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Monstrous passions

by [Jeffrey Meyers](#)

On *Travels with Herodotus* by Ryszard Kapuscinski.

Ryszard Kapuscinski
Travels with Herodotus.
Knopf, 275 pages, \$25

In his youth the Polish war correspondent Ryszard Kapuscinski (1932–2007) was well prepared for his life's work. He lived through the Nazi invasion of Poland, the doomed underground resistance, and the destruction of Warsaw, as well as the totalitarian oppression of the postwar Communist regime. He became the perfect interpreter of the Third World for the West. It's significant that on his first trip to India he flew west from Warsaw to Rome, and west to Amsterdam on his first journey to Hong Kong. Though Italy had lost the war and Poland had been on the victorious side, Rome (which had been an open city) seemed amazingly luxurious compared to the ruins of Warsaw. When he first began his career, under Soviet rule, all criticism was forbidden and he was forced to write obliquely: "Each word had a double meaning, a false bottom, a hidden significance; each contained something secretly encoded, cunningly concealed." By contrast, he made his reportage—adventurous, courageous, and humane—brutally direct.

Kapuscinski's best books are *Another Day of Life* (1976), about the civil war that followed the end of Portuguese rule in Angola; *The Emperor* (1978), about the deposition of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia; *Shah of Shahs* (1982), about the overthrow of the Shah of Iran; and *Imperium* (1993), about the collapse of the Soviet Union. In *The Emperor*, he captured, through interviews with courtiers, the backward and barbaric world that had been extinguished by the revolution, and the life of the Emperor who'd "tolerated corruption in the Palace, defended a backward system, and accepted [indeed, created] the misery of millions of his subjects."

In *Another Day of Life*, he insisted that for him it was absolutely essential to have first-hand experience during that terrifying state of siege: "it's wrong to write about people without living through at least a little of what they are living through. . . . All those who could were fleeing Angola. I was bent on going there." As the country descended into chaos, the Portuguese political police, determined to get even "for the revolution in Portugal, for the loss of Angola, for their shattered careers," terrorized the black population. Luanda turned "into a great burial place inhabited by vultures and hyenas." Kapuscinski saw it all.

Unlike his earlier books, the disappointing essays in *Travels with Herodotus* lack a clear structure and unity and do little to enhance Kapuscinski's impressive reputation. Jumping from place to place and year to year, he notes: "I left Persepolis and now I am leaving Tehran, going back twenty years and returning once more to Africa." To unify these disparate essays Kapuscinski summons up the

spirit of Herodotus, the constant companion of his travels, the fifth-century B.C. Greek historian and friend of the tragedian Sophocles. He admires and clearly identifies with the historian's fearless journeys, acute observations, and personal interviews. "He tries to check everything, to get to the sources, to establish the facts," as Kapuscinski tries to do.

But Kapuscinski does not provide the essential context for Herodotus. Born on the coast of Asia Minor, Herodotus traveled by foot, horse, and boat as far as Egypt and Babylonia, and wrote his *Histories* with reed pens on sheets of papyrus, which he then gummed together to form a scroll. He was interested in foreign cultures as well as in wars against the Greeks. His great theme was the struggle of Greece against the Orient, of freedom against slavery, democracy against despotism, the rule of law against the rule of force. In a letter of February 1930, another admirer, T. E. Lawrence, concluded, "Herodotus is a marvellous fellow. I incline to credit everything he saw, and to give him credit for intelligence and judgement in sifting the stories that he heard. Also he is pre-eminently human."

Kapuscinski pads his book with about forty pages of direct quotations from Herodotus, but his bald summaries are often superficial and dull: "Histiaeus, released by Darius, reaches Sardis and calls on the satrap Artaphrenes, Darius' nephew." He describes but does not interpret or analyze the *Histories*; does not discuss its style and art; does not mention its faults: muddled chronology, exaggerated numbers of warriors, confusion about military strategy and over-emphasis on divine intervention.

Surprisingly uncritical, Kapuscinski accepts Herodotus's claim that the Scythians' disdainful, contemptuous attitude toward the Persian army was "a more dreadful blow for the king of the Persians than losing a great battle." I doubt it. Blindly following Herodotus, he claims that nobody deliberately injures himself and then gives some fearful examples of self-mutilation, self-immolation, and self-destruction. He does not address the question of Herodotus's truthfulness. Indeed his own veracity, his unverified risk-taking, and his reports from the front, admittedly cobbled together from "rumors, whispers, and conjectures," have been questioned. Herodotus recorded the great deeds and astonishing achievements of the past; Kapuscinski records the atrocities of the present.

Other authors sometimes seem more relevant to his travels than Herodotus. Kapuscinski reads *For Whom the Bell Tolls* to learn English in India. But he doesn't mention that Hemingway, his notable precursor, was also a participant and correspondent in five wars: in Italy in World War I, in Turkey in the 1920s, Spain in the 1930s, China in the early 1940s, and France and Germany in World War II. Kapuscinski doesn't mention the relevance of Camus's *The Stranger* when describing "the sun, the cooling breeze, the brightness of the air, the silver of the sea" in Algiers, or the relevance of the powerful film, *The Battle of Algiers*, when noting the clash between "colonizing France and colonized Algeria." It's ironic, though Kapuscinski does not seem to notice, that the Algerians fought bitterly for independence when they were a *département* of France and now, after forty-five years of independence, are desperately eager to emigrate to France.

Unlike Kapuscinski's previous books, there's almost no violence, war, or danger in this one. He plans to cover the bloody civil war in the Congo but, stranded when his car runs out of gas, launches instead into another schoolboy summary of his favorite book. He witnesses the last weeks of the Shah's regime in Tehran and sees indoctrinated children ready for martyrdom, but weakly confesses that he can't find the words to explain them. Instead, he describes the inhuman and overwhelming monuments, built in the age of Darius and Xerxes, in the desert outside Shiraz. He doesn't mention that the Shah used this imperial grandeur to glorify 2,500 years of his dynasty—which, in fact, went back only as far as his father's coup d'état in 1925.

Certain passages, however, recall Kapuscinski's power as a writer. Threatened by sunstroke in

Khartoum, he observes, “The heat emanating from the sky above ground me against the asphalt. My head was pounding and I was short of breath. . . . I started to panic: if I didn’t find some shade soon, the sun, I was certain, would kill me.” He gives grim descriptions of burning corpses on the banks of the Ganges in Benares, and of starving street children fighting for survival in Calcutta. When an old woman accidentally drops a bowl, she scatters the rice “into the mud, amidst the garbage. In that split second, the children throw themselves down, dive between the legs of those still standing, dig around in the muck trying to find the grains of rice.”

Kapuscinski habitually asks, but does not answer, many important questions. Speaking of the proliferation of different tribes and languages in the Congo, he asks, for example: “How did it come to this? Whence this fantastic diversity, this improbable richness of variation? How did it all begin? When? In what place?” But these wonderfully diverse peoples, in a country that lacks a common language, have engaged for centuries in genocidal civil wars. He also asks: why do people wage war? The obvious answer lies in the human lust for power and domination.

This lack of answers is connected to one of his dominant themes: the impossibility, for outsiders, of understanding alien cultures, like those of India and China. Surrounded by disorder, confusion, and chaos, he implicitly compares self-destructive men to the insects in Senegal. They rush blindly toward the light, “slam their heads against the burning bulb, and fall dead to the ground.” After all his horrific experiences, his politically correct conclusion sounds like a grade-school graduation address and is completely unconvincing: “the cultures of others are a mirror in which we can examine ourselves in order to understand ourselves better.”

In his chapter on the Congo, he mentions *Heart of Darkness* by his compatriot Joseph Conrad. Like Kapuscinski’s major works, the novella reveals the inherent evil in man. Kurtz, the heart of darkness within him, establishes maniacal power and reverts in the depths of the Congo to savagery, murder, and cannibalism: “the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions.” I once asked a Polish scholar if Conrad’s view of the world was too dark. Alluding to his country’s tragic history, he solemnly replied: “For Pole, is not dark.”

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