

Mending Walls and Making Neighbors: Spatial Metaphors in the New Modernist Studies

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the project of definitional inquiry central to the New Modernist Studies, identifying the centrality of spatial discourse and particularly models and metaphors of walls therein. The essay turns to Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" in order to resituate the definitional project of the New Modernist Studies in modernism's own representations and conceptions of walls not only as borders and boundaries, but also as points of contact and exchange. Our reading recovers the ambiguous and complex plurisignification of walls in the poem and, perhaps more importantly, the relationships between the people who build walls and are divided and brought into contact by them. Ultimately, the essay uses Frost's depiction of two uneasy neighbors in order to advance a neighborhood model of modernism, one that participates in the existing spatial discourse of the New Modernist Studies but regards modernism as a shared territory that accommodates tentative groupings, difficult-to-fit figures, and even outright contestation.

KEYWORDS

Modernism, The New Modernist Studies, Robert Frost's "Mending Wall," Spatial Metaphors, Walls, Neighbors, Literary History

In his 1986 essay, “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault announces the twentieth century as the “epoch of space” (22). This slight but richly evocative essay anticipates not only the emerging critical trends of literary and cultural studies but also the ways in which critics of twentieth-century literature increasingly understand their own field. The “spatial turn”—a term variously attributed to Edward Soja, Kevin Lynch, Frederic Jameson, and others—demonstrates new interest in how, in the words of Henri Lefebvre, “every society . . . produces a space, its own space” (31) and how geography determines ourselves and our worlds. Modernist studies, in particular, has found a new lease of life in examining the spaces of modernity: the spatial turn has led to productively interdisciplinary work with a keen awareness of the ways in which modernist literature engages with tropes of geography and mapping (Thacker; Hegglund), travel and transcultural experience (Kaplan; Farley), cosmopolitanism (Walkowitz; Berman), and imperial and anti-imperial discourses (Kalliney; Esty; Booth and Rigby).

It seems no coincidence that the spatial turn precedes the emergence in 1998 of what became known as the New Modernist Studies. At the very least, the timing suggests that the New Modernist Studies was inevitably influenced by work being done with space and geography and points to cross-pollination between modernist and postcolonial studies. Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz argue convincingly that an emphasis on transnational exchange has been “crucially transformative” (738) to the New Modernist Studies, and, in his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (2012), Mark Wollaeger suggests that a global perspective changes our understanding of modernism itself, complicating not only “the issues of temporal delimitation” but also “the geographies of modernism . . . , modernism’s conceptual contours . . . , and its motivations” (7). Our essay takes as its impetus the observation that the spatial turn permeates modernist theory and criticism, even that which is not overtly geographical in either nature or interest. Much writing about modernism persistently employs spatial metaphors in

order to describe and understand the “conceptual contours” of our field. Geographers like Neil Smith warn that a retreat to the realm of metaphor risks erasing literal, material spaces (98-9). Without dismissing the importance of this warning for our critical practices, we aim to account for the pervasive spread of spatial metaphors in the New Modernist Studies, as it has developed in the last twenty years, and to reflect on how these metaphors are shaping our understanding of our field and the spaces of our own critical work.

THE SPACES OF MODERNISM AND THE NEW MODERNIST STUDIES

The emergence of the New Modernist Studies both marked a new kind of modernist criticism--one more interested in an expanded canon including a greater ethnic, cultural, and gendered diversity of voices, and geographically, socially, and temporally disparate texts--and inaugurated a period of intense self-reflection for the field. This self-reflection continues to focus on the interrelated questions of how to delimit modernism and how to both make and tend a space for modernist studies. Often, the versions of modernism and modernist studies that emerge are not only different but in fact contradictory, an outcome that Susan Stanford Friedman finds generative for further inquiry when she notes that “*modern*, *modernism*, and *modernity* form a fertile terrain for interrogation, providing ever more sites for examination with each new meaning spawned” (“Definitional Excursions” 497). For Friedman, modernist critics are implicitly figured in spatial terms as farmers working a “terrain” or archaeologists finding “sites.” In order to do such critical work, the New Modernist Studies has worked hard to create literal spaces for modernist scholarship such as the rooms and halls of Modernist Studies Association and British Association of Modernist Studies conferences as well as the collective textual spaces of the journals *Modernism/modernity* and *Modernist Cultures*, book series, edited collections, and textbooks or companions to the field.¹

The spaces of modernism and, indeed, the borders of the field have always been up for debate, for modernism itself was characterized by an ethos of inquiry, uncertainty, and contradiction. As Michael Coyle notes, “Modernism has always been more than a neutral descriptor, and has invariably provoked contest” (17). According to Friedman, the “terminological quagmire” that modernist studies finds itself in may result from “a repetition of the unresolved contradictions present and largely repressed in modernity itself” (“Definitional Excursions” 499). One way in which the New Modernist Studies attempts to understand these “unresolved contradictions” is by returning to the archives to pay attention to how modernist voices speak about their own modernism. Examples of such undertakings include the Modernist Archives Publishing Project (MAPP), the Modernist Journals Project (MJP), and Editing Modernism in Canada (EMiC). Such projects neither aim at nor result in a settled view or single story of modernism; instead, they illuminate the extent to which modernists themselves were anxious about what made them *modernist* or even modern. Such anxiety could be productive, but could also, as Coyle notes with reference to Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, result in gatekeeping the canon. The many parallels to the New Modernist Studies’ current period of critical debate are clear. Melba Cuddy-Keane, Adam Hammond, and Alexandra Peat’s *Modernism: Keywords* tracks cultural and literary debates by showing the often complex and contradictory ways that various keywords circulated in modernism. The entry for “Modern, Modernism” exemplifies the contested nature of these terms, noting that as early as 1934, Lucia Trent and Ralph Cheyney were asking, “What is this Modernism?” Cuddy-Keane, Hammond, and Peat conclude that “returning to modernism as used by ‘modernists’ . . . releases the term from narrow use: in the modernist period, modernism represents something distinctive yet heterogeneous about this particular age, and, at the same time, something ubiquitous and permanent in human life” (145). How does it help us if we understand definitional debates as more than just a particular critical

trend in the New Modernist Studies but as an intrinsic element of modernism, too? How can we do critical work when we stand on such shifting ground? And what does this so-called release from narrowness mean for us as critics?

SPATIAL METAPHORS IN THE NEW MODERNIST STUDIES

On the one hand, the New Modernist Studies offers a view of modernism as open, mobile, unfixed, plural, and constantly in debate, yet, on the other hand, at the heart of these conceptualizations of the field are spatial metaphors of containment, enclosure, boundaries, and division--walls that can be looked over, moved, knocked down or that can contain, protect, divide. The prevalence of wall imagery seems paradoxical in light of the fact that scholars (other than architecture scholars) do not seem to be particularly interested in modernist literary representations or conceptions of walls, even though many modernist texts, from Franz Kafka's "The Great Wall of China" to H. D.'s *Within the Walls*, do take up literal walls as central subjects. Modernist literature's engagement with walls and boundaries might have something to do with the ways in which geographical and social spaces were being policed, inscribed, and rewritten in the period through such means as trenches in the first world war, border control and passports, partition in India, and the erection of the Berlin Wall. Walls of this kind and the impetuses behind them, however, are by no means unique to the modernist period. Indeed, they have been around for millennia and remain central to our collective psyche, as the Melilla border fence, the Israeli West Bank Barrier, and the now threatened Great Wall of Calais indicate.

While representations of walls in modernist literature and their possible relationships to material walls in the period suggest a rich vein for scholarship, we are particularly interested in connecting these fictional modernist walls with the metaphorical significance that walls have accrued in the debates about what modernism was and what the New Modernist Studies is.

Throughout these debates, we find discourse that is not spatial in subject but is spatial conceptually. Wollaeger is “self-consciously unraveling the edges of the field,” while Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel “emplace” modernism so that the term “breaks open” (3). Friedman is perhaps most conscious of her spatial move, as, alluding to Doyle and Winkiel, she enjoins us to “[a]lways spatialize” (“Periodizing Modernism” 426) and reflects on the inherently spatial nature of the definitional project:

Definitional acts establish territories, map terrains, determine centers, margins, and areas ‘beyond the pale.’ Attempts to establish permeable borderlands instead of fixed boundaries and liminal spaces of considerable intermixing between differences diffuse to some extent the territorial imperative of definition but cannot ultimately eliminate the function of categories to demarcate some phenomena in opposition to others which do not belong. (“Definitional Excursions” 506)

Spatial metaphors are so pervasive that they are even being used to describe other spatial metaphors. Mark Wollaeger speaks of “expansion” along “axes” to describe how “Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz have summed up the transformation of modernist studies under the rubric of an ‘expansion’ taking place along three axes--temporal, spatial, and vertical” (9). Spatial metaphors have even made their ways into the self-conceptions of modernist scholarly associations. The Modernist Studies Association’s mandate is articulated in terms of disciplinary “silos” that need to be broken down and “walls” of departments and disciplines that need to be “look[ed] past.”² Similarly, the Editing Modernism in Canada project was described by one of its members as “a centre without walls.” Spatial metaphors can be found in all the spaces of the New Modernist Studies.

Out of this rich abundance of spatial metaphors emerge certain trends or phases in the New Modernist Studies’ self-proclaimed agenda of self-reflection about the state of the field. An

initial period of pluralization transformed “modernism” to “modernisms,” and Michael Coyle declared the question of “whether Modernism is something singular, or something plural” (20) the most pressing matter for twenty-first century critics to resolve. The move to plural modernisms, however, also entailed critical wall building as canonical modernists were divided from progressive modernists and old modernism distinguished from new modernisms. Even as we questioned if modernism was singular or plural, this very debate over pluralization led to a predominant ideal of expansion and the concurrent aim to collapse walls in geographical, temporal, and vertical senses. Modernism became global. The historical limits of the modernist period were stretched and then broken. Modernism embraced popular and “low” culture along with or instead of the high and the canonical. While this project of expansion venerated getting rid of critical walls that had constricted modernism and limited our approach to it, there came, at the same time, a perhaps ironic resurgence of critical wall building. In response to modernism going global, for example, we can see an increased critical interest in specific localities, and, at the same time as temporal expansion, emerge projects like Kevin Jackson’s *Constellation of Genius: 1922: Modernism Year One* (2013).

After the New Modernist Studies has pluralized and pulled at the edges of modernism, expanded and exploded it, where are we now? This is the question posed by the upcoming 2017 MSA conference, which takes as its theme “Modernism Today” and asks, “What does Modernism mean to us today?” A survey of recent monographs dealing with literary modernism shows that inherited terms for defining modernism (e.g. “high modernism”) and traditional regional distinctions still remain, but they now exist alongside a wealth of new coinages creating categories by geographic region, time period, race/culture/ethnicity, language, genre, relation to other periods, gender/sexuality, and more. Modernism can now be green, black, Sapphic, middlebrow, late, Victorian, gothic, machinic, neo, or haptic.³ Clearly, some of these terms are

descriptive and do not necessarily indicate a larger critical movement, but the proliferation of qualifiers or definitional markers for modernism shows how such an urge to categorize is shaping our scholarship. It also shapes our scholarly associations, as a brief survey of the 2015 Modernist Studies Association conference program includes panel and paper titles such as “Backward Modernism,” “Petromodernism,” and “Flyover Modernism.” Such titles also evince a growing self-referential playfulness that comes from a renewed confidence in the field; perhaps we have not reached a consensus about what modernism is, but there is, at the least, a consensus that the debate is central to our field. Recent years have also seen a proliferation of “introductions” to and overviews of modernism, including but not limited to Bloomsbury’s *New Modernism* series edited by Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, Pamela Caughie’s edited collection *Disciplining Modernism* (2010), and Mary Ann Gillies and Aurelea Mahood’s *Modernist Literature: An Introduction* (2007). Taken together, these works suggest that we are currently in a time of consolidation as we look at how far we have come since the emergence of the New Modernist Studies and try to make sense of the field we have created. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s terms, we might see these ongoing definitional debates in the context of the always coexistent centrifugal and centripetal forces at play in the shaping of a modernist discourse. The centrifugal forces push to multiply, decenter, and pluralize modernism, but, at the same time, a centripetal force urges stability and definition.

While we can use these coinages to trace a recent critical history of modernism, they are perhaps most interesting in how they provoke questions about why we are defining, dividing, and walling in modernism in these particular ways. As we continue to make and remake critical walls in order to create the optimum spaces in which to do our research, we also need to be aware of the work that these walls permit and prohibit. Susan Stanford Friedman notes how definitions often end up being “fluid” so as to serve “the changing needs of the moment”

(“Definitional Excursions” 497). She continues, “[t]hey reflect the standpoint of their makers. They emerge out of the spatio/temporal context of their production. They serve different needs and interests. They accomplish different kinds of cultural work” (“Definitional Excursions” 497). Even the avowed ideal of getting rid of limits and borders comes with an agenda. Mark Wollaeger describes a 2010 MLA session on “Unboxing Modernism,” which relied upon “an unstated ideal of unboxedness, a conception of modernism liberated from definitional corners and dead-ends” (11). He recalls how while some attendees alluded to E. M. Forster on the need to exclude something or else we have nothing, “others engaged in a bravado refusal of limits” (11). Wollaeger’s comments come in the context of a discussion around the formation of global modernism; they thus reveal that things are both gained and lost when we pluralize and expand. Moreover, as he frames his discussion of global modernism with an acknowledgment of the “historical reality of nations and their institutions” (4), he suggests the folly of pretending that walls do not exist. While Wollaeger speaks specifically about the global turn in modernism, his words, warnings, and the critical orientation he advocates have a broader significance for the New Modernist Studies as a whole: the “contingency of . . . clusters” in the “coherent yet diverse group of essays” that constitute the *Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* can be “reshuffl[ed] and recross[ed],” thereby enacting a “mobile and continuously provisional” perspective that simultaneously acknowledges one’s own position and decenters it (6).

READING WALLS IN ROBERT FROST’S “MENDING WALL”

If we were to turn to a modernist text and adopt this provisional and mobile positioning suggested by Wollaeger, we might find no better case study to work with than Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Wall.” A consideration of Frost’s poem also offers the possibility of moving the existing walls delimiting what work might be considered quintessentially modernist: Frost is an

unusual or, to extend the metaphor, off-the-wall choice as a modernist case study. Rarely featured in scholarship that surveys modernism, he is instead typically considered an American regionalist. He tends to be studied alone, paired with Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot or, less frequently, with Marianne Moore or Wallace Stevens. Frost is thus not typically regarded as the kind of poet whose work could stand in for modernist poetry as a whole and be brought into dialogue with modernist work in other genres. Yale's Modernism Lab entry, a reasonably definitive reflection of the field, notes that Frost had an "intimate if fraught relationship with international modernism." The issue of Frost's relationship with modernism was also raised in a more public forum through a 2010 *Slate* article, which notes that "[t]his question of categories is interesting not in itself but because Frost himself thought about it." Our choice of Frost is thus grounded not only in our interest in his poem's representation and conception of walls and in his status as a peripheral modernist but also in our broader argument that contemporary definitional debates about modernism are extensions or products of modernists' own debates about this issue. In attending to all three of these interrelated aspects of Frost's work, we take up Mark Wollaeger's injunction that scholars of modernism follow the spirit of Sanja Bahun's call for a "flexible conceptual template . . . that is *constantly redefined by the very object of its inquiry*" (4). Our project here is not to pull a particular, single meaning from "Mending Wall," but rather to use the poem as a possible way to understand better such a curious representation of walls and boundaries, thereby informing not only our ideas about the modernists themselves but also our construction of the field of modernist studies.

Frost's "Mending Wall" is conveyed by a speaker who reports and reflects on the annual springtime wall-mending activity he undertakes in rural New England with his neighbor, who seems to more fully embrace the existence or need for walls even though the speaker himself initiates the collaborative annual activity of mending wall. The poem presents two aphorisms, the

neighbor's motto, "good fences make good neighbors," and another repeated phrase attributed to the speaker, "something there is that doesn't love a wall." The wall they are mending is simultaneously a barrier that keeps the neighbors apart, a topic of conversation, a prompt for independent reflection, and an occasion for collaborative activity. These four undertakings are neither one-time events nor ongoing processes, but rather activities that must be continually returned to and re-enacted. When the speaker observes that they "*meet* to walk the line / And set the wall between [them] once again" (13-14, emphasis added), the poem portrays a momentary coming together with the wall as a point of meeting.

Scholarship on "Mending Wall" often takes a pick-a-side approach based on an endorsement of one of the poem's two repeated aphorisms about walls and a concomitant dismissal of or opposition to the other. Social sciences criticism has co-opted the poem in order to mobilize its insights about walls to do political work. Surveying the use of the poem in border studies, geographer Kenneth D. Madsen and literary scholar D. B. Ruderman lament that "political identification seems to require believing one set of propositions at the expense of another" (83) and observe that "[i]n many ways 'Mending Wall' is a Rorschach test in which proponents see and hear their own positions reflected in the narrative contours of the poem" (84). While we concur with Madsen and Ruderman's conclusion that "What is useful and generative in 'Mending Wall' is precisely its ambivalence about borders and boundaries," their reading nonetheless shares something with the very readings they aim to improve upon with their "integrated, contextual, and holistic" (83) approach: the premise that there are, in this poem, two distinct and oppositional sides on the issue of walls, their existence, and value that the reader "learns from . . . and/or is forced to careen back and forth between" (86). This position of identifying distinct sides at the same time as championing ambivalence is deeply problematic, and yet it dominates even approaches in literary criticism that do not seek to mobilize the poem

for political ends. Frank Lentricchia, for example, argues that the poem highlights the need to move beyond picking a side but still claims the poem represents “two kinds of people” (106), the imaginative and the unimaginative. Similarly, John C. Kemp’s reading of the poem as a place of “rivalry and competition” (20), while nuanced, ultimately sees it as a contrast between men with different “modes of thought” (24).

This assumption that “Mending Wall” presents two distinct sides needs to be interrogated in light of three findings emerging from close attention to the poem. The first is that we only know the neighbor (and his statement “Good fences make good neighbors”) through the speaker’s construction of him, which is based on assumptions the speaker makes about the neighbor having an uncritical approach to the aphorism about good fences. Indeed, he conceives his neighbor in somewhat adversarial terms as “an old-stone savage armed” with the wall-mending stones he is carrying, and he believes the neighbor “moves in darkness . . . / Not of woods only and the shade of trees” (40, 41-2). For the speaker, this darkness is also a refusal to go behind what he assumes is an inherited (“his father’s”) “saying” and what he reads as an unreasonable or unfounded delight in appearing to have “thought of it so well” (43, 44). The speaker’s conclusions about the neighbor seem rooted in his frustration that he himself cannot “put a notion in his [neighbor’s] head” (29), but one wonders how open to discussion the neighbor should be when the speaker’s reigning conception of communication is the rightness of his own position and a concomitant insistence on colonizing the neighbor’s mind with it. What the speaker betrays about his own attitude towards his neighbor and to the prospect of communication with the neighbor does not inspire confidence that his reading of the neighbor’s narrow confinement to an allegedly paternal saying is necessarily an accurate account of the neighbor’s views on the existence and value of walls. This position is also not one he consistently maintains, for it is juxtaposed with other moments in which the speaker seems to enjoy the

activity of wall mending with his neighbor, describing it as a “kind of outdoor game” and somewhat excitedly uttering “a spell” to make the ball-like boulders “balance” on top of the wall (21, 18). Needless to say, we cannot build a critical platform about a poem allegedly juxtaposing two distinct views on walls on the basis of such a highly mediated, inconsistent, and problematic representation of the neighbor and his relationship to the saying “Good fences make good neighbors.”

The speaker’s own position on walls is ostensibly reflected in the phrase, “something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” a phrase which is highly ambiguous from our perspective and perhaps even ambivalent from his own. The speaker presents himself as an inquiring fellow who asks questions about building walls before he builds them: “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” (32-4). It is a laudable approach, to be sure, but there is no evidence that he actually asks such questions in relation to the very wall he refers to in the poem. Indeed, it is the speaker who initiates the wall-mending activity each spring, not his ostensibly wall-obsessed neighbor: “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” (12-4). Furthermore, while the speaker clearly suggests to his neighbor that the wall may not be necessary “[*t*]here where . . . / He is all pine and I am apple orchard” (23-4, emphasis added), this statement implies that the speaker himself does not have an inherent, wholesale, under-all-circumstances opposition to walls. In fact, he believes that there are areas of the property where a wall is necessary: areas in which, it seems, cows are present. Even as he repeats the aphorism “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” his relationship to the wall being mended is far more ambivalent and ambiguous than is acknowledged in criticism seeking to find two distinct views on walls, their existence, and value in the poem.

Finally, the critical consensus about this poem's opposition between two attitudes towards walls is rooted in an unstated reliance upon the significant linguistic, cultural, and historical weight that these gnomic utterances or aphorisms entail beyond what the two utterers of them may have intended, if these intentions are even recoverable in light of the way the poem is framed and mediated by the speaker. When the speaker assumes that "Good fences make good neighbors" is an inherited saying, he evokes the possibility of past articulations by other utterers and in other contexts.⁴ This means that both for him and for us it is difficult to differentiate the neighbor's relationship to the phrase from the accumulated weight of all these possible other utterances. Furthermore, the speaker's own "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," while not as culturally and historically resonant as "Good fences make good neighbors," also carries linguistic and contextual freight beyond what its utterer could have intended: the "[s]omething . . . that doesn't love a wall" is qualified as the "[s]omething . . . / [t]hat sends the frozen-ground-swell under it"--is qualified, in other words, as "frost" (1-2). The speaker is unnamed in the poem, but even if he did share the name "Frost" with his poet, he cannot be aware of his creator, and the significant distance created between the two entails that we cannot equate them or assume they share attitudes and beliefs about walls. Yet the plurisignification of "frost"/"Frost" is inviting, almost teasing us to equate the two, as many critics have done, even though Robert Frost described himself as "both fellows in the poem," suggesting that man (humanity) is, by nature, both "a wall builder and a wall toppler. He makes boundaries and he breaks boundaries. That's man" (*Interviews with Robert Frost*, qtd. in Holland 26). Clearly, both aphorisms are too laden with linguistic, cultural, and historical baggage for any straightforward claims about their utterers' relationships to them to be used as the basis for a reading of the poem that sets two aphorisms up against each other.

What the poem seems to highlight, perhaps more than any wall-related philosophy emerging directly from either of the aphorisms, are various facets of the self-other relation that are highlighted both literally and figuratively by the notion of walls: the problem of other minds, the desire for and barriers to connection, and the potential and limitations of language as a vehicle for communication. As Norman Holland notes, the poem serves as a fantasy of closeness to an Other, but, as Mark Richardson observes, the poem also foregrounds the “limitations” as well as the “seductions and value” of both walls and aphorisms as vehicles for that connection and closeness (Richardson 142). Readings that describe the aphorisms as walls preventing communication and connection, however, rely on a conception of walls--walls as barriers or enclosures--that the poem itself does not unequivocally endorse. Kemp, for example, regards shibboleth as “a form of mental enclosure” (21), which is a metaphor he takes from the speaker’s desire to see the neighbor “go behind” (Frost 43) the aphorism he repeats, “Good fences make good neighbors.” We should not be too quick to assume that the neighbor uses the saying to shut down conversation just because the speaker makes that assumption. Likewise, we should not be too quick to conclude that if the saying is a wall, it is a wall that separates and isolates. As the poem makes abundantly clear, walls are not only artificial or man-made; they can also be naturally occurring, such as the “hill” that constitutes a natural barrier between the speaker and the neighbor. Likewise, they can be destroyed by humans (“[t]he work of hunters” [5]) and by nature (frost). They also serve different purposes beyond property demarcation, as the poem’s reference to keeping cows out of crops makes clear, and the purposes they serve can be regarded differently depending on the extent to which one is involved in the wall building or mending and the extent to which one regards oneself as being walled in or out, more or less connected with the Other.⁵

Connecting these ideas about the complexities of walls to the idea of the aphorisms as walls, we may then regard the aphorisms not necessarily, or at least not exclusively, as walls that separate and isolate but instead--or at least as well--as walls that function as “places of communication and exchange” that bring people together (Sarup 98). In doing so, we may draw upon Frost scholars’ references to the Terminus myth, the Roman festival in which walls bring a community together, and their articulation of the paradox that the very existence of wall-breakers and mischief-makers may depend upon the existence of walls to be broken or subjected to mischief (Monteiro, “Unlinked Myth”; Poirier; Holland). While clichés can suggest a common linguistic and cultural ground, even just as a point of resistance, the aphorisms in the poem ultimately do not foster mutual understanding between the speaker and the neighbor; instead, they merely exacerbate the inherent unknowability of the other mind. It does not, however, necessarily follow that the poem as a whole presents an entirely negative vision of aphorisms as walls. Rather, language functions as a wall in the poem in the sense that it brings together even as it obstructs.

In this vein, we might then regard the entire poem’s communicative gesture as a wall. Frost himself, when asked about the intended meaning of “Mending Wall,” declared that his poems “are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless,” like the “blocks carts chairs and such like ordinaries” he had a habit of leaving, “since infancy,” “where people would be pretty sure to fall forward over them in the dark” (qtd. in Monteiro, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance* 125-6). Paradoxically, it is these obstructions that trigger, or even facilitate, a movement towards the “boundless” beyond obstructions. If we follow Frost in seeing “Mending Wall” as something that people trip and fall *forwards* over and recall the poem’s opening image of a rural wall that hunters have damaged, likely by hastily tripping forwards over it during the hunt, “[t]o please the yelping dogs” (9), we might see the poem in wall-like terms. In other words, it is

not only a wall as in “barrier to understanding,” but also a wall that temporarily arrests progress and then, in fact, propels one *forward*. Critical readings that privilege one aphorism over another, or champion either the speaker or his neighbor, fail to move forward our understanding of the existence and value of walls. They merely reinforce received, simplistic, and polarizing views about them. Frost himself articulated concerns about what Raab calls “applied” uses of the poem:

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. (Raab 203)

Frost also commented on the irreducibility of the poem as a product of its reliance on “formulae [aphorisms] that won’t formulate--that almost but don’t quite formulate” (qtd. in Raab 204). When he suggests we might trip and fall *forwards* over his poem, Frost proposes a notion of the poem as a spatial construct, which challenges us to reflect on what we do as readers when we navigate the poem. Rather than trying to pin down meaning in the poem, or offer yet another reductive and selective “practical use” of the poem, we seek, to paraphrase Wollaeger, a flexible and mobile conceptual approach to the poem. This approach would entail both acknowledging, as we have tried to do above, the plurisignification of walls in the poem, and attending to other, overlooked aspects of Frost’s spatial metaphor.

NEIGHBORS AND NEIGHBORHOODS

What if, for example, we shift our attention to another, related component of the metaphor and consider not the walls themselves but the people who are on the sides of them and divided by

them, who make them and are made by them, and who love and do not love them? The repeated refrain “good fences make good neighbors” obviously asks us to consider the metaphor of the fence, but it places equal emphasis on the concept of the neighbor. “Mending Wall” depicts neighbors who share a common landscape and, to some extent, common rituals, who meet to mend the wall, and in doing so play “just another kind of outdoor game” (21). However, the relationship of neighbors is not only, or primarily, about these similarities and commonalities but also allows room for differences, oppositions, and tension. Neighbors, after all, as Frost’s speaker attests to, can be good and bad. We can best understand the unique facets of the idea of the neighbor in comparison to two other kinds of human relationships: family and friendship. The idea of family evokes ties of blood or social contract that are stable and binding. Friendship, on the other hand, is non-binding. Furthermore, it is predicated on the acknowledgement of difference, even as it imagines connecting across that difference. The model of the neighbor allows even more room for difference than friendship, as neighbors do not necessarily seek kinship but rather coexist in uneasy, sometimes antagonistic, sometimes mutually supportive nearness. Neighbors constitute a provisional, non-binding, open community.

The neighborhood offers a promisingly flexible and mobile metaphor for the already spatial metaphor-inclined modernist studies. Robert Frost is, as we have noted above, a writer who is generally thought *not* to be a modernist or to be only peripherally modernist. What happens, we have asked in this essay, if we move or look over pre-existing definitional boundaries and view him as one? We have thus brought Frost into the neighborhood of modernism and, in doing so, have altered the dominant metaphor for organizing or even gatekeeping modernist studies. In picking Frost, we have picked a neighbor, not a family member. After all, the dominant critical metaphor for imagining the relationship between divergent modernist texts is Wittgenstein’s model of family resemblances. For Wollaeger, family

resemblances “make multiple modernisms recognizable as members of a class” (11). He sees them as offering “a polythetic form of classification in which the aim is to specify a set of criteria, subsets of which are enough to constitute a sense of decentered resemblance” (12). However, even when resemblance is decentered, it is still privileged in this model. Furthermore, specifying criteria in advance risks circumscribing what might be found: we find only what our search parameters permit us to find when we seek similarity. Friedman notes this possible pitfall when she declares that “[d]efining historical periods and conditions or movements in the arts and writing depends upon a circular process Put differently, definitional mapping relies upon prior assumptions of where the boundary belongs, assumptions that reflect the preexisting beliefs or standpoint of the mapmaker” (“Definitional Excursions” 507-8). The family resemblance metaphor evokes genetic fixity: traits are there, waiting to be identified and interpreted. When we eschew a model based on similarities, the model of neighboring means that there are few preexisting or circumscribed limits to what can be noticed.

Relying as it does on ideas of provisional and temporary community as well as proximity and shared or at least adjacent territories, the neighborhood is a spatial construct that accommodates difference, tension, and even antagonism. It thus offers ways to retain modernists we are now rather embarrassed, skeptical, or even horrified about (Pound, Lewis, and other fascist enthusiasts spring to mind) in our modernist community without either diminishing or compromising with their unpalatable attributes. The model of the neighborhood allows us to view such modernist figures with critical and ethical distance while still acknowledging their roles in shaping modernism. It also, as we have noted above in reference to Frost, makes room for wayward modernists who are often left out of both traditional and new modernist configurations. In this way, the neighborhood concept both alters the dominant organizing metaphor for modernist studies and offers new possibilities for the ways in which we undertake

critical work in the field. The ramifications are especially important for comparative work: the neighbor model might help scholars avoid the pitfalls Irene Ramalho Santos identifies when she cautions that comparative work needs to be careful not to intensify separations between distinct traditions. She notes that “[t]he very disciplines that recently emerged for building bridges and establishing comparisons among literatures continue, in general, to assume that such bridges and comparisons occur between integral, preconstituted entities” (4). Santos emphasizes instead the “heteroreferentiality” (4) of literatures. The model of modernism as a neighborhood accommodates this heteroreferentiality by allowing us to make unacknowledged, unexpected, and perhaps illuminating connections.

As a next step, we might ask what happens if we make Frost a neighbor with other modernist writers. If we make him a neighbor specifically with other modernist writers that use walls as metaphors in their texts, then we can find points of connection across divergent historical moments, national or cultural contexts, or genders. For example, in Henry James’ *Portrait of a Lady*, walls represent the stifling boundaries of convention when Isabel Archer sees her life as a “dark, narrow alley, with a wall at the end” (391). Walls are similarly confining for Jean Rhys’ Anna Morgan in *Voyage in the Dark* who looks up at a painting on the wall of her rented room: the painting depicts two children, “a tidy green tree,” and “a shiny pale-blue sky,” and, seeing “a high, dark wall behind the little girl,” Anna thinks, “it was the wall that mattered” (127). In Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*, religious, socio-cultural, economic, and physical barriers both wall Bakha off from the world and, ironically, protect him from angry people who wish to harm him but will not allow themselves to break through the wall of untouchability. These few briefly sketched out examples suggest possibilities for readings that would enrich our understanding of how modes of walling and territorial demarcations function in modernism and potentially reinvigorate modernist debates around, for example, convention, colonialism, and

internationalism. In another move, we could consider ideas around community formation and self-other relations in order to make Frost neighbors with figures like E. M. Forster or Virginia Woolf. In Forster's *A Room with a View*, Cecil ruminates on the "irremovable barriers" between himself and others and notes that "It makes a difference, doesn't it, whether we fence ourselves in, or whether we are fenced out by the barriers of others?" (Forster 91). Woolf imagines a model of neighborly connection when she depicts Clarissa Dalloway looking out of her window to see the old woman in the house opposite and thinking, "And the supreme mystery was merely this: here was one room; there another" (108).

We began this essay by illuminating the hitherto unacknowledged pervasiveness of spatial discourse in recent modernist criticism--recurrent terms, concepts, and images, at times overlapping and at times contesting metaphors. There is something inherently spatial about the New Modernist Studies. By proposing an overarching spatial metaphor--that of the neighborhood--we are neither aiming simply to add to a proliferation of spatial discourse, nor are we abandoning the wall in favour of the neighborhood. Rather, walls and other kinds of borders and demarcations are integral parts of neighborhoods. Within and surrounding neighborhoods, there are different kinds of demarcations, including fences (chain-link or picket), garden hedges, or even flowerbeds. There are man-made, natural, and natural but cultivated boundaries. Some boundaries are porous or transparent, and others are high and impenetrable. There are different ways of looking over or across them--or not. Different demarcations have different roles and affordances; they enable and disable different relationships and forms of relationality among those that build and live within or without them. If, in our criticism, instead of assuming a high or impenetrable wall between, for example, Frost and Forster--two writers divided by genre, geography, and theme--we imagine a garden-hedge relationship, then we are afforded the possibility of seeing perhaps unacknowledged connection and exchange.

The model of modernism as a neighborhood emphasizes the notion of shared territory. Within that shared territory, modernist writers and texts exist in various degrees of nearness and adjacency to one another, and, if we look at modernism as a shared space, we weigh their potential responses to and responsibilities towards one another as well as their multiple possible ethical relationships. There is perhaps, too, something to gain from conceiving of our own critical territory as a neighborhood--a neighborly model of criticism where, instead of concentrating on the ideological walls that divide us from one another, we pay attention to the territory we share and how we communally tend to it. And, in a final move, we might even regard ourselves as kinds of neighbors to modernism itself, thus acknowledging that the very performance of criticism is not predicated on distance but on a reach across distance in order to establish or recognize common ground and accept the responsibilities entailed therein. None of this is to say that the neighborhood is inherently utopian. In fact, what is so appealing about the neighborhood model is that it can fold in multiple and perhaps seemingly incompatible approaches.

The neighborhood model thus allows us to see modernism in a new way, encompasses and organizes what we observe in modernist criticism, and reorients our own critical and ethical relationships with our field. Throughout this essay, we have sketched out briefly some of the connections we can imagine making with a modernism as neighborhood model. The spatial metaphor of the neighborhood allows us to regard modernism as a loose network, a collection of smaller interrelated clusters, or even a constellation of individuals. In its accommodation of difference as well as similarity, neighborhood is vision of community that includes uneasy groupings, difficult-to-fit figures, and outright contestation. As a model for thinking about modernism it is contingent, provisional, capacious, and mobile. Its mobility and contingency allow room for radically different conceptions of what a neighborhood is and invite us to ask

ourselves what kind of neighborhood we imagine modernism to be in any given iteration: what we, as modernism's critics and neighbors, are "walling in" or "walling out."

Notes

¹ New book series include Bloomsbury's New Modernisms and Historicizing Modernism, Edinburgh's Critical Studies in Modernist Culture, Penn State's Refiguring Modernism, Oxford's Modernist Literature and Culture, Columbia's Modernist Latitudes, Texas' Literary Modernism, and deGruyter's European Avant-Garde and Modernism. New edited collections include Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska's two-volume *Modernism* (2007), Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz's *Bad Modernisms* (2006), Pamela Caughie's *Disciplining Modernism* (2010), and Mark Wollaeger's *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (2012). New textbooks or companions to modernism include Peter Childs' *Modernism* (3rd edition, 2016), Melba Cuddy-Keane, Adam Hammond, and Alexandra Peat's *Modernism: Keywords* (2014), Mary Ann Gillies and Aurelea Denise Mahood's *Modernist Literature: An Introduction* (2007).

² From the Modernist Studies Association's mandate: "Since those early conversations in the 1990s, the Modernist Studies Association has continued to break down reified categories and disciplinary silos in the academy. As an organization, and a publishing venue with *Modernism/modernity*, MSA has always invited and continues to invite scholars to look past the walls of their departments and individual disciplines, and to address the relations between not merely individual authors or artists, but among various aspects of culture."

³ Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900-1930* (2015); Miriam Thaggert, *Images of Black Modernism: Verbal and Visual Strategies of the Harlem Renaissance* (2010); Shashi Nair, *Secrecy and Sapphic Modernism: Writing Romans a Clef Between the Wars* (2011); Lise Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow, and the Literary Canon* (2014); Alex Latter, *Late Modernism and The English Intelligencer: On the Poetics of Community* (2015); Jessica R. Feldman, *Victorian Modernism: Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience* (2002); Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace, editors, *Gothic Modernisms* (2001); Beatrice Monaco, *Machinic Modernism: The Deleuzian Literary Machines of Woolf, Lawrence and Joyce* (2008); Monica Latham, *A Poetics of Postmodernism and Neomodernism: Rewriting Mrs Dalloway* (2015); Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (2013).

⁴ George Monteiro argues in "Robert Frost's Linked Analogies" (1973) that Frost's "Good fences make good neighbors" is a proverb dating at least as far back as medieval Spain.

⁵ Lindsay Nash further develops this notion of the contingency of walls when she points to their seasonality in rural New England--one would abide by them as demarcation points in the season in which crops grow, but one would not expect them to be honored in the same way in winter.

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