

AT ISSUE

Out of Bounds

The first time I saw the countryside I was six, and nauseous from the half-day drive to get there. The woods, the trails, the sky to the horizon, the pheasant in flight, the snake in retreat, the horse in motion, the chipmunks in and out of piled New Hampshire walls—all were novel, but they worked no magic. Why sit on a porch when you can sit on a stoop? I missed Brooklyn, and the familiar landscape of the neighborhood. This was perverse, no doubt, and showed ingratitude to the good parents who had saved all year to provide two weeks of absence from the city, but it was conclusive. Without being old enough to make an argument, I had taken a side in the enduring city versus country debate, and there I have remained ever since, on concrete.

Two thousand years ago, the Roman poet Horace gave the argument to mice, at the end of one of his *Satires*. A mouse from the city visits a mouse in the country and insists that life is too short to be spent in rustic deprivation. The city awaits, with its endless easy pleasures. The country mouse is persuaded and leaves home with his friend. The two crawl under the city wall—pass a decisive boundary between the old condition and the new—and enter a great house, where they nibble like kings on the remains of a fancy meal. It's all as promised, until barking dogs interrupt the dinner and scare the mice off their seats and out of their wits. "Who needs this?" cries the country mouse, in flight back to the fields.

The Horatian fable is a *locus classicus* for the debate, which was already old at the time. Country life is hard but simple and honest; the lush delights of the city are tasted at your risk. The city/country debate is not about geography, of course. It's about the values nurtured or denied by the geography and the patterns of association it entails. The physical separation between the two worlds is a ruse; neither can quite let go of the other.

Horace's philosophical mice, for example, borrow the diction of epic poetry and speak with a colloquial grandiloquence that is quite new to Latin literature. Poets don't show off like that for farmers. Horace's heart may side with the country, but his wit is of the forum. The matter is woods and streams; the manner is couches and baths.

The city and the country suggest disputants who face in opposite directions even as they lean back to back, in antagonistic support. Remove one, and the other totters. A New Hampshire house borrowed for summers 50 years ago had its own take on the grudging alliance. The house was so true to its origins that no plumbing breached the walls or floors. The out-facility fell short of a Dogpatch ideal, for it was reachable by covered portico, but it was out, all right, however pretentiously tethered. Yet even in that piney chamber—*et in Arcadia!*—the city and its wickedness staked a claim. *New Yorker* covers and *Esquire* art lined the interior walls, floor to ceiling. Was their consignment to that fundamental place a rough rustic judgment on city ways and lingerie and tuxes? Or were those vibrant, colored rows of leering, mustachioed Arnos gents and recumbent Vargas ladies a talisman against despair, windows on a better life elsewhere—dear God, anywhere?

The sentiment persists that the values acquired in the country and in small towns are superior to those acquired in a metropolis. Was that ever true? The values people fret about are not peculiar to geography. They do not reside in soil or stone. The bounds of a Brooklyn neighborhood at midcentury were drawn as narrowly and etched as clearly as those of a prairie village, and the values learned on a grid of streets needed no empty plain to endorse them. You lived in the neighborhood, not in New York City, which might as well have required a passport. The grocery store and the pharmacy were across



the street, the movie theater around the corner, Catholics on this side of the avenue, Jews in that building on the other. School and church were six blocks from home, and the library seven, at the outer perimeter of normal travel. Within a radius of perhaps fourteen hundred feet from where you slept, you made your acquaintance with the world, and from that careful, elemental circuit you drew values that were universal—about the stresses and satisfactions of social order, about friendship and loyalty (and mistrust and betrayal too), about irreconcilable beliefs, about the routine practice of generosity when no one had much of anything to share, about temptations in scale with opportunities.

The same Horace who set those mice in motion wrote elsewhere of human restlessness and of how we fool ourselves into thinking we will change our lives if we merely change the patch of sky we live beneath. We forget that character trumps geography. The playing field is not the city's streets or the country's expanse, but the mind, which makes its own landscape. The struggle with circumstance is first waged there, as Hamlet ruefully acknowledged when he was losing the fight: "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams."

If the bounds between city and country ever were absolute, they surely are no longer. The dubious enthusiasms of the city now bleed inexorably into the farthest corners of the land—and are persuasive. These are not the innocent encroachments of old: small-town kids needing Broadway, farmers longing for a brush with big-town sin. Technology and its grand reach have ended the protections of distance. The technology sees no space. Beside barns and windmills and corrals, antennas once the size of moons, and now of dinner plates, suck the common culture from the air. Valleys once

the ideal concealment for UFOs are now the target of ISPs (Internet service providers). The rage to connect, to uplink and download, to surf though there's no sea, to peer at a screen's flat surface till it opens onto infinite contours, has closed the distance between any remote there and everywhere else. Important bounds are going, the ones that were never geographical—not the bridgeable distinction between urban and rural but the divide between virtues that enlarge life and values that diminish it. Consider, for example, how many Americans have been persuaded to accept celebrity itself as a credential and an accomplishment. It no longer matters that you are a fool—or a killer or a cheat—so long as you are, ah, a famous fool. In the creeping homogenization of values, and not the healthiest values at that, in the blurring of difference encouraged by the technology, lie danger and, worse, dullness.

We have banished former principles of division in American society, and good riddance to most of them—no tears for the grim once-and-for-all sorting by birth and color and belief and class. But for other lost distinctions perhaps we should feel regret. We have blurred the division between what is honorable behavior and what is not, for example, even as we have made it newly absolute through recourse to notions of "compartmentalized character." Character, it now seems, can be diced up, or julienned. This new tolerance, world weary and worldly wise, has Americans acting like cartoon Parisians. As folks now say, with shoulders shrugged, in Kansas, "*Eh bien*, things occur."

No longer inclined to discern, or to credit, the old social and moral borders, we are reluctant to draw the new. Have we forgotten that only out of bounds—set, respected, crossed, extended, abolished—can one make a measured life?

—James M. Morris