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The Newfound Politics of Robert Frost's "Mending Wall"

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Abstract

Art has always been closely intertwined with politics, and throughout history many artists have protested, both through their art and their political activism, against unjust political actions. In recent history, the Vietnam War era saw the rise of political art, a prime example of which could be observed in the proliferation of protest posters in the era. The ascendance of Donald Trump to the highest political office in the United States, and the fierce opposition by many American artists to him, marked another chapter in the battle between arts and politics. Against this backdrop, this article aims to analyze the way in which one of Robert Frost's most famous poems, "Mending Wall" (1914), was appropriated by the anti-Trump media to criticize his highly contentious immigration policies. In so doing, this article discusses "Mending Wall" and some of its recent political interpretations through juxtaposing two articles on the poem published in *Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post*, respectively. We argue that in their attempt to either support or oppose the building of the wall on the US-Mexico border, the authors offer a blinkered view of "Mending Wall" to serve their own political agendas. Frost's poem, however, transcends the boundaries of reductive politics by leaving the narrative open-ended, which, in turn, encourages the readers

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to come to their own conclusions over the question of the wall—a fact that can account for the sustained interest in the poem since its publication.

Keywords: Political art, Mending Wall, immigration, literature of protest, Donald Trump, Robert Frost

Introduction: "Mending Wall" and the Politics of Being an Artist

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that art has always been political, and poetry, as one of the oldest and most popular art forms, has been no exception. Politicized art, however, is a different entity. In his influential 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Walter Benjamin defines the politicization of art as the subordination of art to political life to advance certain political actions, mainly war (19). External elements deciding the meaning of a work of art based on contemporary politics and modern sensibilities do little to advance the messages contained within the art, and reduce it to just another weapon in partisan fights. Loading a work of art or literature with political messages renders it less unique and turns it into a tool in the hands of those with a political agenda to score political points against their opponents. Of course, politics has always been a part of art, but the subordination of art to politics alienates those with different opinions than the authors, and may even repel those who engage with a work of literature for purposes other than its immediate political function.

The use of art and literature for political means has perhaps never been starker than during the candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump. In order to discredit the man whom they saw as a threat to democracy, many artists and media decided to use works of art as cultural forces against his highly controversial politics. Poetry played a significant role in this respect, and was employed to juxtapose poetical excellence with the crude nature of Trump's politics and personality. Some critics went so far as claiming that under Donald Trump the United States headed toward Fascism (Billet 2016, para. 15). What, however, was often overlooked was the fact that he was not the cause of this perceived decline in American politics, but rather the symptom of it. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Wall Street bailout after the economic crash of 2008, and the shipping of American jobs overseas made it existential for many voters to change the status quo, and many of them invested their hopes in Donald Trump as the agent of change. On the other hand, some mainstream outlets, such as Vox, regarded racism to be the main factor in his victory (Lopez 2017).

Robert Frost's famous "Mending Wall" became a rallying cry for those opposed to Donald Trump's notorious plan of building a wall on the border between the United States and Mexico. Obviously, the poem was written more than a century before Trump ever proposed such plans. However, the fictional argument between the two neighbors, one pro-wall and other anti-wall, was seen as a parallel to the cold relationship between the neighboring nations, both before Trump took office and after that. News organizations such as *The Washington Post* (Petri 2019) and *The Los Angeles Times* (Nazaryan 2016) took that opportunity to rail against his rhetoric about border-related issues by analyzing Frost's poem in a new light.

Indeed, not all the revived attention given to "Mending Wall" has come from those against the former president of the United States. Some outlets, such as *Classical Poets*, took advantage of the climate, and interpreted the poem in a wall-friendly manner (Mantyk 2019). Even Mike Pence, Trump's Vice President, used a recurring phrase in "Mending Wall", "Good fences make good neighbors", to make his point about the need for a wall (27, 45), as ironic as Pence's appropriation of the poem may sound, given that the poem suggests the exact opposite. The proverb, indeed, had existed long before Frost's poem, but given that "Mending Wall" had become a big part of the discussion around the border wall, Pence's use of that sentence could have been intentional.

This article, therefore, examines Frost's poem and a number of its political interpretations in the context of the discussions around building a wall on the US-Mexico border. Two articles published in *Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post* will be analyzed, compared, and contrasted to highlight the anti-wall narrative. The poem itself, along with an article by *Classical Poetry* will also be examined. This third article will be used to illustrate the pro-wall agenda. In the end, Frost's intentions, and each side of the argument concerning the wall will be explored.

"Mending Wall": One Poem and Many Interpretations in the Age of Trump

Frost was not willing to share the meaning of "Mending Wall," and wanted to keep that to himself (Nazaryan 2016, para. 10). In a piece for *Los Angeles Times*, Alexander Nazaryan alludes to this point, and attempts to understand the desire of Donald Trump and his supporters for building a wall, and its connection to the poem (para. 15). He puts Frost above polemics, and elevates the artistic qualities of his poem (para. 5). He also urges Trump and his fans to read the poem more carefully, so that they can understand the wisdom inside it, outside of the phrase that they liked to quote out of context.

Nazaryan sees Trump's coalition of voters not as a monolith, but as a group of people motivated by different objectives. After conceding that some of the people who voted for Trump are probably racist, he proceeds to say:

> But many of those who support Trump are simply frightened; the wall represents a bulwark not so much against the Islamic State or the Sinaloa Cartel, but against the 21st century, blowing across the dark fields of the republic like one of those punishing New Hampshire winds that come in October and stay through March. (para. 15)

Nazaryan sees Trump's proposed wall and people's responses to it as more than a mere race-baiting tactic. He seems to be reluctant to give Trump supporters the benefit of the doubt, and assumes that they might have some real issues with the migrant flow from Mexico, but he does not resort to simple name-calling. He views their problem to be with the broader concept of progress, and that is why he urges them to read Frost's poem.

Alexandra Petri, in an opinion piece for *The Washington Post,* chose a different path. She made a parody of Frost's poem called "Good Pences make good neighbors" as a response to the aforementioned quote by Mike Pence (Petri 2019, para. 4). While Nazaryan's article was an invitation for the critical examination of Frost's poem, Petri settles for political jabs at her opponents. As such, her article offers little room for nuances or subtlety. Furthermore, Petri argues that Frost's use of the proverb "Good fences make good neighbors" was meant to be ironic (para. 3). However, the irony of the statement remains only a matter of speculation. In fact, one could argue that not only does Frost not provide any indication that irony was the reason behind the inclusion of the proverb, but also a more careful examination of the poem may indicate that he was not trying to portray the pro-wall neighbor as a figure to ridicule. In the figure of his neighbor, the speaker sees someone with whom many people can identify, even though Frost himself was not probably one of them.

In the closing of her mock-poem, "Good Pences make good neighbors", Petri writes:

> He will not go behind his father's saying,
> Nor should he; what was good enough for Dad
> Is good enough for me, from measles to
> The general threat of Nazis. Good. We need

> The wall. We've got to build the wall. And I agree.
> Good Pences make good neighbors. (para. 4)

Petri goes as far as equating a call for a specific measure of border control to the possible resurgence of Nazis. She views the supporters of Donald Trump as backward-looking people who are opposed to the many improvements made possible by modernity, such as vaccines.

The disposition to manipulate a work of art to your will is hardly a new concept. However, the manner in which such appropriation is carried out can serve as a telling factor. Nazaryan and Petri are both left-of-center writers, resistant to the idea that there is a need for a wall between the two countries. But while the former is unwilling to condemn all supporters of such a wall and brand them as racists, Petri takes the easy road and suggests that the whole movement is disposed toward Nazism. It is perhaps this same confidence in Petri that leads her to value her own interpretation of the poem above others' and drives her to the conclusion that Frost's use of the proverb "Good fences make good neighbors" was ironic.

It should also be emphasized here that the two pieces also adopt very different tones. Nazaryan's article is a serious piece about the dangers of limitations, especially in regard to the kind of people that we want around us. In the last paragraph of his article, he compares Trump with Frost, and argues that a demagogue like Trump uses walls for his own purposes, while an artist like Frost uses it to make something as thought-provoking as "Mending Wall" (para. 19).

Petri's piece, on the other hand, is a satire, and holding it to the same standard as a serious article would be unreasonable. Yet, since it was published in a mainstream outlet with a significant following, one would expect a fairer representation. Frost took great care in portraying the pro-wall neighbor in a manner that would probably seem fair and balanced to most readers of his poem. Petri, however, seems to have jumped to conclusion, portraying those supportive of Donald Trump, through the person of Mike Pence, as motivated by race.

Apart from Nazaryan's and Petri's interpretation, examining the poem on its own reveals larger truths. While the two authors, each in their own way, try to prioritize their own views, Frost lets both sides of his poem's argument to develop equally. While he evidently devotes more space to the view held by the anti-wall neighbor, who is also the speaker of the poem, this does not imply that he makes a caricature of the second, pro-wall neighbor. He communicates the neighbor's reasoning for such a wall, mostly through the aforementioned proverb, which is also the most well-known line of the entire poem.

Right-wing and conservative voices have clung on the proverb mentioned by Frost in his poem for obvious reasons. They may not necessarily assume that Frost was channeling his own thoughts through the pro-wall neighbor, but they use it without much thought given to the rest of the poem. That is also the case with Evan Mantyk in his 2019 "Trump's Border Wall Revives Frost's 'Mending Wall' (and a Poet's Response)", published in *Classical Poets*. Mantyk mostly focuses on criticizing the liberal co-optation of the poem, but in the end, he shares a parody version of "Mending Wall" that he had written called "Building Wall". In his poem, he even takes some jabs at Frost himself, because he believes that Frost was mocking the pro-wall neighbor (para. 8). This, indeed, is a reductive reading of Frost's poem and a blinkered view of what Frost meant to accomplish by his poem. In his poem, Frost refuses to prescribe what he thinks the best solution is. Rather, he develops both sides of the argument and lets the reader decide for themselves. This is a fact that seems to have escaped Mantyk and others who are willing to insist that Frost favored one neighbor over the other.

Toward the end of his mock-poem, Mantyk chooses to directly compare and contrast his beliefs with what he thought Frost incorporated in his poem:

> No, it was Frost who had a wall in heart
> That tore tradition's timeless truth apart…
> So if a man requests a wall, then build it.
> It's more than what you think you see that willed it. (lines 25-28)

Mantyk, however, seems to have misinterpreted Frost's intentions. He believes that Frost only wanted to take the speaker's arguments seriously, which is at best a dubious suggestion. While Frost might have been more supportive of the speaker's stance himself, he portrays the other neighbor in a fair and even-handed manner. As Milton Reigelman wrote in *The Advocate-Messenger*, "Frost thinks the poem's speaker and his neighbor are as balanced, morally, as the stones they together cast spells on." (2019, para. 10)

Frost's speaker makes his points for why he thinks there should not be a wall between the two houses. By saying "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" twice in lines 1 and 35, the speaker makes his disdain for the concept of walls clear. Nevertheless, Frost does not foreground this view as the only perspective in his poem, even the only valid one. In fact, each time that the speaker uses the abovementioned phrase, the pro-wall neighbor answers with "Good fences make good neighbors." A clear battle of the two different ideologies is at play in the

poem, and Frost does not use his own convictions to give more credence to one or another. This balance, therefore, can serve as a model and a clear example of artistic integrity that even the most partisan ideologues cannot corrupt.

Conclusion

For much of history, art and politics have been interconnected, and whether artists mean for their works to be viewed through a specific political lens or not, partisans of all stripes will find ways to appropriate them for their own political agendas. Frost's "Mending Wall" can serve as an apt example of the co-optation of literature for political ends. During an unusually charged political climate in the history of the United States, and with many discussions around the issue of illegal immigration and its possible solutions, both the left and the right tried to claim the phenomenal verse of Robert Frost.

Most of this article was dedicated to the analysis of the interpretation of "Mending Wall' by those in left-wing circles. The choice in doing so was, indeed, obvious. Since Frost allocates most of the poem to conveying the views of the speaker, one may be forgiven for mistaking that for Frost's own view, as demonstrated above. However, the durability of this poem is due to the fact that it leaves the door open for different interpretations. It would hardly be surprising if in the future people with opposing views used "Mending Wall" to advance their own agenda again. The issue of being welcoming or reserved, especially as a nation, can manifest itself in many different situations, and when it does, Frost's poem is there to make both sides of the argument all over again.

In a 2017 article about political art in the age of Trump, titled "Is Political Art the Only Art That Matters Now?" published in *Vulture*, Carl Swanson described the various ways in which some artists had tried to combat the President through art (Swanson, 2017). The antagonistic and blunt approaches of some of those pieces of art make us appreciate the delicate and subtle construction of Frost's poem even more. Frost is unwilling to offer his readers a black-and-white picture of right versus wrong, but rather chooses to draw the readers' attention to different views that can co-exist and be respectfully considered. Indeed, it is much more convenient to point a finger and tell others what to think; it is much more difficult to provide them with the tools they need to be equipped with to reach their own conclusions.

Ultimately, the lasting qualities of a poem that defy neat ideological boxes preferred by prejudiced parties always triumph over political manipulation and self-interest, as observed in the fact that Trump's age and all the controversies it

engendered have almost come to an end now, but the interest in the poem has not. If Frost's mission was to open dialogue between the different people who are represented by the two neighbors, then he has been successful. More than a century after it was published, "Mending Wall" still generates new views on important topics such as immigration. What happens in the future is unknown, but it is more than likely that Frost's "Mending Wall" will play a role in it again.

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