

THE SELECTED POETRY OF
BOHDAN
RUBCHAK



SONGS OF LOVE,
SONGS OF DEATH,
SONGS OF THE MOON

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL M. NAYDAN AND SVITLANA BUDZHAK-JONES
ESSAYS BY MARIAN J. RUBCHAK, SVITLANA BUDZHAK-JONES, AND MYKOLA RIABCHUK

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by Bohdan Rubchak

Translated by Michael M. Naydan and Svitlana Budzhak-Jones
(with one translation by Liliana M. Naydan)

with:

a biocritical afterword by Marian J. Rubchak
a translator's afterword by Svitlana Budzhak-Jones
an essay on the poet by Mykola Riabchuk
a concise biography and timeline by Michael M. Naydan

Edited by Michael M. Naydan

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Svitlana Budzhak-Jones, and Liliana M. Naydan

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume would not have been possible without the enormous support and efforts of Marian J. Rubchak, who also goes by Mariana or Mar'iana in Ukrainian, to whom we are exceedingly grateful. She went far beyond the call of duty to promote the legacy of her husband Bohdan Rubchak and devoted an enormous amount of time to explaining biographical connections in his poetry.

The poems “Dramaturgy” and “The Angel’s Betrayal” both first appeared in the poetry anthology *A Hundred Years of Youth* (Litopys Publishers, 2000). All other translations are appearing here for the first time. Mykola Riabchuk’s essay “The Stigmata of Wings: On the Poetry of Bohdan Rubchak” first appeared in Ukrainian as a preface to Rubchak’s final collection *Krylo Ikarove* (The Wing of Icarus; Kyiv: Dnipro Publishers, 1991). We are grateful to Alina Zhurbenko for her assistance in the final stages of the project.



PREFACE

BY MICHAEL M. NAYDAN

Prior to the appearance of this collection only a handful of Bohdan Rubchak's poems have appeared in English translation. This volume attempts to remedy that situation for a truly outstanding Ukrainian poet in the North American diaspora, Bohdan Rubchak, who died in 2018 at the age of 83. Rubchak was a child of the displaced post-war generation that escaped from the traumas of World War II to find a new life in a new land on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Bohdan, whom I had met on numerous occasions, had a playfully abrasive personality with a biting sense of humor that immediately set him off from the crowd. To compare him to a poet from the English poetry tradition, one whose poetry he knew quite intimately, I would say that he reminds me a bit of the character and poetry of Dylan Thomas with a similarly obsessive raging against the idea of the dying of the light. Bohdan took Thomas's advice and never went gentle into that good night.

Bohdan's complex, at times seemingly impenetrable poetry, which makes the translator's task imposing, is filled with meaning on multiple levels – semantic, syntactic, auditory, symbolic, allusive, and in other innovative ways, which Svitlana Budhak-Jones illuminates in detail in her essay in an afterword to this volume.

It has been a great pleasure for me to work with Svitlana on these English translations to unravel the mysteries of Rubchak's poetry. She contributed her expansive linguistic expertise in both Ukrainian and English as well as her cultural knowledge of her native Ukraine to our translations. This volume of selected works comprises: 1) translations from many of the best poems of all six of Rubchak's published collections; 2) Mariana Rubchak's revelatory biocritical essay "My Life with Bohdan Rubchak and His Poetry," which includes numerous observations from her husband's soon to be deposited archival materials; 3) Svitlana Budzhak-Jones's essay "The Complexity and Perplexity of Bohdan Rubchak: Remarks on Translating His

Poetry”; 4) a translation of the first half of Ukrainian writer and literary critic Mykola Riabchuk’s essay “The Stigmata of Wings: On the Poetry of Bohdan Rubchak”; a concise biography of Bohdan by me, checked by Mariana, which corrects various errors that persist in Internet and other published articles; and a timeline also corrected by her.

The poems listed in Afterword VI contain page numbers in parentheses from the 1991 *Krylo Ikarove* (The Wing of Icarus) selected works edition, the poet’s final and definitive collection, which, according to Mariana, the poet corrected meticulously. Poems that were included in this volume that come from original volumes that did not appear in that selected works edition are marked with a page number and an asterisk to indicate that the source is from the original collections. This is done to facilitate ease of reference for those who wish to compare the translations to the originals.

FROM THE COLLECTION
THE STONE GARDEN (1956)



IN A ROOM OF A HUNDRED MIRRORS

In a room of a hundred mirrors, I, self-loving,
see myself beautifully distorted. And only
in the gray garden of stone walls – on their surface –
my reflection can never betray me.

I often wear grand clothes. They
glitter on me rich in colors
on the miniature stage of my intimate theater.
But in bare

white light – between the bushes of the stone garden –
my clothing turns entirely gray, my fairy-tale mask grows pale,
the makeup of the grotesque runs, and I
become myself again.

October 1955

AUTUMN

A Byzantine cathedral – this autumn is.

Icons of the evangelists on its Royal Doors,
In deep, contemplative colors,
Framed in time-worn gold,
Forged into grape vines.

It seems – the rings of the glow like chalices of salvation
(Birth. Yes. Not a demise) –
Emerged through the mosaics of windows,
Through trembling depictions of martyrs.

And it seems the trees that have become wise –
Are a band of Christ's disciples.

January 1955

* * *

The lips of leaves, somewhere nearby, call out to me –
Bohdan! They faintly beseech.
Like a lover they invite, the lips of leaves implore.

I can't come – I'm a son of the city,
I'm a son of gray sky, not the blue sky of spring;
My day and my sleep are factory whistles.

I see spring,
because a patch of snow and soot between stone walls
became slightly smaller,

but I know spring,
for somewhere the lips of leaves confess to the sun;
and there somewhere it seems
the miracle of forgotten gods
rises and unsteadily grows.

March 1955

* * *

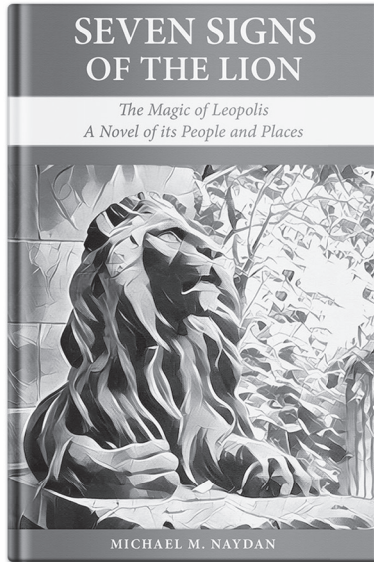
The graves of my great grandsons were here,
Where you and I, my sweetheart, lie,
And to you I am – your young lover.

In the deep blue twilights of the middle ages
I showed my beloved the grass:
It grows from the children of my children.

March 1955

SEVEN SIGNS OF THE LION

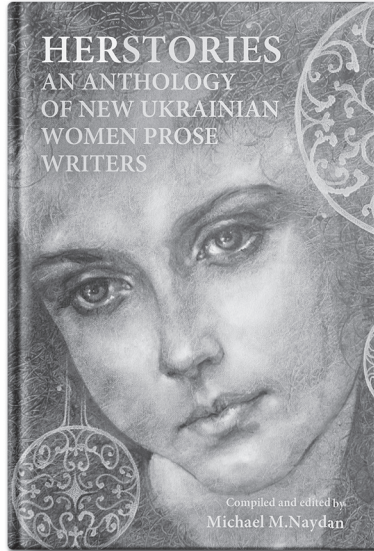
by Michael M. Naydan



The novel *Seven Signs of the Lion* is a magical journey to the city of Lviv in Western Ukraine. Part magical realism, part travelogue, part adventure novel, and part love story, it is a fragmented, hybrid work about a mysterious and mythical place. The hero of the novel Nicholas Bilanchuk is a gatherer of living souls, the unique individuals he meets over the course of his five-month stay in his ancestral homeland. These include the enigmatic Mr. Viktor, who, with one eye that always glimmers, in a dream summons him across the Atlantic Ocean to the city of lions, becoming his spiritual mentor; the genius mathematician Professor Potojbichny (a man of science with a mystical bent and whose name means “man from the other side”); the exquisite beauty Ada, whose name suggests “woman from Hades” in Ukrainian, whose being emanates irresistible sensuality, but who never lets anyone capture her beauty in a picture; the schizophrenic artist Ivan the Ghostseer, who lives in a bohemian hovel of a basement apartment and in an alcohol-induced trance paints the spirits of the city that torment him; and the curly-haired elfin Raya, whose name suggests “paradise” in Ukrainian and who becomes the primary guide and companion for Nicholas on his journey to self-realization...

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HERSTORIES: AN ANTHOLOGY OF NEW UKRAINIAN WOMEN PROSE WRITERS



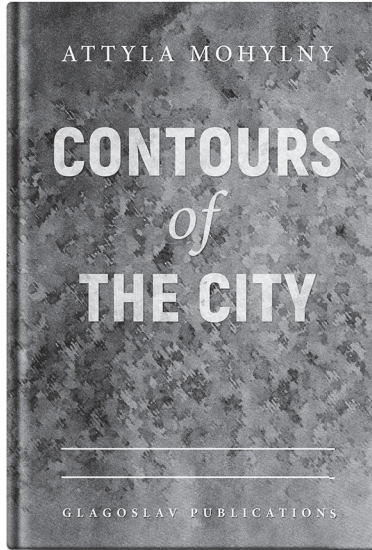
Women's prose writing has exploded on the literary scene in Ukraine just prior to and following Ukrainian independence in 1991. Over the past two decades scores of fascinating new women authors have emerged. These authors write in a wide variety of styles and genres including short stories, novels, essays, and new journalism. In the collection you will find: realism, magical realism, surrealism, the fantastic, deeply intellectual writing, newly discovered feminist perspectives, philosophical prose, psychological mysteries, confessional prose, and much more.

The volume will include 18 contemporary writers: Lina Kostenko, Emma Andijewska, Nina Bichuya, Sofia Maidanska, Ludmyla Taran, Liuko Dashvar, Maria Matios, Eugenia Kononenko, Oksana Zabuzhko, Iren Rozdobudko, Natalka Sniadanko, Larysa Denysenko, Svitlana Povaljajeva, Svitlana Pyrkalo, Dzvinka Matiash, Irena Karpa, Tanya Malyarchuk, and Sofia Andrukhovych.

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Contours of the City

by Attyla Mohylny



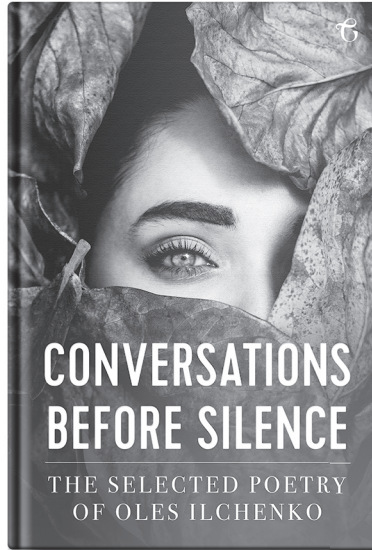
Contours of the City arguably comprises one of the finest collections of free verse ever written in Ukrainian even though it was largely overlooked when it first appeared during the political transition to Ukrainian independence in 1991. It certainly deserves a broader audience both in Mohylny's homeland as well as in the wider world. While it may be described as a one-hit wonder because of the poet's premature death, it remains a brilliant hit for all time.

Translator Michael Naydan received the Eugene Kayden Meritorious Achievement Award in Translation from the University of Colorado for a partial manuscript of his translations of Mohylny's poetry into English in 1993. This edition includes a complete translation of Mohylny's collection *Contours of the City* along with several poems translated by Virlana Tkacz and Wanda Phipps.

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CONVERSATIONS BEFORE SILENCE:

THE SELECTED POETRY OF OLES ILCHENKO



An avid reader of English-language poets such as William Carlos Williams and Stanley Kunitz, Ilchenko is one of the best Ukrainian poets writing in free verse today. His poetry is associative, flitting, and fragmentary. At times he does not form complete sentences in his poems and links words together into phrases before shifting into another thought or idea. The language of his poetry has a tendency to collapse into itself, often forcing the reader to reevaluate a word or line, to reread a previous word to focus on the poet's inner logic. This fragmentary incompleteness and permeability mimics much the way human consciousness works without the filter of the written communicative convention of sentences and grammatical structure. This "slipperiness" and rapid shifting of voice comprises one of the essential invariants in Ilchenko's poetics. The poet also flaunts many traditional poetic Ukrainian conventions. Like ee cummings he tends to avoid capital letters or punctuation such as exclamation points. One will find only commas and dashes for pauses, and an occasional period in his poems, which do not always end with the finality of that punctuation mark...

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- *Robinsons* by Aram Pachyan
- *The Monastery* by Zakhar Prilepin

Bohdan Rubchak has woven a beautiful tapestry of despair, sadness, irony, and love in his poetry. A great poet.

– poet and prose writer Yuri Andrukhovych

Out of the brutality and ruin of a world war rose the singular sensibility that is Bohdan Rubchak, born to salute the poplar's lofty calling while knowing full well that infinitely tender things will wither in the wind unless soul clap its hands and sing and with its spell of language resurrect what once was lost. Rubchak reminds me of those mythical Chinese poets swooning over the moon's reflection in the water: sure, they drowned, but oh the ecstasy of the embrace!

– novelist, poet, and founding editor of AGNI Askold Melnyczuk

Bohdan Rubchak's creativity is primarily associated as a unique phenomenon of Ukrainian literature with the New York Group, a real rebellion led by young intellectuals who desired aesthetic change. Simultaneously, each member of this group possessed a genuine poetic voice. Rubchak particularly succeeded in merging European modernism with the melodies of the Ukrainian language with such authenticity, that, as a result, we witness a brilliant process of the creation of an individual style, in which compelling poetic language is balanced between the poet's biography and history and between literacy and emotional vulnerability. Rubchak's metaphor of the stone, which symbolizes the objectivity of this world and a silent secrecy, becomes the poet's poetic trademark, along with the search for his Personal Clio and the fitting of The Wing of Icarus.

– poet and prose writer Vasyl Makhno

