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Robert Frost once said that "Mending Wall" was a poem that was spoiled by being applied. What did he mean by "applied"? Any poem is damaged by being misunderstood, but that's the risk all poems run. What Frost objects to, I think, is a reduction and distortion of the poem through practical use. When President John F. Kennedy inspected the Berlin Wall he quoted the poem's first line: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." His audience knew what he meant and how the quotation applied. And on the other side of that particular wall, we can find another example of how the poem has been used. Returning from a visit to Russia late in his life, Frost said, "The Russians reprinted 'Mending Wall' over there, and left that first line off." He added wryly, "I don't see how they got the poem started." What the Russians needed, and so took, was the poem's other detachable statement: "Good fences make good neighbors." They applied what they wanted. "I could've done better for them, probably," Frost said, "for the generality, by saying:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
Something there is that does.

"Why didn't I say that?" Frost asked rhetorically. "I didn't mean that. I meant to leave that until later in the poem. I left it there."

"Mending Wall" famously contains these two apparently conflicting statements. One begins the poem, the other ends it, and both are repeated twice. Which are we supposed to believe? What does Frost mean? "The secret of what it means I keep," he said. Of course he was being cagey, but not without reason.

At a reading given at the Library of Congress in 1962 Frost told this anecdote:

In England, two or three years ago, Graham Greene said to me, "The most difficult thing I find in recent literature is your having said that good fences make good neighbors."

And I said, "I wish you knew more about it, without my helping you."

We laughed, and I left it that way.

Why doesn't Frost want to say what he meant? When asked, he'd reply, "What do you want me to do, say it again in different and less good words?" "You get more credit for thinking," Frost wrote in a letter, "if you restate formulae or cite cases that fall in easily under formulae, but all the fun is outside: saying things that suggest formulae that won't formulate--that almost but don't quite formulate." The formula is the easy answer that turns out to be, if right or wrong in general, certainly inadequate in particular. The formula, like a paraphrase of the poem itself, is made of those "less good words" the poet has tried to resist.

"Mending Wall" seems to present us with a problem, and appears to urge us to choose up sides. I suspect most readers are eager to ally themselves with the speaker, to consider the neighbor dim-witted, block-headed, and generally dull. Such a reading is nicely represented by the following passage from a booklet on Robert Frost put out by Monarch Notes:

By the end of the poem [the wall] has become a symbol, and the two farmers have turned into allegorical figures representing opposing views of freedom and confinement, reason and rigidity of mind, tolerance and violence, civilization and savagery.... There is no mistaking the poet's meaning, or his attitude toward what the wall represents ... it stands for... the barrier between human contact and understanding. It is erected by all that is primitive, fearful, irrational and hostile [in the neighbor]. It is opposed by a higher "something" that Frost recognizes as in himself ... the desire not to be alone, walled in, but to be one with the rest of the world.

There is no mistaking what the authors of the Monarch Notes want to believe, and on which side of the wall they stand. And of course it's pleasant--even comforting--to believe that the poem encourages us to be "one with the rest of the world." But is that what the poem actually says?

"Mending Wall" opens with a riddle: "Something there is" And a riddle, after all, is a series of hints calculated to make us imagine and then name its hidden subject. The poem doesn't begin, "I hate walls," or even, "Something dislikes a wall." Its first gesture is one of elaborate and playful concealment, a calculated withholding of meaning. Notice also that it is the speaker himself who repairs the wall after the hunters have broken it. And it is the speaker each year who notifies his neighbor when the time has come to meet and mend the wall. Then can we safely claim that the speaker views the wall simply as a barrier between human contact and understanding?

Speaker and neighbor work together and equally. Although the job is tedious and hard, the speaker considers it "just another kind of outdoor game / One on a side." He acknowledges that his whimsical spell—"stay where you are until our backs are turned!"--is useless, and that the result is impermanent and perhaps less important than something else. For all practical purposes this particular wall is not needed. But the project of mending it has taken on significance: "Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder / If I could put a notion in his head. . . ."

The speaker's mischievous impulse is to plant an idea. He does not say that he wants to change his neighbor's mind, to make him believe what he himself believes. He wants to nudge the neighbor's imagination, just as a teacher might wish to challenge a student. So he asks questions: "'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it / Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.'" But the neighbor is unwilling to play this game of teacher and student. He won't answer the

questions or consider the riddle. The speaker could suggest "Elves" but "it's not elves exactly," and of course it's not elves at all. The speaker's frustration is beginning to get the better of him. He wants to be fanciful--he wants to talk--and his neighbor does not. More importantly, and like a good teacher, "I'd rather / He said it for himself!"

"I wish you knew more about it," Frost says he told Graham Greene, "without my helping you." This is the poem's essential challenge, which the neighbor will not accept. But the challenge is ours as well--our work, our play. The relationship between speaker and neighbor is like the relationship between poem and reader, another kind of indoor game, one on a side.

But this is a relationship between poem and reader, not poet and reader. Frost, I want to believe, is not the speaker exactly. He is behind the whole poem, rather than narrowly inside it. We need to be at least little skeptical of the speaker and not associate him automatically with the side upholding freedom, reason, and tolerance. At the end, because the neighbor won't play his game, the speaker imagines him as "an old stone savage," a harsh judgment to apply even to the most recalcitrant student. Because the neighbor will only repeat what he remembers his father having said, he seems to "Move in darkness ... Not of woods only and the shade of trees." But of what else? We should say it for ourselves. His ignorance? Confinement, violence, and savagery, as the Monarch authors have it? Not exactly. It's his refusal to be playful and imaginative that irks the speaker, and his unwillingness to consider work anything more than a job to be accomplished. The speaker, after all does not ask the neighbor to give up his father's notion. He wants him to "go behind" it. If, as I want to suggest, the poem is about education, this distinction is important. The poem does not merely advocate one position over another. It asks neither for advocacy nor for application, but for investigation. It is not a statement but a performance. It enacts its meanings.

Who, finally, is right about the wall? The poem does not answer that question exactly, swerving off into deeper and more interesting territory. It *uses* that problem to engage us and demand that we think, which is the poem's pleasure, and its strategy. Sometimes good fences do indeed make good neighbors, and we might recall that the phrase "mending fences" means to restore communication and neighborliness. Equally true is the notion that something doesn't love a wall. The riddle isn't difficult one. We know that natural forces disturb those boulders, that the frozen groundswell is frost. But not, for all the play of the pun "Robert Frost." "All the fun's in how you say a thing," says a character in another Frost poem. But fun can be serious, just as work can be turned into play.

The wall in the poem is not "the barrier between human contact and understanding." Certainly a wall may be just that, but it can also serve precisely the opposite function.

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.

The repetition of *between* should give us pause and remind us of its two equally common meanings: *between* as separation, as in "something's come between us," and *between* as what might be shared and held in common, as in "a secret between two people" or "a bond between friends." The wall divides but it also connects, if you look at it that way. All the meaning is in how you look at it--how the poem encourage you to think about it.

Frost once wrote about his experience as a teacher, "I was determined to have it out with my youngers and betters as to what thinking really was. We reached an agreement that most of what they had regarded as thinking, their own and other peoples', was nothing but voting--taking sides on an issue they had nothing to do with laying down." "Mending Wall" is a poem that lures the unwary reader into believing that thinking is merely voting, choosing up sides, taking out of the poem what most fits our own preconceived ideas. It adopts this subversive tactic because its ultimate purpose is to challenge us to go behind what we might find initially appealing in the formulas that he on its surface. "We ask people to think," Frost says, "and we don't show them what thinking is." "Mending Wall" is less a poem about what to think than it is poem about what thinking is, and where it might lead.

In his essay, "Education by Poetry," Frost writes,

Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another. People say, "Why don't you say what you mean?" We never do that, we being all of us too much poets. We like to talk in parables and in hints and indirections--whether from diffidence or some other instinct.

Perhaps we are, all of us, so much poets, or might be; but Frost who certainly was, doesn't really answer his question. Surely diffidence is not the reason why writers are drawn to the indirections of figurative language. What might that "other instinct" be? One answer is the instinct of the teacher who speaks in hints, in questions, and in challenges, who refrains from saying what he means because he wants his students to discover it for themselves. Similarly, the apparent meaning of a poem remains merely a formula unless the reader has understood how the poem came to articulate and embody that meaning. The speaker of "Mending Wall" fails in his attempt to become a successful poet/teacher. Each year, it seems, he fails at the same task. Frost's poem, of course, depends upon and survives this failure, recreating a similar moment each time it is encountered.

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