

ARTICLES / SAGGI

REVOLUTIONARY FAITH AND RELIGIOUS DISILLUSIONMENT IN ENRICO PEA'S GIUDA

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Sommario

L'opera teatrale di Enrico Pea Giuda del 1918 costituisce un esempio estremo di licenza poetica nella rappresentazione letteraria del discepolo che tradì Gesù Cristo. A partire dall'epoca dell'Illuminismo numerosi scrittori europei si sono allontanati dalla tradizione profondamente radicata di rappresentare Giuda Iscariota solamente come il cattivo per antonomasia ispirato da Satana e hanno cercato di spiegarne le motivazioni profonde, e non necessariamente con un atteggiamento di condanna. Il protagonista di Pea, il figlio e legittimo erede di un deposedo sovrano ebreo, aspira a condurre una rivolta contro l'occupazione romana, ma si persuade che i suoi sforzi sono vanificati dalla crescente popolarità di un capo rivale. Questa tragedia segna anche un momento cruciale di transizione nella produzione letteraria di Pea e, pur mostrando chiaramente l'influenza delle sue precedenti affinità con il Marxismo e con il movimento anarchico, guarda già in avanti con il profondo interesse e rispetto di Pea per le proprie radici cattoliche che si realizzerà più tardi nei primi anni '20 in opere come Rosa di Sion e La passione di Cristo.

Enrico Pea's drama of 1918, *Giuda*¹, is an extreme case of authorial licence in literary portrayals of the disciple who betrayed Jesus Christ. Since the Enlightenment, numerous European writers had departed from the deeply entrenched tradition of portraying Judas Iscariot as nothing more than an arch-villain inspired by Satan and attempted to elucidate his motives, not necessarily in a damning way. Pea, like others, refused to be limited by the sparse information about Judas in the canonical gospels of the New Testament. His protagonist, the son and heir apparent of a deposed Jewish king, hoped to lead a revolt against the Roman occupation but believed his efforts were being thwarted by the popularity of Jesus as a rival leader. This tragedy also marked a crucial transition in Pea's literary career. It evinces the influence of his earlier dalliances with Marxism and anarchism but also points forward to Pea's keen interest in and respect for his Catholic heritage, which would come to fruition during the early 1920s in such dramatic works as *Rosa di Sion* and *La passione di Cristo*.

The spiritual journey of Enrico Pea (1881-1958), like those of Giovanni Papini and numerous other early twentieth-century Italian literary artists, was interwoven with a political path as Italy and Europe generally came to grips with the vicissitudes of religious and social modernism. In Pea's case, his disillusionment with both political oppression and social injustice early during his years as a young adult led him to espouse both Marxism and anarchism before, while still in his thirties, beginning to adopt an explicitly religious dimension in his ideological and psychological make-up. This personal pilgrimage has been described in various studies in the career of this novelist, whom

¹ Enrico Pea, *Giuda*, Napoli, Libreria della Diana, 1918. All page references are to this edition.

critics have yet to give his due. One can learn much of a general nature about Pea's authorship from such works as Antonio Arslan and Patrizia Zambon's *Enrico Pea*² and Ernesto Travi's *Umanità di Enrico Pea*³, his early life and years as a businessman in Alexandria in Sergio Pautasso's symposium *Enrico Pea dalla Versilia ad Alessandria d'Egitto e ritorno*⁴, and the shifting course of his political views in Simonetta Salvestroni's *Enrico Pea: fra anarchia e integrazione*⁵. Moreover, Anna Barsotti has provided an insightful introduction to his dramatic works in her lengthy article, "Il teatro novocentesco di Enrico Pea e i 'Maggi'"⁶. Nevertheless, Pea's literary efforts to express his varying perceptions of Christianity and his own unorthodox religious beliefs are a rich lode from which much paydirt can still be mined. In the present article it is my intention to take initial steps towards deeper understanding of these matters in the early stage of his literary career by probing Pea's highly imaginative interpretation of Judas Iscariot in his drama of 1918, *Giuda*, a position from which he would eventually distance himself. This will be discussed against the historical backdrop of depictions of the betraying disciple in European literature, particularly departures since the Enlightenment from conventional vilification of him.

² Antonio Arslan and Patrizia Zambon, *Enrico Pea*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1983.

³ Ernesto Travi, *Umanità di Enrico Pea*, Milan, Vita & Pensiero, 1965.

⁴ Sergio Pautasso (ed.), *Enrico Pea dalla Versilia ad Alessandria d'Egitto e ritorno*, Genova, Casa Editrice Marietti S.p.A., 1999.

⁵ Simonetta Salvestroni, *Enrico Pea: fra anarchia e integrazione*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1976.

⁶ Anna Barsotti, "Il teatro novocentesco di Enrico Pea e i 'Maggi'", *Il Ponte*, XXXIV, nn. 7-8 (31 luglio-31 agosto 1978): 828-861.

The Evolving Portrayal of Judas in European Imaginative Literature

The creation of Judas as a character in any post-Biblical literary genre requires considerable imagination because the narratives in the four canonical gospels provide only the sparsest biographical information about him. About his origins virtually nothing is known. In John 13:2 he is vaguely identified as the “son of Simon”, and he is called “Judas Iscariot”, suggesting that he may have been from one of several Palestinian villages called “Kerioth”. All four authors of the gospels agree that he was one of the twelve men in Jesus’ inner circle of followers. Additionally, in John 13:29, it is stated that he was the keeper of their “common purse”. When Martha anoints Jesus’ feet with expensive nard at Bethany, Judas protests (in John 12:4) on the grounds that it could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor (though the author here interjects that Judas merely wanted to steal the money), but in the parallel passages in Mark 14:5 and Matthew 26:9, the disciples in general make a similar protest. That he betrayed Jesus is reported in all four gospels, although the details of his betrayal are reported variously. As no indisputably reliable extra-Biblical ancient sources provide additional data about Judas, all literary authors who attempt to reconstruct this Biblical figure in any detail necessarily rely on their own devices. Not surprisingly, the resulting literary Judases vary greatly in *inter alia* their personalities and motivations for turning against Jesus; in some instances the latter are not portrayed as underlying a betrayal.

Pea created his Judas against the backdrop of an evolving and complex international tradition of depicting Judas Iscariot in literature and visual art. In European manifestations, the fallen disciple was almost inevitably interpreted negatively until the Enlightenment, when sporadic efforts were

first undertaken to rehabilitate his image to varying degrees⁷. In Italian literary history, of course, one of the most renowned representations of Judas occurs in Dante's *La Divina Commedia*. The portrayal of Judas being eternally chewed by the devil at the centre of the Inferno, the ninth circle thereof eponymously labelled *la Giudecca*, is horrific:

Da ogni bocca dirompea co' denti
un peccatore, a guisa di maciulla,
sì che tre ne faceva così dolenti
A quel dinanzi il mordere era nulla
verso 'l graffiar, ché tal volta la schiena
rimanea delle pelle tutta brulla.
“Quell'anima lassù c' ha maggior pena”
Disse 'l maestro, “é Giuda Scariotto,
che 'l capo ha dentro e fuor le gamba mena.”⁸

Medieval European artists typically portrayed Judas with exaggerated Semitic facial features and surrounded by demons. In other depictions of his alterity outside the familiar fold of the faithful, he was occasionally painted as a black man at a time when Christianity was regarded – at least by its adherents in Europe – as primarily the religion of that continent's inhabitants, not as a faith to be shared by all the world's nations. To cite but one fairly representative example of conventional portrayals, the fifteenth-century Florentine Dominican monk Fra Angelico put a conspicuously dark halo above Judas in his San Marco fresco of the Last

⁷ For a useful sampling of illustrative examples, see Kim Paffenroth, *Judas: Images of the Lost Disciple*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

⁸ *La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri*. Vol. I: *Inferno*, Firenze, G.C. Sansoni, 1950: 253.

Supper as well as in another, portraying the betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane. The other disciples in these pictures are adorned with golden haloes⁹. The radically different status of Judas is thus too obvious to overlook. In short, Judas was for many centuries essentially a negative referent, an object lesson for Christians. As Kim Paffenroth observed, the “negative, frightening, and scolding images” of him were not gratuitous and without purpose but were intended to be “deeply positive and redemptive” as verbal and nonverbal admonitions: “Although Judas is eternally trapped on the other side of the abyss, his story has been used to lead people from the darkness of the cross to the hope and light of the resurrection”¹⁰.

Yet historically the tradition had long been more varied. Within certain factions of the early church, especially those characterised by anti-materialistic Gnosticism, which denied the reality of the incarnation of God in human form and was therefore denounced as heretical, Judas was lauded as an upright disciple of Jesus. Irenaeus, an influential second-century bishop of Lyon, lamented that some Gnostics regarded Judas as one who “recognized the truth and completed the mystery of betrayal” and accused them of having written a “fictitious history [...] which they style the Gospel of Judas”¹¹. That non-canonical work fell into oblivion and in its original version may not be extant. Apparently the dissenting Christians who used it believed that Judas had played a pivotal role in the

⁹ Paolo Morachiello, *Fra Angelico. The San Marco Frescoes*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1996: 304.

¹⁰ Paffenroth, *Judas: Images of the Lost Disciple*: 32.

¹¹ Alexander Roberts & W.H. Rambaut (trans. & eds.), *The Writings of Irenæus*, I, T. Edinburgh & T. Clark, 1868: 113.

salvation of humanity by handing Jesus over to his enemies for crucifixion in accordance with God's plan, a notion which harmonised with the accounts in the New Testament. In any case, the widely discussed discovery of Gnostic manuscripts at Nag Hammadi on the east bank of the Nile during the 1940s left no doubt that some individuals in the second century had discussed Judas with respect and not as one under the sway of Satan¹². The announcement in 2006 that a Coptic Gospel of Judas (carbon-dated to between 220 and 340 A.D.) which may be a translation of an earlier Greek with the same title (though not necessarily the same text to which Irenaeus had referred) had been found renewed international interest in this non-canonical book. Numerous scholarly publications appeared soon thereafter analysing its significance¹³. In this Coptic work, the actions of Judas are not depicted as a betrayal, but rather as obedience to Jesus' instructions. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, quite coincidentally the French writer Marcel Pagnol advanced a similar argument in his tragedy of 1955, *Judas*¹⁴.

The Enlightenment brought numerous literary attempts to go beyond facile caricatures and come to terms with Judas as a complex human being. Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724-1803), for example, in his epic

¹² John M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1977: 229-238).

¹³ See, for example, Randolphe Kasser, *et al.* (trans. & eds.), *The Gospel of Judas*, Washington, D.C., National Geographic Society, 2006; James M. Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel*, San Francisco, Harper, 2006; Elaine Pagels & Karen L. King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity*, New York, Viking, 2007; and Susan Gubar, *Judas: A Biography*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2009.

¹⁴ Frederick Hale, "Justifying the Betrayal: Marcel Pagnol's *Judas*", *French Studies in Southern Africa*, no. 37 (2007): 48-67.

poem *Der Messias*, posited that Judas was envious of John, the beloved disciple, and his own frustrated ambition drove him to betrayal. In the nineteenth century, attempts to rehabilitate Judas gained momentum. To cite one notorious example of this, the French philosopher and Orientalist Ernest Renan (1823-1892) sought to reduce Judas' culpability in his controversial book of 1864, *Vie de Jésus*. Renan, who was turning away from Catholic orthodoxy, acknowledged that Judas had been "actuated by motives impossible to explain". Instead, he challenging theories of motivation which more recent writers had advanced. "Legend, which always uses strong and decisive language, describes the occupants of the little supper-room as eleven saints and one reprobate," Renan observed. "Reality does not proceed by such absolute categories." He dismissed the common attribution of the betrayal to "avarice" as implausible: "It would be very singular if a man who kept the purse, and who knew what he would lose by the death of his chief, were to abandon the profits of his occupation in exchange for a very small sum of money"¹⁵.

Among the most prominent *littérateurs* of the twentieth century who tackled the Judas theme in what might be called a relatively conservative literary treatment was François Mauriac (1885-1970) in his quasi-fictional 1936 *Vie de Jésus*. Mauriac's Judas is a normal but unambiguously self-serving man, one who desired material success and became associated with Jesus in the hope of appropriating some of his spiritual leader's power. Gradually Judas comprehends that the kingdom of Jesus is not of this world and, having accumulated some money which he has withheld from the common apostolic treasury, he seeks to extricate himself from the new messianic movement which he believes is doomed.

¹⁵ Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus*, London, Trübner & Co., 1864: 263-264.

He is thus revealed to be dishonest and conniving. On a more dastardly level, Mauriac's Judas is guilty of complicity with the Sanhedrin in plotting against Jesus, although very few details about this are given. While waiting for an opportunity to betray him, Judas pilfers from the common purse he administers for the other apostles¹⁶. After accepting money from the priests in Jerusalem, he nevertheless vacillates about betraying Jesus until the last supper, when (echoing a theme from Klopstock's *Der Messias* which had reappeared in some other theological and fictional treatments of Judas) he becomes envious of the status enjoyed by the beloved disciple John and takes his crucial decision when Satan enters him. "Judas raged with jealousy, too astute not to understand that he was kept at a distance, that as John was the most loved, he had always been the least loved"¹⁷.

The Son of a Worldly King?

Pea's *Giuda* marked a novel departure in literary portrayals of its eponymous protagonist. It is utterly atypical in that it does not deal directly with the betrayal of Jesus. For that matter, only by implication is that event touched on in the drama. This *Giuda* is primarily a construction of the mind-set of the disciple as a would-be revolutionary whose ambitions of leading an independence movement against the Roman occupation of his land and its puppet Herodian leaders were frustrated when Jesus of Nazareth, in whom he had put his hope, proved to be leading a quite different kind of movement. Ancillary themes are the

¹⁶ François Mauriac, *Life of Jesus*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1937: 205.

¹⁷ Mauriac, *Life of Jesus*: 228.

ineffectiveness and vacillation of the Jewish priesthood with regard to the revolution Judas seeks to lead and relations between him and his fellow disciples.

On the surface Pea's linkage of religious faith and a politically revolutionary mind may seem anomalous, but in fact that amalgam reflects two of the principal forces at work in his mind early in the twentieth century. After emigrating with his older brother to Alexandria, Egypt, as a teenager in 1896, he became involved in the import trade there but, despite his business interests, developed a keen interest in both Marxist ideology and anarchism. Indeed, Pea and his wife named their eldest son, born in 1906, "Marx". As the Italian-American literary scholar Luca Somigli has emphasised, however, concurrent with the germination of these ideological strains in his mind was a personal rediscovery of the Bible, which Pea would subsequently describe as "il libro rivelatore" and call its recovery from his childhood a turning point in his life¹⁸. Attempts to reconstruct the mind or motives of Judas Iscariot inevitably entail a generous portion of authorial creativity, and in this case it is not difficult to perceive the mind-set of Pea in that of his protagonist. An appreciation of Pea's historically determined tragedy requires viewers (or readers) to have a rudimentary knowledge of the Hasmonean dynasty whose rule in Jerusalem had fallen victim to internal friction and then Roman imperialism in the first century B.C. and the rhetorical value of memories of it to Jews living in the Roman province of Judea during the first century A.D. In contrast to what European writers of the early twentieth century could have expected their audiences to have known about the

¹⁸ Luca Somigli, "Enrico Pea", in Luca Somigli and Rocco Capossi (eds.), *Italian Prose Writers, 1900-1945*, Farmington Hills, Michigan, Thompson Gale, 2002: 242.

Jesus of the New Testament, it seems highly questionable that more than a minuscule percentage of Tuscans in 1918 had any foreknowledge of the political setting of Pea's drama beyond the fact that Jesus and his immediate followers lived under the hegemony of Rome. In the severely economical text of *Giuda* the deposed Jewish dynasty is not even identified. Pea probably erred in overestimating viewers' ability to grasp *a priori* what its legacy meant to the subjugated Jews of the time in which the plot is set. That said, it is nevertheless conceivable that the Italians for whom Pea wrote could comprehend something of the revolutionary thrust of the piece while lacking any historical sophistication regarding events in the eastern Mediterranean nearly 1900 years earlier.

Indeed, it seems at least arguable that greater awareness thereof on their part (or, for that matter, on Pea's) may have undermined the premises on which *Giuda* rests. Almost nothing in the documentable history of the deposed royal family lends itself to the credibility of the plot. From such sources as Flavius Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War*, both written in the first century A.D., a rudimentary chronicle of the family can be discerned. In brief, Hyrcanus II, of whom Pea imagined Judas to be the son and would-be royal heir, acceded to the throne of Judea as king and high priest in 67 B.C. His brief reign ended, however, when his rebellious younger brother, Aristobulus II, deposed him. Hyrcanus was compelled to renounce his kingship and office of high priest. His effort to regain his throne in a civil war ended when the Romans conquered the entire region. After the highly successful general Pompey victoriously marched into Jerusalem and, as a gentile, violated temple law by entering the Holy of Holies in 63 B.C., Hyrcanus was restored to his position as high priest but not king; virtually all political power over the Jews remained in Roman hands. In 47 B.C., Julius Caesar appointed Hyrcanus ethnarch, but this gave him and Idumean adviser,

Antipater, only limited power. Furthermore, seven years later Antigonus, a son of Aristobulus, concluded an alliance with the Parthians and, with the co-operation of the Romans, was proclaimed both king and high priest. He seized his uncle Hyrcanus and reportedly either had his ears mutilated or personally bit them off. Hyrcanus subsequently spend four years amongst the dispersed Jews in Babylonia, before Herod the Great, who with Roman assistance had vanquished Antigonus and become king, permitted him to return to Jerusalem in 36 B.C. Herod installed him as president of the state council but in 30 B.C. accused him of plotting a coup and ordered his execution. The saga of Hyrcanus thus ended approximately sixty years before the known ministry of Jesus of Nazareth began. Chronologically, it is virtually impossible to make the account of Judas as the son of Hyrcanus compatible with the plot of *Giuda*.

The historical facts are particularly germane to a scholarly consideration of *Giuda* because in one of the most accessible statements of the purpose of the play Somigli apparently erred in stating them. Writing about Pea in 2002, he declared: “He imagines Judas as the son of a dethroned king, Hyrcanus III [*sic*], and as a heroic figure engaged in a political and social struggle against the enemies of the Hebrews”¹⁹. But there was no Hyrcanus III; Hyrcanus II had lived too early to have had a son who followed Jesus of Nazareth, and the Herods had ruled the area for several decades before the plot of *Giuda* unfolds. Pea’s reconstruction of this character is essentially fiction.

¹⁹ Somigli, “Enrico Pea”: 243.

Acceding to Worldly Kingship

Nothing in *Giuda* reveals anything of note about Judas' early discipleship, *i.e.* before the plot begins to unfold. For that matter, Jesus is not among the *dramatis personae*. Nearly the entire plot rotates around the axes of Judas' relationship to his family and the predicament in which he finds himself when, as the pretender to the throne, he is confronted by the difficulties of promoting a revolt against the Roman occupation while many of his ethnic brethren are apparently apathetic and the perceived challenge of Jesus to his own worldly ambitions. That Judas regards himself as a man of destiny and his mother and sister Rebecca are prepared to accept his royalty Pea does not leave in doubt. In their grief after the death of their husband and father Hyrcanus, they discuss Judas; his mother underscores the young man's patriotism by telling her daughter that Judas had assured her while still an adolescent, "Madre! Io sono figlio di Gerusalemme!" She, in turn, assures her mother that her brother will rise to the occasion and prove his value as the leader of the Jews and the nemesis of their oppressors: "Iuda è cresciuto forte, sotto il sole, sull'orlo del deserto ed ha negli occhi un mar profondo ed ha nel portamento la maestà di chi è da Dio. E saprà governare con giustizia. E metterà la corda intorno al collo dell'oppressore" (9-10).

When Judas returns home, apparently unaware that his deposed father has died, he learns that he has inherited the royal mantle through a series of symbolic acts on the part of his mother and sister. To his surprise, Rebecca addresses him as "Mio Signore" and informs him, "Vi son due cose: il regno di Sion e l'obbedienza della tua servente." Her bereaved mother praises God for turning her sorrow into rejoicing and, in homage to the power of their national legacy, thanks God "per accendere il lume del ricordo," a sentiment Rebecca echoes: "Benedetto il lucignolo che

arde in ricordanza degli eroi sepolti.” The two women then invest Judas with the late Hyrcanus’ royal accoutrements – his robe, his sword, and the crown of Jerusalem. In a marginally more subtle action near the conclusion of the first act, Rebecca places a candelabra, which in Jewish ritual symbolism commemorates *inter alia* independence from foreign oppression, on the table and uses her clothing to protect it from the wind (12).

The Ambiguities of Discipleship

Pea suggests that Judas was – or had been – a sincere follower of Jesus of Nazareth before the death of Hyrcanus but that the messianic movement fomenting in Galilee would soon complicate the young would-be monarch’s ambitions. Immediately after he is invested by his mother and sister, a meteorological sign points to this. “Madre!” warns Rebecca, “Passano nuvole di fuoco spinte dal vento di settentrione.” Judas, however, does not appear to grasp its implications: “Lascia che il turbo entri in questa casa e sulle fiamme segni il mio destino,” he responds as the curtain falls (12).

At the beginning of the second act, it begins to dawn on Judas that he is not the only person whom a segment of the Jewish people (and in his case, at this stage only his mother and sister) recognise as their sovereign. In a meeting with him and three of the other disciples (Andrew, James, and Thomas), possibly in Jerusalem, Simon Peter discloses that the synagogue at Capernaum has become the palace of Jesus and that he is even greater than Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee. “E lo acclamano Re!” adds Thomas. “Lo acclamano Re?” counters Judas, who apparently has previously perceived Jesus as a purely religious leader, not a political one. The other disciples discuss briefly miracles Jesus has performed, but

Judas does not accept their authenticity. When James reminds him that he, too, has witnessed these wonders, Judas professes immediately, “Io no!”, prompting Simon Peter to counter, *con sospetto* in the stage directions, “Tu lo rinneghi!” Judas rejects this accusation: “No! Ero demonio adesso che tentava. No son io suo germano?” He continues to profess his discipleship, but mentions acts by Jesus that harmonise with an awakening of the oppressed Jewish people: “Io l’ho veduto sfamare i mendicanti. Io l’ho veduto alitare sul viso del dormiente e rompere il letargo di Lazzaro.” The division of perceptions of what kind of national leader is needed comes to the fore. Simon Peter states emphatically, “Non vuole scettro! Dice che andrà via, lontano, in alto.” But Judas thinks in worldly, practical terms of a ruler who “chiama i zoppicanti al suo convito, e i lunatici scempi, e monchi, e cienchi, e guarisce gli schiavi, e trascina con sè le donne e i bimbi per lodare le stelle. I suoi lebbrosi porterebbero addosso la corazza di ferro, sulle carni martoriate. Si avventerebbero cani mastini contro i nostri oppressori stranieri e avremmo un Re!” (15).

James and Simon Peter counter that the people do not wish such a king. But Judas, proceeding from different assumptions, asks naïvely, “Che cerca se non questo?” He asks his fellow disciples to plead with Jesus, who is then staying in Bethany, not to come to Jerusalem, which he describes as “terra di predoni” and a place where “i sacerdoti han l’anima del volgo, hanno assediato anche la mia casa. Tendono lacci alle nostre calcagne.” Furthermore, Judas reveals that there is already clerical resistance to Jesus; “L’hanno bandito dalle Sinagoghe” (16). All of this imagined, extra-Biblical discourse reinforces the notion that Judas was primarily interested in keeping his potential rival for the loyalty of the people away from the masses in Jerusalem.

The demise of the fallen disciple is a continuation of his disillusionment and estrangement, and it, too, incorporates authorial

licence on Pea's part, although how it relates to the protagonist's political aspirations is ambiguous. According to two incompatible accounts in the New Testament, Judas hangs himself in a state of extreme guilt after the arrest but before the crucifixion of Jesus (Matthew 27:3-10) and inexplicably falls to his death in a field purchased with the money he received for his misdeed (Acts 1:18). Pea did not attempt to reconcile these two accounts. Instead, on Pea's stage, Judas returns to his home after – apparently – committing the betrayal, although there is no unambiguous statement that he has done so. In any case, he has lost his self-confidence and is now wracked by self-doubt and remorse. Encountering Rebecca, he asks her, “Se ti baciassi ti profanerei?” and, in an unsubtly symbolic act, raises a bloody hand to his chest (29). How this wound has been incurred is unclear, but when she asks him whether he has sought help for it, he simply states, “Non servirebbe”. Seconds later, Judas collapses on the pavement and dies. The finality of his supine pose is stressed in the stage instructions: *Sta come una scultura sopra un basamento funerario*” (30). By implication, perhaps, Pea suggests that Judas is a tragic hero; he sought to lead a noble cause but was undone by both the reluctance of the temple leadership to support him and by his inability to tolerate the perceived competition of the new messianic movement of Jesus Christ. The latter flaw in his character underlay the betrayal.

The Irrelevance of the Priesthood to the Envisaged Revolution

Central to Pea's construction of the complicated political situation in and near Jerusalem during the lives of Judas and Jesus is his unflattering portrayal of the Jewish priesthood as quite irrelevant to the liberation of the Jewish people. The high priest, identified only as “Il Sommo

Sacerdote”, is clearly aware of their plight and voices sympathy for their goal of casting off the Roman-Herodian yoke and is aware that his caste is involved in the imperialist power structure. “Il popolo si svia dietro ai cialtroni,” he laments. “I sacerdoti fanno sacrificii per il bene di Roma. Oh Dio! Prepara lo scanno per il Re! Dio d’Israele, dacci in mano i nemici per vendetta!” (7).

Adding a further wrinkle to the fabric, the high priest resents the intrusion of Jesus into the spiritual life of the nation even before Judas evinces any disillusionment with the Nazarene’s apolitical movement. The priest, speaking to Judas’s widowed mother, laments that he “traligni e vada dietro a quel bastardo falso profeta, dottor di magie” (8). But when the possibility of an armed revolt against the oppressors seems imminent, this cleric insists that the time is not ripe. In a conversation with the impatient Judas, who questions his commitment to the liberation struggle, he explains, “Io non rinunzio. Il tempo non è questo: a Cesarea si vigila. Il Tetrarca banchetta e chiama il Nazzareo a convito. Gli uomini venerandi di Giudea faranno omaggio a Erode e alla cognata cui divide il giaciglio incestuoso” (26). Furthermore, he denies that he prompted John the Baptist to criticise the Herodians (28). He is trapped in his own hypocrisy. On the one hand, the high priest insists, “Il giusto che vacilla innanzi all’empio peggio è dell’acqua putrida di un fosso che abbevera le piante col suo morbo distruggitore, peggio anche del vento che maligno barcolla nel deserto e avvalla e svalla a tradimento e ride quando le sabbie soffocan le mandre e i lor pastori.” He wants justice for the people soon: “Affretta, affretta, o giusto. Io ti armo la mano, e sia su me il tuo peccato, che non mi dia bente” (28-29). But when the kairoitic moment arrives in Jerusalem, and there is a palpable revolutionary spirit among many of the people there, he himself does nothing, hoping instead that others will act. Moreover, when an agitated crowd gathers near his residence and

apparently seeks revenge for the slain John the Baptist who had gone and criticised the Herodians, a soldier informs him, “Gran Sacerdote, mormoran di te che l’hai mandato.” This the priest denies: “Oh! Non io, non io.” He orders the gates closed to isolate himself from the uprising (28). One senses in this severely critical portrayal of clerical weakness Pea’s perception of either the indifferent attitude or direct hostility of the Italian clergy to revolutionary movements of his own day. The status of the clergy is apparently secure in a conservative social order; they have nothing to gain by promoting a revolutionary climate. By contrast, news about John the Baptist’s courage emboldens Judas. He declares “esaltandosi” and in one of the numerous anachronisms that flaw the text of Pea’s drama, “Santo Giovanni a quest’ ora, se vive il nostro Iddio, ha umiliato il Tetrarca e la cognata, ha messo in armi tutta Cesarea: e viene col suo popolo cantando il salmo d’Israel: – *Sabato santo il giusto fiorirà come una palma piantata nella casa del Signore*” (26).

Conclusion

It can hardly be argued that Pea’s *Giuda* is a first-rate literary work, the neglect of which has been detrimental to the study of Italian literary history. The case for serious consideration of this early work in his career must entail a broader context. It represents an extreme case of authorial licence in reconstructing and interpreting the mind of this shadowy character whose identity and motives have vexed historians, theologians, and *littérateurs* for nearly two millennia and, during the past three centuries, prompted many to venture beyond the narrowly defined perimeter of what can tenuously be known about Judas Iscariot from first-century sources – namely the accounts in the canonical gospels of the New Testament, and even they are not fully compatible.

A consideration of the generally sympathetic treatment of Judas Iscariot in this early work of Pea and the freedom he granted himself in

interpreting the man who had traditionally been portrayed as the epitome of evil is crucial for understanding the early stages of Pea's tortuous spiritual, ideological, and artistic path. *Giuda* was initially performed near the close of the First World War, in August 1918, on a modest, open-air stage Pea himself had constructed in the Parco della Versiliana, not far from Marina di Pietrosanta. Predictably, it almost immediately aroused the opposition of the Catholic Church and triggered a public debate²⁰. In the wake of that, Pea elected to halt the production. Before the end of the decade, he was evincing a renewed appreciation of his Catholic heritage in a personal evolution which is not readily comprehensible and on which his autobiographical works shed little light. His *Rosa di Sion*²¹, in which Judaism and Catholicism are juxtaposed, can hardly be called a defence of orthodoxy, but in it he dealt with personal spirituality and religious tradition as treasures to be guarded from the vicissitudes of hostile secular culture. Pea's drama *La Passione di Cristo* (1923)²² evinces his rapprochement with his Catholic faith which, though arguably never complete, nevertheless marked a pivotal and consequential transition in his life and artistic career. The very fact that *Giuda* is not representative of Pea's overall literary output is itself significant; it indicates where he stood at a crucial juncture of his life when he was still strongly influenced by his Marxist and anarchist views but on the verge of becoming a writer with a keen interest in and respect for both his own and other religious traditions during an era of spiritual and ideological turmoil among many Italian intellectuals.

²⁰ Somigli, "Enrico Pea": 243.

²¹ Enrico Pea, *Rosa di Sion*, Napoli, Libreria della Diana, 1920.

²² Enrico Pea, *La passione di Cristo*, Viareggio, Pezzini, 1923.