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In the Cloud Chamber: On Ronald Johnson's *Radi os*

Radi os by Ronald Johnson. Chicago, IL: Flood Editions, 2005.

The day after listening to Lucas Foss's *Baroque Variations*—a work that “tunnels” through pieces by various composers, in which “Groups of instruments play . . . but keep submerging into inaudibility,”* leaving “holes” in the original music—Ronald Johnson walked into a Seattle bookshop, bought a copy of the 1892 edition of *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, and immediately began crossing out whole lines. The result, or so the story goes, was *Radi os*, Johnson's famous poem-by-excision of *Paradise Lost* (think: Tom Phillips's *A Humument* sans visuals), long out of print but recently re-released by Flood Editions. Like all books that come with a backstory, the myth is in danger of overriding the fact: as Peter O'Leary, Johnson's literary executor, has pointed out, “the crossing out . . . was only the first step of the composition.” Johnson revised endlessly, acquiring several copies of the 1892 edition, each of which served as a further “draft” of the work. As Johnson himself said, “You don't tamper with Milton to be funny. You have to be serious.” So that in spite of the book's foregrounded process and source, which have prescribed to some degree how the book has been read (either as a simple derivation of *Paradise Lost* or an example *par excellence* of postmodernist praxis), what *Radi os* amounts to, finally, is greater than the sum of its processes/source: it is the expression, as Johnson says, of the poet's “solitary quest in the cloud chamber.”

Other readers of Johnson's work, including O'Leary and Guy Dav-enport (whose astute afterword has been included in the new edition), have noted the primacy of the eye and the physical act of seeing in *Radi os*. In fact, the poem's first section contains a reference to vision or the eye on nearly every page—sometimes as a single word (e.g.,

* This quote appears in Johnson's “A Note and a Dedication” at the front of *Radi os*.

by absolute

impulse
immutably forseen,

change

Unchangeable, eternal

It's worth noting that if Johnson's theme is grace, his metaphor, here and elsewhere, is the garden—both in the sense of an originary locus (think: Robert Duncan's "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow"), and a structure of which "vegetative" humans are part ("O tree / into the world / Man"). *Radi os*, it must be remembered, was originally conceived of by Johnson as part of his long work, *ARK*, and though *Radi os* was never incorporated into that work, it retains some of the same concerns; as Johnson says in his interview with O'Leary, "I always wanted to make a garden of some kind and that's how I imagine *ARK*." It is no accident, either, that Johnson's last work, *The Shrubberies* (also published by Flood Editions), is similarly concerned with the garden as the place of the sun's embrace and the threshing ground of life, for

therein seep sources clear
one of the great rivers
that cause a civilization

flood after flood twixt
field of wildered corn
& ability to stroke the sun