Mark Richardson: On "Mending Wall"

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 (CPPP 39). 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. In "Rose Pogonias," for example, we read:

We raised a simple prayer Before we left the spot, That in the general mowing That place might be forgot; Or if not all so favored, Obtain such grace of hours, That none should mow the grass there While so confused with flowers.

And in "October":

O hushed October morning mild, Begin the hours of this day slow. Make the day seem to us less brief. Hearts not averse to being beguiled, Beguile us in the way you know. Release one leaf at break of day; At noon release another leaf; One from our trees, one far away. Retard the sun with gentle mist; Enchant the land with amethyst. Slow, slow!

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
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:

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.

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:

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.

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."

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