

# The (im)moral landscape:

Zygmunt Haupt's  
short story

*Deszcz* [The Rain]

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The poetics of Zygmunt Haupt's works, somewhat old-fashioned and excessive in its use of stylistic tricks, is in fact a precise tool that allows the writer to create characters, situations and worlds that are both simple (almost tangible) and complex (in terms of varied and complex epistemological frameworks). Haupt's prose, strongly marked by emotions, ultimately addresses the fundamental existential and ethical issues, and forces us to ask questions about the human condition in a world threatened by disintegration.

The narrator of Haupt's short four-page story entitled *Deszcz* [The Rain] states at one point: "Tak sobie ułożyłem to opowiadanie i teraz przyglądam się swemu dziełu. O czym ono ma mówić? Co za wieść cholerną ma nieść w sobie" [I have arranged this story thus and now I am looking at my work. What is it supposed to be about? What bloody message is it supposed to convey?].<sup>1</sup> Thus, he indicates that this short memoiristic sketch hides some acute and "bloody" problem, and the question of "arranging" – constructing, composing – the narrative, explicitly stated, points to its conceptual nature. Respectively, the questions which the

<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Haupt, "Deszcz" [The Rain], in: *Baskijski diabeł. Opowiadania i reportaże* [The Basque Devil: Stories and reportages], ed. Aleksander Madyda (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne 2016), 277. All quotations and page numbers are from this edition.

narrator asks, which suggest that it might be difficult to unambiguously interpret what he has written thus far, point to the question of the literary genre. This is not a short story, but a literary landscape depicted in three, seemingly similar, variations.

What draws our attention in the text is the linguistic supraorganization combined with emotionality; in other words, artistry combined with the promise of a confession. Andrzej Stasiuk, who recognized Haupt as his literary master, said in an interview entitled *Czytam tylko Haupta* [I only read Haupt] that:

[Haupt] really only describes himself. Although sometimes it's not that obvious. For example, in the story *Deszcz*, we don't know where we are, but these three pages describing rain in the unnamed town send shivers down your spine! Is this Galicia? It could be anywhere...<sup>2</sup>

The personal and intimate dimension of this prose may remain in the sphere of readerly reconstructions: Jakub Lubelski, in his article "Zygmunta Haupta porzucanie literackości" [Zygmunt Haupt Abandons Literariness], stated that this short story is a "prose fresco." He then added: "It seems that *Deszcz* actually is about the rain."<sup>3</sup> And yet, despite the fact that the word "rain" appears in the text 32 times and despite the fact that it is filled with the sound of the rain (and the text supposedly inexplicably "sends shivers down your spine"), rain itself is not the theme – it is a synesthetic trick that has been used in a number of different ways. It is not the rain but what is "hidden" behind it that is the "bloody message," as stated by the narrator at the beginning. It is arrested in a cleverly constructed image.

The short story has been framed, placed in a parenthesis, which points to the constant fight against unwanted shifts of memory. The first sentence reads "Niektóre sprawy zapamiętuje się w życiu na zawsze" [Some things in life are remembered forever] (275) and the final sentence reads "Zapamiętałem tylko deszcz" [I only remember the rain] (278). And the story does not describe the process of reconstructing past events or searching for the cause-and-effect links between them. It is an image of a place arrested in time; it is a landscape arrested in a frame of memories; it is the panorama of a town seen only once. The narrator says: "Musiałem być przez jeden dzień w tym miejscu obcym, nie znanym mi dotąd, byłem tam przez cały dzień i deszcz padał przez dzień cały, i zaledwie ustał nad wieczorem" [I had to be for one day in this strange place, this unknown place, I was there all day, and it rained all day long, and it only stopped raining in the evening] (275). The narrator observes the spa, which he visited only once, through the layers of time; alas, it does not evoke melancholic longing for the past but forces the narrator to come to terms with his traumatic memories.

The landscape recreated in memory is an attempt to see the world subjectively, or even to impose a subjective order on the world (past events). Marek Zaleski thus interprets the essence of Haupt's prose:

<sup>2</sup> Andrzej Stasiuk, "Czytam tylko Haupta" [I only read Haupt], <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/czytam-tylko-haupta-30124>, date of access: February 24, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Jakub Lubelski, "Zygmunta Haupta porzucanie literackości" [Zygmunt Haupt Abandons Literariness], <https://teologiapolityczna.pl/jakub-lubelski-zygmunta-haupta-porzucanie-literackosci-2>, date of access: February 24, 2022.

it tries to become pure intuition, pure seeing. It seems to assume that, unlike in the act of storytelling entangled in time [...], the “now” of the act of perception allows you to touch eternity and capture the momentary, changing aspect of the world, the becoming of reality.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, “seeing” is effectively transgressing epistemological constraints or, as in the case of *Deszcz*, consciously creating them. Epistemological barriers and memory gaps which appear in the text force the reader to dig deeper, to move beyond the surface of the image.

The rain that makes it difficult to see is an important part of the landscape. The narrator recalls: “(...) przyzwyczałem się do tego deszczu, jakby należał on do krajobrazu, jakby tu nie miało nigdy być co innego, tylko deszcz” [I got used to this rain, as if it were part of the landscape, as if there would never be anything else here but the rain] (275). In addition, the rain functions like a screen that blurs the shapes and the colors because it “leżał pionowo na tym zielonym krajobrazie z zieleni drzew” [was lying vertically on this green landscape made of green trees] (275). The surface of the image, recreated from memory, is enriched with further details. The connections between Haupt’s works and painting have been pointed out by many critics. We can see that in this short story as well. The link is thematized and played out at the level of the narrator’s consciousness, who says: “Pamiętam zielen tego miejsca, jakby zielen ta, jak farba przez ten deszcz rozpuszczona, zafarbowała wszystko na zielono” [I remember the green of this place, as if this green, like paint dissolved by the rain, dyed everything green] (275). Thus, what was retained in memory was an immobile, almost monochromatic, blurred, and fuzzy landscape. This image was not a masterpiece of perfection but rather a hasty sketch made by an amateur.

Looking at the represented space makes one want to capture its unique nature. As Ewa Wiegandt writes: “Haupt can make the world flat as a canvas, and he can render the image flat, as if devoid of a sense of perspective and depth (...) It is down-to-earth and trivial but also drawn with tenderness, empathy, grace, and attention.”<sup>5</sup> In *Deszcz*, a special “non-anthropological place” – an empty, lonely, deserted spa whom the narrator visits out of season – is the *locale*. At the same time, it is a canvas on which different elements can be placed and combined.

The narrator remembers the space as “flat.” Its meaning changes, depending on the characters who are placed in it. Trying to remember who they were is not an end in itself but rather a therapeutic exercise or even a form of silencing one’s memories. The narrator states: “To dziwne: pamiętam deszcz, pamiętam tło tego deszczu, a poza tym niczego więcej już nie pamiętam” [It’s strange: I remember the rain, I remember the background of this rain, and I don’t remember anything else] (276). Still, we learn a lot about the past, perhaps more than the narrator would like. In Haupt’s prose, as Bogumiła Kaniewska, Anna Legeżyńska, and Piotr Śliwiński write, one cannot “capture the past” but one can observe how memory fuels creation: “Memory, and its role, is an unknown, an intuition, a projection. It is not epic because it challenges its down-to-earth nature. It is therapeutic because it allows one to turn

<sup>4</sup> Marek Zaleski, *Formy pamięci. O przedstawianiu przeszłości w polskiej literaturze współczesnej* [Forms of Memory: The Representations of the Past in Polish Contemporary Literature] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 1996), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Ewa Wiegandt, *Niepokoje literatury. Studia o prozie polskiej XX wieku* [The anxieties of literature: Polish prose of the twentieth century] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo WBPiCAK, 2010), 205.

injuries into ecstasy.”<sup>6</sup> Especially when the ability to control the image of the past provides one with a sense of security.

In *Deszcz*, looking into the past seems at first to be a form of a play with how deceitfully elusive it is. However, the emotions revealed at the end of the text show that the process of transforming painful experiences into literary epiphanies can be extremely difficult and not always successful. Haupt-the author shows that unwanted memories ultimately turn out to be stronger than his character’s efforts to “forget,” stronger than his attempts to hide the past behind the rain. The three possible reasons which made the protagonist visit the nameless spa are mentioned in the text twice. They effectively give rise to the three variants of the story – it can be read as a social commentary, as a love story, and as a criminal story – and all three are but suggested to the reader.

One reason, therefore, could be money. However, the protagonist does not remember who the creditor or the debtor in that haphazard and as if half-hearted transaction was, nor does he remember the transaction itself. “Może nałgał, a może to ja jemu nałgałem” [Maybe he lied to me, or maybe I lied to him] (276), the narrator says dispassionately. Respectively, a love story mentions a girl who left the protagonist – she remains a disembodied apparition – and the protagonist’s wish to return to her. His futile attempts to win her back, however, are a cliché of memory, which rely on the conventional approach to love stories. In both cases, the protagonist decides to visit the town; it is his choice. It is not the case in the third variant.

The narrator wonders about why he visited the spa and makes an unexpected guess: “A może wysłali mnie, ażebym zabił człowieka” [Maybe they sent me to kill someone?] (276). “They” are mentioned and their right to give orders is not questioned. In this case, unlike in earlier “spectral” variants with equally “spectral” props (money which is an attribute of a social story, or the lover’s hat which “screams” love story), a real gun appears, cocked and loaded. The physicality of the victim, the “faceless” murdered man, which the narrator ineffectively tries to “remove” from his aching memory, is also real:

Posłali mnie aż tam, ażebym poczekał, aż będzie wychodził z furtki pensjonatu, i kiedy wystrzelone i usmolone łuski pistoletu będą lśniły na żużlu chodnika, to nawet wtedy nie będę widział twarzy zabitego przeze mnie i leżącego plecami do góry człowieka ze śmiesznie wykręconymi nogami [They sent me all the way there to wait until he came out of the boarding house gate, and when the tarred pistol shells fell onto the black pavement, even then I couldn’t see the face of the man I killed; I only saw his back and his legs which were ridiculously twisted] (276).

Then, after he shot the man in the back, he could not see his face, but he remembered the grotesque arrangement of the lifeless body, the eternal “trace” of the crime.

The possible variants of the story are mentioned for the second time – they also take place against a green background, with the same characters and the same little details. A social commentary

<sup>6</sup> Bogumiła Kaniewska, Anna Legeżyńska, Piotr Śliwiński, *Literatura polska XX wieku* [Polish literature of the twentieth century] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2005), 126.

points to “wymagowana ważność transakcji dwudziestozłotowej” [the imaginary importance of a twenty-złoty transaction] (277). The unreal romance is ironically presented as a sad love story, that is “jedynosc godną kolekcji najtragiczniejszych dzieł się od stworzenia świata” [a story on a par with the most tragic events since the creation of the world] (277). The third variant is expanded, and the criminal plane is supplemented by ideology. The trip to the rainy town could thus be:

najaltruistyczniejszy dzień, kiedy w imię czegoś, dla racji takiej a takiej sprawy, w mokry dzień pod zmokłymi liśćmi alei uzdrowiska pomiędzy sezonami potrafiłem zabić z tyłu człowieka, którego twarzy nigdy nie widziałem, i patrzeć na swoje ręce, zanim panika poniosła mnie, jak pijaka, by zataczać się pomiędzy ścianami świata [the most altruistic day of my life, when, in the name of something, for the sake of a cause, on a rainy day, under the wet leaves, in an out-of-season spa, in an alley, I killed a man whose face I'd never seen, I shot him in the back and looked at my hands before panic made me stagger between the walls of the world like a drunk] (277–278).

On the one hand, some old, unnamed idea, now irrelevant, forgotten, invalidated, or verified by time is mentioned. On the other hand, we read about a crime that may not be forgotten and that may not be hidden behind the rain. It cannot be processed during DIY therapy sessions either. The suggested “altruism,” a sacrifice made for others or for a cause is just a ploy – cliché justifications rooted in the collective consciousness are imposed on the crime.

In the end, we are left with the dead twisted body and the shameless criminal who killed the man by shooting him in the back, and then staggered, in panic, between the “walls of the world.” In fact, there is no escaping responsibility for the crime. Ideology, believing in the cause, and the verdict issued on behalf of the community cannot remove the stain of guilt. Haupt’s reflections remind me of Barbara Skarga’s comments on the nature of evil in social life:

There is a lot of wickedness in social life. So, we are stuck in an unbridgeable, insurmountable gap between utopian dreams, the desire for brotherhood, closeness to others, and perfect social forms (although we have never witnessed it) and the current of malice, hatred, tragic wars, and evil that surrounds them. If – which no one can say for sure – evil always acts in the “in-between,” which is born between I and You, and the “in-between” provokes and calls, then, I think, we are both responsible for this and no one can absolve us from this responsibility.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of whether I alone contribute to evil, or You, or We, we should be aware of the consequences, Skarga writes, and repeats after Leszek Kołakowski that “it is not only I who am threatened by the enormity of my defiance: the universe as a whole is threatened, plunged as it were into chaos and uncertainty.”<sup>8</sup> Evil permanently violates the orders of reality and, at times, makes individuals lose faith in them.

*Deszcz* challenges the widely held beliefs that murder may be justified, and that the murderer is not affected by his deed. So, he can only attempt to distance himself from his memories and

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Skarga, *Kwintet metafizyczny* [Metaphysical Quintet] (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2009), 118.

<sup>8</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, *Religion: If There is No God-- : on God, the Devil, Sin, and Other Worries of the So-called Philosophy of Religion* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2011), 183.

hide behind a higher – historical, communal, ideological – cause. “Marność nad marnościami i wszystko marność” [Vanity of vanities and all is vanity], the narrator repeats in his artificial style. He then adds: “to sięga po jakiś morał, że co byśmy nie przeżywali, to w obrębie spraw nie liczy się to” [some moral is needed; no matter what we experience, it doesn’t really matter]. And then we save ourselves by repeating the mantra “pozostaje tylko deszcz” [only the rain remains] (277). Therefore, the tragedy of individual experiences, subordinated to what is considered more important than human life, does not count.

The landscape hidden behind the rain is actually a CSI – a crime scene investigation – which the reader may investigate but not judge. There are many traces which point to the murderer – not just the shells on the pavement, the weapon, the train tickets – it is above all the dead body, lying still on the pavement. In the past, probably no one was looking for the criminal who somehow “got away with murder” – he did not answer for what he did – but as a consequence he has to constantly (re)tell the story to himself, so that he can at least partially come to terms with the past.

Covering up the crime is a form of (self)defense against undesired and unpleasant traumatic memories – the reader, in turn, must discover the reason for it. Paweł Panas, who described Haupt as a “European exile” – as a stranger who at all times comes face to face with otherness, stated that the writer was aware that he could “fail only if he insisted on the integrity of his former self.”<sup>9</sup> The protagonist of *Deszcz* is also aware of this – he cannot choose only one variant, only one vision of what happened; the story must forever be divided into hypothetical possibilities. Only such an approach to the “former self” who visits a strange town “for no apparent reason” can help one wrestle with life.

The narrator also expresses doubts as to the nature of his message – “czy ma to być tylko rodzaj sygnału, ażeby odbiorca tego dopowiedział sobie kompletniej, czy też opowiadanie to jest moim osobistym, sztucznym językiem” [is it just meant to be a kind of signal so that the reader may fill in the gaps, or is this story my personal, artificial language] (277) – as if not realizing that, as a rule, the text can be both and that the reader may see a (thinly) veiled personal story in a completely different light. Andrzej Niewiadomski argues that a role reversal takes place in Haupt’s prose:

the narrator-protagonist is “playing the part” of the viewer and wanders – and we wander with him – with his eyes along and across the audience, combining love affairs, fatal accidents, storehouses, books of plants and animals, and the constant passage of time neutralized by topography and the painterly and the architectural perspective of “capturing” a moment forever, i.e. seeing everything in terms of “eternal things;” alas, as we are ashamed of what we feel, we are unable to verbalize it, we are unable to talk about it.<sup>10</sup>

It can therefore be concluded that by placing this particular landscape in front of the reader’s eyes, the writer looks at the details – and we look at the details with him – and the scene of

<sup>9</sup> Paweł Panas, „Zygmunt Haupt – europejski wygnaniec” [Zygmunt Haupt – A European Exile], *Konteksty Kultury* 16, vol. 2 (2019): 228.

<sup>10</sup> Andrzej Niewiadomski, “Manierystyczny teatr pamięci jako słownik świata w prozie Zygmunta Haupta” [The mannerist theater of memory as the language of the world in Zygmunt Haupt’s prose], *Acta Humana* 5 (2014): 33.

the crime, arrested forever in the picture, both hides and reveals the overwhelming power of evil and our frail efforts to fight it.

The crime scene – created and cleverly constructed in literature – encourages reflection on spaces contaminated with evil. From the individual perspective of the person who visited it in the past, the spa forever lost its “innocence,” and it must be viewed through the prism of painful experiences, regardless of the number (and the structure) of the veils and the screens employed. In an article devoted to spatial categories in Haupt’s prose, Jerzy Borowczyk and Krzysztof Skibski argue that it is important for the writer

to enter the place imagined in the story; consequently, he believes that the most precious thing that the writer may possess is a “paper ring.” In this context, a paper place (not to be confused with a model!) would be on a par with an actual (physical) place. Even when it is empty.<sup>11</sup>

The empty stage must be filled, and the viewer who is looking at it – even if he is alone – makes the performance possible.

The literary image of the spa out of season – a space and a place made of paper and words – is remarkable; what took place there destroyed the integrity of the protagonist’s memory and the core of his identity. The rain renders this place empty – or almost empty. If only it had been empty that day. If only there were no need to place those figures in the green landscape (re)created from memory (imagination). Ultimately, the paper rain does not have the power to obscure the presence of the characters who destroy the unity and harmony of the picture. Thanks to this, however, we can read this “embodied” story about the causes and effects of evil.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

<sup>11</sup>Jerzy Borowczyk, Krzysztof Skibski, „Puste miejsca w przestrzeni, puste miejsca w języku. Wokół Miejsca Andrzeja Stasiuka i dwóch opowiadań Zygmunta Haupta” [Empty places in space, empty places in language: Andrzej Stasiuk’s *Miejsce* [Place] and two short stories by Zygmunt Haupt], *Polonistyka. Innowacje* 8 (2018): 188.

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# KEYWORDS

LANDSCAPE

memory

**ABSTRACT:**

The article attempts to offer a new interpretation of Zygmunt Haupt's short story "Deszcz" [The Rain]. The analysis focuses on the literary strategies employed by the Polish writer and the ethical dimension of the short story. The poetics of Haupt's text forces one to reflect on its hidden meanings – the landscape presented in it, recreated in the narrator's memory, inspires a reflection on the human condition in a world of unstable values. Haupt does not impose his own interpretation but encourages the reader to find their own.

e t h i c s

POETICS

PLACE

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