

Names of vagueness.

Deszcz by Haupt
and *Little Snow Landscape*
by Walser: a comparative
reading

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1. Looking askance (at *Deszcz*)

Deszcz [Rain] (from *Pierścień z papieru* [Paper ring]) is a short story by Zygmunt Haupt, petite, anamorphous, and rather vague in terms of its genre classification; Miron Białoszewski would probably call it a *tiny extraordinariness*. It has not had much luck in terms of reception by critics and readers, which might be due to its eclectic, heterogeneous structure (although in this case it should interest those who saw Haupt as the precursor of both existentialism and postmodernism), or to its distinctive character compared to his other work. Or perhaps the reason is simple; in the face of such a gem of Polish prose, its extraordinary character, it

is not really possible to multiply exegetical comments. This short story makes readers want to rethink it over and over again, and at the end of this process – fall silent (the temptation is truly hard to resist).

Aleksander Madyda wrote:

In the case of *Deszcz* nothing can be said about the place nor time of action, which stems from the fact that it was meant to be poetic – the poetic descriptions and the atmosphere they create play the most important role in it¹.

Józef Czapski mentioned *Deszcz* briefly, observing that what he sees as two crucial distinctive characteristics of Haupt's prose – distance and restraint – give “seemingly most trivial experiences such a perspective as if they were already placed in their final, set hierarchy”². This is an accurate observation, however, it does not seem to refer specifically to *Deszcz* (Czapski's paper concerned the whole *Pierścień z papieru*), as no gradation of human experiences can be found in the short story.

Andrzej Stasiuk noted that “the combination of thoughts and things in Haupt's prose creates such a dense network that the powers of reason are hopeless and completely redundant when faced with it”³. And if he is correct, then *Deszcz* is a dark spot in Haupt's prose, its counterpoint reverse.

It is impossible to set oneself free from this short story – but this is not because it is soaked, thick with enumeration, and concrete (even if something specific appears in it, it is momentarily blurred). In the story, it is raining – heavily, endlessly and stubbornly – and even though it highlights how green the greenery is, readers will only remember the rain. This is what the narrator wants; like a true deconstructionist he first outlines clear, disturbing visions of the reasons and goal behind his arrival (in “this town”, “on that day”), only to wipe them out, make them phantoms, subject them to the rain. “The only thing I remember – he claims in the conclusion – is that there was such a day, and that it ended, and I returned to the train station, and that I never saw that place again. The only thing I remember is the rain”⁴. And if so, it would seem we have no right to protest or pick anything up from the letters, constantly showered with rain (“simple, fresh, and energetic”, see D 275). Stasiuk observes that “the point of the infinite number of objects listed in Haupt's short story is for them to last”⁵. And in *Deszcz*, what is left is the rain: the non-entity of rain.

¹ Aleksander Madyda, *Haupt. Monografia* [Haupt. A monograph] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo UMK, 2012), 273.

² See Józef Czapski, “O Hauptcie” [On Haupt], in Czapski: *Czytając* [Reading] (Kraków: Znak, 1990), 410–411.

³ Andrzej Stasiuk, “Zygmunt Haupt”, in Stasiuk: *Tekturowy samolot* [Cardboard plane] (Czarne: Wołowiec, 2001), 156.

⁴ Zygmunt Haupt, “Deszcz”, in Haupt: *Baskijski diabeł. Opowiadania i reportaże* [Basque devil. Short stories and reportages], edited by Aleksander Madyda (Czarne: Wołowiec, 2017), 278 (henceforth D). Translation mine, PZ.

⁵ Stasiuk, 159.

Stasiuk's impression-essay, written in a way truly characteristic of its author, ends with a surprising metaphor:

Zygmunt Haupt's prose is darkness in reverse – it resembles a fire. A fire which leaves behind only bare, scorched earth. His description annihilated everything: people, their deeds and emotions, greenery, animals, cities, villages, history encased in walls, lives of generations encased in objects and utensils, memory and time; he took everything, turned it into smoke and took it away from the world to place it in literature, so that it is preserved there, motionless and more durable than all visible things⁶.

The omnipotent element of Haupt's circumlocution is compared to a metamorphic power of narrative fire, which transforms objects into words in order to save them. This is how tender memory, invention, and creationist power of storytelling work⁷. However, once again, it looks different in *Deszcz*. It is not the reason and rule behind savior-writing that remain at the back, it is not utensils that are rescued from a dying world to be put on the display of the eternal clarity of language. No, the foreground is taken by an element. This element purifies like fire, but by washing things rather than transforming them. "These could be very important matters, with serious consequences. And yet the only thing I remember from that time is rain" (D 277). Rain broke into pieces, and so did the world's construction. Rain also covered oblivion – all matters, bigger and smaller. Rain is the only thing left. Like a canticle.

But is this true? Is it possible that this is how we are supposed to read this short story? Or perhaps we are led by the nose, missing something significant, the gist of *Deszcz*, the key to its meaning? The deconstructionist narrator undermines the validity of the story he tells, he is uncertain, he multiplies questions. "What is it supposed to be about? What damn message does it carry? What is it supposed to be?" (D 277). This is unlike other works by Haupt, suggesting some flirtatiousness of the narrator, that the only worthwhile thing is to get carried away by the vagueness of rain into the gutter oblivion.

This function of the titular rain blurs one of the main directives of the work of memory in Haupt's prose. As Tomasz Mizerkiewicz aptly observed in his extrapolation of the counter-march metaphor from *Meine liebe Mutter...*, the stake of preserving one detail in memory is evoking the past *in extensor* and for an eternal, literary return⁸. However, looking at *Deszcz*

⁶ Stasiuk, 163.

⁷ I generally agree with the line of reasoning within which Haupt is seen as an heir to Proust, an author who – to use a phrase from Rafał Wojaczek's poem – "believes that he will find", who does not doubt the realness and nameability of the world. Even if he has the sense of transforming the visible into the verbal, reality into language, it does not diminish the sense of "preserving the world" (see e.g. the interpretation of the "paper ring" metaphor: Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, "Proza Zygmunta Haupta – problem uwagi" [Zygmunt Haupt's prose – the attention issue], in: *Jestem bardzo niefortunnym wyborem*. *Studia i szkice o twórczości Zygmunta Haupta* [I am a very unfortunate choice. Studies and papers on works by Zygmunt Haupt], edited by Andrzej Niewiadomski, Paweł Panas [Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2018], 22). Maciej Nowak aptly concludes that "aware of his entanglement in the pre-set order of cognition, as well as the mechanisms that govern verbal expression, Haupt nonetheless does not doubt the world which he experiences and which he tries to tell" (Maciej Nowak, "Właściwie niewypowiedziane Haupta i jego konsekwencje" [Haupt's proper untold and its consequences], in: *Jestem bardzo niefortunnym wyborem*, 36).

⁸ Mizerkiewicz, 16–17.

also from this perspective we may come to a conclusion that this specific rain blurs any clarity of “some town”, all reasons and goals of coming there disappear, faces of the people met there fade, ambitions and plans are lost, and we are only left with the knowledge that there was such a day, because there must have been (just as 16 May 1973 in a poem by Szymborska), but the only thing left from is this incessant rain.

Although it is this vagueness⁹ that undermines the potentially autobiographic character of *Deszcz*¹⁰, it is difficult not to suspect that the narrator is like a spokesperson of the author, and so we should pay attention to what he says.

Jakub Lubelski concludes his detailed summary of *Deszcz* with the following statement: “It would seem that *Deszcz* is only about the rain”¹¹. Or is it? Maybe (as Lubelski himself observes) it is some sort of a code, a private *volapük* which demands a solution – which is hardly possible (or even impossible¹²) due to the idiomatic character of such an individual, perfectly concise, closed language? Thus we should look through the text, peek behind the curtain of rain... Where we will only see aporias and forks which force us to stop and make an impossible choice where to go next.

In terms of the relationship between epistemology and phenomenology in Haupt’s works, Andrzej Niewiadomski made an apt observation that in *Deszcz* the vision of the vagueness of human experience, which stems from mutually exclusive reasons behind the protagonist’s arrival, results in rejecting any essentialism: “If attempts at discovering the «essence» do not bring the desired effects, Haupt’s protagonist resorts to the topographic concrete”¹³. As Haupt’s readers we are led towards objects and facts which sparkle and resonate in his various works – but not in the world of *Deszcz*, ruled by the sudden, momentary entropy¹⁴ of any ontology; common rain functions as the reverse of epiphany.

⁹ Andrzej Stasiuk argues that this characteristic of Haupt’s prose transforms some of his works into universal parables: “his obsession with memory is significant: names, objects, landscape. For example, in *Deszcz* we do not know where we are, but a three-page-long description of rain sends shivers down the spine. This could be taking place anywhere...” (“Czytam tylko Haupta [I only read Haupt]. Z Andrzejem Stasiukiem rozmawia Michał Sowiński [An interview with Andrzej Stasiuk by Michał Sowiński]”, *Tygodnik Powszechny* 13.09.2015; <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/czytam-tylko-haupta-30124>, date of access: 11.05.2020). I think that in this short story we are dealing with suspended primacy of memory, with memory *à rebours*, a treaty on not-remembering.

¹⁰ See e.g. Aleksander Madyda, *Zygmunt Haupt. Życie i twórczość literacka* [Zygmunt Haupt. Life and literary work] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo UMK, 1998), 133–140.

¹¹ Jakub Lubelski, *Zygmunt Haupta porzucanie literackości* [Zygmunt Haupt’s abandonment of literariness], <https://teologiapolityczna.pl/jakub-lubelski-zygmunta-haupta-porzucanie-literackosci>, date of access: 15.05.2020.

¹² See Jagoda Wierzejska, “Nietota, czyli Melancholia Erotica. O funkcji niektórych motywów folklorystycznych w prozie Zygmunta Haupta” [Nietota, i.e. Melancholia Erotica. On the function of some folk motifs in Zygmunt Haupt’s prose], *Tekstualia* 2 (2010): 118.

¹³ Andrzej Niewiadomski, “Przestrzenie Zygmunta Haupta (Rekonosans)” [Zygmunt Haupt’s spaces (a reconnaissance)], *Roczniki Humanistyczne* z. 1 (2018): 174.

¹⁴ And perhaps this is one of those rules of Haupt’s writig which works well also in *Deszcz* – see Dorota Utracka, “Aliniowość, rozpad, chaos, czyli o tekstowych figurach entropii w prozie Zygmunta Haupta” [Alinearity, disintegration, chaos – textual figures of entropy in Zygmunt Haupt’s prose], in: *Efekt motyla. Humanisci wobec teorii chaosu* [Butterfly effect. Humanists and the theory of chaos], edited by Kordian Bakula, Dorota Heck (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2009).

Obviously other properties of the poetics of Haupt's prose, especially inconclusiveness and narrative infiniteness¹⁵, highlighted both through the reconstructionist activity of the narrator, and a peculiar self-dispersion of plots, all have an anti-essential dimension. Moreover, Haupt's tendency to use frequent variability in his works, repeating and rejecting once established configurations, lowers the uniformity of the picture of the world, secret formulas and regularities extracted from reality. But such things do not concern *Deszcz*, ruled by "uncertain certainty" of the narrator, who – lulled by the rain – reduces all possibilities of the shape of the past to "an unfathomable essence of a seemingly banal phenomenon which is the opposite to any diversity"¹⁶.

And so these could be very important matters, genuinely fateful. And yet the only thing I remember from that time is the rain. Green, silver, splashing like mercury, I remember the grey of that rain among the greenery, monotony, and some weird freshness of that rain, and I do not remember anything else (D 277).

In *Przeciw entropii, przeciw arkadii* [Against entropy, against arcadia] Andrzej Niewiadomski writes that "peculiarity" (as Haupt's leitmotif) which seems to play the main role in *Deszcz*, is "related to elusiveness", "guarantees an authentic contact between man and reality", and highlights the significance and role of the specific¹⁷. The latter characteristic of Haupt's prose is also mentioned by Mizerkiewicz in his concluding remarks, where he observes that for Haupt materiality is the stake in the game for truth, whose uncovering is about unintentionally repeating material signs and transforming them into "signs of art"¹⁸.

Having outlined several aspects of Haupt's short story (to which we shall return), now let us move on to Robert Walser.

2. Robert Walser's prose – possibility of a dialogue with *Deszcz*

There is no doubt regarding Robert Walser's popularity in Poland: the Polish translation of *The Tanners* has been out of print for many years (it is only available second-hand at a very

¹⁵See e.g. Stanisław Wawrzyniec Zając, "Jak czytać Haupta? Prowokacja interpretacyjna" [How to read Haupt? An interpretative provocation], in: *Paradygmat pamięci w kulturze* [Memory paradigm in culture], edited by Andrzej Borkowski, Marcin Pliszka, Artur Ziótek (Siedlce: Wydawnictwo Akademii Podlaskiej, 2005), 321; Nowak, 24. Krzysztof Rutkowski expressed this property of Haupt's prose in the simplest terms when he observed that Haupt "would like to tell the world's entirety, but he is sentenced to a fragment and combining pieces, always unfinished" (Krzysztof Rutkowski, "W stronę Haupta" [Towards Haupt], *Teksty Drugie* 1-2 [1991]: 122).

¹⁶Andrzej Niewiadomski, "Ja, Zygmunt z Roksolanii. O gatunkowej nieprzejrzystości prozy Haupta" [I, Zygmunt from Roksolania. On the lack of genre clarity in Haupt's prose], in: „*Jestem bardzo niefortunnym wyborem*”, 90.

¹⁷Andrzej Niewiadomski, *Przeciw entropii, przeciw arkadii. O pisarstwie Zygmunta Haupta* [Against entropy, against arcadia. On Zygmunt Haupt's prose] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Literatury, 2021), 41. In his earlier paper on Haupt Niewiadomski draws a precise map of semantic properties of this "weirdness", additionally observing that in Haupt it means: 1) unknown, alien; 2) hybrid; 3) "artificial"; 4) pathological, he determines "strategies for expressing chaos" ("Jeden jest zawsze ostrzem". *Inna nowoczesność Zygmunta Haupta* [One is always a blade. A different modernity of Zygmunt Haupt] [Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2015], 139), and finally, "weirdness" functions as a trope of "suspension and inconclusiveness" (Niewiadomski, „*Jeden jest zawsze ostrzem*”, 156).

¹⁸Mizerkiewicz, 22.

high price); many Polish readers consider Walser an outstanding, or even cult writer¹⁹. In the light of this popularity, there surprisingly few critical studies of his prose: although the first Polish translation of *The Assistant* by Teresa Jętkiewicz was published in 1972, within the prestigious series Library of twentieth-century masterpieces by Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, there have only been 30-40 critical studies to date, mostly short reviews rather than profound analyses. Even if we add to that several interpreters (Jętkiewicz, Łukasiewicz, Musiał, Żychliński), a micromonograph²⁰, several faithful critics²¹, two conferences (Raławice 1990, Opole 2018) – the Polish landscape of Walser’s reception seems rather modest²².

It is difficult to answer why this is the case. Of course we could say that this is an elite writer, outside of the mainstream, trendy styles or tendencies, peculiar, impossible to be referred or reduced to any other work; a master of balancing on the line between naïveté and realism, irony and seriousness, elusiveness and the old-fashioned – in short, an author that has to seduce readers are able to adjust their sensitivity register to his own. Perhaps this is the reason why it is easier for Walser to have his “followers”, admirers of his incredible talent rather than a wide circle of readers and scholars. This also seems to be how Jerzy Łukosz likely saw it when writing about the specificity of Walser’s presence among readers over two decades ago:

The exclusive “clan” of Robert Walser consists of a few experts, scholars who guard the helpless author against editorial and translational incompetence. A “clan” is a rare addition to a book, it emerges spontaneously around the work of authors treated with special care, authors who are spiritually exposed, who escape the norms of scholarly procedures, negating the standards of alien literary cultures, grown-up children of literature and its saints – like Robert Walser²³.

It would seem that this diversity and durability of reception should be guaranteed by the peculiar “ahistoricity” of Walser’s prose (although it is somewhat difficult to detach his work from criticism of bourgeois culture). And if Walser’s prose is dominated by universality, it should – to use Białoszewski’s words – “fit everything”... However, this did not happen – or at least, not in Poland. If we take a closer *en bloc* look at the composition of texts on Walser,

¹⁹In terms of evidence for fascination with Walser’s prose we should mention: Maja Jurkowska, “W cieniu zapomnienia i w blasku sławy” [In the shadow of oblivion and the light of fame], *Twórczość* 6 (1994): 146–147; Urszula Kozioł, “O Robercie Walserze” [On Robert Walser], *Odra* 10 (2003): 96; Michał Paweł Markowski, “Ślady na śniegu” [Traces in snow], in Markowski: *Kiwka* [Dribbling], (Kraków: Znak, 2015); Łukasz Musiał, “Bez troska albo najmniejszy pisarz świata (zamiast kilku słów na koniec)” [Carefreeness or world’s smallest author (instead of a few words at the end)], in Musiał: *Do czego używa się literatury?* [What is literature used for?] (Kraków: Fundacja Tygodnika Powszechnego, 2016), 111–115.

²⁰Małgorzata Łukasiewicz, *Robert Walser* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1990).

²¹Małgorzata Łukasiewicz and Łukasz Musiał wrote about Walser the most in terms of volume and frequency. Their works – both significant and elaborate – are beyond the scope of this paper, and so the presentation of their ideas will be reduced to key theses. Łukasiewicz’s Walser and Musiał’s Walser – these topics probably deserve separate, interesting studies.

²²And if we observed that most Polish studies on Walser were written after the publication of Polish editions of his so-called small prose due to great translational efforts of Małgorzata Łukasiewicz, from *Przechadzki* [Strolls] (Warszawa: Świat Literacki, 1990) to *Niedzielny spacer* [Sunday walk] (Warszawa: Świat Literacki, 2005) this scene of Walser’s reception would seem even smaller.

²³Jerzy Łukosz, “Człowiek czyli sługa. O pisarstwie Roberta Walsera” [Man, i.e. a servant. On Robert Walser’s prose], *Twórczość* 4 (1997): 70.

and especially on their initial and final formulas, we will notice that almost all contain remarks regarding both his genius, and... being completely forgotten²⁴. Thus a large portion of studies devoted to Walser open with a critical-literary “level zero”: replaying a legend that is both complex and petrified²⁵, Walser’s biography and pointing out – typically in an imitative way – his favorite literary motifs (a stroll as a form of “life-writing”, all topoi of modesty, diminishing and disappearing, recluse protagonists, who always feel lost, and whose sensitivity does not allow them to feel at home in the world of “the great number”, or extraordinary concentration on smallest details).

Let us list the most important motifs in Walser’s works which would allow us to outline a common ground with Haupt. First of all, as argued by Małgorzata Łukasiewicz, Walser’s prose takes place outside of conventions, it is open, almost deprived of “composition rules”. Secondly, Łukasiewicz observes that Walser’s prose is set in some vague present determined by “a moment” experienced ecstatically by his protagonists (analogically, in Haupt we would deal with ecstatic moment made present), which makes Walser’s plots seem like collections of isolated moments; fragments of Walser’s descriptions and short stories are thus thrown in a peculiar timelessness of linguistic presentation.

A moment is the proper time in Walser’s prose. His fictional characters – or perhaps the role in which he appears – seem to exist only in this short moment, they are characterized exclusively by the psychological ability to experience or evoke experiences, they do not have a past²⁶.

Thirdly, it is said here that Walser’s protagonists “are uncertain of their status in the world”²⁷, multiplying (in earnest, but naively) existential questions, constructing their microworld *vitae contemplative* they try to set themselves free from the burden of the bourgeois order (social, economic, cultural)²⁸.

Maja Jurkowska’s paper is an interesting attempt at outlining sensual qualities in Walser, such as: 1) Walser’s look, “somewhat melancholic and soft, but certain”²⁹; 2) his style – compared to a court dance on the grounds of its finesse, elegance, discretion and delicateness³⁰;

²⁴Małgorzata Łukasiewicz opens her paper entitled *Mała scena* [Small stage] with: “For some Robert Walser is the favorite author (or at least he is among favorite authors), and for others – an unknown one” (Małgorzata Łukasiewicz, „Mała scena”, in Łukasiewicz: *Rubryka pod różą* [A rubric under a rose] [Kraków: Znak, 2007], 42). See also: Maja Jurkowska, “Robert Walser – szaleństwo bycia nikim” [The madness of being nobody], *Twórczość* 10 (1995): 122; Maja Jurkowska, “W cieniu zapomnienia i w blasku sławy” [In the shadow of oblivion and the limelight of fame], 147.

²⁵Jan Koprowski believes that the biographical and autothematic material is the biggest incentive to reading Walser; his critical paper “Życie na marginesie” [Life in the margin] (*Literatura* 34 [1979]) is actually a summary of Carl Seelig’s *Wanderungen mit Robert Walser* (1957) – Koprowski cites (in his own translations) Walser’s statements about the essence of social-literary life, writing, old age and alcoholism.

²⁶Małgorzata Łukasiewicz, “Roberta Walsera przechadzki” [Robert Walser’s strolls], *Literatura na Świecie* 8 (1975): 169.

²⁷Łukasiewicz, “Roberta Walsera przechadzki”.

²⁸Łukasiewicz, “Roberta Walsera przechadzki”, 170–171. Marian Holona, who was probably the first to compare Walser to Kafka on the grounds of their criticism of the bourgeois lifestyle, echoes Małgorzata Łukasiewicz in this respect (Marian Holona, “Minimalizm Roberta Walsera” [Robert Walser’s minimalism], *Literatura na Świecie* 8 [1975]: 5).

²⁹Jurkowska, “Robert Walser – szaleństwo bycia nikim”, 123.

³⁰See Jurkowska, “Robert Walser – szaleństwo bycia nikim”.

3) the main figure – a stroll which carries both a contestation of the bourgeois lifestyle and contemplative comfort which stems from experiencing nature, which in turn leads Walser's protagonists to a sense of "reconciliation and oblivion" as Jurkowska aptly puts it³¹. Jurkowska generally sees Walser's prose as reconciling contradictions: excessive acts undertaken by his protagonists are supposed to conjure a certain state of existential distance, to put something in brackets, which gives them permission to be unauthentic.

The most interesting studies into Walser's prose were published following the publications of volumes of his "small prose": *Dziwne miasto* [This Strange Town] (Warsaw 2001) and *Mały krajobraz ze śniegiem* [Little snow landscape] (Warsaw 2003). Those studies include: Jakub Ekier, *Tekst jako wyjście* [Text as a starting point] ("Literatura na Świecie" 2003, No 7/8), Piotr Herbich, *Prosastuecke* ("Nowe Książki" 2002, No 5), Piotr Kajewski, *Nie trać otuchy* [Do not get disheartened], ("Odra" 2003, No 3), and Adam Wiedemann, *Homilia*, ("Res Publica Nowa" 2002, No 8).

Following Łukasiewicz's line of thought, Ekier situates Walser among European geniuses of prose who prefer *poiesis* over reproducing, which is manifested in Walser's works both in the "non-transparent narrative convention", and in how the represented world is organized, subjected to the rule of constructing the space-time *in statu nascendi et scribendi*: "Walser's text is the same as the act of its creation, like a territory that unfolds as one walks deeper inside it"³². Hence writing corresponds with the rhythm of the protagonist-narrator's stroll, which creates the textual reality that lasts as long as both the stroll and writing are happening. The subject of this prose (and the reader closely following every step) is thus accompanied by the incessant "sense that in a moment they – together with their world-text – will stop talking, and so stop existing"³³.

An autoironic game is both a signature and seal of such a strategy³⁴. This is a game which a narrator of such a prose plays with themselves (in front of readers), and which manifests itself via: 1) multiple and changeable narrators and protagonists who accept their completely fictional and ephemeral status; 2) the narrative convention (established via strictly defined initial formulas, such as: "I imagine...", "everything will be very strange...", etc.), which triggers clear, ostentatious fictionality; 3) "pseudopunchlines", "plot disruptions" which result from evanescence, insignificance, blandness of events in the story alluded by the narrator, which at some point are simply cut, which blurs the significance of events and images presented in the story³⁵.

Based on all that Ekier draws an ontological conclusion, seeing Walser as an author who foreshadows existential philosophy, opens space for a deconstructionist game, and even draws the horizon of religious experiences of a clearly Buddhist provenance:

³¹Jurkowska, "Robert Walser – szaleństwo bycia nikim".

³²Jakub Ekier, "Tekst jako wyjście", *Literatura na Świecie* 7/8 (2003): 418.

³³Ekier, 420.

³⁴Ekier's observations resemble those by Bialik and Koprowski regarding the theatrical status of the represented reality in Walser's prose (Ekier, 417–418; Piotr Kajewski, "Nie trać otuchy", *Odra* 3 [2003]: 80).

³⁵Ekier, 414–417, 423.

No thoughts, i.e. no vision of sense, only existence, the fact that there is “this and that”. An intensifying sense of emptiness, nothingness even, seems to simultaneously suggest that the text will end soon, followed only by clean white pages up until the next specimen of miniature prose³⁶.

Adam Wiedemann presents an interesting comparative perspective, trying to (if only for a moment) forget about the idiomatycity of Walser’s prose; eager to encourage Polish readers, he outlines the following trajectories for comparisons:

I would situate Walser somewhere halfway between Natasza Goerke (Walser is more “specific”) and Miron Białoszewski (Walser has more “fancifulness”). They are all characterized by a tendency to intellectual flippancy, which allows them to put complex and dangerous issues in a few obnoxiously apt words. And perhaps also the conviction that everyone is both obvious and inscrutable, that those two qualities are not mutually exclusive – to the contrary, they work very well with each other³⁷.

I hope that this brief review of some characteristics of Walser’s prose will encourage numerous further comparative studies of those two great authors who are actually only being discovered. The following sections are one of such strolls.

3. *Deszcz* and *Little snow landscape* – two names for vagueness

Andrzej Niewiadomski observed – aptly and succinctly – that in Haupt, being means being a newcomer³⁸. This mode of existence of protagonists is probably the strongest connection between Haupt and Walser. This is where this sense of “peculiarity” stems from – both reality and existence. Narrators sometimes highlight this peculiarity of themselves being “newcomers” and thus strangers, and sometimes they cover it with language and sensitivity through which they look at the world. They construct their descriptions in such a way as to make the reality – which they observe and experience (and by which they are ruled) – seem like inscrutable, full of contradictions, incomprehensible or vague.

“Only rain will be left from all that” (D 277) – the protagonist of *Deszcz* insists before putting forward numerous hypotheses regarding the supposed meaning of the mysterious reality of some vague town, encompassed and covered with rain, which he visits on a certain morning. Walser’s protagonist says something similar: “Everything is covered, evened out, weakened.

³⁶Ekier, 420.

³⁷Adam Wiedemann, “Homilia”, *Res Publica Nowa* 8 (2002): 81.

³⁸Niewiadomski, “*Jeden jest zawsze ostrzem*”, 178.

Where there was diversity, now there is only one thing: snow”³⁹. Rain and snow cover everything with a thick blanket which highlights the experience of opacity and vagueness. The two protagonists react differently: Walser’s experiences childish, ecstatic joy⁴⁰, Haupt’s is overcome by incomprehensible shaking, but generally his experience is dominated by a sense of “peculiar freshness” brought about by the “silver, splashing like mercury” rain which “wipes everything away”; nonetheless, in both stories the final *crescendo* sounds similar – not much is left by our existence: uncertain identity that breaks down, a sense of peculiar vagueness of existence, a mysterious, opaque reality.

Haupt provides numerous versions of what might have happened to his protagonist in the unknown town on that day, what brought him there, ultimately making everything, all the “historicity” insignificant, whereas Walser leaves his readers with a feeling that events are peripheral, insignificant, temporary (as a result of the “snow effect”); when the narrator discovers this property of all experience, he feels free and joyful, almost like a child. We can see it best in another short story in which snow plays the main role:

Next I came across a peculiar, unexpected obstacle. Two huge fir trees, fallen in a storm, were lying across the narrow path and blocked it with their branches. However, I boldly paved my way through them. It was already getting dark in the magically white forest. I went downhill, wading through snow, as if I was sitting at a table to have dinner. I pulled myself together, laughed, and picked up the pace on my way home” (*Little snow landscape*, MKS 155).

The two short stories differ in terms of mood and tense of narration. Haupt’s protagonist gives an account of the “weirder adventure” (*vide* initializations of Gombrowicz’s late prose) from his past, he experiences the annihilating character of rain. Rain wipes away all meaning, and by existing in spite of human memory, it questions the human ability to tell coherent stories. Thus it also questions the narrator’s ability to construct and express his own uniform identity. By insisting on the illusion of simultaneity of his own experience and writing (via present-tense narration), Walser’s narrator kills off his protagonist, whom he capriciously brought to life just a paragraph earlier, and now he buries him under snow, where – according to the narrator – he is to experience “peace and quiet”, he shall feel “at home”⁴¹.

³⁹Robert Walser, “Little snow landscape”, in Walser: *Mały krajobraz ze śniegiem. Małe poematy. Utwory prozą. Mała proza* [Little landscape with snow. Little poems. Prose. Little prose], translated into Polish by Małgorzata Łukasiewicz (Warszawa: Świat Literacki, 2003), 261. (Henceforth this edition will be marked Ś; later in this paper I will refer to other short stories from that volume, and so it will be marked MKS). Translation into English mine, PZ.

⁴⁰This happens not only in the micro short story *Snow*, but also in other fragmentary prose with the snow leitmotif. The protagonist of *Little landscape with snow* rejoices at the sight of rooftops covered with snow with Nikifor-like flippancy, so to say: “It looked so delicious, so tempting, so joyful and pleasant, like a sophisticated, sweet masterpiece of a skilled confectioner” (*Mały krajobraz ze śniegiem*, MKS 93). Translation into English mine, PZ.

⁴¹This scene could be added the register of fragments of Walser’s short story, which Michał P. Markowski lists in his excellent essay on the phenomenon of insignificance of Walser’s “life writing”, discussing the emblem of the moment of Walser’s death (he died on 25 December 1956, during a winter walk, his body was found deep under snow...). See Markowski, 189–198. Translation mine, PZ.

Haupt talks about the enigma of rain which blurs the contours of memory focused on registering the essence of experiencing, matters taking place between people; the world of *Deszcz* ultimately boils down to what the human eye has preserved, to certain images (painting- or perhaps more photograph-like), this world shines only with a silver stream of water pouring from the sky and the lush green of the landscape highlighted by the rain. It seems that this is the point when Haupt's and Walser's visions meet. In Walser the snowstorm brings the value and significance of the world – there is no point resisting it, eventually snow covers everything, the lightness of the white veil encloses everything that existed before, it is time of motionlessness, persistence, lightness (Walser and his protagonists want to “set themselves free from the weight of earthly life, they want to peacefully pass on to the kingdom of greater freedom”⁴²). Walser's “now” stops, shrinks, reduces itself to one tear rolling down the cheek of the protagonist's widow. Haupt's “past” is one rainy day in some town. And although that day passed, the protagonist learns a lesson on the insignificance of human attempts and struggles, and the protagonist speaks from a perspective located anywhere outside the world, as Baudelaire would see it. Both of them, having their experiences irrevocably blighted, become dispossessed of their heretofore existence. Bearing in mind Walser's dream of “insignificant existence”, we might as well say that they meet at some point which may become a starting point. We should also pay attention to the question of narrative infiniteness present in short stories by both authors. Walser wrote that “it is snowing without a beginning and without an end”, thus situating his short story in some literary timelessness, which actually resembles what stretches beyond the plot events in *Deszcz*; this is probably another structural analogy between the works of Walser and Haupt which deserves its own study.

It is time for the decisive argument. Although I may be misled by my intuition, I think the boldness and intriguing character of this trope is worth the risk. So far we have identified what I believe to be key elements which are striking in Walser's and Haupt's short stories: vagueness of reality and a sense of finding oneself outside the (comprehensible/organized) world. I would say that especially the former plays the major role in both short stories.

There is a large body of literature on vagueness⁴³, but it interests me not as a construction element in literature but as its effect and way of presenting being-in-the-world. I believe that aesthetics and Asian philosophy (especially Chinese) can be an intriguing context for both short stories. Most commentators of Haupt will probably bridle: his prose seems to be against entropy and emptiness, it is salvation and rejecting disappearing. However, once we remember what Niewiadomski wrote – that peculiarity present in Haupt functions also

⁴²W.G. Sebald, “Le promeneur solitaire. Pamięci Roberta Walsera” [In memoriam of Robert Walser], in Sebald; *Opis nieszczęścia. Eseje o literaturze* [Description of unhappiness. Essays on literature], translated into Polish by Małgorzata Łukasiewicz, afterword by Arkadiusz Żychliński (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 2019): 238. Translation mine, PZ.

⁴³Brygida Pawłowska-Jądrzyk's book *Uczta pod wiszącą skałą. Metafizyczność i nieokreśloność w sztuce (nie tylko literackiej)* [Feast at the Hanging Rock. Metaphysicality and vagueness in art (not only literature)] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo UKSW, 2011): 11–14 organizes many aspects of vagueness. However, my considerations will follow a different path, because I do not find “vague thoughts” – motifs characteristic for Western art – in Haupt and Walser; vagueness in their works does not seem to be “an artistic quality resulting from applying measures which in a way answer inexpressibility” (Pawłowska-Jądrzyk, 11) either.

as a plot element which causes suspension and insolubility of sense⁴⁴ – we will see not only the deconstructionist or postmodern character of his prose, but also metaphysical, spiritual. It is similar in the case of Walser; although he is seldom accused of religiousness, this does not allay suspicions that the organizing worldview of his narrator (especially in his small prose), which dominates in *This strange town* – the theme of lessening, gradual fading of existence⁴⁵ – may lead readers towards e.g. the Buddhist experience of emptiness, the mystical expropriation of “I”. And although it would be difficult to find specific tropes in Walser’s text which would legitimize such claims, such as declarations, inclinations, or at least allusions to religious systems and texts, it would nonetheless be difficult to deny that those motifs (gradual uncovering of nothingness which both encompasses an entity and exists inside it, a predilection to indicating negligibility as the basic property of things, consistent belittling of own “I”) invariably suggest metaphysical connotations.

And so the opacity of own construction and vagueness of the world (triggered by rain and snow, i.e. water falling from the sky) brings to mind experiencing vagueness present in the Chinese word *dan* and the centuries-long artistic tradition related to it. According to François Jullien, pseudonymization and metaphorical practice need to be applied in order to identify this experience, to make it a theme of expression; a word is simultaneously a state (e.g. in Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism) because it does not subject itself to interpretative procedures and definitions. To describe them, one needs to refrain from excessive specificity – in fact, one can only get closer to it, but never prove or explain what a bland flavor, sound, or meaning is⁴⁶.

Transformations which took place in Chinese literature (especially in poetry) tended to highlight the experience of emptiness illustrated via words. In poetry, creating specific ambiance which would allow readers to experience a sense of transgressing the materiality of things, reception of meaning which is always evanescent and distant, never clear⁴⁷, became the basic criterion of perfection in poetry. According to Jullien, Chinese vagueness resists metaphysics, and hence searching for connections or references to Western art needs to be careful and restrained⁴⁸, mostly due to the fact that Chinese blandness calls for a change in lifestyle; *dan* expresses the rejection of «I»⁴⁹. And thus – as I have already mentioned – Walser’s prose will be much closer to this kind of experience than Haupt’s short story.

⁴⁴Niewiadomski, “*Jeden jest zawsze ostrzem*”, 156.

⁴⁵See e.g. Musiał, 112–114.

⁴⁶François Jullien, *In praise of blandness. Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics*, translated into Polish by Beata Szymańska, Anna Sieczyńska-Śpiewak (Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2006): 10.

⁴⁷Jullien, 67.

⁴⁸In this respect, Jullien cites the works by Jean-Pierre Richard from the Geneva School of Literary Criticism who finds distant echoes of vagueness in Verlaine in his *Poésie et profondeur* (see Jullien, 116–118; Jean-Pierre Richard, “Verlaine’s Blandness”, in Richard: *Poezja i głębia*, translation and afterword by Tomasz Swoboda [Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2008]: 121–124), which manifest themselves in remarks on quiet and emptiness. Jullien concludes that «Verlaine’s man» is completely enchanted by blandness of «disappearing existence». Verlaine’s blandness as *muffling* or *fading* reveals the beauty of the process of disappearing rather than the beauty of fullness (Jullien, 117). The subject of Verlaine’s poems cannot last long in this state, threatened by atrophy, tension of senses, enchantment, but also anxiety of awareness. What is missing is the liberating sense of potentiality and ambiguity, which are characteristic for art and experiencing blandness of East Asia (Jullien, 118).

⁴⁹Jullien, 116.

Analyzing the style of various Chinese painting schools, Jullien observed some characteristic motifs of imaging which inspire vagueness in recipients. Impressions from “reading” vague landscapes by Ni Zan (one of great masters from the Yuan period) led Jullien to the conclusion that gouaches and lithographs of landscapes are dominated by the following qualities: 1) calmness; 2) monotony; 3) clarity; 4) weightlessness; 5) lack of specific motifs or conditioning⁵⁰. Jullien concludes that such a landscape contains all landscapes in which everything melts down and mixes⁵¹.

In *Deszcz* the landscape is covered with a silver coat of rain from the very beginning, which highlights the lush summer greenery. Colors seem to be the only real thing. Likewise in *Snowstorm* Walser separates the protagonist from the rest of the world using a thick, tight curtain of snow. Regardless of the form in which it appears, water blurs reality (although it does not make it fade like Chinese gouaches, it still renders reality illegible) and becomes the vehicle of vagueness.

Let us compare two analogous “moments”:

When I arrived there early in the morning, it was already raining. It was a warm summer day, and there was actually nothing wrong with it, except for the rain. It was green: the bright green of early summer, light, silvery – silvery due to the curtain of grey rain. I was to spend the whole day there, and later, when I had got used to that rain, as if it belonged to the landscape, as if there was not supposed to be anything but rain. I remember the greenery of that place, as if that greenery was like paint dissolved by the rain which then stained everything green. Before I said: a foul day. But no, it was not foul. There was something fresh and lively in that rain: it was raining straight, not slanting, lying vertically on that green landscape made from the green of trees (D 275).

It is snowing, snowing to the full capacity, and there is a lot of capacity. It never stops, it is snowing without a beginning or an end. There is no sky any more, only the grey-white blizzard. There is no air any more, it is covered with snow. There is no earth any more, it is hidden under snow. There is snow on rooftops, streets, and trees. It is snowing on everything. Everything that is standing, moving, crawling, running, and hopping is momentarily buried under snow. Roads, walls, tree branches, poles, rails, fields, hills, and God knows what else – everything is white. And it keeps snowing, diligently and conscientiously, and it seems it has no intention of stopping. All colors, red, green, brown, and blue – they are all covered by whiteness. Everything is covered, evened out, weakened. Where there was diversity, now there is only one thing: snow. And where opposites were clashing, there is unanimity: snow. Various phenomena and shapes are blissfully and harmoniously joined in the only one countenance, the only one pensive whole⁵² (Š 260–261).

⁵⁰Jullien, 20, 107–109.

⁵¹Jullien, 20.

⁵²Translation mine, PZ.

Of course the two scenes share the same final effect: rain and snow both have a total, all-encompassing character, they wipe away, cover (snow), dissolve (rain) the landscape, making it a plan canvas tightly covered with white/green. “As if nothing else was supposed to be”.

The covered/dissolved reality presented in such a total way (using a number of enumerations – just as Haupt – Walser tries to convince the reader that the snow worked methodically, ruthlessly, unconditionally, and irrevocably, covering absolutely everything; Haupt draws his pen as if it was a stream of rain – one careless stroke crosses out what may have been defined in the landscape) inspires vagueness. The register of reaching this state resembles a ritualistic act revoking the very gesture of creation, it is creation *à rebours*, a return – like in primary rituals – until the first non-differentiation. I believe that it is similar in the case of aesthetic experience of vagueness in the Far Eastern philosophy, when things become uniform, when they lose their individual characteristics, blur differences, and strive towards coming together, becoming one⁵³. And this results in experiencing absence: forms appear only to disappear moments later, they open themselves to what is distant, beyond them⁵⁴.

The fact that both in Haupt and Walser it is water that inspires vagueness is also interesting – and convergent with Chinese aesthetics. According to Jullien, Chinese “blandness” is rendered with water’s clarity, the foundation of all flavors. This peculiar conversion leads consciousness to the *roots* of reality, to its *center*, from which all things stem. This path leads inside (towards what is simple, natural, the essence of things), detachment (from what is special, individual, coincidental). This transcendence does not open itself to a different world, it is experienced in this world as pure immanence⁵⁵.

The narrators’ reaction to being thrown into vagueness is also important. They both let themselves be carried away by the element, experiencing almost sacred *fascinans*. Walser’s narrator is carried away by the totality and charm of snow with childlike trust and enthusiasm. By bringing to life an ephemeral protagonist who bravely tries to resist the overwhelming power of nature, and killing him off almost simultaneously, he may be expressing the need to surrender to the all-encompassing vagueness. Haupt’s narrator is also under the influence of rain which unceremoniously blurs what is left of contours of events, but ultimately escapes the reality that is completely taken over by rain. Walser’s narrator will see the positive effects of snow which provides the world with beautiful, good, solemn universality (§ 261), and the protagonist of *Deszcz* observes that “peculiar freshness” is among key characteristics of rain (D 277).

Experiencing poetic vagueness may lead to experiencing the emptiness of things, which is related to freeing consciousness and its readiness to achieve perfect openness⁵⁶. This in turn is able to provoke spiritual states resembling the Buddhist cognition of “the world of dust”,

⁵³Jullien, 71.

⁵⁴Jullien, 108.

⁵⁵Jullien, 119–120.

⁵⁶Jullien, 81.

which often results in a feeling of detachment, going beyond the world of sensual objects and our attachment to them⁵⁷. This gesture, or rather a certain kind of moving consciousness, is known as the *au-delà* turn – this “beyond”, called for by the vagueness of Chinese aesthetics, is not metaphysical; there is no other world, but our world is simultaneously deprived of its opacity, freed from its realism, it regains its original freshness⁵⁸. Walser’s narrator seems to be more inclined to endure in the (vague) winter landscape, whereas Haupt’s is afraid, and thus tries to escape the world made incredible by its lack of diversity (he never sees that place again, D 278). However, they are unable to remain in this experience⁵⁹, in this *neutrum*, without which – according to Chinese philosophers and artists – taking root in reality is impossible⁶⁰. They also seem to be far from admitting that experiencing vagueness allows them to feel a certain belongingness to the world – the kind which is the foundation of the unity of reality of people and nature for Asian philosophy⁶¹, something that Western philosophers can only dream about⁶². Out of all states and moods which accompany the psyche while entering vagueness (according to Jullien: calmness, lack of expression, loneliness, abandonment⁶³), the narrator of *Snowstorm* experiences calmness; Haupt’s protagonist is clearly moved, he has many questions, and ultimately he leaves the vague territory never to return. However, also in the case of Walser it is difficult to admit that experiencing vagueness may constitute the key, breakthrough point which will mark the beginning of a truly meditative journey to the rule of reality: the never-ending circle of creating the world from its original vagueness: the protagonist heroically dies under thick snow, he is lost in oblivion, and although we are reassured by the narrator that he experiences peace and quiet (§ 262), he is dead, which results in worry and despair. There will be no more contemplative existence; the reader will only take the tears of the protagonist’s widow, who predicted her husband’s fate, beyond the frame of extinguished words.

⁵⁷Jullien, 89.

⁵⁸Jullien, 93.

⁵⁹However, vagueness means a certain intermediate, transition state, which does not last (Jullien, 72–73).

⁶⁰Jullien, 30.

⁶¹Jullien concludes briefly that *dan* takes place without differentiating between subject and object (Jullien, 25).

⁶²As we know, Martin Heidegger criticized Eastern European metaphysics; for him it consolidates the subject-object relation (and representational thinking). In his concept, “What is, in its entirety, is now taken in such a way that it first is in being and only is in being to the extent that it is set up by man, who represents and sets forth” (Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World View”, translated into Polish by Krzysztof Wolicki, in Wolicki: *Budować, mieszkać, myśleć. Eseje wybrane* [Build, live, think. Selected essays], Krzysztof Michalski [Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1977], 142). English: translated by Marjorie Grene, boundary 2, Winter, 1976, Vol. 4, No. 2, Martin Heidegger and Literature (Winter, 1976), pp. 340–355. Heidegger’s existential analytics protests against perceiving reality as a *world view*, in which man is not an isolated *subiectum*, he does not remain outside of the world; being in the world is the basis for constituting self, and as a result any entity within the world is already discovered and open to being encountered (Janusz Mizera, “Przewyciężenie relacji podmiotowo-przedmiotowej w myśleniu Martina Heideggera” [Overcoming the subject-object relation in Martin Heidegger’s philosophy], *Logos i Ethos* 1 [1993]: 88). Nonetheless, no philosophical treaty will not rule that each and every man is always already in the world, as Heidegger would argue (see e.g. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated into Polish by Bogdan Baran [Warszawa: PWN, 1994], 194–195), and Heidegger’s new language of metaphysics (Sygetics) certainly proves one thing: we (i.e. people of the West) do not know a language in which man would be able to encounter oneself inside the world.

⁶³See Jullien, 109.

Julien characterizes the difference between Western and Eastern modus of human existence. In the West reality is tasted – *vide* Lévinas and his polemics with Heidegger⁶⁴. In the East, vagueness is felt, it is the foundation of man's attitude to the world:

Flavor binds us, whereas vagueness – detaches. Flavor dominates, clouds the mind, leads to addiction, and vagueness sets us free from external pressure, sensual excitement, everything that is intensive, and as such – unreal and short-lasting. It frees us from evanescent elations, it quiets internal noise. And then what is deepest inside us is able to capture the rediscovered vagueness of the world, it finds peace in it, and this is the direction in which it begins to develop⁶⁵.

Perhaps – having experienced vagueness – the Western man gets a headache, unable to accept the knowledge of deceptiveness of his own existence; not having a language that could continue the experience of *neutrum*, he stops at the doorstep of the spiritual territory populated by Eastern philosophers. However, this does not belittle the fact that the element presented in Haupt's and Walser's miniatures allows – if for a moment – to cut the ties of the monolith "I", which is worried about certainty, clarity, and unity of knowledge of its own and the world's existence – to break them and be free to think differently!

I hope that these observations regarding the coincidence between Walser's *Snowstorm* and Haupt's *Deszcz* will be developed in future studies that may take us even further.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

⁶⁴See e.g. Marcin Rebes, *Heidegger – Lévinas. Spór o transcendencję prawdy* [Dispute over the transcendence of truth] (Kraków: Universitas, 2005), 103–109.

⁶⁵Jullien, 25–26.

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KEYWORDS

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Zygmunt Haupt

Robert Walser

ABSTRACT:

The paper analyzes two short stories: *Deszcz* by Zygmunt Haupt and *Little landscape with snow* by Robert Walser, which seem marginal in terms of their works. The two stories share the anti-essentialist vision of the world. The aim of the comparative analysis is to identify similarities in creating reality, as well as situating the two works in the philosophical context (vagueness and entropy), especially by François Jullien.

entropy

silence

VAGUENESS

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

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