Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Other* (Verso, 2008).

Ryszard Kapuściński was a Polish correspondent. Victoria Brittain writes in his 2007 obituary for *The Guardian*: ‘journalism was a mission, not a career, and he spent much of his life, happily, in uncomfortable and obscure places, many of them in Africa, trying to convey their essence to a continent far away.’¹ She continues that wartime atrocities deeply affected the author’s psyche and this early experiences taught him about helplessness and how language could fail the resonance of events. Nonetheless he became a prize-winning author with books translated into forty languages. Towards the end of his life Kapuściński made lecture tours in Mexico with South American author Gabriel García Márquez who gave him the epithet: ‘The true master of journalism’² But his literary style is a matter of some controversy.

This edition of *The Other* was translated in 2008 by Antonia Lloyd Jones. The flyleaf touts the book as ‘a distillation of reflections from a lifetime of travel’ and suggests that it ‘takes a fresh look at the Western idea of the Other.’ A slim volume at 20,000 words, the book contains four lectures, eleven footnotes and a useful index of terms and names. Kapuściński’s work traces how the West has understood the non-European from classical times to the present day but goes further to suggest that even in the twenty-first century Europeans treat those from the Global South as aliens and inferior partners in sharing responsibility for the fate of mankind. This book, however, takes the form of a poetic meditation on relationships rather than a comprehensive and factually detailed study.

The cover art is simple and effective, a photograph by Raymond Depardon and the overall design by James Hutcheson. The central visual motif is a black African man. He squats on the insubstantial rim of the land, arms held forward over his knees, but relaxed to counterbalance his weight. Inscrutable, he faces sunrise or perhaps sunset and this in-between world is washed in shades of mocha and grey. The image projects the space of ambivalence which echoes the enticing mystery of new possibilities in an engagement with the Other.

Neal Ascherson, a well-known Scottish journalist who lectures and writes on Polish and Eastern European affairs, contributes the introduction. He praises Kapuściński as an iconic foreign correspondent and weaver of tales – narratives of Africa, Latin America and Asia. He writes that the author was fastidious in his craft, a skilled listener and raconteur whose sensitivity gave people time to slowly unwind. Ascherson quotes Bronislaw Malinowski: ‘to judge something, you have to be there’ and ‘being there’ requires a dimension in time as well as space’ (1). He says that Kapuściński did time in dangerous places – for instance a cell in the Congo – because

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² Gabriel García Márquez in the blurb on the back cover of *The Other* by Ryszard Kapuściński (Verso, 2008).

he believed the place of a journalist was in the front-line and cheek-by-jowl with the locals.

Ascherson recognises Kapuściński’s style as a combination of fictional techniques and factual reporting. He suggests that accusations of fabulism are difficult charges to counter in journalism because the frontier between literature and reporting is such a fine line. He writes that Kapuściński’s close-to-the-bone experiences, especially in Africa, produced reportage that could evoke surreal imagery and chilling revelations of misery and cruelty. But he is forced to defend Kapuściński on the grounds that the writer kept detailed notes, was selective in what he used and changed the order of things only for a better literary effect. Meghan O’Rourke, an American poet and critic, also argues in the author’s favour that ‘narrative journalism, like fiction, needs to avail itself of all possible rhetorical techniques – including inhabiting the minds of characters – for the purpose of storytelling.’

She suggests that the invention of petty details to reveal a larger truth does not make you a bad journalist. And Ascherson uses the word ‘cunning’ to describe the way that Kapuściński utilises distant lands as allegories of Poland under past communist leaders and mocks Europe’s long-standing negative attitudes to nomadic people and aliens through witty tales of Haile Selassie, the last Shah of Persia and Idi Amin. Ascherson writes that these abstractions are ‘a classic way of evading the censors’(9). Jonathan Miller reinforces Kapuściński’s mindset and suggests that his wit comes from the same mould as Franz Kafka’s. He reminisces in The Guardian’s obituary column on how the notebook on Haile Selassie of Ethiopia was adapted for the Royal Court Theatre London. He writes that as the play developed in rehearsal it took shape as ‘an extraordinary representation of ornamental tyranny’ rather than a ‘piece of exotic tourism.’

The ‘Viennese Lectures’ (1, 2, 3) were delivered in December 2004. The first topic is ‘conquest and exchange’, presenting a narrative of first contact that places the Other as always barbarian and inferior. The second topic is ‘The meaning of difference’ which takes a historical perspective of the relationship between Europeans and Others in the era of merchants and envoys, the era of great geographical discoveries, the era of Enlightenment and humanism, and finally the new era marked by three turning points. These pivots are: the discourse of anthropology; the influence of Emmanuel Lévinas who believed that ‘the self is only possible through the recognition of the Other’ (68); the advances of multiculturalism.

The second lecture, ‘My Other’, was presented in October 1990 and speaks about the emotionally charged division of skin colour with its particularity for ‘like’, nationalism as the strongest tie known to man and a crude oversimplifying tool which breeds hatred, and religion as a social and political force that breeds reactionary and

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fundamentalist policies. Kapuściński writes that eighty percent of the world is non-white and the arrangement of the map has changed. He warns that the Third World is invading the developed countries, the state of the world is analogous to the Towers of Babel, but still the Other is treated like an object and not a full partner. Kapuściński goes on to ask if modern literature helps to break down our prejudices, our ignorance or our plain indifference, does it show us Others who live differently?, and does the ‘so-called real literature isolate itself from the problems and conflicts experienced by billions of our Fremede?’ (aliens). He laments that ‘researching, fathoming, interpreting and describing the philosophies of existence ... still remains ... in the hands of a narrow group of specialists: anthropologists, ethnographers, travellers and journalists’ (60). He says that nothing kind can be said of our insularity and indifference and the way we keep the Other at arm’s length and refuse personal involvement.

Ascherson writes that the author may be slightly old-fashioned but he is not interested in the Other as entertainment. Kapuściński’s commitment is to explore the way Otherness comes into being: ‘his generation did not – and does not – wish to turn away from the experience of two world wars, from the crimes of two unimaginably murderous totalitarian systems, and from the “modernist” notion of “mass society”’. Ascherson says that the author cannot see the way forward in an ‘atomising individualism’ but is influenced by Emmanuel Lévinas and also refers to the Holocaust survivor Father Jósef Tischer on the discourse around the ‘We’ of community: ‘I know what I am, because I know that another is’ (68).

The third essay, ‘The Other in the Global Village’, was given in September 2004. Kapuściński argues that the birth of mass society and the rise of totalitarianism threaten the essence of humanity. The only hero is the crowd and anonymity is a refuge from facing the music.

The final lecture, ‘Encountering the Other as the Challenge of the Twenty-First Century’ took place in October 2004 when the author was given an honorary doctorate at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Kapuściński writes that when we meet the Other we have three choices: confrontation that amounts to a duel; segregation behind a retaining wall; dialogue and cooperation that will surely counteract any paranoia. He writes that an encounter with the Other is a significant event and a test. He reasons that any meeting directly opposes mass society with its erasure of individual identity and also counters totalitarianism. The author says that we have a duty to be open and friendly and that we owe hospitality to pilgrims and travellers because the world is made richer by understanding diversity. However, we do pay a price for breaking away from our own culture; those who seek out difference must have a strong sense of individual identity – values and maturity – to confront another culture and the possibilities of change.

Kapuściński goes on to reflect upon the unique differences faced by the young generation. He says that they are going through a period of transition from mass society to a global world, experiencing an electronic and communication revolution and living in a culture that is now hybrid and heterogeneous. He says that multi-ethnic, multicultural voices are demanding ‘a place at the round table of nations’. Those
liberated from colonial dependency are discovering themselves and deciding their own destinies in a ‘polyphonic, many-sided dialogue’ (90).

Acherson observes that despite a life-time of disturbing experiences Kapuściński remained an optimist who writes of the future of Europe with the hope that Otherness can be a positive exchange between liberated peoples everywhere. He suggests that The Other is an earnest compilation which shows the author to be an intellectual who philosophised on the border of Catholic theology and had an enduring belief in Enlightenment principles.

Kapuściński concludes his meditation with heightened emotional appeal. He asks how we may foster the solidarity of empathy and dreams ‘that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts’ (92).

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