A Definition of Regionalism

GRANT WOOD

[Editor's note—During the fall semester of 1937, at a time when interest in "regionalism" was at its height, Professor Norman Foerster of the Iowa faculty and his students in English 293: Critical Conference, attempted to formulate a definition of American literary regionalism. Their tentative definition read as follows: "Revolting against domination by the city (especially New York), against industrial civilization, against cultural nationalism and cosmopolitanism, and against an abstract humanism,—all of them conceived as making for an artificial rootless literature—regionalism seeks to direct preponderating attention to the natural landscape, human geography, and cultural life that mark off particular areas of the country from other areas, in the belief that writers who draw their materials from their own experience and the life they know best are more likely to attain universal values than those who do not."

This definition was then submitted to the painter Grant Wood, who had previously included some remarks on regionalism in his pamphlet *Revolt Against the City* (Whirling World Series, Number 1), Iowa City: Clio Press, 1935. Grant Wood shortened and modified the proposed definition so that it read this way: "Regionalism seeks to direct preponderating attention to the natural landscape, human geography, and cultural life of particular areas of the country, in the belief that writers who draw their materials from their own experience and the life they know best are more likely to attain universal values than those who do not." To this statement he then appended the remarks that follow. We are grateful to Professor Foerster for the gift of this manuscript and to Mrs. Nan Wood Graham for permission to publish it.—F.P.]

In this country, Regionalism has taken the form of a revolt against the cultural domination of the city (particularly New York) and the tendency of metropolitan cliques to lay more emphasis on artificial precepts than on more vital human experience. It is not, to my knowledge, a revolt against industrial civilization (in the William Morris sense), though it has re-emphasized the fact that America is agrarian as well as industrial. It has been a revolt against cultural nationalism —that is the tendency of artists to ignore or deny the fact that there are important differences, psychologically and otherwise, between the various regions of America. But this does not mean that Regionalism,

in turn, advocates a concentration on local peculiarities; such an approach results in anecdotalism and local color.

Regionalism, I believe, would denote a revolt against the tendencies of the Literary Humanism which you represent, to lay (what seems to me) disproportionate emphasis on cultures of the remote past and to remain aristocratically aloof from the life of the people at large. But it should be remembered that this so-called Regionalism, as I have used the term, pertains to artistic methods; it is an elaboration of the general proposition that art, although potentially universal in significance, is always more or less local in inception. The term, therefore, is strictly limited in scope and cannot be compared with Literary Humanism, which, as I understand it, is a general philosophy of life and art.

Grant Wood
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