

## ROBERT FROST'S POETRY: THE DUALITY OF THE SENEX

SONJA VALČIĆ  
Filozofski fakultet u Zadru  
*Faculty of Philosophy in Zadar*

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The senex archetype in Frost's poetry is used extensively, it serves him to portray three antithetical aspects of human condition, aspects characterized by both positive and negative categories. These categories are not portrayed as static divisions, but as poles dynamically and complexly interrelated. This paper examines three of Frost's works "Mending Wall", "An Old Man's Winter Night" and "Directive" as examples for the study of the paradoxical senex consciousness. While the archetypal senex figures in the "Directive" and "An Old Man's Winter Night" represent primarily the antithetical aspects of the nature of humans, the senex protagonists in the "Mending Wall" reflect the inherent binary oppositions and ambivalence within the contradictory and paradoxical world of humankind. Thus, we can say, that Frost's portrayal of the archetype of the senex acknowledges the symbolic paradigm of the human condition.

### I.

Robert Frost has long been considered the "Wise Old Man" of American twentieth-century poets, not simply because of his public persona, or mask, but because, as I shall explore in this paper, so much of his poetry and the characters in his poetry manifest the temperament, nature, principles and ordering qualities of the senex archetype. *Senex* is the Latin word for old man (or old woman). Personifications of the archetype appear everywhere in Frost's work as the guide, judge, father, mentor, philosopher, literate farmer, king, ruler (President and Governor), preacher, hermit, outcast, exile and ogre. He often appears in his antithetical aspects emphasizing his inherent duality (Asa and the stranger in "A Way Out," the city buyer and the country farmer in "Christmas Trees," and the "Father-Time-Like man" and grinder in "The Grindstone"). We find the 'positive'

senex, or Wise Old Man, in Frost's works in situations in which insight, perception, understanding, good advice, determination or planning are required, and the 'negative' senex in situations in which the old is consistently preferred to the new, and any attitude, principle, or habit "begins to coagulate past its prime."<sup>1</sup>

Senex more accurately pertains not simply to old people or to a biological senescence, but to an entire structure of consciousness which is inward and downward. As James Hillman pastulates in his work "On Senex Consciousness",

The inward and downward pull into oneself and one's death implies that the senex is the chief force at work in some descriptions of individuation. The end goal is often presented in senex imagery: isolation, unity, stones, cosmic systems and geometric diagrams, and especially the structured mandala and the Wise old Man.<sup>2</sup>

While Frost's poetry is replete with the theme of isolation vs. unity, and images of stones, cosmic systems and the Wise Old Man, the unmitigated force and power of many of the poems derive from Frost's ability to portray the manifestly antithetical aspects of humans -- aspects characterized by the adjectives positive and negative, good and bad, beneficent and maleficent. These categories, however, are not portrayed as static divisions, but as poles dynamically and complexly interrelated. In Frost's depiction of the senex lies the symbolic paradigm of the human situation.

In this paper, I will examine three of Frost's works, "Mending Wall," "An Old Man's Winter Night," and "Directive," which can be read primarily as studies of the paradoxical senex consciousness. One of Frost's most successful and most frequently anthologized poems, "Mending Wall," contains a classic description of the ambiguous senex, and can serve to clarify for us Frost's use of this paradoxical archetype. Although "Mending Wall" has been widely interpreted and explicated, its skillful presentation of the contradictory nature within man, and its demonstration of the poet's ability to hold polarities in harmony has not been fully explored. Most critics acknowledge that much of the extraordinary power of the poem arises from the conflict of two opposed points of view: "Good fences make good neighbors, and "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." The positions are both logical, yet contradictory, however, since man cannot live without boundaries, walls, limits and self-limitations, yet "something" within him emphatically rebels against these same barriers which serve to separate him from others. The concomitant themes found in the poem, the themes of neighborliness vs. isolation, open-mindedness vs. prejudice, dependence vs. independence, man vs. nature, liberal vs. conservative, instinct vs. reason which have all been frequently explored or acknowledged by critics analyzing the poem, further emphasize polarity and division, rather than harmony and 'mending'. It is my contention that in

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the senex archetype, please see James Hillman's essays:

"On Senex Consciousness," *Spring* (N.Y./Zurich: Spring Publications, 1970).

"The 'Negative' Senex and a Renaissance Solution," *Spring* (N.Y./Zurich: Spring Publications, 1975).

"Senex and Puer: An Aspect of the Historical and Psychological Present," *Erano 36*, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> Hillman, "On Senex Consciousness," p. 153.

"Mending Wall," through the archetype of the senex Frost ably contains rather than contests human contraries and opposites, balancing the ambivalences in a dynamic equilibrium. The senex protagonists of "Mending Wall" embody what Charles Feidelson, Jr., in *Symbolism and American Literature* named "the most exciting quality of modern symbolism," that is, "the tension between opposite meanings in paradox and the tension between logical paradox and its literary resolution."<sup>3</sup> Like the senex archetype, which contains and unifies logical paradox, Frost's poem transforms opposites through metaphor into new unity.

The poet named "Mending Wall" as one of his two favorite poems and added in conversation, "Good fences do make good neighbors, you know!"<sup>4</sup> In a radio talk taped in 1953 Frost commented on "Mending Wall:" "The point of that poem is that you have to have walls even when there is no apparent need for them."<sup>5</sup> In addition, he purportedly once said: "The best line in the poem is the last, and I didn't write that."<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere Frost emphasized that the poem contrasts two different types of people and claimed that he had played "exactly fair" in the poem because he had twice used the aphorism "Good fences make good neighbors," and twice the adage "Something there is that doesn't love a wall."<sup>7</sup> Despite Frost's own ambiguous comments on the poem, however, critics have persisted in taking sides and have concocted a variety of interpretations of who in the poem is most neighborly (or unneighborly) to whom, presenting convincing arguments for and against both proffered points of view: "Good fences make good neighbors," and "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." What seems unequivocal is that critics straddle both sides of the fence.<sup>8</sup>

Marion Montgomery, in "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers: Man vs. Nature Toward God," states convincingly that the poet's concern with barriers is the predominant theme in his poetry, and alleges that boundaries are insisted upon and respected by the old neighbor in "Mending Wall" as they are by Frost in most of his works. John C. Broderick argues that wall-mending is a "perverted ritual" which has lost its *raison d'être* for the protagonists of "Mending Wall,"<sup>9</sup> while Clifford Lyons suggests just the opposite: "Nothing in the poem said or done seems adequate grounds for doubting that both think this is a good wall, to be kept so."<sup>10</sup> John F. Lynen maintains that "the poem presents the speaker's attitude more sympathetically than the neighbor's,"<sup>11</sup> but in "Who Needs Mending?" Robert

<sup>3</sup> Reginald Lansing Cook, *Robert Frost: A Living Voice* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), p. 260.

<sup>4</sup> N. Arthur Bleau, "Robert Frost's Favorite Poem " *Frost: Centennial Essays III*, ed., Jac Tharpe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1978), p. 176.

<sup>5</sup> Clifford Lyons, "Not Unbounded," *Robert Frost: Studies of the Poetry*, ed. Kathryn Gibbs Harris (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1979), p. 82.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Frost interview, reprinted in Edward Connery Lathem, ed. *Interviews with Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 112.

<sup>8</sup> Marion Montgomery, "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers: Man vs. Nature Toward God," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, LVII (Summer, 1958), p. 347.

<sup>9</sup> John C. Broderick, "Frost's 'Mending Wall'" *Explicator*, 14 (Jan., 1956), p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Clifford Lyons, "Not Unbounded," p. 82.

<sup>11</sup> John F. Lynen, *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 29.

Hunting argues that the narrator "is the real villain of the piece."<sup>12</sup> James K. Bowen, in a counter-critique, considers the narrator less villainous than pathetic: "No, the persona is no villain -- accommodating, perhaps, but not malicious; sadly pathetic, perhaps, but not cruel."<sup>13</sup> James L. Potter states that the poem "may be taken mainly as an attack on the neighbor's mindless 'darkness'"<sup>14</sup> while Radcliffe Squires notes that "to read 'Mending Wall' as a plea for breaking down traditional barriers ... takes us to a position which nothing else in Frost's poetry supports."<sup>15</sup> In their psychoanalytic approaches to "Mending Wall," Norman Holland and Mordecai Marcus see the poem "not so much as the symbolic representation of an intellectual attitude but more as the dramatization of partially hidden inner tensions, apprehensions, and character traits ..."<sup>16</sup> Holland and Marcus, along with John C. Kemp, are among the few critics who refuse to take sides. In a perceptive remark on "Mending Wall," Kemp stresses that the poem is "less about neighborliness than it is about modes of thought."<sup>17</sup>

I present these widely divergent views on the poem and its two senex characters to call attention to the predominant approach critics and scholars have taken towards the poem -- their propensity for a pro or con, either-or interpretation. Respect for, vs. contempt for walls or barriers, and neighborliness vs. isolation, however, are not the central themes of the poem. "Mending" -- the verb that stands as the central focus of, the work -- is the principal symbol by which the two disparate and antithetical precepts and figures in the poem are united. I will even go so far as to conjecture that the two figures, the decisive, wall-loving neighbor and the analytical, disquieted speaker, can be seen as two distinct (contradictory and yet complementary) parts of the poet's self (of all our selves). The conflict in "Mending Wall" is not simply between two different kinds of people with two diverging philosophies, but between two paradoxical forces within humankind, our two disparate 'senex' selves -- one rigid, imperturbable, isolated, habitual, and obsessed with limits; the other questioning, accommodating, a seer with a mischievous elfin pucker. Marcus hints at this in his psychoanalytic interpretation of "Mending Wall" when he suggests, 'Perhaps they [the persona and the neighbor] are partly trying to restore their own balance,'<sup>18</sup> and Norman Holland echoes a similar perception when he remarks that 'these two characters might represent different

<sup>12</sup> Robert Hunting, "Who Needs Mending," *Western Humanities Review*, 17 (Winter, 1963), p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> James K. Bowen "The *Persona* in Frost's 'Mending Wall': Mended or Amended?" *CEA Critic*, 31 (Nov. 1968), p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> James L. Potter, *Robert Frost Handbook* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> Radcliff Squires, *The Major Themes of Robert Frost* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> Norman Holland, "The 'Unconscious' of Literature: The Psychoanalytic Approach," *Contemporary Criticism*, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 12, eds. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Edward Arnold, 1970.)

Mordecai Marcus, "Psychoanalytic Approaches to 'Mending Wall,'" *Robert Frost: Studies of Poetry*, ed. Kathryn Gibbs Harris (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1979), p. 180.

<sup>17</sup> John C. Kemp, *Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> Mordecai Marcus, p. 184.

aspects of Robert Frost."<sup>19</sup> However, neither writer elaborates on nor develops these hypotheses. Robert Frost came closest to acknowledging that the two dissimilar characters were simply antithetical aspects of himself when he admitted to a critic: "As if I weren't on both sides of that wall!"<sup>20</sup>

My immediate point is simply that the poem "Mending Wall" can be read, in part, as the poet's attempt to mend or repair the universal schism or division within himself. Jung posits that in order to mend or harmonize or understand the dichotomy within us, the two contradictory or warring parts of ourselves, we often (in dreams or fairy tales or myths ... and, I might add, in literature) project the two onto two different, distinct figures.<sup>21</sup> In "Mending Wall," Frost has adopted the analytical, imaginative, spritely and perceptive narrator and his dispassionate, reserved, sententious neighbor to depict the senex duality inherent in his own psyche. "All a man's art is a bursting unity of opposites," the poet stated in a private notebook, "I can hold in unity the ultimate irreconcilable spirit and matter, good and evil, monism (cohesion) and dualism (reaction), peace and strife. It o'er rules the harsh divorce that parts things natural and divine."<sup>22</sup>

The two figures in "Mending Wall" are 'irreconcilable' aspects (positive and negative) of the same psychic complex. The difference between them is enormous, yet they are separated by only a common, man-made wall. Frost sets the two senex figures in opposition, exploiting the tension between their respective values, emphasizing the ambiguity of feeling which results, and revealing the resemblances beneath the obvious differences. His method is paradoxical in this poem of duality in that his intent is to depict universal experience by revealing the basic realities common to both men, yet he accomplishes this by insisting on their dissimilarity.

"Senex builds ... by excluding the middle, by keeping the opposites in extreme tension, especially through its rules and laws which maintain borders, categories, walls," writes James Hillman in "The 'Negative' Senex and a Renaissance Solution." "One and the same senex nature must express itself in pairs of coinciding opposites ... and also must repress the symbolic paradox of opposites through a separative, rational order. This is its tension."<sup>23</sup> "We get our effects on a tension,"<sup>24</sup> Frost said of poets, and his own poetry can be read as a dialectic of contained contradiction. "Mending Wall;" in particular, is a dialectic which has its source in psychological tensions. My purpose in examining the two senex protagonists of "Mending Wall," then, is not primarily to stress, as most critics have done, the difference between opposites, but to view more 'com-prehensively' how basic opposites are related and contained, the 'bursting unity' within the poem, the unexpected connections between things.

<sup>19</sup> Norman, Holland, p. 150.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> C.G. Jung, *Four Archetypes*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, from *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Vol. 9, Part I, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> Frost. Quoted in Lawrence Thompson's *Robert Frost: The Early Years* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1942), p. 427.

<sup>23</sup> James Hillman, "The 'Negative' Senex and a Renaissance Solution," p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> Reginald Lansing Cook, *Robert Frost: A Living Voice*, p. 272.

## II.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

"Mending Wall" begins with a philosophic and implied moral insight characteristic of the senex, or old man. However, since we are not introduced to a poetic persona or speaker in these first lines, we say them as if they were our own conviction, yet the recognition that they are certainly not ours begins to reveal the implied tension in the lines. Connotatively and denotatively the frozen-ground-swell is a cold, explosive force that, along with the repetition of the sinister's' sound in these four lines, conveys a piercing, ominous sense of the poem's conflict. The indefinite "Something ... that doesn't love a wall" is a natural or supernatural force elaborated on and developed later in the poem, a force, as we shall see, intimately related to the senex archetype. Here it is introduced in a syntactically convoluted but rhythmical first line that underscores the vague but imaginative and poetic character of the petulant narrator. Besides expressing a moral attitude toward walls, the lines tell us much about the speaker's sensitivity and descriptive abilities. Although many critics assume that either one or both of the "farmers" in the poem are old, it is neither explicitly stated that they are farmers nor that they are old. However, we become increasingly aware that the underlying pattern in their attitudes, their language, their principles and frames of mind connote the senex archetype. The portentousness of the first line and its archaic syntax, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," indicate the presence of an insightful, reflective, intuitive, senex persona.

The tension in "Mending Wall," already present in the opening lines in the image of the man-made stone wall, the destructive frozen-ground-swell, spilled boulders and open gaps in the wall, develops in the following lines as we discover that this same questioning, disquieted speaker who seems skeptical of walls has not only initiated the annual spring mending and rebuilding this year, but has often single-handedly repaired the wall in the past after hunters demolished it:

The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
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.

Throughout the first half of the poem the garrulous speaker's natural ambivalence toward walls or barriers is apparent in the dichotomy between his words and his actions. Even before we are introduced to the obstinate, naive

neighbor, we are aware that in the figure of the narrator, polarities are held in harmony. "Ambivalence", maintains Hillman, "is the adequate reaction of the whole psyche to whole truths. To cure away ambivalence removes the eye with which we can perceive the paradox, whereas bearing ambivalence places us within symbolic reality where we perceive both faces at once, even exist as two realities at once."<sup>25</sup> (A reminder of Frost's comment: "As if I'm not on both sides of that wall.") The speaker's ambivalence and bi-polar spirit reflect an intrinsic senex consciousness. "Senex-consciousness, by maintaining the wall and law against something which does not like a wall and a law, makes possible the psychological region of the borderline...."<sup>26</sup> Hillman's perceptive insight appears to have been written explicitly to describe the spirited, mischievous speaker of "Mending Wall."

In the following lines of the poem, a deprecatory senex tone introduces the image of irresponsible, insensitive hunters and their eager, yelping dogs impatient to get to and at the "game," with no regard for the boundaries of others. Holland maintains that this passage underscores the "primitive rage of the oral phase,"<sup>27</sup> but J.E. Cirlot, in *A Dictionary of Symbols*, emphasizes that throughout myths, allegories, fairy tales, literature, vision and fantasy, the hunter connotes a "symbol of action for its own sake, of repetition, of the pursuit of transitoriness."<sup>28</sup> Jung would concur with this interpretation, illustrating in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales* that the hunter personifies "inquisitiveness and love of adventure."<sup>29</sup> The senex narrator's disgruntled comments on the aggressive hunters and their dogs signifies that he is not in sympathy with this way of dismantling a wall, that love of adventure and the pursuit of transitoriness for its own sake are as limited and limiting as his intractable neighbor's mindless dogmatic adherence to a traditional dictum. Supernatural responsibility for some of the gaps in the wall, already suggested in the first line of the poem, is hinted at again in the assertion that "No one has seen them made or heard them made." By implication it is reintroduced just eight lines later when the narrator light-heartedly and whimsically admits that some stones are so round, "We have to use a spell to make them balance." This line in particular underscores the ambiguously elfin character of the senex -- playful, cryptic, magical and unpredictable. The senex archetype, according to Hillman, is idealized in the form of natural man -- as peasant, farmer, wood chopper, or stonecutter - natural man whose emblems are the rock, the old tree and the scythe or sickle.<sup>30</sup> (Frost once admitted that his favorite implements, after the pen, were the axe and the scythe.).<sup>31</sup> It is this type of man, straight-forward and psychologically uncomplex, who would "use a spell" to balance unwieldy

<sup>25</sup> James Hillman "Senex and Puer: An Aspect of the Historical and Psychological Present," p. 316.

<sup>26</sup> James Hillman "On Senex Consciousness," p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> Norman Holland, "The 'Unconscious' of Literature: The Psychoanalytic Approach," p. 141.

<sup>28</sup> J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage, (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1976), p. 154.

<sup>29</sup> C.G. Jung, "The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales," p. 118.

<sup>30</sup> James Hillman, "On Senex Consciousness," p. 147.

<sup>31</sup> Frost. Quoted in *Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose*, eds., Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1972), p. 379.

boulders. In addition, senex consciousness is particularly subject to an "exaggerated irritability of the imaginative powers,"<sup>32</sup> and certainly one of the central traits of the enigmatic speaker in "Mending Wall" is his whimsical imagination. That imagination is vividly depicted in the central lines of the poem:

We keep the wall between us as we go.  
 To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
 And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
 We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
 "Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"  
 We wear our fingers rough with handling them.  
 Oh, just another kind of outdoor game;  
 One on a side. It comes to little more:  
 There where it is we do not need the wall:  
 He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
 My apple trees will never get across  
 and eat the cones under his pines; I tell him.

This unorthodox, fantastic description underscores the playful imagination of the speaker and at the same time reveals the symbolically contradictory nature of the two figures: "He is all pine and I am apple orchard." Through the shrewd imaginative perception of the narrator, we get our first glimpse of the inscrutable neighbor, and a comical description of the antithetical aspects and contrasting natures of the two: one cultivated, refined, carefully tended, the other more natural, untamed, evergreen, resistant to change. Clearly more needs to be mended in this outdoor game than walls. If there weren't an implicit, formidable, psychological wall between the speaker and his taciturn neighbor, perhaps the less substantial stone wall would not be envisioned so symbolically by both. The allusion to "mending wall" as an outdoor game suggests opposition and rivalry and agreed upon boundaries and rules. The word "game" also suggests "play," a word which occurs again and again in Frost's poetry, even "play for mortal stakes." Anyone who is well acquainted with Frost's poetry is acutely aware of his penchant for extending the range and scope of play of mind in his poetry. So, too, in "Mending Wall," the speaker's play of mind, his "Spring mischief," a positive senex characteristic, seeks responding, fulfilling play of mind in the neighbor. But the dour neighbor refuses to play. While the speaker's attitude towards the ritual is playfully divided between ambivalent feelings of order and disorder, trust and mistrust, and intimacy and isolation, the attitude of the obstinate neighbor remains heavy and limited as the wall itself. The emphasis on games and playfulness masks an inherent antagonism between the two figures and contrasts sharply with the implied seriousness of the task: "We wear our fingers rough with handling them."

Norman Holland's psychoanalytic interpretation of "Mending Wall" argues that the narrator's insistence that his apple trees would never cross over to eat the neighbor's pine cones evokes "concealed terror of being eaten and unconscious anger." "In the poem as in the oral stage of childhood, there is a fear, if the

<sup>32</sup> James Hillman, "The 'Negative' Senex and a Renaissance Solution," p. 77.

boundary comes down, of being devoured or engulfed by the symbiotic unit."<sup>33</sup> I agree with Holland that the passage expresses some fear and aggression, but his assertion that the "core fantasy" in the lines is "unconscious oral frustration" may be heavy artillery to apply to the situation. The narrator's anger does not seem to me to be unconscious, since, in his ironic tone, there is some awareness of his own aggressive stance and a concomitant implication that he should perhaps keep that aggression walled in.

The poem's dramatic tension and ambiguity are fully developed in the last lines of the poem, introduced by the laconic neighbor's dogmatic assertion: "Good, fences make good neighbors." As Frost well knows, one of the unquestionable things about walls is that they are two-sided, a "truth" he returns to again and again throughout the poem. The force of the "Good fences" line lies partly in its terse bluntness and partly in its opposition to all that's been previously suggested by the speaker. Against the foreknowledge of disorder, the 'negative' senex consciousness "builds order particularly through boundaries."<sup>34</sup> This senex consciousness draws division lines: your kingdom and mine, real and fantasy, inner and outer. In "Trespass," Frost introduces a similar senex speaker who complains of a stranger who walked his property uninvited:

No, I had set no prohibiting sign,  
And yes, my land was hardly fenced.  
Nevertheless the land was mine:  
I was being trespassed on and against.

And in "Tree at My Window" the negative senex declares on which side of the psychological dividing line he stands:

That day she puts our heads together,  
Fate had her imagination about her,  
Your head so much concerned with outer,  
Mine with inner, weather.

This inward and downward movement in the poetry, the illusion to isolation and retreat, symbolizes the negative senex attitude toward experience, and contrasts starkly with the mischievous, spritely temperament of the positive senex, or Wise Old Man:

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it  
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.  
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.

As Jung indicates in his essay on the spirit, or wise old man, in fairy tales, "Often the old man in fairy tales asks questions like who? why? whence? and

<sup>33</sup> Norman Holland, p. 143.

<sup>34</sup> James Hillman, "On Senex Consciousness," p. 151.

whither? for the purpose of inducing self-reflection and mobilizing the moral forces."<sup>35</sup> In this passage of "Mending Wall," the positive senex shrewdly asks the crucial questions: why? where? what? and to whom? Why do fences make good neighbors? "Isn't it/Where there are cows?" "I'd ask to know/What I was walling in or walling out,/ And to whom I was like to give offense." That the interrogating words have all been placed at the beginning of their respective lines underscores the significance they have in the poem. It is the tendency of the old man to "set one thinking," and these trial phrases generate reflection in the reader as well as in the speaker himself. Like the positive senex within us, the narrator attempts to deal with the issue of barriers philosophically -- through interrogation, through speculation, through arguments and through appeals to the nature of things. Just as something sends the frozen-ground-swell to spill the immobile boulders and make gaps in the wall, so these probing rhetorical questions -- these mischievous "notions" -- of the narrator are subterranean forces aimed at making gaps in the stolid unreasoning neighbor's conventional attitudes and blind habit. Anterior to this is the positive senex at work -- reflecting, taking solitary account, sorting through, figuring out, attempting to balance one opinion against another, knowing full well that the task of maintaining a balance is arduous and delicate. It is important to notice that these lines are presented as interior monologue, not as actual speech; their tone suggests that the petulant narrator derives pleasure from his ability to "walk the fence," to see both sides of the issue, to remain flexible as opposed to the neighbor's implied rigidity. The reference to cows simply underscores the theme of the efficacy of walls and barriers and by implication suggests that the narrator is fully aware that there are practical reasons for barriers of any kind. However, he argues for the erection of walls only when there is a clear need for them and maintains an equilibrium between that need and the offense any wall is likely to cause others. The poet's word play of fence/offense again emphasizes the dramatic conflict between the speaker and his redoubtable, wall-loving neighbor, and illustrates the speaker's awareness that it is to the psyche of man that a fence most likely gives offense.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather,  
He said it for himself.

Most critics either ignore completely the question of what the enigmatic "Something" is that doesn't love a wall, or mistakenly equate it with the destructive frozen-ground-swell or read into it meanings unsubstantiated by the contributory themes and images in the poem. Conspicuously important as the opening line of the poem and repeated again in the thirty-fourth line, the words intimate an identification between the narrator and the supernatural force which Norman Holland views as merely a projection (an unconscious defense mechanism), and John Brokerick interprets in religious connotations. John McGiffert believes that throughout Frost's poetry "something" "stands for the element of uncertainty that is an inescapable reality in Frost's view of human

<sup>35</sup> C.G. Jung, p. 98.

existence."<sup>36</sup> The failure of efforts by scholars and critics to adequately explain the supernatural force that ravages the wall results from the recognition that it is, indeed, supernatural, or as Jung might postulate, a force still hidden in the depths of the unconscious. Jung explores the manifestations of the old man (spirit archetype) including his dwarf form, in a descriptive passage most pertinent and edifying to the explication of the chthonic "Something" of Frost's poem that is not exactly elves, but something resembling Elves with a capital "E":

Just as all archetypes have a positive, favourable, bright side that points upwards, so also they have one that points downwards, partly negative and unfavourable, partly chthonic, but for the rest merely neutral. To this the spirit archetype is no exception. Even his dwarf form implies a kind of limitation and suggests a naturalistic vegetation-numen sprung from the underworld.<sup>37</sup>

And in the same essay Jung discusses the potency and ambiguity of this elfin character:

The archetype of the wise old man is quite tiny, almost imperceptible, and yet it possesses a fateful potency, as anyone can see when he gets down to fundamentals. The archetypes have this peculiarity in common with the atomic world, which is demonstrating before our eyes that the more deeply the investigator penetrates into the universe of microphysics the more devastating are the explosive forces he finds enchained there ... The old man, then, has an ambiguous elfin character -- witness the extremely instructive figure of Merlin -- seeming, in certain of his forms, to be good incarnate and in others an aspect of evil ... I have often encountered motifs which made me think that the unconscious must be the world of the infinitesimally small ... It seems to me that this liking for diminutives on the one hand and for superlatives -- giants etc. -- on the other is connected with the queer uncertainty of spatial and temporal relations in the unconscious.<sup>38</sup>

The elfin character of the force the narrator attempts to describe is clearly related to the unconscious, and although it is not elves, exactly, its extraordinary explosive force is as mysterious as the effects of those chthonic, subterranean figures.

In his Dictionary of Symbols, Cirlot indicates that elves and dwarves are symbols of "ambivalent meaning." "Like dactyls, elves, and gnomes, the dwarf is the personification of those forces which remain virtually outside the orbit of consciousness. In folklore and mythology, the dwarf appears as a mischievous being, with certain childish characteristics befitting its small size."<sup>39</sup> The

<sup>36</sup> John McGiffert, "'Something' in Robert Frost," *English Journal* XXXIV (1945), p. 469.

<sup>37</sup> C.G. Jung, p. 104.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102, 105.

<sup>39</sup> J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 91.

whimsical line "Spring is the mischief in me" underscores the close identification the speaker feels with the enigmatic force. But in "Mending Wall," it is not elves (with a small e), exactly, implying that it is not our conventional idea of elves. The micro 'Something' that resembles Elves, distinguished by its spelling with a capital E, remains unnamed and indefinable because it is truly a symbol of ambivalent meaning, a part of the paradoxical nature of the senex archetype, a force inherent in our very nature. That the speaker recognizes that the endopsychic "Something" is a tangible neighbor should say for himself typifies the positive senex concern with guiding, with bringing others to their own realizations, recognizing with characteristic insight and wisdom that enlightenment must originate from within and, like the lines of a good axe helve, it must be native to the grain." However, as John Kemp notes, correctly I think, the allusion to elves, "though meaningful to the persona, would never appeal to the hide-bound farmer."<sup>40</sup> That this is unlikely is adumbrated in the closing lines of the poem in a gently mocking chimerical vision of the neighbor as a primitive Stone-Aged savage, as narrow and rigid as the wall itself:

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

Clearly, the reserved and sententious neighbor follows the precepts of a by-gone age, and, like the rural clergyman of "The Black Cottage," clings to "the truths we keep coming back and back to." His "armed" stance is a psychological as well as a physical one. Suggestively and symbolically, he lives in a darkness "not of woods only and the shade of trees." He will not "go behind" the dogma and precepts inherited from the past generation, even though he does not consciously recognize the aphorism as his father's, not his own. He values constancy and stability rather than process and alteration, and finds safety in habits and boundaries -- the darkness of woods, the shade of trees and the repetition of inherited maxims. He is a conserver, a guardian-figure, distrustful of new ideas and speculative questioning, who stands in sharp contrast to the inquiring, disquieted speaker. He is stronger in tradition than in innovation. The validity of old social conventions and ingrained personal tendencies are deep-seated in his psyche. As Hillman notes in a passage particularly pertinent to the redoubtable neighbor:

The [negative] senex conceives in terms of time, succession, and the patriarchal visions of fathers ... The establishment is refuge ... In this sense, senex consciousness is particularly temporal, structuring its vision in terms of the chronic. It eyes the eternal, since that lasts longest; and its judgement is passed on in terms of durability, not

<sup>40</sup> John C. Kemp, *Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist*, p. 23.

whether it awakens insight ... Or again, from the viewpoint of senex consciousness, if a matter cannot be altered at all, recalcitrant and obdurate to every treatment, by the very virtue of its durability, it must be true and good. The fixedness of things is evidence of their superior place in the scale of values. Thus does the senex make things last, hard to shed, ourselves coagulated in this or that rigidity, and by gradually extending its stoic reign, adds layers of character armour to our psychic establishment.<sup>41</sup>

Like an "old-stone savage armed," the obstinate, unquestioning neighbor adheres to this father's maxim: "Good fences make good neighbors." Behind this terse, aphoristic saying lies not simply his rigid faith in the value of walls both practical and symbolic (as a hedge against conflict, as a token of respect, as an acknowledgement of responsibilities, and as an indication of self control), but a hint of a romantically primitive notion of contentment in agrarian simplicity. It is a utopian vision equivalent to the senex's stated aim of maintaining an "ideal and perfect vision of truth and order, the senex cosmos."<sup>42</sup> The goal is perfection through order, walls, boundaries, laws -- all things concrete. What the neighbor does not seem to realize, however, is that the ideal cannot be sustained by structure and order alone; dogmatism leads only to its own perpetuation, to a static state of being.

The special strength and extraordinary impact of this poem stems from the recognition that these hardheaded traits of the neighbor's co-exist within each one of us along with the inquisitive, insightful, and analytical traits of the speaker. The process of "Mending Wall" establishes a metaphorical identity between these dichotomous aspects of our nature, and the framework of contrast within the poem brings out their universal aspects. Frost, however, doesn't take sides; he simply presents the paradox as it exists within us, knowing that each of us is inextricably on both sides of that wall.

### III.

While many of Frost's works, like "Mending Wall," contain personifications of the antithetical aspects of the Old Man archetype, the poems in which Frost concentrates on one or the other of the old man's dual aspects give the purist and most characteristic expression of the archetype in his poetry. "An Old Man's Winter Night," one of Frost's favorite and most critically neglected poems, conveys an accurate sense of the unmitigated isolation and despair of the negative senex:

All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him  
 Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,  
 That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.  
 What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze  
 Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.

<sup>41</sup> James Hillman, "The 'Negative' Senex and a Renaissance Solution," pp. 85-86.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

What kept him from remembering what it was  
 That brought him to that creaking room was age.  
 He stood with barrels round him -- at a loss.  
 And having scared the cellar under him  
 In clomping off -- and scared the outer night,  
 Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar  
 Of trees and crack of branches, common things,  
 But nothing so like beating on a box.  
 A light he was to no one but himself  
 Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,  
 A quiet light, and then not even that.  
 He consigned to the moon -- such as she was,  
 So late-arising -- to the broken moon,  
 As better than the sun in any case  
 For such a charge, his snow upon the roof  
 His icicles along the wall to keep;  
 And slept. The log that shifted with a jolt  
 Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,  
 And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.  
 One aged man -- one man -- can't keep a house,  
 A farm, a countryside, or if he can,  
 It's thus he does it of a winter night.

Pathos, the Greek word for death-struggle, is the archetypal theme of the poem. The main character, the suppliant and 'unconscious' old man, presents a picture of utter helplessness and destitution which is exacerbated by his apparent inarticulateness or failure of expression. His weaknesses appeal to our sympathy, however, because they exist both on a universal level and on a level of everyday existence. The central tradition of pathos, as described by Northrop Frye in Anatomy of Criticism, is the "study of the isolated mind, the story of how someone recognizably like ourselves is broken by a conflict between the inner and outer world ... or inner and outer life."<sup>43</sup> The central image of "An Old Man's Winter Night," the fading light imagery, symbolizes the loss of awareness or consciousness in the old man, and the encroaching annihilation of death. Unaware of the gaze of the "out-of-doors," unaware of why he has entered the creaking room, and unaware of the shifting log in the stove, the old man sinks slowly, inexorably into a living death. The four symbols of light -- the lamp, the moon and sun, and the concealed fire of the stove, usually comforting or 'clarifying' symbols -- stand in poignant contrast to the darkening consciousness of the old man:

A light he was to no one but himself  
 Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,  
 A quiet light, and then not even that.

<sup>43</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 39.

The lamp the old man holds, as the poem opens, rather than illuminating the "outside" for him, prevents him from seeing beyond himself. As his inner light fades, he consigns to the broken moon, a faint, reflected light, "his" snow and icicles and then falls asleep, only to be disturbed unconsciously by the log shifting in the wood stove, unaware of the dying fire within. The old man is so inured to his isolation and detachment from life that he is no longer conscious of it. The modifiers in the poem -- "darkly," "separate," "empty," "creaking," "thin," "quiet," "broken" "heavy," "aged," and "winter" -- underscore his isolation and loneliness and the encroaching inevitability of death. The familiar sounds of the outer night, the roar of trees and crack of branches, considered 'common' compared to the portentous sound of beating on a box -- a coffin-like enclosure - are nevertheless hostile and threatening sounds. The descent of night and of winter, like the coming of death, represent the end of a predetermined cycle. The slow, heavy, chronic, leaden quality of consciousness revealed in the portrait of the old man, especially in the words "Stood at a loss," "clomped," "sat," and "slept" illustrate the torpor and foreboding purposelessness of old age, the angst of our human condition. The analogy of nature -- cold, dark and empty -- and the condition of personal psychology intensifies the feeling of solitude and "absent-spiritedness" and the fear of meaninglessness in human experience when man loses his grasp on reality. As Hillman remarks, "The temperament of the [negative] senex is cold, which can also be expressed as distance. Senex-consciousness is outside of things, lonely, wandering, a consciousness set-apart and outcast. Coldness is also cold reality, things just as they are ..."<sup>44</sup>

He consigned to the moon -- such as she was,  
 So late-arising -- to the broken moon,  
 As better than the sun in any case  
 For such a charge, his snow upon the roof,  
 His icicles along the wall to keep;  
 And slept.

.....  
 One aged man -- one man -- can't keep a house,  
 A farm, a countryside, or if he can,  
 It's thus he does it of a winter night.

The detached tone of these lines underscores the speaker's frank recognition and acceptance of 'cold reality,' a reality, in John Lynen's words, that is "neither bitter nor indifferent, but submissive to the harsh facts."<sup>45</sup> Hillman reminds us that "senex-consciousness penetrates illusions with its fantasy of 'bitter truth' and 'cold reality,' of seeing through all exteriors ... the fantasy of 'laying bare' ... exposure of truth to the bone, 'where it hurts' ... penetrating to a self-knowledge, a truth with can be known and is unpleasant."<sup>46</sup> Like the speaker in "To a Moth Seen in Winter" who admits to the moth: "I cannot touch your life, much less can save,/who am tasked to save my own a little while," and the narrator of

<sup>44</sup> James Hillman, "On Senex Consciousness," p. 148.

<sup>45</sup> John F. Lynen, *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost*, p. 40.

<sup>46</sup> James Hillman, "On Senex Consciousness," p. 149.

"Desert Places," "Too absent-spirited to count," who scares himself with his own desert places, the speaker here 'lays bare' the inadequacy and ontological loneliness of man and the limitations set by his own deficiencies. The possible meaninglessness of the universe is a small threat in comparison to the subtle terror of the old man's personal void. "All that is in the abyss is in man,"<sup>47</sup> noted Victor Hugo, acknowledging that the terrifying threat is from the interior, not the exterior. The old man is the personification of the senex hermit, or outcast, a man "well acquainted with the night," metaphorically cold, outside of things, lonely, distant and wandering -- even if only absent-mindedly from room to room in his creaking farmhouse. As Hillman notes:

We are each in exile; but senex consciousness, cooped in its cabin of winter desiccation ... bridges beyond by a 'dying' awareness of decline. He is a 'being whose thoughts have reached the limit.'<sup>48</sup>

Frost's most characteristic metaphor of limits or restriction, including self-restriction, is undoubtedly the wall, and in "An Old Man's Winter Night" the unmentioned but symbolic and ever-present walls of the farm-house define the boundary between the inner and outer world of the old man and his inner and outer life. Once the boundaries are fixed in his mind, the negative senex is free to follow the inward and downward pull into himself, the pull towards habit, repetition, rigidity and stagnation. The senex loses its 'child-like,' dynamic aspect, its inherent tension and ambivalence and becomes me-sided and automatic. The consciousness which denotes vitality and aliveness fades. Solitude, silence, apathy, impotence, withdrawal, lethargy and melancholy in the old man indicate not only a life 'slowed down' and 'drawn out,' but a static state without process or alteration, a state of being, as Hillman notes, "where becoming has been crowded to the edge." Like the symbolic man facing death in "The Onset" who simply "Gives up his errand, and lets death descend/Upon him where he is, with nothing done/To evil, no importance triumph won,/More than if life had never been begun," the isolated old man in this poem allows sleep to slowly descend and envelop him, extinguishing all consciousness and all clarification of life. The sun, principle of energy and vitality and life itself, is eschewed in favor of the moon and its passive, reflected light. The final lines of the poem reinforce the subtle terror of the old man's alienation and loneliness and the inadequacy of his attempt to keep watch upon his world. As in all of Frost's poems in which it appears, the word "keep" in these lines is prominent and weighty. To keep is "to observe or fulfill (something prescribed or obligatory), to adhere to or not swerve from." In "The Constant Symbol," Frost revealed that the word "kept" and the phrase "strongly spent" were synonymous for him, and equivalent to "the way the will has to, pitch into commitments deeper and deeper."<sup>49</sup> Here as in "The Most of It," in which the speaker observes "He thought he kept the universe alone," there is a recognition that 'keeping' denotes interdependence and interrelationship. The poem itself, of course, is a form of keeping, and a symbiotic communication between poet and

<sup>47</sup> Victor Hugo, *The Man Who Laughs (L'Homme qui rit)*.

<sup>48</sup> James Hillman, "The 'Negative' Senex and a Renaissance Solution," p. 102.

<sup>49</sup> Frost, "The Constant Symbol," *Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose*, p. 401.

reader. Written when Frost was only thirty-two years old, the poem portrays a structure of consciousness unrelated to chronological age, the archetypal nature of a man devoid of his internal opposition and ambivalence, devoid of doing, making and creating, a man split like Yeat's falcon split from falconer. No longer even a guardian figure for "his" snow and "his" icicles, the old man resigns himself to his own stagnation and decay, to the ontological loneliness and isolation and helplessness that come with removal from human existence. The poem suggests that the "universal" countryside of the out-of doors cannot be kept through habit and repetition and perpetuation any more than the integrity of a life can be kept by these qualities. The pathos of the portrait of the old man intensifies as we recognize that all enthusiasm, vitality, idealism and passion, all that which gives the soul a feeling of destiny, an eschatological sense that what happens matters, is gone. And with that gone, and because we are all interrelated, a part of us feels missing too.

The poem, then, is not simply a portrait of old age, but an illustration of a quality of consciousness - the negative senex -- which can occur at any age or any time. It seems significant, considering Frost's work, that "An Old Man's Winter Night," with its powerful depiction of isolation and despair, should have appeared so early in his career. It represents, perhaps, the most disturbing conflict of opposing forces (inner and outer, conscious and unconscious, light and dark, order and chaos, man and nature, and life and death) to appear in his poetry. The main theme, the relationship between consciousness and life, has significance, nevertheless, for men of all ages. Whenever a man's ability to keep his world together seems about to fail, whenever he follows the inward and downward pull into himself, he reveals the negative senex, in all our natures. Frost, in "An Old Man's Winter Night," has isolated the negative senex, his temperament, his attitudes, his frame of mind, to reveal that in this state what we engage in, according to the last dictum of Buddha, is not our growth, but "the nodes of our rot."<sup>50</sup>

#### IV.

The presence of the negative senex in "An Old Man's Winter Night" as well as in other of Frost's poems ("Acquainted with the Night," "The Onset," "Winter Owner-ship," and "Carpe Diem," to name but a few) is balanced by the portraits Frost creates in his poetry of the 'positive' senex, or Wise Old Man, at work in the world. Indicative of the positive senex is the persona of one of Frost's late poems, "Directive," an equivocal guide who "only has at heart our getting lost," and whose directive is a parable on the subject of integrity and wholeness. Aptly described in a critical essay by William Pritchard as a "wizard" with the voice of a "priest, magician, rural humorist, child and spellbinder all at the same time,"<sup>51</sup> this Virgil-figure guides us on a backward journey to the metaphorical river Lethe, to the redemptive waters of "A brook .../Cold as a spring as yet so

<sup>50</sup> James Hillman, "On Senex Consciousness," p. 159.

<sup>51</sup> William Pritchard, "Diminished Nature," *The Massachusetts Review*, I, 3 (Spring, 1960), p. 490.

near its source." The poet's subtle transition in the poem from his second-person address to the reader ("if you'll let a guide direct you") to a first-person direct address (the 'I' of the poem's final lines) underscores the poet's integral identification with the guide. Like Dante, we have a poet-guide whose ironic intent is our own self-discovery. The mood of revery and reflection established by the guide's rhythmic repetitions contributes to our 'losing ourselves' in his imaginary landscape and in his incantatory rite:

Back out of all this now too much for us,  
 Back in a time made simple by the loss  
 Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off  
 Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,  
 There is a house that is no more a house  
 Upon a farm that is no more a farm  
 And in a town that is no more a town.  
 The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you  
 Who only has at heart your getting lost,  
 May seem as if it should have been a quarry --  
 Great monolithic knees the former town  
 Long since gave up pretense of keeping covered.  
 And there's a story in a book about it:  
 Besides the wear of iron wagon wheels  
 The ledges show lines ruled southeast-northwest,  
 The chisel work of an enormous Glacier  
 That braced his feet against the Arctic Pole.  
 You must not mind a certain coolness from him  
 Still said to haunt this side of Panther Mountain.  
 Nor need you mind the serial ordeal  
 Of being watched from forty cellar holes  
 As if by eye pairs out of forty firkins.  
 As for the woods' excitement over you  
 That sends light rustle rushes to their leaves,  
 Charge that to upstart inexperience.  
 Where were they all not twenty years ago?  
 They think too much of having shaded out  
 A few old pecker-fretted apple trees.  
 Make yourself up a cheering song of how  
 Someone's road home from work this once was,  
 Who may be just ahead of you on foot  
 Or creaking with a buggy load of grain.  
 The height of the adventure is the height  
 Of country where two village cultures faded  
 Into each other. Both of them are lost.  
 And if you're lost enough to find yourself  
 By now, pull in your ladder road behind you  
 And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me.  
 Then make yourself at home. The only field

Now left's no bigger than a harness gall.  
 First there's the children's house of make-believe,  
 Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,  
 The playthings in the playhouse of the children.  
 Weep for what little things could make them glad.  
 Then for the house that is no more a house,  
 But only a belilaced cellar hole,  
 Now slowly closing like a dent in dough.  
 This was no playhouse but a house in earnest.  
 Your destination and your destiny's  
 A brook that was the water of the house,  
 Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,  
 Too lofty and original to rage.  
 (We know the valley streams that when aroused  
 Will leave their tatters hung on barb and thorn.)  
 I have kept hidden in the instep arch  
 Of an old cedar at the waterside  
 A broken drinking goblet like the Grail  
 Under a spell so: the wrong ones can't find it,  
 So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.  
 (I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)  
 Here are your waters and your watering place.  
 Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.

While a "directive" is, in the literal sense, something that serves to direct, guide, and usually impel toward an action, attainment or goal, a pronouncement urging some action or conduct,<sup>52</sup> the title of the poem is consciously ambiguous and playful. As an adjective, "directive" simply means "serving or qualified to lead, guide or govern thought or action usually by prompting and impelling rather than by dominating." As several critics have emphasized, the poem itself is a "directive," written to guide us, the readers of this poem, providing a symbolic map for the journey backwards to our source. In addition, the directive is a parable on rebirth and integrity, that one must lose oneself in order to find oneself (the paradoxical tenet of Christianity) and "be whole again beyond confusion." The major presence of the guide in "Directive" suggests the idea that there is something beyond us, something or someone to whom we can turn to direct us back to that source.

In the only work in which Jung discusses the "Wise Old Man" figure, "The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales," he emphasizes that it is the 'spiritual factor' in man that is predominantly symbolized by the figure of the "Wise Old Man."<sup>53</sup> Again, less a biological or chronological reference than a structure of consciousness, the wise senex refers to the dynamic principle within mankind. The tendency of the old man is to set one thinking, to point out what roads lead to the goal, and to give the necessary magical talisman, the unexpected

<sup>52</sup> *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Unabridged, p. 641.

<sup>53</sup> C.G. Jung, "The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales," p. 93.

of the rush of everything to nothingness -- to the end of a season or of a family or of a culture. We accept the position of the guide as one who is omniscient, or at least sagacious and perceptive, because we already suspect the truth of what he tells us, and because, as a poet and myth-maker, he creates for us a kind of tentative stability from the entropy of life. He shows us the direction of the road, guides us through the trials and ordeals equivalent to the challenges facing an Arthurian knight, and gives suggestions on how to handle confusion and ontological loneliness. ("Make yourself up a cheering song ..." "Pull in your ladder road behind you/And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me./Then make yourself at home.") It is clear here that what the poet-guide is leading us to is the principal word, "make," a pivotal word in many of Frost's poems, and here used to impel us toward a time we must "make simple" by the use of imagination and "makebelieve" and even 'made-up' poetry or song-'making,' to guide us back to our source -- whatever source that may be. It is the role of the guide to be a helper, redeemer, healer, teacher and explorer, and to lead us to salvific healing through both imagination and through poetry. He guides us into his mythopoetic world to share in a possible regeneration and spiritual renewal of our selves, and in addition, he raises the primary principle of all Grail quests: that one must journey on one's own. While the guide may lead us, we move toward salvation in solitude. The poet-guide's art is an art of implication and as such can only aid in leading us to our source.

"Poetry," Frost remarked, "begins in trivial metaphors, 'grace metaphors,' and goes on to the profoundest thinking we have."<sup>58</sup> In "Directive," Frost attempts to prove his point. As poet-guide-wise senex, Frost has an authority over us in "Directive" which is spiritual and moral as well as artistic. He reconciles the paradoxes of past and present, myth and history, time and space, nature and man, and innocence and experience into the possibility of wholeness. His directive is both a challenge and an invitation to integrity and rebirth, in a very existential sense. The process by which we achieve wholeness is, according to our guide, a process of loss and of getting lost. At the height of our adventure we face the greatest loss described in the poem:

The height of the adventure is the height  
Of country where two village cultures faded  
Into each other. Both of them are lost.

The guide "who only has at heart" our "getting lost" now tells us that if we're "lost enough" to find ourselves by now we should pull in our metaphorical ladder and put up a sign "CLOSED to all but me." This exhortation echoes the biblical idea that we must lose ourselves in order to find ourselves, and the notion adhered to by Thoreau that "Not till we are lost, in other words not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations."<sup>59</sup> The paradox signals a recognition that human separateness as well as human solidarity is essential to integrity. In addition, it intimates that if we lose ourselves, we shall arrive back from where we started,

<sup>58</sup> Frost. "Education by Poetry," *Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose*, eds., Edward C. Lathem and Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972). p. 332.

<sup>59</sup> Henry David Thoreau. *The Works of Thoreau*, ed. H.S. Canby (Boston: 1937), p. 359.

back in a condition defined by Eliot as "a condition of complete simplicity/(Costing not less than everything.)" "And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time."<sup>60</sup>

The next step on our journey under the guide's direction is into the children's house of make-believe. Here, under a pine tree, lie the relics of a former life, "shattered dishes" and "playthings," and we are advised to "Weep for what little things could make them [the children] glad." While the relics themselves, like the dissolved and broken pieces of graveyard sculpture, are shattered and strewn, the playhouse has survived, and if one is to make oneself "at home," it is in this house of make-believe, this house of the imagination, that one must settle. For the 'real' house, the house 'in earnest' (the possible Chapel Perilous of this Grail quest), is no more. Where the house once stood is a "belicaced cellar hole/Now slowly closing like a dent in dough." The guide admonishes us to weep for this, too, for this futile barrier against the vicissitudes of life, for the sincere but illusory efforts of humans to tame nature, and for the transitory and mortal nature of humankind itself. The inadequacy of our defenses against time and loneliness is disheartening, but the guide forces us to face the full extent of it as a prelude to selfdiscovery. The last stage of 'being lost' is within reach.

After gaining our trust, after guiding us step by step in our grail ritual, and after prompting and impelling us ever forward (and backward) in the tradition of a directive, the guide leads us to the goal of our quest. Our journey's end, our "destination" and our "destiny" is the brook of the house, "Cold as a spring as yet so near its source." Here at the almost forgotten spring of wholeness, at the headwaters of the brook, we are offered the magical talisman, a broken chalice like the Grail, found in the children's playhouse, and proffered by the guide who has led us to this moment of personal epiphany. For the first time in the poem, the guide addresses us in the first person:

I have kept hidden in the instep arch  
Of an old cedar at the waterside  
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail  
Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,  
So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.  
(I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)  
Here are your waters and your watering place.  
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.

Like the wise senex farmer of "Mending Wall" who uses a spell to balance the unwieldy boulders, here the guide has cast a spell (using metaphors, word play, and parables) on the children's goblet, to preserve it as a symbol of lost innocence and imagination. And like the prophet, Jesus Christ, as portrayed in the gospel of Saint Mark, the guide prevents the uninitiated from finding salvation and self-knowledge, wholeness "beyond confusion." The biblical reference and the core meaning of this passage lie in Frost's reference to Saint Mark

<sup>60</sup> Eliot, "Little Gidding," "The Four Quartets" , *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1969.).

## 4: 10-12 in which Jesus maintains that:

Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the Kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand ...

Mark 4: 10-12

As Theodore Morrison emphasizes, Frost was intrigued by the paradox and antitheses contained in this verse. Christ spoke in parables not to simplify his message for all of humanity, as the passage is normally interpreted, but to thwart the uninitiated from perceiving and understanding. The poet saw an analogy between the obliqueness and impenetrableness of Jesus' parables and the art of poetry, and frequently affirmed the analogy in lectures and conversation. In his work on "Education by Poetry," Frost argues that poets; like to talk in parables and in hints and in indirections -- Whether from diffidence or some other instinct."<sup>61</sup> And in "The Romantic Chasm" he remarks about poetry that "There is risk in the play. But if some of the company get lost in the excitement, charge it up to proving the truth of chapter and verse in the Gospel according to St. Mark."<sup>62</sup> The poet-guide reiterates the second major principle of all Grail quests: that the Grail must remain concealed so that only the worthy discover it. The poem itself is a test of the worthy and a challenge to new ways of seeing. "Directive implies, too, that we may be guided, or prompted, or impelled, but finally we must decide for ourselves whether or not to 'drink.' Salvation is attainable, but only by those who bring something original to the experience. To move "beyond confusion" into wholeness we must move not only from the plane of the literal to the plane of the imaginative, but from reason to faith, from "all this now too much for us" to the source. As Frost explicitly stated, "the key word in the whole poem is source -- whatever source it is."<sup>63</sup> This metaphoric journey is a personal quest for illumination, and that we have followed the poet-guide this far in the poem implies that we are ready to be illuminated. We have made the backward motion towards the source only hinted at in "West Running Brook," and we have arrived at a cold brook that is lofty and original because it is near its originating source. In contrast to the images of entropy and desolation and decay detailed throughout the rest of the poem, the brook remains changeless, persistent and vital. To drink of its waters is to drink of the ancient and universal symbol of life. That we must drink these waters from a broken chalice stolen from the children's playhouse underscores the poet-guide's implication that salvation is found in surrender -- surrender to the impermanent, the unorthodox, the pathetic, the ambiguous, the insufficient, the paradoxical, the tragic, the irrational -- surrender, in short, to the realities of life. Like our forefathers in "The Gift Outright" who, when they found it was themselves they were "withholding from our land of living," ... "forthwith found salvation in surrender," we too will find the moral equivalent of salvation, the guide implies, in self-surrender, in making ourselves 'at home' with paradox and

<sup>61</sup> Frost. "Education by Poetry," p. 455.

<sup>62</sup> Frost. "The Romantic Chasm," *Selected Prose*, p. 78.

<sup>63</sup> Frost. In Theodore Morrison's "The Agitated Heart," pp. 72-9.

with loss. The poet's penetrating analogies between Grail and goblet, between the gospel according to St. Mark and the poet's "Directive," and between poem and rite, support the significance of the poem as metaphor for spiritual initiation. As Frost has remarked, the "height of poetry" is the "attempt to say matter in terms of spirit and spirit in terms of matter."<sup>64</sup> The wise senex guide who with his imperative force has led us through the rites of initiation, who has spoken to us metaphorically and symbolically, who has directed us to the healing waters and offered the magical talisman from which we can drink and be whole again (as we presumably once were in our childhood innocence) implies that we approach spiritual rebirth through the kind of abandonment and loneliness we have endured during this quest. As John Doyle has remarked, "Perhaps the most significant thing the poet has done in this poem is to go beyond the earlier 'momentary stay against confusion' which art makes possible to the timeless state 'beyond confusion,' which belief makes possible."<sup>65</sup> But unlike the medieval Grail quest, this journey brings salvific healing only to the initiate. Universal, automatic healing is not offered to all. The mystery of wholeness and rebirth is accessible only to those who initiate the quest, endure the "serial ordeals" and trials presented by the guide, penetrate the thin surface of reality and approach life naturally, as children do, then accept the cup of ambiguities the guide offers in the end.

It is the guide, the wise senex, who makes the journey possible, however. Without his superior knowledge and insight, his refinement of perception, his playful irony and genius for understatement, his salient advice, and his 'directed' reflection, we undoubtedly could not take the backward step necessary to achieve a state of wholeness beyond confusion. As Jung emphasized:

Since the conscious will by itself is hardly ever capable of uniting the personality to the point where it acquires this extraordinary power to succeed ... For that, not only in fairy tales but in life generally, the objective intervention of the [senex] archetype is needed, which checks the purely affective reactions with a chain of inner confrontations and realizations ... The resultant enlightenment often has something positively magical about it.<sup>66</sup>

Martin Bickman, in a quote from Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization, by Heinrich Zimmer, reasserts this belief, and reminds us that both the senex guide and the destiny of our journey are not to be sought "in any distant region" but in the "innermost recesses of our own being."

Now the real treasure, the end of our misery and trials, is never far away; it is not to be sought in any distant region; it lies buried in the innermost recesses of our own home, that is to say, our own being ... But there is the odd and persistent fact that it is only after a faithful journey to a distant region, a foreign country, a strange land,

<sup>64</sup> Frost. "Education by Poetry," p. 336.

<sup>65</sup> John Robert Doyle, Jr., "A Reading of Robert Frost's 'Directive,'" *Georgia Review*, 22 (1968), p. 507.

<sup>66</sup> Jung, "The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales," p. 98.

that the meaning of the inner voice that is to guide our quest can be, revealed to us.<sup>67</sup>

## V.

Frost's use of the senex archetype in his poetry aids him, then, both in depicting the poles of the human condition and in resolving and stabilizing the contraries within the human condition. While the archetypal senex figures in "Directive" and "An Old Man's Winter Night" represent primarily antithetical aspects of the nature of humans, the senex protagonists in "Mending Wall" reflect the inherent duality and ambivalence within humankind. In a contradictory and paradoxical world, the senex archetype both reflects and contains opposites. Commenting on the senex narrator of "Mending Wall" Frost acknowledged: "I've got a man there; he's both a wall builder and a wall toppler. He makes boundaries and he breaks boundaries. That's man. And all human life ..."<sup>68</sup> Aptly employing what Levi-Strauss characterized as 'mythical thought,' Frost often worked in his poetry from an "awareness of binary oppositions toward their progressive mediation."<sup>69</sup> Recognizing his own personal relationship to contradictory forces, the poet once admitted: "As to the conflicts of our age, I am the conflicts. I contain them ..."<sup>70</sup> Not only did he contain them, but as Reginald Cook emphatically reveals in Robert Frost: A Living Voice, he presented them in his poetry with clarity and vision, balancing, and counterbalancing them in a dynamic equilibrium. In Frost's portrayal of the archetype of the senex, then, exists the symbolic paradigm of the human condition.

### Sonja Valčić: PJESNIŠTVO ROBERTA FROSTA: DUALITET SENEKSA

#### S a ž e t a k

Seneks (senex) arhetip u pjesništvu Roberta Frosta je vidno izražen i služi mu da prikaže aspekte suprotnosti unutar ljudske prirode. Ti su aspekti karakterizirani kako pozitivnim tako i negativnim seneksom. Kategorizacija ovih aspekata nije prikazana u vidu statičnih podjela već polova koji se dinamički i kompleksno integriraju. Autor rada će obraditi tri pjesme Roberta Frosta "Mending Wall", "An Old Man's Winter Night" i "Directive" kao primjere za studij paradoksnog seneksa ljudske svijesti. Dok su arhetipski likovi seneksa u "Directive" i "An Old Man's Winter Night" indikativni za primarno anitetske aspekte unutar ljudske prirode, dotle seneks arhetip iz "Mending Wall" sadrži već integrirane bipolarne aspekte i antivalentnost unutar suprostavljenog i paradoksalnog svijeta u kojem živimo. Stoga se može zaključiti da je Frostovo korištenje arhetipa seneksa dio pjesnikova koncepta o simoličkoj paradigmi ljudske svijesti.

<sup>67</sup> Martin Bickman, *The Unsounded Centre: Jungian Studies in American Romanticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 21.

<sup>68</sup> Frost. In Reginald Cook's *Robert Frost: A Living Voice*, p. 82.

<sup>69</sup> James Hillman, "Senex and Puer," p. 342.

<sup>70</sup> Frost. In *Robert Frost: A Living Voice*, p. 305.