

Michael M. Naydan and Svitlana Budzhak-Jones, translators.
The Selected Poetry of Bohdan Rubchak: Songs of Love, Songs of Death, Songs of the Moon

Vasyl Makhno

Volume 9, Number 2, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1093287ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus760>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies University of Alberta

ISSN

2292-7956 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Makhno, V. (2022). Review of [Michael M. Naydan and Svitlana Budzhak-Jones, translators. The Selected Poetry of Bohdan Rubchak: Songs of Love, Songs of Death, Songs of the Moon]. *East/West*, 9(2), 239–242.
<https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus760>



Michael M. Naydan and Svitlana Budzhak-Jones, translators. *The Selected Poetry of Bohdan Rubchak: Songs of Love, Songs of Death, Songs of the Moon*. With one translation by Liliana M. Naydan, edited by Michael M. Naydan, afterwords by Marian J. Rubchak, Budzhak-Jones, Mykola Riabchuk, and Michael M. Naydan, Glagoslav Publications, 2020. 178 pp. Illustrations. €14.95, PDF.

The poetry of Bohdan Rubchak (1935–2018) was published in English translation posthumously—the monograph under review representing the first book-length publication of Rubchak’s English-language translated poetry. In this sphere, Rubchak subscribed, perhaps, to an Emily Dickinsonesque writing philosophy, that is, a belief that publishing one’s own texts is not the most important aspect of a writer’s existence. Rubchak, over the course of his lengthy creative life, put out six collections of poetry and a book of collected literary criticism—all in Ukrainian. He was notably part of an important Ukrainian diasporic artistic movement that at the end of the 1950s became the New York Group (NYG; its core members were Bohdan Boychuk, Yuriy Tarnawsky, Zhenia Vasylykivska, Patricia Kylyna, and Wira Wowk). Rubchak assumed the role of lead literary critic within the group and often wrote fundamental examinations of his poet peers; for this reason, his readers could get the impression that he somewhat subdued his poetic ambitions for the sake of others. In the collection *Krylo Ikarove: Poezii (The Wing of Icarus: Poems)*; published by the Kyiv-based Vydavnytstvo khudozhn’oi literary “Dnipro” in 1991), Rubchak’s unique poetic voice shines as it meanders against the backdrop not only of NYG poetry but also of the Ukrainian poetic tradition of the second half of the twentieth century. Now, this poetic language can be discovered and relished by English readers, who might find themselves inundated by the sea of translations from various languages available to them.

Rubchak’s poetic style was formed in the late 1950s and early 1960s— at a juncture when Ukrainian literary life was ushering in a new creative generation. This was the period after World War II. In the case of Rubchak and his fellow NYG poets, their creative formative years coincided with a traumatic event for their respective families—their parents’ forced exile from their native territories and stay in displaced persons (DP) camps in German lands. A more positive aspect of the difficult teenage years experienced by Rubchak and his aesthetic peers as displaced persons was that they mastered several foreign languages—German, French, and English—which greatly expanded the pool of ideas and subjects that they could read and think about. Initially, Rubchak’s development (by his own admission) was entirely influenced by the creative work of several Ukrainian poet predecessors, namely, Oleksandr Oles’, Mykola Zerov, and Maksym

Ryl's'kyi. The young poet's fundamental underpinnings in such outstanding examples of Ukrainian modernism propelled him from the very start in search of his own poetic language. This process did not occur overnight—several unpublished manuscript collections of Rubchak's work preceding *Kamynnyi sad: Poezii* (*Stone Orchard: Poems*; published in 1956) are preserved in his archive. Future researchers writing on the development of Rubchak's poetics will have much material from which to form their analyses and advance their conclusions. The mature Rubchak—that is, the writer with his own, evolved poetic language—remains true to rhythmic, melodic, and rhyming poetry, although several of his poems (including the essential “Spomyn pro misiats” [“A Recollection of the Moon”; see Rubchak, *Promenysta zrada* 18–26]) are written in vers libre. If one considers Rubchak the poet more generally, in addition to his incorporation of the wide-ranging styles of his poetic influences within his own poetic expression, perhaps the most representative element of his style is his molecularly hermetic language. In fact, language is also the main object of his poetic discourse and dialogue, and it is the main arena for that internal struggle that is known to all alchemists of language—a struggle in which there is no victor.

The book *The Selected Poetry of Bohdan Rubchak: Songs of Love, Songs of Death, Songs of the Moon* is structured around several component parts. It contains poems from all six of Rubchak's collections, translated by Michael M. Naydan and Svitlana Budzhak-Jones. There is also an extensive essay-memoir written by the poet's widow, Marian J. Rubchak, titled “My Life with the Poet and His Poetry” (103–35), as well as Budzhak-Jones's study “The Complexity and Perplexity of Bohdan Rubchak: Remarks on Translating His Poetry” (136–51). Furthermore, one finds a translation (see 152–57) of part 2 of Mykola Riabchuk's introduction to the Kyiv edition of Bohdan Rubchak's collected poems (see Rubchak, *Krylo Ikarove* 9–15); a biographic section (158–66); and a bibliographic section (167–69). Perhaps the translator-compiler of the edition under review chose specifically to include the poetic works in such a way as to provide a sampling of offerings from all of Rubchak's collections. The volume thus gives a full chronological and topological overview of the evolution of Rubchak's poetics, from Ukrainian tradition to universal modernism (although, understandably, not in its widest scope). The structuring of this first English-language book of Rubchak's poetry—poetry surrounded by “nonpoetic” accompaniments—is especially designed to supply the reader with additional information about individual aspects of Rubchak's life (see Marian J. Rubchak) and poetics (see Riabchuk; Budzhak-Jones).

Naydan has published quite a few translated volumes of the poetry and prose of Ukrainian authors. In his experience as a translator, he has shown that he can deal with various poetic styles and find the best English

equivalents, thus overcoming the resistance of the literary material. It would seem that Rubchak's poetry does not present great obstacles for a translator, except in the places where the author employs neologisms, idioms, or dialecticisms. But of course, every translator at some point encounters the problem of having to choose the most appropriate variant for reproducing stanzas and syntax in a different (in our case—the English) language. Naydan and Budzhak-Jones, to the best of their ability, attempt to remain true to the length of poetic lines and to strophe structure, but they do so at the expense of rhyme. As one might imagine, creating rhyming stanzas that retain the meaning and poetics of a translated author is one of the most sophisticated methods for translating rhymed poetry. The poems of Dickinson and Philip Larkin, for example, in Ukrainian translation always appear as rhymed variants, which makes them sound more eloquent to the Ukrainian ear.

Marian J. Rubchak, with her lengthy essay on the life and work of her poet husband, has, in effect, initiated an earnest discussion about the influence of biographic events on Rubchak's artistic explorations. She starts her descriptive journey at the juncture when they first met at the University of Manitoba and traverses the period of their fifty-five-year marriage, attempting—in a most candid manner—to bring together poetry and everyday life and diary entries and actual events in order to understand (perhaps first and foremost for herself) the essence of Rubchak. The range of her critical assessments at moments descends into an overt subjectivity that is not entirely justified or warranted, but this is understandable given the type of text that we are dealing with.

The inclusion of Budzhak-Jones's analytic essay on the specificities of translating Rubchak's poems into the English allows the reader to peek into the mechanics and techniques of the translation process. The author aptly notes that the translation of a melodic and rhythmic rhymed poem from a Slavic language into the English generally creates a whole host of unresolvable difficulties for the translator. At the same time (while viewing Rubchak's poetics for some reason as surrealist—"[t]ranslating Bohdan Rubchak's poetry is further exacerbated by the poet's unique, somewhat surrealist writing style" [136]), Budzhak-Jones analytically, through the juxtaposition of Ukrainian poetic stanzas with their English translations, sheds light on the lexical, phonological, and linguistic components of Rubchak's poetic expression and the methods and possibilities inherent in the English language for devising appropriate equivalents.

Of fundamental importance here is that Rubchak's poetry has experienced its English-language *vagitus*. English was Rubchak's everyday language, both in his professional life—as a professor at the University of Illinois Chicago—and, to some extent, in his private life. In his literary endeavours, he aspired to create in English, but he nonetheless fell short of

becoming poetically bilingual. He became a personage of Ukrainian literary history as a poet writing Ukrainian works—and these merit innovative translations and novel literary interpretations. The translated collection under review, therefore, represents a vital rite of passage for the poet Rubchak.

Vasyl Makhno
Shevchenko Scientific Society in the US
Translated from the Ukrainian by Tania Plawuszczak-Stech

Works Cited

- Rubchak, Bohdan. *Kaminnyi sad: Poezii*. Ob"iednannia Ukrains'kykh Pys'mennykiv "Slovo," 1956.
- . *Krylo Ikarove: Poezii*. Introduction by Mykola Riabchuk, edited by Ihor Rymaruk, Vydavnytstvo khudozhn'oi literatury "Dnipro," 1991.
- . *Promenysta zrada*. Vydavnytstvo N'iu-Iorks'koi Hrupy, 1960. *Diasporiana.org.ua elektronna biblioteka*, <https://diasporiana.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/books/963/file.pdf>. Accessed 10 Sept. 2022.