Oh, to vex me, contraryes meet in one:
Inconstancy unnaturally hath begott
A constant habit; that when I would not
I change in vowes, and in devotions.
John Donne, *Holy Sonnets*

The Ukrainian Avant-Garde and Its Roots: The Poetics of Mykola (Nik) Bazhan

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In his nomination of Mykola Bazhan for the 1970 Nobel Prize,¹ Omeljan Pritsak, the founder of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, proposes Bazhan's early period—his most controversial and stylistically diverse—as crucial for understanding the nature of his poetic talent. It is the works of Bazhan's first literary decade, ranging from his debut publication in 1923 to a panegyric for Stalin in 1932, that secured him a place in Ukrainian Soviet literature.² Pritsak especially singles out Bazhan's second poetry collection, *The Sculpted Shadow*, and

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- 1 The nomination was doomed from the very beginning because of the political realities of that time. Mykola Bazhan refused to send the bibliography of translations of his poems needed for the nomination because he knew too well how dearly he would have to pay for it if it came to pass.
 - 2 Mykola Bazhan, "Rura-marsh" (Ruhr-March), *Bil'shovyk*, May 17, 1923, 10. Mykola Bazhan, "Liudyna stoit' v zorenosnim Kremli" (A man stands in the star-bearing Kremlin), in Mykola Bazhan, *Poezii* (Saratov: Ukrvydav CK KP(b)U, 1943).

also such poems as “Edifices,” “Ghetto in Uman,” “Hoffman’s Night,” and “Blind Bards.” For Pritsak, Bazhan’s poetry of the 1920s represents the European experimental style. But at the same time he stresses that it is deeply rooted in the late seventeenth-century Ukrainian Baroque tradition,³ “with its profusion of grotesque emblematic details, extended metaphors, often enigmatic metonymies, and an approach which is at the same time furiously sensual and icily detached.”⁴

The poet himself emphasized the dichotomy between the avant-garde and Baroque in his work. In 1927 Bazhan wrote: “I love the Zaborovs’kyi Gate and the Dniprel’stan.⁵ I love organic and robust culture, and Ukraine produced such culture only once: the culture of feudalism, the culture of Mazepa. Now it’ll have it the second time: the culture of proletariat and the culture of building a socialist society.”⁶ The two architectural symbols of the radically opposing styles that Bazhan names are Dniprel’stan, part of the Dnipro hydroelectric station, which had just been started in 1927, and the former main entrance to Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, Zaborovs’kyi Gate, one of the most vivid examples of Ukrainian Baroque. He thereby indicates the two poles of his poetics. On the one hand, he is a member of the avant-garde; on the other, from the mid-1920s he turns to the Baroque tradition and to philosophical epic poems. The coexistence of these different stylistic approaches is demonstrated in his two earliest poetry collections.

Bazhan’s first Futurist book *The Seventeenth Patrol* (1926) was an attempt to pay tribute to the revolutionary years; it consequently required decisive gestures and new forms of expression. However, his second collection *The Sculpted Shadow* (1927) struck a completely different tone in addition to that of experimentalism: its speaker tries to develop an understanding of life with all its contradictions. The same philosophical orientation can be detected in the poems Bazhan wrote in the late 1920s and early 1930s. They are marked by accumulating images that are perceived as separate and chaotic, but together the poems uncover the very essence of things through the objectification—both in the sense of focusing on concrete objects or details, and in the sense of refraining

3 For the Ukrainian Baroque, which flourished during the Hetmanship of Ivan Mazepa (1639–1709), see Giovanna Brogi Bercoff, “Plurilinguism and Identity: Rethinking Ukrainian Literature of the Seventeenth Century,” in *Ukraine and Europe: Cultural Encounters and Negotiations*, ed. Marko Pavlyshyn et al., 45–72 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

4 Omeljan Pritsak Memorial Library, Archival Collection, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, collection 10, file 983, pages 101–118.

5 *Brama Zaborovs’koho*. More can be found at <http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CZ%5CA%5CZaborovskyGate.htm>.

6 All translations are from the current volume, unless otherwise specified.

from personal emotion—of the sensory world.⁷ The initial chaos, divided and solidified by the description of disparate objects, is perceived by the reader as a sequence of fragments, built frame by frame in the manner of montage, conveying the complexity of the artistic experience.

Thus, objectification and montage become the main techniques that connect avant-garde with Baroque aesthetics in Bazhan's poems of the late 1920s. In broader terms, these principles may be said to characterize European art and literature of the 1920s in general: the emergence of Surrealism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* from Dada, and of Constructivism, Bauhaus, and other forms of engineering-oriented art from Cubism and Futurism. The employment of these techniques also indicates an understanding of art and literature as autonomous spheres, governed by their own laws, as the focus shifts to the formal aspects of a literary work. The ontological autonomy of art was a foundational tenet of the Russian Formalists and, a bit later, of the Anglo-American New Critics. Both movements developed as a reaction to the older literary history schools that considered literary work only as a product of the author's personality, status, or attitudes toward their own social reality.

In his essay "Art as Device" (also translated as "Art as Technique"), published 1917, Viktor Shklovsky, one of the founders of Russian Formalism and its main proponent, considered the complexity of artistic form as the main principle of defamiliarization or estrangement, which is also a "way of experiencing the process of creativity."⁸ If avant-garde technique defamiliarizes the object by dividing it into parts and reshuffling them, then Baroque technique is avant-garde avant la lettre in its desire for asymmetry, logical leaps, semantic and rhythmic shifts, conjunction of distant ideas, and its ambition to surprise. Hence concretization of detail and, at the same time, the transition from linear connections to juxtaposition and montage are features common both to avant-garde and Baroque. Later in his 1931 essay "The Golden Land" Shklovsky wrote: "People of our time, people of intense detail are people of the

7 This could be compared to the destruction of the lyrical "I" in Marinetti's Futurist manifestos, Pound's principle of "Direct treatment of the 'thing,'" or William Carlos Williams's dictum "no ideas but in things." See Paolo Tonini, *I manifesti del futurismo italiano 1909–1945* (Gussago: Edizioni dell'Arengario, 2011); Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect," in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. and introd. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 3–14; William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, ed. Christopher McGowan (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1995).

8 Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. and ed. Benjamin Sher (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 6.

Baroque. ... The Baroque, life of intense details, is not a vice, but an attribute of our times.”⁹

It is no coincidence that T. S. Eliot, in his shaping of the principles of modern poetry, appeals to the English Baroque tradition. In his famous essay “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921), along with ascribing a new level of significance to early modern English poetry, he concludes “that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. ... The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.”¹⁰ In another essay “Hamlet and His Problems” (1919), Eliot provides a more precise formula: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.”¹¹

Bazhan’s definition of poetry appears in his 1927 manifesto “Put On Your Glasses.” Although he calls it “revolutionary materialism,” his idea is similar to those of both Eliot and Shklovsky: “To properly see things, browse, and touch them—means to be unlike the impressionists. To touch things that are material and objective—means to differ from the Expressionists. To not contemplate, not photograph them—means to differ from the naturalists. To be a revolutionary materialist.”¹² The same overt objectification becomes the foundation of modern aesthetics, and is also effective in Bazhan’s poetry of the late 1920s, where it is given the task of defamiliarization.

Bazhan was thirteen years old during the October 1917 revolution. This partly explains the romantic perception of the events in his first poetic collection *The Seventeenth Patrol*, published under the name Nik Bazhan.

In 1921 Bazhan set out from Uman’ to study in Kyiv. From the beginning of the February Revolution until the final establishment of Communist rule in

9 Viktor Shklovsky, *Gamburgskii schet. Stat’i—vospominaniia—esse (1914–1933)* (*The Hamburg reckoning. Articles—memoirs—essays*), ed. Aleksandr Galushkin (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1990), 444.

10 T. S. Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets,” in *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 287.

11 T. S. Eliot, “Hamlet and Its Problems,” in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1921), 87–94.

12 Mykola Bazhan, “Odiahnit’ okuliary” (Put on your glasses), *Bumerang. Zhurnal pamfletiv* 1 (1927): 25. My translation.

1920, Kyiv was controlled by various powers, changing hands fourteen times. In the spring of 1920, the city suffered a terrible famine. Still, this hardship and turmoil did not stop an intense whirlpool of literary life. Among the first to appear in the literary arena were the Futurists, headed by Mykhail' Semenko. The history of Ukrainian Futurism began as early as 1914, when Semenko invented "Quero-Futurism" (Searching-Futurism) and published his collection *Daring*, containing the manifesto "Myself."

The manifesto challenged the most canonical of Ukrainian poets, Taras Shevchenko, who for Semenko symbolized the rustic backward Ukrainian culture of the nineteenth century. Semenko called upon Ukrainians to "burn *The Kobzar*," Shevchenko's main poetry collection. The text caused a large debate among the intelligentsia, primarily because the Romantic poet was perceived not only as poet but as liberator, prophet, and messiah. Although inspired by Italian and Russian precedents, this gesture was much stronger than Marinetti's call to "burn libraries and museums" or the Cubo-Futurist command "to throw Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and others off from the ship of modernity."¹³ Of course, Pushkin and Shevchenko were the main representatives and symbols of their national literatures. But the difference is that Pushkin, unlike Shevchenko, was a poet of an imperial, multinational Russia. Shevchenko, on the other hand, had been installed as a symbol of Ukrainian national liberation during his lifetime. At this point, further development of Ukrainian Futurism was interrupted by World War I.

At the end of the 1910s the Futurist movement in Ukraine began gaining more power, pushing earlier Symbolist practices into the background. The demands of Communist ideology to destroy the old "bourgeois" world and build the new "proletarian" society were to a certain extent consistent with the Futurist vision of art. Therefore, after the revolution the avant-garde movement saw itself as the righteous art of the new proletarian class.

Here it would be helpful to introduce the term "Late Futurism" to help define some versions of 1920s Futurism. The term "Late Futurism" can be applied to avant-garde groups and movements in those national literatures which either never had the first phase of so-called "High Futurism" (in the prewar period) or in which this phase was not original or quickly aborted. We can see examples of

13 Filippo Marinetti, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," 1909; "Slap in the Face of Public Taste," 1912. See also Tonini, *I manifesti del futurismo italiano 1909–1945*; S. Dzhybinova, ed., *Literaturnye manifesty ot simvolizma do nashykh dnei* (Moscow: XXI vek—Soglasie, 2000), 142.

Late Futurist movements in Poland and Slovenia.¹⁴ “Late Futurism” arises as a more mature form of the radical avant-garde and—this is very important—as an artistic consciousness that is much closer to national traditions.

Ukrainian Futurism started its quick development after World War I and 1917, at the time when the main European Futurist movements began to transform. Whereas prewar Italian and Russian Futurisms were anarchic and anti-establishment, especially anti-state, after the war both movements tried to position themselves as the artistic arms of their respective regimes. In 1922, former Russian Futurists formed a new organization, LEF (Left Front of the Arts), and no longer called themselves “Futurists.” Furthermore, after the war, Italian Futurists started to support the fascist movement, and embraced the state after Mussolini’s “March on Rome” in October 1922. In Western literatures, nationalism and communism were the two paradigms between which “Late Futurism” played its brief role.

As for Ukraine, the development of a separate Futurism was minor before the war and interrupted by it. The period from 1918, when Semenko came back to Kyiv, until about 1922, can be described as Late Futurism. At that time, Ukrainian Futurism was one of the vocal factions offering competing visions of artistic form and social function in the initially dynamic Soviet environment. But in the early to mid-twenties, political pressure began to distort and dilute avant-garde aesthetics. The mechanism of “social demand” played a substantial role in literature: it empowered the creation of works that fit into state discourse.

It was in 1921 that Semenko invented “Pan-Futurism”—a “post-art of the future” that aimed to synthesize the achievements of all experimental movements in art. In terms of its theory and artistic practices, “Pan-Futurism” was close to Constructivism, even though the followers still called themselves “futurists” or “pan-futurists”. Bazhan joined the Association of Pan-Futurists (Aspanfut) that same year. As he later explained in his memoirs:

By the time I moved to Kyiv, I had already become a full-scale “leftist,” and so I did not join the Neoclassicists¹⁵ but instead went to meet up with Mykhail’

14 See Nina Kolesnikoff, “Polish Futurism: Its Origin and the Aesthetic Program,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 18, no. 3 (1976): 301–311; Marijan Dović, “Anton Podbevšek, Futurism, and Slovenian Interwar Avant-garde Literature,” *International Yearbook of Futurism Studies* 1 (2011): 262–276.

15 The Neoclassicists (from the word “neoclassicism.” In Ukrainian: *neoklasyky*) was a group of Ukrainian poets as well as literary critics and theorists of Ukrainian Modernism in the 1920s. Unlike other groups, they had no organized structure. Their works were characterized by aestheticism, an appeal to Greek and Roman themes and plots, and an interest in the formal

Semenko. Semenko persuaded me and Iurii Ianovs'kyi to move to Kharkiv.
... He discovered us all. He supported us and helped us to get settled.¹⁶

Bazhan's other mentor was the avant-garde director Les' Kurbas. Kurbas, the leader of *Berezil'* theatre, was one of the most outstanding figures in the Ukrainian arts:

When he [Kurbas] came to Uman' with his theatre lab, I read him Tychyna's "Like Harps, Like Harps." He was stunned. ... Tychyna and, of course, Mayakovsky: these were my first teachers. I happened to get hold of Mayakovsky's "150000000" in Uman', and this book greatly influenced me. ... When I moved to Kyiv, I used to visit Kurbas quite often, and I followed Berezil' theatre all the time. I really felt the influence of expressionism through the plays of Berezil'. ...¹⁷

Apart from Kurbas, the influence of Vladimir Mayakovsky and German Expressionism can be discerned in Bazhan's first poetry collection *The Seventeenth Patrol* (1926), which includes twenty-four poems written during the years he spent in Kyiv. The poems are clearly identified with Futurist poetics: they aim to affirm the heroic pathos of the revolutionary years, and feature sound polyphony, sophisticated metaphors, pronounced emotion, and asymmetric rhythm. Bazhan plays with the formal and semantic aspects of word-creation, capitalizes on the nuances of meaning, and searches for new techniques to effect dynamism.

Perhaps unexpectedly for a Futurist, the poet appeals to traditional songs and ballads, but he fills them with unusual content. For example, the poem "Trooper's Song" (1925) reflects the author's perception of the revolutionary years. What it lacks in plot development it makes up for in revolutionary and romantic pathos. As Red Army guards leave for a battle, figurative sound patterning evokes the clanking of steel stirrups. The reader is meant to be immersed in the atmosphere of the battle and to experience the ringing of weapons and the smoke of the battlefields:

aspects of literature. From the mid-1920s, Marxist critics accused them of formalism. The main representatives of this movement were Mykola Zerov, Maksym Ryl's'kyi, Pavlo Fylypovych, Mykhailo Drai-Khmara, and Iurii Klen. See <http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CN%5CE%5CNeoclassicists.htm>.

16 Nataliia Kostenko, "Razgovory s poetom" (Conversations with the poet), in *Vospominania o Mykole Bazhane* (*Memories of Mykola Bazhan*), ed. Nina Bazhan and Evgeniia Deich (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1989), 272.

17 *Ibid.*, 271.

The hops of green legs lull me,
 of bodies, tulle.
 O, one who eyes in the evening
 the shimmering shingles of waves.

Original:

Мене зелених ніг,
 тіл тюль люля хміль.
 О, хто зазирає ввечері на зорі
 в хвиль сльотну толь?

Such semantic shifts attempt to communicate the *mood* of night. The poem replaces sense with sound. The author uses a purely avant-garde strategy of creating an image by emphasizing impulsive forms of utterance.

In 1925, Semenko's Pan-Futurists settled in Kharkiv, which from 1919 was the capital of Soviet Ukraine. Having moved there as well, Bazhan found himself at the epicenter of Ukrainian cultural and artistic life, where most of the literary groups and publishing houses were concentrated. *Berezil'* moved to Kharkiv in 1926. Bazhan befriended the future film director Alexander Dovzhenko, who worked as a magazine illustrator there. The poet also encountered the avant-garde artists led by Vasyl' Iermylvov, who had collaborated with Russian Futurists Velimir Khlebnikov and David Burliuk. Vladimir Mayakovsky also frequented the city. Kharkiv in the 1920s lay at an intersection of Ukrainian and Russian cultures.

A new period in Bazhan's artistic development began in 1926. In his search for a suitable cultural paradigm, he turned to the Ukrainian folklore tradition as well as to classical forms. This turn testified to an ideological discrepancy between Semenko and Bazhan. Bazhan's avant-garde strategies—unlike those of Semenko or Geo Shkurupii—never entailed ideological gestures against the national literary canon.²⁰ He became a member of the more

Gerald Janecek, *Zaum: The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1996).

20 In 1925, Semenko published his complete collection of poetry in one volume (1910–1922) provocatively titled *Kobzar'*. In 1930, Geo Shkurupii published his unfinished novel *A Tale of the Poet Taras Shevchenko's Bitter Love* in the journals *Zhyttia i revoliutsiia* (the first three parts) and *Nova generatsiia* (another two parts).

aesthetically conservative literary group VAPLITE that same year.²¹ Headed by Mykola Khvylovyyi, this organization adopted Bolshevik policy in matters of literature. VAPLITE advocated for the creation of a new Ukrainian literature, which should be oriented towards the best examples of West European writing. VAPLITE also emphasized the professional status and qualifications of the writer. It did not recognize the participation of its members in any other literary organizations, which caused problems for Bazhan who did not break his cooperation with Semenko.

In 1927, the Pan-Futurists published the collection *Meeting at the Cross-road Station*, subtitled *A Conversation Between the Three*, that contained poems by Mykhail' Semenko, Mykola Bazhan, and Geo Shkurupii, as well as a prosaic fragment with the same title. Here, Bazhan presented such classical stanza poems as "The Blood of the Captive Maidens" and "The Night of Zalizniak," as well as "Heart-to-Heart Conversation," which he signed with his own name rather than his Futurist pen name Nik. This gesture itself indicates a transition to new aesthetic and ideological positions. In the prose section, the authors expressed their visions of contemporary literature and of their further participation in the Futurist movement. Here Bazhan said that he had lost faith in Futurism, with its ideal of art for the masses and by the masses, and turned instead to the elite culture of Ukrainian Baroque:

Okay, I'd admit it: I've laid down my arms. I stopped dreaming about new forms of art that are a thousand times more influential, robust, majestic than the old ones. I stopped believing that tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, pocket-size, chamber, domestic art (like in the collocation "domestic cattle") will be supplanted by new art of mobs, streets, demonstrations, and uprisings.

Such a decision could have been dictated not only by the artistic search of the poet, but also by domestic politics.

By the mid-1920s, revolutionary enthusiasm gave way to feelings of confusion and uncertainty among Ukrainian intellectuals, as they reacted to the policies of the Soviet state. On the one side, there was the policy of *korenizatsiia*

21 VAPLITE, an acronym of *Vil'na akademiia proletars'koï literatury* (*Free Academy of Proletarian Literature*), was an organization of Modernist writers founded in 1925 by Mykola Khvylovyyi. In subsequent years, Maik Iohansen, Oleksa Slisarenko, Iurii Ianovs'kyi, Pavlo Tychyna, Mykola Bazhan, Oleksandr Dovzhenko, and other cultural figures joined the group.

(nativization), which aimed to strengthen the Communist regime in the national republics by promoting the local population into larger governing bodies. On the other, the Bolsheviks introduced the NEP, or New Economic Policy, which was more market-oriented and aimed to foster the economic development of the country. While the policy of Ukrainization was perceived positively and stimulated the flourishing of Ukrainian culture in the 1920s, the NEP was criticized by the left wing of the Communist Party and was seen by its representatives as an unpleasant, temporary necessity. The split directly affected the ideological climate of literary life. Some of the literary groups tried to maintain the “leftist” approach to literature and show their “usefulness,”²² while others assumed an increasingly loyal attitude to the party’s general line. As a consequence, from the mid-1920s the Pan-Futurists were criticized by both party authorities and other literary groups, including VAPLITE.

Another heated polemic concerned the ideological and aesthetic principles of Ukrainian national art and its accomplishments. In the course of the so-called Literary Discussion of 1925–1928, initiated by Mykola Khvylovyyi, the question of the content of Ukrainian proletarian literature became an object of focus. The fact that more than a hundred writers and critics participated in the polemics may indicate its relevance. The discussion centered on some of Khvylovyyi’s statements in a series of pamphlets from 1925–1928. Khvylovyyi mainly argued against didactic literature as well as low-quality, mass-market literature, and for the professionalization of writers as an educated elite: “First, the new art is being created by workers and peasants. On condition, however, that they be intellectually developed, talented, people of genius.”²³

From the second half of the 1920s, the intellectual vector of discussions changed: the question of the content of national literature was articulated with a more sharply politicized tone. Khvylovyyi called for Ukrainian literature to “flee as quickly as possible from Russian literature and its styles.”²⁴ He argued that

22 From 1924, *Aspanfut* was reorganized as the Association of Communist Culture (AsKK or Komunkul’t). The main aim was to introduce art to the masses. The Futurists saw themselves as “a political body on the Third Front and as a State Planning Committee (GOSPLAN) through cultural production” (quoted in Mykhail’ Semenko, “Tsentr, iacheiki komunkul’ta,” *Gong komunkul’ta* 1 [1924]: 4–5). Also see Oleh S. Ilnytskyj, *Ukrainian Futurism, 1914–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 1997), 111–133.

23 Mykola Khvylovyyi, “On Satan in a Barrel ...,” in *The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine: Polemical Pamphlets, 1925–1926*, ed. Myroslav Shkandrij (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1986), 54.

24 Mykola Khvylovyyi, *Mykola Khvylovyyi. Tvory v 5-kh tomakh* (Mykola Khvylovyyi: Works in five volumes), ed. Hryhoriy Kostyuk (Toronto: Smoloskyp, 1983), vol. 4, 315.

“Russian literature has weighed down upon us for centuries as master of the situation, as one that has conditioned our psyche to play a slavish imitator. ... Our orientation must be towards Western European art, its style, its techniques.”²⁵ These views drew the attention of party authorities. In April 1926, Joseph Stalin sent a special letter to Lazar Kaganovich, who was the first secretary of the Communist Party of the Ukrainian SSR. In his letter Stalin stated that “a wide movement for Ukrainian culture among the Ukrainian public has begun and is growing in Ukraine.”²⁶ He continued: “this movement, led by non-Communist intelligentsia, can manifest itself at the local level as an attempt to alienate Ukrainian culture and the Ukrainian society from all-Soviet culture, to reveal itself in the manner of struggle against Moscow as a whole, against the Russians, against Russian culture and its highest achievement—Leninism.”²⁷ Khvył’ovyi was accused of Ukrainian nationalism, and VAPLITE was dissolved in 1928.

Bazhan later recalled of his participation in VAPLITE that “I was not orthodox. I kept close to Oleksa Slisarenko, Iurii Smolych, Iurii Ianovs’kyi. ... We were rather cosmopolitan. But most of us did not take part in the literary clashes.”²⁸ The word “orthodox” here is used in the sense of an aesthetic orthodoxy, under which the poet was meant to be faithful to a particular literary group. However, echoes of literary discussions are evident in Bazhan’s poems from the period, such as “The Blood of the Captive Maidens,” “The Road,” “An Autumn Road,” “Heart-to-Heart Conversation,” and “Hoffmann’s Night.” For example, “The Blood of the Captive Maidens” (1926) is a poetic transformation of Khvył’ovyi’s conception of an “Asiatic Renaissance.” Khvył’ovyi prophesied a spiritual rebirth in then-backward Asian countries, which, he claimed, were fated to wrest cultural primacy from the West: “It has to appear, the Asiatic Renaissance, because the idea of Communism stalks like a specter not so much over Europe as over Asia; because Asia, realizing that only Communism will liberate it from economic slavery, will utilize art as a factor in the battle.”²⁹ Interestingly, it is Soviet Ukraine that Khvył’ovyi locates the birthplace of the Asian Renaissance. Correspondingly, Bazhan’s poem depicts the rape and impregnation of the “fair Ukrainian captive woman” by the Mongol conqueror. The

25 Mykola Khvył’ovyi, “Apologists of Scribbling,” in *ibid.*, 222.

26 Iurii Shevel’ov, introduction to *Mykola Khvył’ovyi. Tvory v 5-kh tomakh*, by Mykola Khvył’ovyi, vol. 4, 16–17.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Kostenko, “Razgovory s poetom,” 274.

29 Mykola Khvył’ovyi, “About Copernicus from Friborg ...,” in Shkandrij, ed., *The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine*, 67.

mixing of blood allegorically indicates not only the genesis of Ukrainian people but also Khvylovyyi's utopian conception: "But through the centuries the offspring's managed to preserve/That ancient blood inside its knotty veins."

Bazhan's second poetry collection *The Sculpted Shadow* (1927), which included this poem, testifies to a new period of his development. Its uncertainty, hesitation, and a minor, elegiac mood stand in sharp contrast to the sublime and affirmative intonations of the early heroic ballads and songs. It is surprising that such a great change in the author's artistic views could happen within a year. The poet gives preference to sonnets and verses with a clear strophic structure. The sonnets "Fern," "Lovage," and "Love Potion" show a Modernist desire to reconstruct lost truths by turning to Ukrainian traditional culture, folklore, and Slavic legends. However, Bazhan employs conventional narrative as a pretext for Modernist concretization, disjunction, formal innovation, and a lack of obvious personal emotional involvement. For example, in the sonnet "Lovage," a man goes to war and leaves his pregnant lover. The child dies afterwards: "And in the hut, the newborn will emit a short-lived cry." In this way the poet hints that the newborn was killed shortly after the birth, as would befit a child resulting from an extra-marital affair. The situation is so archetypal that the woman has no name. Normally, the protagonists of such a traditional plot rouse sympathy and compassion, but the poet transfers the reader's attention to language itself. The easily reproducible classical scheme allows for a great deal of linguistic improvisation and lets Bazhan show the very process of creating the text. He plays with unexpected comparisons and the symbolic meanings of colors ("blue umbra," "pink traces"). The irony of the title is revealed only at the end. According to folk beliefs, lovage, a common herb, protects the home and represents love and concord: "Rue buds will bloom and lovage stems will sprout." This "objectification" of the story exposes Symbolism as an observer rather than a participant in life.

Symbolism and Romanticism are also drawn upon in the cycle composed of "Autumn Path" and "The Road." Working against its archetypal motif of the journey of life, "Autumn Path" surprises by projecting a feeling of alienation and despondency onto postrevolutionary reality. The dramatic bifurcation between dream and reality provokes a feeling of confusion and disappointment. This private experience is articulated publicly and is felt as a matter of public significance: "Whom can I offer the pain of my little mornings,/my miserable and useless exhaustion?" Non-Futurist feeling is buttressed by non-Futurist, classical prosody. The poem consists of a sequence of eight-line iambic stanzas tending towards octaves. However, at the end of it all the speaker tries to throw

away doubt and disappointment in the name of the Communist ideal, because “there are no words of disbelief on the flag of the Commune!” The final couplet, serving as a conclusion, sharply—and perhaps not entirely convincingly—contrasts with the pessimistic intonation of the whole text: “The fog settles. Lights are shining/The lights are far away. A distant, happy road.” The poem attempts to throw away the “ghosts of romanticism” in order to affirm socialist reality, but makes a respectable case for Romanticism—and for hesitation—in the process. Critics hated this change in Bazhan’s internal trajectory. For example, the poet Yakiv Savchenko lambasted the book: “M. Bazhan, who has recently written poetry full of revolutionary energy, with a clear phrasing of social problems, now copies neo-classical poetry, mainly Ryl’s’kyi, wandering in the shaky fogs of his own vague feelings.”³⁰ Indeed, Bazhan did greatly value Maksym Ryl’s’kyi.

The late 1920s saw Bazhan at a “breaking point.”³¹ Seemingly directing a spotlight at the inner self, he tried to harmonize universal values with the ideological demands of the new regime. Hence dualism, bifurcation, and uncertainty haunt the poems of that period. In his masterpieces—“Heart-to-Heart Conversation” (1928), “Edifices” (1929), “Hoffmann’s Night” (1929), “Ghetto in Uman” (1929), and the unfinished poem “Blind Bards” (1931)—Bazhan achieves a new complexity in structure, semantics, and rhythm. Notwithstanding his interest in classical forms, Bazhan works with avant-garde techniques and employs montage, contrast, grotesquery, metaphorical complexity, and “objectification” as literary devices. His poetry acknowledges the coexistence of different artistic paradigms. He creates both Futurist (see “Foxtrot” or “Elegy for Circus Attractions”) and allegorical poems.

As for their subject matter, the poems of the late 1920s are ideologically and philosophically concerned with the establishment of the new socialist world. The triptych “Edifices,” which gave the title to Bazhan’s third poetry collection, published in 1929, describes three architectural structures characteristic of three epochs: the Middle Ages; the Cossack Hetmanate; and the Soviet era. The poem interprets national history lyrically with metaphors that symbolize the respective epoch, contrasting the past with modernity. The poem’s montage bears traces of Constructivism and Expressionism in its imagery.

30 Iakiv Savchenko, “Zanepadnytstvo v ukrains’kii poezii” (Decay in Ukrainian Poetry), *Zhyttia i revoliutsiia* 2 (1927): 165. See Andrii Bondar, “Poema M. Bazhana ‘Sliptsi’ iak tekst-vyklyk: sproba teoretychnoho modeliuвання” (M. Bazhan’s poem “Blind Bards” as a text-challenge: an attempt at theoretical modeling), *Suchasnist’* 12 (1998): 70.

31 See Bondar, “Poema M. Bazhana,” 70.

The first part of the triptych, "Cathedral," presents a Gothic cathedral as the embodiment of human suffering and torment. However, along with a metaphorically rich description of the Gothic style, the poem also emphasizes the suffering of the people who built the cathedral for the "glory of the feudal lord":

And they fell,
 and clawed their way forward under the vault,
Those bodies without arms, and arms without bodies,
With mouths half torn apart.

In the second part of the poem, “Archway,” Bazhan portrays the Zaborovs’kyi Gate, the Baroque main entrance to Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, by again contrasting civilizational achievement with the oppression that made it possible. The richness of architectural ornaments and the lush details common to Baroque style disguise the true function of the gates, because

no one opened the generous arch
To let through prisoners captured
in conquered states.

The poet likens the construction of the gate to sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, while the arch itself is compared with a female breast. This juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane is characteristic of the Baroque, a technique which the poet explicitly calls “raunchy” (*khtyvvyi*).

The third part of the poem, "Building" ("Budynok"), is the most expressive because great architecture is here for the first time not predicated on slavery. Bazhan finds delight in the music and rhythm of the focused work of a free people: "The iron is beaten, the beautiful brass bent/In the rolling muscles of men's arms." The author depicts socialist reality as better and more progressive than previous historical epochs.

Together with “Edifices,” the poem “Heart-to-Heart Conversation” (1928) constitutes another of the central text-allegories of the book. Its background is the social and political atmosphere of the late 1920s in Soviet Ukraine. The reader overhears echoes of the Literary Discussion of 1925–1928, and of the anticipation of new political changes (the Ukrainization policy and the NEP were abolished in 1928). Bazhan’s deep psychological discomfort again manifests itself in dual structures and an attitude of inner ambivalence. The

author takes the position of a fellow traveler, which was common for many intellectuals.³² He makes great efforts to adhere to Communist ideals, but at the same time experiences doubts. The poem offers another example of how private sentiments are converted to public forces by publication. Back in 1928, Bazhan found the courage to speak of doubts common to his time.

"Heart-to-Heart Conversation" appears to be a phantasmagoria in the form of a dialogue between the protagonist and a mysterious figure in an "old blue uniform," which signifies participation in the governance of the Russian Empire. Curiously, this specter of prerevolutionary Russia, given in opposition to the "new" socialist reality, is in fact an alter ego of the main character. At the same time, pre-revolutionary Russia is portrayed as backward, dirty, drunken, and religious: "In foreign dumps, like a starving dog,/Your Rus' expired." In this context, the conjuring up of Dostoyevsky ("Dostoyevsky with his withered arms"), who symbolizes not only the old regime, but also uncertainty, becomes clear. Dostoyevsky did not fit into the framework of official Marxist literary criticism, as he opposed the violent methods of the revolutionary struggle and preached Christianity. Consequently, the dead novelist was vilified at the time and his works were no longer printed. The dismissive term *dostoevshchina* was bandied about to denote the confusion, mental instability, and wallowing in suffering that is inherent to Dostoyevsky's characters. Bazhan himself strikes a critical, or perhaps self-critical, pose: "Obviously, the poem had an internal intention. It was a protest against *dostoevshchina*, which was common not only among the Russian but among the Ukrainian intelligentsia as well. The ghosts followed me up the stairs to the attic. They had to be fought against."³³ Yet the poem's perception of imperial Russia strangely concords with that of Mykola Khvylovyi, who urged Ukrainian literature to "run away from Moscow" as "the center of an All-Union Philistinism."³⁴

The central image-symbol of the poem is a heart. It appears "chewed-up," "screaming," or "crumbled," as if it were the organ itself that is suffering. On the other hand, it is a heart given to the revolutionary idea, where it serves as a "trophy" and "honorary banner." At the end of the poem, the lyric subject chooses to break the two-faced heart, and the "night guest" disappears like a ghost at the dawn of a new era. Thus, the protagonist makes up his mind and decides to be faithful to the revolutionary ideals.

32 The term *fellow traveler* (also *poputchik* [one who travels the same path]) was invented by Lev Trotsky to identify those indecisive intellectuals, who were sympathetic to the Communist regime, but were not the formal members of any organization.

33 Kostenko, "Razgovory s poetom," 275.

34 *Ibid.*, 228.

The conflict between a talented artist and his surroundings reappears in “Hoffmann’s Night,” which is not part of *Edifices*, although it organically fits into the scope of the collection’s aesthetic and philosophical problems. When it was published in 1929, the poem provoked controversy and even animosity with its ideological implications, the author’s detached manner of narration, and lack of clear standpoint. Choosing the German romantic writer E. T. A. Hoffmann as his protagonist, Bazhan displays an interest in the irrational and unconscious—features that are typical of Hoffmann’s Romanticism as well as early Modernism. Consequently, the text again reads like a phantasmagoria. Its events take place in a Berlin tavern, where Hoffmann and his friends, the members of the literary circle The Serapion Brethren, probably met in 1815. Located in a cellar, the tavern is depicted as a place of debauchery, chaos, and mysticism. Grotesque and naturalistic descriptions associate it with hell, while the main character is likened to Mephistopheles. These analogies let the author launch into his main theme: the company of drunkards does not empower the spirit of the true artist. Hence the negative depiction of the most important character, who ruins his talent: “It’s here that for thousands of hours and thousands of nights/The spiteful Amadeus drinks and guffaws.”

In another poem “Ghetto in Uman’,” published separately in 1929, Bazhan raises the question of the historical perspectives of the Jewish people. In the USSR in the late 1920s, the idea of national self-determination for the Jews was considered unacceptable, since the prevailing view was that they should assimilate with other nationalities. The author’s criticism is, on the surface level, directed at the phenomenon of ghettos, such as had existed in Uman’ since the city’s foundation in the seventeenth century. But what is in fact being critiqued is ethnic or national separatism in general—in the case of the city’s Jews, no matter whether separatism it is enforced by others or by themselves. Even though the city is not named in the body of the poem, the author signals it by referring to Maksym Zalizniak, a leader of the Koliivshchyna rebellion, who destroyed the Jewish community in the Uman’ in 1768.³⁵

Bazhan draws an ambivalent analogy between the hilltop city and Mount Zion. On the one hand, this makes the history of the Jewish community in Uman’ stand for the tragic history of the entire Jewish people, with Maksym Zalizniak’s pogrom associated with the autos-da-fé of the Inquisition and the

35 Koliivshchyna, a peasant and Cossack rebellion in Right-Bank Ukraine in 1768, was also characterized by violence towards Roman Catholics, Poles, and Jews, and culminated in the massacre of Uman’.

First Crusade, and perhaps even with the burning of the Temple by the Babylonians and the Romans:

Zion is burning—above it an unwavering and unmerciful flame
Has arisen for centuries,
Whether the fire of twisted Torquemada,
Or the sharp tongues of the Rhine's bonfires,
Or the sweeping, unkempt and treacherous storms
Of Zalizniak's desperate gang. ...

On the other hand, Bazhan *also* calls for the burning of “Zions,” which he perceives as symbols of Hasidic fanaticism (the poet even names them “Hasidic Sodom” and “the burial pit of faith's orgasm”) and relics of the past:

Not all your paths, Israel,
Lead to defamed Zion, to execution and despair!
Do not sleep, Israel!

Such an appeal could provide us with more than one interpretation. In the poet's historical context, the call “to burn Zions” suggests a vision of the future of the Jewish people as not separate but, on the contrary, fully integrated into the family of progressive nations that makes up socialist humanity. Bazhan therefore opposes religion, represented by the Hasidic fanaticism that led to the creation of self-imposed ghettos and made integration into general society impossible. “Religious stupor” and “ruthlessness of faith” are the remains of the “old world,” but “Your future is born on other fields,/exhausted, defamed people!” Yet the poem can, in addition, be seen as taking aim at nationalist—rather than religious—separatism. At least by implication, one may overhear in it a critique of the Zionist movement at a time when it offered a vision for secular Jews that competed with the Soviet one—a vision in which Jews would have a separate state rather than become integrated into the socialist world. The logical development of this argument, however, also implies a critique of any nationalism, including a Ukrainian one.

The idea of the representation of a truly modern Ukrainian national identity, constructed on the historical phenomenon of *kobzarstvo*, plays a crucial role in one of Bazhan's early masterpieces, the poem “Blind Bards.” The poem remained incomplete, and just two parts of it survive—“Odklynshchyna” (1930) and “At the Fair” (1931). Bazhan's quest for a new artistic form and

way to engage with the ideological context of the late 1920s takes shape here, as is evident in the thematic intersection of “Blind Bards” with his other compositions from this period—“Heart-to-Heart Conversation,” “Edifices,” and “Hoffmann’s Night.”

The plot of the poem concerns the ritual of initiation (or, more specifically, the ritual of “release” known as *odklynshchyna* in *kobzar* terminology) of a young bard who intends to join a kobzar guild.³⁶ According to custom, the young bard has to learn the art of kobza from a master for three years and three months; and after an initiation ritual he is permitted to lead a vagrant life playing kobza and asking for alms. The heart of the second part of the poem is a dialogue between the young aspirant and an old, blind kobzar. In this conversation, they discuss the role of the singers and their art in society.

Bazhan rejects the Romantic view of kobzarstvo that had taken hold in Ukrainian literature by the time the poem was written. From the beginning of the nineteenth-century National Revival, the Romantics saw kobzars as the exclusive keepers of oral tradition, folk wisdom, and consequently national identity. Bazhan adheres to this perspective; the blind bard in the poem is undoubtedly the one who sees more than the sighted:

O, blind guide
 look sharply and lead
 The crowds that are blinder than you!

However, the author also takes up the other side of this phenomenon as well. Kobzars are not simply moral authorities: they are also human beings, who can be weak, make mistakes, and even abandon their talent. The heated discussion in the first part of the poem starts when the young kobzar addresses a kobzar guild. The author depicts the feasting blind bards in a naturalistic and satirical manner:

What’s preserved in your songs
 and what’s in your hearts?
 For these desperate lechers
 just carry their stomachs like kobzas?

36 Kobzar guilds (Kobzars’kyi tsekh) were professional groups of kobzars and lirnyks, which existed from the seventeenth century on in the territory of contemporary Ukraine. The guilds ceased to exist during the Soviet period.

Bazhan called his work “a historical poem in four parts.”³⁷ Yet the historical background (the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century) appears only at the end of the second part and has little significant meaning. The author is interested in more than a specific period. The interaction between the young bard and the blind bards takes place at a fair, that is, at a *market*—a place where items are bought and sold by means of the exchange equivalence facilitated by money. But in “Blind Bards,” Bazhan reflects upon the high social and symbolic capital of talent, rather than ordinary market trade where the value of goods is reckoned in terms of price.

By the time of “Blind Bards,” early modernity’s Romantic attitude to cultural activity, with its cult of genius, had been replaced by a more pragmatic, bourgeois approach, according to which the artist or writer was just another producer. Bazhan strongly opposes this perspective from a socialist standpoint, thus departing from a now outdated Romanticism. Yet in the Soviet period, the artist was expected to be an “engineer of the human soul.”³⁸ That is why Bazhan regards the revival of the artist’s special status important: the bard is a vital part of the new socialist society. The young bard asks:

So give me an answer, passerby...

Will I,

Ever in shame, haul my doubt around the world’s market?

Of course, this poem is not only about the historical phenomenon of kobzarstvo and the challenges that kobzars faced at the time of writing. “Blind Bards” also reveals two major strategies used by Bazhan in his work. The first is artistic; the second is cultural-ideological. The intentionally sophisticated language of the poem, comprised of professional jargon and archaic dialects, is not used by the author in order to imitate forgotten, even nonexistent languages. Its aim is to make understanding the poem *difficult*, or, after Viktor Shklovsky,³⁹

37 Nataliia Kostenko, “Komentari, prymitky do rozdilu ‘Poemy,’” [Comments, notes to the chapter “Poems”] in *Mykola Bazan. Vybrani tvory v dvoch tomach* [Mykola Bazhan: selected works in two volumes], vol. 1, ed. Dmytro Pavlychko (Kyiv: Ukrain’ska entsyklopediia, 2003), 579.

38 This expression was applied to writers and other cultural workers by Joseph Stalin in 1932. See Kornely Zelinsky, “Odna vstrecha u M. Gorkogo (Zapis iz dnevnika). Publikatsya A. Zelinskogo” (One meeting with M. Gorky (Note from the diary). Published by A. Zelinsky), *Voprosy literatury* 5 (1991): 144–170.

39 Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. and ed. Benjamin Sher (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 6.

to *defamiliarize* its subject. In other words, Bazhan takes a typically modernist position: one must speak about modernity using perplexing language in order to prompt the reader to rethink modernity and its reality. This puts him fully in step with the great European and American modernist poets of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Yeats, Eliot, and Pound.

Bazhan's second strategy appeals to the cultural and ideological context. Kobzarstvo was known as one of the cornerstones of the Ukrainian national cultural identity. While building a new national culture within the ideological framework of Soviet Ukraine, Bazhan attempts to reassert the unconditional cultural value of Kobzarstvo with the help of defamiliarization. The polemic between the young and old bards manifests the tension, even struggle, between the two ways of representing Ukrainian national culture—the “old” and the “new.” This is probably why Bazhan did not complete the poem. The very possibility of developing a new voice for Ukraine's national culture was destroyed by the imposition of the Stalinist regime's cultural policy in the early 1930s.⁴⁰

Ironically or not, Bazhan's early poetry ends with an ode to Joseph Stalin “A Man Stands in the Star-Bearing Kremlin,” published in 1932. Bazhan adopts Socialist Realism, necessary at the time for those who wished to continue to live and publish. This aesthetic turn took place during a period of increasingly harsh ideological scrutiny of artists and their work. In 1931 the Russian literary critic Aleksei Selivanovskii published a crushing article titled “Where M. Bazhan is Heading,” in which he accused the poet of being a “fellow traveler”:

We can add Bazhan to the group of authors, whose creativity passed by the socialist revolution in silence, even though he should have become a fully competent master of the subject. Bazhan, especially in his recent poetry, seems to be beyond politics. ... Yet we would like to get a better sense of Bazhan's *poputnytstvo*, its roots, state, and possible prognosis as to its development.⁴¹

This attack was dictated by the general policy of the party: from the end of the 1920s onwards, both the national project and all the theories that competed with Marxism gradually ground to a halt. As a result, the diverse and

40 For a more detailed analysis of the poem, refer to George G. Grabowicz's essay “A Spectral Text” in this volume.

41 Oleksii Selivanovs'kyi [Aleksei Selivanovskii], “Kudy priamuie M. Bazhan” (Where M. Bazhan is heading), *Krytyka* 4 (1931): 41, 45.

multilayered Soviet culture of the 1920s was replaced by a more monolithic culture. In 1934, the Union of Soviet Writers was created and Socialist Realism was proclaimed as the only form of literature permitted in the USSR. This led to the “breaking” of those artists who had to choose between reforming in order to “play” by established rules or else becoming the victims of the regime. Already in the early 1930s, Mykola Bazhan’s work had started to change drastically. In order play the role of a Socialist Realist writer, the main requirement was glorifying socialist “reality” in a style that was comprehensible to the masses, and therefore abandoning one’s avant-garde past.

The 1930a were some of the most tragic in the history of Ukraine: Stalin’s purges of Ukrainian intelligentsia, which began in 1930 and reached their apogee in 1937,⁴² were followed by the mass starvation that the dictator forced on the republic—the Holodomor—in 1932–1933. In these years of violence, social upheaval, and near-complete totalitarian rule, it was impossible to oppose the Communist Party and defend the interests of a national culture. This period of Ukrainian culture is also known as the “Executed Renaissance”—a term that was invented by literary critic Iurii Lavrinenko to describe the generation of Soviet Ukrainian writers and artists of 1920s who were wiped out by Stalin’s regime.

Even though Mykola Bazhan became a captive of his age, we cannot underestimate his poetic genius, which was fully manifested in his ability to rejuvenate the Ukrainian literary tradition and his attempt to establish a new model for the further development of the national literature. Certainly, the avant-garde—with its experimentalism, playfulness, and audacity—provided him with the poetic freedom to produce his masterpieces of the late 1920s: his unique writing flourished in the context of Ukrainian Futurism (and its Baroque roots) while, however, remaining outside the framework of any movement. A construction of poetic reality with a focus on objects became the common feature of Bazhan’s poetry. Despite its avant-garde techniques, metaphorical complexity, and creative debt to a Ukrainian literature and folklore largely unknown outside the country, the philosophical scope and universality of his lyrics place him among the great world writers.

42 The first fabricated trial of the so-called Union for the Liberation of Ukraine (Spilka Vyzvolennia Ukraïny) took place in 1930 in Kharkiv. Forty-five Ukrainian intellectuals were convicted of anti-state activities. See Volodymyr Prystaiko and Yuriy Shapoval, *Sprava “Spilky Vyzvolennia Ukraïny.” Nevidomi dokumenty i fakty* (Kyiv: Intel, 1995).

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