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Yan Satunovsky and the Genre of “Definition of Poetry”

Abstract: The article examines the genre of “definition of poetry” in the poetic oeuvre of Yan Satunovsky (1913–1982). Analyzing Satunovsky’s poems that define or characterize poetry, it traces his engagement with questions of poetics and his continued dialogue with the Russian poetic tradition, including such authors as Boris Pasternak, Georgy Obolduev, and especially Boris Slutsky, one of the few officially recognized contemporary poets whose work Satunovsky admired. Satunovsky’s definitions of poetry engage with broad questions about the nature, purpose, and possibilities of poetry itself – with some key ideas summarized in his famous monostich, “The most important thing is to have the audacity to know that this is poetry”. They also reflect both his avant-garde heritage and his position as an unofficial poet. The analysis reveals how Satunovsky’s definitions of poetry often combine elements of that legacy with a distinctively ethics-inflected approach to poetic material.

Keywords: poetry, poetics, Lianozovo school, Boris Slutsky, Georgy Obolduev

From audacity to poverty: a scatter of definitions

Like many other poets, Yan Satunovsky often reflected in his poems on his craft, its philosophical and ethical implications. Perhaps the ethical dimension was the most important for him. During his lifetime, Satunovsky was an unpublished poet (except children’s books), which sometimes comes out as bitterness in his works. Since his poetry was a continuation of Russian avant-garde poetics, he found it necessary to compare his self-perception as a poet with those recorded by the avant-garde poets of the past, including Mayakovsky, Pasternak, and the circle of Constructivists – despite not enjoying even a fraction of their recognition. At the same time, he remained in dialogue with his contemporaries whom he knew personally or at least admired as a

reader. The result of these dialogues and reflections was a significant broadening of the “definition of poetry” – a type of poem that can be said to constitute a separate genre in the Russian tradition (Oborin 2015).

An anthology of Russian metapoetic statements, published in the 2000s (Shtain et al. 2002–2006), comprises four large volumes – and, of course, does not encompass this phenomenon in its entirety: one glaring omission is the works of Satunovsky, although fellow Lianozovo poets Evgeny Kropivnitsky and Genrikh Saghir are represented. In various literary systems, the definition of poetry constitutes an aesthetic creed that typically corresponds not only to the author’s own axiology but also to their position in that literary system: by saying that poetry is one thing and not another (“a suburb, not a chorus”, to take an example from Pasternak)¹, poets assert their stance within the literary landscape and offer their perspective on the work of their fellow poets.

As Stephanie Sandler writes, the Russian tradition, especially in the twentieth century, “elevates poems about poetry making; it potentially orients poetry, poets, and readers toward the past” (Sandler 2024: 21–22). However, in the twentieth century the definitions of poetry themselves were often not as elevated, both semantically and stylistically, as had been the case in previous centuries, e.g. in the poetry of Gavriil Derzhavin or Nikolai Nekrasov. David Burliuk, a Russophone Ukrainian poet who was one of the founders of Russian Futurism, calls poetry a “worn-out floozy” (“istrepannaia devka”; D. Burliuk / N. Burliuk 2002: 170). For Anna Akhmatova, famously, poetry grows from trash; for Vladimir Mayakovsky, it’s “radium mining” (“dobycha radiia”; Maiakovskii 1955–1961: VII, 121) – something that could be taken as an honorable and even sacred work if not for the poet’s obvious irony. Meanwhile, in his article “Kak delat’ stikhi?” (“How to make poetry?”), one of the most significant Russian examples of *ars poetica* in the twentieth century, Mayakovsky bluntly states: “Poëziia – proizvodstvo” (“Poetry is production”; *ibid.*: XIII, 116). For Satunovsky, with his Constructivist background, the idea of poetry as industry is also important – but, as this article will demonstrate, it is prone to subversion: for example, he can compare poetry to a prosthetics factory (see below). It is worth recalling that the flip side of the industrial life, emphasizing its emaciated anti-lyricism, is the subject of Satunovsky’s fellow Lianozovo poet Igor’ Kholin’s most famous cycle “Zhiteli baraka” (“Barrack Dwellers”). These

1 «Ты пригород, а не припев» («Поэзия», 1922; Pasternak 1977: 230).

examples suggest that while modernism reconsiders poetry’s traditional status as a sublime, sacred occupation, the very scope of poetry’s definitions expands along with its creative possibilities. While this shift might seem to desacralize poetry, it could also be viewed as elevating the mundane – a trend that can be traced back to Pushkin’s poetry.

In his work on “definitions of poetry” in the 1990s–2010s, Aleksandr Zhitenev analyzes the work of such poets as D. A. Prigov, Mikhail Aizenberg, Maria Stepanova, and Evgenia Suslova, and demonstrates that today’s “definition of poetry” is associated precisely with the idea of crossing borders, transgression, moving away from normativity – understood in terms of formal limitations or in terms of the stereotypical lyrical attitude (Zhitenev 2022). It can be said that Yan Satunovsky was one of the poets who established this trend for the next generation. His 1976 monostich «Главное иметь нахальство знать, что это стихи» (“The most important thing is to have the audacity to know that this is poetry”; [399])² is an example of a radical break with normative poetics – something quite characteristic for the practice of the Lianozovo poets. The group persistently problematized its underground status and its juxtaposition to “official” poetry and poetics. Satunovsky was perhaps the most active in this regard. «Поэзия, её значение, её природа, суть – вот любимейшая тема для размышлений и исследований у Яна Сатуновского», writes Olga Lebedinskaia in her essay about the poet (Lebedinskaia 2013: 13).³

Among Satunovsky’s collected poems (Satunovsky 2012), we encounter several distinct cases of “definitions of poetry”. This article examines several of the most significant examples, beginning with the aforementioned famous single-line poem:

Главное иметь нахальство знать, что это стихи.

The most important thing is to have the audacity to know that this is poetry.⁴

2 In the recent translation by Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko, the poem goes, “The main thing is to have the chutzpah to know this is poetry”. For a detailed analysis of this monostich, see Kukuj’s article in this volume.

3 “Poetry – its meaning, nature, and essence – is Satunovsky’s favorite subject of reflection and inquiry”.

4 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. – L. O.

It was written in 1976, six years before Satunovsky's death. By that time, he had already written most of his oeuvre; thus, one is tempted to read this monostich as a kind of self-definition, a poet's creed. Quoting this poem in his book on the Russian monostich, Dmitrii Kuz'min describes the strong tension "between its obvious self-referential character – and equally obvious non-poetic nature, freedom from any metrical or sound organization, absence of any tropes, etc.: all this takes on the character of a negative device".⁵ However, in a subsequent short publication, Kuz'min would argue that a kind of implicit, loose trochaic rhythm can still be discerned in Satunovsky's monostich (Kuz'min 2016b).

Satunovsky's aphoristic text is constructed so that the word *stikhi* ("poem" or "poetry"), standing seemingly in a highlighted position (it is at the end of the poem and looks like the purpose of its creation), is overshadowed by at least three words, each of which has its own self-referential property. *Glavnoe* ("the most important thing") serves as the subject of the statement. *Nakhal'stvo* ("audacity", or "chutpah") is a word which throughout the history of Russian poetry changed its connotations several times: from the purely negative ones in the Neoclassical era to more positive ones in the Romantic era, then to the ironic one in the mid-nineteenth century, and again pejorative in the twentieth century; it is worth noting that the rhyme to *nakhal'stvo* in the overwhelming majority of cases is *nachal'stvo*, "authorities", and one can assume that with his *nakhal'stvo*, Satunovsky refutes the authoritative settings of poetic normativity. Finally, there is the word *znat'* ("to know") – according to Kuz'min, this verb presupposes the truthfulness of the assertion in advance, reinforcing the poet's confidence: "these are poems".⁶

But what is "this" (*это*)? Of course, it's not just about the monostich – a minimalistic form, the belonging of which to poetry has been debated more than once. Perhaps "this" is not only the poetry of Satunovsky or those close to him. Perhaps "this" can be anything – and in that case, this poetic creed can be read as the advice of an author who has successfully overcome the boundaries of poetic possibilities: poetry is what you know to be poetry. The entire poem, then, can be read as a justification for such a technique as ready-made (and

5 «[...] особенно сильное напряжение возникает между его очевидным автореферентным характером — и столь же очевидной „непоэтичностью“, свободой от какой-либо метрической и звуковой организации, отсутствием каких-либо тропов и т. д.: все это приобретает характер минус-приема» (Kuz'min 2016a: 229).

6 Kuz'min references the linguist Elena Paducheva (Kuz'min 2016a: 229).

"ready-made" phrases are often incorporated into Lianozovites' poetry). This orientation recalls the metapoetic ideas of LEF and the Constructivists; at the same time, it leads us toward the theory of Conceptualist art. In much Conceptualist art, the act of declaring something art enacts its actually becoming art; or the idea behind the art (including the idea of art-making itself) is the driving force behind the art's viability, provoking thought processes that are, effectively, art: "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. [...] The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (LeWitt 1999: 13). A possible parallel to Satunovsky's poem is another aphorism, by Marshall McLuhan: "Art is anything you can get away with" (McLuhan/Fiore 2001: 132–136). "In my opinion, this is simply a definition of conceptualism, after which no special theories (and conceptualists are very fond of them) are needed", Vladislav Kulakov comments on Satunovsky's monostich.⁷ And in a 1966 poem, Satunovsky himself seems to anticipate McLuhan: «Поэзия – это то, что я себе позволяю» ("Poetry is what I allow myself"; [198]).⁸ He immediately adds, suggesting that restrictions in poetry are no less important – or at least they are something to bear with: «Что я позволяю себе, / и чего / не доз-во-ляю» ("What I allow myself / and what / I dis-al-low"; *ibid.*). Although in one of his poems Satunovsky states that "Everything is being told into verse" («Всё выговаривается в стих»; [56]), there are limits to this "everything": Satunovsky is not an "encyclopedic" poet. In one of his most important metapoetic texts that can be read as a credo and an answer to the criticism from his acquaintances, he writes:

Мне говорят:
какая бедность словаря!
Да, бедность, бедность;
низость, гнилость баракров;
серость, сырость смертная;

7 «По-моему, это просто определение концептуализма, после которого никаких особых теорий (а на них концептуалисты очень горазды) уже и не требуется» (Kulakov 2009).

8 Satunovsky's statement can be read in various ways, with different sociological and metapoetic implications: "Poetry is whatever I allow myself"; "Poetry is the only thing I can allow myself"; "Poetry is what I (as opposed to everyone else) allow myself". I would like to thank Luba Golburt for this observation.

и вечный страх: а ну, как...

да, бедность, так.

[72]

They tell me:

what poverty of lexicon!

Yes, poverty, poverty;

misery, rot of the barracks;

grayness,

deathly damp;

and constant fear: well, so..

yeah, poverty, that's right.

(Transl. by Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko)⁹

This poem deserves a close reading. The first thing that grabs our attention is the construction in the beginning: “They tell me” or “I am told”. Who, exactly, reprimands Satunovsky for the “poverty” of his vocabulary? As mentioned above, Satunovsky’s poems were not published (tamizdat publications would happen only near the end of his life), and the only aesthetic evaluation he could get was from the few people whom he showed his poetry (e.g., in 1945 he met Ilya Ehrenburg, who approved of the poems; Burkov 2009: 4). The poem under consideration was presumably written in the 1950s¹⁰, before Satunovsky’s first contacts with the Lianozovo group (which didn’t exist yet) and long after his pre-war acquaintance with the Constructivist and IFLI¹¹ circles (some of these poets were killed in combat). Of course, he could have shown his poetry to friends – but Katia Kompaneets, the daughter of one of Satunovsky’s friends, states in her memoirs that his poetry was unknown to

9 The translations by Morse and Redko, henceforth quoted in this article, will be published in the forthcoming collection of Satunovsky’s poems *Prosthetics Factory*.

10 It is published among the 1950s poems in Satunovsky 2012; the editor of the volume, Ivan Akhmet’ev, presumes that it was written no later than mid-50s. I would like to thank Akhmet’ev for this clarification.

11 IFLI (Moscow Institute for Philosophy, Literature, and History) was a short-lived but influential humanities college that separated from the Moscow State University in 1931 and merged back into it ten years later. IFLI was the *alma mater* for dozens of Soviet poets; some of them fought and were killed in the World War II.

the circle of his youth (Kompaneets 2009: 2). It is, therefore, more likely that he implies an imaginary figure of a collective critic. There is a kind of "subaltern" attitude to his poetry of the 1950–1960s: he feels the need to justify his method (the unapologetic idea about the "audacity to know that this is poetry" would crystalize later). As we will see, this attitude can be traced back to his earliest literary connections. Meanwhile, the "constant fear" that Satunovsky references is biographical: the poet's brother, Piotr, recalled that in the late 1970s Satunovsky specifically asked the Lianozovo painter Oskar Rabin, who had by then emigrated to France, to halt the publication of his book: «[...] он боялся; боялся провокаций, погрома, боялся за своих взрослых дочерей [...]» (Burkov 2009: 9–10).¹² Vladislav Kulakov cites the juxtaposition of fear and protest as Satunovsky's poetic position (Kulakov 1999: 30). The word "fear" (*strakh*) can be found in yet another Satunovsky "definition of poetry": «[...] стих – / Это смех со страха [...]» ([234]; "[...] a poem / is laughter induced by fear [...]").

Satunovsky's justification of his method of "poverty" should be placed in a broader context (see Vitte 2021). As Grigory Starikovskiy argues, "the dominant state of Satunovsky's poetry is contemplation of the 'surrounding environment', however terrible it may be".¹³ We might compare this with a poem by Satunovsky's fellow Lianozovo poet Evgenii Kropivnitskii: «Да, певец я нищеты / И голодных и холодных: / Умирающих старух, / Обездоленных, убогих [...]» (Kropivnitskii 2004: 504).¹⁴

Satunovsky in the 1960s: Dialogue with the First Avant-Garde

In the 1960s, during Satunovsky's creative peak associated with his close contacts with the Lianozovo group, he produced the greatest number of "definitions of poetry"; he even wrote a specific poetic cycle titled "Piat' stikhotvoreniĭ o poezii" ("Five Poems About Poetry"; [485–489]), where he, with a grain of ironic nostalgia, recalls the times when the "elders", the Futurists and

12 "[...] he was afraid; afraid of provocations, of a pogrom, he was afraid for his grown-up daughters [...]"

13 «Основное состояние поэзии Сатуновского — созерцание «окружающей среды», какой бы страшной она ни была» (Starikovskii 2013).

14 "Yes, I am a poet of poverty / And the hungry, and the freezing: / Of dying old women, / Helpless, wretched [...]"

Constructivists, now virtually extinct, “tried to tailor poetry to the growth / of labor productivity”. Satunovsky counters this rationalism with a more contemporary poetic credo:

Цели поэзии неисповедимы.
 Форма — свободна.
 Содержание: ничто не запрещено.
 Противопоказано одно —
 жажда поражать,
 как цель поэзии. [...]
 [487]

The purposes of poetry are unfathomable.
 Its form, free.
 Its content: nothing is forbidden.
 Only one thing is contraindicated –
 the urge to astonish
 as poetry's aim. [...]

This “urge to astonish” also extends to *poëtichnost'* (“a poetic quality”) – perceived as a stylistic quality and external effect. Such a “poetic quality” inherits its theme from conventionally understood lyricism – a subject of special antipathy for Satunovsky: «Один поэт, довольно симпатичный, / Сказал: / — Стихи должны быть антипоэтичны»; [542].¹⁵ Satunovsky is likely referring to the officially published authors of the 1960s who, in his eyes, aligned with the official and benign discourse of “pure lyrics”, “flyweights” (e.g. «Вот мелкая козявка — Кушнер. / Среди чухонцевых он Пушкин»; [255]¹⁶). In another mocking dedication to Aleksandr Kushner (1974), Satunovsky would blame him for disguising the official heaviness with lightness (in contrast to the unofficial heaviness disguised as lightness – the “real” heaviness that is genuine, hard-earned, elevated into a method).

Still, Satunovsky's own “definitions of poetry” during this period range from the conditionally romantic, reminiscent of his Constructivist youth,

15 “One poet, quite likable, / Said: / Poetry must be anti-poetic”.

16 “Here is a petty bug, Kushner, / a Pushkin among the chukhontsevs”.

to the more stoic, laconic, and paradoxical. An example of the former can be found in the 1961 poem "Svoim potainym fonarikom..." ("With your secret flashlight"; [115]), describing the process of writing: «А сами стихи не пишутся. / Их пишут, как землю пашут».¹⁷ The poet here speaks of the effort of writing – which is curiously linked to the clandestine, almost thief-like nature of this activity:

Своим потайным фонариком
иной раз — всю ночь — до рассвета,
знай, шарить,
светя,
по словарикам,
по закромам,
по сусекам [...]

With your secret flashlight,
sometimes – all night – until dawn,
you go rummaging,
lighting up
lexicons,
grain stores,
the bottom of the barrel [...]

(*Transl. by Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko*)

This might be read as a parallel to Osip Mandelstam's idea of poetry being like "stolen air" ("vorovannyi vozdukh"; Mandel'shtam 1994: 171) – a quote possibly known to Satunovsky; at the same time, it is yet another indication of the "poverty of vocabulary": Satunovsky references the fairy tale *Kolobok*, where an elderly peasant couple bake the round bun (*kolobok*) out of the last edible scraps they could find in their "nooks and crannies".

A more modernist "definition of poetry", possibly hinting at Mayakovsky, can be found in the poem "Khochetsia napisat' stikhotvorenie..." ("I'd like to write a poem..."; [147]).

17 "Poems don't write themselves. / They get written, as the earth gets tilled".

Хочется написать стихотворение
не по замыслам старого времени,
а
попикассистей,
посовременнее,

хочется
в ямб или хорей
вставить
вечернее огнеоконие,
хочется
лабануть
симфамфонию
в сопровождении фонарей,

но,
уважаемая публика,
поэзия — каверзная музыка;
носится в воздухе,
а в руки не даётся.

I'd like to write a poem
not following the old-time ideas,
but
more Picasso-esque,
more contemporary,

I'd like
to insert
an evening's window-fire
into iambs or trochees,
I'd like
to jam
a sym-pham-phony
accompanied by streetlights,

but,
 dear audience,
 poetry is treacherous music;
 it hovers in the air,
 but you can't quite grasp it.

Satunovsky likely recalls Mayakovsky's "Iubileinoe" ("The Anniversary", 1924), a satirical commemoration of Pushkin: «Но поэзия – пресволоочнейшая штуковина: / существует – и ни в зуб ногой» (Maiakovskii 1955–1961: VI, 49).¹⁸ Unlike Mayakovsky, who ironically diminishes the status of his craft, Satunovsky, after summarizing the history of Russian poetry from *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* to Futurism in just a few lines, acknowledges the elusive nature of poetry. The speaker in his poems sometimes scolds himself for writing poems that are created "without the slightest effort" ("bez maleishei zatraty sil"; [278]) and sarcastically congratulates poetry scholars who assume that Tyutchev could have "miscalculated" (*obschitat'sia*) when creating a poem (Ibid.: 296). This elusiveness, paradoxically, gives rise to the special tension of poetic labor, inaccessible to the reader:

Читатель — чего он хочет?

Он хочет,
 насколько я выяснил,

по — э — зии,
 то есть неясных мыслей

и звуков kloкочущих,
 в ухе щекочущих
 [228]

18 "But poetry is such a scoundrelish thing: it exists – and you can't make heads nor tails of it".

The reader – what does he want?

He wants,
as far as I could understand,

по – е – try,
i.e., some vague thoughts

and some sounds, gurgling,
ear-tickling

The pursuit of “vague thoughts” may turn out to be so exhausting that in a poem written on the same day (August 17, 1967), Satunovsky, while elaborating on the “leftist” (Futurist/Proletkult/Constructivist) idea of poetry as industry, immediately travesties it:

[...] Но поэзия — это ведь
не консервный завод?
Нет, поэзия — это
протезный завод! [...]
[228]

[...] But look, poetry
is hardly a canning factory?
No, poetry is
a prosthetics factory! [...]
(*Transl. by Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko*)

There may be several explanations as to why poetry is described by Satunovsky as a “prosthetics factory”. One idea that seems apt is that, instead of producing “semi-finished”, “convenience”, “mass-market” goods, poetry rather makes something that is gruesome, yet, in the end, can save a life; or, rather, something that can help a person return to a relatively fulfilling life while indicating permanent trauma. For the generation of World War II veterans in which Satunovsky belonged prosthetics were a constant part of reality.

Overall, it looks like in the 1960s, Satunovsky was composing his "definitions of poetry" along a certain narrative line. After the "prosthetics factory", there appears a "med-tent" from the poet's war recollections, reintroducing the motifs of disability and injury experiences that are, in a way, more authentic than the elusive and inadequate poetry (here we once again encounter the poet's "stoic" side):

Поэзия гиблое дело,
дерьмо, и — какое мне дело?

В санбате, на прелой соломе
мы думали думу о доме.
[246]

A dead-end deal, that's poetry,
a pile of shit, and – what's it to me?

In the med-tent, on musty straw,
we thought our thoughts of home.
(*Transl. by Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko*)

In this grim context, Satunovsky's notion of "chopped prose" ("rublenaia proza") voiced in a 1968 poem can be seen in a new light (the poet uses this term for free verse – once again with reference to Mayakovsky; [663]). Finally, the coda of this macabre line of reasoning can be found in a 1969 poem titled "Poëziia" ("Poetry") that seems to be written from the perspective of poetry itself:

Я вам говорю: чудес не бывает.
Меня
ветрянкой называют.
А я не ветрянка,
а Черная Оспа.
Когда вы поймете, будет поздно.
[280]

I say to you: there's no such thing as miracles.

They

call me chickenpox.

I'm not chickenpox.

I'm Smallpox.

When you figure it out, it'll be too late.

(Transl. by Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko)

Comparing poetry to illness, Satunovsky suggests that it is not a light, trivial illness, something “caught from the wind” (a notion felt in the Russian name of chickenpox, literally “wind-pox”), but the dreadful smallpox, which leaves its marks forever. As seen earlier, in the poverty-of-vocabulary poem, Satunovsky in his definitions of poetry often constructs someone else’s viewpoint with which to argue. We can’t say for certain who exactly called poetry “chickenpox”, but Satunovsky seems to have needed this claim in order to amplify the idea of poetry’s subversive power. Perhaps here he engages in a dialogue with the classical “definitions of poetry” coined by Boris Pasternak – beginning with his long poem *Vysokaia bolezni'* (*A Lofty Illness*) dedicated to the work of poetry and describing it in detail, and continuing in: «О, знал бы я, что так бывает, / [...] / Что строчки с кровью — убивают, / Нахлынут горлом и убьют!» (Pasternak 1977: 303)¹⁹ The fatal and accidental nature of poetry was important for Satunovsky. In one of his later poems, he quotes Mykola Vinhranovskyi, a Ukrainian poet whom he translated: «Поэзия — это неожиданно открытая Правда» [412].²⁰

Contemporaries and acquaintances: Slutsky and Obolduev

A comparison with Satunovsky’s contemporaries sheds further light on his understanding of poetry. The first poet to be drawn to such comparison is Boris Slutsky, a fellow war veteran, an author who, like Satunovsky, was deeply influenced by Constructivism, and one of the few officially recognized Soviet poets whom Satunovsky admired. Although “we know nothing about the per-

19 “If I only knew that so it happens, / [...] / That the lines with blood can kill, / They will flow down your throat and kill you!”

20 “Poetry is the accidentally discovered Truth”.

sonal relationship between Slutsky and Satunovsky",²¹ the connection between their poetics has been noted many times.²² Satunovsky mentioned Slutsky repeatedly in his poems, always in a highly praiseful manner, addressing him as a comrade-in-arms:

Борис Абрамович Слуцкий,
товарищ эксполитрук,
случился такой случай,
что мне без Вас, как без рук
(случился — такой — случай!)

Что мне не Фет,
не Тютчев,
не Бунин-Сологуб
и не Случевский,
а
Слуцкий,
Ваш
стих,
раздражающий слух,
понадобился вдруг.

Сознательное стихотворение,
снаряженное как на войну,
понадобится в наше время
не мне одному.

[118]

Boris Abramovich Slutsky,
comrade ex-politruk [political officer],

21 «[...] о личных отношениях Слуцкого и Сатуновского ничего не известно» (Korchagin 2021: 564).

22 A comprehensive study on this connection that has some biographical context has been published by Kirill Korchagin (Korchagin 2021). Important ideas about the parallels between Slutsky and Satunovsky, particularly in their treatment of their Jewish identities, can be found in Marat Grinberg's book on Slutsky (Grinberg 2011: 355–377).

such a case has taken place –
without you, I'm helpless²³,
(a case – has taken place!).

Not Fet,
not Tyutchev,
not Bunin or Sologub,
not Sluchevsky –
it was
Slutsky,
your poetry,
grating to the ear,
that suddenly became what I needed.

A conscious poem,
equipped as if for war,
in our time will be needed
not by me alone.

Characterizing this connection in the afterword to the collection of Satunovsky's poems *Rublenaia proza*, Gennadii Aigi writes:

Слущкий оголяет слово, лишает его поэтизмов. Сатуновский же, на мой взгляд, гораздо многограннее. У него есть та же прямота и оголенность, что и у Слущкого, но также он идет и с другой, «хлебниковско-крученовской» стороны, он наслаждается природной данностью русского слова, наслаждается тем, что это слово само по себе прекрасно, что это Богом данная человеку игра.

(Aigi 1994: 308)

Slutsky strips the word bare, deprives it of its poeticism. Satunovsky, in my opinion, is much more multifaceted. He has the same directness and nakedness as Slutsky. But he also is coming from another lineage, a “Khlebnikov-Kruchy-

23 Literally, “as if without hands” – note the continuation of the “prosthetics” motif.

onykh" one. He finds delight in the natural gifts of the Russian word, enjoying the fact that this word itself is beautiful, that it is a game granted to humanity by God.

Aigi's description confirms the idea of Satunovsky's allegiance to the avant-garde principles that underlie Constructivist poetry – and allows us to distinguish between Slutsky's and Satunovsky's poetics. Both poets use military metaphors to speak about poetry. Satunovsky's word "snariazhennoe" ("equipped for war") refers to arms, to the sharpening of rhetoric, to the use of makeshift items as weapons. Similar metaphors are constant in Slutsky's "definitions of poetry": «Только ямбы выдержат бомбы» (Slutsky 1991: II, 101)²⁴; «<Стих> доведу до кондиций, / чтоб стал лихим и стальным, / чтоб то, что мне годится, / годилось всем остальным» (Slutsky 1990: 288);²⁵ «Похожее в прозе на анекдот, / Пройдя сквозь хорей и ямб, / Напоминает взорванный дот / В соцветьи воронок и ям» (Slutsky 1991: I, 349)²⁶. This quality made Anna Akhmatova call Slutsky's poems "made of tin" ("zhestianye"; Ronen 2013: 339) – possibly referring to their discordant, "metallic" sound. Yet the trochees and iambs that Slutsky refers to are standard in poetry. Satunovsky would go much further, as in his 1965 poem:

По пулемету!
Гранатой!
Взрыватель осколочный!
Заряд нормальный!
Вот он,
первоисточник моих стихов.
[517]

At the machine gun!
With a grenade!

24 "Only the iambs can withstand the bombs".

25 "I'll refine it [the verse] to the perfect condition, / make it sharp and steely, / so that what suits me / will suit everybody else".

26 "What in prose would resemble a joke, / will, after passing through trochee and iamb, / look like a bunker blown apart / amidst the flowering of craters and pits".

Fragmentation fuse!
 Standard ammo!
 This is
 the primary source of my poetry.

Satunovsky here is not just speaking about his military experience: he is showing how ready-made syntagms turn into poetic lines. In another 1960s poem, he writes: «Поэзия, / опрозаивайся!» (“Poetry, / prose yourself!”; [159]).

There is an intriguing twist in the story of Slutsky’s “tin allegiance”. Around the time when Satunovsky wrote his poetic address to Slutsky, Slutsky himself offered the following “definition of poetry”:

Поэзия — не мертвый столб.
 Поэзия — живое древо,
 А кроме того — чистый стол,
 А кроме того — окна слева.
 Чтоб слева падал белый свет
 И серый, темный, вечеровый, —
 Закаты, полдень и рассвет,
 Когда, смятен и очарован,
 Я древо чудное ращу,
 И кроной небу угрожаю,
 И скудную свою прашу
 Далеким камнем заряжаю.
 (Slutsky 1991: I, 480)

Poetry is not a lifeless post.
 Poetry is a living tree,
 Besides, it’s a clean table,
 Besides, it’s windows at the left.
 So white light would fall from the left,
 Or gray light, dark light, evening light;
 Sunsets, noon, and sunrise,
 When, embarrassed and enchanted,
 I grow a wondrous tree,
 And I threat the sky with its crown,

And I load my meager sling
With a distant stone.

This poem looks very uncharacteristic for Slutsky, who previously would proudly claim that amidst the versatility of Russian poetry he was "simple as barley porridge" and "the one without chimes" («простой, как ячная каша, / [...] один, чтоб звону без»; *ibid.*: 503). Admiration for sunsets and sunrises, combined with exquisite enjambments, just doesn't fit the "tin" paradigm. For Satunovsky, admiring sunsets by way of defining poetry was almost impossible. In one of his early poems, he is openly skeptical about the luxury of a poet's own table, a poet's own window, a poet's own view of the sunset:

Так что же — стать советским Фетом
и наслаждаться светом, цветом неба?
Но, во-первых, человек
сейчас на это и не смотрит,
а смотрит в землю.
Во-вторых,
Фет, как-никак, был крепостник,
а я, я? — чем я обеспечен? Чем?
.....
[51]

So what – should I become a Soviet Fet
and take pleasure in sky's light and hue?
But, firstly, a man
doesn't look at all that now,
rather he looks at the ground.
And, secondly,
Fet, after all, was a serf-owner,
but what about me? What am I provided with? What?
.....

I've already mentioned Satunovsky's disdain toward his officially published contemporaries who exploited the tradition of "quiet lyrics" and "art for art's sake". For Satunovsky, just as for other Lianozovites (especially Vsevolod

Nekrasov), such polemics mixed ethical and metapoetic aspects. This does not mean that the association of nature with poetic sensation was taboo for Satunovsky or Nekrasov. In a number of poems – notably, in “Poliubil ia poslednee vremia...” (“Lately, I’ve grown to like...”, 1958; [90]) – Satunovsky explores this association. Characteristically, in such poems, he expresses his fondness for the motifs of grayness and dullness, where nature merges with the mundane communal atmosphere – consistent with the idea of “poverty of vocabulary”.

The “concrete” metapoetic ideas of both Slutsky and Satunovsky can be traced back to the poets of the Union of Approximately Equal (Soiuz priblizitel’no ravnykh: Ivan Aksenov, Georgy Obolduev, Ivan Pul’kin). Following the declarations of the Literary Center of the Constructivists, they called for a “local method” or the method of the “localized device” («[...] применение к образованию тропов — элементов речевого материала, образующего словесную среду субъекта изложения»; Korchagin 2021: 556).²⁷ Satunovsky was personally acquainted with Obolduev, perhaps the best-known member of the Union, and very possibly was influenced by his ideas. In Obolduev’s poems, we encounter “definitions of poetry” more than once. In his 1946 poem “Poèziia” (“Poetry”), Obolduev actually refuses to give a direct definition:

Не знаю я, что такое стихи,
Кому это надо, кому нужно,
Кому понадобятся — тихи,
Как взоры, как взгляды, —
Тихи, как очи ночи южной.
(Obolduev 2005: 65)

I don’t know what poetry is,
Who needs it, who requires it,
Who will make use of it, quiet,
As glances, as gazes,
Quiet as the eyes of a southern night.

As suggested by Galina Zykova (2020: 142–144), a direct response to this passage can be found in Satunovsky’s poem dedicated to Obolduev:

²⁷ “[...] the application of the elements of speech material that form the verbal environment of the subject to the construction of tropes”.

Я тоже думал,
что это стихи,
что это
ха-ха
да хи-хи,
а это
не хи,
и не ха,
и не хо,
и мне не до смеха,
и не до стихов,
и весь ваш Фет — пустяки
[52]

I also thought
that this was poetry,
that this was
ha ha
and hee hee,
but this
is not
hee,
not ha,
not ho,
and I'm not up to laughs
and not up to poems,
and all your Fet is nonsense.

In Obolduev's long cycle "Mysli do vetru" ("Thoughts on Wind"); the title is a pun on the Russian expression, meaning "to relieve oneself", "to take a leak"), written in the 1930s, some parts – especially the ones that employ quotations – already look almost like Satunovsky's poetry. In one of the fragments, he suggests the equation: "poetry = juxtaposition" ("poëziia = sopostavlen'e"; Obolduev 2005: 254). In the preceding fragment, he states:

Поэзия — ощущение возможности этого и того,
 Что птицы хлопьями просыпаны в сад,
 Что карта еле-еле, едва-едва, чуть-чуть,
 Всего в каких-нибудь несколько миллионов раз
 Увеличивает и уменьшает действительность.
 (Ibid.)

Poetry is the sense of the possibility of this and that,
 of birds spilled like flakes into the garden,
 of a map that, barely, ever so lightly, ever so slightly,
 magnifies and shrinks reality
 by just a few million times.

Obolduev's poem becomes a critical treatise of sorts, while partially remaining a commentary on everyday language, including the language of love. This is the point where the difference between Obolduev's and Satunovsky's approaches to "definitions of poetry" becomes visible. The motif of love is quite important for Obolduev's metapoetic texts; for example, the poetic and the amorous merge in his monumental poem *Ia videl (I Saw)*: «Поэзия, как акт / Любви и лени, / Даёт прознать, как так / Клонить колени [...]» (Ibid.: 451).²⁸ On the contrary, in Satunovsky's work, while love and poetry are also the key subjects, they never merge, never form a synthesis. While Satunovsky's love poems oscillate between self-irony and suffering, talking about poetry, in his opinion, requires different emotional qualities: seriousness, even harshness. Satunovsky felt very strongly that poetry could not be discussed in frivolous or romantic terms. Living in difficult conditions, being afraid of repressions, seeing the success of those authors whose impact he considered superficial, he held to this conviction which in his case was hard-won – and continued to write uncompromising poetry.

The comparison of "definitions of poetry" by Satunovsky and Obolduev thus points toward an important conclusion. Both poets engage in indirect

28 "Poetry, as an act / Of love and laze, / Lets you understand / What it feels like to bend the knee [...]"

dialogues with the same poets (the Constructivists and Pasternak²⁹). Both speak apophatically about the elusiveness and indefinability of poetry, yet at the same time they constantly attempt to grasp and define it. I would argue that Satunovsky went farther than either Obolduev or Slutsky by keeping a unique approach toward poetics: at once morally rigoristic – at least in relation to his “flyweight” peers – and formally innovative. By engaging in dialogue and polemics with his predecessors and contemporaries, Satunovsky created a space for himself as a theorist and practitioner of poetry, and there was considerable pride in the position that he occupied – a pride even more poignant if we recall the fate of Satunovsky’s texts during his lifetime, as well as the fear of the state and the constant perception of social animosity in the Soviet Union. These themes blend in Satunovsky’s poetry, imparting his meta-poetical texts with the qualities of ethical and political statements.

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29 Obolduev directly polemicalizes with Pasternak in *I Saw*, stating that he has “lost his theme” (“poterial temu”; Obolduev 2005: 254–255).

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