

John Fraser

SPLENDOUR IN DARKNESS: B. TRAVEN'S *THE DEATH SHIP*

WHEN THE FIRST CRITICAL ARTICLE on him in English appeared in 1940, B. Traven had been writing for fourteen years and had produced fourteen books, ten of them novels; and of the latter *The Death Ship* had been translated into ten languages, and well over a million and a half copies of it had been sold in Europe. Since the Second World War there have been at least twenty new editions of it in a dozen languages, and three further critical articles and a bibliography have appeared on Traven in English.¹ Yet if you mention his name in academic circles the almost invariable response, in my experience, is "Who?" or words to that effect; if you mention *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* your interlocutor hasn't read it, and if you mention *The Death Ship* he hasn't heard of it. Conceivably this state of affairs will improve somewhat. *The Death Ship* was filmed in Germany three or four years ago, a movie of "The Third Guest" (*Macario*) has been shown in New York, *March to Caobaland* was made available in England in 1961 (almost thirty years after its appearance in Germany), and in 1962 a paperback collection of short stories appeared in the United States. Most important of all, *The Death Ship* itself, long out of print, has at last been issued as a paperback.² Yet it would probably be naive to expect things to improve very much, since even the filming of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* fifteen years ago and the flurry of biographical speculation it occasioned have had so little discernible effect. In any event, the record of neglect till now is extraordinary, for Traven is surely one of the most important American novelists to have appeared since the First World War.³

All of his eleven novels have merit (the finest, after *The Death Ship*, are *The Bridge in the Jungle*, *Government*, *General from the Jungle*, and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*), and their general qualities have been well described in the four articles I have mentioned. But *The Death Ship* (1926), which has not been accorded a detailed examination, is so much the most remarkable that one would have thought that by now it would be recognized everywhere as a twentieth-century American

classic. In post-1918 fiction, it stands with that handful of works, especially *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises*, which have no obvious precursors, which yet are not eccentric, and which chart accurately and poetically an important new area of contemporary civilization, contemporary consciousness; and I am not at all certain that it isn't the weightiest of them. Its vitality is astonishing.

Throughout the book one is continually in the presence of an exceptionally alive mind—alert, sardonic, undefeated, intensely interested in what it is doing and doing it, *qua* novelist, marvellously freshly. The arresting style — in the words of D. Lynn, “a tough argot reminiscent of Brecht and Toller in its irony and accent, and quite unlike the American-Hemingway school of hearty suppressed sentimentality”—which at first seems so odd, soon comes to seem arrestingly successful. One assents to Arthur Calder-Marshall's assertion that “it is at the same time colloquial and mannered. It is American as she was never spoken. Bombast is deliberately used in order not to impress; rhetoric to minimize, not magnify horror. Over-statement is employed consciously as a form of underwriting.” And one sees, further, how supple and varied that style is, being capable of ranging from the epigrammatic intelligence of “A civilized country means a country that sends to jail a man found asleep in the streets without evening clothes on”,—through the casual effectiveness of “Not easy to describe in detail everything that was lying about the deck. To make the description short I would say: everything possible under heaven was lying on deck. Even a ship's carpenter was lying there, drunk like a helpless gun with all its ammunition shot off”,—to the different modes of poetic vitality found in passages such as the following. The first describes the narrator's first view of the Death Ship:

She trembled all over and began to glide backwards along the bulks. She didn't want to go out into the open water. She was, obviously, afraid, knowing perhaps that she might never come back. She grazed and scratched along the heavy timbers of the pier, making a squeaking piercing noise. Seeing her struggling so hard against the orders of her skipper, I began to pity her. It was like dragging old Aunt Lucinda, who had never been away from her native town, Jetmore, Kansas, into a bathing-suit and out upon a diving board thirty feet above the level of the ocean. I felt real sympathy for the frightened *Yorikke*, who had to leave the calm, smooth water of the sheltered port and be driven out into the merciless world to fight against gales and typhoons and all the grim elements under heaven . . . She couldn't be blamed for her behavior. She had begun to get heavy feet; she was no longer as young and springy as she was when she stood by to guard Cleopatra's banquets for Antony. Were it not for the many thick coats of paint on her hull, she would have frozen to death in the cold ocean, for her blood was no longer as hot as it was five thousand years ago.

The second concerns the experiences of some of the rag-clad, filthy crew of the *Yorikke* ashore in the Mediterranean:

The effect we had upon children was perhaps the most remarkable. Some of them, especially the older ones, cried for their mothers when they met us; some stood lifeless, as if touched with a magician's wand; some ran off like deer. The younger ones, though, stopped in front of us, gazed at us with eyes wide open, as if seeing birds of paradise. Others would follow us, overtake us, smile openly like little golden suns, and frequently they would say: "Good morning, sailor-man! Have you a fairy ship to sail in?" They would shake hands and pray us to bring them little princes and maidens one inch high from the blue Yonderland. Then suddenly they would give us another look, and they would take a deep breath and show an expression as if they were waking up from a sweet dream. Then they would run away and cry without ever looking back again. It was on such occasions that I thought that perhaps we were already dead, and only the souls of children could see us as we really were.

To illustrate Traven's narrative technique effectively, with its wonderfully sustained tone, its command of fact, its effortless use of generalization and reminiscence, its mastery of dialogue, is unfortunately impossible here; but at least it can be said that some of the accounts of stokehold work are unforgettable, that the first of the three sections of the book, despite its chronicling of maddening frustration, is one of the very few lastingly funny pieces of writing of our time—funny in a way that perfectly illustrates Orwell's observation that "a joke worth laughing at always has an idea behind it, and usually a subversive idea"—and that the final section of the book builds steadily towards a climax whose poetical richness, poignancy, and complexity of tone are almost unequalled in American writing outside the closing pages of *Moby Dick*. And the structure too has the invigorating effect that comes when one finds a man writing with a seemingly total disregard of what others have done or might do with a similar subject, and yet almost all the time effortlessly in control. The book has affinities with such works as Hamsun's *Hunger* and Céline's *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* (the latter is plainly indebted to it), but I cannot think of any similar work in English. It is, in sum, the kind of book that is especially refreshing at a time when, in the words of Leslie Fiedler,

Everyone knows that in our literature an age of experimentalism is over and an age of recapitulation has begun; and few of us, I suspect, really regret it. How comfortable it is to be interested in literature in a time of standard acceptance and standard dissent—when the only thing more conventionalized than convention is revolt. How reassuring to pick up the latest book of the latest young novelist and to discover there familiar themes, familiar techniques—accompanied often by the order of skill available to the beginner when he is able (sometimes even with passionate conviction) to embrace received ideas, exploit established forms.

However, it is the substance of the book that I chiefly wish to talk about; and I hope that my account will continue to suggest that if Ezra Pound is right in asserting that "the supreme test of a book is that we should feel some unusual intelligence working behind the words", then that test is passed by *The Death Ship*.

As will be apparent from my account of it, *The Death Ship*, like all of Traven's work, provides a much-needed reminder of the kinds of basic experiences, especially painful or violent ones, that writers like Hemingway have been admired for handling and which some of our contemporary "rebels" have seemingly been trying to rediscover. But even more important, I suggest, is the fundamentally humane and civilized way in which Traven has been able to come to terms with the appalling realities presented in his novel. It is the appallingness that I wish to stress first.

Having been stranded in Europe without his seaman's card or other means of identification, the virtually anonymous narrator is shunted back and forth across frontiers and between various consulates, police-stations, and prisons during the first section of the book until finally, resigned to getting nothing better, he signs on aboard the only kind of ship that will take him with no questions asked—the "death ship" *Yorikke*, engaged in arms smuggling and liable to be scuttled at any time without warning for the insurance. The conditions that he finds aboard it are unmitigatedly frightful. The stokehold is permanently undermanned, essential safety equipment is missing, the crew's food is appalling, and so are their living quarters. And the ship's officers (not that one sees much of them) have a total disregard for the welfare of the men. It is not that there is brutality; it is simply that not the slightest attempt is made to ameliorate the conditions under which the men have to live and work. As I indicated above, Traven's descriptions of work in the stokehold are unfortunately too long to be quoted (they are very brilliant and very horrifying, and one is liable to find oneself agreeing temporarily that "there is nothing under heaven or in hell that can be compared with putting back fallen-out grate-bars on the *Yorikke*"), but something of the danger of the work can be inferred, perhaps, from the following passage. It comes from a hair-raising account (told, mercifully, at second-hand) of the scalding to death of a coal-drag or stoker's assistant who had to shut off an escape of steam when safety equipment failed:

"I do not wish anybody on earth," Stanislav said, "no matter how much I hate him, to hear once in his lifetime the shrieking and screaming that we had to listen to from the bunk Kurt was in. It went on hours and hours without ceasing for a minute. Never before . . . had I believed that any human being can cry so long a time without losing his voice. He could not lie on his back, nor on his belly, nor on

either side. The skin hung down on his body in long strips and rags as if it had been a torn shirt. All over blisters, some as thick as a man's head . . .

"He screamed himself to death. The mate had nothing in his medicine chest to make it easier for the poor devil. We tried to pour into him a cup of gin, but he could not hold it. Late in the afternoon he was sent overboard, the boy from Memel land . . . Sent overboard like an escaped convict. The second engineer looked down over the rail when he disappeared in the water. Then he said: 'Damn it all. Hell. Rotten business, short again a drag. Wonder when I will ever be complete.'"

And the awfulness aboard ship is only part of the general awfulness that the narrator is aware of and that the situations of the novel enable Traven unforcedly to bring in. The *Yorikke* stands, as it were, at the centre of a widening circle of destructiveness. Throughout the book one is made constantly aware of the still potent influence of the Great War: the *Yorikke's* chief business is arms smuggling, as I have said, and its crew, one infers, are almost all, like the narrator, stateless as a result of war-time or post-war nationalism. Then, too, behind both the ship's activities and the war itself stands the worst kind of capitalism, the kind that thrives on war, maintains the numerous "death ships" of which the *Yorikke* is a specimen, and is perfectly willing to have its ships sunk with all hands, if necessary, for the sake of the insurance. Then, again, Traven widens the circle by explicitly, and sometimes poetically, stressing the tradition of war and slavery going back to Roman times and beyond. And finally, at the outer edges of the circle lie glimpses of universal flux and chaos. Compellingly as all this is presented, however, Traven has been able to face it without becoming a simple-minded social protester, or a nihilist, or a self-pitier, or a profitably verbose doom-minger or pseudo-mystic. What the book celebrates is not defeat but a triumph.

Essentially, *The Death Ship* deals with one man's exposure to, and his gradual discovery of his ability to survive in, something very like what has been called *l'univers concentrationnaire*. One finds in the novel a progressive stripping away from an individual of all the aids and appurtenances of "civilization", all the assurances that come to a man from his being treated by others as an individual—which, paradoxically, generally means his being typed and accorded the respect conventionally thought appropriate to a respectable social group. Ashore, the narrator loses his nationality and virtually his identity in the eyes of officialdom. (The effect of the writing here, I might add, though not its technique, is markedly Kafkaesque.) Aboard the *Yorikke* he not only is tricked out of his status as an able-bodied seaman and made the lowest member of the crew, but finds himself in a community in which absolutely no normal standards of maritime conduct prevail and there is no-one and no organization that can be appealed to. Moreover, even ordinary communal satis-

factions are at first impossible: no-one except his fellow coal-drag Stanislavski is in the least interested in him except as a worker, and his killing labour in the stokehold leaves him no time or energy for relationships with anything but Stanislavski and the mechanics of the work itself. And escape, because of his statelessness and the system of payment aboard, appears impossible, except to another death ship; it is, in fact, one of those fearsome situations in which "one may be all wiped out of all that lives, one may have vanished from earth and sea, and yet there can happen horrors and tortures which you cannot escape no matter how dead you are. For when all means of escape are cut off, there is nothing left to do but to bear it." In sum, Traven has succeeded, in a way that almost no other Anglo-American writer of this century has done, in creating an extreme situation that can produce the kind of radical testing-out of human strengths and values that Conrad accomplished in *Heart of Darkness*. And it appears to me that the book is wonderfully successful in showing how human sensitivity and dignity can in fact survive the unendurable and be strengthened by it.

Not only does the narrator find the strength and courage within him to endure the work until he can even take pride in it. More important, his survival is made possible by his surrendering, in effect, all claims on existence, including even the right to condemn the ship's officers and owners. It is a demonstration, of course, that Traven offers and not an analysis—not a systematic demonstration, either, but one having much of the looseness of life itself and including those psychical leaps by which major shifts in the set of one's mind can come about. But I think one can fairly see the narrator as passing through (using the terms "hour" and "God" loosely) something like what Martin Buber has called "that decisive hour of personal existence when we forget everything we imagined we knew of God, when we dared to keep nothing handed down or learned or self-contrived, no shred of knowledge, and were plunged into the night." What he comes to, it seems to me, is an emotional acceptance of the basic human condition that is presented to him in so extreme a form in the terms of his existence on the death ship, an acceptance of the truths perceived in the following passage:

Through these rags of clouds we could see, for a few seconds, the shining stars that, in spite of all the uproar, called down upon us the eternal promise: "We are the Peace and the Rest!" Yet between these words of promise we could see another meaning: "Within the flames of never ceasing creation and restlessness, there we are enveloped; do not long for us if you are in want of peace and rest; we cannot give you anything which you do not find within yourself!"

But at the same time, and perhaps most important of all—certainly it is integrally

related to that acceptance—he arrives also at what, so far as I understand him, Buber calls an “I-Thou” relationship with things around him, even inanimate things.⁴ Here is the passage in which the kind of relationship is described the most explicitly:

The *Yorikkē* has taught me another big thing for which I am grateful. She taught me to see the soul in apparently lifeless objects. Before I shipped on the *Yorikkē* I never thought that a thing like a burned match, or a scrap of paper in the mud, or a fallen leaf, or a rusty worthless nail might have a soul. The *Yorikkē* taught me otherwise. Since then life for me has become a thousand times richer, even without a motor-car or radio. No more can I ever feel alone. I feel I am a tiny part of the universe, always surrounded by other tiny parts of the universe; and if one is missing, the universe is not complete—in fact does not exist.

And here, I am convinced, we hear the authentic voice of Traven himself, or something very close to it. A religious sense of the singularity and numinousness of events, things, people, pervades *The Death Ship* as it does all of Traven's writings (in *The Bridge in the Jungle*, for instance, it is responsible for the most believable handling of a supernatural episode that I have encountered in fiction), and it makes possible, I believe, the kind of acceptance of the unacceptable, the ironical equanimity, that one finds, for example, even in his account of the crew's disgusting quarters:

The filth on the floor and the walls was so thick and so hardened that only an ax could break it off. I would have liked to try it—not out of any sentiment about cleanliness, which was wholly lost on the *Yorikkē*, but for scientific reasons. I felt sure—and to this very day I still feel the same way—that if I had broken open the crusted filth and mud, layer by layer, I would have found Phoenician coins and medals near the bottom. I still feel excited when I speculate on what I might have found if I had gone still deeper. There is a great possibility that I might have found the bitten-off fingernails of the great-grandfather of the Java man, so very essential to science for determining whether the cave-man had ever heard of Henry Ford and if early bank mathematicians had had sufficient intelligence to figure out exactly how much money old Rockefeller makes while he cleans his dark goggles.

As for the treatment of *people* in the novel, there is considerable truth in D. Lynn's assertion that

The sailors in *The Death Ship* live in dirt and starvation, chained in perpetual misery to each other and the sea. Yet the stories of Stanislav, Kurt, Paul and the “I” who tells them, are stories of the survival of love in man. The gallimaufry language, the “Yorikkish” spoken, is a link between those in desperate exile. There is a solidarity of crew against officers and a feeling of mystic kinship between derelict men and derelict ship.

And I strongly suspect, having in mind now his work as a whole, that it was through

enduring and triumphing over experiences similar to those described in *The Death Ship* that Traven himself was enabled to become, eventually, so important and moving a writer about "uninteresting" or "unpleasant" people—the filthy, stateless sailors of *The Death Ship*, the down-and-out Americans of *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and especially the Mexican Indians of the majority of his novels—and to show human dignity and even love glowing on despite the most unpromising exteriors and the most ferocious denials of circumstances.

I will suggest in conclusion, while hoping that it may have been apparent already, that a rare combination of qualities is to be found in *The Death Ship*, and one that makes it especially valuable at the present time. In that magnificent essay "Inside the Whale", George Orwell made the damning criticism of most English writers in the 'thirties—and, suitably modified, it surely applies to most present-day American writers—that nothing really seemed to have ever happened to them: "It is the same pattern all the time; public school, university, a few trips abroad, then London. Hunger, hardship, solitude, exile, war, prison, persecution, manual labour—hardly even words." Well, *The Death Ship* is pre-eminently the work of someone to whom things of that order seem to have happened, things that resulted from very powerful forces outside of his own control and put him in touch with very basic features of contemporary existence. Beside the violence and suffering in *The Death Ship*, the kind of violence and suffering that one does encounter in contemporary fiction has too frequently a parochial air or, even worse, an air of having been sought out to gratify neurotic personal needs. That in *The Death Ship* is both unsought for and absolutely solid in its presentation, neither coalescing out of fantasy nor susceptible of being dissolved into allegory; and it is not there to feed the ego of the author by providing occasions for self-pity or excuses for abandoning conventional standards of decency and feeling superior (with the assistance of a few "philosophical" gesticulations, perhaps) to the ordinary run of people. On the contrary, the reality of ordinary non-neurotic humanity and of one's primary human responsibilities is deeply reaffirmed—reaffirmed by demonstration and without vapourings and fuss. In *The Death Ship*, as in Traven's other books, one can find more true courage, independence, integrity, humaneness, and love than in the works of almost any other twentieth-century American novelist. To Traven as encountered in it can be applied F. R. Leavis's judgment about D. H. Lawrence:

His radical attitude towards life is positive; looking for a term with which to indicate its nature, we have to use 'reverence'. But 'reverence' must not be allowed to suggest any idealizing bent; and if we say that the reverence expresses itself in a certain essential tenderness, we don't mean that [he] is 'tender-minded' or in the least senti-

mentally given. The attitude is one of strength, and it is clairvoyant and incorruptible in its preoccupation with realities.

NOTES

1. The works on him that I have alluded to are as follows: Arthur Calder-Marshall, "The Novels of B. Traven", *Horizon*, I (July, 1940), 522-528; H. R. Hays, "The Importance of B. Traven", *Chimera*, IV (Summer, 1946), 44-54; B. Lynn, "The Works of B. Traven", *Arena*, I (1950), 89-94; John Fraser, "The Novels of B. Traven", *Graduate Student of English*, II (Fall, 1958), pp. 7-17; E. R. Hagemann, "A Checklist of the Work of B. Traven and the Critical Estimates and Biographical Essays on Him; together with a Brief Biography", *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, LIII (First Quarter, 1959), 37-67.
2. (New York: Collier, 1962).
3. Though Traven is, as Hagemann points out, "probably the most mysterious and baffling of all modern authors", Hagemann's invaluable bibliography, the discussions in the Luce press, certain other items, and especially the internal evidence of the novels themselves seem to me to leave no room for reasonable doubt that he is in fact American. He appears to have been born in the States in the 1890s, to have lived in Germany sometime in his twenties, to have been to sea, and to have lived since at least 1925 in Mexico. Almost all his works were first published in German translations in the 1920s and 1930s.
4. Obviously one cannot hope to prove anything by a tiny quotation or two from writing of the profundity of Buber's. But perhaps the following passage can at least be offered here from *Between Man and Man*: "It by no means needs to be a man of whom I become aware. It can be an animal, a plant, a stone. No kind of appearance or event is fundamentally excluded from the series of the things through which from time to time something is said to me. Nothing can refuse to be the vessel for the Word. The limits of the possibility of dialogue are the limits of awareness."