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Marko Pavlyshyn

What Really Happens in Kobylans'ka's *Land*, and Why It Matters

ABSTRACT: Since the publication of Ol'ha Kobylans'ka's novel *Zemlia* (Land, 1902), the consensus of Ukrainian critics and scholars, both non-Soviet and Soviet, has held that the novel's central event, and the element of the plot offering the main challenge to interpretation, is the murder of a young peasant by his brother. Attentive reading, however, reveals that the murder is constructed in the novel as a deed whose perpetrator remains unknown. Readings of the novel as an illustration of social or psychological causation in human affairs corresponded to the predispositions of populist critics of various periods. Readings more respectful of the text, and more in keeping with Kobylans'ka's *oeuvre* as a whole, need to acknowledge that the world-view consistent with the novel is one that despairs of demonstrable causes. Narrative voice and implied readership in *Land* are managed so as to exclude the construct of an omniscient narrator authorizing a final, knowable version of past events. Instead, the novel may be seen as reflecting upon the irrationality of diverse models for explaining human behaviour. Common-sense social and psychological notions of causality are found inadequate to explain the murder in *Land*, as are racial determinism, accident, divine intervention, and the Nietzsche-inspired model of humankind as divided into strong and weak, free and enslaved.

To put it in a nutshell: there is no certainty that the murder of Mykhailo in Kobylans'ka's novel *Zemlia* (Land) is a case of fratricide, even though the century-old critical consensus to the contrary is unanimous.

The populist critic Serhii Iefremov wrote confidently in 1902, in his notorious attack upon what he deemed to be Kobylans'ka's adherence to modernism, of the "fact of fratricide" in *Land*.¹ On this, if little else, his modernist opponents Hnat Khotkevych and Mykola Ievshan agreed with him, as did the doyen of Ukrainian turn-of-the-century letters Ivan Franko.² So did the early Soviet critic Pavlo Fylypovych and the post-war Soviet critics Babyshkin,

¹ S. O. Iefremov, "V poiskakh novoi krasoty (Zametki chitatelia)" [1902], in his *Literaturno-krytychni statti* (Kyiv: Dnipro, 1993) 48–120, here 101.

² Hnat Khotkevych, "Zemlia: Povist' Ol'hy Kobylans'koi (Krytychna otsinka)" [1907], in Fedir Pohrebennyk et al., eds., *Ol'ha Kobylans'ka v krytytsi ta spohadakh* (Kyiv: Derzhavne vydavnytstvo khudozhn'oi literatury, 1963) 104–47, here 116; Mykola Ievshan, "Ol'ha Kobylans'ka" [1909], in his *Krytyka, literaturoznavstvo, estetyka*, ed. Nataliia Shumylo (Kyiv: Osnovy, 1998) 199–205, here 202; Ivan Franko, "Iuzhnorusskaia literatura" [1904], in his *Zibrannia tvoriv u p'iatdesiaty tomakh* (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1976–86) XLI: 101–61, here 159.

Komyshanchenko, Tomashuk, Leshchenko and, most authoritatively, Fedir Pohrebennyk.³ So did the authors of pedagogical advice for teachers of literature in Ukraine both before independence (Korzhpova, Huzar) and since (Koval'chuk, Horyk).⁴ So does the post-Soviet scholar Tamara Hundorova.⁵

Ol'ha Kobylians'ka (1863–1942) finished the novel *Land* in 1901. It was published in 1902.⁶ Most of Kobylians'ka's earlier novels and stories had central characters who were members of the intelligentsia. In *Land*, by contrast, the main figures were peasants. The plot of the novel, whose pivotal event is the object of this inquiry, might be summarised as follows. The prosperous peasants Ivonika and Mariia have two sons: the hard-working and obedient Mykhailo, and the lazy and headstrong Sava. Both have lovers: Mykhailo secretly courts Anna, a penniless serving girl, while Sava has an affair with Rakhira, who is widely regarded as a thief and condemned for her licentiousness. Relations between the two brothers, and between Sava and his parents, are strained. Mykhailo is conscripted. On one of his leaves from the army he plans to tell his parents of

³ Pavlo Fylypovych, "Spustoshena idyliia ('Zemlia' O. Kobylians'koi)" [1926], in his *Literatura: Statti, rozvidky, ohliady* (New York, Melbourne: Ukrains'ka Vil'na Akademiia Nauk u SSHa, 1971) 322–44, here 331; Oleh Babyshkin, "Tvorchist' Ol'hy Kobylians'koi" [1952], introduction to Ol'ha Kobylians'ka, *Tvory v tr'okh tomakh*, (Kyiv: Derzhavne vydavnytstvo khudozhn'oi literatury, 1956) I: 5–64, here 34; Maksym Komyshanchenko, "Iz statti 'Ol'ha Kobylians'ka'" [1958], in *Ol'ha Kobylians'ka v krytytsi ta spohadakh* 269–84, here 270, and "Ol'ha Kobylians'ka," his introduction to Ol'ha Kobylians'ka, *Tvory v p'iaty tomakh* (Kyiv: Derzhavne vydavnytstvo khudozhn'oi literatury, 1962–63) I: 5–42, here 21; Nykyfor Tomashuk, *Ol'ha Kobylians'ka: Zhyttia i tvorchist'* (Kyiv: Dnipro, 1969) 105; Myroslava Leshchenko, *Ol'ha Kobylians'ka* (Kyiv: Dnipro, 1973) 113; Fedir Pohrebennyk, "Ol'ha Kobylians'ka," in Ievhen Kyryliuk et al., eds., *Istoriia ukrains'koi literatury u vos'my tomakh* (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1967–71) V: 177–209, here 198; and his "Ol'ha Kobylians'ka," introduction to *Tvory u dvokh tomakh* (Kyiv: Dnipro, 1983) I: 5–20, here 13.

⁴ A. Korzhupova, "Problematyka povisti Ol'hy Kobylians'koi 'Zemlia' (Materialiia dlia vchytelia)," *Ukrains'ka mova i literatura v shkoli*, 21.5 (1971): 44–48, here 44; Zenon Huzar, *Vyvchennia tvorchosti Ol'hy Kobylians'koi: Posibnyk dlia vchyteliv* (Kyiv: Radians'ka shkola, 1978) 58; Olesia Koval'chuk, "Pys'mennyts'ka pozytsiia v povisti Kobylians'koi 'Zemlia'," *Ukrains'ka mova i literatura v shkoli* 2 (1993): 16–19, here 16; Nina Horyk, "Tematychni rozrobky urokiv z ukrains'koi literatury," *Dyvoslovo* 3 (1998): 28–40, here 31.

⁵ Tamara Hundorova, "Kobylians'ka—Dovzhenko: Navkolo 'Zemli', abo riznytsia analogii," *Slovo i chas* 11–12 (1997): 57–68, here 59.

⁶ For an account of the chronology of Kobylians'ka's work on *Zemlia* see Fedir Pohrebennyk's notes in Ol'ha Kobylians'ka, *Tvory v p'iaty tomakh* (Kyiv: Derzhavne vydavnytstvo khudozhn'oi literatury, 1962–63) II: 475–77. Volume and page numbers in the following refer to the text of this edition.

his plan to marry Anna, who is pregnant with his child. Before he can make this disclosure Mykhailo is shot dead. The killing occurs at night in a forest near the village. Public suspicion falls upon Sava. There is an inquiry. Sava is arrested and faces court, but is acquitted for lack of evidence. On returning to the village he rejoins Rakhira and eventually marries her. Ivonika and Mariia remain convinced of Sava's guilt. The distraught Anna gives birth to twins, who die. Much later she marries Petro, a man much older than herself. Their son has prospects of an education and of leaving the land.

In her autobiographies and letters Kobylans'ka stressed repeatedly that the characters of the novel, and its climax—the unexplained death of a young peasant, Mykhailo, widely thought in his village to be the doing of his younger brother Sava—were modelled on real people and a real event.⁷ The real murder took place in the autumn of 1894 in Dymka, a village in Bukovyna where Kobylans'ka spent part of her youth and to which she often returned. The family to which the two brothers belonged—the Zhyzhians in life, the Fedorchuks in the book—was personally well known to the author, who stayed in touch with the prototypes of several of her characters into the 1920s. Like his counterpart in the novel, the real Sava was arrested as a suspect, tried, and released, there being insufficient evidence for a verdict of guilty.⁸ Contemporary press reports of the murder did not identify a prime suspect.⁹ This did not prevent Babyshkin, Komyschanchenko, Tomashuk and Korzhupova, as well as the memoirist Panchuk, evidently unimpressed by the Austro-Hungarian legal process, from stating as a fact that the real Sava killed the real Mykhailo.¹⁰ They might be

⁷ In her autobiography of 1902, written for the Bulgarian writer Petko Todorov as an introduction to a selection of her works in Bulgarian translation (the works, but not Kobylans'ka's autobiography, were published in 1903; see V: 676), Kobylans'ka called *Land* “a work from the life of the people of Bukovyna, *faithfully rendered*” (author's italics, V: 217). In her autobiographical letters of 1921 and 1922 to the politician and scholar Stepan Smal'-Stots'kyi, Kobylans'ka is even more explicit: “The facts that motivated me to write *Land* are true. The characters, too, almost without exception, are taken from life” (V, 234). In a letter to Osyp Makovei dated 15 December 1903, defending herself against Iefremov's charge that the crime in *Land* is “untruthful” because it comes too unexpectedly” (V, 523), she stresses that the unexpectedness of the murder is precisely the quality of that event in the book that she copied from its prototype in life (V, 532).

⁸ See Epidel'for Panchuk, “Frahmenty iz spohadiv pro Ol'hu Kobylans'ku” [1961], in *Ol'ha Kobylans'ka v krytytsi ta spohadakh* 381–401, esp. 397, and his *Hirs'ka orlytsia: Spohady* (Uzhhorod: Karpaty, 1976) 14–40.

⁹ Tomashuk 85.

¹⁰ Babyshkin, “Tvorchist' Ol'hy Kobylans'koi” 34; Komyschanchenko 270; Tomashuk 84; Panchuk 397. Oleh Babyshkin in his book *Ol'ha Kobylans'ka: Narys pro zhyttia i tvorchist'* (L'viv: Knyzhkovo-zhurnal'ne vydavnytstvo, 1963) gives the

forgiven, considering that Kobylians'ka herself, in a letter to her friend and confidant, the writer Osyp Makovei, called the crime a fratricide in the very same sentence in which she spoke of it as a mystery: "in *Land* I describe the fratricide which struck the hapless parents like a thunderbolt and caused upheaval in the village, and which *to this day* no-one can precisely solve" (author's italics).¹¹ Furthermore, in the novel *Tsarivna* (The Princess, 1896) Kobylians'ka had used an anecdote which may have been based on the events in Dymka, but which unequivocally presents the murder as a fratricide: a woman "lost both of her sons in terrifying circumstances. The elder, well-behaved and kind, the pride of his parents, was shot to death by the younger, who had been wicked since childhood" (I, 335). For Iefremov and others, this was the "embryonic" version of the plot of *Land*, a direct statement of Kobylians'ka's opinion about the facts of the murder, and sufficient evidence for assuming that the same construction upon the facts had been embodied in the later novel.¹² The consideration that the real murder, even assuming that it had been a fratricide, need not necessarily have been so "reflected" in any of the imaginative works that bear a resemblance to it, was overlooked by all who understood Kobylians'ka's assurances of the truthfulness of her representation as a guarantee that the "facts" in the book are the same as the facts in life.

The argument of this article has two parts. It contends, first, that the text of *Land* does not establish with certainty that Sava killed Mykhailo; or, to paraphrase, that the narrative voice behind the many individual characters' voices does not authorize a plot which identifies a murderer. *Land* does not share with the genre of the detective novel the narrative goal of finding the guilty party from among a range of suspects. On the contrary: even in the absence of other suspects than Sava, *Land* leaves the identity of the killer uncertain.

This thesis, once demonstrated, alters the content that the novel appears to offer for interpretation. The second part of this discussion starts by recognizing that what needs to be accounted for is not a murder alone, but a more complex state of affairs: a murder whose perpetrator cannot be reliably established, and a widespread, but unreliable, consensus that the sole suspect is guilty. Traditional accounts of *Land*, grounded almost without exception in one or another variant of realist aesthetics, have focussed on the theme of causation, reading the novel as an explanation of the social and psychological origins of a known human action. The present study, by contrast, places at its centre the theme of the

name of the brother on whom the figure of Mykhailo was based as "Mykhai" (98). Kobylians'ka's notes, mostly in German, for a continuation of *Land* use the Romanian form, "Mihalaki" (II, 451 ff.).

¹¹ Letter to Osyp Makovei of 15 December 1902 (V, 523).

¹² Iefremov 101. See also Oleh Babyshkin, *Ol'ha Kobylians'ka* 99.

opacity of human action. It argues that the novel is coherent with a world view, also attested elsewhere in Kobylans'ka's writings, in which events are unknowable and subject to no discernible laws, while human convictions about their causation are irrational. Such a world view both responds to Kobylans'ka's personal experiences, and resists the determinism of the Darwinist, Spencerian and Marxist thought that is known to have been part of her intellectual formation. In this world view, several explanatory models compete with each other to attribute cause to human actions, yet none of itself is robust enough, uncorroborated by reliable testimony, to produce knowledge of what happened in the past.

Behind the contention that a conventional description of a work of literature may be challenged and displaced by another, more securely grounded in the text, are a number of assumptions: that the literary work of art is best examined as a coherent whole; that within the work a logic may be discerned that justifies the parts of the whole and the relationships between them; and that verifiable statements may be made about states of affairs prevailing within a work. Such notions were central to mid-twentieth-century New Criticism, especially as refracted by Wellek through the prisms of structuralism and phenomenology, and went hand in hand with New Criticism's favoured analytic method, close reading. They are not greatly in evidence in contemporary Western and even post-Soviet scholarship, imprinted as these are by post-structuralist doubt concerning the possibility of objective statements or stable, conclusive explanatory models. Nor does the present inquiry propose to dispel such doubts. It does, however, aim by means of close or, to use a less encumbered term, attentive reading to put to rest a plain misconception that has long stood in the way of locating *Land* in the contexts of Kobylans'ka's oeuvre and her intellectual environment.

The argument demonstrating that the text constructs uncertainty as to the identity of the killer rests on considerations of credible evidence—that is, of testimony which, within the logic of the novel, is reliable. Reliability and unreliability are constructed in *Land* through the management of voice. Kobylans'ka is a highly deliberate artist when it comes to voice, and each of her longer prose works employs it differently. In *The Princess*, for example, the main and, for long stretches of the novel, the sole voice is that of the first-person diarist-narrator.¹³ In *Liudyna* (A Human Being, 1894) the main voice is that of the third-person omniscient narrator, but occasionally it merges with the voice of one of the characters, without, however, the third person being abandoned. In *Land* there is third-person narrative throughout, but only some of

¹³ M. N. Krupa, "Slovesno-movlennieva struktura obrazu avtora u povisti 'Tsarivna' O. Kobylans'koi," *Movoznavstvo* 6 (1988): 47-52.

it belongs uniquely to the narrator. Most of the text iterates the consciousness of the characters, one by one; in Mieke Bal's narratological terms, "character-bound focalization" dominates. Less frequently, the narrative is carried by the "external focalizer," the anonymous narrator who stands outside of the action.¹⁴ Thus, the reader sees very little of the world evoked by *Land* except as mediated through the characters. Character-bound focalization conflates the presentation of events and states of affairs in the world as apprehended by a character with the articulation of that character's beliefs, desires, prejudices and habits of thought. The technique creates for readers the sense that they "know" a character even more immediately than they know a person in life, because they receive direct access to the character's thoughts. On the other hand, character-bound focalization in *Land* ensures that almost every piece of knowledge offered to the reader is marked as subjective and therefore as requiring critical comparison with other pieces. Getting a balanced and complete view involves the reader in a constant labour of juxtaposition and corroboration.

Another consequence of the dominance of character-bound focalization in *Land* is the unobtrusiveness of the external focalizer and the concealment of the distinction between various inner monologues and the voice of the narrator. Inner monologue in *Land* is not the sole preserve of individual characters, but is sometimes also used to give voice to groups of persons, paraphrasing the sentiments of what is presented as a collective subject. Because individual and collective inner monologues are in the third person, there is no grammatical distinction between them and the "neutral" voice of the external focalizer—the narrator's "own" voice, not mediated through a character's consciousness. The transition between such subjective voices, both individual and collective, and the neutral narrative voice is seldom obtrusive, and may or may not be marked by a stylistic shift. The following passages, where I have marked points of transition between the voice of the external focalizer and character-focalized voice, may serve to illustrate this. In the first passage the character-focalized voice belongs to an individual, Ivonika. In the second it is the collective voice of the villagers.

Today Ivonika was not himself. He did not guide the plough well, for his gaze turned repeatedly from the plough to his son, who had put his arm over the neck of one of the oxen and was walking forward easily and in a straight line. [/] This boy was to leave him! Youth itself, strength and health! [/] When, from time to time, Mykhailo looked back to see if all was well with his father, the latter could not see enough of him, as if he had never seen him properly until this day. (II, 97)

¹⁴ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, trans. Christine von Boehmen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985) 100–06.

Some looked around anxiously, others crossed themselves. Almost everyone sighed. Nobody would pronounce the word "Sava" any more. [/] This thing that had happened was so terrible that you could lose your mind. [/] Again and again, the same questions went forth and came back.

[...]

Thoughts refused to compose themselves.

Scattered as if by a sudden gunshot, they did not hold together, but wandered in fright this way and that, pausing now at the bereaved house, now at the nearby forest. [/] *That* was where it all happened.

But all will come to light. God will not suffer such a thing lightly. He is good. [/]

The forest loomed hostile and black in the darkness of the autumn night that engulfed the silent fields of stubble, and, wreathing itself in ever denser darkness, seemed to rejoice in the emptiness of the abandoned fields. (II, 235)

The easy alternation between the voice of the narrator and that of the characters suggests that the intelligence behind the narrator's voice understands and even empathizes with the characters' emotions and beliefs. But this understanding and empathy does not signify that the narrative voice also authorizes the convictions of characters concerning matters of fact. On the contrary, the novel foregrounds the issue of evidence, especially through those elements of the plot that are connected to the judicial process: the investigating commission's inquiry and the trial.

There is no incontrovertible evidence that incriminates Sava, just as there is none that clears him of suspicion. His alibi is corroborated, but by unreliable witnesses: Sava's beloved, Rakhira, and her parents (II, 243). Their untrustworthiness as witnesses, on the other hand, is part of the negative image of them that is cultivated in the village. The disapproving voice that articulates the sentences, "Rakhira herself lied in the most repellent way. She said that he had come to her house early in the evening and did not leave the loft until evening" (II, 243) is the voice, not of the narrator, but of public opinion. Rakhira's claim contradicts that of the village tailor, who testified before the commission that Sava had come to his, the tailor's, house at midnight, pale and exhausted, and had asked for water to drink (II, 241). But, of itself, the contradiction proves nothing. Even if the tailor's testimony is accepted as true and Rakhira's is entirely set aside, no certainty emerges as to what Sava did or did not do before arriving at the tailor's house, or after leaving it.

Circumstantial evidence against Sava is inconclusive. Specks of blood are observed on his trousers, but their origin remains unknown. It is true that Sava's credibility is eroded when he changes his explanation of the bloodstains in response to questions by the investigating physician. At first he claims that the blood is from a rabbit that he shot some time ago. Confronted by the doctor's observation that the blood is fresh, Sava connects the stains to a duck that he had

killed (II, 239–40). But the novel does not exclude the possibility that Sava is telling the truth—that at different times he killed both a rabbit and a duck. No proof is provided that the blood is human, let alone Mykhailo's. Furthermore, no murder weapon is discovered. The only rifle to which Sava has access, his father's, is rusty and, the commission finds, has not been fired for a long time.

The evidential situation is made—seemingly—less straightforward by the introduction into the narrative of two items of information that are not presented to the court and therefore do not influence its verdict. They place the reader in the position of having to decide whether they constitute evidence that would prove Sava's guilt. The first has to do with the bullet that caused the death. During the post mortem examination of the corpse a bullet is dislodged from the body. Unnoticed by members of the commission, Ivonika seizes and examines the object. His mood changes drastically. He leaves the premises, finds his remaining son, and beats him (II, 245). For Ivonika, the bullet evidently proves Sava's guilt. At the same time, the authorial narrative scrupulously avoids confirming Ivonika's belief.

It should be remarked that the episode as a whole puts a strain on the convention of realistic plausibility by which the novel otherwise abides. From the perspective of common sense it is implausible that the fatal bullet, having entered from the back and lodged in the lungs (II, 236), should have “fallen out” while the corpse was being turned over (II, 245); that the physician did not extract the bullet as one of the first steps of his examination of the body, and was not surprised to find it missing; and that the home-made cloth cartridge was not only still attached to the bullet, but was recognizable. These implausibilities are more likely to be the consequences of the author's sketchy knowledge of firearms and forensic medicine, than of a deliberate breach of common-sense credibility. Whatever the reason for the strangeness of these details, the purpose of their inclusion is evident. The bullet is the catalyst that transforms Ivonika's suspicion into certainty. Ivonika had formerly believed Sava to be guilty on the basis of intuition alone: “Unlike the magistrates, he had no need of proof (he turned cold: tomorrow they would be here) to be convinced of who had done it. His heart itself told him the name of the murderer” (II, 231). After the incident, Ivonika believes that his intuition has been corroborated, and Sava's guilt objectively demonstrated. Leshchenko, the only commentator who considers the status of the bullet as evidence, assumes without argument that Ivonika is correct in regarding it as the missing proof of Sava's guilt.¹⁵ Attentive readers, however, would notice that the novel requires them to remain sceptical: a bullet,

¹⁵ Leshchenko 113.

even if recognizably Sava's, need not have been fired by him. We know it was not fired from the gun to which he had access.

The second item of seemingly important, but ultimately inconclusive information is the claim—by an unidentified man who speaks to Mykhailo's and Sava's mother Mariia through a closed door—that on the evening of the murder he saw Mykhailo with another man, whom he refuses to name. The unnamed man was carrying a rifle. Mariia concludes that this must have been Sava (II, 276). But Mariia had believed her younger son to be the murderer from the moment when Anna, Mykhailo's beloved, first accused Sava in public: "Instinctively the mother felt that Anna had divined a truth. [...] Her son was a murderer, a fratricide!" (II, 229–30). The new allegation, which, in fact, does not even name Sava, strengthens Mariia's subjective belief, but adds nothing to the balance of evidence. The novel is so constructed as to show that, while both parents believe in Sava's guilt, their belief is irrational, and all the evidence that is produced fails to shift this conviction onto a rational basis. Just as irrational is the growing public conviction that Sava did the deed. The villagers, initially puzzled by the murder ("Who could have killed him? For what?"—II, 221) change their minds under the influence of whispered rumours (II, 248) and the confident affirmations of such opinion leaders as Old Petro, who takes Sava's guilt for granted and treats as open to speculation only the question of who else may have been involved (II, 259).

The reader implied by the logic of the text, then, should come to an understanding of the sources, psychological and social, for the *opinion* that Sava killed Mykhailo. The implied reader, however, is guided by the text to regard the *facts* of the case as uncertain. This emphatic uncertainty is corroborated by two other aspects of the management of voice in the novel. The first is the strategic silencing of particular characters' voices. Up to the murder, the reader receives messages focalized through all the main characters and several minor ones. Sava and Rakhira, though commented upon disapprovingly in the voices of the majority of the characters, are nevertheless also presented to the reader through their own inner monologues. After the murder, however, the reader never hears Sava's or Rakhira's voices again. Sava's memory and his inner monologue, being the unmediated record of his consciousness, would disclose authoritatively whether he had committed the crime. If readers had access to Rakhira's inner voice, they would know whether Sava's only confidante believed him to be guilty. But these sources of information are closed to the reader, who is limited, now, to hearing those who believe, but do not know, Sava to be guilty. The opportunity of listening to both sides is denied, and the scrupulous reader is compelled to withdraw from the business of judging lest he or she come to share one side's subjective position.

Second, among the communications that the reader receives on the authority of the narrator as external focalizer are intimations of the mysteriousness of human affairs in general, and the murder of Mykhailo in particular. The epigraph to the novel, quoted in German and attributed by Kobylians'ka to the Norwegian writer Jonas Lie, proclaims: "Around us there is many an abyss that fate has dug, but the deepest lies here in our hearts" (II, 7).¹⁶ As for the matter at hand, "This murder was a riddle, a rare and most interesting riddle" (II, 236), as the steadfastly non-omniscient narrator observes.

Ultimately, the only certainty about the murder is that it took place. The identity of the perpetrator, despite many confidently articulated opinions, is unknown. But while providing no proof of Sava's guilt, the novel furnishes no proof of his innocence, either. There is no hint of another suspect, and there are many possible motives for Sava's murdering Mykhailo. As sociologically and psychologically interested critics have shown, much of the novel is given over to depicting human relations which, especially in combination, might plausibly be regarded as provocations to murder by a character shown to be congenitally vengeful (as a child he patiently plotted cruel retaliation for perceived slights and injustices) and violent (he has a passion for hunting and shoots even small and worthless birds in his zest for the kill). These motives include jealousy (his parents plainly prefer his brother), anger (his brother patronizes him, while taking every opportunity to report on him to their father in the worst possible terms), and greed (after an initial period of indifference Sava begins to covet the parental land, but believes himself unlikely to receive any of it if Mykhailo lives). The novel is no less at pains to show that Sava is a plausible suspect than it is to establish that, in the case in question, there is not sufficient information to incriminate him. Symbolic of this lack of clarity is the autumn fog that settles on the landscape on the morning after the murder—the fog in which Ivonika, both literally and metaphorically, "could not see much" (II, 219).

It is established, then, that the pivotal event of *Land*, the murder of Mykhailo, cannot with certainty be ascribed to Sava. That being the case, the readings that assume the murderer to be known require revision. Kobylians'ka's *Land* has, by and large, been interpreted as a novel that shows, for the reader's edification, the life of the peasants. Iefremov, while attacking Kobylians'ka as an exponent of modernism, partly exempted *Land* from his accusations, remarking

¹⁶ Unpublished letter to Makovei dated 2 August 1900. Quoted in Babyshkin, *Ol'ha Kobylians'ka* 103. Soviet editions of *Land* routinely mistranslated the German, "Es liegt um uns herum gar mancher Abgrund, den das Schicksal grub, doch hier in unseren Herzen ist das tiefste," as "navkolo nas znakhodyt'sia iakas' bezodnia, shcho ii vyryla dolia, ale tut u nashykh sertsiaKh vona naihlybsha" (around us there is some kind of abyss that fate has dug, but here in our hearts it is the deepest).

that it contained much ethnographic detail and displayed “fundamental knowledge of the lifestyle of the ordinary people,”¹⁷ while Ivan Franko approvingly ascribed to Kobylans'ka an intention “to present a broad picture of the way of life of the people of Bukovyna.”¹⁸ Even Hnat Khotkevych, while emphasising the modernist credentials of *Land*, could find no better way of praising the aesthetic achievement of the novel than by pointing out its mimetic plausibility.¹⁹ In the Soviet period, emphasis on the social dimension of *Land* was inescapable. The question that remained was whether *Land* presented a reliable or an unreliable account of social reality. Pavlo Fylypovych, writing in the 1920s, could still aver that sociological analysis was not the main aim of *Land*, which presented an inaccurate picture of social realities without, however, being thereby discredited as a novel.²⁰ Subsequent Soviet critics, for whom the value of a literary work was directly linked to the perceived correctness of its social diagnoses and remedies, were constrained, when praising Kobylans'ka, to laud her reflection of social realities or, at worst, to excuse her historically conditioned inability to comprehend society in a wholly progressive way. In such readings, what characters think, feel and do is shown to depend on what they experience and learn in their economic, social and cultural lives. When Fedir Pohrebennyk called *Land* a “socio-psychological novel,” he summed up the consensus of Soviet criticism from the 1930s onward.²¹ According to this kind of reading, from the general intention of holding up a mirror to social reality flows the particular intention of *Land*: to give a cause-and-effect account of Mykhailo's murder. As Pohrebennyk puts it,

A social, as well as moral and ethical drama—a fratricide for the sake of land—gave the writer the opportunity of penetrating into the soul of the working people, unveiling the world of their inner experiences and important facets of their way of life. Using as an example the life of one peasant family, O. Kobylans'ka skilfully showed the typical features of the capitalist realities of the time, including the process of the proletarianization of the peasantry and the growing power of land over the agricultural worker. [...] She created true-to-life and psychologically credible

17 Iefremov 101.

18 Franko, letter dated 8 November 1905 to Vatroslav Jagić, in *Zibrannia tvoriv L*: 280.

19 Khotkevych 109.

20 Fylypovych 333-35.

21 Pohrebennyk, “Ol'ha Kobylans'ka,” in *Istoriia ukrains'koi literatury u vos'my tomakh* V: 207. See also his entry “Kobylans'ka Ol'ha Iulianivna,” in *Ukrains'ka Literaturna Entsyklopediia* (Kyiv: Ukrains'ka Radians'ka Entsyklopediia im. M. Bazhana, 1990) II: 502-04, here 503.

images—of Ivonika, Mariika, Anna and others—in which she embodied the thoughts, dreams and expectations of the peasant workers of Bukovyna.²²

It is essential for this model that the issue of *what* happened be regarded as resolved (the murderer must, of course, be Sava), so that attention can be focussed on *why* it happened. Tomashuk constructs an entire narrative of Kobylians'ka's gradual evolution toward this accomplishment of realism. "The fratricide," he submits, "was not immediately comprehended [*osmyslene*] by her." It was only later that she conceived the desire "to say why the crime happened, to reveal the causes that brought it about, and in the course of dissecting the event to take a look at the peasantry in general." This could be done on the basis of serious preparatory work: "it was necessary to link the fratricide to the conditions of life not merely of one family, but of the broad peasant masses, [...] that is, to present Sava's crime as a phenomenon not accidental, but one that flowed of necessity from the whole complex of social conditions, traditional ways of life, and moral and ethical views of the peasants of Bukovyna."²³

Two lines of inquiry have dominated socio-psychological interpretations of *Land*, whether Soviet or non-Soviet: the mimetic and the determinist. They are not mutually exclusive, and most readings combine them in different proportions. The mimetic perspective, represented in the early period of the reception of Kobylians'ka most notably by Franko, Iefremov and Fylypovych, is concerned primarily with the way in which *Land* reflects, and reflects upon, peasant life. This approach often focuses on the symbol of "land," understood to signify the sum of the conditions of peasant life. Not infrequently borrowing the title of Franko's essay on Zola, "The Power of Land in the Contemporary Novel" (1891), mimeticists claim that Kobylians'ka's novel "reflects" the "power of the land" and strive to explicate the manner of this reflection.²⁴ For Marxist mimeticists, the murder in *Land* is either a pathological case, atypical and therefore in breach of the realistic obligations of any progressive novel,²⁵ or,

²² Pohrebennyk, "Ol'ha Kobylians'ka," introduction to *Tvory u dvokh tomakh* I: 13.

²³ Tomashuk 84.

²⁴ See, e.g., the émigré critic Leonid Bilets'kyi, "Ol'ha Kobylians'ka," in his *Try syl'vetky: Marko Vovchok, Ol'ha Kobylians'ka, Lesia Ukrainka* (Winnipeg: Soiuz Ukrainok Kanady, 1951) 23-74, here 62, and the Soviet critics Tomashuk (92) and Huzar (35).

²⁵ For example, Pohrebennyk concedes that the admission of subconscious and biological factors as causes contributing to Sava's murder diminishes the "realistic quality" of Sava's character and, thereby, of the novel as a whole ("Ol'ha Kobylians'ka," *Istoriia ukrains'koi literatury u vos'my tomakh* V: 199). See also

alternatively, it is the necessary outcome of a particular economic configuration and, therefore, an event exhibiting typicality. No less mimeticist is Solomea Pavlychko's claim that the novel "depicts" the brutalizing, anticivilizational influence of "the land" upon human beings, thus challenging populist patriarchal myths of the idyllically natural and humane village.²⁶

Determinist readers of *Land*, especially Babyshkin and Tomashuk, the authors of the longer monographs on Kobylans'ka, focus on the murder itself, assume that Sava is the murderer and seek to trace the evolution of his character into that of a killer. They mix common-sense psychological commonplaces (Sava responds to environment, Sava has some qualities that are intrinsic)²⁷ with sociological commonplaces (the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of peasant society influences Sava; the nature of peasant work, which Sava finds uncongenial, also influences him). Babyshkin puts this view in its starkest form: "Sava's crime [...] is explained by the agency of the predatory laws of capitalist society."²⁸ Central to such readings, both mimeticist and determinist, is the assumption that the novel structures the causes and effects of a known event.

If, however, the murder being explained by the determinists and observed by the mimeticists cannot with certainty be attributed to a particular criminal, then the principal matter that calls for interpretation in *Land* is not a known event and its causes, but a tension between knowledge and belief. On the one hand, the novel is carefully structured so as to show that the perpetrator of Mykhailo's murder is not known. On the other hand, the reader is shown a community of people who, without sufficient rational grounds, believe that they know the identity of the murderer. Their belief is based on the assumption that human character is consistent and that human beings with certain character traits act in particular ways. The juxtaposition of these two demonstrations confronts the reader with two questions, both of which Kobylans'ka had previously addressed in her diary and in her early novels: how plausible is any claim that there is a

Ievhen Kyryliuk, "Velych Kobylans'koi," *Radians'ke literaturoznavstvo* 6 (1965): 41–53, here 47.

²⁶ Solomiia [Solomea] Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrains'kii literaturi* (Kyiv: Lybid', 1997) 63.

²⁷ Babyshkin presents evidence for both the environmental and the genetic formation of Sava's character, while feigning to dismiss the latter in a critique of Khotkevych's article of 1907. In doing so, he not only reiterates Khotkevych's observations, but quotes the passages in *Land* which support the viewpoint that Sava's essential character is fixed at birth (*Ol'ha Kobylans'ka* 114–21). Tomashuk, on the other hand, is not so concerned to deny the agency of "negative natural inputs" (103).

²⁸ Babyshkin, "Tvorchist' Ol'hy Kobylans'koi" 36.

relationship between character and action? And what is the status of attempts to explain actions as outcomes of human character?

If we take *Land* at its word, the relationship between character and action is not very strong at all, and certainly not strong enough to sustain predictions of human behaviour. We learn a great deal about Sava, but all our knowledge of his past, and even of the thoughts articulated in his own voice, is not enough to establish whether he murdered, or not; whether a man shown to be violent, malicious and vengeful was a murderer in a particular instance. On the contrary: *Land* may be said to subscribe to a theory of the human event as non-predetermined and unexpected in principle. Regardless of the past, the future is unknowable, and attempts to view the present as the effect of past causes are but the rationalizations of hindsight.

Kobylians'ka's scepticism as to the possibility of connecting prior and subsequent events to each other through the expedient of the idea of a cause—a scepticism reminiscent of David Hume's consideration of causal inference in the first book of his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1737)—is not formulated for the first time in *Land*. The principle of discontinuity in human affairs was the central insight attested by the diary which she kept as a young woman. The diarist is ever open to, and ready for, heterosexual love. She never enjoys a love which is returned, but experiences it as possible at any instant, with an unexpected man, with no prelude or preparation. Also in this vein, the narrator of Kobylians'ka's sketch "Impromptu phantasie" (1894) confesses, "I await happiness every day and every hour" (I, 463). The early novels *A Human Being* and *The Princess* show characters who breach their principles or change radically. In *A Human Being*, a novel in which the background of Darwinist thought is especially palpable, the argument is made that, while the general behaviour of human beings as a species may well follow certain regularities, the behaviour of individuals depends on their choices which, being subject to their will, are not predetermined and therefore cannot be predicted.²⁹ *Land* espouses the same theory concerning the unpredictable quality of human affairs, but extends it: the unwitnessed past in *Land* is as unknowable as the yet-to-be-lived future of Kobylians'ka's diary. In the universe attested to by *Land*, then, attempts to explain human action are not reliable. Indeed, *Land* may be read as offering an anticipatory critique of its future sociologizing and psychologizing interpreters: their prototypes in the novel are the peasant characters who do not hesitate to act

²⁹ See my articles, "Diary, Autobiography and Autobiographical Fiction: Reading Ol'ha Kobylians'ka," *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 2000: 43–58 and "Avtobiohrafichna persona ta darvinists'ka Liudyna Ol'hy Kobylians'koi," *Suchasnist'* 4 (2001): 113–21.

as folk psychologists and folk sociologists. Ivonika and Mariia, Dokiia and Petro, and the village as a collective all speculate about Sava. They generate the public opinion that condemns him as a murderer. According to the logic of the novel, as we have seen, they are wrong, for their views, subjective even if they are widespread, cannot be corroborated by the superior authority of evidence.

Practically all explicators of *Land* imagine themselves as bringing to light the “key” to the novel, usually in the form of a statement about social and psychological causes. But *Land*, if read with any care, may be seen to present, not a unitary thesis of this kind, but a range of explanatory models of human behaviour, each of which proves as powerless to produce certainty as the next. Next to common-sense social and psychological causality, the explanatory model for human action most thoroughly elaborated in *Land* is one that is easily traced to Nietzsche, and it, too, is tried and found wanting. Critics have not remarked upon the Nietzschean notions in *Land*, perhaps because in this novel, in contrast to *The Princess*, Kobyliaks'ka neither quotes the philosopher verbatim nor mentions him by name. In addition, official disapproval of Nietzsche in the USSR made it inconvenient to concede that Kobyliaks'ka's encounter with Nietzschean ideas extended beyond those of her works which explicitly refer to them. Kobyliaks'ka's correspondence attests to the fact that, while working on *Land*, she continued to study Nietzsche.³⁰ As elsewhere in Kobyliaks'ka's work, there is evidence in *Land* of an appropriation of the idea of the exceptionally free, courageous and elect individual, set apart by these qualities from the majority—the “free spirit” defined by Nietzsche in his preface to the second edition of *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches: Ein Buch für freie Geister* (Human, All-Too-Human: A Book for Free Spirits, 1878, 1886).³¹ The qualities of the free spirit, conflated with other attributes, notably a readiness to act without reference to received notions of good and evil, came soon to be linked in intellectual and even popular parlance with the term *Übermensch* that Nietzsche employed in *Also sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen* (Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None, 1883–85).³² The impact of Nietzsche is

³⁰ On 9 May 1897 she sent Makovei the second part of the second part of Hugo Kaatz's book *Die Weltanschauung Friedrich Nietzsches* (Dresden: C. Pierson, 1892–93) with suggestions as to parts deserving attentive reading (V, 297 and Pohrebennyk's note, V, 691). On 5 February 1898 she reported to Makovei on her impressions of Nietzsche's *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* (V, 319).

³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Karl Schlechta, 6th ed. (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1969) I: 438–40.

³² For an account of the meanings that the term *Übermensch* acquired in European culture in Kobyliaks'ka's times, see Norbert Reichel, *Der Traum vom höheren Leben*:

most clearly evident in the construction in *Land* of the dichotomy between the two brothers, Mykhailo and Sava. Mykhailo is regarded as something of a positive hero by his parents and the village (and by the critics, who by and large have considered the parents' viewpoint, and that of village public opinion, to be identical with the "viewpoint" of the novel itself). Mykhailo loves labour and his father's land and is physically strong. But he is strong and attractive only within the context of his own society and its values. Outside—in the army, for example—he is helpless and immature. As a fresh conscript he "wept like a child. [...] He was losing himself. Things within him no longer held together as they had done so firmly over there, in the fields. His gait was uncertain and awkward, for he dared not walk in his own way, and his movements were stiff and timid, for they were not his movements" (II, 106). He needs weekly visits by his father, reminders of the world of the village, to keep him from despair. In short, his strength is the strength of the weak. It rests upon the identification of one's own wishes with the expectations of society and its authorities. It is the strength of the Nietzschean crowd, which resents individualism just as Mykhailo resents Sava's breaches of social convention. Mykhailo is a weak man: he dares not articulate his only socially unsanctioned desire (to marry the landless Anna), and he suffers injustice in the army without demur. Kobylans'ka's words for Ivonika's equally weak reaction to the victimization of Mykhailo in the army are not accidental: "His [Ivonika's] hands were manacled, and he could do nothing but witness everything in silence" (II, 124). Like father, like son: they exhibit the behaviour of slaves.

As for Sava, many of his attributes echo the *Übermensch* of popular Nietzscheism. Sava resists the force of conventional opinion and rebels against received notions of good and evil. He disregards the incest taboo, showing no concern that his beloved, Rakhira, is his cousin: his voice, channelled through the narrator, boldly proclaims, "let someone else fear such sins, he [Sava] has no fear of them" (II, 33). He shows scant and grudging respect for parents and elders, and has no patience with the law. In his love for Rakhira he exhibits the Nietzschean virtues of courage, loyalty and steadfastness that are missing from Mykhailo's love for Anna. Rakhira, too, corresponds in certain ways to the image of an *Übermensch*. Her physical appearance, sexual voracity and strength of personality identify her as a manifestation of the *femme fatale* of European literary *décadence*, and as far as Nietzschean will to power is concerned, she is more amply endowed with it than Sava himself. Indeed, she appears to gain control over Sava and dominate him through her will: she "held him at her side,

Nietzsches Übermensch und die Conditio humana europäischer Intellektueller von 1890 bis 1945 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994).

as if by magical power" (II, 87) and "drank out of him his spiritual goodness" (II, 293). Rakhira's power sustains interpretation as Kobylans'ka's polemical rejoinder to Nietzsche: a woman as *Übermensch* signals both dissent from Nietzsche's notorious misogyny and a willingness to appropriate, while modifying, some of his more familiar ideas.

On the other hand—and in this, too, *Land* is in line with Kobylans'ka's other writing—the novel refuses to acquiesce in the rejection of traditional, especially Christian, morality that Nietzsche enunciated in *Morgenröthe* (Dawn, 1881) and subsequent works, nor does it recommend to its readers a transvaluation of values.³³ The novel derives no satisfaction from the fact that Sava pays little heed to the views of good and evil that prevail in his society. Alongside social and psychological causes—Sava's wish to pursue his own and Rakhira's material interests; his sense of enmity toward, and isolation from, mainstream society; and his feeling of resentment toward his self-righteous brother—his amorality and his contempt for social constraints stand as arguments for the plausibility of his becoming a fratricide. But the gulf between plausibility and certainty remains unbridged, and the Nietzschean model of humankind, in the end, gives no help in answering the question of whether Sava did the deed.

Other models for attributing cause to human events that are invoked or at least alluded to in *Land* include biological (especially racial) determinism, inborn psychological inclination, accident, and divine intervention. None is especially well developed, and each may be seen as merely augmenting the list of explanatory models which cannot tell the reader what happened. The role of race in *Land*, an aspect of the novel that most critics have demurely overlooked, hinges upon the idea that members of certain ethnic groups are predisposed

33 In 1902 Iefremov criticized Kobylans'ka on the grounds that the German influences on her writing were "limited to Nietzscheanism alone" (73), which manifested itself in "abasement before 'higher people' and contempt for ordinary mortals, a sacrifice of the interests of the masses to the interests of a small coterie of elect children of fortune" (79). Iefremov made the further claim that Kobylans'ka's works promoted the idea that "for higher people everything is permitted" (80). Subsequent non-Soviet critics were much more restrained, on the whole agreeing with Kobylans'ka's own statements that she had been impressed by Nietzsche's ideas but not overwhelmingly influenced by them. See, e.g., Luka Lutsiv, "O. Kobylans'ka i F. Nitshe" [1928], in his *Literatura i zhyttia: Literaturni otsinky* (Jersey City, New Jersey: Svoboda, n. d. [1975?]) 151–78. Soviet critics, on the other hand, insisted that Kobylans'ka had explicitly rejected Nietzsche's "reactionary people-hating philosophy" (Pohrebennyk, "Ol'ha Kobylans'ka" in *Istoriia ukrains'koi literatury* V: 192). A study of Kobylans'ka's reception of Nietzsche that would go beyond the enumeration of Nietzschean motifs in her work has yet to be written.

toward certain kinds of behaviour.³⁴ This idea is invoked in *Land* with reference to Rakhira. Rakhira's influence over Sava is shown to be resented by the other characters, especially Mykhailo, who attempts to persuade his brother of her unworthiness by linking her physical appearance both to racial origin and to (imputed) inclinations to act immorally: "She is a wicked Vlach, a Gypsy. Look at her teeth and her mouth! Look how the flesh on her face gathers in knots! Has she cast a spell over you? Look how ugly she is! Her forehead is overgrown with hair and she has eyes like a she-devil or a hungry dog" (II, 33). Even the voice of the external focalizer presents Rakhira's personality as partly determined, for the worse, by her Roma heritage. The reader learns that Rakhira's father Hryhorii was born in Tsyhaniia, a Roma settlement, and is confronted soon afterwards with the negative stereotype of Roma as thieves, ameliorated only slightly by nostalgia: "Old people who remembered the good times when Tsyhaniia flourished told many stories about their [the Roma] way of life and their temperament, and their special talent for deceit. Yet they were remembered with sympathy and a certain warmth" (II, 85). Hryhorii served a prison term after getting drunk and beating an old man to death. Rakhira "took after him entirely" (II, 86). A link between inherited traits, criminal behaviour, and Gypsy heritage is thus implied, without being directly asserted with the authority of the narrator. This link is convincing for many villagers, and is the source, for example, of Petro's intuitive certainty that "whoever else had a hand in that business [the murder], she [Rakhira] certainly did" (II, 259). But any amount of conjecture about the alleged genetic sources of Rakhira's bad character, and the influence that her allegedly hereditary wickedness may have had upon Sava, is powerless to produce certainty as to the perpetrator of the crime.

Related to the idea of biological, racially-based predisposition toward certain forms of behaviour is the idea that some aspects of human character are inborn and do not change, regardless of environment or upbringing. This view is articulated in *Land* by Mariia in relation to her son Sava: "I tell you, even as a child he was stubborn and wicked, and you keep telling me what you and I and other people were like as children. What has that to do with it?" (II, 82). Mariia's opinion stands in opposition to her husband's belief that Sava can be socialized through incentives (land) and example (the villagers' contempt for the indolent and landless Hryhorii). To illustrate her theory, Mariia tells the story of Sava's revenge on a boy who had taken away his reed-pipe: four weeks later Sava threw a bumble-bee down the boy's collar. Though the stings made the victim seriously ill, Sava refused to utter a word of explanation or apology, even after

³⁴ But see, in relation to other works than *Land*, I. Izotov, "Do kharakterystyky tvorchosti O. Kobylans'koi," *Chervonyi shliakh* 2 (1928): 80–92, here 87.

severe punishment (II, 82–83). The episode shows Sava to possess several character traits—readiness to nurse a grudge over a long period, willingness to take revenge and to do injury far greater than the one received, and a refusal to confess or repent—that appear to be attested later at the murder. If Sava's guilt were established, the correspondence between his behaviour in boyhood and in adulthood would constitute retrospective support for Mariia's theory. But Mariia's theory, by itself, is no proof of Sava's guilt.

Two other theories of cause entertained by *Land* do not focus on character, but on random circumstance and divine intervention. An event which precedes the murder, and which is described in sufficient detail to justify the conclusion that it is of importance, is the death of a calf. This accident is presented as part of a chain of events that put the hapless Mykhailo in the fatal wood at a time convenient for the murderer. The Fedorchuks' dog frightened a calf, which impaled itself on a fence, which then had to be fixed. To fix the fence one needed wood, which in turn had to be stolen from the forest. This provided a reason for Mykhailo and Sava to enter the forest together under cover of night. In a trivial sense, therefore, the "cause" of the murder—a prior event without which the murder would not have taken place in that spot and at that time—was a calf or dog. Ivonika, who entertains several explanations for the murder of his son, groups this idea of random causation with that of supernatural agency, placing the superstitious notion of a cursed place where evil things are likely to happen alongside the belief in the sinfulness of theft and the fear that there may be retribution for sin even in this life: "It's an ill-fated forest! And it was other people's goods that he went after. It was the miserable calf that set off such a terrible calamity. If it had not perished, things would not have come to such a pass. It would never have entered his head to go into that uncanny forest" (II, 224).

At the end of this rehearsal of various models for attributing causes to events in the human world that are exercised in *Land*, it is possible to conclude only that these models, separately or in combination, could be applied more or less plausibly, were the event that they seek to explain itself known. In the absence of such knowledge, the list of inefficient explanatory models serves to parody the very idea of explanation. If there is causation in *Land*, it accounts, not for events themselves, but for perceptions of events. Access to the thought processes of Mariia and Ivonika allows the reader to observe the convictions and habits of judgment which predispose them, in the circumstances, to regard Sava as guilty. Students of the novel in their discussions of character have repeatedly paraphrased what Mariia and Ivonika say about themselves and each other: she is avaricious, hoarding wealth for the future benefit of her children, while he is

infatuated with land and judges people on the basis of their attitude toward it.³⁵ Mariia cannot help suspecting a child who fails to conform to her concept of proper filial-paternal relations, while Ivonika cannot help suspecting a man who, on the one hand, has no intuitive emotional attachment to land, and, on the other, stands to receive a larger share of land if he eliminates another claimant. If *Land* possesses a tragic quality, a capacity to inspire pity and fear, it is not because of any inevitable presence of evil in human affairs or any inexorable social or psychological forces that render a catastrophic event—a fratricide—inevitable. Rather, *Land* is a tragedy because inexplicable catastrophic events occur, and human suffering ensues; and because human beings readily ascribe guilt on insufficient grounds, thus multiplying the suffering caused by the events themselves. The human condition is tragic not only because someone killed Abel, but also because, even though Abel's death is a mystery, the lives of all concerned become miserable once they have convinced themselves that Cain did the deed.

Does it matter whether we continue to assert that, in *Land*, Sava killed Mykhailo, or choose rather to explore the consequences of our uncertainty concerning this event? In the context of post-Soviet literary criticism it matters a great deal. First, at stake is not an opinion, but a textually verifiable fact about the structure of a work of art. This fact has been overlooked since the beginning of critical encounter with Kobylans'ka's works, because populists and modernists, as well as Soviets and their opponents, were more comfortable with a simpler fact that more readily conformed to their preferred teleologies.

Second, what happens in *Land* matters, because in Ukraine Kobylans'ka is a canonical figure and therefore a part of the educational system. What is said about her (and the classics in general) by literary scholars influences what is said about her in schools, and what habits of thought, analysis, and discussion are thereby promoted. If canonical texts become objects of statements that are demonstrably untrue, imprecise, or motivated by propagandist interests, the dignity of the canon itself, and, by extension, the culture which it represents, is corrupted. On the other hand, honest and careful readings can restore the canonical text as an object demanding discussion, attention, and re-encounter in the light of contemporary experience. In the case of Kobylans'ka, such readings can bring to light issues capable of resonating with the culturally interested public of the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries even more, perhaps, than they did with the author's contemporaries. Some of Kobylans'ka's works invite reflection upon the desiring, gendered human body and mind, or upon the moulding of complex and malleable human identities in

³⁵ E.g. Babushkin, *Ol'ha Kobylans'ka* 106–10 and Tomashuk 94–99.

environments of ethnic and social difference. *Land* challenges its reader to acknowledge the precariousness of moral intuitions and judgments in the absence of rationally sustainable models of human behaviour or of confident knowledge concerning the past.