

# “New Alchimie”: Reading John Donne’s “Nocturnall” Through Poems by Kimberly Johnson and Alice Fulton

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*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 30 (2021): 113-139.

DOI: [10.25623/conn030-dipasquale-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn030-dipasquale-1)

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This article is the first entry in a debate on “‘New Alchimie’: Reading John Donne’s ‘Nocturnall’ Through Poems by Kimberly Johnson and Alice Fulton” <http://www.connotations.de/debate/reading-donnes-nocturnall-through-poems-by-johnson-and-fulton/>. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de)

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## Abstract

The study of pre-Enlightenment literature is too often separated from the study of contemporary literature; literary scholars are too often out of touch with their colleagues in creative writing; and mutual disdain divides literary folk from STEM folk. Who better to bridge such gaps than John Donne and those twenty-first-century poets who are, like Donne, inspired by both the humanities and the sciences, analytic dissection and linguistic play? In “A Nocturnall Upon *S. Lucies Day*,” Donne blends alchemical terms and liturgical language, moving readers but also puzzling them. Those most fruitfully puzzled and moved by Donne’s “Nocturnall” are poets who have taken it as a point of departure for new poems of their own. Kimberly Johnson’s “A Nocturnall Upon Saint Chuck Yeager’s Day” and Alice Fulton’s “A Lightenment On New Year’s Eve” are startlingly original poems and, at the same time, scholarly interpretations of Donne’s piece. In selecting Donne’s “A Nocturnall Upon *S. Lucies Day*” as the *prima materia* for their creations, Kimberly Johnson and Alice Fulton reveal the radical ductility of Donne’s poem, its openness to the diverse needs, desires, traumas, and dreams of twenty-first-century readers.

In *John Donne and Contemporary Poetry: Essays and Poems*, edited by Judith Scherer Herz, Heather Dubrow traces “The History of the Donne and Contemporary Poetry Project” and notes that the “project” might better be referred to in the plural as a range of projects—publications, discussions, poetry readings, and other communal events—undertaken by poets, by critics, and by writers who are both poets and critics (Dubrow, “History” 9). She stresses that such projects work, implicitly and explicitly, to bridge a number of painful divides in the academy: “These issues assume distinctive forms in different institutions” and in different parts of the English-speaking world, Dubrow notes, “but recurrent patterns do emerge”:

First, witness the separation between those engaged with more contemporary texts and those studying the centuries tellingly coagulated into “early literature” by our students. Increasing specialization in graduate programs, impelled in part by a partly justified distrust of the “coverage” model and in part by an understandable agenda of limiting time to degree, means that those studying twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts are less likely than in earlier decades to know or care about what was written earlier. Symmetrically, students of the medieval and early modern periods may well be less informed about and less interested in modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary literature, perhaps partly from resentment of the increasingly central role of the later periods in many departments. (Dubrow, “History” 12)

Even more intense, Dubrow notes, is the disjunction that too often separates literary studies from creative writing: “mutual distrust and disdain are still common in the cultures of many departments” (“History” 13). Poets and literary scholars can and must, she stresses, challenge “*either/or* schemas (studying and teaching earlier or contemporary literature, publishing scholarly articles or poems, adopting models of periodization or undermining them, etc.)” by replacing the “*either/or*” approach with methodologies, teaching practices, and professional agendas that acknowledge and include “*both/and*” (“History” 13).

To the list of divides Dubrow mentions, one might add the rift dividing what C. P. Snow called “the two cultures”: the culture of what we now call the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) is still, despite efforts toward cross-disciplinary thinking at many colleges and universities, divided from that of the humanities

and arts. Indeed, a lamentable tendency Snow pointed out over half a century ago endures: while not a few engineers, mathematicians, and lab scientists do take a lively interest in the arts and humanities, humanist scholars and poets are too often math- and science-illiterate. Who better to prod us out of each of these prejudicial, limiting silos than John Donne and those twenty-first-century poets who are, like Donne, inspired by both the humanities and the sciences, who enjoy both analytic dissection and linguistic play?

In the early seventeenth-century the dividing lines between these competing discourses had begun to form, but they were still blurred and indistinct. The science of alchemy as metallurgic proto-chemistry and the religio-philosophical discipline of spiritual alchemy had yet to go entirely their separate ways. In "A Nocturnall Upon *S. Lucies Day, Being the Shortest Day*" (*Complete Poetry* 155-57) Donne blends alchemical terms and liturgical language, and he does so in ways that, paradoxically, both move readers and puzzle them deeply. Most readers require footnotes and marginal glosses to appreciate the technical and religious apparatus of the poem; yet I have seldom encountered one who does not respond with sympathy to the devastating alchemical transformation that love has worked upon the bereaved persona, a man who declares himself to be "every dead thing, / In whom love wrought new Alchimie" (ll. 12-13).

The readers most fruitfully puzzled and moved by Donne's "Nocturnall" are the poets who have taken it as a point of departure for new poems of their own. Among these, I have found particularly illuminating the work of two American poets known for their sensitivity to language, their investment in the natural world, and their use of images and forms drawn from sacred ritual, from mathematics, and from the physical sciences. Taking seriously Dubrow's call for a "both/and" approach to Donne as an early modern poet and to contemporary poets' Donnean investments, I read Kimberly Johnson's "A Nocturnall Upon Saint Chuck Yeager's Day" and Alice Fulton's "A Lightenment On New Year's Eve" not only as startlingly original poems, but also as scholarly

interpretations of Donne's "Nocturnall" that open up new ways of understanding the earlier poem.

### 1. "an ordinary nothing": Indefinite Poetics in Donne and Johnson

Kimberly Johnson's "A Nocturnall Upon Saint Chuck Yeager's Day," from her 2014 collection *Uncommon Prayer*, sensitizes the reader to minute details of Donne's language.<sup>1</sup> The speaker of Johnson's poem—first published in *Plume* in 2011 under a slightly different title—is "trying to work out" not only "the ever-aftermath" of a "life" that "hurtles heartbreak to heartbreak," but also "the ever-aftermath" of Donne's poem, its afterlife in the language of post-modern poetry.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, Johnson's speaker renders audible in Donne's "Nocturnall" words that usually speed by too quickly to be acknowledged by the ear, including one of the shortest and most common English words, the indefinite article "a." Johnson and Donne both use the indefinite article (and its definite partner, "the") in order to define their poems' personae, to establish them as epitomes of the human condition who are, nevertheless, individualized. Donne's speaker sees himself as "A quintessence," "the grave," and "the Elixer"; Johnson's persona is concerned to explore what happens in "the chest" when it is bombarded "like a kickdrum" and plays "a tune" that leaves "the sense" struggling to define its own experience.

According to the *OED*, articles are adjectives; they modify nouns in subtle ways relating to degrees of specificity, definiteness, and indefiniteness. The definite article, linguist John Lyons explains, is diachronically related to "the adjectivalized deictic adverbial 'there.'" It "invit[es] the addressee to find the referent in the environment, without [...] directing his attention to any particular region of it" (Lyons 655-56). "The" is thus less *pointy*, one might say, than the deictic terms Heather Dubrow calls "*Unsettling Spatial Anchors*," but it retains a residual hint of deixis (Dubrow, *Deixis*). Indeed, as the linguist James Pe-

ter Thorne suggests, "the basic meaning" of the definite article may perhaps be captured in the expression "*which is there*" (Thorne 565). But the indefinite article marks a noun as singular while at the same time steering clear of specificity. As the *OED* explains, "a" (along with its inflection "an") was "[o]riginally a variant of" the adjective "one." It modifies "a singular countable noun head," and its primary application is in reference "to something not specifically identified (and, frequently, mentioned for the first time) but treated as one of a class: one, some, any" (*OED*, "a, *adj.*" 1.).

Since Johnson's poem is called "A Nocturnall," one might expect that it belongs to the class of things specified in the most obviously relevant *OED* definition of "nocturnal": that it is a "night-piece," which is "[a] poem or literary composition associated with qualities of the night" ("nocturnal, *adj.* and *n.*" B.2.; "night-piece, *n.*" 1.c.). But though "A Nocturnall Upon Saint Chuck Yeager's Day" certainly deals with dark emotions, the body of the poem neither evokes nor mentions night. Indeed, once a Donne-savvy reader notices the idiosyncratic spelling of "Nocturnall" with two Ls, and parses that spelling in relation to the rest of Johnson's title, she realizes that the indefinite article with which that title begins is meant to introduce, not so much "one of a class" of poems associated with qualities of night, as "one of a class" of poems inspired by Donne's "A Nocturnall Upon *S. Lucies Day, Being the Shortest Day.*"

Reflecting upon Johnson's title as allusive and intertextual rather than literal raises the question of what—exactly—Donne meant when he called his poem "A Nocturnall." Scholars have rightly argued that the title and the poem as a whole evoke the liturgy of the hours, in which the three divisions of Matins, also called the "night office," are called "nocturns."<sup>3</sup> But the *OED* cites Donne's title as an example of the usage "night-piece" (meaning "[a] poem or literary composition associated with qualities of the night"). After much sleuthing, I've concluded that this example of usage is not reliable. Before Donne's poem, the literary meaning of the English word "nocturnal" was, as William J. Lawrence explains, a farcical drama or dramatic scene featuring night-time mischief: the chaotic final scene of Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*,

for example, in which the citizens of Windsor take to the forest to torment and punish the horn-bedecked Falstaff (Lawrence 133).<sup>4</sup> I've come to doubt, then, that "nocturnal" was, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, an established sub-genre of serious lyric poetry such that, in calling his poem "A Nocturnall," Donne (or whoever supplied the header used in the posthumous 1633 poems), was literally labeling his St. Lucy's eve lyric as a kind of poem in addition to labeling it analogically as a kind of prayer. That is, while the poem is not literally a prayer to St. Lucy (and never explicitly addresses her), it quite clearly draws upon and parodies the liturgical nocturnes assigned for the office of Matins on St. Lucy's Day, so the title "A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day" should be taken to mean "a liturgy-like poem poured forth at midnight on the feast of St. Lucy and inspired by the midnight prayers assigned to that feast in the breviary." Conversely, since the word "nocturne" did not yet mean "a meditative nighttime poem" when Donne was writing the poem, it is anachronistic to read the words "A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day" as labeling what follows "a meditative nighttime poem written on and about St. Lucy's day."

The title by which Donne's poem is known in our time may or may not be authorial. But it is useful, regardless, to consider the different ways in which that title will signify if one reads it analogically and with an eye to early seventeenth-century usage of the word "nocturnal," versus literally and anachronistically as referring to a poetic subgenre not yet established when Donne wrote the piece. For pondering the distinction leads the reader to discover a distinct but important point: that the indefinite article often sets up an opportunity for interpretation based in figurative definitions of the noun that follows it. This is the case, for example, in the usage of "a" covered by *OED* definition 1.f., where the article precedes "a proper name, used connotatively with reference to the qualities of the individual, or figuratively as the type of a class: someone or something like; a person or thing of the same kind as." A familiar example, cited by the *OED*, is Shakespeare's "A Daniel come to judgment" (*The Merchant of Venice* 4.1.218). Johnson's use of "A Nocturnall" in her title (especially as spelled with two Ls and accompanied

by the words "Upon," "Saint," "Day," and a proper name in the possessive case) works along these lines to identify her poem as a "thing of the same kind as" Donne's poem.

This distinction between "the" as indicating a definitive thing and "a" as pointing to things that are merely one of a class or that are a given kind of thing only figuratively lies just under the surface of many lines in Donne's poem. For the speaker wishes to convey to others that he is not simply a nothing—that is, as he puts it in line 35, "an ordinary nothing"—one among many things in the class of nothings, but that he is (or has become) literally nothingness itself, *the* very essence of nothingness, "Of the first nothing, *the* Elixer grown" (l. 29; my emphasis). If he succeeds, how can we respond? What emotional investment can readers make in the words of non-being personified? Johnson helps answer these questions through her deployment of the indefinite article.

"A Nocturnall Upon Saint Chuck Yeager's Day" is about indefiniteness, about the frustrating indeterminacy of human experience in the quantum universe of post-modernity. Johnson manages the paradoxical task of making indefiniteness concrete partly by using the indefinite article no fewer than seven times in 26 lines (that is, considerably more frequently than Donne's five times in 45 lines). Three of the seven are included in a single sentence at the end of Johnson's second stanza: "There should be a bombblast / bellknocking bonejar of noise, a jolt / to all wavelengths, a tremor through the pavement / tripping car-alarms and dog-howls to the proof / that something happened." In order to appreciate the third "a," in this sentence, one must proceed from *OED* definition 1. to 2.b., which explains that "a," when used "[w]ith infinitive clause as complement," means "such as (to do, undergo, etc., what is expressed by the complement)." The seventeenth-century example provided is directly relevant; for it—like Johnson's poem—describes a very loud noise: "O, 'twas a din to fright a monster's ear; / To make an earthquake" (Shakespeare, *The Tempest* 2.1.308-09). In Shakespeare's lines, "a din to fright" means "a din such as to frighten," a din capable of frightening. An obsolete version of the same usage, the *OED* adds, can also be constructed using the word "*for* and verbal noun," as

in Edmund Burke's "I am not a man for construing with too much rigorous the expressions of men under a sense of ill-usage" (Burke 4: 312).<sup>5</sup> But poets invite such rigor, and critics are happy to supply it. Johnson—who is a scholar, a critic, and a poet—is creatively rigorous in deploying arcane details mined from the *OED*. It is not surprising, then, to discover that she not only uses "a" to mean "such a," but links it to a verbal noun rather than to an infinitive clause: "There should be [...] a tremor," the speaker says, "to the proof / that something happened." Here, "a tremor" means "such a tremor as to"; and what follows is a version of the allegedly obsolete usage involving a verbal noun rather than an infinitive: not "a tremor to prove that" but "a tremor to the proof that."

Johnson's *OED*-inspired word magic prompts reexamination of a sentence that lies at the center of Donne's poem: "Oft a flood / Have wee two wept, and so / Drownd the whole world, us two" (ll. 22-24). The "a" of "a flood" is not, strictly speaking, used here to mean "such a." Donne's speaker does not say that the lovers wept "such a flood such as to drown the whole world"; he says that "a flood" wept by them did drown it. He may thus seem to be employing the word in the sense of *OED* definition 5.a.: "flood" ("A profuse and violent outpouring of water [...] threatening an inundation") in its "transferred" sense, 5.b. (which includes "a profuse burst of tears"). But "threatening an inundation" doesn't quite work in Donne's poem if we read the "a" of "a flood" in its usual, definition 1.a. sense; for "a flood" that drowns the whole world is not just "a flood"—any flood, some flood. Rather, it is (even if figuratively rather than literally) "the flood" of *OED* definition 4.b.: "the great deluge recorded in the book of Genesis as occurring in the time of Noah" ("flood, *n.*"). The flood sent by God in Noah's time was not only "such a" flood "as" might hypothetically drown "the whole world" (as the noise in *The Tempest* was such "a din" as could, hypothetically "fright a monster's ear," or as Johnson's "a tremor through the pavement" is something that "should" follow upon the breaking of hearts as upon the breaking of the sound barrier "to the proof that / something happened"). No, it was, according to Scripture,



the flood that literally did drown the whole world. But because the flood that drowns the microcosm of "us two" in Donne's poem is *not* literally Noah's flood, the word "a" in the construction "a flood" does have the force of "such a": the couple wept "a flood" such as did to their microcosm what "the flood" did to the earth. As in Genesis, moreover, sorrow—figured in the poem as weeping and in Scripture as God's "being touched inwardly with sorrow of heart" (Genesis 6:6; Douay-Rheims translation)—is the motive force behind the deluge. My larger point is that, by using the construction "a thing, X" in a context that invites comparison between "a thing, X" and "*the* thing X," Donne is no longer simply classifying "an X" as "one of a class" of things called "X." He is figuratively tying "a thing, X" to *the* exemplary, quintessential X, the X that defines X-ness.

Donne explores the limits of this technique in line 15 of "A Nocturnall" when the speaker uses a problematic construction: "A quintessence even from nothingness." The general point of the paradox is clear enough: nothingness is the absence of any thing or substance, and this bereaved man feels himself to be the very substance of nothingness. But the indefinite article seems off. The fifth essence is, by its very nature, not a thing belonging to a class of things, but something unique. *OED* definition 1.a. of the term explains that, "[i]n classical and medieval philosophy," the word "quintessence" is specifically "[a] *fifth* essence existing in addition to the four elements, supposed to be *the* substance of which the celestial bodies were composed" ("quintessence, *n.*"; emphases mine). Later in "A Nocturnall," using the word "Elixer" as a synonym for this definition of "quintessence" by combining it with the definite article and linking it to the primordial chaos from which God created the universe, the speaker of Donne's poem says, "I am [...] / Of *the* first nothing, *the* Elixer grown" (emphases mine). The *OED* further specifies that, in alchemical discourse—which Donne taps throughout the poem—"quintessence" is "this" same essence, the ineffable super-substance that cannot be classified as belonging to any of the ordinary four classes of matter (definition 1.a.). All of the *OED*'s examples of usage for this definition from texts written prior to the mid-

seventeenth century deploy it either without an article or with “the.” Of course, one might well object that, in the construction “a quintessence even from nothingness,” the relevant *OED* definition of “quintessence” is number 2.: “The essence which characterizes, and can be extracted from, any substance.” But the examples of usage for this definition reveal that, while the word is often used without an article or in the plural to refer to such essences as a group, whenever the essence of a particular thing is being discussed, the default usage is either “quintessence of x” or “the quintessence of x,” not “a quintessence” from or of x.<sup>6</sup> So why does Donne’s persona put it that way?

Once again, Johnson’s poem provides a clue. In line 3, the speaker describes the emotional “boom” that has thumped at her heart as “the first and final beat of a tune.” But isn’t “a tune” one of a class of things that has many beats? How can there be “a tune” in which the first beat is also the final one? The most familiar definition of the noun “tune” is “a rhythmical succession of musical tones” (“tune, *n.*” 2.a.), which implies a plurality of beats that allow for a rhythm. But as the *OED* junkie Johnson knows, two other now obsolete definitions included in the *OED* entry for the noun “tune” are “a [...] sound or tone, esp. the sound of the voice,” and “[s]tyle, manner, or ‘tone’ (of discourse or writing)”; it can also be used figuratively to mean “Frame of mind, temper, mood” (“tune, *n.*” 1.a., 5.).

Immediately after using the indefinite article to introduce an unspecified “tune” belonging to the general category of such monometric sounds or moods, however, Johnson’s speaker proceeds—through a wittily enjambed and italicized act of nomination that also works as an internal rhyme—to specify that this “tune” is not just, to quote once again from the first and most obvious *OED* definition of “a,” “some” tune or “any” tune, but rather, very specifically, “a tune called”—line break! wait for it!—“*Too Late.*” The title “*Too Late,*” italicized in Johnson’s text, may mean past saving, or it may evoke the sleepless vigil of a man still awake at midnight on the longest night of the year. It might even mean “Excessively Dead”—an incongruous superlative reminiscent of the hyperbolic grief Donne’s poem expresses.

But why does Johnson's persona speak of "a tune" at all when she is about to specify that it is *the* particular "tune called / *Too Late*"? A similar enjambment in Donne's opening lines does not say "Tis the yeares midnight, and it is a dayes, / *Lucies*," but rather "Tis the yeares midnight, and it is the dayes, / *Lucies*." Perhaps in Johnson's construction, "the" would be too deictic; it would imply, before "the tune" is named, that "the tune" in question is already "there" (as "the [day]" called "S. Lucies Day" was there every December 13th in the Julian calendar). It would imply that *Too Late* is "the tune"—you know, the one we all hear in the wake of an emotional "sonic boom"—as opposed to *a* tune not previously known to readers, one not already "there" for us, not the one Donne or any other poet heard; rather, one Johnson's speaker is uniquely qualified to hear, recognize, entitle, and introduce to us.

In choosing "a tune" over "the tune," in short, Johnson grapples with a question central to readers' experience of Donne's poem: how can a lyric persona establish his/her/its/their own uniqueness while, at the same time, tapping into readers' sympathy, encouraging them to identify with that persona's pain, joy, or frustration? This question is particularly urgent for the post-modern lyricist who wants to project her own voice and to discover fresh means of tapping into human emotion even as she practices the kinds of quotation and appropriation so characteristic of our era and often rendered deliberately, ironically, and—to my ear—despairingly voiceless in the practices of the so-called "conceptual poets." But it is also important to Donne. Which takes me back to "a quintessence" versus "the quintessence."

Constructions in which "quintessence" is used with "a" rather than "the" seem, according to the *OED*'s examples of usage, to appear most consistently in illustrating two figurative definitions of the term "quintessence": "The most essential part or feature of some non-material thing; the purest or most perfect form or manifestation of some quality, idea, etc.", and "[t]he most typical example of a category or class; the most perfect embodiment of a certain type of person or thing" ("quintessence, *n.*" 3.a., 3.b.). These are the definitions most immediately applicable to Donne's use of "A quintessence" in his "Nocturnall," and

the *OED* illustrates them with two examples of usage, each dated 1590, in which “a quintessence” is used figuratively. Another early modern example comes from a dedicatory epistle by Thomas Nashe, in which he calls his 1593 *Christs Teares Ouer Jerusalem* “a quintessence of holy complaint extracted out of my true cause of condolement” (Nashe sig. \*2v). But most relevant of all is an example from a 1622 sermon preached by John Donne himself, in which he uses the indefinite article to signal figurative meaning when he asks his auditory, “Dost thou love learning, as it is contracted, brought to a quintessence, wrought to a spirit, by *Philosophers?*” (*Sermons* 4: 166).<sup>7</sup> If the combination of the word “quintessence” with the indefinite article in “A Nocturnall Upon S. *Lucies* Day” signals a comparable figurative application of the word, then Donne’s speaker, whether intentionally or in a slip of the tongue, speaks of his supposed transformation into “the” literal essence of nothingness in terms usually reserved for talking about a figurative essence.<sup>8</sup> And in doing so, he sings “a tune” that Johnson also sings and hears, a sound that is in fact the quintessence of humanness: an “Elixer” distilled through the quintessentially human act of versification, the fettering of grief in tropes and numbered syllables so as “to work out the ever-aftermath” of heartbreak.

The pun on “math” in Johnson’s coinage “ever-aftermath,” and the scientific and technological lexicon of her “Nocturnall”—which includes such terms as “mach-cone,” “molecule,” and “wavelengths”—reflects Johnson’s engagement with what early modern thinkers called “natural philosophy.” Her poem is more than superficially invested in Yeager’s breaking of the sound barrier; it is conscious of its status as something written not only “after” Donne’s “Nocturnall” in the attributive sense so often applied in the subtitles of contemporary poems that adapt or rewrite other poems, but chronologically later than Yeager’s 1947 achievement. The poem is about belatedness: “Here comes that sonic boom,” the speaker cries, “thumping at the chest like a kickdrum / the first and final beat of a tune called / *Too Late*.” The speaker’s sense of belatedness, these lines reveal, is not only artistic and emotional, but sensory: “Ever too late the event / reveals its narrative to the sense, /

ever too slow on the uptake." If, in our age of broken sound, the "sense" is too slow to catch even the "narrative" revealed by a lived "event," how can it possibly respond to the lyric sounds of a poet long dead? How, in the mad onrush of post-modern experience, can one *hear* a poem of the past?

For Johnson, the answer involves revisiting one of the central images of Donne's poem, that of "loves limbecke," which she treats not as arcane and mystical, but rather as highly technical, not as evoking the occult realm of spiritual alchemy often explored by Donne scholars, but rather as a reference to the most cutting-edge metallurgical technology of Donne's time.<sup>9</sup> Johnson prompts us to reorient our understanding of "loves limbecke" in this way when her persona laments, "ever life hurtles heartbreak to heartbreak / while I rattle around in its mach-cone." A mach-cone is a pattern of sound waves formed by an object travelling at super-sonic speeds. And as one comes to realize after seeking out images of conical early modern alembics and comparing them to diagrams explaining the physics of a sonic boom, a mach-cone is limbecke-shaped. Both are funnels, wide at one end and narrow at the other.<sup>10</sup> Johnson's image thus revitalizes Donne's. It shocks us into realizing that the alchemical transformation of Donne's persona is at least as much a technological process as it is an involuntary and spontaneous spiritual experience. It reminds us that our response to Donne's poem is not just a matter of its silent but striking visible apparatus, the stanza on the page, but also of the auditory punch that apparatus delivers, a sonic boom produced four hundred years ago when "Something wider than the sky / got broken, something faster than a word / arrowed into it."

In blending terms drawn from physics, plant biology, human anatomy, bio-chemistry, and astronomy with the structures and intonations of Christian ritual, Johnson's poetry insists—as does Donne's—upon the fundamental oneness of what have in our time become warring clans: the tribe of religion and the tribe of science. Johnson's deeply Donnean 2008 collection *A Metaphorical God* traces the seasons of the liturgical year from Advent through Easter and includes a trio of poems

on the Triduum inspired, in part, by Donne's "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward" in which the light toward which the speaker ultimately turns is both the shining of the divine Sun/Son and the bioluminescence of marine dinoflagellates.<sup>11</sup> Johnson's yoking of science and faith continues in *Uncommon Prayer*, the collection in which "A Nocturnall Upon Saint Chuck Yeager's Day" appears; the collection as a whole, like the *Book of Common Prayer*, owes much to the Psalter. Its cover art is a gorgeous illuminated detail from a Medieval Book of Hours, and the collection's first part, entitled *Book of Hours*, includes not only Johnson's "Nocturnall," but other poems alluding to the canonical hours—"Matins for the Last Frost," "Three Lauds," "Vigil." These prayer-like poems also teach the reader scientific terms like "hibernacle" and "lyr-ids."

## 2. "her vigil and her Eve": Alchemical Ritual in Donne and Fulton

Alice Fulton, too, blends ritual with technology, ceremony with science. Indeed, her 2015 collection *Barely Composed* draws upon every imaginable resource in its struggle to answer the question Magdalena Edwards sums up in her review of the volume: "How do you compose yourself if your mother is dying, dead?" In *Barely Composed*, Edwards observes, Fulton is "doubly" concerned with this question as she "probes both her biological mother's death and Mother Earth's destruction around us, 'the inmates of this late-stage civilization.'"<sup>12</sup> In "A Lightenment On New Year's Eve," Fulton approaches the question from a distinctly gendered perspective, demonstrating that, when a poem responding to Donne's "Nocturnall" is the work of a woman, the text of that poem implicitly activates the potential in Donne's imperative, "[l]et mee prepare towards her," rendering it a gendered prophesy and casting Donne's poem as a harbinger of the lucid woman whose text enlightens his. "A Lightenment" presents its maker, Alice Fulton, as a light-bringer, a Lucy, no less devastated than the Donne persona who keeps vigil on the feast of Saint Lucy. Exploring her own, individual grief,

both as a poet and as a woman, Fulton gives a voice to the silent, un-speaking "her" of Donne's poem, the woman "toward" whom its speaker "prepare[s]": a feminine entity who is at once the anonymous "she" mourned by the speaker and the canonized Lucy, saint of the winter solstice.

Donne's poem itself, however, provides the ground upon which Fulton descants. In a note at the back of her collection, Fulton announces her poem's debt to both Donne and Shakespeare: "'A Lightenment On New Year's Eve' repurposes lines from 'A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day' by John Donne and quotes a phrase from Shakespeare's Sonnet 55" (92).<sup>13</sup> Her recycling of recognizable phrases from Donne's "Nocturnall" is appropriate, one realizes as one reads, in part because the situation in which Fulton's first-person speaker finds herself recalls that of Donne's speaker: she is in mourning for the death of a woman; and the darkness of winter enfolds her (though the occasion is New Year's Eve, the night of December 31st rather than midnight on December 12th, the eve of St. Lucy's Day, as in Donne's poem). Like Donne's speaker, she is engaged in a quasi-religious ritual; while his "Nocturnall" evokes the Roman Catholic liturgy of the hours, Fulton draws upon a rather self-mocking blend of Catholicism, Tibetan Buddhism, and trendy New Age psychobabble to describe a ceremony in which the participants are encouraged first "[t]o write / the year's grievances by hand on scrap" and then immolate the paper in a "burning bowl" (75). But while Donne's persona begins his final stanza insisting that his sun will never "renew" even as he bitterly urges other "lovers" to "Enjoy" their next year's "summer" (lines 37, 38, 41), the third section of Fulton's poem presents the persona as joining others in composing what amount to epistolary New Year's resolutions: "After the offering, we compose letters / of intention for the year ahead" (76).

Fulton's "A Lightenment On New Year's Eve" also resembles Donne's "Nocturnall" in challenging the reader with cryptic and knotty language. In his "Nocturnall," Donne includes such medical, philosophical, and alchemical terms as "hydroptique," "quintessence," "limbecke," and "Elixer," relying upon the reader to know their literal

meanings even as he applies them figuratively to the persona's ceremony of self-aggrandizing self-negation. Fulton uses such abstruse religious and scientific terms as "sodality," "Rinpoche," "control rods," and "recombinant."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, she goes even further than Donne in testing readers' tolerance for obscurity, taunting them with neologisms that remain entirely opaque until—in a sudden onrush of the "lightenment" to which her poem's punning title refers—one "gets" the pun or the allusion and (if one is anything like me) finds oneself both enlightened and amused by the heavy-handed lightness of Fulton's wordplay.<sup>15</sup>

The first explicit quotation from Donne's poem in Fulton's poem appears when, introducing a passage that relies upon images drawn from the world of digital photography, the speaker pleads,

[...] Since she enjoys her long night's  
festival let me. Some use their digital fireworks  
setting to preserve the letting go. (75)

Mourning her mother's passing, the speaker takes Donne's "[s]ince shee enjoys her long nights festivall" ("Nocturnall" 42) quite literally as evoking a night-time celebration of the dead complete with fireworks displays: displays that are, like grief itself, worth capturing and preserving rather than simply "letting go." By interpreting the festival of Donne's line 42 in this way, Fulton perhaps suggests as well that the "light squibs" of the winter sun in lines 2-4 of Donne's poem are fireworks set off in honor of Saint Lucy and the deceased beloved.<sup>16</sup> This suggestion—if such it is—nudges the reader toward interpreting Donne's poem not as an articulation of despair, but as an intentional and technically advanced snapshot of a hyperbolically bereaved persona, a highly controlled work of pictorial art rather than a confessional outpouring.

In Donne's poem, the speaker's pyrotechnically spectacular grief is mirrored by the diseased state of a planet sick unto death: "[t]he worlds whole sap is sunke," he says (l. 5), and "[t]he generall balme"—the moisture that ought to infuse the atmosphere—has been gulped down



by a sickly, "hydroptique earth" (l. 6). While the world's devastation in midwinter is not so much the result of the Donnean speaker's actions as a glass in which he sees his own deadness reflected, Fulton's poem encourages me to hear in Donne's lines a prophetic presentiment of what we now know as global climate change. In the second section of Fulton's poem, the speaker quotes the advice of "the pyropathologist" (76) who presides over the New Year's Eve burning ceremony, a New Age practitioner who uses fire ceremonies (and dubious bromides) to heal clients. Fulton's grimly funny neologism suggests that this person is something of a pyromaniac and at the same time alludes to the climate-oriented sciences of pyrogeography (which maps the global effects of wildfires) and phytopathology (the study of plant diseases). The precepts mouthed by the "pyropathologist" strike the mourning persona as ironically alarming rather than comforting: "*Change the world, the pyropathologist / says without a beat. Fire has a sense of entitlement. / It owns the stage. If you do fire / it does you back more deeply*" (76). Change the world, the speaker winces; do we really want to keep doing that? For us, "drown[ing] the whole world" (Donne, "Nocturnall" 24) is no mere hyperbole, no microcosmic metaphor, but a terrifyingly literal and macrocosmic work-in-progress.

Indeed, Fulton's speaker worries that fire—like the love that has "ruin'd" the speaker of Donne's poem—is a very dangerous thing indeed to "do." It, like love, is all too likely to consume you:

[...] *If you do fire*  
*it does you back more deeply.* If you do love—  
 but I was saying. To fire it's all to the tooth.  
 It's a felony-friendly entity not a force  
 with whom it is advisable to link your fate. (76)

The speaker of Donne's poem was, after all, far too willing to "do love"; and in "A Nocturnall," it has most certainly done[ne] him: he has been burnt to ash in "loves limbecke" (l. 21).

Despite her awareness of such dangers, however, the speaker of Fulton's poem proceeds to carry out the New Year's fire ritual, to seek purification and transformation through the alchemical incineration of base

elements, which in her case include slips of paper on which she has inscribed all the “fatuous platitudes” people offer the bereaved. The process recalls and updates that undergone by the speaker of Donne’s “Nocturnall”; for, though the “festivall” of bereavement in Donne’s poem does not involve immolating written words, its speaker has undergone the *nigredo*, the first stage of the four-stage *opus* undertaken by alchemists.<sup>17</sup> “Fire is the fuel of the alchemical work and the main agent of its continuous process of transmutation,” alchemy scholar Johannes Fabricius explains, and the *nigredo* is the stage of the alchemical process in which “the glory of the coniunctio”—the conjugal fusion of the male and female principles into a mystically hermaphroditic figure—“suddenly fades into darkness and despair” and “bier and marriage bed are made one” (14, 98).<sup>18</sup> This alchemical descent into blackened residue resembles psychotic depression in that it “subjects the ego to [...] feelings of dejection, loneliness and hopelessness and reactions of self-depreciation” that “reach delusional proportions” (Fabricius 99): Donne’s persona in a nutshell. In Fulton’s poem, the speaker undergoes an alchemical burning ritual in order to emerge from such desolation. But she seems all too aware that the fire she uses to process the death of her mother may also “*Change the world*” for the worse, altering the planet as relentlessly as the lovers of Donne’s “Nocturnall” do when their weeping “[drowns] the whole world” in a rising ocean of tears.

The Donnean reverberations set up by “A Lightenment” are not accidental. Alice Fulton was introduced at a 2017 reading by her Cornell University colleague, poet Ishion Hutchinson, as the mysterious “she” of Donne’s *First Anniversary*: “In the year 1611,” Hutchinson said, “John Donne prophesied Alice Fulton with these words: ‘She that should all parts to reunion bow, / She that had all Magnetique force alone, / To draw, and fasten sundred parts in one’” (Hutchinson).<sup>19</sup> In part 3 of Fulton’s “Lightenment,” this powerful Donnean woman leaves the despair and the anti-futurity of Donne’s persona on its own for a moment and joins the rest of her New Year’s companions, who turn from burning their “grievances” to “compose letters / of intention for the year

ahead." But her mood remains sardonic; she is as skeptical of resolutions as she is of professorial pretension. Responding to a witticism that sounds like it comes from a satirical academic novel, she positions herself not so much as inspired poet as frustrated party-goer (or party member), a weary academic whose hood and gown could stand some repair:

*A party without a procedural guide-*

*book's like a faculty club without a tattoo  
removal service. True fool, my twice-turned  
regalia does need to be retooled. (77)*

This wryly self-deprecating observation complete, Fulton's "Lightenment" begins its fourth and final part, in which the autobiographical persona mourns her mother's death by explicitly "retool[ing]" lines 17-18 of Donne's poem:

One gasp and she was rebegot

of nightness nullsense nilthings  
which are not. (77)<sup>20</sup>

Here, it is the deceased "she," not the speaker, whom death transmutes into a quintessence of nothingness. The poet/speaker, the "I" of Fulton's poem remains; she is "the living cell," the organism that has grown from the viable egg once produced by her mother's ovary.

But she is not the dead woman's only monument; the collection *Barely Composed* is a carefully sealed "tome," the poetic tomb a daughter has chosen to "build" around her mother's absence. Text generated in the face of death is, Fulton knows, a blasphemy of sorts, an imposition upon the wordless purity of unspoken grief. Yet, like Donne's speaker, who objects that even the word "death" itself "wrongs" the dead, and who nevertheless chooses to speak that word, Fulton boldly defies "the eraser," death, by writing of writing:

[...] Though the eraser  
grays the paper and silence breaks

the state it names, I'll call this hour  
her vigil and her Eve. (78)

Reproducing the capitalized "Eve" found in some manuscripts' rendering of Donne's line 44, Fulton detects its equivocal potential: "her Eve" is the second thing that the speaker "call[s] [...] this hour," but Donne's persona (and Fulton's) are also saying that, while they will call "this hour her vigil," they will "call" *her*—the dead woman—"Eve." That is, they will call her the mother of all who live. In calling the mother she mourns by that primal name, Fulton recognizes herself, however "molished / with time and old with all / these bratty fire ribbons tucked inside // my head" (78), as a daughter who mourns both the mother who bore her and a more primal Mother: one who is what Donne would call "a quintessence" of mortal motherhood. Performing, with "attentional" precision, a ceremony for this Woman, who is both suffering Mother Earth and a holy *mater misericordiae*, Fulton assumes the duties of "The link girl," the girl bearing "a torch made of cloth / dipped in pitch," who "runs ahead / to light the way" and, in so doing, links the future of earth, humanity, and poetry to their pasts. Such running ahead requires, paradoxically, a sense of oneself as coming after, being the offspring rather than the parent, the flame kindled by, yet consuming, a prior flame. It marks one's silent pain as heir to preexisting grief: "Writing is the fire / that burns fire. Every silence quotes / a greater silence" (78).

Fulton's "link girl" is also her version of St. Lucy, the light bearer. In mourning her biological mother as the now-annihilated "Eve" from whom she sprang, this Lucy highlights for the reader of Donne's "Nocturnall" the radical fruitlessness of the love his poem describes. That love, the radically painful *eros* that Donne's persona once experienced with the woman he mourns, gave birth—even in life—only to turbulent nothingness and dead flesh. The moments in which the couple momentarily withdrew from their fixation upon one another in order to "show / Care to ought else" made them "grow / To be two Chaosses" (ll. 25-26, 24-25)—side-by-side universes of the unformed *prima materia*—

while their times apart, the "absences" they often endured, "[w]ithdrew [their] soules and made [them] carcasses" (ll. 26, 27). Re-reading these lines in the context of Fulton's poem, one is sensitized to the temporal implications of the speaker's repeated use of "grow": "oft did we grow" in life "To be two Chaosses" (ll. 24-25); and now, after her death "I am [...] / Of the first nothing, the Elixer grown" (ll. 28, 29). In the first case, any engagement with the world outside their coupledness turned the lovers into nothing but two abysses of the four elements at war with one another. And now that his fellow-chaos is dead, the speaker finds that he has "grown" to be a unique and inimitable essence of the chaos prior to all chaoses: the primordial nothingness. His claim to be "first" reflects a will-to-priority that denies poetry's intertextual nature and thus undermines poesis. He cannot acknowledge the likeness of his grief to any prior grief or of his text to any prior text and thus cannot engage in the re-creation essential to poetic creativity. In rounding out the poem with an echo of its opening lines, the persona quotes only himself.

Of course, his radical originality is a fiction. As I have stressed in exploring the title "A Nocturnall," Donne's poem is not what its persona claims it is. It is not the singular, unprecedented and inimitable expression of matchless grief. It is "A" nocturnal, a liturgy created by John Donne that relies for its resonance upon echoes of Christian prayer, Petrarchan conceits, and an alchemical lexicon; its speaker is "a quintessence," not *the* fifth essence, but something in the class of things to which the fifth essence belongs, something that paradoxically comes both before and after the other four essences. And because Donne's "Nocturnall" is—for all its speaker's claim to unborn nothingness—a fruit sprung from the womb of pre-existing texts, it too has "grown" to be a womb, a fertile recess in which other poems grow, an incubator not of chaos, but of beauty. Donne's poem is admittedly a very different sort of uterus from that of a living woman.<sup>21</sup> It is a dark matrix consciously chosen by its self-declared offspring, a deep well of pain and loss in which new poems gestate, a fertile grave from which they emerge.<sup>22</sup> In selecting it as a *prima materia* for their creations, Kimberly

Johnson and Alice Fulton reveal the radical ductility of Donne's "A Nocturnall Upon *S. Lucies Day*," marking it as a poem open to the diverse needs, desires, traumas, and dreams of twenty-first-century readers.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Kimberly Johnson, "A Nocturnall Upon Saint Chuck Yeager's Day," in *Uncommon Prayer* 12-13. All quotations of Johnson's poem are taken from this edition with the permission of the author. Johnson's "Nocturnall" is reprinted in Herz (48-49).

<sup>2</sup>In the *Plume* version of the poem (<https://plumepoetry.com/a-nocturnal-by-kimberly-johnson/>), "Nocturnall" is spelled with only one L and Yeager is referred to by his formal given name, Charles, rather than by the more familiar nickname "Chuck."

<sup>3</sup>See Miller; and Frost 156-59.

<sup>4</sup>See also Chapter 5 of Steggle.

<sup>5</sup>The *OED*'s quotation of Burke's sentence extends only through the word "men." Burke's point in this passage is one that would have interested Donne; he attempts to distinguish the legitimate grievances of Irish Catholics "as Catholics" from what he considers the "factious and imaginary" complaints of Ireland "as Ireland" against England.

<sup>6</sup>See Dolan 13-20. She does not explicitly address the issue raised by Donne's use of the indefinite article.

<sup>7</sup>This sermon on Job 36:25, which Donne preached 25 August 1622, will be included in the forthcoming vol. 6 (*Sermons Preached to the Nobility and Gentry*, ed. Philip West) of *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*. It was—as its header indicates—preached "at Hanworth, to my Lord of Carlile, and his company, being the Earls of Northumberland, and Buckingham, &c." The peer whose "company" formed Donne's auditory on this occasion was James Hay, Viscount Doncaster and Earl of Carlisle, whom Donne had accompanied to Germany when Hay traveled there as English ambassador. As West notes on the *Oxford Sermons* website, Hanworth was "the home of Sir Robert Killigrew, one of the knights who had accompanied Doncaster on the German embassy and who, like Donne, had become a client of Buckingham [...]. Also in the auditory at Hanworth was Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland, Hay's father-in-law, the so-called 'Wizard' Earl, who in 1602 had broken the news of Donne's marriage to Anne More to her father, Sir George More." Northumberland was well known for his love of learning, including alchemy.

<sup>8</sup>See Dolan: "All declarations of 'nothingness' are qualified and paradoxical, as despair is made to submit to an alchemical metaphysics." Of the speaker's claim to be an epitaph, for example, Dolan says that, "as 'Epitaph' is conventionally an expression of the essence of that which is dead (and as such an intensified, condensed death), it is also that which gives the most concise meaning to that which is dead. Like the alchemical 'quintessence,' it is an extraction from the elements which have dissolved and moved downwards towards incoherence, and as such is, paradoxically, a reconstruction: elements which have decomposed are symbolically resuscitated by the 'Epitaph,' a verbal quintessence, definitive verbal enclosure and monument" (14).

<sup>9</sup>For an image of workers selecting limbecks in an early modern metal-working factory, see a woodcut from Ercker, available online at the Getty Images website: <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/woodcut-illustration-from-beschreibung-aller-furnemisten-news-photo/90778700>.

<sup>10</sup>See the engravings of conical limbecks in *De Alchemia* assembled in a flip-book on Adam McLean's *Alchemy Web Site* at [https://www.alchemywebsite.com/Equipment\\_de\\_Alchemia\\_1541.html](https://www.alchemywebsite.com/Equipment_de_Alchemia_1541.html). Also compelling is the image of "Alchymya" that is one of several from Thurneysser, also digitized by McLean [https://www.alchemywebsite.com/Emblems\\_Quinta\\_Essentia\\_1570.html](https://www.alchemywebsite.com/Emblems_Quinta_Essentia_1570.html). The conical flask held by Alchymya in this image is labeled "Aßentia"—absence. The shape of these apparatuses resembles that of a mach-cone; see "Sonic booms and Mach cones" on the science blog MrReid.org, 15 Dec. 2012: <http://wordpress.mrreid.org/2012/12/15/sonic-booms-and-mach-cones/>.

<sup>11</sup>The poems are "Goodfriday"; "[ ]"; and "Easter, Looking Westward" (Johnson, *A Metaphorical God* 56-61). The bracketed blank that serves as the title of the second poem corresponds to the liturgical emptiness of Holy Saturday, which ends with the kindling of new fire that begins the solemn celebration of the Easter Vigil.

<sup>12</sup>Fulton's *Barely Composed* is, like Donne's poem with its five stanzas, a five-part composition. Both "You Own It" (82-84), the poem Edwards quotes in her description of Fulton's book, and "A Lightenment On New Year's Eve" (75-78) appear in Part V. All quotations from "A Lightenment On New Year's Eve" are taken from this edition with the permission of the author. The poem is also available at KROnline, the website of the *Kenyon Review*, the journal in which it was first published in Summer 2011: <https://kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2011-summer/selections/a-lightenment-on-new-years-eve/>.

<sup>13</sup>The allusion to Sonnet 55 appears in the fourth and final section of Fulton's poem with the lines "No / parched marble memorates her" and "Nor war's quick fire shall burn" (77). The piece begins, moreover, with a darkly funny mash-up of Keats and Shakespeare: "Season of no weedwhackers and wind / that moans like a folding choir." Compare the opening of Keats's "To Autumn" ("Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness") and the opening quatrain of Shakespeare's Sonnet 73: "That time of year thou mayst in me behold / When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang / Upon those boughs which shake against the cold, / Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang." Fulton's pun in these lines plays upon the idea

that a “folding choir”—a choral group that is ceasing to operate, giving up and going out of business, may make a moaning sound like that of a rusty old folding chair in an abandoned choir-loft. For a Donne scholar, these equivocal images evoke not only the demolished churches of Shakespeare’s sonnet, but also Donne’s comparison of copious and hollow verbiage to “winds” that “in our ruin’d Abbeyes rore” (“Satyre 2,” l. 60).

<sup>14</sup>A “sodality” is a Roman Catholic confraternity devoted to a particular spirituality; a “Rinpoche” is a Buddhist lama who, after death, reincarnates as an especially enlightened infant, a child who will enlighten others. On sodalities, and their frequent association with the Blessed Virgin Mary as patroness, see Hilgers. On the nature of “tulkus,” bodhisattvas who choose reincarnation over nirvana in order to teach others and who are given the title “Rinpoche” in Tibetan Buddhism, see Barzin. On how “control rods” work in a nuclear reactor, see “Nuclear 101”; and on the technology used to produce “recombinant” DNA, see Green.

<sup>15</sup>Examples include “folding choir” (see n13 above), a double warping of the word “nuclear” in the phrase “newclear nukeyouler” (75), and a catalogue of what sound like plant species that would emerge either from a fire-scarred forest or from the scorched mind of a poet obsessed with light and fire: “chandelierium. Kindweed / ashquill” (78).

<sup>16</sup>According to the *OED*, the word “squib”—referring to a “species of firework, in which the burning of the composition is usually terminated by a slight explosion” (“squib, *n.*” 1.a.)—first appeared in English in a 1535 play by Donne’s maternal grandfather John Heywood.

<sup>17</sup>See especially Peter, who characterizes Donne’s poem as anticipating Carl Jung’s psychoanalytic interpretation of spiritual alchemy.

<sup>18</sup>Like Peter, Fabricius explores spiritual alchemy as the medieval and early modern precursor to Jungian psychology. In discussing the *nigredo*, he quotes Caldwell on the trauma arising when one is forced “to face the bitter knowledge of death”; “the death of a loved one can suddenly [...] flood the mind with unbearable horrors” (Caldwell 181; qtd. in Fabricius 99).

<sup>19</sup>Hutchinson quotes *The First Anniuersary*, ll. 220-22; these lines follow, and present an alternative to, Donne’s vision of a world in which “all Relation” is lost and “euery man alone thinkes” himself “a Phoenix.”

<sup>20</sup>In Donne’s “Nocturnall,” the lines are “I am rebegot, / Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not.”

<sup>21</sup>An exception, of course, is the womb of the Virgin Mary as Donne himself defined it, which was chosen by the child it bore. See his *La Corona* 2: “Annunciation.”

<sup>22</sup>For the idea of a text’s “matrix” as “the structure of the given” that “becomes visible only in its variants,” see Riffaterre (13). Images, phrases, and sentences from Donne’s “Nocturnall” are more visibly (and audibly) present in the five poems I discuss than would be the case for the implicit “matrix” of a poem as Riffaterre defines it; yet Donne’s poem functions similarly in relation to the poems I discuss



here: key words and phrases from the "Nocturnall" serve as "generator[s]" (Riffaterre 21), textual energy sources for later poems.

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