

Disbelief Against Disbelief

The Cases of Goodwife Agnes and Mrs. Larkin:
A comparative analysis of János Arany's ballad "Goodwife
Agnes" and Eudora Welty's story "A Curtain of Green"
KATALIN G. KÁLLAY

Abstract: In this paper I examine a nineteenth-century Hungarian poem and a twentieth-century American short story. The central characters are both widows who cannot comprehend the death of their husbands, and gradually turn insane, both of them obsessively get occupied with an irrational activity. Goodwife Agnes had helped her lover to kill her husband—but in the text, she is oblivious of the deed: all she knows is that she has to wash her bloodstained linen in the streamlet. Her disbelief is directed against the fact of death and murder, as well as against the fact that the sheet is spotless. Mrs. Larkin's husband died of an accident in the garden, her disbelief is directed against the powerlessness of her own most intimate protective words, as well as against the fact that her husband was killed by her garden, all she knows is that she feverishly has to plant more and more green life in the chaotic sloping plot behind her house. From the point of view of the gesture of abandoning oneself to disbelief, the difference between murder and accident seems to be irrelevant. However, the central metaphors of cleaning and planting might subtly indicate separate attitudes to disbelief in death, i.e. to the continuity of life.

If the phrase *hope against hope* means clinging to a mere possibility that something, though very unlikely, might still happen, *disbelief against disbelief* may mean clinging to a mere impossibility, that something that has happened, might still *un-happen*. In spite of all evidence, perhaps it can still be undone. In such a case, one might become obsessive in undoing the evidence, while this behavior in itself might become a proof of the thing that had happened, as well as of the traumatic deformation it had caused.

In my paper, I wish to examine a nineteenth-century Hungarian poem¹ and a twentieth-century American short story. The central characters are both widows who cannot comprehend the death of their husbands, and gradually turn insane, both of them are obsessively occupied with an irrational activity (washing a clean sheet, planting new shrubs in a jungle-like garden), they both become not only exposed to the natural elements, but in fact, part of them, transforming into mythical figures of the landscape.

Goodwife Agnes had helped her lover to kill her husband—but in the text, she is oblivious of the deed: all she knows is that she has to wash her bloodstained linen in the streamlet. Her disbelief is directed against the fact of death and murder, as well as against the fact that the sheet is spotless. Mrs. Larkin's husband died of an accident in the garden, he became the victim of a fragrant chinaberry tree that fell on his car, in spite of his wife's protective words: "You can't be hurt" (Welty 109). Mrs. Larkin's disbelief is directed against the powerlessness of her own most intimate protective words, as well as against the fact that her husband was killed by her garden; all she knows is that she feverishly has to plant more and more green life in the chaotic sloping plot behind her house. She, too, almost becomes a murderer: when she approaches Jamey (the young black boy helping in her garden) from behind, she is tempted to take his life by striking him in the neck with her hoe, thus compensating for her own losses—but the sudden rain confuses her and prevents the tragedy. From the point of view of the gesture of abandoning oneself to disbelief, the difference between murder and accident seems to be irrelevant. However, the central metaphors of cleaning and planting might subtly indicate separate attitudes to the disbelief in death, i.e. to the continuity of life.

János Arany, one of the most prominent nineteenth-century Hungarian poets and a translator of Shakespeare, wrote the ballad "Goodwife Agnes" in 1853. Eudora Welty, one of the most sensitive twentieth-century prose writers of the American South, published her first volume of short stories entitled *A Curtain of Green* in 1941, in which the story with the same title appeared as the 13th piece of the collection. Yet, in spite of the undeniable distance between the age, the nationality, the gender and the genre of the two authors, I believe the two texts may enter into a meaningful conversation, not only on the basis of the similar theme but also on the basis

1 The English translation of the poem was created by Géza Kállay, published in: "A Stain of Blood as Cultural Transmission. Lady Macbeth and János Arany's 'Goodwife Agnes'" (135–138).

DISBELIEF AGAINST DISBELIEF

of the two authors' extraordinary sensitivity to psychological subtleties and their power of expressing these in ageless metaphors, as well as on the basis of their precision in observation, especially concerning effects of light. Perhaps it goes without saying, I still feel it important to state that this poem is, to a large extent "narrative" and this short story is remarkably "poetic." Arany's powerful verse, with the refrain "O, merciful Lord, never leave me" sounding like either a prayer or an exclamation of shock or distress at the end of each stanza, also tells a story. Welty's prose, without leaving the tone of colloquial storytelling, also has a rhythm, which derives from the alternating description of stillness and movement, and it also contains poetic, ballad-like elements in its metaphors and in its obscure conclusion: Mrs. Larkin is left lying among the shrubs in her garden and it is not clear if she will ever get up: she seems to have succeeded in planting herself and becoming a part of nature.

Before turning to the main question of disbelief strongly connected to memory, I would like to examine the two protagonists' place in their respective communities, their relation to their society, since their beliefs and disbeliefs are also influenced to some extent by their social situations.

Goodwife Agnes is seen surrounded by "urchins" of the village in the second stanza, whom she tries to hush away saying her "chicken's blood smudged [her] linen." As Géza Kállay has observed, this may be a euphemistic allusion to menstruation, thus indirectly to her infertility. She has no children of her own—although apart from this, very little is said about her private life, neither her husband, nor her lover are described in the poem (145). The next stanza gives an account of the neighboring women asking where her husband is, and she wants to keep them away by saying he is asleep inside. When the bailiff comes to take her to prison, she argues that she must clean her sheet of the spot before going. It is clear that she wants to pretend that all is well, and by playing this role, she distances herself from the others, still, the way she addresses them ("my dearest," "my dove, darling," even to the bailiff) indicates that she is on good terms with the neighborhood and its authorities. Although she is imprisoned and tried, she is not alienated from the community: the hoary elders judging her deed call her "my child," and after seeing her concern for continuing her washing, after recognizing her insanity, they tacitly agree on letting her go and abandon herself to her self-imposed punishment.

Mrs. Larkin (after whose father-in-law the whole small town, Larkin's Hill was named) is in a different position. Her garden is surrounded by a high, wall-like

hedge (a real curtain of green), so the neighbors (mostly gossiping ladies) can only see her in it from their windows upstairs. This way, she is both secluded and exposed. The garden, symbol of safety, privacy and virginity embraces her, she has not left it since the accident. Yet it is also the place where the accident happened, imprisoning her in her memory. The only person she allows to enter this space is Jamey, but she is not content with his work, far from being kind or grateful. She becomes extremely vulnerable in her exposure, and the women judging and criticizing her from above keep no direct contact with her at all. Not that she would care about this in the least: she does not feel the need to play a role for the sake of social acceptance. The only thing she can concentrate on is planting more and more life (the gesture in itself may be a compensation for her own infertility).

So, in spite of the fact that Goodwife Agnes is imprisoned and tried for complicity in murder whereas Mrs. Larkin is an innocent widow, the respective communities accept the former and refuse to accept the latter. Perhaps this is why Agnes is so concerned about appearances, including her own appearance: she desperately tries to convince herself and the jury of her sanity. Out of the three instances, perhaps the second one, in stanza 9, is the most telling:

She tidies up her attire,
Her kerchief neatly arranged,
Her straight hair adjusted also,
Lest they think something's *deranged*.
O, merciful Lord, never leave me. (Kállay 136)

As opposed to this, Mrs. Larkin wears her husband's untidy overalls, "often with her hair streaming and tangled where she had neglected to comb it" (Welty 107).

There is another difference between the two protagonists, which concerns their attitude to light and darkness, so attention must also be paid to the role of light in the two contexts. Both authors refer to light in memorable images. For Goodwife Agnes, a ray of light in the prison is essential, as we can see in stanzas 5–7:

Deep's the prison, one ray of light
Can hardly find way to enter,
One ray of sun's the prison's day,

DISBELIEF AGAINST DISBELIEF

And its night a swarm of specter,
O, merciful Lord, never leave me.

All day Agnes keeps an eye on
This narrow light, slender, small,
She stares it out,—it's so tiny,
It fits into one eye-ball.
O, merciful Lord, never leave me.

For when she turns, right around her
There dance specters, up they wind,
If that tiny light were not there,
She believes she'd *lose her mind*.
O, merciful Lord, never leave me. (Kállay 135–136)

By *italicizing* “lose her mind,” as well as “deranged” in stanza 9, Arany seems to suggest that it is already too late, she had hopelessly gone insane. Still, she clings to the one slender ray of sun and associates it with sanity, although towards the end of the poem, in stanza 24, she must lose her trust in the sun as well, since “The sun scorches her dewy cheeks.”

In “A Curtain of Green,” the scorching sun appears in the setting; the tension of the summer afternoon, and the waiting for the rain is described in powerful words:

One day, almost as late as five o'clock, the sun was still shining. It seemed almost to spin in a tiny groove in the polished sky, and down below, in the trees along the street and in the rows of flower gardens in the town, every leaf reflected the sun from a hardness like a mirror surface. (Welty 107)

The repetition of the word “almost” in the quoted passage makes the description tentative, in line with the hesitant and vague character (who also *almost* becomes a murderer) and is introduced in the text in sharp contrast with the harsh light:

Now the intense light like a tweezers picked out her clumsy, small figure in its old pair of men's overalls rolled up at the sleeves and trousers, separated it from the

thick leaves, and made it look strange and yellow as she worked with a hoe—over-vigorous, disreputable, and heedless. (Welty 107)

It seems that the sun is harmful for Mrs. Larkin. It throws light on the hard leaves (whose “mirror surface” she is forced to face), it throws light on her separation from her surroundings, it ultimately throws light on her insanity. For her, it is only the clouds and the rain that might bring some relief.

This difference in attitude to light might be explained by the difference of the time-span of the two texts: “A Curtain of Green” embraces one single afternoon, whereas “Goodwife Agnes” opens up the span of many years to come, which expresses the process of ageing. Agnes is young in the prison and has enough time to grow old, develop “freakish wrinkles,” become “misshapen,” weather-beaten, ignorant about light or darkness. Mrs. Larkin is also young: when she lifts the hoe above Jamey’s head, “the clumsy sleeves both fell back, exposing the thin, unsunburned whiteness of her arms, the shocking fact of their youth” (Welty 110). However, in her case, ageing is expressed in her longing for the shade, some “pale darkness” that will come with the rain, some protective cloud of her memory (Welty 111).

It is at this point that memory as well as the crucial difference between the metaphors of cleaning and planting must be examined in the two cases. The stain is an age-old metaphor of sin: the obsession of trying to get rid of it may indicate the need of getting rid of memory, erasing the past. For Goodwife Agnes, disbelief might mean a deliberate act of forgetting about the murder, her excuse is the priority of household duties: stains must be washed. There is another act of disbelief: the deliberate act of forgetting that the linen she keeps washing is clean. As stanza 21 states:

For in vain is the linen clean
 No sign of blood offered to sight,
 Agnes can still see it clearly,
 Just as she did then, *on that night*.
 O, merciful Lord, never leave me. (Kállay 138)²

So, by the double act of disbelief, by wanting to forget, first the murder and then, the fact that the linen is clean, she forces herself to remember and to re-enact, if not

2 Emphasis in the original.

DISBELIEF AGAINST DISBELIEF

the murder, then the consequence caused by the guilt, i.e. the cleaning. With the words “that night,” italicised, it becomes clear that she in fact remembers.

Mrs. Larkin does not want to forget at all, she is rather trapped in her memory. Her different attitude to disbelief is explained in the following paragraph:

[...] memory tightened about her easily, without any prelude of warning or even despair. She would see promptly, as if a curtain had been jerked quite unceremoniously away from a little scene, the front porch of the white house, the shady street in front, and the blue automobile in which her husband approached, driving home from work. It was a summer day, a day from the summer before. In the freedom of gaily turning her head, a motion she was now forced by memory to repeat as she hoed the ground, she could see again the tree that was going to fall. There had been no warning. But there was the enormous tree, the fragrant chinaberry tree suddenly tilting, dark and slow, like a cloud, leaning down to her husband. From her place on the front porch she had spoken in a soft voice to him, never so intimate as at that moment, “You can’t be hurt.” But the tree had fallen, had struck the car exactly so as to crush him to death. She had waited there on the porch for a time afterward, not moving at all—in a sort of recollection—as if to reach under and bring out from obliteration her protective words and to try them once again ... so as to change the whole happening. It was accident that was incredible, when her love for her husband was keeping him safe. (Welty 109)

The text’s word for disbelief is “incredible.” Instead of trying to forget these details, she deliberately recalls them, in the form of a “little scene,” quite theatrically, even feeling the jerking away of the “curtain.” It is her aim to re-enact the moment, to repeat it over and over, to make the tragedy un-happen by giving more power to her protective words. She wants to “reach under” the cloud of the tree in order to bring him out with the words, again and again. In a strange and desperate moment of the story, the idea of taking revenge or of performing a sacrifice crosses her mind, when she stands above the vulnerable neck of Jamey, lost in his own daydreams.

However, the rain intervenes, confuses her even more, until the complete confusion brings her some relief:

Then, as if it had swelled and broken over a daily levee, tenderness tore and spun through her sagging body.

It has come, she thought senselessly, her head lifting and her eyes looking without understanding at the sky which had begun to move, to fold nearer in softening, dissolving clouds. It was almost dark. [...]

Then Mrs. Larkin sank in one motion down into the flowers and lay there, fainting and streaked with rain. Her face was fully upturned, down among the plants, with the hair beaten away from her forehead and her open eyes closing at once when the rain touched them. Slowly her lips began to part. She seemed to move slightly, in the sad adjustment of a sleeper. (Welty 111–2)

The frequent use of the words “seemed” and “almost” creates an opaque atmosphere around the story: the text ends on the note of Jamey running away, horrified, but it is not clear whether Mrs. Larkin will ever get up from her final position. Whether Mr. Larkin is buried in the garden also remains unsaid, but with her last motion, Mrs. Larkin re-enacts what had happened to him. The clouds folding near her repeat the gesture of the chinaberry tree, and the whole event is gentle, tender, as if the protective words had also become effective somehow, now referring to both of them: “You can’t be hurt.” Planting as a reaction to her disbelief emphasizes the proliferation not only of her memory but of the power of the life-giving words as well and she finally comes to a rest by sharing her husband’s experience, in a sense, planting herself in the garden.

But is there any protection for Goodwife Agnes? By perpetuating her position in the streamlet, she, too, becomes a part of nature. The detailed description of her withering away in stanza 25 seems to indicate incessant pain:

The ruffled hair has turned hoary
No strand is dark, none is raven,
Freakish wrinkles creep all over

DISBELIEF AGAINST DISBELIEF

The smooth face moulded misshapen.

O, merciful Lord, never leave me. (Kállay 138)

If the result of her double disbelief is re-enactment, she must constantly be conjuring up her guilt and pain.

But double disbelief might end up in belief. The mantra-like refrain, repeated just as obsessively as the movements of Agnes' mallet, might also gain some power and become effective. Perhaps this had already been foreseen by the "hoary elders," and slowly accepted by the community: Agnes, as part of the landscape, gradually enters another dimension where even Mrs. Larkin's protective word might also apply to her: she can't be hurt.

In both texts, disbelief concerns two facts. In both cases, one of these facts is the death of the husband. The second, in Agnes' case is the fact that the sheet is clean; in Mrs. Larkin's case, it is the powerlessness of her protective words. The repetitive irrational action that follows their disbelief results in the re-enactment of the tragedy they had wished to make un-happen: Agnes through erasure, Mrs. Larkin through proliferation. Agnes deliberately wants to forget, Mrs. Larkin deliberately wants to remember. Unable to come to terms with death, both protagonists go through a shift of dimension, grammatically speaking, a shift of voice, from active to passive. Both become the objects of their frenzied repetitive activity. Mrs. Larkin keeps planting until she becomes planted in the end, Agnes keeps cleaning until she is slowly washed away by the streamlet, until she is finally cleaned. It is only in this new dimension (or new voice) that their disbelief against disbelief might end up in belief, that they "can't be hurt" and, perhaps, the merciful Lord never leaves them.

WORKS CITED

- Kállay, Géza. "A Stain of Blood as Cultural Transmission. Lady Macbeth and János Arany's 'Goodwife Agnes.'" In *Confrontations and Interactions. Essays on Cultural Memory*. Eds. Gárdos, B., Á. Péter, N. Pikli, M. Vincze. Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2011. 135-138.
- Welty, Eudora. *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*. Houghton Mifflin, Harcourt, 1982. 107-112.

KATALIN G. KÁLLAY

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Katalin G. Kállay teaches American literature at Károli Gáspár University in Budapest and used to offer summer courses at the University of California in Santa Cruz. She took an M.A. at L. Eötvös University in Budapest and defended her Ph.D. at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. Her first book on nineteenth-century American short stories, *Going Home Through Seven Paths to Nowhere: Reading Short Stories by Hawthorne, Poe, Melville and James* was published in 2003 by the Hungarian Academy of Science. Her fields of research include nineteenth- and twentieth-century American fiction, especially Southern women writers, Hungarian literature in English, literary responses to the Holocaust and the relationship between philosophy and literature.