# George Montiero: On "Mending Wall"

"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 vezinos 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 senti ment 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.

It is difficult to ascertain Frost's full intent in linking "Mending Wall" with "The Tuft of Flowers." If the latter is about unexpected fellowship, then some interesting possibilities present themselves when it is paired with "Mending Wall." One way of stating the theme of "The Tuft of Flowers" is that even when a man works alone he works with others?but that is hardly the theme of "Mending Wall." On the contrary, in "Mending Wall" the poet discovers that, even when men work together, each of them works alone. "The Tuft of Flowers" also says that there can be communication without words, beyond physical presence and across time. But in "Mending Wall" we see that communication breaks down even as men converse: For Frost, "taking up a theme" did not at all entail dealing with it always in the same way. When we examine these linked poems in the light that each casts on the other, we find that their relationship really involves statement and counterstatement, or, put another way, theme and antitheme.

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.

"Who are bad neighbors?" asked 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 as readily have asked, "Who are good neighbors?" Whereupon, following his reasoning, he could have answered, "Those who build and maintain walls which keep out their neighbors' cattle."

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.

> 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.'

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.

Indeed, Frost shrewdly and characteristically stopped his poem just short of a mythological link. That Frost and his neighbor engage in what is tantamount to a vestigial ritual and that, furthermore, 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. Terminus was annually honored in a ritual that not only reaffirmed boundaries but 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 neighbours on either side of any boundary gathered round 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 neighbourhood joined in a general feast.

If the poet's 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 and who had read in Walden of Thoreau's search for firewood: "An old forest fence which had seen its best days was a great haul for me. I sacrificed it to Vulcan, for it was past serving the god Terminus." What impresses itself on Frost, however, is something quite different. Whatever the reason, men continue to need marked boundaries, even when they find it difficult to justify their existence.

> From Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988. Copyright © 1988 by the UP of Kentucky.

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Excerpted Criticism [1]
**Publication:**
- Private group -
**Criticism Target:**
Robert Frost [2]
**Author:**

George Montiero [3]
**Poem:**
Mending Wall [4]

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