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# Against *haute littérature*? André Gide's contribution to the world literature debate

RICHARD HIBBITT

## **Abstract:**

In 1909 André Gide published three short articles in the new journal *La Nouvelle Revue française*, subsequently grouped under the title 'Nationalisme et littérature' (Nationalism and literature). The pieces were written as his response to a survey by the young French journalist Henri Clouard, 'Enquête sur la littérature nationale' (Survey on National Literature), in which contemporary writers and critics answered questions regarding possible definitions of French literature. Gide questions the value of the term 'national literature' and objects to the view that *haute littérature* (good literature) is synonymous with neo-Classical values, arguing instead for a conception of literature that embraces curiosity and innovation. For Gide the term *haute littérature* is problematic because it implies a hierarchical, regimented and limited view of literature and, by extension, of culture *tout court*. The first part of this article argues that Gide's critique of both national literature and *haute littérature* can be read as a preference for a literariness that is liberated from the constraints of balance and imitation. The second part reads Gide's agronomical metaphor for literary innovation through the lens of Alexander Beecroft's theory of overlapping literary ecologies. Beecroft's model of different world literature ecologies enables us to locate what I propose to be Gide's own contribution to the world literature debate: an emphasis on literariness that transcends the national-literature ecology and reclaims the notion of *haute littérature* for a different aesthetic. Gide's argument

that good literature is always individual, national *and* universal also provides an alternative to dichotomous models of national and world literature, as well as a different way to consider the relationship between different literary ecologies.

Keywords: André Gide, *haute littérature*, national, universal, ecology, Alexander Beecroft

## I ON NATIONAL, UNIVERSAL AND GOOD LITERATURE

Between August 1908 and February 1909, the young French critic and journalist Henri Clouard (1889-1974) published in the journal *La Phalange* the results of a survey on national literature, 'Enquête sur la littérature nationale', in which he invited responses to the following three questions:

1. *Une haute littérature est-elle nécessairement nationale?*
2. *Est-il possible de déterminer, dans le cours de notre histoire esthétique, une littérature spécifiquement française?*
3. *Si oui, cette littérature est-elle continuée ou, du moins, susceptible d'être continuée?*<sup>1</sup>

(1. Is good literature necessarily national?

2. Is it possible to determine during the course of our artistic history a specifically French literature?

3. If so, is this literature being sustained, or is it at least likely to be sustained?)

Clouard's questions provoked around thirty replies, ranging from the view that good literature was and would always remain national by definition (Ernest Charles, Francis Jammes, Jules Lemaître), to angry dismissal of the 'inane' premises for the questions (Louis Thomas), and assertions that the only possible critical response is to say whether one likes a book or not (Jules Renard).<sup>2</sup> The replies also encompassed a range of nuanced views which acknowledged the link between language and nation while emphasizing the universality of literature (Edgar Baes, Ernest Gaubert, Tristan Klingsor, Han Ryner, Tancred de Visan). Other respondents historicized the debate, suggesting that the twentieth century will see a good literature that is by necessity international rather than national (Lucien Rolmer). The responses to the survey provoked an impassioned debate about the status of French literature, resulting in three articles published by André Gide in the newly founded *Nouvelle Revue française*, each published under the title 'Nationalisme et littérature'.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than replying directly to Clouard's survey, Gide decided to enter the debate through a critical appraisal of the survey; Pierre Masson sees this as Gide taking on the role of 'arbitre' (referee).<sup>4</sup> Gide's initial response is disarmingly emollient. He begins with the observation that the survey was bound to degenerate into quarrelling, due to the loaded connotations of the word 'national', which had led to a familiar ill-tempered escalation featuring accusations of jingoism.<sup>5</sup> He then suggests that the first question – which he paraphrases as asking whether good literature can bypass the national – is 'pointless' ('oiseuse'), because it is impossible to imagine any literature which is not the expression of both an individual and a particular group ('un peuple').<sup>6</sup> His terminological manoeuvre here catches the eye: while acknowledging the significance of the national, he replaces it with the more flexible term 'un peuple', placing the emphasis on the inhabitants rather than the polity to which they belong. He then turns Clouard's question on its head, suggesting that it might have been more interesting to ask

whether the epithet 'haute littérature' should in fact refer to literature that has a universal human interest:

N'eût-il pas été plus intéressant, plus raisonnable de demander si l'on pouvait oser appeler 'haute littérature' quelque littérature que ce fût, qui ne présentât pas, en plus de sa valeur représentative inéluctable, un intérêt universel, c'est-à-dire tout simplement humain?<sup>7</sup>

(Would it not have been more interesting and more reasonable to ask whether one might dare to call 'good literature' any kind of literature which, in addition to its undeniable representative value, presents a universal interest; in other words, is quite simply human?)

This reference to the universal interest of *haute littérature* suggests an affinity between Gide's argument and a well-known lineage of writings on world literature, beginning with Goethe's statement in 1827 that 'there is being formed a universal world literature, in which an honourable role is reserved for us Germans'.<sup>8</sup> The harmonious co-existence of the national and universal is also evident in Gide's conception of *haute littérature*, in terms of the familiar combination of the general and the particular:

il eût été facile alors de constater ceci, que je n'ai pas la prétention de découvrir : les œuvres les plus humaines, celles qui demeurent d'intérêt le plus général, sont aussi bien les plus particulières, celles où se manifeste le plus spécialement le génie d'une race à travers le génie d'un individu.<sup>9</sup>

(it would have been easy to assert the following, which I do not claim to have discovered: the most human works, those which remain of the most general interest, are also those which are the most particular, those where the genius of a race is especially evident in the genius of an individual).

The apparent paradox of the particular being the most universal is also a familiar trope in debates on world literature. It is also analogous to more recent theories about the symbiotic relationship between the local and the global.<sup>10</sup> In Gide's case, his examples demonstrate the influence of a traditional patriarchal white European canon on shaping his conception of literary genius:

Qui de plus national qu'Eschyle, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, Goethe, Ibsen, Dostoïewsky ? Quoi de plus généralement humain ? Et aussi de plus individuel?<sup>11</sup>

(Who is more national than Aeschylus, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, Goethe, Ibsen, Dostoevsky? What is more generally human? And also more individual?)

This caveat notwithstanding, Gide's point is a valid one: the universal appeal of literature can doubtlessly be attributed in part to its individual explorations and narrations of the human condition, beyond canonical bias, subjective blind spots, and the historical and geographical contexts of production and reception. But where more recent theorists might ignore or play down the importance of the national and focus on transnational relational pairs of particular and universal, or local and global, Gide argues that a work of art requires the presence of three different types of significance, which we might interpret as three different types of value:

Car il faudrait enfin comprendre que ces trois termes se superposent et qu'aucune œuvre d'art n'a de signification universelle qui n'a d'abord une signification nationale ; n'a de signification nationale qui n'a d'abord une signification individuelle.<sup>12</sup>

(Because it must finally be understood that these three terms overlap and that there is no work of art of universal significance that does not first have a national significance; no work of art of national significance that does not first have an individual significance).

This emphasis on the co-existence of the individual, national and universal demonstrates the affinity between Gide's view of literature and Immanuel Kant's tripartite conception of identity as simultaneously local, national and cosmopolitan, glossed deftly by Martha Nussbaum as a set of concentric circles.<sup>13</sup> It is perhaps at this point where the historical context of Gide's argument is most obvious: this view of identity is based on established definitions, where the category of 'national' is to some extent an *a priori* construction, in contrast with more recent views of fluid and interstitial identity.

In the remainder of this first article Gide explores what is understood by 'French literature', starting with a critique of the ongoing influence of neo-Classical views of how literature should be policed. A consequence of this view, he argues, is the fallacy that French literature is somehow opposed to the undisciplined individualism of Romanticism. The problem with Clouard's question about the relationship between *haute littérature* and the national is that it implies a certain view of what 'French literature' means, which rests in turn on stereotypical views of national characteristics and values: this view of French literature is based on good taste – and French taste is always good –, deriving from commonplaces such as 'passion tempérée par la raison' ('passion moderated by reason').<sup>14</sup> Gide argues that these conditions for beauty are in fact universal, even if they may be found to the highest degree in certain

countries at certain times; he cites both France and ancient Greece as examples. The reference to classical Greece as the yardstick for aesthetic quality recalls Goethe's conception of *Weltliteratur* as an aspiration to emulate the Greeks' achievements: 'In our pursuit of models, we ought always to return to the Greeks of antiquity in whose works beautiful man is represented. The rest we contemplate historically and assimilate from it the best as far as we can'.<sup>15</sup> It also nuances Gide's attitude towards neo-Classicism: rather than rejecting the view that French literature shares this superiority, he rejects the view that neo-Classicism is the *sine qua non* of good literature.

The next stage of his argument questions the understanding of the term 'French' in way that anticipates postcolonial debates about identity: what one understands as French identity is in any case hybrid, 'un heureux confluent des races' ('a happy confluence of races'); *ergo*, how can some writers be less French than others?<sup>16</sup> Moreover, although Gide professes a personal dislike for Romanticism and what he calls artistic anarchy, such manifestations are undeniably part of French culture. This defence of non-hierarchical cultural diversity prefigures debates surrounding definitions of national literature, the implications of the canon, and the birth of cultural studies. Gide's article ends with a playful swipe at Clouard, whose survey is more interested in disseminating his own views than finding out about others': it is a self-fulfilling exercise, carried out 'discrètement, poliment, à la française' ('discreetly, politely, in the French way'), with the unexpected consequence of appearing less French by dint of trying to be too French.<sup>17</sup> The final sentence warns against the dangers of copying the past: 'c'est qu'on ne devient pas plus Français en singeant les manières de la vieille France' ('one doesn't become more French by aping the ways of old France').<sup>18</sup>

Gide's initial intention had been to develop this article into a longer study on political theory.<sup>19</sup> However, he found himself embroiled in the ongoing debate instigated by Clouard's survey and felt compelled to write two further short articles under the same heading.<sup>20</sup> His

initial response is concise: if one accepts the view that French literature achieved its maximum potential during the reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715) and that neo-Classicism is therefore its apogee, it then follows that it will never again attain such heights. It is here where the full metaphorical implications of the term 'high' come into play: Gide argues that the corollary of this view is that 'il n'y a pas deux points littéraires de la même *hauteur* dans l'histoire d'une langue' ('there are not two literary places/moments of the same height during the history of a language').<sup>21</sup> But, Gide continues, are these qualities of *équilibre* and *mesure* (balance and moderation) the only ones to which literature can aspire? It is at this point where he questions the concept of *haute littérature*: 'Estiment-ils que la littérature ne se développe que sur une dimension?' ('Do they believe that literature only develops in a single dimension?').<sup>22</sup> Although Gide does not develop the metaphor here to consider the connotations of breadth and depth, we can infer from these examples that certain works bring more to literature than neo-Classical balance and restraint. He concludes that this quarrel is simply a variation on the old quarrel between the ancients and the moderns ('Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes'), dating back to the reign of Louis XIV, when the *anciens* advocated continuing the neo-Classical Renaissance tradition, whereas the *modernes* argued for a distinctively new French culture, embracing philosophy, literature and the arts. Gide implies that the new generation of conservative young critics are simply revisiting the same premises of a debate that had already been played out in the late seventeenth century.

The most interesting part of Gide's argument for the discussion of literariness comes in the third and final article, where he argues for a different conception of literature based on an extended ecological metaphor concerning culture and innovation. It begins with a theory of agronomy borrowed from the British economist and MP David Ricardo (1772-1823): when a piece of land is first cultivated, all the best spots are soon taken, leaving only poor-quality places for those who come afterwards. Those who are shrewd, or fortunate enough to inherit plots

from their ancestors, can still produce a decent harvest from the land. Gide transposes this theory of tangible harvests to the intellectual sphere, playing on the double meaning of culture: 'O classiques grecs, latins, français! vous avez pris les bonnes places' ('O classics of Greek, Latin and French! you have taken the best spots').<sup>23</sup> Those who come later are left with impoverished soil, hardly worth the trouble of cultivating for such a miserable harvest; it is easier simply to borrow their ancestors' plough and till the existing furrows, because everything has been said and we have arrived too late: "Tout a été dit [...] "On vient trop tard".<sup>24</sup>

The premises underlying Ricardo's doctrine, seen as pessimistic in the field of economic theory, were challenged by the American economist Henry Charles Carey (1793-1879).<sup>25</sup> According to Carey, Gide argues, the first pieces of land to be cultivated are the easiest, not the best: 'Ce sont les terres des hauts plateaux (je songe à votre "haute littérature"), au sol sans grande profondeur' ('These are the land on the high plateaus - I think of your "high literature" - where the soil has little depth').<sup>26</sup> Here metaphors of height and depth are employed in the context of an extended metaphor about culture: the richer, deeper lower land will only be considered later, remaining until that point both marginal and uncivilized ('barbares'). Gide proposes that this fertile lower land is already characterized by lush vegetation, forests and marshlands, populated by ferocious wild animals, making them the hardest to cultivate. The tenor of his metaphor is then set out in explicit detail: until now literature has concerned itself with the high plateaus, synonymous with 'hautes pensées, hauts sentiments, passion nobles' ('high thoughts, high feelings, noble passions'). Consequently the heroes of the first novels and tragedies seemed similar to sublime puppets manipulated by their creators; they lacked the dense ('touffu') quality of a more complex personality.<sup>27</sup> It is here where the limitations of *haute littérature* as conceived by Clouard are exposed: it lacks originality, depth and complexity.

Warming to his argument, Gide asserts that is too easy simply to copy the models inherited from a Latinate view of culture; he proposes the alternative examples of Rousseau, the

Romantics, Racine (perhaps surprisingly), and Baudelaire, all of whom appreciated ‘l’ineffable ressource qu’offrent à l’artiste les régions basses, sauvages, fiévreuses et non nettoyées’ (‘the ineffable resources offered to the artist by lower regions, which are wild, feverish and unsanitised’).<sup>28</sup> It becomes apparent here that for Gide the concept of culture *per se* is potentially problematic, insofar as it can become disdainful, contemptuous and ignorant. If these neo-Latins wish to advocate such an epigonal view of culture, they are distancing themselves from those who wish to cultivate new lands: ‘ceux à qui la robustesse, la hardiesse, la *curiosité* et peut-être certaine inquiétude ambitieuse et passionnée proposent une aventure plus hardie’ (‘those to whom robustness, boldness, *curiosity* and perhaps a certain ambitious anxiety propose a more intrepid adventure’).<sup>29</sup> The challenge for the artist is to discover these new fertile lands which lead to new types of harvest. What, asks Gide with recourse to a different analogy, is the interest of revisiting the splendid *châteaux* of Trianon and Versailles? The final sentence encapsulates his measured ambivalence towards this group of young writers:

Et voici pourquoi, chers jeunes traditionalistes, si j’admire autant que vous notre ‘grand siècle’ et partage avec vous beaucoup d’idées, je ne veux épouser ni votre pessimisme ni votre impie renoncement.<sup>30</sup>

(And that is why, my dear young traditionalists, although I admire as much as you do our ‘grand century’ and share many of your ideas, I do not wish to espouse your pessimism or your ungodly renunciation.)

The composition of these three short articles enabled Gide to develop an argument which might be summarized as follows: it is a fallacy to conflate good literature with national literature; the

concept of *haute littérature* as employed by Clouard is predicated on a limiting adherence to neo-Classical aesthetics; literature should embrace the challenge of the new and look to the future rather than the past.

If we consider the implications of Gide's argument for our interest in the literariness of world literature, it is clear that his rejection of the concept of *haute littérature* is instigated by a desire to advocate a different conception of what good literature might be. In addition to the explicit references to density, curiosity, anxiety and adventure, the terms we might infer here include innovation, complexity, difficulty, challenge, imperfection, risk, error, physicality, and, specifically, the avant garde or Modernist. This form of literariness can also be seen as a move from text as imitation to textuality as a process of discovery, with an emphasis on the granular, uneven qualities of literature and the eschewal of generic stereotypes. These concerns with stylistic and formal innovation are of course displayed in Gide's own attempts to write differently about themes such as identity, psychology, tradition, sexuality and morality. Although there are no references to his own works, this interest in a different view of both culture and literature is clearly manifested in the experimental prose narratives written in his twenties and thirties, such as *Les Cahiers d'André Walter* (*The Notebooks of André Walter*) in 1891, *Paludes* (*Marshlands*) in 1895, *Les Nourritures Terrestres* (*The Fruits of the Earth*) in 1897, *L'Immoraliste* (*The Immoralist*) in 1902, and *La Porte étroite* (*Strait is the Gate*) in 1909.<sup>31</sup> It is also interesting that Gide's conception of *haute littérature* is ambivalent. Initially he suggests that it should refer to literature with a universal human interest; by the end of the third article, it has been criticized for lacking depth and curiosity. It becomes apparent then that the term *haute littérature* is a mobile signifier with the potential to be reclaimed and redefined, as will be discussed below. The next part of this article will consider the relationship between Gide's view of literature and Alexander Beecroft's theory of literary ecologies.

## II READING GIDE WITH BEECROFT

The affinities between Gide's argument for the universal value of literature and Goethe's conception of *Weltliteratur* suggest that his discussion of French literature may serve as a useful point of departure for wider considerations. In a similar vein, his use of both spatial and ecological metaphors to describe literary innovation anticipate more recent views of world literature, in particular Alexander Beecroft's theory of literary ecologies in *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (2015). Beecroft's theory is particularly constructive for reading Gide for two reasons: first, it adopts both a diachronic and synchronic approach to its study of literature, negotiating between historical developments and specific instances; second, it considers the modifier of 'world' in conjunction with six distinct yet overlapping terms: epichoric, panchoric, cosmopolitan, vernacular, national, and global. Beecroft's conception of literature is also useful for our discussion of Gide because it offers a similar sense of flexibility and potential: in contradistinction to Sheldon Pollock and Pascale Casanova, respectively, he argues that literature does not need to be written down or to exist in a 'particular kind of relationship to the nation', thereby opening up space for both oral literatures and non-national forms of literature.<sup>32</sup> Beecroft's preference for the term 'ecology' rather than system or space is also relevant to Gide's view of literature, not only because of their shared interest in analogies between literature and the environment, but also in their common view that the national conception of literature should not be hegemonic.<sup>33</sup>

Beecroft's central deployment of the metaphor of ecology is based on the starting point that 'texts and literatures are in competition with one another'; as he points out, 'metaphors of ecology and economy have a great deal in common'.<sup>34</sup> In Gide's case, the notion of competition is implicit: writers can choose to emulate the past, in which case they have already 'lost', or they can choose to embrace the future by attempting to cultivate new territories. Perhaps the most

important aspect of this shared interest in the environment is the fact that it allows for different conceptions of literature, as Beecroft writes: 'But if we use an ecological lens to understand this process of survival and recognition, we can see that different literatures over time have thrived in different ways.'<sup>35</sup> For Beecroft this is a diagnostic approach; for Gide it is a way of arguing against a specific regimented view of what literature should be, in the case the balance and measure of neo-Classicism. In the work of both critics it is evident that definitions of literature should not be prescribed by national models. This can be extended to the notion of culture *per se*: as Beecroft writes, 'it is difficult enough to draw anything like a strict border around a culture'.<sup>36</sup>

Beecroft's use of a 'biomes approach' to the study of literature provides a particularly illuminating way of thinking about Gide's ecological metaphors for literary innovation. He draws here on the distinction between *ecozones*, which are roughly commensurate with geographical regions, and *biomes*, which refer to different types of environment with common features such as 'climate, landscape and major plant types, including such environments as deserts, tropical rainforests, tundra, boreal forests, Mediterranean climates, and so on'.<sup>37</sup> It is clear why the concept of the biome is so appealing for the comparative study of cultures, because it allows for the identification of shared ecologies across time and space. Beecroft posits six possible significant determinants of his model of the literary biome: the linguistic situation; the political world; economics; religion; cultural politics; technologies of distribution.<sup>38</sup> The most relevant one of these to Gide's reflections on the relationship between literature and the nation is cultural politics. One of Beecroft's rhetorical questions here is directly relevant both to Clouard's survey and to Gide's response: 'Who assigns authors and texts to different levels of prestige and on what basis?'<sup>39</sup> In other words, the cultural-cum-political argument instigated by Clouard's survey can be seen as an example of the struggle between opposing views of how the literary biome should be classified; in arguing against a

specific neo-Classical view of what good French literature is, Gide is taking a more liberal but no less political position.<sup>40</sup>

Beecroft's six-point model of the literary biome is complemented by his six-point typology of the literary ecology, which places the model in both synchronic and diachronic temporalities. For those unfamiliar with his typology, the six categories can be glossed briefly as follows: the epichoric refers to a local literary ecology; the panchoric to a regional one; the cosmopolitan to the use of a single literary language over a wider area and longer period of time; the vernacular to the emergence of a local literature; the national to the politicisation of the vernacular; the global to literary circulation without borders.<sup>41</sup> As far as French literature is concerned, Beecroft's theories of cosmopolitan, vernacular and national literatures are the most germane; the epichoric and panchoric predate this specific debate, although I will return briefly to Beecroft's discussion of global literature at the end. Beecroft proposes the following definition of national literature:

The national literary ecology emerges out of the vernacular literary ecology of Europe, together with the emergence of nationalism per se, gaining considerable momentum in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Napoleonic Wars, and independence movements of the settler colonies in the Americas and continuing to grow throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>42</sup>

In the case of French literature, the cosmopolitan language of Latin was gradually replaced by the vernacular in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, although the continued use of both languages was still evident in the seventeenth century, as Descartes's works attest. However, French literature constitutes an interesting overlapping of ecologies, as Beecroft acknowledges throughout his study. The national French literature that developed out of the vernacular one

was simultaneously a cosmopolitan one, read by many throughout the world. The cosmopolitan nature of French literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was based not only on powers of circulation, imperial expansion, or the well-known position of Paris as a centre of international literary consecration. It was also based on a belief that concepts such as republicanism, Enlightenment humanism and neo-Classicism were to some extent both French and universal at the same time.<sup>43</sup> This belief offers another explanation for why Gide suggested that *haute littérature* is both national and universal: French literature provides a particular model for the universal. This interpretation constitutes a variation on Goethe's conception of *Weltliteratur*; not only does the 'epoch of universal literature' reserve a special place for certain literatures, but some literatures may already claim to be more universal than others.

According to Beecroft's typology, national literature is characterized by the establishment of 'a progressive narrative for national literary history', which is epitomized by the French case discussed above: the difference between Clouard's and Gide's respective views concerns what this progression means in practice, although by definition Gide's view is clearly the more progressive.<sup>44</sup> Beecroft's proposal that the national-literature ecology neglects 'works that do not suit the narrative of the national history' is also of relevance to Gide's response to Clouard;<sup>45</sup> by arguing against a narrow view of *haute littérature* and for a multi-dimensional view of what French literature might be, Gide is proposing a different view of the national-literature ecology. We can therefore develop Beecroft's initial introduction of this category by adding the following: the term 'national' is not simply a neutral container and must always be considered in the context of its usage.

Beecroft's development of these characteristics in his discrete chapter on the national-literature ecology provides further insights into Gide's disagreement with Clouard. The proposal that a national literature 'is one that reads and interprets texts through the lens of the nation-state' is epitomized by the premises for Clouard's survey and the different responses to

it, which is why some respondents dismissed the whole survey as at best reductive and at worst jingoistic ('chauvin').<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Beecroft's discussion of the 'Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns' refers to the 'connection between the imperial power wielded by Louis XIV and the greatness of the literature produced in his orbit'.<sup>47</sup> This partly explains why the neo-Classical literature produced in the *grand siècle* is seen by Clouard as synonymous with *haute littérature*, since it combines artistic achievement with political power and relative stability; by the same token, this is exactly why Gide argues against it. In his analysis of the genesis of French as a national language, Beecroft acknowledges how the political aim from Cardinal Richelieu onwards (i.e. from 1616, when Richelieu became Foreign Secretary) was 'that the French language and French literature would assume something of the cosmopolitan role previously enjoyed by Latin, a sort of vernacular cosmopolitanism'. He adds: 'This cosmopolitanism certainly had a very real force in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries but was always in a dynamic tension with the status of French as the national language of the nation-state par excellence'.<sup>48</sup> In my view this relationship between the national and the cosmopolitan is not only a source of dynamic tension; it can also be construed as a source of harmonious co-existence. If we return to Gide's initial response that good literature is always individual, national and universal, this concentric model provides a different way of thinking about the overlapping of literary ecologies. It can be surmised that part of Gide's frustration with Clouard's survey was that it was based on a premise of tension rather than harmony: competition does not always have to rely on a binary model of inclusion and exclusion.

Writing about foundational or 'shibboleth' texts that give national literatures a sense of chronological depth, Beecroft proposes that 'the device of literary history seeks to strengthen that claim to depth by constructing a continuous narrative of literary production'.<sup>49</sup> This reference to 'chronological depth' undergoes an interesting transformation in Clouard's survey, where the longevity of the neo-Classical tradition is presented in terms of 'height': an aesthetic

high standard to which works should aspire. Once more Gide subverts Clouard's term, arguing for the value to be found in the 'lower regions' ('régions basses'). Here two overlapping metaphorical fields work in tandem: the relational pairs of height and depth, and the environmental topoi of high plateaus and lower regions. Gide's argument against the traditionalists' view that *haute littérature* in French is synonymous with neo-Classicism can therefore be seen as an alternative form of national literary history, demonstrated by his interpretation of Baudelaire, Racine, Rousseau and the Romantics. It also proposes a different tradition based on curiosity and innovation, which will result in different future histories, including that of Modernism. Beecroft argues that literary history follows a typical narrative progression: if it does not culminate in an end as such, it leads to 'at least a *telos* in the triumph of the national literature, both against its cosmopolitan past and as an embodiment of national virtues in competition with its rivals'.<sup>50</sup> With regard to the debate instigated by Clouard's survey, we can add a further nuance to this narrative: the concept of 'national literature' is also in competition with its internal rivals, or its others, and is always susceptible to questioning, revision and renewal.<sup>51</sup>

Reading Gide's view of literature with Alexander Beecroft's theory of literary ecologies enables us to do two things. First, it allows us to see how Gide's disagreement with Clouard is part of a wider process of negotiation between national and cosmopolitan models of literature. Second, it places Gide's use of ecological metaphors to describe literary innovation in the context of current theoretical interest in literary biomes, the biospheres where different conceptions of literature can thrive and progress. But this reading still leaves certain questions unanswered. The first concerns nomenclature. There are two interesting omissions not just from Beecroft's typology but also from his index: the universal and the transnational. The relationship between these terms and the cosmopolitan and global ecologies will need consideration in order to offer some hypotheses about Gide's contribution to the world

literature debate. The second question concerns literariness, another term that is understandably absent from Beecroft's wide-ranging study of literary ecologies. How does Gide's interest in the fertile lower regions of literature relate to the distinctiveness of the literary text? It is to these questions that the final part of this article now turns.

### III RECLAIMING *HAUTE LITTÉRATURE*: UNIVERSAL LITERATURE AS WORLD LITERATURE

It is not surprising that Gide's response to Henri Clouard's survey on national literature has potential ramifications for the study of world literature. As comparatists have known for a long time, discussions of national literature invariably open up questions of literature *per se*. In Gide's case it is his attempt to argue against Clouard's view of French literature that invokes these questions. Let us return to his initial response:

N'eût-il pas été plus intéressant, plus raisonnable de demander si l'on pouvait oser appeler 'haute littérature' quelque littérature que ce fût, qui ne présentât pas, en plus de sa valeur représentative inéluctable, un intérêt universel, c'est-à-dire tout simplement humain ?<sup>52</sup>

(Would it not have been more interesting and more reasonable to ask whether one might dare to call 'good literature' any kind of literature which, in addition to its undeniable representative value, presents a universal interest; in other words, is quite simply human?)

My contention is that the term *haute littérature* could be replaced here by *Weltliteratur* without making any fundamental difference to Gide's argument. According to this reading, Gide is reclaiming the concept of *haute littérature* from an exclusively French nationalist context and placing it in a harmonious tripartite concentric nexus of individual, national and world. But this hypothesis is complicated by the fact that Gide then questions the very term *haute littérature*, arguing that it is too narrow; there are more dimensions than height, with its connotations of elitism and aspirations to neo-Classical aesthetic ideals. He argues conversely for depth, represented here by the hitherto uncultivated and unsanitised lower regions where the new can be found, beyond values of measure and balance. But although Gide argues against *haute littérature* in this specific context, the term itself can also be reclaimed. If we look again at his initial response to Clouard's survey, *haute littérature* refers to literature with a universal representative value; it should not be co-opted and tamed for official or national purposes, but kept as an independent aspiration for the new. By aligning this universal aspiration for *haute littérature* with a flexible conception of world literature stretching from Goethe to Damrosch, we can reclaim the term as another example of literature that has value beyond its culture of origin. Although Gide's examples of universal literature illustrate his personal literary heritage, other examples can be used to support the same argument, with varying emphases on challenges to the canon, new readings of literary histories, modes of circulation, the importance of translation, and other factors.

Gide's argument for the universal interest of *haute littérature* can therefore be seen as a further contribution to the various conceptions of world literature, be they explicit or implicit.<sup>53</sup> Returning to Beecroft's ecologies, the closest analogies are with the categories of cosmopolitan and global. The term 'cosmopolite' has specific connotations in French – as, of course, does the term 'cosmopolitan' in English – which might explain Gide's preference for 'universel' as the third element of his model. The French terms 'global' and 'mondial' (the closest to the modifier

'world') are found less frequently in French discussions of literature, although the work of Pascale Casanova has led to increased usage of 'mondial' in recent years.<sup>54</sup> Beecroft's final ecology, the global, is a 'limit case' located in the future, where 'major languages (most obviously, of course, English) escape the bonds of the nation-state, and texts begin to circulate more rapidly around the planet'.<sup>55</sup> We are already moving in this direction, as Beecroft asserts, but he is too astute a critic to claim that ecologies such as the vernacular, cosmopolitan and national will become obsolete.<sup>56</sup> Here Gide's alternative typology of the individual, national and universal interest of *haute littérature* can provide a constructive complement to Beecroft's typology: the universal human interest of literature identified by Gide, Goethe, Tagore and others prefigures the ecology of the global and removes it from its diachronic position as the final frontier.<sup>57</sup> Gide's model is also transnational insofar as it acknowledges the national whilst simultaneously surpassing it, which avoids the pitfall of assuming the universal 'human interest' can ever be separate from its context of production and reception.

If we accept the hypothesis that Gide's argument for the universal interest of *haute littérature* can be read as an implicit argument for the universal interest of world literature, what is distinctive about his contribution to the world literature debate? It is here where our interest in the literariness of world literature becomes significant. In one respect Gide's espousal of a new approach to literature can be historicized as Modernist or interested in the avant garde. But of course the desire to innovate can also be seen synchronically across all areas, periods, genres and ecologies. Gide's use of ecological metaphors is particularly helpful here. His interest in the uncultivated and unsanitized lower regions of literature (be it a literary field or a literary biome) is a riposte to clichéd conservative views of French identity and French literature, such as passion tempered by reason. In terms of textuality, we can interpret these regions as both dirty and messy; crucially, these terms can be posited as positive characteristics. We can apply the terms to Gide himself in terms of content and form respectively: the dirt connotes any

content that traditionalists or censors wish to exclude (subversion, transgression, the unconscious, sexuality, perceived immorality); the mess connotes Gide's desire to break free from restrictive notions of form and genre and to experiment with the possibilities of prose narrative. The metaphor of higher and lower regions can also be productively extended to mind and body: here reason is matched with desire, instinct and drive. Following Deleuze and Guattari, a further analogy could be made between the arborescent and the rhizomatic: instead of a vertical aspiration to heights of inherited ideals, this form of literature is multiple and non-hierarchical. 'Good' or 'high' literature can also be about 'bad' or 'low' things; universal literature can also celebrate the vibrant dirt and mess of the literary text and the human condition.

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Clouard, 'Enquête sur la littérature nationale', *La Phalange*, August 1908, p. 144. I have translated *haute littérature* as 'good literature' instead of the unusual English equivalent 'high literature', although the latter has cognate terms in both 'high culture' and 'high society', which also connote the elements of elitism inherent in the French term. The metaphorical implications of height will become apparent in the course of the article.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief overview of the survey, see Pierre Masson's notes in André Gide, *Essais critiques*, edited by Pierre Masson (Paris: Gallimard; Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1999), pp. 1024-1026 and 1032-1034.

<sup>3</sup> André Gide, 'Nationalisme et littérature', *Nouvelle Revue française*, no. 5 (June 1909), 429-434 ; no. 9 (October 1909), 190-194 ; and no. 10 (November 1909), 237-244. The three articles were first collected as a single continuous piece in André Gide, *Nouveaux Prétextes: Réflexions sur quelques points de littérature et de morale* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1911). They are also available separately in André Gide, *Essais critiques*, edited by Pierre Masson (Paris: Gallimard; Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1999), pp. 176-80 (first article); pp. 192-999 (second and third articles). Gide was one of the co-founding editors of the *NRF*, which had launched in February that year.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Masson, in Gide, *Essais critiques*, p. 1026.

<sup>5</sup> Quotations from Gide's articles are taken from 'Nationalisme et littérature', in *Nouveaux Prétextes: Réflexions sur quelques points de littérature et de morale* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1930), pp. 73-93 (here p. 73).

<sup>6</sup> Gide, 'Nationalisme et littérature', p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Über Kunst und Altertum', Vol. 6, Part I (1827), reprinted in Fritz Strich, *Goethe and World Literature*, translated by C. A. Sym (New York: Hafner, 1949), p. 349.

<sup>9</sup> Gide, 'Nationalisme et littérature', p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> For an incisive overview of the relationship between the global and local and the wider practice of 'relational thinking', see Vilashini Cooppan, 'World Literature and Global Theory: Comparative Literature for the New Millennium', *symplokē*, 9 (2001), 15-43 (p. 15).

<sup>11</sup> Gide, 'Nationalisme et littérature', p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> See Immanuel Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', in *Political Writings*, edited by Hans Reiss and translated by H. B. Nisbet, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 41-53; see also Kant, 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch', in *Political Writings*, pp. 93-130. Cf. Martha Nussbaum, 'Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism', *Boston Review*, 19.5 (1994), 3-16; reprinted in Martha Nussbaum and others, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*, edited by Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 3-17.

- <sup>14</sup> Gide, 'Nationalisme et littérature', p. 76.
- <sup>15</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Conversation with Eckermann', 31 January 1827, reprinted in Fritz Strich, *Goethe and World Literature*, translated by C. A. Sym (New York: Hafner, 1949), p. 349.
- <sup>16</sup> Gide, 'Nationalisme et littérature', p. 77.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79. Despite his aim to remain balanced, Gide cannot resist a stereotypical dig at Cloaurd's project: 'je trouve effroyablement germanique la couleur de l'ennui que respire toute son enquête' ('I find the tone of boredom exuded by his entire survey frighteningly Germanic'); *Ibid.*, p. 79, n. 1.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- <sup>19</sup> See Pierre Masson's notes in Gide, *Essais critiques*, p. 1032.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* The debate on national literature had spilled over from the pages of *La Phalange* and *La Nouvelle Revue française* into the aptly named *Les Guêpes* (The Wasps), described by Gide as '[c]ette piquante petite revue [qui] groupe quelques jeunes gens nettement conservatrices et réactionnaires' ('this stinging little journal [which] brings together some young people with distinctly conservative and reactionary tendencies'). Characteristically the soon-to-be-forty-year-old Gide expresses his sympathy for the convictions held by these young wasps, as he calls them, before justifying his return to the battlefield as a 'glaneur de vérités' ('seeker of truths') rather than an adversary.
- <sup>21</sup> Gide, 'Nationalisme et littérature', pp. 82, 83.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84. Gide notes here that the assumption that periods of moral solidity are vital for the production of *haute littérature* would imply that works such as *The Decameron*, *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* should not be included, because they were all produced in periods of political upheaval. See Pierre Masson's notes on the context in Gide, *Essais critiques*, p. 1032.
- <sup>23</sup> Gide, 'Nationalisme et littérature', p. 87.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- <sup>25</sup> Masson surmises that Gide's knowledge of economic theory was taken from a recently published book by his uncle, Charles Gide, entitled *Histoires des doctrines économiques depuis les physiocrates jusqu'à nos jours* (Histories of economic doctrines from the Physiocracy until the present day), which he paraphrases here for his own needs. See the notes in Gide, *Essais critiques*, pp. 1032 and 1034.
- <sup>26</sup> Gide, 'Nationalisme et littérature', pp. 87-88.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91. Gide adds some interesting qualifications to these examples: the Romantics only penetrated these regions as 'saboteurs' ('bunglers'); Racine's dramas would have been less interesting if he had not analysed the full range of his characters' passions.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91, 92. For a study of the central importance of curiosity to Gide's conception of both art and life, see Victoria Reid, *André Gide and Curiosity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009).
- <sup>30</sup> Gide, 'Nationalisme et littérature', p. 93. His incisive polemic is tempered by a slight note of caution: if this is unbridled, it can easily lead to what he calls a confused Romanticism ('romantisme confus'); some form of order and arrangement ('ordonnance') is still required (p. 92).
- <sup>31</sup> These are just five works among a dozen publications in this period. It should also be noted that Gide avoided using the term *roman* (novel) to refer to his early prose works, preferring different generic labels such as  *récit* (narrative) and *sotie* (a form of short comic play without a denouement dating from the fifteenth century, which might be translated as 'folly'). His only work to bear the generic marker of *roman* is *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (*The Counterfeiters*) from 1926, which subverts a conventional narrative with self-conscious metafictional reflections on its own construction.
- <sup>32</sup> Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature*, p. 14.
- <sup>33</sup> It should be noted however that a different understanding of space is of course implicit in Beecroft's analogy between literary ecologies and *biomes*, which are the different types of environment found in the world; *An Ecology*, p. 22.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22. In the model used by Beecroft the world is composed of eight ecozones and fourteen biomes.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-27.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- <sup>40</sup> If we consider Gide's argument for experimental literature with the benefit of more than one hundred years of hindsight, it is possible to conclude that the emphasis on Modernist experimentation has become as dominant as neo-Classicism once was.
- <sup>41</sup> For the full definition of these six ecologies, see Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), pp. 33-36. For a slightly different earlier version of this typology, see Alexander Beecroft, 'World Literature Without a Hyphen: Towards a Typology of Literary

Systems', *New Left Review*, 54 (2008), 87-100 (pp. 92-99). In the later version the reference to 'regional and global' ecologies is replaced by 'global' alone.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> For a comprehensive study of the relationship between the concept of cosmopolitanism and French literature from the 1850s to the 1950s, see Nicolas di Méo, *Le cosmopolitisme dans la littérature française de Paul Bourget à Marguerite Yourcenar* (Geneva: Droz, 2009). Di Méo writes interestingly about Gide throughout his study.

<sup>44</sup> Beecroft, *An Ecology*, p. 35. Beecroft identifies the 'Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns' as symptomatic of the gradual shift from a cosmopolitan to a national literature.<sup>44</sup> In the French case, the sustained interest in neo-Classicism provides a variation on this shift: the ancients are not those who argue for the return of the Latin language, but for the Classical view of literature.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222. This sense of dynamic tension is characterized by articles such as Maurice Barrès's article 'La Querelle des nationalistes et des cosmopolites' ('The quarrel between nationalists and cosmopolitans') in 1892. See Maurice Barrès, 'La Querelle des nationalistes et des cosmopolites', *Le Figaro*, 4 July 1892, p. 1. Barrès's article instigated a debate about nationalism and cosmopolitanism which anticipates to some extent the debate instigated by Clouard's survey. See Catherine A. Barry, "'La Revue des Deux Mondes" in Transition: From the Death of Naturalism to the Early Debate on Literary Cosmopolitanism', *Modern Language Review*, 68.3 (1975), 545-550.

<sup>49</sup> Beecroft, *An Ecology*, p. 233. Beecroft borrows the term 'shibboleth text' from Marita Mathijssen, 'The Editing of National Shibboleth Texts: An Historical Account', *Text*, 17 (2005), 223-235. Mathijssen 'uses the term to refer to those medieval texts recovered in the nineteenth century as part of the project of constructing a sense of national history – most famously, *Beowulf* and the *Chanson de Roland*' (Beecroft, *An Ecology*, p. 229).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>51</sup> Beecroft refers here to Jean-Charles-Léonard Sismondi's two-volume *De la littérature du midi de l'Europe*, 2 vols (Paris: Treuttel et Würtz, 1813), which is notable for not discussing French literature because of 'its dominant position and [...] uniquely successful appropriation of the stylistic merits of the Greek and Latin traditions' (Beecroft, *An Ecology*, p. 234). This view summarizes the traditional conception of French national literary history.

<sup>52</sup> Gide, 'Nationalisme et littérature', p. 74.

<sup>53</sup> It is notable that there are relatively few French contributions to the debates on world literature, which is dominated initially by Germanic contributions and latterly by American ones, with Erich Auerbach's 1952 essay 'Philologie der Weltliteratur' ('Philology and *Weltliteratur*') as the fulcrum: see Erich Auerbach, 'Philology and *Weltliteratur*', trans. by Maire Said and Edward Said, *Centennial Review*, 13.1 (1969), 1-17. One reason for this is terminological custom; French literary debates on similar questions preferred to consider 'national literature' in a relational pair with the foreign, the cosmopolitan or the universal, as opposed to the world. An interesting exception is René Etiemble's 1964 essay 'Faut-il réviser la notion de *Weltliteratur*', in *Essais de littérature (vraiment) générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 15-36; translated by Theo D'haen as 'Do We Have to Revise the Notion of World Literature', in *World Literature: A Reader*, ed. by Theo D'haen, César Dominguez and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 93-103.

<sup>54</sup> The French adjective 'mondial' is not commonly used in writings in French on world literature, which tend to gloss the German noun *Weltliteratur* in different ways according to the specific context. See Xavier Landrin, 'La sémantique historique de la *Weltliteratur*: genèse conceptuelle et usages savantes', in Anna Boschetti, ed., *L'espace culturel transnational* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2010), pp. 73-134. The more recent use of the term 'littérature-monde' constitutes a specifically Francophone variation on French literature. See Nicolas Di Méo, 'L'universel et le particulier: enjeux et présupposés de la "littérature-monde" en français', *Carnets: Revue électronique d'études françaises de l'APEF*, 1.2 (2010), special issue: < <https://journals.openedition.org/carnets/4916> > [accessed 9 November 2019].

<sup>55</sup> Beecroft, *An Ecology*, p. 36.

<sup>56</sup> In fact Beecroft argues that to a great extent 'it is within the national literary ecology that we still find ourselves today; certainly the institutional structures around which literature operates – school curricula, literary histories, anthologies, and reference works, publishing houses, and prize committees – still generally operate on national assumptions'. Although there are notable exceptions to this rule, such as the Man Booker Prize (for Anglophone literature) and the Man Booker International Prize (for literature translated into English), or the six-volume *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Beecroft's point is undoubtedly valid, and the recent increase in nationalist views of education serves only to entrench the national literary ecology. As an example we can cite the regrettable decision by the former UK Education secretary Michael Gove in 2014 to revise the school English Literature syllabus on national rather than linguistic lines. Current comparative literature undergraduates now speak of how their younger siblings are deriving less enjoyment from a restricted choice: See the following:

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< <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-purpose-of-our-school-reforms> >;

< <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/10860569/Michael-Gove-is-wrong-to-divide-literature-by-nationality-says-Toni-Morrison.html> > [both accessed 9 November 2019].

<sup>57</sup> A further avenue of research would be to consider the affinities between Gide's views and those of contemporaneous writers with a similar interest in the concepts of universal or world literature, not just Rabindranath Tagore (1861-41), but also Hermann Hesse (1877-1962), Romain Rolland (1866-1944), and others.