

John C. Kemp: On "Mending Wall"

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:

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.

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."

Having touched on the seriousness of wall building, however, the speaker indulges in another irreverent speculation:

Oh, just another kind of outdoor game, One on a side. It comes to little more.

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:

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.

This telling passage indicates how far the persona's imagination can carry him. It is true that the acidity of pine duff would prevent apple seeds from taking root, but simple aboricultural observation leads to a fantastic--and deeply revealing--personification. Although the speaker seems merely facetious, his imagery betrays antagonism as he ridicules the farmer, implying that he is too foolish and stubborn to see the incongruity of a rapacious invasion of apples (which are edible) seeking to devour pine cones (which are not). 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 to 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 illusiveness, 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 offense, 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.

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