

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

March 27, 2017

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



excerpt from *Radi os* \*

O

tree  
into the World,  
Man

the chosen

Rose out of Chaos:

song,

Ronald Johnson<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

Ronald Johnson's poem is an example of what is called "erasure poetry" or, more broadly, *found* poetry, which is a particular genre created by taking words, phrases, and sometimes whole passages from other sources and reframing them as poetry, a sort of literary equivalent of collage. The changes—addition, deletion, alterations in spacing or line breaks, etc.—are intended to impart new meaning. In this particular case, Johnson has "erased" the first part of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. (The title, you see, is what's left after redaction: ~~Paradise~~ **Lost**.)

Erasure is a form of revision—of literal re-seeing. And what we are to learn from this process is that sometimes by removing layers, removing words, removing parts of the whole, we are more able to receive anew, better able to understand what is and what once was. In my own thinking about this, I sometimes have the image of clay, or a block of marble, as though I were a sculptor; it occurs to me that the sculptor might continue to shape, move, reconfigure what is there in front of her. *And/or*, she might carve away in order to see refreshed, renewed, and the real subject can then emerge. The sculpture may not be "born," so to speak, except by removing what obscures it. So, removal and erasure become their own form. It is purposeful decision-making that celebrates and subverts and transforms, reminding me of what Meister Eckhart says: "God is found in the human soul not by addition, but by subtraction."

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<sup>1</sup> excerpted from *Radios* by Ronald Johnson, Sand Dollar Press, 1977.

First published in 1977, *Radi os*, through drastic “revision” discovers a visionary poem *within* the 17th century *Paradise Lost*. As the author explains, “To etch is ‘to cut away,’ and each page... is a single picture.” With both God and Satan removed from the first four chapters, *Radi os* reduces Milton’s poem to elemental forces. In this retelling of the Fall, song precipitates from chaos, sight from fire: “*out of Chaos: song.*” It’s exquisite! Scholars say that whereas Milton sought to make visible the faded world, Johnson’s process was essentially the reverse: he revealed the world by muting Milton and, some say, discovered or *rediscovered* something new.

What this poem, and the world of erasure poetics, leads me to think about has to do with negative space, silence, and darkness. I believe it is true that the unsaid is often as important as the said, that silence is as important as speaking. I also believe it is true that silence is not nothing. And I believe that it is true that often what we cannot articulate, what we cannot explain, what we cannot or do not say, can instruct us in peculiar and valuable ways. In my case, what I have perceived as God’s silence, for example, has been as important to my understanding of myself in the world as God’s call has been. And, for me, sometimes God’s call *is* the silence itself. It is not nothing.

The poet Seamus Heaney once said that poetry “offers a clarification, a fleeting glimpse of a potential order of things ‘beyond confusion,’ a glimpse that has to be its own reward...” How reassuring that is! Even if it’s a glimpse, even if it’s fleeting, even if it is but a fragment of something, Heaney’s claim feels hopeful and true to me: the imagination is truth-bearing and capable of restoring whatever kind of imbalance there is between what we see *out there* and what we know *in here*. Heaney says we can always trust poetry and its particular way of knowledge.

I cling to that notion: poetry as a way of knowledge. One way of knowledge. And a complementary knowledge to other—perhaps more rational or more analytical—ways of knowledge. In that way, poetry, even in excision, is whole making.

### ✧ About the Poet

Born in Kansas in 1935, Ronald Johnson spent most of his adult life in San Francisco. He attended both the University of Kansas and Columbia University before hiking the Appalachian Trail. In San Francisco, he was active in the gay community and was a co-founder of the famous Rainbow Motorcycle Club. Johnson was also a well-regarded author of cookbooks, including *The Aficionado’s Southwestern Cooking* (1985) and *The American Table* (1984). He died in 1998.



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\* The cover and first page of Johnson's *Radi os*

