, or reinterpret his life according to a superior order, for he cannot tolerate the utter nihilism of the arbitrary absurdity inherent in his condition. Existence may precede essence, but Lagerkvist's heroes unconsciously live their lives according to some mythological image or archetype. They all pattern their personalities and follow the paths indicated to them by buried biblical or heathen traditions. Some are more aware than others. They come to understand these mythical forces at maturity. Others garner this understanding only on the verge of death. Others yet, such as Barabbas,² die in the maternal darkness of the unconscious.

Lagerkvist uses the theory of mythological archetype projection very much in the manner of Thomas Mann whose heroes fashion their natures and destinies according to certain legendary prototypes.³ Fuller recognition of identification with mythical figures is slowly attained by certain individuals, as the generations move towards more civilized levels of conscience. In the case of Lagerkvist's fictional characters, complete self-realization can be gained only after a lifetime of guilt, struggles and re-enactment of some original sins. His heroes descend into hell several times and undergo several partial epiphanies while groping for final answers which cannot be definitely stated. They also change identities along the way. One thing, however, remains a leitmotiv: their pilgrimage is always placed under the aegis of the Magna Mater. She may assume many masks: the sea of oblivion, the hounding witch, the virgin saint of christianity, the pagan huntress, to name but a few, but she is the feminine dark side of the earth, as conceived by the male spirit.⁴ Her modifications are due to the state of mind of man, who projects his own emotions and symbolism upon the female, according to his age, his upbringing and his times. She is present in all of Lagerkvist's works and completely engulfs his later novels.

Lagerkvist's heroes, females as well as males, spend their lives in the search for a God or Ideal which would give them a sense of purpose, of peace and of value. In their peregrinations, they must confront their shadow side, namely the Great Mother, upon which they project their own desires, fears and guilt. Basically, the Mythical Mother is neither absolutely good nor absolutely bad. In the circle of life, vice and virtue, moral criteria, are relative. The unconscious may well assume a threatening face, especially to the uninitiated: "Lagerkvist is a very dwelling place of dualisms, of contending opposites, darkness and light, good and evil, the cosmic and the familiar, life and death, comfort and despair."⁵

In order to experience a rebirth, it is necessary that these characters come in contact with the divine under its manifold guises. Such a spiritual epiphany requires one or many descents into hell, often expressed as the mines, the bowels of the ship, or the Delphic wombpit.⁶ It entails one or several attempts to realize the presence of a soul or "anima," as translated by a variety of symbols.

It is a matter of scant importance whether Lagerkvist is actually a literary exponent of Freudian or Jungian theories. Both interpretations are equally valid in his case. From a Freudian angle, his heroes, when they refer to their childhood at all, were often brought up under abnormal conditions. The Dwarf and Barabbas were warped by parental rejection; Giovanni, the Pilgrim at Sea, was brought up in an atmosphere of hypocrisy by a puritanical mother within the confines of a "stifling, narrow little home."⁷ This mother is a typical castrating woman, and her son is overly attached to her. He later becomes a priest to suit her possessive schemes, but falls subsequently into the clutches of an exploiting older mistress, and is finally destroyed by both women. Barabbas, scarred by his father, unwanted by his mother, finds his father in Oedipal fashion and kills him without recognizing his identity, thus enacting an age-old myth, redolent also of the ritual father sacrifice of Chronos by his sons. The Dwarf, less titanic in proportions, has been stunted by maternal rejection: "Thus did my mother sell me, turning from me in disgust when she saw what she had borne and not understanding that I was of an ancient race. She was paid twenty scudi for me and with them she bought three cubits of cloth and a watchdog for her sheep."⁸ The Sybil, although brought up by loving parents, grows up without siblings and daydreams her adolescence away, rejecting the joys of normal life, only to crave them later in almost hysterical fashion, like so many of Thomas Mann's heroes and heroines.⁹

But although formative trauma may explain some of these characters whose dreams also elicit a strongly sexual content, they are too deeply rooted on common ground and extra-individual symbolism to account for mere infantile repression and adult compensation. The archetypes after which they pattern themselves transcend their own Vita, have resonances in the outside world and in the consciousness of their whole species. Actually Freud himself postulated in *Totem and Taboo*, written in 1913, the existence of a collective mind, while acknowledging his debt to the sociologist Wundt and to C. J. Jung with whom he did not yet disagree.¹⁰ Lagerkvist's fictional heroes are seldom personal; often they are so archetypal in nature as to remain nameless or designated by such vague mythological appellations as "the woman he called Diana," "the Sybil," "the Babe." They represent a whole race or group of kindred men. Some are reprobates such as the Dwarf, Barabbas or King Herod, who belong to the ancient red-haired progeny of Cain, Esau and Judas, sinners and sinned against, firebrands endowed with Promethean traits. On the other hand there is a constant reappearance of minor Cabiric characters, lavatory keepers, pagan temple servants or christian lay brothers who lead the weary soul to rest, thus mirroring the role of Hermes Psychopompos. It is significant that Tom-Thumb chthonic deities have the soles of their feet black, while their heads are bathed in radiance.¹¹ All are shrouded in hermetic ambiguity which stems from their dual role: service of Apollo, the paternal god of light, and yet devotion to the dark goddess of the underworld.

Lagerkvist rarely elaborates, he suggests in streamlined fashion. Yet every word is pregnant with symbolic meaning. He usually avoids dating the stage

on which he places his works, so as to endow them with a cyclical sweep. Some of the locales are loosely set in early Christianity (although he never refers to Christ by name, but by circumlocution so as to emphasize the archetypal nature of the Messianic prototype), others are placed in Apocalyptic days. Still others take place in a prehistorical setting with futuristic overtones. Lagerkvist will not pinpoint his tales in a given span. He presents us with the wheel of time, the returning aeons, blending the ancient with the modern, while the subterranean roots push their ramifications far into the archaic matriarchal antiquity. The past resonates in the present, as the circle revolves from cradle to grave. Meanwhile the locket, which for him symbolizes life and the womb, typical aspects of the Great Mother, gets handed from one person to the next.¹² Characters fade and reappear from one work to the next.

One feature, though, remains constant, despite its many guises: that is the Anima Figure of feminine visage of the collective mind. It provides not only a poetic pattern, a meaning which has to be discovered by the writer, his heroes and his readers, to gain more insight into an opaque and seemingly senseless universe, but it lends cohesion to the entire work.

The Magna Mater may not even appear in womanly guise in some novels, as she may be expressed by a more abstract natural symbol such as the sea. *Pilgrim at Sea* is the saga of a man "named Giovanni, after the disciple He loved best,"¹³ and who seeks solace in the embrace of the maternal sea of oblivion, after having been hounded by a castrating mother and a similar mistress. He is tied with a John the Baptist role, and his element is the water which cleanses past sins and washes away painful memories. He surrenders to "the sea — the great and endless sea which in its indifference forgives all things. Primeval, irresponsible, inhuman."¹⁴ Giovanni turns blind as he sinks in the fluid grip. Until his end, he never relinquishes the empty locket snatched from his lover. He neither comes to realize the symbolic meaning of his escape into the primitive waters of the Flood, nor is he capable of reaching an adult stage of maturity.

Barabbas, who would scorn women, confronts the Magna Mater in the form of unrelieved darkness, the night of ignorance. For him, she means utter nothingness, death which he welcomes after a life of tribulations. She finally delivers him from his fetters and from the burden of an existence barren of human companionship.

The Magna Mater personifies nature for most heroes. In the *Sybil*, she is Gaia, the Pagan Earth Goddess. She is also the underground side of Apollo the Sun-god, worshipped at Delphi in his sacred grove and shrine. The virgin Pythia who spends her life in the devotion of the paternal god of light is nevertheless overcome by dionysian forces which create a terrifying split in her. While she places herself under the protection of the chaste father-spirit, her descent into the hell of the oracular pit grows more orgiastic. Finally a Pan-like goat overpowers her amidst the snakes of the cleft. Subsequently, she bears an imbecilic son whose enigmatic smile reflects the animal side of the archaic matriarchal goddess who had been worshipped at Delphi before being supplanted by the male deity, Apollo. The forces of conscious light and of maenad-like possession constantly vie in her, until old age, when she comes to realize that the divine may display a variety of attributes, some bestial, others harmonious. Here the Great Mother represents

an undifferentiated, preconscious stage of adaptation. Her main symbols are rivers and wells, trees, vegetables, and finally animals such as the serpent, fraught with ritual and sexual overtones, the black goat, the sheep and the lame black mare of Scandinavian mythology, which heralds the approach of death at midnight.¹⁵ Lagerkvist, in common with Thomas Mann, likes to mingle all mythologies, mixing the Mediterranean with the Norse and with the Oriental in order to emphasize the common ground from which all myths have sprung.¹⁶

The Magna Mater often represents a face of the moon. She can be typified as a horrid dark moon witch, connected with Hecate. As such, she relives in the form of the malicious old hags which reappear in most of his novels. She takes the shape of a vindictive old woman who ruins her children or her wards. More often she is revealed in a pleasanter phase, that of Diana, the Huntress. Tobias, one of the principal heroes, meets his love at the well, under the boughs of the sacred oak tree. "She was like a virgin whom no one could utterly possess."¹⁷ She is savage, accompanied by hunting dogs, free of a human past, relations, or cares other than roaming the forests in a wild, unwomanly fashion. To the man, Diana means chastity which he must ravish in an act fraught with classical symbolism. But the magical aura of the lunar goddess is destroyed as soon as the rape is consummated. Diana becomes a woman, stripped of daemonic forces. No longer can she be confused with a mythological figure lurking in her lover's consciousness, and so he abandons her.

Parallel but contrasting with this pagan lunar incarnation, we find noble silvery Mariamne in an eschatological setting which foreshadows the coming of Christianity. Depraved King Herod meets the Maccabean princess, precursor in appearance and in nature of the Virgin Mary "on the road to Damascus, only a little way beyond the Gate of the City, amidst flowers."¹⁸ Like Paul, the Apostle, he is smitten with blindness at the miraculous vision. The tyrant experiences a partial rebirth which temporarily mitigates his fierceness and causes his bride to be considered as a savior by the people for whom she intercedes. The metamorphosis, however, does not last and Herod degrades and kills her in a scene fraught with Othello-like overtones.

Diana and other heroines of Lagerkvist then conform to the next stage of the Magna Mater's earthly appearances, that of the Scarlet Woman of Babylon. To men she is a scorned harlot, the butt of every degradation which, however, makes her more desirable as a sexual object. The woman herself is not so depraved as the male imagination would picture her, but she loses her youth and innocence in the course of a career foisted upon her by the vagaries of life. The Great Mother is now embodied in a figure which abounds in Lagerkvist's novels: that of the middle-aged woman, ready to seduce a younger boy. She is greatly feared by her prey, who yet feels drawn to her, as she plays the part of Potiphar's wife. Finally she causes the downfall of her youthful victim whom she swallows in a murky situation, yet fraught with the delights of the incest taboo. Actually, she appears more dangerous to the uninitiated male than she is in reality.

The Magdalen phase is the sequel to that of the Sinner. There we see the fallen woman regenerated by love and sacrifice for man, her Savior Image.¹⁹ Diana as well as other heroines voluntarily die for their own and their lover's regeneration. This aspect of the redeemed and redeeming Margaret figure leads next to the Beatrice-like guiding spirit which is more abstract and

unsullied by past stains. This is the pure "anima" symbol which leads the hero to his salvation.

To the older man, the Great Mother appears in the travesty of Mary, the Mater Dolorosa. She wears the blue cloak of the Madonna and guides the weary traveller to full awareness, amnesty for the sins of existence, and finally ushers in death, eternal sleep and absolution. She bears the serene expression of the Mother of God.

Her image may linger in a man's consciousness even beyond the grave. In the short story, "The Wave of Osiris," a deceased king is about to be led into the courts of Osiris, the god of the dead, when a golden statuette of Isis elicits a vivid interest in him. Although the idol crumbles into dust, the feminine figure has provided the man with his last mediating link between being and nothingness, terrestrial and nether-worldly existence.²⁰

Despite the fact that Magna Mater has transformed herself in the image of many earthly women, her unity is never in doubt. Her voice and gait betray her oneness. To one single hero she might appear under the likeness of several females: his own carnal mother, his virgin bride, sacred harlot, patron saint, and guide to the beyond. She might even adopt an anima shape such as the vulture, the serpent, the bitch or the sow.²¹ Yet these are but some facets of the Great Mother. Tobias, the dying hero, realizes that she is but One: his own experience of the Eternal Feminine. At least he is free to die in peace as the splits between darkness and light, nature and religion fade away. After he draws his last breath, she repossesses her locket or chain of life. The cycle which is ended for one man shall go on for others, as tomb and womb are interchangeable.

The Magna Mater has very little to do with the true nature of the women who confront Lagerkvist's heroes: the Dwarf sees the Princess as a loathsome Temptress, Bernardo, alias Leonardo da Vinci recognizes an angelic quality in her Mona-Lisa-like smile, her lover celebrates her beauty in Petrarchan verse whereas her husband considers her as a commonplace elderly wife. Woman is a symbol or product of the male's aspirations, fears or ideals. He keeps projecting these qualities upon the female rather than truly relating to a human being. Misunderstanding and alienation are the basis of the relationship, as in the typical case of Herod who seeks a love with whom he can never communicate: "She was new to him and his very opposite; and from this arose also his inability to understand her, or to enter into her alien; cool, emotional world."²² On the other hand, Lagerkvist's women (except for the exalted somewhat masculine Sybil) are much closer to nature and more pragmatic than the men.

It is noticeable that in all of his fiction, love can only thrive on sex, stealth, violence and prohibition. This allows the mind of the subject to endow his object with mythological traits. Never does he depict a permanent relationship, one in which personalities and basic needs are understood and respected. Men insist on forcing their partners to re-enact archetypal patterns, thus excluding insight of true feminine psychology and of the real flesh and blood woman, who naturally suffers from such a basic misunderstanding.

Both men and women adopt various mythological roles in their search for the divine. Whether they follow a course decided upon by free existential

choice or unconsciously, according to biblical or pagan stereotypes, is immaterial. They all try to find a certain harmony between their aspirations and the enigmatic natural world. They all seek to decode the irony of their fates, in order to render life meaningful. Some succeed in finding an answer and die surrounded by bright light, others return to the embrace of darkness. In the end, ambiguity may still reign. Lagerkvist does not ultimately solve the question. Yet this very ambiguity may be yet another face of the Magna Mater, that of the eternal silence of nature.

NOTES

¹Robert Spector, "Lagerkvist and Existentialism," *Scandinavian Studies*, November 1960, pp. 203-211.

²Pär Lagerkvist, *Barabbas*, trans. Alan Blair (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958).

³See Thomas Mann: "... denn wir wandeln in Spuren und alles Leben ist Ausfüllung mythischer Formen mit Gegenwart." *Joseph und seine Brüder* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1956), I, 819.

⁴See Otto Christian Oberholzer, *Pär Lagerkvist: Studien zu seiner Prosa und seinen Dramen* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1958), p. 209.

⁵Richard Vowles, preface to *The Eternal Smile and Other Stories*, by Pär Lagerkvist, trans. Alan Blair et al. (New York: Random House, 1954), p. XII.

⁶See Pär Lagerkvist, *The Sybil*, trans. Naomi Walford (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 49.

⁷Pär Lagerkvist, *Pilgrim at Sea*, trans. Naomi Walford (New York: Random House 1964), p. 59.

⁸Pär Lagerkvist, *The Dwarf*, trans. Alexandra Dick (New York: Hill and Wang Inc. 1945), p. 15.

⁹Tonio Kröger, Gustav von Aschenbach, Mut-em-Enet, and Rosalie von Tümmeler, in the short story, "Die Betrogene" translated as "The Black Swan," to mention the most dramatic ones. It is significant to note that the two male heroes are artists who have deliberately chosen a career which alienates them from the joys of a normal existence, whereas the females, Potiphar's wife as well as the elderly German widow have been pushed into a frustrating bourgeois life wherein marriage is an empty form of social convenience.

¹⁰See Sigmund Freud: "... I have taken as the basis of my whole position the existence of a collective mind in which mental processes occur just as they do in the mind of the individual." *Totem and Taboo* (New York: Norton, 1952), p. 157.

¹¹See Pär Lagerkvist, *Death of Ahasuerus*, trans. Naomi Walford (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 117.

¹²See Pär Lagerkvist, *The Holy Land*, trans. Naomi Walford (New York: Random House, 1966).

¹³*Pilgrim at Sea*, p. 22.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁵In his article "Pär Lagerkvist's *The Eternal Smile and The Sybil*" Sven Linner emphasizes the need for a study which would trace Lagerkvist's knowledge of folklore and religious history. Thereby his place might be located in a European tradition where such sophisticated writers as Thomas Mann "turn to myth and the imaginings of the primitive mind." *SS*, May 1965, p. 162.

¹⁶The nameless heroine of *Pilgrim at Sea* appears like a twin sister of Mut, Potiphar's wife in Mann's *Joseph in Egypt*. Like her Egyptian counterpart, she is a composite of Isis, the Syrian seductress Ishtar, Philistine Delilah, Greek Phaedra, and a meanad skilled in the practice of black magic.

¹⁷*Death of Ahasuerus*, p. 24.

¹⁸Pär Lagerkvist, *Herod and Mariamne*, trans. Naomi Walford (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1968), p. 22.

¹⁹The repentant sinner who assumes the Magdalen role closely parallels such Kazantsakis heroines as the Widow in the *Greek Passion*, and Magdalene, in the *Last Temptation of Christ*.

²⁰See *The Eternal Smile and Other Stories*, pp. 387-389.

²¹In *The Eternal Smile*, the fat boar-like miller's wife literally feeds and swallows her young lover to death, as they both wallow in self-indulgence. Her attitude towards him is definitely maternal. p. 27.

²²*Herod and Mariamne*, p. 57.