Preface

When Lev and I first met sometime in February 2018 to discuss Mykola Bazhan, we could not have known what would eventually emerge from those fragmentary and tentative discussions about publishing a small book of Bazhan's early poetry in English translation. Right now you are holding in your hands the simultaneously improbable and inevitable product of that work: a snowball of inspiration rolling down a mountain of effort and support.

Lev came to this project through an emotional encounter with Bazhan's gut-wrenching poetic response to the Babyn Yar massacre, having compelled a group of translators to work on a poem called "Iar" (Ravine, 1943), and was awed by the poet's efforts to document the horrors that occurred on his native soil. I, on the other hand, emerged from three months' work on the translation of Bazhan's long poem "Rozмова сердеть" (Heart-to-heart conversation, 1929), and realized that I had become completely engrossed in the intensity of the emotions and dreamlike quality of the text that transformed my understanding of this—as I used to think of him before—conventional poet. I kept wondering why, having studied Ukrainian poetry of the 1920s–1930s in the past, I had never heard of this oeuvre, filled with the overwhelming internal monologues of a lyrical hero, who in the first part of the poem finds himself stuck in a building-coffin structure: "Arching over me/The building lifts, like a maddening hearse. The floors, immobile and silent coffins/Are stacked on top of one another."¹ This feeling of being stuck epitomized the situation in which an entire generation of Ukrainian writers, poets, and artists in general found themselves toward the end of the 1920s. Furthermore, Bazhan's poetry, the trajectory of which encompassed various movements and creative platforms, was far from conventional, eclectic in style, and not easy to categorize.

Our selection of Bazhan's early poetry took into account a few seemingly simple principles: we wanted to showcase the work that is lesser known, more

1 Quoted from this volume.

experimental, and speaks to the sensibility of the contemporary reader. With that being said, Bazhan's work is known for its linguistic complexity, so there is nothing simple about it, which might be one of the reasons why this kind of a collection has not been put together before. Despite continued interest in Bazhan's life and work in Ukraine, he has received little attention in the West, and it is our humble hope that this book will fill in this gap.²

Our anthology includes poems from the three early Bazhan collections: *Simnadtsiatyi patrol'* (*The Seventeenth Patrol*, 1926), *Riz'blena tin'* (*The Sculpted Shadow*, 1927), and *Budivli* (*Edifices*, 1929). It also includes translations of Bazhan's important long poems, written in 1929–1930: "Getto v Umani" (Ghetto in Uman'), "Hofmanova nich" (Hoffmann's night), and "Sliptsi" (Blind bards). Additional material is represented by the book of both prose and poetry *Zustrich na perekhresnii stantsii: rozmova tr'oh* (Meeting at the crossroad station: a conversation among the three, 1927), which contains a polemical exchange between three leading poets of the time: Mykhail' Semenko, Geo Shkurupii, and Mykola Bazhan. *Zustrichi* sheds light on Bazhan's creative thought process behind his collection *Budivli*.

The rationale behind publishing the originals in Ukrainian is that up until now there has been no collection of Bazhan's early work. One has to scout various Ukrainian and North American libraries in order to find the poems, quite a few of which are scattered among journals and almanacs of the 1920s. Because of the rarity of some of Bazhan's early poems and collections, such as *Riz'blena tin'* (*The Sculpted Shadow*), there has been confusion among scholars of Bazhan's work as to the content of each particular poetry collection, as well as with the dating of the poems. As a result, some poems have been mistakenly assigned to collections to which they did not belong. This anthology consolidates this material and clarifies the confusion.

In addition to creating the critical apparatus for the early works of Bazhan, clarifying the content of the collections and dates of the poems, the translation process itself represents a new milestone in the process of expanding Bazhan's literary canon in both Ukrainian and English. Only a few of Bazhan's poems from the 1920s and early 1930s have previously been published in English.³

2 See Aheieva, *Vizerunok na kameni. Mykola Bazhan: zhyttepys (ne)radians'koho poeta* (*Pattern on a stone. Mykola Bazhan: a chronicle of a [non-]Soviet poet*) (Lviv: Vydavnytstvo staroho leva, 2018).

3 "Hofmanova nich" (Hoffmann's night) appeared in *Kenyon Review* 2, no. 3 (1980): 35–40, in a translation by Bohdan Boychuk and Mark Rudman. "Getto v Umani" (Ghetto in Uman') appeared in *Agni* 52 (2000): 217–220, in a translation by Michael M. Naydan.

His poetry has been described as dense, rich, and syntactically complex. His vocabulary is unusually varied, even for a poet of this caliber. It is no wonder that contemporary readers of Bazhan have to reach for numerous dictionaries and encyclopedias, as well as post their inquiries on Facebook forums.

The translators' essays that supplement almost every chapter of the book were conceived as experimental pieces, as a common ground for testing out various ideas about the process of translation itself. Inevitably, every translator has their own approach. Some are more literal, while others prefer to wander off into unknown territory and take risks by conveying the emotional component of the poetry, rather than its literal meaning, in the target language.

We know that not every poem and its translation in this anthology will resonate with the reader, yet we hope that everyone finds something here that presents Mykola Bazhan's early creative output from an unexpected angle.

A few words about the title of our book: it comes from Bazhan's 1929 poem "Hoffmann's Night," a tribute to Romanticism and early Modernism. The strikingly dark imagery of the poem speaks volumes about the role of the unconscious in the creative process, something that Bazhan must have been acutely aware of:

Наказую я привидам-словам:

Із прірв свідомості, з найглибших людських ям

Ви павуками тихими вилазьте!

I order the word-ghosts

To creep out from the deepest manholes of the mind,

Like quiet spiders of the hidden soul!⁴

Oksana Rosenblum

"Krov polonianok" (The blood of captive maidens) appeared in *Hundred Years of Youth: A Bilingual Anthology of 20th Century Ukrainian Poetry*, ed. Olha Luchuk and Michael M. Naydan (Lviv: Litopys, 2000).

4 Translated for this book by Svetlana Lavochkina.