

A Possible Source for the Title
of "The Small Rain"

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Thomas Pynchon's short story "The Small Rain" appeared in The Cornell Writer in March 1959. To date, hypotheses as to the source of the title and its relation to the story have been unsatisfactory. This essay is concerned with an aspect of the story which Pynchon, writing in the introduction to Slow Learner: Early Stories, now feels detracts from the work: "Apparently I felt I had to put on a whole extra overlay of rain images . . ." ¹ Whatever the implications of this self-criticism, the allusion of the title and its ramifications for the story nevertheless require correct identification.

In Deuteronomy, Chapter 31, the Lord tells Moses that he is going to die. He also foretells that, after the people of Israel come into the Promised Land, they will break their covenant with God and worship idols. He says that He will then hide His face from them and requite them with retribution. God accordingly tells Moses to write down a rule of life which will be a witness against the people of Israel during calamity and which will confront them as a record of God's forewarning, not to be forgotten by their descendants. Moses' song opens Deuteronomy, Chapter 32:

Give ear, O ye heavens, and I will speak;
And hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.
My doctrine shall drop as the rain,
My speech shall distil as the dew,
As the small rain upon the tender herb,
And as the showers upon the grass.

(Deut. 32:1-2)

God's forewarning is communicated by ironic understatement. The doctrine is mild and evanescent, and God is long-suffering in maintaining His law, until His anger is unleashed in retribution. The foreknowledge that the mildness will be transformed into its opposite makes the statement the core of an irony of dramatic reversal.

Moses' song at its climax is an unmitigated prophecy of doom:

For a fire is kindled in mine anger,
 And shall burn unto the lowest hell,
 And shall consume the earth with her increase,
 And set on fire the foundations of the mountains.
 I will heap mischiefs upon them;
 I will spend mine arrows upon them.
 They shall be burnt with hunger,
 And devoured with burning heat,
 And with bitter destruction;
 I will also send the teeth of beasts upon them,
 With the poison of serpents of the dust.
 The sword without, and the terror within,
 Shall destroy both the young man and the virgin,
 The suckling also with the man of gray hairs.
 I said, "I would scatter them into corners,
 I would make the remembrance of them to cease from
 among men."

(Deut. 32:22-26)

The gentle persuasion of the doctrine which is spoken like the small rain ironically contains its own transformation.

Applying the ramifications of the allusion to Pynchon's story, we find that images of Old Testament vengeance abound in "The Small Rain": "The sun . . . scorches me and I wither away" (SL, 39) recalls the retributive denial of rain for the sustenance of crops and for refuge from the heat of the desert. The multitude of corpses in the Pynchon story recalls the many vengeful slaughterings of the people of Israel unprotected from their enemies: "The oil company tugs would bring in a bunch of corpses. . . decay hung in the air" (SL, 44). The particularly cruel desecration of corpses in the Old Testament also finds its way into "The Small Rain": "They cruised around looking for dead. . . They took them off roofs, out of trees, they found them floating or tangled in the debris of houses" (SL, 47).

Allusions to the Biblical context of Moses' song are plentiful in "The Small Rain." The "thousands of frogs" (SL, 49) serve as a reminder of the plague of frogs brought on the Egyptians forty years before Moses' song was composed. Picnic refers to the coeds as "quail" (SL, 49). When the Israelites complained about the lack of meat, having only manna for food, God punished them

by sending an overabundance of quail, telling them they should eat it, "even a whole month, until it come out at your nostrils, and it be loathsome unto you" (Num.11: 20). Picnic's euphemism suggests a similar sensual craving which will sicken with oversatiation. The Israelites' clamor to return to slavery in Egypt is faintly alluded to when Rizzo chides Levine: "'What are you, homesick or what'" (SL, 42). The landscape of desolation in "The Small Rain" is total; even the thought of return to slavery cannot alleviate the suffering of all-consuming merciless retribution. The entrance into the Holy Land, which is to follow shortly after Moses' song, bringing to an end forty years of wandering in the desert, is also suggested: "He was also starting . . . to anticipate some radical change, perhaps, after three years of sand . . ." (SL, 43).

We now realize that the understatement of the title has dramatically foreshadowed the unremitting retribution which was promised to the defiant people. The patient and gentle persuasion of a forgiving Father has opened onto the landscape of wrath, which wholly encompasses the story. The unobtrusiveness of the warning given in the title "The Small Rain" has come to signify by the end of the story the full fury it foretold: "'In the midst of great death . . . the little death. . . . We are in death. Oh god'" (SL, 50).

We find that the rain imagery of the title functions as a type of the Flood. The light drizzle transforms into the death-unleashing cataclysm of the hurricane: "'Rain is pretty weird that way. . . . It can stir dull roots; it can rip them up, wash them away'" (SL, 51).

The hurricane, described in terms that have been used to evoke future or past cataclysms, from the Bible to T. S. Eliot, is more than retribution; it is a taunt to those who are potentially rebellious. It bares their helplessness and crushes their impulse to seek to escape their predicament: "He watched the windshield wipers pushing the rain away, listened to the rain slashing on the roof. After a while he fell-asleep" (SL, 51). The impossibility of escape throws Pynchon's characters onto the mercy of the relentless, impersonal sky.

Notes

¹ Thomas Pynchon, "The Small Rain," in Slow Learner (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), 4.