INTRODUCTION

THE NEW GEORGICS: RURAL AND REGIONAL MOTIFS IN THE CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN NOVEL

Liesbeth Korthals Altes and Manet van Montfrans

In view of the global, urban features that are commonly supposed to characterize our era, there has been a remarkable increase in interest in the rural and the regional in contemporary European fiction. This interest is to be found not only in the more popular, traditional type of fiction for local consumption, but also in the quality literary fiction that privileges issues of literary language and form. How is this move to the local – to village or to region – to be accounted for? How strong is the continuity and how clear is the break with the traditional rural and regional novel in terms of forms, themes, and ideological orientation?

The recent focus on the rural or regional is all the more striking because for various reasons the corresponding subgenres were long held in rather low canonic esteem. From an ideological point of view, abuse by right-wing and fascist regimes of the *Blut und Boden* theme has left the *Heimat-roman* or *roman du terroir* contaminated, notably in Germany and Austria of course, but in Flanders, France, and Portugal as well. What is more, during the past four decennia or so, modernist or postmodernist experimentation with literary form has inevitably gone hand-in-hand with a rejection of straightforward realism: the patient evocation of country life in full realistic detail could scarcely be the subject of canonic privileging. Finally, high culture tended invariably to be associated with cultural ‘centres’, in a move that linked the metropolis with the values of universality, cosmopolitanism, and (post)modernity. The regional and the rural
novel were usually seen in terms of artistic and ideological conservatism, if not reactionary backwardness.

Since the 1960s, however, important changes have occurred in cultural perceptions in Europe. Criticism of the imperialism of ‘the West’ towards ‘the rest’ has been extended to the relationship between the metropolis or centre and the regions or periphery. A different conception of national identity and culture is evolving, one that is critical of assumptions of homogeneity and unity that were so fundamental to nineteenth-century nation-building and prevailed for the next century. The term ‘Regionalism’, in a cultural and political sense, seems to have regained a positive ring, and the term is now broadly used to represent any marginalized space in need of rescue from cultural oppression. Claims for a decentralized literature, for minority cultures, for local ‘difference’, are increasingly widely heard, and merge with similar endeavours in postcolonial and multicultural settings. Ecological awareness, too, is fostering a more positive view of the regional and of what is left of traditional rural life. These are imagined as pockets where life has contrived to maintain a more human scale and pace, preserved from the ills of modernity, and of globalization in particular.

Yet the changes sketched above prompt important questions. Is this return to the rural and the regional simply another elegy of loss, a nostalgic celebration of man idyllically rooted in his natural surroundings, turning his back on the evils of modern society? Are we now witnessing the ‘essentializing’ of regional and rural cultures, construed as organic unities, supplanting the ‘imagined community’ of nation? How is such a move to be valued at a time when the cultivation of regionalism and the sense of regional identity that has accompanied it has led to violence and intolerance in the very heart of Europe?

The following contributions do not pretend to explore these questions systematically or exhaustively: not all European countries are represented, and the works discussed cannot themselves even claim to be representative of a specific region, let alone country. It would be more accurate to claim that these essays represent a first modest incursion into a promising area of research, a mapping out of the problems. The writers whose work is examined do indeed reveal significant differences when compared to the more traditional prototypes of the genres they represent, but there are also important continuities.

After a general historical frame sketched out by way of introduction (Leerssen), which stresses the ancient origins of the rural as a topos, the