



TRANSLATING MONDEGREEN: SONGS ABOUT DEATH AND LOVE

AN INTERVIEW WITH
MARK ANDRYCZYK

By Masha Udensiva-Brenner

In the previous issue of *Harriman Magazine* we published an excerpt of Volodymyr Rafeyenko's novel *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love*. Rafeyenko is an award-winning Russophone writer who was living in Donetsk when Russia invaded Donbas in 2014. He evacuated to Kyiv later that year; learned Ukrainian; and wrote *Mondegreen*, his first Ukrainian-language novel, about a displaced person from Donetsk who moves to Kyiv. It was published in 2019 and Mark Andryczyk, head of the Ukrainian Studies Program at the Harriman Institute, translated it into English.

The translation was published right after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Harvard Library of Ukrainian Literature, 2022). At that point, Rafeyenko was again trapped by war. I interviewed Andryczyk about the book and Rafeyenko's experience in May, for our "Voices of Ukraine" podcast. What follows is a brief excerpt of our conversation, edited for clarity.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: How did you become aware of this novel, and what was your original reaction to it? Why did you decide to translate it?

Mark Andryczyk: A lot of my writer friends lived in a region northwest of Kyiv, in towns such as Bucha and Hostomel, which are unfortunately known now because of the war. Every time my family and I would visit Ukraine, we'd go and stay with them, and everybody who lived in that region would come over to my friend's house and hang out. We've done this for years. And several years ago, when we were in Hostomel, one of my friends was telling us that a refugee from Donetsk was living in their Kyiv apartment. "He's a writer and he's writing this amazing novel, and

we're going to let him stay there until he finishes and gets on his feet." So I had heard about this novel way ahead of time.

Then, when I visited Ukraine in 2019, I saw that this novel had been published and purchased it and read it while in Ukraine that summer. I decided that it is indeed a fantastic novel and that I needed to translate this so that my students could read it when I teach my course on contemporary Ukrainian literature.

Udensiva-Brenner: What struck you the most about it? Why did you feel it needed to be translated?

Andryczyk: It was very interesting to have this perspective on Ukrainian identity from somebody from Donbas. The fact that it dealt with an internally displaced person was important. It was a topic that was key in Ukraine at the time; it touched on the Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbas and just the whole idea of language in Ukraine.

Udensiva-Brenner: There's a very powerful scene toward the beginning of the novel, where Haba, the protagonist, describes two Ukrainian men in Donetsk who spoke Ukrainian to each other. Whenever he would try to speak Ukrainian with them, they would immediately switch to Russian. Can you talk about that dynamic and the dynamics of language in that region?

Andryczyk: I've never been to the Donbas region, but what I noticed over the years, even traveling to Kyiv in the early- to mid-nineties, was that there was a conscious switch to Russian by Ukrainian speakers in public. There was this inferiority complex whenever they left their own little circle. You needed to switch to Russian to have more prestige, more of a footing. So if you were a

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Ukrainian speaker, that was reserved for your closest circle. That's probably what he's explaining in the novel.

Udensiva-Brenner: You mentioned in your introduction that it was a really difficult novel to translate. Can you talk a little bit about the process of how you dealt with a lot of the challenges presented in the book?

Andryczyk: It was quite unique compared to other things I've translated in that the author was writing his first novel in a new language; and you could tell that there was this kind of freshness, this fascination, like taking a car out for the first ride. There are a lot of language games and illusions to language, which are very important to the theme of the novel. It was important to try to convey that in English.

There are a hundred footnotes in my translation. I didn't explain all the language games, because that would have been too burdensome. But in addition to the language games, there are so many intertextual references to Russian culture, to Ukrainian culture, both pop culture and high culture, that are important to really

appreciate the novel. I think in a text that deals with Ukraine there are so many gaps, so much missing knowledge about Ukraine.

Udensiva-Brenner: You finally met Rafeyenko in person last summer. What was he like?

Andryczyk: Rafeyenko is a very sensitive, very thoughtful, very delicate person. He's kind of shy, keeps to himself. But just speaking with him was almost like translating his novel. We'd get into these pretty profound discussions, even in the short time that we hung out, less than two hours. He's a very gentle soul.

After sitting in somebody's head for two years, translating this complex work, it was just really nice. The book hadn't come out yet. And when you're translating, you try to imagine the author, how his face changes when he speaks, how he uses his hands. So when you finally meet them in person, and you have a chance to observe that, it's always interesting. Because this is probably the first living author I translated without meeting them beforehand.



Mark Andryczyk (left) with Volodymyr Rafeyenko shortly after meeting for the first time at the home of a friend in Hostomel, Ukraine (August 2021). Tragically that home was looted and badly damaged during the first days of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

From left to right: Maria Genkin, Mark Andryczyk, and Eugene Ostashevsky at "In Translation: Voices from Ukraine," Center for Fiction (April 20, 2022, Brooklyn). Photo by Ronald Meyer.



Udensiva-Brenner: Right as you were gearing up to publish the English translation, and working on bringing Rafeyenko to the U.S. for a book tour, it was becoming clear that Russia might invade Ukraine. Can you describe what happened?

Andryczyk: He was actually already set up for an interview for his visa at the U.S. Embassy when the embassy was evacuated, just before the war. So we were setting up a visa meeting for him in Warsaw, and that was when the war just exploded.

Udensiva-Brenner: And what happened to Rafeyenko during the war?

Andryczyk: In the first weeks, he was living with his wife just northwest of Bucha and Hostomel. The Russian army had surrounded that area, and he was stuck in a secluded area near the woods. As he said recently in an interview, Russian soldiers were coming in and taking over people's

homes, looting them and doing all these horrific things, but his area was spared. He thinks it was because they didn't have electricity, they didn't have water, they were cut off from these things.

He finally got in touch with another writer and asked if he could get them out of there because it was an extremely dangerous part of the world to be in. They coordinated with the Ukrainian army when there was a chance to get him out. They bring aid for those that aren't leaving and try to grab anybody they can, who are ready to go.

So through various attempts and by using a network of people—my wife was involved in coordinating one small part of this network from the U.S.—they sent in two guys willing to go in and get him. When he was finally out, my wife was sent a photo of the two heroes who got him out. You wouldn't believe it. It was these two hipsters. I think they were actors. Ukrainian actors who had a car.

Udensiva-Brenner: All of this must have been terrifying for Rafeyenko.

Andryczyk: Yeah. And to have experienced this twice, you know, within eight years. He's dealing with the same force that he described in this novel, but obviously to a greater extent. And as he did with this novel, he's writing about it.

Udensiva-Brenner: And is he writing about it in Ukrainian?

Andryczyk: When I finally met him last summer, he told me that he planned to go back and forth between writing in Russian and Ukrainian. He even joked that it was hard to write in Russian after *Mondegreen*, because it's as if he had cheated on her by writing in Ukrainian. But I read in this recent interview that after what he's experienced, he's not going to publish anything ever in Russian with his name; he just can't see it happening. So it'll be in Ukrainian. ■