

Heidi Zogbaum

B. Traven: A Vision of Mexico

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Reviewed by Kenneth Payne

Heidi Zogbaum's *B. Traven: A Vision of Mexico* fills a vacuum in Traven scholarship, tracing the course of the author's work as a political exile in post-Revolutionary Mexico, from *The Cottonpickers* (1925) to the last of the great "Jungle Novel" cycle, *General from the Jungle* (1940). There have been studies on Traven which have given us part of the Mexican picture (one thinks, for instance, of Karl Guthke's impressive *B. Traven: The Life Behind the Legends*, first published in German in 1987), but nothing so meticulously or convincingly documented as Zogbaum's volume. Using archival materials and new interview sources, she examines Traven's writing within the social and political developments in his adopted homeland, and pays particular attention to his changing attitude towards the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and the plight to the indigenous Indian peoples, whose traditional patterns of life were coming under threat of extinction from both internal and external forces, and whose cause Traven wholeheartedly embraced. Zogbaum enables us to read Traven more meaningfully against the backdrop of Mexican history and of Mexican events in the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, she also emphasizes the extent to which the concerns of the novels were shaped by political currents in central and southern Europe, as the Fascist movements began their assault on democratic and libertarian values in Traven's native Germany and elsewhere.

One of the several refreshing aspects of Zogbaum's study is that she has not set out to perform yet another speculative "literary critical" operation on Traven's fiction. Her discussion of the novels is firmly grounded in the sociohistorical context, which she draws on to illuminate the texts. Her treatment of *The White Rose* (1929) is an example. Zogbaum relates the novel to Traven's exposure to IWW (International Workers of the World) and syndicalist politics during his period in Tampico (1924-1926), to the moves by the Calles government in 1924 to return control of oil resource development to Mexican hands, and to the momentous events of 1925, when the Mexican and U.S. governments had been involved in a serious dispute over oil which threatened relations between the two countries. Into these historical sources, Zogbaum interweaves Traven's growing nationalist and *indigenista* sympathies. The result is that *The White Rose*, often dismissed as a slight and simplistic narrative, takes on a more sharply focused significance as a major Traven statement about American-Mexican relations, American economic imperialism, and the dispossession of the rural Indian communities. Another "problem" text that is rendered more intelligible is Traven's 1938 travelogue, *Land des Fruhlings (Land of Springtime)*, which Zogbaum moves into a central position as "the pivot of Traven's work on Mexico," and which she reassesses as "a pioneering work" (1) for the way in which Traven anticipates later Marxist analyses of the relation between capitalism and underdevelopment, and (2) because Traven was the first observer to record the anthropological significance of the Chamula Indians way of life.

Chapter Five of Zogbaum's study, "The Monterias: The Unknown Hell," is particularly impressive. It is concerned with the series of six "Jungle Novels" which appeared between 1931 and 1939. Zogbaum provides extensive historical and documentary background (some of the latter in the form of eyewitness accounts from former mahogany camp owners and employees) which highlights the uncertain hold Traven actually had over his material, much of which came to him secondhand from ex-workers in the camps or through simply fictitious stories. One result of Traven's distortions and inaccuracies, Zogbaum notes, was that he had actually failed to stimulate serious debate on the socioeconomic conditions of the exploited Chiapan Indians.

B. Traven: A Vision of Mexico is by no means without its flaws. Occasionally, Zogbaum makes assumptions about the novelist which seem somewhat cavalier. Why, for example, should we assume, as she does, that Traven "probably knew next to nothing about Mexico upon his arrival," when the progress of the Mexican Revolution had been covered extensively in a range of left-wing and radical periodicals throughout Europe? Such shortcomings are very minor, however, and do not detract from the invaluable contribution Zogbaum has made in broadening and deepening our understanding of the man once described as the Marie Celeste of American literature. The fact that she does so in a crisp and jargon-free style is further to her credit.

Robert Pinget
The Enemy
Translated by Barbara Wright
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Reviewed by Peter Broome

In the case of an author such as Pinget, for whom the "secret ear"—its murmurs, its undercurrents, its interferences—is of prime importance, the translator must be a sensitive receiver. Moving in the "space between," the translator is more aware than most of the elusive tones, divergent claims, alternative versions left in parenthesis or in a limbo if not a graveyard of approximations: of recalcitrant language, half-captured with missing dimensions, degrees and relativities of possession, the text as compromise and unsettled negotiation, tension between the original and its derivatives, sameness changing its face or distorted in different contexts. In this, the translator is Pinget's virtual twin: a shadowy double glimpsed in a mirror, at a distance, as through a glass darkly.

Barbara Wright is at ease (or perhaps at a finely attuned unease?) with the shifting registers of *The Enemy*. She straddles the gaps, rides the gear-changes, with a natural balance and deftness. She chases the voices with nothing obtrusive to frighten them away. She catches the heterogeneous tones, the flavors of idiom, the threads of colloquialism, the aural touches suddenly injected, with the appropriate dosage of looseness and rigor, drift and direction: two "secret ears" reverberating to each other's tune.