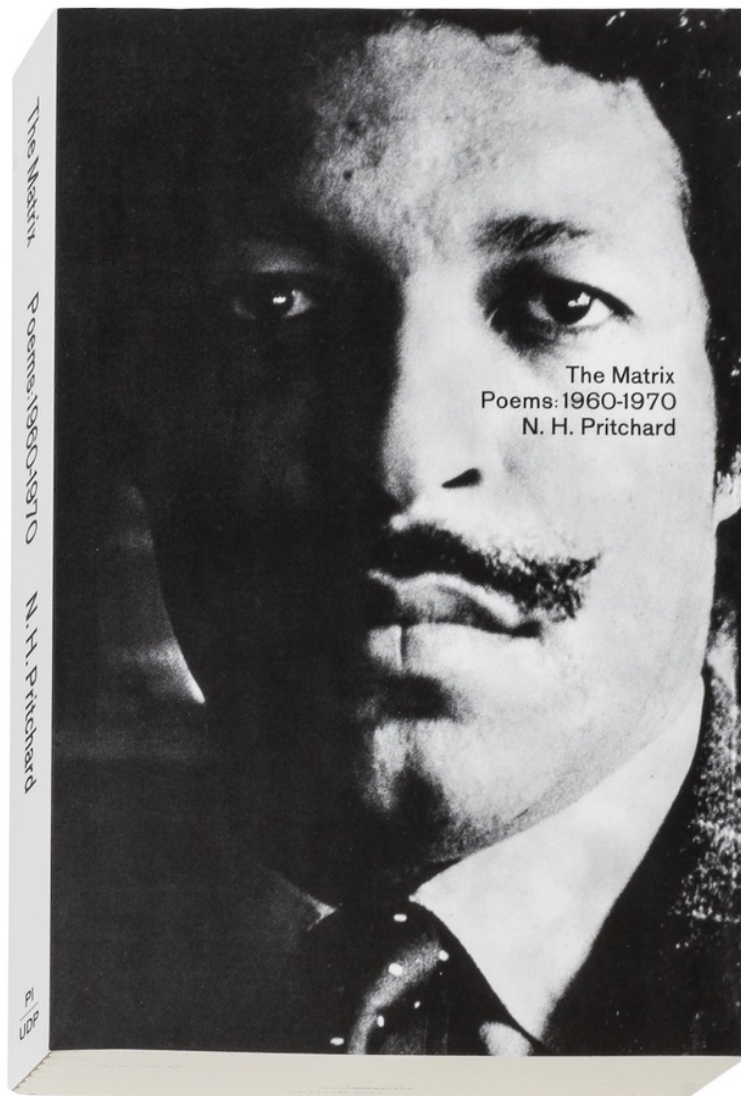


Matrix Revolutions

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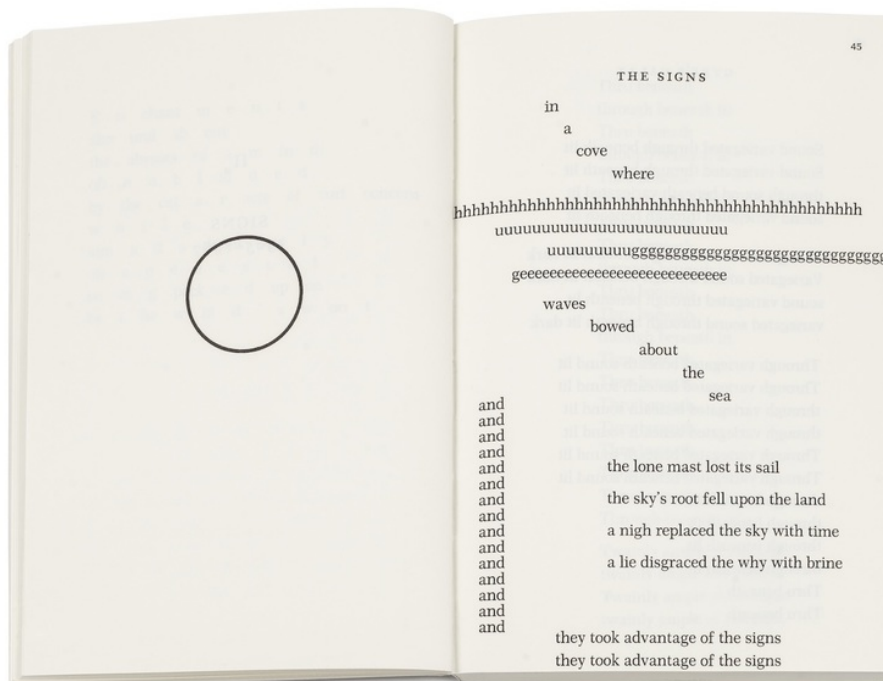
April 27, 2021 • David Grundy on N.H. Pritchard's *The Matrix* (1970)



Cover of N.H. Pritchard's *The Matrix*, 1970 (Primary Information, 2021).
N.H. Pritchard, *The Matrix*. New York, New York: Primary Information and Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021. 113 pages.

THE MATRIX is one of the most radical—and most important—books of poetry of the 1960s. It's also one of the most mysterious. A new facsimile reissue of N. H. Pritchard's first collection—along with DABA press's republication of his only other book, *EECCHHOOEESS* (1971)—provides an opportunity to re-examine an extraordinary and extraordinarily neglected poet whose work continues to evade capture. Born in New York and of West Indian descent, Norman Henry Pritchard II considered attending Columbia on a sports scholarship but ultimately studied art history at NYU, where he wrote an MA thesis on Eastman Johnson's paintings on "the Negro theme" under art historian Robert Goldwater. Discovering the bohemian and artistic life of the East Village, he befriended artists including Philip Guston and Allen Ginsberg and joined the Umbra Poets Workshop, a proto-Black Arts Movement collective, where he found a natural home alongside experimental writers such as Oliver Pitcher and Lloyd Addison. Like theirs, Pritchard's work was invariably political, but almost never in expected ways. Early, uncollected poems feature dedications to civil-rights activist James Meredith and allusions to Billie Holiday. But Pritchard's work is radical beyond simply writing *about* the events or figures of the era. Rather, in W. F. Lucas's wonderfully suggestive phrase, it "decomposes the reader by sight and sound." A poetry of shattered rites, it offers disorienting reconfigurations of our coordinates for race, identity, and thought, interrogating the very grounds of being.

In 1967, Pritchard had what he called a "theosophical" awakening, which led him to develop an aesthetic he named "transrealism." Drawing on apophatic theology, the *I Ching*, and Quaker mysticism, Pritchard defined transreality as "more ancient than time, for its essence is absence"; as "unceasing elliptical change" offering a "path into that which is without change." Put more simply: "transrealism = O." In *The Matrix's* opening poem, "Wreath," the "O" is at once funerary emblem and poet's laurel. Elsewhere, it suggests the number zero, the letter *O*, Empedocles's definition of God, poetic apostrophe, the chemical symbol for oxygen, and the void: a negative presence constitutive of being itself, a perpetual echo of an originary noise we can't hear. Deploying elements of concrete and sound poetry, Pritchard treats poems as textual shapes, splitting individual words through unconventional spacing that functions something like electronic distortion in music. Poems like "Aswelay" and "Gyre's Galax" repeat and alter common words and phrases, forcing an interrogation of their origins and meanings; Pritchard's recordings of these poems enact a kind of precursor to hip-hop looping, while also paralleling the use of space in the work of free-jazz musicians like Bill Dixon (with whom Pritchard collaborated) or in the minimalism of Julius Eastman. Visually, Pritchard emphasizes paratextual features such as gutters and margins, turning the book's pages into zones of punning drama, "forums of ruined will." By the time the eye has managed to rearrange a single line into its constituent parts, the form of the whole has slipped away: a reading experience akin to what Fanny Howe calls "bewilderment"—the collapse of master narratives of conquest and power.



Interior of N.H. Pritchard’s *The Matrix*, 1970 (Primary Information, 2021).

At times suggesting nature poetry—“a montage / a collage / of bucolic silences”—these poems are caught between the transient and the fated, with brief moments of rest and fulfillment—rural landscapes, erotic reveries, visionary dawns—offset by alcoholic wandering, urban homelessness, funereal rites, “DOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO.” A particularly grim and historically resonant visual pun sees the word “Passage” printed in the gutter between facing pages, literally down the middle of the book. Yet from the very experience of loss and dispossession—“ghosts / hovering . . . in words / from an unknown / tongue”—Pritchard’s “decomposed” poems begin to reach toward another light, to “return / in something other than urn.” The book’s closing section consists of textual “objects”—the letter *A* composed entirely of *Z*s; the word “rising” printed upside down and so “falling” down the page. Its final poems repeat the words “LOVE” and “PEACE” in ecstatic capital letters, with the transrealist *O* returning as an open-ended completion that is, like the Ghanaian *Sankofa*, both beginning and retrieval.

Pritchard was probably the most experimental writer in *any* of the numerous scenes in which he participated. His work not only rewrites literary history but presents continuing problems for poetry and thought. In returning to these poems, we must be careful not to reform the forms Pritchard has so carefully deformed, nor to soften their revolutionary edges—all within them that escapes regulation, policing, and capture. At a recent concert, vocalist Elaine Mitchener performed a setting of Pritchard’s words in what sounded at times like an invented language somewhere between speech and song—yodel, whisper, call—the words “BLACK CLOUDBANK / FORMING / ELSE WHERE / IN THE SKY” surfacing as if in the process of formation, a horizon coming into view. On the front cover of *The Matrix*, Pritchard

seems at once to gaze directly at and *through* the viewer, fixed on some indeterminate, distant point. If one shifts perspective, Pritchard's work provides the base for a new conceptualization of language, the formation of a new Black elsewhere—"a l a n c e / to pier c e the p o s s i b l e."

— David Grundy

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