

The Making of a Mexican Revolutionary: B. Traven's *March to the Monteria*

Kenneth Payne, Kuwait University

Hermann Albert Otto Maximilian Wienecke was born in 1882 in the town of Schwiebus, in Pomerania. The subsequent marriage of his parents legitimized him as Otto Feige.¹ Forty-two years and several pseudonyms later, the veteran of the 1919 Bavarian Räterepublik surfaced in Mexico under the new name of B. Traven, and began frenetic work on a series of short stories and novels, mostly set in Mexico. Although *The Death Ship* (1926) has been the most discussed of the novels,² the best known is probably still *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (first published in Berlin as *Der Schatz der Sierra Madre*, in 1927), made famous by John Huston's filmed version of 1947. Between 1931 and 1939, Traven completed a series of six "Jungle" novels, tracing the events leading up to the Mexican Revolution of 1911.³ The "Jungle" series have recently begun to attract some long overdue attention, and have been recognized by one commentator as "among the very finest novels in any language to describe the genesis, growth, and triumph of a revolution."⁴

March to the Monteria (1933)⁵ has received less notice than the better-known novels in the "Jungle" series, like *The Carreta* (1930) and *The Rebellion of the Hanged* (1936). *March* is a more sombre work than *The Carreta*, and is certainly less dramatic than *Rebellion*, which deals with the outbreak of the Indian insurrection against the mahogany plantation owners. However, there is a common principle of narrative organization linking all three novels, with each presenting a version of the education tale involving an individual Indian who progresses toward some degree of enlightenment as to the oppressive social structure in which he exists. In *The Carreta*, the peasant Andres Ugalde is transformed from an ignorant village boy into a hard-bitten wagoner with a mission for social justice. In *Rebellion*, Traven follows the misfortunes of the Tsotsil Indian, Candido Castro, as he endures the hell of the *monteria*

¹ The most significant recent biographical spadework on Traven has been done by Will Wyatt in *The Man Who Was B. Traven* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980).

² Some of the most perceptive analyses of *The Death Ship* include: John Fraser, "Rereading Traven's *The Death Ship*," *Southern Review* 9 (1973): 69-92; Donald Gutierrez, "B. Traven's *Death Ship Commune*," *Texas Quarterly* 20.4 (1977): 59-78; James L. Kastely, "Understanding the 'Work' of Literature: B. Traven's *The Death Ship*," *Mosaic* 18.1 (1985): 79-96.

³ In order of publication (with the date of the original German publication in parentheses) these are: *The Carreta* (1930), *Government* (1931), *March to the Monteria* (1933), *The Rebellion of the Hanged* (1936), *The Troza* (1936), and *General from the Jungle* (1939). My listing is taken from E.R. Hagemann's "A Checklist of the Work of B. Traven and the Critical Estimates and Biographical Essays on Him: Together with a Brief Biography," in *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 53 (1959): 37-67. This remains the fullest bibliographical reference for the many international editions of Traven's works.

⁴ Jonah Raskin, "B. Traven's Revolution in Latin America," in *B. Traven: Life and Work*, ed. E. Schürer and P. Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987) 226-32.

⁵ The novel was published in its original German as *Der Marsch ins Reich der Caoba*, by the Bücher-igle Gutenberg, Zürich, in 1933. Due to growing Nazi influence, Traven's works had been blacklisted in Germany. *March* was the first of his major works to appear outside Germany initially.

(mahogany camp), expands in vision, and emerges finally as a member of the revolutionary army. I wish to consider *March* in a similar context, to trace the stages by which another Tsotsil, Celso Flores, moves through persecution and injustice toward a raised level of consciousness. *March* must be understood in relation to the other novels of the Revolution, since Traven himself conceived of them as inter-connected.

Celso has toiled for two years on a coffee plantation in order to earn enough money to marry. The opening scenes of the novel emphasize Celso's industry, dedication, and sagacity. On the way back to his village, he avoids liquor (in order not to be thrown into jail for drunkenness and then be heavily fined) and deliberately dresses in rags in order to appear penniless. Celso is "astute and obstinate,"⁶ but all his caution counts for nothing when he is duped out of his hard-earned wages by the crafty Don Sixto, who claims repayment of money allegedly owed him by Celso's father. Although Celso silently questions the validity of the claim, he "knew that against the word of the caballero the word of an Indian was no good. If the caballero said the earth turns around the sun, the Indian had to accept it as the truth, even though it was evident to his eyes that the sun turned around the earth" (5-6). Celso is also well aware of the power which Don Sixto has at his disposal, as a *ladino* (a non-Indian Mexican) in a society controlled by *ladinos*. Threatened with the police if he refuses to pay, Celso reminds himself "how expensive jail could be for an Indian. They would take the money away from him, because he could not hide it. And on top of that he would probably be sentenced to three months of forced labor on the highways for concealment of a debt or whatever they might call it. A judge or the chief of police would surely find the right word, and, regardless of what the Indian said or did not say, he had committed a serious breach of the law" (6). Submissively, Celso hands over the precious coins. In so doing, he acts out the age-old spectacle of Indian exploitation at the hands of a corrupt "white" establishment, a ritual which Traven traces back to Cortes and the *conquistadores*. Through all of this, Celso behaves "as though in a state of hypnosis" (7). What hypnotizes him is four centuries of inbred acquiescence and a large dose of fear. Celso is powerless to prevent himself from being defrauded not only of his cash but also of the means to marry, have children, and "to build up a world of his own and give meaning to his life" (14). Underlining the Indian's devastation, Traven shows him arriving home, after two years of labor, "without gifts, without money for his marriage and without his pack, which he had lost somewhere along the road" (16).

The influence of the nineteenth century anarchist philosopher Max Stirner on Traven's political thought has been discussed most fully by Baumann and Essbach.⁷ Baumann has detected Stirner's impact in Traven's hostility to the "fixed idea," or any idea which "has subjected the man to itself" (such as State, God, Man, etc).⁸ As Olafson has noted of *The Carreta*, Traven investigated the psychological mechanisms of "behavior modification," "mind control," and

⁶ B. Traven, *March to the Monteria* (London: Allison and Busby, 1982) 3. Subsequent references are to this edition.

⁷ See Michael L. Baumann, *B. Traven: An Introduction* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976) 62-75 and 131-53. See also Wolfgang Essbach, "A Language Without a Master: Max Stirner's Influence on B. Traven," in *B. Traven: Life and Work* 101-19.

⁸ Baumann 132.

"brainwashing" long before the terms were popularized.⁹ *The Carreta* shows how an individual Indian succeeds in freeing himself from the insidious control exerted by *ladino* authority, with Andres Ugalde, the protagonist, coming to see through organized religion, for one thing. A large part of the Indians' problem is their obedience to the "fixed ideas" disseminated by their *ladino* rulers. However, thanks to his exposure in the coffee plantation to what Traven calls "the slimy, shrewd and oily scum of the cities" (28), Celso "had begun to shake off the clumsiness of his thinking process." Although "being afraid of jail was one of the complexes which he had not been able to get rid of," Celso's world view has begun to change subtly, with the result that he sees himself in an altered relationship to his surroundings, and can now exploit conditions more effectively to his own advantage. Celso is marginally more in control of circumstances, and is now sometimes able to influence them. This is brought out in the small victory he scores over the *ladinos* in having his way paid into the *monterias* by agreeing to act as a letter carrier for Don Apolinar (when Celso is actually keen to go in order to find work). "Faked was the fearful and shy gesture with which he approached Don Apolinar" (29), as Celso negotiates a satisfactory fee for his services. It seems to be with some regret for the Indian's loss of innocence that Traven notes, "for the first time in his life, Celso acted with well-studied hypocrisy." To survive, the Indian must master the arts of insincerity, is Traven's resigned finding.

Celso's growth from the submissive peon to the shrewd manipulator continues on his jungle trek to the mahogany camp. Traven sketches the stages in the "bitter schooling" Celso has received from the *ladino* class so far: his "first lesson" had been "when Don Sixto had deprived him of the money he had saved for his marriage. A second valuable lesson came when he could not buy a present for his mother because the storekeeper demanded three times the real price for the gift for no other reason than to sell him hard liquor instead. And another important change occurred in him when he learned from his father that Don Sixto had not been entitled to take the money away from him the way he did" (53-54). The most significant effect of all of this is that Celso is now able to "think quicker" and say "at your service, patroncito" slower, says Traven. The Indian's "fixed idea" of the *ladino* as all-powerful is modified, as a result. After much feigned hesitation, Celso finally accepts the trader's offer of payment to accompany him through the jungle. For Celso, Don Policarpo is merely "a link in the chain of those whom, somehow, he was going to use to get back the money which Don Sixto had taken away from him" (55).

Throughout his Mexican fiction, Traven makes the point that Indian enlightenment must be a painfully gradual process, with its false starts and its illusions of a fuller control over circumstances than the individual actually has. In this, *March* is no exception. After two years' hard labor, Celso is once again tricked out of his earnings (this time by the labor recruiter, Don Gabriel) and into a new *monteria* contract in order to avoid imprisonment for his part in a brawl provoked by Don Gabriel's henchmen. A small psychological drama is enacted in Celso, as he weighs the prospect of a long jail term against the green openness of the forests, even if he will only see it as a slave worker. Traven captures the Indian's instinctual attachment to the wild, as Celso muses on the

⁹ Robert B. Olafson, "B. Traven's Six-Novel Epic of the Mexican Revolution: An Overview," in *B. Traven: Life and Work* 141-47.

"sun, sky, stars, green, humming insects, twittering birds, monkeys playing in the trees, splashing brooks, romantic rivers all the year round" (94). The thought of the deprivations of prison is so intolerable that "automatically, with no will of his own" (96), Celso chooses the *monteria*. Feeling "oppressed like a captured deer" (99), Celso soon dispels his mood of fatalistic indifference and confronts the painful implications of the new situation. He realizes that "the girl and the children had been torn from him, and what was worse, there existed no possibility for him to reweave the torn pieces into a single whole" (102). At this critical moment in Celso's growth, he is transformed from the downtrodden peasant into an incipient rebel. Knowing that family shame will now prevent him from returning home when his contract expires, Celso decides that "voluntarily he would count himself among the dead, among the hundreds of dead working in the monterias" (102). At this point, Celso's desire for revenge centers on Don Gabriel's two henchmen. Celso's desperate mood will soon harden into a calculated program of vengeance made possible by his sense of complete detachment from "the living" (104).

Pearson has observed that the situation of Traven's *monteria* characters "supercedes the matter of their physical extremity. Beyond their obvious trials their experiences also represent a species of self-testing, a descent into the abyss of the nuclear self in search of individual and racial strengths. To emerge from the experience," Pearson argues, "means both survival and the achievement of identity, both to have conquered the nightmare and also to be reborn into a new cycle of existence."¹⁰ The jungle, symbolically, denotes the frontier dividing two different dimensions of experience. To use Pearson's terms, it "separates quotidian reality from the charged, inverted reality of the camps." As Celso begins his second jungle passage, he turns his back on his former life and enters a nightmarish world of pain in which he will be compelled to discover new resources within himself in order to preserve his own humanity and to influence the infernal *monteria* regime he becomes subject to.

The marching workers are not a united or cooperative social unit. "There was no link of comradeship or any inclination for mutual assistance" (111), Traven writes. The will to resist exists only in the most unfocused form. This emerges in the incident involving the *ladino* labor agent, Don Anselmo, who is attacked in half-hearted fashion by two of the Indians during a river crossing. With the agent unhorsed and encircled, the moment seems to have arrived for a workers' revolt. "But," says Traven, "nobody did anything. . . . They did not think of attempting a second attack. And the old feeling of submission, of obedience and respect for the *ladino* rapidly regained its hold on their minds. They turned completely humble" (130). Even when the agent's gun misfires and the Indians realize that he is "completely in their hands" (133), they "did nothing." In this way, the instant of insurrectionary potential fizzles out.

The men's inertia leaves the status quo unaffected. All of the troops had "fallen under powers which were stronger than they were and over which they had no influence whatever" (159). The Indians "recognized as the fateful power governing them those who were nearest, those whom they could see and those whose whip lashes they could feel" (161). It is the *capataces* (drivers) whom the

¹⁰ Sheryl Marie Sherman Pearson, "The Anglo-American Novel of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940: D. H. Lawrence, B. Traven, Graham Greene," Diss. University of Michigan 1976, 197.

marchers identify as the enemy, since "they exercise their power directly." It does not occur to the peons to eliminate the *capataces* "by a combined attack on the system of which a capataz was but a tool" (162). Celso's murder of the two most vicious drivers, El Zorro and El Camaron, are individual acts of revenge, personal rather than political, which have no impact on the march or on the relationship between the marchers and the agents. Catching him off guard, Celso clubs El Zorro to death with a branch. El Camaron, the other driver who entrapped Celso, is impaled on a stake of "iron-hard wood."

Yet, in other respects, Traven obviously attaches great significance to Celso's actions. The murders signal a further development in the Indian's spirit, as the docile village youth metamorphoses into a calculating killer. This seems to me an important change, which makes it hard to agree with Chankin's complaint that Traven "does not look into Celso's mind and reveal what he feels."¹¹ It seems obvious that Celso feels an overwhelming satisfaction. Celso's brutality speaks for itself, and for the alteration in personality it marks. Pearson has seen the significance of this more clearly, noting that the jungle environment exposes "each individual's potential for spiritual extinction or diminution of humanness."¹² In the urge for revenge, Celso's character is hardened and impaired, but Traven seems to view this as the inevitable outcome of centuries of oppression. In the Indian, the violence is cathartic. What is lost in the process, of course, is the Indian's childlike innocence. Most important is the simple but central fact that Celso revises his relationship to his persecutors. He demystifies their power, and reduces them to the vulnerably mortal. His killing of the drivers is symbolic, in a way, of what Traven refers to elsewhere in the narrative as "the will to non-obedience, to resist brute force" (159). Celso demonstrates the Stirnerite axiom that "every power rests upon recognition," as Traven paraphrases it. Celso's gestures of defiance attest his refusal to recognize any longer.

In the closing pages, Traven frames Celso's experience against the awesome backdrop of the jungle, and points to the true significance of the Indian's exploits. The jungle represents "a ruthless rivalry, a relentless struggle for a piece of space as small as a child's hand. Men's strife for existence could hardly be waged more inflexibly than the battle among the plants" (221). The *caoba* (mahogany) flourishes here because it "has to fight cruelly and pitilessly for its existence and survival. Whatever is conceived here, and once conceived grows and survives, has to be of a truly heroic nature. Softness and timidity are stamped into the mud to rot." Like the *caoba*, Celso has dispensed with "softness and timidity." Celso's newfound self-assertiveness prepares him for "heroic" participation in the Indian uprising in *Rebellion*. Celso himself seems to hint at some such eventuality, when he advises his greenhorn companions at the end of the novel that they will have to become "hard as steel," to "fight tooth and claw against capataces, against whippings and hangings, and above all against the jungle that wants to devour you" (226). Traven's characterization of the forest as "an entirely new world," in which "one felt lonely and abandoned, separated from all the remaining world" (223), sets the scene for a struggle for

¹¹ Donald O. Chankin, *Anonymity and Death: The Fiction of B. Traven* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975) 86.

¹² Pearson 200.

supremacy in which Celso's kind of iconoclasm will offer the only means for victory.

If, in *March to the Monteria*, B. Traven does indeed seem "to be more interested in describing the murder of the two capataces" than in anything else, as Chankin has remarked,¹³ it is surely because the author views the killings of the tyrants as terrible but positive instances of one way in which "the dumb acquire speech," as Berman has described the narrative direction of the "Jungle" series as a unit.¹⁴ The dumb (the Mexican Indians) will speak even more loudly in *The Rebellion of the Hanged* and *General from the Jungle* (1939), in both of which Celso's dedication to revenge proves a potent element in the rebel esprit. It seems unarguable that *March to the Monteria* functions on an altogether more dynamic level than that of a mere tiger-and-tarantula adventure tale or a story of localized underdog revenge. B. Traven's novel traces the first stirrings of the process whereby the likes of Celso Flores, once such a submissive and cowed individual, will have to "go down to the beast in order to be resurrected as a man."¹⁵

¹³ Chankin 85.

¹⁴ Paul Berman, "B. Traven, I Presume," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 18.1 (Winter 1978): 91.

¹⁵ H.R. Hayes, "The Importance of B. Traven," *Chimera* 4 (Summer 1946): 50.