

Frank Lentricchia: On Mending Wall

The mass of men lead lives of quiet deperation. . . . There is no play in them, for this comes after work. (Thoreau)

"Mending Wall" is the opening poem of Frost's second volume, *North of Boston*. One of the dominating moods of this volume, forcefully established in such important poems as "The Death of the Hired Man," "Home Burial," "The Black Cottage," and "A Servant to Servants," and carried through some of the minor pieces, flows from the tension of having to maintain balance at the precipitous edge of hysteria. With "The Mountain" and with "A Hundred Collars," "Mending Wall" stands opposed to such visions of human existence; more precisely put, to existences that are fashioned by the neurotic visions of central characters like the wife in "Home Burial," the servant in "A Servant to Servants." "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.

The opening lines evoke the coy posture of the shrewd imaginative man who understands the words of the farmer in "The Mountain": "All the fun's in how you say a thing,"

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends a frozen-ground-swell
under it And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can
pass abreast.

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 work of hunters is another thing: I have come after them and made repair
Where they would 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.

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.

Like the selves dramatized in "Going For Water" and "The Tuft of Flowers," this persona would prefer not to be alone in his imaginative journey:

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 outdoor 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."

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 and 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. Overt magic-making is acceptable in the world of this poem because we are governed by the narrator's

perspective; we are in the fictive world where all things are possible, where walls go tumbling for mysterious reasons. Kant's theory that work and the aesthetic activity are antagonistic, polar activities of man is, in effect, disproven, as the narrator makes work take on the aesthetic dimension. The real differences between the two people in the poem is that one moves in a world of freedom; aware of the resources of the mind, he nurtures the latent imaginative power within himself and makes it a factor in everyday living; while the other, unaware of the value of imagination, must live his unliberated life without it. And this difference makes a difference in the quality of the life lived.

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:

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 offense.
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.

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."

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