



11-15-1998

## Walter McDonald's "Mending the Fence" and Robert Frost's "Mending Wall": One Region Speaks to Another

Helen Maxson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Maxson, Helen (1998) "Walter McDonald's "Mending the Fence" and Robert Frost's "Mending Wall": One Region Speaks to Another," *Westview*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol18/iss1/8>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).



## Walter McDonald's "Mending the Fence" and Robert Frost's "Mending Wall": One Region Speaks to Another

by Helen Maxson

A professor of English at Texas Tech University, poet Walter McDonald has published over 1600 poems and won several prizes for his work. Raised in Texas, he has lived much of his life there, and his identification with the state figures prominently throughout his verse. Even as he explores the universal in life, he does so in a distinctly Texan context, taking the region itself as a subject. In a recent interview, he elaborated on the power of a "region" in a writer's material:

I discover poems from the regions I own—or which own me. I think a writer finds at least one *region* to keep coming back to. It may be a *place* — Robert Frost's New England, for example, or James Wright's Ohio, or Eudora Welty's Mississippi; or in my case, Texas. A poet keeps prowling a certain region until he or she begins to settle it, homestead and live on it, and eventually own it.

By "region" I don't mean simply *geography* — but regions of the mind, a cluster of images or obsessions that a writer draws on over and over, for poems. When writers accept their regions, they can discover a motherlode of images. Every poem is a metaphor of how it feels to someone to be alive at that time, at that place. (8)

Every poem, suggests McDonald, explores at least one region, whether topical or geographical, and the experience of dwelling in it. His poem "Mending the Fence," printed in the 1993 volume *Where Skies Are Not Cloudy*, conjures two such dwelling places, one, a geographical location and the other, a perspective on the world. In fact, their parameters assume center stage in a rhetorical ges-

ture of the second and third verses: an extended allusion to Robert Frost's more famous poem "Mending Wall." McDonald's title foretells the move, of course, and signals its centrality to his poem's purposes, suggestions then borne out in forthright borrowing and reenvisioning of Frost's material. The allusion expands McDonald's title to refer to a fence not only between cows of one rancher and cows of another, but also between Texas and New England and between McDonald and the older poet whom he, in many ways, resembles. In one more elaboration, the reference to Frost makes of fence mending not only a separating but also a twisting together of two separate strands. In this ambiguous poem, that is, the regions inhabited by Frost and McDonald are simultaneously defined against each other and conflated into one province.

The poem's ambiguity extends to each of its aspects. "Mending the Fence" explores most obviously the perspective of a rancher who, as he tightens his barbed wire, adds one of many gashes to his work gloves and then meditates on other destructive effects of the fence: cattle cruelly trapped in its barbs, and dogs flung back when chasing a rabbit. The poem's central energies lie in two tensions: one, between the fence and the "something" that, as a force of nature, pushes against it toward a freedom from human constructs, and the other, between the contradictory impulses of the rancher who even as he repairs the fence, is sensitive to its violation of what is natural. Hunters, cows, dogs, and imaginary whirlwind devils cause the fence to sag and break. Pet dogs in packs become wolves, obeying some call of the wild. Buzzards crowd the skies, waiting for the suffering, trapped cattle, among other prey, to die. Against these natural occurrences, the rancher takes

his stand on behalf of his livelihood and, perhaps, a need to assert control, mending his fence even amidst evidence of the cruelty and limited success of his interference.

### Mending the Fence

I twist the barbed wire tight  
to hold the dumbest cow. Another rip,  
these gloves no older than wires I strung  
last year, already sagging.

Whirlwinds are devils roaming the fields  
for mischief. Something shoves posts down  
and makes good neighbors strangers—  
hunters mad at the moon

shooting at shadows, cows straining  
through barbed wires, a pack of dogs  
at night, flung back by wires  
losing the track of a rabbit.

I've seen them sometimes in shadows,  
stray pets becoming wolves.  
Caught in the pickup's headlights, they blink  
and slink away through cactus,

flashing their tails in moonlight.  
I've found cows bloodied, necks caught  
by barbed wires, walled and bawling,  
their fat tongues purple.

I wave to anyone on horseback  
or walking across my pasture  
under a sky of buzzards. If he's alone,  
if I haven't heard a shot for hours,

I let him go, hoping I'll find  
no fence posts broken,  
no cow gut-shot and bleeding,  
her wild eyes staring at heaven.

At the end of the poem, the rancher speaks of letting trespassers who seem not to be hunters continue across his land, hoping that the destructions

typical of hunters will not later appear. He tells us he waves at anyone he sees. His meditation on the damages of barbed wire has brought the poem to an ending of tentative trust and community in spite of the sterner separations the fence imposes.

The rancher's view of the hunters contributes to the ambiguity of his perspective since their destructiveness hurts both the fence and the cows who are victimized by it. The rancher wants to indulge his friendly feelings for other people, but fears he will pay for doing so. In this poem, relationships, whether among people or between people and nature, fail to unfold along clear lines, taking varying turns like the barbed wire the rancher twists in the first line. The implications of one's actions are similarly complex. Nothing in the poem suggests that the rancher should give up his ownership of the land or the work which demands fences. Yet, its images convey the suffering they inflict with powerful immediacy. The poem does not provide answers or even ask questions. It simply makes observations that are painful to absorb, conveying feeling rather than sorting issues. As a result, issues cluster around McDonald's images more like a surrounding aura than as clearly defined components.

As part of this aura, McDonald's relationship with Frost infuses the poem with a sense of ancestry. The poem's derivative nature is clear. At the same time, McDonald makes his differences from Frost clear too. The interaction he describes evades easy labels. However, literary theory offers us ways of understanding both what it is and what it is not. Harold Bloom, the influential theorist at Yale, has put forth a famous theory about what he calls an "anxiety of influence," according to which strong writers misread those who have come before them to create a space for their own originality. Bloom implies that young writers can feel compromised by the degree to which their work is derivative, and, so, distort the literary context in which they write in order to distinguish themselves more clearly within it. Doubtless, one could read "Mending the Fence" and find evidence of this

anxiety in McDonald's remaking of Frost's poem and, simply, in the directness of his allusion. However, another theory of influence rings more true in this case, especially when one considers how faithfully McDonald reads Frost as a point of reference for his own identity. Certain women theorists have addressed the detrimental lack for women writers of any highly developed tradition within which to work. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf, the British novelist of the early twentieth century, discusses the tradition of British women writers, many of whom were barely recognized as serious artists and had limited success with their work. Woolf's purpose is not only to explain why no woman has written the plays of Shakespeare, but also to provide women writers with a tradition of mothers through whom to think back as they work, mothers from whom to learn what fathers cannot know about writing as women. Alice Walker, in the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," adapts Woolf's ideas to the situation of black women writers. I believe one can adapt them also to the mentor/student relationship between writers who are men.

The interaction between forebears and descendants in *A Room of One's Own* is primarily one of cooperation rather than competition, and for Woolf, this fact in no way compromises the originality of younger writers. An ideal mother's nurturing is pointed toward the daughter's discovery of herself. In Woolf's process, the daughter might work against her mothers even as Bloom's sons work against their fathers, but the act would involve welcomed guidance from the parent. For Woolf, the important thing for daughters is to "look past Milton's bogey" (118), seeing beyond the male models of the past into "the open sky" (39) of their own creative possibilities. It is interesting to note that it is not only for Woolf but also for Bloom that Milton is a monumental figure beyond whom young poets must see. But for Bloom, Milton represents a father's greatness that incapacitates the

sons who must equal it, whereas for Woolf, he represents a father's way of doing things that, alien to daughters, simply misleads them. Perhaps for Woolf he represents as well a general failure on the part of fathers to nurture. Regardless, for Woolf, Milton's greatness is not the problem. In fact, in her model, greatness in forebears can validate one's self, bestowing power; furthermore, originality can incorporate similarity, adding community to its various components. Both these benefits, rather than anxiety, seem to motivate McDonald's gesture toward Frost.

In "Mending the Fence," McDonald's technique of borrowing from Frost bespeaks a fellowfeeling for the great poet and a sense that for McDonald, membership in the community of American poets is a valued part of his artistic identity. The two verses in which the allusion to Frost is most forthright read like a twisting together of two voices into one. McDonald's "Whirlwinds are devils roaming the fields / for mischief" echoes Frost's "Spring is the mischief in me"; in both cases the consequence of mischief is the weakening of the wall. McDonald's "Something shoves posts down" echoes Frost's "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." McDonald's "and makes good neighbors strangers" echoes Frost's "Good fences make good neighbors," the metrics of the two lines mirroring each other exactly. The hunters in McDonald's poem evoke Frost's line "The work of hunters is another thing," both poems pitting a dog pack chasing a rabbit against the barrier of the wall or fence. McDonald's whirlwind devils evoke Frost's playful "I could say 'elves' to him." The two verses set up a dense echo chamber of phrases, tones, and rhythms in which McDonald says to Frost, much of what you are, I am. Let us, for the moment, make one voice together.

Furthermore, the two poems share themes as well. Both question the thoughtless enactment of a tradition that from certain perspectives might better be dropped; both treat the imposition of un-

natural constructs on natural things; and both question the separation of natural things from each other to reflect human ownership. In another poem of the same volume, McDonald's speaker, referring to cows, mentions

brands on their flanks  
better than fences to keep two fools  
from quarrels — this calf is mine  
that, yours... (80)

The poem, "The Last Good Saddles," evokes these lines from "Mending Wall":

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...

In all three poems, the process of fencing serves the demands of human possessiveness more than any need inherent in what is fenced off. McDonald borrows from Frost's treatment of the theme, making the two poets collaborators in the poems about Texas, and suggesting that one region owns its inhabitants as does any other: Texas and Vermont aren't so different after all."

At the same time, McDonald's "Mending the Fence" veers away from Frost's in its other verses, taking as a point of departure Frost's question about walls — "Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it / Where there are cows? But here there are no cows." In Texas, there are cows, and the image of their cruel suffering when caught in the barbed wire or "gut-shot and bleeding" occurs three times in McDonald's short poem, working together with the flinging of the dogs to cast the fence in terms more grim and affective than the philosophical terms Frost's speaker applies to the question of walling in and walling out. One message from McDonald to Frost seems to be that in some places where there are cows, the themes that the two poems explore in common acquire life-and-death dimensions; fixing the fence is no longer, as Frost's speaker puts it, "just another kind of outdoor game." Life in Texas is harsher, McDonald seems to say, and lived

in more basic terms. So, its poetry must be more blunt and concrete. And to be sure, much about McDonald's poem affirms that the day-to-day demands of ranching in Texas are far removed from the abstract epistemological questions Frost likes to ask. For one thing, the contrast in style between the graceful and pensive "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" and the blunt "Something shoves posts down" comments on life in Texas and the kind of poetry such a life can produce. Furthermore, the two allusive verses in McDonald's poem are the only ones in which he talks about life in general. The rest of the poem is built of sentences the grammatical subject of which is "I" and the content of which is the speaker's immediate experience. In an interview, McDonald inveighed against the presence of all but the most effective abstract terms in poetry:

I try to slam abstractions down, and  
stomp them; kick, stab them to death, and  
gouge out their eyes. If they still crawl  
up my legs and bless me like the air I  
breathe, then I let them stay.(6)

The power of McDonald's concrete verbs here makes his point well.

And the difference between the dramatic structures of the two poems makes it in another way. In Frost's poem, a philosophical speaker using gently cadenced language thinks out loud about his "old-stone savage" of a neighbor who "will not go behind his father's saying," and who accepts the necessity of the wall on the basis of tradition rather than evidence. Of course, it is the speaker himself who initiates the mending process each year and who repeats the neighbor's platitude about fences and neighbors. His thinking does not question his own attitudes far enough, and so provides the poem with the rich ambiguity that McDonald imports into his own poem.

However, in McDonald's poem, the gracious, philosophical speaker is missing, as is any discussion using abstract terms. The images say it all, revealing the rancher's awareness on some level

that all is not simple or logical or kind in his chosen life. In effect, McDonald twists Frost's philosopher and stone age neighbor into one character who senses pointlessness and inconsistency but cannot formulate or verbalize exactly what it is that doesn't add up. What is more, contrasted to the fluid musings of the philosopher, the reticence of the rancher ironically expresses much more. In Frost's poem, the speaker evades his own failure to question words by hiding behind the wall of language that describes his neighbor's. In "Mending Wall," what is most true is what is not expressed, a point Frost made elsewhere, saying, "If you feel it, let's just exchange glances and not say anything about it" (qtd. in Barry 6). Along with its verbiage, we find a profound mistrust of words in "Mending Wall." In McDonald's poem, however, our reliance on the rancher's concrete imagery leads us to the notion that since the harshness of life in Texas resists falsification, poetry about Texas can achieve a force and an accuracy that poetry about a gentler place cannot. In McDonald, what is true is not what is not expressed, but, rather, what is suggested rather than stated. McDonald is reversing Frost's pessimism here, claiming a power for words in

Texas that Frost's poem has questioned in New England. The absence of the gracious philosopher in McDonald's poem claims the concrete and immediate as McDonald's own province, going Frost one better at his own game.

Still, there is no Bloomian misreading here. McDonald has had to be faithful to Frost in order to go beyond him. Perhaps it is the distance and difference between New England and Texas that permit his faithfulness to the first region even as he remakes it in the second. The young Romantic poets with whom Bloom illustrated the anxiety of influence had a much harder time claiming their own terrain in a country as small as England, particularly when the specter of Milton loomed so large. But in a country containing regions still only partly charted, regions still—in ways—frontiers, poets can embrace what has come before without threat of losing themselves in it. In the open space of Texas, Walter McDonald homesteads his own poetic terrain and pays tribute to an older poet from a different landscape who is a valued part of what he builds.



### Works Cited

- Barry, Elaine. *Robert Frost on Writing*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1973.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.
- Frost, Robert. "Mending Wall." *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. Ed. Edward Connery Lathem. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1974. 33-34.
- McDonald, Walter. "An Interview with Walter McDonald." *Westview: A Journal of Western Oklahoma*, spring/summer 1998.
- . "The Last Good Saddles." *Where Skies Are Not Cloudy*. Denton, Texas: U North Texas P, 1993. 80.
- . "Mending the Fence." *Where Skies Are Not Cloudy*. Denton, Texas: U North Texas P, 1993. 10.
- Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens." *Woman as Writer*. Eds. Jeannette L. Webber and Joan Grumman. Boston: Houghton, 1978. 193-201.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, 1957.