




**TRAVELS WITH  
HERODOTUS**


**RYSZARD KAPUŚCIŃSKI**

A K N O P F  B O O K



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HERODOTUS**

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A KNOPF  BOOK

*The Shadow of the Sun*

*Imperium*

*The Soccer War*

*The Emperor*

*Shah of Shahs*

*Another Day of Life*

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TRAVELS WITH  
HERODOTUS

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I am like one of those old books that ends up moldering for lack of having been read. There's nothing to do but spin out the thread of memory and, from time to time, wipe away the dust building up there.

—SENECA

All memory is present.

—NOVALIS

We are, all of us, pilgrims who struggle along different paths toward the same destination.

—ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

Crossing the Border

Condemned to India

The Train Station and the Palace

Rabi Sings the Upanishads

Chairman Mao's One Hundred Flowers

Chinese Thought

Memory Along the Roadways of the World

The Happiness and Unhappiness of Croesus

The Battle's End

On the Origin of the Gods

The View from the Minaret

Armstrong's Concert

The Face of Zopyrus

The Hare

Among Dead Kings and Forgotten Gods

Honors for the Head of Histiaeus

At Doctor Ranke's

The Greek's Technique

Before He Is Torn Apart by Dogs and Birds

Xerxes

The Oath of Athens

Time Vanishes

The Desert and the Sea

The Anchor

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Black Is Beautiful

Scenes of Passion and Prudence

Herodotus's Discovery

We Stand in Darkness, Surrounded by Light

## CROSSING THE BORDER

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Before Herodotus sets out on his travels, ascending rocky paths, sailing a ship over the seas, riding on horseback through the wilds of Asia; before he happens upon the mistrustful Scythians, discovers the wonders of Babylon, and plumbs the mysteries of the Nile; before he experiences a hundred different places and sees a thousand inconceivable things, he will appear for a moment in a lecture on ancient Greece, which Professor Bieźuńska-Malowist delivers twice weekly to the first-year students in Warsaw University's department of history. He will appear and just as quickly vanish. He will disappear so completely that now, years later, when I look through my notes from those classes, I do not find his name. There are Aeschylus and Pericles, Sappho and Socrates, Heraclitus and Plato, but no Herodotus. And yet we took such careful notes. They were our only source of information. The war had ended six years earlier, and the city lay in ruins. Libraries had gone up in flames, we had no textbooks, no books at all to speak of.

The professor has a calm, soft, even voice. Her dark, attentive eyes regard us through thick lenses with marked curiosity. Sitting at a high lectern, she has before her a hundred young people the majority of whom have no idea that Solon was great, do not know the cause of Antigone's despair, and could not explain how Themistocles lured the Persians into a trap.

If truth be told, we didn't even quite know where Greece was or, for that matter, that contemporary country by that name had a past so remarkable and extraordinary as to merit studying at university. We were children of war. High schools were closed during the war years, and although in the larger cities clandestine classes were occasionally convened, here in this lecture hall, sat mostly girls and boys from remote villages and small towns, ill read and undereducated. It was 1951. University admissions were granted without entrance examinations, family provenance mattering most—in the communist state the children of workers and peasants had the best chances of getting in.

The benches were long, meant for several students, but they were still too few and so we sat crowded together. To my left was Z.—a taciturn peasant from a village near Radomsk, the kind of place where, as he once told me, a household would keep a piece of dried kielbasa as medicine: if an infant fell ill, it would be given the kielbasa to suck. “Did that help?” I asked, skeptically. “Of course,” he replied with conviction and fell into gloomy silence again. To my right sat skinny W., with his emaciated, pockmarked face. He moaned with pain whenever the weather changed; he said he had taken a bullet in the knee during a forest battle. But who was fighting against whom, and exactly who shot him, this he would not say. There were also several students from better families among us. They were neatly attired, had nicer clothes, and the girls wore high heels. Yet they were striking exceptions—rare occurrences—the poor, uncouth countryside predominated: wrinkled coats from army surplus, patched sweaters, percale dresses.

The professor showed us photographs of antique sculptures and of Greek figures painted on brown vases—beautiful, statuesque bodies, noble, elongated faces with fine features. They belonged to some unknown, mythic universe, a world of sun and silver, warm and full of light, populated by slender heroes and dancing nymphs. We didn't know what to make of it.



Looking at the photographs, Z. was morosely silent and W. contorted himself to massage his aching knee. Others looked on, attentive yet indifferent. Before those future prophets proclaiming the clash of civilizations, the collision was taking place long ago, twice a week in the lecture hall where I learned that there once lived a Greek named Herodotus.

I knew nothing as yet of his life, or about the fact that he left us a famous book. We would at any event have been unable to read *The Histories*, because at that moment its Polish translation was locked away in a closet. In the mid-1940s *The Histories* had been translated by Professor Seweryn Hammer, who deposited his manuscript in the Czytelnik publishing house. I was unable to ascertain the details because all the documentation disappeared, but it happens that Hammer's text was sent by the publisher to the typesetter in the fall of 1951. Barring any complications, the book should have appeared in 1952, in time to find its way into our hands while we were still studying ancient history. But that's not what happened because the printing was suddenly halted. Who gave the order? Probably the censor, but it is impossible to know for certain. Suffice it to say that the book finally did not go to press until three years later, at the end of 1954, arriving in the bookstores in 1955.

One can speculate about the delay in the publication of *The Histories*. It coincides with the period preceding the death of Stalin and the time immediately following it. The Herodotus manuscript arrived at the press just as Western radio stations began speaking of Stalin's serious illness. The details were murky, but people were afraid of a new wave of terror and preferred to lie low, to risk nothing, to give no one any pretext, to wait things out. The atmosphere was tense. The censors redoubled their vigilance.

But Herodotus? A book written two and a half thousand years ago? Well, yes: because at that time our thinking, our looking and reading, was governed during those years by an obsession with allusion. Each word brought another one to mind; each had a double meaning, a false bottom, a hidden significance; each contained something secretly encoded, cunningly concealed. Nothing was ever plain, literal, unambiguous—from behind every gesture and word peered some referential sign, gazed a meaningfully winking eye. The man who wrote had difficulty communicating with the man who read, not only because the censor could confiscate the text en route, but also because, when the text finally reached him, the latter read something utterly different from what was clearly written, constantly asking himself: What did the author *really* want to tell me?

And so a person consumed, obsessively tormented by allusion reaches for Herodotus. How many allusions he will find there! *The Histories* consists of nine books, and each one is heaped upon allusions. Let us say he opens, quite by accident, Book Five. He opens it, reads, and learns that in Corinth, after thirty years of bloodthirsty rule, the tyrant called Cypselus died and was succeeded by his son, Periander, who would in time turn out to be even more bloodthirsty than his father. This Periander, when he was still a dictator-in-training, wanted to learn how to stay in power, and so sent a messenger to the dictator of Miletus, old Thrasybulus, asking him for advice on how best to keep a people in slavish fear and subjugation.

Thrasybulus, writes Herodotus, *took the man sent by Periander out of the city and into a field where there were crops growing. As he walked through the grain, he kept questioning the messenger*

and getting him to repeat over and over again what he had come from Corinth to ask. Meanwhile every time he saw an ear of grain standing higher than the rest, he broke it off and threw it away and he went on doing this until he had destroyed the choicest, tallest stems in the crop. After the walk across the field, Thrasybulus sent Periander's man back home, without having offered him any advice. When the man got back to Corinth, Periander was eager to hear Thrasybulus' recommendations, but the agent said that he had not made any at all. In fact, he said, he was surprised that Periander had sent him to a man of that kind—a lunatic who destroyed his own property—and he described what he had seen Thrasybulus doing.

Periander, however, understood Thrasybulus' actions. He realized that he had been advising him to kill outstanding citizens, and from then on he treated his people with unremitting brutality. Cypselus had left anything undone during his spell of slaughter and persecution, Periander finished the job.\*

And gloomy, maniacally suspicious Cambyses? How many allusions, analogies, and parallels in this figure! Cambyses was the king of a great contemporary power, Persia. He ruled between 529 and 522 B.C.E.

*Everything goes to make me certain that Cambyses was completely mad ... His first atrocity was to do away with his brother Smerdis... and the second was to do away with his sister, who had come with him to Egypt. She was also his wife, as well as being his full sister... [and] on another occasion he found twelve of the highest-ranking Persians guilty of a paltry misdemeanour and buried them alive up to their necks in the ground.... These are a few examples of the insanity of his behavior towards the Persians and his allies. During his time in Memphis he even opened some ancient tombs and examined the corpses.*

*Cambyses... set out to attack the Ethiopians, without having requisitioned supplies or considered the fact that he was intending to make an expedition to the ends of the earth ... so enraged and insane that he just set off with all his land forces... However, they completely ran out of food before they had got a fifth of the way there, and then they ran out of yoke-animals as well, because the oxen were all eaten up. Had Cambyses changed his mind when he saw what was happening, and turned back, he would have redeemed his original mistake by acting wisely; in fact, however, he paid no attention to the situation and continued to press on. As long as there were plants to scavenge, his men could stay alive by eating grass, but then they reached the sandy desert. At that point some of them did something dreadful: they cast lots to choose one in every ten men among them—and a man to eat him. When Cambyses heard about this, fear of cannibalism made him abandon his expedition to Ethiopia and turn his men back.*

As I mentioned, Herodotus's opus appeared in the bookstores in 1955. Two years had passed since Stalin's death. The atmosphere became more relaxed, people breathed more freely. Ilya Ehrenburg's novel *The Thaw* had just appeared, its title lending itself to the new epoch just beginning. Literature seemed to be everything then. People looked to it for the strength to live, for guidance, for revelation.

I completed my studies and began working at a newspaper. It was called *Sztandar Młodych* (The Banner of Youth). I was a novice reporter and my beat was to follow the trail of letters sent to the editor back to their points of origin. The writers complained about injustice and

poverty, about the fact that the state took their last cow or that their village was still without electricity. Censorship abated and one could write, for example, that in the village of Chodów there is a store but that its shelves are always bare and there is never anything to buy. Progress consisted of the fact that while Stalin was alive, one could not write that a store was empty—all of them had to be excellently stocked, bursting with wares. I rattled along from village to village, from town to town, in a hay cart or a rickety bus, for private cars were a rarity and even a bicycle wasn't easily to be had.

My route sometimes took me to villages along the border. But this happened infrequently. For the closer one got to a border, the emptier grew the land and the fewer people one encountered. This emptiness increased the mystery of these regions. I was struck, too, by how silent the border zone was. This mystery and quiet attracted and intrigued me. I was tempted to see what lay beyond, on the other side. I wondered what one experiences when one crosses the border. What does one feel? What does one think? It must be a moment of great emotion, agitation, tension. What is it like, on the other side? It must certainly be different. But what does "different" mean? What does it look like? What does it resemble? Maybe it resembles nothing that I know, and thus is inconceivable, unimaginable? And so my greatest desire, which gave me no peace, which tormented and tantalized me, was actually quite modest: I wanted one thing only—the moment, the act, the simple fact of *crossing the border*. To cross it and come right back—that, I thought, would be entirely sufficient, would satisfy my quite inexplicable yet acute psychological hunger.

But how to do this? None of my friends from school or university had ever been abroad. Anyone with a contact in another country generally preferred not to advertise it. I was even cross with myself for this bizarre yen; still, it didn't abate for a moment.

One day I encountered my editor in chief in the hallway. Irena Tarłowska was a strapping, handsome woman with thick blond hair parted to one side. She said something about my recent stories, and then asked me about my plans for the near future. I named various villages to which I would be going, the issues that awaited me there, and then summoned my courage and said: "One day, I would very much like to go abroad."

"Abroad?" she said, surprised and slightly frightened, because in those days going abroad was no ordinary matter. "Where? What for?" she asked.

"I was thinking about Czechoslovakia," I answered. I wouldn't have dared to say something like Paris or London, and frankly they didn't really interest me; I couldn't even imagine them. This was only about *crossing the border*—somewhere. It made no difference which one because what was important was not the destination, the goal, the end, but the almost mystical and transcendent act. *Crossing the border*.

A year passed following that conversation. The telephone rang in our newsroom. The editor in chief was summoning me to her office. "You know," she said, as I stood before her desk, "we are sending you. You'll go to India."

My first reaction was astonishment. And right after that, panic: I knew nothing about India. I feverishly searched my thoughts for some associations, images, names. Nothing. Zero. (The idea of an Indian trip originated in the fact that several months earlier Jawaharlal Nehru had

visited Poland, the first premier of a non-Soviet-bloc country to do so. The first contacts were being established. My stories were to bring that distant land closer.)

At the end of our conversation, during which I learned that I would indeed be going for into the world, Tarłowska reached into a cabinet, took out a book, and handing it to me said, “Here, a present, for the road.” It was a thick book with a stiff cover of yellow cloth. On the front, stamped in gold letters, was Herodotus, *THE HISTORIES*.

It was an old twin-engine DC-3, well-worn from wartime forays along the front lines, its wings blackened by exhaust fumes and patches on its fuselage. But it flew, and headed, with only a few passengers, almost empty, to Rome. I sat by the window, excitedly looking out to see the world from a bird’s-eye view for the first time. Until then I hadn’t even been to the mountains. Beneath us slowly passed multicolored chessboards, motley patchwork quilts, gray-green tapestries, as if stretched out on the ground to dry in the sun. But dusk came quickly, then darkness.

“It’s evening,” my neighbor said in Polish, but with a foreign accent. He was an Italian journalist returning home, and I remember only that his name was Mario. When I told him where I was going and why, that this was my first trip abroad and that I really knew nothing, he laughed and said something to the effect of “Don’t worry!” and promised to help. I was secretly overjoyed and felt slightly more confident. I needed that, because I was flying west and had been taught to fear the West like fire.

We flew in darkness; even inside the cabin the lights were barely shining. Suddenly, the tension which afflicts all parts of the plane when the engines are at full throttle started to lessen, the sound of the engines grew quieter and less urgent—we were approaching the end of our journey. Mario grabbed me by the arm and pointed out the window: “Look!”

I was dumbstruck.

Below me, the entire length and breadth of the blackness through which we were flying was now filled with light. It was an intense light, blinding, quivering, flickering. One had the impression of a liquid substance, like molten lava, glimmering down below, with a sparkling surface that pulsed with brightness, rising and falling, expanding and contracting. The entire luminous apparition was something alive, full of movement, vibration, energy.

It was the first time in my life I was seeing an illuminated city. What few cities and towns I had known until then were depressingly dark. Shop windows never shone in them, there were no colorful advertisements, the street lamps had weak lightbulbs. And who needed lights anyway? In the evenings the streets were deserted: one encountered few cars.

As we descended, this landscape of lights drew nearer and assumed enormous proportions. Finally the plane thumped against the tarmac, crunched and creaked. We had arrived. The Rome airport—a great, glassed-in lump full of people. We drove into the city on a warm evening through busy, crowded streets. Bustle, traffic, lights, and sounds—it worked like a narcotic. I became disoriented at moments—where was I? I must have looked like a creature of the forest: stunned, a little fearful, wide-eyed, trying to take in, understand, distinguish.

things.

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In the morning I overheard a conversation in the adjoining room and recognized Mario's voice. I would find out later that it was a discussion about how to dress me, seeing as how I had arrived sporting fashions à la Warsaw Pact 1956. I had a suit of Cheviot wool in sharp gray-blue stripes—a double-breasted jacket with protruding, angular shoulders and overlong, wide trousers with large cuffs. I had a pale-yellow nylon shirt with a green plaid tie. Finally, the shoes—massive loafers with thick, stiff soles.

The confrontation between East and West took place not only in the military realm but in all other spheres of life as well. If the West dressed lightly, then the East, according to the law of opposites, dressed heavily; if the West wore closely fitting clothes, then the East did the reverse—everything had to stick out by a mile. One did not have to carry one's passport around:—one could see at a distance who was from which side of the Iron Curtain.

We started making rounds of the shops, accompanied by Mario's wife. For me, these were expeditions of discovery. Three things dazzled me the most. First, that the stores were full of merchandise, were actually brimming with it, the goods weighing down shelves and counters spilling out in towering, colorful streams onto sidewalks, streets, and squares. Second, that the salesladies did not sit, but stood, looking at the entrance doors. It was strange that they stood in silence, rather than sitting and talking to one another. Women, after all, have so many subjects in common. Troubles with their husbands, problems with the children. What to wear, one's health, whether something burned on the stove yesterday. And here I had the impression that they did not know each other at all and had no desire to converse. The third shock was that the salesclerks answered the questions posed to them. They responded in complete sentences and then at the end added "*Grazie!*" Mario's wife would ask about something and they would listen to her with sympathy and attention, so focused and inclined forward that they looked as if they were about to start in a race. And then one heard that often repeated, sacramental *grazie!*

In the evening I summoned the courage to go out alone. I must have been living somewhere in the center, because Stazione Termini was nearby, and from there I walked along Via Cavour all the way to Piazza Venezia, and then through little streets and alleys back to Stazione Termini. I did not notice the architecture, the statues, the monuments; I was fascinated only by the cafés and bars. There were tables everywhere on the sidewalks, and people sat at them, drinking and talking, or just simply looking at the street and the passersby. Behind tall, narrow counters the barmen poured drinks, mixed cocktails, brewed coffee. Waiters bustled about, delivering glasses and cups with a magician's legerdemain, the likes of which I had seen only once before, in a Soviet circus, when the performer charmed a wooden plate, a glass goblet, and a screeching rooster out of thin air.

One day I spotted an empty table, sat down, and ordered a coffee. After a while I became conscious that people were looking at me. I had on a new suit, an Italian shirt white as snow and a most fashionable polka-dotted tie, but there must still have been something in my appearance and gestures, in my way of sitting and moving, that gave me away—betrayed

where I came from, from how different a world. I sensed that they took me for an alien, and although I should have been happy, sitting there beneath the miraculous skies of Rome, began to feel unpleasant and uncomfortable. I had changed my suit, but I apparently could not conceal whatever lay beneath it that had shaped and marked me as a foreign particle.

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\* All quotations in italics throughout the text are from Herodotus, *The Histories*, translated by Robin Waterfield, with an introduction and notes by Carolyn Dewald (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

A stewardess dressed in a light, pastel-colored sari was greeting passengers in the doors of the four-engine Air India International colossus. The subdued hues of her outfit suggested that a peaceful, pleasant flight awaited us. Her hands were arranged as if in prayer—the *anjali*, I would soon learn, was a Hindu gesture of greeting. In the cabin was a strong and unfamiliar aroma—surely, I thought, the scent of some eastern incense, Hindu herbs, fruits, and resins.

We flew by night, only a small green light twinkling at the tip of the wing visible through the window. This was still before the population explosion, when air travel was comfortable with planes often carrying but a few passengers. So it was this time. Passengers slept stretched out across several seats.

I felt that I wouldn't be able to shut my eyes, so I reached into my bag and took out the book that Tarłowska had given me. *The Histories* of Herodotus is a lengthy tome of several hundred pages. I found such thick books alluring, and I began with the introduction, in which the translator, Seweryn Hammer, describes Herodotus's life and introduces us to the meaning of his work. Herodotus, writes Hammer, was born in 485 B.C.E. in Halicarnassus, a port city in Asia Minor. Around 450 he moved to Athens, and from there, several years later, to the Greek colony of Thurii, in southern Italy. He died around 425 B.C.E. He traveled extensively during his life. And he left us a book—one can assume it is the only one he wrote.

Hammer tried to bring to life a man who lived two and a half thousand years ago, about whom we know little, and whose appearance is difficult to imagine. Even the one thing he left behind was, in its original version, accessible to only a handful of specialists who, in addition to possessing a knowledge of ancient Greek, had to know how to decipher a very specific kind of notation: the text looked like one unending, undifferentiated word stretching across dozens of rolls of papyrus. "Individual words or sentences were not demarcated," wrote Hammer, "just as chapters and books were unknown; the text was as densely woven as a tapestry." Herodotus concealed himself behind this verbal fabric as behind a screen, which we are even less well equipped to penetrate than his contemporaries were.

The night ended and day came. Looking through the little window, I was able to gaze for the first time on an enormous expanse of our planet. The sight brought thoughts of infinity to my mind. The world I had known until then was perhaps five hundred kilometers in length and four hundred in width. And here we were, flying seemingly forever, while the earth, very far below us, kept changing colors—for a while it was burnt, brown; then green; and then, for a long while, dark blue.

It was late evening when we landed in New Delhi. I was instantly awash in heat and humidity, and stood dripping with sweat. The people with whom I had been flying suddenly vanished, swept away by the colorful, animated crowd of friends and relatives that had been waiting for them.

I was left alone and had no idea what to do. The airport building was small, dark, and deserted, a far cry from Rome's. It stood all by itself cloaked in night, and I didn't know what lay beyond, in the depths of the darkness. After a while an old man in a white, loose knee-length garment appeared. He had a gray beard and an orange turban. He said something I did not understand, although I assume he was asking why I was standing there alone, in the middle of the empty airport. I had no idea what to answer and looked about me, pondering—what next? I was quite unprepared for this journey. I had neither names nor addresses in my notebook. My English was poor. I was not entirely to blame, though: my sole desire had been to achieve the unachievable—to *cross the border*. I wanted nothing more. But in expressing that wish I'd started the chain of events that had now deposited me all the way here, on the far side of the world.

The old man thought for a while, then motioned with his hand for me to follow him. To one side of the entrance stood a scratched-up, dilapidated bus. We got in, the old man started the motor, and we set off. We had covered only several hundred meters when the driver slowed down and began honking violently. Before us, where the road should have been, I saw a broad, white river vanishing somewhere in the thick blackness of the sultry, sweltering night. The river was of people sleeping out in the open, some on wooden plank beds, others on mats, on blankets, but most directly on the bare asphalt and the sandy banks stretching on each side of it.

I thought that the crowds, awakened by the roar of the horn resounding directly over their heads, would fall upon us in a rage, beat us, perhaps lynch us even. Far from it! As we inched forward, they rose one by one and moved aside, taking with them children and pushing along old women barely able to walk. In their ardent compliance, in their submissive humility, there was something apologetic, as if sleeping here on the road were some crime whose traces they were quickly trying to erase. And thus we inched our way toward the city, the horn blaring, people stirring and giving way—on and on and on. Once we reached town, the streets turned out to be equally difficult to navigate: it too seemed just one enormous canal of white-clad, somnambular phantoms of the night.

In this fashion we arrived at a place illuminated by a red light-bulb: HOTEL. The driver led me at reception and disappeared without a word. The man at the desk, this one sporting a blue turban, led me upstairs to a little room furnished with only a bed, a table, and a washstand. Without a word he pulled off the bedsheet, on which scurried panicked bugs which he shook off onto the floor, muttered something by way of good night, and departed.

Left alone, I sat down on the bed and started to consider my situation. On the negative side, I didn't know where I was. On the positive, I had a roof over my head; an institution (the hotel) had given me shelter. Did I feel safe? Yes. Uncomfortable? No. Strange? Yes. I could not define precisely wherein lay this strangeness, but the sensation grew stronger in the morning, when a barefoot man entered the room bearing a pot of tea and several biscuits. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. He placed the tray on the table, bowed, and, having uttered not a word, softly withdrew. There was such a natural politeness in his manner, such profound tactfulness, something so astonishingly delicate and dignified, that I felt instant admiration and respect for him.

Something more disconcerting occurred an hour later, when I stepped out of the hotel. C



the opposite side of the street, on a cramped little square, rickshaw drivers had been gathering since dawn—skinny, stooped men with bony, sinewy legs. They must have learned that a sahib had arrived in the hotel. A sahib, by definition, must have money, so they waited patiently, ready to serve. But the very idea of sprawling comfortably in a rickshaw pulled by a hungry, weak waif of a man with one foot already in the grave filled me with the utmost revulsion, outrage, horror. To be an exploiter? A bloodsucker? To oppress another human being in this way? Never! I had been brought up in a precisely opposite spirit, taught that even living skeletons such as these were my brothers, kindred souls, near ones, flesh of my flesh. So when the rickshaw drivers threw themselves upon me with pleading encouragement, clamoring and fighting amongst themselves for my business, I began to firmly push them away, rebuke them, protest. They were astounded—what was I saying, what was I doing? They had been counting on me, after all. I was their only chance, their only hope—if only for a bowl of rice. I walked on without turning my head, impassive, resolute, a little smugly proud of not having allowed myself to be manipulated into assuming the role of a leech.

Old Delhi! Its narrow, dusty, fiendishly hot streets, with their stifling odor of tropical fermentation. And this crowd of silently moving people, appearing and disappearing, their faces dark, humid, anonymous, closed. Quiet children, making no sound. A man stares dully at the remains of his bicycle, which has fallen apart in the middle of the street. A woman sells something wrapped in green leaves—what is it? What do those leaves enfold? A beggar demonstrates how the skin of his stomach is plastered to his spinal cord—but is this even possible? One has to walk carefully, to pay attention, because many vendors spread their wares directly on the ground, on the sidewalks, right on the edge of the road. Here is a man who has laid out two rows of human teeth and some old pliers on a piece of newspaper, thereby advertising his dental services. His neighbor—a wizened, shrunken fellow—is hawking books. I rummage through the carelessly arranged, dusty piles and settle on two: Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (useful for learning English) and the priest J. A. Dubois' *Hindu Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies*. Father Dubois arrived in India as a missionary in 1792 and stayed for thirty-one years, and the fruit of his studies of Hindu ways of life was the book I had just purchased, which was published in England in 1816 with the assistance of the British East India Company.

I returned to the hotel, opened the Hemingway to the first sentence: "He lay flat on the brown, pine-needled floor of the forest, his chin on his folded arms, and high overhead the wind blew in the tops of the pine trees." I understood nothing. I had a small English-Polish pocket dictionary, the only one that had been available in Warsaw. I managed to find the word "brown," but none of the others. I proceeded to the next sentence: "The mountainside sloped gently..." Again—not a word. "There was a stream alongside ..." The more I tried to understand this text, the more discouraged and despairing I became. I felt trapped. Besieged by language. Language struck me at that moment as something material, something with a physical dimension, a wall rising up in the middle of the road and preventing my going further, closing off the world, making it unattainable. It was an unpleasant and humiliating sensation. It might explain why, in a first encounter with someone or something foreign

there are those who will feel fear and uncertainty, bristle with mistrust. What will the meeting bring? How will it end? Better not to risk it and to remain in the cocoon of the familiar! Better not to stick one's neck out of one's own backyard!

On first impulse, I might have fled India and returned home, if not for my having bought a return ticket on the passenger ship *Batory*, which in those days sailed between Gdańsk and Bombay. The Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser had just nationalized the Suez Canal, prompting England and France to respond with armed intervention; as war broke out, the canal was blocked, and the *Batory* was stuck somewhere on the Mediterranean Sea. Cut off from home, I was condemned to India.

Cast into deep water, I didn't want to drown. I realized that only language could save me. I started to think about how Herodotus, wandering the world, had dealt with foreign languages. Hammer writes that Herodotus knew only Greek, but because Greeks at the time were scattered over the entire planet, had their colonies, ports, and factories everywhere, the author of *The Histories* could avail himself of help offered by the countrymen he encountered, who served as his translators and guides. Moreover, Greek was the lingua franca of those days, and many people in Europe, Asia, and Africa spoke the language, which was later replaced by Latin, and then French and English.

I began cramming words, night and day. I placed a cold towel on my temples, feeling my head was bursting. I was never without the Hemingway, but now I skipped the descriptive passages I couldn't understand and read the dialogues, which were easier:

"How many are you?" Robert Jordan asked.

"We are seven and there are two women."

"Two?"

"Yes."

I understood all of that! And this, too:

"Augustín is a very good man," Anselmo said....

"You know him well?"

"Yes. For a long time."

I walked around the city, copying down signboards, the names of goods in stores, words overheard at bus stops. In movie theaters I scribbled blindly, in darkness, the words on the screen, and noted the slogans on banners carried by demonstrators in the streets. I approached India not through images, sounds, and smells, but through words; furthermore, the words not of the indigenous Hindi, but of a foreign, imposed tongue, which by then had so fully taken root here that it was for me an indispensable key to this country, almost identical with it. I understood that every distinct geographic universe has its own mystery and that one can decipher it only by learning the local language. Without it, this universe will remain impenetrable and unknowable, even if one were to spend entire years in it. I noticed, too, the relationship between naming and being, because I realized upon my return to the hotel that in town I had seen only that which I was able to name: for example, I remembered the acacia tree, but not the tree standing next to it, whose name I did not know. I understood, in short,

that the more words I knew, the richer, fuller, and more variegated would be the world that opened before me, and which I could capture.

During all those days after my arrival in Delhi I was tormented by the thought that I was not working as a reporter, that I was not gathering material for the stories that I would later have to write. I hadn't come as a tourist, after all. I was an envoy, engaged to render an account to transmit, relate. But I found myself empty-handed, and feeling incapable of doing anything, at a loss even to know where to begin. I knew nothing about India, after all, and hadn't asked for it. *Crossing the border*—that was it. Nothing more. But now, since the Sudan war made returning impossible, I could only move forward. I decided to travel.

. . .

The receptionists in my hotel advised me to go to Benares: "Sacred town!" they explained. I had noticed already how many things in India are sacred: the sacred town, the sacred river, millions of sacred cows. It is striking, the degree to which mysticism permeates life, how many temples there are, chapels and various little altars at every step, how many fires are burning, how much incense is burning, how many people have ritual markings on their foreheads, how many are sitting motionless, staring at some transcendent point.)

I heeded the receptionists and took a bus to Benares. One drives there through the valley of the Jamuna and the Ganges, through flat, green countryside dotted with the white silhouettes of peasants wading in rice paddies, digging in the ground with hoes, or carrying bundles of baskets, or sacks on their heads. But this view outside the window was mutable, and frequently an immense expanse of water filled the landscape. It was the season of the autumn floods, and rivers metamorphosed into broad lakes, veritable seas. On their shores camped barefoot flood victims. They fled before the rising water but maintained their contact with it, escaping only as far as was necessary and returning immediately when the floodwaters started to recede. In the ghastly heat of the dying day, the water vaporized and a milky, steamy fog hovered over everything.

We reached Benares in late evening, at night really. The city seemed to have no suburbs which normally prepare one gradually for the encounter with downtown; here one emerged all of a sudden out of the dark, silent, and empty night into the brightly lit, crowded, and noisy city center. Why do these people flock and swarm together so, clamber all over one another while all around, just beyond, there is so much free space, so much room for everyone? After getting off the bus I went for a walk. I reached the outskirts of Benares. To one side, in the darkness, lay the still, uninhabited fields, and to the other rose the buildings of the city, densely peopled, bustling, brilliantly illuminated, throbbing with loud music. I cannot fathom this need for a life of congestion, of rubbing against one another, of endless pushing and shoving—all the more so when right over there is so much free space.

The locals advised me not to go to sleep at night, so that I would get to the banks of the Ganges while it was still dark and there, on the stone steps that stretch along the river, await the dawn. "The sunrise is very important!" they said, their voices resounding with the

promise of something truly magnificent.

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It was indeed still dark when people began converging on the river. Singly and in groups. Entire clans. Columns of pilgrims. The lame on crutches. Aged virtual skeletons, some carried on the backs of the young, others—twisted, exhausted—crawling with great difficulty on their own along the asphalt. Cows and goats trailed alongside the people, as did packs of bony, malarial dogs. I too joined this strange mystery play.

Reaching the riverside steps is not easy, because they are preceded by a thicket of narrow, airless, and dirty little streets tightly packed with beggars, who nudge the pilgrims importunately all the while raising a lament unbearably terrible and piercing. Finally, passing various passages and arcades, one emerges at the top of the stairs that descend straight down to the river. Although dawn has barely touched the sky, thousands of the faithful are already there. Some are animated, pushing their way who knows where and why. Others sit in the lotus position, stretching their arms up toward the heavens. The bottom rungs of the stairs are occupied by those performing the purification ritual—they wade in the river and now and then submerge themselves completely in the water. I see a family subjecting a stooped grandmother to the purification rite. The grandmother doesn't know how to swim and sinks at once to the bottom. The family rush in and bring her back up to the surface. The grandmother gulps as much air as she can, but the instant they let her go, she goes under again. I can see her bulging eyes, her terrified face. She sinks once more, they search for her again in the murky waters and again pull her out, barely alive. The whole ritual looks like torture, but she endures it without protest, perhaps even in ecstasy.

Beside the Ganges, which at this point is wide, expansive, and lazy, stretch rows of wooden pyres, on which are burning dozens, hundreds of corpses. The curious can for several rupees take a boat over to this gigantic open-air crematorium. Half-naked, soot-covered men bustle about here, as do many young boys. With long poles they adjust the pyres to direct a better draft so the cremation can proceed faster; the line of corpses has no end, the wait is long. The gravediggers rake the still-glowing ashes and push them into the river. The gray dust floats atop the waves for a while but very soon, saturated with water, it sinks and vanishes.

## THE TRAIN STATION AND THE PALACE

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If in Benares one finds cause for hope—a cleansing in the holy river, and with it the improvement of one’s spiritual condition, the promise of drawing closer to the infinite—Sealdah Station in Calcutta has the opposite effect. I arrived in Calcutta from Benares by train, a progress, as I was to discover, from a relative heaven to an absolute hell. The conductor at the Benares station looked me over and asked: “Where is your bed?”

I understood what he was saying but apparently looked as if I didn’t, for a moment later he repeated his question, this time more insistently:

“Where is your bed?”

It turns out that even the moderately wealthy, not to mention members of a chosen race like the European, travel the rails with their own beds. They arrive at the station accompanied by servants carrying rolled-up mattresses on their heads, as well as blankets, sheets, pillows, as well as, of course, other luggage. Once aboard (there are no seats in the train cars) the servant arranges his master’s bed, then vanishes without a word, as if dissolving into thin air. Raised as I was in the spirit of brotherhood and individual equality, this situation, in which one walks empty-handed while another walks behind, laden with mattress, suitcases, and a basket of food, seemed offensive in the extreme, a cause for protest and objection. But upon entering the train car I quickly reevaluated my position, as voices of clearly astonished people resounded from every direction.

“Where is your bed?”

I felt idiotic to have nothing with me except my hand luggage. But how could I have known that I would need a mattress in addition to a ticket? And even if I had known, and had bought a mattress, I couldn’t have carried it by myself and would have had to engage a servant. But what would I have done with the servant later? Or with the mattress, for that matter?

I had noticed already that a different person is assigned here to every type of activity and chore, and that this person vigilantly guards his role and his place—this society’s equilibrium seems to depend upon it. One person brings tea in the morning, another shines shoes, another still launders shirts, an altogether different one cleans the room—and so on ad infinitum. Heaven forbid that I ask the person who irons my shirt to sew a button on it. For me, of course, raised as I was in the manner foregoingly described, it would be simple just to sew on the button myself, but then I would be committing a terrible error, for I would be depriving someone burdened with a large family and obliged to make his living by sewing buttons on shirts of his livelihood. This society was a pedantically, meticulously woven fabric of roles and assignments, classifications and purposes, and a great deal of experience, a profound knowledge and a keen intuition were required to penetrate and decipher the delicacies of its structure.

I passed a sleepless night on the train, for those old cars, dating back to colonial times, shook

hurled you about, rumbled, and you were even pelted with rain, which came in through windows that could not be shut. It was a gray, overcast day by the time we pulled into Sealdah Station. On every square inch of the enormous terminal, on its long platforms, in the dead-end tracks, the swampy fields nearby, sat or lay tens of thousands of emaciated people—under streams of rain, in the water and the mud; it was the rainy season, and the heavy tropical downpour did not abate for a moment. I was struck at once by the poverty of the soaked skeletons, their untold numbers, and, perhaps most of all, their immobility. They seemed a lifeless component of this dismal landscape, whose sole kinetic element was the sheets of water pouring from the sky. There was of course a certain, albeit desperate, logic and rationality in the utter passivity of these unfortunates: they sought no shelter from the downpour because they had nowhere to go—this was the end of their road—and they made no exertion to cover themselves because they had nothing to cover themselves with.

They were refugees from a civil war, which ended but a few years earlier, between Hindus and Muslims, a war which saw the birth of independent India and Pakistan and which resulted in hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of dead and many millions of refugees. The latter wandered about for a long time, unable to find succor, left to their own fate, vegetating for a while in places like Sealdah Station before eventually dying there of hunger or disease. But there was more to this. These columns of postwar vagabonds encountered throngs of others along the way—the legions of flood victims evicted from villages and small towns by the waters of India's powerful and unbridled rivers. And so millions of homeless, indifferent people shuffled along the roads, dropping from exhaustion, often never to rise. Others tried to reach the cities hoping to get a sip of water there, and perhaps a handful of rice.

. . .

Just getting out of the train car was difficult—there was no room for me to place my foot on the platform. Usually, a different color skin attracts attention here; but nothing distracts the denizens of Sealdah Station, as they seem already to settle into a realm on the other side of life. An old woman next to me was digging a bit of rice out of the folds of her sari. She poured it into a little bowl and started to look around, perhaps for water, perhaps for fire, so that she could boil the rice. I noticed several children near her, eyeing the bowl. Staring—motionless, wordless. This lasts a moment, and the moment drags on. The children do not throw themselves on the rice; the rice is the property of the old woman, and these children have been inculcated with something more powerful than hunger.

A man is pushing his way through the huddled multitudes. He jostles the old woman, the bowl drops from her hands, and the rice scatters onto the platform, 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. The old woman stands there empty-handed, another man shoves her. The old woman, the children, the train station, everything—soaked through by the unending torrents of a tropical downpour. And they too stand dripping wet, afraid to take a step; and anyway, I don't know where to go.

From Calcutta I traveled south, to Hyderabad. The south was very different from the north

and all its pains. The south seemed cheerful, calm, sleepy, and a little provincial. The servants of a local rajah must have confused me with someone else, because they greeted me ceremoniously at the station and drove me straight to a palace. A polite, elderly man welcomed me, sat me down in a wide leather armchair, and was surely counting on a long and deeper conversation than my primitive English could allow. I stuttered something or other, felt myself turning red, sweat was pouring down my forehead. The elderly man smiled kindly, which gave me some courage. It was all rather dreamlike. Surrealistic. The servant led me to a room in one of the palace wings. As the guest of the rajah I was to live here. I wanted to call the whole thing off, but didn't know how—I lacked the words with which to explain that there had been some misunderstanding. Perhaps just the fact of my being from Europe conferred some prestige on the palace? I don't know.

I crammed vocabulary words daily, doggedly, feverishly. What shone in the sky? *The sun*. What fell on the earth? *The rain*. What swayed the trees? *The wind*. Etc., etc., twenty to forty words daily. I read Hemingway, and in the book by Father Dubois I tried to make sense of the chapter on castes. The beginning actually wasn't difficult: There are four castes. The first and highest are the Brahmans—priests, people of the spirit, thinkers, those who show the way. The second, lower down, are the Kshatriyas—warriors and rulers, people of the sword and of politics. The third, lower still, are the Vaisyas—merchants, craftsmen, and farmers. The fourth and final caste are the Sudras—laborers, peasants, servants, workers for hire. Here's where the problems started, because it turns out that these castes are divided into hundreds of sub-castes, and these in turn into dozens of sub-subcastes, and so on into infinity. India is all about infinity—an infinity of gods and myths, beliefs and languages, races and cultures; in everything, and everywhere one looks, there is this dizzying endlessness.

At the same time I felt instinctively that that which I perceived all around me were mere external signs, images, symbols, of a vast and varied world of hidden beliefs, ideas about which I knew nothing. I wondered, too, whether this realm was inaccessible to me because I lacked theoretical, book knowledge about it, or whether there was a more profound reason, namely that my mind was too fully imbued with rationalism and materialism to be able to identify with and grasp a culture as saturated with spirituality and metaphysics as Hinduism.

In such a state, and further overwhelmed by the richness of the details I found in the work of the French missionary, I would put down the book and go into town.

The rajah's palace—all glassed-in verandahs, maybe a hundred of them, which when the panes were opened allowed a light and bracing breeze to waft through the rooms—was surrounded by lush, well-tended gardens, in which gardeners constantly bustled, pruning, mowing, and raking. Further on, beyond a high wall, the city began. One walked there along little streets and alleyways, narrow and always crowded, passing countless colorful shop stalls, and stands selling food, clothing, shoes, cleaning products. Even when it wasn't raining the streets were always muddy, because all waste gets poured into the middle of the street here—the street belongs to no one.

There are speakers everywhere, and emanating from them a piercing, loud, continuous singing. It's coming from the local temples. These are small structures, often no larger than the one-or two-story houses surrounding them, but they are numerous. They look alike

painted white, dressed in garlands of flowers and glittering decorations, bright and festive like brides going to their wedding. The atmosphere in these little temples is somehow at once serene and joyful. They are full of people, whispering amongst themselves, burning incense, rolling their eyes, stretching out their hands. Some men (sacristans? altar boys?) distribute food to the faithful—a piece of cake, marzipan, or candy. If one holds out one's hand a little longer, one can receive two, maybe even three portions. One must eat what one gets or place it on the altar. Admission to each temple is free: no one asks who you are, or of what faith. Everyone worships individually, on his own, without a collective rite, and as a result there is an atmosphere of ease, freedom, even a bit of disorder.

There are so many of these places of worship because the deities in Hinduism are infinite in number; no one has been able to make a complete inventory. Furthermore, the deities do not compete with one another, but rather coexist harmoniously and peacefully. One can believe in one or in several at once, even exchange one for another depending on place, time, mood, or need. The ultimate worldly ambition of any given deity's followers is to erect a dedicated sanctuary, to build a temple. One can imagine the material consequences of this, bearing in mind that this liberal polytheism has lasted thousands of years already. How many temples, chapels, altars, and statues have been raised over the years, and how many have been destroyed by floods, fires, typhoons, wars with Muslims. If all the ones ever constructed were still to exist, simultaneously, they would surely cover half the surface of the globe.

In my wanderings I happened upon the temple of Kali. She is the goddess of destruction and represents the ruinous workings of time. I do not know if she can be propitiated, because after all one cannot stop time. Kali is tall, black, sticks out her tongue, wears a necklace of skulls, and stands with her arms outstretched. She is a woman, but into her embrace it is better not to fall.

The way to the temple leads between two rows of stalls selling pungent scents, colorful powders, pictures, pendants, all manner of kitschy bric-a-brac. A dense, slowly moving line of perspiring, excited people snakes its way to the goddess's statue. Inside the sanctuary, a overpowering airless odor of incense, heat, darkness. A symbolic exchange takes place before the statue—you give the priest a previously purchased pebble, and he hands back another one. I suppose you leave the unconsecrated one and receive one that's been blessed. But I'm not certain.

The palace of the rajah is full of servants. You see no one else, really, and it's as if the entire estate had been given over to their absolute rule. Countless butlers, footmen, waiters, maids, and valets, specialists in brewing tea and frosting cakes, clothes pressers and messenger exterminators of mosquitoes and spiders, and many more whose duties and roles it is impossible to fathom, course continually through the rooms and salons, pass by along the corridors and on the stairs, dusting rugs and furniture, beating pillows, arranging armchairs, cutting and watering the flowers.

All of them move about in silence, fluidly, cautiously, giving a slightly fearful impression. But there is no visible nervousness, no running about or gesticulating. It's as if a Bengal tiger were circling around here somewhere; one's only chance is to make no sudden movements. Even during the day, in the glare of the shining sun, the servants resemble anonymous



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