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Ryszard Kapuściński:
Reportage and Ethics or Fading
Tyranny of the Narrative

EXTRACT

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I. Life and oeuvre

Ryszard Kapuściński's life and oeuvre are a testament to the need of participation in history as it unfolds, history *in statu nascendi*. Kapuściński, one of the leading figures in Polish reportage, was born in 1932 in Pińsk (present-day Belarus, at that time a part of Poland) and died in January 2007 in Warsaw. He was an active proponent of establishing the communist system in post-war Poland, a member of Związek Młodzieży Polskiej (Union of Polish Youth) in the 1950s as well as of Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza (The Polish United Workers' Party) between 1953 and 1984, a direct witness to the creation of and collapse of independent African states in the 1960s and 1970s, the guerilla movements against military regimes in South America, the military combat in Honduras and El Salvador, the coup in Angola, the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia, the anti-Shah revolt in Iran, the 1980 strike in the Gdańsk Shipyard, and ultimately the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991.

Kapuściński's oeuvre is extraordinary. Putting aside obvious elements such as the incredible variety of topics or the vast number of places he visited and described, the sheer diversity of genres in his work is impressive: lyrical poetry, newspaper articles and reports, war correspondences, reportage books, philosophical reflections, memoirs, interviews, and even photography. The size and duration themselves are astonishing; he debuted as a poet in 1951 and remained an active writer until his death in 2007.

In *Lapidaria I* Kapuściński explains "[I] became a foreign correspondent in 1956, at the age of 24. Since then I have worked in this profession continuously, specializing in the problems of underdeveloped countries, particularly in Africa, Asia and Latin America" (208). Kapuściński's numerous travels in this capacity resulted in a diverse body of work consisting of variegated literary genres. This book concentrates on his book-length reportage works, products of the author's travels to distant lands, regarded by some as exempla of mastery in the reportage genre and by others as ethically questionable semi-fictional stories. The book's intention is to look closely at the process of the aesthetic formation of the author's travel experiences into book-length texts and the ideological paradigm shaping his representation of the facts. In addition to that, the effects of authorial re-shaping of documentary material, the question of authenticity or fabrication thereof, and the epistemological responsibility of a reportage writer are also examined. The objective of this book is neither an analysis of Kapuściński's entire oeuvre, nor his exhaustive biography, as these goals have already been achieved by other scholars. Hence, only four Kapuściński's crucial works are this book's focus.

1. Structure of the study

Part 2 of this book, immediately following this Introduction, focuses on the analysis of *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat (Cesarz)*.¹ The first of Kapuściński's books translated into English, *The Emperor*, recounts the collapse of Haile Selassie's over 40-year long tyranny in Ethiopia in 1974. The book is an excellent study of the problems and tragedies a lonely yet opportunistic individual encounters when irrevocably entangled in the web of a totalitarian system. The book's main narrative describes the conflict of two worlds, each world expressed through the use of its own language. The conflict is intriguingly articulated through the dynamic interplay of two idioms: that of the emperor's courtiers living in resplendent luxury juxtaposed with the rest of society fighting extreme poverty and starvation. *The Emperor*, the ninth of Kapuściński's reportage books, is his most widely known and his most ideological 'African' book. While the events of the main narrative take place in Africa and detail only one of many coups d'état Kapuściński witnessed, the observations and reflections cannot be more universally poignant.

Part 3 focuses on Kapuściński's 'Russian' book, *Imperium*.² Situating his work mostly during the Soviet Union's last years, the author encapsulates in this narrative his life-long contention with one of Poland's most infamous Others, namely Russia/Soviet Union. *Imperium* is a result of Kapuściński's many journeys through the Soviet Union, the last one during the final years of the Soviet Union's existence (1989-1991); the book is a fascinating glimpse at the final moments of the once immortal and invincible empire. Notably, Kapuściński starts the book with his childhood memories of hunger and fear caused by the Soviet invasion of Poland in September of 1939. *Imperium* then opens with personal and vivid descriptions of childhood horror. In the 'Russian' book, the author tries to recapitulate his multifarious encounters with Russia but finds it impossible to enclose Russia in any kind of delimiting structure, as the topic is both intimate and disconcerting for Kapuściński. His typical method of employing the point of view of a seemingly gullible and trusting wanderer is much more apparent in this book. Moreover, even the style sets *Imperium* apart from his 'African' and 'South American' books; *Imperium's* narration is very slow, with its long sentences paralleling the great Russian ex-

1 First Polish edition – Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1978. English translation by William R. Brand, Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand, New York; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

2 First Polish edition – Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1993. English translation by Klara Glowczewska, New York: A. A. Knopf, 1994.

panases. The unhurried stories and lack of rigid structure also mirror the crumbling of the former empire.

Part 4 examines two works, *Lapidaria* and *Travels with Herodotus*. *Lapidaria* is essentially a pastiche of writings by Kapuściński, culled from several decades. It originally appeared as six separate volumes, the first of which was published in 1990, the last (sixth) in 2007.³ *Lapidaria* differs significantly in form and poetics from the earlier works, as in this book the author turns inward to undertake a journey of self-reflection. The texts gathered in this book are primarily literary vignettes, often containing only a few sentences. They include observations of the contemporary world, reflections on our civilization at the turn of the millennia, notes remembered from the author's several decades of travel, and, perhaps most interestingly, observations about Kapuściński's own writing process and experience as a journalist. The second book analyzed in Part 4 is *Travels with Herodotus*, published in Poland in 2004.⁴ The book is Kapuściński's literary summary of his life-long travels to the farthest corners of the world, as well as – with a dubious degree of self-awareness – his valediction to writing. *Travels with Herodotus* is an extensive report and a colorful tale from Kapuściński's inaugural journeys to foreign lands and the awakening of his reportorial sensitivity to otherness. In *Travels*, he also crosses the borders of time and space, with the narration happening simultaneously on several temporal and spatial planes. The accounts of his first several foreign reporting trips are interwoven with fragments from *The Histories* by Herodotus, which Kapuściński (supposedly) had in tow throughout his entire professional life. As Kapuściński reads *The Histories* over and over again, Herodotus' experiences become a significant paradigm for construing reality for the author of *Travels*. And not just that, for Kapuściński Herodotus becomes the personification of the spirit of *Dichtung*.

The concluding chapter contains my closing observations on Kapuściński's treatment of narrative, ideology, and ethics, and problems encountered throughout the study.

In my opinion, *The Emperor*, *Imperium*, *Lapidaria*, and *Travels with Herodotus* – analyzed in this book in chronological order – not only possess exceptional literary significance but also frame Kapuściński's reportage writing career with salience and precision.⁵ All four books represent milestones of his writing

3 First part of the series was published in 1990; the last, sixth one came out in 2007. All six parts of the series were published by Czytelnik in Warszawa, none of it have been translated into English.

4 First Polish edition – *Podróże z Herodotem*, Kraków: Znak, 2003. English translation by Klara Glowczewska, Vintage International, New York, 2008.

5 *The Emperor*, *Imperium* and *Travels with Herodotus* have been translated into English. As of now, I am not aware of any attempts to translate *Lapidaria* into English.

career and showcase the transformation of his treatment of narrative, method, and style, which are accompanied by significant changes in the author's philosophy of life and his Weltanschauung.

I have chosen to analyze Ryszard Kapuściński's reportage works, or specifically to concentrate on the ethical component of his version of reporting factual events, because it encompasses what I see as a fundamental issue in the stance and mission of today's literature as well as mass media – the question of epistemological responsibility.

Although there are several more books by Kapuściński known in the English literary world worth mentioning, structural constraints preclude their inclusion in this study. These books, similar to the ones I analyze in this book, serve to establish the author's place in the tradition of reportage and contain descriptions of the author's continuous attempts at participating in the challenging lives of the communities he describes. Among many other important books by Kapuściński is *Another Day of Life*.⁶ It is a volume based on the author's African experiences concentrating on the end of Portuguese rule in Angola. Chaotic, ruthless, and unpredictable fighting in one of the world's then politically hottest spots causes most of the foreigners to leave Angola in panic. The author describes not necessarily the actual combat and warfare or the opposing sides of the conflict but rather the overwhelming mood of uncertainty, disorientation, and fear among the general population. The focus of another reportage book, *Szachinszach*, published in English as *Shah of Shahs*,⁷ is the violent overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 and the beginning of the revolutionary period in the country's postwar history. Kapuściński paints a surprisingly cohesive picture of the tremendous changes in Iran via anecdotal stories, numerous eyewitness reports, massive amounts of notes and photographs, as he keeps searching for the meaning of the events in it all. The conclusion at which he arrives is that only several things remain stable throughout such drastic social changes: chaos, an overwhelming disconcertment, and – once the transformation is over – a certain sadness. *Heban*, known in the English-speaking world as *Shadow of the Sun*,⁸ published in 1998, is yet another 'African' reportage in which Kapuściński employs a strategy similar to the one used in *Imperium* – a recapitulation of his several-decades-long encounter with the people and vast continent of Africa.

6 *Jeszcze dzień życia* – first Polish edition came out in 1976, published by Czytelnik in Warszawa, English translation came out as *Another day of life*, translated by William R. Brand, Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand, Klara Glowczewska, London: Penguin Books, 1988.

7 *Szachinszach*, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1982, English translation by William R. Brand, Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand, San Diego: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 1985.

8 First Polish edition by Czytelnik in Warszawa in 1998, English translation by Klara Glowczewska, New York: Vintage Books, 2001.

Typical journalistic devices, such as giving the exact dates of events, which he witnessed, the precise locations of places that he visited, or the political systems which control those places, are very scarce in *Shadow of the Sun*. As if in contradiction with this arguable imprecision, Kapuściński creates long, elaborate lists of simple, quotidian, often cheap objects and meticulously catalogues their use. This method of ascribing a strong presence to the objects generates a feeling of authenticity and the elusive verisimilitude of reportage. It should be clarified that I see Kapuściński's employment of objects similar to Heideggerian 'useful tools' and anchors in reality. The world reveals itself to us due to the 'usefulness' of objects, which serve as 'tools' for our contact with reality, as explained by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*. The objects also serve the author to describe the 'otherness' and to oppose the dominant Western discourse of mass ready-made consumerism; they are the vehicle of the stylistic innovations inherent in reportage.

The last four books Kapuściński authored, *Lapidarium VI* (2007), *Rwący nurt historii: Zapiski o XX i XXI wieku* (2007), *Dalem głos ubogim* (2008), and *O książkach, ludziach i sztuce* (2009), were published posthumously. Since 2009, only interviews with Kapuściński, accounts of his visits, and collections of his notes were published.

2. Style

Kapuściński's style – wry, subtle, and allusive – developed mostly in response to communist censorship, since many of his books – published prior to 1989 – were subjected to the scrutiny of the communist censors. Kapuściński was an extremely perceptive observer, and his keen and persuasive eyewitness accounts proved effective. Throughout his entire life, he relentlessly makes an effort to understand the processes and mechanisms regulating the apparent reality. Moreover, he has to experience everything himself, directly exposing himself to danger and suffering – often shocking contingencies and terrifying, albeit hilarious, events. The feelings, atmosphere, and intensity of a particular moment appropriated by his senses are crucial to his style. Kapuściński sympathizes with the Other and identifies with the people he invokes in his books, avoiding distance, mockery, and judgment. On the one hand, he does not capitalize on his boldness and courage, on the other, his efforts at presenting himself as a person equipped with essential fairness and integrity are a constant in his books. The effect is a distinctive style, which conveys the impression of being cool yet emphatic, self-effacing, and wise.