## (REVIEW) An Essential Such as Isn't: The Matrix & EECCHHOOEESS, by N.H. Pritchard

Greg Thomas delves inside the esoteric concrete poetry of N.H. Pritchard in two recently reprinted titles: *The Matrix* (Primary Information: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021) and *EECCHHOOEESS* (DABA, 2021), revealing the mystical and tangentially politically loaded themes and desires in these poems, which language can fail to express.

These two reprinted titles by the African-American modernist N.H. Pritchard (1939-96), originally published in 1970 and 1971, are works of genuine ascetic strangeness. Emphasising typographical space and phonetic play while taking flight from semantic sense, they comprise a significant contribution to concrete-adjacent and proto-L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movements of the 1960s-70s.

It is a truism that black voices ought to be amplified within canons of experimental literature. A more targeted and nuanced version of that statement – for which I lean on Anthony Reed's

FreedomTime:ThePoeticsandPoliticsofBlackExperimentalWriting— is that Pritchard's work deserves revisiting because of the way it activates visual-material form to disrupt semantic sense (in contrast to the meditative minimalism of much concrete poetry—say, Robert Lax). In so doing, it alludes to themes and desires which language fails to express, in a way that is both mystical, in the Mallarméan sense of alluding to the space between words, and tangentially politically loaded.

Pritchard's connection during the 1960s to New York's Umbra group, which grew out of the *OnGuardforFreedom* black-nationalist magazine, is sufficient to suggest the activist connotations of his practice. But his thematic range is that of an esoteric rather than a radical in the vein of, say, Amiri Baraka. Early poems from *TheMatrix*, such as 'Sub Scan', have a loosely diagrammatic quality. In this case, we assume, the eyes and ears are mapping the thronged spaces of a subway carriage or concourse, the perpendicular visual suggesting a cross-section or x-ray:

an old hat 6 shoes hair squeaking signs couples part though apart moving doors met

Elsewhere, in "Outing," one of a number of water-side scenes, graphic and phonetic exuberance pay homage to the poem's non-human subjects:

The tricky-to-parse last line hints at the more daring ways in which visual placement, including the stretching, snipping, and splicing of words, will be utilised later on in the text, becoming a vessel for trans-semantic play. Rhythms and rhyme-patterns start to emulate jazz music, while language seems to reach for the essence of a visual scene, as if relaying its emotional and cognitive import beyond its material components and grammatical trappings. Here is the opening of the catachresis-speckled 'Epilogue':

## F O LL O WING THE C ALM HARKEN IN G CRYSTALS SP READ T HEIR LIGHT G ONE W AS S WEPT A WAY THE O T HER S WAND ERE D ON

"Gone was swept away:" throughout Pritchard's work, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions become nouns, while qualifying statements are offered without a prior subject: "the others wandered on." It is perhaps this mirage-like physical detail which leads some critics to speak of Pritchard's work as religious in tone.

Between 'Signs' (1965-67) and 'Objects' (1968-70), the second and third sections of *TheMatrix*, Pritchard seems to have seized on a kind of revelatory repetitive quality, carried through to the more boldly visual poetics of *EECCHHOOEESS*. The long-form 'Aurora,' the final work in 'Signs,' serves as a threshold piece, stringing a single, gnomic phrase – "there are only pebbles now, soft beneath our feet, & the hour is knew and the lights few, though somewhere isn't that horn a matter that scorn is worn...." – over dozens of pages, through incantatory recurrence, and across oceans of white space, until it gradually disperses in a foam of letters and words.

It's not clear if 'Objects' and *EECCHHOOEESS* were composed in more direct response to the international concrete poetry movement, but sequences from the latter, such as 'Frog,' pull out all the typographical stops. Words are printed backwards, fill unmargined double-spreads, are blown up, strung out in vertical and horizontal bands. At the same time, pieces like 'carbon' probe new depths of gnostic introspection:

eitwa hen heli sneat lethe this ta heta ubur heno heno purte kanda gews

Is there a demotic African-American register buried in these verses? Are these charged anagrammatic codes of some kind?

That the potential cultural and political subtexts of Pritchard's experiments – the marginalisation of black experience in the American-English lexicon, or, as Reed notes, the unswerving essentialism of some midcentury black-activist thought – are never brought to the surface does not mean they are not there, as deep presences within his work. Perhaps the five-word vertical poem 'Point' gets close to the point:

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