

The Other Side of the Wall · Douglas L. Wilson

I

MY STARTING POINT is something that must seem fairly obvious: the notion that we are creatures of our own experience. I would not expect to get much of an argument on that score, and yet if one begins to develop this idea in certain ways, one can readily create a dialectic that has the appearance, at least, of a dilemma. One could, for example, emphasize the ways in which we are the *victims* of our experience, limited or, to heighten the metaphor, imprisoned by its iron precincts. Or one could, I think, with equal validity emphasize the *liberating* character of experience and stress how every new experience frees us from the limitations of our former condition. It is simply a matter of how we wish to construe the notion that we are creatures of our own experience. What both versions of the idea have in common, however, is the concept of a barrier, a line of demarcation. And this has special significance for the poem that is the focus of my essay—Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall.”

“Mending Wall” is extremely familiar, certainly one of Frost’s best known poems and perhaps one of the most famous in all of American poetry. It is almost invariably read by students from elementary school to the college level; until very recently, it made every anthology; it readily lends itself to quotation. Say “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” and educated people are certain to catch the reference. Moreover, it is a remarkably straightforward poem. That is to say, given the standard new critical reservations, it seems to mean pretty much what it says and to present no classic ambiguities. A survey of the long record of commentary on the poem, which was published in 1914, reveals relatively little critical disagreement.

To rehearse briefly a very familiar story, “Mending Wall” is about two New England neighbors who meet in the spring to repair the stone wall that separates their properties. Since they clearly live in the country, one might assume that they are farmers, though all we are told is that one “is all pine” and the other is “apple orchard” and that neither has cows (and, by extension, other livestock) that might wander through the broken wall. As they mend the wall, the speaker attempts to engage his neighbor in a debate over the necessity of having a wall between them. His position is summed up in the classic line, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” His neighbor refuses to be drawn into an argument and simply replies (another classic line), “Good fences make good neighbors.” The speaker regards this as a kind of category mistake, for he sees his neighbor as applying a rule that was intended to cover a different kind of situation. The poem concludes

with the speaker's depiction of the neighbor as an unreflective primitive, incapable of independent thinking or change.

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."

Now in spite of all the ways that the poem can be, and has been, approached and dealt with, it is difficult *not* to adopt the point of view of the speaker, and virtually all the commentators do. Given the commitment of educators and educated people to the examined life and the predominantly progressive spirit of modern times, this is perhaps inevitable. Is there any way of understanding the poem, one might ask, in which the neighbor does not emerge as the heavy? Before 1968-69 I would have said "no," but since that time I have found myself on the other side of the wall.

II

In 1968-69 I spent a sabbatical year on a small farm that my wife and I had just acquired and that had over a mile and a half of line fence. Almost the first question asked me by one of my neighbors when I met him was whether I intended to pasture cows. This question was prompted by the wretched condition of the fences I had inherited from the former owner. My new neighbor was visibly relieved when I said that I didn't. During the course of that year I was to see and hear a good deal about the importance of fences in a rural community.

One of the first things I heard about was the case of a former neighbor who had been regarded as a notoriously bad neighbor. It was not simply that his fences were neglected and in a constant state of disrepair. This is a very serious matter in dairy country, where half of a farmer's line fence (or boundary fence) is his responsibility and the other half is the responsibility of his neighbor. But it was clearly more than that. It was more that he was distrustful, quarrelsome, and generally indifferent or insensitive towards his neighbors—cardinal sins in a community that operated on the basis of mutual assistance and support. In truth, it was his attitude towards his neighbors and his neighborly responsibilities that accounted for his notoriety, and his fences, I came to see, were actually regarded not so much the source as the symbol of the problem. A long-standing member of the

neighborhood, and one I am sure who had never heard of Robert Frost or read his poems, summarized the situation for me as follows: “They say good fences make good neighbors.”

As time went by, I had occasion to see the problem a little closer to home. My neighbor across the road could not keep his livestock properly penned, and I awoke one morning to find that a huge sow had uprooted half our front lawn. The situation deteriorated as the summer went along, and we found ourselves on the receiving end of a pilgrimage of pigs. I could take matters in hand and build a fence around my front yard (which I eventually did), but this would not keep the pigs at home. I decided in due course that the fault was not in my neighbor’s fences but in my neighbor—more precisely in his attitude toward his neighborly responsibilities.

As one of my principal preoccupations that year was considering what it meant to live in the country and how that differed from urban life, I began to think a good deal about fences. And whenever I did, my thoughts invariably returned to Frost’s “Mending Wall.” Having studied it in school, college, and graduate school, and having taught it every year in my American literature classes, I assumed that I knew “Mending Wall” pretty thoroughly and understood perfectly well.

“Good fences make good neighbors.”
“*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 and walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.”

The position of the speaker was convincing enough, as it had been in the past, and my experience on the farm had given it ample warrant. But the notion that the speaker was leaving something important out of the equation—that fences were more than merely barriers to livestock—would not go away and, in fact, continued to grow in my mind.

In the fall of the year I happened to meet one of my neighbors—a reticent, older man—at the fenceline, where he was making some make shift repairs to a stretch of very poor fence that I realized, alas, was my responsibility to keep up. I was, of course, properly embarrassed but also surprised because I had understood that he never kept cattle in that field. He quickly explained that he only wanted to pasture his cows there for a few weeks and that he didn’t expect me to rebuild the fence just for that. We fell to talking about the condition of our fences, what repairs were needed and which should be made first. Having satisfied himself as to my good intentions, he volunteered that he did not feel right about his neglect of the fencerow in front of us. While the fence in question was mine to keep up, he had allowed trees and shrubs to grow up on his side, as they had done prodigiously on mine,

making for a dense and entangled mass of foliage on either side of the dilapidated fence. I thought I saw what he was driving at, and I said that this certainly made it more difficult to keep up the fence. But that wasn't it. What bothered him, he finally allowed, was that "it didn't *look* good." We soon agreed, with a warmth and enthusiasm that astonished me, to meet in the spring and clear the fencerow together.

It became abundantly clear to me, in thinking about this encounter, that what we had been talking about was much more than the condition of the fence that divided our farms. It had rather to do with our relationship as neighbors. The practical aspect of the fence, in fact, had virtually been eliminated from consideration, for he had told me that he was about to give up his cows and his milking operation so as to qualify for social security. What we had agreed to do had little or nothing to do with wandering livestock. My cornstalks would never get across and eat his alfalfa. We were going to put our fences in order because we wanted to be good neighbors.

Coming back to "Mending Wall" after this series of experiences, I began to see it in a different light. There was a pattern in these experiences—the notorious former neighbor, the neighbor with the unpenable pigs, and the neighbor who wanted to clear the fencerow—and I began to discern what it was. Good fences *do* make good neighbors. Not just where there are cows but where there are neighbors. The speaker in "Mending Wall," if he really believes that the force of nature that sunders stone walls should be regarded as a cue to right conduct, is short on experience and long on mischief. The neighbor's view, on the other hand, is true wisdom. Our only reason for supposing that he "moves in darkness" is that this is the way the speaker represents him. How, I began to ask myself, if this were the case, had this poem come to be so widely misread and misunderstood? And how had Frost, who must have known all of this perfectly well from the beginning, come to cast the poem in the form he did? The balance of my essay deals with these two questions.

III

The first question can be answered fairly easily, I believe, in the context of the unstartling proposition with which I began. We are creatures of our own experience. To understand that the neighbor who says "Good fences make good neighbors" is uttering something like practical wisdom requires an appeal to experience. As a debate there is little to choose. The speaker seems to have all the arguments on his side. The wall is useless, and mending it is meaningless, done only in the interest of the outmoded thinking of the neighbor; and all of this is confirmed by a principle of nature: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." To judge this encounter strictly as a debate, as most readers apparently do, is inevitably to run a tally in favor of the speaker and award him the decision on points. Besides,

he has qualities that have general appeal to readers of modern American poetry: he is critical; he doesn't take things like traditional sayings for granted; he is open to change; and he has a sense of humor. Our impression of the neighbor, poor man, is just the opposite, though it rests almost entirely on the speaker's biased references.

To judge the issue between them intelligently requires knowledge or experience that lies outside the poem—what Frost calls elsewhere “the need of being versed in country things.” The speaker in the poem tries to deal with the issue of fences philosophically—by speculation, by arguments, by appeals to the nature of things. What the reader must grasp is that the speaker cannot or, for some reason, *will* not acknowledge what is truly at stake in the ritual of fence mending. He insists that, since he has only apple trees and the neighbor has only pines, the wall is not “needed.” This assumes that a boundary serves only a very limited function, such as keeping livestock out or in. But country people know, not by an appeal to philosophy but as part of their culture, that a boundary is something very important; it is both an acknowledgement of responsibility and a token of respect. Maintaining a boundary is a hedge against uncertainty, a guarantee against dispute. The boundary can be seen in these terms as nothing less than an aspect of one's identity.

Now these are things that are understood implicitly by people whose land is an extension of their lives. One could never persuade a farmer that the speaker in this poem has the better of this argument. Certainly Frost was aware of this, for his poetry is replete with references to boundaries and their critical importance. As Radcliffe Squires has observed, if Frost's position with respect to boundaries is represented by the speaker in “Mending Wall,” it is at odds with everything else he has written on the subject. But Frost's readers, and certainly his commentators, have not been farmers. On the contrary, we have been city dwellers who have approached his poem from an unmistakably urban perspective. This, in combination with our disposition to judge the poem as a debate, has led to a decidedly imperfect understanding of the poem.

IV

There is a great deal that might be said at this point, but I propose to postpone further discussion of the poem's interpretation in order to say something about the second question I raised, namely, how did Frost come to cast the dramatic encounter of “Mending Wall” in the form that he did and so seem to contribute to a widespread misunderstanding of his own poem. To pursue this question, I am going to risk the indulgence of the reader and ease back into the biographical mode in which I began.

As is well known, Frost's career as a poet did not really begin in earnest until he was nearly 40 years old and he had moved his family to England.

How he came to find himself as a poet while there was not simply his good fortune in finding a publisher for a volume of his early poems or his acquaintance with Edward Thomas and other British poets or his recognition by Ezra Pound, though these were all important results of his two-year stay in England. What Lawrance Thompson's biography and his edition of the letters make clear is that Frost's sudden emergence as a poet can be traced to a series of poems, written in England and published in *North of Boston*, that were the outcropping of his homesickness for the life and landscape of rural New England.

In 1975, I had the good fortune to spend a summer in England, and while there I set for myself the task of investigating the circumstances in which Frost's emergence as a poet took place. Not long after arriving in England, I went with my family on a tour of the Cotswolds, a picturesque range of broad-backed hills west of Oxford. There my attention was caught at once by the distinctive stone walls that lined the fields and roadsides. Here were miles of well-kept walls made of neatly stacked slabs of limestone, which nowhere betrayed signs of an annual upheaval, even though they frequently had been built on the steepest of inclines. If something there is that doesn't love a wall, it seemed to be inoperative in the Cotswolds.

A little investigation into these walls served only to heighten my interest. They are called dry stone walls, "dry" because they are made without cement, and they do stand for scores of years, if well made, without need of repair. They are found only in certain parts of England and Scotland (where they are called dry stane dykes) for the obvious reason that they are only put up where limestone is readily available and close to the site of the wall.

Had Frost seen these dry stone walls before he wrote "Mending Wall," I wondered. Certainly they would have caught his eye if he had been around them, for they are both very prominent and very attractive features of the rural landscape where they appear. What began as curiosity soon ripened into speculation. If Frost had seen the dry stone walls, he would have made it a point to learn something about them and would have discovered their remarkable properties. If he came to see that stone walls, under certain conditions, can stand for generations without repair, it would have undoubtedly affected the way he conceived and constructed a poem that seems to urge upon its readers the futility of wall-building. He would have been made keenly aware of how limited and parochial the position taken by the speaker in "Mending Wall" can be seen to be.

So compelling was this possibility that I conceived an hypothesis about the writing of "Mending Wall": that Frost's experiences in England had brought about a dramatic change in his attitude toward rural New England and the life that he had lived there; for the people and the places that he had left behind thinking he hated, he discovered that he now felt something like affection; he grew homesick for the life that he had so gladly left, and this

experience issued in a series of new poems that were far better than anything he had written previously. So much of my theory was simply drawn from the biographical record as it emerges from the published letters and Thompson's biography. "Mending Wall," I now conjectured, could have come to Frost as a reconsideration of his relationship with his former New Hampshire neighbor, Napoleon Guay. Nostalgically remembering his neighbor and their spring outings at the wall in conjunction with seeing dry stone walls could have triggered a poem in which his perversity in having made the worse appear the better reasoning was implicitly acknowledged.

A number of problems now presented themselves. If this theory were to hold its own, it would be necessary to show that Frost was at least exposed to dry stone walls before "Mending Walls" was written. If he had brought the poem over to England with him from America, for example, the theory was kaput. But that did not seem to be the case, though it was true of a few *North of Boston* poems. Frost seems to have begun writing the poems for this volume—except for these few earlier poems—in the late fall of 1912, and the completed manuscript was apparently sent to the publisher about a year later. It seemed a reasonable time in which to get Frost and dry stone walls together and to get the poem written. All that was required, I reasoned, was the necessary persistence on my part.

I had the benefit of ideal working conditions for this task, for the summer of 1975 was an unprecedented season of glorious sunshine in England, and I was working in the rarified scholarly atmosphere of the English Reading Room of the Bodleian Library at Oxford. The sunshine was important, incidentally, not just for its effect on the spirit, but because the light in the Bodleian, like its cataloging system, is scandalous by American library standards, and I could not always arrive in time to get a seat by the windows.

The early going was not encouraging. Frost had spent his first year and a half in England—the time during which the *North of Boston* poems were written—in Beaconsfield in Buckinghamshire. Chalk country. Lovely but no limestone, and thus no dry stone walls. No mention of "Mending Wall" could be found in the published letters during this period, and Frost was staying maddeningly close to Beaconsfield, with occasional trips to London, which was only 30 miles away. By August, he had so nearly completed the new book that he was considering various titles for it and had awarded himself and his family a vacation. But now things began to look up, for he announced in letters to his friends that he was going to spend his vacation in Scotland. Having just read a marvellous book on dry stone walls written by a Scotsman, I knew that he was headed in a promising direction. His report on his trip to Scotland, in a letter to Sidney Cox dated *circa* Sept. 15, proved to be all that I could have hoped for. It read in part:

We are just back from a two week's journey in Scotland . . . The

best adventure was the time in Kingsbarns where tourists and summer boarders never come. The common people in the south of England I don't like to have around me. They don't know how to meet you man to man. The people in the north are more like Americans. I wonder whether they made Burns' poems or Burns' poems made them. And there are stone walls (dry stone dykes) in the north: I liked those.

To say that I was elated at finding this passage in Frost's letter to Cox on that bright summer morning in the Bodleian is to seriously understate it. And yet I was curiously troubled by a minor matter. "Could Frost," I wrote in my notebook, "have written 'dry stane dykes'?" This was admittedly trivial, but I felt *certain* that if Frost had taken note of the Scottish form "dykes," as he had, he would likely have used "stane" as well. And certainty exacts its price. I duly noted that the letter was in the Baker Library at Dartmouth and resolved to check it for myself when I got the chance.

I was thus able to establish that Frost had indeed seen the dry stone walls of Great Britain, and he had taken particular note of them. But had he already written "Mending Wall" when he saw them? Just before going to Scotland he had written a letter to his friend John T. Bartlett in which he listed the titles of 12 poems to be included in the new book, which would eventually appear with a total of 17 poems. "Mending Wall" was not on the list. Had it been omitted for some reason, inadvertently left out, or was it more likely that it had not yet been written? I decided that there was no percentage in doubting.

The only other clue that I could find in the published sources was a seemingly unrelated reference, buried deep in the footnotes of Thompson's biography, to a friendship that Frost had formed with a Scots Shakespearian scholar named James Cruickshanks Smith. Thompson mentions this friendship only in connection with Frost's departure from England in 1915, for Smith was one of the people who loaned him money to make the crossing to America. Frost, according to Thompson, had met Smith at Kingsbarns during his 1913 vacation, so I made a note in my notebook to check out the relationship between Frost and Smith. I could find nothing further to shed light on my theory in England, and, in due course, I followed Frost back to America.

V

The following year, in 1976, I went with my family on a bicentennial pilgrimage to the eastern United States, where, with millions of others, we patriotically made the rounds of the essential New England sites: Bunker Hill in Boston, Concord Bridge at Concord, and the Baker Library at

Dartmouth. I may as well confess that, while I was excited about working in the superb collection of original Frost materials that repose in the Baker Library, the prospect that I most keenly anticipated was the examination of Frost's letter to Cox in which he had written of the dry stone dykes, a topic that had become dear to my heart. I was certain that Thompson, in editing the letters, had mis-transcribed Frost's handwriting and that the word "stone" would actually be "stane"—and I was right. Thus fortified by a clearcut victory, I settled down in that marvellous reading room (the light was much better than the Bodleian's) to see what I could learn from the remaining material.

There are a great many different collections in the Baker relating to Frost, and I soon discovered that virtually all of the interesting letters by Frost himself had been published by Thompson. The collection that proved to be most productive for my purposes turned out to be the file of letters that Frost received while living in England. In trying to gauge Frost's homesickness while in England, because of its crucial effect on his poetry, I had observed that the mail that he received was of great importance to him. A passage in Frost's correspondence captures his feelings very memorably. "Homesickness makes us news-hungry. Every time the postman bangs the letter-slot-door our mouths go open and our eyes shut like birds' in a nest. . . ." Sitting in the Baker Library, I spent several fascinating hours reading through the mail that had come through that letter-slot-door.

Thus engaged in the otherwise despicable practice of reading someone else's mail, I struck gold. For here were the letters written to Frost by the man he had met on his Scottish vacation at Kingsbarns, James Cruickshanks Smith. This first letter acknowledges receipt of Frost's first book, *A Boy's Will*, and its Sept. 15 date indicates that Frost must have sent the book to him immediately after arriving home from his vacation in Kingsbarns. The second letter is dated Nov. 24, 1913, which is very close to the time that the final manuscript of *North of Boston* was to go to the printer. Smith begins by describing the work that he has been doing and then the things that he does for recreation. "I do some pure geometry," he writes, "and learn some Shelley by heart: Geometry is very like poetry for releasing the mind. And that, by one of the natural transitions of which the masters of style have the secret, brings me round to your latest poems—which I herewith return. Now about those poems:—

"Imprimis. Of course I recognized 'Mending Wall' at once as the poem which had been suggested by our walk at Kingsbarns. . . ."

It was not the 4th of July in Hanover, New Hampshire, but at that moment it felt like fireworks to me.

VI

I realize, of course, that it would be premature at this juncture to pro-

nounce: Q.E.D. What I have been able to show is that Frost wrote “Mending Wall” in the fall of 1913 and that it was prompted by something that happened on a walk with J. C. Smith at Kingsbarns, Fifeshire, Scotland, where he had been particularly attracted by dry stone walls. But adding this to what we know about Frost’s situation and attitudes at this time, I feel little hesitation in filling in the picture as follows: Frost takes a walk in the countryside with J. C. Smith, who explains dry stone walls to him—how they are built, how durable they are, and how little maintenance they require. Frost responds with a description of the wall on his farm in Derry, N.H., which he shared with his neighbor, Napolean Guay. He describes how he used to argue with Guay each spring about mending the wall, partly out of mischief, partly from an inability to see the point of it all. Possibly he emphasized the contrast between the ingenious arguments of the young schoolteacher and the stubbornly laconic reply of the neighbor. With this dramatic encounter freshly summoned up in his consciousness, Frost returned to Beaconsfield and began working on the poem. His frame of mind is suggested by a remark he made years later: “I wrote the poem ‘Mending Wall’ thinking of the old wall that I hadn’t mended in several years and which must be in a terrible condition. I wrote that poem in England when I was very homesick for my old wall in New England.”

I began this essay with the proposition that we are creatures of our own experience. It is certainly true for me, as I have tried to show in shamelessly personal terms. But I want to conclude by suggesting that it was also profoundly true for Frost and that bearing this in mind can help us to gain a truer perspective on “Mending Wall.” The poet who had found his subject and was beginning to find success, who was living in England and growing increasingly homesick for a region he thought he despised, saw and understood the world differently from the bitterly discontented schoolteacher he had been a few years before. So much did the young schoolteacher think himself a *victim* of his circumstances that he had begun to believe that the grandfather who had willed him the hated Derry farm had deliberately intended the legacy as a curse. In England, he began to see his experiences in a very different and what we may legitimately call a *liberating* perspective, as is perfectly illustrated in his confessed homesickness for the old wall. The extent of this change is measured rather precisely in “Mending Wall” in the difference between the point of view of the poet, who understands the wisdom of the neighbor’s view, and that of the speaker in the poem, who presumably does not. But this can only be grasped by readers who are sufficiently versed in country things to know how to judge the substance of the issue between them. To be persuaded by the arguments of the speaker is clearly to be misled.

Ironically, it may well be that this sympathetic response to the speaker, which I believe is a function of an urban perspective and essentially misplaced, largely accounts for the poem’s popularity. Frost, who is reported

to have said that “the poet is entitled to everything that the reader can find in the poem,” may have been aware that this was the case, for he deliberately sidestepped a number of opportunities to explain the poem or take sides in the debate. Indeed, he once claimed that he had played “exactly fair” in the poem because he had twice said “Good fences make good neighbors” and twice “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” But this is a perfect example of the puckish answer that Frost liked to give when someone tried to pin him down. (In a poem of 45 lines, the speaker’s position is expounded in all but two; and those, setting forth the neighbor’s position, are virtually the same.) Whatever disputative equilibrium the poem has may be said to be achieved by a balancing of all the advantages of the speaker—the central point of view, the wit, the humor, the arguments, the invidious depiction of the neighbor—against a simple statement whose full authority is undiminished by all that the speaker can say or do. A more fitting authorial commentary on the poem, to my mind, is a celebrated remark of the mature Frost, which appears in the preface to his *Complete Poems*. He is describing what he calls “the figure a poem makes.” “It begins,” he says, “in delight and ends in wisdom.”

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”

“Good fences make good neighbors.”