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"Poems of Little Consequence"[1]

Editors' Introduction

Yakov (Yan) Abramovich Satunovsky was born in 1913 into a Jewish family in Ekaterinoslav (later Soviet Dnepropetrovsk and now the Ukrainian city of Dnipro), in the Russian Empire's Pale of Settlement. His early childhood coincided with the post-1917 Civil War (particularly protracted in Ukraine, with multiple warring political factions) and the relatively liberal 1920s. He studied in Moscow in the early 1930s, acquiring some familiarity with the Constructivist-dominated poetry scene at the time, before returning to Dnepropetrovsk, finishing university, getting married, and working for a local newspaper. Satunovsky's service in the Red Army began soon after he finished his studies, with the 1940 Polish campaign (during the period of German-Soviet collaboration); he went on to fight the Germans in 1941–1945, serving as an officer and, after being wounded, as a war correspondent. After the war, Satunovsky's family had to leave Dnepropetrovsk, where their home had been destroyed; they settled in Elektrostal′ outside of Moscow, where Satunovsky worked for the rest of his life as a chemical engineer. He would subsequently go back to Dnepropetrovsk a few times to visit. Through his acquaintances in the semi-official literary scene, Satunovsky worked occasionally as a freelance literary critic and children's book author. His poems "for grown-ups" were almost completely unpublished (even in samizdat and tamizdat) in his lifetime.

Satunovsky's biographical record is brief and fragmentary. As he writes in his own laconic "40 years of poems: A short autobiography": "Besides what's in the poems there's almost nothing to write".[2] Aside from a few pub-

1 Satunovskii 2012: 543. Translation by Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko for: Yan Satunovsky, *Prosthesis Factory,* ed. and trans. Morse & Redko (World Poetry Books, forthcoming 2027).

2 «Кроме того, что есть в стихах, писать почти что нечего» [4]. – Translation by Morse & Redko.

lications in sam- and tamizdat during his lifetime, Satunovsky's work began to be published only in the early post-Soviet period, nearly a decade after his death in 1982. This volume includes previously unpublished materials from Satunovsky's archive, curated by Ivan Akhmet′ev; Akhmet′ev also edited the fullest edition of Satunovsky's work, which contains more than 1300 poems, written between 1938 and 1982 (see Satunovskii 2012).[3] But even the thick and relatively definitive 2012 edition does not include everything, and the poems, though neatly ordered and, for the most part, scrupulously numbered, themselves constitute a very fragmentary record. Satunovsky's practice of writing them down on notecards and often in "prose" (without clear line breaks) adds to the confusion.

By way of introduction, we can identify Satunovsky as a lesser-known major Russian-language poet of the twentieth century. For reasons perhaps both political and aesthetic, Satunovsky seems to have maintained an image of insistent ordinariness: with a mixture of affection and puzzlement, his more bohemian contemporaries in and around the Lianozovo unofficial art scene describe a typical Soviet engineer in a beige coat and sensible shoes (in Eduard Limonov's account, "an older bald guy, kinda simple-looking, with an accountant's moustache, carrying a shopping bag"),[4] a family man with two daughters. Neither in the poems nor in life was Satunovsky engaged in myth-making or the cultivation of an image, unless "typical Soviet engineer" can be perceived as a faintly exaggerated mask intended to ensure self-preservation. Satunovsky's poetic practice – which in its frequency and regularity often recalls a diary – might likewise suggest that he has "nothing to hide". Meanwhile, this apparently uninterrupted recording of experience reveals something still more fragmentary: unresolved mysteries, great chasms of the unspoken, things passed over in silence.

In keeping with his position as a humble Soviet everyman, Satunovsky's poetry takes everyday speech as both its material and its instrument. His best known "calling card" is a late one-line poem from 1976: «Главное иметь нахальство знать, что это стихи» – in a rather wordier prose rendition, "The

3 For a more detailed history of Satunovsky's publications, see Akhmet′ev's contribution to this volume.

4 Cf.: «Сапгир привел с собой какого-то лысого дядьку простоватого вида, с бухгалтерскими усиками, в руке у дядьки была авоська. Познакомься — поэт Ян Сатуновский» (Limonov 1980).

most important thing is to have the chutzpah to know that this is poetry" [399].[5] Vsevolod Nekrasov, a fellow admirer of the poetic possibilities of seemingly unpoetic, prosaic and simple language, said of Satunovsky: "I can't think of anyone else as capable of 'catching themselves at poetry'".[6] Of course, just as Satunovsky is no ordinary diarist, neither Nekrasov nor Satunovsky is just "catching" snippets of speech at random out of the grim and sooty air of mid-century Soviet reality. Everyday speech becomes both the impetus and the foundation for a surprisingly complex and layered poetic system. The insistence on the everyday and the apparently random reflects a value system entirely embedded in overlapping Soviet contexts while wryly registering political, societal and spiritual dissent.

This volume begins by mapping some of these contexts while moving toward a reading of Satunovsky on his own terms.[7] Because he was almost unpublished during the Soviet period, Satunovsky's work has had to wait longer to draw attention from readers and scholars. He has appeared as an occasional side note in scholarship on the post-war unofficial Lianozovo poets; on war and frontline poetry; on Jewish Soviet poets; on children's authors. The articles here turn the spotlight on Satunovsky, asking: how does reading Satunovsky's work change our ideas about Soviet poetry of World War II (Barskova)? Jewish poetry in Russian after the Holocaust (Grinberg)? To what extent does Satunovsky coincide with the concerns and poetic moves of Lianozovo poets like Nekrasov, or the "barracks poetry" of Igor′ Kholin and Evgeny Kropivnitsky (Davydov)? What does reading Satunovsky in the context of Constructivism reveal about Constructivism (Kukulin), or about children's literature and Soviet literary scholarship (Pavlovets, Morse), or about Soviet media readership during the Thaw and Stagnation periods (Lipovetsky)?

Rather than analyzing Satunovsky's work as the sum of all these contexts, the articles likewise read Satunovsky in a way that mobilizes questions about the workings of poetry per se. What kind of poetics do we encounter here? However laconic, Satunovsky's programmatic statements about poetry invite comparison with other "poetological" maxims (Oborin); their laconicism in

5 Translation by Morse & Redko. See Ilja Kukuj's article for an extended discussion of this monostich.

6 «Не знаю, кто ещё так умеет ловить себя на поэзии» (Zhuravleva/Nekrasov 1996: 304).

7 The impetus for this volume comes from a conference held at Dartmouth College in May 2024, "The Gall to Call This Poetry: Yan Satunovsky." See Sabsai/Yakovenko 2025.

turn encourages a formalist consideration of the "minimal conditions" needed for poetry (Kukuj). Satunovsky's consistent practices and persistent areas of interest draw serious attention to questions of temporality and biopolitics in poetry (Golburt), documentary poetics (Lipovetsky), multilingualism (Morse), and even religious transcendence (Glazova).

It's no accident that Satunovsky's work began drawing more concentrated scholarly and popular attention after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the subsequent waves of disruption, displacement and increasing state violence around the world. Here is a poet who writes with disarming directness about the sordid filth and criminality of war; about problems of cultural, linguistic and national identity; about the contamination of intimate language and the private sphere with the official; about the inescapable loop of traumatic memory and the impossibility of changing one's circumstances. Satunovsky is a poet for our time, just as he was a poet of his time; we hope the articles in this volume illuminate a poet both enriched by his contexts and transcending them.

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