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The Petty Theft of Fiction – V. S. Pritchett and the Moderate Short Story

Abstract

The article presents the most important formal and thematic characteristics of V. S. Pritchett's short stories, and attempts to provide an analytical paradigm for what seems to be an original form of social realist short fiction. By analysing themes (crime, above all others), characterisation, eventfulness, and rhetorical closures of selected stories, the author of this article draws attention to the importance of *stasis* and recalcitrance in the texts, and aims to address the problem of the relative neglect V. S. Pritchett's short fiction has suffered from in the critical debates of the last few decades.

The status of V. S. Pritchett's short stories in the history of British short fiction is indicative of an ambivalent aftermath of the historical process of canon formation: the fossilization and generalization of commentary on a writer who seems apparently crucial to the understanding of certain portions of literary history. Pritchett's short fiction is undoubtedly central to the history of the short story form in Britain in the twentieth century. His stories have been published both in Britain and America,¹ praised by fellow writers (Eudora Welty [39], Frank Kermode [online] and William Trevor [30–31]), and discussed in the context of the short story works of other writers, such as William Trevor (Bloom) and T. F. Powys (Wojtyna). Pritchett is commonly listed among the masters of British short story writing (Gąsiorek 423, Hanson 113), is quoted as a veritable authority in theoretical debates of the specific form of the short story (Allen 268), and has been commemorated by the organizers of a short fiction contest (V. S. Pritchett Memorial Prize). At least five book-length studies have been devoted to his life and works (Baldwin 1987; Bloom; Stinson; Treglown; Wojtyna). Despite a fairly extensive range of critical commentary, there seems to be a striking disproportion concerning the subject matter the critics have been concerned with. What David Malcolm calls “one of the scandals of the canon of British literature” (158), the critical neglect of Pritchett's work does not consist in the ignoring of Pritchett's mastery, but in the lack of detailed scrutiny of the actual form that the mastery takes in narrative. While authors of monographs on Pritchett have focused on the intersections of work and biography (Treglown, Baldwin,

B. L. Reid, Bloom), on his novelistic and travel writing (Baldwin, Treglown), as well as on Pritchett's own critical work (Baldwin, Bloom), very little attention (perhaps with the exception of Stinson's excellent monograph and Wojtyna's formalist study) has been devoted to the actual structures and formal devices that his short fiction makes use of.² When short fiction has been discussed, it was immediately reduced to social-psychological concerns (e.g. Henderson 155, Ian Reid 24), and claimed to be stylistically rich (Stinson 188). While such statements are generally true, they offer very little detail about formal means. Such a general tone of critical commentary is especially striking when it comes to the short story form – itself a literary phenomenon that has been claimed to be preoccupied with structural specificity and formal precision (Poe 569–577; Hanson 1–9, Current-García and Walton; Ferguson 457–471).

I would like to propose that such polarization results from a crime his work commits on itself. An excellent exercise in moderation, his short stories do not strike the reader with formal or thematic extravagance. “Pritchett is not thought to be anywhere near the cutting edge of experimentation,” John Stinson claims (3–4),³ and this perhaps, together with a very strong interest in apparently commonplace situations and unglamorous protagonists, accompanied by a set of quite unobvious narrative strategies, dooms Pritchett to be fossilized in the canon of British twentieth-century literature as a predominantly conventional exponent of psychological realism. While generalizations of this sort tend to enhance typological demarcation, in this case they are severely reductive of the actual appeal of Pritchett's short fiction. The relative lack of precision of critical commentary⁴ – apparently resulting from the author's aesthetic and thematic sobriety that generates texts in the form of the “free story” (Hanson 113) based on the “haze effect” (with its “vagaries of plot, character, or structure” – Stinson 4) – seems undeserved. What appears to be predominantly realist social-psychological short story, under closer scrutiny reveals a richness of generic conventions (tale, fable, parable, short story of exotic adventure, crime story), a linguistic diversity (demotic, conversational, formal, poetic registers are used equally often), and a mastery of narrative patterns. What the critical categorization misses by ignoring the very formal detail of the Pritchett's narrative texture is the whole range of cases in which the author manages to be a profoundly modern writer (dealing with stasis, the ordinary, the social pressures of the twentieth century), despite his unwillingness to engage with techniques characteristic of the modernist or post-modernist repertoire.

The moderateness of Pritchett's short fiction is especially evident in the few texts that, unlike the majority of his short stories concerned primarily with the ordinary, present transgressive themes and hideous human interactions. Pritchett's crime stories – due to their moderate character – all the more strikingly point to the importance of (thematic, structural) violations that organize most narrative texts by building textual tensions on the level of plot, characterisation and readerly judgement. Pritchett's crime stories conduct these violations in an altogether

unstraightforward manner – the crimes presented are either negligible and given a serious presentation, or serious but shown in a manner that moves focus to other problems. In what follows I discuss different kinds of literary misdemeanours of the Pritchett short story: internal violations of thematic and formal patterns; presentation of crime that is at odds with generic conventions; and the self-incriminating recalcitrant simplicity that may not be without effect on the canonical fossilization of Pritchett's stories.

Suicide, fraud, robbery, assault or attempted poisoning play a central role in perhaps only 10 of the 83 short stories included in the 1990 volume of *Complete Collected Stories*. Although a more extensive group of Pritchett's short stories reveals a detective aspect of a fairly particular kind (numerous character sketches aim at penetrating the mystery of a person, at analysing characterological lacunae and completing information), in most of the stories affiliations with crime fiction are scarce and not very obvious. An understanding of the general character of Pritchett's short fiction, however, is necessary before a closer look is taken at the petty theft Pritchett commits.

Many texts we find in the 1990 volume are Chekhovian slice-of-life stories, with their attention to the ordinary, to man-woman relationship, to family strife, personality intricacies and mundane situations.⁵ Many of Pritchett's stories present repetitive experiences. "One of those everlasting situations," we read in "The Sniff," where a mother's habit becomes a dominant of a family's life (391). Careful characterisation in "The Ladder," a story of family mischief, points to obstinacy of habit by presenting a character of Janey, who "had no behaviour" other than repetition (355). The stories are mostly set in unglamorous locations: the streets of London, shops, pubs, restaurants, offices, roads in the country. The presentation of characters highlights is highly mimetic – detailed information is given about their conduct, profession and social status.⁶ There is almost no heroism. Events are often unsurprising and rarely change the narrative situation. These elements build one part of the visible facade of Pritchett's stories.

The other, equally overt part of the same facade are violations of the patterns established by usual settings, characters, events and the balanced, restrained diction. Presentation of seemingly unsurprising protagonists is essentially concerned with characterological obsession, inconsistency or mistake. What is typical in characters, reveals a shady aspect, escalates into momentary madness or leads to a dramatic change. In "The Lion's Den," which takes place during the war, and presents most of its material through a conventional dialogue of mother and son, the son learns about his father's obsessive day-by-day stealing. In "Sense of Humour" a background of endless repetitions about the meetings of man and woman (highlighted by the repetitive use of phrases such as: "Every time I went to that town"), leads to suicide and a peculiarly dramatic funeral. The simple regular activities in "The Collection" include one that is shown in completely different light – a collection the main protagonists conducts at Sunday mass is

his central obsession, and receives a striking, grotesquely excessive presentation: "Treading like a cat, floating silkily down, watching the amazing stripes of his trousers, with the gravity of a mourner, a little distracted, like a bridegroom by the flash of his spats which might make him misjudge the steps if he were not careful, he arrives downstairs" (402), we read about the way the man walks off to the church.

This sort of linguistic excess works to counter the impression that the thematic focus of Pritchett's short stories is on the balanced construction of the commonplace. Language, with its extensive use of dialogue, varies from simple colloquial diction, with elements of local dialect, to elevated phrasing of a strongly literary style: "His dullness was a sort of earthly deposit left by a being whose diluted mind was far away in the effervescence of metaphysical matters" (197), we read in "The Saint."

In a number of stories settings of the usual kind receive an exotic, repulsive or uncanny aspect. This is the case with an empty bed in "The Story of Don Juan," where the bedroom becomes a locus of torture, haunting and vision, or in "The Main Road," where country paths seem to aggravate the personal conflict of two walkers.

As these examples indicate, Pritchett's short narratives insistently rework their thematic dominant. The reworking is frequently concerned with variable degrees of eventfulness that can be observed in different sections of texts. Very often the beginning of a story sketches the usual plain of reference and afterwards a significant event is introduced. "One Monday, when I had been four or five months in the firm, a woman came to the counter" (271), we read in a story about an office with no women. "And then came the most extraordinary fortnight of Roger's life," we read in "Pocock Passes." Sometimes, breakthrough events are shown in hierarchy: "The death of a Rogers is something. But the death of a stranger like Pocock, who had been in the place only a few months, was like a motor smash" (224), tells us the narrator of the same text. Usually the event which seems to be climactic, leads to a further complication; event sequences, if such appear, manifest rather evident causality arrangements. All in all, event presentation seems to offer a reassuring sense of coherence to the texts, and to comply with the general conventions of plot-oriented fictions. There are nevertheless several aspects of Pritchett's short stories that render such an impression untenable.

Many of the stories do not use what Peter Hühn calls type II events, or they use just one, while much of what happens are clearly type I events. Hühn describes the difference in the following way:

The difference between event I and event II lies in the degree of specificity of change to which they refer. Event I involves all kinds of change of state, whereas event II concerns a special kind of change that meets certain additional conditions in the sense, for example, of being a decisive, unpredictable turn in the narrated

happenings, a deviation from the normal, expected course of things, as is implied by event in everyday language. Whether these additional conditions are met is a matter of interpretation; event II is therefore a hermeneutic category, unlike event I, which can largely be described objectively. (5)

This is the case in “The Collection,” where no dramatic change occurs through an event of the second type, but obsession results from a reiteration of a type I event, and in “The Main Road,” where just one type II event appears. If more than two type II events appear, the relation between them is hardly ever that of reinforcement; usually the events either create another focus for the story or confront the meanings created by what precedes them.

Thematic reversal is yet another aspect of the short stories that violates the patterns constructed. This is the case in “The Saint,” where the central protagonist reveals his gloomy nature and turns out to be far less saintly than he seemed. A similar effect is achieved through the use of ironic, telling titles, like “The Sailor,” “Sense of Humour,” “Lion’s Den,” all of which are at odds with what is presented in the texts.

Narrational repertoire is as rich as the range of characters, locations and linguistic registers. The stories employ a variety of etic and emic openings, involve a great deal of analepsis and use a range of narrative voices (Genette’s heterodiegetic, homodiegetic and autodiegetic are more or less equally frequent). The formal mastery of techniques and rhetorical devices highlight the artistic organization of Pritchett’s narratives, and even further deautomatize the image of the commonplace that they frequently so consistently construct.

As shown above, the majority of Pritchett’s short stories are based on an interplay between regularity and violation. A set of formal and thematic elements that construct both the stable, unchangeable, repetitive structures of the narratives themselves and the images of protagonists and events they present, stand against a rich selection of, again, formal and thematic explosions. Relative stasis on the level of plot, enhanced by extensive use of long descriptive characterisation passages and of markers of commonplace unchangeability indeed support the general mood of the stories that seem not to “have any news.” Still, this is subject to numerous revisions. Here, then, one faces crime number one of Pritchett’s work – patterns are violated.

Crime number two – crimes are presented. More than that: they are revealing of the nature of the Pritchett short story, in which moderation and subtlety dominate. Interestingly, where Pritchett presents crime, the nature of the violation mechanism is all the more visible. In “The Main Road” two men of unknown origin are walking in the country. The setting is unglamorous and simple – they follow side lanes, muddy, dirty and sodden. They are hungry, mute, furious and desperate. The aim of their walk is obscure, they seem to have forgotten it themselves. “Anarchy of hunger,” as the narrator announces, starts to take control of their emotions. A large

part of the story is devoted to the presentation of their discomfort and hatred of each other. Typically for Pritchett, the study of character plays an important role, and establishes a clear focus on the antagonism of the two figures. Analepsis enhances the effect of circling around a growing obsession. Suspense, in Todorov's understanding of the word⁷, is centred around this very unfriendliness. Suddenly, an element is introduced that is strangely at odds with the development of the plot – the two men attack and beat a young boy in order to get food and money. The assault scene is shown in detail, as if extinguishing the anger accumulated all the way:

Now there was no doubt about it. It was as if silently under all their talk and in all their silences they had been rehearsing this all day, working out every detail to perfection. They said nothing but sprang to it. The big fellow went down gay and hard on the gasping youth and sat on him. The younger one snatched up the bag and rummaged in the youth's pocket for a handkerchief. Money chinked. The youth feebly kicked. Without a word, the older man stuffed a bit of the handkerchief between the youth's teeth and ties it round his neck. A look of extraordinary pale, breathless gaiety rose in the older man's exhausted face; a look of keenness and shrewd skill sprang up in the eyes of the other. Their breath came in helpless gasps. [...] They pitched the youth at the top of their strength through the hedge and into the ditch and run for the bus. (29)

The fact that brutality is directed towards somebody else and not against each other would of course seem to totally comply with the general rule of violation that works clearly for many Pritchett stories. Still, the problematic aspect is in the recalcitrant ending that does not provide any precise interpretive clues that might guarantee the reader a cognitive closure. "Food! He looked at the old man with contempt. What he wanted, his tortured hating soul cried out within him, was not food" (30).

In "A Spring Morning" the subject matter is apparently typical and definitely very distant from any general definition of crime. Still, however, the text uses some conventional mechanisms of crime fiction. In this story of teenage assault and sexual stalking positive and negative characters are clearly distinguishable. "A thin girl, ill-nourished," who is standing in the door of a shop she is in a quiet village, where "one side of the [...] street was in the sun and the other in shadow" becomes here the victim of a "fat, pale youth with his thick unbrushed hair and his pimpled skin" (18). The physical opposition of the two, highlighted by the difference of the two sides of the street, clearly points to the roles the protagonists play in the text. The "great quietness" of the place in which routine dominates (18) is violated by an encroachment the youth makes: "Slowly, smiling, threatening, he came back towards her. He came nearer and nearer and when he was so close that she could smell the breakfast tea in his warm breath on her cheeks, he took one hot fat freckled hand out of his pocket, and leaned it on the doorpost above her head. Then he looked over her shoulder impertinently into the shop. She was

alarmed because he was nearly touching her” (19). This very subtly tense fragment is followed by a taunting exchange of words, and a fight: “Now he got hold of both wrists. His mouth was open. She was angry and helpless, her fingers crooked, trying to scratch at his face. He laughed at her with what breath he had. [...] He did not know what he wanted to do and she did not know what she did not want him to do. They just stood fighting” (20). The fight is followed by physical contact of yet different character: “Then he made a leap at her. He had his arm round her waist and his fingers on the hollow of her spine at once. She was dragged and rubbed in confusion against him. He kissed her roughly on the lips and would not release her, though she pushed with her knees and her hands against him” (21). Soon after, the girl is presented as victim: “Her heart was striking against her chest, and her aching lips were bruised with kissing” (21).

Thus, up to this point, the text presents an intense account of an assault. Its problematic character is connected with three issues. Firstly, “the crime” is negligible – although painful, the assault would perhaps be seen as very typical among youths. Secondly, the girl at some point is drawn to the aggressor: “She was driven straight out of the shop towards him and he stood up waiting for her to come and be near to him” (22). Thirdly, she takes revenge in the end of the story by emptying a pail of water on the boy. With the gradual presentation of the assault, with the clear division into good and bad protagonists, with the final revenge, the story reveals clear affinities with crime fiction. However, the seemingly petty character of the offence, and the otherwise moderate circumstances, the ambiguous attitude the girl has to the event, together with the very balanced opening and closure of the story, are compatible with a larger strategy Pritchett uses in other texts. The typical is broken by a violation, but the violation does not restore a clear order. The text does not offer clear information about the aggressor-victim roles, the brutality of actual happenings and the relationship of the teenagers.

Ambiguity is used in a similar way in relation to petty crime in “The Clerk’s Tale,” a story of assault a young boy commits on an older fellow passenger on a train. The story presents a routine action (commuting to school), and introduces a violation of the routine in the fight scene. There is again a male-female tension that underlies the teenage crime – the boy explodes in the fight because his attempts to see a girl in the train corridor are interrupted by the old man. The narrator describes his attitude to the ugly girl in a way that resembles an obsessive criminal’s devising of a heist:

I used to follow in the evenings. My technique was like this. [...] The idea of knowing exactly where D.O.M. lived was repugnant. At first there was excitement in this pursuit; then dead but obliged boredom and finally the humiliation of secrecy. [...] This went into the summer. It was a bondage. I believed that [the girl] did not know I followed her. [...] I felt deep shame and anger. But this soon gave place to a decisive bombast and brutality. (293–294)

Again, motives are not completely straightforward, and the crime itself is both brutal and treated lightly (“It wasn’t a fight,” the narrator says, initially downgrading the importance of the incident [296]). The moral aspect of the situation – highlighted in the story by reference to the victim’s difficult past (291, 296) clearly marks the youth as guilty (“evil”) and the old man as innocent. Unlike in the previous example, the first-person narrator attempts to explain the situation. Also, as in “The Spring Morning” aggressive action is connected to teenage initiation into life: “Then I felt horror at myself; and at the whole human race. I had struck a man whose son had been killed. I suddenly knew what the war was. I went home and was sick” (296). Still, the last paragraph not only concludes the story, but again introduces elements of mystery:

After this, I did not use the East station any more. I got up earlier and used the Junction. For two years I dared not go near the East station [...]. I found a new girl on the new line and went out arm-in-arm with her. That had an unhappy ending, too – unhappy for the girl. None of this would have happened if Isabel Hertz had not known what God is. (296)

Thus, the misdemeanour which violates a routine, does not have a clear explanation and is supposedly followed by another case of misconduct.

Minor theft is presented in “The Aristocrat.” The story takes place in a pub. Circumstances are typical. “The usual people” are present (74) – guests who are “always present there on Saturday afternoon” (75) – and busy with drink and chat. Suddenly, a stranger comes in. From this point onwards, the story focuses on the presentation of the old, elegant gentleman. Regulars of the pub become the collective focalizer of the scene. Eyes are on the stranger and one Mr Murgatroyd who gets involved in conversation with him (“They watched him” [75], “Everybody noted this” [76], “Everybody was watching” [78], “They gazed with command” [79]; “They all looked” [84]). This insistent gaze the people of the pub offer underlines the interest of the story in character. As it normally is in Pritchett stories, people are described in detail. Still, the gaze is also crucial in the story for another reason – the spectators watch the stranger perform tricks. These are of different sorts (a handkerchief and a coin, a ring and a stick, fingers and a tumbler) but all catch the attention of the guests. The whole pub watches in awe. Still, something escapes their attention and leads to the final confusion of the story: to the surprise of all, it turns out, when the stranger has left, that he stole Mr Murgatroyd’s watch.

In “The Scapegoat” the crime is involuntary and the criminal becomes (post-humously) a hero. Again, the story initially refers to a background of habits in the life of a (“good”) community of Terrence Street conflicted with the neighbouring (“evil”) Earl Street. A special occasion occurs in the normal rivalry of the two: a money collection to celebrate the Jubilee (106). A person is needed to collect the funds. Art Edwards, a widower who “was made serious by death,” seems a perfect

choice because he remains very stable in his behaviour (“Every Sunday he used to go alone with a bunch of flowers for his wife’s grave”; “He never changed”; “He never seemed to get richer or poorer. He just went on the same” [108]). The very last person to be suspected of mischief, and watched very carefully by the community, Art Edwards does commit the crime of fraud. With good intentions, though: he loses the money in dog races, because he wants to double the sum. Violation of habit is introduced, but the crime is revealed only in the very end of the text. Much of what is offered before is focuses on character presentation. Thus, “The Scapegoat” deals with the fraud in characterological terms. Since the crime involves a change in personality – an act at odds with Art’s normal conduct – it is considered by the narrator and protagonists to be a personal mistake. Immediately after the crime is revealed, the failed protagonist is despised by the crowd and accused: “The bloody twister”; “That bloody widower”; “The rotten thief” (117). Eventually, however, he receives a fair deal of respect: “Art Edwards was suddenly our hero. [...] He was ourselves, our hero, our god. He had borne our sins” (118–119). A major instability in the plot (the fraud) results here from an instability of character, but an ambiguity of the ultimate change in social opinion again points to some unresolved, problematic nature of crime in this text. The personality-changing offence, and the attention to character detail, together with a surprising ending that glorifies the criminal, are the distinctive marks of “The Scapegoat.”

In all the crime stories discussed above, the criminal subject matter is presented in an ambiguous way. Here, then, we deal with the third crime of Pritchett’s short fiction. The violation of internal patterns of the texts does not provide ultimate informative solutions about the motives, the consequences, or reliable narratorial judgement of the criminal act. The crimes are not the ones normally associated with the most gripping plots of crime fiction, and the themes accompanying them are hardly controversial. Pritchett’s relative insistence on (repetitive) type I events, and his limited use of type II events (that introduce genuine change into plot), is also rather untypical for crime fiction. Moreover, this mechanism of moderation decides that Pritchett’s stories, with their interest in the commonplace, are not in agreement with some of the normally accepted markers of crime fiction, especially with the genre’s insistence on the presentation of shocking themes. On the other hand, Pritchett’s criminal subject matter, and his frequent use of different violations of the usual, together with a clear division into good and bad protagonists, and detailed observation of the criminal procedures (which strengthens suspense in the texts), indicate some affinities with the genre. Therefore one can assume that despite their apparent ambiguities, Pritchett’s crime stories offer interesting insight into the complexity of generic divisions.

The breaking of patterns – which occurs in a majority of Pritchett’s short stories, and can create a larger sequence of mutual violations, means for some of the texts – and for his criminal stories especially – an introduction of what James Phelan in

Narrative as Rhetoric calls “the stubborn,” that is, as opposed to “the difficult,” recalcitrance that does not “yield to explanatory efforts” (Phelan 178). In his practical-theoretical work that can offer interesting comment on the rhetorical reader-response to crime fiction, Phelan proposes a view of narrative as rhetoric and bases his study on phenomenology of reading. He seeks “to link the experience of reading with the activity of interpretation” (173). In this vein Phelan writes that “some textual recalcitrance cannot be fully explained, even though it functions very productively in our reading” (173).

The productivity of recalcitrant, stubborn material can be shown very well in “The Main Road,” which offers examples of irresolvable difficulties in connection with crime. First of all, since the aim of the walk of the two men is imprecise, the story progresses in a vacuum of motive and reason. “On this third day the object of their journey had been driven from their minds altogether.” The motivation for the walk seems the more obscure when a juxtaposition of adventure and anger is offered: “They had eaten poorly on the first two days when the adventure was young, but on this day the singing had stopped and the whistling. The only sounds all day had been the dazed singing in their heads, the gritting of their teeth” (24). One may ask numerous questions: Are they looking for work? Why is that an adventure? Why are the two together? Is December good time for a walking escapade? What does the anger lead to? Answers there are none. Moreover, the conflict between protagonists is also not completely clear. One clue seems not completely plausible: “In his hunger he had begun to hate the man who was always in front” (25). Most importantly, the brutal act the protagonists commit, cannot be clearly explained either. The ending paragraph of the text again disrupts certainty (30), rejecting the possible motivation of crime with the hunger the two felt. With its open ending and a relative lack of motivation for the assault, the story points to the nonsensical character of crime and highlights the Pritchett’s general insistence on moderate, non-finite, recalcitrant textual closures.

A similar issue in relation to form in the short story is described by Austin Wright as formal “resistance” or “recalcitrance.” Wright links the concept to Edgar Allan Poe’s formal unity, and adds that the tradition of the short story “has always stressed the vital functioning of parts in a whole” (115). He attempts to indicate that a special cognitive effect of recalcitrance is “essential to the strength and attractiveness of the short story” (119). One argument seems particularly useful when dealing with the petty theft Pritchett’s crime fiction commits – the abovementioned problem of recalcitrant closure. Wright quotes Susan Lohafer, who writes about the reader’s experience of the resistant material: “[The reader] undergoes a sequential process which is yearning toward a static result: he is experiencing an impetus toward closure, blocked by various kinds of interference which are in one way and another removed, surmounted, absorbed” (Lohafer 42, qtd. in Wright 119). True as this seems for numerous Pritchett short stories, in the texts discussed above the resistance is enhanced because the stubborn culminates mostly in the closures of

respective stories. Frequently, then, the closure of a story functions as anticlosure. “It means, quite literally, that the text has provided for a reading that the text itself will not bring to an end,” Terry Heller clarifies the issue in relation to Poe’s “Ligeia” (Heller). To put Wright’s more precise categorisation of final recalcitrance into practice, one may try to apply his conclusions to the Pritchett texts discussed above. “Unresolved contradiction at the level of character or action” or “mimetic resistance” (Wright 124) appears in “The Main Road” with the protagonists who “themselves do not understand what motivates them” (Wright 124). Unexplaining explanation works in the closure of “The Clerk’s Tale,” where the boy’s fight “appears to be, abstractly, an explanation of what has gone before [...] yet which fails, at the level of explicitness, actually to explain” (Wright 125). A recalcitrant ending with suppressed explanation can be observed in “The Aristocrat,” where no comment is offered about the crime and the criminal. Symbolic recalcitrance can be seen in “The Scapegoat,” where the presentation of Edwards is organised – paradoxically for a criminal figure – around some typical markers of the figure of Christ.

Still another kind of textual resistance is at work in Pritchett’s short stories. It is strongly related to the petty theft this article refers to in its title. The resistant moderation of Pritchett’s stories or their “recalcitrant simplicity” – a phrase used by Alexander Hollenberg (301) – turns out to be particularly interesting for the treatment of a criminal subject matter. Reticence of language, interest in the mundane, focus on character rather than event, presentation of petty offences – these lead to a series of puzzling questions about the genre that Pritchett subtly refers to. Can crime fiction be moderate? Is simplicity a useful tool for a fictional genre centred around complexity? How does simplicity reveal mysteries in a crime story? Is a petty theft serious enough as a subject of a crime story? Does readerly cognitive and interpretive effort follow from what is not said? These questions, naturally, remain unanswered.

The problematic simplicity of Pritchett’s short stories essentially depends on the interplay of the difficult and the stubborn (Phelan), on the mixture of the commonplace and the unexpected, but most essentially on the unsaid, absent elements that give the opposition numerous additional, most stubborn dimensions.⁸ These resistant, unresolved elements, clearly highlight the productive effect the texts’ simplicity has in the reader’s cognitive and interpretive processes.

“We, academic interpreters naturally gravitate toward recalcitrant material, but we typically assume that all recalcitrance can yield to understanding, even if all that is finally revealed is the inevitability of recalcitrance” (178), Phelan writes, when introducing the concept of the stubborn. One could adopt this comment to claim that we, fiction readers, gravitate towards complicated stories with a desire to fully understand the mechanisms of human actions and of the textual presentations of these – despite the rather convincing conclusion that even an apparently simple, moderate text might remain resistant to interpretive efforts.

A conclusion with Pritchett is difficult, but the most important petty theft of his fiction is clearly connected with the notorious proffering of complicated material with a content and in a form that seem simple, but repeatedly violate their own internal patterns. A Pritchett text is by all means surprising – because of its moderate character one hardly expects to confront the enormous amount of irresolvable issues. This, in turn, proves to be a very meaningful aspect of the stories. Untypical combination of themes, but also different kinds of formal recalcitrance in narration provide the detective instincts of readers with a very interesting case – quite contrary to the position Pritchett occupies in the British literary history. The richness of Pritchett’s formal and thematic repertoire – his competent use of dialogue, outstanding skill with linguistic registers, inimitable grasp of textual instabilities and tensions that generate incomplete closures, insistent refusal to present ground-breaking events (even in his genre-bending crime fictions), as well as the resulting focus on the ordinary aspects of the fictional worlds – is ample evidence of how inappropriate it might be to “come to terms” (to quote the title of Lohafer’s seminal study) with Pritchett’s short fiction. In order to duly approach the large oeuvre of the short fiction writer – and, to “spark further critical inquiry into Pritchett’s art” (Baldwin 1993, 431), we ought to honour the variety of its forms rather than reduce it to the psychological-realistic paradigm or to ignore it on grounds of relative conventionality. Moderation and convention, as Pritchett’s short stories prove, are very engaging indeed.

Notes

- 1 The year 2011 saw the publication of *The Camberwell Beauty and Other Stories* by the London Folio Society with an introduction by William Trevor.
- 2 It is perhaps another reason for the dwindling enthusiasm Pritchett felt for the short story in the 1960s. “The short-story writer V. S. Pritchett (1900–1997) was not unpopular. Indeed, he was much respected. He had had his first short story, ‘Rain in the Sierra,’ published in the *New Statesman* in 1926 and was [in the 1960s – M. W.] still going strong. But forty years later things had changed, and his faith in the short story as a form which ‘concentrates an impulse that is essentially poetic’ was being severely tested. In a long diatribe, Pritchett wrote that ‘the periodicals on which the writer can rely have almost all vanished, driven out by expensive printing, by television and the hundred and one diversions of an extrovert and leisured society’” (Pritchett 1966, 6, qtd. in Liggins, Maunder and Robbins 211–212)
- 3 A similar claim is expressed by Robert Kiely: “Even as a young writer, he seemed to have the confidence not to strain for effect.” Kiely adds that Pritchett’s is “the course of quiet originality.”
- 4 In 2001 Karen Tracey diagnosed the state of Pritchett studies in the following

way: “Pritchett has not yet become the subject of extended critical dialogue, yet he is among the most highly respected of twentieth-century short-story writers. [...] In 1981 Walter Allen anointed Pritchett the ‘outstanding English short-story writer’ after the death of D. H. Lawrence, but discussed his work for only seven pages. This combination of lavish praise and stinting discussion typifies Pritchett’s fate in academic circles. [...] Were it not for Twayne [the publisher of two monographs on Pritchett – Baldwin 1987, Stinson 1992], he would still be noticed primarily with exclamations about his undeserved neglect” (348). Though Tracey’s claim has lost some of its validity with the appearance of book-length studies (Bloom 2007, Wojtyna 2015) the unhurried historical development seems to support the overriding claim of this article: general praise for Pritchett’s fiction has not always translated into detailed study.

- 5 Andrzej Gąsiorek writes that “[Pritchett’s] greatest contribution [...] surely lies in his even-handed representation of ordinary people in all their glorious multiplicity” (429). Sarah Lyall supports such a claim: “Mr. Pritchett made the commonplace fascinating, capturing subtleties of mood, language, behavior and motivation with precision and sensitivity.”
- 6 “Characters and settings are unglamorous, without even the literary attraction of being poor” (Malcolm 159).
- 7 “Two entirely different forms of interest exist. The first can be called *curiosity*; it proceeds from effect to cause [...]. The second form is *suspense*, and here the movement is from cause to effect” (Todorov 124).
- 8 David Malcolm comments on “You Make Your Own Life” in the following way “The story’s excellence lies in its reticence. True? Partly true? The reader can only speculate” (160).

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