

Barry Schwabsky, Some Odd Star — Sidecar

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The first thing I should say about N.H. Pritchard's poetry – but already, even before I've reached that first thing, there's the thing before the first thing: I must admit that I don't feel sure that poetry is the right thing to call it. But never mind, let me start again: one of the first things I should say about Pritchard's poetry is that I don't know how to read it. Now, I know what you're thinking. 'His strategy is to pretend he doesn't know how to read it and all the while he's planning to set forth some brilliant (he thinks) reading that will dazzle us even more after he's lowered our expectations'. Trust me, that's not what I have in mind. It's just that I take seriously the stipulation that Pritchard made at the beginning of the first of the two books he published in his lifetime: 'Words are ancillary to content'. And as Kevin Young warned, in the first thoroughgoing critical appreciation of Pritchard's work, 'the reader's frustration produces the poem'.

One of Pritchard's favourite devices was to use the spacing between letters to contradict the legibility of words. A typical line in one of the poems in *Matrix* reads (I can only approximate the metrics of Pritchard's spacing): 'am id the eth icks hift s tin t ofmo ans'. Yes, you can slow yourself down and put the pieces back together to read: 'amid the thick shifts tint of moans'. But you might wonder if you should instead leave the little letter-clusters as they are, and accept the random associations they generate. Is that 'am id' in the Freudian sense? And what 'ethicks' does that allow me? And so on. Pritchard, I think, was less interested in slowing reading down, in making it difficult in the modernist way, than in frustrating it (which can only happen when it almost seems possible). I agree with Lillian-Yvonne Bertram that 'no attempt to "read" Pritchard's texts can be fully satisfactory or representative without experiencing its sounds' – but how it sounds is precisely the question. Bertram cites the line 'an i m age less gleam in g' and wonders whether it should be read as 'imageless gleaming' or 'image less gleaming', though I can equally read it as something like 'an I'm ageless gleam in G' (whether that's G major or G minor, who knows). I doubt there's a single correct reading.

Faced with the conundrum of how to read such writing, one casts about for context.

Biography? Available information is scant: Norman Henry Pritchard was born to a Caribbean immigrant family in New York in 1939. While a student at NYU, he frequented the Cedar Tavern where he hobnobbed with the Abstract Expressionist painters, a generation his elder, and in the 1960s he became involved with the Umbra group of radical Black writers and poets. His work appeared in magazines, was anthologized, and was recorded for an LP of 'New Jazz Poets'. Pritchard's first book, *The Matrix*, was published by Doubleday in 1970, and it was followed by *Eecchhooeess* the following year, but they were both ignored by the critics. His appearances in print soon trailed off and no further books appeared. Pritchard

was lost to sight, his work virtually forgotten. Was this an accident? The substance of his work as well as the apparent happenstance of its disappearance seems to confirm Charles Bernstein's 'dread' of its intimation that 'the context that imparts meaning to our work is so fragile'.

Writing in 1992 – in an essay that essentially relaunched Pritchard's reputation – Young wondered why his work was never mentioned, 'especially odd given that *The Matrix* was published during the heyday of the international concrete and Black Arts movements, two largely separate but concurrent movements' to which Pritchard's work would seem to be connected. More attention followed, mostly from fellow poets (Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Zachary Schomburg, and Craig Dworkin, as well as Bernstein and Bertram and probably others I'm not aware of), but wider recognition only came in 2021 when *The Matrix* was republished by Ugly Duckling Presse and Primary Information, and *Eecchhooeess* by DABA, a press run by the artist Adam Pendleton. That same year, *Jacket2* published for the first time a lengthy interview with Pritchard that had been recorded by Judd Tully in 1978. In 2022, Pritchard was included in the Whitney Biennial, with a display of thirty sheets of both typed and handwritten words as well as colour and line drawing.

Pritchard was one of the most radically abstract poets of a moment when radically abstract or 'parasemantic' poetry was flourishing – *inter alia*, Aram Saroyan, *Pages*, 1969; Clark Coolidge, *Space*, 1970; Jackson Mac Low, *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*, 1971 – and also the most difficult: compare Saroyan's insouciance about meaning in the face of the irreducible materiality of the printed word with the sense, inescapable in Pritchard, that some vast but unrecoverable cosmic vision underpins the turbid surface of language. And the man himself remains mysterious. Almost nothing is publicly known of his life in the years between 1978 and his death from cancer in 1996. Filling this absence, an understandable impulse has been to interpret Pritchard's writing in view of his sometime association with the Black Arts Movement, which favoured writing with a clear political stance foregrounding ethnic identity – its ambition 'to define & legitimize Black people's reality (*that* which is real to us)', as Young quotes Don Lee. The result is to identify a specifically Black consciousness at the heart of an oeuvre that Pritchard himself aligned with those of Joyce and Beckett (and which seems even more connected to the spatial architecture of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*) rather than with any African American confrères or precursors.

Such efforts to specify an essential Blackness seem strained at best. Bertram, for instance, suggests that in *The Matrix* the poem 'Self' uses 'the tropes of darkness and the slang meanings of "cracker" to direct attention, if obliquely, to constructions of race and particularly those constructions of whiteness', which could be right – but why does this constitute what the title indicates as 'self', presumably including the poet's own self? I can't help recall Darby English's observation in *1971: A Year in the Life of Colour* (2016) that 'art-historical texts that address black modernists tend toward a singular determination to reconcile them with the very ideology their practices escaped', that is, an identitarian ideology, and that such commentaries 'proceed as though the black modernist's basic asymmetry with dominant

models of black political subjectivity was either a problem inviting a solution or a portal to a whole class of questions one is told it is not in one's interest to pursue'. We should probably accept that Pritchard was a modernist in the sense that the painters English was concerned with – Peter Bradley, Raymond Saunders, *et al.* – were modernists, and that, like them, he was determined to hinder rather than facilitate representation of any kind. To assert his freedom, precisely as a Black artist, from an imposed responsibility to represent viewpoints pre-identified as Black.

If Pritchard's anti-representationalism wasn't already clear from *The Matrix* and *Eecchhooeess*, it's become even more evident now with the publication – thanks to Primary Information – of *The Mundus*. This book adds immeasurably to Pritchard's known oeuvre and gives the clearest idea yet of his aims and achievement, at least as of 1971 when the project, begun in 1965, was completed, or abandoned. Paul Stephens, in an Afterword, calls it the poet's 'magnum opus', and that's undoubtedly the case – unless the archives hold more surprises. That proviso leads me to raise a complaint: the Afterword is strangely unforthcoming about the process by which the text of *The Mundus* came to press. When a work is published posthumously, the reader might like to know something of its provenance, and of how the editor worked from the available manuscript or manuscripts. In this case, given the centrality of spacing to the effect of the text, it would have been particularly helpful to understand how the (presumably typewritten) source was transcribed into a digital file for printing. One would also like to know if the archive harbours other manuscripts. Did Pritchard stop writing, or did he only stop publishing?

The text we have here is one that Pritchard often referred to, not as a poem, but as a novel – though he also called it 'an exploded haiku', which is perhaps to say he was ambivalent as to whether the text was the compression of something vast or the expansion of something minute. It begins with what might not exactly be text at all: six pages dotted with dozens of o's scattered like bubbles. Are these letters as letters, or letters used to picture, for instance, a multiplicity of worlds? Would reading these involve repeating the word 'o' hundreds of times, or are these pages simply meant to be looked at, to be registered pictorially, as the chart of a world (perhaps that of the book's title) filled with a multitude of smaller worlds? Some fractured words begin to appear within this field of spheres on the seventh page: 'in m omen tso ft heg one on cesh' (with the final two letters beginning a word that is only completed overleaf) and for about forty pages we see a few lines of words floating amidst this atmosphere or background of o-bubbles. Sometimes the words themselves seem to get stuck for pages in an asignifying stutter: 'poo poo oo opo oo poo poo poo poo' – where the reiterated o's seem to want to merge with their surroundings.

Then the o's subside and we encounter lines of text, beginning, 't hein v isi blero peof tenswa ye' and so on, but this is interrupted after six pages by dense, marginless fields of the letters s and h, upside down and right side up, more text, more repetitions of s and h, more text, eventually with a line of shshshshsh (etc.) crossing the

whole page about a third of the way up, a sort of horizon of silence that then stretches on through eighteen otherwise empty pages until the text returns above it. Twenty-four full pages of hushing sh's follow (interrupted once by a page of text), after which things subside into thirty more pages of O and o, here and there, as before with some text afloat among the field of bubbles, the last line of which is 't asks oil b rit t leno tof.'

If I've focused here on how words and letters appear rather than on what they 'say', that's in adherence to Pritchard's dictum. Part of the content may be borne by words but only part; and part of the content is given to the eye, part to the ear, some seems disputed between the two, and the semantic burden of any of it may be moot. In the Afterword, Stephens helpfully transcribes a passage that is scattered among the O's and o's of the book's last section:

what claim of will did defend its perch with eyes and skies to foster gain searching through the plains of mist remaining quietly regaining might thee be if wat was said should spread of light lif lifting grim to heights of brightbrou brou brou brou brou brou brou brou brou brou brou brought back again to the dirth of shall shall we come kind pilgrim put itcup on by some odd star and farther then strove off to sing the quest of light the truth to bring

Read this way, the words convey both an intense aspiration to transcendence and unruly tropism toward a kind of stuckness in the base materiality (all those pages of 'poo') that underlies but also stymies the communicative flow of language. That's 'some odd star' indeed. But as Stephens certainly understands, such a reorganization of Pritchard's text – shorn of the seemingly irrational breaks that give it its specificity – turns it into a muted shadow of itself. Ishmael Reed once recalled a reading at which, 'asked his own definition of poetry, N. H. Pritchard uttered guttural, bestial, primitive grunts and groans'. Was it the act of definition, or poetry itself, that elicited these raw and painful expressions? Or was this a mockery of the very question? Pritchard takes language apart and, while it might be tempting to take the broken pieces as constituting a puzzle the reader is called on to put back together, it seems to me that *The Mundus* creates a space of disarticulation that urges us merely to observe, with whatever pity or elation this might provoke in us, the scattered remnants of some divine violence.