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“The Travelin’est Man I Ever Seed”:
V. S. Pritchett and the Short Story

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Synopsis: V. S. Pritchett (1900–97) is acknowledged as the master of the British short story in the 20th century. By its nature, the short story is a transient form, being read usually either in literary magazines at the time of publication or in anthologies, so that Pritchett has inevitably attracted less attention than his contemporary novelists. It is also, in Pritchett’s case, less dependent on plot than the novel, devolving instead on key poetic details that serve obliquely to communicate the stories’ meanings. This article proposes that one approach to Pritchett’s short stories may be to root him in his early career as a travel writer, arguing that although he never ventured further than Europe and the United States his stories express a fundamental similarity to the experience of travel, namely the power of the individual moment within an unpredictable format.

V. S. Pritchett was one of the outstanding British writers of the 20th century, whose work—although anthologized—is thought nowadays to be little read, which is because his main genre was the short story, whose popularity declined in the postwar era with the decline of the weekly magazines that used to publish them (Liggins et al., 211). Yet if it is true that short stories attract less recognition than novels and that, as Pritchett put it, they concentrate “an impulse that is essentially poetic” (Pritchett 1966, 6), they must be worth reading as examples at least of the art of fiction, and to offer pleasures and surprises lacking in other genres.

The chief characteristic of the short story is, of course, its brevity, which in Pritchett’s case can range from just a few pages to well over fifty. “The Oedipus Complex” (1945) is one example of a very short
story, and takes as its setting a routine visit to the narrator’s dentist, Mr Pollfax, who distracts his patient from the inevitable pain with a patter of eccentric anecdote, innuendo and even songs. The story hinges on this comic tension between the drama of dental treatment and the unpredictable flow of Mr Pollfax’s commentary, although the central joke of the story comes from its title, “The Oedipus Complex,” referring to Freud’s famous theory that boys sexually desire their mothers before finding alternative partners as they mature. Based on a classical myth, the Oedipus complex itself became a very modern myth in its apparent questioning of traditional family hierarchies, and was arguably at its height of influence at the time when Pritchett wrote the story in 1945, as modern ideas were popularized in cheap paperbacks from publishers such as Penguin and reading was promoted among the armed forces; a few years later, Lawrence Olivier was to star in his own Oedipal film version of Hamlet, and in 1949 Freud’s disciple Ernest Jones wrote his influential study of Hamlet and the Oedipus complex.

Yet the Oedipus complex also induced popular anxieties about homosexuality (which remained illegal in Britain until 1967) and about family conflict that seem to be countered by exactly the qualities the narrator admires in his dentist:

> There was something innocent, heroic and determined about Mr Pollfax, something of the English Tommy in tin hat and full pack going up the line. He suggested in a quiet way—war. (Pritchett 1999, 291)

Mr Pollfax is clearly not one to be too bothered by psychological scruples, wishing only to get on with his life. With his offhand revelation that he ran off with his father’s mistress and had seven children by her, Pollfax might seem to have had a challenging upbringing, but for him Freud is an admirable model of professional success rather than a sourcebook for his personal troubles:
I was reading Freud the other day. There’s a man. Oedipus complex? Ever read about that? Don’t move, don’t breathe, you’ll feel a prick, but for God’s sake don’t jump. (293)

The command not to move or breathe is necessary for the success of the treatment but could just as equally refer to Pollfax’s strategy for living a life that has brought him “Perfect happiness at last” (295) as it did to the resilience of the English Tommy and to young men like Hamlet who feel emotionally out of their depth. There is a touch of Hamlet in Mr Pollfax as he calls his patient “my lord and prince” (296); his dramatic technique succeeds in achieving his medical goal just as it does of pre-empting pain in the patient. The story’s ending is comic and exact:

“Spit,” he said. “And now let’s have another look.” He wiped his brow. “Don’t say anything. Keep dead still. For God’s sake don’t let it hear you. My lords, ladies and gentlemen, pray silence for Mr Pollfax. It’s coming, it isn’t. No, it isn’t. It is. It is. There,” he cried, holding a fragment in his fingers.

He stood gravely to attention.

“And his chief beside,
Smiling the boy fell dead,”

said Mr Pollfax. “A good and final spit, my lord and prince.” (296)

To appreciate a writer like Pritchett is to recognize the potential of “the little people” such as Pollfax to transcend the lives they have carved for themselves. It is this moment of poetry or transcendence that gives the story its point, and is as momentary or transient as the genre itself, since the realist in Pritchett knows there is no hanging on to the moment. As John Bayley writes, “Pritchett has a delicate sense of the way people live inside clichés, and only come out to give them a fresh emphasis.” (xvii) In terms of influence, we can see “the little people”
coming out of Dickens and the economy of style from Chekhov but in this article I should like to consider another facet of Pritchett’s writing, namely his interest in travel and the role of travel in his fiction.

The experience of travel represents a mirror image of the short story in the sense that the unfamiliarity of new places lends momentary significance to the individual in contrast to the short story where the individual breaks out of his or her shell to lend momentary significance to the familiar. Pritchett’s own disposition to travel and awareness of the significant moments of others came partly from a rather unstable upbringing. His father was a traveling salesman, whose Micawberish imprudence caused the Pritchett family to have no single home as such; this tendency to grab at opportunities is similar, albeit at a more perilous level, to the experience of travel.

Pritchett’s memoir (A Cab at the Door, 1968) evinces a sympathy for his loyal mother with an exasperated admiration of his father:

the magic of the man!—without warning we would, as I say, get up one morning to find my mother in her fawn rain-coat (her only coat), and hat, ourselves being pulled into coats too. A cabby and his horse would be coughing together outside the house and the next thing we knew we were driving to an underground station and to a new house in a new part of London, to the smell of new paint, new mice dirts, new cupboards, and to race out into a new garden to see if there were any trees and start, in our fashion, to wreck the garden and make it the byword of the neighbourhood. The aggravating thing was that my mother was always crying in the cabs we took; and then my father would begin to sing in his moving bass voice:

Oh dry those tears
Oh calm those fears
Life will be brighter tomorrow. (15–16)
While Pritchett’s memories of his childhood were not exactly unhappy, it seems that he was never long in one place, and that this potentially damaging influence was turned into the positive experience of travel in his early adulthood in the 1920s and 1930s, when he traveled in France, Spain and the United States. We can also see how, like Dickens, Pritchett learnt not to take his adult role models very seriously, or at least view them in a comic light that glimpses occasionally at deeper realities.

Pritchett’s greatest regret was not his role models, who are portrayed as comic and innocuous in his memoirs, but his lack of formal education that prevented him from going to university and made him into the autodidact that he became. Sometimes applied pejoratively, the label of autodidact meant for Pritchett constantly to educate himself into paid employment as a journalist and writer, which he did through remarkably wide reading of the Western classics from *Don Quixote* through to Salman Rushdie. Yet the autodidact is not without advantages. Freed from the need to subscribe to the critical schools of the academy, Pritchett is arguably better able to empathize with the relative ignorance of his readers, to laugh at his subjects, to state his opinions, which may also serve as equivalents to the poetic illuminations that give point to his stories. Pritchett groans at the physical and mental toil of writing but is always liberated by language, even ironically as an intrusion that frees him from the knowledge that he has to write. He asks:

> Why, even when I travel, do I still have to work? But the moment I’ve cleaned my pipe and put pen to paper the groans stop. I am under the spell of language which has ruled me since I was ten. A few minutes later—four hours’ writing have washed out all sense of time—my wife calls me down to a delicious lunch. (5)

His wife’s call to the top of his “tall late-Nash house” (5) is another lin-
guistic release.

In his travel essay “The Appalachian Mountains” (1925), the young Pritchett visits the mountain people of the Unakas and the Blue Ridge, where “it is said you may hear the English of Shakespeare and Chaucer; though in my wanderings to the remote part of these mountains I did not experience the happiness of noting anything so rare, except the name Leander.” (96) What he does discover is a language, a dialect, that has been shaped by the isolation and continuity of mountain life: where illiteracy is common and the main reason for learning how to read and write seems to be so as to read the Bible, since as one local sheriff puts it, “You can’t ’scape Holy Writ.” (105) Pritchett observes acerbically of this man that “His voice had the nasal pitch of the village dialectician. He denounced Darwin partly as a nincompoop, partly as an ill-equipped emissary from Avernus.” (104)

The sympathetic impression Pritchett gives of the mountaineers is of an hospitable people who make a meager living fattening up turkeys for Thanksgiving and selling apples, and where most problems can be settled with the exchange of a few words:

If hospitality is riches, then the mountaineers are the richest people in the world. I remember the rebuke I received from a man whom I had offered to pay for a service:

“Pore folks haster work. But we don’t hafter work. We hain’t pore.” (110–111)

In the racially divided South, they are also to some extent protected by their ignorance, existing in a historical time warp on the cusp of the Great Depression and wartime upheaval.

These boys had never seen the sea, or cities, or Negroes. One of them told me he first saw a Negro when he was eighteen, and that he ran home frightened, shouting, “I’ve seen the boogeyman!” (109)
And as one of Pritchett’s informants suggests, the world is no wider than the view from the highest tree on the top of the highest mountain:

“If ya get up on top of the Dome and shins up a tree a man could see everywhars in the worl’ almost ’till – till his eyes was a-tired o’ lookin, an’ he come down an’ go away. But ye hafter climb. The Dome’s too coverdly wi’ trees to see without.” (119)

From the viewpoint of the educated reader, Pritchett memorializes these people through his accurate record of their dialect or way of speaking: their malapropisms and terse logic. This language is enough to frame a view of the world that is unlikely to be threatened by the presence of a single young man from England: “‘Wan a woman takes an idee into her head hit hain’t no good obstructioning. I’ve got twelve daughters and seven sons, an’ I know summat about it.’” (110) Even if this is not the language of Shakespeare, it does objectify a relationship with the natural world that recalls a simpler age than the busy, mercantile London metropolis from which Pritchett has come. As one of the women comments,

“Las’ night the moon was travelin’ north [. . .] Hit’ll rain a right smart piece more and get cold. I mind the time wan our spring friz plumb up on the first of September.”(111)

The same woman observes that Pritchett has come “‘a scandalously long ways, yander’” (111), and although the outside world may indeed be associated with “scandal,” it is rather the scandal of uniqueness that challenges their communality and even physical similarity through inter-marriage.

Pritchett’s journey through the Appalachians can only have raised questions and possibilities in the writer’s young mind, and in this regard the essay contains two hints. One is the peddler Gashry, or Gash,
Alison, whose humble trade belies his reputation for grandiloquence and for “getting about.” Known throughout the mountains for his tall stories, he represents a uniqueness that the local people do not have; as one of them puts it, “He’s the travelin’est man I ever seed.” (107–108) Gashry’s unusual name was given quite literally out of nowhere by a voice that spoke to his father, but in its shorter form of Gash could refer to all kinds of cut or gash that denote the hidden rites of passage of these people. In other words, his innocence and his ubiquity seem to connect the mountain people in experiences that cannot be discussed openly in a god-fearing society. Pritchett goes in search of Gashry (99–102), and never finds him, but perhaps this experience of the quest that defines all travel writing also helps him find his greater role as a writer: one who in a less innocent way strives to raise the connections that bind communities.

Finally, the end of the essay highlights a detail of mountain life, the mountaineers’ boots, whose loss is presented as a danger far worse than that of bears, rattlesnakes or the recently concluded First World War, where (as the old man says) the “French is heathians.” (119) Those are all external dangers but it is the loss of a possession as essential as a man’s boots that poses the greater threat to identity, and which in the old man’s language have become part of his vocabulary:

“Waal now, I’ll tell you, I hain’t bin out in the sun today. Reckon I’ll be broguin’ round a bit.”

And he backed obliquely down the stairs, brown boots first. (119)

Obliquity is a feature of Pritchett’s writing that serves to frame the author’s point of view. In a late story, “Things as They Are” (1982), “Two middle-class women” discuss their love lives sitting “at half past eleven in the morning in the empty bar of a suburban public house” (297). They are women for whom love is “a beautiful dream” (301) but
at the same time true fulfillment seems permanently deferred by the reality of their own bodies, and the fact that they have started drinking before the midday rush suggests something deliberately premature about their various affairs as well. The most striking detail comes when one of the pair, Margaret, lifts her skirt to show off the flea bites on her thighs which she has just been boasting about to her friend, Mrs Forster, but discovers to her annoyance they are no longer there:

“Big as pennies, horrible pink lumps, red, Jill,” argued Margaret. “I couldn’t sleep. Scratching doesn’t make it any better. It wasn’t a London flea, that I know, Jill. I know a London flea, I mean you know a London flea, an ordinary one, small beastly things, I hate them, but this must have been some great black foreign brute. Indian!” (299)

From their later discussion, it is evident that these mysterious flea bites may refer to some sexual experience, perhaps involving “some great black foreign brute,” that both attracts and repels the pair as lonely middle-class women. The pub’s landlord Frederick is their unwilling auditor; when they leave at the end of the story, he exclaims angrily, “Ladies, talking about love.” (307)

As in this story, the foreign is a natural object of Pritchett’s obliquity, although for contact with abroad the most remarkable of Pritchett’s stories is “When My Girl Comes Home” (1961), which was also his favourite. Set in early postwar Britain, the story concerns Hilda, who returns to her family after thirteen years in the Far East, first through marriage to a Mr Singh and then apparent incarceration in a Japanese prisoner of war camp, where it is alleged she was raped and tortured. Yet this Mr Singh turns out to have been a Japanese man named Shinji Kobayashi, and following Shinji’s death in the war, at the end of hostilities in 1945 she decides to go home to start off her life again. Hilda’s experience would be considered extraordinary under any
circumstances, but what strikes her friends and family who come to meet her are not the marks of horror but rather the ordinariness of her appearance:

When we thought of everything that must have happened to her it was strange to see that her strong face was smooth and blank. Except for the few minutes of arrival and the time the reporters came, her face was vacant and plain. It was as vacant as a stone that has been smoothed for centuries in the sand of some hot country. It was the face of someone to whom nothing had happened; or, perhaps, so much had happened to her that each event wiped out what had happened before. I was disturbed by something in her—the lack of history, I think. (317)

It is tempting to interpret Hilda’s blank expression as that of some sexualized Yamato nadeshiko, as the narrator might be insinuating when he describes people in the street staring at her:

the people were not staring at her clothes. They were staring at her eyebrows. I said before that her face was an extension of her nudity and I say it again. Those eyebrows of hers were painted and looked like the only things she had on—they were like a pair of beetles with turned up tails that had settled on her forehead. (352)

Hilda’s “nudity” is not necessarily a Japanese nudity, but it does indicate “the lack of history” that separates her from her family and friends. She does have a history, but one that can mean little to the others, including her mother, old Mrs Johnson, who was sick when she took the ferry from Southend as a girl.

One acquaintance is Bill Williams, who has served time in a Japanese prisoner of war camp, where he witnessed the atrocities (the executions, starvation rations and so on) that were widely reported in the
British press after the war. Yet Bill makes light of his experience:

“You had to get round the guards,” he said with a wink. “If you used your loaf a bit, eh? Scrounge around, do a bit of trade. One or two had Japanese girls.” (334)

It never apparently occurs to the narrator that Bill may be repressing his painful memories, and that they may partly account for his present rather unpleasant nature and erratic behaviour.

In the end, after a desultory attempt to settle down that attracts the unwanted attentions of Bill, Hilda goes off with an American writer, Mr Gloster, to the Far East, where it is assumed she can once again adopt the impervious mask she had brought with her from Japan, and Gloster pays her London circle the unusual compliment of producing a book not “about Japan or India or anything like that” but “about us” (360). Gloster’s book is no doubt similar in its purpose to Pritchett’s own writing, which from the 1920s through to the 1990s enabled him to cultivate his own mask as a writer writing against the expectations of his lower middle-class background. Gloster’s book and Pritchett’s writing commemorate the contemporary society as lived experience and living history, which seems important in early postwar London, as the people struggled to regain a sense of normality based on personal histories that had been badly shaken by the experience of war. Eudora Welty (Welty 1978) is not alone in praising the intensity of the following description of a people for whom the end of war introduced a degree of sexual freedom that is clearly at odds with the image of postwar austerity and conservatism:

Iris and I used to go the park on some evenings and then every blade of grass had been wire-brushed by sunlight; the trees were heavy with still leaves and when darkness came they gathered into soft black walls and their edges were cut out against the nail var-
nish of the city’s night. During the day the park was crowded. All over the long sweeps of grass the couples were lying, their legs at careless angles, their bottoms restless as they turned to the horse-play of love in the open. Girls were leaning over the men rumpling their hair, men were tickling the girls’ chins with stalks of grass. Occasionally they would knock the wind out of each other with plunging kisses; and every now and then a girl would sit up and straighten her skirt at the waist, narrowing her eyes in a pretence of looking at some refining sight in the distance, until she was pulled down again and, keeping her knees together, was caught again. Lying down you smelt the grass and listened to the pleasant rumble of the distant traffic going round like a wheel that never stopped. (338)

The Englishness of Pritchett so evident from his literary style belies a deep interest in foreign places and a traveler’s memory for passing experiences, since in addition to his travel writing, much of his fiction includes encounters with the foreign. Pritchett did write some novels, but preferred short stories. In his view, “a novel is like an enormous tree,” rooted in the substance of its plot, whereas the short story represents a certain vision of reality that consists of isolating the incident. The great thing about the short story is the detail, not the plot. The plot is useful, but only for supplying the sort of detail that is not descriptive but which pushes the action forward. (Guppy and Weller 1990)

In a sense, therefore, wherever the novel takes us, it will always stay in the same place. Travel writing also is a genre that is lacking in plot, where the interest is derived not from the journey itself (which is conceived beforehand) but from the incidents, adventures and encounters, that occur and develop largely beyond the author’s control. Pritchett has
no real adventures in “The Appalachian Mountains,” and so he constructs incidents out of the lives and language of the mountain people. In “The Oedipus Complex,” we learn nothing of the psychological histories of the dentist and his patient, although we may well guess, and in “Things As They Are” the two women would never be foolish enough to reveal the full and actual details of their love lives. Finally, in "When My Girl Comes Home," Hilda risks losing all her mystique as she faces up to the reality of a society that she once knew well but from which she has grown alienated through her thirteen years in the Far East. Unlike the novel, the genre of the short story is too short to become a world in itself, but it is through obliquity and detail that Pritchett connotes a world beyond the very English milieu in which he originated.

Notes

1 Due to his father’s financial difficulties, Pritchett had to leave school early to work in the London leather trade, but a love of books and writing persuaded him to contribute his work first to *The Christian Science Monitor* (as his father was a Christian Scientist) and then to *The New Statesman*, where he was literary editor for many years. He made his name with a collection of short stories, *The Spanish Virgin and Other Stories* (1932), and although known primarily as a writer of short stories, also wrote five novels, travel books, and literary biographies, including one of Anton Chekhov, his leading influence. Pritchett was knighted in 1975 and became Companion of Honour in 1993. McRae and Carter (60) comment that when Pritchett died in 1997 he was “the most highly regarded writer of short stories in the language”, adding that “He is that almost extinct phenomenon in late twentieth-century Britain: a ‘man of letters’, who made a career from writing in a number of forms, including criticism, without ever working in an academic institution.”

2 The nickname given to British soldiers in the First World War.

3 John Nash was a British architect of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, who as architect to the Prince Regent (later George IV) designed many of the buildings of Regency London, including the house where Pritchett lived overlooking Regents Park.

4 Leander is the lover from the Greek myth who features in Christopher Marlowe’s poem “Hero and Leander” (published 1598).

5 In modern English, “You cannot deny the words of the Bible.”
A lake in southern Italy believed by the ancient Romans to be the entrance to Hell, or the underworld.

“Poor people have to work, but we don’t have to work because we aren’t poor.”

“The bogeyman,” an imaginary monster used by parents to frighten their children into behaving properly.

“If you climb to the top of a tree on top of Dome mountain, you will be able to see the whole world around you until you will be tired of looking and decide to come down. But you will have to climb a tree to see it, as the Dome is covered with trees.”

“When a woman gets an idea into her head, there’s no stopping her. I have twelve daughters and seven sons, and so I know something about women.”

“Last night the moon was heading north, which means we’re going to have rain and it will be cold. I remember how the spring near our house froze as early as September 1st last year.”

“You’ve come a hell of a long way!”

“I’ve never met anyone who travels so much as Gashry Alison.”

He means that the French cannot be called true Christians as they are all Roman Catholics.

A brogue is a heavy leather shoe suitable for wearing in the mountains. It is notable that the speaker uses the word as a verb to mean walking around in his brogues.

The narrator is the son of family friends and twelve years younger than Hilda, probably about 25 at the time of the story.

The pleasure steamers that used to make short strips around the Thames Estuary.

References