

# Poetry

ANN PYNE, McMILLEN, INC.

*"We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms"* —JOHN DONNE

I like to think of a room as a poem.

Is the room composed in silvers and silvery whites? If so, it would remind me of lines from Walter de la Mare's poem "Silver": "slowly, silently now the moon, walks the night in its silver shoon." Or is it neoclassical and elegiac, like Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," in which case I picture long curtain panels holding their form like the fluting on columns, or a pair of Adam Weisweiler commodes caught in candlelight. Is the room spunky and funny, like an Ogden Nash poem? Or is it arch and odd, like a poem by Emily Dickinson?

Then comes the notion of structure.

Is the room "matchy-matchy," a term some use to deride a room that is conspicuously well-coordinated, like a poem with an obvious rhyme scheme. I love rooms like this, particularly guest rooms and country sitting rooms.

And as to meter, is the meter of the room clipped and obvious? Or is it more casual and conversational, like Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," suggesting a large, airy room, very democratically arranged with no authoritarian seating groups and lots of room for lolling and meditation.

To take the other extreme, can a room be like a sonnet, strictly organized and formal, with an argument? Here I think of Robert Frost's "Design," the title of which is no coincidence. In the octave Frost describes a design that is entirely white—a white spider, a white flower, a white moth. In the sextet he asks, is this a design of evil? Or is it benign? Can a room ask questions too? I contend it can and should.

"The Canonization" by John Donne is a poem of structural layering, with images that morph from tears into hymns and half-acre tombs. A room, too, can be layered—a layer that is visual (what a beautiful table).

a layer that is practical (what is that table doing there?), a layer that is academic (what is the table's history?), a layer that is sentimental (that table was my grandmother's . . .). Interest in a room is created by the interplay between one layer and another. In "The Canonization," images that initially seem contradictory resolve into something larger than those the poet started with. The tears and moths become "counties, towns, courts"—a virtual empire. So too with the layers of a room—they threaten disruption, but their unity, when achieved, gives the room its power.

As to a room as metaphor, I reference Mrs. Eleanor Stockstrom McMillen Brown, McMillen's founder, and her large drawing room at the Four Fountains in Southampton, New York, which was originally a theater. The room is dominated by a large Dufy tapestry *Circus Horses*—a printed fabric, not valuable—and the poem that occurs to me in relation to this circus metaphor is William Butler Yeats' "The Circus Animals' Desertion."

In short order, the theme assembles its minions: a painting of a clown playing an accordion, isolated on a large wall; an androgynous plaster-work figure positioned on the mantel, hands raised, as if to start a routine; the layout of the room, with circles of activity (library, dining, seating groups); the fact that the room itself had been built as a space for performance. The center table, the Venetian chandelier, the center carpet—all keep the arenas for the room's performers at a distance from one another.

Did Mrs. Brown know this Yeats poem to which I refer?

Whatever the case, to anyone who knew her, there were no alternatives acceptable to Mrs. Brown other than "circus," with "circus" meaning an insistence on elegance, refinement, performance, program, distance, and irony—the opposite of the "foul

This bedroom takes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for its theme. This bed is the bed of Titania and Oberon, Theseus and Hippolyta, Lysander and Hermia—not to mention Puck. For in dream, we all exchange places, and a happy bower is what we all wish for, and all deserve.



rag-and-bone shop of the heart," the final words of Yeats' poem. Indeed, to anyone who came to the Four Fountains for Mrs. Brown's lunches or small dinner parties, there was nothing more dignified or sophisticated or challenging to the visitor than this space. It demanded to be remembered.

So, what does poetry tell us about a room?

A room, like a poem, offers ways of looking. It provides windows.

A room, like a poem, is also a way of excluding the world, of being private.

A room, like a poem, has authority. Its rhythm, its rhyme, its metaphor system, its tone—these are elements with which a visitor cannot argue.

A room, like a poem, must be understood in time—the time it takes to read the poem from beginning to end, the time it takes to look around the room. To re-read; to re-look. Sometimes, after many years, to return.

A room, like a poem, is an argument against the expectations of the person entering. It forces the visitor to ask, "If this is *you*, who am *I*?"

A room and a poem present the same question. Within the immensity of the universe surrounding us, do our feelings matter, do our constructions matter?

This is a room's greatness, its argument against mortality.

This drawing room is about a love of classical civilization that does not fear the questions such a landscape raises, or the rebukes and misgivings it opens us to. On the parchment top of a small table Pyne copied W. H. Auden's poem "In Praise of Limestone."



