

## THE WALL IN KOSTES PALAMAS AND ROBERT FROST

An interesting comparison between the epico-lyric poem, *The Twelve Words of the Gypsy* by Kostas Palamas and «*Mending Wall*» by Robert Frost can be made. A central, common theme, the theme of the wall, is evident in both. A brief attempt will be made here to compare and to contrast both poets' use of the wall as an underlying theme. Both poets agree on many aspects of the characteristics of the wall: its purpose, its meaning, and its origin, yet they differ in its implications and in their suggested means of escaping the restricting walls.

In *The Twelve Words of the Gypsy* of Palamas, the theme of the wall appears in many cantos of the dodecalogue. The gypsy is forever escaping and shunning the walls which people build around themselves, societies, and nations. A passage from the seventh canto, «*The Fair at Kakava*», conveys the gypsy's conception of the wall.

Ἡ μάντρα εἶν' ὁ ἀφίλιωτος ὀχτρός μας  
τὴν πλατωσιὰ τοῦ κόσμου τῆ στενεύει,  
στριγγλόχορτα φυτρώνουν καὶ γοργόνια  
βλαστομπνώνοντας κάτω ἀπὸ τὸν ἴσκιό της·  
τοῦ δολεροῦ ἀναγάλλιασμα, τὰ μαραζώνει  
τὰ ξεφτέρια τοῦ νοῦ καὶ τῆς καρδιάς τ' ἀηδόνια.

«The built-up wall will ever be our foe,  
The wall which hems the wide horizon in,  
For in its shade the poison plant prevails:  
Hypocrisy it shelters and it slays  
With moldering blight the eagles of the mind  
And of the heart the tuneful nightingales.»<sup>1</sup>

The walls seem stifling and constricting to the gypsy, society, and all of mankind. The gypsy later on in the canto exhorts man to leap over every barrier wall. He adds that the world is unbounded and unpartitioned. Again, in Canto X, entitled «*Resurrection*,» Palamas refers to the national walls that bound a fatherland.

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1. For the Greek text and English translation of Palamas I have used *The Twelve Words of the Gypsy* by Kostas Palamas, translated by Theodore Ph. Stefanides and George C. Katsimbalis (Memphis State University Press, 1975). This first quotation is taken from pages 154–155. On the same pages the poet says:

Leap over every barrier wall. Oh, give,  
Give to your mules swift-soaring wings like those  
Which urge the broom-sticks that the witches ride,  
Unbounded, unpartitioned is the world;  
And where the spreading continents have end  
Begins the oceans' tide.

κι ὅσο ζοῦνε μέσ' στοὺς φράχτες  
τοὺς στενοὺς τραγοὶ λαοί,

«And so long as every Nation  
Knows a cramping frontier-wall;»<sup>2</sup>

Palamas goes on to say that man will continue to build walls until everyone is enlightened in the same sense as the gypsy, who has sought the Truth. Robert Frost's poem, «Mending Wall,» opens with the passage:

«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.»<sup>3</sup>

The poet is questioning the mysterious force which destroys the wall built between his and his neighbor's property. On the day that the two go about repairing the upheaved wall, the poet starts to question the motives behind this «outdoor game.» The neighbor replies that «Good fences make good neighbors». Essentially, the poem asks us to examine why we build walls to separate each other. They presumably make good neighbors, but why? The wall apparently is an onslaught against nature, and it even hurts one's fingers to build. The poem presents a conflicting issue which remains unsolved throughout the poem. Frost is in doubt as to why there is a wall between him and his neighbor, but he continues to build it up again.

There are many common points between these two poems. Both poets present walls in a physical sense, although their implications rise high above the actual stone walls. Frost implies that when we have a home, we build walls around it. In Palamas' poem the gypsy doesn't build a wall since he doesn't have a home; however, when offered a home, he refuses. He claims that the gypsies are «the race that shall abolish all fatherlands, that is to say the hates and the frontiers which divide all peoples.»<sup>4</sup> The gypsy can go inside the wall but he feels he

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2. *Ibid.*, pp. 224—225.

3. For Robert Frost's text I have used the *New Enlarged Pocket Anthology of Robert Frost's Poems*, with an introduction and commentary by Louis Untermeyer (New York: Washington Square Press, 1973), pp. 94—95.

4. See Thanasis Maskaleris, *Kostis Palamas* (New York: Twayne World Author Series, 1972), p. 59, who says:

«The Gypsy sees political and moral corruption within the boundaries of the state and inside the city walls. Underneath the shield of national structure operate disintegrating forces. Grouping under a national ideal results in a narrowing of man's view of humanity. Also, a narrow social confinement creates a rigidity of values and ideas which opposes the movement of man toward progress and freedom.» Palamas is more forceful:

«Then, even, had we answered: 'We refuse!  
Spoil not our festival; we celebrate  
The shattering of every bond and chain,  
Be they of diamond or of tempered steel.  
We are the great affranchised of the Earth—  
A curse, a curse on fatherlands again!»

must escape the wall. An envoy of the Emperor of Byzantium at the Fair of Kakava had offered the Land of Lacedaemon as a favorable domain and gift for the gypsies, but the gypsy would not accept this «gift.»

Both poets present living proof that walls are unnecessary. In «Mending Wall» Frost cites the natural distinction between the apple and pine trees, which form a natural separation. Although they don't have a barrier between them, they do not lose their individuality, nor cross, nor overcome, nor consume each other. Palamas' figure of the gypsy displays living proof that walls are not necessary to mankind. The gypsies know one can live without barriers and boundaries.

Both poets dislike walls and believe that walls separate people from each other, although the intensity of their dislike varies. Frost isn't sure what he doesn't like about the wall. He is wary and dubious of the reason for having one. It could be argued that he wants the wall down in order to be friendly and free, but somehow he also wants to be separate and protected from the other side. Often we may say and wish the wall down, but when it is close to our home, we build it up again. There is perhaps a need to be protected or a fear of losing our own identity when mixing with others. Frost does not go to the Ideal of the gypsy, as exhibited in Palamas' poem, which is the absolute need to break all barriers. The gypsy hates walls and urges that all walls be broken and torn down. The gypsy holds high to this conviction or ideal in refuting all walls. Palamas conveys the connotation of the wall in a more abstract manner than Robert Frost, seeing that he works in three basic levels of lyricism in his poetry. On the personal level, there is a private need for the restricting wall to be broken. Here human emotions act as a binding wall and a barrier to the Truth. On the temporal level, or the «lyricism of the we,»<sup>5</sup> fatherlands' and societies' wall in their cities and countries, walling in the possibility of looking for some place better. In Canto VII, the gypsy urges nations to look beyond their lands, suggesting that there is always a better place. The wall also represents the laws of civilization that society imposes on people. They are the restrictions of law and religion. Finally, in the universal sense, the gypsy tries to break down the barriers of Man. Mankind, totality and universality can only be reached with the absence of binding walls.

There are also various contrasts between the two poems. Frost asks what it is that his neighbor and he are walling in or walling out. He is puzzled. The wall has become a way of life, simply an outdoor game, a tradition. The gypsy however feels that he knows what walls are walling in or walling out. Personal walls wall in emotions. City walls wall in all things vile. National walls wall out the possibility of a better communication and understanding. The poet is aware of the things that are being walled in or out. Generally, the gypsy believes that the wall separates all men from what is good.

Another difference between the two poems is their means of dealing with the walls. Frost more or less accepts the wall and by the conclusion the wall is still there. This is the dilemma of «Mending Wall.» Whereas in Palamas' poem the gypsy is forever escaping and evading the wall in a possible ways by roaming and staying outside the walls, the gypsy will not give into the wall.

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5. For an exegesis of the «lyricism of the 'we'» see Maskaleris, Kostis Palamas, pp. 31—32, Also Christopher Robinson, «Greece in the Poetry of Costis Palamas.» *Review of National Literatures*, vol. 2 (Fall. 1974), pp. 44—45.

Finally, there are many similarities and differences in how the two poets present the theme of the wall. Palamas believes that until people find the Truth, walls will continue to be built on all three levels of lyricism. Frost concludes his poem on an enigmatic note. The wall is unintentionally kept to keep his property distinct as nations will keep walls between them. This is a present-day reality. The wall may be imaginary, physical or biological. People continue to build walls around themselves, an external wall such as a specific body space or skin thickness, which may be used as defense, as well as an internal wall of emotions. Nations of the world continue to build walls around themselves, a physical wall, for example, the Great Wall of China or the Berlin Wall, as well as economic tariff walls, strategic arms barriers, and various other protective walls. Geographically, there are natural walls which separate people and countries such as rivers, mountains and oceans. Palamas however stresses that the world is unpartitioned :

ὅπου τελειώνουν οἱ στεριές,  
τὰ πέλαγα ἀρχινᾶνε.

«And where the spreading continents have end  
Begins the oceans' tide.»<sup>6</sup>

It is fascinating how two poets of completely different backgrounds and times have seen the «wall» in a similar light in many respects, Kostas Palamas, an urban Greek poet<sup>7</sup>, and the American poet, Robert Frost, who embodied the spirit and wisdom of a rural New England.

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6. See note 1 above.

7. The reader is also referred to three studies on Palamas by Costas M. Froussis that provide valuable insights into the mind of the modern Greek poet: (1) «Kostis Palamas (1859—1943)» in *The Byzantine Fellowship Lectures I* (Brookline, Massachusetts, 1974), pp. 29—54; (2) «Platonic Elements in Palamas» in *Stasinios IV* (Nicosia, 1973), pp. 1—8, and (3) «Lucretius and Palamas» in *Stassinios IV* (Nicosia, 1973), pp. 9—12.