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Signs of Repression: N.H. Pritchard's *The Matrix*

Kevin Young

The [poetic] text functions something like a neurosis: as the matrix is repressed, the displacement produces variants all through the text, just as suppressed symptoms break out somewhere else in the body.

—Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*

The title of N.H. Pritchard's book of material poems from 1960 to 1970 boldly announces itself as *The Matrix*.¹ In hindsight, this title seems to participate overtly in the semiotic and structuralist texts and contexts of that era, and particularly to anticipate Michael Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry*, which introduces and develops the concept of the matrix. For Riffaterre, the matrix is "a minimal and literal sentence" which the reader transforms into meaning.

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The poem's significance, both as a principle of unity and as the agent of semantic indirection, is produced by the detour the text makes as it runs the gauntlet of mimesis, moving from representation to representation . . . with the aim of exhausting the paradigm of all possible variations on the matrix. [As such,] the matrix is hypothetical, being only the grammatical and lexical actualization of a structure. The matrix may be epitomized in one word, in which case the word will not appear in the text.²

In other and far fewer words, the concept of the matrix is that the matrix is the concept, or rather, the paradigm from which the poem gets produced.

As shown by the epigraph, Riffaterre most concretely analogizes the poetic text as a neurosis produced by repressing this one-word matrix, this single unsaid sign. In turn, the poem itself can be said to be a series of symptoms, of indirect, even unconscious re-presentations of the matrix in "the body" of the text. Notably missing from such a schema is the author; as semiotician, Riffaterre is more interested in what meaning the text makes, or rather, what meaning the reader makes of the text. In this sense, Riffaterre favors Umberto Eco's view of the poetic function as described by Antony Easthope: "The materiality of the signifier in the literary text is such that it is continuously polysemous, continuously available to produce readings in the present beyond any originating 'message' whether as author's intention or ideological signified."³ Easthope's article contrasts (but does not privilege) this

¹ N. H. Pritchard, *The Matrix: Poems, 1960-1970* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970). Pritchard's other book of poems, published a year later, is *EECCHHOOEESS* (New York: New York University Press, 1971).

² Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 19.

³ Antony Easthope, "Literature, History, and the Materiality of the Text," *Literature and History* 9 (1983): 35-36.

semiotic view of the poetic function with Roman Jakobson's more formalist one in which the text remains more or less inevitable, fixed, its meaning stemming from the author's "originating message" and his or her textual choices. To the semiotic sensibilities of Eco and Riffaterre, the poetic function occurs later, in the reader's unfixing the text, or the text's unfixing itself, beyond the matrix or "message" of origin.

Riffaterre and even Eco seem overeager to eliminate the author. Using Riffaterre's own analogy, semiotic criticism functions almost neurotically, repressing the author until *author* becomes the one-word matrix that the semiotic text is about but never mentions. This repression of the author becomes crucial in a case like Pritchard's *The Matrix*. Though published in a handsome hardcover edition by Doubleday, *The Matrix* is never mentioned today, whether as a concrete or an African-American text. This silence seems 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 complete with widely popular and seemingly populist readings, anthologies, and propaganda. Why then has Pritchard (b. 1939) been largely lost? Certainly in theory, Pritchard's poems—ranging from the rhyme and wordplay in earlier poems such as "Mist Place" to the pure and almost absent reason of the later poems "@" and "y"—earn places if not in an established canon, then in the avant-garde and Black Aesthetic camps.

Perhaps the answer lies in the phrase "in theory," with Pritchard emerging as far too abstract for a largely white avant-garde trying to simplify and internationalize the poem by making it graphic. Products such as Robert Indiana's famous "Love" (1966) with its leaning "O" represent an attempt to make the poem "concrete," taking on the qualities of physical object in order to become objective, reader-friendly. At the same time, Pritchard's abstract, even highfalutin work would seem to fall outside the Black Aesthetic's vernacular and political aims. Though often viewed as oppositional to "white poetry," Black poetry shares a rhetoric of "concreteness" related but not identical to that of the white avant-garde. Don Lee argues that "Black poetry in its purest form is diametrically opposed to white poetry. Whereas, Black poets deal in the concrete rather than the abstract (concrete: art for people's sake; Black language or Afro-American language in contrast to standard English, etc.) Black poetry moves to define & legitimize Black people's reality (*that* which is real to us.)"⁴ Pritchard seems positioned outside whichever definition of "concrete" is chosen, whether Black reality or reader-oriented physicality.

Yet Pritchard certainly gathered respect, even acclaim during the late 1960s and early 1970s from Black and white critics alike. According to the African-American avant-garde writer Ishmael Reed, Pritchard received much praise from the white avant-garde, particularly the anthologist Richard Kostelanetz.⁵ Reed himself featured Pritchard in both his Umbra writing workshop and his "multiculti" *Yardbird Reader I*, while Clarence Major included him in his seminal *New Black Poetry*, both of which appeared in 1969. Perhaps more significant is the cover story "Norman Pritchard, poet" in *Liberator* of June 1967—not only does the radical monthly Black magazine feature four poems, two photographs, and the (un)critical commentary of W. Francis Lucas, it affords the necessary authentication of the poet's "Blackness."⁶

⁴ Don Lee, quoted in Walter Lowenfels, "The White Literary Syndicate," *Liberator* 10, no. 3 (March 1970): 9.

⁵ Telephone conversation with the author, August 1992.

⁶ Lucas starts off with the premise that "N.H. Pritchard has poetic genius. And this is not hyperbole." *Liberator* 7, no. 6 (June 1967): 12.

Pritchard was “down,” published in the journal alongside the poems of Sonia Sanchez, the reviews of H. Rap Brown, and articles such as “The White Literary Syndicate.” Much like Zora Neale Hurston, who was fairly well received in her lifetime, Pritchard—whose present whereabouts are unknown to members of his former circles—seems to have fallen not so much out of favor as out of the picture altogether.

Has *The Matrix* not fared well simply because its literariness—defined by Easthope as a trans-historical capacity to survive change and constantly be re-read—is relatively low?⁷ To what degree are the intersecting factors of race, class, and education implicated in the fate of Pritchard’s project? What interests me here is not only the matrix-like repression of the author by semioticians such as Riffaterre, but the repression of Pritchard as author and *The Matrix* as text by marginal and “separate but equal” Black and concrete poetry communities. Perhaps all of these creative and critical movements, while operating at the “cutting edge,” sometimes end up amputating the work they try to save.

Just as the author Pritchard and the text of *The Matrix* are not the same, one need not equate the semioticians’ general omission of the author with their specific term “matrix”; though we should not eliminate the author in purportedly semiotic fashion, neither should we make the author the originating and thus limiting “message” of the poem. Rather, for Pritchard, it is exactly this tension between the Author and the Matrix (the latter here capitalized but not italicized, indicating both the actual book and hypothetical one-word “originating message”) that poses problems for his own literary staying power.

The physicality of the book itself provides many clues about such tensions. The book’s dust-jacket cover contains a black and white photograph “bleed” (that is, to the edges) of the author’s face over which is printed the book’s title in small type (figure 1), even smaller than the type used for most of the poems. At the height of the Black Arts movement, when one might expect an author to show himself as “down” with an afro or a dashiki, Pritchard’s hair is nearly in shadow. Better delineated is his rather plain mustache—in the era of muttonchops—and his small, polka-dotted tie. Not only does Pritchard look nothing like avant-garde, he appears downright unfashionable. Interestingly enough, the clothes are the same as those worn on the cover of *Liberator*. As liberator, Pritchard leans more toward W.E.B. DuBois than H. Rap Brown.

Moreover, the blurbs on the back of the book—more material marketing, like the front cover—not only contradict each other, but appear internally oxymoronic. Allen Ginsberg, the most famous vanguardist featured in the quotations, says “These poems are ‘of our time,’” while Maxwell Geismar places them “in the ‘classicist’ tradition of Joyce and Beckett” after comparing them to “the best abstract painting.” In perhaps the most deadly compliment of all, W. Francis Lucas claims that “the future inevitably holds a great deal in store for his pristine sensibility.”⁸ Pristine qualities might seem out of place in an era of protest, and do not accurately represent the work of the Black concrete poet, in general and in particular. Why such a “pristine,” “classicist,” conservative manner of marketing the materiality of Pritchard’s poetry? And what of the seeming tension between

⁷ Easthope, “Literature, History, and the Materiality of the Text,” 33.

⁸ This statement originally appears in slightly different form in the *Liberator* article, 13.

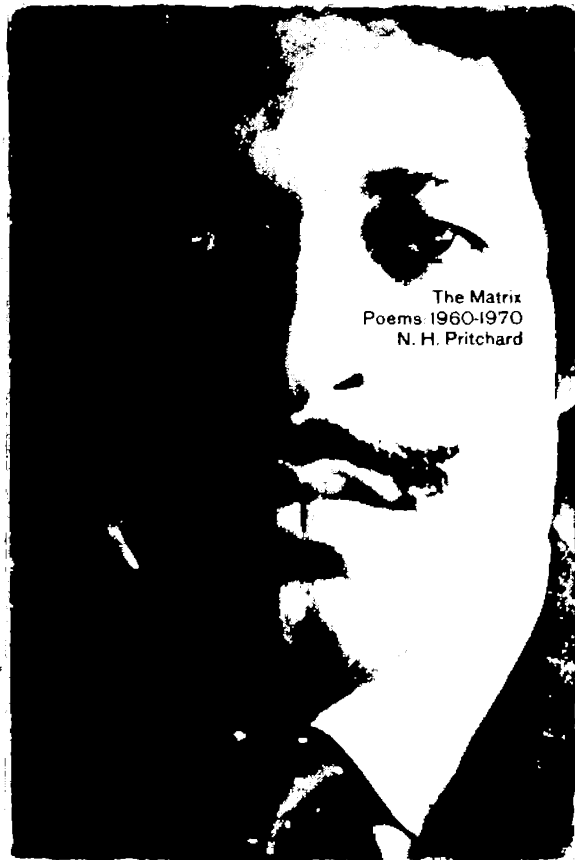


Figure 1. Cover of *The Matrix*.

“pristine” Pritchard and the Black Aesthetic of Nikki Giovanni, who insists “there is no difference between the warrior, the poet, and the people”⁹

This tension between what the reader—Black Arts, concrete, even semiotic—expects and what the text provides is exactly what the Matrix, both as Pritchard’s text and as Riffaterre’s term, plays on and produces meaning from. Also called “the structure of the given,” the Matrix, “like all structures, is an abstract concept never actualized per se: it becomes visible only in its variants, the ungrammaticalities. The greater the distance between the inherently simple matrix and the inherently complex mimesis, the greater the incompatibility between ungrammaticalities and mimesis.” In Riffaterre’s theory and Pritchard’s actualization, the poetic text’s significance emerges from this discrepancy between (syntagmatic) re-presentations and (paradigmatic) ungrammaticalities until the reader and the text realize the Matrix. The reader’s frustration produces the poem (and I would add, vice versa), with what the poem thrusts forward out of its own social, cultural, or imaginative program disrupting the reader’s expectations. “Thus, what makes the poem, what constitutes its message, has little to do with what it tells us or with the language it employs. It has everything to do with the way the given twists the mimetic codes out of shape by substituting its own structure for their structures.”¹⁰

In this way, we can better understand the frustration and poetry inherent in “reading” what can now be thought of as the “ungrammaticalities”—material inconsistencies—of the Pritchard cover, not to mention its discrepancy with the

⁹ Lowenfels, “The White Literary Syndicate,” 8–9, provides this and many other definitions of the Black Aesthetic. from Don Lee to Gwendolyn Brooks to Giovanni.

¹⁰ Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, p. 13.

actual, “internal” text: the Matrix, again both text and term. For after the rather typical (if not excessively detailed) biographical information and the filial dedication, *The Matrix* announces itself as a fairly experimental text. A prefatory note signed simply “N.H.P.” informs us: “Words are ancillary to content.” This raises as many questions as it clarifies. Which words? All words? The words in this volume? The ensuing frustration, or rather, ambiguity, is made more complex by the substitution of “words” for what usually gets dubbed “form” in dichotomies and hierarchies. The brief sentence alone—in many ways the matrix of *The Matrix*—participates in the poetic function by substituting its own one-word matrix, itself quite literally “words,” for the expected, constructed terminology of form versus content.

The irony does not stop here: turning the page, we find the “Contents,” which given the previous N.H.P. statement becomes a charged list of “words” (poetic titles) subordinate to the whole of the content; likewise, the content becomes a (w)hole in which the sections are placed. Progressing through time, from past to present, the Matrix moves from “Inscriptions: 1960–1964” and “Signs: 1965–1967” to “Objects: 1968–1970,” iconic poems that create a Stein-like “Carafe, a Blind Glass” of poetic form filled ultimately with words. Hence, it’s fitting that *The Matrix* begins with a poem called “Wreath” (figure 2), simply consisting of an *O* set on a page otherwise blank except for the title the same size. Typographically it is uncertain whether this is a zero or the capital letter *O*, continuing and questioning ambiguities. Only two certainties present themselves: first, this is not a “perfectly” round circle, but instead a “sort” from a modern typeface, either letter or numeral but not geometrical; second, the poem announces itself as a concrete object with “real world” referents.

While, certainly, few readers would expect a literal, three-dimensional wreath on page one, most would expect a literary approximation, perhaps a meditation on or a description of a wreath. The text presents very few mimetic attempts in representing a wreath—perhaps frustrating even the reader who, according to semiotics, makes the poem’s significance out of such paradigmatic possibilities. The poem instead comments on all the paradigms it does not participate in, or rather, the “isms” it denies, whether real, surreal, or political. By clearly presenting a piece of type, whether letter or numeral, the “poem” displays an awareness of the materiality of language as physical “inscription,” as well as the ungrammaticality or impossibility of the poem as mimesis, not quite functioning as the last section of “Objects.”

Pritchard questions the mimetic assumptions of both historical material poetry, such as George Herbert’s “Altar,” and the Black Arts movement, ironically by relying on each movement’s oxymoronic insistence on physicality and (Black) reality, respectively. When Clarence Major’s introduction to *The New Black Poetry* asserts “we are mirrors here” in white society and then turns around to say “the proper movement of human art is to shatter illusion and make concrete the most explicit and useful reality,” the paradox of the movement’s need for (Black) mimesis and (Black) reality creates the loophole in which “Wreath” and *The Matrix* situate as text, and in which Pritchard gets forgotten as author.¹¹ Pritchard goes beyond the white illusion–Black reality dichotomy, ending up questioning even the notion that the poem can mirror anything beyond words or letters; likewise, Pritchard

¹¹ Clarence Major, ed., *The New Black Poetry* (New York: International Publishing, 1969), pp. 12, 18.

WREATH

O

Figure 2. *The Matrix*, p. 1.

purposefully displaces Herbert's mimetic poetic "Altar" with the concept of displacing itself, as in "Metagnomy" when he writes "Often a wish defined / like lust returns / as though upon an alter [sic] / blood is broken / as meat / is rite."¹²

Yet what assumptions are to be found in the matrix of these poems? Is there a matrix at all? Is the matrix contained in the poem's simple titles, such as "Wreath"? If so, then how and why is this structure named, particularly "given" that for Riffaterre, the matrix must remain unmentioned? Indeed, for Riffaterre it is exactly this unnameable, absent center that creates the semiotic meaning for the reader: in the poem, "the significance is shaped like a doughnut, the hole being either the matrix of the hypogram or the hypogram as matrix. The effect of this disappearing act is that the reader feels he is in the presence of true originality, or of what he believes to be a feature of poetic language, a typical case of obscurity" which leads the reader to create meanings, to fill the (w)hole, as it were, often wrongly with authorial intention.¹³

It is no wonder then that throughout the text of *The Matrix*, the O's have it. The zero-like anti- and ante-mimetic "Wreath" also doubles as the typographical

¹² *The New Black Poetry*, ed. Major, p. 101. "Metagnomy"—which I derive from its initial two morphemes to mean "aphorisms about aphorisms" or "changing aphorisms"—appears first in Major's *New Black Poetry*, from which this is taken. When reprinted in *The Matrix*, it is further altered, divided up within words, for instance "as tho up on an alt er" (*Matrix*, 41).

¹³ Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, p. 13. Riffaterre defines the hypogram as the text eventually gestured to by the poem. For a critical analysis of matrix and hypogram in Riffaterre's thought, see Paul de Man, "Hypogram and Inscription," *The Resistance to Theory*, *Theory and History of Literature* 33 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 27–53.

O

| | |
|-------------|-------------|
| uou who uou | who who uou |
| uou who uou | who who uou |
| who uou uou | uou who uou |
| uou uou who | who uou who |

| | |
|-------------|-------------|
| uou who uou | who who uou |
| uou who uou | who who uou |
| who uou uou | uou who uou |
| uou uou who | who uou who |

Figure 3. *The Matrix*, p. 191.

representation of nothing (zerO) and the primal, poetic mOan (“oh”). This, in turn, is quite different from the larger, ringlike O which recurs, untitled, throughout the latter “Signs” and “Objects” sections until it ends the book in the poem titled “O” (figure 3), the same typographical character that makes up the “Wreath.” Here the reader, as with many of the other *Matrix* poems, knows the title only from reading the “Contents” page; here, quite explicitly, the black ring that represents an absence of content is only “titled” after looking it up in the now literal “Contents.” The repetition and structure of the ring gesture towards infinity as well as nothing—both sides of the same coin, both the ultimate, anti-mimetic forces. As throughout the *Matrix*, how does “mimesis” or “concreteness” happen here through repetition? Does repetition “mirror,” or “materialize,” or both?

For Riffaterre, repetition indicates a poetic expansion, much like a series of rings rippling outward in water, the matrix being the stone that created them, the unseen originator.¹⁴ However, by starting and ending with the same O, *The Matrix* as text not only expands but connects back to its originating poetic message. As such, *The Matrix* as text functions much like the matrix as term, expanded or made circular (or both) by the reader; in turn, *The Matrix* inverts and subverts Riffaterre’s principle of “given structure,” that “the mimesis occupies a lot of space while the matrix structure can be summed up in a single word.” In doing so, *The Matrix* achieves what Riffaterre predicts as the eventual move to the poem as experimental construct when “the mimesis is now quite spurious and illusory, realized only

¹⁴ Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, p. 49.

for the sake of the semiosis; and conversely, the semiosis is a reference to the word *nothing* (the word, since the concept 'nothingness' would be heavy metaphysical stuffing indeed)."¹⁵

Although Pritchard deals with the word rather than the concept "nothing," he also deals with the concreteness of "no-thing." Riffaterre's semiotic foresight projects only "a point where the poem is a form totally empty of 'message' in the usual sense, that is, without content—emotional, moral, or philosophical."¹⁶ Pritchard stresses that "words are ancillary to content," lifting the content over the words, if only to show the emptiness that the content contains. In other words, Pritchard's "locus of literariness" is not a form without message, matrix, or content, but rather the message that a poem can contain, or successfully fail to contain, "nothing." That said, Pritchard's poems contain a great deal more than much of the ideological and movement-based work of the 1960s. Pritchard's work warns not just against the empty promise, not just of the politicians, but of anti-politician politics.

I am reminded here of the *O*'s of *Othello*—once again, not just as the name "O t hell O," but also as play: in the last act, after the murder of Desdemona, "O" is repeated so often by all the company that the sign "O" itself takes on iconic meaning.¹⁷ At the same time, the shock of "O" lessens. The lesson for Othello, the Black warrior, is one of horror, of learning signs not to be what they set out to be; for Pritchard, the Black writer, it is to question the lesson of Othello, but also the lessening of "O." For Pritchard, the real revolution is not in saying there is "no difference" between the Black warrior (Othello) and the Black writer (Pritchard), but rather that for the writer to imitate the warrior or vice versa is a difficult, perhaps impossible task since the writer cannot imitate anything. *Othello* itself, with its long history of white actors portraying its "Black" leading role, provides plenty of ironies on content belied by words. Pritchard critiques the opposite sensibility which states there is a Black content achievable by words, realizing only a comment on the word "nothing," the "O," and ultimately, words themselves.

¹⁵ Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, p. 13.

¹⁶ Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, p. 13.

¹⁷ In Act 5, Scene 2, line 197 we see the most extreme version spoken by the Moor: "O! O! O!" *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton

Mifflin, 1974), p. 1238. For a different approach to the same material fact, see Joel Fineman, "The Sound of *O* in *Othello*: The Real of the Tragedy of Desire," *October* 45 (1988), 77–96.