

# On The Mundus by N.H. Pritchard

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Much has been made of N.H. Pritchard's omission from the canons of avant garde and Black poetry alike, as much as those things can or should be distinguished. Writers as varied as Kevin Young, Anthony Reed, Lillian Yvonne-Bertram, and Craig Dworkin have written to revive and repair his reputation in American letters through careful, often painstaking analysis of his small but mystifying body of work. In connection, many have also noted his disappearance from the Lower East Side literary scene of 1960s New York, after which he would die a relatively early death from cancer in 1996. Now, long after his significant presence in the downtown literary scene and still almost thirty years after his early demise, *The Mundus* (Primary Information, 2024)—considered by Paul Stephens, who wrote the afterword, to be Pritchard's magnum opus—is available in its entirety for the first time to the reading public. It is available, too, to the chroniclers of his life and critics of his work intent on contextualizing his legacy as much as securing it.

“Oddly seem to be getting away from a literary outlook on life seem to be tending more toward a type of theosophical inquiry which of course began to manifest itself in *Mundus* but now appears to pervade my being. Literature in and of itself doesn't seem to have a broad enough scope for me any more,” writes Pritchard in a letter to Ishmael Reed, dated 1968. Like Laura Riding Jackson, another poet-cum-philosopher with an uncertain legacy, Pritchard eventually felt that poetry had become inadequate to his concerns as an intellectual. *The Mundus*, then, represents the boundary between Pritchard's writing practice and his supra-literary “theosophical” concerns, and, as such, it also marks the end of his artistic production as he retreated into hermetic solitude, preferring to keep his visions to himself rather than delivering them unto the crowded bars and galleries of the LES.

All of Pritchard's aforementioned critics have made the case, in one way or another, that his writing practice emphasizes the clash of semantic levels: the literary, the visual, and the musical. Whereas the conventional poem establishes and manipulates a relative harmony between what the reader sees, hears, and “reads,” Pritchard's poems, described by turns as both concrete poems and sound poems, tend to be of multiple minds, their materials separating like oil in water, each layer of foregrounded artifice operating autonomously and only interacting wryly with its neighboring elements. The reader of Pritchard's work tends to be confronted with a stuttering typographic affect characterized by irregular spacing between words and letters which denatures the poem, blinding the mind's eye and leaving the “literary work” to be reverse engineered (if indeed it can be), raising questions about the existential status, nevermind the semantic status, of the poem buried “beneath” or “inside” of the poem. The reader should expect no less from *The Mundus*.

Pritchard's novel, which is really a long poem, is structured according to a visual and musical, even incantatory program, and covered nearly page to page with Pritchard's great symbolic obsession: the O. As the book's cover would suggest, a majority of its pages feature a sporadic, perhaps "natural" arrangement of upper and lowercase O's, among which the narrative of the novel is nested in a sparser arrangement. Immediately, the O's suggest the primordial: per Paul Stephens in the afterword, they may be seen as "effervescent bubbles on the page," rising to the surface of an eons-gone swamp; just as plausibly, "these O's might suggest atomic particles, and at the other [extreme], stars making up distant galaxies." Kevin Young sees the O in Pritchard's work as "the representation of nothing (zerO) and the primal poetic mOan," to which we might also add the "O" of poetic address. At the level of sound, *The Mundus* is apparently echoing with the low drone of a billion O's, maybe moaning louder than the narrator can speak. But at the level of vision, a billion stars burn; or—in the words of a sardonic Hegel felt here more honestly—"a gleaming leprosy" spreads across the sky; or, and most tellingly of all, a billion eyes watch as the story unfolds, and watch doubly as the reader puzzles her way through its textures.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the plot of *The Mundus* represents the encroachment of Pritchard's poetics upon narrativity, this being a sort of final frontier for his work—or else a final threshold. Craig Dworkin, in his essay collection *Radium of the Word: A Poetics of Materiality*, paraphrasing the ideas of literary theorist Michael Riffaterre, suggests that the poetry of N.H. Pritchard is like "a torus of variants and deformations—metonyms and ungrammaticalities—accreting about an absent center around which they veer off and slue back in turn." *The Mundus*, per its subtitle "a novel in voices," tells a story and features characters, though only kind of. It centers on the journey of an unnamed pilgrim—in fact, seemingly a whole group of unnamed pilgrims, designated only by plural pronouns, embarking on their pilgrim's quest, although this quest is not to a destination so much as an idea. Glossing the text, which throws interpretive obstacles in front of the reader even after he has sidestepped its typographic pitfalls, it is apparent that the pilgrims are seeking the enlightenment of the "NOUS." The NOUS, a term in Greek that means "mind" or "spirit," is one of the few recurring "characters" in the book. And yet it is only ever described as having, maybe even *being*, an eye—perhaps one of those that watches over the pages:

he ..... eding ..... g .... mu ..... c ..... h ..... f ..... romt ..... heshi  
mm ..... erin ..... g .... t ..... hewa ..... y ..... p ..... ass ..... edfra  
ugh ..... t ..... w ..... it ..... hit ..... shove ..... ring ..... l ..... acke  
dupa ..... gain ..... stabu ..... m ..... bleha ..... unte ..... db ..... y  
t ..... he ..... t ..... rue ..... k ..... newgi ..... vesre ..... veal  
in ..... ginunwo ..... oedto ..... n .. gue ..... s ..... quest ..... in



understand it as the “inverted Platonism” described by Gilles Deleuze: rather than a vulgar reality which models an ideal one, a miasmic reality that prefigures its own origin, bursting out from the ripeness of a zero.

The journey to the NOUS takes inward paths; as Stephens notes in the afterword, the Latin “mundus” is one of the fundamental concepts of Carl Jung, whose metaphysical framework sought a ground for human experience that lies beyond human history, concerning instead the timeless “collective unconscious” of mankind, itself a distinctly ahistorical concept. (Perhaps the psychoanalyst closer to Pritchard is Wilfred Bion, whose own concept of the “O” concerns precisely an ultimate, unknowable truth that is yet apprehended by the unconscious.) We may detect such an ahistorical impulse—which is apparently something other than mere solipsism—in *The Mundus*, but this does not prevent our own inquiry into the inquiry of the theosopher. Does his metaphysics come to bear on the world? Is this flight actually a descent into the underpinnings of something else? The absent term which structures the text, the very “structure of the structure” which is the blinding, deafening NOUS, can be read in fruitful conjunction with the concept of History as understood by Fredric Jameson in his seminal work *The Political Unconscious*: always acting yet never present, informing the nature of the world but never in it. In this sense, *The Mundus* escapes history into History, from context into concept, and its utopia is the maddening possibility of one. Though it is missing from this publication and perhaps lost completely, Pritchard’s *Mundus* supposedly began with an epigraph from Heraclitus, the Presocratic philosopher known for his belief in the unity of opposites. If the Heraclitean inclinations of Pritchard are to be taken seriously, then it can only follow that his mythopoeic “novel in voices,” set somewhere beyond our reality, is itself an attempt to know the absolute, cosmogenic darkness that engenders that reality—with all of its social contradictions and brute facts—from which his pilgrims first fled.