

***The Emperor on the Verge of Genres***

**KEY WORDS**

Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Emperor*, Polish school of reportage, criticism of reportage, literary reportage

**ABSTRACT**

The presented article is an attempt at a new take on *The Emperor*, a book by Ryszard Kapuściński that has been widely regarded as a crown achievement of the so-called Polish school of reportage. A reason to take on this subject comes from the media debate surrounding *Kapuściński non-fiction*, a controversial biography of Ryszard Kapuściński, written by Artur Domosławski and published in 2010. The author of this article draws his research material from many sources: statements by Ryszard Kapuściński, studies of the reception of his works, reviews and finally opinions published in the press between February and March 2010. The aim was to recreate the creative process behind *The Emperor*, the attitude of Ryszard Kapuściński towards his subject, emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie, and to evaluate some of the criticism that has been aimed towards the book over the years. The article is a contribution to the ongoing debate on the boundaries of reportage and the problems that may arise as a result of their crossing.

Since the day of its publication, *The Emperor* has widely been considered one of Ryszard Kapuściński's masterpieces. The myriad of reviews and comments have by now surpassed the size of the small book several times over. The story of the court of the deposed Emperor, Haile Selassie I, since its first release in 1978, has met with almost exclusively enthusiastic reception – reviews that rightly admire its literary artistry, stylistic mastery, captivating imagery, and the author's astute observations on the authoritarian system of government. Both Polish (including: Zbigniew Bauer, Andrzej Zwanecki, Andrzej W. Pawluczuk), and international reviewers (such as John Updike, Susan Sontag, Salman Rushdie and Peter Prescott) drew attention to the versatility and allegory of Kapuściński's work: 'A book about the idea of emperorship', 'an attempt to synthesize all of the dictatorships', 'a discourse of the fall' – wrote the reviewers, among them those from some of the most prestigious literary magazines in the world, occasionally comparing Kapuściński to the best writers of the twentieth century, such as Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and others<sup>1</sup>. There were also a few critics, but their contentions were for a long time unheard of in the author's homeland.

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<sup>1</sup> B. Nowacka, *Magiczne dziennikarstwo. Ryszard Kapuściński w oczach krytyków*, [Magical Journalism. Ryszard Kapuściński in the Critics' Eyes] edition 2, Katowice 2006, p.. 73–90.

In the work titled *'Magic Journalism. Ryszard Kapuściński in the eyes of the critics'*, Beata Nowacka collected only positive comments about his book – including 32 Polish reviews and 21 international. Strangely, the researcher of the reception of Kapuściński's works ignored the critical comments, and among them two of the most interesting, because of the unique extent of their critical approach: a sketch of professor Harold G. Marcus, an etiophist and author of a biography of Haile Selassie, entitled: *Prejudice and Ignorance in Reviewing Books about Africa: The Strange Case of Ryszard Kapuściński's The Emperor*<sup>2</sup>, and the text of John Ryle, a reviewer of the literary supplement to 'The Times', published under the title: *At Play In the Bush of Ghosts*:<sup>3</sup> (Ryle's text is briefly, using one sentence and without assigning a greater importance to it, quoted in the chapter of Nowacka's work, discussing Polish and international reception of *Heban*, but the English reviewer focused as much on *The Emperor*). These two texts are not cited either in *Magic Journalism*, or in the later *Biography of a writer*, written jointly with Zygmunt Ziątek<sup>4</sup>. The researcher has referred to them only in a review of a book by Artur Domoślawski<sup>5</sup>, published – nearly a year after its premiere – in the pages of "Studia Medioznawcze"<sup>6</sup>, rejecting some of them effectively and convincingly (the main argument of the researcher was that Kapuściński did not write about the history of Ethiopia, but described the world as it was seen by Haile Sellasie's courtiers). Nevertheless, it is surprising that such critical and interesting texts – differing greatly from the typical reception of Kapuściński's work – aroused the curiosity of the researcher of his works' reviews only after they had been publicized in the book *Kapuściński non-fiction* by Artur Domoślawski. The assertions made by international reviewers of *The Emperor* were described by Domoślawski in the chapter entitled *The reporter amends reality, or, Critics of all Nations, Unite!!*<sup>7</sup>. This part of the book begins with a conversation with a Polish woman who had lived in Ethiopia for forty years and had hosted Kapuściński when he was in Addis Ababa. '*The Emperor*... is a tale of a thousand and one nights [...]. Something is consistent with reality, but rather less than more' – says this acquaintance of Kapuściński's<sup>8</sup>. After bringing up her comments, Domoślawski delves into extensive accusations taken from a critical essay by Professor Marcus, according to whom, Kapuściński wrote a book that was uncritical of information that came from his sources, and inaccurate in the description of its main character – the emperor of Ethiopia. This inaccuracy in the assessment of the etiophist is reflected by a faulty documentation of facts. Claiming that the

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<sup>2</sup> H.G. Marcus, *Prejudice and Ignorance in Reviewing Books about Africa: The Strange Case of Ryszard Kapuściński's The Emperor*, „History in Africa” 17 (1990), p. 373–378, See reprint: „Afryka” No. 4 (1996), p. 69–76.

<sup>3</sup> J. Ryle, *At Play In the Bush of Ghosts: Tropical Baroque, African Reality and the Work of Ryszard Kapuściński*, „Times Literary Supplement” 27 July 2001.

<sup>4</sup> B. Nowacka, Z. Ziątek, *Ryszard Kapuściński. Biografia pisarza* [Writer's Biography], Kraków 2008.

<sup>5</sup> A. Domoślawski, *Kapuściński non-fiction*, Warszawa 2010.

<sup>6</sup> B. Nowacka, [A. Domoślawski, *Kapuściński non-fiction* – rec.], „Studia Medioznawcze” 2011, No. 2, p. 159–166.

<sup>7</sup> A. Domoślawski, *Kapuściński...*, p. 417–441.

<sup>8</sup> Hereinafter, p. 417.

emperor was illiterate is absurd according to the reviewer, while another fragment of the book is defined as ‘racist ignorance, defaming the Ethiopians’<sup>9</sup>. However, along with this sometimes severe criticism, Professor Marcus also saw qualities of the book – that, among other things, Kapuściński actually did a good job describing the background of events which led to the dethronement of the emperor in 1974, and adequately reflected some of the emperor’s characteristics. ‘In spite of its flaws, *The Emperor* often contained some insightful assessment; therefore, the book should be read carefully. The facts given by Kapuściński should be thoroughly checked, according to historical sources’ – concluded Professor Marcus<sup>10</sup>.

Many reviewers of ‘*Kapuściński non-fiction*’ have questioned whether *The Emperor* should be considered reportage: ‘Kapuściński – experimenting with form – wrote a perceptive book about the mechanisms of absolute power, but it shall be considered a documentary novel, not a work of non-fiction’ – wrote Bartosz Marzec, a non-fiction critic in of ‘Rzeczpospolita’, a Polish newspaper of record<sup>11</sup>.

Let us, therefore, try again to answer the question concerning the genre appurtenance of Kapuściński’s most popular book. Reviewers often took the trouble, but with different results. New sources and opinions, however, justify asking it once again.

### **Literary creations in *The Emperor***

Answers to the question about *The Emperor* should be looked for in two directions: on the one hand - analysing what was said about the book by its author, while on the other – using the available research on the reception of his work by the readers (other than investigations of Beata Nowacka).

Kapuściński did not define his works in accordance with traditional divisions of genres. Once he said that it only consists of ‘texts’, while another time he used the Latin term *silva rerum* – i.e. ‘the forest of things’<sup>12</sup>. He referred to the precursors of New Journalism, created in the United States by names such as Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, and Hunter S. Thompson, who combined non-fiction with the techniques of description used in the prose of fiction, as well as to the theory of ‘tinged genres’ by Clifford Geertz<sup>13</sup>. He formulated a hard, typological definition of reportage only once, which, according to him he for a long time understood intuitively– “the definition of reportage includes two elements: (a) the intentionality of the project: I am going somewhere [...], in

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<sup>9</sup> Hereinafter, p. 419.

<sup>10</sup> Hereinafter, p. 419.

<sup>11</sup> B. Marzec, *Ostatni romantyk* [The Last Romantic] [www.rp.pl/artykul/9148,796122-Piec-lat-temu-zmarl-Ryszard-Kapuscinski.html](http://www.rp.pl/artykul/9148,796122-Piec-lat-temu-zmarl-Ryszard-Kapuscinski.html) [access from: 19.05.2012].

<sup>12</sup> R. Kapuściński, *Autoportret reportera* [A Reporter's Self Portrait] Kraków 2006, p. 77.

<sup>13</sup> Hereinafter, *O książkach, ludziach i sztuce. Pisma rozproszone* [On Books, People and Art. Scattered Works], Warszawa 2009, p. 177.

order to refer the case, and (b) the topic was taken from life”<sup>14</sup>. On the other hand, he said: ‘I use a certain technique, a method, in order to best express what I would like to say. [...] I do not ask myself is it to be considered fiction or non-fiction. I have an idea I want to express and I express it in a certain way’<sup>15</sup>. Important here is another of the author’s statements – the one in which he says that in his books he does not use fiction, defined as inventions and description of events that did not exist in reality<sup>16</sup>.

The genesis of *The Emperor* has been repeatedly described in at least several books (this issue was most exhaustively tackled by Ziątek and Nowacka)<sup>17</sup>. The story of Haile Sallasje’s fall, right from the beginning was formed in Kapuściński’s mind as a book about single system of government. Another well-known and often described aspect of the creation of *The Emperor* is Kapuściński’s use of language in the course of writing the book – the use of Polish language taken directly from the baroque prose of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Repetitive use of various language designs and narrative devices – including archaisms, rhymes, and redundancies – make it impossible to not wonder how much of *The Emperor* has its source in the stories of Kapuściński’s interlocutors, and how much is the result of his own invention. Kapuściński rejects such a question as naive: “I am still questioned about the relationship of content based on the facts and fiction. Is *The Emperor* a work of fiction or non-fiction? I believe that such a question is not only naive, but also brings nothing new. Of course, my text does not consist of transcribed tapes, but is a literary construction. It is self-evident”<sup>18</sup>.

Several of Kapuściński’s statements can be found, which indicate that not all the monologues, which made up the book, are derived from the courtiers of the emperor. The most helpful here is an interview, which was carried out in 1987 with the writer by Marek Miller, and especially its two passages. One concerns the famous puppy named Lulu, and the second is about the description of the palace coteries that in the book take their special names. ‘I look for the simplest sentence, the simplest thing. [...]. And I look for it in these pictures and I think that the emperor had a small dog. [...]. What can a person tell about the dog? The simplest sentence that can be written about the dog: ‘It was a small dog, Japanese breed. His name was Lulu’ – said Kapuściński to Miller<sup>19</sup>. And here is another passage from the interview, in which Kapuściński adds more details: ‘It occurred to me that the emperor had a small dog; he always walked with the little

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<sup>14</sup> Hereinafter, *Lapidaria*, edition 2, Warszawa 2002, p. 396–397.

<sup>15</sup> Hereinafter, *Pisanie*, z Ryszardem Kapuścińskim rozmawia Marek Miller, [Writing, Marek Miller talks to Ryszard Kapuściński], Warszawa 2012, s. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Hereinafter, *Czterokrotnie rozstrzelany*, z Ryszardem Kapuścińskim rozmawia Wojciech Giełżyński [w:] *Wojna futbolowa. Postscriptum* [Shot four times, Wojciech Giełżyński talks to Ryszard Kapuściński [in:] *The Soccer War. Postscript*], Warszawa 2008, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> B. Nowacka, Z. Ziątek, *Ryszard Kapuściński...*, p. 190–193.

<sup>18</sup> H.M. Enzensberger, *Parabola władzy* [The Parable of Power] [w:] *The Emperor. Postscriptum*, Warszawa 2008, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Za: B. Nowacka, Z. Ziątek, *Ryszard Kapuściński...*, p. 193.

dog, it always accompanied him and he had a servant who took care of it. I thought that ‘here is the servant and he may say something’<sup>20</sup>. Another passage of the same interview shows that this intervention went much further. “I also come up with a lot of different words. [...]. I divided the people of the court into three categories, describing them in words that do not exist in the Polish language. [...]. I believe that each type of government, in time of danger, divides into lattices, corks and tables [so – into concrete, timeservers and liberal-compromisers – ed. A.S.]. These are my words, *The Emperor* is full of such words” – said Kapuściński<sup>21</sup>. In the book, the words on the lattices, tables and corks – i.e. the division, according to the above-mentioned words, invented by Kapuściński – are given as a monologue of one of the courtiers<sup>22</sup>.

Anyone who would like to rebuke Kapuściński at this point must take into account the fact that the reporter made no secret of the method that he chose when writing *The Emperor*, and he said about at least few literary creations, which are used in this work.

One of the popular models of reading of *The Emperor* in Poland was to interpret the story of the court of Haile Selassie as an allegory of authoritarian power structures, not only to an abstract and a universal extent, but also as the most concrete. According to the method of finding ‘between the lines’ critical content concerning the rulers of Polish People’s Republic; in Kapuściński’s new book, readers found a veiled criticism of the rule of Edward Gierek’s party. This model has been repeatedly challenged, but it survived and returned with new vigour with the discussion on *Kapuściński non-fiction*.

These universalizing and allegorical interpretations were referred to in Domosławski’s book as: ‘defensive reflex’, making itself apparent when someone undermines the veracity of the factual layer of the book. After the publication of *Kapuściński non-fiction*, there appeared a number of comments that confirmed this observation. Among the commentators who used this argument, was Stefan Bratkowski: ‘The interviews with Domosławski prove that he does not understand that ‘*The Emperor*’ was not a reportage! It was supposed to be a big metaphorical prose with elements of reportage, just as ‘*Shah of Shahs*’. It was not written to tell about the emperor of Ethiopia, but the problems of our system!’<sup>23</sup> Bratkowski was accompanied by Zygmunt Ziątek: “*The Emperor* was never thought of to be a simple journalistic reportage!”<sup>24</sup>.

What was the Kapuściński’s opinion on this model of interpretation? The interesting thing is that once he rejected it, as in an interview in 1994 for a German journalist, Hans Enzensberg: “In

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<sup>20</sup> R. Kapuściński, *Pisanie...*, [Writing...], p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Hereinafter, p. 158.

<sup>22</sup> Hereinafter, *the Emperor*, Warszawa 2008, p. 101.

<sup>23</sup> *Torańska, Bratkowski i Szwed o biografii Kapuścińskiego* [Torańska, Bratkowski and Szwed on Kapuściński’s Biography], [www.se.pl/wydarzenia/opinie/zawsze-niepokoi-mnie-jego-us-miech\\_131308.html](http://www.se.pl/wydarzenia/opinie/zawsze-niepokoi-mnie-jego-us-miech_131308.html) [access from: 31.05.2012].

<sup>24</sup> Z. Ziątek, „*Biografia pisarza*” [„Writer’s biography”] and „*Kapuściński non-fiction*”, „*Odra*” 2011, No, 3, p. 64–72.

any case, I did not want to engage in a direct description of the situation in my country”<sup>25</sup>, and another time he confirmed it to be a actual creative idea behind the book, as in an interview carried out in the United States: “Kapuściński said: Of course, this is not a book about Ethiopia or Haile Selassie, but more about the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The name of the former first Secretary of the communist party was Gierek and he was much like the emperor with his court. Everybody read this book as a story about him and the Central Committee. Tom Wolfe: But you did not write openly about the Central Committee. Kapuściński: No. However, the authorities obviously knew what this book was about, and thus it had a very small number of editions, and it was forbidden to shoot its film adaptation and doing it as a play”<sup>26</sup>.

An obvious inspiration stemming from the “court of Gierek” can be seen most evidently in one of the passages of *The Emperor*. Kapuściński describes how the palace is marvelled by the plan to create the dams on the Nile, the last idea of the brilliant ruler. Here is the opinion about the creation of this passage, made by Wiktor Osiatyński, Kapuściński’s associate from the editorial office ‘Kultura’ (‘Culture’): “One day [Kapuściński] phoned the editorial office asking to stop the episode, previously provided by him. He said he will prepare another one for the next day. The same day a meeting was held by the Central Committee during which Gierek revealed his idea for the action entitled “Wisła” (“the Vistula”), i.e. a plan to regulate the course of the Vistula<sup>27</sup>. And what did Kapuściński bring the next day? – A fragment of *The Emperor*, in which Haile Selassie had an idea to create dams on the Nile”.

### **Research on reception and discussion around the biography**

“One has to decide whether, and to what extent going beyond the level of basic journalism can create something lasting” – Kapuściński said about his masterpiece<sup>28</sup>. We also know that the question of whether *The Emperor* is non-fiction or fiction was considered by Kapuściński as naive and irrelevant. It is worth considering whether this question, however, has some meaning -for the reader.

Kapuściński has never suggested that *The Emperor* is a pure reportage, as claimed in the commentary about *Kapuściński non-fiction* written by the “Gazeta Wyborcza” reporter, Adam Leszczyński (“*The Emperor* – with the approval of the author – was sold not as a fairy tale, but as a

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<sup>25</sup> H.M. Enzensberger, *Parabola...* [Parable...], p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> T. Wolfe, *An Interview with Ryszard Kapuściński: Writing about Suffering*, „The Journal of the International Institute” Vol. 6 (1998), No. 1, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/jjii/4750978.0006.107?rgn=main;view=fulltext> [access from: 26.09.2012].

<sup>27</sup> Statement of Osiatyński comes from the documentary titled: *A poet on the front line: The reportage of Ryszard Kapuściński*, filmed in 2004 by an American documentary filmmaker, Gabrielle Pfeiffer; the statement falls in 49 minute of the movie– <http://vimeo.com/41303514> [access from: 7.03.2012].

<sup>28</sup> H. Enzensberger, *Parabola...* [Parable...], p. 11.

piece of reportage)<sup>29</sup>. But, did the readers have a right to think so? They did, and many thought so, as evidenced not only by the works of researches of Kapuściński's work, but also by the studies on the reception of his books by the readers.

In 2006, Katarzyna Potaczek, preparing a thesis which took on the title *Reception of The Emperor by Ryszard Kapuściński in secondary schools*<sup>30</sup>, developed a questionnaire on *The Emperor*, which was given to 77 high school students. Discussing the results of the study, Potaczek said that according to 27 per cent of students *The Emperor* tells the true story of the rule of Haile Selassie and his serfs, 64 per cent described the book as a reportage, 15 per cent found it to be a literary reportage, 4 per cent thought of it to be a historical reportage, while 3 per cent – a work of non-fiction. Summarizing this part of the study, the researcher writes: “The research materials show that one shall spend more time considering a theoretical and a literary analysis of this work. Nevertheless, this knowledge helps to better understand *The Emperor* as a document describing authentic events”<sup>31</sup>. Earlier, however, she makes a statement that sounds oddly in contrast with the previous one: “Despite the fact that the school lessons took on the issue of timelessness of *The Emperor*, a relatively large percentage of the respondents [in the question of the historicity of the book – ed. A.S.] commented on this matter incorrectly”<sup>32</sup>. Incorrectly, that is claiming that *The Emperor* shall be read as a book about the history of Ethiopia. After the publication of *Kapuściński non-fiction*, a similar statement was made by Jacek Żakowski, a prominent Polish journalist: “If anyone reading *The Emperor* or *Sztywny* [the reportage from *Busz po polsku*, the first collection of reportages by Kapuściński – ed. A.S.], considered them word for word factual, as you do with information from the stock market, it is his fault”<sup>33</sup>.

Let us ignore the contradiction of Potaczek's conclusions and let us ask another question: Are the tested students actually “hopeless” according to the researcher, and “shall blame themselves” in accordance with Żakowski? Contrary to the claims of those who say that *The Emperor*, for obvious reasons, shall not be read literally, many readers read it exactly this way, and it is because they know Kapuściński primarily as a peerless master of journalism and a reporter first and foremost.

In the course of writing the book, Kapuściński based his without a doubt insightful and universal treaty on the power on a real country. He wrote about real individuals, sometimes giving

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<sup>29</sup> A. Leszczyński, *Kiedy reporter jest nie fair* [When a Reporter Is Not Fair], „Gazeta Wyborcza” 27–28.02.2010, p. 15–16.

<sup>30</sup> K. Potaczek, *Recepcja „Cesarza” Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego w szkole średniej* [The Reception of the ‘The Emperor’ by Ryszard Kapuściński in Secondary Schools], Kraków 2006 [master thesis defended at the Institute of Polish Philology at Pedagogical University of National Education Commission in Cracow], the electronic version, see: [www.kapuscinski.info/pobierz/katarzyna\\_potaczek.pdf](http://www.kapuscinski.info/pobierz/katarzyna_potaczek.pdf) [access from: 7.03.2013].

<sup>31</sup> Hereinafter, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Hereinafter, p. 48.

<sup>33</sup> J. Żakowski, *Ta biografia nam pomoże* [This biography is going to help us], „Gazeta Wyborcza” 4.03.2010, p. 14.

their names. Narrative devices, which he used – reporters account, transcription of monologues and telegrams – prove the assertion of the work, understood as the impression of veracity<sup>34</sup>. Therefore, it is not surprising that many readers, guided by the reputation of the author and the most popular model of reading all of his works, understood *The Emperor* literally and drew from it knowledge of real events, just as from his other books.

Shall Kapuściński be blamed for this? Well, yes and no. On the one hand it has already been demonstrated that Kapuściński made no secret of the method and literary creations, which are used in the book. On the other – not every reader will see the statements quoted above, in which the author explained exactly what his story on Ethiopia is about and how it should be read.

### **Kapuściński on Haile Selassie**

It is time to look at the part of the critical voices concerning *The Emperor*, which investigate the way in which Haile Selassie is described in the book. First, however, it is worth trying to restore the relationship between Kapuściński and the last emperor of Ethiopia as it is seen outside the pages of his most famous piece of work.

In the biography of the writer, Artur Domosławski formulates the thesis that the assessment of governments and the figure of the Emperor in the Kapuściński's texts have changed, and these fluctuations corresponded with the official propaganda of the Polish People's Republic and Eastern Block. The biographer notes that in the 60's, when the emperor had good relations with the Polish People's Republic, Kapuściński described him in glowing terms as the most outstanding mind of Africa, but, however, the situation changed when he was overthrown by a Marxist colonel, Mengistu Haile Mariam. Then, he is described in *The Emperor* as a "satrap, dunce, and almost illiterate"<sup>35</sup>. In support of his arguments, Domosławski cites the fragment of correspondence of Kapuściński from the founding conference of the Organization of African Unity, which he reported on as a correspondent of the Polish Press Agency in 1963: "Despite his seventy-five years, Haile Selassie is a man of indefatigable energy, quick mind and deep sensitivity... one of the prominent elders, who amaze us with their vitality and clarity of thought. As a man he is very sympathetic, cheerful and captivating... The emperor is undoubtedly the most outstanding political mind of this country"<sup>36</sup>.

The image that Domosławski tends to show, however, is incomplete. The biographer omits – deliberately, it appears – a very important piece of the text that he quotes. In the original text, Kapuściński writes: "The power of Haile Selassie is absolute. Ethiopia has no political parties and

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<sup>34</sup> K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, A. Kaliszewski, W. Furman, *Gatunki dziennikarskie. Teoria, praktyka, język* [Journalist Genres. Theory, Practice, Language], Warszawa 2006, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> A. Domosławski, *Kapuściński...*, p. 305.

<sup>36</sup> Hereinafter, p. 303.



trade unions, and the parliament is purely symbolic and appointed, since there are also no general elections [...]. There is a classically feudal system”<sup>37</sup>. It turns out that Kapuściński wrote about Haile Selassie as being a single-ruler and feudal also in the 60s – in time when, according to Domosławski, he wrote about him in superlatives. At least a few times the author of *the Emperor* said in interviews that the subject of his book is not Haile Selassie himself. The most interesting of these statements came in a television interview that Kapuściński gave in 2001 to an American journalist Charlie Rose: „The emperor was a man who commanded respect. So when I wrote *the Emperor*, I did not write a single word against him [...] He was an important part of history, one of the most enlightened figures of the twentieth century and one of the three, alongside Nelson Mandela and Julius Nyerere, most important people in the history of Africa”<sup>38</sup>. In 1987, he told Mark Miller that Haile Selassie was the man who saved Africa, and *The Emperor* is the book about dwarfs in politics, which “has nothing to do with the emperor”<sup>39</sup>.

How to reconcile these words with unambiguously negative image of Haile Selassie that the readers are left with after reading *The Emperor*?

One of the questions from the survey conducted by the previously mentioned Katarzyna Potaczek concerns the figure of the emperor, and was worded as follows: “Characterize the main character of Kapuściński’s reportage and describe the ways, in which he exercised his authority” The task of the respondents was to name the features of Haile Selassie on the basis of what they had read in the book. According to the interpretation of the students – and not only theirs – Haile Selassie is in fact, contrary to the intentions of the author, considered the main character of the book. The research of Potaczek showed that the readers perceive *The Emperor* as a book describing Haile Selassie, who has the following characteristics: is a despot (67 per cent of answers), is not educated (34 per cent of answers), cannot read or write, is a suspicious, proud and strict egoist. In addition, the respondents attributed to the emperor of Ethiopia features such as: cleverness, physical weakness, charisma and patience; moreover, his governance was assessed as totalitarian, authoritarian and manipulative. They also pointed to ubiquitous informing, control and “corruption”, which bounded and subordinated all officials from the palace to the person of the emperor”<sup>40</sup>. The students also wrote that Haile Selassie came to power through a conspiracy. “On the basis of what the students say, one can tell that they correctly characterized [the students – A.S.] the emperor and the way he exercised his authority” – concluded Katarzyna Potaczek<sup>41</sup>. The way

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<sup>37</sup> R. Kapuściński, *Gdyby cała Afryka...*[If all Africa...], Warszawa 2011, p. 48.

<sup>38</sup> *A conversation with journalist Ryszard Kapuściński*, [www.charlieroose.com/view/interview/3091](http://www.charlieroose.com/view/interview/3091) [access from: 31.05.2012].

<sup>39</sup> Statement from the movie entitled: *Ryszard Kapuściński* which is the writing of the fragment of a long interview. A DVD of the movie is included in the book entitled: *Pisanie*.

<sup>40</sup> K. Potaczek, *Recepcja...* [Reception...], p. 42.

<sup>41</sup> Hereinafter, p. 43.

that school lessons present the emperor Haile Selassie is perfectly represented by a large number of examples of school essays which can easily be found on the Internet<sup>42</sup>.

What image of the emperor was seen by the researchers of Kapuściński? They also saw a clearly negative figure. In the biography of the writer, Ziątek and Nowacka wrote that the book is a “convincing”, even a master parable of absolute, corrupt and inept power; while the Ethiopian reality proved to be an excellent background for a full presentation of this model<sup>43</sup>. In turn, the professor Kazimierz Wolny-Zmorzyński wrote that „Haile Selassie by his selfish behaviour led to the collapse of himself and his country”<sup>44</sup>.

A particular piece of evidence of a negative image of the ruler of Ethiopia in *The Emperor* is an interview with a grandson of Haile Selassie, the prince Sahle Selassie, published in “Rzeczpospolita” daily at the beginning of April 2010, at the high point of the debate around *Kapuściński non-fiction*. The grandson of the emperor is apparently embittered and, using very harsh words, he calls *The Emperor* “confabulation of the author coming from the Soviet zone, a former Stalinist”, a book written on a certain order. Let us listen to the grandson of the emperor: “This book not only destroyed the reputation of the emperor and our family, but also poisoned the modern history of Ethiopia for several future generations. [...] Apparently it is fiction, but if one looks for books about Ethiopia or Haile Selassie, then this title pops up in the search engine as the first source of information. [...] All the facts, no matter how far distorted or exaggerated, concern the Ethiopian reality and history”<sup>45</sup>.

A descendant of Haile Selassie is biased in his assessments – he does not agree with Kapuściński at all, as does previously mentioned professor Marcus. for example – but a few of his arguments seem apt, especially the fact that *The Emperor* is for many readers an important source of information about the real Ethiopia. It is not about the fact of whether or not this negative image of the emperor and the negative assessment of his authority contained in *The Emperor* is appropriate, but whether such an assessment comes from the content of the book – apparently contrary to the intentions of the author. At the same time, we know that the evaluation of the persona of the emperor, declared by him “outside” the book, was different – and certainly more balanced – than the one shared by many readers of the book. Where can we look for the sources of this dissonance?

Here the grandson of the emperor is right. The problem comes from the fact that

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<sup>42</sup> Three examples of such works: <http://cesarz.klp.pl/a-9129.html>; [www.polskina5.pl/cesarz\\_streszczenie](http://www.polskina5.pl/cesarz_streszczenie); [http://polski.opracowania.pl/cesarz\\_r\\_kapuscinski/](http://polski.opracowania.pl/cesarz_r_kapuscinski/) [access from: 31.05.2012]

<sup>43</sup> B. Nowacka, Z. Ziątek, *Ryszard Kapuściński...*, p. 194.

<sup>44</sup> K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, *Wobec świata i mediów. Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego dylematy dziennikarskie, literackie, społeczno-polityczne* [Towards the World and Media. Ryszard Kapuściński's Journalist, Literary and Socio-Political Dilemmas], Kraków 1999, p. 190.

<sup>45</sup> Ermias Sahle Selassie, „Cesarz” nie jest o moim dziadku, z księciem... rozmawia Joanna Mieszko-Wiórkiewicz, [‘The Emperor’ Is Not About My Grandfather, Joanna Mieszko-Wiórkiewicz talks to the Prince], „Rzeczpospolita” 3.04.2010, p. 12–13.

Kapuściński's allegorical, penetrating, and at a higher level of semantics, amazingly real and universal "treatise on the fall" is placed in the reality of an existing country. And the archetype of anachronistic and authoritarian power, against which he wrote, is given the face of Haile Selassie. What is more – Kapuściński did it without explaining his exact plan to the reader.

Researchers of Kapuściński's work, for example Beata Nowacka, wrote that, in his book, Kapuściński does not show an objective history of the rule of Haile Selassie, but describes the world of the palace through the eyes of the servants.<sup>46</sup> This argument is almost always proposed to counter the plea that the image of Haile Selassie contained in the book is, firstly, full of false rumours, and secondly, generally negative. But *The Emperor* contains not only monologues from the courtiers (real or modelled and created by Kapuściński), but also the author's commentary, at times acting as an objective and complementary add-on to the voices from the interior of the palace. Why it doesn't include a more balanced approach in the assessment of the figure of the emperor? Perhaps Domosławski is right when he draws attention to the standards of "political correctness" that prevailed at the time when *The Emperor* was first published.

This aspect of the understanding of *The Emperor* was taken into account also by the reviewers of *Kapuściński non-fiction*. According to Polish journalist Piotr Semka, *The Emperor* is the book that allowed Kapuściński to wax poetic about "the victory of People's Power in Ethiopia". The most serious criticism of *The Emperor* coming after the publication of the biography of Domosławski, was released in a local magazine "Puls" in Zielona Góra, published by the Dialog-Cooperation-Development Association. Its author, Dariusz Chmielarski, says: "This book is a great work of literature, but at the same time it is morally repugnant. *The Emperor* is a vile libel against the Ethiopian emperor, Haile Selassie, one of the two greatest figures in the history of sub-Saharan Africa (the other is, of course, Nelson Mandela)"<sup>47</sup>.

Objections that Chmielarski raises towards Kapuściński are serious. Let us try to verify them. We already know that Kapuściński's opinion about the emperor of Ethiopia was different than the one that can be taken from the book. Interestingly, Chmielarski calls Haile Selassie one of the two most prominent figures in the history of Africa. Kapuściński said exactly the same thing in an interview for American television. However, with only a copy of the book available, the critic came to the conclusion that Kapuściński did not respect the emperor, and that he tried to ridicule him and present him in an extremely unflattering manner.

Did Kapuściński give the "alibi" to the perpetrators of the Red Terror in Ethiopia? In order to answer this question, we first need to consider the attitude of Kapuściński towards the Ethiopian

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<sup>46</sup> B. Nowacka [A. Domosławski...], s. 162.

<sup>47</sup> D. Chmielarski, *Mit – pocałunek Judasza* [The Myth – Judas' Kiss], [www.puls.ctinet.pl/index.php?bmF2PTImZGJpX3Jvaz0yMDEwJmRiaV9taWVzaWFjPTUmZGJpX2lkPTEyMDA=](http://www.puls.ctinet.pl/index.php?bmF2PTImZGJpX3Jvaz0yMDEwJmRiaV9taWVzaWFjPTUmZGJpX2lkPTEyMDA=) [access from: 31.05.2012].

revolution and try to reconstruct its description presented in the book. Domosławski writes at one point in his book that Kapuściński watched the Red Revolution in Ethiopia “with sympathy”<sup>48</sup> It is not known on what is the basis for this assumption, but let us assume that the first stage of this revolution – the overthrowing of the emperor – could actually be viewed by Kapuściński with enthusiasm. The Ethiopian Revolution had in fact several stages – first, in 1974, it began with the deposition of the monarch, then the military council, called Derg, took control, and at last in 1977 a dominant position was won by Haile Mengistu Mariam, later called the Black Stalin.

Kapuściński was in Ethiopia when the Red Terror was already raging. Description of the atmosphere of fear in the country permeated his book. However, it is symptomatic that, in the course of writing about the doings of the new regime, Kapuściński never once mentioned the political identity of the military junta and the participation in the revolution of its foreign allies from Cuba and the German Democratic Republic, and above all from the Soviet Union. The reason for this seems obvious. Kapuściński could not write that the Communist Revolution in Ethiopia, which bathed the country in blood (he did it only twenty years later, in *The shadows of the sun*), was supported by the Soviets, the “Big Brother” of Polish People’s Republic. But already in the first pages of *The Emperor*, Kapuściński writes about enforcement platoons, omnipresent military, the mood of the civil war and constant searches and roundups. It is therefore not so that Kapuściński described the deposed emperor in a negative way, and the revolution that overthrew him is referred to positively.

It is worth recalling the circumstances of the death of the emperor. Kapuściński ends *The Emperor* with a brief dispatch (and so – undoubtedly journalistic material, even a symbol of reliable information), announcing that Haile Selassie died, and the cause of his death was heart failure. The source of this message is the Ethiopian News Agency (ENA), and a title quoted by Kapuściński is “The Ethiopian Herald”, a newspaper that was a propaganda mouthpiece of the communist junta. The cause of death of the emperor still remains unexplained. Heart failure is the reason given by the Derg. Supporters of the emperor, however, even today still argue that he was strangled<sup>49</sup>. Kapuściński gives only one version of that event, the one that comes from government sources (some critics accused Kapuściński of filling *The Emperor* with anti-monarchy propaganda, distributed by the Derg in the post-revolutionary period). Salman Rushdie, one of the West’s promoters of Kapuściński’s work, also noticed “Probably the only real disagreement I ever had with Kapuściński was about *The Emperor*, because, beautiful as it is—and indeed, it becomes like a work of poetry as well as reportage—there is nevertheless a certain, what shall I say, disrespect for facts

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<sup>48</sup> A. Domosławski, *Kapuściński...*, p. 350.

<sup>49</sup> M. Meredith, *Historia współczesnej Afryki. Pół wieku niepodległości* [The History of Contemporary Africa. A Half of Century of Independence], Warszawa 2011, p. 200.

(which you occasionally encounter in the work of Kapuściński). In the case of *The Emperor*, the book ends with the tragic—or poignant—image of Haile Selassie dying in bed still believing he was emperor of Ethiopia. Whereas this is not how Haile Selassie died. He was murdered in his bed. He was smothered to death by the Marxist regime that had succeeded him. And it seemed a flaw in this otherwise great book that the death of the emperor was romanticized. Ryszard looked cross, when I told him this, and he refused to discuss it and took the refuge of the artist, that his version was what worked best as a book, which is fine if you're not claiming to be telling the truth"<sup>50</sup>.

Kapuściński's way to represent the death of the emperor was also considered by Małgorzata Horodecka. The researcher, aware of the existence of different versions of the event, sees Kapuściński's treatment of it as a kind of metaphor – an insufficient circulation of blood in the emperor's body can be viewed as a symbol of the failure of the government system<sup>51</sup>. It is, therefore, an interpretation consistent with the creative idea behind the narrative, which was connected with *The Emperor* from the very beginning. She also refers to the words, which Kapuściński told to Rushdie – that this version is suits the book better.

An American, Jack Shafer, shortly after the death of Kapuściński wondered what would happen if an Ethiopian journalist freely changed the story of Lech Wałęsa and the “Solidarność” (Solidarity) movement, in order to give a reader a deeper truth about the government in Addis Abeba<sup>52</sup>. A similar argument in the discussion surrounding *Kapuściński non-fiction* was recalled by Bartosz Machalica, a columnist of “Krytyka Polityczna” (“Political Criticism”): “Would it make no difference for us (i.e. Poles), if some Ethiopian writer wrote that dog belonging to John Paul II pissed on his cardinals, or that Wałęsa's dog pissed on the opposition leaders during meetings of the Civic Committee, or that Jaruzelski's dog pissed on comrades-generals from WRON?”<sup>53</sup>.

Both Shafer and Machalica are quite right. Perhaps it is true that a proverbial dog named Lulu is not the best example, but *The Emperor* is full of a variety of other examples of this practice. Referring to *the Emperor*, Horodecka argues that “thievery” of Ethiopia by Kapuściński is not an expression of ignorance or superiority: “a kind of instrumentalization of Ethiopia and its problems serves as the release of a broader mechanism of the boundaries of a certain African country”<sup>54</sup>. But is the writer's intentions are clear to anyone who takes the book in his hands? Quoted comments indicate that they are not.

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<sup>50</sup> L. Weschler, *The Emperor's Deathbed: An Exchange*, „The Virginia Quarterly Review” Winter 2008, [www.vqronline.org/articles/2008/winter/rushdie-wescher-kapuscinski/](http://www.vqronline.org/articles/2008/winter/rushdie-wescher-kapuscinski/) [access from: 31.05.2012].

<sup>51</sup> M. Horodecka, *Zbieranie głosów. Sztuka opowiadania Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* [Collecting Voices: Ryszard Kapuściński's Art of Narration], Gdańsk 2010, p. 161.

<sup>52</sup> J. Shafer, *The lies of Ryszard Kapuściński*, [www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/press\\_box/2007/01/the\\_lies\\_of\\_ryszard\\_kapucinski.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/press_box/2007/01/the_lies_of_ryszard_kapucinski.html) [access from: 25.01.2012].

<sup>53</sup> B. Machalica, *Piesek Lulu sika na orientalizm* [Lulu the Dog Pisses on Orientalism], [www.krytykapolityczna.pl/Bartosz-Machalica/Piesek-Lulu-sika-na-orientalizm-/menu-id-195.html](http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/Bartosz-Machalica/Piesek-Lulu-sika-na-orientalizm-/menu-id-195.html) [access from: 7.03.2012].

<sup>54</sup> M. Horodecka, *Zbieranie....* [Collecting...], p. 183.

### River of fiction and non-fiction

*The Emperor* is not all fiction, but its parts can become a basis unbalanced and overly simplified opinions. It is said that Kapuściński invalidated the boundary between fact and fiction. It seems that, both for the work and for the author, it would be better to go through the river of fiction and non-fiction, taking his readers with him, explaining to them his motives and methods. One of the interlocutors of Artur Domosławski says: “*The Emperor*? The most outstanding Polish novel of the twentieth century!”<sup>55</sup>. There still remains one question – when would Kapuściński carry the readers of *the Emperor* by this metaphorical river? Let us consider a few moments in time. Would he do it at the time of the release of this book? Absolutely not. It is impossible to imagine that here, in the 1970s Poland, a country ruled by authoritarian Party, a writer publishes a book with a preface in which he discloses that what follows is an allegory of dictatorship and centralized political structures. Or maybe he could do it at the time of release of the English translation of the book? It would be equally risky for an author, even if he still still has a good relationship with the government, although he is gradually moving away from it. Was it possible to do so after the fall of communism? It seems that by then it was too late. The book had long since begun to live its own life, especially abroad. Maybe in Poland such an action could go right, but rather certainly not in other countries, where the writer from Poland had established a reputation. In the literary world, *the Emperor* functioned primarily as a book about Ethiopia. Let’s imagine that Kapuściński, ten years after the release of the book which became a sensation – mainly because its material consists of unique voices from inside of a fallen palace – said that “in fact” it is not about Haile Selassie. This could end very badly for Kapuściński’s reputation among the literary elite of the West.

*The Emperor* is the product of a specific time and a school of Polish reportage. Kapuściński probably did not dream that the book will be so successful, popularizing his name all over the world. All in all, it has been translated into dozens of languages and became the property of many readers who could not know the specific meaning and the “context” of this book. Paradoxically, what makes this book great - mixing fact and fiction – can also be a source of great confusion. And Precisely for this reason *The Emperor* deserves to be called Kapuściński’s problematic masterpiece.

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<sup>55</sup> A. Domosławski, *Kapuściński...*, p. 437.