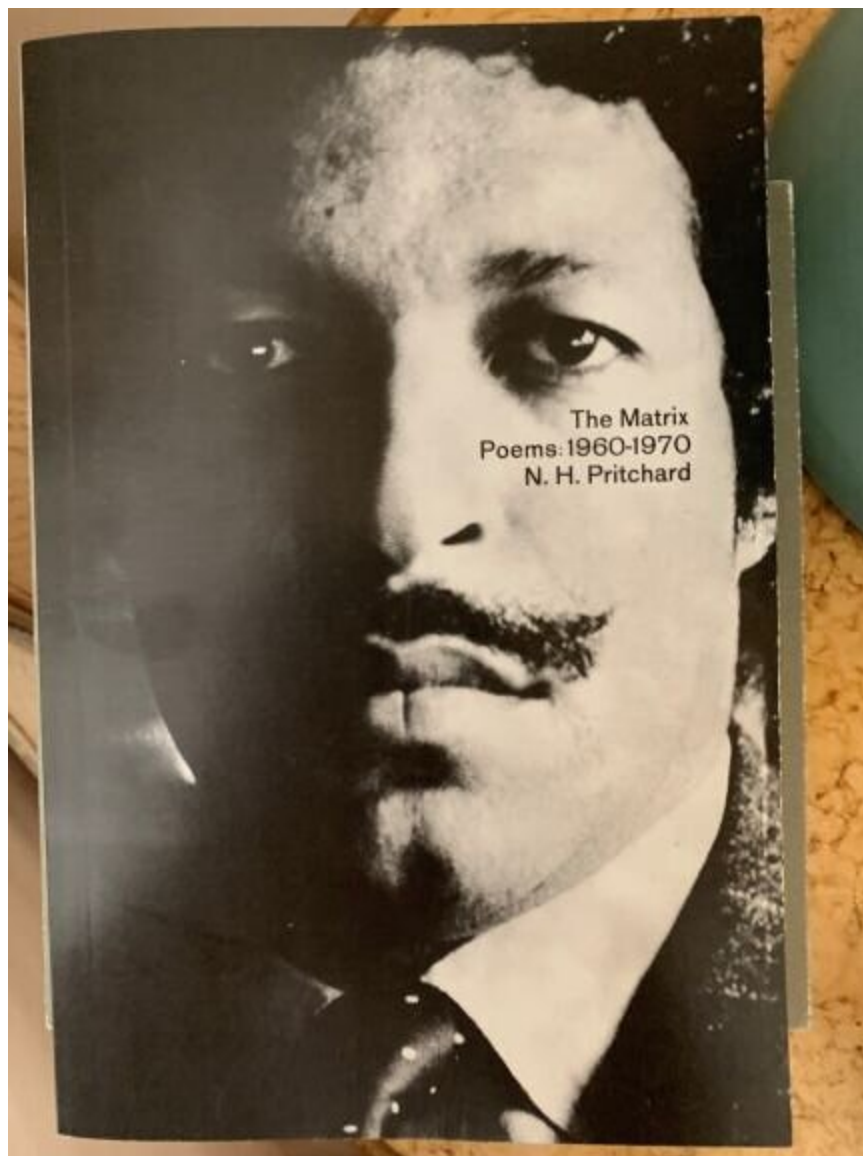


Jul 15 A Reader's Diary: "as if a bird in flight"

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The appearance of this edition of Norman H. Pritchard's book *The Matrix* more than fifty years after its first appearance has created something of a stir in the poetry world, or at least those of its precincts that are concerned with the legacy of the avant-garde. As for me, I think that train left the station long ago, and I'm resigned to walk where I'm going. But still, I was curious too, and despite the fact that early reports cast this rediscovered African-American as a practitioner of concrete or visual poetry, precisely the form of avant-garde activity that interests me least. (I get more visual pleasure *and* more poetic pleasure elsewhere, so why settle for a lukewarm mix?) That description, in any case, was not quite accurate: *some* of Pritchard's work turns out to be vispo, but not most. Especially in the

earlier works here (the book is divided into three sections chronologically) Pritchard reveals himself as fundamentally an imagist poet rather than a “visual” one: a descendent of Pound and Williams—but with a twist. Thus the poem titled “Vista”:

Much is disclosed

to the eye

of an eddy

blinded

by a leaf

The first line inevitably recalls Williams’ “So much depends” and I’m not sure whether the poem is a homage or a parody, or whether it matters. As the title indicates, it’s a poem about seeing, but it’s that in an antagonistic sense: Sight becomes disclosure when it is struck blind by what it sees. And that blindness is embodied poetically by the central word that removes the poem from the realm of the picturable: eddy. Yes, an eddy is something you can see, or of which you can have a mental image, but a blinded eddy? What’s that? Here the eddy is instead the receiver of the image—metaphorically, the consciousness or perhaps I should say the body that is traversed by this blinding seeing. In what seems to me to be Pritchard’s richest and most characteristic works, he interweaves the legible with illegibility as another instance of visibility and blindness by scattered spaces among his words according to their own independent rhythm that seems concerned in part to make unrelated words appear within words, such as the “in” in “mind” and the “age” in “image” here in the beginning of “Metagnomy” (the rare word that gives this poem its title means clairvoyance or divination):

A mid the non com mit t e d

com pound s of t he m in d

an I m age less gleam in g

we at hers h aunts as yet un k no w n

& t a u n t s

thru a c he mist r y of ought

t h at c hang e s

c ours e s

s ee m in g l y

as if a bird in flight

a word

for gotten

in the wind's wont

That really does make me feel like an eddy blinded by Pritchard's leaf, e.g., page. It's a trip, as they used to say. Letters themselves change course as unpredictably as flocks of birds, and then comes that funny bit of high-flown diction: "wont"? really? It's amazing to think that writing like this could have been published the first time around by Doubleday—but remember that 1970 was also the year that Harper and Row published Clark Coolidge's *Space*; Random House had already put out two volumes of Aram Saroyan. Avant-garde poetry, it seems, was briefly fashionable with the publishing industry. That early work of Coolidge's and Saroyan's is the closest thing I know to Pritchard's, but he doesn't seem to have been connected to them. Reviewing the 2008 republication of Saroyan's "minimal poems," Richard Hell took note of the fact that Saroyan "was smoking a lot of grass at the time," and I don't mind telling you that, reading *The Matrix*, I wondered how much acid Pritchard was taking—but then I realized that he was writing as he did even before the drug made the leap from Timothy Leary's Harvard research center to the culture at large. In any case, Pritchard himself is a figure of mystery. The closest thing he published to a programmatic statement is at the front of this book, the warning "Words are ancillary to content." A poetry, not of language then, but of being. Searching online, I can't find any personal recollections of him, even by a figure such as Ishmael Reed, who published Pritchard's work more than once, although a note in a 1967 anthology Reed edited describes a reading where, "When asked his own definition of poetry, N. H. Pritchard uttered guttural, bestial, primitive grunts and groans. Through his intuitive, visionary work, N. H. Pritchard attempts to put together fragments of a lost primordial poetry." Pritchard published a second book in 1971, and a few poems appeared in magazines and anthologies thereafter, but he seems to have ended his literary activity by the mid-1970s and published nothing more before his death in 1996. His lost primordial poetry is like what Mahmoud Darwish called—I quoted it last week—"the fluent poetry of intuition; easy, yet inaccessible, and inaccessible, yet easy."



N.H. Pritchard, *The Matrix: Poems 1960-1970* is published by [Primary Information](#) and [Ugly Duckling Presse](#), 2021.



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