Ian Satunovskii: Identity and Biography, from the War to the Lyric

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Toward the end of his life, sometime in 1977–78, having collected and ordered a substantial corpus of his poems, Ian Satunovskii (1913–1982), one of the most striking "non-official" poets of the middle of the Soviet century, laconically surveyed his life and work: "Poems are my life. This is why I am copying them in chronological order."[1] The very title of another one-page life summary draws the same equivalence between poetry and biography: *40 let stikhov: Kratkaia avtobiografiia* (40 Years of Poems: A Short Autobiography, 1979). It is all the more remarkable, then, that this second text leaves the story of Satunovskii's poetic activity entirely beyond its confines—as something to which the hurried autobiographical sketch can only serve as preface; as something that exists as an alternative or complement to narrative. Lyrically brief yet also obviously reliant on the normative structures of official self-presentation and therefore excising from itself the lyric as the domain of the non-official, the narrative retells only Satunovskii's early life—a life that takes place amid the turbulent history of the twentieth century, particularly its wars. This summary hangs passively (the Russian fittingly omits personal pronouns) upon the scaffolding of public history. The text underscores war's power to shape a life and the very language in which life-writing can be performed around collective milestones, but, in this forceful and routinizing shaping, to leave certain domains beyond the bounds of biographical narrative:

> I was born [*rodilsia*] on the eve of World War I—in 1913. As a boy I lived through the Civil War—the partisans of Makhno, Shkuro, Petliura; finally, our own arrived—the Reds.

1. Ian Satunovskii, *Stikhi i proza k stikham* (Moscow, 2012), 4. All poems are cited with a poem number and page number from this volume. Satunovskii numbered and dated his poems, leading his readers to refer to his oeuvre as a poetic diary. Genrikh Sapgir, for example, describes Satunovskii's work as a "poet's diary, which would suddenly illumine from the chaos of the everyday, from the boredom of mundanity a certain something—an image, a worry, a sarcasm." Quoted from Piotr Satunovskii, *Posmertnaia slava*. ImWerden, 2009. PDF e-book, 22. All translations are collaborations of the author and Hank Miller whom the author thanks for his editorial and translation help. I am also grateful for their feedback to Polina Barskova, Nila Friedberg, Ainsley Morse, and the audiences at Dartmouth College, Sorbonne University, Reed College, and UC Berkeley.

Slavic Review 82, no. 3 (Fall 2023)
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doi: 10.1017/slr.2023.281

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2023.281 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> I studied [*uchilsia*] in the seven-year school, in the technical school, worked, then entered the Dnepropetrovsk State University, the department of Chemistry. Graduated, one might say, on the eve of World War II—in 1938.
>
> I began World War II as a platoon commander. And in 1942, after I was wounded (at the village of Bol′shie Vesniny) and treated at the Tula and Saratov hospitals, I was sent to the editorial office of the army paper, *The Patriot of the Motherland*. The gulches north of Stalingrad, the Kursk-Belgorod Arc, Ukraine, Poland, Dresden, Prague—these are the "stages of the grand path" of my 5th Guards Army.
>
> Victory. Our house was destroyed by bombs, had to relocate to Elektrostal′, near Moscow, where I was offered a place to live and work. Further there was nothing more—"I lived, worked, grew oldish" (Maiakovskii). "And life has passed, managed to flicker by, like the night to the knocking of a shabby carriage" (Pasternak).
>
> The author has already been on his old-age pension for many years. Here, for now, is the entire biography. Aside from what's in the poems, there is hardly anything to write about.[2]

This life story peters out together with the wars it enumerates. But this is also precisely where poetry is invoked, first in the ironically quoted lines by Vladimir Maiakovskii and Boris Pasternak (both declaring a collapse of biography), then in the suggestion that Satunovskii's own poetry might capture better the post-war everyday. "*Krome togo, chto est′ v stikhakh, pisat′ pochti chto nechego"* (Aside from what's in the poems, there is hardly anything to write about) is an unusual preface for the poetic work that follows, both an opening towards the poetry and a negation of life outside it.

How does Satunovskii's poetry intercede in the place of autobiography? In a sense, this is a question that can be asked of any lyric poet, certainly starting with the romantics. Important in Satunovskii's case is not so much a vaunted coherence of the subject where all his utterances point back to a powerful center, but the understanding that the languages of public autobiography and of poetry perform different work of life-writing, converging without corresponding to each other.

Just like any war, the Great Patriotic War—the central life-structuring and narrative-generating event of the Soviet experience—hardened identities, consolidating them around agonistically defined collectives, intensifying epochal consciousness, and insisting on amplified, often strident, discursive forms of representation and remembrance. While he acknowledges war experience as the source of his poetics, Satunovskii resists war's reductive ontologies. His deeply misaligned lyric subject both channels and withdraws himself from public discourse. Characterized by a powerful analytical voice and insistent on bearing witness, the poems also yield a lyric identity that is plural, fractured, and conflicted.[3] Even as it fully recognizes this plurality's traumatic origins, this brief essay proposes to recuperate it as a site of resistance to wartime and

2. Satunovskii, *Stikhi i proza*, 4.

3. Interpreting poem #407 with which my analysis begins, Oleg Burkov astutely characterizes this plurality as the "crisis of lyric identity." Burkov, "Ian Satunovskii sredi poetov lianozovskoi gruppy" (Undergrad Thesis, Novosibirsk State Pedogogical University, 2008), 44.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2023.281 Published online by Cambridge University Press

post-war rigidity of discursive and identitarian positions, as a site, that is, of purposeful conversion of war language into lyric language.

Written in 1965, "Po pulemetu!" (Aim for the machine gun!) can be read as a poetic antecedent and alternative to the above biographical sketch:

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

Я уже не помню,
кто из нас был одноногий,
а кто ранен в сумку сердца—
ты или я.
Одного из двух
расстреливали с "Фокке-Вульфа."
Другого
накрыл миномет. (#407, 517)

Aim for the machine gun!
With a grenade!
Shrapnel fuse!
Standard charge!
Here it is,
The primary source of my poetry.

I no longer remember
Which of us had one leg
And which was wounded in the heart sac—
You or I?
One of the two
Was shot at from a Focke-Wulf.
The other
Covered by mortar fire.

Exploding into existence through the fragmentary, unmediated language of the battlefield, the first stanza places war at the source of Satunovskii's writing. Yet, the opening commands are at the same time pre-poetic conative language of war experience and poetic language: minimalistic, paratactic, cadenced, acquired in the prewar years of Satunovskii's apprenticeship in constructivist circles. The first stanza thus presents a double life-story of the speaker in history and in poetry, accessing the world at the same time *in medias res* and retrospectively. It is all the more significant, then, that the remaining two stanzas, framed by the first as an explication of Satunovsky's poetic credo, foreground further epistemic uncertainties: over the reliability of memory (*Ia uzhe ne pomniu*) and over the stability of identity (*ty ili ia*, self or other). The moment of the wounding, the precise place where the constructivist *taktovik* staggers, is also the place where the subject is most notably an object of action, a silenced receptacle of violence in a poem about the origins of poetic speech.

With its explicit binary of speech and silence, "Im govoriat, a oni molchat" (Things are said to them, but they say nothing), likely written in the fall of 1942, is a stark early statement of this distinctive lyric subject position:

Им говорят, а они молчат.
—Ребята,—говорят.
—Герои,—говорят.
—Решительный час настал.
—Вперёд,—говорят,—назад.
Им говорят.

Ну, что ж ты молчишь?
Не молчи, мычи.
Вой, Иван.
Сейчас тебя на убой.
Я тоже, я с тобой.

Things are said to them, but they say nothing.
"Lads" is said.
"Heroes" is said.
"The time has come."
"Forward" is said, "back."
These things are said to them.

Why are you quiet?
Don't stay silent—moo.
Howl, Ivan.
Now you are driven to the slaughter.
I am too, I am with you.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2023.281 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Я рядом, кричу—вставай,	I am close, I scream “up,”
кричу—давай,	I scream “let’s go,”
кричу...	I scream...
Кому-то надо кричать. (#25, 21)	Somebody has to scream.

While perfectly idiomatic, the structure of the very first sentence deserves a pause: it grants a personal pronoun (*oni/im*) to an entity that is essentially passive while omitting the pronoun for the active speaker (*govoriat*). Neither the soldiers nor the commanders are fully subjects: the former consigned to voiceless passivity; the latter, to being implied by the predicates designating their speech. The two become visible only in their relationship to one another—a relationship of contrast, if not confrontation, but also at the same time of assumed solidarity against an enemy who in the poem remains unmentioned, a framing circumstance rather than a presence. This, then, is the poem’s first implicit line of argument or resistance: to shift the fundamental wartime division away from the one between enemy camps to one between the silent and the speaking; in this case, between those whose lives are about to be lost and those who rhetorically frame this loss as necessary sacrifice. Indeed, the more the occluded collective speaker paternalistically insists on the ‘heroism’ of their addressee, the starker this other, silent collective’s muteness, its death in speech.

The rest of the poem reenacts this tension as the lyric speaker’s inner conflict. And herein lies the second, most poignant line of Satunovskii’s resistance: to move—within a very short text—from a social vignette inward into a fractured interiority that does not recognize itself in the collective structures to which the subject belongs. The invocation to the soldier to raise his voice (*Voi, Ivan*), to acknowledge—if not reject—his impending slaughter implies the speaker’s solidarity with the rank and file. Yet this invocation is itself speech, and hence the very premise upon which the division it attempts to bridge is founded. The third stanza recognizes the speaker’s compromised position as one who is in command, however reluctantly so, and thus as one who rouses the soldiers (*vstavai...davai*) not primarily to speak up, but to charge into battle. First introduced as a figure of solidarity (*Ia tozhe, ia s toboi*), the speaker is both together with and apart from Ivan; himself cannon fodder and also, inescapably, an officer who frames the slaughter in language. Speech as resistance—imagined here only in its inarticulate potentiality (*Ne molchi, mychi*)—is subsumed by speech as both instrument and product of coercion (*Komu-to nado krichat'*). Even as he screams, the speaker remembers that at the heart of his action is an imposition, an imperative, and, in doing so, retreats from screaming, generating—by a mere ellipsis—a silence when the poem is at its loudest: *krichu...Komu-to nado krichat'*.

“Ia ikh ne ne nenavidel” (I did not not hate them) is, if anything, still more ambivalent about wartime identities and insistent on locating the subject outside language. The lyric ‘I’ comes forward only apophatically, always embedded in negative constructions that portray him as rejecting the reality of which he is part, but also as implicated in it and hesitant. How does this text’s resistance take shape?

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Я их не не ненавидел, пока я их не увидел.	I did not not hate them Until I saw them.
Они все были как душевно-больные, «Фриц, а, Фриц, хочешь пить?» — еле двигались и быстро что-то говорили, — «скажи Гитлер-капут».	They all were like men deranged. “Fritz, hey, Fritz, are you thirsty?” Barely were stirring, were saying something fast. “Say Hitler’s kaput.”
Не я, не я, а косомордый писарь — «Ну, Фриц, сказал Гитлер-капут?» — постоял за углом и вынес полную флягу —	Not I, Not I, but a crooked-faced scribbler— “Well, Fritz, did you say Hitler’s kaput?”— Stood a while around the corner and brought out a full flask
«на, враг, пей русский суп». Не я, не я, а ваши вшивые фрицы — «жид, а, жид, хочешь пить?» — облизываясь, долго глотали жёлтую влагу,	“Here, enemy, have some Russian soup.” Not I, not I, but your lousy Fritzes— “Yid, hey, yid, are you thirsty?” Licking their lips, long they gulped the yellow liquid
«жид, а жид, перекрестись». (#33, 27)	“Yid, hey, yid, cross yourself.”)

The opening line “Ia ikh ne ne nenavidel” chips away at its own strong affect, reaching extreme precision, both affective and temporal. But for all its precision, it verges on a stutter, with the three ‘*ne*’ impeding the linear progression of the sentence, marking a sentiment which language struggles to express.

The pronoun *oni*/*they* is likewise a site of hesitation. Scholars tend to read the pronoun as referring to German POWs. Marat Grinberg, for example, interprets the invocation of hatred here as a response to Ilʹia Erenburg’s call to “hate” the Germans.[4] Indeed, Erenburg’s “On Hatred”—an article that promoted this feeling (by contrast to “malice” (*zloba*) characteristic of the Nazis)—also takes up the problem of the “collective plural” and the scale at which to think about the enemy: “We hate each and every one of them for what they have done collectively. We hate the blond and the brunet Fritz because for us he is a petty Hitlerite (*gitleriaga*), guilty of children’s suffering, of defiling our soil, because for us he is a fascist.”[5] Significantly for our reading of Satunovskii’s poem, this passage in Erenburg is followed by a hypothetical scenario of the actions hatred might entail if a German is taken prisoner: “If a German soldier puts down his weapons and surrenders, we won’t touch him—he will live,” in order, Erenburg conjectures, for him to be reforged by the reformed German state of the future. While this and other of Erenburg’s essays and poems on hatred might in fact be the source of Satunovskii’s “not not hatred,” the enemy whom he encounters in the poem is not German; his identity also a kind of stutter or hesitation.

4. Marat Grinberg, “Poetry of Witness and Poetry of Commentary: Responses to the Holocaust in Russian Verse,” in Victoria Aarons and Phyllis Lassner, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Holocaust Literature and Culture* (Cham, Switzerland, 2020), 313. Grinberg offers a similar reading in his essay in this cluster.

5. Ilʹia Erenburg, “O nenavisti,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, No. 103 (May 5, 1942), 4.

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In a retrospective auto-commentary, Satunovskii remembers that "Ia ikh ne ne nenavidel" was written when "the Sov[iet] troops entered Hungary (these were Hungarians, or Hungarian Jews, about to be sent off to Siberia, as was said then)" (630). The slippage from Hungarians to Hungarian Jews is illuminating. The history of Hungary's participation in World War II and in particular of its status in 1944, in September of which year the poem appears to be set and written, is complicated by two circumstances in particular. A member of the Axis powers since 1940 and effectively obliterated as a military force following its participation in the Battles of Stalingrad and Voronezh in the winter of 1943, Hungary attempted to break away from Germany and entered into negotiations with the allies in early 1944; Germany responded by invading. Thus, when the Soviets entered the country in September of that year, this was the second of Hungary's defeats in rapid succession, making Hungarians into both perpetrators and doubly the recipients of aggression. The second crucial context is that, in the first years of the war, Hungary, despite its alliance with Germany, protected its sizable Jewish population against deportations, and it was only after the German invasion of March 1944 that the final solution was hastily applied to Hungarian Jewry. From May to July 1944, when these mass deportations took place, around 400,000 Hungarian Jews were killed in Auschwitz. Through the intercession of Prime Minister Miklós Horthy, these deportations were significantly slowed in late July 1944, with only a few ongoing when the Soviet troops arrived in September. It is thus that the prisoners the speaker observes could have been Jewish, and ironically on the verge of being deported after all. Auschwitz is here replaced with Siberia, but Satunovskii's commentary does not pass unnoticed the euphemistic character of these place names ("v Sibir′, kak govorili togda"). Another replacement that the poem discreetly records is that committed by the Soviet soldiers whose image of the enemy permits no gradations, with Fritz standing in as an Erenburgian metonym for all Germans, but also for Hungarians and Jews alike.

The poem records a non-dialogue between the incoherent prisoners, reduced to their gestures, and their jeering captors, represented through direct quotation. The captors, as we have established, misread the prisoners' identity. The syntax of the exchange is designed to produce further confusion: the direct speech of the second and fourth lines of each quatrain interrupts the speaker's inner monologue, in the course of which he transitions from attempting to distinguish himself from his fellow Soviet soldiers (he is not the one offering prisoners urine as soup) to the one setting himself apart from the prisoners (he is not forced to drink this revolting offering). Built upon a series of disarticulations between subjects rendered in these mutual interruptions between interior monologue and direct speech, the poem also relies on their intermingling. And it is the lyric speaker who is most profoundly and simultaneously merged with and alienated from both sides.

Even as he removes himself from participation in the poem's nauseating plot (*ne ia, ne ia*), the very insistence on this *not-I* lays bare the power of the collective identities that bind him. This troubled, apophatic subject-position is familiar to us from Isaak Babel′'s *Konarmiia* (Red Cavalry), a blueprint for Jewish wartime subjectivity. Satunovskii's war is an ever-disturbing spectrum

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from action and self-definition to noninvolvement and alienation. And the ethical position, in fact the resistance that his poems put up, inheres in the recognition not only of the brutalities of wartime identities, but also of the subject's unwilling, but nowhere unwitting (and nowhere, as at times in Babel′, giddy), encasement in them. Babel′'s lyrical form, furthermore, is here radically truncated: no wistful landscapes, no admiration for the characters, only the I (*not-I*) confronting and refusing language. Satunovskii's subject, this marginal surplus of *not-I*, asserts himself through what is not said and through the hesitation between different vectors of cruelty and different subject-positions.

We encounter another scenario of hesitation in Satunovskii's poems of post-war return to his native Dnepropetrovsk (present-day Dnipro). Identified by Evgeny Dobrenko as a recurrent motif in the poetry written in 1946–47, the plot of homecoming persists in Satunovskii's oeuvre well into the 1970s, precisely because it emplots and corresponds so powerfully to the fractured identities and temporalities already resident in his texts.[6] In "No razve myslili my" (But could we have thought, 1952), for example, the speaker reprises his life through different scenarios of displacement:

Но разве мыслили мы,	But could we have thought
чтобы Д н е п р о п е т р о в с к	that D n e p r o p e t r o v s k
стал пустым местом?	would become an empty place?
Ни знакомых, ни родственников,	No acquaintances, no relatives,
даже выпить не с кем,	no one to drink with,
не примазываться же к иным,	no sense glomming on to those others,
безусым,—	the beardless ones,—
я, должно быть, кажусь им	to them I must seem like
беженцем,	a refugee,
переселенцем,	a transplant,
выходцем с того света.	a visitor from the other world.
Здесь я прожил 27 лет.	I spent 27 years here.
Отсюда пошёл на немца. (#11, 69)	Left from here to go get the Germans.

Although lived before, during, and after the war, this life cannot be expressed as a continuum. Categorically non-epic, Satunovskii's modern Odysseus holds back the knowledge of his origins, never to be recognized in the vignettes of post-war and post-Holocaust homecoming he records. The new polis cannot admit him into the fold of the living because the likes of him now inhabit the world of the dead and because he has stayed constant to something that is no longer there. Equally important is the way the subject's very self-withholding,

6. Evgeny Dobrenko, *Late Stalinism: The Aesthetics of Politics* (New Haven, 2021), 40–44. Unlike in many of the poems Dobrenko analyzes, for Satunovskii this plot of return brings him not so much *from* the war as *to* his native Ukraine as a place where life has continued without him and his people. I am referring here to poems #55 (1946), #11 (1952), #209 (1961), #259 and #263 (1963), and a series of poems written in 1973 (#798, 801, 803, and 804).

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his insistence on the impossibility of an exchange where he can be made known to others, renders the lyric a site of implicit *recognition* or *continuity*—a site where one's fractured biography can be spectrally recuperated in the line break between "a visitor from the other world": and "Here I lived for 27 years." As one of the lyric's most powerful affordances, the line-break (and parataxis more generally) offer in Satunovskii a space of acknowledgement and testimony that is both outside language and restricted by it.

In a study dedicated to "Poetry, War, Allegory," Ilya Kukulin proposes that "Satunovsky's innovation in his mature poetry. . . consisted in pointing out that at the center of poetry's crystallization lie not some marked or strong feelings, but any experience, especially one where man breaks free from the bonds of ideological and socially customary structures of existence."[7] It is in this context that Kukulin emphasizes the "unique opportunities" afforded such an author by the experience of war. As an intensification of experience, war indeed marks it as a domain in urgent need of signification, but the characterization of the dissident quality of Satunovskii's lyric, I think, calls for further refinement. It is not so much that his subject "breaks free from the bonds" (*vyryvaetsia iz plena*) of ideology as that he makes his captivity and its pervasive pressures known. If, as Kukulin suggests in comparing Satunovskii's war writing to Lydia Ginzburg's, a key feature for both is "the perception of mundane personal reflection as a microhistorical event," what distinguishes Satunovskii is that he shows the historical as everywhere impinging upon the personal, making the personal story unavailable to discourse.[8] Structuring one's biography, public history also erodes it, making much of it unrecognizable in language. Satunovskii's lyric works by shrinking and delimiting the space of personal reflection, rather than amplifying its humanistic status (*chelovek* is the key term for Ginzburg, but not for Satunovskii). Rather than being elevated by its historical eventness, the personal domain is subject to multiple silencings and withholdings, and resistance takes place precisely in the recognition—at times serious, at times mocking—of the diminishment of this domain: "ne krikom, / tak skripom soprotivleniia, / khripom . . ." (if not by a scream, / then by a screech of resistance, / a wheeze [87]).[9]

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7. Ilya Kukulin, *Proryv k nevozmozhnoi sviazi: Stat'i o russkoi poezii* (Ekaterinburg, 2019), 186.

8. Ibid., 187.

9. One is reminded of the remarkable observation by Satunovskii's brother Piotr about the fear that characterized the poet's comportment: "He was afraid always, all his life. He was afraid of the KGB, expected some provocations. He was afraid that his pension would be taken away—80 rubles. He was afraid, but still he wrote his poems, couldn't not write them." Cited in Vladislav Kulakov, "Lianozovo." *Poeziia kak fakt* (Moscow, 1999), 30. Piotr Satunovskii sees this fear as in stark contrast to Ian's daring poetry; yet, as I have suggested silencing is the very precondition of the emergence of the poet's daring subject.

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