



Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

Mending Wall (1914,1919)

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.

He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'

ANALYSIS

“Who are bad neighbors?” asked H. D. Thoreau, for the sole purpose of answering his own question. ‘They who suffer their neighbors’ cattle to go at large because they don’t want their ill will,—are afraid to anger them. They are abettors of the ill-doers.’ Thoreau could have as readily asked, ‘Who are good neighbors?’ Whereupon, following his reasoning, one could answer, ‘Those who build and maintain walls which keep out their neighbors’ cattle.’ How, and indeed whether, the good will of one’s neighbor is fostered by boundaries, however, was a general question that would engage Thoreau’s latter-day disciple, Robert Frost. Were walls and fences instrumental in the retention and renewal of human relationships Is a question central to ‘Mending Wall.’ The answers the poem presents us with are somewhat less than clear-cut. This is so, at least partly, because Frost has purposely and purposefully left out of his poem a piece of important information. One key to the poet’s omission lies in the final lines of the poem.

In these lines the poet moves back through time, beyond his own earlier questioning of the possible reasons for continuing the annual repair of those now apparently useless boundaries, to an earlier, darker age. Indeed, his neighbor seems to be moving in a ‘darkness’ that is, suggestively, ‘not of woods only and the shade of trees.’ To the poet he is now ‘like an old-stone savage armed.’ Even on New England farms in this century the ways of the savage continue, it would seem, no matter how transformed, no matter how radically attenuated. Indeed, Frost shrewdly, and characteristic ally, stopped his poem just short of the mythological link toward which the poem is moving. That Frost and his neighbor engage in what is tantamount to a vestigial ritual and that further, prodded by the poet, the neighbor would defend his father’s idea (proverbially expressed) that ‘Good fences make good neighbors’ relates this poem to traditions and rituals antedating the Romans. The god of boundaries they named Terminus was not invented by the Romans, but he became one of their important household gods. Annually Terminus was honored in a ritual which not only reaffirmed boundaries but which also provided the occasion for predetermined traditional festivities among neighbors.

The festival of the Terminalia was celebrated in Rome and in the country on the 23rd of February. The neighbors on either side of any boundary gathered around the landmark [the stones which marked boundaries], with their wives, children, and servants; and crowned it, each on his own side, with garlands, and offered cakes and, bloodless sacrifices. In later times, however, a lamb, or sucking pig, was sometimes slain, and the stone sprinkled with the blood. Lastly, the whole neighborhood joined in a general feast. If his neighbor does not know that this annual ritual of walking the boundaries to repair their common wall has its obscure source in the all-but-totally lost mysteries of ancient man, that information could not possibly have been unknown to the serious student of the Classics who wrote the poem. What impresses

itself upon the poet is that, for whatever reasons, men continue to need marked boundaries, even when they find it difficult to justify their existence.

In conclusion, it should be noted that Frost's decision—a characteristic and revealing decision—not to link explicitly his view of his farmers' ritualistic occupation to the myth and ritual from which it probably derives distinguishes his poetic method from that of the Modernists, who were then predominant. By contrast, a similar mythic parallel in a representative poem by a T. S. Eliot or an Ezra Pound, for example, would have been made, less subtly, either through direct statement or by pointed allusion."

George Montiero
"Unlinked Myth in Frost's 'Mending Wall'"
Concerning Poetry 7:2 (Fall 1974)

"'Mending Wall' dramatizes the redemptive imagination in its playful phase, guided surely and confidently by a man who has his world under full control, who in his serenity is riding his realities, not being shocked by them into traumatic response. The place of 'Mending Wall' in the structure of *North of Boston* suggests, in its sharp contrasts to the dark tones of some of the major poems in the volume, the psychological necessities of sustaining supreme fictions... It does not take more than one reading of the poem to understand that the speaker is not a country primitive who is easily spooked by the normal processes of Nature. He knows very well what it is 'that doesn't love a wall' (frost, of course). His fun lies in not naming it. And in not naming the scientific truth he is able to manipulate intransigent fact into the world of the mind where all things are pliable. The artful vagueness of the phrase 'Something there is' is enchanting and magical, suggesting even the bushed tones of reverence before mystery in Nature. And the speaker (who is not at all reverent toward Nature) consciously works at deepening that sense of mystery....

The play of the mature, imaginative man is grounded in ironic awareness--and must be. Even as he excludes verifiable realities from his fictive world the unmistakable tone of scorn for the hunters comes seeping through. He may step into a fictive world but not before glancing back briefly at the brutality that attends upon the play of others. Having paid for his imaginative excursions by establishing his complex awareness, he is free to close the magic circle cast out by his playful energies, and close out the world reported by the senses ('No one has seen them made or heard them made'). In knowing how to say a thing in and through adroit linguistic manipulation, the fiction of the 'something' that doesn't love a wall is created; the imagined reality stands formed before him, ready to be entered.

If the fact of a broken wall is excuse enough to make a fiction about why it got that way, then that same fact may be the occasion for two together to take a journey in the mind. For those still tempted to read 'Mending Wall' as political allegory (the narrator standing for a broad-minded liberal internationalism, the thick-headed second speaker representing a selfish super-patriot) they must first face the line 'I let my neighbor know beyond the hill.' 'Mending Wall' has nothing to do with one-world political ideals, with good or bad neighbor policies: on this point the title of the poem is helpful. It is a poem that celebrates a process, not the thing itself. It is a poem, furthermore, that distinguishes between two kinds of people: one who seizes the particular occasion of mending as fuel for the imagination and as a release from the dull ritual of work each spring an one who is trapped by work and by the New England past as it comes down to him in the form of his father's cliché. Tied as he is to his father's words that 'Good fences make good neighbors,' the neighbor beyond the hill is committed to an end, the fence's completion. His participation in the process of rebuilding is sheer work--he never plays the outdoor game.

The narrator, however, is not committed to ends, but to the process itself which he sees as having non-utilitarian value: 'There where it is we do not need the wall.' The process itself is the matrix of the play that redeems work by transforming it into the pleasure of an outdoor game in which you need to cast spells to make rocks balance.... The narrator of 'Mending Wall' does not give up easily: he tries again to tempt his neighbor to enter into the fictive world with him and to share his experience of play... All to no avail: the outrageously appropriate pun on 'offense'--a linguistic emblem of the poem's spirit of play and freedom--falls on deaf ears.

The neighbor won't say 'elves,' those little folk who don't love a wall; he will not enter the play world of imagination. He moves in 'darkness,' our narrator concludes, 'like an old-stone savage armed.' The characterization is philosophically precise in the logic of post-Kantian aesthetics; the recalcitrant and plodding neighbor is a slave to the rituals of the quotidian, a primitive whose spirit has not been freed by the artistic consciousness that lies dormant within. It is the play spirit of imagination, as Schiller suggests, which distinguishes the civilized man from his cave-dwelling ancestor--that 'old-stone savage' who moved in 'darkness'."

Frank Lentricchia
Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self
(Duke 1975)

"The conflict in 'Mending Wall' develops as the speaker reveals more and more of himself while portraying a native Yankee and responding to the regional spirit he embodies. The opposition between observer and observed--and the tension produced by the observer's awareness of the difference--is crucial to the poem. Ultimately, the very knowledge of this opposition becomes itself a kind of barrier behind which the persona, for all his dislike of walls, finds himself confined. But at the beginning, the Yankee farmer is not present, and the persona introduces himself in a reflective, offhanded way, musing about walls... Clearly, he is a casual sort. He broaches no difficult subjects, nor does he insist on talking about himself; yet Frost is at his best in a sentence like this.

Through the language and rhythm of the lines we gain a faint but unmistakable sense of the poem's conflict. Like the 'frozen-ground-swell,' it gathers strength while lying buried beneath the denotative surface of the poem. From the start, we suspect that the speaker has more sympathy than he admits for whatever it is 'that doesn't love a wall.' Frost establishes at the outset his speaker's discursive indirection. He combines the indefinite pronoun 'something' with the loose expletive construction 'there is' to evoke a ruminative vagueness even before raising the central subject of walls. A more straightforward character (like the Yankee farmer) might condense this opening line to three direct words: 'Something dislikes walls.' But Frost employs informal, indulgently convoluted language to provide a linguistic texture for the dramatic conflict that develops later in the poem.

By using syntactical inversion ('something there is...') to introduce a rambling, undisciplined series of relative clauses and compound verb phrases ('that doesn't love...that sends...and spills...and makes...'), he evinces his persona's unorthodox, unrestrained imagination. Not only does this speaker believe in a strange force, a seemingly intelligent, natural or supernatural 'something' that 'sends the frozen-ground-swell' to ravage the wall, but his speech is also charged with a deep sensitivity to it. The three active verbs ('sends,' 'spills,' 'makes') that impel the second, third, and fourth lines forward are completed by direct objects that suggest his close observation of the destructive process. He appreciates the subterranean dynamics of the frost, he knows how spilled boulders look in the bright winter light, and he seems so familiar with the gaps that we suspect he has walked through more than a few (evidently with a companion).

The first line of 'Mending Wall' is also notable because it functions effectively as a counterpoint to the farmer's 'good fences' apothegm, which appears once in the middle of the poem and then again in the final line. The farmer is summed up by his adage, fittingly his only utterance; his reiteration of it is an appropriate ending to the poem because it completes a cyclical pattern to which the speaker has no rejoinder and from which he cannot escape. Beyond expressing an attitude toward walls, it evokes the farmer's personality through its simplicity and balanced directness. The basic subject-verb-object syntax of the five-word maxim is reinforced by the repeated adjective and by the symmetrical balance and rhythmic similarity of subject ('Good fences') and object ('good neighbors') on either side of the monosyllabic verb 'make.' The persona's initial observation, 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall,' with its hesitations and indefinite circumlocutions, conveys not only a contrasting opinion, but also a different way of thinking from the tight-lipped Yankee's. Significantly, though the speaker's observation is reiterated later in the poem, it is not a self-contained statement. Unlike the farmer's encapsulated wisdom, it is a protest, a complaint leading into a series of tenuously linked explanations, digressions, and ruminations.

Throughout the first half of the poem the speaker contemplates the deterioration and repair of walls, strengthening our awareness of his two central traits; his whimsical imagination and his fine sensitivity to detail. He digresses to describe hunters who actively tear walls apart in search of rabbits. Then he returns to his own interest in a more mysterious, unseen, unheard, destructive power. With relaxed, conversational irrelevance, he launches in a discussion of the rebuilding ritual, objective physical description to a light touch of fantasy—'We have to use a spell to make them balance'--which is likely to be noticed only because of the suggestive hints made earlier to the strange force responsible for the gaps.

Frost's control of tone during this desultory ramble is responsible for the speaker's ability to hold our attention and pique our interest. Even on successive readings, we are surprised by the implications of a given line or phrase, and we find ourselves gauging how much of a smile or frown accompanies each sentence. The imagined spell of line 18 dissolves in the jocularity of line 19: 'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!' Yet, just as quickly, the concrete, sensory images in the following line remind us of the real effort such work requires: 'We wear our fingers rough with handling them'....

The unceremonious sentence fragment and the deprecatory offhandedness of 'just another kind' and 'comes to little more' are unsuited to the earnestness of the preceding line; yet by now we are accustomed to incongruities, and we suspect that behind his capriciousness there is something on the speaker's mind. The allusion to an 'outdoor game' evokes rivalry and competition, not only in wall repair, but also in wall destruction. This persona shows great appreciation of playfulness and recognizes many kinds of sport. If the wall builders participate in one 'kind of outdoor game together,' then they surely play another game against the wall destroyers: the hunters and those mysterious underground forces that wait strategically until the workers' backs are turned before spilling any more boulders. Hints of opposition and competitiveness soon gain strength in lines that effect a marvelous blend of natural fact and fanciful fabrication...

While attacking his neighbor's lack of open-minded amiability, the speaker is the one who exhibits antisocial tendencies. He is quick to think the worst, presuming that the farmer's concern with the wall is motivated by base selfishness, despite the latter's expressed interest in being 'good neighbors.' Furthermore, it is not the farmer but the speaker who initiates the mending-wall ritual. Thus these lines heighten a still undefined tension and reveal surprising complexities while preparing us for the Yankee farmer's blunt precept: 'Good fences make good neighbors.' Such a forceful line crystallizes the poem's dramatic conflict by standing in salient opposition to everything the persona has said and, indeed, to his mode of speech. It is a remarkable and memorable line, not because of its inherent truth or quotability, but because of Frost's effective anticipatory presentation of an extraordinarily imaginative antagonism to 'good fences.'

Just as the twenty-five lines preceding the farmer's aphorism contribute to its impact, so do the sixteen succeeding lines that lead up to its reiteration. But once the conflict of farmer and observer has been made overt, the last section of the poem develops a contentiousness that further elucidates the differences between the two characters and reveals how little sociability there is between them. As the poem draws to its close with a chimerical vision of the farmer as 'an old stone savage' the term 'neighbor' seems increasingly ironic. The farmer looms not as an associate or coworker, but as an alien being whom the speaker observes, criticizes, and reflects upon while maintaining his distance and objectivity.

The two men--farmer and observer, insider and outsider--are separated by deep differences in perception, differences that the speaker does not fully appreciate. He thinks they are building a wall, but to his neighbor it is merely fence mending. A more significant contrast is suggested by the Yankee farmer's reliance on shibboleth (a form of mental enclosure). Confident in his beliefs, he relies on traditional wisdom to suppress inquisitive or speculative tendencies. He concerns himself not with the whys and wherefores of walls but with the simple, practical fact (to him a fact) of their efficacy. His unwillingness to explain or debate his position implies that he feels there is nothing to be gained through communicating or exchanging ideas. If fences are good, then, conversely, too much closeness between neighbors must be undesirable. Indeed, there is no evidence that his 'neighborly' relations with the speaker extend much beyond the laconic yearly ritual described in the poem. Satisfied to confine himself behind his personal wall of self-assumed taciturnity, he never converses with the speaker. He only repeats the aphorism he

learned from his father, as if to keep from something original (or as if incapable of saying something original).

The persona, for his part, does not equate thinking with adages; instead of accepting parental or neighborly authorities, he seems willing to 'go behind' anyone's sayings, including his own. Even his tendentious investigation of whatever it is 'that doesn't love a wall' is inconclusive, shifting as it does from the mysterious instability of walls to the foibles of the barrier-loving neighbor before finally dissipating in bitter complaints. But conclusiveness can hardly be the major concern of a speaker so given to equivocations (ll. 21-22, 36-38), digressions (ll. 5-9), questions (ll. 30-34), suppositions (ll. 28-29, 32-35, 41-42), and outright fantasies (ll. 18-19, 25-26, 39-40).

After ranging from careful description to seemingly frivolous speculation, from shrewdness to willful allusiveness, and from subtle irony to urgent sincerity, the persona grows diffident toward the end of the poem about his own perceptions. He is particularly uncertain about how he should respond to his neighbor. Though wanting to 'put a notion' in his head, he goes no further than conjecture: 'I wonder / If I could.' His claim that 'Spring is the mischief in me' recalls the mischievous force 'that doesn't love a wall,' yet he does not try to make gaps in the farmer's mental fortifications. He indulges only in speculative, figmental 'mischief,' contemplating the crucial question he dares not ask: 'Why do they make good neighbors?' He even undercuts his strongest comment with a qualifier: 'He moves in darkness as it seems to me' (my emphasis).

Ironically (and there is much irony in this poem), although the speaker complains about his neighbor's unfriendliness, his own susceptibility to subjective vision and his willingness to let his imagination run away with him predispose him also to prejudicial attitudes. He sees the wall and its symbolism virtually overwhelms him. By contrast, the farmer, who surely knows that 'fence' is a misnomer for the country-style stone wall they are working on, sees no sinister implications in it and evidently uses the slightly imprecise adage to show his desire not 'to give offense.' It was a brilliant touch by Frost to use wordplay in exposing his persona's central misjudgment. For wordplay is the mark of the poet, and it is a poet's sensibility that so delightfully plays this speaker false. It is only in the imagination that the fence gives offence, and it is only this visionary speaker who insists a wall cannot be innocent, cannot be the benign fence of the farmer's precept.

Ultimately, the persona's imaginative and indecisive disposition renders him incapable of challenging the Yankee's confident maxim. But Frost has shrewdly made him both unable and unwilling to settle on an argument that might demonstrate what it is to want a wall down. The allusion to elves, though meaningful to the persona, would never appeal to the hidebound farmer; it is such a hopeless suggestion that it leads to a kind of surrender: 'I'd rather / He said it for himself.' Yet this concession only reaffirms the personality displayed earlier. The speaker's sensitivity to what he sees may excite his desire for action, but he is neither capable nor desirous of didactic argument. Though the Yankee farmer says little in the poem, we may not notice that the persona actually has less to say to break down those walls he finds so detestable. He can only imagine saying something, for he is an observer and a commentator, not a reformer or a philosopher.

In the closing lines of 'Mending Wall' the Yankee farmer may seem to get the last word and leave his antagonist circumscribed--indeed, walled in--by an alien philosophy. But truly, the speaker has mended the walls of his own personality, and instead of combating an opponent, attempting moral or philosophical sallies, and worrying about victory or defeat, he has again taken an observer's approach to his neighbor. At the end he presents a highly imaginative and appropriately climactic response to the Yankee, envisioning him as a shadowy 'old-stone savage.' As he completes this portrait, he brings his own drama to its denouement. His deep feelings about walls have led him to challenge what he takes neighbor's antithetical position; but after recognizing the futility of debate, he returns to his original contemplative outlook.

This study of Frost's treatment of his persona in 'Mending Wall' should be sufficient to establish that the poem is not primarily an expression of moral views on neighborliness. Contrary to the burden of critical opinion, it is less about neighborliness than it is about modes of thought, about language, perhaps even about poetry itself. To the speaker, the farmer is antipathetic because he seems so antipoetic: he distrusts

the flow of words, ideas, and feelings. Lacking a playful imagination and the willingness to 'go behind' a saying or a concept, he seems cut off from the poetic.

But we must not forget that the failure of communication in the poem is mutual. And in truth, Frost's persona is the less communicative and the more hostile of the two. His portrait of an intractable neighbor involves feverish speculation that makes us doubt the reliability of his point of view. On the surface of it, at least, the Yankee's brief adage bespeaks more amiability than do the speaker's speculations and suspicious conjectures. Yet Frost offers no answers in 'Mending Wall,' no clues about who is right or wrong. He does not moralize: he demonstrates. And what he demonstrates is a conflict that commands our attention because in its origin and development it exhibits the power of imagination in flight."

John C. Kemp

Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist
(Princeton 1979)

"'Mending Wall' is a meditative lyric that reports and assesses a dialogue between neighbors who have joined in the annual occupation of rebuilding the wall which separates their farms. Obviously antedating the farmers themselves, the old wall seems to serve no modern need. Has 'walking the line' degenerated, the poet wonders, into bootless and vulgar ritual? Or are there fresh reasons, as yet unarticulated, for maintaining the wall? The poet's mischief—that impulse which urges him to needle his rather taciturn neighbor with this puckish question—acts to open things up.

Asked once about his intended meaning, Frost recast the question: 'In my "Mending Wall" was my intention fulfilled with the characters portrayed and the atmosphere of the place?' Characteristically, he went on to answer obliquely. 'I should be sorry if a single one of my poems stopped with either of those things—stopped anywhere in fact. My poems—I should suppose everybody's poems—are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless. Ever since infancy I have had the habit of leaving my blocks carts chairs and such like ordinaries where people would be pretty sure to fall forward over them in the dark. Forward, you understand, and in the dark. I may leave my toys in the wrong place and so in vain. It is my intention we are speaking of—my innate mischievousness.'

No other poem in the Frost canon better illustrates his manner—as he described it—and his overall poetic intention. 'Mending Wall' is constructed around the idea of mischief. The poet's mischief ultimately erects the verbal barrier that his neighbor is bullied into trying to surmount or withstand. 'Why rebuild ancient walls?' is a question offered to trip the neighbor. But one of the surprises in 'Mending Wall' is that the neighbor responds with a defense. He does not fall forward. He cannot be tripped into darkness—and a new outlook. Instead, threatened, he reaches into the past for support and comes up with his father's proverb: 'Good fences make good neighbors.' When we fail to recognize that the neighbor replies to the poet's prodding with a proverb, we miss a good deal of Frost's point.

Current in America as early as 1850, 'Good fences make good neighbors' can be traced to the Spanish, 'Una pared entre dos vecinos guarda mas (haze durar) la amistad,' which goes back at least to the Middle Ages. In this form, Vicesimus Knox translated it for his compendium of *Elegant Extracts* in 1797, and in 1832 Emerson recorded it in his journal—'A wall between both, best preserves friendship.' That Frost encountered the idea in Emerson's published journals is probable, though it seems more likely that he found its precise expression elsewhere. For our purpose it is important that both Frost and Emerson were attracted to the same idea, suggesting an affinity of poetic temperament. 'The sea, vocation, poverty, are seeming fences, but man is insular and cannot be touched.' In sentiment this is vintage Frost, but Emerson made the remark.

Speech in proverbial form surfaces as the poem's final 'wall.' Since the proverb's message is sanctioned by tradition, the poet's neighbor can retreat to safety: Resorting to a proverb enables him, moreover, to have the last word in the exchange. The importance of what he chooses to say is exceeded by the import of how he has chosen to say it. Provoked into speech, the farmer hides behind a clinching proverb. Twice the proverb is offered to close the matter. Failing to understand the message the first time, the poet repeats his question. The neighbor employs his proverb to win his point, even as it is employed in some African tribes, for example, where participants are allowed to use proverbs in litigation.

What finally emerges from Frost's poem is the idea that the stock reply—unexamined wisdom from the past—seals off the possibility of further thought and communication. When thought has frozen into folk expression, language itself becomes another wall, one unresponsive to that which it encircles and given over to fulfilling a new and perhaps unintended function. Meeting once a year and insulated from anything beyond simple interaction by their well-defined duties and limits, these 'good' neighbors turn out to be almost incommunicative.... Yet if Frost could provide links between and among his poems to encourage the kind of cross-reading that he so much favored for poetry, he could also omit from his poems the kinds of links—in the form of pieces of information—that would show him plainly to be writing in many cases within a larger historical and mythic context. Such is the case with 'Mending Wall,' in which the poet deliberately withholds a piece of useful information....

How, and indeed whether, the goodwill of one's neighbor is fostered by boundaries, however, was a general question that engaged Frost. Were walls and fences instrumental in the retention and renewal of human relationships? The answers presented in 'Mending Wall' are somewhat less than clear-cut. The reason is at least partly that Frost has purposely and purposefully left out of his poem some important information. One key to the poet's omission lies in the final lines of the poem. In these lines the poet moves back through time, no longer questioning the possible reasons for continuing annually to repair the now apparently useless boundaries, and returns to an earlier, darker age. Indeed, his neighbor seems to be moving in a 'darkness' that is, suggestively, 'not of woods only and the shade of trees.' To the poet he is now 'like an old-stone savage armed.' Even on New England farms in this century the ways of the savage continue, it would seem, no matter how transformed they may be or how radically attenuated."

George Montiero
Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance
(U Kentucky 1988)

"It is arguable that the self-righteous speaker of 'Mending Wall' is himself obsessively committed to wall building, far more intractably and instinctively committed than his cliché-bound neighbor. While the speaker of 'Mending Wall' justifiably castigates his unthinking neighbor and is himself far more aware of the powers of language for good and for ill, he is nonetheless caught up, ironically perhaps, in the same actual task, wall building, which will have the same results and look no different from his neighbor's contribution despite the narrative he brings to it.

There are several possibilities for irony here, depending on the level of Frost's self-awareness. Wall imagery pervades his poetry, as a conscious poetic image and as a psychosexual marker of control and limitation. That the speaker is the one who calls the neighbor to mend the wall is vitally important, then, but it is not clear that Frost meant for the speaker to be ironically perceived as a hypocrite. The simple explanation, that the speaker acts out of a sense of inevitability, knowing his neighbor's habits, seems hardly enough given the contextual symbolism of the wall in Frost's poetry; the psychological explanation attendant upon this version might suggest that Frost's conscious intent was subverted by his own unconscious need for walls. So while Frost might not mean the speaker to be self-parodic, the reader might judge that there is an ironic discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, both by the speaker and by the poet. On a deeper level even than this is the possibility that Frost was aware of, had taken account of and justified, his own need for barriers. One does, after all, need something against which to push.

In this case, the poem might be completely unironic, for while both men are engaged in the same task, each brings a different narrative to it, the one limited to a thoughtless cliché, the other enriched philosophically. It could be that Frost is illustrating what it means to move from delight to wisdom: the road less traveled may not look any different, but it is made different by the inner progress of the traveler. The one wall becomes, in this reading, two walls, the speaker's wall a philosophically differentiated structure, the neighbor's wall a mere landmark of past clichés."

Katherine Kearns
Robert Frost and a Poetics of Appetite
(Cambridge U 1994)

“Recall that the speaker in ‘Mending Wall’ questions his neighbor’s stolid assumption that ‘good fences make good neighbors.’ What he objects to is not so much the sentiment itself as the unwillingness or inability of the other to think for himself, to ‘go beyond his father’s saying.’ Just so; we must try to get beyond the apothegm-like opening line of ‘Mending Wall,’ testing carefully for gradations of tone as we proceed. Is it the proverb-like authority of ‘something there is...’ that makes it so natural to equate ‘something’ with the speaker? Once this equation has been made, the reader joins the speaker in sympathizing with this mysterious ‘something’ and hence in opposing the neighbor’s unthinking defense of walls.

Frost rings subtly drastic changes on the sound of a phrase like ‘good fences make good neighbors.’ By the time the poem ends, this line has acquired some of the pat stupidity of a slogan. Similar turns of the screw affect the opening line, when to it is added the darker phrase ‘that wants it down’ and again when the speaker refuses to name the anti-wall ‘something.’ ‘Elves’ is the closest he gets, yet ‘It’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather / He said it for himself.’ Elves may mean not willowy things out of Tolkien but darker forces of the wood, for the next image is one of darkness. The neighbor is viewed as subtly menacing, ‘an old-stone savage armed.’ Yet this man has been the one to defend boundaries. The apparently relaxed and leisurely pace of the poem has made us lower our own boundaries and forget who is on what side.

Though the speaker may or may not think that good neighbors are made by good fences, it is abundantly clear that he likes the yearly ritual, the yearly ‘outdoor game’ by which fences are because if fences do not make good neighbors the making of fences can.... Part of an old-fashioned neighborliness which results from the annual wall mending is fellowship, the potential exchange of feelings and ideas. More salient still is the joint maintenance of form for its own sake, not for utility, so that wall-making also becomes ‘a time to talk.’ At the same time, repairing the wall means renewing that structure protective of ‘infant industries’ or ‘a mood apart,’ protective from trespass on a symbolic level, even if ‘My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines.’ As an occasion for craft, besides being a guarantee of privacy, the wall is also crucial. Frost often compared free verse to playing tennis without the net--a remark which no one has ever interpreted as an attack on nets.”

Rachel Hadas

Form, Cycle, Infinity: Landscape Imagery in the Poetry of Robert Frost and George Seferis
(Bucknell 1976) 56-57

“Robert Frost once said that ‘Mending Wall’ was a poem that was spoiled by being applied. What did he mean by ‘applied’? Any poem is damaged by being misunderstood, but that’s the risk all poems run. What Frost objects to, I think, is a reduction and distortion of the poem through practical use. When President John F. Kennedy inspected the Berlin Wall he quoted the poem’s first line: ‘Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.’ His audience knew what he meant and how the quotation applied. And on the other side of that particular wall, we can find another example of how the poem has been used.

Returning from a visit to Russia late in his life, Frost said, ‘The Russians reprinted “Mending Wall” over there, and left that first line off.’ He added wryly, ‘I don’t see how they got the poem started.’ What the Russians needed, and so took, was the poem’s other detachable statement: ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’ They applied what they wanted. ‘I could’ve done better for them, probably,’ Frost said, ‘for the generality, by saying: ‘Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, / Something there is that does.’ ‘Why didn’t I say that?’ Frost asked rhetorically. ‘I didn’t mean that. I meant to leave that until later in the poem. I left it there.’

‘Mending Wall’ famously contains these two apparently conflicting statements. One begins the poem, the other ends it, and both are repeated twice. Which are we supposed to believe? What does Frost mean? ‘The secret of what it means I keep,’ he said. Of course he was being cagey, but not without reason. At a reading given at the Library of Congress in 1962 Frost told this anecdote: ‘In England, two or three years ago, Graham Greene said to me, “The most difficult thing I find in recent literature is your having said that good fences make good neighbors.” And I said, “I wish you knew more about it, without my helping you.” We laughed, and I left it that way.’

Why doesn't Frost want to say what he meant? When asked, he'd reply, 'What do you want me to do, say it again in different and less good words?' 'You get more credit for thinking,' Frost wrote in a letter, 'if you restate formulae or cite cases that fall in easily under formulae, but all the fun is outside: saying things that suggest formulae that won't formulate--that almost but don't quite formulate.' The formula is the easy answer that turns out to be, if right or wrong in general, certainly inadequate in particular. The formula, like a paraphrase of the poem itself, is made of those 'less good words' the poet has tried to resist.

'Mending Wall' seems to present us with a problem, and appears to urge us to choose up sides. I suspect most readers are eager to ally themselves with the speaker, to consider the neighbor dim-witted, block-headed, and generally dull. Such a reading is nicely represented by...a booklet on Robert Frost put out by *Monarch Notes*... By the end of the poem [the wall] has become a symbol, and the two farmers have turned into allegorical figures representing opposing views of freedom and confinement, reason and rigidity of mind, tolerance and violence, civilization and savagery.... There is no mistaking the poet's meaning, or his attitude toward what the wall represents... It stands for...the barrier between human contact and understanding. It is erected by all that is primitive, fearful, irrational and hostile [in the neighbor]. It is opposed by a higher 'something' that Frost recognizes as in himself...the desire not to be alone, walled in, but to be one with the rest of the world.

There is no mistaking what the authors of the *Monarch Notes* want to believe, and on which side of the wall they stand. And of course it's pleasant--even comforting--to believe that the poem encourages us to be 'one with the rest of the world.' But is that what the poem actually says? 'Mending Wall' opens with a riddle: 'Something there is...' And a riddle, after all, is a series of hints calculated to make us imagine and then name its hidden subject. The poem doesn't begin, 'I hate walls,' or even, 'Something dislikes a wall.' Its first gesture is one of elaborate and playful concealment, a calculated withholding of meaning. Notice also that it is the speaker himself who repairs the wall after the hunters have broken it. And it is the speaker each year who notifies his neighbor when the time has come to meet and mend the wall. Then can we safely claim that the speaker views the wall simply as a barrier between human contact and understanding?

Speaker and neighbor work together and equally. Although the job is tedious and hard, the speaker considers it 'just another kind of outdoor game / One on a side.' He acknowledges that his whimsical spell--'stay where you are until our backs are turned!'--is useless, and that the result is impermanent and perhaps less important than something else. For all practical purposes this particular wall is not needed. But the project of mending it has taken on significance: 'Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder / If I could put a notion in his head....'

The speaker's mischievous impulse is to plant an idea. He does not say that he wants to change his neighbor's mind, to make him believe what he himself believes. He wants to nudge the neighbor's imagination, just as a teacher might wish to challenge a student. So he asks questions: 'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it / Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.' But the neighbor is unwilling to play this game of teacher and student. He won't answer the questions or consider the riddle. The speaker could suggest 'Elves' but 'it's not elves exactly,' and of course it's not elves at all. The speaker's frustration is beginning to get the better of him. He wants to be fanciful--he wants to talk--and his neighbor does not. More importantly, and like a good teacher, 'I'd rather / He said it for himself!'

'I wish you knew more about it,' Frost says he told Graham Greene, 'without my helping you.' This is the poem's essential challenge, which the neighbor will not accept. But the challenge is ours as well--our work, our play. The relationship between speaker and neighbor is like the relationship between poem and reader, another kind of indoor game, one on a side. But this is a relationship between poem and reader, not poet and reader. Frost, I want to believe, is not the speaker exactly. He is behind the whole poem, rather than narrowly inside it. We need to be at least little skeptical of the speaker and not associate him automatically with the side upholding freedom, reason, and tolerance.

At the end, because the neighbor won't play his game, the speaker imagines him as 'an old stone savage,' a harsh judgment to apply even to the most recalcitrant student. Because the neighbor will only repeat what he remembers his father having said, he seems to 'Move in darkness... Not of woods only and the shade of trees.' But of what else? We should say it for ourselves. His ignorance? Confinement,

violence, and savagery, as the *Monarch* authors have it? Not exactly. It's his refusal to be playful and imaginative that irks the speaker, and his unwillingness to consider work anything more than a job to be accomplished. The speaker, after all does not ask the neighbor to give up his father's notion. He wants him to 'go behind' it. If, as I want to suggest, the poem is about education, this distinction is important. The poem does not merely advocate one position over another. It asks neither for advocacy nor for application, but for investigation. It is not a statement but a performance. It enacts its meanings.

Who, finally, is right about the wall? The poem does not answer that question exactly, swerving off into deeper and more interesting territory. It uses that problem to engage us and demand that we think, which is the poem's pleasure, and its strategy. Sometimes good fences do indeed make good neighbors, and we might recall that the phrase 'mending fences' means to restore communication and neighborliness. Equally true is the notion that something doesn't love a wall. The riddle isn't difficult one. We know that natural forces disturb those boulders, that the frozen groundswell is frost. But not, for all the play of the pun 'Robert Frost.' 'All the fun's in how you say a thing,' says a character in another Frost poem. But fun can be serious, just as work can be turned into play.

The wall in the poem is not 'the barrier between human contact and understanding.' Certainly a wall may be just that, but it can also serve precisely the opposite function.... The repetition of 'between' should give us pause and remind us of its two equally common meanings: between as separation, as in 'something's come between us,' and between as what might be shared and held in common, as in 'a secret between two people' or 'a bond between friends.' The wall divides but it also connects, if you look at it that way. All the meaning is in how you look at it--how the poem encourages you to think about it.

Frost once wrote about his experience as a teacher, 'I was determined to have it out with my youngers and betters as to what thinking really was. We reached an agreement that most of what they had regarded as thinking, their own and other peoples', was nothing but voting--taking sides on an issue they had nothing to do with laying down.' 'Mending Wall' is a poem that lures the unwary reader into believing that thinking is merely voting, choosing up sides, taking out of the poem what most fits our own preconceived ideas. It adopts this subversive tactic because its ultimate purpose is to challenge us to go behind what we might find initially appealing in the formulas that he on its surface. 'We ask people to think,' Frost says, 'and we don't show them what thinking is.' 'Mending Wall' is less a poem about what to think than it is a poem about what thinking is, and where it might lead.

The speaker of 'Mending Wall' fails in his attempt to become a successful poet/teacher. Each year, it seems, he fails at the same task. Frost's poem, of course, depends upon and survives this failure, recreating a similar moment each time it is encountered."

Lawrence Raab
Touchstone: American Poets on a Favorite Poem
eds. Robert Pack and Jay Parini
(University Press of New England 1996)

"This is one of Frost's most often anthologized and analyzed poems, justifiably so. I sense from it deep and widely shared psychological issues like those of 'Once by the Pacific'.... Several phrases refer to the seasons, particularly in a repetitive, cyclic way: 'spring mending-time,' 'frozen ground-swell,' 'once again,' 'spring is the mischief in me.' One of the major themes I see, then, is the cycle of the seasons.... Another theme I would use to bring together a number of particular lines and images is parallelism or the lack of it. Sometimes this parallelism takes a physical form, associated with the wall, as we imagine the two men walking parallel paths... It is a mental wall, though, as well as a physical one...

A failure to keep one's boundaries marks the most severe mental disorders. It could indicate either a regression to the earliest stage of infancy or a failure to develop out of that oral stage. Thus, when the speaker imagines that wall down, he says, 'He is all pine and I am apple orchard.' If the wall comes down, individual identity will be destroyed. Unconscious anger is masked as gentle sarcasm, but the chaos comes through unchanged. I hear the neighbor (and the poem) saying, If there is no wall, craziness will break through. The poem plays off two human attitudes, one wintry, one spring-like. The warm spring-like (but dangerous) walls-down feeling corresponds to a poet's wish for a cozy but risky return to some original

one-ness. The neighbor's wintry, New England standoffishness, his walls-up sense of privacy and separateness, corresponds to the cold, hard, more grownup reality of individuation."

Norman Holland

The Brain of Robert Frost: A Cognitive Approach to Literature
(Routledge 1988)

"The speaker of that poem allies himself with the insubordinate energies of spring, which yearly destroy the wall separating his property from his neighbor's: 'Spring is the mischief in me,' he says. This alliance at first has the effect of setting the speaker against the basic conservatism of his neighbor beyond the hill, who as everybody knows never 'goes behind his father's saying': 'Good fences make good neighbors.' But the association of the speaker with insubordinate natural forces should not be permitted to obscure an important fact, which has been often enough noticed: he, not the neighbor, initiates the yearly spring repair of the wall; moreover, it is again he, not the neighbor, who goes behind hunters who destroy the wall in other seasons and makes repairs. So if the speaker is allied with the vernal mischief of spring and its insubordinations, he is nevertheless also set against them in his efforts to make the stones of the wall balance and remain in place: 'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!' he wryly says to the stones. Here, in fact, the speaker is rather like those of Frost's earlier poems 'Rose Pogonias' and 'October,' each of whom, in imagination at least, attempts to arrest the naturally entropic and destructive forces of Nature in the hope of achieving a momentary stay against confusion...."

The happy irony of 'Mending Wall' is this: the speaker in this case allies himself with the destructive energies of Nature, not against them as in 'Rose Pogonias' and 'October'; but at the same time he ritually initiates the wall-building exercise that so inefficiently resists and contains those same energies. The speaker of 'Mending Wall' is obviously of two minds: at once wall-builder and wall-destroyer, at once abettor and antagonist of seasonal entropies. I would point out further that his impatience with his neighbor's aphoristic turn of mind is significantly (and playfully) qualified by the admonitory aphorism he himself devises and twice repeats, clearly delighted at having thought of it himself: 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall,' he says in a tone that by the poem's end almost acquires an air of finger-wagging, country pedantry. The difference is that, unlike his benighted neighbor, the speaker of the poem does indeed go behind his own favored aphorism to play both sides of the fence. In short, the two opposed men in the poem fairly shape up into one, and his name is Robert Frost.

At last, then, we have alternative aphorisms about walls and fences, and the truth of the matter resides in the 'gap' between them that this famously mischievous poem opens up. In this way 'Mending Wall' at once acknowledges the limitations of walls (and aphorisms) and also their seductions and value. As has often been pointed out, this dual theme is embodied even in the movement of the blank verse lines of 'Mending Wall,' which subtly play both within and against the metrical and structural impositions of the iambic pentameter line. When his speaker has in view the energies that disturb walls and boundaries, Frost's prosody vagrantly resists the regularities of his metrical contract... Enjambment and metrical variations—trochaic feet for iambic ones, spondaic and pyrrhic substitutions, and so on—contribute subtly to the theme of these lines. It is exactly as Pope would have it. How better to, describe a disordered wall than in lines themselves disordered?

At such times Frost's blank verse recalls 'Tintern Abbey,' in which Wordsworth describes those 'hedgerows hardly hedgerows' in eloquently unruly lines. In any case, here—as at a number of moments in 'Mending Wall'—metrical and rhythmical patterns work in a kind of loosely running counterpoint characterized more by 'formity' than by 'conformity,' as Frost might say. By contrast, when Frost imagines the reconstruction of the wall as the two men labor, the rhythm and meter of his lines coincide quite exactly.... Here, end-stopped lines are the rule: grammatical and rhetorical units more or less confine themselves to their prescribed ten-syllable boundaries. And there is little or no rhythmical variation against the basic iambic grid, which reasserts itself in these lines rather as the wall itself is 'reasserted.' Other such examples of Frost's metrical dexterity in this poem might be given, but these two suffice to suggest how tightly integrated in 'Mending Wall' are form and theme.

In sum, the speaker of the poem exhibits, both in his manner and in his actions, a certain flexibility. He unsettles walls that he also always repairs; he is at once Apollonian and Dionysian. Once again—as in the

introduction to King Jasper and 'The Future of Man'—Frost's conservative and rebellious tendencies are perfectly balanced, just as the 'intransigent' and 'accommodating' tendencies of the speaker of 'Good Hours' are metrically and thematically balanced....

We might also regard 'Mending Wall' in light of what Frost says in his 1934 letter to his daughter Lesley about the doctrine of Inner Form. The 'neighbor beyond the hill' is all on the side of conformity, the speaker of the poem (at least by his own account) all on the side of formity. Frost himself—and here we should perhaps distinguish him from his speaker—stands at the dialectical intersection of these two opposed terms, for as he says in 'The Constant Symbol' about the 'discipline[s]' from 'within' and from 'without': 'He who knows not both knows neither'."

Mark Richardson
The Ordeal of Robert Frost: The Poet and His Poetics
(U Michigan 1997)

Michael Hollister (2015)