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Architexture Of “Walling In And Walling Out” in Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall”

Abstract

Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” explores the complexities of boundaries, both physical and metaphorical, through the annual ritual of two neighbors who meet and mend a stone wall. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s geophilosophical concepts, this “architextural” essay analyzes the poem as a dynamic interplay between the war machine –represented by the questioning narrator – and the State apparatus, embodied by the tradition-bound neighbor. The wall serves as a One-Two structure, simultaneously a limes and a limen, by reflecting the tension between striating and smoothing forces. While the neighbor upholds the stratified order with the maxim “Good fences make good neighbors,” the narrator challenges this equilibrium through a willingness to transgress and a pursuit of deterritorializing freedom. With this perspective, the poem offers a profound reflection on the paradox of boundaries, which are both divisive and unifying forces. “Mending Wall” also offers unique geophilosophical insights into the enduring human struggle between the mechanisms of control and tradition, and the transformative potentials of liberation and change.

Keywords: Robert Frost, “Mending Wall,” geocriticism, geophilosophy, architexture, striation, the war machine, non-equilibrium, limes, limen

1. Introduction: Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?

“Mending Wall” by Robert Frost (1874-1963) first appeared in his poetry collection *North of Boston*, published in 1914, at the start of World War I. It is a narrative poem set in medias res, featuring two neighbors who come together each spring and mend a stone wall separating their lands. The

narrator's bantering tone, as one of the two neighbors, suggests a level of friendly familiarity between them. He playfully remarks on this recurring springtime ritual after winter's "frozen ground" (Frost, line 2) and other forces such as hunters and their dogs have damaged the wall. He humorously comments: "We have to use a spell to make them balance: / 'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'" (19-20).

This annual chore leads the narrator to question the very existence of the wall even though he also initiates its repair. The wall continually crumbles, requiring that both neighbors constantly maintain it. Therefore, the narrator raises a key question: What, exactly, are they trying to keep in or out with a wall? "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know," he wonders, "[w]hat I was walling in or walling out" (lines 32-33).

The narrator merely wants to initiate a discussion about the wall while lifting the stones and boulders to repair it since even magic cannot keep it intact. "If I could put a notion in his head: / 'Why do they make good neighbors? ...'" (lines 29-30), he commences after his neighbor's words: "Good fences make good neighbors" (27; 45).

Since his neighbor "[would] not go behind his father's saying" (line 43), the narrator's attempt to start a reasonable debate presumably fails.

"Mending Wall" has remained the focus of multiple academic debates more than a century after its publication. It continues to be an important text for exploring the intricacies of borders, boundaries, both literal and figurative, as well as human relationships. Wolfgang Mieder, for instance, in his 2005 article "'Good Fences Make Good Neighbors': The Sociopolitical Significance of an Ambiguous Proverb" explores the rich history behind the proverb "Good fences make good neighbors" used twice in the poem (Frost, lines 27 and 45). Mieder's analysis shows how this seemingly simple expression has been interpreted in numerous ways. He further writes about "Mending Wall:" "The complex meaning of the ambiguous poem can be summarized as follows: it is a poem about boundaries, barriers, (in)determinacy, conventions, tradition, innovation, (dis)agreements, individuality, community, property, behavior, communication, knowledge, and folk wisdom, to be sure" (222).

In his 2019 article, “Robert Frost: ‘Mending Wall,’” Austin Allen captures the poem’s enduring relevance with the subtitle: “How a poem about a rural stone wall quickly became part of debates on nationalism, international borders, and immigration.” Allen describes the poem as a work that “holds a pocket mirror to international relations since 1960” to emphasize its profound influence on the political sphere. As explored by Allen in the article, Robert Frost himself engaged in “poetic diplomacy” to bring opposing factions together in the Cold War conflicts such as the Berlin Wall construction and the Israel-Palestine divide. Frost recited the poem during a goodwill visit to the Soviet Union and invoked its themes in Jerusalem, where he lamented the segregations created by stones and walls (Allen).

In his 2013 essay, “Political Foundations in ‘Mending Wall,’” Steven Knepper reads the poem “as a parable about political foundations” (54). The annual ritual of mending the wall is analyzed through contrasting perspectives: the narrator’s skepticism aligns with Rousseau’s critique of property “as a source of alienation,” while the neighbor’s adherence to tradition reflects Hobbesian fears of chaos without boundaries, with the wall symbolizing “deliverance from the pernicious state of nature” (54). Knepper also introduces a third dimension: “Two men of fundamentally different temperaments engage in a ritual of finding a common project. They reestablish both a wall and a relationship. Perhaps the point, then, is not that they are divided by the wall but that they are united in mending it” (54-55).

2. A Rhizomatic and Architextural Reading

Bertrand Westphal, drawing upon Henri Lefebvre’s concept of “archi-texture” as a method to “clarify a spatial practice” (Lefebvre 118) suggests that the critic’s approach to a given space should be architextual, transforming “a referential space” into “a theater of representation, a place of spectacle translatable within the arts” (131). This process frees the text from the confines of a textual system. As Westphal puts it: “One reads space; one traverses a text; one reads a text as one traverses space” (168).

Unlike earlier works on the poem, which come from diverse academic fields such as sociology, psychoanalysis, history, philosophy, literary studies, and more, this essay offers an alternative

architextual reading of the poem “Mending Wall” through a geophilosophical lens. For this reading, the essay draws on the key concepts from twentieth-century geophilosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, particularly from their seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (2005; originally published in 1987). The essay engages in a geophilosophical dialogue with the text, exploring the dynamic between the two neighbors who were (un)willing to debate each other.

Deleuze and Guattari structured *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* in a rhizomatic manner. Rhizomes, a botanical subterranean stem system characterized by underground stems that grow horizontally, sending out roots and shoots in multiple directions, serve as a metaphor for all organic and non-hierarchical structures in *A Thousand Plateaus*. “Rhizomatic” models embody multiplicity, decentralization, and interconnectedness, unlike the “arborescent” models of organization, which follow a vertical, linear progression rooted in fixed origins and tracing hierarchies (Deleuze and Guattari 3-25).

Rhizomatic structures emerge from what Deleuze and Guattari call nomad thought (3-25), and this metaphor extends to their writing style, where multiple plateaus function as autonomous yet interconnected units. This mode of rhizomatic writing is an open-ended structure, and it resists hierarchical thinking and encourages a multiplicity of interpretations (Massumi ix-xv). Similarly, the essay adopts a rhizomatic mode inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, and comprises three plateaus, each representing a different “pitch of intensity” in the poem, a concept suggested by Brian Massumi (xiv). Massumi explains:

In Deleuze and Guattari, a plateau is reached when circumstances combine to bring an activity to a pitch of intensity that is not automatically dissipated in a climax. The heightening of energies is sustained long enough to leave a kind of afterimage of its dynamism that can be reactivated or injected into other activities, creating a fabric of intensive states between which any number of connecting routes could exist. (Massumi xiv; my emphasis)

Following this concept, this architextual reading is structured in three plateaus, and each title is derived from “Mending Wall,” that is, the lines where the text reaches “a pitch of intensity,” a pivotal moment that does not dissipate but lingers throughout the poem.

3. The First Plateau: “Oh, Just Another Kind of Outdoor Game”

Deleuze and Guattari, in the twelfth plateau, “1227: Treatise on Nomadology—The War Machine,” explain the concepts of the “war machine” and “the State apparatus” within a binary model. They explore the complexities of “political sovereignty” or “domination” through Georges Dumézil’s analyses of Indo-European mythology (351-52). Dumézil demonstrates that “political sovereignty, or domination, has two heads:” “the magician-king” and “the jurist-priest” (351). In this binary model, these figures symbolize separate but interdependent aspects of “political sovereignty” and “domination,” while Deleuze and Guattari further elaborate on Dumézil’s ideas: “Undoubtedly, these two poles stand in opposition term by term, as the obscure and the clear, the violent and the calm, the quick and the weighty, the fearsome and the regulated, the ‘bond’ and the ‘pact’” (351).

These opposing forces, they postulate, are not antagonistic but complementary, functioning as two sides of the same sovereign unity (351-52). Here, Deleuze and Guattari juxtapose “the State apparatus,” which is defined by “a milieu of interiority,” with “the war machine,” which exists “outside [any] sovereignty” of the State and resists its organization (352). The State apparatus can function within any stratum of any system, social or natural, and has the power to turn anything into a commodity (Bonta and Protevi 148).

As Bonta and Protevi further explain, the State apparatus is any force that overcodes, stratifies, and organizes territories in multiple methods “to the limits of human tolerance” (149). While the State apparatus creates interiority, closed systems of rules, laws, institutions and such that stratify society, the war machine remains external to any closed control instruments and operates with an openness and fluidity. Its exteriority—its existence outside any domain—signifies the war machine’s potential for freedom but also a challenge to the State’s hegemony. Deleuze and Guattari explain this potential: “He [the war machine] unties the bond just as he betrays the pact” (352). The war machine has “the power of metamorphosis” (352). The war machine, Bonta and Protevi further clarify, “is the counterforce to the State’s stratification machine, which forms hierarchical, centralized, and overcoded social formations” (165).

In “Mending Wall,” the two opposing but complementary entities are reflected in the characters of the narrator, representing the war machine, who questions the existence of the wall, and the neighbor, acting as the mouthpiece of the State apparatus, who defends its presence. These interdependent figures operate within a binary division. As Allen observes, “[i]f ‘Mending Wall’ takes up the same theme without variation, then wall-mending must be a form of bonding, the joint renewal of something worthwhile.” This underscores the paradoxical nature of the wall as both a separating and bonding entity, forming what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a “One-Two” structure (352). This dual articulation is fundamental to the formation of the State apparatus, which relies on binary distinctions and establishes an interiority that consolidates its power (352).

In the poem, the neighbor, as an embodiment of the State apparatus, relies on the divisive and stratified nature of the wall to create “a milieu of interiority” (Deleuze and Guattari 352) and reinforce the idea of “the good neighbor” (Frost, lines 27; 45), a code of social stratification. He equates being a good neighbor with maintaining the borders and limits he creates around his property. Meanwhile, the narrator, representing the war machine that exists “outside [any] sovereignty” (Deleuze and Guattari 352), focuses on the exterior and states: “He is all pine and I am apple orchard” (Frost, line 24). Bonta and Protevi note that “the State apparatus must operate to transform the earth [terre] of primitive society” (148). In the poem, the stratification of the State is embodied in the renowned proverb: “Good fences make good neighbors” (Frost, lines 27; 45).

The narrator resists conforming to the stratified organization of the State apparatus, embodied in his neighbor’s words and reinforced by his father’s maxim, an indisputable tradition that solidifies the neighbor’s stance. As the war machine, the narrator also possesses what Deleuze and Guattari describe as “the power of metamorphosis” (352). He humorously affirms, “Spring is the mischief in me” (Frost, line 28), and perceives his neighbor who is holding a stone “like an old-stone savage armed” (40). Since spring symbolizes change and transformation, and as the narrator attempts to “put a notion in [his neighbor’s] head” (line 29), it can be inferred that he seeks to introduce a new perspective to his neighbor.

This clash of power between the two forces—the war machine and the State apparatus—is described by the narrator as “[j]ust another kind of outdoor game” (Frost, line 21). As the narrator questions the wall’s permanence and resists the neighbor’s adherence to tradition, the ritual

becomes a medium for negotiating power and relationships. This “outdoor game” parallels Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between the games of “Go” and “chess.” Chess, they argue, is a coded, regulated game emblematic of the State apparatus and the State’s restricting and striating reasoning (Deleuze and Guattari 352-53). Deleuze and Guattari further elaborate on chess in the context of the State apparatus:

Chess pieces are coded; they have an internal nature and intrinsic properties from which their movements, situations, and confrontations derive. They have qualities; a knight remains a knight, a pawn a pawn, a bishop a bishop. Each is like a subject of the statement endowed with a relative power, and these relative powers combine in a subject of enunciation, that is, the chess player or the game’s form of interiority. (352)

“Go,” on the other hand, is a game of perpetual movement and strategy resonant with the war machine’s expansive and smoothing logic (Deleuze and Guattari 352-53). Deleuze and Guattari further explain:

Go pieces ... are pellets, disks, simple arithmetic units, and have only an anonymous, collective, or third-person function: ‘It’ makes a move. ‘It’ could be a man, a woman, a louse, an elephant. Go pieces are elements of a nonsubjectified machine assemblage with no intrinsic properties, only situational ones. (352-53)

As these two characters in “Mending Wall” engage in their respective games— “Go” in the case of the narrator and “chess” in the case of the neighbor—the stones and boulders symbolize their differing approaches. The neighbor seeks to incorporate them into the structure of the wall, gripping and placing them with determination: “Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top / In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed” (Frost, lines 39-40). The narrator, however, values the stones and boulders in their expansive and natural state with gaps through which “even two can pass abreast” (line 4). This metaphor encapsulates their divergent stances on state organization, embodied in the famous proverb. The act of repairing the wall, a symbolic game, reflects these opposing forces in action. Like the fluid, territorial strategies of Go, the narrator destabilizes the wall’s permanence with his argument, challenging its stratified organization and underscoring the broader philosophical tension between stratified and nomadic modes of existence:

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. (Frost, lines 32-34)

The narrator here questions the logic of their ritual games. These lines reflect his fundamental struggle with the State apparatus, which thrives on hierarchical organization within a nomadic nature, and his skepticism of fixed boundaries imposed by the State. The line "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" (33) points to the smoothing force of nature that seeks openness, fluidity and deterritorialization.

4. The Second Plateau: "Something There Is That Doesn't Love a Wall"

In the fourteenth plateau, "1440: The Smooth and the Striated," Deleuze and Guattari introduce two additional key concepts as part of their broader discussion on the dynamics between the war machine and the State apparatus: smooth and striated spaces (474-500). These spaces operate on different principles and function similar to the games of Go and chess, which the authors use as metaphors to illustrate their ideas (Deleuze and Guattari 499). Comparing these two games, they also draw parallels between actual and conceptual spaces where the games take place: "The 'smooth' space of Go, as against the 'striated' space of chess" (353). They further explicate: "In Go, it is a question of arraying oneself in an open space, of holding space, of maintaining the possibility of springing up at any point: the movement is not from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival" (353).

The smooth space of Go is "the nomad space" associated with the war machine, characterized by openness, fluidity, and the absence of predefined boundaries. Go is "[a] war without battle lines, with neither confrontation nor retreat, without battles even: pure strategy" (Deleuze and Guattari

353). Smooth space is a space of becoming, where movement is continuous and trajectories adaptable, much like the nomadic lifestyles that Deleuze and Guattari often reference (474-500).

In contrast, chess is a war game “but an institutionalized, regulated, coded war, with a front, a rear, battles” (353). Deleuze and Guattari explain that in a chess game, “it is a question of arranging a closed space for oneself, thus of going from one point to another, of occupying the maximum number of squares with the minimum number of pieces” (353). The striated space of chess is “the sedentary space” associated with the State apparatus, and it is structured, segmented, and hierarchical. It is marked by the imposition of borders, rules, and control mechanisms that stabilize and regulate the flow of life (474-500).

These two types of spaces are, of course, not merely geographical but also figurative, conceptual, and social. Smooth space represents the deterritorializing forces of creativity, resistance, and change, while striated space symbolizes the reterritorializing efforts of the State to enforce order and maintain power (353, 474-500). Deleuze and Guattari describe the convergence between smooth and striated spaces in various forms: at times “a smooth space [is] captured, enveloped by a striated space,” while in other instances, “a striated space dissolve[s] into a smooth space”—these interactions occur in asymmetrical mixtures (475).

In the context of Frost’s “Mending Wall,” the physical wall itself can be seen as a material embodiment of striated space imposed by the State apparatus. The wall serves as a boundary that organizes and separates, and it is the product of the neighbors’ adherence to the proverbial organization of “Good fences make good neighbors” (Frost, lines 27;45). Thus, the poem dramatizes the philosophical tension of “walling in or walling out” (32-33) between the forces of smooth and striated spaces.

“Mending Wall” opens with an enigmatic line: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” (Frost, line 1). This line invites the reader to unravel the mystery throughout the poem. Is it the swollen, frozen land that crumbles the wall? Or the winter itself? Perhaps the hunters, or their dogs, or all these forces working together? What force wants it down? Regardless of the cause, the inevitable destruction of the wall necessitates a recurring ritual each spring: “The gaps I mean, / No one has seen them made or heard them made, / But at spring mending-time we find them there” (9-11).

The same enigmatic statement reappears later in the poem, in line 35. It is as if Frost is teasing the reader: if you haven't found an answer so far, go back to the first line and reflect on it once again.

The narrator devises arguments for both his neighbor and the reader as part of his Go game strategy. The first deterritorializing entity that wants the wall down is nature itself, the ultimate smooth space, a process that can be called 'natural deterritorialization' within the smooth body of nature. Bonta and Protevi explain that "steppe, sea, desert, polar ice, air" are all smooth spaces (144). The narrator also evokes other smooth space entities in the poem: "rabbit" (Frost, line 8), "pine," "apple orchard" (24), "apple trees" (25), and "cones" (26). Here, the narrator strives, as Westphal describes, "to perceive the smooth in the dense layers of the world" (163).

The second deterritorializing entity is the hunters and their dogs, who create "gaps even two can pass abreast" (Frost, line 4).

Hunters, along with the narrator, the neighbor, and the neighbor's father, are the only human figures referenced in the poem. As nomads of the land, hunters with their dogs serve as smoothing forces within nature. Deleuze and Guattari regard them as spiritual entities, akin to shamans and warriors, who "operate through corporeality, animality, and vegetality" (176), signifying their connection to the natural world and smooth space. They describe the nomadic life as transient, an "intermezzo," characterized by perpetual motion and shaped by an ongoing journey (380).

Despite these deterritorializing smooth forces, both the narrator and his neighbor assume the role of reterritorializing, striating entities as they collaborate to build the wall:

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. (Frost, lines 12-15)

Each has his own use for the boulders. They set the wall between them for different purposes—the neighbor reterritorializes the striation, creating a limes, while the narrator finds an opportunity in the

chore, deterritorializing the wall with his arguments, creating a limen. For each, the act of setting the wall functions differently.

5. The Third Plateau: “And Set the Wall Between Us Once Again”

Setting the wall between the neighbors corresponds to the paradoxical double perspective of the wall as both a separating and bonding entity—what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a “One-Two” structure (352), as previously discussed in the essay. The wall establishes a striating interiority and smoothing exteriority, and spaces of inclusion, “walling in” (Frost, line 33), and exclusion, “walling out” (33). It also generates two distinct gazes: the neighbor’s striating gaze, which seeks “a state of equilibrium” (Deleuze and Guattari 395), and the narrator’s smoothing gaze, which seeks a state of non-equilibrium, which is what Westphal calls “transgressive gaze” (47). Above all else, the existence of the wall gives rise to two additional concepts: limes and limen.

The neighbor, unwilling to move beyond his father’s saying and embrace non-equilibrium, chooses the safest route dictated by the state apparatus: maintaining the status quo, equilibrium, and balance of forces. In contrast, the narrator seeks to transgress the walls of equilibrium, as evident in the lines: “I wonder / If I could put a notion in his head: / Why do they make good neighbors?” (Frost, lines 28-30).

This raises the question of why the narrator assists in mending the wall. Resistance to the striations of the state apparatus is the driving force behind the nomadic way of life. For the narrator, this act serves as a form of self-regeneration. As Deleuze and Guattari assert, “an equilibrium of forces is a phenomenon of resistance, whereas the counterattack implies a rush or change of speed that breaks the equilibrium” (397). Helping to set the wall provides the narrator with an opportunity for resistance, specifically, the chance “to put a notion in [his neighbor’s] head” (Frost, line 29).

Westphal argues that “nonequilibrium” is “coherent and, ultimately, more interesting than equilibrium,” equating it to “a very complex story ... of instability” (19). In contrast, he describes equilibrium as “a nonstory” (19). Ultimately, “Mending Wall” presents a nuanced narrative of

nonequilibrium and deterritorialization. The poem grapples with these tensions like boulders that “we wear our fingers rough with handling (...)” (Frost, line 20), like “... old-stone savage[s]” (40).

The lack of equilibrium necessitates transgression, the willingness to move beyond any obstacle set forth. The narrator, embodying Westphal describes as a “transgressive gaze,” looks “toward an emancipatory horizon in order to see beyond a code and territory that serves as its ‘domain’” (47).

This emancipatory perspective is evident in the poem:

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.’ (Frost, lines 23-27)

Here, the narrator also delineates the smooth domains of both his own space and his neighbor’s: “He is all pine and I am apple orchard” (Frost, line 24). Transgression, as Westphal explains, requires “a closed and striated space and a will to penetrate,” which the state apparatus perceives as “a form of burglary” (Westphal 42). Thus, the neighbor, embodying the voice of the state apparatus, at once protests and asserts the boundaries (limes) of his domains: “Good fences make good neighbors” (Frost, line 27).

Westphal also highlights the religious dimension of transgression: “Striated space is sometimes the space of the gods high on Olympus or in heaven, making rules for places and lives. Transgressing their domain can be dangerous, as much so as subverting the political norms” (Westphal 42).

Therefore, transgression is not merely a physical or spatial act but also a symbolic defiance of the sacred institutional order.

Transgression necessitates both the absence of equilibrium and the striation imposed by the state apparatus. The smoothing will of the war machine, then, transforms the limes (erected boundaries) into a limen (a threshold). As Westphal asserts: “Transgression corresponds to the crossing of a boundary beyond which stretches a marginal space of freedom” (47). In the poem, the wall establishes a limes by marking the borders of the ancestral order, but it also generates a limen, a

liminal threshold that serves as a “porous border, intended to be crossed” (Westphal 42).

Therefore, the gaps in the wall emphasize its liminal nature and reveal what lies beyond: “the other impermissible and thus (officially) nonexistent” entity: “a marginal space of freedom” (42).

6. Conclusion

Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” explores literal and metaphorical boundaries and the tensions they create between individuals, communities, and ideologies. Through a geophilosophical lens, the poem stages a dynamic game between “the war machine” and “the State apparatus” and an enticing clash between “smoothing” and “striating” forces, as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari. The narrator, representing the war machine, challenges the stratified order symbolized by the renowned maxim “Good fences make good neighbors” and disrupts the status quo, generating nonequilibrium. In contrast, the neighbor, as the voice of the State apparatus, upholds the sacred tradition and maintains the equilibrium of boundaries. The wall itself serves as a quintessential liminal space—paradoxically representing a limes that marks separation and a limen that invites crossing. The wall also symbolizes the tension between containment and freedom. Ultimately, Frost’s “Mending Wall” remains a timeless meditation on the complexities of coexistence and the enduring human desire to both build and dismantle obstacles.

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