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Jason Labbe on Michael Kelleher; James R. Hugunin on Yuriy Tarnawsky

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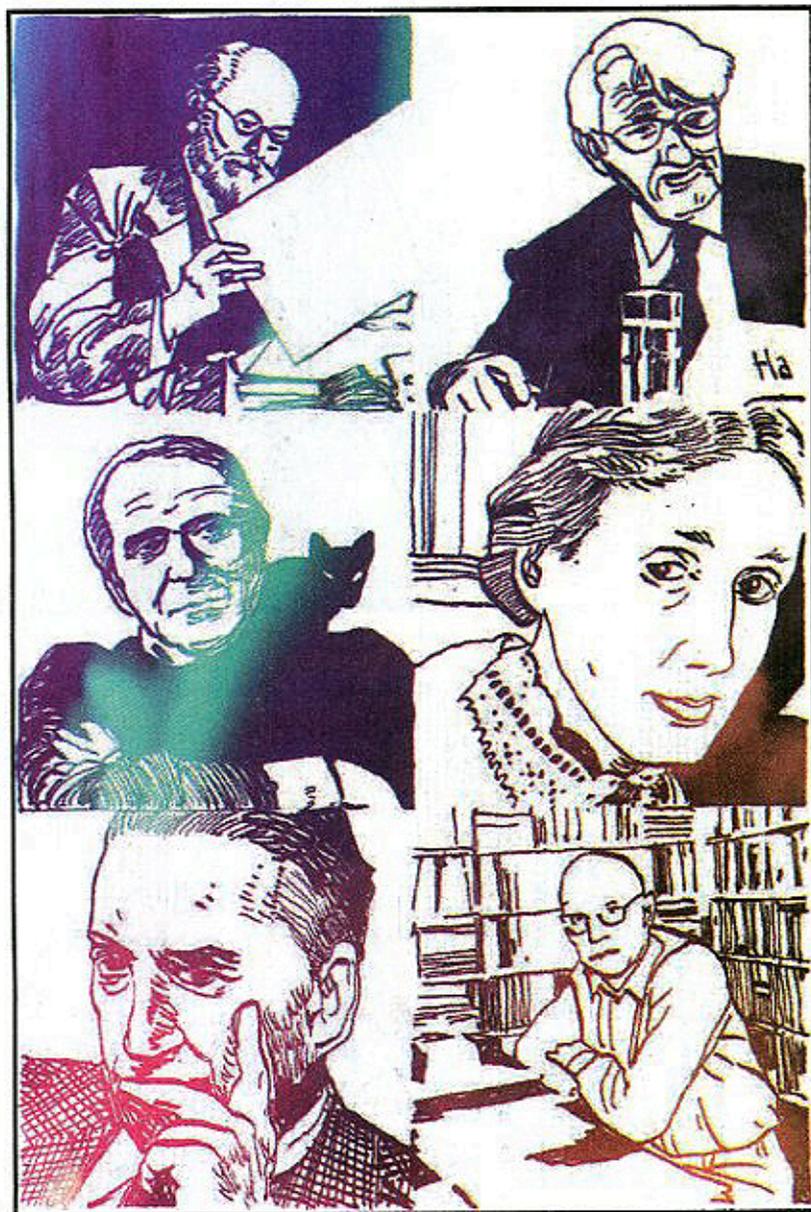
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In Focus:

## Critical Lives

Part II

with contributions  
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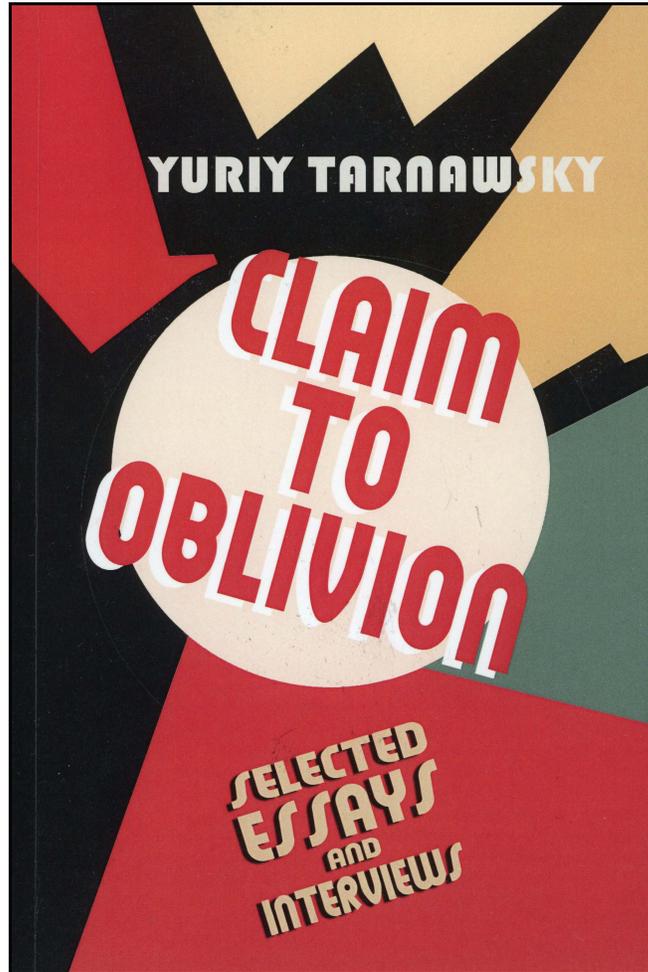


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Review of *Claim to Oblivion* by Yuriy Tarnawsky

by

James R. Hugunin



*If it doesn't bring you pleasure, don't write it!*

— Yuriy Tarnawsky in "Interview with AD Jameson"

*Induced coma is increasingly common in medical procedures.*

*Patients lapsing back to real time claim it's a sweet space.*

*Coma-land.*

— Harold Jaffe, *Induced Coma: 50 & 100 Word Stories*

What does it mean to break a rule, “to put oneself into a ‘dream-producing’ mood to loosen the restrictions placed on your mind by the real-life way of thinking?” Experimental writer of poetry, drama, fiction, and translations, Yuriy Tarnawsky (b. 1934) asks such in his book, *Claim to Oblivion: Selected Essays and Interviews* (2016). He urges writers to break the conventions of realist, plotted fiction, bending language out of shape like “bent eyeglasses” that have been sat upon. But to do so is to risk “oblivion” in terms of money, reputation, and audience. It is a risk he, over his long career, has been willing to take, for oblivion can also suggest the “induced coma” à la Harold Jaffe (also a writer of “small fiction”) that removes the strictures of waking life, inducing a surreality that Tarnawsky’s odd characters inhabit.

From what he calls “Heuristic Poetry” (as seen in the collection *Modus Tollens*, 2013, its title referring to deductive reasoning with negation) with its IPDs (“improvised poetic devices”), to this self-taught writer’s short stories in *Short Tails* (2011) with their fragmented and stilted syntax, to “Screaming” and “Pavarotti/Agamemnon,” two of sixteen “mininovels”(fifteen are collected in *The Placebo Effect Trilogy*, 2013), so called by the author as they employ a verbal “jump cuts” across scenes, maximizing reader interpretation and avoiding plot which he sees as too artificial, to constricting: “Life is a series of loosely bound events rather than a spring of tightly connected ones like those in the chain reaction in a nuclear explosion.... Imagination is so much more powerful than real life. It is the same way that dreams reflect reality.”

Dreams play an important role in his aesthetic; the opening essay in this collection discusses Andre Breton and Comte de Lautréamont in relation to Freud and mentions Spanish surrealism as a major influence as well. But Tarnawsky reveals that the strongest outside influences on his writing has come from visual sources, visits to New York’s Museum of Modern Art to view Dali, De Chirico, Tanguy, and Picasso. In another essay, “Adapting Static Images to Narration,” he details using photographs as raw material for narratives that riff on the chosen still image. In his *Short Tails* (where titles were used as prompts) there is a short piece titled “Photographs,” the impetus for which was Diane Arbus’s well-known photograph “A Jewish Giant at Home with His Parents, The Bronx, NY, 1970.” The story is a plays off this image, always stressing uncertainty over the man’s identity: “The man looks young, in his early twenties, but he could be younger, even eighteen. . . . The man’s unnaturally light-colored eyes — probably sky-blue in reality — look also unnaturally round, and there is a strange, inappropriate air of vivacity and gaiety on his face indicating a possible incipient, or perhaps actual, senility, perhaps brought on by Alzheimer disease.” The author goes on to discuss twelve other photographs not related pictorially to Arbus’s

image, but prompted by it, “in a mixture of description and analysis” during which the author continues to destabilize certainty, opening the text to various interpretations by the reader.

If you’ve not read Tarnawsky before, this book is a superb introduction. It is also a must-read for students of writing. It would make an excellent text for a MFA-level writing class, opening up a space for teacher and students to examine what language can do and what literary models one might learn from. The discussions, assisted with generous amounts of citation from the works under discussion, suggest exercises the instructor could task students with to enlarge their experience of their craft; although, the author asserts one can’t really teach creativity — “I am uneasy about the practice of other people telling you how to write” — only provide a healthy soil in which it can flourish. In fact, he has developed a sort of teach-yourself handbook, *Literary Yoga: Exercises for Those Who Can Write* (forthcoming from Lit Fest Press), “exercises that point out what happens when you take a certain path in your writing — different point of view, different tense, etc.”

Through his essays and the interviews with him we become privy to Tarnawsky’s background as a polyglot Ukrainian immigrant who lived in Germany for some years, absorbing Existentialism. He then came to the U.S.A., where he took a Ph.D. in Linguistics after working some years in the computer field. One learns he’s written in several languages, something about his personal aspects, his moods, and when he is most productive: “I write best, no, exclusively, on an empty stomach, in the morning, when I am still fresh after a night’s sleep and before running.”

In reading this book, one comes to appreciate a text rich with critical insights on language-use: wordplay, puns, titles as prompts, and “mistakes” that can be conducive to “making new” in Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s modernist call to breach conventions. Also the inspiration of films: their treatment of space-time, jump cuts, non-linear editing, and oneiric scenes, “wordless secrets only cinema can discover.” All that which can influence one’s modes and approaches to writing. For instance, Tarnawsky lauds the ending dialogue- and actor-free seven minutes of Antonioni’s *L’Eclisse* (1962) for what it means to cinema and its possibilities for writers. He might also call attention to the opening scenes of that filmmaker’s later achievement, *The Passenger* (1975), wherein uncertainty is induced by removing linking shots, minimizing language, and leaking information in reverse.

Tarnawsky reminds his readers of creative expression’s financial and psychic cost to the writer, as well as its plus side: “One of the benefits of liberating myself from the constraints of a plot was that I was free to organize the novel in any way I wanted and could write what I felt like

writing at any particular time. . . . I had told myself that as long as I didn't write for money and didn't do to please anyone, I might as well write to please myself.”

The book begins with the author examining the outside influences on his writing (esthetic and philosophical). Tarnawsky details the art (Cubism and Surrealism), authors (Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Kleist, Proust, Andre Breton, and Sartre), philosophers (Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre) of importance to his development. He includes the cinema, addressing the work of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Ingmar Bergman, and Michelangelo Antonioni. All these outside influence have fed his experimental, polysemic, broken line approach to poetry (heuristic, Brokenhaiku) and his fiction (short stories and plotless mininovels composed of fragments of text), an approach to writing that encourages readers to respond as a *creative* audience. This is akin to Roland Barthes (*The Pleasure of the Text*, 1973) where work like Tarnawsky's would be understood as a “writerly text” giving us “*jouissance*,” a more intense experience rooted in the co-production of meaning, as opposed to a mundane, commercial “readerly text” that merely offers us *plaisir* (like that Ukrainian comfort food *varenyky* [pierogi] and beer) by feeding us conventions and clichés.

All of Tarnawky's fiction is jarring, terse, teasing the reader to fill in the blanks of his “negative text” (as in negative space). For instance, in *Three Blondes and Death* (1993), which adds up to *four* and plays an important role in the book, nothing at all is said about the main character's appearance — and that character's name, “Hwdrgrdtse,” is unpronounceable — until the beginning of part four, three hundred pages into the book. His mininovels, such as *Like Blood in Water* (2013), are largely dark, about disconnected selves, unachieved desires, and the just bearable intimation of death; but where it lurks, so does beauty, beauty revealed in Tarnawky's handling of language. This is true even when some of his writing reads like an autopsy report. In a story in *Short Tails*, our skeletal system becomes “the albino inside you.” Also true when engaging childhood as subject matter, he does in *The Future of Giraffes* (2013), where he finds innocence violated: children turn into monsters or at best into flawed individuals. Apropos, he comments, “I have a little script that goes like this: ‘What do you want to be when you grow up? — A sonofabitch, like my daddy.’ ”

In sum, Tarnawsky's varied production's principal objective is existential: “. . . to laugh at humanity, and above all at myself, at how silly we all look in our pursuit of happiness.” It is not just us clowns, but HE who gets slapped.

— The End —

James R. Hugunin is an Adjunct Full Professor in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1983, he was awarded the Reva and David Logan Award for Distinguished New Writing in Photography. He also writes fiction.