The Short Stories

Although it has been reported that Pynchon wrote 'several loosely connected stories which form a kind of picaresque novel' centring on one Meatball Mulligan only one story in this series was ever published – 'Entropy'. He originally planned to make Pig Bodine, a similar figure, central to the story 'Low-Lands' but in the event he was given a secondary role not only in that story but also in V. and Gravity's Rainbow. Pynchon's published stories then are individual works using radically different techniques which all move away from realism. Even his first story establishes a realistic narrative on to which Pynchon then superimposes – with varying degrees of success – layers of symbolism. In spite of their varied subjects the stories usually bear, however obliquely, on contemporary American themes – on diplomacy, consumerism, espionage and so on.

1 'THE SMALL RAIN'

Pynchon's first story dates from his undergraduate days at Cornell. He struck up friendship with Kirkpatrick Sale (then editor of the Cornell Daily Sun) and Richard Fariña both of whom were involved in The Cornell Writer. Pynchon served for a time on the editorial staff and it was in this journal that his story 'The Small Rain' appeared in March 1959. Jules Siegel, another fellow-student at Cornell, has recorded that Pynchon was writing short stories (and even French quatrains) earlier in the 1950s and, since 'The Small Rain' draws on events which took place in mid-1957, it is possible that the story dates from that year. At any rate part of its interest lies in the glimpses it gives us of Pynchon's later preoccupations.

The story centres on one Nathan 'Lardass' Levine, a soldier at Fort Roach, Louisiana. Levine's impending leave has to be postponed when he is sent south to help in hurricane relief work in the Bayou district near Lake Charles. While there he has a
casual sexual encounter with a student called Buttercup. Levine is
the first in a whole series of disengaged protagonists which
includes Benny Profane and Tyrone Slothrop. He is introduced to
the reader as ‘an inert figure in fatigues lying on a bunk, reading
a paperback’. The story’s humour grows out of the irritating
effects which this inertia has on others. He doesn’t react at all when
Dugan, the company clerk, tells him the Lieutenant wants him.
He engages briefly in repartee with the first sergeant and with a
friend; when the latter asks him what is happening, Levine
mockingly inflates his own self-importance by saying ‘Oh, the
Pentagon again . . . just won’t let me alone’ (30). On one level
Levine’s manner is an exercise in brinkmanship. He pushes his
disrespectful style as far as he can without over-stepping the
limits but, more basically, Levine displays a constant anxiety to
avoid being classified. His lack of respect reflects his resistance to
the role of private. Equally he dislikes the labels of ‘college boy’ or
‘intellectual’ which his friends try to pin on him. His mannerisms
are drawn from Marlon Brando films, vaudeville, etc, and he has
‘gone native’ in the sense of adopting a Southern drawl and
switching his taste from jazz to hillbilly music. He does the latter
with a conscious sense of mimickry, as if once again he was trying
to avoid stereotyping as the Jewish boy-made-good from the
Bronx.

Levine has deliberately cultivated the manner of a lazy slob to
articulate his sense of pointlessness. When other characters
criticize him he ducks their criticism by facetious evasions. He is
urged to become an officer, for instance; is charged with being a
romantic or simply afraid of experience. Given the pointlessness
of everything then, immobility takes on a positive value for
Levine as do his throw-away jokes since they prevent commitment.
In the latter respect Levine resembles the hero of Richard Farina’s
novel, Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me (1966). As we have
seen, Gnossos Pappadopoulis adopts a variety of guises and
postures to avoid being identified with any of the situations in
which he participates. This so-called ‘exemption’ can only be
maintained by a style which Pynchon, in his introduction to the
novel, has described as ‘an extended version of 1950s Cool’.6
Levine similarly draws on wise-cracks, ‘in’ slang and roles from
the cinema to as it were free-wheel through the story.

If Levine were the only substantial subject the story would very
quickly become tedious. But circumstances force movement upon