

# Haupt's America.

Attempts at an entropic novel.  
*Luizjana, W barze Harry'ego,  
Zamierzchłe echa, Oak Alley  
nad Missisipi, Cyklon*

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Our universe may end in two billion years. Don't make any long-range plans. May your entropy be small<sup>1</sup>.

Wołyń entropy and Duino entropy

At the beginning of *Entropia* [Entropy] (first published under the title *Entropia wzrasta do zera* [Entropy reaches zero] in "Nowa Polska" in 1944, and in London – at the time when Haupt married Edith Norris from New Orleans<sup>2</sup>) Haupt casually discusses the titular notion together with the second law of thermodynamics:

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Hershey, *Entropy Theory of Aging Systems: Humans, Corporations and the Universe* (London: Imperial College Press, 2010), 260.

<sup>2</sup> See Andrzej Niewiadomski, *Przeciw entropii, przeciw arkadii. O pisarstwie Zygmunta Haupta* [Against entropy, against arcadia. On Zygmunt Haupt's prose] (Kraków: Instytut Literatury, 2021), 15–16.

If you are familiar with thermodynamics, you must have come across the pessimistic formula, according to which “entropy reaches zero”. Heat moves from hotter objects to colder objects. The same involution phenomenon takes place everywhere. Electric voltage wants to discharge, a mixture of colors is gray, we are witnessing the slow levelling of earth leading to mountains falling into valleys, and together with seas they will create huge shallows<sup>3</sup>.

In Polish modernism, it was a rare moment when the speculation of modern scientism was aptly and consciously connected with modernist prose. This encounter of different paradigms was not a coincidence. A scientific explanation – physics – was used for interpreting the natural and social history of the world. The humanistic character of this example of proficiency in advanced physics is unique in contemporary Polish prose. The second law of thermodynamics is commonly understood as a physical axiom infected by a pessimistic perspective of subjective judgments.

From the existentialist perspective, it is the law of the evanescence of energy – of life, the human world, civilization.

Using a detail borrowed from science, Haupt later reduced the title of his short story to a single word, “entropy”, used also in its less scientific meaning as a synonym of chaos or a measure of chaos, disorder, disorganization. He thus makes a pessimistic diagnosis, which can be found also in works by other modernist authors: standardization of behaviors, objects and processes must lead to the loss of diversity and cognitive inquisitiveness, as well as reduce the aesthetic component of existence of individuals and societies<sup>4</sup>.

Niewiadomski, who perceives entropy as a key notion in Haupt's prose, points out to the loss of diversity and dynamicity of changes, and stagnation of matter. He proposes that breaking free from the universal omnipotence of deterministic laws of the universe towards a personalistic, particular perspective of a creative individual is a literary antidote to entropy<sup>5</sup>. I believe that we should nuance and inspect the palpably subjective pessimism related to (what would seem) the scientifically objective notion of entropy. Does this result from the incompatibility of literature and the scientific paradigm? Is it a necessary aporia of a cognitive misunderstanding of the incompatibility of scientific and existential discourses?

This seems to be an oversimplification. Haupt's prose is characterized by his respect for professionalism; he did not believe in the power of universal and complete knowledge, but he respected specialization. Perceiving himself as an amateur, he avoided the incompetence of the twentieth-century's mass culture<sup>6</sup>. However, he sought to anchor his considerations in the context of the age of scientism while looking at it from an artistic perspective. So where does this pessimism come from? Can the existential tone, characteristic for 1940s, be found in the history of science?

<sup>3</sup> Zygmunt Haupt, “Entropia”, in *Baskijski diabeł. Opowiadania i reportaże* [Basque devil. Short stories and reportages], edited by Aleksander Madyda (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2016), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Niewiadomski, *Przeciw entropii, przeciw arkadii. O pisarstwie Zygmunta Haupta*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Niewiadomski, *Przeciw entropii, przeciw arkadii. O pisarstwie Zygmunta Haupta*, 37–38.

<sup>6</sup> Niewiadomski offers an excellent analysis of this phenomenon, *Przeciw entropii, przeciw arkadii. O pisarstwie Zygmunta Haupta*, 21–22.

It turns out that indeed, there was a context of reflection, vital and still up-to-date, clearly subjectivizing the objectivism of physics at the center of considerations regarding entropy. In no way does the tone of Haupt's considerations contradict clearly existentialist ideas of modern physicists. In the rich scientific literature problematizing entropy, there is a lot of evidence suggesting that the laws of thermodynamics are worryingly difficult also for scientists. Moreover, the biographical context is of significance as well.

Ludwig Boltzmann's biography, *Anxiety and the Equation. Understanding Boltzmann's Entropy*, immediately offers this undertone determining the scientific and humanistic entropy discourse. The tellingly entitled book, which reads like a history of science, is about the traumatic origins of an extremely pessimistic understanding of a theory. Boltzmann, an old man suffering from growing neurasthenia and depression, went to a seaside resort in Duino, Italy, with his family, to restore his health – and ended up unexpectedly committing suicide<sup>7</sup>. Biographical considerations and searching for possible origins of depression comprise most of the book. How was such a death received in the scientific community? How has it influenced us – rather random heirs to convictions about the expiration of all creative energy of space? Johnson does not use euphemisms, brutally illustrating a psychological problem with the often-idealized world of science.

[...] But Boltzmann had already lived more days than he could bear. And though he had planned to return to Vienna the following day, he decided that he would rather kill himself instead. So, as his family went down to the sea to bathe, Boltzmann set about the task of committing suicide. [...] He was a kind man with a generous mind. This is his story, and the story of his second law<sup>8</sup>.

Boltzmann's biography contains the psychological and social symptoms of issues with his law. He committed a culturally "influential" suicide, reinforcing the ambivalent status of the anxious reception of the second law of thermodynamics. Even if such opinions became less common with time, the skeptical conclusions of Haupt's short story unknowingly fitted in with the general trend. This was an unexpected turn away from scientific optimism, an aberration containing symptoms of a crisis of affirmative modernity. Entropic anxiety and depression are an interesting examples of the "royal price" which the enlightened world started to pay for knowledge and truth. "Horror Metaphysics inevitably emerged, together with the specter of never-ending uncertainty"<sup>9</sup>. The truth discourse did not set us free from anxiety; to the contrary – it took away the possibility of any consolation.

Boltzmann's equation-based anxiety seems to be a significant element of Haupt's storyworld, complicated and skeptical already in terms of the fragmentation and disintegration of continuity. In his patchwork narratives comprising elements of history, psychology, existentialism and social observation, science is a marginal inspiration. And yet the scientific title, *Entropia*, is a surprising choice for a nostalgic short story which focuses on the expiration of life energy

<sup>7</sup> "It was an inelegant death. Hanging there. He was a fat man. He might have made a convincing Santa Claus on a good day. But the past few years had brought him very few good days. Imagine a Santa Claus who, at the end of a long and successful career, finds himself unable to face the impending arrival of yet another December 25. So too must Ludwig Boltzmann have felt at the age of sixty-two in the summer of 1906.", Eric Johnson, *Anxiety and the Equation. Understanding Boltzmann's Entropy* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, *Horror Metaphysicus* (Warszawa: Res Publica, 1990), 136.

of Wołyń's Iitaka. A broader, less "nostalgic" understanding of pessimism related to this notion is clear. Already at the beginning of *Entropia*, in the context of extinguishing the lost, inherited world, it is not melancholy that interests Haupt, but the necessity of accepting the law which equalizes energy to zero. In this sense, Haupt refers a strictly physical law to a cultural context, thus resembling Boltzmann's students, traumatized after losing their master.

In the sphere of human matters, such greying and shallows result from the slow process of uniformizing and standardizing, not only by the mechanized civilization, which – even with details from everyday life – becomes the same and tacky, but also the radio, press and cinema are slowly turning us into millions and billions of people equally fixed on die-cut ideas. Entropy reaches zero. When you travel the world, it seems that even the seasons of the year are losing their distinguishing features and melt into one, grey season, even if it is eternal Californian spring<sup>10</sup>.

Cultural entropy – of interest to the humanist – is characterized via the homogenizing and unifying characteristic of mass culture, which is in line with Andrzej Niewiadomski's observations. To me, the last sentence from the quote above is particularly curious. Immediately after it, Haupt returns to the world of Eastern borderlands, affected by the law of entropy. However, this last sentence seems personal, and it refers to entropic anxiety. It appears to be about the promise of a new beginning – a stereotypical image of the New World. Writing about the permanent spring in California (which he had not seen at the time, but he had already met a woman thanks to whom he considered American peregrinations), Haupt prefigures his fate, which is ambivalently described via oxymoronic imaging. Spring suggests hope for rebirth, but the "Californian eternal spring" strives towards zero – "one, grey season", without any distinguishing features. Even before experiencing it, Haupt gets a paradoxical message from America: of hope and hopelessness.

## Fragmentariness of Louisianian impressions

How does Haupt's biography compare to his premonitions? Can his early reactions to America be interpreted in the context of *Entropia*? His surviving, American correspondence is incomplete, and it shows that Haupt's America was an encounter with almost all aspects of exile. Paweł Panas offers the most complete discussion of this issue in his analysis of both Haupt's prose and its epistolographic contexts<sup>11</sup>. The New World does not deliver in terms of the classical "spring" promises. Haupt's descriptions resemble later accounts by Jean Baudrillard and his reactions to America's desolation, post-industrial, vandalized landscapes, and simulacra-cities<sup>12</sup>, implying the subject's alienation. In Haupt, the modernity anxiety is further reinforced by his fear for his son, who is a permanent context in his American narratives, both in correspondence and in contemporary literary sketches – always related to his biography. Both his letters and American prose share the sense of peculiar anxiousness<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>10</sup>Haupt, "Entropia", 21.

<sup>11</sup>See Paweł Panas, "Zagubiony wśród obcych". Zygmunt Haupt – pisarz, wygnaniec, outsider [Lost among strangers. Zygmunt Haupt – writer, exile, outsider] (Bielsko-Biała, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe ATH, Instytut Literatury, 2019).

<sup>12</sup>See Jean Baudrillard, *America*, translated into Polish by Renata Lis (Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Sic!, 1998).

<sup>13</sup>See especially Panas, 153–163.

I see anxiety – not abstract, cultural, but related to the anxious problem of entropy – as an underappreciated characteristic of Haupt’s cycle of fragmentary prose published in Grydzewski’s *Wiadomości* [News] in 1948. The narrative of “the world’s twilight” does not come out of nowhere. The world of Wołyń, slowly expiring in memory, in which the end of civilized history is simultaneously a measure of growing disorder, redirects us to the trope of treating America as a background for inherited memory. America’s images are abundant in short, sudden tensions which bring the new landscape closer to Eastern borderlands.

Houses, American provincial, wooden architecture (the American province is wooden and pioneering in terms of houses), telegraph poles as sad and cross-like as ours in Wołyń<sup>14</sup>.

The contextual way of seeing America is obvious – Haupt is burdened with painful personal experiences, nostalgia, his mannerist taste. Why is this prose treated as attempts at journalism? Although admittedly they display some characteristics of a reportage, there is an obvious, broader, genetically silvan idea behind these texts. Curiously, most scholars who wrote about reportage in this context, generally notice his failure. Aleksander Madyda describes these fragments as a reportage about southern America from the perspective of Louisiana, where Haupt’s wife was from<sup>15</sup>. According to Madyda, America turns out to be cognitively impossible for Haupt, untamable, too strange and exotic for a European<sup>16</sup>. The failure of description can also be extremely stressed: Stanisław Zając writes about “not encountering” America in these texts. On the other hand, Panas, aware of the sensuality of Haupt’s descriptions, nuances Zając’s overinterpretation, positioning the character of American prose in terms of exile alienation, i.e. inevitable damages sustained by Haupt’s European memory to a potential reportage. This is because Haupt’s American prose is full of reflections regarding distance from his home world in terms of time and space, and the difficulty with work of memory.

And all this together actually moved away and elevated to some other, unreal dimension, as if our century did not border with that one, as if it was a woodcutter’s fantasy and a grandmother’s story rather than a recent reality<sup>17</sup>.

In the context of the memory curse, indeed America creates a cognitive problem – however, it is “unrecognizable” rather than “uncognizable”. The subject, fixated on eastern Europe and its past, does not have any claims to closeness to the new world. To the contrary – he effectively uses the fact that it is far away and foreign. I agree with Panas that Haupt watches without making comments.

Haupt’s Louisiana texts are not a record of his attitude to American reality. Instead, he tries to describe his sensual experiences and the world he sees, even if it is difficult to do for many reasons, or even utopian<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>14</sup>Zygmunt Haupt, “Luizjana”, in: Baskijski diabeł. Opowiadania i reportaże, zebrał, oprac. i notą edytorską opatrzył Aleksander Madyda (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2016), 686.

<sup>15</sup>See Aleksander Madyda, Zygmunt Haupt. Życie i twórczość literacka [Zygmunt Haupt. Life and literary work] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo UMK, 1998), 112–118.

<sup>16</sup>Madyda, 115.

<sup>17</sup>Zygmunt Haupt, “Zamierzchnie echa”, in: Baskijski diabeł. Opowiadania i reportaże, zebrał, oprac. i notą edytorską opatrzył Aleksander Madyda (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2016), 706.

<sup>18</sup>Panas, 160.

Indeed, the (in)describable America is describable in its sensual epiphany, but as an allotopy – a different world. Haupt's imaging is highly effective. In fact, we are presented with too many images, but without an organizing comment. We are visitors on a strange planet. For the same reason, I would be careful regarding the "indescribability". In the six surviving fragments, the level of immersiveness of descriptions of nature, multicultural communities, changeability of landscape, instability of climate is unusually inventive, unique compared to contemporary Polish prose about America. And the utopian project to describe America is Haupt's necessary self-limitation, because in his descriptions he struggles with affirmation and rejection, the utopian desire for the new and ultimate dystopian effect of observation. Cognitive skepticism (America's sensational, chaotic nature as the result) in relation to the sensuality of experiencing it. America is described to the extent in which it "presents" itself. This is an ontological problem, which Baudrillard (following Paul Virilio) calls "aesthetics of disappearance"<sup>19</sup>.

Fragmentary prose is thus the right reaction of a critical mind to an encounter with chaos and desertification of senses ("forms of extermination"<sup>20</sup>). Should we not – contrary to diagnosing "not-encountering" America – accept that the fragmentary gestures of Haupt's discourse are his way of encountering "another" America? This is related genre ambiguity, which Niewiadomski describes in his interpretation of *Próby* [Trials] through Haupt<sup>21</sup>.

Reading Haupt's American prose as essays seems to be a better idea – they contain more references to the poetics of a travel essay. This brings us to the genre ambiguity of these miniatures – short stories, reportages, and essays – which were conceived as a cycle of a peculiar *coincidentia oppositorum*. In Haupt's correspondence with Zdzisław Ruskowski there is some supporting evidence:

(1.7.1948) I made a marginal note "Trip to Louisiana", which Grydzewski publishes for me in fragments in "Wiadomości".

(13.11.1948) [...] I wrote a long story about my Louisianan impressions, which Grydzewski sporadically publishes in "Wiadomości", and this my only one solid source of income<sup>22</sup>.

Both mentions indicate the potentiality of the project – "a long story about Louisianan impressions" and "Trip to Louisiana". Niewiadomski writes about "a relative non-autonomy" of Haupt's prose. Everything is separate until we notice subtle links ideologically connecting the whole project: "In this sense – and this is a paradox – as an author of short forms, Haupt demands that we interpret them as fragments of a non-existing, quasi-novel"<sup>23</sup>. I shall compare this unfinished project to William Faulkner's narrative experiments from the late 1930s and early 1940s. Faulkner too appreciated such quasi-novels, which in his case took the form of

<sup>19</sup>Baudrillard, 13.

<sup>20</sup>Baudrillard.

<sup>21</sup>Andrzej Niewiadomski, "Ja. Zygmunt z Roksolanii. O gatunkowej nieprzejrzystości prozy Haupta" [I, Zygmunt of Roksolania. On the genre ambiguity of Haupt's prose], in: Jestem bardzo niefortunnym wyborem. Studia i szkice o twórczości Zygmunta Haupta [I am a very unfortunate choice. Studies and essays on works by Zygmunt Haupt] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2018), 105.

<sup>22</sup>Haupt's correspondence with Zdzisław Ruskowski, Zdzisław Ruskowski papers, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Green Library, Stanford University, MISC. 0239. I owe my access to unpublished facsimiles of these American letters to Paweł Panas's kindness and help.

<sup>23</sup>Niewiadomski, *Przeciw entropii, przeciw arkadii. O pisarstwie Zygmunta Haupta*, 31.

cycles of short stories connected by the same idea and place of action. This is showcased by *Go Down, Moses* – prose which shares its form, as well as the geographical and cultural context of the Mississippi Delta, with Haupt's project.

## The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta

First, let us conceptualize the Delta phenomenon – a significant American allegory of the power of nature/universe over the world of human usurpations. The definitions of the region are heavily historical and cultural (from the anthropological, historical, and musicological perspective). The prolificacy of the Delta metaphor is already revealed in its borders – river deltas are naturally formless and changeable. The cultural and political markers on the Delta's imagined map enter relations based on physical characteristics: geological and climatic. Ecoregions encounter industrial and post-industrial excess, transport routes cut through reservoirs of natural riches, and the ethnic history of music clashes with racism.

The Mississippi River Delta is the land built up by alluvium where the Mississippi River enters the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana. This physiographic feature, however, is not the customary meaning of the Delta. The region more typically associated with the term is not actually a river delta but is the land that lies along the Mississippi River north of the river delta, which includes the Mississippi embayment, the sedimentary basin that is part of the larger alluvial plain created by the Mississippi River. Perhaps what most commonly springs to mind when the Delta is mentioned is the region specifically known as the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, the subject of James Cobb's *The Most Southern Place on Earth*. In geographic terms, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is the floodplain of the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers; in cultural terms, it follows the oft-repeated adage of David L. Cohn as the region that "begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg." [...] Since the terminology is not precise in physiographic terms—the river delta is one small portion of the region under discussion and the Mississippi-Yazoo Delta, the most commonly understood meaning of the Delta, is actually an alluvial floodplain of two rivers<sup>24</sup>.

The Delta is the protagonist of *Lousiana*, the first short story in Haupt's cycle. The story is (mostly) without any human characters, stressing the almost pantheist, above-human perspective of the river. "The river is red" – in terms of its actual color and metaphorical symptoms of human intrusion in its history. A human observer/narrator travels with their son from New York to Louisiana (and back to New York), experiencing the power of nature, which he interprets as a force which creates and destroys the Delta's geography. Nature is observed after the decomposition in industrial civilizational processes. The Delta proves to be a destructive force to people. It vindictively terramorphizes postindustrial wastelands and landfills with floods, returning them to the state of formless wildness. In American literature, geology is sometimes an analogue of some power superior to man's pathetic attempts. In Haupt's prose the Mississippi's ecosystem and floods play such a metaphorical role. The river is almost a deity taking vengeance for man-made devastation.

<sup>24</sup>Janelle Collins, "Defining the Delta: A River, a Floodplain, and Geopolitical Boundaries", w: *Defining the Delta. Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Lower Mississippi River Delta*, ed. Janelle Collins (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2015), 1–2.

And when we turn around – there is the river. Its surging breast is flowing, carrying tree trunks and roots washed away somewhere a thousand miles up, when the current reaches the banks, washing them and tearing away steep embankments, and openwork tree roots hanging like an octopus's tentacles, the green crown swaying and falling into the watery abyss. Since La Salle's Times the river has changed its route many times, biting at Illinois bank, flooding Tennessee valleys, cutting Arkansas loops, and there, where the swan breasts of canoe made of birch bark were hanging over peatbogs at the time when La Salle was paddling south, now you can walk all the way without getting your feet wet. It carries beech trunks and outstretched pine roots, dry branches of cotton trees, pathetically twisted towards the sky, are carried with wood stolen from stockpiles along the banks and crashed rafts, it swirls with timber from washed houses and raised river piers<sup>25</sup>.

This short expository fragment contains various aspects of the Mississippi's riches – in terms of natural and human history. Moreover, towards the end Haupt stresses the destructive force of alluvial pools. I am avoiding the word “entropy” for now, but this image highlights the decomposing civilizational diversity of the area's industrial history. In *Louisiana's* order it is only after this introduction that we discover the symbolic reasons behind the river's destructive activity. The fact that these late-1940s considerations from America remain valid today – both from the scientific and artistic perspectives – is striking. “Polish” impressions from Louisiana overlap with the American perspective on perceiving the area and its problems in an interesting way.

### Faulkner's literary “menopause” in the Delta

There are numerous examples demonstrating the significance of the Delta in American culture, so I would like to focus on the similarities between Haupt's experimental prose and Faulkner's modernist experiments. The similarities between the two authors, both formal and in terms of their skepticism, or even pessimism, are particularly significant for me.

Faulkner set his cycle, in which violent aspects of American history accompany the anthropomorphized Mississippi metaphor, in the same area as Haupt did a few years later. In his 1942 *Go Down, Moses* (the Polish translation is literal, but it loses the musical context, i.e. a direct reference to the title of a Black Delta gospel), he considered the relationship between the people and nature of the area, stressing the degradation of its natural environment. In the key short story, *Delta Autumn* (again, the Polish translation is less complex than the original), the narrator famously complains about human activity in the Delta:

This Delta, he thought: This Delta. This land which man has deswamped and denuded and delivered in two generations so that white men can own plantations and commute every night to Memphis [...] No wonder the ruined woods I used to know don't cry for retribution! he thought: The people who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>25</sup>Haupt, “Luizjana”, 687.

<sup>26</sup>William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 347.



In American ecological literature, the Delta is a significant example of the degradation of America's natural world, and *Delta Autumn* is an exceptionally illustrative and depressing example of America's desertification due to the devastating exploitation of the past two centuries<sup>27</sup>. The fragment above is often used as a motto in monographs – on Faulkner, as well as the Delta's ecohistory and ecology. One of such works describes it as Faulkner's key message:

[...] a collection of stories describing the problematic relationships between black and white Mississippians and their natural environment, the then relatively unknown William Faulkner displayed an acute awareness of an immense process that had irreversibly transformed the natural and cultural landscape of his home state<sup>28</sup>.

How did the Delta become so significant for Faulkner? Apart from topographical obsessions, the autobiographical context is the key reason, co-creating the pessimistic and decadent atmosphere of *Delta Autumn*. In November 1940, Faulkner – frustrated, suffering from alcoholism – went hunting with his friends in the smaller delta of the Big Sunflower, one of the most important Yazoo's tributaries. One morning, he did not get up. At first it was thought that he was hungover, but later he was taken to hospital in Oxford, Lafayette. As it turned out later, at the last moment – he had a massive hemorrhage from a perforated ulcer.

In "Delta Autumn", the next story he wrote after his medical emergency, Faulkner appropriated the geography of the delta as a personal symbol for both his and the world's fatigue. Throughout the following decade and a half, he drew periodically upon the imagery of rivers floods, and deltas to express gloom over his physical mortality, over the uncertain fate of his life's work, and over the violent course of human history. "Delta Autumn" transformed the novel he was writing at the time [...]. It is a central document in his intermittent fictionalized autobiography: his premature portrait of the artist as an old man"<sup>29</sup>.

For Michael Grimwood the quasi-novel (in its fragments) is the most obvious sign of Faulkner's artistic and existential exhaustion. Although he does not use the word "entropy", he is close to a similar understanding of a crisis of the natural and social world: "the central subject of 'Delta Autumn' is not race relations or the failure of love, or the wilderness, but the gradual depletion of energy from the earth, from history, from men's lives, from Faulkner's career"<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, in his analysis of *Go Down, Moses*, he proposes to read it as a parabiographical story

<sup>27</sup>In the penultimate segment of *Go Down, Moses*, "Delta Autumn," which is also the bleakest portion of the novel, the darkness of the human story has its parallels in the depredations visited upon the landscape. Now the aged Ike sees himself and the wilderness "as coevals," [...] connected in such fundamental ways that the decay of the wilderness mirrors his. He reflects sadly on how dramatically it has diminished, retreated, been beaten back by loggers, planters, developers, and automobiles until only a small portion of the splendid vastness remains. It has been "deswamped and denuded and derivered in two generations", Judith Bryant Wittenberg, "Go Down, Moses and the Discourse of Environmentalism", in: *New Essays on Go Down, Moses*, ed. Linda Wagner-Marti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 68.

<sup>28</sup>Mikko Saikku, *This Delta, This Land. An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Floodplain* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>29</sup>Michael Grimwood, "Delta Autumn: Stagnation and Sedimentation in Faulkner's Career", *The Southern Literary Journal* Vol. 16, 2 (Spring, 1984): 93–94.

<sup>30</sup>Michael Grimwood, *Heart in Conflict: Faulkner's Struggles with Vocation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 261.

about “the ultimate depletion”<sup>31</sup> of Faulkner’s energy, which providently hides personal motifs. Faulkner’s personal correspondence reveals that the following decade of his life was filled with complaints about old age, loss of memory and writing skills. Grimwood believes that the hunting incident was the ultimate source of that crisis, claiming that it led to Faulkner’s “spiritual menopause”, together with his alcoholism. Although Faulkner was only forty-three at the time, according to Grimwood “he was beginning to think like a man whose time was running out”<sup>32</sup>, deeply scarred by the traumatic event.

## Entropy from the ecological perspective

To the contrary, Zygmunt Haupt does not avoid autobiographical motifs following his move to America. His perspective on the devastation of the New World clearly correlates with pessimistic considerations of a survivor of the Central European disaster. The world of inherited, locational identity had expired, which affected his perception of America. Therefore, it is not surprising that Haupt pays attention to those elements of American landscape which indicate disintegration, degradation, atrophy and expiration of the human world in a continent which promised a civilizational rebirth.

Closer to us there is a fallow land littered with wire, rusty metal sheets and tins, and decaying rubber, and rotten rags. Outside of cities, America is in fact one huge desert or dump littered with chewed-up, rusty, decaying leftovers from automated production<sup>33</sup>.

This predilection for litter, dumps, rust and decay was not unique in the USA. In the Louisiana cycle, this description precedes settling with social injustice and racial violence. Violent relationships between nature and man, and conflicts between communities are symmetrical. Such a perspective is another element which Haupt and Faulkner have in common.

Some years after the publication of *Go Down, Moses* [i.e. exactly when Haupt was staying in the same area – R.Sz.], Faulkner spoke on several occasions about the European colonizers’ effect on the American landscape over the centuries, sometimes doing so in a general way, sometimes making particular reference to that portion of wilderness exemplified in the Mississippi Delta region often referred to as “The Big Bottom.” During a question and answer period at the University of Virginia, Faulkner described the tragedy inherent in the moment of origin when land ownership in the United States essentially began, when it was first taken by white settlers from the indigenous inhabitants, [...] There is a “ghost of ravishment that lingers in the land,” said Faulkner, “the land is inimical to the white man because of the unjust way in which it was taken from [the Indians]”<sup>34</sup>.

This brings us to the core of the Delta’s problem from the ecological perspective, which seems obvious when reading Haupt’s and Faulkner’s comments on the Delta. In the light of

<sup>31</sup>Grimwood, *Heart in Conflict: Faulkner’s Struggles with Vocation*, 267.

<sup>32</sup>Grimwood, *Heart in Conflict: Faulkner’s Struggles with Vocation*, 88.

<sup>33</sup>Haupt, “Luizjana”, 690–691.

<sup>34</sup>Wittenberg, 50.

natural history, the short social history of American deltas is a clear example of a broader phenomenon of Western expansion and interference with both the natural and the pre-Columbian world.

European expansion, or the global dispersion of humans and other organisms of Eurasian origin within the past five hundred years, has resulted in immense environmental change [...]. Among the most dramatic examples of this phenomenon is the socioecological change in North America [...]. For example, it has been estimated that between the arrival of the first European colonists in the early seventeenth century and the adaptation of sustained-yield forestry in the first decades of the twentieth century, the original forest cover of the coterminous United States was reduced by more than 80 percent. The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta [...], the Delta region is thought to have been transformed between 1865 and the early 1930s from a virgin hardwood forest into an agricultural landscape; the floodplain covered by impenetrable low-land forests had been remade into a [...] cotton kingdom where by 1934 only 2 percent of the area could be classified as old-growth forest<sup>35</sup>.

Haupt and Faulkner are concerned with the worrying imbalance between nature and civilization, which leads to a crisis of nature and human societies. In Haupt's cycle, American nature comprises Wołyń afterimages, abandoned houses, poles, trackways – elements of a world that is gone. Memory overlaps with local devastations, which Haupt refers also to history. The Delta's devastation leads to the Mississippi flooding alluvial farming lands, unprotected by the virgin forest, a natural barrier. Scientifically, such phenomena are described as examples of the entropic crisis of American nature. What is entropy from the ecological perspective? The monograph *The Entropy Crisis* by Guy Deutscher, about the necessary awareness of Earth's degradation, offers an answer; Deutscher explains that the ecological contact between people and nature is an underappreciated face of entropy<sup>36</sup>. A breakdown of our world's biosphere. Sudden, uncontrollable, and harmful changes taking place in the biosphere are typically caused by human activity. Anxiety expressed in literary descriptions of exhausting Earth's energy can be referred to writers' ecological awareness, ever-growing in critical modernity.

## A cyclone in the eye of nature and history

At the beginning of the Louisiana cycle, the Red River is a revenge figure, whereas in the last published fragment, the most discursive and metatextual one, it is a cyclone. Haupt describes the divine violence of the element, symbolized in meteorological announcements, newspaper articles and radio auditions. Southerners no longer pay attention to warnings about extreme weather conditions, they are used to them. Haupt is wondering whether the „credibility” of the cyclone is a sign of relations between the devastation of the natural world and a crisis in

<sup>35</sup>Saikku, 1–2.

<sup>36</sup>“Do these fears have a scientific basis, or are they grossly exaggerated? For instance, is climate change a real threat? And what is more harmful to the biosphere, to burn more fossil fuels, or to build and operate more nuclear reactors? Today these issues are in the public domain and, in the end, it will be the people who will decide what should or should not be done. This is why I believe it is important for everybody to understand the nature of the issues at hand”, Guy Deutscher, *The Entropy Crisis* (New Jersey: World Scientific Publishing, 2008), 1.

a multicultural community. Signals of another similarity are scattered across Haupt's short stories – Faulkner's tragedy of racism and segregation – as an analogy to natural devastations. A cyclone appears in the context of America's social history.

I would like to mention that aristocrats and feudal lords of the past South took mistresses – they provided for them, they threw famous “quadroon balls” in New Orleans – only Black women, they never picked “white trash”.

This is the world that lies in the eye of the storm...<sup>37</sup>

Since the element appears in the context of the history of social injustice, it should be stressed that it obviously acts neutrally and indifferently. In no way is it a deliberate reaction to a wrong in the ethical order of human matters. If anything, it is a cosmic necessity to apply a balance of measures of order and disorder also in terms of closed social orders, which are doomed to decomposition, sooner or later – just like nature.

In simple terms, entropy is a measure of order and disorder, [...]. If left alone, these aging systems go spontaneously from low entropy and order, to high entropy and disorder<sup>38</sup>.

The deep awareness of the fact that the laws of entropy can be referred not only to the natural world is surprising in Haupt's short stories. The universe's revenge is not a driving force, but rather an ontologically justified one, a rationally understood reaction to natural and social devastation. Societies are ageing. The decadence of the world described by Haupt, the world of “whites”, Creoles, and “Blacks”, is a picture of a social sclerosis. Perhaps Grimwood's “creative menopause” can also refer to the “late” awareness of radical critics of modernity. Haupt's attitude resembles understanding the inevitability of high entropy as a consequence of old age – of an organism, biology, but also societies.

[...] the aging of so-called inanimate systems such as cities, corporations and civilizations. We connect these aging systems to the entropy concept: why they age, the dynamics of the change process, and order and disorder. [...] These so-called inanimate systems seemingly evince the same characteristics as living, aging systems<sup>39</sup>.

It is not a coincidence that in Faulkner, the moral downfall of our world in the context of nature's degradation is watched by an old man. Analogically, Haupt characterizes violent relationships between Southerners following the description of a river deity's violence. At first, he does it quite innocently. In *W barze Harry'ego* [At Harry's bar] he watches a cross-section of a racial society with a satirical tone. “People of color”, Creoles, Mexicans, “white”, “Black” Afro-Americans, white trash, i.e. hillbillies. This diversity is not an “enrichment”, because it cannot be organized into any pattern. Haupt watches chaotic and inconsistent images.

<sup>37</sup>Zygmunt Haupt, “Cyklon”, in: Baskijski diabeł. Opowiadania i reportaże, zebrał, oprac. i notą edytorską opatrzył Aleksander Madyda (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2016), 717.

<sup>38</sup>Daniel Hershey, *Entropy Theory of Aging Systems: Humans, Corporations and the Universe* (London: Imperial College Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>39</sup>Hershey, 10.

Various faces, all different from one another, a huge head with a tiny face, bushy eyebrows and folds of fat, and prominent cheekbones, and furrows, and wrinkles of older people, and smooth, plain faces of young ones, short hair, crew crop, or matted hair, or bald heads, some people with loose, hanging skin, other – swarthy and blue from shaving, the most fantastic gathering and motley crew, lost races, and suddenly the most characteristic Hispanic feature pops up, or Mexican, Slavic, but mixed racial characteristics, disordered and scattered, tower over all this and give this gathering the most varied and specific features<sup>40</sup>.

Social comments are overloaded with enumerative information which does not construct a general picture. It does not aspire to organizing knowledge about the world observed by the narrator. (Not) describing America is about describing it in a crisis. An effective flow of information about society is impossible; each fragment is an example of growing chaos and disorder, especially in terms of racism. This is a clear similarity to *Go Down, Moses* – many of those descriptions show a brutal perspective focalizing readers to “white” prejudice.

There is a Black house: the porch propped up with poles, the arcade tipping, a nauseating dump nearby. Under the arcade the children are playing with a baseball – boys wearing patched pants – and there is a little Black boy hiding behind a bent pole, the whites of his eyes going blue in the little brown face, watching us with scared, curious and deep eyes<sup>41</sup>.

In *Zamierzchłe echa* [Dim and distant echoes] this racial ethnos of Louisiana, an evident ethnos of injustice and the Delta’s tragic past are described in a provocatively brutal way.

[...] the house is always full of Black faces [...]. Viola comes sporadically (Viola is a unique specimen of monstrous obesity even compared to a standard, fat Black woman), a real mountain of fat [...]. Black faces and heads show up and disappear like in an amusement park, they smile with their big lips and flash their white teeth<sup>42</sup>.

These (self)accusatory images are overlapped with the perspective of inherited identity and cultural memory, creating a deliberate dissonance. The incompatibility of the remembered image, and the one experienced in real time in the American south, reveals the abject aspect of racial presence.

I have seen Othello on some small provincial stage, and Othello was wearing blackface, with well-painted lips, black gloves on his hands as he was strangling Desdemona under Venetian curtains. Well, then! And here, when I saw Black people for the first time, the first thing I noticed about them are their pink hands, the white – like ours – soles and heels of their bare feet, where pigment does not reach. And it is very weird and unexpected, and, I would say, even a bit disgusting for me<sup>43</sup>.

<sup>40</sup>Zygmunt Haupt, “W barze Harry’ego”, w: Baskijski diabeł. Opowiadania i reportaże, zebrał, oprac. i notą edytorską opatrzył Aleksander Madyda (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2016), 699.

<sup>41</sup>Haupt, “W barze Harry’ego”, 700.

<sup>42</sup>Haupt, “Zamierzchłe echa”, 703.

<sup>43</sup>Haupt, “Zamierzchłe echa”, 703–704.

Xenology meets xenotopography<sup>44</sup>. Being in a completely new place, Haupt has no intention of pretending, denying his involuntary reaction to a race that is alien from his European perspective. Too many social stimuli make the narrator note the chaos of numerous differences, divisions, and conflicts rather than reject what he sees. Systems which become so chaotic indicate a society's entropic old age. And in the flashes of Haupt's descriptions, the stories of "white", "Black" and Creole families seem alarmingly sclerotic. When Faulkner writes about the Delta's entropic degradation from the perspective of an old man in his short story about hunting, his considerations indicating ideological mechanisms become clear.

The brutality internal to the project of enlightenment - the violence inherent in abstraction and equivalence-making - makes southern racist ideology, like an otherwise so different European fascism, a conceptual product of Western idealism. It is no wonder that in "Delta Autumn" the last strained determination to flee to the woods must negotiate a prefatory confrontation with the subject of Hitler, fascism, and demagoguery<sup>45</sup>.

Is it not the same as Haupt looking at Louisiana from the perspective of the late 1940s European disaster? First, he notices the degradation of nature, later – the river's revenge, and then he smoothly proceeds to characterizing the chaotic community entangled in numerous ideological discourses of modernity, devastating the social tissue.

## A promise of smaller entropy

I insist that in this cycle, just as in *Entropy*, the laws of thermodynamics are the key. Haupt's considerations begin with the formula "entropy reaches zero". Everything strives from difference towards buzz and equalization, from order and agency to chaos and formlessness. There are two fragments in the cycle in which Haupt clearly signals that he is thinking about Boltzmann's entropy in the American south. In the first one, there is a one-sentence comment referring to the river's image, which used to be the measure of natural order in its delta: "In the past, the continent's virgin **equilibrium** was not disturbed nor affected by man"<sup>46</sup>. Significantly, Haupt does not explain this notion as "balance", instead using a word which is immediately associated with the language of Boltzmann's physics. He uses this notion in a paradoxical way, separating nature's equilibrium from its destabilization resulting from human activity. This is explained in the second fragment, where the same word reappears. This time it accompanies nostalgic reflections which derive the current state of the American community from historical sources of social chaos.

[...] it has been bellowing and dragging since the war which resulted in a million deaths on both sides – a million is a lot even today – the Union almost starved the South with the blockade, and as professor Toynbee says, if Sherman had not ordered Southerners with their horses to go back to

<sup>44</sup>A reference to Bernhard Waldenfels's phenomenological proposition, *A Topography of the Other*, translated into Polish by Janusz Sidorek (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2002).

<sup>45</sup>John T. Matthews, "Touching Race in Go Down, Moses", in: *New Essays on Go Down, Moses*, red. Linda Wagner-Marti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 38.

<sup>46</sup>Haupt, "Luizjana", 688.

their farms immediately after the fights ceased, so that they could cultivate the land that same season, this seemingly unimportant fact would not have allowed to shake the continent's economic **equilibrium**, which may have affected what is happening in the world also today<sup>47</sup>.

This image treats history as a laboratory of entropic processes. The symmetrism of natural and social equilibrium in the theory of entropy has already been partially explained here. We are left with one more issue: if in both cases (continent and economy equilibria) the stagnation of equilibrium is described as a time of stabilization, does it mean that entropy can be described in positive terms? What is this „equilibrium” quoted from Boltzmann's book? What is balance if we do not want to see it only as zero, a state of maximum entropy? The word has positive associations. We appreciate balance.

Our personal lives are complicated in ways that these simpler systems are obviously not. Equilibrium in a gas is something easily achieved. It happens spontaneously. [...] If we know that something occurs spontaneously, we know what to expect. More specifically, we know what to expect in the future. If a gas, in its present state, is not at equilibrium, it will be at equilibrium in the future, and we'll know that the gas is at equilibrium because its entropy will have stopped increasing. The increase in entropy therefore serves a critical role in establishing an unambiguous arrow of time—a clear distinction between the past, present, and future<sup>48</sup>.

And so there is some type of pessimistic optimism or considerations about the point of the passing of time in entropy. The ambivalence in treating entropic presentiments regarding the human world manifests itself at the end of *Cyklon* [Cyclone]. On the one hand, there is an image of a child and his darkness, and on the other – the allegorical darkness of the “Black” in the South.

First, let us consider the child, implicitly Haupt's son. The first hint can be found in the motto of the Louisiana cycle: in *Le voyage difficile* [A difficult journey] from the poem *Le forçat innocent* by Jules Supervielle, the poet warns against forgetting about children when traveling. From the beginning of the quasi-journalist observation, from the image of the river, Haupt's *alter ego*'s narrative is burdened by his son's silent presence. The narrator remembers him: they watch the river together, and they are at Harry's bar together as well. We sense not this presence, but the father's emotions, thinking about the world's uncertain future and his son being lost in it. The contexts of this disturbing image have been subtly considered by Paweł Panas from the existential perspective: “[...] the experience of future death, impossible to verbalize, an unclear sense of an ending are lurking in the momentary loneliness of the loving subject, they are hiding in the most vital elements of the world”<sup>49</sup>. This vitalism can occasionally be the world's advantage – as well as its uncertain card. In this sense, a child symbolizes both darkness and hope. The disturbing ending of *Cyklon* represents a more “optimistic” understanding of entropy.

<sup>47</sup>Haupt, “Zamierzchłe echa”, 706.

<sup>48</sup>Johnson, 129–130.

<sup>49</sup>Panas, 154–155.

And in the evening, after bathing ceremonies etc. our little boy is tucked in his baby cot. He is still standing, holding the rungs, looking at us, and in the strange candle lights his eyes, looking at us from the shadows of the room, are reflecting the light like cat's eyes, and as we are standing, holding hands, he is so precious to us, even though his eyes are watching us carefully, strange like a basilisk's eyes<sup>50</sup>.

Petrified, we are looking straight into the future's eyes – but these are not necessarily eyes of a storm. We simply do not know what the future will be, just like the inscrutable, “dark” eyes of America's Black communities seem to be symmetrical to the image of uncertain future and a child's knowledge, hidden from us. In the end, the human world reacts to the catastrophe, but in this “post-cyclone” image an energetic representative of a socially impaired race turns out to be a hope for a post-apocalyptic *renovation*.

A Black man jumps off a truck loaded with rescue material. He is tall and muscular, smiling with his white teeth, moving with resilience and nonchalance of a young body. He is trying to do some work on an abandoned tram, slamming huge hickory wedges under its wheels. It is very uplifting to see such fresh human strength against the wildness of the element<sup>51</sup>.

This bitter-sweet lesson from a civilizational disaster and losing nature indicates that not everything is a way into darkness, that darkness is only a sign of our ignorance, and that a calming order is worse than the hope of a growing disorder, which may be announcing a new, blooming system, and with it – somewhat younger entropy. Accepting entropy's fundamental character is the essence of consolation. Boltzmann, enraged because everyone misunderstands entropy as our dark fate, cautions:

My overall objective in writing this book is to help you answer two questions that are associated with the Second Law. One is: What is entropy? The second is: Why does it change in only one direction — in apparent defiance of the time-symmetry of other laws of physics?

The second question is the more important one. It is the heart and core of the mystery associated with the Second Law. I hope to convince you that:

1. The Second Law is basically a law of probability.
2. The laws of probability are basically the laws of common sense.
3. It follows from (1) and (2) that the Second Law is basically a law of common sense — nothing more<sup>52</sup>.

The second law of thermodynamics is nothing but a cautious, skeptical constatation that common sense prevails. If we accept that the journey “towards zero” is necessary, if we stop resisting it – we will always choose common sense, any chance to delay entropy of the ageing world, in our existence and that of our descendants. Card players are always the best at the theory of probability; as Haupt reminds us, one needs to know how to play solitaire. Regardless of whether it works out or not, it will be something to remember, and it will offer the thrill of new possibilities of young entropy.

<sup>50</sup>Haupt, “Cyklon”, 723.

<sup>51</sup>Haupt, “Cyklon”, 723.

<sup>52</sup>Arieh Ben-Naim, *Entropy demystified. The second law reduced to plain common sense* (New Jersey: World Scientific Publishing, 2007), XVIII.



When I look at spaced-out, scattered cards [...] I can turn things around. I could compare this to a film played in reverse. The cards are flying around chaotically, and they lie down, and here we are with the previous order: once again, the three of spades is on the four of spades, and Queens on Jacks.

We play solitaire from chaos, and it works out or it does not, but this order comes down for us, some card metabolism intertwines with a thrill of satisfaction, and it approaches the ideal, but then it all falls apart and returns to chaos. But we are left with the satisfaction of looking back, and the thrill of a new game unraveling in front of us<sup>53</sup>.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>53</sup>Zygmunt Haupt, "Oak Alley nad Missisipi" [Oak Alley upon Mississippi], in: *Baskijski diabeł. Opowiadania i reportaże, zebrał, oprac. i notą edytorską opatrzył Aleksander Madyda* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2016), 711.

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# KEYWORDS

entropy

ecology

**ABSTRACT:**

In works by Zygmunt Haupt, the motif of entropy was a unique moment associating the speculative character of modern scientism with modernist prose. The scientific explanation – physics – is used to interpret the world's natural and social history. Haupt extends the connotations of the second law of thermodynamics, typically conceptualized in terms of humanities as a pessimistic perspective on the passing of energetic livelihood of life, the human world, civilization. At the beginning of his experience of America, it provided him with both hope and hopelessness. The paper analyzes similarities between Haupt's and Faulkner's prose, as well as formal similarities between their worldviews. Writing about the Delta, both authors are interested in the imbalance between nature and civilization, which leads to a crisis of both nature and human society. Entropy turns out to be a paradoxical trace of hope in the growing disorder which may be heralding a new system, and with it – a form of younger entropy.

# equilibrium

## DELTA MISSISIPI

*William Faulkner*

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Rafał Szczerbakiewicz –D. Litt., profesor at UMCS (Department of Contemporary Polish Literature and Culture at the Institute of Linguistics and Culture Studies). Author of a monograph *„Niepokalana szczerłość jest urojeniem”. Dekonstrukcje mitu śródziemnomorskiego w twórczości Jana Parandowskiego* (2013) [Pure honesty is a delusion. Deconstructions of the Mediterranean myth in Jan Parandowski's works]; his research interests and numerous papers as well as monograph chapters include: twentieth-century essays, popular literature and culture, especially in terms of the history of popular music, new media, ideology criticism, the Mediterranean myth in modernist culture, classical cinema ideology. |