

“Which homeland?”: Towards a postcolonial reading of Andrei Kurkov’s “penguin novels”

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“Imperialism has not allowed us to achieve ‘historical normality’.”
(Paz 1961, 147)

Andrei Kurkov’s novel known in English as *Death and the Penguin* is one of the greatest literary successes internationally of Ukrainian literature as well as of Russophone literature after the fall of the Soviet Union. The novel has proved immensely popular across the globe and as of 2025 been translated into more than 35 languages (Goodreads n.d.). The novel was originally published in 1996 under the name *Death of a Stranger* (Смерть посторонного), subsequently renamed *Picknick on the Ice* (Пикник на льду) in 2000, in correspondence with the title of the German translation of 1999. Meanwhile, in English and many other languages it is known as *Death and Penguin*.

While it is common to change the name of a work when translating it, all these different titles for the same text also suggest that there are different ways of reading it. Is it a crime story, as not only the title but also covers of early editions suggested? This is the context that Eliot Borenstein places the novel in, as an “ironic boevik” (2011, 187; crime motifs are also discussed in Olteanu 2008). Or is it rather the story of the everyday life of an author trying to make a living in the new, capitalist Kyiv, where “picknicks on the ice” and other mundane activities are what makes life meaningful (or not)? The *Picknick on the Ice* title also hints to the uncertainties of this everyday life and even the feeling of displacement, arguably a key theme of the book (Puleri 2020, 126–132). Or is it first and foremost an absurd story of a man living together with a penguin, which we can place in an absurdist, posthumanist tradition of Russophone Ukrainian literature going back to

Gogol and Bulgakov?¹ The novel's success has been explained precisely with reference to the ways in which it “merged satire, surrealism and suspense in a way that had not been done before” (Rogatchevski 2010).

Death and the Penguin—I will in this text for the sake of convenience use the title for which it is most famous in English—is the story of the writer Viktor Zolotarëv, who lives together with the penguin Misha, whom he recently adopted from the metropolitan Zoo, which for economic reasons was forced to downscale. As he struggles to make a living as a writer, he is approached by newspaper editor Igor Lvovich, who requests obituaries from him—for public figures who are still alive, but who are, quite naturally, expected to die someday. Gradually it turns out that Viktor hereby becomes involved in networks of organized crime, and quite soon the people he writes about begin to die. As readers we learn about all this in a third-person narrative but from Viktor's perspective, which means that we never fully realize how everything is connected, we only assume that there must be some connection. Towards the end of the novel, Viktor realizes that his own life is in danger—someone has been spying on him for a while and then he discovers that this person is writing *his* obituary. Viktor escapes from Kyiv to the Antarctic, an escape initially meant for his penguin in order to save the life of a creature suffering from heart issues in a wrong climate.

In 2002 Kurkov published a sequel to *Death and the Penguin*, translated into English as *Penguin Lost*, but whose original title is *The Law of the Snail* (Закон улитки). Again, the two different titles may suggest two different approaches to the story. The “law” of, or rather *for*, a snail is that you carry your home with you, and the law therefore may be read as a metaphor for rootlessness or the lack of a proper homeland, but also for insecurity and the need for protection. On the other hand, the main plot of the story is Viktor's trying to bring back his lost penguin Misha, whom Viktor has not seen since he left for the Antarctic. Twice the length of *Death and the Penguin*, *Penguin Lost* opens with Viktor returning to Kyiv. His search for Misha brings him once more into contact with dubious networks, partly the same, partly new ones. More importantly, it also takes him across parts of the former Soviet Union. While the first part takes place in Kyiv, Viktor subsequently travels to Moscow both in search for Misha and to fulfil obligations he made to a colleague from Moscow in the Antarctic. After Moscow follows a trip to Chechnya, where Misha is also reported to be, before Viktor heads back to Kyiv, where

¹ There are several allusions in the work in particular to Gogol, perhaps also to Bulgakov. See e.g. Puleri (2020, 129). Other classic motifs include “the double” and the “superfluous man,” see below.

he is eventually reunited with his penguin. However, towards the end of the novel he once more leaves Kyiv and Ukraine, this time for good, taking Misha with him in order to finally bring him back to his proper Antarctic home.

In contrast to the popularity of *Death and the Penguin* there are relatively few in-depth studies of it, apart from those referenced above and a few more below. This holds true even more for *Penguin Lost*, which also did not experience quite the same popularity as the first novel did. In this article I will nevertheless make a scholarly case for the two “penguin novels” by discussing them as examples of postcolonial literature. It is obvious from the very first pages of *Death and the Penguin* that Kurkov writes about the post-Soviet condition in and of Ukraine. *Penguin Lost*, by the same token, takes the chief protagonist and his readers through Ukraine and Russia. Thus, while it intuitively makes sense to characterize them as postimperial novels, will it make sense also to approach them as postcolonial literature, and if so—how?

A central theme in postcolonial theory is hybridity and hybrid identities, thanks above all to Homi Bhabha’s theorizing on the topic (Bhabha 1994). Scholars have discussed Andrei Kurkov’s literature as a case of “hybridity,” but mostly with reference to the language question, that is Kurkov as a Russophone Ukrainian writer and possible reflections of such linguistic hybridity in his novels (see Rewakowicz 2018, 143–147). Indeed, one of Viktor’s last remarks in this fictional universe is that he is українець ... Родители – русские (Kurkov 2005, 520).² In my view, however, hybridity in these novels is not so much a question of language and linguistic identity as one of identification, or lack thereof, with different homelands and spaces. What I will show in this article is that Kurkov’s novels put both Kyiv and in a wider sense Ukraine on the literary map, as has also been argued by Maria Rewakowicz and even by Kurkov himself as one of his literary ambitions (in Rewakowicz 2010, 87). This makes them comparable to what many classics of postcolonial literature have done, be it Chinua Achebe’s accounts of Nigeria, V.S. Naipaul’s of Trinidad or Salman Rushdie’s of India. Kurkov’s novels zoom in on everyday life in post-socialist and post-imperial Ukraine, even if with an unrealistic bend, in a way that puts the legacy of empire on full display. At the same time, as is the case with the aforementioned “classic” postcolonial authors, Kurkov’s characters, too, reveal a

² “Ukrainian of Russian parents” (Kurkov 2006b, 479). Translations into English of Kurkov’s two “penguin novels” are taken from Kurkov 2006b, an edition that contains both. However, the translation here of *Penguin Lost* is abridged in several places, and in some cases, I have adjusted it or supplied my own.

“complex engagement with the nation-state” (Zacharias 2015, 219). We rarely encounter a clear-cut positive identification; more common is an *ambivalence* (Bhabha 1994, 86) towards both the homeland that was and the new one that recently emerged, while the question as to what or where the “homeland” really is remains a contested one. By implication, space and place are key motives of post-colonial literature, Kurkov included. As the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* argue (a point that I will use as a theoretical perspective framing my readings),

A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989, 8)

Death and the Penguin and *Penguin Lost* may not come across as particularly political novels. At least their main character must be described as politically indifferent. But they are novels about identities or their absence in a postimperial and postcolonial Ukraine. In the following, I will proceed by identifying motives in them that thematizes a postimperial and possibly postcolonial condition. More specifically, I will explore the representation of spaces in the novels and the main characters’ attitude to, perception of and identification with—or lack thereof—the place in which they live and act and their encounters there with others.

The post-Soviet condition in Death and the Penguin

Kurkov’s penguin novels tell the story about the life of human beings and one animal in the new independent, post-Soviet and not least capitalist Ukraine. Viktor Zolotarëv can no longer live as an author in the traditional Soviet way—though it is highly uncertain if he ever did, or for how long he has been trying to be an author. In *Death and the Penguin*, he emerges as a man without a past, and he is portrayed as such for the most part of it, with a few exceptions. He hardly ever looks back on earlier times, for better or for worse. He is a man of the present and in that sense an illustration of what according to Marco Puleri has been a recurrent motif in Ukrainian Russophone literature: “how to live here and now” (Puleri 2020, 121).

In this present, Viktor seeks ways of making a living, but he hardly qualifies as a struggler. When he, early in the novel, offers his new story to the local newspaper and is rejected, he appears to be just as much indifferent as disillusioned. *Death and the Penguin* presents him as a passive character, as has been emphasized in previous

studies of the novel (cf. Dalton-Brown 2010, cited in Puleri 2020, 127). Instead of Viktor thrusting himself on publishers, this becomes a story of commissions: he is gradually approached by others with specific orders.

Thus, Viktor finds himself in a situation where he must write for the market, but on demand. Obituaries is not a genre he chooses himself, though he does invent their parodic style, whose relatively complex syntax and emotional style form a comic and parodic contrast to the minimalist narration of Viktor's own story.³ In any case, as an author of fiction, he has no clear role, at least not one that is clear to himself, in the new society. When Viktor complains to the news editor who has commissioned the obituaries that he writes in vain (no one has at this point died yet), the editor responds by drawing a parallel to Soviet writers "writing for the drawer": Но с той разницей, что твои вещи все равно рано или поздно напечатают... Гарантирую (Kurkov 2006a, 34).⁴

On the background of this reference, Viktor reads as a post-Soviet Ukrainian ironic comment about the Soviet writer, and even to Evgenii Evtushenko's famous statement that "in Russia a poet is more than a poet." It is precisely the fact that Viktor is, if not a "poet" then an author of short stories that brings him into contact with the criminal world, perhaps the mafia. His profession becomes an ironic refraction of what was a prestigious position in Soviet society. Viktor is, from early on in the novel, situated in a world characterized by commercialization, marginalization, corruption, criminal networks, prostitution (early in the novel during his visit to Kharkiv he is approached by a prostitute)—in general, by disintegration and decay.

³ One telling example: He от хорошей жизни покойный согласился на убийство своего младшего брата, в руки к которому случайно попал список будущих акционеров еще не приватизированного завода стиральных машин. Но памятник, поставленный покойным в память о брате, стал настоящим украшением кладбища. Часто жизнь заставляет убивать, а смерть близкого человека заставляет жить дальше, жить, несмотря ни на что... Все взаимозависимо. Все в этом мире объединено кровеносными сосудами. Жизнь всех —это одно целое, и потому смерть одной малой части целого все равно оставляет позади себя жизнь, так как количество живых частей целого всегда превышает количество умерших частей... (Kurkov 2006a, 37; "Much against his will, the departed acquiesced in the murder of his younger brother, the latter having chanced upon a list of shareholders of an as yet unprivatized washing-machine factory. However, the monument erected by the deceased in memory of his brother has become a veritable adornment of the cemetery. Often life makes it necessary to kill, while the death of someone close makes it necessary to live on regardless. Everything in this world is united by virtue of blood. The life of all is a single whole, and for that reason the death of one small part of the whole still leaves life behind it, since the number of living parts always exceeds the number of deceased ..." Kurkov 2006b, 24–25).

⁴ "With the difference that you, sooner or later, *are* going to be published ... *That* I guarantee" (Kurkov 2006b, 23)

Already in the opening scene this condition is illustrated with a focus on boredom, lawlessness and poverty. Someone is throwing bricks at Viktor outside his apartment. Обычным людям просто скучно жить, развлечения для них теперь не по карману. Отсюда и булыжники катятся (Kurkov 2006a, 5).⁵ When Viktor finally enters his apartment while trying not to panic too much, we are introduced to the penguin, whose presence is also the result of poverty, that is of the zoo that had to get rid of some of their animals. When Viktor later in the story (chapter 25) returns to the zoo with the little girl he is taking care of, Sonia, we learn that the zoo still struggles financially and expects to close down its terrarium soon.

The novel thus starts off as a story of marginalized, displaced characters, outcasts, in a setting of decay: a writer in pursuit of work and income and a penguin whom the metropolitan zoo was no longer able to keep. Since Viktor divorced not long before the novel starts, the penguin has come to replace his girlfriend, while at the same time mirroring Viktor himself and his melancholy and displacement, possibly forming his “alter ego” (Puleri 2020, 129): Ему было одиноко, но пингвин принес с собой собственное одиночество, и теперь два одиночества просто дополняли друг друга, создавая больше впечатление взаимозависимости, чем дружбы (Kurkov 2006a, 6).⁶ Viktor’s loneliness recurs as a theme throughout the novel.

Another marginalized character is the “penguinologist” Stepan Pidpalyj, who is introduced later in the novel and who displays a strong connection to the (Soviet) past due to his by now useless profession in the new society. Taken together, Viktor, Misha and Pidpalyi are postimperial, superfluous characters and hence represents a “recoding” (cf. Mladona Tlostanova 2004, cited in Puleri 2020, 120–121) of a topos of classic Russian literature. Their superfluosity is the result of the collapse of the empire, not of their inability to find meaningful tasks and projects within it, as was the case for the classic figure.

⁵ “They found life dull, ordinary people, now that entertainment was beyond their means. So they bowled cobbles” (Kurkov 2006b, 1).

⁶ “he had been feeling lonely. But Misha had brought his own kind of loneliness, and the result was now two complementary lonelinesses, creating an impression more of interdependence than of amity” (Kurkov 2006b, 1).

Ukraine present and past

The post-imperial context that the novel depicts and situates the writer and his penguin in is the newly independent Ukraine. But is the new nation-state Ukraine an important identification for the main characters, Viktor in particular?

In *Death and the Penguin*, the setting of Viktor's actions is Kyiv, while Kharkiv and Odesa form a wider scene, twice referred to as "province" (Kurkov 2006a, 31, 66). Viktor visits Kharkiv early in the story, while a planned trip to Odesa later is cancelled. Viktor apparently had no desire to go there. Otherwise, the action takes place in Kyiv and its suburbs. The remaining Ukraine matters seemingly little to Viktor, nor is he affected by it.

Even more peripheral are Moscow and Chechnya. Moscow is "abroad" (cf. Kurkov 2006a, 259). Chechnya, on the other hand, is significantly present from early on through news updates on the radio that is continually turned on in Viktor's kitchen and fills it with reports from the war going on there. Through Viktor's radio the collapse of the empire becomes present, though primarily as background noise. Media reports also of organized crime, and the two kinds of conflict (war, crime) overlap in Viktor's indifferent mind (chapter 22). Later in the novel, we are once more informed about media headlines. This time it is not shooting or scandals, but "happy" news: The opening of a new supermarket, progress in negotiations with Russia, advertisement for travels to Italy (Kurkov 2006a, 222). In the ensuing conversation, Viktor picks up on the last topic, Italy. The negotiations with Russia matter little or nothing to him. Besides, to place news about Russia in a context of a new supermarket and travel advertisement adds an ironic twist to the description.

Viktor's obituaries are—with a nod to Gogol's story "The Overcoat" and Akakii Akakievich who must address "very significant persons"—devoted to VIP names (фамилии Очень Важных Персон, Kurkov 2006a, 12). The first obituary he composes is about a writer turned parliamentarian (chapter 5), a figure that puts Viktor's fate in sharp relief, as Viktor himself seems to have little or no interest in this new thing called parliamentary politics and, by implication, in Ukraine as a new political project. Moreover, since it gradually turns out that there are obvious connections between politics and organized crime, politics is not depicted as a positive arena for activity and subjectivity. Later, Viktor's lack of affinity for politics is confirmed via the "parliamentary talk" coming out of his radio (chapter 18), to which he pays little or no

attention. Here, too, radio news are background noise, in parallel to the reports from Chechnya mentioned above.

Viktor's safe homeland is first and foremost his apartment and subsequently Kyiv, which is described through its topography: streets, river, monastery gardens etc. In Chapter 51 it is suggested that he identifies with his city, but merely indirectly by letting us know that he has no particular feelings for the countryside and, moreover, that he does not understand his new acquaintance Nina's aversion towards Kyiv. This is perhaps the closest we come to an expression of love for his city. Rewakowicz, in her analysis of Kurkov's portrayal of Kyiv in *Death and the Penguin* and other works, argues that they reflect a "strong sense of belonging to Kyiv," something that could also be said about their author (Rewakowicz 2010, 88). I agree with Rewakowicz that there are few if any expressions of ethnic nationalism in Viktor; if he identifies with his surroundings at all, it is with urban territory.⁷ She goes on to argue that Kyiv for Viktor is more than Kyiv; in the novel, the capital is depicted as "some kind of a macro-region synonymous with Ukraine itself" (Rewakowicz 2010, 90). I would argue, by contrast, that Ukraine as a country is remarkably absent in *Death and the Penguin*. The very words "Ukraine" and "Ukrainian" seldom occur. The first time Viktor comes to reflect on "Ukraine" is fairly late in the novel, when he learns of the research station in the Antarctic that Ukraine has inherited from Great Britain, and to which Pidpalyj, who in the meantime has passed away, donated a large amount of money after reading a newspaper announcement about it. «Зачем Украине Антарктида?» – подумал Виктор и пожал плечами (Kurkov 2006a, 188).⁸ Thus, the theme of Ukraine is introduced with a slightly absurd twist: The country becomes a theme through a reference to research projects in the Antarctic only.

It is the story of the Antarctic expedition, however, that introduces the Soviet past in the novel. The day of Ukraine's forthcoming polar expedition is set to take place on May 9, the World War II Victory Day. Or as it is twice referred to: бывший День Победы (Kurkov 2006a, 255, 264), that is the "former Victory Day." This is the day that Viktor has planned to solve Misha's displacement and send him "back" to the Antarctic, even though it would mean that Viktor would become even more alone on this very—former—

⁷ Rewakowicz discusses Kurkov's novels and the author Kurkov's public persona in light of one another and detects in Viktor an identity similar to that which Kurkov has expressed explicitly, that territory more than language is what defines Ukraine.

⁸ "What, wondered Viktor, had the Antarctic to do with Ukraine?" (Kurkov 2006b, 142).

Victory Day: Девятого мая он останется один and «После девятого мая все пройдет», – думал он (Kurkov 2006a, 257, 258) are remarks that also underscore Soviet symbols' loss of significance.⁹ In the end, however, it is Viktor who leaves Kyiv and Ukraine, while Misha the displaced penguin and Viktor's double remains displaced. The role of the double is reversed: Viktor takes Misha's place.

As noted, Viktor is from the beginning portrayed as a man without a past focused on preserving himself in the present. The city surrounding him, meanwhile, displays numerous traces of the past, implying, as Puleri has suggested, that in this novel the "Soviet and post-Soviet spatio-temporal dimensions [...] overlap" (2017, 129). We occasionally hear about the "former Lenin Museum," the "October Hospital" and "Hotel (and Restaurant) Moscow." But similar to "May 9" these references, too, have lost their significance and have become empty signifiers for Viktor. By contrast, Pidpalyi is a character who does bring the Soviet past into the novel, also in Viktor's mind, if only for a short while. First, Pidpalyi is connected to it through his profession, which is no longer required, but which remained his job until he died. Second, after Pidpalyi's death Viktor visits his house, which he promised Pidpalyi to burn down (chapter 53). It is here that he learns of the Antarctic expedition. And for the first time, as a result of his encounter with Pidpalyi's interior and its artifacts, Viktor reflects on the past. Вся обстановка квартиры принадлежала другой эпохе. Viktor soon starts to think of his grandmother's flat, where he grew up (his parents divorced, we now learn for the first time) and which contained similar items: И такие же фотографии в рамках – та же эпоха, то же недавнее, но такое уже далекое прошлое, прошлое страны, которой уже нет (Kurkov 2006a, 185, 186).¹⁰

In Pidpalyi's house, there are also photos of famous Soviet resorts on the wall, of Yalta and Batumi taken in 1976 and 1981 respectively, which in their current situation are merely decontextualized "cultural relicts" (Puleri 2017, 131). This scene forms a remarkable contrast to the rest of the novel. Viktor has so far not related to the past, to his Soviet childhood. Moreover, this encounter with the past does not, as far as I can see, make significant changes to his mindset. The past is gone and remains so, it has no

⁹ "On the 9th of May he would be left alone [...] After the 9th of May it would all be over, he thought" (Kurkov 2006b, 194, 195).

¹⁰ "The whole furnishing of the flat was of a past age [...] And there had been the same framed photographs of the same epoch, the same recent but already so far distant past of a country that no longer existed" (Kurkov 2006b, 140–141).

meaning for him, and on the 9th of May it will disappear for good, when Misha, who as a penguin in Kyiv represents the Soviet legacy, is sent to the Antarctic. In addition, Pidpalyi has now passed away, and Viktor does as he promised: he extinguishes his house and its Soviet relics. However, Viktor does not succeed in bringing the Soviet legacy to an end in this novel, since it is he and not the penguin who escapes to the Antarctic. The solution he planned for is postponed.

Hybrid identities in Death and the Penguin

When the novel starts, Viktor has no family apart from the penguin. Later he “obtains” a child, Sonia, who is left there by her father Misha (“Misha-non-penguin”), an early acquaintance of Viktor who apparently is involved in organized crime. This Misha never returns. Later Nina enters the novel, first as Sonia’s nanny and then becoming Viktor’s lover. Together Viktor, the penguin, Sonia and Nina make up a family. These relations are emblematic for Viktor and his world: they have no connection with the past, with tradition, or with the traditional notion of a family. His family is a hybrid one.

Postcolonial identities are often portrayed as *hybrid*. In keeping with Homi Bhabha (1994), postcolonial figures are neither replicas of the colonial subjects, which in this case would be someone identifying unambiguously with Soviet Union or Russia of the past or present (“May 9”), nor a truly liberated national subject, in this case with a clear-cut identity as Ukrainian. The “rule” is rather that such subjects are hybrid in one way or another, occupying a “third” or “separate space” that has been “denied by both colonialists and nationalists” and that questions ideas of “origins and essences” (Bhabha 1994, 120). Hybridity typically means mixed identities, “mimicry” in Bhabha’s terminology, but the striking thing about Viktor is the lack of any identity, at least in *Death and the Penguin* (on a possible transformation in *Penguin Lost*, see below). He is totally indifferent to Russia and also, thus far, quite indifferent to Ukraine.

There is, however, another figure in the novel who seems to fit the hybrid description even better, and that is the constable Sergei Fischbein. For a short period Viktor develops a friendship with him, and as is characteristic for Viktor’s universe it happens randomly—Viktor was simply in need of someone to look after the penguin while he travelled to Kharkiv, and he called the police. Because of his surname, Viktor expects Fischbein to be Jewish, and when Viktor towards the end of their first encounter comments that “you do not look like a Jew,” he learns that Fischbein—in another nod to Gogol’s “The Overcoat,” where Akakii Akakievich’s parents chose his name via a random

search in the church calendar—deliberately chose his surname. Fischbein is a person who apparently has created his own persona.

Moreover, it is Fischbein of the two who appears to identify stronger with the old world, with “Moscow.” Viktor and Fischbein become friends to the extent that they celebrate the New Year together, and one hour before the new year begins, at 23 pm, Fischbein remarks: Москва уже чокается (Kurkov 2006a, 115).¹¹ We have by this point never heard Viktor utter any kind of orientation towards Moscow, and in fact this comment on the time difference underscores Ukraine’s independence from Moscow, even if it draws Fischbein’s attention to the latter. Earlier in the evening, together they watched the classic Soviet crime comedy of 1969 (said to be funny as “always”), *The Diamond Arm* — one of the few references in the novel to the Soviet cultural legacy. As happens with so many other characters in the novel, Fischbein, too, disappears, though seemingly at his own will. He informs Viktor (chapter 41) that he has received a position in Moscow, with a salary ten times higher than in Kyiv, and leaves, never to return. Towards the end of the novel, he is reported to be dead. Viktor and his family receive his ashes by mail, which they keep in the apartment, as if Fischbein, too, was one of the family members.

With his fictionalized Jewish identity Fischbein reads as a representative of the master story of the “Jewish century” as conceptualized by Yuri Slezkine (2004): The drift from the Jewish core areas (the Pale of Settlement in the Russian Empire) to the metropolis of the new Soviet civilization, Moscow. This time, however, with the ironic twist that this happens in order to serve as a security guard for representatives of new post-Soviet democracy.

However, Viktor, too, is a hybrid character, though in a different and less clear-cut sense. As indicated above, his appearance may be read as a “mimicry” of the Soviet author. On the one hand, he is very far from achieving the same, privileged position; on the other, his importance is nevertheless enhanced, but also exploited, by the newspaper editor. Viktor, too, serves society, but one that is corrupt and criminal. Moreover, the parodic style of his obituaries written for the drawer casts the “poet that is more than a poet,” and inherited cultural models more generally, in an ironic light.

¹¹ “In Moscow they’ll be clinking glasses already” (Kurkov 2006b, 87). There is a double meaning in this phrase; the verb чокается also means “going insane.”

(Post-)Imperial encounters and identities in Penguin Lost

Death and the Penguin ends, as noted, with Viktor instead of the penguin escaping from Kyiv on May 9. *Penguin Lost* begins with Viktor returning to Kyiv about half a year later. The story resumes in mid or late October earliest.

Whereas *Death and the Penguin* is a novel about a man living in and for the present, in *Penguin Lost* the same person is now very much looking back on the past, but first and foremost on his near past: life together with the penguin and Sonia in particular, partially also Nina. Having talked to Sonia on the phone for the first time after his return to Kyiv, he reacts with sad longing. Опустив трубку, Виктор взгрустнул. Ему захотелось назад, в прошлое, в свою тогдашнюю жизнь (Kurkov 2005, 40).¹² He wants to restore his life as it recently was; even the writing of obituaries now looks acceptable (only the funeral attendances, another part of the job for the criminal network, do not).

Several parts of *Penguin Lost* are devoted to his thoughts about his recent past, which forms a marked stylistic contrast to its predecessor. While in *Death and the Penguin* it was action and dialogues that made up its core, in its sequel the representation of main protagonist's mind occupies a much larger space. To evoke two terms by Jerome Bruner (1986, 14): A "landscape of action" is significantly supplemented by a "landscape of consciousness." Viktor comes across as a much more reflective character now, observing for himself that в прошлое можно было только окунуться мыслями и воспоминаниями (Kurkov 2005, 40).¹³ His recollections are not only about the near past, though this is what matters most to him. Yet from time to time his mind also fluctuates all the way back to Soviet champagne, pioneer camps, songs, tv comedies, and more generally his childhood and its everyday life. A recurrent relic of this past is the Winnie the Pooh cup that he acquires in Chechnya and even brings with him on the journey to the Antarctic at the very end of the story. And yet as in *Death and the Penguin* the recollections elicited by such relics do not possess any deeper significance for him, at least when compared to his recent past. To new acquaintances he pretends that the cup stems from his childhood, while the reader knows that it does not (Kurkov 2005, 515).

¹² "Ringing off left him depressed and with a sudden urge to go home, resume his old life" (Kurkov 2006b, 250). Note that Viktor's current mixed attitude to his obituary writing is lost in the English translation here.

¹³ "Into the past one can only plunge in thoughts and recollections" (my translation, omitted in Kurkov 2006b).

Roughly the first third of *Penguin Lost* (chapters 2 to 28) takes place in Kyiv, after Viktor's return. A new source of income for Viktor while searching for Misha is to be a speech writer for Sergei Pavlovich, whom Viktor met at a graveyard when looking for Misha and who turns out to run for election to the parliament. This would-be parliamentarian, it turns out, has obvious connections to organized crime. The future politician, and by implication parliamentary politics as such, is portrayed rather cynically, as when he dictates the content of his election program to Viktor, whose indifference to politics in turn is once more put on display. Subheadings to chapters count down to the election, but when only four days remain, a deal has obviously been struck behind the scenes and Sergei Pavlovich is not running anymore, he is—in advance—promised the position as a deputy, which he gladly, or so it seems, accepts. Like its predecessor, *Penguin Lost* is a satire of how corruption and crime penetrate the political landscape in post-Soviet Ukraine. Likewise, gambling and prostitution are features of the urban landscape. While Viktor rejected sexual offerings in Kharkiv in the first novel, he now spends his first night in Kyiv with the rather unconventional prostitute Sveta at her daytime workplace—a kindergarten—for fifty dollars.

Viktor remains an outsider to many of the key events that influence his life. He observes but does not fully understand, or truly care about, what is really going on. To find out more might also be risky; at some point, he reminds himself of what the newspaper editor Igor Lvovich indirectly taught him: Меньше знаешь—дольше живешь (Kurkov 2005, 144).¹⁴ As in *Death and the Penguin*, the readers, too, receive only fragmentary knowledge of what “really” happens behind the scenes. Meanwhile, while Misha the missing penguin is what compels Viktor to act, the penguin recedes for several chapters into the background as the election campaign goes on.

However, while there are several similarities between the two novels, *Penguin Lost* nevertheless presents us with a Viktor who is more active and takes greater responsibility. His main project is to find Misha and bring him back, which takes him, in a picaresque fashion, through various social layers in Kyiv, Moscow and Chechnya. His engagement is elicited by his family ties, perhaps also by an identification with his penguin as alter ego (see above), and not his role as writer. However, he also promised a colleague in the Antarctic, Stanislav Bronikovskii, to hand over a letter and credit card to his wife in Moscow, for which he gives Viktor a neat sum of money and an additional

¹⁴ “The less you know, the longer you live” (Kurkov 2006b, 304).

passport. Having also learned that Misha might be in Moscow, Viktor departs for the Russian capital—a few days before Ukraine’s election day. Both the search for Misha and his obligation to his colleague in the Antarctic are what brings him to Moscow.

As in *Death and the Penguin*, Viktor is at first indifferent to Moscow and Russia. One of the first things he wonders about when he returns to Kyiv is whether there has been a “landslide” towards Russia (and whether his hryvnias are still valid), and he seems relieved when finding out that no such “landslide” has taken place; his insecure home country Ukraine remains independent. Subsequently, as he is more directly confronted with Russia and its capital (chapters 29 to 35), Viktor is steeped in feelings of bewilderment, distance and estrangement. Moscow represents otherness for Viktor. One of the first things he does upon his arrival in Moscow is to visit a cybercafé. This is apparently the first time that Viktor uses the internet. He needs help and when he reveals that he is from Kyiv he receives a slightly patronizing response in terms of a smile from the man behind the counter (услышав слово «Киев», усмехнулся. Усмехнулся, но объяснил все очень доходчиво. Kurkov 2005, 171).¹⁵

The Moscow that Viktor encounters is one of modern technology and bright lights. He visited Moscow eight years earlier, but does not recognize the city. Then he heads for Bronikovskii’s apartment on Kutuzovskii prospect, known from the late Soviet period to be the residing area for party bosses and hence a rather prestigious part of the city—as it still turns out to be. This is a completely different world from Viktor’s own apartment in Kyiv. Bronikovskii’s wife or widow, Marina, lives a life of luxury, and she brings him into further contact with posh Muscovite lifestyle, as she takes him to the Praga restaurant on Arbat, where Viktor can choose among the most expensive wines and dishes. When returning home, they sleep with each other. Viktor has taken the place of her husband in several senses; he even imitates his handwriting so that he can use his credit card. The motif of the double, which we encountered in the first novel in the relationship between Viktor and the penguin, now resurfaces, and as we shall see it will appear several times throughout *Penguin Lost*.

Marina’s life is sharply contrasted with her husband’s lover, who, as she describes it with contempt, lives “beyond the [Garden] ring” (За кольцевую! Kurkov 2005, 204) and hence belongs to a poorer class. And yet it is Marina who sends Viktor to her to bring her

¹⁵ “‘Kiev’. [Viktor said]

The young fat man grinned, then explained simply and clearly” (Kurkov 2006b, 316)

some extra money. Viktor thus encounters both higher and lower strata of Muscovite society, where the contrast is markedly greater than in Viktor's hometown Kyiv, as the reader has learned to know it from the opening of *Death and the Penguin*. This contrast underscores the difference and distance that Viktor experiences while walking around in Moscow. While he also was an outsider at home, this feeling becomes even stronger in him now, and, beginning at the cybercafe, he begins articulating a Kyivan identity, which otherwise was hardly thematized in the first novel. At the Praga restaurant Viktor compares, in his mind, the price of the starters on the menu to a night with Sveta in Kyiv, revealing that he would prefer the latter.

His self-awareness as Kyivan intensifies further after he has parted with Marina and turns to his other main task, the search for Misha. Now, he is brought back into the world of presumably criminal networks, whose members soon pass him on to Chechnya, where the search for Misha continues (chapters 36–64). While drunk, Viktor is put on a minibus, where he wakes up. When finally arriving in the Caucasus, he ends up working in a crematorium located by an oil pipeline, which offers its services to both the Chechen and the Federal side. He is not confronted directly with the war; the world he encounters here is first and foremost characterized by transactions across the frontline, and Viktor comes into contact with participants of both sides. And it is in situations like these that we witness how he increasingly finds himself articulating his identity as neither (federal) Russian nor Caucasian.

Notably, already on the road to Chechnya, Viktor starts to register speech (accents) and physiognomy, or ethnic and geographical descent, in a way that he has hardly done before. When Viktor for the first time sees Aza, a manager who turns out to be close to the boss Khachayev at the crematory, he thinks for himself: Было в нем что-то кавказское, но явно не чеченское (Kurkov 2005, 257).¹⁶ More important than physiognomic remarks, however, is Viktor's speech recognition. While still on the road, Viktor hears people on the bus speaking languages that he does not understand. The driver is "ours," a fellow traveler Seva says, while other men apparently in charge are "Chechen." One of them, Rezvan, has a едва заметный акцент (Kurkov 2005, 226).¹⁷ Likewise, later we hear of a Chechen speaking Russian практически без акцента (Kurkov 2005, 271, see

¹⁶ "[His round face ...] were of the Caucasus, but not Chechnya" (Kurkov 2006b, 355).

¹⁷ "with the merest trace of foreign accent" (Kurkov 2006b, 339).

also 303, 312).¹⁸ However, Viktor does not only register Chechen or Caucasian languages and accents; one figure speaks fluently not only Chechen, but also “Moscow Russian” (с московским акцентом, Kurkov 2005, 233)—to Viktor’s confusion.¹⁹

The voice of the latter figure and Viktor’s reaction to it implies that “Moscow Russian” is also a marker of difference for Viktor; this is the Russian accent that is apparently not his own. The one who speaks “Moscow Russian” is Petia from “Zagorsk,” for whom Muscovite accent is clearly something he has actively acquired in order to distance himself from his origins. Видно, его не устраивало загорское происхождение и поэтому выучился он московскому акценту. Его удлиненное «аканье» звучало в тишине чеченской ночи странно и чужеродно (Kurkov 2005, 235).²⁰ What is significant in Viktor’s registration of this speech is not only that it sounds alien in Chechen surroundings, but the fact that he registers it *as* Muscovite and that it comes from a person who apparently has changed his dialect—which apparently Viktor has not or would not have done. Viktor, we may assume, does not speak with the *akanie* characteristic of Moscow Russian as well as of Russian standard pronunciation more generally. Furthermore, the sound of Moscow Russian in Chechnya is for Viktor associated with danger, which in turn foreshadows Viktor’s privilege in this situation as belonging to neither side.

Viktor is several times taken to be a Russian. Ты что, думаешь, что в Чечне как в русской деревне, все друг друга знают? (Kurkov 2005, 241) someone says to him.²¹ A little later, another figure, Maga, asks him whether he is “from Moscow,” and Viktor answers “no, from Kyiv,” but Maga goes on praising Moscow (Я в Москве был! Вот это город! Kurkov 2005, 249).²² Viktor objects, on behalf of people from the Caucasus, citing the xenophobic attitudes they are likely to encounter there. Still Maga keeps referring to Moscow’s beautiful women, and when he asks whether those in Kyiv are comparable, Viktor simply answers “no.” Viktor’s thoughts, meanwhile, are recurrently turning to Kyiv—he searches a Russian federal newspaper for news about his hometown, he

¹⁸ “with little trace of accent” (Kurkov 2006b, 361).

¹⁹ “Two or three male voices approached, then went away – one, to his confusion, speaking both Moscow Russian and Chechen” (Kurkov 2006b, 344).

²⁰ “Crew-cut Petya was from Zagorsk something he’d lived down by adopting a Moscow accent which, in the silence of the Chechen night rang out so odd and alien, as to be in danger of stopping a bullet any minute” (Kurkov 2006b, 344). It is unclear whether “Zagorsk” refers to the town that today is Sergiev Posad (which is too close to Moscow to warrant notable dialectal differences) or, perhaps, Zagorskii in Stavropol.

²¹ “This isn’t a Russian village, you know, where everyone knows everyone else” (Kurkov 2006b, 347).

²² “Some place that! I’ve been!” (Kurkov 2006b, 352).

compares the winter in the Caucasus to that of Kyiv, and he thinks about Sonia (Kurkov 2005, 280, 286).

The key scene with regard to Viktor's self-awareness as neither Chechen nor Russian happens in chapter 55, when he finally meets the local boss Khachaev, whom Viktor needs to persuade about his neutrality. Khachaev, however, automatically assumes that Viktor is Russian, and it takes Viktor quite some efforts to convince him otherwise:

- Я из Киева, я вас в Москве искал, чтобы ... понимаете, это мой пингвин, он попал к этому банкиру, а потом к вам ...

- А теперь ты ко мне попал, - грустно усмехнулся чеченец. – Что это вы все ко мне попадаете? Я же не боевик, я же вам не мешал. И в Москве я сидел и тихонько занимался бизнесом. Я вообще обычный учитель физики и истории, понимаешь? Я на вашей великой литературе воспитан! На гордости! «Песня о Соколе», «Песня о буреветнике»! А теперь у вас что? А?

- Я из Киева, - произнес Виктор и сглотнул слюну. Во рту все еще ощущался неприятный жгучий вкус этой самодельной то ли водки, то ли чачи. – Я не из России...

- Украинец? – В глазах у Хачаева промелькнул мгновенный интерес. – А у вас что? Какая гордость? Есть своя «Песня о Соколе»? А?

- Чому я не сокил, чому не летаю, - прошептал Виктор пришедшие на ум слова украинской народной песни.

Хачаев тяжело вздохнул.

- Ты знаешь, у некоторых народов, и у нас, у чеченцев, есть врожденная гордость. В генах, в крови. [...] И вы, русские, воюете с нами только потому, что у нас есть врожденная гордость, а у вас – нет!

- Украинцы с вами не воюют!

- А с кем они воюют?

- Ни с кем.

- Это плохо! – Хачаев покачал головой. – Значит, сами с собой воюют ... Ладно, рассказывай! (Kurkov 2005, 306–307)²³

²³ “‘I’m from Kiev’, said Viktor. ‘I looked for you in Moscow, You see, it’s my penguin, But he came into the possession of a certain banker, and then into yours.’
‘Rather like you’, he laughed. ‘Why do you lot keep coming? I’m not fighting. I’ve not interfered with you. And in Moscow I minded my own business. An ordinary teacher of Physics and History, that’s me. Reared on

In this scene, Viktor is clearly compelled to think of himself in terms that are not natural to him. In contrast to Khachaeu, who strongly identifies as Chechen, Viktor must search in the back of his mind for “folkloristic evidence.” Meanwhile, when he subsequently tells his “short” life story to Khachaeu, it remains a story without national “inborn pride” (cf. Khachaeu). Viktor tells of the obituaries, the funerals, the trip to the Antarctic, Sergei Pavlovich’s election campaign.

Next, Viktor is allowed to make a phone call to Sonia, during which also Khachaeu “gives his word” to Sonia to return Misha to Kyiv. This Chechen “national characteristic” of holding one’s promise turns out to be decisive. In this regard, Khachaeu becomes Viktor’s double, who in the novel’s opening scene promised to travel to Marina in Moscow. Then he promised to bring Misha back. In the last part of the novel, Viktor will make one more, decisive promise: to finally redress Misha’s displacement.

It is eventually confirmed that Misha is in Chechnya, living together with dogs (!). In chapter 59, Viktor is allowed to meet him. This chapter stands out in that it is not narrated from Viktor’s perspective, but from the driver Aslan’s, who repeatedly assumes that Viktor is Russian, something that creates a particularly comic effect on the background of the dialogue cited above and of the reader’s knowledge that he is wrong. Not long after, Viktor is sent back to Kyiv via Taganrog. Misha arrives in Kyiv later, just before New Year’s Eve (chapter 75). Khachaeu kept his word. But how should Viktor continue with his life?

your great Russian literature! Its glory! “The Song of the Falcon”, “The Song of the Storm Petrel”! And what do you have now, eh?”

‘Kiev’s where I’m from, not Russia’, Viktor said and swallowed. In his mouth he still felt the unpleasant burning taste of bootlegged vodka or brandy. ‘I’m not from Russia’.

Khachaeu’s eyes showed a glimmer of interests. ‘So you’re Ukrainian. Well, what have you got? What glory? Do you have your own “Song of the Falcon,” eh?’

“Why am I not a falcon, why do I not fly,” Viktor whispered some words from a Ukrainian folksong that came to his mind.

Khachaeu deeply sighed.

‘Some nations – we Chechens being one – have an inborne sense of their own worth – in the genes, in the blood. [...] Which is the reason why you Russians fight us. We’ve got it, you haven’t.’

‘We aren’t fighting you.’

‘Who are you Ukrainians fighting?’

‘Nobody’.

Khachayev shook his head. ‘Bad. Fighting amongst yourselves, then ... Now, let’s have your story’.

(Kurkov 2006b, 378; adjusted in keeping with the original, the dialogue is altered in the translation)

The Law of the Snail

The “Law of the Snail,” which is also the original title of the second penguin novel, is introduced to Viktor by Sergei Pavlovich in chapter 8 as follows: A small snail needs a small house; a bigger snail (such as Sergei Pavlovich himself) needs a bigger house. Meanwhile, a snail without a house is a “slug”; it needs “protection” (крыша). This is said at the time when Viktor does not have access to his own house (someone has put a new lock on his apartment door). Thus, what Sergei Pavlovich apparently aims to say is that Viktor is in need of protection and thus dependent on others (Sergei Pavlovich). The Law of the Snail as it is introduced to Viktor is about dependency.

While still in Kyiv, just before the elections, Viktor does indeed feel well protected, currently residing at Sergei Pavlovich’s. However, as soon as his protector has pulled out of the election race, Viktor is left to fend for himself. Sergei Pavlovich’s ambition was to become a “two-headed snail,” that is a more powerful one, but another two-headed snail defeated him. His reference to a “two-headed snail” reminds Viktor of the two-headed eagle, traditionally an emblem of Russia. First and foremost, however, a “two-headed snail” enjoys double protection: by criminal networks and by the government. Once more, the harsh reality of post-Soviet parliamentary politics is articulated. Viktor, for his part, is now free and unprotected—he has left his “house” without having found a new one (Kurkov 2005, 156, 160). At this moment he leaves for Moscow.

Later in the novel Viktor returns to the Law of the Snail in his thoughts but reinterprets it. By ending up in Chechnya, Viktor imagines that he might have violated “some paragraphs” of that law. He even drinks outside his house—he is “homeless” (бомж, Kurkov 2005, 237). On the other hand, he reasons a little later, a snail leaving its house to participate in war (his current surroundings) becomes a soldier, but Viktor does not fight. In keeping with this logic, Viktor sees himself as, after all, a snail with a house of his own. This resonates with the statement he later makes that he (like other “Ukrainians,” cf. the long dialogue quoted above) does not fight with anyone. What he does in seemingly trivial reflections like these is to rewrite the “law” on behalf of himself, which also reinforces his self-confidence: Виктор улыбнулся, ощутив гордость за свое мысленное «законотворчество». Осознание того, что он может сам дополнять Закон

улитки, добавило ему самоуверенности (Kurkov 2005, 253).²⁴ At this point, Viktor finds himself on the path towards a higher degree of self-realization.

The final time that Viktor returns to the law in his thoughts is when he is back in Kyiv, after Misha has been brought home and he has resumed working for Sergei Pavlovich. Viktor needed more money to pay for Misha's return and again turned to Sergei Pavlovich, who proposed that Viktor visit an orphanage, an act that might benefit the politician Sergei Pavlovich's public image. Thus, hypocrisy remains a feature of political life in Kyiv. However, Viktor afterwards realizes that the two visits he made to the orphanage, right before and right after New Year, were after all good deeds for the children living there: They were taken to lunch at McDonalds and they received presents. At this point, a feeling of civic engagement has arisen in Viktor, and the Law of the snail now attains a new and different meaning for him. It is no longer about being protected by Sergei Pavlovich. There is a constitution that is supposed to guarantee certain rights, he reasons, but in reality it does not, as he previously experienced in Pidpalyi's case, who ended his life in poverty and where Viktor had to bribe health personnel to bring him to a hospital even as he suffered from cancer. By contrast: Закон улитки ничего, кроме наказаний за его нарушение, не обещает (Kurkov 2005, 451).²⁵ The Law of the snail is descriptive rather than normative. It does not make life more secure, but it fosters agency and responsibility.

While Viktor's own thoughts about the new meaning of the Law of the Snail (chapter 89) may not come across as particularly articulate or coherent, they are uttered, or thought, at a time when Viktor has emerged as a more responsible character. While he, at this point, still benefits from Sergei Pavlovich's protection, he is also able to use it for his own advantage, first and foremost to bring his idiosyncratic family together. "There is a house" that one can create for oneself and one's nearest, and this realization is what creates agency and subjectivity: Есть домик, есть стены – есть улитка. Нет домика – нет улитки. Нет улитки – нет проблемы.²⁶ This is what the Law of the Snail eventually means for Viktor: not protection by others, but a subject's proclivity to self-protection and responsibility towards oneself and one's family.

²⁴ "Viktor smiled and felt proud of his imaginary lawmaking. He realized that he could fill out Law of the snail himself and this gave him self-confidence" (not included in Kurkov 2006b, my translation).

²⁵ "Snail's Law promised nothing, beyond punishment for its infringement" (Kurkov 2006b, 447).

²⁶ "There is a house, there are walls, therefore there is a snail. No house – no snail. No snail – no problem" (not included in Kurkov 2006b, my translation).

Responsibility emerges as an even more important motif in the novel's final part. True, it was present already in the opening chapter, since the story was elicited by Viktor's obligation to his colleague Bronikovskii to bring his wife in Moscow the letter and his credit card. Home in Kyiv, Viktor makes the pledge to find Misha. A new decisive moment occurs in Chechnya, when Sonia, having first talked to Viktor, makes Khachaeu promise to bring Misha back. He "gives his word," a speech act that for the Chechen Khachaeu is binding. Back in Kyiv, two more projects emerge: Viktor wants, once more (cf. *Death and the Penguin*), to bring Misha back to his proper home, that is to the Antarctic. And, as it turns out, he wants to abandon Kyiv and his family himself, however much he up to this point has struggled to bring it together again.

The latter plan involves several people. In this novel, too, a traditional Soviet celebration, this time New Year's Day, becomes a turning point. On this day Viktor, as he did in Moscow, visits a cybercafe and finds a Croatian announcement for an Antarctic expedition. He then begins planning to set up an arm-wrestling team around Liosha, a character briefly encountered in the first novel as the man who hired Viktor and the penguin to attend funerals, but who after in-fighting ended up in a wheelchair and in the first part of *Penguin Lost* is hanging out together with Afghan war veterans, another reference to the Soviet legacy. Subsequently, Liosha becomes another member of Viktor's "family" while Viktor is away; he even begins developing a close relationship to Nina, to whom Viktor is less attracted now. Gradually, it is Liosha who takes Viktor's place as Sonia's dad and Nina's boyfriend, that is as his double residing in his apartment. In the final part, Viktor brings to Split Liosha and his arm-wrestling team, who eventually return as champions. In the meantime, Viktor embarks the boat of his new Balkan acquaintances, who turn out be Serbians wanted for war crimes and who were only after Viktor's money (they make a final withdrawal from Bronikovskii's credit card). Viktor and Misha are saved by the Serbian boss Mladen's daughter Vesna, who has already slept with Viktor and therefore, as Mladen sees it, must marry him. Having been assured that Viktor is "not Jewish"—this is the scene where Viktor describes himself as "Ukrainian of Russian parents" as cited at the beginning of this article—Mladen, who has just revealed a golden Orthodox cross hanging around his neck, exclaims "Мы, славяне, должны держаться вместе" (Kurkov 2005, 521).²⁷ Later in the evening, when he hears about the arm-wrestling team's victory, he proposes a toast "to Ukraine."

²⁷ "We Slavs must stick together" (Kurkov 2006b, 479).

Viktor, however, in a final set of thoughts that reflect what has been his attitude throughout the two novels, does not see the point of bringing up “Ukraine” on his wedding day. He proposes instead a toast to family members. Viktor is oriented towards the future, in a new homeland, whatever that homeland would be. With Vesna he aims to start a new life, and at the very end of the novel he leaves Misha on a small island in the Southern Ocean.

Viktor has throughout the novel been driven by guilt towards Misha (Kurkov 2005, 410) but also by responsibility, both of which brought him to Moscow and Chechnya. Having restored life as it was in the near past, living once more in Kyiv with his family, he continues to feel insecure about the future there, and he recognizes the need to get on. Задумался о том, что с каждой неделей он теряет все больше и больше (Kurkov 2005, 462).²⁸ Viktor realizes that he needs to sort life out and liberate himself from dependency on others, be it politicians or newspaper editors: чужое влияние на его судьбу Виктору уже больше чем надоело (Kurkov 2005, 479).²⁹ A symbolic, liberating act for Viktor is to drop his typewriter from his apartment balcony, which in particular breaks off his connection to Igor Lvovich (cf. Kurkov 2005, 484, 486).

Having arrived in Split with his arm-wrestling team—and with Misha, who is travelling with them officially as their mascot—Viktor is ridden with embarrassment:

Стыдно было, что вот он, представитель общества-обманщиков, приехал сюда как какой-то спортивный деятель. Но, с другой стороны, в ребятах он был уверен и смотрел на них сейчас как на настоящую команду. «А если выиграют? – с восторгом подумал он [...]. «Если выиграют, то ложь станет правдой!» Может, так все и должно быть, по крайней мере на Украине. Может, и Сергей Павлович станет в парламенте настоящим политиком и сделает что-то полезное для страны? Может, Игорь Львович возьмет и превратит свой «боевой листок» в нормальную честную и объективную газету? (Kurkov 2005, 505)³⁰

²⁸ “He mused [...] on the fact that every week was losing him more of his freedom” (Kurkov 2006b, 452)

²⁹ “Viktor was more than fed up with someone else influencing his fate” (not included in Kurkov 2006b, my translation).

³⁰ “It was embarrassing that he, a representative of the society of deceived deceivers, travelled here as some sport agent. On the other hand, he had confidence in the guys and looked at them as a genuine team. ‘But what if they win?’ he thought in excitement. [...] ‘If they win, the lie becomes truth’. That’s how it would turn out, at least in Ukraine. Andrey Pavlovich, as successful as politician, might do something useful for the

Even though the trip to Croatia was founded on deceit—Viktor came up with the idea of an arm-wrestling team to cover up its real purpose—it nevertheless contributed to making life better and more normal for those involved. The utopia of the penguin novels as it emerges towards the end of *Penguin Lost* is simply normalcy. Viktor's contribution is to remove at least one anomaly of the Soviet legacy—the displaced penguin—while at the same time solving his own feeling of displacement.

Thus, that the final project is based on deceits is of less importance—in accordance with Viktor's new understanding of the Law of the snail it is the good result that matters. Except for Sonia there is little purity in the life of these characters. The world is penetrated by deceits, crime and corruption, and yet it is possible in this situation to make it a little better. If there is after all a community-building project contained in these novels, it is in this orientation towards a better future, not towards any idealized past or the nation's "origins and essences" (Bhabha). However, Viktor leaves it to the other characters to shape this future, having bid farewell to Misha in the Antarctic and to Liosha and Sonia in Kyiv. Теперь, как показалось ему, он был свободен от Родины, свободен от прошлого (Kurkov 2005, 515).³¹ In the final call home to Sonia, Viktor informs her that Misha is "home" in the Antarctic—the Croatian Mladen is also a person who holds his word (cf. Kurkov 2005, 525)—while hearing in return that Nina is expecting a child with Liosha, the newly returned Champion of arm-wrestling, who has also bought a car. Viktor's response is telling: Значит, у вас все в порядке (Kurkov 2005, 527).³² The novel ends on a positive note for all parts—Viktor, Misha and those who reside in Kyiv—with the real prospects of life becoming more *normal*. However, in the background lingers the fact that normality is achieved in a private context thanks to personal initiatives, and not on a broader, political scale. Constitutional rights are still not working properly, but the Law of the snail is.

Conclusions

The phrase "which homeland" that figures in the title of this article is taken from a dialogue between Viktor and Sveta in *Penguin Lost*, and it is Viktor's question to Sveta as she suddenly, in their intimate setting, refers to some родина ("homeland," Kurkov

country. Igor Lvovich might turn his electioneering rag into a decent and objective newspaper" (Kurkov 2006b, 472).

³¹ Now, as it appeared to him, he was free from his Homeland, free from his past" (not included in Kurkov 2006b, my translation).

³² "This means that everything is all right at your end" (not included in Kurkov 2006b, my translation).

2005, 31–32). She explains to him that her “homeland” is the kindergarten, where they have just spent the night together. This answer resonates well with Viktor, who, as explained earlier, identifies with his home and his city, but only marginally with his country. For Viktor, the question “which homeland” is a natural one, and the meaning of “homeland” is never evident for him. By the same token, Sveta’s answer makes sense to him. The meaning of *родина* in these novels is never taken for granted. It can be anything from your workplace or your hometown to your country, state or even—for a few (e.g. Fischbein)—empire.

In Ukrainian Russophone literature of the early post-Soviet period, of which Kurkov’s penguin novels are a case, identities are predominantly local or regional (except for those cases where they are “Russian”) and rarely national, that is “Ukrainian” (Chernetsky 2019, 57). And while Kurkov from early on has insisted that his Russophone literature *is* Ukrainian, the identification of the protagonists of *Death and the Penguin* is consistently vague in terms of their political and national identity. Meanwhile, a development towards a broader civic engagement is discernible in *Penguin Lost*.³³ Furthermore, the lack of identification with the former imperial center, with Moscow or Russia, makes it possible to place the penguin novels, the skeptical attitudes of their protagonists to ethnic identities notwithstanding, in the history of the “Russophone novel as an anti-imperial genre” and see them as an example of writing “against empire and its cultural influence in a language laden with imperial baggage” (Goldstone 2025, 682, 700).

The identities of the different Ukrainian characters encountered in these novels are, I would argue, postcolonial. While struggling with legacies of the Soviet empire, they display no precolonial, essentialist identification with a Ukrainian nation. Furthermore, the civic identity and responsibility that emerges in Viktor after his return to Kyiv is future-oriented and aims at solving, or rather to make a modest contribution to the solving, of problems rooted in the Soviet past. While it may not come across as a deeply political project, it can nevertheless be summarized as a quest for normalcy, in which the “snails” that make up the nation strive to liberate themselves from protection, that is

³³ Viktor’s political vagueness, at times indifference, has a parallel to the main character Sergei of the later Kurkov novel, *Grey Bees* (2018). Sergei, who finds himself situated between two fronts in the Donbas war, tries to keep politics at a distance. While there are several references to politics, they matter relatively little to him; he assumes a “neither/nor” position. And yet he is a character that demonstrates responsibility and belonging, virtues that do have a political meaning. See the analyses by Ingunn Lunde (2023) and by Nathan Goldstone (2025, 696–700).

from dependency, and build their own house(s) to try and secure their own independence.

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