
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Study of Communication Predicament in Robert Frost's "Mending Wall"

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| ABSTRACT

Employing Bakhtin's Dialogism and Levinas's philosophy of the Other, this thesis analyzes Robert Frost's renowned poem "Mending Wall" through the lens of dialogue of consensus. While "Mending Wall" has been traditionally interpreted as a criticism of conservatism, this study moves beyond the subjective perspective of the speaker in the poem, providing a nuanced reading that transcends simplistic binary moral oppositions. The thesis reexamines the communication predicament between the speaker and his neighbor by expounding on "process of communication," "reason of predicament," and "consensus as implication" in a progressive manner. Through this exploration, the thesis uncovers the poet's underlying intention of creating this predicament. The thesis primarily focuses on examining the transformation of communication, analyzing the unreliability of single narrative and unequal projection onto the Other, and underscoring the significance of consensus in facilitating effective communication. It argues that consensus should not be viewed as mechanized uniformity, but rather as a convergent process that allows for a multiplicity of perspectives.

| KEYWORDS

communication predicament; dialogue of consensus; self and other; dialogue and monologue

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1. Introduction

Robert Frost, one of the truly outstanding American poets in the 20th century, has received four Pulitzer Prizes for Poetry and is renowned as the "American National Poet" as well as the "Poet Laureate of Vermont." His poetry employs the New England settings with vivid descriptions of nature and rural life. By presenting the pastoral scenery, Frost instills subtle and profound philosophical meditation into those simple and unadorned lines, rendering his poetry unpretentious and eloquent, which has been described as a poetics "from delight to wisdom" (Frost 2002: 442).

First included in the poetry collection *North of Boston* in 1914, Frost's "Mending Wall" is one of his most often anthologized and analyzed poems. It shows a clip of New England country life—the speaker "I" and his neighbor "beyond the hill" repair and rebuild the broken wall as a yearly ritual; their different opinions toward the need for this boundary come to the front. This annual practice is believed to be associated with a New England festival named *Terminalia* that traces back to the Roman period or even earlier: The owners of adjacent property on either side of any boundary, together with their wives and children, gathered around the stone landmark and crowned it with garlands; then they sang the praises, offered tributes to the god *Terminus* who presided over boundaries; the whole neighborhood joined in a general feast (Streeter 2012). Against this cultural backdrop, this poem, from the speaker's perspective, mainly focuses on the process of mending and persuading—in the end, "mending" triumphs but "persuading" fails.

"Mending Wall" features dualism. In this poem, the two people with different stances are separated by a wall that serves as a physical obstacle, representing the barriers that can exist between people despite their shared humanity. Time and again, Frost "reiterates in his work the need for obstacles, resistances, and constraints" (Cousins & Howarth 2011: 218). This theme of obstacles and constraints is a recurring one in Frost's work, as he often explores the difficulties and limitations that people face in their lives, relationships, and pursuits. It is a common practice for Robert Frost to present dualistic vision in his poetry by setting an encounter, which inspires readers to think in a dialectical manner while reading. Furthermore, he believes that

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everything has two sides that can be transformed into each other. This belief suggests a willingness to see multiple perspectives and find common ground between seemingly opposed viewpoints. It is reflected in his preference for the middle way and his willingness to engage in dialogue with those who share this approach. As he once expressed himself in an interview: "I like the middle way, as I like to talk to the man who walks the middle way with me" (Frost 2002: 331). This expression has been regarded as "The Middleness of the Road," which is also the title of one of his poems. It reflects his tendency to maintain balance between opposites. His poem "Mending Wall" is a case in point, in which he presents the encounter of a wall-destroyer and a wall-defender. Describing this encounter of opinions on the issue of demolishing the wall, Frost uses the speaker's narration and his communication with the neighbor to present a dualistic view. The poet's own opinion is not in accordance with "I" as it seems to be, but shows a dialectical color.

In applying dualism, Frost designs a communication predicament between the speaker and the neighbor. Communication predicament, in the literary sense, refers to a situation in which characters face obstacles in effectively conveying or understanding messages or information, leading to misunderstandings or conflicts. While the poem appears to present a conflict between the two neighbors, it also holds the potential for a dialogue of consensus to take place. Dialogue of consensus refers to a type of dialogue in literature where characters or voices engage in a cooperative exchange of ideas, opinions, or values. In this form of dialogue, there is a mutual recognition and acceptance of diverse perspectives, and a sense of openness and inclusivity. Therefore, the dualism in "Mending Wall" can be seen as a microcosm of the larger themes and concerns that Frost grapples with in his poetry.

Based on Bakhtin's theory of Dialogue and Levinas's theory of Other, this thesis argues that the communication predicament in Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" is derived from the lack of consensus between the speaker and his neighbor, rather than solely from the neighbor's fault, and that Frost's intention is not to criticize either party, but to establish a dialogue between different perspectives. To support this argument, this thesis will first present the communication predicament by describing the transformation of consensus from dialogue to monologue. Then, the thesis will unscramble how does the poet present the predicament and accordingly analyze the cause for this predicament, specifically the unreliability of single statement by the Self and the unequal projection toward the Other; In the end, the thesis will explore the underlying implication expressed by the poet and probe into how the dialogue of consensus can transform the gap into the gate, offering a potential solution to the communication predicament.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research on Robert Frost's "Mending Wall"

Existing studies on Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" mainly examine its themes, structure, and poetic techniques. Scholars have also discussed the poem from such perspectives as moral ethics, community consciousness, psychoanalysis, binary opposition and unity.

In terms of moral ethics, Mary Houston Davis and Elizabeth Lamer Rose once presented in their paper about the dual meaning of the "wall" image in "Mending Wall": the material wall, which acts as a physical barrier; and the spiritual wall, which reflects human relations. As for the spiritual one, there are also two kinds of walls between people—"the walls of needless estrangement" (1943: 70) of the cautious and conventional neighbor; "the spiritual walls of mutual/self-respect" (1943: 70) of the fanciful, imaginative and trusting speaker. Moving forward, the book *A Survey of American Literature* by Chang Yaoxin stated in a straightforward manner that it is not only "about the sense of alienation inherent in life and human nature" (2008: 196), but also "about understanding life and human nature" (2008: 196)—the wiser one is the neighbor rather than the speaker in that he has already learned the paradox of "distance makes for closer relationships" from his life experience. Therefore, it is not difficult to see that, over time since its publication, the focus has shifted from criticism of the hidebound neighbors to the speaker, who is not reliable as imagined. Readers are not to blindly stand in the position of him to criticize the words and deeds of the neighbor; simultaneously, it is advisable for readers to further consider the poet's own point of view, rather than roughly equate the poet with the speaker.

Since the 21st century, the sense of community has gradually flourished. Under the influence of this trend of thought, scholars are paying more attention to the role of the speaker himself in this neighborhood community. Lisa Hinrichsen and Sean Dempsey put forward that both the speaker and the neighbor are to be blamed rather than simply criticizing the neighbor's conformity, by illustrating the condescending air of the speaker and "his inability to establish his own self-worth except by casting the Other as a relative primitive" (2011: 15); additionally, their paper further demonstrates the encounter of individuality and community with regard to modernity. The same year, Baron Wormser discussed the necessity of questioning the speaker under the theme of "encounter," and even points directly out that the neighbor is dealing with a "droll un Wordsworthian trickster" who wants to pull the neighbor's leg. Therefore, Wormser reminds that Frost "is calling attention to the speaker's limited powers of discernment" (2011: 80), and that the poet takes advantages of the partial speaker to recognize the narration's subjectivity, guiding readers to jump out of such subjective perspective and to observe the whole poem more objectively. There are also scholars interpreting "Mending Wall" from the perspective of psychoanalysis. Edward Jayne comments in his paper that "... even in his composition of 'Mending Wall', in which eruptive latent homosexual implications are barely disguised by the theme of rural isolation" (1973: 950). According to the biography of Frost written by Lawrence Thompson, Frost in reality

had a neighbor called Napoleon Guay, and Guay was actually the one who showed friendliness and hospitality while Robert Frost was the reticent neighbor who presented aloofness and alienation. That is to say, "Mending Wall" swaps different real-life identities and assigns them to imaginary figures with the poet himself standing on both sides of the wall at the same time, integrating two personae in an internal debate.

As for binary opposition and unity, there are certain contributions both from home and abroad. Shi Changxia and Yin Xirong base their research upon structuralism and Saussure's view of language on binary opposition, and elucidates on three kinds of opposite elements in the poem (2014): oppositions between mending wall and demolishing wall, between speaker's and neighbor's ideas, and between speaker's behavior and psychology. Furthermore, they explained the super-binary opposition in the poem: the speaker wants to take the opportunity of mending wall as a euphemistic method to express his intension of abandoning the wall. About the speaker's ambivalent attitude, Lois Tyson illustrated the Self-contradictions elements hidden in "Mending Wall" by implementing deconstructive criticism. Tyson inspected the fact that "the opposing elements in the text overlap or aren't really opposed" (2006: 262). This feature deconstructs the binary opposition, on which the New Critical reading rests, that one side of the confrontation is superior over the Other. Through breaking the traditionally assumed ideological framework of the text, Tyson proved that the often-denounced notion of "Good fences make good neighbors," as a matter of fact, carries much conviction. It is not difficult to see that the analysis of the two entities in "Mending Wall" in the existing literature at home and abroad can transcend the traditional dichotomy, without presumption of the author's preference, deconstructing and recombining the opposition presented on the surface of the content, so as to understand the connotation of the poem with deeper interpretation.

Research has revealed several examples of applying the theory of the Other to analyze Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" and to understand the conflicts between the speaker and the neighbor; however, for now, cases on using Bakhtin's Dialogism, which is closely related to the philosophy of the Other, to explore possible solutions to this metaphorical dilemma in the poem, has not been found. As a result, the poet's true intention of setting such communication predicament maybe misapprehended. Hence, standing on the shoulder of predecessors' research results, this thesis mainly focuses on the communication predicament from the perspective of dialogue of consensus, and will jump out of the subjective perspective presented by the poem's surface, making a detailed analysis to demonstrate the unreliability of the single narrative. Therefore, the thesis will re-examine the connotation of the conflict with the relatively objective attitude to shed light on the key role of consensus in dialogical relations.

2.2 Bakhtin's Dialogism and Levinas's Philosophy of the Other

There are examples in which Bakhtin's Dialogism and Levinas' philosophy of the Other have been correlated and combined. For instance, in "The Ethics of Dialogue: Bakhtin and Levinas," Jeffrey T. Nealon analyzes the similarities and differences between the two theories: "Here Bakhtin, like Levinas, asks us to think and respond to the Other not abstractly or theoretically, but 'from within' a dialogic situation" (1997: 134); Bi Xiao indicates that, "Bakhtin and Levinas formed a hidden conversation on the ethics of the Other" (2021: 186). In the above-mentioned theories, the subject is bound by an unavoidable sense to the Other, as articulated by Levinas' concept of "responsibility" and Bakhtin's notion of "answerability". This is based on the fact that the "responsibility" and "answerability" have a common point of departure—a profound disenchantment with Western ontology that "strives to assimilate the Other to the same" (Erdinast-Vulcan 2013: 167).

Bakhtin's Dialogism and Levinas' philosophy of Other, along with other relevant theories, have been increasingly influential in literary criticism for some time, particularly in the ethical analysis of the novel. The notion of the Other was commonly seen in the post-colonial criticism and analysis in the early days, mainly involving relatively large social concepts such as ethnicity, gender and class. With the deepening of research, this notion has been applied more widely—as for the Self, every phenomenon is the Other; the confrontation between these two has evolved from the previous novelistic discourse to poetic discourse, even has taken place between the author and the reader. Coincidentally, Bakhtin normally valorizes novel over poem for the former is a better discourse for natural dialogue while "the language of poetic genres, when they approach their stylistic limit, often becomes authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative" (Bakhtin 1981: 287). However, just like Pound's "The Cantos" or Eliot's "The Waste Land," especially Frost's poems with the evident feature of "encounter," modern and contemporary poetic texts can also exhibit the polyphonic characteristics of novels based on "dialogue," thus confirming Bakhtin's idea "all language to be dialogic by nature" (Steinby & Klapuri 2013: 74).

Dialogue of consensus, or consensus in dialogue is "the cornerstone of Bakhtin's dialogue theory" (Tyupa 2020: 146). Dialogue is the essence of human existence, and consensus is the most important foundation for dialogue. Here, the consensus cannot be equated with mechanized uniformity or overarching truth without individual differences; the best consensus expresses itself in the highest level of dialogue to be heterogeneous and liberal, tending to be convergent but not identical. Such feature of consensus would involve Bakhtin's polyphonic theory based on his study of the Russian writer Dostoyevsky's novel, which was put forward by using musical terms to explain the "multi voice" in literary creation. For instance, both "voices" claim to be dominant at the same time, and it is not clear to the reader which is the principal, thus the writer's own point of view is hidden between two different individuals or different representations of the same individual in the work. In addition, Bakhtin reckons that it is far more difficult to achieve independence, liberty and equality in terms of the consensus, than to practice confrontation

in controversy. In view of this, the consensus in dialogue is like what the Chinese wisdom puts, “to seek common points while reserving difference”.

Given the genealogical spectrum, presented by Bakhtin, of consensus from zero to infinity, there exists the monologue which is not the opposite of dialogue, but belonging to “an extreme dialogue relationship” (Tyupa 2020: 146). Monologism portrays itself as “the rejection of the Other in the final discourse” (143). It controls the exclusive right and the right of final interpretation, ignoring the characteristics and inner being of the Other, therefore deprives the due status of the object in discourse. The monologist excludes the Other from the conversation and makes the Other as the silent object of his own thoughts. Bakhtin maintains that pluralism of different values is the core of dialogue relations, and that correspondingly, if the speaker who has the right of narration blindly refutes others’ ideas in his discourse, it will lead to monologism, for the speaker refuses the discourse power of different thoughts. Bakhtin’s dialogue theory plays a positive role in solving the conflict between different cultures—only on the premise of equality can the dialogue be carried out effectively.

Emmanuel Levinas was deeply influenced by existentialist philosophy, and his work thoroughly and profoundly criticizes the ontological tradition of Western philosophy, including its foundations in ancient Greek philosophy, by challenging its emphasis on abstract reasoning and detached objectivity, and advocating for a more relational and ethical approach to understanding the Other. Such ontological tradition has the philosophical propensity and aims for discrepancy elimination, totality and identity. According to Levinas, this kind of ontological thought is selfish and narrow-minded, neglecting the independence of the Other, and typifies “egocentrism” that constantly abolishes the Other and absorbs them into the Self. Levinas contends that the oblivion of the Other will jeopardize the modern society by pushing it into unimaginable ethical crisis. As the student of Levinas, Derrida has his diverse skeptical procedures, which are quite cardinal, to subvert the binary oppositions such as nature and culture, truth and error. Such oppositions are just like the pair of the Self and the Other, “... constitute a tactic hierarchy, in which the first term functions as privileged and superior and the second term as derivative and inferior” (Abrams 2003: 58). Regarding the pair of the Self and the Other, Derrida once emphasized the significance of respect in his *Writing and Difference*, “... there is a soliloquy of reason and a solitude of light. Incapable of respecting the Being and meaning of the Other, phenomenology and ontology would be philosophies of violence” (2021: 91).

To confront with ontology, Levinas puts forward his theory of the Other with new definition. It is creative in that he lifts up the alterity of the Other to an unprecedented level (Chen & Wang 2018: 123). As opposed to the “egocentrism,” Levinas accentuates the necessity of communication and dialogue with the Other—only when the Self is approaching toward the Other and undertakes the ethical responsibilities for the Other, can equal dialogue be established in the first place. In the sight of Levinas, it is difficult to find in ontology the existence of the respect for the Other, which is exactly the premise of forming equal dialogue between the Self and the Other. The dialogue cannot obliterate the specificity of the Other, nor is it allowed to adopt any perspective beyond the interlocutor; The relationship between the interlocutors is not antagonistic or demarcated, and the Self no longer absorbs the Other, but opens itself up in the interactive relationship. Here are three key terms to be discussed for later analysis, “face of the Other,” “desire,” and “saying”.

“Face of the Other,” also called “visage,” serves as the medium for the encounter between the Self and the absolutely other, and the way in which the Other presents itself to the Self. It has the dual traits of meeting without seeing, for the “visage” represents the superficial other but covers the essential other when encounter happens. As a result, in the literary relations of inter-subjectivity between the Self and the Other, the reader oftentimes can only get in touch with the Other which appears in the form of “visage” under the gaze of the Self—this “visage” is the relative other like an alter ego that has the potential to be converted into the Self. Hence, the reader will unwittingly overlook the absolutely other hidden beneath the surface, the one who can get away from the control of the unity.

And it is this cloaked absolutely other that triggers the “desire” from the Self toward the Other. At the beginning of Section one, Levinas distinguished “desire” from “need” in *Totality and Infinity*, that “need” is a kind of material lack, hankering after reabsorbing their alterity into my own identity, “myself for myself”; While “desire” is more like a spiritual pursuit, yearning for the invisible, the unknowable, but cannot be satisfied. That is to say, the metaphysical “desire” is always after the absolutely other. (2007: 33)

“Saying” emphasizes the relation between language and ethic, and it is a core concept in Levinas’ *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, and it is the Self’s compelling obligation endowed by “face of the Other,” which requiring the Self to face and gaze at the “visage” away from the fetters of language, so as to approach the Other. However, on the flip side, there is “the said,” belonging to ontology and applied to the knowable entity. “The said,” constrained by the language, tends to assimilate the Other as the being of alter ego. Comparatively speaking, “saying” opens the gate toward the Other, and it transcends “the said,” owing to its humble posture.

3. Process of Communication: from Dialogue to Monologue

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the communication predicament depicted in “Mending Wall,” this chapter will closely analyze the process of communication between the speaker and the neighbor by examining the poem following the sequential flow of the poem. Specifically, this analysis will focus on the transformation from dialogue to monologue, which is framed against the backdrop of encounter.

3.1 Encounter Generating Dialogue

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Frost's poetry, on the whole, is dyed with the color of encounter among man, nature, and society. The speaker usually acts as the Self and keeps meeting up with something different from the speaker that makes him contemplate. Where there is an encounter, there is a dialogue (or monologue) between the Self and the Other. His poem "An Encounter," as the title suggested, illustrates Frost's meditation upon nature and technology through the speaker's trek and his dialogue with a barkless spectre, which in strict sense is not a human being at all. Even when Frost is alone in the woods with no one else around in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "The Road Not Taken," and even in "Fire and Ice," he is always presenting another option and considering other viewpoints that differ from the sole self, like to "sleep" or to "keep," to travel which road, and the world will end in what. It is exactly the contrasting options that help creating a dialogue that in turn allows a space for the Self to meet and to approach the Other.

In this regard, "Mending Wall" serves as a paradigmatic example of the encounter of conflicting perspectives through conversation between two personae. While monologue dominates the overall tone, Frost provides readers with an opportunity to experience the dialogue between the speaker and the neighbor. Thus, Frost is in the meanwhile guiding readers to have an encounter with the speaker or the neighbor, depending on which side of the conflict the reader prefers. The opening line, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," straightforwardly expresses a negative attitude toward the wall, which is in line with the viewpoint of the first persona to appear in the poem. At this juncture, readers have encountered the side supporting the removal of the wall, leading to a dialogue with the poet persona who seems to agree with this idea.

The real communication of "Mending Wall" begins from line 12 where the wall-defender neighbor first appears in the narrative of the wall-destroyer speaker. Their encounter of ideas generates the dialogue initiated by the speaker, who reminds his neighbor to mend the broken wall with an underlying motive to ultimately discard it. Thus, it begins their contentious debate on the topic of the wall, which unfolds as the narrative progresses.

3.2 Downward Consensus between Speaker and Neighbor

As previously discussed in the Literature Review, Bakhtin's theory posits that consensus is marked by convergence and diversification, rather than uniformity or conformity to authority. Following analysis mainly focuses on the varying degrees of "consensus" throughout the entirety of the poem, with the aim of bolstering the argument that consensus is a crucial element in conversational practices.

The first expression to show their consensus appears in lines 12-14, where the speaker goes all the way to call up his neighbor "beyond the hill" to mend the wall together on his own initiative:

12 I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;
13 And on a day we meet to walk the line
14 And set the wall between us once again.

(Frost 1964: 47)

It is apparent that the speaker and the neighbor come to a partial consensus regarding the need to mend the broken wall this year, which serves as the foundation for the speaker's subsequent actions of inviting the neighbor to repair it together and engaging in further conversation. In this case, both parties agree on the notion of repairing the wall, at least the speaker does not reject the existence of the wall itself. As such, this consensus serves as a crucial point of connection between the two characters, facilitating their collaborative efforts toward the shared goal of mending the wall. Except for the "something," till now, all of the speaker's actions are consistent with a wall-defender. "I have come after them and made repair" in line 6 even explicitly suggests that it is the speaker who acts as the active protector of the wall.

17 And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
18 We have to use a spell to make them balance:
19 "Stay where you are until our backs are
turned!"
20 We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
21 Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
22 One on a side. It comes to little more:

(Frost 1964: 47)

The playful wording of "spell" and "game" in these lines inevitably captures the readers' attention, adding a touch of lightheartedness that seems at odds with the whole poem or even the overall somber of the anthology *North of Boston*, which features darker themes with some of the major poems in the volume. Given his later objection to the wall, here the speaker unexpectedly redeems this monotonous task of wall-repairing by presenting it as an enjoyable outdoor game. The speaker casts spells on rocks, akin to a child's game of "playing house," and the phrase "one on a side" suggests a competitive rivalry akin to a sports game. Clearly, the speaker relishes this annual ritual and views the wall-making as a time for conversation. Despite the poem's overall serious tone, the speaker's appreciation for this "game" adds a nuanced layer of complexity to the poem.

By closely examining the line 20 "We have to use a spell," we can discern a markedly different portrayal of the neighbor from the typical impression. Contrary to his usual depiction as stubborn and unyielding, the neighbor here actively participates in the speaker's spell-casting game. This suggests that the neighbor is not as obstinate as previously thought and is willing to engage in conversation. Both the speaker and the neighbor share a consensus in enjoying this wall-mending game, finding pleasure in the laborious task at hand. This portrayal of the neighbor adds depth and nuance to his character, challenging the reader's assumptions and reinforcing the importance of seeking consensus through dialogue.

The speaker's persuasive efforts mark a turning point in the poem's narrative, with the tone taking a downward trajectory. In particular, the speaker's reference to "mischief" aligns him with the subversive power of spring, which symbolizes the destructive, entropic forces of nature. This shift in tone highlights the tension between the speaker's desire to dismantle the wall and the neighbor's steadfast commitment to its upkeep.

27 He only says, "Good fences make good
neighbours."

28 Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder

29 If I could put a notion in his head:

(Frost 1964: 47)

After the speaker mentions "mischief" and allies himself with the insubordinate power of spring that damages the wall, their level of consensus drops a notch by a notch. The speaker, with a series of queries only in his mind, puts himself in a more powerful position where the Nature is in his alliance, while the neighbor is out on a limb. Here the speaker is evidently establishing his tyranny over the farmer, who strikes a defensive pose by putting forward the elders' proverb: "Good fences make good neighbors." As the speaker does not place his neighbor in juxtaposition, the neighbor refuses further communication, possibly sensing the speaker's sermonizing manner. Their differing opinions on the necessity of the wall result in the fact that the speaker is determined to infuse his idea into the Other's mind, while the neighbor retreats to his safety resort by wielding his encapsulated wisdom. These opposing attitudes, aggressive and passive, actually prevent further communication between the two.

With the tension escalating, their level of consensus plummets to its nadir when the speaker's self-granted superiority and the neighbor's reluctance to justify his insistence culminate in the damning description of the neighbor as "an old-stone savage" who "moves in darkness". This moment marks a complete breakdown in their ability to communicate and agree upon the necessity of the wall, highlighting the irreconcilable differences between them.

39 Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
40 In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
41 He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
42 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

(Frost 1964: 48)

The speaker seems to be irked by his neighbor's unswerving stance on wall-building and he does not try to observe this debate through the lens of his neighbor, who also has a fixation on his own perspective. Bakhtin's theory emphasizes the importance of receptive cognition in fostering authentic dialogue, and the absence of this bidirectional understanding in the poem's conversation implies its failure. As the speaker's frustration with his neighbor's obstinacy mounts, he becomes increasingly self-assured and fails to engage in genuine communication. This is reflected in the final lines, where the neighbor retreats into the darkness of enclosure while the speaker is left alone in the darkness of his own self-approbation. The lack of consensus between the two characters is therefore a crux of their failure to engage in a mutually receptive dialogue, ultimately resulting in their inability to mend the broken wall between them, physically and mentally.

3.3 Communication Predicament

By definition, communication predicament refers to a situation in which two or more individuals encounter difficulties or barriers in their communication with one another. This predicament can arise for a variety of reasons, such as differences in language, culture, or background, as well as misunderstandings, conflicts, or power imbalances between the parties involved. In the context of literary analysis, communication predicament may refer to the challenges and obstacles that the characters face in their attempts to communicate effectively, which can play a significant role in the development of the plot and themes of a work of literature.

On the ground of what have been analyzed, in Frost's "Mending Wall," the communication predicament refers to the difficulties encountered by the speaker and his neighbor in their attempts to communicate and connect with each other. The poem portrays a situation in which a physical wall separates the two characters and acts as a metaphorical barrier that inhibits their ability to fully understand each other. Despite their efforts to mend the wall together, the speaker and his neighbor lack enough consensus and have different perspectives on the necessity and purpose, which creates a communication predicament that underscores the themes of isolation, individualism, and the limitations of language. Ultimately, the poem highlights the challenges and complexities of interpersonal communication and the potential for miscommunication and conflict even in seemingly mundane interactions.

4. Reason of Predicament: from Self to Other

Given the former description of such communication predicament, it is evident that this rural wall debate does not come out with an ideal result. At first glance, readers are inclined to stand with the speaker and criticize the neighbor for his blind adherence toward the old wisdom. However, Frost's work never standardizes a simplistic black-and-white judgment, and "Mending Wall" is no exception. This chapter will first demonstrate the speaker's unreliability in presenting his interpretation of right and wrong, and will explore its impact on the reader's understanding of the poem. Furthermore, it will discuss the unequal projection from the Self onto the Other, leading to a flawed and ineffective communication between the two characters.

4.1 Speaker's Unreliability and Self-Cognition

As readers, we may be inclined to directly align ourselves with the speaker's perspective and view his desire to bring down walls as a reflection of the poet's intention to praise the progressiveness of the speaker and criticize the conservatism of the neighbor, so as to promote communication and coexistence. However, the fact that the entire poem is presented from the singular viewpoint of the speaker "I" significantly reduces the objectivity and credibility of the argument for demolishing walls. The description of the environment and characters, including their actions, language, and mental processes, is all portrayed from the perspective of the speaker, resulting in a monologue rather than a dialogue in essence. Therefore, our perception of the neighbor is filtered through the speaker's lens, presenting the neighbor as the "Face of the Other," as described by Levinas.

There are only two sentences throughout the poem present the neighbor's direct utterance, in the middle and at the end of the structure respectively: He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours." (l. 27); He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours." (l. 45) From the speaker's point of view, his neighbor is the Other who is mysterious in his real reason for defending the wall. And it is this unknown aspect that triggers the "desire" from both the speaker and the reader to demonstrate in their own words and to explain in their own understanding. It is noteworthy that we readers may be easily misled by the speakers' wording when he narrates his neighbor's aphorism passed through generations, like "only" and "again," which exude the ambience of stubbornness and cliché. Notwithstanding, it is actually the speaker who exhibits negative tendencies in that he thinks the worst, presuming his neighbor's concern is merely about privacy and property which is based on his selfishness. He ignores his neighbor's real interest is positively in being "good neighbors". That is to say, the speaker judges the Other by himself, and this act of projection makes the Other serve as his own alter ego. His narration, in this sense, is "the said" instead of "saying" and the latter has a humble attitude but the former arbitrarily sorts his neighbor into the category of standoffishness, in his own regard, by standing at an illusionary moral high ground.

We might never get to know what is the real intention of this Yankee farmer to repeat this aphorism and insist on mending the wall, for it is the absolute other which is cloaked under the "visage" painted by the persona of the speaker. Apart from this, this "face of the Other" has been intensified by the identity construction by the speaker, who narrates himself as the broad-minded, forward-looking teacher, who is here to lecture his cliché-bound neighbor.

1 Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
...
28 Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
29 If I could put a notion in his head:
...
35 Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
36 That wants it down.' I could say "Elves" to him,
37 But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
38 He said it for himself. I see him there

(Frost 1964: 47-48)

From the outset, and as we proceed, the poet mentions twice about "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," (l. 1 & 35). Naturally, readers are disposed to equate "something" with the speaker, and with even the poet Robert Frost. Equation being made, readers begin to sympathize with the speaker who allies himself with the intelligent, supernatural, ravaging power of nature and hence criticizing the neighbor's defense of walls. But with careful reading of the Self-contradictory statements of the speaker, his stance is not that convictive. Apart from the conflicting identities of nature and hunters, that both of them want the wall down but hunters represent not only nature but tradition as well—here is another contradiction worth deconstructing: the speaker tells the neighbor that it is the "elves," namely "something," who "doesn't love the wall" (l. 1 & 35), but continues with "But it's not elves exactly" (l. 37). Elf is the embodiment of supernatural forces just like the magical "spell" in lines 18-19, yet elf wants the wall down while spell, conversely, is chanted to "make them balance". Therefore, there are many self-contradictory narratives that blur the speaker's own standpoint and undermine the reliability of his argument.

4.2 Unequal Projection toward the Other

Zeroing in on the spelling of "elves," the reader can easily notice its resemblance to "selves," implicitly pointing to the boundaries between self and other. It is quite possible that this "something," also maybe the "elves" according to the speaker, is

actually himself all along. As mischievous creatures, elves take delight in causing trouble; their desire, as the speaker's, to have the wall down appears to be untrustworthy instead of supporting his argument. This weakens the readers' alliance with the speaker in acknowledging the reasonability of tearing down the wall. Furthermore, the speaker often uses "seems" to describe his views, and it shows the capriciousness and ambivalence in his wording. According to this, his action of having mending the wall on his own in the past and having called on his neighbor to join this work in fact contradict his nonconformist attitude toward the wall.

Among the numerous justifications "I" lists from "the pine and apple trees," "cows," "walling in and walling out," to "the giving offense question," most of them are just the speaker's inner turmoil, and he does not tell the neighbor about all of his logical argument in a proper way. Here implants strongly the seeds of indoctrination, "I wonder / If I could put a notion in his head:"; Another obvious example, "I'd rather / He said it for himself." the speaker is projecting his own value upon his neighbor, hoping the opposite side could be strike with a sudden enlightenment to agree with his opinion. The speaker's mental state transformation from wall-builder to wall-destroyer takes quite a period of time for him to figure out, as can be seen in the poem that it was the speaker used to come after the hunters to repair the wall and it was, he himself went to inform the neighbor to accomplish the annual spring mending-time task. But now he is complacent about his epiphany and look down upon the neighbor who has his own philosophy of life. His asymmetry projection of value and the abjection to the opposite side have the propensity to assimilate the absolute other and he is later irritated by the Other's defense and resistance.

The "alterity," interpreted from Levinas' idea, is that "There is something about the other person, a dimension of separateness, interiority, secrecy ... that escapes my comprehension. That which exceeds the bounds of my knowledge demands acknowledgement" (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 26). Obviously, the speaker in "Mending Wall" fails to learn to acknowledge what one cannot know and does not respect the separateness of the other person. Regardless of the potential that if the two sides, after patiently having a good conversation, can really reach an agreement or reconciliation on whether or not to continue building the wall, the speaker indeed has the attempt to communicate and dialogue with his neighbor, but he does not manage to take his ethical responsibilities from the Self toward the Other, as Levinas stressed, "the knowing being lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity" (Levinas 2007: 42). Martin Buber, "father of the philosophy of dialogue" has phrased the concepts of "I-It" monologue relation and "I-You" dialogue relation in the sphere of mutual "confrontation". The "I-It" is "a relation to an object, to the world, to everything that surrounds us and is not a person" (Górzna 2014: 46). However, the pair "I-You" is constructed on equality and openness. It is only on the basis of such respect that a proper dialogue can be established, which cannot be discovered from the confrontation between the speaker and his neighbor.

If we say the unequal hue of the conversations is not that obvious till now, then this kind of disrespect and disregard climbs to the climax when it comes to the last section, in which the speaker likens his neighbor to a sinister "an old-stone savage" and cloaks him in the stereotyped and racialized rhetoric of "darkness".

38 He said it for himself. I see him there
39 Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
40 In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
41 He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
42 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
43 He will not go behind his father's saying,
44 And he likes having thought of it so well
45 He says again, "Good fences make good
neighbours."

(Frost 1964: 48)

As the poem draws to its close, "The farmer looms not as an associate or coworker, but as an alien being whom the speaker observes, criticized, and reflects upon while maintaining his distance and objectivity" (Kemp 2015: 21). The speaker does not construct an equal mode of dialogue between the two, cannot establish his self-value and rationality by other means except debasing the Other as a primitive barbarian. "...the façade of genial tolerance drops to reveal his real antagonism toward any beliefs he cannot understand" (Watson 1971: 655). Just as we would like to build unnecessary barriers between ourselves and those unfamiliar persons or experiences around us, we can also be so intolerant of ideas, beliefs, and lifestyles which are different from our own that we stigmatize and censure them for being different, being the Other. Robert Burns wrote the poignant description of this phenomenon in his 1785 poem, *Man was made to Mourn: A Dirge*, "man's inhumanity to man".

One might say that it is, as the speaker implied, the neighbor who is to be blamed as the culprit of this communication predicament. That is not unreal to a certain extent. Because his unexamined folk expression of traditional practice is the language becoming another wall that rejects a proper discussion or a debate; and the neighbor's notion of "good neighbors" turns out to be almost insular and incommunicative, examined from the New England rural living picture. However, as a matter of fact, the speaker also shoulders the responsibility. Regarding himself as progressive and enlightened wise man, the speaker antagonizes each other's identity by derogating his neighbor as a primitive to further confirm his advisability and the neighbor's ignorance, in order to deepen his own sense of superiority. His inability to illustrate the rationality of his opinion, his presumption of their status and his final impatience, are all the factors leading to their communication failure. Therefore, the

encounter presented by "Mending Wall" is actually a typical case of ineffective communication spawned by both sides, rather than the deadlock caused by unilateral fault as the common interpretation explains.

From the speaker's perspective, the neighbor's stubbornness of defending the wall is unreasonable; while as for the neighbor, the speaker may also be a lunatic. Both men are engaged in the same wall-mending task, each brings a different narrative, which is not based on objective facts, but rather their individual self-cognition. Perhaps the neighbor would go back and tell his fellows how ridiculous the speaker is. If he also had the knowledge of literature, he would have written a poem, an essay to argue in favor of the necessity of walls between neighbors, critiquing the naivety and self-righteousness of his neighbor. Evidently, this remark presupposes that old-fashioned country folk are oftentimes illiterate. The readers, aligning with the speaker involuntarily, tend to deem rural dwellers to be naturally inferior to the so-called modern selves. It also reveals that the most pernicious discrimination and disrespect for the Other is not the obvious declaration, but the subtle, implicit and unconscious bias preset in our mind even before confronting with others. That, propels we readers to ponder on the question, as often does by other Frost's poems, "... how to counterbalance the tendency toward projection and abjection of the opposed other" (Hinrichsen & Sean 2011: 15).

5. Consensus as Implication: from Gap to Gate

As we have analyzed before, the speaker under Robert Frost's pen point is more like an unreliable speaker instead of the poet's own incarnation. Frost has his "innate mischievousness," as he once replied to readers' question about his intended meaning in writing "Mending Wall," "My poems—I should suppose everybody's poems—are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless." The poet, stands at the dialectical intersection of opposed sides, is not the proponent of either party. As what Bakhtin insists, that the fundamental task facing the author is to become the Other to himself and to show a polyphonic voice through collision and encounter (Patterson 1985). Hiding behind the conflict he depicted rather than narrowly inside it, Frost repletes his poem with bucolic wisdom, representing the task of breaking through the monotony of the single perspective and thus traversing the paranoiac delusions of ones' own identity.

For the sake of breaking such subjective delusion and the predicament of communication between the Self and the Other, the consensus is the key, the foothold for both sides to encounter and converse in a dialogic meeting rather than monologic confrontation. There is an undeniable gap between the Self and the Other, but this gap can be turned into a gate. Through the metaphors of the "wall" and the interpretations of the title, following analysis will elucidate how the consensus serves in the transformation from gap to gate.

5.1 Metaphors of "Wall"

The wall in the poem is not merely the barrier between human contact and understanding, it can also serve precisely the opposite function, the channel. Though as neighbors, the speaker and the farmer do not have many opportunities to converse, since his neighbor is beyond the hill. Thanks to this yearly spring mending-time, both of them can take the advantage to work together and chat. And this exact time period, is more or less associated with the New England festival named *Terminalia*, when people gather around their boundaries, to pay tribute to the god and celebrate with the feast together. Hence, the wall divides but it also connects.

In this sense, all the meaning is in how readers look at it, how the poem encourages readers with different stances to think about it. This resonates with Frost's saying in his 1931 speech at Amherst College, "Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another." Therefore, we cannot simply regard the wall in "Mending Wall" as the physical or psychological barrier functioning in a negative way, just as it is imprudent to deem the speaker as the poet and blindly form a league with this unreliable speaker. Frost's poems "... trigger recognitions of the need to move beyond simple binary moral oppositions" (Trilling 1959: 448). In order to comprehend the poem in a dialectic approach, we readers are supposed to, at least, put the persona of neighbor on the same level with the speaker; one step further, place ourselves on both sides of them and search for reasons for their propositions. Subsequently, we may find both of their opinions hold water in that demolishing wall can dispel the estrangement and facilitate neighbors' relationship while maintaining the wall can avoid unnecessary trouble and future conflicts, which are usually inevitable once two individuals' distance is narrowed.

5.2 Interpretations of "Mending"

The title "Mending Wall" itself has quite space for discussion and interpretation. From the general perspective, "mend" is a verb, "-ing" indicates a continuous tense that something is happening or takes place on a regular basis. Thus "mending wall" is a verbal phrase of "somebody be mending wall". In this light, the title might suggest that "mending wall" is a normal practice—there is always a cracked wall to be mended; and there are always broken relationships to be reconnected. Pessimistically speaking, it is somehow tantamount to the punishment of Sisyphus, who was condemned to roll an immense boulder up a hill only to have the boulder roll down again every time it neared the top. Accordingly, mending wall is just a cyclic, incessant toil of fruitless labor.

However, if "mending" is perceived as an adjective, namely "having the function of repairing," then the title "mending wall" can insinuate that it is "a wall that mends ... rather than a wall that is mended." (Tyson 2015: 250) To a certain extent, people are

repairing the alienated relations while mending the broken wall. As is presented in line 13, "And on a day we meet to walk the line," it is exactly "the activity of mending the wall that brings the men together" (Tyson 2015: 249) and facilitates the dialogue to form in the first place. Therefore, at least they have reached a consensus on mending this year's wall, and the wall serves as a platform and a medium for both sides to connect in the course of mending, whether the restoration leads to keeping the two of them back to their estranged but seemingly harmonious isolation with scarce communication, or results in granting them more opportunities to promote the relationship for further conversation. That is to say, the fence can act both as the barrier and as the connecting hinge. Indeed, there is a gap between the two people, and the gap denotes that the wall is broken with cracks and breakage, indicating that certain estrangement or conflicts have developed. Meanwhile, the gap is gaping open, and it also plays the role as the gate connecting the two territories.

There is no final say of whether the speaker or the neighbor is correct, but to search for a balance, here comes consensus. Consensus of equal identity, due respect, openness to communicate, recognition of multiple perspectives and the common goal of being good neighbors—it is not likely for them to settle this dispute in one shot, but in the long run, just as what debates are for, both of them will view this issue more holistically through dialogue, instead of being stuck at the extreme ends of the value spectrum in the monologue. Mutual respect and understanding, partly constitutes the consensus itself, is one of the results of consensus simultaneously, which will lead to more reasonable methods of solving problems. With such consensus, expression and discussion are very less likely to fall into invectives hurling at each other or rejection to communicate in an opinionated manner.

From "gap" to "gate," the key is consensus. Some scholars have pointed out that, "Levinas ... to return to another source for thinking, namely the more Biblical wisdom of unconditional respect for the other human being" (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 26). There is a sentence in *Leviticus* 19:18, of the *Old Testament*, "love thy neighbor as thy self". This kind of projection is not to judge others by the Self, but to juxtapose the Self and the Other in an equal narration, in which both of the interlocutors establish a stage of understanding and perform the dialogue of consensus. The interlocutors are not in an antagonistic relation. As been concluded as the core idea of Levinas' *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, "... responsibility to the Other is seen as something interior to the Self" (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: XXV), the inner status of the Other, the absolute other in particular, is deprived by Monologism upheld by the Self. In such situation, the Self also loses the possibility for truly having a conversational relationship with the interior self.

5.3 Feature of Binary Opposition and Unity

Dualism, or binary opposition and unity, is one of the most common philosophical features in Robert Frost's poems. "I am a dualist" (Stanlis 2007: 4), Frost tends to depict an individual's relationships to himself, to his fellowmen, to society, to nature, and to God. Dualists think the world is composed of opposed and contrasted elements and dualism exist everywhere and in everything. According to Robert Frost, it is imprudent to approach things only in one respect. Frost offers his version of Plato's Allegory of the Cave in "Neither Out Far nor in Deep," criticizing those who "All turn and look one way" (1964: 394). "Their single-mindedness keeps them from turning toward the land, so they turn their backs on something meaningful." (Fagan 2007: 398) It is only when people are willing to turn around that the Self is beginning to respect the Other and walking toward the Other, that the dialogue can be carried out effectively with consensus.

In the poetic confrontation between the Self and the Other, it is natural to find conflicts arising from the physical and psychological barriers that separate people from one another. However, Frost does not rest content with representing the opposition which is somehow inevitable in the modern world. It can be discerned that there is often a kind of dialogue between different perspectives and Frost carries it further to offer the respect for the integrity of the Other behind every encounter—the poet does not give a final say on whether to keep the promise or to sleep in the forest is the right choice, on if taking the road that less traveled by is definitely the better way or not, on the world will end in fire or ice; he may pick a side as a persona, but designing his poems under a polyphonic style that represents the unity. Thus, there is no reason to presume that Robert Frost is in favor of either the wall-defender or the wall-destroyer. His implication lies in the design of gap that divides, but stressing the function of consensus that morphs the gap into the gate which can connect.

6. Conclusion

Given the aforementioned analysis, Robert Frost represents binary opposition and unity through his art of encounter by portraying the opposing standpoints toward the wall. As the poem progresses, the conversational relationship between the speaker and the neighbor flows from dialogue to monologue, with the consensus leveling down. Due to the unequal projection from self to other, the speaker assumes his self-identity over the neighbor without sufficient explanations to support his idea, while the neighbor responds with passive repetition of an ancient wisdom without flexibility. Consequently, both of them conspire to the communication predicament with no solution or progress. Although the poem does not provide a clear answer on how to achieve it, the connotation embedded in this work implies the significance of consensus that can produce the transformation from gap to gate. It involves a harmonious interaction among different voices, allowing for multiple viewpoints to coexist and contribute to the creation of meaning.

Dialogue of consensus reflects the diversity and complexity of human experience, contributing to the richness and depth of a literary text. The wall of selfhood generates the communication predicament, and it is the dialogue of consensus that can help people move beyond it to achieve an effective communication. Frost manages to forge a conversation between the two viewpoints within "Mending Wall" and also beyond this work, guiding readers to have a dialogue of consensus with the poem, the poet, and the Other.

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