

Horace the *ruris amator* in *Epistles* 1
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Horace's attitude toward city and country in the *Epistles* is ambivalent and inconsistent; as he famously says at 1.8.12: *Romae Tibur amem, ventosus Tibure Romam*. Such a statement invites us to question Horace in those passages where he claims to be an unambiguous *ruris amator*. Horace most values the countryside for the freedom it provides, and this freedom, as scholars have shown, is often expressed through language of slavery and manumission.¹ In this paper I will focus on passages from *Epist.* 1.1, 1.10, and 1.14 where Horace expresses preference for the freedom of the countryside over the slavery of urban life. I will argue that in each of these passages Horace actually reveals the problems involved in rejecting the city, for rural withdrawal leads to isolation from society and leaves no outlet for the recognition of poetic talent. Horace must negotiate a relationship between the city and country that leaves him free to move between them without a loss of independence. This new relationship is expressed in 1.20.

Horace opens the collection (*Epist.* 1.1) with a firm refusal to Maecenas to resume lyric composition, and Horace explains his refusal by comparing himself to a manumitted gladiator now retired in the countryside. Maecenas, figured as his former master, seeks to re-enslave him by recalling him to public view. Freedom, as described in 1.1, requires Horace to withdraw both from his public poetic role and from friendship with Maecenas. By this definition of freedom, all ties to the city threaten to re-enslave. The same rustic freedom is found in *Epist.* 1.10, where Horace again likens himself to a former slave (*fugitivus*, 10). He calls himself a *ruris amator*, unlike his friend Fuscus, an *urbis amator* (1). In the country he is a king (*vivo et regno*, 8), but this fragile freedom collapses in the face of public involvement. This formulation of freedom compels Horace to choose rural life alone (*fuge magna*, 32-33). The poem ends with a hint that this definition of freedom is flawed, for Horace's separation from Fuscus diminishes his rustic contentment (*excepto quod non simul esses, cetera laetus*, 50).

Horace resumes the role of a *ruris amator* in *Epist.* 1.14, where issues of freedom and slavery are again central, for Horace's addressee is the bailiff of his farm, i.e. his slave. Horace's claim to rule when in the country in 1.10.8 is literalized; he is a slaveholder. Horace criticizes the *vilicus* for previously longing for the country but now longing for the city again, the same inconsistency he attributes to himself at 1.8.12 (quoted above). Now Horace claims to be perfectly consistent in his preference for the country. Horace's portrait of himself here is not, however, entirely trustworthy. At 1.14.6-9 we learn that Horace is writing the letter in the city, where he is attending to a friend. Whereas in 1.10 Horace was at the farm missing a friend, here he is with a friend missing the farm. Perhaps he is not so different from the *vilicus* after all. The two poems read together actually confirm 1.8.12 and offer no reconciliation between city and country, isolation and friendship, freedom and slavery.

Yet reconciliation is suggested by the closing poem of the book. In 1.20 Horace again presents himself as a slaveholder, and the slave he addresses is the very book of poetry we have been reading. The book/slave, like the *vilicus* of 1.14, longs for urban adventure, but in this poem Horace grants the book/slave freedom to leave. The manumitted book, unlike the manumitted Horace of 1.1, heads straight to the city. By creating this separation between author and book, Horace can create a public, urban role for himself that does not impinge upon his rural freedom. As scholars have shown, the book's desire for publication can be read as a projection of Horace's own desire.² Horace can accommodate both sides of his personality, the one that longs for rural isolation and the one that longs for public renown and friendship. Interestingly, Horace himself will be the book's subject matter (19-28), and it will be of his success and public

¹ Johnson. 1993. *Horace and the Rhetoric of Freedom*. Ithaca. 78; Porter. 2002. "Playing the Game." *CW* 96: 40.

² Most recently Mayer. 1994. *Horace Epistles* 1. Cambridge. 274 and Oliensis. 1995. "Life After Publication" *Arethusa* 28: 216.

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connections that Horace asks his book to tell posterity (21-23). The *ruris amator* and *urbis amator* are in fact two sides of the same man, a more complete man than 1.10 and 1.14 present.