

Fleshing/Flashing Discourse: Sorokin's Master Trope

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PROBABLY Vladimir Sorokin's most famous and most repeated saying is that his characters and their actions are nothing more than words on paper, and should not be judged on moral or any other extra-literary grounds. In one of his interviews, in 2002, after the attack on his works by the pro-government youth organization "Idushchie vmeste" (Walking Together), he maintained (and this phrase has repeatedly been quoted by critics):

Я люблю экспериментировать с различными стилями. Когда меня спрашивают: «Почему в ваших книгах вы издеваетесь над людьми?»—я обычно отвечаю: «Это не люди. Это просто буквы на бумаге».¹

In another interview accompanying the first edition of his collected works, Sorokin has proposed something resembling an apophatic justification of his apparent "immoralism": На бумаге можно позволить все, что угодно. Она стерпит... То самое Слово, что было у Бога, было вовсе не на бумаге.²

- 1 "I like to experiment with various styles. When I am asked why I mock people like this, I usually respond: 'These are not people, these are just letters on a piece of paper.'" Vladimir Sorokin & Oksana Semenova, 2002, "Ja khotel napolnit' russkuiu literaturu govnom," interview, *Moskovskii komsomolets v voskresen'e*, 21 July, http://www.laertsky.com/sk/sk_037.htm, accessed 26 February 2013. Except for fn. 20, all translations are mine.
- 2 "On paper one may allow oneself to do anything. It will tolerate everything... God's Word was not on paper." Vladimir Sorokin, 1998, "V kul'ture dlia menia net tabu..." interview by S. Shapoval, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, Moscow, pp. 8–20; p. 20.

I would like to argue that this dictum only partially reflects the form-shaping ideology of Sorokin's texts. It is a half-truth at best, something that Sorokin indirectly admits when he says: Текст—очень мощное оружие. Он гипнотизирует, а иногда—просто парализует.³ Sorokin thus emphasizes—and, in all likelihood, desires—the physiological effects of the text. He has frequently spoken about the lack of attention paid to the corporeal aspects of literary representation in the Russian cultural tradition, declaring that his artistic originality lies in precisely this area:

В русской литературе вообще тела было очень мало. Духа было выше крыши. Когда читаешь Достоевского, не можешь почувствовать тела героев: сложение князя Мышкина или какая грудь была у Настасьи Филипповны. Я же очень хотел наполнить русскую литературу телесностью: запахом пота, движением мышц, естественными отправлениями, спермой, говном. Как сказал Арто: «Там, где пахнет говном, пахнет жизнью».⁴

Here, I am not merely interested in Sorokin's focus on the body as opposed to the spirit, the soul, and the philosophical and moral themes characteristic of Russian literary culture as defined by the classics of the nineteenth century. More significant is Sorokin's trademark transformation of verbal concepts into corporeal images, or, more generally, the translation of discursive implications and rhetorical presuppositions into a language of bodily gestures. The latter relates either to the "lower bodily stratum"—eating, defecation, copulation, vomiting (which resonates with Bakhtin's concept of "carnivalization")—or to naturalistically depicted violence and graphic representations of a mutilated human body. In Sorokin's own words:

3 "Text is a very powerful weapon. It can hypnotize, and sometimes it paralyzes." Vladimir Sorokin, 1992, "Tekst kak narkotik," interview by T. Rasskazova, *Sbornik rasskazov*, Moscow, pp. 119–26; p. 121.

4 "In Russian literature, there's generally been very little body. Spirituality has been in excess. When one reads Dostoevsky, it's impossible to feel the characters' bodies: how Prince Myshkin was built, what Nastasia Filippovna's bust looked like. I very much wanted to fill Russian literature with corporeality: the smell of sweat, muscles moving, body fluids, sperm, shit. As Artaud once said, 'where you can smell shit, there you can smell life.'" Sorokin & Semenova, 2002, p. 4.

Я постоянно работаю с пограничными зонами, где тело вторгается в текст. Для меня всегда была важна эта граница между литературой и телесностью. Собственно, в моих текстах всегда стоит вопрос литературной телесности, и я пытаюсь разрешить проблему, телесна ли литература. Я получаю удовольствие в тот момент, когда литература становится телесной и нелитературной.⁵

In his periodization of Sorokin's oeuvre, Dirk Uffelmann has defined the early period as dominated by the materialization of metaphors, while describing subsequent periods as being focused on the positivism of emotions and later on fantastic substantialism.⁶ I would like to argue that this trope, which can only be partially described as the materialization of metaphors, functions as Sorokin's master-trope, and can be traced right through from his earliest works to the most recent. Sorokin methodically transforms discursive elements into living, active and suffering bodies. Although this transformation is reminiscent of carnivalization and materialization, I propose to call this trope *carnalization* (from the Latin *carnalis*, "fleshy"). Unlike the former, carnalization does not necessarily imply the utopia of revitalization, and, unlike the latter, it exposes graphically represented physiological and gory aspects typically concealed in the discourse. In my view, carnalization represents the core of Sorokin's own distinctive method of deconstruction as applied to authoritative discourses, symbols and cultural narratives. How does carnalization acquire deconstructive functions? What are the symbolic implications of this trope? What is its heuristic potential? In seeking answers to these questions, I will first present an overview of Sorokin's uses of this trope throughout his works, and then suggest an overarching interpretation.

5 "I am constantly working with the liminal zones where the body invades the text. For me, this boundary between literature and corporeality has always been important. As a matter of fact, my texts always raise the question of literary corporeality, and I try to resolve the problem of whether literature is corporeal. I enjoy the moment when literature becomes corporeal and non-literary." Vladimir Sorokin, 1996, "Literatura ili kladbishche stilisticheskikh nakhodok," *Postmodernisty o postkul'ture*, ed. S. Roll, Moscow, pp. 119–30; pp. 123–24.

6 Dirk Uffelmann, 2006, "L'éd tronulsia: The Overlapping Periods in Vladimir Sorokin's Work from the Materialization of Metaphors to Fantastic Substantialism," *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Slavica Bergensia 6), eds. I. Lunde & T. Roesen, Bergen, pp. 100–25; p. 109.

Direct carnalization

Sorokin's early works are full of *direct carnalization*, brought about by the corporeal materialization of verbal metaphors and speech idioms. The most illuminating examples can be found in *Norma* (*The Norm*, 1979–83). For instance, in the first part of the book, the idiomatic expression *govna nazhrat'sia* (“to pig out on shit”) is represented through scenes from various walks of Soviet life. These scenes invariably include situations where characters consume their daily *norma*, which, as we learn in the course of reading, consists of bricks of processed children's faeces. In the seventh part of *The Norm* (also known as “Stikhi i pesni” (“Poems and songs”)), Sorokin, or rather his “substitute author,” directly materializes quotations from Soviet songs and poems in each short story. Thus, a trite poetic line about a sailor who leaves his heart with a girl transforms into an episode where the girl in question delivers a jar containing a beating heart to a police station. Another idiom-made-flesh, *zolyte ruki* (“golden hands,” connoting a jack-of-all-trades),—the pride of a boy from flat no. 5—are melted down and used to purchase a foreign-made device for an enormous monument of Lenin atop the Palace of Soviets. The ideologically charged idiom *dyshat' rodinnoi* (“to breathe one's motherland”) is sarcastically reconfigured in a scene on a submarine, where, in order to cope with a shortage of oxygen, crew members are forced to press a map of the USSR to their faces: Каждый прижимал ко рту карту своей области и дышал, дышал, дышал...⁷ Similar materializations of metaphors and idioms can be found in the collection *Pervyi subbotnik* (*The First Saturday Workday*, 1979–84) (for instance, in “San'kina liubov'” (“San'ka's Love”)), or in *Serdtsa chetyrekh* (*Four Stout Hearts*, 1991)—in particular, the memorable materialization of the idiom *ebat' mozgi* (literally, “to fuck the brains,” i.e., “to bullshit”) in the novel's conclusion.

This device does not entirely disappear in Sorokin's later works. One may recall the scene in *Moskva* (*Moscow*, 1997) where Lev is tortured with an air-pump; Aleksandr Genis was the first to notice that this is a direct manifestation of the idiom, один жулик надул другого—one crook cheated (literally, “pumped up”) another.⁸ In *Trilogiia* (*Ice Trilogy*,

7 “Everyone was pressing a map of their native region to their face and breathing, breathing, breathing...” Sorokin, 1998, p. 241.

8 Aleksandr Genis, 2002, “Chuzn' i zhido: Vladimir Sorokin,” *Rassledovaniia: Dval*, ed. A. Genis, Moscow, pp. 94–106; pp. 104–05.

2002–2005), the entire ritual of the Brothers of Light is built around the idioms *golos serdtsa* (“the voice of the heart”) and *govori serdtsem* (“speak with your heart”), discursive manifestations of the fetishization of ultimate sincerity which dominated the liberal rhetoric of the Perestroika period and the 1990s (e.g. the slogan *golosui serdtsem*, “vote with your heart,” from Boris Yeltsin’s 1996 election campaign).

In the collection of short stories *Sakharnyi Kreml’* (*Sugar Kremlin*, 2008), the acts of eating and licking “the sugar Kremlin” echo the first part of *The Norm*, presenting new variations on the motif of the consumption and internalization of repressive power by its subjects.⁹ However, one can also detect in this motif a direct materialization of the expression *sladost’ vlasti* (“the sweet taste of power”), which had already been invoked by Sorokin in *Den’ oprichnika* (*Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006), when the oprichnik Komiaga debates Mandel’shtam’s formula *власть отвратительна как руки брадобрея*.¹⁰ Finally, the entire myth-world of *Metel’* (*The Snowstorm*, 2010), with its giants and dwarves, seems to derive from a cultural idiom vital to nineteenth-century literature—*malen’kii chelovek* (“an insignificant person,” literally “a small person”)—especially relevant given the novel’s numerous stylistic, plot and characterological references to the works of Pushkin, Tolstoy and Chekhov.

Usually, these carnalizations have been interpreted as Sorokin’s mockery of authoritative idioms and symbols, especially when their connection to Socialist Realism and official Soviet discourses is blatantly obvious.¹¹ However, as one may notice, even in Sorokin’s early works the discursive sources of carnalization are not necessarily marked ideologically. Rather, through these carnalizations, Sorokin declaratively introduces his main theme: the *corporeality of language*, especially, but not exclusively, as represented by various authoritative discourses, both cultural and political. Using Dirk Uffermann’s apt definition, in Sorokin’s quest for the corporeality of language one can detect “[t]he ontological presup-

9 Noted by Nariman Skakov.

10 “Power is revolting, like a barber’s hands” from Mandel’shtam’s poem “Ariost,” 1933.

11 See for instance Mark Lipovetsky, 2000, “Vladimir Sorokin’s Theater of Cruelty,” *Endquote: Russian and Soviet Grand Style*, eds. M. Balina, Y. Dobrenko & N. Condee. Evanston, Ill., pp. 167–92.

position [...] that nothing exists beyond metaphors (and their materializations), that (textual) reality is created by (destructive) language.”¹²

From this perspective, Sorokin’s work for theatre and cinema seems not only natural but also necessary: these media are able to lay bare his major theme by adding a *visible* corporeal dimension to text. Sorokin emphasizes the transformation of the textual into the corporeal by utilizing easily recognizable works from classical literature as the pretexts of his film scripts: Shakespeare’s plays in *Dismorfomaniia* (*Dismorphomania*, 1989), Chekhov’s in *Iubilei* (*Anniversary*, 1993), Dostoevsky’s novels in *Dostoevsky-Trip* (1997), Andersen’s “Lykkens Kalosker” (“The Galoshes of Fortune”) in *Kopeika* (*Kopeck*, 2001), Chekhov’s *Tri sestry* (*Three Sisters*) in *Moscow*, and Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* in *Mishen’* (*The Target*, 2011). By these means, he underscores the transformation of the *exemplary literariness* of classical discourses into the contemporary corporeality of filmic representation.

It is hardly surprising that his entire oeuvre, earlier and later works alike, is peppered with what may be called *meta-carnalization*; Sorokin applies this variation to his master trope when he needs to represent a body of discourse in a generalized, yet literal form. For instance, in the short story “Zaplyv” (“Swimming in,” included in *Goluboe salo* (*Blue Lard*, 1999), but written in the early 1980s), Sorokin depicts a quotation from some official speech or narrative—a metonymy for the discourse of totalitarian power—as compiled by military swimmers floating with torches in their hands. Similarly, *Roman* (*A Novel*, 1985–89), a narrative of more than 500 pages stylized as a nineteenth-century Russian novel, may be read as a meta-carnalization of the thesis of the death of the novel (*smert’ romana*), as widely debated from the 1950s through to the 1970s.

Indirect carnalization

Along with direct carnalizations, Sorokin methodically explores the possibilities of *indirect carnalizations*—when a corporeal image manifests a hidden discursive logic rather than an easily recognizable idiom. *The First Saturday Workday* was, probably, Sorokin’s first experiment in this direction. It is as though these stories have two sides: a conventional, middle-brow Soviet narrative; and violence, brutal sex or gibberish.¹³ The rapid

¹² Uffelmann, 2006, p. 109.

¹³ В 80-е годы я делал бинарные литературные бомбочки, состоящие из двух

shifts between these sides suggest that the connection between them is not arbitrary, but guided by a deliberate inner logic. In the most characteristic examples, a corporeal act appears as the *extension* of a discourse.

For instance, in "Sergei Andreevich," a devoted schoolboy absorbs with admiration all the banalities that his teacher utters. This process is taken to the point of nausea (more or less literally), when the same student excitedly eats his teacher's faeces. In another teacher-student story, "Svobodnyi urok" ("A Free Lesson"), a female teacher tames a schoolboy's pubertal energy by manipulating and extolling him to "grow up," while giving him a lesson in sexuality by forcing the boy to touch her genitalia. While repeating *Для тебя же стараюсь, балбес!*,¹⁴ she, unlike her student, obviously enjoys the act.

In the first instance, the eating of the teacher's shit appears as a form of the Eucharist; in the second, the student's rape serves as the source of the teacher's not-so-secret physical enjoyment. Such motifs appear in these stories as two interconnected aspects of didacticism, which many conceptualists (as in Lev Rubinshtein's and Dmitrii Prigov's writings) considered to be the core of the Russian cultural tradition. It is noteworthy that in "Sergei Andreevich," as well as in many other stories in this book ("Otkrytie sezona" ("Opening of the season"), "Pominal'noe slovo" ("Eulogy"), "Proezdom" ("Passing by"), "The First Saturday Workday," and others), the transformation of the discursive into the corporeal emerges as a kind of ritual, pointing to a transcendent meaning. It is transcendent *only* because it is situated *beyond* discourse. To manifest this movement beyond discursive and verbal means, along with sex and violence, Sorokin broadly employs *zaum'*, nonsensical language and a rich helping of obscenity, as seen in *The First Saturday Workday*, *The Norm*, and the play *Russkaia babushka* (*Russian Grandmother*, 1988). Similarly, the language of power borders on nonsense in *Four Stout Hearts*, the play

несоединимых частей: соцреалистической и части, построенной на реальной физиологии, а в результате происходил взрыв, и он наполнял меня, как литератора, некой вспышкой свободы; "In the 1980s, I made little binary literary bombs consisting of two incompatible parts: a Socialist Realist part and a part based on actual physiology. As a result, there was an explosion, and it filled me, as a writer, with a certain flash of freedom." Vladimir Sorokin, 2006, "Zakony russkoi metafiziki," interview by A. Voznesenskii, <http://www.srkn.ru/interview/voznescnski.shtml>, accessed 3 January 2013.

¹⁴ "I am doing this for you, stupid!" Sorokin, 1998, p. 506.

Doverie (*Confidence*, 1989), and the play *Zanos* (*Kickback*, 2009). I suspect that Sorokin uses Chinese words and expressions for the same purpose—first in *Blue Lard* and later in *Day of the Oprichnik*, *Sugar Kremlin* and *The Target*.¹⁵

The chain of transformations from the discursive to the corporeal and into the transcendent is represented best in *Blue Lard*. “Blue lard,” a mystical substance emitted in the process of writing by the clones of great Russian writers, serves as the corporeal equivalent of Russia’s famed spirituality; in Aleksandr Genis’ words, the blue fat is русский грааль, дух, ставший плотью.¹⁶ As the carnalized sacred, the blue fat appears to be equally resonant with the desires of a scientific cosmopolitan society of the future: a retro-utopian nationalist community of *zemleby* (literally, “earth-fuckers”), and an alternative, bloodless totalitarianism where Stalin and Hitler are allies, and where sexuality and drugs are not repressed but celebrated.

Furthermore, in Sorokin’s early and more recent texts alike, one may detect relatively stable affinities between a discourse and the form its carnalization takes. For instance, the traditionalist, nationalist discourse of love for all things Russian is almost inevitably embodied in ritualized massacres, where sadistic mass murder serves as the ultimate manifestation of this sentiment. This connection first appears in the third part of *The Norm*, where a Buninesque narrative about a return to a destroyed aristocratic household leads to “Padezh” (“Cattle Plague”), a narrative about collectivization depicted as the ecstatic celebration of accelerating violence and destruction.

Similarly, in *Roman/A Novel* ritualized violence enters the narrative at a very particular moment: during Roman and Tat’iana’s wedding night. The artfully stylized discourse of the classical Russian novel does not leave room for sexuality. This is why a scene charged with sexual expectation ruptures the discourse, paving the way for non-discursive violence—which simultaneously resonates with the hidden logic of traditionalist discourse. The fact that Roman’s rampage is triggered by two

15 For more on *zaum’* in Sorokin’s oeuvre see: Maxim Marusenkov, 2012, *Absurdopediia russkoi zhizni Vladimira Sorokina: zaum’, grotesk i absurd*, St Petersburg, pp. 71–140.

16 “Russian Grail, the spirit transformed into flesh.” Aleksandr Genis, 2003, “Strashnyi son,” *Radio svoboda*, <http://archive.svoboda.org/programs/OTB/2003/OBT.081703.asp>, accessed 3 January 2013.

strange wedding gifts—an axe and a wooden bell—only supports this interpretation, since both objects are sexually suggestive, and simultaneously marked as exotic, as somehow “truly Russian.” In short, due to the discursive block set by the Russian classical tradition, Roman (and the novel) “make love” to the Russian people with an axe, instead of having sex with Tat’iana. There is also nothing illogical in the fact that Roman hangs the entrails of his victims on the icons—these are his sacred gifts of love.

I believe that the same logic also structures the foundation of *Day of the Oprichnik*, with its stylized, quasi-archaic language, and scenes of orgiastic violence that range from the oprichniks’ assaults on the “enemies of the state” to their collective dream or *bylina* (a traditional Russian epic poem) about a seven-headed dragon burning and raping all of Russia’s global foes with its purging fire.

The reverse version of carnalization

An interesting example of indirect carnalization may be found in *Tridtsataia liubov’ Mariny* (*Marina’s Thirtieth Love*, 1982–84), where the corporeal ceases to function as an extension of the discursive, and acquires its own agency. On the one hand, Marina’s bisexuality serves as the most tangible and glorious manifestation of the free-minded atmosphere of the 1970s dissident circle. On the other hand, this same sexuality undermines the dissident discourse in the novel. Marina’s first orgasm with a man, which she experiences with the Solzhenitsyn lookalike *partorg*, not only drastically changes her life but also transforms the novel’s narrative. After this memorable night, Marina gets rid of all her samizdat and becomes a Socialist Realist poster-girl; similarly, at this point the novel’s narrative abandons a style balanced between Henry Miller and urban women’s prose, and rapidly transforms into an endless *Pravda* article. Obviously, *Marina’s Thirtieth Love* not only manifests this discursive logic on a bodily level, but also introduces an opposite process: the transformation of the corporeal into the discursive, i.e., the *disembodiment* of

the corporeal (the female orgasm with a patriarchal figure functioning as a discursive switch).¹⁷

The transformation of the corporeal into the discursive also operates as the main driving force of the plot in *Ice Trilogy*. The violent crushing of a victim's chest in order to extract the voice of his or her heart is a recurring element of the plot. This violence transforms a "meat machine" into a Brother or Sister of Light (or a *pneumaticist* to adopt the Gnostic terminology), imbued with a spiritual love that only concerns other Brothers/Sisters of Light, and excludes everyone else. This violence is emphatically cleansed of any corporeality and depicted as a purely spiritual phenomenon. No wonder Aleksandr Genis defined this novel as "a fairy tale for Gnostics."¹⁸ Gnostic mythology does indeed animate *Ice Trilogy*: one may detect its traces in the conceptualization of the material world as evil and the human body as the prison of the spirit; in the metaphor of Light for "alien" but true life (in Sorokin's novel, it is delivered from outer space in the form of the Tunguska meteorite); in the motif of a true spiritual name; in the quest of chosen "pneumaticists" who are capable of the Gnosis, etc. The dictatorship of this mythology in *Ice Trilogy* is quite evident, and therefore scenes of violence (customary for an avid reader of Sorokin) do not transcend discourse and become corporeal, but on the contrary serve as ritualistic illustrations of the Gnostic mythological narrative. Thus, corporeal elements in these novels are transformed into discursive ones; their vital (wild) energy is "disciplined" by the strict hierarchy of the Gnostic myth.

This is just one revealing example of disembodiment in the *Ice Trilogy*. Another can be seen in the change Sorokin's narrative undergoes from its first part (*Led/Ice*, 2002), which is the most corporeal, to its last part (23,000, 2005), which is the most "spiritual," yet equally lifeless and stereotypical. Elsewhere, I have argued that although his intentions were quite different, in *Ice Trilogy* Sorokin creates a totalitarian meta-discourse, a

17 Sorokin speaks about this novel as a turning point in his evolution: Вообще этот роман во многом стал для меня поворотным: я завершил свой соц-артистский период и вышел к проблеме телесности в русской литературе. "This novel was in many ways a turning point for me: I ended my Sots-Art period and began exploring the problem of corporeality in Russian literature." Sorokin, 1998, p. 17.

18 Aleksandr Genis, 2004, "Novyi roman Vladimira Sorokina 'Put' Bro'," interview by D. Volchek, *Radio Svoboda*, <http://www.svoboda.org/ll/cult/0904/ll.091804-1.asp>, accessed 3 January 2013.

universal formula for a brutal cleansing in pursuit of a transcendent goal.¹⁹ However, the Brothers of Light fail to overcome the violence reigning in the world of “meat machines”; they only manage to elevate it to a new level. Their violence is justified by a sacral discourse, thus becoming “mythic violence”—which, according to Walter Benjamin, serves as tangible proof of the existence of the gods.²⁰ Sorokin's 23,000 Brothers of Light are precisely the gods whose existence is confirmed by mythic violence. These new gods, according to Sorokin's trilogy, may mercilessly kill those others who are unable to undergo the transition from “meat machines” to Brothers/Sisters of Light. It is telling that, for the sake of their sacral goals, the Brothers of Light do not hesitate to use both the GULAG and Nazi death camps.

Placed next to *Marina's Thirtieth Love*, *Ice Trilogy* is hardly anomalous; instead it confirms a recurring pattern, of which Sorokin may not be entirely cognizant. As these texts demonstrate, a totalitarian discourse may emerge on any basis (see, for instance, ecological totalitarianism in the play *Shchi (Cabbage Soup)*, 1995–96), but always functions via the transformation of the corporeal into the spiritual, or the discursive—that is, via disembodiment. Thus, in Sorokin's world totalitarianism is reinterpreted as the dictatorship of the “spiritual” (i.e. the bodiless) and impersonal over discrete human bodies and concrete lives: as the dictatorship of the discursive over the non-discursive. This formula derives not from his ideology but from his immanent aesthetic logic, and therefore may sometimes conflict with his rationally designed conceptions, as happens in *Ice Trilogy*.

Sorokin in the 2000s: multi-directional transitions

The juxtaposition of Sorokin's works before and after *Blue Lard* (1999) has become a cliché among Russian and Western critics alike.²¹ The predominant point of view is that Sorokin “mellowed” in the 2000s, became more reader-oriented, and therefore eliminated the most extreme aspects of his style, such as gore, violence and obscenities. However, from the

19 See Mark Lipovetskii, 2008, *Paralogii: transformatsii (post)modernistskogo diskursa v russkoi kul'ture 1920–2000-kh godov*, Moscow, pp. 625–37.

20 See Walter Benjamin, 1978, “Critique of Violence,” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. W. Benjamin, transl. E. Jephcott, New York, pp. 277–300; especially pp. 294–95.

21 See about this in Uffelmann, 2006, pp. 106–108.

perspective of carnalization, Sorokin's works of the 2000s differ from his earlier, conceptualist writings not in the sheer "quantity" of transgressive gestures, but rather in the vector of these transgressions. If, in his early period, each of Sorokin's works is dominated by a particular type of transgressive transformation—usually from the level of discourse to the level of the body—then, in the later period, the carnalization of the discursive and the disembodiment of the corporeal *coexist*. The most illuminating examples of this can be found in *Day of the Oprichnik*, *Sugar Kremlin*, *The Snowstorm*, and the recent collection *Monoklon* (2010). In *Day of the Oprichnik*, neo-traditionalist ideological discourse manifests itself in scenes of gang rape, group hallucinogenic trips, group copulation (the so-called *gusenitsa* (caterpillar) of oprichniks), and finally, mutual torture by drilling each other's feet—thus presenting a full spectrum of carnalizations. It becomes clear that the internal "unity" of the oprichnina is achieved through the very means that establish its fearsome public authority. Although seemingly reserved only for outsiders, violent sex and sadistic violence also serve as the cement solidifying the "unity" of the brotherhood. At the same time, the gang rape of the boyarin's wife is immediately dematerialized when Komiaga preaches about the oprichnina's moral purity: *Пойми, дурак, мы же охранная стая. Должны ум держать в холоде, а сердце в чистоте.*²² The ensuing scene of the oprichnina prayer in the Cathedral of the Dormition presents neo-traditionalist discourse in a nutshell. Furthermore, the rape and arson depicted during the oprichnina's pogrom of the boyarin's household reappear in the next chapter as the constitutive parts of Urusov's crime. What was initially coded as a legitimate ritual to underline the oprichnina's unity transforms into a violent crime when it becomes a private act situated outside the realm of power and its discursive justifications—a clear case of ideological disembodiment.

These multi-directional transitions are typical of Sorokin in the 2000s; such switches from carnalization to disembodiment occur even in the short texts (see, for instance, "Volny" ("Waves," 2005), "Gubernator" ("The Governor") and "Tridtsat' pervoe" ("The Thirty-First"), the latter two from *Monoklon*). These tropes, however, never generate a discursive

22 "Just understand, you idiot, we're guards. We have to keep our minds cold and our hearts pure." Vladimir Sorokin, 2006, *Den' oprichnika*, Moscow, p. 21; Eng. Vladimir Sorokin, 2011, *Day of the Oprichnik*, transl. J. Gambrell, New York, p. 35.

collapse, as in Sorokin's earlier works. The reason for this lies in the nature of the discourses that the writer deals with taps. As recognizable authoritative discourses were losing their power in the post-Soviet period, Sorokin turned his focus to *synthetic quasi-authoritative discourses*. The functioning of these discourses is based on the co-existence of two mutually contradictory operations. While establishing their symbolic power (through the disembodiment of the corporeal), these discourses simultaneously, and shamelessly, deconstruct their own authority (through the carnalization of ideological constructs in self-gratifying sexualized violence). One may argue that these synthetic discourses constitute a new *cynical language of power*, reflected by the writer. Notably, from this point of view, Sorokin hardly distinguishes between neo-traditionalist state ideology and its opponents ("The Thirty-First" (*Monoklon*), as well as "Underground" and "Kocherga" ("The Poker") (*Sugar Kremlin*)).

Furthermore, Sorokin's later works employ several recurring motifs that serve as metaphors for endless mutual transformations of the corporeal into the spiritual, and vice versa. Just a few examples:

Food is arguably the most obvious example of the *peaceful* fusion of cultural conventions and discourses with physiological needs and reactions. Beginning with *The Norm* and *Roman/A Novel*, Sorokin explores food imagery, presenting it via the process of the *literal* digestion of culture (which is eventually transformed into faeces). However, in later works, he increasingly emphasizes the transgressive potential of food. Food's transgressive capacity first emerges in the sadistic *Pel'meni* (*Dumplings*, 1986), followed by the cannibalistic "Eucharist" depicted in *Mesiats v Dakhau* (*A Month in Dachau*, 1990), which in turn leads to *Blue Lard* with its fondue of human meat, and the collection of stories *Pir* (*The Feast*, 2000), which opens with "Nast'ia"—a Buninesque story about the cannibalistic "initiation" of a 16-year-old girl. Additionally, the 1995–96 play *Cabbage Soup* explores the transformation of culinary arts into crime in a regime of ecological totalitarianism. The motif of food as transgression reappears in Sorokin's script for Il'ia Khrzhanovskii's film 4 (*Four*, 2004), especially in its climax, which features the revolting hags' feast. Food functions as a field of militant competition (rather than collaboration) between the discursive and the non-discursive, with the focus shifting from the former to the latter.

Drugs: In a tongue-and-cheek polemic against the dominant perception, since *Blue Lard* Sorokin has inscribed drugs into a totalitarian, rather than a counter-cultural, context. In his alternative version of Stalinism, drugs are legal and the image of Stalin holding a syringe is iconic. The same is true of *Day of the Oprichnik*, where certain drugs are not only legal but serve as the foundation of the nation's internal comfort because they offer an illusion of freedom. To use Sorokin's auto-commentary:

До революции кокаин продавался в аптеках. В новом российском государстве это компенсация за железный занавес. Мы вас лишаем Запада, этого райского плода, но мы вам даем зато вот это. Можете получить удовольствие. Вам не нужен никакой Запад: идите в аптеку, покупайте кокаин. Будете счастливы. А на Западе как раз это запрещено.²³

In Sorokin's logic, as material substances capable of generating psychological and even spiritual effects, drugs match the disembodiment of the corporeal, and are therefore essentially totalitarian. Yet, the opposite movement towards carnalization is apparent here as well. For instance, in one of his interviews Sorokin directly compares literature with drugs: Я занимаюсь литературой, потому что с детства был подсажен на этот наркотик. Я литературный наркоман, как и вы, но я еще умею изготавливать эти наркотики, что не каждый может.²⁴ Tellingly, the blue fat, which is presented in *Blue Lard* as the material quintessence of Russian literature, also appears as a super-drug, which Stalin eventually injects into his brain. One may also find a similar analogy between literature and drugs in *Dostoevsky-Trip* and *The Snowstorm* (little pyramids). Much like literature, drugs allow Sorokin's characters to transcend

23 "Before the revolution, cocaine was sold in [Russian] pharmacies. In the new Russian state, this is a compensation for the iron curtain. We are depriving you of the West, that forbidden fruit, but we are giving you this instead. You don't need any West, just go to a pharmacy and buy some cocaine. You will be happy. And in the West, all this is forbidden." Vladimir Sorokin, 2008, "V Mavzolee dolzhen lezhat' Ivan Groznyi," interview by L. Novikova, *Kommersant*, 22 August 2008, p. 14.

24 "I am engaged in literature, because since my childhood I have been addicted to this drug. I am a literary addict, like you, but I can also produce these drugs, which not everyone can do." Vladimir Sorokin, 2004, "Ia literaturnyi narkoman, no ia eshche umeiu izgotovliat' eti narkotiki," interview by N. Kochetkova, *Izvestiia*, 14 September, pp. 11–12; p. 11.

their physicality, either emerging as the representation of the cultural/social Other (as in *The Snowstorm*), or merging with the collective other (*Day of the Oprichnik*, *Sugar Kremlin*). As such, even if drugs are legal they still accommodate transgression and, therefore, the dangers of freedom. The latter motif is most obvious in Sorokin's script for the film *The Target*. There, a huge astrophysical aggregate, a relic of the Soviet era, produces an euphoric intoxication, which, in turn, generates a sense of unlimited freedom in the characters. This freedom is invariably (self-)destructive. Symptomatically, in Sorokin's recent texts drug-induced trips also create a new collective body, yet this body appears to be necessarily *monstrous*—as exemplified by the seven-headed dragon in *Day of the Oprichnik*, or by the pack of man-eating bears in "Underground."

Ice/Snow: According to Sorokin: Снег—наше богатство, как и нефть, и газ. То, что делает Россию Россией в большей степени, чем нефть и газ. Снег мистифицирует жизнь, он, так сказать, скрывает стыд земли.²⁵ This motif appears for the first time in *Four Stout Hearts*, where the protagonists' ultimate goal is the transformation of their hearts into frozen cubes marked as dice, which a mechanical gambler tosses onto a field covered with the (also frozen) "liquid mother." Far from being merely a morbid metaphor of fate, this scene can be interpreted as the manifestation of (heroic or transcendent) discourse compressed into material form. The frozen matter thus serves as the substance of the transcendent, a liminal zone between discursive and corporeal realities. The latter interpretation correlates well with *Ice Trilogy*, where the cosmic ice induces metaphysical transfigurations and serves as a tool for the selection of the Brothers of Light. In *The Snowstorm*, the snowstorm operates as a metaphor for the resistance of the non-discursive (i.e., the natural, transcendent, or violent elements) to the discourse of modernization. The final symbolic rape of the modernizer, Dr Garin, by a gigantic snowman vividly demonstrates the meaning of this motif in the novel. Another example worth mentioning in this context includes the monologue of the therapist Mark in *Moscow*, where he compares the Russian collective unconscious with *pel'meni* (dumplings): frozen under the Soviet regime,

25 "Snow is our wealth, like oil and gas. This, more than oil and gas, is what makes Russia Russia. Snow mystifies life, it conceals the earth's shame, so to speak." Vladimir Sorokin, 2008, "Ja pochuvstvoval, chto seichas poidu i prsto-naprostu ub'iu ego," interview by I. Rudik, *Konkurent*, <http://www.konkurent-krsk.ru/index.php?id=1259>, accessed 3 January 2013.

and melted into a formless mess in the post-Soviet era. Similarly, in his comments on *The Target*, Sorokin mentions that this script/film depicts Russia in a slightly frozen state (подмороженная Россия).²⁶ Thus, the ice/snow motif functions as a metaphor for a discourse that has obtained a (murderous) materiality, but has not yet become a living body—suspended and sustained in a liminal zone.

A certain parallel to the ice/snow motif can be detected in the motif of clones, which first appears in *Blue Lard*, then in *Deti Rozentalia* (*Rosenthal's Children*, 2005) and finally in *Four*. Clones also manifest a discourse whose carnalization is incomplete. Due to their liminal status, clones in *Blue Lard* and *Rosenthal's Children* are able to produce sacred objects as the natural by-product of their brief existence. In *Four*, however, a mob of clones that have reached old age appears as a Boschian carnival, where corporeality is equally disconnected from justifying discourses and non-discursive vitality alike, thus presenting a nightmarish image of living death.

An attempt at interpretation

The radicalism of Sorokin's master-trope is much more profound than his critics think. His work does not just deflate everything lofty and authoritarian to the level of obscenity, gore, and gibberish. He aims at the very core of the logocentric paradigm.

The ritualistic context surrounding Sorokin's carnalizations of the discursive highlights the connection between these tropes and the foundational Christian dictum: the incarnation of the Word (*Logos*) in Jesus Christ's flesh, his mortal body representing the very essence of the process of cosmic redemption:

In the beginning was the Word (*Logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life (*zoë*), and the life was the light (*phōs*) of all people. The light shines in the darkness,

26 See Vladimir Sorokin, 2011, "Podmorozhennaia Rossiia: Vladimir Sorokin o fil'me Aleksandra Zel'dovicha 'Mishen'," interview by V. Nuriev, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 5 July, <http://www.srkn.ru/interview/podmorozhennaya-rossiya.html>, accessed 3 January 2013.

and the darkness did not overcome it. [...] And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1–5; 14)

When situated in this context, Sorokin's carnalizations of discourse deeply resonate with a deconstructive reading of the dictum "the Word became flesh." In his article "How the Spirit (Almost) Became Flesh: Gospel of John," Henry Staten, a well-known expert in deconstruction and author of books such as *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (1984), *Nietzsche's Voice* (1990) and *Eros in Mourning: Homer to Lacan* (1995), argues for the following logic constitutive to Johannine thought:

— "If the Word becomes flesh, this must not imply any degradation of the Word but only the exaltation of the flesh."²⁷

— To resolve this problem, Christian theology, beginning from Paul, "asserts the more subtle distinction between *two kinds of soma*, based on a distinction between the associated life principles, one mortal and one immortal (*psykhe* and *pneuma*) [...] the pneumatic *sarx* is glorious, powerful and immortal where the psychic *sarx* is the opposite [...]"²⁸;

— "For what Christianity calls the corruption of the flesh is nothing but an effervescence of new life at a nonhuman level, and when the individual life ruptures, it does so because organic life has passed through it as its momentary instrument on the way to new configurations."²⁹

Does this logic apply to Sorokin? Yes, it does, but only to one of his works—namely, *Ice Trilogy*. The "corruption of flesh" and "an effervescence of new life at a nonhuman level" are manifested here through the

27 Henry Staten, 1993, "How the Spirit (Almost) Became Flesh: Gospel of John," *Representations* 41, pp. 34–57; p. 35.

28 Staten, 1993, pp. 36–37.

29 Staten, 1993, p. 43. As noted by Dirk Uffelmann, this reading is contrary to the Russian tradition of kenotism, where carnal self-humiliation is interpreted as a human path to Christ, as a way of becoming similar to Christ. See Dirk Uffelmann, 2010, *Der erniedrigte Christus—Metaphern und Metonymien in der russischen Kultur und Literatur*, Cologne et al. See also: G.P. Fedotov, 2001, *Sobranie sochinenii v 12-i tomakh*, vol. 10, *Russkaia religioznost'* 1, Moscow, pp. 95–125.

destruction of ordinary humans, defined as “meat machines,” for the sake of their (possible) elevation to a new state of being that is represented by the Brothers of Light. In them, the psychic *sárx*, or *sōma*, of “meat machines” is brought to the state of a glorious, powerful and immortal pneumatic *sárx*. Those transfigured from *psychic* to *pneumatic* become living and breathing parts of the “heart language,” or the ultimately authentic, non-distorting, cosmic discourse. Simply put, the Logos.³⁰

Ice Trilogy is the only work of Sorokin’s that, much in agreement with Johannine theology as interpreted by Staten, fulfils “the need to evade or contain the *nausea* aroused by the reduction of the living *sōma* to the generic and purifying *sárx*.”³¹ All of his other texts try to achieve the opposite goal: they do not substitute *sárx* for *sōma*, nor *sōma* for *sárx*. As was demonstrated, in Sorokin’s carnalizations discourse is incarnated not in *sárx*, but in *sōma*: neither glorious nor purified, but puking, defecating, copulating and violated. If in Christianity, miracles (“signs”) appear as the “disruptions of natural process, which must, however, be understood not as mere literal events but as vehicles of a transcendental significance,”³² Sorokin replaces miracles with acts of brutal (mechanical) violence, rape, cannibalism, coprophagia and nonsensical language. These acts disrupt the “natural” course of discourse; they do not “evade or contain the nausea,” but rather they intentionally provoke it. As

30 The characterization mentioned above, of *Ice Trilogy* as a Neo-Gnostic text, does not contradict this interpretation. As PHEME PERKINS points out, despite the differences between Gnosticism and Orthodox Christianity as represented by John’s Gospel, the Johannine prologue and Gnostic texts also display profound similarities. “Direct dependence of either on the other is excluded. But the personified Word of divine revelation that both traditions have appropriated may point to a common background. [...] the evangelist historicizes a mythic presentation of the coming of divine revelation by identifying the Word with Jesus of Nazareth. Both apocalyptic and gnostic dualism make the presence of divine revelation in the material world problematic. Interpreters should not read the Stoic or Platonic imagery of the Word as a rational ordering of the cosmos into the Fourth Gospel. Gnostic mythologizing provides a monistic account for the origins of the lower world in which the manifestations of the revealer play a crucial role. Read against that background, the Johannine prologue speaks of the manifold appearances of revelation in the cosmos, not singular moments of creation and incarnation.” PHEME PERKINS, 1993, *Gnosticism and the New Testament*, Minneapolis, Min., pp. 120–21.

31 Staten, 1993, p. 43.

32 Staten, 1993, p. 38.

Sorokin argues: Рвотный рефлекс—это не значит плохо, это очищает организм.³³

In other words, while mirroring the fundamental Johannine dictum, Sorokin *implements it literally*, disregarding the distinction between the psychic and pneumatic. Through this travesty Sorokin transforms the corporeal into a radical critique of the Logos. From this perspective, it is possible to argue that Sorokin's method represents a *kynical* reaction to the cynical manipulations performed by authoritative discourses in Soviet and post-Soviet (or, generally speaking, modern and postmodern) culture. In *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft (Critique of Cynical Reason)*, Peter Sloterdijk finds the foundations of *kynicism* in Diogenes' philosophizing through obscene body gestures. Sloterdijk interprets cynicism as the only viable alternative to modern cynicism: "Cynicism can only be stemmed by cynicism, not by morality. Only a joyful cynicism of ends is never tempted to forget that life has nothing to lose except itself."³⁴ Sloterdijk also argues that the kynic possesses a specific sort of shamelessness. In a given context, shamelessness implies the rejection of moral taboos surrounding bodily functions, the equation of intellectual and corporeal activities—in short, "existence in resistance, in laughter, in refusal, in the appeal to the whole of nature and a full life."³⁵

All these characteristics perfectly fit Sorokin's carnalizations: in fact, his artistic strategy may be regarded as one of the most vivid and philosophically provocative examples of Neo-Kynicism in contemporary Russian culture. If Diogenes mocked theoretical doctrines with his "philosophic pantomimes," Sorokin subverts the power of authoritative discourses and ideologies through what may be defined as *corporeal charades*, reminiscent of one of the most popular intelligentsia games of the 1980s–2000s. Similar to French and American versions of this game, in the Russian version, players had to use silent re-enactment to convey phrases from popular films and songs, book and movie titles, ideological idiomatics, etc. to his or her team. These charades not only lay bare the mechanisms of discourse, they also strip discourses of their symbolic

33 "A puking reflex is not necessarily bad. It purifies the organism." Sorokin & Semeno-va, 2002, p. 4.

34 Peter Sloterdijk, 1987, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, transl. M. Eldred, Minneapolis, Min., p. 194.

35 Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 218.

status. When performed on the level of body gestures, discourse ceases to seem invisible and unnoticeably interiorized, and comes to be seen as a body—that is, as a radical Other. As Jean-Luc Nancy argues: “A body is always ob-jected from the outside, to ‘me’ or to someone else. Bodies are first and always other—just as others are first and always bodies [...] *An other is a body* because only *a body is an other* [...] *other* is not even the right word, just *body* [...]”³⁶ Thus, the carnalization of discourse leads to the defamiliarization of and, eventually, alienation from discourse’s hypnotic power. In other words, fleshing out discourse becomes the scandalous act of *flashing*.

However, this kynical mirroring of the core logocentric principle in Sorokin’s prose produces an unexpected “side-effect.” According to Staten, in John’s hyperliteral discourse, Christ’s ascent is inseparable from his descent, his journey towards death; and the Eucharist is not much different from cannibalism: “[...] unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’ (John 6: 53). [...] Bread is meat, water is wine, and wine is blood, and there is no horror in all this if it is understood as the fleshly passion of the Logos and the agapetic action of spirit.”³⁷

From this perspective, it is possible to argue that, while Sorokin’s carnalizations deconstruct the discursive pretence of manifesting the universal and eternal truth, they do not entirely release his own narrative from transcendent meaning. In other words, while deconstructing logocentrism by kynical mirroring, Sorokin also reproduces certain aspects of the sacramental logic manifested in the incarnation of the Logos into flesh.

Most likely, in Sorokin’s works, the sacred, much as in Julia Kristeva’s *Pouvoirs de l’horreur* (*Powers of Horror*, 1980), is inseparable from abjection, caused by the externalization of what is typically hidden within the body (of *sōma*, in other words):

For abjection, when all is said and done, is the other facet of religious, moral, and ideological codes... Such codes are abjection’s purification and repression. But the return of their repressed make up our ‘apoca-

36 Jean-Luc Nancy, 2008, *Corpus*, transl. R.A. Rand, Fordham, pp. 29, 31. Emphasis in the original.

37 Staten, 1993, p. 50.

lypse,' and that is why we cannot escape the dramatic convulsions of religious crises.³⁸

I would like to suggest that Sorokin produces the sacred in the form of a *discursive apocalypse*, achieved through the revelation of discourse's abject (somatic) side. What we defined as Sorokin's master-trope, carnalization, is the central principle of this discursive apocalypse.

As for the meaning of Sorokin's sacred, it can be defined as "the manifestation of the divinity of flesh, of universal lifedeath"³⁹—or *zoé*, bare life—to once again employ Staten's characterization of John's gospel. In Sorokin's oeuvre, this is always the obverse of the discursive apocalypse, the potentiality, or the non-discursive undercurrent of his texts, rather than their rationally articulated "message." The presence of this undercurrent in Sorokin's works reveals a utopian aspiration akin to that of radical feminism, as, for example, in Luce Irigaray's words: "We have to renew the whole of language [...] To reintroduce the values of desire, pain, joy, the body. Living values. Not discourses of mastery, which are in a way dead discourse, a dead grid imposed upon the living."⁴⁰

Quoting Sloterdijk's characterization of Diogenes once again, Sorokin's philosophy of *zoé* does not go "primarily through the head; he experiences the world as neither tragic nor absurd. There is not the slightest trace of melancholy around him... His weapon is not so much analysis as laughter..."⁴¹ This is why Sorokin failed in *Ice Trilogy*: he attempted to construct a sombre mythic discourse around the principally non-discursive sacred of bare life.

Sorokin's other texts, however, exhibit positive, albeit tangential, manifestations of the non-discursive theme of the lifedeath, or bare life. For instance, in the finale of *Ochered'* (*The Queue*, 1983), the celebration of sexuality displaces the abstract and indefinable "transcendental signified" of the queue (and the entire narrative). Other examples include the rapture and eroticism of the characters' self-destruction in *Four Stout*

38 Julia Kristeva, 1982, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, transl. L. Roudiez, New York, p. 209.

39 Staten, 1993, p. 50.

40 As quoted in Anne-Claire Mulder, 2006, *Divine Flesh, Embodied Word: Incarnation as a Hermeneutical Key to a Feminist Theologian's Reading of Luce Irigaray's Work*, Amsterdam, p. 94.

41 Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 160.

Hearts; the infinity of metamorphoses triggered by the blue fat in *Blue Lard* (notably, the novel ends with the mention of Easter); the fierce carnivalesque luxury of feasting scenes—from *Roman/A Novel* to *Day of the Oprichnik*; the wedding with two brides and one groom at the end of *Moscow*; and the pregnancy of Komiaga's mistress—the only news that he cannot recall at the end of his long day. It is possible to assert that all the events in the film *Four* bear an apocalyptic meaning triggered by the death of Zoia—*zoé*—one of the four sister-clones (a parallel to the four riders of the Apocalypse?). From this perspective, it is possible to explain even Sorokin's own anger against his former peers and friends—as expressed in the infamous fragment of *Day of the Oprichnik* where Komiaga listens to Western radio stations.⁴² Sorokin's imaginary oprichniks (and actual neo-traditionalist ideology) seem to possess a much greater affinity for *zoé* as the horrifying and exciting sensation of bare life than his (former?) peers, with their conceptualist abstractions and poststructuralist obscurities.

Yet, most importantly, Sorokin's drive towards *zoé* manifests itself through his master-trope—the carnalization of the discursive, which, as I have tried to demonstrate, methodically forces discourse to overcome itself in an attempt to reach the non-discursive dimension. In this dimension, the distinction between the abject and the sacred, the corporeal and the transcendental, disappears. Sorokin's carnalizations thus correspond to the effect of the bare life of politics, as described by Giorgio Agamben: “Once their fundamental referent becomes bare life, traditional political distinctions (such as those between Right and Left, liberalism and totalitarianism, private and public) lose their clarity and intelligibility and enter into a zone of indistinction.”⁴³

Sorokin's ever-present drive towards *zoé* fills his corporeal charades with excessive performative power. Dmitrii Prigov used to say that he staged discourses as a theatre director manipulates actors. Sorokin does the same, but he also saturates these rhetorical figures with bare life, thereby transforming carnalizations into self-sufficient performances.

42 Sorokin, 2006, *Den' oprichnika*, pp. 78–81.

43 Giorgio Agamben, 1995, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, transl. D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford, Cal., p. 122. Agamben adds: “The ex-communist ruling classes' unexpected fall into the most extreme racism (as in the Serbian program of ‘ethnic cleansing’) and the rebirth of new forms of fascism in Europe also have their roots here.” Agamben, 1995, p. 122.

The meaning of these performances is paradoxical: while operating through discursive means, the writer nevertheless creates the illusion of transcending discourse, if only for a while, into a non-discursive state of bare life or *zoé*. As a result, the reader, absorbed by Sorokin's text, effectively finds himself or herself in the state of the *homo sacer* who stays within bare life and personalizes it—be it as the humiliated victim of the state of exception, or as the oprichnik whose power stems from this very exception. In this respect, Sorokin's performances of discursivity resonate with Agamben's notion that modern society “does not abolish sacred life but rather shatters it and disseminates it into every individual body, making it into what is at stake in political conflict.”⁴⁴

44 Agamben, 1995, p. 124.