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STEPHEN JAMES

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Seamus Heaney

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STEPHEN JAMES

Dividing Lines: Robert Frost and Seamus Heaney

Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more.

*Robert Frost, 'Mending Wall'*¹

We marked the pitch: four jackets for four goalposts,
That was all.

*Seamus Heaney, 'Markings'*²

Something there is in Heaney, as in Frost, that doesn't love a wall. Both poets manifest an acute consciousness of barriers, borders and boundaries in their work, and both are keen to demolish or traverse them. Heaney has learnt from Frost one way of doing this: by the use of an affable aside, by the reliance in particular on a casually offhand disclaimer. Yet the reader familiar with either poet recognizes in the diffident verbal shrug—in such phrases as 'That was all' or 'It comes to little more'—an implicit invitation to attend to the serious import of what is being described: for Frost, we know, mending a wall is never merely mending a wall; just so, nobody reading Heaney's poem 'Markings' would dare to venture that football is just a game. The lines that divide up land between two people (in Heaney's case, two competing groups of people) clearly matter to these poets. They also clearly worry them. It is in the sounding of that intriguing double-note—insouciant on the surface, more troubled underneath—that Frost's voice most resonantly reverberates within Heaney's.

Frost described himself on more than one occasion as never more serious than when joking; Heaney, likewise, is accustomed to blurring the border between gravity and levity. A distinctly Frostian lightness of touch is detectable in Heaney's blend of geniality, hominess and regard for the authentically colloquial. The same light touch may be found also in certain deftly-handled play-offs between two opposing qualities; thus, Heaney's tendency towards a note of rural nostalgia is, like Frost's, kept in check by flourishes of urbane, sophisticated self-reflexiveness; thus, too, the air of open, easy, conversational familiarity set up between poet and reader frequently deflects attention

¹ *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951), 53.

² *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1991), 8.