Revision as Transformation: The Making and Re-Making of V.S. Pritchett’s “You Make Your Own Life”

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1 Sir Victor Sawdon Pritchett is one of the twentieth century’s last great men of letters. An essayist, reviewer, biographer, autobiographer, and travel writer, he remains a British institution—one of the most highly regarded literary journalists of his time. Fellow journalists and writers alike admire him for his uncanny ability to distil the essence of what he reads, and to express his perceptive comments in a style that graciously draws attention to the work of other writers, never himself. Not long ago, in a review for the New York Review of Books, Joyce Carol Oates listed Pritchett in the select company of those who produce “literary criticism that qualifies as art”. Yet as astute as he was as a critic, V.S. Pritchett was also a serious writer of fiction. While honouring his time-consuming, and often exhausting professional responsibilities, he managed to write five novels and ten collections of short stories. Although he has been an invaluable, distinguished curator of Britain’s literary heritage for most of the century, it is principally for his remarkable contribution to the modern short story that he will be remembered.

2 Pritchett has been lauded as the finest English short-story writer of his time and one of the most important practitioners and ambassadors of the genre in the world. Major critics and writers throughout the English-speaking world are unanimous in their praise of his unusual gift for the short form. Walter Allen considered him to be the most outstanding English short-story writer since D. H. Lawrence. Paul Theroux judged him “Our best short story writer.” In his review of Pritchett’s Collected Stories, Valentine Cunningham called him “the best living English short story writer”, and Douglas Hughes deems him “one of the finest, most engaging short-story writers of our time”. Other internationally acclaimed practitioners of the art are equally enthusiastic about Pritchett’s accomplishments. William Trevor feels Pritchett “has done more for the short
story in his lifetime than anyone since Joyce or Chekhov”—high praise from perhaps the finest living short-story writer:

The more parochial and domestic these stories appear to be on the surface the deeper the depths they acquire when considered in retrospect. Pritchett writes of the universal by way of a narrow particular, allowing humor and the variations in human relationships to create his patterns of truth.\(^5\)

Eudora Welty claims “that any Pritchett story is all of it alight and busy at once, like a well-going fire. Wasteless and at the same time well fed […] He is one of the great pleasure givers in our language.”\(^7\)

However, although he has established an enviable reputation, he has proved a conundrum for critics and scholars alike. At the same time that some reviewers and critics lavish praise on Pritchett, they claim his short stories are too elusive to be studied. While some readers criticize his stories’ lack of plots, others complain about their inconsistent structure. Oddly enough, some of the critics who appreciate his craft, dismiss its importance. One reviewer who was clearly frustrated with the complexity of “When My Girl Comes Home”, for instance, recognised Pritchett’s technical prowess, but managed to turn it against him:

The story needs to be read twice for its flavour to be appreciated, and even then one may perhaps feel that its obliquities and lacunae are as much the result of the temptations of a teasing technique as of artistic necessity.\(^8\)

The only critic to write a full-length study in English of Pritchett’s short fiction ironically believes “the essential Pritchett” to be “elusive of all critics”:

[It] is precisely this elusiveness—the lack of a sufficient number of clear interpretive clues—that renders the stories resistant to New Critical dissection. Interpretation of Pritchett stories is sometimes frustrated because causality is dim or ambiguous […] In fact, most Pritchett stories seem to be wafted away in the wind as heavy critical machinery is driven up. \(9\)

Another reviewer feels that “in Pritchett’s stories nothing is ever quite resolved; indeed, having come full circle, his situations seem to dissolve at the very place where they began”.\(^10\)

Even some of those genuinely interested in his craft—who believe it worth study—have not managed to come to terms with it, reluctant as they are to abandon the crutch of plot summary. Ironically, the lavish praise critics have given Pritchett—praise intended to give him the recognition he so richly deserves—has discouraged detailed critical appraisal outside of this journal. Such unqualified praise gives his achievement the power of the kind of magic trick the old man performs at the end of Pritchett’s “The Aristocrat”. Paradoxically, and absurdly, he seems to be viewed as either too fine a craftsman by his admirers or too unorthodox a practitioner by his detractors to warrant more extensive critical attention. As long ago as 1982, Douglas Hughes made an impassioned plea in a guest editorial, chastising the academic community for its shameful neglect of Pritchett’s substantial body of work.\(^11\) Except for a handful of articles, one book-length study, a chapter of another, and this journal’s special Pritchett issue in 1986, there has been relatively little response to Hughes’s call to arms over twenty years later. Some reviews of Pritchett’s short-story collections come closer to understanding his art, but the promising ideas necessarily lack development, bound as they are by the space limitations of magazines and newspapers. Unfortunately, without further study, Pritchett may indeed be relegated to the list of forgotten short-story artists whose work seems too slight to merit serious scholarly attention. Until as recently as 2005, all of his books
published in his lifetime were out of print, and despite Jeremy Treglown’s new Pritchett biography that should help revive interest in him, his publishers have reissued only Mr. Beluncle and a short selection of his short stories.

While no one can dismiss the role that intuition and talent plays in constructing meaningful fictions, Pritchett fashioned his stories through a long process of writing, re-writing, and revising in order to achieve his intended effect. His technical approach to the short story is widely known. On numerous occasions he has described his curious method of reducing one hundred pages to short-story length. His most famous comment about this is a result of his own speculation: “How did the story change as I re-wrote it, perhaps four or five times, boiling down a hundred pages to twenty or thirty, as I still do? Story writing is exacting work.”

Queried about this statement in a long interview toward the end of his life, Pritchett corroborated his earlier revelation in even greater detail:

Sometimes I’ve noticed that the story which perhaps runs from about fifteen to twenty pages, I look at the manuscript of it and I find I’ve got versions about that high. [...] You do have to cut down, cut down, cut down. With your writing a narrative story of any kind it always seems to you first of all that every event has equal importance, that every bit of it ought to have three sentences to it; when sometimes three words is quite enough.

According to Pritchett, his seemingly effortless style and construction are dearly achieved: “I write most stories three or four times over. I don’t think I’ve ever just dashed off a short story. It takes me quite a considerable time.” Such revealing comments are not confined to his prefaces and interviews. In the second volume of his autobiography, he once again implicates himself as a tireless reviser obsessed with his “protest against the discursive”:

I have an impatient character; for every page I write there are half a dozen thrown away. The survivors are criss-crossed with deletions. [...] There is the fascination of packing a great deal into very little space. The fact that form is decisive concentrates an impulse that is essentially poetic.

Pritchett himself was not the only witness to such claims. Throughout his childhood, Pritchett’s own son, Oliver, now a journalist in his own right, observed his father’s indefatigable manipulation of the printed word first-hand during visits to his study. He has written about these discoveries in a moving forward to a commemorative selection of his father’s work:

The handwritten pages, covered in revisions, crossings out, second and third thoughts, and sideways writing in the margins, were given to my mother to type. They would be revised and typed again and again.

Oliver Pritchett, who has had much practice reading his father’s handwriting throughout his life, corroborates the frustrating experience in speaking of his mother’s inexplicable ability to type Pritchett’s autograph manuscripts:

Her ability to decipher V.S.P.’s handwriting must have been the result of some sort of brilliant telepathy. When he was abroad a five-line postcard from him would take me two days to work out and a letter could last for a week or more.

Even Pritchett’s lifelong correspondent, Gerald Brenan, who also had numerous opportunities to decipher Pritchett’s “almost illegible” handwriting, believed Dorothy’s powers to be just as magical.

From an examination of his papers at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Texas and the Berg Collection in New York, it is evident that the English language was precious to him, but the physical presentation of that language was not. On the backs of
many short-story drafts are rough drafts of book reviews he wrote for the *New Statesman*, or essays he composed for other publications—writings which sometimes interfere with the chronology of a short-story draft. Furthermore, Pritchett delegated all of the typing to his wife, which means that no reader of his manuscripts has the luxury of an occasional typed correction. All of Pritchett’s words are initially handwritten. And while there is no fixed formula for the revisions, the extensive deletions, additions, interleaving of rewritten pages, and roadmaps for Dorothy, they are in evidence throughout his career.

The extensive collection of short-story manuscripts has preserved the evolution of Pritchett’s art, not only throughout his career, but between the drafts of each story. This article focuses on one short story to permit a comprehensive analysis of the additions and deletions, from autograph manuscript to final typescript. The discussion of Pritchett’s revisions shows this exceptional short-story artist at work, sculpting one of the most compact and successful stories of his career, “You Make Your Own Life”.

The simplicity of plot, structure, and language belies the complexity of the story’s scope. Instead of relying on well-wrought psychological portraits, or elaborate plot and setting, Pritchett makes the telling of the story its essence. Impeccable timing, diction, mastery of the vernacular, and narrative technique make “You Make Your Own Life” quintessentially Pritchettian. Like most of his short stories, it has few characters—the nameless narrator, Fred the barber, and Albert, the other customer in the barber shop—but like a Chekhov story it has far-reaching implications.

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While it is tempting to compare Ring Lardner’s “The Haircut” with “You Make Your Own Life”, the two stories are far more remarkable for their differences than their superficial similarities. Lardner creates suspense through his narrator’s folksy, ungrammatical, small-town vernacular—copied from *Huckleberry Finn*—and the barber’s tantalizing digressions, tangents, non sequiturs and repetitions, which cover for Lardner’s lack of plot. While both stories are set in barbershops, the American author’s achieves its comic effects through a relentless monologue—a barrage of language that becomes comical, if tedious. Lardner’s 4,500-word tale suffers from its length, and, once finished, with the suspense diffused, fails to provoke further thought. Contrary to one critic’s observation, “The Haircut” narrator does not engage in a conversation with his out-of-town customer, an omission that necessarily limits its scope. The customer’s passive role precludes closer examination of the barber’s character as well as the veracity of his story. Pritchett’s barbershop story, on the other hand, is a spare 2,200 words, devoid of the inessential, in which subtle verbal and situational irony depend upon a deftly chosen word or phrase. Most importantly, Pritchett’s story involves a tale placed within a crucial if unobtrusive frame—a profound technical difference that enables the writer to transform a mere yarn into the complexity of a truly modern short story.

If V.S. Pritchett had not made extensive revisions in the typescript draft of “You Make Your Own Life”, it would almost certainly not have become one of his most celebrated stories. One can argue that the act of selection—self-editing—that all short story artists must undertake—is just as creative and important as the initial writing. Excising the inessential is an art, and few can have done it better than Pritchett. On the way to the published version, he removes many of the frame-narrator’s speculative remarks about the barber, based on intermittent interpretations of his facial gestures, and judgments.
about his character. Wishing to leave interpretation to his reader, Pritchett creates ambiguities.

The title story from the collection *You Make Your Own Life* exemplifies the breakthrough Pritchett made in the early part of his career as he established his inimitable elliptical style perfectly suited to comic irony. Unlike some writers, whose numerous drafts of particular stories undergo subtle, minor changes from one to the next, Pritchett often made substantial alterations between his autograph manuscript, first typescript with autograph revisions, and final typescript, the most significant of them usually appearing in the first typescript.

Our discussion will begin with a brief comparison between the openings of the autograph manuscript and the heavily revised first typescript. Although the former has a few autograph emendations, it is most interesting for the way in which its opening was restructured. And, except for the opening, a few line corrections, and a handful of rewritten lines, the surviving first version is reflected in the first typescript. As well preserved as the drafts are, however, the first page of the typescript was replaced by one page of autograph manuscript, probably because Pritchett chose to transform the original opening completely. For the purpose of witnessing the evolution of a Pritchett story, the corrected typescript is most revealing and for that reason I have supplied a transcription of this telling draft as an appendix to which I will refer parenthetically during the course of my comparative analysis. To differentiate between the typewritten and handwritten words in the transcription, Pritchett's penned emendations are italicized and his handwritten deletions are represented by a single line through the words. Except for a few emendations, the third version – the typescript carbon copy – is a faithful transcription of the heavily edited first typescript.

Entitled “The Barber” in the top left hand corner of the autograph manuscript, the story begins with a visitor’s description of a town rather than its barbershop. Instead of intriguing the reader with the inviting, veiled sentence of the second version, “Upstairs from the street a sign in electric light said ‘Gent’s Saloon’”, Pritchett allows the visitor to state his purpose plainly, ending the undistinguished three sentence paragraph with two unremarkable sentences. The personal pronouns that begin those sentences make the narrator’s position more important than the story he is about to tell. Here is the opening page of the first draft:

> It was a small town in a valley with a slow mud-coloured river running through it, one long main street and only two good trains in the day. I had an hour to wait. I thought I would get my haircut. Genevieve’s was the name of the place. Permanent nursery 12/6, chiropodist in attendance; it looked like a women’s place. But upstairs an electric sign said “Gent’s Saloon”. It was a small hot back room full of sunlight with newspapers on the chairs. “Take a seat. I won’t be long”, said the barber. He was finishing a man’s shave hair.

> “I haven’t got too long”, I said.

The barber took no notice. He was a young man with fair hair receding & brushed up into the air from his forehead. He clipped away in silence with the sun on his back. He did not say anything to his customer and his customer said nothing to him. There was only the sound of the step of his foot in the room on the floor and the, his grunt and grunts of absorption as he cut and the tedious movement of He said nothing to his customer and his customer said nothing to him. There was only the harsh sound of the razor over the skin, the rattle of the brush in the jar, the step of the barber on the floor and his absorbed breathing.

> I read all the murders in the papers. I read the abductions. There were mothers
clamouring for lost babies, a clergyman’s wife was caught stealing, a man’s wife met his wife on Folkstone pier three days after he had identified her as a drowned body at an inquest, a girl was drowned trying to save a dog. The skeletons of five men killed in the battle of Hastings had been dug up in the Downs. There it was in black & white, very black, very white and big letters. I put the papers down & looked up. I didn’t believe it.21

And here is the opening page of the second draft:

Upstairs an electric sign from the street an electric light sign said “Gent’s Saloon”. I went up. There was a small hot back room full of sunlight, with hair clippings on the floor, towels hanging from a peg and newspapers on the chairs. “Take a seat. Just finishing”, said the barber. It was a lie. He wasn’t anywhere near finishing. He had in fact just begun a shave and the customer was having anything. In a dead place like this town you had to wait for everything. I was waiting for a train, now I had to wait for a haircut. It was a small town in a valley with one long street, one cinema on Thursdays and Saturdays and a slow mud-coloured river moving between willows and the backs of houses.

I picked up the a newspaper. A man had murdered an old woman, a clergyman’s wife sister was caught stealing gloves in a shop, a man who had identified the body of his wife at an inquest on a drowning fatality met her the foil-three days later in Folkestone pier. Ten An. Four thousand Japanese had been killed in an earthquake, an Indian had walked on a bed of barefoot on a bed of fire. Ten miles from this town the skeletons of men killed in a battle eight centuries ago had been dug up in the Downs. That was nearer. Still, I put the paper down. I looked at the two men in the room.22

Pritchett not only transforms the opening, deleting such extraneous, misleading details as “Genevieve’s”, the nursery, and the chiropodist, with their incongruous feminine overtones, but finds his true first line imbedded in the second paragraph. The second draft begins more appropriately with the barbershop and, ingeniously, incorporates all the central elements of the story—the setting, speech from the barber, the rivals upon whom the barber’s story will be based, and the narrator’s keen eye for detail and human behaviour—in the first six lines. The narrative sequence in the first draft makes little sense as we move from town to shop to description of the barber and his work to newspaper headlines. The restructured second draft, however, immerses the reader in the central setting of the story before moving to the larger world of the town, and finally to the outside world through the newspaper headlines.

In order to make the opening more suspenseful, Pritchett moves the description of the barber and his work that appears in the third paragraph of the first draft to the fifth paragraph of the second draft, albeit with substantial alterations—changes that will be examined later in the analysis. This shift slows down the pacing of the story by delaying the introduction of the main characters, and allows for the completion of the more natural progression described earlier. Furthermore, while the paragraph devoted to news stories separates the portraits of the two main characters in the first draft, its repositioning in the second inextricably links Albert, the customer, and Fred, the barber, “best friends” and rivals, whether in the narrator’s opening, the barbershop, or the barber’s tale.

Finally, the editing of the newspaper contents reveals Pritchett’s intentions as well. The news items in the first draft are clearly more numerous and sensational than they will be in the third. Without specifying the publication, the frame-narrator, in three sentences, refers to “all the murders”, “the abductions”, and the “mothers clamouring for lost
babies”. The first draft also includes a “girl [...] drowned trying to save a dog”. This combination of the tragic and absurd is typical eye-catching tabloid fare, emphasizing the incredible, not the credible. In both drafts, a clergyman’s relative is caught stealing but her identity changes from wife to sister, her theft unspecified to a pair of gloves. While the isolated incidents appear similar, the addition of four thousand Japanese killed in an earthquake and an Indian’s barefoot fire walk serve to enlarge the dimensions of the events while making them both more distant and abstract. Ultimately, however, they are weeded out in the third draft or final typescript. Even “the skeletons of five men killed in the battle of Hastings” that had been dug up ten miles from town become simply “the skeletons of men killed in a battle eight centuries ago”—the unspecified number of skeletons and nameless battle reinforcing the extent, distance, and anonymity of the human tragedy. Evidently, Pritchett was not satisfied with the second version because he excised the Japanese earthquake and the Indian fire walk, probably to render the series of events less exotic and more credible. In addition, he probably wished to accentuate melodramatic incidents involving two people, not hundreds or thousands, in order to foreshadow the barber’s own sparsely populated tabloid tale. The sarcastic description of the tabloid itself: “There it was in black & white, very black, very white and big letters”, with its mock plea for the veracity of the written word, has the intended, opposite effect. This phrase is replaced by the subtler “That was nearer”, a sarcastic appraisal of the more personal battle’s comparative proximity. Ironically, the narrator himself believes the “battle of eight centuries ago” to be “nearer” than the incidents mentioned earlier. But as soon as he lowers the paper, he looks at the two men whose story involves all the elements of true melodrama -- passionate love, tragic illness, rival lovers, attempted murder, and attempted suicide. The barber’s story is no less sensational than what he has just read. His matter-of-fact telling in such a common setting only heightens the irony. After all, barbershops are full of forgettable banter, not passionate tales of woe. Even the artful addition of the word “Still” in the second draft, expressing the frame-narrator’s ironic (tongue-in-cheek) feigned interest in the final news item, adds to the comic irony in the passage in a way that the more heavy handed phrase, “I didn’t believe it”, does not.

From the very opening of the published version of “You Make Your Own Life”, Pritchett puts the reader in the nameless narrator’s shoes. Attracted by an “electric light” advertising the “‘Gent’s Saloon’", the narrator climbs “Upstairs from the street” and into the small-town barbershop where he is invited to wait his turn. His succinct description of the shop is followed by a city dweller’s obvious impatience with the slow pace of provincial life. Instead of accepting the inevitable wait patiently, the narrator reveals his unspoken thoughts to the reader in an accusatory tone, frustrated with the barber’s unrealistic estimation and unconscious dishonesty:

> “Take a seat. Just finishing,” said the barber. It was a lie. He wasn’t anywhere near finishing. He had in fact just begun a shave. The customer was having everything. In a dead place like this town you always had to wait. I was waiting for a train, now I had to wait for a haircut. It was a small town in a valley with one long street, and a slow mud-coloured river moving between willows and backs of houses."

Paradoxically, Pritchett creates suspense through inaction at this early stage in the narrative, and uses the narrator’s contempt for small-town life to accentuate its dislocation from the outside world. Stranded in this “dead place”, where “you always had to wait,” he must “wait for a haircut” while “waiting for a train” (my italics). The telescoped view of the “small” valley town with one “long” street, and a “slow” mud-coloured river “moving between willows” recalls the bucolic frieze on Keats’s Grecian
urn. The willows that have been planted in the second draft are not mere incidental ornaments by the side of the river but a symbol of grief for unrequited love or the loss of a mate. Later in the analysis we will see that even Pritchett’s choice of tree is consistent with the story’s themes.

27 After establishing the dislocated, seemingly uneventful identity of the town, the bored narrator picks up a newspaper, shifts his and the reader’s attention to the predictably sensational stories—distant stories of murder, shoplifting, unsolved mysteries, and exhumed war graves that, ironically, have become banal through the frequency of their appearance. Only in retrospect will the reader understand Pritchett’s abrupt transition from peaceful town to distant troubles involving barbarous acts, the last of which confirms their great distance from the slow time of the town:

Ten miles from this town skeletons of men killed in a battle eight centuries ago had been dug up at the Downs. That was nearer. Still, I put the paper down. I looked at the two men in the room.24 (My italics)

28 Like a camera, the narrator’s eye refocuses on the scene before him. The short, declarative, objective sentences beginning with subjects and verbs force the reader to see the scene distinctly, each sentence establishing a separate image or physical detail. The full stops enforce the languid rhythm experienced by nameless narrator and reader alike. Herein lies one of the pacing techniques more closely associated with verse than prose—a hallmark of the modern short story that is rarely used in the novel: “I could see the man in the mirror. He was in his thirties. He had a swarthy skin and brilliant long black eyes. The lashes were long too and the lids when he blinked were pale.”25 In this section of the revised typescript, Pritchett has crossed out a number of the frame-narrator’s subjective, interpretive remarks about both customer and barber that judge, compare, and evaluate. He must have realised that the effectiveness of “You Make Your Own Life” would depend, in part, on the relative discretion of the frame-narrator, especially in that narrator’s opening descriptions of the main characters. With this objective in mind, many of the passages have been excised throughout the second draft while others have been completely rewritten (see appendix). In his description of Albert, for instance, we see Pritchett has deleted “a well-made man” from “He was a well-made man in his thirties.” The phrase “bright long black eyes like a gypsy’s” sheds the comparison and trades “bright” for “brilliant” to become simply “brilliant long black eyes” (appendix ll.4-6). Yet almost imperceptibly, Pritchett’s frame-narrator begins to describe the customer in more subjective terms, unable to report everything wholly without a “suggestion” of interpretation or figurative language. He adds “just that suggestion of weakness” to the customer’s eyes, and where once there was “a glister to his skin like a Hindu’s”, there is now “a sallow glister” (app.ll.7-8) as he sits “engrossed in his reflection, half smiling at himself and very deeply pleased”. Ever careful to monitor his narrator’s assessment of the main characters, Pritchett restricts his interpretive remarks to their facial gestures. Fortunately, the incongruous “bright violet socks” that were probably intended to complement the customer’s “very dandyish” dress, described before his exit, but merely detract from the portrait at this stage, have been removed as well (app. l.11).

29 Initially content to present the barber as “a careful man”, Pritchett deletes his frame-narrator’s direct, unequivocal statement about character in the typescript, preferring to restrict his narrator’s description to the barber’s actions. The rewritten description of the barber as “careful and responsible in his movements but nonchalant and detached” assigns human qualities to “movements” in a way that differs from the earlier, more
objective reporting of the story’s opening (see app. ll. 12-13). Ever careful to preserve his narrator’s objective tone, Pritchett has pruned away the likening of his barber’s regard for the customer to a painter’s regard for a “picture in a frame” (see app. ll.13-15). This comparison has been replaced by a simple physical description of the barber, lifted from the third paragraph of the autograph manuscript, that balances the description of his customer in the previous paragraph. At the end of the same typescript paragraph we find a similar deletion. Although Pritchett has added “A peculiar look of amused affection […] on his face”, as he looks at the black-haired man, for the purpose of enticing the reader, he has crossed out the more extensive interpretation of the “look” that seems to compare the customer’s “soaped head” to “a piece of putty” (see app. ll. 19-21). Clearly, Pritchett wishes to arouse curiosity about both characters without giving away too many interpretive clues. Yet, even from these early revisions, whether deletions or additions, whether in the autograph manuscript or the corrected typescript, we can see that the barber is the focus.

At this stage in the narrative, in fewer than 400 words, Pritchett has not only established the story’s setting, situation, tone, and characters, but has begun a subtle, intentional comparison between the barber and his customer. Both men are in their thirties, but the customer has curly “glossy black hair” to contrast with the barber’s “fair receding hair”. Pritchett’s redundant insistence on this comparison in the first draft has been removed from the second draft: “They were youngish men, both of them, the fair and the dark, much the same age” (app. ll.54-55). Their notable lack of conversation indicates that they are either perfect strangers or know each other well. We are left to wonder whether their mutual silence is a result of familiarity or intimacy. The barber, though silent, is in control of all of the action and movement in the story. The narrator’s active verbs, multiplied through revision, and longer sentences, reinforce the sense of speed with which the barber works as he is “rattling his brush,” “wiping the razor,” “pushing” the chair, “soaping the head” (app. ll. 16-19). Clearly, the barber is in the dominant position as he prepares his customer for the final treatment, and the narrator’s humorous description of his “machine”, replete with war imagery, suggests an instrument of torture in a laboratory or an electric chair:

He wheeled a machine on a tripod to the back of the man. A curved black thing like a helmet enclosed the head. The machine was plugged to the wall. There were phials with coloured liquids in them and soon steam was rushing out under the helmet. I don’t know what happened to the man or what the barber did. […] [T]hat customer had everything. 26

To reinforce the implied reference to war, the narrator describes the customer as “dressed in a square-shouldered grey suit” and likens him to “a guardsman” (app.ll.42-43), a comparison the author has added to the second draft. The long sentence that has been deleted on page three is even more revealing. Just as he has been editing out some of the visitor’s interpretations of the barber’s facial expressions, Pritchett has deleted several of the visitor’s interpretations of the customer’s expressions: His “eyes closed into long slits with satisfaction like a cat’s”, and “he smiled slightly at himself in the mirror and then, with the idle luxurious step of a cat, he went to the door.” (app. ll. 39-40, ll. 46-48). Always sensitive to language, Pritchett has removed both cat comparisons along with their hackneyed associations and exchanged Albert’s parting “wide smile” for a faint one. The “unmistakable” “look of dandified derision” (app. l. 49) that has been penned into the second draft has been crossed out in the third and final
draft. The barber’s parting good-bye is accompanied by “a small hardly perceptible smile too” (app. l. 51).

At this point, approximately a third of the way through the story, the frame-narrator becomes more of a participant as he succeeds Albert in the barber’s chair. Pritchett continues to permit him to interpret the barber’s behaviour, piquing the reader’s curiosity, but he has deliberately repressed explicit comparisons that may either anticipate the content of the barber’s story or undermine the balance of the narrative. The following passage is a good example of this judicious deletion:

The barber put the sheet round me. The barber was smiling to himself like a man remembering a tune. He was not thinking about me. The small sardonic smile like the abstracted smile of a man who remembers a story he has been told and is getting another unsuspected flavour from it.

(app. ll. 57-62)

Similarly, the “stronger and more sardonic” smile (app. ll. 95-96) has been changed to a “faint”, “sardonic” smile in the second draft and deleted altogether in the final typescript. One of the salient differences between the drafts is effected through changes in the narrator’s perception as Pritchett attempts to make him more of an observer than an interpreter.

We learn much more about Albert in his absence, not through the action perceived by the narrator, but through the barber’s own story within the story. Even though Albert leaves the shop, the barber remains eerily preoccupied, smiling to himself as he “glanced at the door where this man had gone”, long after his departure. While making reference to Albert, the barber is described as having “nodded to the door” (app. l. 82) in acknowledgment of Albert’s weekly visits. This too has been written into the second draft. Although they have been crossed out in the corrected typescript, the descriptions of the barber’s reaction to Albert’s exit and the barber’s altered “state […] as if he were still with that man who had just gone out of the door” (app. ll. 78-79), show that Pritchett wished Albert to haunt the shop. Even at the end of his story, the barber is said to have “glanced sardonically at the door as if expecting to see the man standing there” (app. ll. 191-192).

Of course the most profound changes in the second draft are those involving the central character, the barber himself, as he is transformed from a crude, sinister, sardonic, vengeful, scheming villain, into a more mysterious, illusive figure—a transformation that necessarily alters the relationships between the characters and has far-reaching implications for the story as a whole. Through a close examination of the extensive revisions, we can see Pritchett altering the very conception of the barber through his frame-narrator’s evolving portrait. Many of the changes involve the deletion of expressive smiles that punctuate the barber’s dialogue. One of the added smiles, however, demonstrates the subtlety of the revisions. In the first draft, the barber is portrayed as “a dull young man with pale blue eyes and a look of ironical stubbornness in him” (app. ll. 72-73). Conscious of the rigidity of such a statement, Pritchett has inserted one of his panoply of smiles, a simile that complicates the reader’s conception and builds suspense: “The small dry smile was still like claw marks at the corners of his lips” (app. l. 74). Later on, the barber makes an observation with a veiled but sadistic “grim sort of pleasure”, in reference to the girl, that Pritchett has crossed out (app. ll. 136-137). At the point at which the barber divulges the identity of Albert’s love interest, Pritchett has cut away another, more sinister expression conveyed through the barber’s eyes and mouth: “His small pale eyes glared a little but the dry smile was still on his lips” (app. ll. 148-149).
Furthermore, throughout the first draft version of the barber’s tale are numerous telling remarks, that have also been excised because their insistence make him overtly vengeful and threatening. The following passage demonstrates just how pervasive is the first draft’s more marked characterization:

The barber stared me hard in the face.

“Keep quiet”, I said. “Or you’ll be a corpse”.

“And so he would if he didn’t keep quiet”, he said, relaxing his stare.

“Consumptives want it, they want it worse than others, but it kills them”, he said.

“I thought you meant you’d kill him”, I said.

The young barber gave a short, dry laugh. He chuckled

looked at me scornfully.

(app. ll. 197-207)

This passage is indicative of the original barber’s more pronounced malevolence in the first draft before he was metamorphosed through Pritchett’s artful excision. Presumably, he recognized that by diminishing the role of the frame-narrator, and simultaneously modifying the barber’s character, he could create the ambiguity necessary for more evocative, impressionistic literary possibilities. The revisions in the second draft show Pritchett creating a more subtle portrayal through the implied but unsaid. And as we shall see through a close examination of the story’s most important section, he knows just how to engineer such a transformation, pruning dialogue, creating silences, manipulating the plot, and restructuring the sequence of events so that the barber’s story haunts us long after the final sentence.

Appropriately enough, Fred the barber’s story begins with a brief comment about Albert’s receding hairline. Curiously, it is the barber who has the receding hairline, not Albert who has a full head of “glossy black hair” (app. l. 2). From the outset then, the reader must wonder about the veracity of the details that follow. A second unsolicited comment from the barber, an observation about Albert’s throat, indicates his desire to engage the narrator in conversation. Pritchett has revised this exchange extensively in order to draw both narrator and reader into the drama. In the first draft, without the narrator’s participation, the barber appears overzealous, indiscreet, and loquacious. Pritchett has changed the passage dramatically, however, by enlisting his narrator as discreet participant and commentator, adding simple actions that retard the pace and create suspense between the lines (see app. ll. 116-120). Gone are his earlier, subjective asides, replaced by the eerie revelation of an attempted suicide, spoken in the barber’s hushed tones close to the neck with a “small firm friendly grin” and scissors in hand. A surprisingly modern aural flashback has been penned in as well. The narrator suddenly hears the echo of Albert and Fred’s earlier good-bye: “So long, Fred”. “Cheero, Albert” (app. ll. 119-120).

In the corrected typescript, Fred recounts his story about Albert’s tuberculosis and suicide attempt with subtle, unobtrusive interpretive commentary from the narrator. Except for the narrator’s five brief phrases, this melodrama is uninterrupted for two pages. One has the illusion of a dialogue but this is a monologue that continues until the end of the story, with a handful of the frame-narrator’s comments describing the barber’s
gestures and actions. Nevertheless, the narrator’s involvement evinces important responses, misunderstandings, ironies, and clarifications.

Instead of allowing the barber to spill the contents of his story prematurely in the succeeding paragraph and diffuse the suspense, Pritchett has cut fifteen sentences of background information from the second draft, the important details of which have been condensed, refined, and relocated in the conclusion of the final typescript. This substantial deletion helps to maintain the reader’s interest in a character that might otherwise be rendered a loquacious bore (see app. ll.122-134). Already a mature writer when he crafted “You Make Your Own Life”, Pritchett understood that silences are often more suspenseful than conversation. Dialogue should not be a verbatim record of what has been said, especially not in a short story where every word counts. It must advance action and wherever it has not, Pritchett has pruned it. This simple principle is the foundation for his elliptical style and one can see merely by glancing through the appendix just how exhaustively it has been applied.

The barber’s speech itself becomes increasingly elliptical as he nonchalantly tells his tale of woe. Speaking in half sentences, “absently”, accompanied by the sound of his scissors, he tells a disturbing story in the vernacular that is, ironically, anything but “usual”. We can see that Pritchett has weeded out the narrator’s perfunctory questions designed to further the conversation, preferring the barber’s unfiltered monologue. The reliability of the barber’s narration is most in question once the frame-narrator becomes the listener. In short, clipped phrases, lacking proper quotations and subjects, relayed indirectly by the frame-narrator, the barber begins his seemingly dispassionate account of the suicidal Albert: “He fell in love with a local girl who took pity on him when he was ill, when he was in bed. Nursed him. Usual story. Took pity on him but wasn’t interested in him in that way” (app. ll. 138-141). Despite his denial, the barber’s insistence about the local girl’s isolated emotion of pity suggests she may have had romantic interest in Albert, especially in a story full of irony. After all, the barber describes her as “A very attractive girl”. He suddenly reveals her identity after a pregnant pause: “Matter of fact”, said the barber stepping over for the clippers and shooting a hard sideways stare at me. “It was my wife” (app. ll. 146-147, my italics for autograph addition). To further complicate the situation, we learn that Albert the consumptive, “got it badly” and must have been passionate about and full of desire for the girl who became the barber’s wife. Furthermore, while we know from the first draft that Albert and Fred have known each other since childhood, Pritchett has added “Used to be his best friend. Still was” to Fred’s account of Albert, a comment full of irony (app. l. 154). Even the characters’ background changes from one version to the next. The following passage from the first draft, that has been crossed out in the second draft, shows that the girl was first Albert’s, not Fred’s: “She knew him before she knew me. But she went away for a couple of years to look after a lady and when she got fed up she came back. Then I took up with her” (app. ll. 156-159). Pritchett has removed this background from the story in order to make our conception of the barber more ambiguous. While the original version makes him more villainous—an unscrupulous man who steals women away from sick friends, chuckling about his success, the revised draft creates the kind of ambiguity for which Pritchett is famous. Similarly, he has deleted the barber’s mention of Albert’s visits to the girl’s shop—a passage that betrays obvious jealousy “in the same tone of amused scorn” (app. ll. 168-170). Yet Pritchett has salvaged an idea from the too obvious expression of jealousy: “I didn’t mind. I knew my mind. She knew hers” (app. l. 172). To preserve the potential irony of the
barber’s supposed confidence in the couple, he has also deleted the more insecure line, “I was glad someone was looking after her” (app. ll. 172-173). All the while the barber expresses and reiterates his confidence in the harmlessness of the river excursions, we cannot discern the reality of the situation. His insistence on purportedly knowing the minds of the other players could be a sign of complete confidence or utter insecurity. Likewise, his seemingly permissive attitude about the river excursions could be interpreted variously. Yet even if we are willing to accept the barber’s self-proclaimed confidence in his wife and “best friend”, we soon realise that the sanctioning of their outings may be part of a more sinister scheme. The barber’s description of the river’s unhealthy humidity in the first draft is utterly factual, but the few words Pritchett has added to the second and third drafts belie the barber’s subtle competitiveness. In the second draft the barber speaks “reflectively” (app. l. 178), and makes an ambiguous reference with the indeterminate subject “It” to either the origin of Albert’s illness, or the complex triangle relationship (see app. l. 179). And in the final typescript, Pritchett has written in an even more telling phrase that hints at Albert’s tactical mistake in his and the barber’s fight for the girl: “That’s when he made his mistake”. Consistent with this competitive tone is a more piquant two-sentence addition to the second draft: “He couldn’t get away with it.” He said. “He was smiling at the past” (app. l. 184). Though the first of these sentences betrays the possibility of a malicious barber full of pent up jealousy and ill-will, the description of the barber’s smile has been excised from the third draft because it portrays him as pleased with his rival’s misfortune, gloating about his demise.

The barber’s account of his and his wife’s visits to the convalescing Albert is modified as well. Pritchett has crossed out his frame-narrator’s detailed assessment of the barber’s character, replacing it with a comment about his “cocksure irony” (see app. ll. 192-193). In the first draft, in mentioning his and his wife’s visits to Albert’s before they were married, the barber explains that “Both of us used to go” (app. l. 188). This sentence has been deleted in the second draft, leaving the reader to wonder about Albert and the girl’s relationship during the day, before the barber would “turn up in the evenings” after closing (app. ll. 188-189). We cannot determine if Albert’s lurid bedside invitation to the girl in the barber’s presence is a provocative joke or merely a pathetic plea because the barber’s “short laugh” punctuating his retelling could be interpreted variously in our mind’s ear (app. ll. 194-196).

Pritchett allows the barber to react with fervor during his telling of the attempted murder, but he has removed the barber’s defensive explanation which the reader might associate with a possessive, jealous man—a figure whose demeanor would be inconsistent with the self-assurance Pritchett has fashioned for him in the second draft (see app. ll. 211-213).

The barber’s unsolicited remark “I rumbled him” (app. l. 247), meaning he uncovered Albert’s plan, uttered while singeing the narrator’s hair, has been crossed out of the second draft to preserve the ambiguity of the rivalry. Yet these three words and the deleted sentences that follow suggest that the barber may have been uncertain about his own relationship with the girl and sought a way to diffuse his friend’s threat. Once again, Pritchett has made deletions consistent with his subtler portrait of the barber.

After finishing “You Make Your Own Life”, we cannot be sure that the girl loved the barber more than Albert, or if Fred simply destroys his rival by allowing his “best friend” Albert to endanger his health on the river. The autograph manuscript confirms a more
pronounced vengefulness and malevolence in the barber while the deletion of numerous lines, facial gestures, and vindictive phrases makes the barber more sympathetic, still allowing for the possibility of his retaliatory scheme in the end. There is no “black and white” (see transcription of p.1, first draft) for the mysterious relationships between the three main players in the final version of this understated drama. And it is our inability to explain beyond a doubt that enhances this most thought-provoking fiction.

Most critics who have written about “You Make Your Own Life” believe the barber implicitly, but the role he plays in the trio makes his account necessarily subjective. If he is indeed an unreliable narrator, to what extent is he telling the truth? In an overtly ironic story, which lines mean the opposite of what they say? Why does Albert’s brief appearance in the beginning of the story completely contradict the barber’s portrait of him? And what is the explanation for the trio’s continuation? What, after all, is the complex nature of their continued association?

An examination of numerous short-story drafts reveals Pritchett’s expert fashioning of the unspoken or the unsaid. There are two kinds of unsaid – what has been deleted from the story and the far more subtle, illusive unsaid that remains in silences. Yet the two work in concert; the first must be excised to create the second. Distilling the essence from a tangible whole creates the desired effect. And, as in impressionist painting in which viewers see different things, Pritchett’s stories permit his readers to interpret different things on different readings. One may wonder why he felt it necessary to work in such a laborious, meticulous manner. But the answer becomes clear once we have consulted his revisions. His initial drafts often contain explicit descriptions of his characters’ appearances, inner thoughts, and motivations that, through extensive revision, deletion, and rewriting make for subtle narratives that give the reader a more active role in the interpretation of the stories. Instead of writing to measure, Pritchett prefers to exceed it and then to cut out unnecessary material in successive drafts. The mere writing of the over-explicit passages gives him a more tangible sense of the characters he has created—a keen sense that enables their elliptical yet convincing presentation. Pritchett’s stories, like Chekhov’s, continually disclose the complexities of human nature through subtle evocation.

Pritchett is a maximalist, not a minimalist, whose well-wrought, concentrated stories owe their uncommon intensity to their creator’s meticulous revisions. Dismissed by some readers as a merely traditional writer, he is actually a deft innovator whose genius for making and re-making is in evidence throughout his career.

Extracts and quotations from the three drafts of V. S. Pritchett’s “You Make Your Own Life” and Jonathan Bloom’s computer drawn transcription of the corrected typescript are reproduced here by permission of PFD on behalf of the Estate of V. S. Pritchett. Permission was also granted by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin for use of this material in its V. S. Pritchett Collection.
NOTES

20. The following discussion is based on the three successive drafts of “You Make Your Own Life” in the Pritchett Collection at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin: an autograph manuscript with autograph revisions (9 pp.), a composite autograph and typed manuscript with substantial autograph revisions (12 pp.), and a typed carbon copy manuscript with few autograph emendations (11 pp.).
21. This autograph manuscript, the first known version of “You Make Your Own Life”, is entitled “The Barber”.
22. Autograph manuscript first page of the heavily revised typescript of “You Make Your Own Life”, Pritchett Collection, HRC. The transcription of the typescript continues from this point in the appendix.
ABSTRACTS

V. S. Pritchett s’est rendu célèbre en tant que nouvelliste avec le recueil You Make Your Own Life publié en 1938. “Revision as Transformation: The Making and Re-Making of V.S. Pritchett’s ‘You Make Your Own Life’” s’emploie à reconstituer la genèse de la nouvelle qui donne son titre au recueil, à partir des trois manuscrits originaux afin de montrer l’évolution de l’écriture de Pritchett et l’intérêt de l’auteur pour les espaces blancs et le non-dit. Les premières ébauches de ces trois nouvelles offrent une description exhaustive des personnages, de leurs pensées et de leurs motivations. Après révision, les versions publiées nous présentent des nouvelles elliptiques qui donnent au lecteur un rôle actif dans l’interprétation du récit. La transcription du dernier dactylogramme de la nouvelle étudiée se trouve reproduit en appendice afin d’aider le lecteur à mieux suivre l’analyse des modifications apportées par l’auteur entre ce jet et la version définitive.

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Jonathan Bloom has taught at the universities of Oxford and Paris. His work has appeared in the Sewanee Review and his book, The Art of Revision in the Short Stories of V. S. Pritchett and William Trevor, will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in autumn 2006. He is currently working on an edition of the letters and diaries of V.S. Pritchett.