

A PROBABLE SOURCE FOR THE TITLE
OF "THE SMALL RAIN"

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Richard Darabaner suggests that the title of Pynchon's short story "The Small Rain" may have been derived from a passage in Deuteronomy.¹ He goes on to argue that the atmosphere of Pynchon's story is appropriate to the Old Testament reference. Indeed it is, though I would like to suggest that the story echoes the Old Testament, not directly, but indirectly through the works of Ernest Hemingway and T. S. Eliot. Pynchon himself admits to having made a conscious effort to echo A Farewell to Arms and The Waste Land in his story,² and both of those works have atmospheres that can be fruitfully glossed by reference to the Old Testament, particularly to Ecclesiastes. Moreover, rain is extremely significant in both of those works, as Pynchon's story explicitly remarks:

Back at the truck Picnic said, "Jesus Christ I hate rain."
"You and Hemingway," Rizzo said. "Funny, ain't it. T. S. Eliot likes rain." (51)

Specifically, it is important to note here that, during the rain of the famous Caporetto retreat in A Farewell to Arms, Frederic Henry muses:

Blow, blow, ye western wind. Well, it blew and it wasn't the small rain but the big rain down that rained. It rained all night. You knew it rained down that rained. Look at it. Christ, that my love were in my arms and I in my bed again.³

Henry, of course, is remembering lines from the anonymous sixteenth-century lyric:

O western wind, when wilt thou blow,
That the small rain down can rain?
Christ! that my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again.

It is certainly possible that Pynchon is directly alluding to the same lyric, since it is well known. It appears, for example, in The Oxford Book of English Verse (under the title "The Lover in Winter Plaineth for Spring"), and Louis recites the poem in Virginia Woolf's The Waves. Still, given the importance Pynchon himself places on A Farewell to Arms as an inspiration for his story, it seems likely that Hemingway's book is the primary source of Pynchon's title.

This simple reference to Hemingway also illustrates the potential richness and complexity of Pynchon's intertextuality. Perceptive readers of Pynchon have already become sensitized to the fact that a seemingly odd phrase or expression in his work often signals a reference to some other text. Riffaterre (without reference to Pynchon) describes this technique:

Intertextual connection takes place when the reader's attention is triggered by the clues . . . by intratextual anomalies--obscure wordings, phrasings that the context alone will not suffice to explain--in short, ungrammaticalities within the idiolectic norm . . . which are traces left by an absent intertext, signs of an incompleteness to be completed elsewhere.⁴

Interestingly (just to show how intertextual echoes are to be found in all sorts of places), Riffaterre goes on to describe intertextuality as one aspect of the general tendency of literary language, in which "every lexical element is the tip of an iceberg" (627). The echo here, though apparently unintentional, is again of Hemingway, who compares his own literary language to an iceberg in *Death in the Afternoon*, noting that "the dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water."⁵ Meanwhile, we know to expect that the submerged seven-eighths of a Pynchon text is often to be found in other texts. Thus, Darabaner finds in Pynchon's title a reference to the Old Testament, and though that was probably not the reference Pynchon intended, it nevertheless serves as a useful gloss. And again, when the reference to Hemingway is correctly identified, the reference is still not definitively fixed, because it ripples through Hemingway to the sixteenth-century lyric, and perhaps (if the reader is so minded) even to Woolf. Hemingway himself provides an excellent example of this ripple effect in *A Farewell to Arms*, in which Henry cites the famous lines from Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" in response to the honking of a motor car (148). The association of these lines with that stimulus, of course, is a clear reference to *The Waste Land*, in which Eliot (in a clear reference to Marvell) writes: "But at my back from time to time I hear / The sound of horns and motors . . ." (196-97).

Some observers will decry the sort of literary anarchy that gives the reader such freedom of interpretation, but then some observers have been decrying such things at least since 1922. Others will appreciate the richness, density, and liberating multiplicity that intertextuality brings to Pynchon's work. So what if some readers think of the Bible, some of Hemingway, some of Eliot, and some of sixteenth-century poetry? The point is that they think. The reader of a simple short story like "The Small Rain" can thus experience not only that text but other familiar texts such as *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Waste Land*, as Pynchon clearly intended. Others may experience texts Pynchon did not intend, but if that experience enriches the reading of

Pynchon's story, then it is a benefit nevertheless. After all, as all readers of Gravity's Rainbow (and of For Whom the Bell Tolls, and of John Donne . . .) know, everything is connected.

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Notes

¹ Richard Darabaner, "A Possible Source for the Title of 'The Small Rain,'" Pynchon Notes 15 (1984): 69-72.

² Thomas Pynchon, Slow Learner (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984) 4.

³ Ernest Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms (New York: Scribner's, 1929) 189.

⁴ Michael Riffaterre, "Syllepsis," Critical Inquiry 6 (1980): 627.

⁵ Hemingway, Death in the Afternoon (New York: Scribner's, 1932) 192.