STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXX, 3, 2025, p. 41 - 58
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2025.3.02

THE NOVEL GOES UTOPIA: ON VOLODYMYR VYNNYCHENKO'S *THE SUN MACHINE*

Natalya BEKHTA[1]

Article history: Received 15 June 2025; Revised 31 August 2025; Accepted 05 September 2025; Available online 24 September 2025; Available print 30 September 2025

ABSTRACT. ***The Novel Goes Utopia. On Volodymyr Vynnychenko's*** **The Sun Machine.** This article contributes to the project of "un-noveling" literary theory by drawing attention to the homogenizing tendency in (world-)literary theory, caused by its strong focus on the genre of the novel, however global and all-encompassing that genre may be understood. In order to discern the limits and limitations of the novel, it is examined in opposition to utopia. In particular, a discussion of Volodymyr Vynnychenko's bestselling "utopian novel" *The Sun Machine* (1928) and its critical reception draws out a host of critical-theoretical presuppositions related to the novel and questions of aesthetics, politics and narrative. An "unnovelistic" genre of utopia also invites a brief discussion of the semiotic method of reading (for) utopia and the problem of binary oppositions for literary theory more generally. It is through these two angles that the article proposes to address the overarching theme of the special issue, post-novel, and one of its sub-interests – the interpretive methods grounded in semiotics.

Keywords: *novel, "global novel", utopia, Ukrainian fiction, world-literary theory.*

REZUMAT. ***Romanul spre calea utopiei. Despre*** **Mașina Soarelui** ***de Volodymyr Vynnychenko****.* Acest articol contribuie la proiectul deconstrucției genului romanesc în teoria literară prin descrierea tendinței de omogenizare din teoria

[1] **Natalya BEKHTA** is Adjunct Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Helsinki and Senior Research Fellow at Tampere University (Finland), where she leads a research project on "Utopia and Eastern European Literature after 1989". She is an elected member of the AILC/ICLA Research Committee on Literary Theory and an author of *We-Narratives: Collective Storytelling in Contemporary Fiction* (2020). She can be reached at natalya.bekhta@tuni.fi.
The work on this article has been funded by the Research Council of Finland (grant decision no. 361957) and the Kone Foundation.

(mondial-)literară, cauzată de focalizarea acesteia asupra genului romanesc, oricât de global și atotcuprinzător ar fi acesta înțeles. Pentru a discerne limitele și limitările romanului, acesta este examinat în opoziție cu utopia. În special, o discuție a „romanului utopic", bestsellerul *Mașina Soarelui* (1928) de Volodymyr Vynnychenko și a receptării sale critice, scoate la iveală o serie de presupoziții critico-teoretice legate de roman și de chestiuni de estetică, politică și narațiune. Un gen non-romanesc al utopiei invită, de asemenea, la o scurtă discuție despre metoda semiotică de a citi (pentru) utopie, dar și despre problema opozițiilor binare în raport cu teoria literară în general. Prin aceste două perspective, articolul propune abordarea temei generale a numărului special, post-romanul, și a unuia dintre sub-interesele sale – metodele interpretative întemeiate pe semiotică.

Cuvinte-cheie: *roman, „roman global", utopie, ficțiune ucraineană, teorie literară mondială.*

Literary theory today, and world-literary theory specifically, has become largely *homogeneric*.[2] Its prevalent interest in studying literary (and extra-literary) phenomena on the basis of the novel is not merely a reflection of the international literary field, where the novel is a dominant aesthetic form and a favourite commodity. This particular generic lens also dramatically directs and formats theory's interests and claims – to a point where literary phenomena and traditions outside the novel are either omitted from theory or remain invisible and thus unavailable for study. Sticking to the novel, however 'global' and multicultural we may want to see it today, can, at best, let these 'belated' literary traditions join the big table and prove their aesthetic and theoretical worth in a reinforcement of the developmental view of literary history (see Shapiro 2023, 38). Or, worse, this literary-theoretical focus on the novel will continue obscuring the actual diversity and unevenness of the world-literary field by reinforcing a semblance of globality.

Thus, viewed as a historically specific genre, the modern novel is typically approached as a foreign form in "almost all cultures, inside and outside Europe" (Moretti qtd. in Siskind 2010, 340). Coming out of, primarily, England and France, the novel spreads through "formal and thematic imitation, importation, translation, and adaptation" in Latin America, in "colonial Africa, Asia, and Eastern and Southern Europe" (Siskind, 340). But from this angle, a

[2] I have elaborated this observation in Bekhta (2025). I remain grateful to Matti Kangaskoski for the term 'homogeneric'.

fact of literary history – that certain literary traditions, genres and names have exerted a significant influence on others – has also come to suggest that these 'others' develop linearly, by going through a specific set of 'literary stages' (realism-modernism-postmodernism) or by adopting and reproducing core-like genre systems.

The novel also operates as a "general type" of a literary text without history or geography and includes anything from "Latin prose from the first century CE" to *Robinson Crusoe* to the *"*Chinese novel*"* because of a specific process of semantic expansion that occurred, as Guido Mazzoni shows, between the mid-16th and the beginning of the 19th centuries in several dominant European languages and literary traditions (Mazzoni 2017, 62-64). The novel today has come to mean a global phenomenon, synonymous with literature itself, as, for example Adam Kirsch formulates it: "The global novel exists, *not as a genre* separated from and opposed to other kinds of fiction, *but as a perspective* that governs the interpretation of experience. [...] Life lived here is experienced in its profound and often unsettling connections with life lived elsewhere, and everywhere. The local gains dignity, and significance, insofar as it can be seen as part of a worldwide phenomenon" (2017, n.p.; emphases mine). Here, a writer from the world-literary periphery may have a fitting interjection: As Andriy Lyubka jokily puts in this his *small ukrainian novel* (2020), the novel is "the highest form of being for the human spirit. It is serenity itself shaped as words. An ordering of the chaos of the world on the plot canvass" (24).[3] Therefore, Lyubka's protagonist proclaims, any decent Ukrainian poet has to turn to prose and produce not "a simple story, some dragged-out novella" (24), nor a science fiction tale about the future (33) but a "real novel" – the Big Ukrainian Novel – that would "finally bring Ukrainian literature into the canon of the most developed world cultures [sic!]" (5).

Selections of case studies in the discussions of the "global novel" confirm the satirical aspirations of Lyubka's fictional poet. Kirsch (2017) choses writers that "span six languages and five continents": Orhan Pamuk, Haruki Murakami, Roberto Bolaño, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, Mohsin Hamid, Margaret Atwood, Michel Houellebecq, and Elena Ferrante. Strikingly, not only all of the writers have been widely consecrated and promoted by the US literary-cultural institutions – no outsiders here, but half of the list also studied or taught at the most prestigious American universities. In the introduction to the special issue on the global novel, Debjani Ganguly suggests that the novelists under scrutiny in the issue are more versatile, "a mix of renowned figures and emerging creative voices" (2020, vii), and in line with the description of the 'global novel'

[3] All translations in this article are mine, unless otherwise stated.

as a signal of "the linguistic and cultural diversity of this fictional form across time and space" (vi). But the list, again, is overwhelmingly US-based, with the majority of writers working in English and, again, boasting education or employment from the most prestigious US and British universities: Besides Orhan Pamuk, J. M. Coetzee, Kazuo Ishiguro, Yoko Tawada, Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Roberto Bolaño, Daniel Sada, Taha Hussein and Han Kang, the 'global list' includes Jhumpa Lahiri [Boston], Cristina Rivera Garza [Houston, MacArthur Fellow], Jorge Volpi [University of Mexico], Sinan Antoon [Harvard and New York], Pitchaya Sudbanthad [Duke], Namwali Serpell [Yale & Harvard], Amitav Ghosh [Oxford], James George [Auckland], and Indra Sinha [Cambridge]. From the Amero-centric vantage point, the novel is indeed a global form but this may be because the globe has come to live in New York, which functions today as the gateway to the vast sea of 'world literature' (see Vermeulen 2017), with the novel being the only (noteworthy) fish in this sea. To add a qualification to Lyubka's quip: We, in the back alleys of the world, need a Big Novel and we need it in the Ivy-league English!

While translation may be an obstacle for the project of de-novelising literary theory, the lack of the already translated works[4] in the current theoretical debates is, arguably, a result of a certain hierarchy of literary traditions whereby those with prominence of poetry or satire (e.g. Eastern Europe / literary semi-periphery/ 'Second World' at certain points in history; Bekhta 2025) or short story (e.g. certain peripheral literatures/'Third World'; see Pravinchandra 2018) cannot join the production of literary concepts because they lack 'the Big Novel'.

In this article I would like to challenge the *theoretical* dominance of the novel by taking as a starting point an opposition of two genres, utopia vs. the novel. While there are other genres that can challenge the scholarly and even cultural authority of the novel (see, e.g., Shapiro 2021), I pick the "unnovelistic" but still prose genre of utopia (Elliott 1970, 104), because it will also let me to briefly consider the semiotic method of reading (for) utopia and the problem of binary oppositions for literary theory more generally. It is through these two angles that I propose to address the overarching theme of the special issue, post-novel, and one of its sub-interests in the interpretive methods grounded in semiotics.

[4] For example, Yale University Press, in the "The Margellos World Republic of Letters" series, features some of the best texts of contemporary "world literature" in the English translation but, without literary-critical interest in and a suitable theoretical apparatus, these works do not join the world-literary "globe".

Effective utopia — a novel?

At the dawn of the twentieth century, when the struggle of Ukrainian political and intellectual elites for a national project was often cast in socialist terms, Lesya Ukraïnka published an extended essay on "Utopia in *belles lettres*" (1906). An exceptional figure herself — a prominent poet, dramatist, translator and a polyglot as well as an erudite scholar with a keen interest in social life, Ukraïnka reviews the whole history of Western utopian thought from Babylonian legends, Hebrew Biblical sources and Ancient Greece to the most recent French texts through the lens of the pressing political (and poetic) challenge of the emerging century. *How should a writer render a socialist utopia so that it convinces and inspires the widest possible readership?*

Ukraïnka observes that not many have succeeded so far in producing an artistically convincing literary utopia. After Thomas More and Jonathan Swift, she singles out only William Morris, Anatole France and — the absolute highlight — Maurice Maeterlinck. Ukraïnka translated Maeterlinck's philosophical essay "Les rameaux d'olivier" (1904) into Ukrainian in 1906 but, in terms of its classification, she wrote: "We struggle to determine, to which genre of literature this work belongs. It is not a novel and not a short story; for a prose poem it contains too many scientific hypotheses and philosophic problems. If it had been written in a different style, it could have been classified as a scientific utopia, akin to Mechnikov's 'Disharmony of the human nature'[5]" (Ukraïnka 2021 [1906], 300). But as it stands, Ukraïnka concludes, it has to be treated as a literary work of its own kind, a genre innovation in the history of utopia: "If Ecclesiast were reborn as optimist, he would write like this" (300). I'll return to the formal reasons for Ukraïnka's high praise for "Les rameaux d'olivier" later in this section.

As for the rest of her contemporaries (e.g., Maurice Spronck, Camille Mauclair, Ludovic Halévy, Herbert Wells), Ukraïnka is ruthless: their writing is simply "senile drivel from a decadent bunch and a desire to scare the readers with the invented horrors of socialism. These populist [політіканські] utopias are worthy of attention as polemical efforts but as fiction they are absolutely uninteresting" (300). Even in the more socialist utopian attempts (Nikolai Chernyshevskii, chiefly, but also Edward Bellamy), utopian propositions remain the least convincing parts of these works and, when it comes to questions such as female emancipation — or female characters more generally, they are outright backward and bourgeois (287-289). Thus, when utopia enters a literary text,

[5] A reference to the work *Études sur la nature humaine* (1903) by the Ukrainian-French microbiologist and Nobel laureate, Illya Mechnikov.

aesthetics seems to yield way to didacticism on either side of the political spectrum. Ukraïnka's critical evaluations also foreshadow those of Fredric Jameson: Our utopian imagination remains bound to the coordinates of the present. If realized in the concrete terms of the storyworld and plot, these utopias tend to offer a reconfigured present, reproducing some of its major contradictions in the process, but they do not show a truly new, futural world.[6]

Ukraïnka nevertheless argues for a literary form for utopia precisely because of the ability of *belles lettres* to make us feel that, which theoretical discourse can only offer to reason, and, via this feeling, potentially inspire us to a struggle and even sacrifice for a socialist ideal, which now, at the dawn of the 20th century, has become a tangible possibility (Ukraïnka 2021 [1906], 298). Whereas Thomas More in the 16th century was a "solitary voice in the desert", whereas William Morris had to work hard to educate a small group of "apostles of the new Evangelium", a "utopist of our epoch" is "surrounded by the masses thirsty for a prophetic word about the world that is coming into being" (298). But, paradoxically, this makes the utopian task (of educating desire, we may add, after Miguel Abensour) even more difficult:

> How to convince a reader-evolutionist to accept the possibility of the vision of a new world, without having shown to him step-by-step how that world would arise from the contemporary form of social existence? How to make him step out of his time and occupy the future not just as a mental [theoretical] exercise (any scholar can do that) but with his feeling? How to "infect" with the futural spirit that person, who already knows she will not live to see the forthcoming "paradise" nor "hell", neither in this life nor after death? For to elicit in another person an interest in our ideas, we need to find some kind of common ground or, at least, a common starting point. We cannot comprehend the future from the standpoint of future people, unknowable to us, we only cherish it in those elements, which we *now* desire, even if the people of the future would perhaps disregard these very elements.[7]
>
> Ukraïnka (2021 [1906], 285)

The task, as we can see, is enormous. So, what literary form would be fit to take on the challenges of the new century, to optimistically and without fear project a radically new future? In addition to the imperatives Ukraïnka notes in the

[6] See, e.g., Fredric Jameson: Utopia's "function lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future—our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity—so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined" (2004, 46)

[7] For another curious resonance, see Jameson on the "unknowability thesis" (2007, 111, 113).

quote above, a successful literary utopia must also have "fictional verisimilitude" (287), a "living, dramatized (and not scholastic) language" (281), scenes from everyday life, psychological depth of characters — in other words, it must write out its ideas through the focal point of a human being, with "colours, forms, perspectives that are alive" (282). Any utopia must be in tune with contemporary political and scientific reality and thus, for example, at the threshold between the 19th and 20th centuries, there is no place anymore for religious visions or the device of a dream that could transport romantic characters to better places and lands. We must unexpectedly conclude that an aesthetically and politically successful form for utopia is not a tractatus or satire, not a pastoral or the chivalric *romanzo* but... the novel.

And, if we look ahead to the genre debates of the 1920-30s, the question of the novel seems to remain on the table. It is taken on even more explicitly by Volodymyr Vynnychenko, the author of a bestselling "utopian novel" *The Sun Machine* (1928) and a prominent writer, politician as well as a dedicated utopian thinker himself. In a preface to his later, fictional-polemic text *The Floor is Yours, Stalin!* from 1950 (published posthumously in 1971), Vynnychenko writes:

> I have outlined the main idea of the social-political and pacifist conception [framework], offered in this *book*, in my previous *work* that was published under the title "A New Commandment" [1932, N.B.]. There I deliberately dressed up this conception into such literary form that could most easily attract the attention of the widest readership (i.e., *into the form of the novel*), starting with a factory worker and ending with a university professor. (Vynnychenko 2024, 3; emphases mine)

While Vynnychenko's later works, including *The Floor is Yours, Stalin!* (published under the genre category of "Political proposal in figures") moved away from strictly fictional genres into the direction of tractatuses, this comment in the preface offers us another glimpse into the heated genre struggles of the first decades of the 20th century, where modernist aesthetic imperatives combined with the political ones.[8]

[8] And, not to a small degree, material ones – a writer had to be sold and read widely to be able to earn her or his living. She had to be, in many senses, *popular*. Cf. Krisch's defense of the 'global novel', which polemicizes with the authors of n+1's essay "World Lite", accusing them of "nostalgia for the union of modernist aesthetics and radical politics that characterized the advanced intelligentsia in the 1930s and 1940s" (2017). Difficult literature, Kirsch suggests, is unpopular and this makes it "an uncomfortable bedfellow for socialist politics", making "great modernists [...] more often sympathetic to fascism than socialism". I suspect that a look beyond the conventional novel-heavy canon of the 20th century would unearth many examples to challenge both sides in this polemic, as brief examples from Ukraïnka and Vynnychenko already suggest.

To return to my main question: If the novel is indeed a fitting genre for spreading a utopian argument with conviction and inspiration, then why has Ukraïnka, in her unfinished utopian sketches, opted for short prose or poetic dramas? Why was it not possible for her to complete any of these sketches? Why has Vynnychenko continued to look for the most fitting literary form, after his bestselling novel *The Sun Machine*, with whose ending he was ultimately not satisfied? Finally, Ukraïnka's most praised example of an aesthetically successful utopian text, Maeterlinck's "Les rameaux d'olivier", is non-narrative and decidedly non-novelistic.

One of Ukraïnka's own utopian attempts, the unfinished fantasy drama "An Autumn Tale" (dated 25 December 1905 and written in Tbilisi, amidst the revolutionary events in Georgia), is structured as a series of polemical conversations between figure-types: a Knight, a Princess, servants in the King's court (Dishwasher Girl and Shepherd) and a group of workers. These workers are builders summoned to construct a hospital in place of the castle's old pigsty – the pigsty was polluting the ground waters and caused a widespread dissatisfaction with the King in the neighboring villages. The new hospital, however, in addition to calming down the masses, would also serve as a new kind of prison for those deemed insane by the court doctors (Ukraïnka, 2021 [1905], 199).[9] (Pigsty already being a prison, of course, for the animals but also for the Knight, who's freed from an actual prison and locked in there by the Dishwasher Girl at the beginning of the play). While the workers don't know about the hospital's double purpose, by the end of the sketch they decide to drop this senseless labour anyway: "prison, hospital, then prison again, / and this till the end of days. Boys, let's not allow this! / Enough of hospitals and prisons!" (203; my translation). They then embark on a dangerous ascend towards another former prison that sits at the top of a crystal mountain and from which the Princess was freed, with plans of turning it into their fortress in the imminent fight with the King's army.

The drama ends abruptly with the Knight appealing to realism (a typical anti-utopian argument today as well) when the workers express optimism that, even though the road to the mountain top is long and difficult, it'll end in spring "like an autumn fairy tale". To which the Knight quips: "After autumn winter comes" and gets a reply from the Builder, full of (utopian) conviction: "But winters end as well". The author's final note reads: "Ending will perhaps be [written] some day" (216). Left as is, the text is indeed incomplete: more a

[9] In her monumental study of Ukraïnka's work, Oksana Zabuzhko notes Ukraïnka's often involuntary prophetic discoveries (since, according to Zabuzhko, Ukraïnka has deliberately avoided futural and utopian genres), such as this vision of penitentiary psychiatry that will come into being in the USSR of 1960s (Zabuzhko 2021, 237).

parable or allegory than a drama with its narrative set-up of a fairy tale. The structure of narrative is incomplete without a closure (even an open one) – and closure is something Ukraïnka cannot (yet) provide in 1905 for the upward movement of a group of workers on a slippery crystal mountain.

This unfinished drama, however, seems to be well in line with Ukraïnka's theory of utopia, developed around the same time. Positive utopias, Ukraïnka observes in her essay, have conventionally relied on the technique of contrast between a bright future versus the darkness of the current life. She singles out the genius of Maeterlinck's "Les rameaux d'olivier" because in this text "the dark background stays somewhere deep in the back, as a memory of the chaotic past of the planet and of the humankind, but the center of the painting, its brightest spot is the present moment, and this spot radiates its light into the future, into eternity" (Ukraïnka 2021 [1906], 302-303). A better life is not some time or some place else. It's here and now and we only need to see the utopian potential inherent in the present, seize it and make sure that the future, which grows out from the present, is still following these rays of light. But such a utopia, as Jameson (2004) has also demonstrated, is essentially non-narratable as substance, as a concrete futural vision.

To provisionally sum up the above considerations, utopia, when it inserts itself into the structure of a narrative text, unsettles the familiar narrative logic. Most clearly it is visible in the complications caused for narrative closure (see Bekhta 2023, 4-7 for elaboration). Put differently, there is an unresolvable tension between utopia and the novel, which lies in the issue of narrative.

Utopia vs. the novel

At this point a more detailed elaboration is in order on the problem of definitions of these two genres. Historically, utopias have often been re-read as anti-utopian by later generations and, since the beginning of the 20th century, it has become difficult to draw a firm line between utopias (positive and negative) and works of science fiction (see Suvin 2010, 30 for an attempt at a definition). The novel, on the other hand, has become synonymic with literary fiction in general and rarely, if at all, raises the question of what exactly this form comprises. Of course, being one of the most flexible and ever-changing genres, the novel can only elicit contingent definitions in the first place. But even the most general definitions confirm one key thing: the novel equals some kind of story. The genre of the novel and the narrative form go hand in hand (even when the novel may want to 'break' or 'experiment' with the narrative framework). To borrow a formulation from Guido Mazzoni: "The first defining

characteristic of the novel as we understand the term today is its narrative form. The second is its capacity to tell all sorts of stories in all sorts of ways" (2017, 60). For utopia, on the contrary, the story and related questions of representation are subordinated to its socio-political agenda, and its futural vision is, essentially, unknowable in the present and therefore non-narratable.

To reiterate, when utopian inserts itself into the narrative form of the novel, this provokes a clash between the two competing desires: to create a convincing story(world), drawing the reader into it, and to communicate a convincing political vision, which often comes at the expense of fictional verisimilitude. This clash comes to the fore in the literary-critical discourse, which frequently reads utopias as deficient novels.

For example, in his *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre* (1970), Robert C. Elliott mentions Aldous Huxley's *Island* (1962) as a positive utopia, "an honorable, if unnovelistic, mode of fiction" (104). *Island* was published as a novel and "most reviewers, accepting the designation without question, proceeded to belabor the book accordingly: despite its interesting ideas, one of the worst novels ever written, Frank Kermode decided" (102). Wayne Booth suggested that "although it calls itself a novel, *Island* actually belongs [. . .] [to] works which use fictional devices to provoke thought. Booth avowed his interest in *Island*, although he felt unable to pronounce an aesthetic judgement, the criteria for this 'nameless and tricky genre' not yet having been worked out" (Elliott, 102–104). It is interesting that Booth was unable to define the genre of *Island* as utopia. Probably because the novel employs a stern critical discourse, which falls within the conventions of the novel.[10]

Another good case in point is Oleksandr Biletskyi's influential review of Vynnychenko's bestseller *The Sun Machine.* The 1928 review starts right off with the question of genre: *The Sun Machine* appeared under the label "utopian novel" and could signal a major shift in the Ukrainian literary tradition, typically uninterested in this genre. But is this designation coming from the author (and hence signals a key to the text) or is it a publisher's move (evidently, a less important genre imperative)? Solving the question of genre designation, Biletskyi rightly notes, is not a mere typological exercise but it would "in part, influence the characterisation of Vynnychenko's new novel as a literary text" (1990 [1928], 122). For Biletskyi, in the 1920s Soviet Ukraine, utopias were expected to have a

[10] Robert C. Elliott cites Richard Gerber's argument who, in 1955, observed how contemporary utopian fiction "slowly assumes the shape of a novel" (Gerber qtd. in Elliott 1970, 103) in becoming problematic and "full of social and moral conflicts, its characters diversified and individualized" (104). The gist of my argument in what follows is to suggest that, while the novel exerts a strong pressure on utopia, the latter genre nevertheless cannot fully dissolve into a "utopian novel" due to its formal and ideological peculiarities.

strong, convincing science-fictional element. And since Vynnychenko's fictional invention (the sun machine) is more of a symbol than a science-fictional device from the near future, and since any science-fictional problems, "insignificant to begin with" (126), fall off in the course of the novel as old leaves, Biletskyi concludes that this text cannot be deemed a utopia. Instead, it's an engaging socio-psychological novel.[11]

There is, however, a contradiction in Biletskyi's analysis: He has to note that also psychologism and the most interesting plot twists and conflicts (love rivalries, detective mysteries, cunning plans of power seizures and coups) gradually are "liquidated by the author" rather than developed to some logical conclusion. Thus, for example, when the Head of the United Bank (almost literally "the King of the Earth"), Friedrich Mertens fails to keep his power, fails to, brutally and violently, reign in the revolution of the adepts of the sun machine and has to subsequently learn to live in the new social order, he eventually simply sees its emancipatory potential and even offers his help to the emerging commune – without any conniving agendas or unexpected plot twists. His storyline simply recedes into the background without a dedicated closure or resolution, once the mimetic-argumentative role of his character – to offer an initial caricature of a capitalist – is exhausted. I argue that these are precisely the generic discontinuities that expose the limits of the novel.

The imperative of the novel is to follow the logic of a particular story, but the utopia's imperative is to try and give an answer to the socio-political concerns that *The Sun Machine* was set to examine: Is there a non-violent alternative for a radical rebuilding of a society? Would a socialist re-organisation or merely an elimination of work inevitably deteriorate social structure? In the storyworld of the book, a scientific discovery functions as a catalyst for such radical re-organisation. A ground-breaking mineral termed "helionite," when fused with a glass lens, makes solar energy suitable for direct consumption – by infusing a kind of plant 'smoothie' made from plain grass or fallen leaves with this energy. The trick is that you have to add a few drops of your own sweat to this mix in order for it to properly fuse. Such "sun machine" is extremely easy to make at home and, by providing access to easy sustenance, it frees masses of people from hard, forced work or else death by hunger (the novel was written during 1922-1924). At the same time, the fact that a production of "solar bread" still demands human sweat, in the literal sense, makes the sun machine into a symbol of some overarching necessity of work, central to human life: Solar bread is not a gift of heavens but a result of human ingenuity and work. It is in

[11] Another literary scholar, Marko Pavlyshyn, points out how Vynnychenko's critics often focused on the question whether his explicitly formulated ideological positions retracted from the aesthetic value of his literary works (Pavlyshyn 1989).

this sense that the invention of the sun machine is both an enactment of the Biblical imperative ("By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground", Genesis 3:19) and a utopian victory over God, who banished humankind from Paradise.

If we read *The Sun Machine*[12] first and foremost as a utopia, then criteria for its aesthetic judgement and "characterization as a literary work" would be far less plot-based than for a novel. Following Jameson, I approach a utopian text "as a determinate type of praxis, rather than a specific mode of representation" (Jameson 2009, 392). This praxis, furthermore, is not a game of construction of a specific idea of a 'perfect society' but "a concrete set of mental operations to be performed on a determinate type of raw material given in advance, which is contemporary society itself—or, what amounts to the same thing, on those collective representations of contemporary society that inform our ideologies just as they order our experience of daily life" (392). Viewed in this light, the abundance of plot elements, character types, political organisations and (narrative) conflicts *without resolution* makes complete sense in *The Sun Machine* given the tumultuous historical reality behind it: In particular, the Ukrainian revolutions of 1917-1920 (peasant, national and socialist), with their competing fractions and governments, a Polish-Ukrainian war within the Austro-Hungarian empire, a joint Polish-Ukrainian attack on the Soviet Ukraine, and the WWI, much of which has played out on the Ukrainian territory (see Hrystak 2021, Chapter 5 for overview).

The dramatic and often tragic nature of this "raw material" behind *The Sun Machine*, and Vynnychenko's own role in the events (including as the head of one of the governments in 1918), make his utopia into a remarkable document of the political imagination of the early 20th century. Furthermore, as Mykola Soroka observes, *The Sun Machine*, written in exile in Berlin, can be read as "Vynnychenko's attempt to polemicize with the Soviet form of socialism, but it was broadly addressed to the Western readership as a way of highlighting the main problems of the capitalist system" (2005, 328-329). The book also begins to outline the foundations of Vynnychenko's idea for harmonious life, which he subsequently termed a "concordist" system. But on top of its clearly utopian agenda, *The Sun Machine* was also Vynnychenko's attempt at the 'Big Novel' that should have become "a calling card for Ukrainian literature in Europe" (Vynnychenko 1983, 279) and carved out a space in the international canon alongside the works of Herbert Wells, Karel Capek and Anatole France.[13] While these hopes didn't

[12] For a very detailed plot summary and analysis see Smyrniw (2013; Chapter 6 "The Solar Machine"). See also Soroka (2012; Chapter 4). Since Vynnychenko's work has not been translated into English, I refer to it in my own translation as "The Sun Machine".

[13] He commissioned translations of this novel into French, German and English but, eventually, could not find a publisher – neither in Germany nor in France. This was partly due to the anti-

materialize, *The Sun Machine* was an immense success in the Soviet Ukraine: Upon its publication, three consecutive printings of the book were sold out, there were waiting lists in the libraries; it also had three editions in the Russian translation, reaching far across the Soviet Union.[14]

Given how with each element in the discussion of *The Sun Machine* its opposite inevitably emerges, I suggest that this text is best approached not with a question framed by the 'either/or' choice (novel/utopia, Ukrainian/European, positive/negative) but via the complex structure of a binary opposition, which lies at heart of utopian discourse more generally. Utopias are conventionally understood as drawing a firm line between good and bad but in practice an opposition (or "contrast", in Ukrainka's formulation) does not mean an either/or choice. Ursula K. Le Guin once offered to view utopia as a yin and yang symbol in action, "not a stasis but a process" (196): "Every utopia since *Utopia* has also been, clearly or obscurely, actually or possibly, in the author's or in the readers' judgement, both a good place and a bad one. Every eutopia contains a dystopia, every dystopia contains a eutopia" (195). Oppositions such as these, Jameson notes, "betray some more fundamental dynamic in the utopian process" (2004, 48). His elaboration is worth quoting at length:

> These utopian oppositions allow us [...], by way of negation, to grasp the moment of truth of each term. Put the other way around, the value of each term is differential, it lies not in its own substantive content but as an ideological critique of its opposite number. [...] Yet the operation does not conform to that stereotype of the dialectic in which the two opposites are ultimately united in some impossible synthesis (or what Greimas calls the 'complex term'). If dialectical, then this one is a negative dialectic in which each term persists in its negation of the other; it is in their double negation that the genuine political and philosophic content is to be located. But the two terms must not cancel each other out; their disappearance would leave us back in that status quo, that realm of current being which it was the function and value of the utopian fantasy to have negated in the first place; indeed—as we have now been able to observe—to have doubly negated. Jameson (2004, 50-1)

capitalist stance of the book, partly due to its 800-page volume and partly due to xenophobic and almost colonial attitudes a writer from Ukraine faced in Europe at the time, especially in France. For details, see Soroka (2005, 339-351).

[14] Vynnychenko notes in his diary on 10 February 1928, in a rebuff of the professional readers-critics: "My hopes for *The Sun Machine* have become reality: a mass reader is reading it, lower classes are reading it, *Donbas* [reference to the proletarian population of this region, N.B.] is reading it, they are reading it without critics' instructions, without paying attention to various Demchenkos" (Vynnychenko 2010, 410).

Jameson, following Louis Marin (1973) and Greimassian semiotics, elaborates also a method of reading for utopia (in this terminology, the 'neutral term'), which I cannot discuss here in detail. I shall note, however, that an identification of the initial structuring opposition, which the utopian operation then proceeds to doubly negate, is one of the main interpretative moves within this method. To stay with the example of *The Sun Machine*, the end of the backbreaking toil that the book proposes is, undoubtedly, an eutopia. And yet, once the social repercussions of the invention of the sun machine are thoroughly seen through, Vynnychenko shows that such an invention not only eliminates the need for labour but soon puts an end to basic comfort, medicine, education, culture and leads to a dystopian downgrading of human life to the level of mere physical survival. (This condition, in a properly utopian spirit, is also considered seriously by Vynnychenko: What makes animal life seem worse than human life? Would we not be happier leading an animal-like existence?) To phrase this in Jameson's terms, the moment of truth about daily toil that we see via the relation of opposition is that such toil is not merely dystopian (in the sense of exploitation of labour) but it also exposes the destructive potential of a work-free life (selfish hedonism or else – aimless, vegetative existence). Similarly, its opposite, freedom from forced work («праця-примус», Vynnychenko 1989, 530) illuminates our inability to conceive of work in some joyous, non-material and non-monetary terms as an activity indivisible from human life itself («творча праця-насолода», "creative work-as-pleasure", 520).[15]

Capitalist exploitation vs. freedom from all work is, however, only an initial and the most obvious opposition, structuring the utopian experiment of *The Sun Machine* – an initial dead-end of imagination demanding further exploration. If exploitative toil as well as removal of all work from a society do not lead to a better life, what does? The logic of the basic structure of meaning (as revealed by the procedures of the semiotic square; see Jameson 2009, 402) would now offer several possible developments to the initial opposition, which Vynnychenko formulates in political terms: (a) 'monarchism vs. capitalism', where a version of democratic monarchy re-emerges as a more desirable, more noble and morally robust form of power in comparison to the brutality of capitalist accumulation and the logic of profit for the sake of more profit without any principles. But this opposition also figures in the novel as (b) 'liberalism vs. feudalism', with the frail and theatrical aristocratic nobility getting satirized for their failure to side with the new forces of history. The opposition of (c) 'socialism vs. capitalism' for Vynnychenko already presents itself as outdated, with socialism

[15] This resonates with the idea of "congenial work" («сродна праця») by the Ukrainian 18-th C philosopher Hyrhorii Skovoroda.

having turned into a legitimate 'opposition party' within a liberal-capitalist government, to which *The Sun Machine* offers a utopian-speculative solution of '*sontseism* vs. socialism', where a 'sontseism', or 'sun-ism' in translation, is Vynnychenko's neologism for a pacifist reconfiguration of the communist cause.

Sontseism as a quasi-anarchic world revolution but without violence, a radical and all-encompassing grass-roots movement motivated by love. Here the potential derogatory accusations of being a utopian lurk between the lines (Biletskyi, e.g., accused Vynnychenko of "naivete in the set-up and resolution of the social problem", 131). But such is the quality of all utopias: once actualized, verbalized, put into concrete representational terms, they become dull, naïve, they disintegrate. And yet, 'sontseism' offers itself as a double negation of the available terms of the initial opposition, capitalist exploitation or socialist stagnation — "a desperate (and impossible) final attempt to eradicate the contradictions of the system by some extreme gesture" (Jameson 2009, 402). It is fitting to conclude with Vynnychenko's diary entry, ten years after the publication of *The Sun Machine*, which turned out to be less a work of fiction but a starting argument in Vynnychenko's life-long utopian programme:

> I hope that my prediction about the victory of *The Solar Machine*, that is, nature, labour, science, and freedom in the life of human society, is justified sooner and on such a scale. I wish a "solarist", or preferably concordist Republic of Earth comes sooner, for this would have great importance! I can predict with absolute confidence that this will come true one day. The only question is how soon? Shall we live to see the realization of my prophecy? What stages will it take to fight for *The Solar Machine* and for sunism? How many epochs? What will be sacrificed on its altar? What "shadows of the past" will be the most durable, fierce, and bloody in this great and final struggle, indeed the final one? (Vynnychenko, *Diary*, 1938, trans. by Mykola Soroka, qtd. in Soroka 2012, 97)

Conclusion: Un-noveling literary theory

A cursory look at the texts and at the genre debates of the beginning of the 20th century that I have offered in this article reveals how utopia comes forward as a genre working in parallel with the novel, productively illuminating the latter's boundaries – as well as biases of literary criticism and theory – in the process. Utopian and alternative or parallel to it polemical-satirical traditions of the Eastern-European semi-periphery during the revolutionary struggles and the emergence of new state formations of the early 1900s cannot be easily

read within the long world-literary history of the novel – nor are they even visible,[16] for various reasons, from the contemporary vantage point of the world-literary theory. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro have identified a similar problem in the context of Early American Studies: "Before 1820, the novel was still in flux, formally speaking, and coexisted with a host of alternative forms of expression. Yet once the novel became dominant, it became so dominant that it tended to obscure or efface the prior existence of these other forms as contemporaneous competitors" (Barnard & Shapiro 2022, 552). With this contribution, I join Barnard's and Shapiro's call for "un-noveling" our approaches to the study of individual authors and traditions as well as literary theory more generally.

In conclusion, I would like to stress: establishing the one and only 'correct' genre designation for a literary work, especially such a mix of genres as *The Sun Machine*, has not been my goal and in itself this is not a very useful exercise. My larger aim has been to draw attention to the genre preconceptions that literary theory and criticism bring to literary work, which then determine its analysis, evaluation or judgement and a subsequent inclusion into canon. A comprehensive theory of the world-literary system should be able to account *on their own terms* for the literary traditions and epochs outside the trajectory of the initial rise to prominence and spread of the novel. A comprehensive theory of a literary system should also be able to hold in view residual and emergent genres (if any) at specific points in history in specific literary traditions and regions. Finally, a comprehensive theory of a literary system would be world-systemic, multiscalar and open to what Divya Dwivedi has recently described as homologies and polynomia operating in the field of literature and literary theory: phenomena that have "multiple common origins rather than a single theological or hypophysical origin" (2024, 313) and constructions that "enter into new regularities or are legislated into more than one regularity" (316). At the same time, while the novel seems to pose a hindrance to such a project of literary theory today, I have suggested that the structure and operation of binary opposition (especially as elaborated by Fredric Jameson), understood in properly semiotic terms, continue to offer a productive interpretative method for literary theory, and, in particular, for those literary and aesthetic artefacts that are semantically and artistically multidirectional, like utopias.

[16] Here I echo Divya Dwivedi's discussion of the problems of decolonization and de-canonisation of literary theory – with theory understood as "the discourse of the principles of selection, criticism, and interpretation, or theory as *seeing*" (2024, 312).

WORKS CITED

Barnard, Philip, and Stephen Shapiro. 2022. "Un-Noveling Brown: Liberalism and Its Literary Discontents." *Early American Literature* 57.2: 549-554.

Bekhta, Natalya. 2023. "Thomas the Baboon and Utopia: Constructing a Realistic Future." *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 15: 1-22.

Bekhta, Natalya. 2025. "Beyond the Novel. Satire in Eastern Europe and Volodymyr Rafeyenko's *Mondegreen*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 66.1: 12-22.

Biletskyi, Oleksandr. 1990 [1928]. «*Сонячна машина* Володимира Винниченка». *Літературно-критичні статті*. Київ: Дніпро, 121-131.

Dwivedi, Divya. 2024. "De-canonising Theory, Junūn-ising Canon." *Parallax* 30.3: 312-341.

Elliott, Robert C. 1970. *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hrytsak, Yaroslav. 2021. *Подолати минуле: глобальна історія України*. Portal.

Huxley, Aldous. 1962. *Island*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Ganguly, Debjani. 2020. "The Global Novel: Comparative Perspectives Introduction." In *New Literary History* 51:2, v-xvii.

Jameson, Fredric. 2004. "The Politics of Utopia." *New Left Review*, 25: 35-54.

Jameson, Fredric. 2007 [2005]. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions.* Verso.

Jameson, Fredric. 2009. "Of Islands and Trenches: Naturalization and the Production of Utopian Discourse." In *Ideologies of Theory*. Verso Books, 386-414.

Kirsch, Adam. 2017. *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century.* New York: Columbia Global Reports. Ebook.

Le Guin, Ursula K. 2016. "Utopiyin, Utopiyang." In Thomas More *Utopia.* Introduction by China Mieville. Essays by Ursula K. Le Guin. Verso, 195-198.

Lyubka, Andriy. 2020. *малий український роман*. Chernitvsi: Meridian Czernowitz.

Marin, Louis. 1973. *Utopiques : jeux d'espaces.* Editions de Minuit.

Mazzoni, Guido. 2017 [2011]. *Theory of the Novel*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Harvard University Press.

Pavylyshyn, Marko. 1989. "Artist or Moralist? Volodymyr Vynnychenko's 'The Solar Machine'." In *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies* 3.2: 17-33.

Pravinchandra, Shital. 2018. "Short story and peripheral production." In *The Cambridge companion to world literature*, eds. Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimbler. Cambridge University Press: 197-210.

Shapiro, Stephen. 2021. "Un-noveling *Lovecraft County*." In "New Literary Television" Special Issue, eds. Arin Keeble and Samuel Thomas. *Post45.* https://post45.org/journal.

Shapiro, Stephen. 2023. "The World-System of Global Gothic, Horror and Weird." In *The Edinburgh Companion to Globalgothic,* ed. Rebecca Duncan. Edinburgh University Press: 38-52.

Siskind, Mariano. 2010. "The Globalization of the Novel and the Novelization of the Global: A Critique of World Literature." *Comparative Literature*, 62.4: 336–360.
Smyrniw, Walter. 2013. *Ukrainian Science Fiction: Historical and Thematic Perspectives*. Bern: Peter Lang.
Soroka, Mykola. 2005. *Displacement and Literature: The Writings of Volodymyr Vynnychenko, 1907-1925*. Doctoral dissertation. University of Alberta. Edmonton, Alberta.
Soroka, Mykola. 2012. *Faces of Displacement: The Writings of Volodymyr Vynnychenko*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
Suvin, Darko. 2010. *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction and Political Epistemology.* Peter Lang.
Ukraïnka, Lesya. 2021 [1905]. *Осіння казка: Фантастична драма*. *Повне академічне зібрання творів у чотирнадцяти томах.* Том 1. Упор. Тереза Левчук. Луцьк: Волинський національний університет імені Лесі Українки, 180-216.
Ukraïnka, Lesya. 2021 [1906]. «Утопія в белетристиці». *Повне академічне зібрання творів у чотирнадцяти томах.* Том 7. Упор. Віра Агеєва. Луцьк: Волинський національний університет імені Лесі Українки, 263–310.
Vermeulen, Pieter. 2017. "New York, Capital of World Literature? On Holocaust Memory and World Literary Value." In *Anglia* 135.1: 67-85.
Vynnychenko, Volodymyr. 1989 [1928]. *Сонячна машина*. Київ: Видавництво художньої літератури «Дніпро».
Vynnychenko, Volodymyr. 2024 [1950]. *Слово за тобою, Сталіне!* Київ: Видавництво «Центр учбової літератури».
Vynnychenko, Volodymyr. 1983. *Щоденник 1921-1925.* Vol. 2. Ed. Hryhory Kostiuk. Edmonton, New York: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies.
Vynnychenko, Volodymyr. 2010. *Щоденник 1926-1928.* Vol. 3. Ed. Hryhory Kostiuk. Edmonton, New York, Kyiv: Smoloskyp.
Zabuzhko, Oksana. 2021 [2007]. *Notre Dame d'Ukraine: Українка в конфлікті міфологій.* Київ: Видавничий дім «Комора».